

THREE AFFIRMISTS
Lionel Trilling, Wayne Booth, and John Gardner
And a brief negative manifesto

Negative Poetics, chapter 9
University of Iowa Press, 1992
revised August, 2005

Edward Jayne

The sixties decade (roughly between 1963 and 1973) was unique for its anarchistic extravagance. The Vietnam War combined with the black protest movement produced a heightened level of anarchism that featured the rejection of the status quo in just about every realm of endeavor. Of course there was also opposition to the protest movement, led by such figures as Howe, Podhoretz, Bell, and Glazer, among others, and, as to be expected, a full-scale period of reaction began to mount once Vietnam ceased to dominate the headlines. This was when many in the field of literary criticism, somewhat reticent during the period of anarchism, suddenly dedicated themselves to their own version of political commitment in their rejection of radical activism. An entirely different *Zeitgeist* asserted itself, so a collective purposefulness seemed needed, as well as a new theory of literature, a new vision of politics, and, most important, a new version of social responsibility. Scientific objectivity emphasized by Bertrand Russell and dialectics emphasized by Jean Paul Sartre were both obviously too dangerous to be tolerated at excessive levels, as had been amply demonstrated during the previous decade. What best suited the task turned out to be a heightened level of doubt to cleanse the public mind of knee-jerk leftist certitudes, followed by a gathering appreciation for orthodox quietude. The first of these steps was best served by modernized Pyrrhonian skepticism that featured indeterminacy and relentless intertextuality as opposed to the insistence on referential verification. Ugly truths could be ignored in favor of endless significations justified by the acceptance of the ultimate truth that the truth is finally inaccessible. The second step was to grant orthodox truths their due as being no less true than any others whereupon the sixties could be treated as a forgotten nightmare.

This tacit reactionary withdrawal strategy was most obvious with the relatively quick acceptance of French-imported theories of structuralism and deconstructionism, structuralism led by Levi-Strauss and Barthes during the mid-sixties, and deconstructionism led by Derrida and Foucault with the belated support of Barthes just a couple of years later. By the mid-seventies it was deconstructionism that totally prevailed, structuralism having been reduced almost to the status of a footnote. Derivative of Russian Formalism, structuralism had not been entirely up to the job. It had emphasized textuality as opposed to raw behavior), and this was useful enough, but its version of textuality was limited to the investigation of form as a *mélange* of synchronic binarisms at the expense of diachronic process (hence politics as an agent of change), much as advocated by Russian formalists such as Jakobson and Shklovsky at the time of the Russian Revolution. In contrast, but ultimately with better results, deconstructionism emphasized the rejection of form as well as any possibility of outright praxis by stretching intertextuality to generate endless significations without closure. Also excluded from consideration were radical politics and Marxist dialectics, both of which had primarily concerned Sartre during his final years. Having

declared his Marxist assumptions in *Search for a Method*, published in 1963, Sartre was thus "out," and Derrida and Foucault were "in," as was Roland Barthes, whose opposition to Sartre's politics extended back to the mid-fifties. It was in the late sixties, then, that these intrepid soldiers of reaction from France penetrated American academia, first at Johns Hopkins and SUNY of Buffalo, later everywhere, but most of all Yale and other major universities. Not surprisingly, their cutting-edge substitute for egalitarian politics turned to be instrumental in promoting a new elitism that featured a random (and often incorrect) assortment of knowledge almost entirely devoid of Marxist contamination. Intellection had become strictly verbal--Bakhtinian "voice" alone--in lectures and instant books, admired for its wise opacity and imitated by a rapidly gathering throng of deconstructionist epigones to the extent that they could bend, tear, and spindle their particular versions of cryptic obscurity in comparable fashion.

An indigenous American reaction to sixties activism also rose to the challenge at about the same time, promulgated by such journals as *Commentary*, *Dissent*, *The Partisan Review*, and *The Public Interest*. Also, the remnants of New Criticism seem to have converged with those of archetypal criticism as well as the New York and Chicago schools of criticism in their shared disapprobation toward the Left.. Northrop Frye expressed his opposition to the radical cause in his fascinating but problematic book, *The Critical Path*, published in 1977 (-reviewed elsewhere on my website), advocating the myth of freedom at the expense of leftist myths of concern. Robert Penn Warren also put himself on record with a somewhat comparable objective in his wise but simplistic book *Democracy & Poetry* (Harvard, 1975), a populist essay advocating the restitution of selfhood through a relatively benign celebration of life. All in all, however, most of the critics supportive of this perspective, Warren and Frye included, had much less impact during the seventies than the structuralists and deconstructuralists, sometimes described along with others as post-structuralists. Nevertheless, the insights of Frye, Warren, and others who shared their opinion were for the most part more germane--at least lucid and easier to read relative to the complexity of their arguments.

So it seems useful to address their now neglected contribution with an emphasis on some of the more intricate of their arguments. Toward this end I want to take into account three seminal books of literary criticism hostile to the ideology of the sixties: Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*, published in 1972, Wayne Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, published in 1974, and John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*, published in 1978. Trilling was at the time the high priest of the so-called New York School of Criticism, many of its practitioners (not including Trilling) having been thirties activists; Booth was the most eminent of the younger critics identified with the so-called Chicago School of criticism, which had earlier featured a rigorous version of Aristotelian formalism; and Booth, eminent as both author and critic at a relatively young age, represented free-floating intellectuals in search for better answers during the seventies. The convergence of the three was in their shared effort to eradicate leftist vulgarity. Each of their conservative assessments provided what amounted to a manifesto that was clearly intact and complete unto itself, but the advance among these manifestos also suggests a more inclusive intertextual unity expressive of the mounting conservatism at the time. The first two attempted to turn leftist dialectics against itself in the interpretation of literature, while the third could abandon the effort as being no longer necessary in favor of a relatively orthodox affirmative assessment of literary achievement. Nevertheless, its unspoken political viewpoint can be demonstrated to be roughly the same. All three rejected the posture of freedom and authenticity emphasized by the

protest movement by pursuing the essentially complementary virtues of, (1) sophisticated inauthenticity as recommended by Trilling, (2) systematic assent as recommended by Booth, and (3) the pursuit of useful practical applications within the context of fiction as recommended by Gardner:

- stage 1: simple negation inauthenticity as a rejection of authenticity
- stage 2: *Negationsnegierung* systematic assent as a better version of authenticity
- stage 3: Affirmative Fallacy upbeat values featured, including integrity and individualism

Appropriately, the trend among the three was cumulative, hence linear, so both denial and metonymic designification may be detected in their sequence. What I want to demonstrate is that Trilling and Booth denied to affirm relatively early during the period of reaction, while Gardner, who came later, resorted to a more conventional use of affirmation in order to ignore what had already been denied. If it makes any sense, one might say their phylogenetic use of denial to liberate literary criticism from radical politics effectively replicated the ontogenetic use of denial involved in the Affirmative Fallacy. Denial was essential to all three of them, but it was finally their sequence that confirmed their collective success in this effort.

1.

Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*,¹ the first of the three conservative testaments to have been published, was also the most complex because of its ingenious historical treatment of the two concepts linked by its title, sincerity and authenticity. Superficially, Trilling praised the three-hundred-year evolution of sincerity until it was finally reduced to parody by the protest movement of the sixties. In Trilling's opinion, sincerity was always a useful virtue when it was suitably constrained, but once exaggerated out of proportion it became a potentially dangerous public illusion. According to Trilling, sincerity's status as a virtue first took root at the time of Shakespeare, when the reckless disregard of ethics epitomized by Machiavellian villains led to the pursuit of villainy as an end in and of itself. Trilling sketched sincerity's later evolution both in its Continental tradition from Rameau's Nephew by Diderot to Rousseau, Robespierre, Goethe, Schiller, Nietzsche, and Freud, and its pragmatic English tradition that featured narrative sincerity from Shaftesbury to Austen, Wordsworth, George Eliot, Ruskin, Wilde, and Conrad. Trilling confessed admiring English tradition's collective insistence upon a tangible "thereness" in dealing with moral issues, but he was even more fascinated by the relative sophistication of Continental theory, and he attributed its misapplication during the sixties to simplistic trends brought to their culmination in the theories of Laing, Cooper, and Norman O. Brown. Trilling proposed that a better balance is needed, and that this can be provided by consulting either the Continental or English tradition once its implicit constraints are fully understood. Otherwise, he suggested, sincerity can be taken to such an extreme that it becomes virtually a threat to civilization.

A superficial reading of Trilling's book suggests he was trying to resurrect a balanced theory of sincerity as the basis for social and literary discourse. However, an entirely different picture emerges once his exposition is reexamined in dialectic terms, since his undercurrent of negative assumptions finally overshadows his numerous affirmative protestations. Not until the

last sentence of his book did Trilling provide the key to the entire exposition, but he expressed his final view in a Judeo-Christian allusion with sufficient complexity that its full implications are easily overlooked:

The falsities of an alienated social reality are rejected [nowadays] in favor of an upward psychopathic mobility to the point of divinity, each one of us a Christ--but with none of the inconvenience of undertaking to intercede, of being a sacrifice, of reasoning with rabbis, of making sermons, of having disciples, of going to weddings and to funerals, of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished. (pp. 171-172)

Appropriately, Trilling completed his polemic with the words "it is finished," bringing his argument with a close with a declared sense of an ending suggestive of Christ's final words on the cross according to the Gospel of John. Trilling obviously intended the allusion, but he also used these words to imply his wish to be done with the revolutionary pretensions of the sixties, since its activists lacked the wisdom and responsibility to justify any commitment to their particular truths. According to Trilling, their extreme self-indulgence has reduced sincerity to the expression of uncompromising dissatisfaction rather than honest social responsibility, as had been its original aim. Once an agent of social cohesion, sincerity instead invited anarchy and economic breakdown, thus coming full circle in its transition from an integrative and vitalizing influence to a destructive force of new and unprecedented levels of mindlessness.

But to what virtue, exactly, did Trilling oppose this decadent worship of sincerity? The answer remains unclear unless "it is finished" is fully understood relevant to his earlier assertion emphasizing the value "of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished." Obviously what was finished were the ideological pretensions of the sixties, so much less impressive in the viewpoint of Trilling than their counterpart in the behavior of Christ. This linear and essentially Aristotelian transition from start to finish (the fall of the New Left) must also be understood in light of Trilling's remark earlier in the chapter that British fiction's narrative excellence depends on its inauthentic behavior (pp. 135-36)--probably something on the order of Sartre's doubled self resulting from Heidegger's failure in self-examination. Without exactly declaring himself, Trilling advocated the abandonment of the shibboleth of authenticity during the sixties for a more sophisticated cultivation of inauthenticity. Featured by Sartre as well as the New Left, the worship of authenticity was in Trilling's opinion the principle malady of the protest movement. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, Trilling accordingly praised the deceptive empathy of literary illusion as an appropriate substitute:

[T]here is something inauthentic for our time in being held spellbound, momentarily forgetful of oneself, concerned with the fate of a person who is not oneself but who also, by reason of the spell that is being cast, is oneself, his conduct and his destiny bearing upon the reader's own (p. 135).

In the same context Trilling also quoted Richard Gilman to the same effect, putting emphasis on the escapist value of narrative deception:

. . . it is precisely that element of fiction which coerces and degrades it into a mere alternative to life, like life, only better of course, a dream (or a serviceable nightmare), a

way out, a recompense, a blueprint, a lesson. A chief part of the inauthenticity of narration would seem to be its assumption that life is susceptible of comprehension and thus of management. It is the nature of narration to explain; it cannot help telling how things are and even why they are that way.² [italics added]

How does narration promote this inauthenticity? For Trilling it does so by imposing a linear sequence of events that promises a significance probably at odds with normal expectations:

But a beginning implies an end, with something in the middle to connect them. The beginning is not merely the first in a series of events; it is the event that originates those that follow. And the end is not merely the ultimate event, the cessation of happening; it is a significance or at least the promise, dark or bright, of a significance. (p. 130)

For Trilling this inauthentic "significance" or "promise of a significance" typical of literary form could nevertheless be valuable. He asked of this narrative capacity: "Can we, in this day and age, submit to a mode of explanation so primitive, so flagrantly Aristotelian?" His answer to his own question implicit in his final sentence was that our destiny does in fact depend on narrative simplifications, turning back the clock to that stage in human development when sincerity could be organized in the insincere context of narrative form. That Trilling saved this answer for his final remark gave narrative impact to this insight as a useful truth for those readers willing to accept his assumptions. In effect, his placement of his culminating insight in its terminal position disclosed (or actually boasted of) his realization that he too was capable of engaging in narrative deception toward the experience of truth--in this one particular instance by declaring the value of ritualized deception in strictly positive terms and within his own linear context of narrative form.

Trilling's fascination with insincerity is also apparent throughout his survey of the continental philosophers concerned with the issue. He expressed his admiration of Diderot's Rameau's Nephew, for example because it "lays bare the principle of insecurity upon which society is based and demonstrates the loss of personal integrity and dignity that the impersonations of social existence entail" (p. 31). Trilling likewise quoted and elucidated Hegel's explanation of truth as one particular mode of successful alienation:

The truth of the self at a certain stage of its historical development, consists in its being not true to itself, in there being no self to be true to: the truth for self, for spirit, consists precisely in shamelessness. "The content uttered by spirit and uttered about itself," Hegel says, "is . . . the inversion and perversion of all conceptions and realities, a universal deception of itself and others. . . . The shamelessness manifested in stating this deceit is just on that account the greatest truth."³

Trilling apparently agreed with Hegel's dialectic explanation that the final truth consists of the shameless acknowledgement of deception's necessity. Moreover, he suggested a need for comparable shamelessness today if we too are to be true to ourselves on a mature basis.

To explain Rousseau's modification of this dialectic, Trilling summarized the argument of his First Discourse to the effect that literature bears a unique role in perverting and undermining our natural virtues:

It is literature that is the pre-eminent agent of man's corruption, the essence or paradigm of the inherent falsehood of civilized society. Literature embodies the very principle of society, which is the individual's abnegation of autonomy in order to win the forbearance and esteem of others. (p. 60)

As explained by Trilling, Rousseau attacked literature because it teaches individuals to curtail their natural feelings in order to be accepted by their peers. Trilling obviously agreed with Rousseau's thesis--that fiction bears an inhibitive influence--but disagreed with Rousseau's conclusion that reading fiction should therefore be discouraged. Quite the contrary, Trilling suggested, this inhibitive influence is fiction's most valuable lesson. Trilling was critical of Rousseau's pretensions of honesty in *The Confessions*, but he also respected Rousseau's willingness to countenance dishonesty as an important source of social integration. When Trilling discussed Rousseau's essay on contemporary drama, for example, one senses his rapport:

The claim made for the theater that it advances moral enlightenment is met by Rousseau with impatient incredulity. The purpose of the theatre is to please, and such moral judgment as it makes is accepted to the extent that it is pleasurable, which is to say, so far as it confirms and flatters the settled views of the audience. (p. 63).

By implication, the moral enlightenment attributed to the theater does little more than confirm and flatter one's settled views. This is an opinion could not bring himself to acknowledge, but he did quote with approval the passage in which Rousseau made this point.

With comparable subversiveness, Trilling resorted to etymology in tracing the word authenticity from the Greek word *authentio*, pointing out that its original definition included both murder and suicide. Trilling also took obvious pleasure in quoting Oscar Wilde's epigrams that the first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible, that all bad poetry springs from genuine feeling, that an individual must first be given a mask to tell you the truth, and that truth in art is that whose contradictions is also true (pp. 131, 118-20). In every instance, Trilling, like Milton, seems to have been of the devil's party, more interested in undermining than in reforming the doctrine of authenticity important to the sixties protest movement.

The same perspective emerges in Trilling's discussion of psychoanalysis, which he defined as a narrative science whose awareness of deceptionist contradictions affords its ethical value. Explaining psychoanalysis on a sociological basis, Trilling traced neurosis to the breakdown of the nuclear family and the consequent loss of authority exercised by parents. Drawing upon the thinking of sociologist David Riesman, he argued that the current abandonment of narrative inauthenticity may directly reflect the decline in traditional family life:

And perhaps the low status of narration can be thought to have a connection with revisions of the child's relation to the family--traditionally the family has been a narrative institution: it was the past and it had a tale to tell of how things began, including the child himself; and it had counsel to give. (p. 139)

In other words, the nuclear family is to be praised as an institution because its narrative

inauthenticity fosters both ethics and cultural continuity. If uncompromising sincerity leads to the breakdown of the family, the dislocation that results exceeds any of its benefits. Later Trilling favorably quoted Marcuse much to the same effect, contrasting individualization based on adequate parental authority to the nonliterary deficiencies resulting from accelerated peer orientation among preadolescent children:

But in our contemporary cultural situation, Marcuse says, with the authority of the family, especially of the father, much diminished, the individual's ego "has shrunk to such a degree that the multiform antagonistic processes between id, ego, and superego cannot unfold themselves in their classic form." In the present dispensation "the formation of the mature ego seems to skip the stage of individualization," with the result that "the generic atom becomes directly a social atom."⁴

Trilling's repetition of this argument reinforced his point that diminished patriarchal authority undermines both the Oedipus complex and the early appreciation of narrative form as important states in gaining full maturity. Instead, there is a disproportionate emphasis upon authenticity, which permits supposedly liberated individuals to justify their antisocial behavior with an exaggerated faith in freedom, self-fulfillment, and hip-relatedness. Trilling was dubious of psychoanalysis as a cure resulting from increased self-awareness. Instead he suggested, the real benefit of this "narrative science" derive from pitting inhibition against raw impulse, counterathesis and cathesis, and, most important, conscience (or superego) against the libido and by extension the ego itself.

Trilling contrasted normal expressiveness with the extremes encouraged by an exaggerated commitment to sincerity. Uncompromising sincerity might lead self-confession to the brink of psychosis, as advocated by Laing and Cooper, but for the individual with a healthy ego, the basic goal of expressiveness is to be encouraged: "[B]eneath the appearance of every human phenomenon there lies concealed a discrepant actuality and . . . intellectual, practical, and (not least) moral advantage is to be gained by forcibly bringing it to light" (p. 142). Presumably, this "discrepant actuality" may be consulted only if one possesses an ego cultivated by parental identification and the narrative values it implies. And in the final analysis, this capacity is only relative. "We are all neurotic," Trilling declared, establishing as "mature" the necessary dialectic interaction between expressiveness and our narrative commitment to appropriate behavior.

Trilling emphatically disagreed with Jean-Paul Sartre's effort in *Being and Nothing* to reject psychoanalysis because it undermines sincerity rather than encouraging it. As explained by Trilling, Sartre consigned all repressive behavior to the designation of inauthenticity, or bad faith, since, "in order to carry out its function, the censor must engage in purposive acts of perception and discrimination which are of the very nature of consciousness . . . that the censor must have a consciousness of 'being conscious of the drive to be repressed, but precisely in order not to be conscious of it'" (pp. 147-47). Trilling approved of Sartre's explanation of bad faith's censorship dynamics, but disagreed with his conclusion that these dynamics guarantee the failure of psychoanalysis to come to terms with human conduct. Praising psychoanalysis for exactly the qualities offensive to Sartre, he asked, "Must we not say that Freud's theory of the mind and of society has at its core a flagrant inauthenticity which it deplores but accepts as essential in the mental structure?" (p. 154) Here Trilling admitted that he was primarily drawn to Freudian

psychoanalysis by its theoretical acceptance of inauthenticity as an organizing principle of consciousness. Because classical Freudian psychoanalysis encourages displacement, sublimation, and a grab bag of other avoidance strategies, it can be considered superior to the confessional excesses that Laing and Cooper praised in their simplistic celebration of schizophrenia. As in the cases of Diderot, Hegel, Rousseau, Austen, Conrad, and even Marcuse, Trilling saw in psychoanalysis a complexity of vision that subordinates raw truth to a civilizing emphasis on misrepresentation.

Why, then, must Trilling be included in the category of affirmists? Trilling's concept of sincerity more or less corroborates the negative principles I have been trying, but like Hegel and Marcuse, Trilling finally believed that fiction's inauthenticity teaches readers to recognize and neutralize the comparable inauthenticity they encounter in the real world without entirely rejecting it. According to Trilling, fiction's untruths expose the untruths that dominate our daily behavior, thus encouraging our pursuit of genuine truths. More simply explained, he believed that "the authentic work of art instructs us in our inauthenticity and adjures us to overcome it" (p. 100). With this basically affirmative conclusion I must disagree, if for no other reason than the credulousness of most readers and critics in their appreciation of literary truth. As opposed to Trilling's notion that fiction tells its share of untruths to induce the recognition of the extent to which untruths dominate our lives, the model I am proposing assigns to fiction a limitless capacity to deceive and be deceived pleurably without stirring any such insight. Readers, for example, do not finish *Pride and Prejudice* delighted because of all the lies and distortions their acceptance of the story has brought to their attention. Instead, they cherish at least a conditional or suspended truth the results of a story that verges on the preposterous. How many readers scan their memory to recall all the fiction they have read, proclaiming, "What lies, what wonderful lies?" Not even Trilling declares this to be the source of fiction's broad public appeal.

However, it is only with Trilling's final sentence that we fully recognize his attraction to insincerity's virtue as a narrative achievement, and here at last we discover that local insight had been our journey's purpose, that the instances of insincerity exposed by Trilling provided, for him at least, the saving grace of the theories he chose to elaborate in defense of insincerity as an affirmative standard. Earlier, Trilling quoted Andre Gide that one cannot at the same time both be sincere and seem so, or, more to the point, that one cannot be totally sincere in advocating the final necessity of this particular virtue (p. 70). Vice Versa, Trilling showed in his book that one cannot be totally sincere in advocating the advantages of insincerity. Too wise to try to bridge the difference, Trilling settled for a narrative statement (insincere) of his crisis (the elusiveness of sincerity) in the final major work of his criticism.

2.

Published two years later in 1974, Wayne Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, based on a lecture series at Notre Dame, offered a more strident commitment to the Affirmative Fallacy.⁵ Its organization lacked the elegant subversiveness of Trilling's book, but this deficiency was redressed by a unique blend of high ethics and dialectic evasiveness that gave it literary value of its own. Like Trilling, Booth formulated his ideas in reaction to the rhetorical excesses of the protest movement of the late sixties and early seventies. In Booth's view, the angry irrationalism of the antiwar protesters was both directly and indirectly the result of scientific

enthusiasm and the excesses of depth analysis infiltrating the realm of personal ethics. He isolated two fallacies supportive of this trend, "scientism" and "motivism," and argued that they discourage one's confidence in the world we know that is otherwise permeated with values. In Booth's opinion, motivism prevents the appreciation of virtue for its intrinsic worth, and the scientific method's relentless dependence on skepticism and uncompromising behaviorism has so pervasively biased social attitudes that a mindless quest for underlying truths has come to undermine the very fabric of our society (pp. 24-26).

Booth accordingly rejected the systematic empirical standards of science as well as the therapeutic effort to penetrate human behavior in pursuit of a "secret motive." In his opinion these seemingly harmless pursuits, taken far enough, serve to justify the Marxist emphasis on class struggle and the Freudian pursuit of psychological maladjustment, both of which distract our attention from the most important goal of all: systematic assent, the shared belief in obvious standards of truth and behavior at all levels of discourse. The primary need, Booth proposed, is for a moral renaissance that disposes of mindless nihilistic extremes typified by scientism and psychoanalysis by injecting values "back into the domain of knowledge" through systematic assent. Many of the social dropouts in the sixties and early seventies might have felt they shared Booth's antagonism to behaviorism, but Booth insisted that their reaction was strictly nihilist, hence in the spirit of behaviorism. Booth instead advocated a more responsible commitment to received values as cultivated by appropriate public discourse supportive of (you guessed it) systematic assent. It should be mentioned here, as far as I can determine, that Booth's vision of systematic assent closely approximates the notion of *Doxa* (orthodox opinion) that the French critic Barthes repeatedly assailed in his criticism, so to this extent at least the intellectual perspective of these two critics diverged at a very basic level.

Booth's defense of received opinion necessitated an appreciation of rhetoric, he argued, as not only a "supremely self-justifying activity" (p. 138), but also the intellectual battlefield between radical ideology and traditionalist values inculcated through systematic assent. Since the ideology of the protest movement had become essentially rhetorical, Booth argued, his refutation of its principles could likewise draw upon rhetoric, in his case by resurrecting classical standards that originally linked ethics and persuasiveness, as to be observed for example in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (in fact a wonderful book). As Booth explained in a footnote, his purpose was "only to undermine confidence in the [modernist] dogmas and thus restore practical confidence in a process that might, as one product, buttress a variety of philosophies" (p. 143). What variety he had in mind he did not try to elucidate before his Notre Dame audience. He also claimed to rely on dialectic exchange as the best way to establish the truth, but his approach was obviously derivative of Platonic dialectics, emphasizing audience appeal at the sacrifice of potentially tedious intricate analysis. At war with the New Left's rhetorical exaggerations, he himself too often capitulated to the tendency with sweeping generalizations that can easily be denied. There was obvious categorical excess, for example, when he declared that "modern philosophy . . . has saddled us with standards of truth under which no man can live," or, that "motivism entails fearful consequences which no one can live for thirty seconds" (pp. xii, 32). These exaggerations might seem impressive to a sympathetic audience, but submitted to careful scrutiny they readily dissolve into absurdity.

Booth's most annoying rhetorical transgression was his unfortunate habit of calling upon his

listeners (readers as well as his original audience) to confirm by their silent assent the universal validity of his arguments. He challenged dissenters to disclose who might ever have felt, for example, that the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is not ironic, or that Bach's B Minor Mass is not a profound a moving experience. This rhetorical tactic might have been effective at the time Booth spoke, but it is of questionable value in establishing the truth of his argument. For example, Bach's choral music, as opposed to his organ and chamber music, tends to bore many listeners (it was all but ignored for the better part of two centuries), and Austen's initial use of admittedly blatant irony no less frequently escapes the attention of readers, as any English professor can confirm who has taught Austen's novels with honest feedback from his students at the undergraduate level. Why? Because young readers tend to skim, as do older readers as well. Both of Booth's argument might have been convincing in front of his audience at the time. However, they could just as easily have been challenged in a smaller forum at a secular university. And in the context of a published book, careful readers too often find themselves reduced to the task of sifting an author's arguments with more than usual caution to determine their validity, quite aside from their rhetorical persuasiveness.

Not surprisingly, Booth rejected scientific verification standards and proposed in their stead the "ancient and natural command to 'assent pending this disproof'" (p. 101). Toward this end he denied the value of empirical methodology by proposing his own version of an if-then deduction: "If we know only what survives after we have done our best to doubt, we are driven to conclude that most of our action has no cognitive base, since we almost always act on propositions that have not been proved in this sense" (pp. 103-4). Again one must challenge his assumption, since most human knowledge derives from repeated observation rather than experiment, and the useful but random benefits of day-to-day perceptions pending disproof on a relatively haphazard basis do not and should not be expected to demonstrate the shortcomings of the scientific method. Since Strato first resorted to crude laboratory experiments in the third century, B.C., the systematic empirical standards explained by John Dewey's principle of warranted assertibility have compelled stringent verification standards in all scientific matters without exception. Simply enough, anything that cannot be proved one way or the other (for example the existence of God) is not the stuff of science. And when assent pending disproof applies to popular misconceptions (ghosts, Santa Claus, etc.), their disproof compels the withdrawal of assent, at least among educated adults. Again, the contrast with Barthes becomes plain: assent not pending disproof asrecommended by Booth by happenstance typifies the concept of *Doxa* loathed by Barthes when it compels the acceptance of orthodox beliefs. Booth's cure turns out to have been Barthes's disease, though both were formulated in opposition to leftist activism--Barthes' animosity toward Sartre's concept of engagement, and Booth's animosity toward the scientism and political motivism of the sixties supposedly promoted by Russell. In effect, Barthes rejected radical politics in favor of zero-degree neutrality, while Booth rejected it in favor of a conventional acceptance of the status quo.

Booth did qualify his advocacy of systematic assent with William James's caveat that we cannot permit ourselves to be "flooded with every belief that anyone offers," and that we must begin "only with those beliefs that really recommend themselves to us" (p. 107). Indeed, this qualification seems necessary, as demonstrated by the thousands of collective assumptions "that really recommend themselves" but are proven wrong at a later time. These have included, for example, animist superstitions and the flat-earth hypotheses that still enjoy respectability in some

backward societies. No less erroneous have been widespread assumptions about sex, race, health, personality, physiognomy, religion, history, and national destiny. According to a recent poll, fewer than one-third of the American public realize the Soviet Union was an ally of the United States during World War II, and the overwhelming majority of the American public was convinced during the Vietnam War that our defeat and withdrawal would produce a domino effect (which it did not) and that the Gulf of Tonkin attack occurred and thus justified a full-scale invasion (which it did not). For in fact ignorance is widespread among even the most educated individuals. Ask almost anybody in the northern hemisphere whether the earth comes closer to the sun in the summer or winter and majority opinion establishes by "systematic assent" that the sun comes closer in the summer, despite the hard astronomical fact that the distance is the shortest on about January 3. This vulnerability of popular misconceptions has long been noted, and its skeptical recognition provided the basis for both Plato's metaphysical Allegory of the Cave and Bacon's empirically based catalog of popular misinformation under four Idols--of the Tribe (due to human nature), of the Cave (due to individual bias), of the Marketplace (due to language), and of the Theater (due to traditional doctrine). By demanding systematic assent, Booth rejected the warnings of both these authors as well as the most basic assumptions of metaphysical and empirical traditions they represented. Instead he promoted authoritarian consensus based on the dangerous imperative that shared affirmation must be emphasized to discourage excessive skepticism, an essentially totalitarian compulsion imposed by Stalinism, fascism, and other such ideologies as well as the most backward religions.

Whereas Trilling basked in negativity to reject the protest movement, Booth resorted to his own version of the *Negationsnegierung* by rejecting the presumably negative vision of sixties activists. Of course one can agree with Booth's affirmative assumption, "that the primary mental act of man is to assent to truth rather than to detect error" (p. xvi). . And one can even agree with Booth's disdain for the "negative pose" that can be associated with uncompromising resistance to the straightforward affirmative commitment to any particular belief. This affirmative compulsion is a human need tantamount to instinct, and among the populace it necessitates a wholehearted commitment to the psychological benefits of the Affirmative Fallacy regardless of the various doubts it stirs among more educated citizens. As a rule of thumb, however, most of the accessible "truths" that compel easy assent are far more prone to error than scientific truths whose acceptance finally depends on careful, even mathematical, verification procedures. Moreover, the exclusion of false truths is crucial to accurate judgment, both in science and daily affairs, as originally recommended by such ancient skeptics as Arcesilaus and Carneades--the latter actually having established three increasingly stringent levels of probable truth, (1) the probable, (2) the tested, and (3) the irreversible. The first of these levels seems to have been confined to matters of daily experience, and the latter two to scientific probability. At any of these levels, and indeed in any field of inquiry, these so-called "Academic" skeptics argued that all assumptions or hypotheses are susceptible to careful examination, and that some, if not all of them, must be rejected in favor of others. It may be further argued that this process of selection is necessarily based on negative skills that Booth too readily found unacceptable. As the ancient skeptics Pyrrho and Arcesilaus proposed twenty-three centuries ago (three hundred years before Christ), a suspension of judgment (*epoche*) becomes necessary in the pursuit of better answers relevant to every issue without exception. As proposed by Carneades a century after Arcesilaus (more than a hundred years before Christ), the necessarily tentative truth of ideas, theories, and inspired pronouncements unavoidably becomes a matter of probability at all levels of analysis, from common sense in our

daily lives (eulogon--first proposed by Arcesilaus) to the dependence on tested probability (pithanon) in the field of science as well as all other areas of systematic inquiry.⁶ At these more advanced levels, I would propose, negation becomes essential in the substitution of one tentative truth for another based on their respective probability. If systematic assent plays any role in this process of investigation, as in fact it does, it becomes entirely justified once concepts can be tested and confirmed as hypotheses. At this point they can be conditionally accepted for their "truth" until better truths come along--better in the sense that they are more probable. This, in fact, is the primary assumption today among most educated people, whether they have heard of Arcesilaus and Carneades or not.

Booth tried to minimize the role of negation by limiting its function to the choice to be made among positive alternatives. "Assent and affirmation are more fundamental than negation, in both logic and experience," he claimed, and one must concur in the sense that this is the goal of all human endeavor (p. 194). Booth also conceded, "Our withdrawals and rejections come always in the light of some affirmation that has been denied or is being threatened" (p. 194). Booth explained relevant to individual growth, "Our negatives are learned as we discover violations of our affirmings," a second and more complicated level of perception that originates in the earliest stages of infancy, for example in learning to avoid fire. Again, one cannot disagree, though more complicated avoidances can also be brought into play at an early age, for example when my lovely two-year-old granddaughter Zoë admonished her dog, "No no, Jo Jo," in front of her parents once they found the two of them in a room with a heap of unraveled toilet paper. Obviously Zoë sought to incriminate Jo Jo rather than herself with the briefest fragment of a sentence whose full interpretation can be adduced, "No no [not me], no no [we can admonish] Jo Jo. How amazingly complicated, and later in life, of course, the sky is the limit. To illustrate the extent to which the capacity for negative thinking has influenced our cultural tradition, Booth appropriately listed some of the antiheroes who could declare "no" (or "No, in thunder!"), from Prometheus to Faust and Dr. Rieux in Camus's *The Plague*. In the broadest sense, of course, all literature involves negation, a resounding affirmative outcome that by implication denies everything its opposite, especially the various obstructions experienced throughout a story before it is finally brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

Booth conceded the existence of negativity at least to the extent that people are "divided from the rest of animal creation by the capacity to say no . . . by constructing elaborate symbolic structures, some of which will belie what they know to be true" (p. 196). Here Booth would seem to have acknowledged the importance of denial as well as the dialectic complexity of human consciousness that it permits. However, he wanted to protect the public from the negative extravagance of both Prometheus and Faust, and his line of argument consisted of restricting denial to human consciousness without otherwise playing any kind of a role in the universe. He treated it as a logical function without substantive "thereness" and explained its phantom capacity by quoting words attributed to Satan in Kenneth Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion*, to the effect that the negative constitutes nothing more than the generative principle of both logic and language. Otherwise, Satan declares, "The negative cannot exist. Anything that exists must, by the same token be positively what it is" (p. 287). Paradoxically, almost exactly the same point was made by Bertrand Russell (it turns out, Booth's favorite whipping boy) in his brief cautionary tale, "The Metaphysician's Nightmare," in which Satan is depicted as a preposterous phantom whose disappearance confirms negation's identity as an empty term, exposing the truth that the word not is

superfluous and that its elimination consists of an ethical choice to reject negation's inhibitive implications. Other relevant examples of denial associated with the role of Satan (or a satanic father figure) include the ghost of Hamlet's father, whose uncertain existence initiates the negative accomplishment of tragedy, and Hawthorne's vision of Satan in "Young Goodman Brown" as a patriarchal apparition whose disappearance symbolizes the rejection of inhibitive Oedipal demands. Still other examples include the Ancient Mariner, who detains the wedding guest only long enough to tell his story; Kurtz, whom Marlow remembers only as a voice, and Frost's fleeting impression of his neighbor's father. All the satans and patriarchal surrogates listed here also seem capable of disappearing, and for all of them the "no" compels designification by ejecting them from tangible experience.

What neither Booth nor any of the literary satans explains is how and why the negative that rejects Y as not X bears any positive value for both contextualization and the principle of life itself. There is no problem in denying negation's existence as a thing, but its more important role seems evident as an exclusionary function that recurs at every level of existence in the physical universe. Of course negation cannot be reified as an object, but it does constitute an act or process for avoiding, resisting, countermining, pushing away, providing counterthrust, and/or lining up in opposition against the force of circumstance, as argued by Friedrich Engel in his book, *The Dialectics of Nature*, first gathered and published in 1927, and as earlier explained by Emerson with his relatively simple sentence:

Once we thought, positive power was all. Now we learn, that negative power, or circumstance is half. Each defines the other--life and its circumstance--and dialectics explains their interaction.⁸

Negative accomplishment thus may be seen as being crucial to our existence, embodied in process (or praxis), as opposed to any particular "stuff" that might be identified independent of process. William Blake explained what happens in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell": "Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence."⁹ In the same light, Alexander Oparin and George Wald have proposed that the first trace of life probably arose from colloidal resistance to the disintegrative molecular activity of water--biology's most primitive "no" of all. And more recently Gunter Wachtershauser's theory of pre-biotic life starting with the "no" imposed by the protective surface of carbon adhesions to iron sulfide surfaces.¹⁰ Mating behavior can also be explained to feature its own particular version of "no," replicated at a microscopic level by the ovum's "no" in rejecting all but one of the spermatozoa clustered on its surface. And as explained by Konrad Lorenz, even social cooperation does the same through its inhibition of aggression, again a version of "no" to the extent that restraint serves as a denial-based control mechanism crucial to cooperative behavior. In the realm of brain physiology, this use of denial to moderate human behavior would seem to be rooted in the neo-cortex's inhibition of the otherwise persistent aggressiveness exerted by the amygdalae in the lower brain.¹¹ "Yes--right now," insist the persistent amygdalae; "Let's first think about this a bit more," replies the no less persistent neo-cortex.

All behavior, in fact, may be defined as choice-making, with denial necessarily involved in the rejection of unacceptable alternatives. The purpose might be affirmative--joining the process

called existence," as Booth put it--but its means usually consist of a negative strategy based on a complex interplay of avoidances. This inevitability may be seen in the all-or-nothing threshold of excitation for all particular neurons, in the exclusionary relationship among competitive associative patterns, in the use of negative feedback to produce homeostasis, and finally in the strictly inhibitive role of the neocortex in governing the limbic system's production of emotions. When we become angry, for example, the relationship between the cortex and amygdalae is actually more complicated than described above. The neocortex inhibits the hypothalamus from inhibiting the amygdalae, whose sudden freedom from constraint produces the behavior commonly associated with anger--presumably a negative response. But the same happens when the neocortex inhibits the hypothalamus from inhibiting the septal nuclei so pleasure can be experienced. Moreover, at least four giant noes have crisscrossed if there is any pleasure in anger, such as in the behavior of a choleric individual explained by Renaissance psychology.

Booth did concede that learning depends on the use of negatives, but so does other conscious activity, including the experience of literature with its presumably affirmative organization of consciousness. This is also true of ethics and religion, the latter by denying both death after death (as opposed to life after death) and the meaninglessness of a universe too big and too impersonal to imagine. Value itself also depends on choice-making in determining which alternatives must be rejected in favor of others. In all instances the goal of consciousness might be affirmative, but its mode of operation for making this goal achievable is negative. This is especially true in the most rigorous commitment to affirmative principles--as might be demonstrated by Booth's appeal to systematic assent in order to deny the supposedly negative pose of the Vietnam protest movement. All in all, Booth may be praised for the concessions he granted to negativity, but he conceded too few. There is a good deal more to be said.

In stark contradiction with his effort to limit negativity to human consciousness, Booth rejected Bertrand Russell's scientism because it implied a universe that is deterministic and value-free except for the artificial values imposed by society itself. Instead, Booth insisted, what is needed is a different and patently anthropomorphic faith that human values permeate the universe itself. This is amazing: exactly the universal status he rejected for negativity he was willing to extend to ethics, as if moral behavior somehow supercedes denial on a cosmic scale despite denial's obvious linkage with the inhibitive impact of moral behavior. Without all the "thou shalt not's" imposed by denial, it seems utterly impossible to be moral in any Christian sense of the word, even for the seemingly affirmative stricture, "though shalt love thy neighbor," which derives from the obvious and more basic axiom once delivered as an ultimatum, "thou shalt not not love thy neighbor." But Booth seems to have something else in mind. If human values exist, Booth claimed, they are automatically built into the universe, demonstrating a benign and humanistic reality for those who can accept the pervasiveness of this intrinsic relationship. For this reason, evolution has not been strictly purposeless, Booth suggested, but has given humanity the capacity for unique spiritual attainment supposedly putting them in harmony with everything else in the world around us.

This unique blessing, Booth proposed, might be explained by Michael Polanyi's "hierarchy of explanatory systems," which, like Bergson's creative evolution, establishes human values as an integral component of the universe regardless of their origin, whether by evolution from below or by divine creation from above (p. 51). Can such a paradigm be seriously defended? Yes, in fact,

but only if the exclusionary standards implied by Booth's theory of value can be reformulated to apply to the entire universe. Such a possibility would be confirmed, for example, by the cosmic nihilism of the so-called Grand Unified Theories (GUTs) that reduce matter to an elaborate scheme of destabilized symmetries whose restoration contributes to new destabilizations, further suggesting the possibility, as explained by Paul Davies (unfortunately a theist)--

that the entire universe, including all the apparently concrete matter that assails our senses, is in reality only a frolic of convoluted nothingness, that in the end the world will turn out to be a sculpture of pure emptiness, a self-organized void.¹²

More likely, one suspects, it will turn out to be a "frolic of convoluted energy converting to matter," which necessitates the participation of something to sculpt--energy here, matter there, in a grand cosmic transition from a multitude of big bangs to their detritus more or less eighty billions later in one or more relatively small black holes (energy divided by the speed of light squared as explained by Einstein's famous equation, $e = mc^2$). This grand "frolic" described as the universe can be explained to sustain itself as the denial of its absence, at least until it is finally and irretrievably gone. Not that void's imminence totally escapes notice in our daily lives, for example as a probable outcome of death. As William James suggested, quoting Chauncey Wright, there seems to be nothing behind the bare phenomenal facts, leaving the world "adrift in space, with neither elephant nor tortoise to plant the sole of its foot upon."¹³ Absolutely nothing? Little more than the frolic of negation itself, the capacity to make something of nothing and vice versa, nothing of something.

If existence itself is God, as both Poe and Allen Ginsberg have proposed, it is an empty god predicated on "convoluted nothingness," and it offers a very different "matter" from the positivists' universe envisaged by both Kenneth Burke and Bertrand Russell, since both the imaginary satans they refute turn out to be on the right track. Indeed, the conscious yes can "no" other yeses without disturbing the affirmative role of the universe itself, but when the total universe's grand yes is both incessantly and finally "noed" at a more basic level, for example with the termination of the universe, everything reduces to no, the firmament on which all the yeses have done their little dance. Then again, the dance will have happened, and certainly to that extent, at least, the yes can be said to have noed the eternal no, however temporary its accomplishment. Such a compromise necessarily replicates itself at every level of Booth's and Polanyi's hierarchy of explanatory systems, and its manifestation provides room enough for both Russell's physical universe, necessarily permeated by negative resistances, and Booth's built-in system of morals, no less permeated by denial. But also, alas, room enough for the Vietnam War, costing as many as three million lives, which Russell, not Booth, had the integrity to oppose. By noeing Russell's "no" against the war, Booth yessed a hideous crime against humanity that desecrates the reputation of everybody who played a role in making it happen.

Perhaps a more inclusive synthesis may be established to give both our morals and physical existence equivalent validity, but only through their negative realization in a vertical hierarchy extending from physics to biology, psychology, ethics, literature, and even the theory of literature. As explained by elementary particle physics, destabilized symmetries underlie force fields that attract and repel each other (i.e., say both yes and no in response to each other), thus providing the basis for inorganic and organic molecular structures, for invertebrate life forms, for

animal behavior, and for the ethics of human relationships as epitomized by literary deception. For, indeed, the electrodynamic tension between attraction and repulsion successively replicates itself in colloidal resistances, primitive negative feedback loops, avoidance reflexes, and the dynamics of consciousness, ethics, and even narrative form. In this sense it can indeed be said that there is a fundamental identity between human values and basic physical principles, as argued by Booth. However, the pyramid stands, if at all, on its base, not its apex, and it stands in a physical universe whose negative versatility ultimately both predetermines and suffuses the values we emphasize in the conduct of human affairs. The same principles of attraction and repulsion manifest themselves at every level, if with the most attenuated (hence, most complicated) effects restricted to human consciousness and the literature that serves its needs. And if ours is a nihilistic dance at the edge of the void, we possess this literature, as Nietzsche proposed, "lest we perish of the truth." So we dance on, until we perish of the truth.

The organization of Booth's book is both discursive and argumentative rather than expository. Its organization shifts from the protest movement to Russell's scientific determinism, then to Booth's theory of assent followed by an anticlimactic treatment of art stressing the importance of the reader's identification with literary characters based on the projective displacement. Nevertheless, a cumulative advancement seems apparent as Booth proceeds from his initial attack upon scientism and motivism to his celebration of an affirmative vision in his final chapter on art. From admittedly chilling examples of student anti-intellectualism he advances to the treatment of their intellectual forbears (in his opinion at least), then closes with renewed commitment to a positive and life-supportive vision of human purpose. At one point Booth argues that the narrative success of discursive treatises is restricted to "those which, like Pascal's *Pensées*, make narrative heroes out of their authors" (p. 186). This heroism he apparently claims for himself, and with a certain measure of justification, since he offers his book as both a personal testament of a perplexed hero and the story of this hero's struggle to grasp the necessity of systematic assent. Now and again he seems on target, but at least as often the truth of the ideas he challenges survive his effort to disprove them, producing a literary vision comparable to Trilling's, if based on a different argumentative strategy, and with a different, more obstinate vision of affirmative values. I make this concession as a former faculty advisor for the VDC and SDS, as a former state representative of the CLR and CNP in the state of California, and as an organizer and former local candidate for the 1968 Peace and Freedom Party (we lost the night Robert Kennedy was killed).

3.

The third post-Vietnam affirmist testament to be discussed is John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*, published in 1978, when the rejection of the sixties could at last be taken for granted.¹⁴ There was no longer any need to cope with dialectics, and literary criticism could be reduced to what amounted to a breviary of useful advice, some of it positive, some negative (but not in any dialectic sense). Trilling's valorization of inauthenticity had played out its usefulness, as had Booth's insistence upon systematic. As a result, Gardner's role was relatively simple--to skate on thin ice confident that nothing was truly at stake beyond the authorial competence of writers with something to say. Profundity was something to be admitted from afar, not to explore too closely. Nor was there much relevance to the remarkable creative alienation of Bellow, Nabokov, Updike, or any of the other authors preceding the anti-war movement. Nevertheless, Gardner's insights

could be useful to contemporary authors at the turn of the eighties who were at once less ambitious and more addicted to the status of authorship. As a literary critic Gardner accordingly ignored the major intellectual crisis just a few years earlier and took on the free-floating role of a frontier roustabout ("the only available rules are those of a gunfighter") in combating the pervasiveness of bad art he found in American culture (p. 149). Amazingly, his casual remark to this effect, John Wayne-style, could only have sent a shot across the bow among activists once obsessed with the kill ratio in Vietnam. Not that Gardner noticed the connection, or that anybody else did. This is how remote Gardner's perspective was from the sixties--the notion of gunfire had been restored to its mythological status as a matter of frontier justice.

Gardner was not trying to restore orthodoxy but rather accepted it as the dominant shared outlook. On friendly terms with this outcome, he wanted to encourage the recovery of aesthetic and ethical values in contemporary fiction--values that had deteriorated resulting from the war, but also, though he did not make any effort to explore such a possibility, through the restoration of conservative orthodoxy over the decade that followed. Admittedly, Vietnam bore a stultifying impact, but Vietnam's aftermath was equally stultifying, as may be illustrated by any comparison of its literary output with the wealth of publications in the decade preceding Vietnam. The same had happened during the decade following World War II, and if anything, creativity became even worse during the Reagan eighties as an extension of the seventies. Gardner's problem was that his freedom, thanks in small part Trilling and Booth's vision of engagement, deadened his sense of proportion. Perhaps Gardner tried to justify this limitation by declaring on the most inclusive basis, "Criticism, when most interesting and vital, tends toward art, that is, bad science, making up fictions about fictions" (p. 14). True, perhaps, but criticism's bad science during the earlier decades in the twentieth century (most notably, I.A. Richards' use of impulse psychology) had been far more convincing than the bad science of Booth's contemporaries. And Booth himself offered little more than a loose assortment of useful but inconsistent insights, too many of them unexamined grand vagaries. This may be seen, for example, with his delight in the three great virtues of fiction--the Good, the True, and the Beautiful--oblivious to the extent to which these complementary Platonic ideals effectively cancel each other in life as well as most serious works of art (pp. 133, 144). Often, unfortunately, the True is neither good nor beautiful, the Good is neither true nor beautiful, and the Beautiful neither true nor good. Moreover, there are times when none prevails, and without necessarily diminishing the value of a text, for example *Naked Lunch*, by William Burroughs.

On one page Gardner attacked literary criticism for trying to universalize "some handy formula" ("What is the simplest formula I can hope to get away with?" he asked to mimic those prone to the effort), but then he acknowledged on the very next page that "art does the same things age after age" (pp. 129-30). Gardner ignored the possibility that fiction's "same things age after age" just might have been explicable by "some handy formula." Moreover, if literature keeps repeating itself, why exactly must critics be discouraged from seeking out a relatively simple theory for explaining this recurrence? Obviously, the formulaic obsessiveness of critics might be justified by the comparable formulaic obsessiveness of the literature they try to explain. How could Gardner have simultaneously (within the span of two pages) complained of both except through egregious oversight?

But perhaps Gardner's most serious lapse was the hyperbole with which he concluded his

book, "remembering that we live or die by the artist's vision, sane or cracked" (p. 205). By "we" he means we the public. He seems to have taken this stance in order to clarify and elaborate his inversion of optimistic assumptions undoubtedly shared with Booth: "I am convinced that, once the alarm has been sounded, good art easily beats out bad, and that the present scarcity of first-rate art does not follow from a sickness of society but the other way round" (p. 126). In other words, bad art is not the product of oppressive social circumstance but its cause, and, vice versa, good art is not the product of social harmony, but its cause. Here Gardner denied the one-way influence between base and superstructure advocated by presumably sophisticated Marxists (Lukács for example) in favor of its opposite, the vulgar Zhdanovite thesis that art appropriately generates beneficial social trends--as if Harriet Beecher Stowe caused the Civil War all by herself, and Fitzgerald and Hemingway invented the roaring twenties with similar success. Gardner's argument could further be extended to maintain that the American literary movement that dissolved with the inception of the Vietnam conflict obviously caused both the war itself and the reaction that followed. But not true. A more complicated dialectic took place, and the impact of fiction at the time was relatively minor compared to the more inclusive impact of social and economic trends.

Indeed, a base-superstructure dialectic interaction takes place between art and history, but with the literary aspect of superstructure limited to a relatively minor role, even in the case of Stowe, whose contribution was probably less influential, for example, than the Dred Scott Case, John Brown's execution, and Lincoln's election. Artistic trends do beget social and economic consequences--who can deny this? On the other hand, major social and economic have borne significantly greater impact upon artistic expression. Chaucer's magnificent poetry, for example, had little influence in causing or postponing the Wars of the Roses, but there can be little doubt that this brutal extended conflict played a major role in discouraging English literary expression over the next one hundred-fifty years. Other such examples may be cited almost ad infinitum--for example the effect of the Thirty Years' War on German culture, and of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars on mid-nineteenth century French culture. True, the role of such figures as Voltaire and Rousseau thirty years earlier encouraged the French Revolution, but in doing so they proved the rule by having restored French history to a matrix of social and economic forces entirely beyond their ability to influence. It would seem a kind of historic jujitsu occurred in the sense that a relatively minor use of leverage produced thrust vastly in excess of the power it could produce otherwise, but with the result that this use of leverage terminated its effectiveness for another few decades, at least until the 1848 rebellion. Rousseau's Social Contract of 1762 might have had a tortuous and serpentine causal link with Napoleon's march on Moscow in 1812, but in the final analysis it was Napoleon's overextension of his military capabilities that produced tectonic results, among other things ceding to England its unhampered economic hegemony across the globe for the next century.

For the specific historical period important to Gardner's book--our last two decades of social, creative, and economic stagnation in the United States--it seems foolish to blame general trends on authors, most of whom are unknown to the public. Novelists such as Bellow, Mailer, Updike, Pynchon, Roth, and Vonnegut may have influenced opinion makers whose response was felt by others in "trickle-down" fashion, but this input seems minuscule compared to the influence of television, Hollywood, and spectator sports. Also influential has been the steady but inexorable decline in our standard of living since the mid-sixties resulting from a no less steady decline in our inflation-adjusted real wages matched by an increase in productivity, hence of

course a reduction in jobs. Fewer jobs, lower salaries--no wonder everything seems to be going wrong. Other major influences include bureaucratization, exploitative trends in the media, the pursuit of unskilled labor abroad by American industry, the decline of the education "factory," the steadily expanding creation of both urban and rural underclasses, and our economy's chronic dependence on the defense industry and Cold War profits. More recent difficulties have included the government-induced spiral inflation during President Carter's administration and the false prosperity under President Reagan (the result of a trillion-dollar deficit budget that never quite trickled down). So to elevate admittedly talented novelists to the status of unmoved movers whose perverse genius somehow caused the malaise of these two decades seems totally disproportionate. Yet this was one of Gardner's principal assumptions--bad science, perhaps, but a charming and wonderful fiction about fiction. Hubris, almost.

The deficiencies that Gardner found in modern fiction may be arbitrarily divided into two categories, the manipulative gimmickry of popular escapism and the esoteric posturing of presumably serious writing. Apropos of popular fiction, Gardner pointed out such defects as commercialism, superficial optimism, simplistic propaganda, failure to depict people believably, a "comfortable" vision of life, and obvious pandering to a wide market. He contrasted popular fiction's quick and shallow uses of sincerity to the more intricate use of honesty expected by sophisticated readers. He also contrasted popular fiction's conformist ideals to genuine individualism tolerant of aesthetic risk, and, contrary to Booth's position, he contrasted popular fiction's dependence on universal assumptions (i.e., systematic assent) to the genuine creativity necessary to transcend these assumptions. Gardner argued, "The more appealing or widely shared the doctrine, the more immoral the book" (p. 117). On balance this is probably true, thus contradicting both Booth's insistence upon systematic assent and his own willingness to limit fiction's historic impact to the very best fiction. Turning to serious fiction, Gardner deplored pedantry, creepiness, fake structure, excessive idiosyncrasy, parochial ethic, an unnatural dependence on texture as opposed to form, the lack of belief, excessive trivia, sleight of hand in the manipulation of characters, overpowering guilt feelings, a death-supportive vision of society, experimentation for its own sake, and "cynical attacks on traditional values such as honesty, love of country, marital fidelity, work, and moral courage" (p. 42). At last a reference to the sixties! The list is impressive, but Gardner gave no clear ranking to its itemization, and, again, he almost randomly glided from the expression of awkward platitudes to remarks of startling perspicacity. Nevertheless, his energy in declaring his aversions--a most negative commitment indeed--helps to rescue his book from its inconsistencies.

In the final analysis it is Gardner's affirmative vision that one finds the most interesting. As in the case of dealing with any litany of dogmatic principles (for example hearing out the empty suppositions of ill-informed friends), it is useful to formulate Gardner's asserted "truths" in both their positive and negative light. When Gardner (or anybody else) hazards to declare a dubious positive stance relevant to any particular issue, one can insert a negative word or two (not, for example) to see if its opposite version just might be more valid. And too often it turns out in fact to be more valid. Vice versa, when Gardner urges his own particular thou shalt not's, it's likewise beneficial to revise his ideas in a positive light (for example by eliminating the nots), again toward a better and more comprehensive viewpoint. And by making a catalog of his assumptions based on this relatively simple dialectic strategy, it's possible to cobble together a Negative Manifesto with each of Gardner's arguments conceded as much as seems appropriate (for they are indeed true),

then enlarged and "resignified" (for they are also only partially true) in order to suggest a better and more inclusive vision of literary achievement. And thus an admittedly primitive use of rhetoric serves to generate a more complicated negative poetics that might be just as useful to authors and readers.

A BRIEF NEGATIVE MANIFESTO FOR AUTHORS BOTH SERIOUS AND POPULAR

1. Literary deception works best if writers can fully believe in the lies they are telling.

"The artist's affirmation, or, more precisely, his search for affirmation, is the work of art," Gardner declared (p. 163). Indeed, the search for affirmation is the most fundamental purpose of the negative poetics I propose. Authors must affirm what seems in their opinion to be true, recognizing that negative possibilities are best realized if kept subordinate to this positive quest. They must focus on their attention on those beliefs they think the most important, confident that by making their beliefs come true they are telling their most effective artistic lies. They may acknowledge to themselves at least a few of the lies they tell, but like Blake, Dostoevsky, and D. H. Lawrence, they must believe in as many of them as possible. Also useful is their ignorance of human psychology, since it enhances the lies they believe at the expense of those they choose not to recognize. As a general principle, the aversions and repressed feelings of authors can diminish the effect of sincerity crucial to good fiction only if authors let themselves be inhibited by doubts and reservations, for above all, they must be confident of themselves while sharing their dishonesty with readers. First and foremost, they must believe in the organic integrity of their work, leaving to others the recognition of how they have manipulated this integrity to suit their needs. And if confronted by such a possibility, they must be capable of anger in disavowing it. How do readers know when authors have succeeded in this strategy? Whenever they present compelling ethical choices, whenever their characters and situations resonate with unusual appeal, and whenever negative overtones can be felt and perhaps observed despite the best effort to suppress them. Incessant objective inquiry thwarts this expressiveness. Consequently it becomes imperative, as argued by Plato in *The Ion*, for authors and their readers to let themselves be inspired unhampered as much as possible by self-recognition.

2. Writers should latch on to as many diversionary truths as possible to hide their most intimate lies from themselves and their readers. The more convincing these diversionary truths, the better.

Gardner argued that "there can be no moral social art . . . without honesty in the individual--the artist--as a premise for just and reasonable discussion" (p. 82). Later he conceded, "We live, necessarily, in a jungle of half-truths and outright lies; if we didn't we'd be forever at one another's throats . . . Art is our way of keeping track of what we know and have known, secretly, from the beginning" (p. 146). Indeed, Gardner's emphasis upon the importance of honesty and poetic truth may be granted, but with the important caveat that one truth or set of truths almost inevitably appeals to us when it helps to deny another that undermines our sense of personal and collective worth. The literary faults we confess might be important, but even more important are those we cannot confess--of selfishness, idiotic greed, meaninglessness, dull-wittedness, and blatant unmitigated mediocrity. A mild dose of literary self-deception thus becomes a useful antidote--like aspirin--to help bring improvements on at least a temporary basis.

3. Writers should avoid rehashing obviously stale lies; instead, their self deception must seem as fresh and precarious as the exploration of new and unrecognized truths.

Gardner argued that "art gropes" (p. 9), that "art deals, at its best with what has never been observed or observed only peripherally" (p. 13), that there is "endless blind experiment" (p. 14), and that the writer "has nothing to guide him but his feeling as he writes) (p. 170). A particular novelist can take this approach with his materials because he is "a man of maximum sensitivity, a man who sees and feels more things in more precise detail than the people around him, partly because he has excellent emotional and intellectual equipment, including--above all, perhaps--the security which makes for shamelessness and partly because he has special machinery for seeing and feeling: the tradition of art" (p. 167). All true. Indeed, every work of fiction possesses this sensitivity described by Gardner to some degree, and the very greatest works to a considerable degree. However, by itself the willingness to grope, to indulge in shamelessness, and to test the unthinkable is insufficient; fiction must also be structured by the inevitable dialectic between threat and denial (X supplanted by Y as not X) that justifies a moral outcome that represses and finally denies this shamelessness. Otherwise, artistic credibility is vulnerable to awkward ethical dislocations--stories of just deserts perversely thwarted, of conniving trickiness rewarded, etc. What happens too often in real life must be prevented or punished in fiction unless one is truly ashamed of talking about it, whereupon fiction loses its appeal at least to that extent.

4. Writers should willingly accept the task of confronting their most intimate, most embarrassing lies, for these are the most likely to be appreciated by their readers.

Gardner argued that "the artist ought not to be too civilized" (p. 147), that fiction must be fascist in making the strongest case possible (p. 101), and that the novelist's identity as "poet-priest" ideally expresses the close kinship between primitive artist and primitive priest (p. 155). All of these prescriptions seem useful, but with the qualification that the myth and ritual of primitive religion primarily express taboos to guarantee social cohesion among particular tribes--animist taboos compounded by courtship taboos, warfare taboos, culinary taboos, etc. This primitive machinery persists in modern science fiction, transformed by Gardner into something akin to scientific experimentation: "The moral fiction is a laboratory experiment too difficult and dangerous to try in the world but safe and important in the mirror image of reality in the writer's mind" (p. 116). Prohibited alternatives can certainly be tested in fiction--as much as possible, in fact. Whenever authors feel they have something to say but cannot fit it into the story, it is probably important that they should make an effort to do so. Its relevance can be decided later. Moreover, whenever an author is on the brink of something too embarrassing to admit and just saying it seems tantamount to confession, this, for sure, must be added, again with its final acceptance to be decided later. First-draft verbal freedom is a zone of confessional exuberance entirely one's own, and it should be cultivated. Later drafts can eliminate genuine excesses. The more embarrassed one is by one's ideas--not necessarily because they're sexual but also because they might seem trivial, or selfish, or stupid, or neurotic--the more likely one is exactly on target. The pleasures of fascist viciousness should be tried out by liberals, and the leftist dedication to lost causes (or, worse yet, to soured causes) should be tried out by conservatives. There is little to worry about as long as the effective use of closure may be counted on to absorb and deny the story's earlier implications.

5. Writers should make an ethical commitment of their aversion to the truths that disturb them.

"Art is by its nature moral. We recognize true art by its careful, thoroughly honest search for and analysis of values," Gardner argued (p. 19). Again, this imperative seems essential, for what is morality but choice-making that features one thought or mode of behavior over another? To profess a morality is to declare its superiority to others; to explore morality is to compare competitive version relevant to particular circumstances; and to write a moral novel is to demonstrate the final advantage of one option as compared to the presumed failure of another (or others). Gardner warned against any conflict between good and bad guys that is too obvious, but it should also be recognized that all overt moral prescriptions are no less vulnerable to criticism. This is true even when the choice is internalized: good guys in possession of more thises than thats, bad guys in possession of too many thats which fatally undermine their conceded thises. A scale of relative complexity may accordingly be established between Hamlet's grand uncertainties and Lone Ranger-style popular ethics. One novel, for example, sets a junior-grade Romeo against a Hester Prynne, two Natty Bumppos, and the rest of the cast an assortment of Tontos and Blondies; another might try for an Odysseus beset by a Claudius with everybody else limited to Tontos and Blondies, etc. The personal ethics of authors necessarily determine the roles they impose upon their characters, and the subversiveness of their creativity comes from feelings they can acknowledge by loading the deck for or against characters they dislike. It is this essentially bogus ethical gamesmanship that gives writing its felt morality. Ethics (at least indignation) is every author's obsession, and ethics must be provided, of course mixed with a healthy dose of unexamined motivation.

6. Writers should breathe life into the characters that best illustrate and test those problems they themselves want to deny. This is the primary source of growth, complexity, and vital discovery in characterization.

Gardner argued that novelists must experience sincere affection for their characters: "And without compassion--without real and deep love for his 'subject' (the people he writes about and, by extension, all human beings)--no artist can summon the will to make true art" (p. 85). Again, Gardner's prescription seems essential, but with the qualification that this love relationship necessarily brings into play many of the contradictions in the love relationship between real people. For love is more complex than can be comfortably admitted. There must be room for disappointment, ambivalence, and outright aversion. As with love between individuals, there must also be a sense of reciprocity, of projective interaction. Authors must also cultivate an intimate relationship with their characters, fascinated by their villains and at least a bit worried about the behavior of their heroes--what kind of people they really are as well as what is happening to their personalities as the story unfolds. A healthy dose of ignorance about their characters is also important for authors. They should not feel entirely in control of the characters they love. Instead, they should give them free rein, at least for a while, to do as they please in their conduct of their affairs. In fact, fiction's negative appeal almost inevitably comes from authors' effective mixture of insight and inspired ignorance in their ongoing empathy with their characters. Exactly what authors both loath and admire in themselves must be insinuated into their characters, providing their mysterious appeal to themselves at least.

7. Writers should focus on the story they tell, confident that its presumably realistic outcome will give formal validity to their effort to deceive themselves.

Gardner stressed the importance of form as a dynamic achievement that expresses a new (or renewed) sense of belief: "In literature structure is the evolving sequence of dramatized events tending toward understanding and assertion; that is, toward some meticulously qualified belief" (p. 65). He also praised repetition, the epiphany, and symbolism as essential literary devices, all of which play their role in fiction's struggle against its sworn enemy, chaos. Gardner's qualification that belief be "meticulously qualified" might differentiate serious fiction from the potboiler but in both instances dramatized events encourage belief (i.e., relaxed consciousness) within a linear momentum that grants fiction its negative achievement. Chaos and the lack of form might threaten at the beginning, but literary structure should culminate in felt belief rooted in the denial imperative. The achievement is cathartic. Much of what has been acknowledged in this manner can accordingly be rejected, with truth limited to those assumptions that remain intact by the story's end.

8. Writers should be prepared to test the bounds of sanity in finding a projective context most adequate to the lies that need to be told.

Finally, Gardner stressed the paradox that fiction is both sane and insane: "Art possesses him [the artist], establishing his norms, which are not the world's norms; hence he is saner than the world, and daemonically mad" (p. 184). On the one hand, Gardner argued, art's "chief quality" is "the good sense and efficient energy with which it goes after what is really there and feels significant" (pp. 176-77); on the other, it "begins in a wound" (p.181), and the artist must recognize "that the whole thing is a delusion" (p. 194). According to Gardner, "Art imitates insanity and borrows the madman's methods . . . but as long as it is art it is only an imitation" (p. 187). Once again Gardner's thesis--important enough to conclude his book--befits the negative poetics I am proposing, since the psychosis he featured is little more than an unsuccessful coping mechanism for dealing with otherwise unmanageable feelings and impulses. The individual's perceived incapacity expresses failure to control a more fundamental problem, the welter of anxieties and psychological disruptions that otherwise bear a serious disintegrative effect. Like quack medicine, one's preferred version of insanity for dealing with the crisis provides an insufficient cure, and more often than not family, friends, and doctors blame the individual's dependence on this cure rather than the more basic problems it is intended to alleviate. As already indicated in another of my papers in this web site ("The Dialectics of Paranoid Form"), the most obvious example of this problem is the paranoid delusion, which tells stories that help individuals to cope with anxieties that they do not want to admit to themselves. In lieu of confessional honesty, a story of victimization is concocted that pits the paranoid hero against everybody conspiring against him. A hopeless geek in real life, he becomes the hero, and soon enough victory is his.

Pretty much the same happens with fiction. Of course "normal" works of literature fall short of psychotic delusions, but perhaps not to the extent that many want to think, since literary "entrancement" (Gardner's epithet) does in fact play upon risk at the edge of sanity, again to a much greater extent than generally recognized. Where the id was, let the ego be, Freud declared, and indeed fiction probes and stretches the imagination to its limits at the very edge of sanity (the receding boundary between id and ego) so that health and emotional comfort can finally be paid

their due. Experience is accordingly reorganized so its most threatening features may be denied to produce a new and more sufficient sense of adequacy. This is the dialectic machinery intrinsic to fiction--its *sine que non* and eidetically irreducible ingredient. Ultimately, fiction's success depends on the writer's verbal audacity in bringing this dialectic to life. Fiction should excite to relax, affirm to deny, and declare those truths that help authors share with their readers their most important lies. And their strategy must go unobserved, most of all by the authors themselves. As Plato explained in *Ion*, writers must be inspired but ignorant of what inspired them, and glad of it. They must keep those thoughts that really matter on the brink of disclosure, imminent but undiscerned.

© 2005 by Edward Jayne. This document may be reproduced in any non-profit form without permission of the author; however, for-profit reproduction requires written permission.
<http://www.edwardjayne.com/>

Footnotes

1. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1972).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 135, quoted from Richard Gilman's *The Confusion of Realms* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 78.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 44; Trilling quoted Hegel from J.B. Baille's translation of *The Phenomenology of Mind*, rev. and corr. 2nd. ed. (Humanities Press, 1967), p. 543.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 165; the passage cited is from Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 96-97.
5. Wayne Booth, *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1974).
6. See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Loeb Classical Library, 1976), vol. 1, pp. 21-23, 139-43; and *Against the Logicians* (Loeb Classical Library, 1983), vol. 2, p. 83. Also see Cicero, *Academica* (Loeb Classical Library, 1979), vol. 19, pp. 453, 475, 487-89 509-11, 543, 605, etc. For the best grasp of Academic philosophy relevant to the issue of probability, it is best to interpret Sextus Empiricus's information from an essentially hostile point of view in light of Cicero's supportive perspective. Modern historians of skepticism such as Richard Popkin, Myles Burnyeat, and Michael Frede feature Pyrrhonian skepticism as the precursor of modern Fideism (a version of skepticism supportive of Christianity since the ultimate truth is presumably inaccessible). As a result, they try to downplay Carneades' theory of probability (*pithanon*) by limiting its definition to the rhetorical concept of persuasiveness. However, Cicero, whom they also mention as little as possible, was utterly confident of his translation of the word as *probabilia*. A careful reading of Sextus' explanation of the three levels of probability also makes it plain this was exactly what Carneades meant. It may be mentioned here that the willful misinterpretation of Carneades by Christian apologists is only possible because the extensive publications of his amenuensis, Clitomachus, were totally destroyed, undoubtedly by Christian scribes.
7. Bertrand Russell, *Nightmares of Eminent Persons* (Simon & Schuster, 1955), pp. 29-35-
-for the record published six years before Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.
8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (Library of America, 1983), p. 949. Engels' more thoroughgoing explanation of negation and the negation of negation (*Negationsnegierung*) is to be found in *Anti-Duhrung* (Progress, 1947), chap. 13, esp. pp. 166-70. Hegel's version of the negative, to which Engels repeatedly expresses his indebtedness, is explained in *Science of Logic*, vol. 2 (George Allen, 1929), vol. 2, pp. 50-54, and *The Phenomenology of Mind* (George Allen, 1949), pp. 96-99. Like Hegel, Engels also expresses in a footnote on p. 457 his debt to Spinoza's earlier notion incidentally mentioned in personal correspondence, (*determinatio est negatio*). See also Spinoza's *Correspondence*, Letter 50 to Jarich Jelles of June 2, 1674.

9. William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in *The Poems of Blake*, ed. John Sampson (Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 248.

10. A. I. Oparin, *The Origins of Life*, trans. Sergius Margulis (Macmillan, 1938); George Wald, "The Origin of Life," *Scientific American* 191, no. 2 (August 1954), 44-53; and Gunter Wächtershäuser in several of his publications, especially "Groundworks for an Evolutionary Biochemistry: The Iron-Sulphur World," *Prog. Biophys. molec. Biol.*, vol. 58, 1992, pp. 85-201, esp. 184-87.

11. Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Wilson (Harcourt Brace & World, 1963).

12. Paul Davies, *Superforce: The Search for a Grand Unified Theory of Nature* (Simon & Schuster, 1984), p. 165.

13. William James, *Pragmatism* (Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 126. James theory of pragmatism obviously fits deceptionist standards by encouraging beliefs useful to those who hold them regardless of their scientific inaccuracy. Earlier in his text, James makes this extreme relativism abundantly clear: "'the true,' to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is on the expedient in our way of behaving" (p. 106).