

## *Affirming Art*

**On Moral Fiction**, by John Gardner, *New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1978. 214 pp. \$8.95.*

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN was right, of course, when he pointed out in his Harvard commencement address that we are living in spiritually and morally sterile times. Our greatest concerns, despite the occasional flutterings of the banners proclaiming human rights, appear to be the inflationary spiral and rising taxes. The best sellers reflect this seemingly exclusive preoccupation with material considerations. Books emphasizing the skills and thrills of jogging are outselling those recording the vibrations of the soul and how to keep it fit.

Into this moral miasma, Mr. John Gardner's book is a welcome antipollutant. Gardner, already well established as a successful novelist (*Nickel Mountain, The Sunlight Dialogues, Grendel, and October Light*), a publishing scholar (*The Life and Times of Chaucer*), and a

professor of English, now substitutes prescriptive criticism for descriptive fiction. What he has to say about "true art" in the following excerpt fairly well summarizes, I believe, his approach to art (and, of course, the kind of criticism which would endorse this art):

True art, by specific technical means now commonly forgotten, clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns. It does not rant. It does not sneer or giggle in the face of death, it invents prayers and weapons. It designs visions worth trying to make fact. It does not whimper or cower or throw up its hands and bat its lashes. It does not make hope contingent on acceptance of some religious theory. It strikes like lightning, or *is* lightning; whichever.

In trying to elaborate upon this critical concern, Gardner incorporates adverse comments upon many of our contemporary novelists (although he does include occasional comments about current drama and music, his major concern is fiction). He is particularly negative on such writers as William Gass, Philip Roth, Robert Coover, E. L. Doctorov, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Norman Mailer, etc., and praises mightily the English novelist John Fowles (especially his novel *Daniel Martin*). Gardner attacks these writers because they fail to affirm the values of life (he particularly endorses those he tried to emphasize in his *October Light*: "the New England values . . . we should live by: good workmanship, independence, unswerving honesty, and so on") and/or emphasize the nihilistic and absurd elements of modern life, and/or are stylistically defective. What makes Gardner especially disheartened is that art, with its power to affect the quality of life, often influences it for the worse. "After Marlon Brando appeared in *On the Waterfront*, an entire generation took to slumping, mumbling, turning up its collar, and hanging its cigarette casually off the lip." Thus, bad art does not merely affect our aesthetic sense but also our daily behavior.

Now no one can argue with Gardner's diagnosis of the modern sterility in culture. One

winces when one recalls that within the space of a few years in the 1850's the United States produced such masterpieces as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *Walden*, and *Leaves of Grass*, and that after World War I, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner came into their own. Who are their equivalents in post World War II culture? The very word *culture* has either an exotic or sinister connotation today—as in *sub-cultures* and *the drug culture*.

And certainly, Gardner is quite right in dissecting the way he does the massive vacuity and moral hollowness of today's fiction (as well as drama and music). Unfortunately, Gardner's skill as critic does not always match his intention to persuade the artist (or the reader) to become a seeker of "healing vision or affirmation." There are several problems here. For one thing, though one may be tempted to agree with many of his judgments about today's novelists, still it would be proper not merely to list the indictments but also to itemize and sustain these indictments by a careful analysis. For example, when Gardner writes of his disappointment with writers like Vonnegut, Mailer, and Bellow, it would seem that their works deserve a more detailed treatment than just a few paragraphs—or even the several pages that he devotes to Bellow. It seems rather odd that though purporting to be a treatment of today's writers (almost exclusively American ones), the book allots the most extensive treatment and the most generous endorsement to one who has been with us several centuries and hardly needs additional critical support—Dante, "our model moral artist." Similarly, when Gardner attempts to allocate blame for the waves of nihilism inundating our works of art, he singles out Freud, Sartre, and Wittgenstein. But the judgment certainly needs more than a few perfunctory paragraphs.

Another area where Gardner's work is weak is in the hyperbolic claims he makes for art. It may be true, as he points out, that "the best sort of artist is always, has always been, an enemy of all that is shoddy or false in the world around him and will not hide the fact," but is it equally true that great works of art "can exert their civilizing influence century after century" and that "the highest purpose of art is to make

people good by choice?" In a remarkably lucid and effective speech [see the text, "Humanity in Science: A Perspective and a Plan" *The* (Phi Beta Kappa) *Key Reporter*, Summer, 1977, pages 2-4], June Goodfield alludes to George Steiner's observation that "people returned from a day's work as guards in the concentration camps and then put Mozart on their gramophones" and reminds us that Shakespeare's audiences were not necessarily morally superior because of witnessing his plays. In other words, art may help to illuminate human behavior; it does not automatically ameliorate it.

Occasionally, Gardner's desire for something to be, leads him to distort that which is: he, it seems to me, assigns to Homer a tendentious moralizing which simply is not there. Note the following:

As Zeus's fire possesses Achilles (daemonically entering him) and shows mankind a living image of how to behave when betrayals and general corruption must be purged, the artificer of the gods, Hephaestus, creates Achilles' shield in order to show forth in a picture what proper order ought to be: in other words, gives a visual image of the order to be pursued once the Iliadic evil is burned away.

A careful reading of this part of the *Iliad* will show to what extent Gardner is suffering from the subjective fallacy. That Achilles is the hero of the poem is clear; that he is the paradigmatic hero for all of us today is debatable. Achilles sulks like a child when his personal honor has been sullied by Agamemnon, seems to enjoy the spectacle of his fellow Greeks being slaughtered by the enemy, and returns to battle only because he wishes to get revenge for the death of his friend Patroklos. Furthermore, the fire which "possesses" Achilles is not "Zeus's fire" and is not intended to "show mankind a living image of how to behave when betrayals and general corruption must be purged." As a matter of fact, so horrifying is the slaughter which Achilles performs that the river Xanthus seeks to drown him in order to put out his avenging fire. Part of Homer's greatness is due to his *not* moralizing; he prefers giving a

graphic and realistic presentation of how mankind behaves, and not how it should behave.

There are also echoes of Plato, Aristotle, Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, etc. These echoes are not so much reminders that these philosopher-critics were right in their judgments as that they made their observations with greater originality and effectiveness than Gardner. Gardner's definition of the artist ("a man of maximum sensitivity, a man who sees and feels more things in more precise detail than do the people around him") certainly does not add anything to Wordsworth's delineation of a poet in his 1800 Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads*. When Gardner leaves the comfortable thoughts (and style) of his predecessors and tries to capture the flavor of current language, he occasionally lapses into puerile breeziness and solecisms.

Yes, art can be affirming, healing, and powerful; and Gardner is generally right in his dissection of modern culture. Unfortunately, he does not give the subject the carefully substantiated and stylistically effective presentation that it deserves. Yet, despite my demurrers, I believe that a good case badly presented is better than a bad one consummately delivered—and Gardner has here an excellent case.

Reviewed by MILTON BIRNBAUM

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### *This Is London . . .*

**Under Siege: Literary Life in London, 1939-45**, by Robert Hewison, *New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. x + 219 pp. \$11.95.*

*Under Siege* is a history of literary life in London during the Second World War, chronicling the responses of writers, artists, and musicians to the conditions of war and viewing interest in literature and art as both an expression of and an escape from the issues and attitudes of the time. Hewison is at his best in writing evoca-