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The Dying Fall: John Gardner's *October Light*

DAVID COWART

Blessed were the days before you read a President's message. Blessed are the young, for they do not read the President's message. Blessed are they who never read a newspaper, for they shall see Nature, and through her, God.

Thoreau, Letter to Parker Pillsbury

When *October Light* appeared in 1976, few recognized it as an observance of the Bicentennial—perhaps because it did not conform to the general vulgarity of that year-long festival of chauvinism. Gardner expressed his own disgust at Bicentennial excess when a character in his novel discovers a picture of the Boston Tea Party on a matchbook cover. “Everywhere you looked, it was the Bicentennial. Did people have no fucking shame?”¹ Gardner celebrated the nation's two-hundredth birthday more thoughtfully. He set the action of his novel in the days just before the general election of 1976 and peopled it with characters embodying not only the forces that created the American nation, but also those that—for better or worse—were reshaping it.

Seventy-two-year-old James Page, born on the Fourth of July, embodies the Yankee virtues traditionally associated with the American ethos: honesty, frugality, self-reliance. But these virtues can harden in a nation as in a man into self-righteousness, parsimony, and a general failure of compassion. Page's heart, like the Vermont landscape in winter, has undergone “locking.” Narrow, opinionated, and embittered, he rails against labor unions, welfare, Democrats, television, and

women's liberation with a virulence familiar to anyone acquainted with aged patriots. His antagonist is his eighty-year-old sister and housemate, Sally Page Abbot. A television-watcher and Republican-baiter, Sally has been mildly radicalized, late in life, after finding herself obliged to depend on the grudging charity of the brother to whom, as a man, the ancestral farm had been left as a matter of course.² Sally's struggle for her rights recalls that of the Wife of Bath in a similar domestic situation, and the churlish James, like Dame Alisoun's Jankyn, soon resorts to violence: he takes his shotgun to her television. Later, brandishing a piece of firewood, he drives her to her room and locks her in. But when the door is unlocked, she refuses to come out, and a state of siege ensues.

Sally sustains herself during this "war" with a crate of apples, a bedpan, a box of tissues, and a "trashy novel" she finds on the floor. In the thinly veiled allegory of her novel, *The Smugglers of Lost Souls' Rock*, one sees the larger implications of Sally's contest with her brother. *Smugglers* is a parody of the kind of fiction Gardner despises, but at the same time that this particular production is held up to ridicule, it provides a historical and social context for the passions of James and Sally. As Sally begins to realize that characters in *Smugglers* resemble people in her own circle, the reader begins to apply the heavy-handed symbolism of the novel-within-the-novel to the more subtle thematic drift of the frame story. Sally recognizes her violent brother James, for example, in her novel's odious Captain Johann Fist. The captain's name, suggestive of his brutality, derives from that of the legendary scholar Faust, the type of Western man's indomitable drive toward ever greater power and knowledge. That drive ultimately came to be regarded as distinctively American, and Captain Fist embodies a historical force still vital in Americans like James Page. A reader of Hegel, Fist is convinced that he but serves the awesome and divinely guided dialectic of history itself. But he also embodies the excesses of the expansionist spirit. Exploiting, taming, conquering, expanding, building railroads, slaughtering Indians, and enslaving blacks, this kind of American goes through life convinced of his own rightness. This rightness he construes in terms at once patriotic and spiritual, for American expansionism, not to mention the American economic system and the prodigies it has wrought, has its roots in the Calvinist and Puritan beliefs that, according to Max Weber's classic study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,³ shaped the national ethos.

"So!" cried Sally Abbot. . . . "The novel was all about Capitalism—about those pious, self-righteous and violent True

Americans who'd staked out their claim and, for all their talk about 'Send me your poor' (or whatever the Statue of Liberty intoned), would let nobody else in on the pickings." (p. 146)

Fist captains the *Indomitable*, smuggling marijuana from Mexico to San Francisco. His ancestors, one imagines, were the colonial scofflaws whose defiance of British trade restrictions before the American Revolution culminated in the Boston Tea Party. Two centuries later the "tea" party continues on the other side of the continent tamed by the colonists' descendants. "What sport for the Sons of Liberty!" (pp. 43, 337), chortles a prospective buyer of Fist's wares. The crew of the *Indomitable*, as Fist himself notes, represent the forces that have contributed to the dominance of Western civilization in general and of America in particular. Mr. Nit, for example, represents technology, but his name suggests that technology may be civilization's parasite rather than its servant. Basically godless and amoral, he is nevertheless as distressed as certain atomic scientists at the possibility of getting blood on his hands. Sally, rather unfairly, sees Mr. Nit as her niece's husband, the atheist handyman Lewis Hicks.

Another crew member, the "ministerial" Mr. Goodman, embodies the good will that Americans profess so readily. His name also recalls the smug assumptions of our Puritan fathers, who addressed each other as "goodman." This character, however, seems in fact to be a good man, a "humanist," though he does not question overmuch the morality of his livelihood. His Vermont counterpart is less clear; he may be associated with the decent Horace Abbot, Sally's late husband, or with the clergymen who come to the siege-breaking party organized by friends of Sally and James. Mr. Goodman rescues a would-be suicide, Peter Wagner, who is then impressed into service aboard the *Indomitable*. In Wagner (named for Faust's reluctant servant), Sally sees her nephew Richard Page, a real-life suicide. Whereas Wagner, who drops from the Golden Gate Bridge, has figuratively "come to the end of his rope" (p. 16), Richard Page, who hanged himself, had done so literally.

The last crew member, a sexy creature named Jane, is the *Ewig-Weibliche*. "What was Guinevere to King Arthur's court, or the Virgin Mary to the Christian religion?" (p. 98), asks Captain Fist rhetorically. Jane also seems to be a younger version of Sally herself. Sally envies her sexual freedom and sees her own situation mirrored in Jane's reluctant association with the captain. But Sally also identifies with a group of black and Indian smugglers who compete with Fist. Santisillia, "the Indian," and Dancer, who crew the aptly named *Militant*, are also

allegorical figures. Just as America's conception of itself has been challenged by her own minorities, so do the crew of the *Militant* challenge the *Indomitable* and all she represents. Sally the nascent feminist challenges her brother James in much the same spirit. *Smugglers*, then, allows Gardner to make resonant the tragicomic antagonism of the elderly couple on the Vermont farm. Theirs is the portentous conflict of the *Indomitable* and the *Militant* writ small.

Yet the frame story has a resonance all its own. It boasts a mythic dimension that complements the socio-historical allegory of *Smugglers*. The myth behind the frame story is the one long applied by American writers to their native land. According to this venerable literary tradition, America is the new Eden in which man must once again make moral choices having enormous consequences. The frontiersman, the archetypal American, is the new Adam alone in a paradisaical wilderness. His decisions about the land and the beings with which he shares it are the moral equivalent of those executed by the first Adam. According to some versions of the myth the Edenic possibilities of the new land are perpetual, and the American nation is the most shining promise of all to a humanity eager to right the wrongs that began in the original garden. But many see the fall reenacted on these shores. Faulkner's Ike McCaslin, for example, becomes convinced that the new covenant has been abrogated by men's insistence—and even the aboriginal Americans are guilty of these primal sins—on owning both land and their fellow men. Similarly Pynchon's Oedipa Maas, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, discovers to her chagrin what men like her former lover, the quasi-mythic tycoon Pierce Inverarity, have done to the once-pure American wilderness. Like Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, she discovers the disparity between the Edenic American Dream and the eminently postlapsarian American reality.

Gardner exploits the tradition masterfully, for *October Light*, set in autumn, is a story of the fall in more senses than one. The novel's warring couple are in fact an elderly Adam and Eve. In Eden, man's first parents may have been more siblings than spouses, but one need not get into the theological controversy over prelapsarian sexuality to suspect allegory in a story in which a woman consumes apples—and later attempts to undo her partner with apples. Even if Lane Walker, the minister, did not see James Page as the "old Adam" (p. 420), the reader would be inclined to make the connection for himself. Like the first man, James Page had two sons, and one, Richard, may have been responsible for the death of the other, Ethan, who fell from a ladder left out by his brother. In his pocket, as if to remind himself of the

Original mistake, James habitually carries a snake's skull, an emblem of mortality and of the evil that engendered it. But the real serpent in James's Eden is the television—"the filth of hell made visible in the world" (p. 3)—that has seduced Sally. Patriotism and piety have always gone hand in hand in the American Eden, and the programs of this foul seducer are appropriately characterized as "blasphemy and high treason" (p. 4).

Adam and Eve sinned in seeking knowledge, and it is in terms of knowledge and guilt that the author describes James Page's final epiphany. Like Adam and his progeny, Page suffers from some primal guilt that is an ineluctable part of his existence. He knows that he is himself responsible for the failure and ultimately for the suicide of his son Richard. But when he learns from a chance remark of Sally's that his son did not commit suicide merely to spite him, he realizes how groundless his lifelong misery has been. "Guilt. All this time he'd carried it, a burden that had bent his whole life double and when he caught it and held it in his two hands and opened them, there was nothing there." Yet beyond guilt—and hardly comforting—is knowledge: "Tears streamed down the old man's face, though what he felt did not even seem sorrow, seemed merely knowledge, knowledge of them all from inside, understanding of the waste" (p. 430).

When, in the end, Page discards his snake's skull and edges toward accepting television, one is tempted to think that Gardner is depicting the acceptance of evil in a fallen world. But Gardner is not engaging in Christian apologetics. Although he seems to view James's experience of crippling guilt as a kind of universal, something with which all men must grapple, he insists that the guilt—of James Page, at least—is essentially illusory. In allegorical terms, the old Adam is his own redeemer. No Christ, no "new Adam," is required, and Gardner reinforces the point by introducing a singularly inept and reluctant savior in *Smugglers*. In that production the Christ figure, a complement to the Adamic James Page, is the shanghaied Peter Wagner. When Mr. Goodman pulls the thirty-three-year-old would-be suicide from the water, Mr. Nit's disgusted comment is "Jesus" (p. 30)—a remark he makes four times, then changes to "Christ" (p. 31). Jane's initial comment is "Jesus Christ" (p. 32), and Mr. Goodman thinks the bedraggled Peter looks "like one of those pictures called *Descent from the Cross* (Mr. Goodman had once been a museum guard)" (p. 30). The crew lose no time in hailing Peter as their "captain" and "pilot"—both traditional iconography for Christ. Soon Peter imagines himself aboard a vessel called *The New Jerusalem* (p. 98). "And so now he had been chosen

saviour of this groaning, floating little Eden. Saviour, not leader, there was no mistaking that, 'Captain' him and 'sir' him as they might. Pride and damnation were their leader; agent: J. Faust" (p. 114).

One puzzles over just how this Christ's career is to be perceived. The attempted suicide might correspond to the Crucifixion, which took place when Christ was thirty-three, but Peter's subsequent experiences in the "underworld" last longer than the three days traditionally allotted to the harrowing of hell. Peter's dropping into the lives of the *Indomitable's* crew corresponds more closely to Christmas, or rather Epiphany, with Mr. Goodman and Mr. Nit as gaping magi. This Jesus receives His call aboard the *Indomitable*, which flees death and the forces of hell in the form of the ghastly Dr. Alkahest—a senile old man obsessed with marijuana—and the *Militant*. Ironically named for alchemy's "universal solvent," Dr. Alkahest is allegorically Death (pp. 39, 282)—the most universal "solvent" of all. The *Militant*, under the absentee leadership of the satanic "Dusky," first appears on the horizon as "darkness made visible" (p. 138), and Fist denounces its crew as "devils" (p. 145) and "Lucifer's legions" (p. 146). In this schema Peter's concussion—which puts him out for three days (p. 267)—is his crucifixion, and the sojourn on Lost Souls' Rock corresponds to Christ's last days on earth, which culminate in the ascension.

Yet the conclusion is closer to apocalypse than ascension, for Peter Wagner's career is as much Christ's second coming as a symbolic reenactment of His first. Thus Santisillia refers to Lost Souls' Rock as another Patmos (*ibid.*), equating it with the island where Saint John the Divine had the vision recorded in Revelation. Thus, too, all the crew members of the *Indomitable*—en route to this Patmos—seem to be named John: Johann Fist, Jane, Jonathan Nit. The author does not mention Mr. Goodman's first name, but one doubts that it breaks the nominal pattern. When the general cataclysm occurs on the island, only the Christlike Peter and the still-religious Jane survive. One must, however, avoid pushing analysis of *Smugglers* too far and obscuring the satire on its pretentiousness, its ineptitude, and its ultimate emptiness. What is the rationale behind elaborate Christian allegory in a novel that so eloquently discovers the groundlessness of such things? Besides, one could as easily argue that the nihilistic Peter Wagner is in fact not Christ but Antichrist—falsely worshiped by a degenerate humanity and sharing their fate at the final reckoning. Gardner means for his readers to see that fictions like *Smugglers* are so laden with symbolism that ultimately they lack coherence. Such symbolism, intimidating readers and seducing critics, functions as a smoke screen for an author lacking

any real message and therefore purveying a lot of false ones to disguise his moral bankruptcy and his artistic dishonesty.

The philosophical pretensions of *Smugglers*, in other words, go beyond the half-baked Christian allegory. But just as Peter Wagner, the parody-Christ who saves no one, comes off poorly in comparison with James Page, the old Adam who saves himself, so does the dark philosophizing at one level contrast sharply with the simple sanity eventually brought to bear in the frame tale. The philosophical allusions woven through *Smugglers* are nowhere denser than in the scene in which Captain Fist is tried by his enemies and late friends, who have in effect joined forces. Captain Fist's own philosophical position seems less than clear, because it emerges in the welter of competing philosophies at his trial. Though he peppers his discourse with references to Hegel and Rousseau, Fist is most recognizable when, during that trial, he rhapsodizes on the glories of America and the free enterprise system in rhetoric resembling that of Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple in West's *A Cool Million*. One glimpses the grounds on which Gardner himself would condemn Fist when Peter Wagner, interpreting the testimony of Santisillia, labels the captain an existentialist. Gardner tends to apply this term pejoratively, for reasons adumbrated in *On Moral Fiction*: "Whereas Sartre invoked 'the individual transcendent goal,' the future as negation of the repellent present (what Bluebeard, being Bluebeard, decided one dark night he would make of himself, a murderer by rule)," others "conceived a transcendent goal for humanity as a whole . . . a world ruled not by policemen but by moral choice, a world where every man's chief ambition was to be Christlike."⁴ In affirming an ethics of individual choice, Gardner argues, Sartre and his followers are powerless to disaffirm the pernicious choices of the selfish or perverted. Thus Bluebeard, Fist, and their kind, convinced of an absence of absolute, preexistent moral guidelines, erect value systems the benefits of which accrue to them alone. By labeling as "existentialist" the selfishness of Fist, his representative capitalist, the author intimates his quarrel with the ideology of rugged individualism: "the only laws the Captain knows are the ones he made up" (p. 380).

Each of the witnesses in Fist's trial takes the stand more to propound his own metaphysics than to contribute to the workings of justice. Mr. Nit seems to be defending the determinist world view that his own involvement with technology makes congenial. Likewise, the speech of Peter Wagner merely mirrors the nihilism he embraces, whereas Dancer's fulminations, predictably, compound Marx and Islam. The task for a generation so philosophically confused is pro-

nounced by Santisillia in a scene that anticipates the trial: "We were supposed to be talking about . . . justice for the future, how to make gods that exist" (p. 280). The question—how to establish moral standards or "gods that exist" and have some real meaning—is at the heart of all ethical philosophy, but the attempt to sort things out in *Smugglers* soon degenerates. Such a jumble of philosophies (earlier Plato, Bergson, and Spinoza have been invoked) figures in the trial scene and its anticipation during the waiting period on Lost Souls' Rock that the reader gets lost. His bafflement is reflected in that of the Mexican drug smugglers, who, though they do not understand English, compose the audience for the Americans' silly exercise in noncommunication and self-justification. One sees the Chaucerian influence on Gardner here, for the colloquy on Lost Souls' Rock resembles nothing so much as a Parliament of Fowls.

The scene functions nicely because Gardner means to show that books like *Smugglers* habitually raise all manner of serious questions without answering them. Such fiction has nothing to offer its readers beyond the dreary reiteration of despair and *Angst*. Gardner probably set out to write a story incorporating all of the worst features of contemporary fiction as he sees it: the sensational or schematic plot, the refusal to attempt affirmation, and—least forgivable—the failure to allow character to shape action. A novel in which no one develops or matures is a weak novel indeed, and perhaps the single greatest liability of *Smugglers* is that none of its characters changes in any way. Even the joining of one crew with the other is done *faute de mieux*, rather than as a result of enlightenment on their parts.

For the most part, *Smugglers* succeeds brilliantly as polemic, but one must admit that it is less than satisfactory on one count. Although one agrees readily enough that the novel-within-the-novel is pretentious twaddle, one wishes for a clearer satirical target—what Fielding gives his readers in *Shamela*, for example. Unfortunately, attempts at discovering possible targets lead to bafflement or indignation, for what major contemporary novelist is guilty of anything like *Smugglers*? The flying saucer at the end of that novel might lead one to think of Kurt Vonnegut, whose *Slaughterhouse-Five* balances various modern horrors against transcendental nonsense from the planet Tralfamadore. This butterfly, however, hardly requires breaking on Gardner's satiric wheel. From hints Gardner drops in his critical writing and in interviews, one might also suspect a satire on Thomas Pynchon, whose *Gravity's Rainbow* ends apocalyptically. But if so, the attack reveals only a failure to

read Pynchon carefully. The apocalyptic conclusion of *Gravity's Rainbow* is hardly the kind of *deus ex machina* seen in *Smugglers*.

The likeliest candidate for Gardner's satire would probably be John Barth, prince of what Gardner calls the "smart-mouth" cynics. *The Floating Opera*, Barth's first novel, resembles *Smugglers* in its suicidal hero, Todd Andrews; its sexually casual heroine, another "Jane"; and its archetypal capitalist, Harrison Mack. The novels also share a tone of comic nihilism. Of course the search for a particular target is misguided if Gardner merely meant to create a perfect example of bad fiction by committing all the literary crimes he deplors among his contemporaries. *Smugglers*, the resulting pastiche, avoids satirizing any particular book and making its creator appear self-serving or ungracious—as Hemingway was made to appear by *The Torrents of Spring*, his parody of Sherwood Anderson. Nevertheless, the lack of a clear target risks leaving the reader confused about the rationale behind *Smugglers*, and at the same time that he is certain of some polemical intent.

The big questions of political and metaphysical destiny—those dear to the hearts of authors producing novels like *Smugglers*—cannot be answered satisfactorily until they are posed in terms that take into account private, personal emotions like love, guilt, and compassion. For the *Indomitable* and the *Militant*, as for the United States of America, there can only be the kind of solution that the peaceful settlement of the war between James and Sally discovers. If men and women can learn to see into their hearts, recognize their own evil, and forgive themselves, then they can find the grounds for reconciliation with their fellows. James Page's self-knowledge is a remarkable thing in one of his years, yet Gardner makes the reader believe it and accept his humility and his change of heart, "No hero is ever righteous," Gardner once remarked in an interview; "a hero makes mistakes, recognizes them, says, 'I made a mistake,' and tries to do something about it."⁵

To be sure, the reconciliation between brother and sister—between factions only superficially polarized—will take one only so far toward imagining any millennial solution of the racial, political, and economic problems elaborated in *Smugglers*. Gardner therefore adds depth to the resolution of his novel's central conflict by introducing into the action two veteran civil rights activists—one actually a member of an oppressed minority. The Reverend Lane Walker and Father Rafael Hernandez live close to much of the conflict that shakes America—closer than James and Sally, however well-informed, can be. The clergymen

provide Gardner with an important link between the two levels of his novel. Occupying a middle ground between the frame tale and *Smugglers*, they make clearer the connections between the two that the difference in scale and narrative tone might obscure.

Both men, but especially Father Hernandez, pose an ideological threat to James Page, yet they represent what Page must come to accept. The forces of change proliferate in the old farmer's America, but these waves of a more just future—black, chicano, and feminist activism, the welfare state, even television—threaten to capsize the bark of Yankee integrity that he personifies. They threaten, in fact, the very ship of state, for James Page is ultimately America itself, beset by disaffected minorities, the third world, the intellectual and moral depredations of the mass media, and complacent Democrats spending the country into bankruptcy. By the end of the novel, however, Page has a kind thought for Father Hernandez—quietly recognizing the other man's courage and decency—and concedes a modicum of tolerance not only to Sally's feminist position, but even to the hated television, which he realizes will raise the general sophistication of the electorate during political campaigns and bring more truth to politics than was to be found in the days he remembers so fondly, when tame bears, talking horses, and other such flimflams shilled votes among hicks like—he suddenly realizes—himself. In James Page, then, one sees an older idea of America criticized, even threatened, but one that ultimately allows itself to be reshaped to the ends of justice, the ends the country was founded to serve.

In its attention to such questions and to the individual human beings who must address them *October Light* exemplifies all that is most attractive in Gardner's advocacy of "moral fiction." Rather than explicitly denouncing the kind of fiction typified by *Smugglers*, Gardner merely shows the reader that Sally's book affects her emotionally, and little analysis is required to see demoralization giving way to a certain moral slippage—in, for example, her incipient regret at having missed the kind of sexual freedom enjoyed by the heroine of the novel. Sally becomes "more wry, more wearily disgusted with the world . . ." (p. 21). "Why . . . this ugly cynicism? It was an effect of the novel, she had to suppose. An unhealthy effect, no question about it!" (p. 38). As Sally finds it subtly demoralizing to start thinking about the "world" and the "universe," with their grim prospects, Gardner is indirectly insisting on the validity—indeed, the superiority—of a fiction of everyday life. He would remind us—and does in the frame tale's domestic focus—that however terribly enlightened and *Angst*-ridden modern man is, how-

ever convinced of the groundlessness of all values, he still busies himself quite purposively from day to day trying to provide for himself and his family, educate his children, and minimize the dangers posed to himself and his loved ones by a perilous world. Only the most grievously stricken with what a John Barth character calls "cosmopsis," the cosmic view that defeats purposeful action, would deny that such behavior, however coldly deterministic the instincts in which it is rooted, tends automatically to confer on life a purpose largely indistinguishable from that formerly derived from teleological convictions about existence.

If Gardner chooses to celebrate life's tenacity in the face of certain death, he does so out of heroic optimism, not blindness, for he refuses, as an article of literary faith, to misrepresent the human condition. Though receptive to modern "idealist" philosophies (e.g., those of Collingwood, Bradley, and Brand Blanchard) and convinced that contemporary physics and chemistry make positivist biases about existence and reality less and less tenable, Gardner scrupulously declines to embrace mysticism, spiritualism, or other mythologies of transcendence. Even when he makes the highest claims for his *métier*, he concedes its meaninglessness from the perspective of eternity:

Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy. It is a tragic game, for those who have the wit to take it seriously, because our side must lose; a comic game—or so a troll might say—because only a clown with sawdust brains would take our side and eagerly join in.⁶

There is, then, a darker side to every Gardner novel—the side against which he must define whatever affirmation he attempts. In *The Resurrection* it is the protagonist's untimely and meaningless death, in *Nickel Mountain* it is the workings of dreadful chance, against which humanity seems so frail, and in *Grendel* it is the nihilist dragon, sayer of the eternal no. The darker side of *October Light* is the advanced age of the main characters, an aspect that links it to such novels as Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* or Updike's *The Poorhouse Fair*, which also focus on autumnal lives. Gardner's characters will soon experience a winter more absolute than even their native Vermont's, and the reader senses that James and Sally, both affected by the imminent death of their friend Ed Thomas, terminate their war as much out of the realization that their own remaining time ought not to be squandered in bickering as out of any other form of enlightenment. From his hospital bed Ed reminds James that life, whatever its trials, is a rich and infinitely valuable thing. Though dying himself, Ed takes great comfort in con-

templating the unfailing redemption of winter by spring, of death by the following cycle of life. He also takes advantage of his friend's embarrassed docility (for James's drunken rampage the night of the siege party may have caused Ed's heart attack) to remind him gently that change, whether of the technological or the social variety, has its positive as well as its negative side. The word "progress" is not, as James seems to think, a euphemism for "decline." Ed implies that what James in his mule-headedness takes for decline can just as easily be taken as evidence of some rich new dawn, a spring after winter, for Americans like James and himself.

The idea of a new beginning, one appropriate to the Bicentennial year in which the novel's action transpires, inheres also in its seasonal setting, for Halloween, according to Sir James George Frazer, was observed by primitive peoples as the beginning of the new year. The ancient Celts, who called this festival the Eve of Samhain, kindled a new year's bonfire—an October Light, so to speak—and renewed hearth fires all over Ireland from its flames.⁷ Some such renewal seems to take place in the characters of Gardner's novel, as in the country for which they stand. Other venerable Halloween traditions embellish the novel less obliquely; for example, as the spirits of the dead return to the hearth for nourishment and warmth on Halloween, the book is filled with evocations of the dead—both the characters' own personal dead and the nation's. American folk heroes like Ethan Allen, Parson Dewey, and Judge Sherbrooke are mentioned frequently, for they, particularly, would be abroad on this, the nation's two-hundredth Halloween. On the personal level there are the crowding memories of Sally's husband Horace and of James's wife Aariah, his sons Richard and Ethan, and his Uncle Ira—all dead. At least one real ghost also puts in an appearance: Sally sees it out her window during the storm that anticipates the human violence building indoors.

But the most remarkable of the Halloween revenants is the bear that James Page encounters at the end. Bears, the author has noted, are sometimes thought to be "visitors from another world" (p. 13), indeed, from "the underworld" (p. 303). James, who "believed that his ghosts, insofar as they were real or had the power of things real, were allies in the grim, universal war" that he perceives as "the battle of spirit up through matter" (p. 14), encounters the ghost of his wife Aariah in this bear, for its reproach to him for shooting at it—"Oh James, James!" (p. 434)—is the one she often uttered.

The novel's climactic revelation concerns a fateful Halloween

twenty years earlier, when Richard Page's prank resulted in the death of his Uncle Horace. Like his father, Richard would thereafter be haunted by an uncle's death. But the persistent focus on the season, past and present, suggests that Halloween is more to *October Light* than a source of mildly supernatural touches. Some attention to the actual dates on which the action occurs will be illuminating. These must be deduced from the novel's one concrete date, for Gardner specifies the day of the month only for the second day of the war between James and Sally, the day culminating, after the party designed to lure Sally out of her room, in James's accident and rampage. James deserts the party for Merton's Hideaway and cronies like Sam Frost, who grins at every observation, "making everything he said sound humorous—if you asked him the date and he told you 'Today is October the twenty-ninth,' he'd wink and give you a poke as he said it, as if the date had salacious implications" (p. 289). By means of this indirect dating, the reader can figure that the novel begins on the twenty-eighth, that the apple crate intended for James falls on Ginny on the thirtieth, and that Ginny's return from the hospital, Sally's emergence from her room, James's encounter with the bear, and the end of the book all occur on Halloween proper.

Apparently a matter of importance, like the specificity regarding season and year, this careful dating makes *October Light* an analogue to another literary work with a Halloween setting—Joyce's "Clay." One of the stories in *Dubliners*, a book that anatomizes Ireland less charitably than Gardner anatomizes America, "Clay" concerns the pathetic Maria, a superannuated nursemaid invited by one of her former charges to spend Halloween at a family hearth. In her holiday outing, the spare and frail woman becomes symbolically one of the host of disembodied spirits that seek out sustenance and human warmth every Halloween. But Joyce makes her at once a witch ("when she laughed . . . the tip of her nose nearly met the tip of her chin")⁸ and a picture of tragically wasted maternal instincts—a Virgin Mary *manqué*. Like Gardner, Joyce presents characters who personify his native land. Maria is the paradoxical mixture of piety and sterility that embodies Ireland itself. Meek, pure, even persecuted in a minor way for righteousness' sake (her host blows up when she tries to play peacemaker on behalf of his estranged brother), she is an ideal candidate for the blessings bestowed by Christ during the Sermon on the Mount—which happens to be the text for church services on the day after Halloween, All Saints'. Joyce, ever indirect, says nothing about the Sermon on the Mount, but he

does emphasize Maria's role as peacemaker and her other gentle qualities. Moreover, he makes a point of mentioning that she resets her alarm clock for early mass on the morning after her Halloween visit.

Gardner may expect his reader to make a similar connection and to carry it further. The liturgy for All Saints' Day includes not only the Sermon on the Mount, but also a scene from the apocalypse. The one makes a fitting commentary on the frame story, the other on *Smugglers*. The frame story's characters and their dead include some that are poor in spirit, some that mourn, some that are meek, some that hunger and thirst after righteousness, some that are merciful, some that are pure in heart, some that are peacemakers, and some that are persecuted for righteousness' sake. One can, for example, number Lane Walker, Father Hernandez, and the others who come to the siege party among the peacemakers; the young people, Terence Parks and Margie Phelps, among the pure in heart; the feckless Richard Page among the poor in spirit; and so forth. But as in the Bible the point is not really to identify as blessed particular individuals or groups, but rather to set up criteria that are inclusive. Thus, characters whose ideologies or temperaments vary widely may fall under the same rubric: like the clergymen, both Sally and James hunger and thirst for "righteousness"—and are persecuted for its sake. They are also "they that mourn": Sally for Horace; James for Arian, Richard, and Ethan. In other words, the inclusiveness that accounts for the universal appeal of the Beatitudes accounts as well for the appeal, the genial humanity, of Gardner's novel.

The possibility of such indirect reference to the New Testament need not lay the frame tale open to the complaint previously registered for the pretentious Christian symbolism of *Smugglers*, for the Sermon on the Mount is after all the most humanistic message in the Bible. But if the familiar verses from Matthew hint at a universal salvation, Revelation makes clear distinctions between the saved and the damned. The apocalyptic verses in the All Saints' text describe the masses of those sealed in their foreheads gazing up at a refulgent Lamb of God; consequently, in the parody-apocalypse that concludes *Smugglers*, Peter and Jane gaze up at a refulgent flying saucer and plead for salvation ("Save us! . . . Beam us up!"—p. 400) as one disreputable companion after another is swallowed up in the general destruction. The naming of their Patmos—*Lost Souls' Rock*—hints at their fate at the same time that it provides another ironic glance at the liturgical calendar, since All Souls' Day follows All Saints'. The souls prayed for on All Souls' are those of the faithful departed—all others are numbered among what Thomas Pynchon would call the preterite, the passed over, the "lost."

But Gardner is the god who says "Depart from me ye accursed," and along with these desperate souls he consigns *Smugglers* itself—or rather the kind of fiction *Smugglers* represents—to the outer darkness. Salvation, in the form of self-knowledge and domestic tranquillity, he reserves for decent folk like James Page and for the nation Page personifies—more believably, at last, than the squabblers of the *Indomitable* and the *Militant*—at the beginning of its third century. It was a remarkable inspiration that led the author to juxtapose his engaging Vermont world with the cynical and soul-weary world of *Smugglers*, which manages superficially to entertain—and thus to avoid the impatience of—the reader who readily perceives its inferiority to the frame narrative with its real people, real problems, and real values. As in *The Resurrection* and *Nickel Mountain*, Gardner focuses on the domestic scene and its redemptive aspects. He does not distort, and he does not sentimentalize, but he asserts that life, and the art that celebrates it, can be positive, hopeful, even redemptive.

Gardner always believed that life follows art and that consequently the artist bears a heavy responsibility for the health of the culture in which he lives and works. If the artist chronicles bleakness, he teaches the world to despair. If he struggles to affirm, he teaches the world to hope. In his Bicentennial novel Gardner affirms the possibility that the American nation can graft new ideals onto old values and atone for the injustices that have crept into the system. Though it recapitulates the American myths elaborated in the fictions of such moderns as Fitzgerald, West, Faulkner, and Pynchon, *October Light* avoids their satiric or tragic extremes. If Gardner's novel lasts, it may well do so as the century's most intelligently optimistic meditation on the character and future of America.

¹ John Gardner, *October Light* (New York: Knopf, 1976), p. 60. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² James leaves the farm to Sally in his will; however, if she is no longer living, it goes not to Ginny, his daughter, but to her husband.

³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner's, 1958).

⁴ John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 26.

⁵ Joe David Bellamy and Pat Ensworth, "John Gardner," in *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*, ed. Bellamy (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 185–86.

⁶ Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, p. 6.

⁷ James George Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, ed. Theodor H. Gaster (New York: Criterion Books, 1959), pp. 617–18.

⁸ James Joyce, *Dubliners* (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 101.