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A WORLD OF ORDER AND LIGHT: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO
THE FICTION OF JOHN GARDNER

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PREVIEW

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A WORLD OF ORDER AND LIGHT:
A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE FICTION OF JOHN GARDNER

by

Gregory L. Morris

A DISSERTATION

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The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
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Major: English

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A World of Order and Light: A Critical Introduction

to the Fiction of John Gardner

BY

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Perhaps they were insane.
"Legend"

I cup my guilt in baffled hands
and squint at it, and choke.
She lent me airy radiance,
She left me churning smoke.
"She Loves Me Not"

and I must turn my smarting eyes
to those loves I'm committed to,
must love where nothing satisfies
but death, if worms, like higher forms, are true;
"Desire on Sunday Morning"

(These, and all other epigraphs, are taken from Poems,
by John Gardner, Lord John Press, 1978.)

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PREVIEW

INTRODUCTION

It is ironic that John Gardner established his early reputation on his two novels, The Wreckage of Agathon and Grendel. Both were politically and philosophically timely books, and they were easily misinterpreted as fresh additions to the bleak and cynical literature that marked the 1960's. The idea of John Gardner as an existential comedian seems farcical to anyone who has read the greater body of his work (and who possesses ten years of valuable hindsight), but that is how he was viewed by the critical press at the time.

Now, however, there is little doubt of Gardner's philosophical and aesthetic stance. Today the world of John Gardner is a much clearer one. The Gardner universe is one organized by a belief in what he calls "emotional metaphysics," in a sort of "felt" philosophical system that is as dependent upon the heart as upon the head. In On Moral Fiction (Gardner's critical manifesto), Gardner says that art "is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy."¹ Metaphysical collapse, the "twilight of the gods," the winding down of the universe is always around the corner, almost inevitable. Art and life are games, or perhaps more aptly, jousts between existence and death, order and chaos, virtue and sin; opposites charge, battle, resign, in a continual challenge to each other. What makes it more than a game and so ultimately serious, of course, is the ineluctability of death, chaos, and extinction.

Man, naturally, has his choice in this scheme. He may submit to the metaphysical despair of it all, "go nihilistic," and contemplate suicide. Or he may summon his courage and his madness and struggle against the

darkness, confront the dragon, and "go heroic." Gardner's heroes never enter the battle empty-handed. They go armed with the lunacies of love, faith, intuition, and art--the weapons of humanistic thought and the tenets of emotional metaphysics. They are "lunacies" because only a lunatic would enter the lists against the forces of chaos--the monsters, the trolls, the Grendels--and expect the world to actually be the better for it. Only a lunatic would put so much stock in such an assortment of abstractions--but then, "all heroes are crazy." The hero acts out of love for man and his community, and acts with what I call applied faith, or a faith that is both religious and practical, that puts to work the sentiment and discards the dogma. Moreover, the hero (and we all could very well be heroes) acts upon an intuitive intellect that in some mysterious and indefinable way feels and ferrets out the proper, heroic course of action; the hero acts rightly because something inside him, something that he knows is reliable and consistent, tells him he is acting rightly and morally.

That intuition, that hunch, moreover, has been nurtured by what Gardner calls the tradition of moral art, a tradition that "seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us."² This, says Gardner, is what all of the artists of the great tradition--Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy--have felt and believed and worked from. And it is from this same humanistic, moral aesthetic that Gardner writes and creates. The artist is one who works to preserve this metaphysic and this cosmology "of god and man." He is both singer and priest, and he creates his art from a specific Aristotelian model that stresses character, energeia, and honest experimentation. Authentic art "imitates nature's total process [and] in sworn

opposition to chaos, discovers by its process what it can say. That is art's morality."³ True art admits no cheating, no deceit, no falsification of action or motive. And what the artist and the reader should discover (and here is where it all becomes contentious) is that the world, though an annoying mixture of good and evil, of progress and stasis, of belief and negation, is finally holy and humane and purposeful. Both man and artist work through this emotional metaphysic--employing compassion and love and intuition and a vaguely religious impulse--and arrive at an affirmation of the world and of existence.

Gardner's aesthetic is in part a reaction to a whole chain of previous aesthetic positions and trends that have marked the twentieth century as one of the most artistically active and unpredictable ages ever. It is true, I think, that the artist is something of a reactionary animal. He forges his work out of his responses to developments, trends, and movements that appear in his craft. These responses take many forms--concessions, rejections, departures, assents--and are reflected in the finished work in just as many varied shapes. What is clear is that each emergent aesthetic evolves from a preceding aesthetic, that today's theory grew out of a past and, most likely, recent theory. I do not mean, of course, to deny the validity of the individual imaginative vision; art would be mere mechanics were it not for the unique creative effort that can come only from the artist's soul. It is true, however, that an artist's personal aesthetic belief and practice many times are products of an awareness of previous artistic traditions.

Curiously, these private responses often collect and coalesce into larger and more potent aesthetic movements, or "neo-traditions." There will build, simultaneously, sympathetic and modestly concurrent factions

in several art forms, moving with the solemnity and certainty of sea-waves to overtake and perhaps supplant their predecessors. The history of art is the history of these periods, these movements, these "neo-isms."

And our age is no different. The twentieth century has witnessed surge upon surge of artistic fashions, each one playing upon the other, each one in some way a product of an aesthetic dialectic that manufactures, out of conflict, a new style, a new form, a new ethic. Perhaps no movement has elicited such rabid and promiscuous response as Impressionism, which in its vitality and surprising unorthodoxy bred a host of new traditions, many of which cut across artistic and generic boundaries. This backlash culminated near mid-century in the Neo-Classical movement which, after many years of aesthetic chaos and impulsiveness, sought to reimpose a control and an order over artistic form and content.

Neo-Classicism made its greatest impact on music, where it was identified with the work of such composers as Paul Hindemith, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky, in fact, became the symbol of this Neo-Classical revival in music, a large part of his work being an exercise in recovering and applying the classical forms to his own tonal theories. Yet Stravinsky's classicism was not pure, but tendentious. As Eric Salzman has pointed out, Stravinsky composed almost tongue-in-cheek, his music at times an adventure in parody: "Stravinsky's esthetic is, to some extent, that of art removed to the second degree; that is, art about art or, more to the point, about the experience of art."⁴ Stravinsky, it seems, was one of the first postmodernists, a creator of self-conscious art. His The Rake's Progress, Salzman says, "is a kind of meta-opera, a second-degree opera whose subject matter is largely opera itself."⁵

Stravinsky's opera, completed in 1951, could well be taken as the starting point for all of postmodernist art. It at least opened (with much help from Jorge Luis Borges) the way for the flood of "meta-art" that has characterized the last thirty years: the pop art of Warhol and Rauschenberg, the meta-fiction of Barth and Barthelme, the withdrawal into silence of Beckett and John Cage. Art became (to paraphrase John Barth) the "art of exhaustion." Old forms were revived, but were reshaped by the modern artistic consciousness, a consciousness that perceived the world in a distinctly unclassical mode. What was once heroic became ironic, and ideals and ideas became a way of laughing at the gods and at ourselves. Form became parodic, to fit the postmodern temperament.

In the late 1960's, almost from a sort of reflex, a counter-trend developed that denied the claim that art was spent and dry. This trend embraced a collection of artists (Gardner among and, perhaps, at the head of them) who, while practicing disparate styles in disparate media, all shared a belief in a progressive, hopeful universe in which man and his community advanced through energy and faith. This Neo-Humanistic tendency was built upon a variety of philosophic and aesthetic borrowings and compromises. It blended a visual and representational taste for realism (or, in some cases, social realism) with an appreciation of traditional classical forms and an idealism and sentiment that were distantly romantic.

While any attempt to gather several artists under one convenient label is naturally difficult and uncomfortable, I believe that there are certain people who share most evidently Gardner's humanistic aesthetic, who represent a combination of the already variegated threads of Neo-Humanism. In music, composers such as John Corigliano (whose "unfashionably

Romantic music" and concern for the audience put him at the center of this revival), Warren Benson, and Joseph Baber (Gardner's friend and operatic collaborator) are at work creating a musical style that builds upon the old traditions, ultimately the emotional traditions in music history. In the visual and plastic arts, one might include sculptors such as Henry Moore, Thomas Mallory, and Gardner's friend, the late Nicholas Vergette. One might also mention painters such as John Napper (a friend of Gardner and illustrator of one of his novels), Wayne Thiebaud, Karen Moss, and Jack Beal (who has been clearly marked by the critics as the leader of this drive toward Social Realism and the New Sentimentality in painting⁶). All are artists who celebrate a sort of reality of the eye and heart, who maintain the perceptions of both to be accurate and dependable. Finally, writers such as John Fowles, Larry Woiwode, Mark Helprin,⁷ and Italo Calvino (whom both Gardner and John Barth, Gardner's bitterest metafictionist critic, admire and claim, but for clearly different reasons) all work out of a concern for the continuation of the universe (with its history), and seek the preservation of those forms and ideals that have come to shape the great tradition.

What has happened, in short, is that the Neo-Humanist artist has come to view the world from a different perspective and has relocated the emphases of his art. The Impressionists, following the Romantic lead, depended for their art on the Self, a Self which by definition was shifting and somewhat chaotic (not the Self of Wordsworth or Emerson). The return to classical form ended in a concentration on art itself (which replaces the Self as the center of attention), but an art devoid of living content since the old verities, abandoned for the Romantic concept of the world-

making artist, remained lost. Gardner and other Neo-Humanists do two things. They return to art a content, a human subject that is real and living. And, so to speak, they turn Romanticism on its head by admitting the apparently chaotic nature of the universe at the same time that they affirm the power of art not to make order where none may have existed but to discover order. Gardner insists that order, however invisible it may be most times, exists in reality. (The Romantics assumed it did too, but they insisted that it took the artistic imagination to bring it into full being.) Gardner says that what the artist does is necessary not for the realization of the order but for the salvation of a mankind that struggles in a confusing universe. The artist does not make order "more real" in a cosmic sense, but he makes it quite real to the human beings who need it so desperately and miss finding it so often.⁸

What is most satisfying about Gardner's own art (at least to many people) is that he is so faithful to his own rigid aesthetic and to his metaphysics of the heart. His fictions function by legitimate process and development; Gardner allows his characters to act and to think and to sometimes fail as they humanly should. There is no naivete, no convenient turning of the back to what is real in the world. The real is what drives his characters to act, and to act genuinely. That reality might be located in various sectors of Time and Space, might be historical, mythical, autobiographical, or contemporaneous--but it is ultimately real and believable and discoverable. John Gardner has been faulted for many things--a bourgeois realism and moralism, a reactionary aesthetic, an obnoxious sentimentality--but like his lunatic heroes, he must be admired for the virtuous effort he puts forth in his art: the effort to keep the world sane and loving and convinced of its own moral value. It is the

philosophical consistency and quality of this vision which is Gardner's artistic hallmark and, as I intend to show in the succeeding chapters, his artistic achievement.

PREVIEW

FOOTNOTES

¹John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), p. 6.

²Gardner, On Moral Fiction, p. 5.

³Gardner, On Moral Fiction, p. 14.

⁴Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 47.

⁵Salzman, p. 50.

⁶The sense of morality and of humanity that Beal shares with Gardner is apparent not only in his work but in his remarks which, except for his references to painting, could easily be attributed to Gardner. For example, in a recent article by Jane Cottingham in American Artist 44(November 1980), Beal commented: "'Painters have the ability, the responsibility to make beauty . . . That beauty is more than just a good-looking painting; it also has to do with having a good life, a social responsibility" (p. 61).

⁷Helprin is a good example of the hybrid nature of the neo-humanistic movement, for while his work expresses a clear and sincere human concern, he has personally declared an affection for language that would mark him as a neo-classicist:

"I consider myself a sort of a neo-classicist . . . Most of my reading is in the classics. I read and reread Shakespeare, for example, because he reminds me of what language can do, of what it ought to be. I am quite comfortable being a neo-classicist; because I don't believe that art inevitably evolves. It need not advance but must only be good, for any true work is both an end and a beginning."

(New York Times Book Review, March 1, 1981, p. 35)

⁸I am indebted to Robert Bergstrom for this summation of the development of Self in the art of the twentieth century, and for the demonstration of its connection to the Gardner aesthetic.

Chapter I

The Old Men

Dead brother, give me your hand,
materialized once more in the strange gray room:
bend down and breathe into my dry mouth,
as if with love, the earthsmell of your cold
invulnerable indifference to the world.

"The Visitor"

PREVIEW

John Gardner completed The Old Men in 1958 as his doctoral dissertation at the University of Iowa. Apparently the direction by Ralph Freedman was rather loose; it was a looseness, however, that Gardner appreciated and exploited because he

was writing something that was different from what other people in the workshop were writing, and at that time it was a lot worse than what the people at the workshop were writing. But I didn't like what they wrote, and when I got good I didn't want to be like them when they got good. And so I sort of wrote privately and took medieval courses, and at the last minute some very kind professors let me do a "creative Ph.D.," that is to say, a novel, and I had been taking workshops. I had a very nice deal with the workshop there; there were very good teachers at that time, in fact, some of the best writers in America--Saul Bellow was there, and Herb Gold, and Robert O. Bowen and Marguerite Young and Spencer Tyler and Vance Bourjaily--and I would write and turn in my stories into their mailboxes and not go to any classes, and at the end of the quarter get back my papers with the "A's" on them and no comments. And that was very nice, I didn't want any comments because some writers really want to learn how to write correctly. What that really means is that they write exactly like everybody else. There's another kind of writer who may be worse, sometimes is, who's absolutely stubborn about what he's going to do.

Gardner's insistence on going his own with this dissertation-novel is perhaps the reason it shows those qualities most typical of him as a novelist: the confidence, the broadness, and the somewhat brusque individualism. He was convinced of the worth of his style, though it ran counter to the accepted grain, the slick postmodernist cynicism of the black humorists. Gardner was after something more in the American tradition--in the grand tradition--a realistic and faithfully told story, one with credible characters and ideas solid enough to endure.

At the time of its writing, Gardner was reasonably satisfied with the quality of The Old Men, but the twenty intervening years have dimmed, in his eyes, the book's value. He has told me that it is "a bad book . . . full of flaws and weak writing."² And in many ways this is true. It

is an ambitious book, perhaps overpopulated and sprawling, with many of its resolutions unearned. The writing is at times naive, embarrassingly over-complex and over-played, and shamefully melodramatic. Still it is an important work in that it reveals the shapes of things to come. It is, certainly, "early Gardner," the product of a twenty-five-year-old writer, but it is buttressed by nearly ten years of fiction apprenticeship, of story-writing and story-telling.

Part of the importance of The Old Men lies in its relation to the remainder of the Gardner canon. It is the touchstone for comparison, for from it can be traced certain patterns of development, various growths and recessions. It is an obvious source for subject and idea in the later works; places, names, and themes spring up in more recent novels and stories that first appeared in this dissertation-novel. Gardner, quite early on, seemed to know where he wished to go in his fiction, and The Old Men serves as a literary roadsign, pointing out thematic direction to his works to come.

Most apparent is the mere geography: The Catskills. The Old Men is part, one might say, of a "Catskill Pair" whose other half is the novel Nickel Mountain.³ The Mohawk Valley of New York provides the setting for both novels, and in both books we find looming over the characters the forested humps of Crow and Nickel Mountain. The names are invented, but their awesome physicality is authentic. For Gardner, as for Cooper, the Catskills and their environs offer a proving ground for the testing of men and women and their ideas.

Among these ideas is the inevitability of old age and death, of mortality. Beneath the near agelessness of the hills, all too age-conscious man struggles to outwit (or outwait) the finality of dying. It is a theme

later dealt with in The Resurrection, Grendel, Nickel Mountain, and October Light, and is perhaps Gardner's prime philosophic concern.

Also present is the notion of ghosts and visions, of dreams and nightmares. The human imagination is a creative force and is shaped (so Gardner maintains) by personal belief and development. The ability to envision the immaterial and the questionable is important for Gardner. His visionaries are special and peculiar people, ones marked for private, but important destinies. We see this idea played upon again in The Resurrection, Nickel Mountain, The King's Indian, and October Light, wherein certain characters possess certain imaginative qualities that are explored and annotated.

There too are characters in almost every Gardner fiction, and beginning in The Old Men, who are forced to confront the shocks of accident and grief. The universe is causal, but surprising; events are related to one another in causal sequence, but that sequence does not always reveal itself to human rationality or knowledge. The seer is the rare talent who can reach back far enough into history, unravel the connections, and make predictions and pronouncements upon the future. Most of us, however, are caught unawares by the mishaps of the cosmos and so often assume unnecessary responsibility for actions that hold no relation to us. In The Old Men, as well as in The Resurrection, The Wreckage of Agathon, Grendel, Nickel Mountain, and October Light, people know logical and illogical suffering, the kinds of pain that come in a volatile world.

To combat this felt anguish, Gardner offers love--an old solution, but not, in Gardner's case, a sentimental one. Wounds are salved by strength of community, constancy of faith, temperance of ideals. Bizarrely

enough, love and hate spring from the same source, and are often the weird progeny of each other. Such love-hate relationships are at work in The Old Men, where they generate much of the book's physical and psychological action; and they reappear in every one of Gardner's later works or adult fiction.

Finally, there are other, lesser ideas that randomly turn up in Gardner's fiction that first appear in The Old Men. There is the notion of youthful perversity and iniquity (The Resurrection, Nickel Mountain, October Light); the sterility of institutionalized religion (Nickel Mountain, The King's Indian, October Light) and the revitalizing force of art, particularly music (The Resurrection, Grendel, The King's Indian, October Light); and the idea of "modeling," or character formation based on role models (The Resurrection, October Light). In short, there is an impressive quantity of technical and intellectual substance that has made its way from The Old Men, in whatever re-carved form, into Gardner's later writings. The Old Men is a marred work, but hardly one to be benignly swept off into a corner, mused at as a curious, but ultimately jejune piece of craft.

The Old Men is set within the Catskill Mountains, in Slater, New York--a small town with a small university. It lies cordoned by mountains: to the north, Crow Mountain; to the south, Hood Mountain; and to the west, "the local giant," Nickel Mountain. Nickel Mountain is just one of the hauntings of Slater; its past is mysterious, its origins so unclear that

No one could say how the mountain had gotten its name. Perhaps it was a distortion of some pre-Monhawanta Indian name, or perhaps it was that once, near the mountain's base, a mine shaft had been sunk in search of nickel. None had been found. Instead, the miners had made the vaguely disquieting discovery that Nickel⁴ Mountain was hollowed out inside, like a meeting place of the gods.

Nickel Mountain rises, ghost-like, over the town, an enigma to the men who live at its base. "It was not simply that men had hanged themselves on Nickel Mountain or that the dead had been seen walking there, palpable, gray-white, thoughtful, for the mystery had come earlier, was perhaps implicit in the mountain's lines or in its two lakes, set close together like huge misshapen eyes" (4). The mountain is a malign presence that commands awed attention.

Slater is also pervaded by the spirit of age, of infinite and tiresome years. As the title suggests, the town is peopled with "old men," men who have drawn out their lives in Slater, men who will die in Slater. They are farmers and professors, fanatics and skeptics, but they are all aged, and all share the same backward vision that comes with time and experience. The "old men" are the keepers of the legends, the storytellers, the preservers of myth. They are bent-spined old men in search of a tale and a truth as they drift off toward death. They are lined and grizzled, some wise and some crazed. Some are like living ghosts, men who have already passed through "the gentle decline toward the grave."

Amidst the legends and ghosts and near-ghosts walks the spirit of Lawrence Emery Leigh, Slater's "great man." The town, like all else, had been dying in the mid-19th-century when Leigh appeared. A "dentist and Methodist preacher," Leigh quickly established a seminary (later to become Leigh University--also dying) and generally looked after the spiritual life of the town, until (as one of Slater's men tells it), "Leigh was murdered in a Nickel Mountain tavern, where he'd gone to preach. It seems as he lay there, or kneeled there, dying . . . he promised to keep an eye on Slater, alive or dead. Promised to come

back from the grave to keep the town righteous" (47). And to many of the men and women in Slater, Leigh is indeed still keeping the village honest.

Naturally, there are believers and non-believers. Those who accept the legend accept it in varying ways. Sam Ghoki is an aging Jehovah's Witness, a doctrinaire and a visionary, but his visions are forced. His morality is strict and overbearing, and he seeks to repress and obscure, instead of cultivate pure instinct. He is a man caught in the sweep of time, a man so bundled up in his blind belief and mortal guilt that he cannot deal with the realities of the present life. He is a tyrant to his daughter Ginger, a 16-year-old whose precocity only torments old Ghoki the more. He sees the world in spiritual symbols, as emblems of a warped theology: "He, old Ghoki, like Nickel Mountain, and like the ghost of Lawrence Leigh--like both, for the two were one, and one with himself and one with Almighty Jehovah--he was another kind of metaphor, and he went his way" (8).

Ghoki's is just one type of belief, a narrow and egotistical sort of belief that denies the legend's impressive power. A broader and more imaginative sort of belief is that held by Professor Utt, an aging man who earnestly seeks to maintain the wonderful essence of the myth. He affirms the presence of the ghost, exalts its purpose, and refutes its mere whimsicalness. Leigh appears to those who are faithful to him, who have the sensitivity (whether conscious of it or not) to detect his coming. Says Utt:

"These young people, and the baked old men you see rocking on their porches, believe in Leigh's ghost. The thing's a force, a bullwhip for evil in a world where none of us knows, for sure, what's evil and what's not. That's the terror." The definition--

the exact location of the basis of terror--was good, an insight he hadn't expected. And the light of the insight drove him on. He knew, well enough, what was happening to him; it had happened many times. Nevertheless, he leaned forward farther, punching out his words with the stem of his pipe. "I've seen strapping eighteen-year-olds run like sheep till they fell down sobbing, beating the shale, because they'd seen Leigh's face." (49-50)

Cynics enrage Utt, as do the quantifiers and logicians of myth. He rails against "the scientification of ghosts: poetry not as search but as lament" (51). In their ability to envision, Utt and Ghoki are kin, but Ghoki's vision is pernicious, while the Professor's is healthful and restorative.

Among the skeptics is old Lorward, like Utt a professor at the university. Lorward is a scientist, a wizened and wise old man, "deep-brained" and owl-like with "Merlin's eyes." His perceptiveness is unnerving; it travels beyond deduction to near mind-reading. He is Gardner's oracle and seer, though his visions are not always blessed. He neither accepts nor rejects the folklore of Lawrence Leigh, but he approaches it doubtingly, a hand kept behind his back. What is most strange, though, is Lorward's clear resemblance to old Leigh himself. Like Leigh, Lorward is bearded, hook-nosed, and gray: "Lorward's black coat, in the mirror image, sank from his humped back to a point a few inches below each shoulder, and the tip of his frayed, dark brown vest, just visible under the beard, was loose, revealing behind it a frayed white shirt with yellowing buttons, sagging from the old, hollow chest; unreal. The voice, though, was as deep and full-bodied as the voice of the cello" (41). He is Leigh's avatar, a man who lives with gray cats in rooms with old furniture and cobwebbed picture frames. People are afraid to meet his eyes. He knows more than anyone around him.