

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 73

JOHN GARDNER

The following interview incorporates three done with John Gardner over the last decade of his life. After interviewing him in 1971, Frank McConnell wrote of the thirty-nine-year-old author as one of the most original and promising younger American novelists. His first four novels—*The Resurrection* (1966), *The Wreckage of Agathon* (1970), *Grendel* (1971), and *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972)—represented, in the eyes of many critics and reviewers, a new and exhilarating phase in the enterprise of modern writing, a consolidation of the resources of the contemporary novel and a leap forward—or backward—into a reestablished humanism. One finds in his books elements of the three major strains of current fiction: the elegant narrative gamesmanship of Barth or Pynchon, the hyperrealistic gothicism of Joyce Carol Oates and Stanley Elkin, and the cultural, intellectual history of Saul Bellow. Like so many characters in current fiction, Gardner's are men on the fringe, men shocked into the consciousness that they are living lives that seem to be determined, not by their own will, but by massive myths, cosmic fictions over which they have no control (e.g., Ebenezer Cooke in Barth's *Sot-Weed Factor*, Tyrone Slothrop in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*); but Gardner's characters

are philosophers on the fringe, heirs, all of them, to the great debates over authenticity and bad faith that characterize our era. In *Grendel*, for example, the hero-monster is initiated into the Sartrean vision of Nothingness by an ancient, obviously well-read dragon: a myth speaking of the emptiness of all myths—“Theory-makers . . . They’d map out roads through Hell with their crackpot theories, their here-to-the-moon-and-back lists of paltry facts. Insanity—the simplest insanity ever devised!” His heroes—like all men—are philosophers who are going to die; and their characteristic discovery—the central creative energy of Gardner’s fiction—is that the death of consciousness finally justifies consciousness itself. The myths, whose artificiality contemporary writers have been at such pains to point out, become in Gardner’s work real and life giving once again, without ever losing their modern character of fictiveness.

Gardner’s work may well represent, then, the new “conservatism,” which some observers have noted in the current scene. But it is a conservatism of high originality, and, at least in Gardner’s case, of deep authority in his life. When he guest-taught a course in “Narrative Forms” at Northwestern University, a number of his students were surprised to find a modern writer—and a hot property—enthusiastic, not only about Homer, Virgil, Apollonius Rhodius, and Dante, but deeply concerned with the critical controversies surrounding those writers, and with mistakes in their English translations. As the interview following makes clear, Gardner’s job in and affection for ancient writing and the tradition of metaphysics is, if anything, greater than for the explosions and involutions of modern fiction. He is, in the full sense of the word, a literary man.

“It’s as if God put me on earth to write,” Gardner observed once. And writing, or thinking about writing, takes up much of his day. He works, he says, usually on three or four books at the same time, allowing the plots to cross-pollinate, shape and qualify each other.

Sara Matthiessen describes Gardner in the spring of 1978 (additional works published by then included *October Light*; *On*

Moral Fiction was about to be published). Matthiessen arrived with a friend to interview him at the Breadloaf Writer's Colony in Vermont: "After we'd knocked a couple of times, he opened the door looking haggard and just wakened. Dressed in a purple sateen, bell-sleeved, turtleneck shirt and jeans, he was an exotic figure: unnaturally white hair to below his shoulders, of medium height, he seemed an incarnation from the medieval era central to his study. 'Come in!' he said, as though there were no two people he'd rather have seen than Sally and me, and he led us into a cold, bright room sparsely equipped with wooden furniture. We were offered extra socks against the chill. John lit his pipe, and we sat down to talk."

—*Paul F. Ferguson, John R. Maier,
Frank McConnell, Sara Matthiessen, 1979*

INTERVIEWER

You've worked in several different areas: prose, fiction, verse, criticism, book reviews, scholarly books, children's books, radio plays; you wrote the libretto for a recently produced opera. Could you discuss the different genres? Which one have you most enjoyed doing?

JOHN GARDNER

The one that feels the most important is the novel. You create a whole world in a novel and you deal with values in a way that you can't possibly in a short story. The trouble is that since novels represent a whole world, you can't write them all the time. After you finish a novel, it takes a couple of years to get in enough life and enough thinking about things to have anything to say, any clear questions to work through. You have to keep busy, so it's fun to do the other things. I do book reviews when I'm hard up for money, which I am all the time. They don't pay much, but they

keep you going. Book reviews are interesting because it's necessary to keep an eye on what's good and what's bad in the books of a society worked so heavily by advertising, public relations, and so on. Writing reviews isn't really analytical, it's for the most part quick reactions—joys and rages. I certainly never write a review about a book I don't think worth reviewing, a flat-out bad book, unless it's an enormously fashionable bad book. As for writing children's books, I've done them because when my kids were growing up I would now and then write them a story as a Christmas present, and then after I became sort of successful, people saw the stories and said they should be published. I like them, of course. I wouldn't give junk to my kids. I've also done scholarly books and articles. The reason I've done those is that I've been teaching things like *Beowulf* and Chaucer for a long time. As you teach a poem year after year, you realize, or anyway convince yourself, that you understand the poem and that most people have got it slightly wrong. That's natural with any poem, but during the years I taught lit courses, it was especially true of medieval and classical poetry. When the general critical view has a major poem or poet *badly* wrong, you feel like you ought to straighten it out. The studies of Chaucer since the fifties are very strange stuff: like the theory that Chaucer is a frosty Oxford-donnish guy shunning carnality and cupidity. Not true. So close analysis is useful. But writing novels—and maybe opera libretti—is the kind of writing that gives me greatest satisfaction; the rest is more like entertainment.

INTERVIEWER

You have been called a “philosophical novelist.” What do you think of the label?

GARDNER

I'm not sure that being a philosophical novelist is better than being some other kind, but I guess that there's not much doubt that, in a way at least, that's what I am. A writer's material is what he cares about, and I like philosophy the way some people like

politics, or football games, or unidentified flying objects. I read a man like Collingwood, or even Brand Blanchard or C. D. Broad, and I get excited—even anxious—filled with suspense. I read a man like Swinburn on time and space and it becomes a matter of deep concern to me whether the structure of space changes near large masses. It's as if I actually think philosophy will solve life's great questions—which sometimes, come to think of it, it does, at least for me. Probably not often, but I like the illusion. Blanchard's attempt at a logical demonstration that there really *is* a universal human morality, or the recent flurry of theories by various majestic cranks that the universe is stabilizing itself instead of flying apart—those are lovely things to run into. Interesting and arresting, I mean, like talking frogs. I get a good deal more out of the philosophy section of a college bookstore than out of the fiction section, and I more often read philosophical books than I read novels. So sure, I'm "philosophical," though what I write is by no means straight philosophy. I make up stories. Meaning creeps in of necessity, to keep things clear, like paragraph breaks and punctuation. And, I might add, my friends are all artists and critics, not philosophers. Philosophers—except for the few who are my friends—drink beer and watch football games and defeat their wives and children by the fraudulent tyranny of logic.

INTERVIEWER

But insofar as you *are* a "philosophical novelist," what is it that you do?

GARDNER

I write novels, books about people, and what I write is philosophical only in a limited way. The human dramas that interest me—stir me to excitement and, loosely, vision—are always rooted in serious philosophical questions. That is, I'm bored by plots that depend on the psychological or sociological quirks of the main characters—mere melodramas of healthy against sick—stories that, subtly or otherwise, merely preach. Art as the wisdom of

Marcus Welby, M.D. Granted, most of fiction's great heroes are at least slightly crazy, from Achilles to Captain Ahab, but the problems that make great heroes act are the problems no sane man could have gotten around either. Achilles, in his nobler, saner moments, lays down the whole moral code of *The Iliad*. But the violence and anger triggered by war, the human passions that overwhelm Achilles's reason and make him the greatest criminal in all fiction—they're just as much a problem for lesser, more ordinary people. The same with Ahab's desire to pierce the Mask, smash through to absolute knowledge. Ahab's crazy, so he actually tries it; but the same Mask leers at all of us. So, when I write a piece of fiction I select my characters and settings and so on because they have a bearing, at least to me, on the old unanswerable philosophical questions. And as I spin out the action, I'm always very concerned with springing discoveries—actual philosophical discoveries. But at the same time I'm concerned—and finally *more* concerned—with what the discoveries do to the character who makes them, and to the people around him. It's that that makes me not really a philosopher, but a novelist.

INTERVIEWER

The novel *Grendel* is a retelling of the Beowulf story from the monster's point of view. Why does an American writer living in the twentieth century abandon the realistic approach and borrow such legendary material as the basis for a novel?

GARDNER

I've never been terribly fond of realism because of certain things that realism seems to commit me to. With realism you have to spend two hundred pages proving that somebody lives in Detroit so that something can happen and be absolutely convincing. But the value systems of the people involved is the important thing, not the fact that they live on Nine Mile Road. In my earlier fiction I went as far as I could from realism because the easy way to get to the heart of what you want to say is to take somebody else's story,

particularly a nonrealistic story. When you tell the story of Grendel, or Jason and Medeia, you've got to end it the way the story ends—traditionally, but you can get to do it in your own way. The result is that the writer comes to understand things about the modern world in light of the history of human consciousness; he understands it a little more deeply, and has a lot more fun writing it.

INTERVIEWER

But why specifically *Beowulf*?

GARDNER

Some stories are more interesting than others. *Beowulf* is a terribly interesting story. It gives you some really wonderful visual images, such as the dragon. It's got Swedes looking over the hills and scaring everybody. It's got mead halls. It's got Grendel, and Grendel's mother. I really do believe that a novel has to be a feast of the senses, a delightful thing. One of the better things that has happened to the novel in recent years is that it has become rich. Think of a book like *Chimera* or *The Sot-Weed Factor*—they may not be very good books, but they are at least rich experiences. For me, writers like John O'Hara are interesting only in the way that movies and TV plays are interesting; there is almost nothing in a John O'Hara novel that couldn't be in the movies just as easily. On the other hand, there is no way an animator, or anyone else, can create an image from *Grendel* as exciting as the image in the reader's mind: Grendel is a monster, and living in the first person, because we're all in some sense monsters, trapped in our own language and habits of emotion. Grendel expresses feelings we all feel—enormous hostility, frustration, disbelief, and so on, so that the reader, projecting his own monster, projects a monster that is, for him, the perfect horror show. There is no way you can do that in television or the movies, where you are always seeing the kind of realistic novel O'Hara wrote . . . Gregory Peck walking down the street. It's just the same old thing to me. There are other things that are interesting in O'Hara, and I don't mean to put him down

excessively, but I go for another kind of fiction: I want the effect that a radio play gives you or that novels are always giving you at their best.

INTERVIEWER

You do something very interesting in *Grendel*. You never name Beowulf, and in the concluding scene you describe him in such a way as to give the impression that Grendel is really confronting, not Beowulf or another human being, but the dragon. That seems a significant change from the poem.

GARDNER

I didn't mean it to be a change. As a medievalist, one knows there are two great dragons in medieval art. There's Christ the dragon, and there's Satan the dragon. There's always a war between those two great dragons. In modern Christian symbolism a sweeter image of Jesus with the sheep in his arms has evolved, but I like the old image of the warring dragon. That's not to say Beowulf really is Christ, but that he's Christ-like. Actually, he is many things. When Grendel first sees Beowulf coming, Grendel thinks of him as a sort of machine, and what comes to the reader's mind is a kind of computer, a spaceman, a complete alien, unknown. The inescapable mechanics of the universe. At other times, Beowulf looks like a fish to Grendel. He comes in the season of Pisces when, among other things, you stab yourself in the back. On other occasions, Grendel sees other things, one after another, and for a brief flash, when he is probably hallucinating—he's fighting, losing blood very badly because he has his arm torn off—Grendel thinks he's fighting the dragon instead of Beowulf. At the end of the story, Grendel doesn't know *who* he's fighting. He's just fighting something big and horrible and sure to kill him, something that he could never have predicted in the universe as he understood it, because from the beginning of the novel, Grendel feels himself hopelessly determined, hopelessly struggling against—in the profoundest sense—the way things are. He feels there's no way

out, that there's no hope for living consciousness, particularly *his* consciousness, since, for reasons inexplicable to him, he's on the wrong side, Cain's side instead of mankind's.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to me that determinism is affliction imposed on him by the *scop*.

GARDNER

It's true, but only partly. In the novel, he's undeniably pushed around by the universe, but also not to believe, not to have faith in life. What happens is, in the story, the shaper, the *scop*, the court poet comes to this horrible court that's made itself what it is by killing everybody, beating people, chopping them to death, and the poet looks at this havoc around him and makes up a story about what a wonderful court it is, what noble ideals it has. The courtiers are just dumb enough to believe it, just as Americans have believed the stories about Sam Adams and Ethan Allen and all those half-mythical heroes. George Washington once stood for thirty minutes stuttering in a rage before executing a private for a minor misdeed. Sam Adams was like a well-meaning Marxist agitator. Constantly lied. He told Boston that New York had fallen when it hadn't fallen. Or anyway so one of my characters claims. I no longer remember what the truth is.

INTERVIEWER

But that's an important moment in Grendel's development, isn't it, when he hears this story?

GARDNER

He hears the story and is tempted to believe it. And for certain reasons, partly because he is kicked out of the mead hall, he decides to reject the myth. That's Grendel's hard luck, because when he goes to the mead hall and wants to be a good monster and

doesn't want to kill people anymore, Hrothgar's warriors don't know that, and they throw spears at him and hurt him.

INTERVIEWER

You don't see yourself, as a novelist, analogous to the *scop* in the telling of a story?

GARDNER

Oh, sure. Absolutely. I absolutely believe every artist is in the position of the *scop*. As I tried to make plain in *On Moral Fiction*, I think that the difference right now between good art and bad art is that the good artists are the people who are, in one way or another, creating, out of deep and honest concern, a vision of life in the twentieth century that is worth pursuing. And the bad artists, of whom there are many, are whining or moaning or staring, because it's fashionable, into the dark abyss. If you believe that life is fundamentally a volcano full of baby skulls, you've got two main choices as an artist: You can either stare into the volcano and count the skulls for the thousandth time and tell everybody, "There are the skulls; that's your baby, Mrs. Miller." Or you can try to build walls so that fewer baby skulls go in. It seems to me that the artist ought to hunt for positive ways of surviving, of living. You shouldn't lie. If there aren't any, so far as you can see, you should say so, like the *Merdistes*. But I don't think the *Merdistes* are right—except for Céline himself, by accident, because Céline (as character, not as author) is comic; a villain so outrageous, miserable, and inept that we laugh at him and at all he so earnestly stands for. I think the world is not all merde. I think it's possible to make walls around at least some of the smoking holes.

INTERVIEWER

Won't this have the effect of transforming the modern writer into a didactic writer?

GARDNER

Not didactic. The didactic writer is anything but moral because he is always simplifying the argument, always narrowing away, getting rid of legitimate objections. *Mein Kampf* is a moralistic book—a stupid, ugly one. A truly moral book is one that is radically open to persuasion, but looks hard at a problem, and keeps looking for answers. It gives you an absolutely clear vision, as if the poet, the writer, had nothing to do with it, had just done everything in his power to imagine how things are. It's the situation of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche—an illusion I use in *On Moral Fiction*. Nietzsche sets up this abstract theory of the Superman according to which a person can kill or do anything he wants because there is no basis of law except the herd. God doesn't speak; dead. So the people get together and vote to have a red light on Highway 61 where there's no traffic. It's three o'clock in the morning. You're traveling, and there's a red light, and you decide to jump the light. A car pulls out of the weeds, a policeman, and he comes after you. If you're a superman, you politely and gently kill him, put him back in the weeds, and drive on. The theory of the superman is kind of interesting, abstractly. The question is, is it right? Will it work? Can human beings live with it? So Dostoyevsky sets up the experiment imaginatively. Obviously he doesn't want to go out and actually kill somebody to see if it works, so he imagines a perfectly convincing St. Petersburg, and a perfectly convincing person who would do this. (What student in all St. Petersburg would commit a murder? What relatives would he have? What friends? What would his pattern be? What would he eat?) Dostoyevsky follows the experiment out and finds out what does happen.

I think all great art does this, and you don't have to do it realistically. Obviously Raskolnikov could have been a giant saurian, as long as his character is consistent and convincing, tuned to what we know about actual feeling. The point is realism of imagination, convincingness of imagination. The novelist pursues questions, and pursues them thoroughly. Not only when does it rain and

when doesn't it rain, but can we tolerate rain? What can we be made to tolerate? What should we not allow ourselves to be made to tolerate? And so on. So that finally, what's moral in fiction is chiefly its way of looking. The premise of moral art is that life is better than death; art hunts for avenues to life. The book succeeds if we're powerfully persuaded that the focal characters, in their fight for life, have won honestly or, if they lose, are tragic in their loss, not just tiresome or pitiful.

INTERVIEWER

So you have a strong sense of mission, or of a goal, in modern fiction.

GARDNER

Yes, I do. In my own way, anyway. I want to push the novel in a new direction, or back to an old one—Homer's or the *Beowulf* poet's. Of course, a lot of other writers are trying to do something rather different—Barth and Pynchon, I grant them their right—grudgingly. But to paraphrase the Imagists, I want “no ideas but in *energeia*”—Aristotle's made-up word for (excuse the jazz), “the actualization of the potential which exists in character and situation.” Philosophy as plot. I think no novel can please for very long without plot as the center of its argument. We get too many books full of meaning by innuendo—the ingenious symbol, the allegorical overlay, stories in which *events* are of only the most trivial importance, just the thread on which the writer strings hints of his “real” meaning. This has been partly a fault of the way we've been studying and teaching literature, of course. Our talk of levels and all that. For instance, take John Updike's *Couples*. It's a fairly good book, it seems to me, but there's a good reason no one reads it anymore: contrived phrases bear all the burden. Symbolically constructed names; descriptions of a living room that slyly hint at the expansion of the universe; or Updike's whole cunning trick with Christian iconography, circles and straight lines—circles traditionally associated with reason, straight lines with faith. You work the

whole symbolic structure out and you're impressed by Updike's intelligence—maybe, in this book, even wisdom—but you have difficulty telling the fornicators apart. Reading *Couples* is like studying science while watching pornographic movies put together from random scraps on the cutting-room floor.

INTERVIEWER

You want novels to be whole entertainments, then.

GARDNER

Sure! Look: It's impossible for us to read Dostoyevsky as a writer of thrillers anymore, because of this whole weight of explanation and analysis we've loaded on the books. And yet *The Brothers Karamazov* is obviously, among other things, a thriller novel. (It also contains, to my mind, some pretentious philosophizing.) What I've wanted to do, in *The Sunlight Dialogues*, for example, is write a book—maybe not a novel—that you could read as entertainment. Where there's straight philosophizing, here as in *The Resurrection*, it's present because that's what the character would say (or so I thought at the time), present because that's what makes him behave as he does. No meaning but emotion-charged action and emotional reaction.

INTERVIEWER

The classical forms, like *Grendel*, are not your only models, nor do you always adhere to the superficial nature of the form you've chosen—for instance, there are parts in the *Sunlight Dialogues* that parody Faulkner.

GARDNER

Sure. In fact, the whole conception of the book is in a way parodic of Faulkner, among others—the whole idea of family and locale. A lot of times I've consciously taken a writer on. In the first novel I did, I used the title *The Resurrection* to give the reader a clue as to what's wrong with Tolstoy in his *Resurrection*. I don't

think many readers notice, and of course it doesn't matter. In fact, a friend of mine who's a very good critic asked me one time if I were aware that I'd used a title that Tolstoy had used. That's all right. If I sounded too much like Tolstoy, then my novel would be a critical footnote.

INTERVIEWER

How about your contemporaries? Has any of their work influenced your writing?

GARDNER

Of course I'm aware of modern writers . . . and some writers have changed my way of thinking. I don't always like what Bill Gass does—though I do immensely like much of his fiction—but I certainly have changed my writing style because of his emphasis on language, that is, his brilliant use of it in books. It has always seemed to me that the main thing you ought to be doing when you write a story is, as Robert Louis Stevenson said, to set a “dream” going in the reader's mind . . . so that he opens the page, reads about three words, and drops into a sort of trance. He's seeing Russia instead of his living room. Not that he's *passive*. The reader hopes and judges. I used to think that words and style should be transparent, that no word should call attention to itself in any way; that you could say the plainest thing possible to get the dream going. After I read some early Gass—“The Pedersen Kid,” I think—I realized that you don't really interfere with the dream by saying things in an interesting way. Performance is an important part of the show. But I don't, like Gass, think language is of value when it's opaque, more decorative than communicative. Gass loves those formalist arguments. He's said, for instance, that it's naïve to think of characters as real—that it's absurd to cry for little Nell. It may be absurd to cry at that particular death, because in that case the writing is lousy. But what happens in real fiction is identical to what happens in a dream—as long as we have the right to wake up screaming from a nightmare, we have the right to worry about a

character. Gass has a funny theory. But I have borrowed a great many elements from it—I'm sure I owe more to him than to any other living writer. And I have learned a few things from slightly contemporary writers. About symbols, for instance. If you stop with James Joyce, you may write a slightly goofy kind of symbolic novel. Joyce's fondness for the "mannered" is the least of it. At the time Joyce was writing, people were less attuned than they are now to symbolic writing, so he sometimes let himself get away with bald, obvious symbols. Now, thanks largely to the New Criticism, any smart college freshman can catch every symbol that comes rolling along. The trouble is that if a reader starts watching the play of symbolism and missing what's happening to the characters, he gets an intellectual apprehension of the book, and that's pretty awful. He might as well read philosophy or meditations on the wounds of Christ. But you still need resonance, deep effect. You have to build into the novel the movement from particular to general. The question is, how do you get a symbolic structure without tipping your hand? A number of modern writers have shown ways of doing it. The red herring symbols of Pynchon, the structural distractions of Barth, the machine-gun energy of Gaddis. Above all, Gass's verbal glory.

INTERVIEWER

Do you, like Joyce, play to the reader subliminally through symbolism, or do you make fairly overt statements by demonstrating what certain values can lead to?

GARDNER

I try to be as overt as possible. Plot, character, and action first. I try to say everything with absolute directness so that the reader sees the characters moving around, sees the house they're moving through, the landscape, the weather, and so on. I try to be absolutely direct about moral values and dilemmas. Read it to the charwoman, Richardson said. I say, make it plain to her dog. But when you write fiction such as mine, fantastic or quasi-realistic

fiction, it happens inevitably that as you're going over it, thinking about it, you recognize unconscious symbols bubbling up to the surface, and you begin to revise to give them room, sort of nudge them into sight. Though ideally the reader should never catch you shaking a symbol at him. (Intellect is the chief distracter of the mind.) The process of writing becomes more and more mysterious as you go over the draft more and more times; finally everything is symbolic. Even then you keep pushing it, making sure that it's as coherent and self-contained as a grapefruit. Frequently, when you write a novel you start out feeling pretty clear about your position, what side you're on; as you revise, you find your unconscious pushing up associations that modify that position, force you to reconsider.

INTERVIEWER

You began *October Light*, you've said, with the idea that "the traditional New England values are the values we should live by: good workmanship, independence, unswerving honesty—" but these proved oversimple. Is the process of fiction always the process of discovery for you? In other words, do you often find that the idea that prompted the fiction turns out to be too simple, or even wrong?

GARDNER

I always start out with a position I later discover to be too simple. That's the nature of things—what physicists call complementarity. What's interesting is that my ideas prove too simple in ways I could never have anticipated. In everything I've written I've come to the realization that I was missing something, telling myself lies. That's one of the main pleasures of writing. What I do is follow the drama where it goes; the potential of the characters in their given situation. I let them go where they have to go, and analyze as I'm going along what's involved, what the implications are. When I don't like the implications, I think hard about it. Chasing implications to the wall is my one real skill. I think of ways of

dramatically setting up contrasts so that my position on a thing is clear to me, and then I hound the thing till it rolls over. I certainly wouldn't ever fake the actions, or the characters, or make people say what they wouldn't say. I never use sleight of wits like Stanley Elkin—though no one can fail to admire a really good sophist's skill.

INTERVIEWER

How important is setting?

GARDNER

Setting is one of the most powerful symbols you have, but mainly it serves characterization. The first thing that makes a reader read a book is the characters. Say you're standing in a train station, or an airport, and you're leafing through books; what you're hoping for is a book where you'll like the characters, where the characters are interesting. To establish powerful characters, a writer needs a landscape to help define them; so setting becomes important. Setting is also a powerful vehicle of thematic concerns; in fact, it's one of the most powerful. If you're going to talk about the decline of Western civilization or at least the possibility of that decline, you take an old place that's sort of worn out and run-down. For instance, Batavia, New York, where the Holland Land Office was . . . the beginning of a civilization . . . selling the land in this country. It was, in the beginning, a wonderful, beautiful place with the smartest Indians in America around. Now it's this old, run-down town that has been urban-renewalized just about out of existence. The factories have stopped and the people are poor and sometimes crabby; the elm trees are all dead, and so are the oaks and maples. So it's a good symbol. If you're writing the kind of book I was writing in *Sunlight Dialogues* or *The Resurrection*, both of them books about death, both spiritual death and the death of civilization, you choose a place like that. I couldn't have found, in my experience, a better setting. It's just not a feeling you have in San Francisco. If I was going to write a book about southern Illinois, which in fact I did in *King's Indian*, that's

another, completely different feeling. There it's as if human beings had never landed; the human beings—the natives, anyway—seem more like gnomes. You choose the setting that suits and illuminates your material.

INTERVIEWER

The Resurrection, *Sunlight Dialogues*, *Nickel Mountain*, *October Light*, all take place in your native surroundings, more or less; do you find that you need distance on a place before you can write about it? Would you have been able to get a proper perspective on these places in the East, and the type of people who live there, if you'd not spent a good deal of your time in the West and Midwest?

GARDNER

I don't really think so. It's true that *The Resurrection* and *Sunlight Dialogues* take place in Batavia. I wrote one of them in California, the other partly in California, and partly in southern Illinois. So I was using memories from my childhood. Every once in a while, I'd go back and see my parents and go over and see the Brumsteds and the characters who show up in the story, and I'd look the streets over and think, that'd be funny to put in a novel, or whatever. But *Nickel Mountain* is set in the Catskills, which I'd only passed through once or twice, and when I did *October Light*, which came out of a very direct and immediate experience in the East, I'd just moved back to the East after years away. I'd never been in Vermont, and the landscape and the feeling of the people is not at all like western New York. I had never seen anything like it; I certainly didn't have any distance on it. It may be that ten years from now when I look the book over I'll see that I didn't do it very well, but now it feels just as authentic to me as the other books I've written. So I don't think you necessarily do need distance. It is certainly true though that memory selects well. What you keep in your memory is psychologically symbolic, hence powerful, so that when you write about things that you knew a long time ago, you're going to get a fairly powerful evocation of place. I think one

sees that in Bernard Malamud's work. When he writes about his childhood, his early memories of New York, you get a very powerful sense of the place. But I think in *A New Life*, written out of immediate experience, you get a more superficial sense of place.

It's different; nobody could deny that the landscapes in *A New Life* are vivid, it's just that they don't have that *lived* feeling that the earlier cityscapes have. You have to write about what's useful and that's the problem; you can't just write about the place that's the most digested for you. In a really good writer's work you'll see that a writer doesn't have to have been around a place very long at all. John Fowles's novel *Daniel Martin* has got some long sections on Los Angeles, which seem to be absolutely incredible. You'd swear he grew up there. Most people writing about Los Angeles can only see the phoniness, the greenery, and the gilt. Fowles sees everything, and he gets in it.

INTERVIEWER

Your *belief* in literature, your affection for it as a living force, goes back pretty far in your childhood. Did you read mostly the classics when you were a boy?

GARDNER

Not mostly—we had a lot of books. My mother was a schoolteacher, and my father was a farmer who loved to read: classics, Shakespeare, and of course, the Bible. They were great reciters of literature, too. I've had visitors—sophisticated people—who've heard my father recite things, and have been amazed at how powerfully he does it. It's an old country tradition, but my father was and is the best. We'd be put to bed with a recital of poetry, things like that. At Grange meetings, for instance, my mother and father would do recitations as part of the evening's entertainment. Or while my father was milking the cows my mother would come out and read something to him—*Lear*, say—leaving out the part of whomever my father felt like being that day, and he'd answer his lines from the cow.

INTERVIEWER

He actually had the whole thing memorized?

GARDNER

Oh, sure. Lots of plays. And he'd write things—lay sermons, stories—while he was driving his tractor: compose them in his head, rather like Ben Hodge in *Sunlight*. Not that Ben Hodge is exactly like my father. My father isn't weak willed. My father knows hundreds of poems, including some very long ones. Beautiful to listen to. A lot of people that we dismiss as terrible poets, like Longfellow, are changed entirely when you say their poems out loud—as they were intended to be. It's like singing; a song can't be very complex; the tune takes up part of the energy so that the words are kind of silly on the page, but when you sing it, it may be wonderful. The same thing happens with oral poetry—lots of stuff that's thin, even goofy on the page can be recited beautifully. That's one of the reasons I write the way I do. Oral stuff written. I hope that comes through.

INTERVIEWER

Did you do any writing as a child?

GARDNER

I started writing stories when I was five or so—making these books I'd send to relatives every Christmas. And around eight, I was writing longer things . . . I wrote in ledger books given to me by my grandmother the lawyer. I really enjoyed writing on ledger paper: There's something nice about a page with a red line down the middle.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still use them?

GARDNER

No, I own my own typewriter now. Very professional.

INTERVIEWER

Is there an advantage to growing up on a farm?

GARDNER

Farm boys have some advantages; it depends on the family. I learned to love the land at least partly because my parents did—working it, watching things grow. Farm boys spend a lot of time with animals of all kinds. I liked it. Some don't. Also, sometimes on the happiest farms, the hunger comes to get away from all that work, and so they may see New York with more excited eyes than some New Yorkers do; or Chicago, or Los Angeles. I love all those places, even the ones that everybody else hates. I have a little trouble with Cleveland, but parts of it are nice. But except for short stints in San Francisco, Chicago, and Detroit, my whole life has been spent in the country, working with plants and animals, reading and writing. It's nice to live in the country when you grew up there and worked yourself to death in the old days and now you don't have to; you just have a few horses and you play.

INTERVIEWER

What did you study at college?

GARDNER

The usual things—wanted to major in chemistry for a while. In graduate school I studied creative writing and medieval literature mostly. It was useful. I learned a lot of things about an older kind of literature that I thought would be handy in writing my own works, if only because I wouldn't be doing the same thing as everybody else.

INTERVIEWER

Is your fiction at all autobiographical? Do you write about people you know specifically, do you write about yourself?

GARDNER

Sometimes. My fiction is usually autobiographical, but in a distant, almost unrecognizable way. Once in a while, as in the story “Redemption,” I write pretty close to what happened. But I fictionalized that, too—which worries me, in fact. When you get to an event that close to real life and you change the characters, you run the risk of your sister, or your mother or father, thinking: “You don’t understand me. That wasn’t what I was thinking.” I *know* that’s not what they were thinking, but I need searchlights on a piece, so I have to change characters, make them more appropriate to the fictional idea, the *real* subject, which isn’t just history. Usually, though, I’m not interested—as Updike and Malamud are—in celebrating my own life. I use feelings that I have myself—the only feelings I know, directly—and I deal them out to a group of characters, and let the characters fight out the problems that I’ve been fighting out. Characteristically there’s a battle in my fiction between the hunger for roots, stability, law, and another element in my character that is anarchic. I hate to obey speed laws. I hate to park where it says you have to park. I hate to have to be someplace on time. And in fact I often don’t do those things I know I should do, which of course fills me with uneasiness and guilt. Every time you break the law you pay, and every time you obey the law you pay. That compulsion not to do what people tell me, to avoid tic repetitions, makes me constantly keep pushing the edges. It makes me change places of living, or change my life in one way or another, which often makes me very unhappy. I wish I could just settle down. I keep promising myself that really soon now I’m going to get this little farm or maybe house and take care of it, never move again. But I’ll probably never do it. Anyway, the autobiographical element is more emotional than anything else.

INTERVIEWER

How do you name your characters?

GARDNER

Sometimes I use characters from real life, and sometimes I use their real names—when I do, it’s always in celebration of people that I like. Once or twice, as in *October Light*, I’ve borrowed other people’s fictional characters. Naming is only a problem, of course, when you make the character up. It seems to me that every character—every person—is an embodiment of a very complicated, philosophical way of looking at the world, whether conscious or not. Names can be strong clues to the characters system. Names are magic. If you name a kid John, he’ll grow up a different kid than if you named him Rudolph. I’ve used real characters in every single novel, except in *Grendel*, where it’s impossible—they didn’t have our kinds of names in those days—but even in *Grendel* I used jokes and puns that give you clues to who I’m talking about. For instance, there’s a guy named Red Horse, which is really a sorrel, which is really George Sorel. And so on. Sometimes I put real, live characters into books under fictional names—to protect the real person from what the fiction makes of him—and thus I get the pleasure of thinking, for example, what my cousin Bill would do if he were confronted with a particular problem. I get to understand my cousin Bill, whom I love, in a way I never understood him before. I get to see him in a situation perhaps more grave, certainly more compromising, than any he’s ever been in. Besides using real people, as I’ve said, I get great pleasure out of stealing other people’s writings. Actually, I do that at least partly because of a peculiar and unfortunate quality of my mind: I remember things. Word for word. I’m not always aware of it. Once in college, I wrote a paragraph of a novel that was word for word out of Joyce’s “The Dead,” and I wasn’t aware of it at all. I absolutely wasn’t. My teacher at the time said, Why did you do this? He wasn’t accusing me of plagiarism, he was just saying it was a very odd thing to do. I realized then that I had a problem. Of course, it was a big help when I was a teacher, because I could quote long passages of *Beowulf* and things like that. Once I realized that I also accidentally quote, that I’m constantly alluding to things I’m not

consciously aware of, I began to develop this allusive technique—at least when it's fiction—so that nobody could accuse me of plagiarism, since it's so obvious that I'm alluding. In fact, sometimes I have great fun with it. Particularly in *Jason and Medeia*, where I took long sections of writing by Bill Gass, whom I'm enormously fond of, and with whom I completely disagree on almost everything unimportant, and altered a few words to mess up his argument. And in *The Wreckage of Agathon* I took long sections out of Jean-Paul Sartre, changed all the images, but kept the rest directly translated. So I use everything.

INTERVIEWER

How do your victims react? Is Sartre aware? Or Gass?

GARDNER

I'm sure Sartre has never heard of me. I hope he'd be amused. As for Gass, he knows why I do it: partly from impishness, partly for a comically noble reason that has to do with Gass's present and future fame.

INTERVIEWER

How do you react to Peter Prescott's insinuation in *Newsweek* that you plagiarized in your *Life and Times of Chaucer*?

GARDNER

With a sigh.

INTERVIEWER

How about the charge that you're, excuse the expression, a male chauvinist?

GARDNER

Consciously, I'm a feminist; but neither the best things we do or the worst are fully conscious. That's why the effect of art is so important. One does not consciously make oneself more bestial by

reading pornographic books, and I think only the worst sort of people become consciously “better” people by reading the Bible. When I’m accused of male chauvinism, as I was in one review of *Nickel Mountain*, I’m indignant and hurt; but I watch myself more closely to see if it’s true. I’ve also been accused of being antihomosexual. I’m glad I was accused, because although I wasn’t aware of that bigotry, the accusation was just. I don’t want to hurt people.

INTERVIEWER

What about the influences of being a teacher?

GARDNER

My academic career has, of course, had considerable influence on my writing of fiction and poetry, though I hope my writing has had no effect on my scholarship and teaching—except to boost my university salary, attract students I might otherwise not meet, and get me invited to visit now and then at other universities. When I first began teaching my main job was in creative writing, and I discovered very quickly that it’s fairly easy to transform an eager, intelligent student to a publishing creative writer. Silly as it sounds, that discovery was a shock to my ego and changed my whole approach to writing fiction. (I was twenty-four, twenty-five at the time.) Since I found out that anyone has stories he can tell, and, once you’ve shown him a little technique, can tell them relatively well, I was determined to set myself apart from the herd (I was reading that devil Nietzsche then) by writing as other people couldn’t. I became a mildly fanatic stylist, and experimenter with form, and so on. Also, I quit teaching creative writing, maybe partly from annoyance that my students were as good as I was, but mainly in hopes of learning the things I had to know to become a good writer. I began teaching history of criticism courses, which turned out to be one of the most valuable experiences in my life.

INTERVIEWER

I don’t mean to dwell on this, but it’s obviously a subject you’ve

thought about a lot. Any more specific effects of your teaching on your writing?

GARDNER

Two more, at least. One is, it's given me material—a lot of it—with which to give a modern story-line resonance. For instance, though I don't mention it in the novel, Chief Fred Clumly in *Sunlight* once read Dante on a ship, though he no longer remembers it. It sank deep into the swamp of his mind and now throws strange light on his modern-seeming problems. The narrator of the novel has obviously read and pondered hard on Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, which presents a medieval world view totally oppressed to Dante's. I mention this not because I care how readers read the novel but because it shows, more clearly than anything else I can say, the usefulness of my scholarly work in my writing. Nobody but Blake—except possibly Stanley Elkin—can churn up ideas and images with the genius of Blake. But stealing the ideas and images of brilliant men like Dante and Malory (and of course many others), forcing them into confrontation, trying to find some sane resolution to the opposition of such minds and values, a writer can not only get new insights but get, far more important, rich texture and an energy of language beyond the energy of mere conflict in plot. Which is to say, my subject really is (as one critic once mentioned), human history—the conflict of ideas and emotions through the ages.

The other important effect of my teaching on my writing is that, working with intelligent undergraduate and graduate students—and working alongside intelligent teachers—I have a clear idea of my audience, or anyway of a hypothetical audience. I don't think a writer can write well without some such notions. One may claim one writes for oneself, but it's a paltry claim. One more word on all this, I'm obviously convinced that my scholarly career has made me a better writer than I would have been without it, but I'm no longer concerned—as I was in my tempestuous, ego-maddened youth—with proving myself the greatest writer of

all time. What I notice now is that all around me there are first-rate writers, and in nearly every case it seems to me that what makes them first-rate is their similar involvement in teaching and scholarship. There are exceptions—maybe William Gaddis, I'm not sure. (A brilliant writer, though I disapprove of him.) Perhaps the most important exception is John Updike, who, unlike John Hawkes, Bill Gass, Stanley Elkin, and Saul Bellow and so on, is not a teacher. But the exception means nothing, because, teacher or not, he's the most academic of all.

INTERVIEWER

What about the teaching of creative writing?

GARDNER

When you teach creative writing, you discover a great deal. For instance, if a student's story is really wonderful, but thin, you have to analyze to figure out why it's thin; how you could beef it up. Every discovery of that kind is important. When you're reading only classical and medieval literature, all the bad stuff has been filtered out. There are no bad works in either Greek or Anglo-Saxon. Even the ones that are minor are the very best of the minor, because everything else has been lost or burned or thrown away. When you read this kind of literature, you never really learn how a piece can go wrong, but when you teach creative writing, you see a thousand ways that a piece can go wrong. So it's helpful to me. The other thing that's helpful when you're teaching creative writing is that there are an awful lot of people who at the age of seventeen or eighteen can write as well as you do. That's a frightening discovery. So you ask yourself, What am I doing? Here I've decided that what I'm going to be in life is to be this literary artist, at best; I'm going to stand with Tolstoy, Melville, and all the boys. And there's this kid, nineteen, who's writing just as well. The characters are vividly perceived, the rhythm in the story is wonderful. What have I got that he hasn't got? You begin to think harder and harder about what makes great fiction. That can lead you to straining and

overblowing your own fiction, which I've done sometimes, but it's useful to think about.

INTERVIEWER

What are some specific things you can teach in creative writing?

GARDNER

When you teach creative writing, you teach people, among other things, how to plot. You explain the principles, how it is that fiction *thinks*. And to give the kids a sense of how a plot works, you just spin out plot after plot after plot. In an hour session, you may spin out forty possible plots, one adhering to the real laws of *energeia*, each one a balance of the particular and general—and not one of them a story that you'd really want to write. Then one time, you hit one that *catches* you for some reason—you hit on the story that expresses your unrest. When I was teaching creative writing at Chico State, for instance, one of many plots I spun out was *The Resurrection*.

INTERVIEWER

How does this work?

GARDNER

One plot will just sort of rise above all the others for reasons that you don't fully understand. All of them are interesting, all of them have interesting characters, all of them talk about things that you could talk about; but one of them catches you like a nightmare. Then you have no choice but to write it; you can't forget it. It's a weird thing. If it's the kind of plot you really don't want to do because it involves your mother too closely, or whatever, you can try to do something else. But the typewriter keeps hissing at you and shooting sparks, and the paper keeps wrinkling and the lamp goes off and nothing else works, so finally you do the one that God said you've got to do. And once you do it, you're grounded. It's an amazing thing. For instance, before I wrote the story about the kid

who runs over his younger brother (“Redemption”), always, regularly, every day I used to have four or five flashes of that accident. I’d be driving down the highway and I couldn’t see what was coming because I’d have a memory flash. I haven’t had it once since I wrote the story. You really do ground your nightmares, you *name* them. When you write a story, you have to play that image, no matter how painful, over and over until you’ve got all the sharp details so you know exactly how to put it down on paper. By the time you’ve run your mind through it a hundred times, relentlessly worked every tic of your terror, it’s lost its power over you. That’s what bibliotherapy is all about, I guess. You take crazy people and have them write their story, better and better, and soon it’s just a story on a page, or, more precisely, everybody’s story on a page. It’s a wonderful thing. Which isn’t to say that I think writing is done for the health of the writer, though it certainly does incidentally have that effect.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that literary techniques can really be taught? Some people feel that technique is an artifice or even a hindrance to “true expression.”

GARDNER

Certainly it can be taught. But a teacher has to *know* technique to teach it. I’ve seen a lot of writing teachers because I go around visiting colleges, visiting creative writing classes. A terrible number of awful ones, grotesquely bad. That doesn’t mean that one should throw writing out of the curriculum; because when you get a good creative writing class it’s magisterial. Most of the writers I know in the world don’t know how they do what they do. Most of them *feel* it out. Bernard Malamud and I had a conversation one time in which he said that he doesn’t know how he does those magnificent things he sometimes does. He just keeps writing until it comes out right. If that’s the way a writer works, then that’s the way he had to work, and that’s fine. But I like to be in control as much of the

time as possible. One of the first things you have to understand when you are writing fiction—or teaching writing—is that there are different ways of doing things, and each one has a slightly different effect. A misunderstanding of this leads you to the Bill Gass position: that fiction can't tell the truth, because every way you say the thing changes it. I don't think that's to the point. I think that what fiction does is sneak up on the truth by telling it six different ways and finally releasing it. That's what Dante said, that you can't really get at the poetic, inexpressible truths, that the way things are leaps up like steam between them. So you have to determine very accurately the potential of a particular writer's style and help that potential develop at the same time, ignoring what you think of his moral stands.

I hate nihilistic, cynical writing. I hate it. It bothers me, and worse yet, bores me. But if I have a student who writes with morbid delight about murder, what I'll have to do (though of course I'll tell him I don't like this kind of writing, that it's immoral, stupid, and bad for civilization), is say what is successful about the work and what is not. I have to swallow every bit of my moral feelings to help the writer write his way, his truth. It may be that the most moral writing of all is writing that shows us how a murderer feels, how it happens. It may be it will protect us from murderers someday.

INTERVIEWER

You've recently had essays appear on the subject of what you call "moral fiction" and "moral criticism." Some readers might have trouble with the word "moral." Could you explain what you mean by "moral"? The word, as you've acknowledged, has pejorative implications these days.

GARDNER

I know. It shouldn't. I certainly don't mean fiction that preaches. I'm talking mainly—though not exclusively—about works of fiction that are moral in their process. That is to say, the way they *work* is moral. Good works of fiction study values by testing them

in imagined/real situations, testing them hard, being absolutely fair to both sides. The real moral writer is the opposite of the minister, the preacher, the rabbi. Insofar as he can, the preacher tries to keep religion as it always was, outlawing contraceptives or whatever; his job is conservative. The writer's job on the other hand, is to be radically open to persuasion. He should, if possible, not be committed to one side more than to the other—which is simply to say that he wants to affirm life, not sneer at it—but he has to be absolutely fair, understand the moral limits of his partisanship. His affirmation has to be earned. If he favors the cop, he must understand the arguments for life on the side of the robber.

INTERVIEWER

What would be “immoral” literature?

GARDNER

Mainly, fiction goes immoral when it stops being fair, when it stops trusting the laboratory experiment. You lie about characters, you make people do what you want them to do. This is characteristic of most hot-shot writers around now. I would agree with people who get nervous around the word “morality,” because usually the people who shout “immoral” are those who want to censor things, or think that all bathroom scenes or bedroom scenes or whatever are wicked. That kind of morality is life-denying, evil. But I *do* think morality is a real thing that's worth talking about. I thought of using some other word so that people wouldn't be mad at me for talking like a minister, but I decided that's the right word. It means what it means, and the fact that it's out of style doesn't matter very much. It's like patriotism, which has got a very bad name because devils keep yelling for it. Ultimately patriotism ought not to mean that you hate all other countries. It ought to mean that you love certain things about your country; you don't want them to change. Unfortunately, when you say “patriotism,” everybody goes “aargh.” Same thing with morality.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see the risk of dogmatism in your thesis on what fiction and criticism ought to be?

GARDNER

No, only a risk of dogmatism in stubborn or witless misinterpretations of my thesis, of which there have been, alas, many. I'm sure that no matter how carefully I write about true morality, some self-righteous ignoramus will read it too fast and say, "Aha, he's on our side." He will use me to support awful ideas, and I'm sorry about that. I don't think real morality can ever be codified. You can't say "Thou shalt not," and you can't say "Thou shalt." What you *can* say is that this is how people feel and why they feel the way they do. My argument in *Moral Fiction* is this: that immoral fiction is indifferent to the real issues. I'm saying that there's good and evil. And in particular situations, maybe the only healthy situation is universal destruction. I would never set up a morality that's goody-goody. Sometimes morality is awful. Fiction can never pronounce ultimate solutions, but it can lead to understanding. It leads, and that's all. It gives visions of what's possible. If I were going to write a book that told people how to live, I would write an incredibly meticulous book about Indian gurus, Jewish heroes, Christian saints. I would present every right argument and show clearly and logically what the wrong sides are. It would be simple, except that logic is never to be trusted. And everybody who read my book would say, if I did my job brilliantly, that's the way to live. The trouble is they wouldn't read the book because it would be boring, and even if they did read and understand, they wouldn't be moved to action. The book wouldn't be interesting because it wouldn't show people we care about growing toward the truth. If you show characters struggling to know what's right, and in the process of the novel you work out their issues more and more clearly, whether the character heroically wins or tragically loses, *then* you move the reader, having first moved yourself. I think morality has to be persuasive. And you can only be

persuasive if you start with imperfect human beings. Of course, if you wind up with *perfect* human beings, that's a bore too. I guess the morality of the fiction is the seriousness of the question and the seriousness of the concern with imaginary people's lives and feelings—a reflection of real people's lives and feelings—not the seriousness or logicity of the answer.

INTERVIEWER

Should the writer examine the morality of a piece before, say, the quality of its prose, its interest and salability?

GARDNER

Certainly morality should come first—for writers, critics, and everybody else. People who change tires. People in factories. They should always ask, Is this moral? Not, Will it sell? If you're in construction and building houses out of shingles and you realize that you're wiping out ten thousand acres of Canadian pine every year, you should ask yourself, Can I make it cheaper or as cheaply out of clay? Because clay is inexhaustible. Every place there's dirt. A construction owner should say, I don't have to be committed to this particular product: I can go for the one that will make me money, *and* make a better civilization. Occasionally businessmen actually do that. The best will even settle for a profit cut. The same thing is true of writers—ultimately it comes down to, are you making or are you destroying? If you try very hard to create ways of living, create dreams of what is possible, then you win. If you don't, you may make a fortune in ten years, but you're not going to be read in twenty years, and that's that. Why do something cheap? I can't understand people who go for the moment of the book. In the long run, Melville's estate is worth vastly more than the estate of Octave Thanet. Octave Thanet was, I think, the best-selling novelist of the nineteenth century. Melville told the truth, Thanet told high-minded lies. All liars are soon dead, forgotten. Dickens's novels didn't sell half as well as a novel of Octave Thanet's

called *A Slave to Duty*. But you haven't heard of her, right? I know of her only because I know obscure facts.

INTERVIEWER

And that is why certain works of fiction have lasted, and others have disappeared?

GARDNER

Of course. So I believe. The ones that last are the ones that are true. You look at Faulkner and John O'Hara. John O'Hara outsold Faulkner, he circled Faulkner at the time they were writing. Ten years after his death, O'Hara's books are out of print. We all read Faulkner, nobody reads O'Hara. Dreiser in some ways, some of the time, is one of the worst writers who ever lived. *An American Tragedy*, for instance, is an endless book with terrible sentences like "He found her extremely intellectually interesting." But by the time you finish the book, you've sopped your vest. He's a great writer, though he wrote badly. But what he does morally, that is to say, what he does in terms of analysis of character and honest statement about the way the world is, is very good. Of course, some writers last a long time because of their brilliance, their style; Fitzgerald is a good example—a fine stylist. But he never quite got to the heart of things. *That's* what should concern the critics. If a critic is concerned with only how well the sentences go, or how neat the symbolic structure is, or how new the devices are, he's going to exaggerate the importance of mediocre books. Samuel Beckett—surely one of the great writers of our time, despite my objections—is loved by critics, but except for John Fowles, I hear no one pointing out that the tendency of all he says is wrong. He says it powerfully, with comi-tragic brilliance, and he believes it, but what he says is not quite sound. Every night Samuel Beckett goes home to his wife, whom he's lived with all these years; he lies down in bed with her, puts his arms around her, and says, "No meaning again today . . ." Critics can say, and do say, Well, it doesn't matter what he says, it's how well he says it. But I think in the

long run Beckett is in for it. Because great writers tell the truth exactly—and get it right. A man can be a brilliant writer who writes wonderful lines, and still say what is just not so; like Sartre, Beckett—and in his lapses, Faulkner. Faulkner's sentimentality in the bad moments—every reader knows he's missing a little. I like Dilsey. I believe Dilsey really exists, but I just don't believe that Faulkner understands her or really cares. He's more interested in Dilsey as a symbol than as a person. Everything that Faulkner says about Dilsey is no doubt true . . . it's just all those things he didn't say, the things that make her fully human, not just a symbol. Mythologizing her—or accepting the standard mythology of his age—he slightly skews the inevitability of his story. He does the same thing every time he turns on his mannered rhetoric—distorts the inherent emotion of the story and thus gets diverted from the real and inevitable progress of events.

INTERVIEWER

You've said there are exceptions to your thesis on moral fiction. Could you mention a few?

GARDNER

First, there's fiction that's neither moral nor immoral—minor fiction, pure entertainment. I'm accused of not valuing it, but actually all I say is that it's trivial: I'm not at all against it except when some critic takes it seriously. I favor it as on a hot day I favor ice cream. Second, there's fiction I'd call moral only in the earnestness of its concern. This kind of fiction I would *not* call trivial. There's one man whose name is Ernest Finney. He's a wonderful writer. He sent me his fiction, he's been writing for years, unpublished. He writes grim, frightening stories. But I would certainly publish them if I had a magazine. Absolutely no question. One is about a lower-class guy, tough; he's got a good car, a T-Bird, third-hand. He marries this beautiful girl who's kind of a whore. She finally gets his money and disappears. He's making his money stealing. He goes to prison. All the time he's in prison, he plans on killing her. That's all

he cares about, that's all he thinks about. His idea is to put a shotgun up her and blow her to smithereens. You understand exactly why he feels the way he does. It's a very powerful, terrifying story. Because you become the character. You would do it, too.

INTERVIEWER

How does this fit any standard we've talked about?

GARDNER

Well, I think it's moral fiction, but in a tricky way. Finney does honestly describe a situation. He's not looking for ways that we could live better—the highest way—but he's describing exactly, and with original genius, how it feels to want to kill your wife. Terribly difficult. It's moral fiction of the third degree. Moral fiction can exist in only three forms. The highest form is moral fiction in which you see absolutely accurate description of the best people; fiction that gives you an idea how to live. It's uplifting: You want to be like the hero. You want to be like Jesus, or Buddha, or Moses, whatever. Tolstoy does it. Everybody wants to be like Pierre in *War and Peace*. Everybody wants to be like Levin in *Anna Karenina*. In the next form of moral fiction you see an evil person and you realize you don't want to be like that. Like Macbeth. You see there's an alternative. You don't have to be like Macbeth. It's kind of negative moral fiction, or moral fiction in the tragic mode, where you want to be different than the protagonist—you want to be better. Then there's the third form, 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's the world of Ernest Finney's fiction, or Constance Urdgang's. You understand exactly why a wife would want to kill her husband, saw up the body, and put it in a suitcase. We've all read the newspaper stories about this kind of thing. It happens. But only a great artist can show it happen so that you feel that you saw it, and saw it from inside the murderer's mind: You understand. 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. Mostly what we get, it seems to me, is "serious" fiction not in any of those three categories. People kill people, we don't understand why they did it, we don't care why they did it, we read it because it's cheaply thrilling, an escape from the common decency we sometimes feel trapped in. Blood drips, people piss on people or live their boring "lives of quiet desperation." It's at worst a kind of sick daydream, at best useless actuality, not morally worth reading.

INTERVIEWER

What effect do you think your writing has had?

GARDNER

I think it has given a few readers pleasure. And I suppose it may have depressed a few. I hope it does more good than harm.

