liberal political theory. He rightly sees that the issue is not the assertion of the individual as the basis for societal life. Rather, it has to do with the kind of individual that is developed. His attempt to develop a theory of "normative individualism" abstracted from the narratively articulated traditions of particular people reflects the liberal assumption that we can and should be free from the past. He thus fails to see that the claim that one is an "individual" makes sense only in relation to some historical alternative. In spite of richer individualism, Norton still gives us the kind of presocial individualism found in Rawls and Nozick. Such individualism has forgotten that we cannot gain our individuality by being stripped of our roles (and our history), but only by living in our roles. There are certainly aspects of Norton's position that are in tension with this, but I suspect that Norton's book, for all its brilliance, continues to be more a reflection than a critique of that history which has us so firmly in its grip.

Again, "True art...clarifies life, establishes models of human action, casts nets toward the future, carefully judges our right and wrong directions, celebrates and mourns...It designs visions worth trying to make fact."

Statements like these earn our good will because we hope that they are true and, consequently, that the author is right. If we are not certain that they are true, we nevertheless recognize that Mr. Gardner must be a very kind man to wish it this way. If we agree that they are true, then we surely want to be counted on the author's side.

True art, Mr. Gardner argues, somehow makes us better, puts us on the side of life and the living, and so does the criticism that treasures and encourages this art. The admiration of mistaken critics for the honesty of Sylvia Plath's art, life, and finally death "is perhaps one of the reasons Anne Sexton is now dead." If young men all over Europe really did commit suicide after reading the Sorrows of Young Werther, "then either Goethe's book was false art or his readers misunderstood." I wish Mr. Gardner had said which of these seems to him the case: if the former, whether Goethe knew what he was doing and could have done otherwise; if the latter, how misunderstanding is to be prevented.

Let me put the question a little more sharply with an illustration of my own. We have Cervantes's word for it that Don Quixote becomes a knight errant, centuries after the time for such figures has passed, because of the influence of the many chivalric romances he has read, principally Amadis of Gaul. Are we to conclude that the Don simply misunderstands what the lessons of a novel are, the way literature is supposed to enter into human experience, and that no moral judgment with respect to the Amadis is called for? Or are we to conclude, since the Don's motives are high-minded and generous in the extreme, that the Amadis is therefore true art, a good book for anyone to read? Or, finally, are we to conclude, since the Don's nobility of purpose often ends in his own broken bones and increased misery for those whom he would help, that the Amadis is false art, an immoral and even a dangerous book? These three possible conclusions all represent serious critical positions that are, or have been, held about Don Quixote; all can be cogently argued, and in some para-

doxical way each is probably part of the truth. But to each this objection can be made: Why should Amadis of Gaul be judged according to its influence on Don Quixote, of all people, since he is mad? (The premise of madness, incidentally, is not one that all readers would grant.) To this one replies in turn: Maybe so, but then who is to judge? Whose behavior is to be taken into account? Whom do we believe? Not Thackeray on Gulliver's Travels, not the United States Customs authorities or, for that matter, Virginia Woolf on Ulysses.

Mr. Gardner's stance is not, of course, new. The related notions that writers can be moral or immoral forces, that books can be good or bad, and that it matters what we choose to read have been around at least since Plato and in one way or another have exercised (among many others) Aristotle, Sidney, Shelley, Arnold, Simone Weil, and T.S. Eliot. The last, in the essay "Religion and Literature," wrote: "The fiction that we read affects our behavior towards our fellow men, affects our patterns of ourselves." Well, I hope that is true; I believe it is; I should despair of living in a world in which the very idea that a good book is ennobling of its reader must be dismissed as sentimental slop. At the same time, I know that it is a premise very hard to prove in theory and harder still to legislate in practice. And so, beyond noting that Mr. Gardner's book is a thoughtful contribution to a timeless cultural debate, I shall pursue the matter no further. Instead, it might be interesting to consider why Mr. Gardner offers his apologia for moral fiction at this particular moment.

It is his conviction that the literature of our time—in fact, all the arts—and the criticism that both feeds on and nourishes it are in a bad way. There are numerous reasons for this unhappy state. One is the "post-modernist" insistence on superficiality, on texture, on surfaces for their own sake, whether or not there be anything beneath. A second is an academic, critical, and thus novelistic valuing of opacity or unintelligibility—again, for its own sake. "The harshest [writers] to read," Mr. Gardner says, are "the easiest to teach." That is true enough with brilliant graduate students but doubtful otherwise. A third reason, according to Gardner, is an arrogant devaluation of matters, like good

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On Moral Fiction
by John Gardner
(Basic Books; 214 pp.; $8.95)

Mark Taylor

On Moral Fiction comes out strongly for moral fiction, a position that has the great virtue of assuring the author of the good will of most readers. I am not altogether sure whether Mr. Gardner considers bad art and false art, of which he speaks a good deal, to be nonetheless a species of genuine art. I am not sure, that is, whether the word "art" is used eulogistically or neutrally. Gardner unequivocally values art that is "primarily moral—that is, life-giving—moral in its process of creation and moral in what it says." An artistic medium, even television, "is good (as opposed to pernicious or vacuous) only when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue, toward life affirmation as opposed to destruction or indifference."
characterization, that have always worked and always pleased. There is a common denominator here. "In literature, structure is the evolving sequence of dramatized events tending toward understanding and assertion; that is, toward some meticulously qualified belief. What we see around us is, for the most part, dramatization without belief or else opinion untested by honest drama." This means, I think, that literature should not give up on making sense of the materials it records. Like Hamlet, Mr. Gardner believes the artist should hold a mirror up to nature, but he finds, more and more often, that this is not what artists are doing.

Half a century ago Robert Graves's tutor in Anglo-Saxon at Oxford offered an extraordinary judgment in which no one today would concur. His subject, he said, was "a language of purely linguistic interest," and "hardly a line of Anglo-Saxon poetry extant possessed the slightest literary merit." Such pronouncements over a whole area, be it Anglo-Saxon poetry or the contemporary novel, are always dangerous. Mr. Gardner's judgments are easy enough to accept in the abstract, but their accuracy as diagnosis—their applicability to a large number of our writers—is an indictment for which many readers will have to take his word, and they should not. He does not set himself the task of demolishing an individual reputation by examining in detail a body of work and finding it wanting. Rather, he makes a case for a current cultural malaise and asserts, but doesn't begin to prove, that our novelists (and artists and composers) are responsible for it.

He may be, he surely is, simply wrong about some of the novelists—Coover, Gaddis, Updike, Mailer, Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, and others—whose work he finds not to be moral fiction, as Thackeray was wrong about Swift and Woolf about Joyce. I know that I am loath to accept as a guide a critic who can speak of Paradise Lost as "clumsily put together." But what is really at issue here is not so much Mr. Gardner's credentials and authority as a critic as the general wisdom of listening to someone who finds a whole body of literature to be unserious and trivial rather than to someone who finds it significant and of enduring value (especially when the former choice can justify lazy, uninformed, and even anti-intellectual opinions of one's own).

Mr. Gardner specifies the novelists who trouble him, but not, unfortunately, the critics. He may mean a contemporary "school" of critics who value literature in proportion to its capacity for revealing how interesting they, the critics, are: le texte, c'est moi. Here I might agree with him. But in general the business of literary criticism and the teaching of literature in universities (where Pynchon is usually taught, if at all, because of the instructor's belief that he is important, not merely difficult, and where, in fact, Pynchon is not taught at all because he is too difficult for the instructor) reflect, not a conspiracy among those eager to keep themselves in business, but the efforts of serious men and women to separate the good from the bad, to understand it, and to pass on their understanding. No doubt some of the authors alleged in On Moral Fiction to enjoy "inflated reputations" indeed do so; time will take care of them and show, when the world no longer cares, that their present champions were misguided though hardly ever malevolent. In the meantime, since this fiction happens to be the fiction we've got, one is better off trying to come to terms with the strongest and most articulate arguments for it rather than otherwise. An excess of attention is preferable to a deficiency.

There is another pertinent consideration. If our critics are not conspiratorial in what they praise, neither are our novelists in what they write. They are trying as hard as they can. Even if Mr. Gardner is entirely correct in what he says, it is unlikely that anything can be done about it. Put another way, we can hardly avoid wondering why one age produces great art and another does not—one moment Romantic poets, the next only pre-Raphaelites. Voltaire explained the Renaissance by and large as coincidence, as the fortuitous appearance in Italy at a certain time of a large number of geniuses. That sounds rather naive now, as a view of history, but geniuses do have the tendency to pop up in great numbers at certain moments (in Periclean Greece; in the Italian Renaissance and Elizabethan England; during the periods we call Romantic, at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, and modern, at the beginning of the twentieth) and not at all at others. Mere seriousness of purpose is not enough, and neither is brilliance or effort; they are characteristic of every age. Needed also is something we don't really understand at all, the mysterious circumstances that allow talent to ripen into genius and allow that genius to produce true art. Not all the good intentions in the world can call these circumstances spontaneously into being.

**Catholicism Between Luther & Voltaire**

*by Jean Delumeau*

( Westminster; 294 pp.; $19.50)

**Miracles, Convulsions, and Ecclesiastical Politics in Early Eighteenth Century Paris**

*by B. Robert Kreiser*

(Princeton University; 485 pp.; $27.50)

**J. T. Moore**

Most histories of the post-Tridentine period in France have concentrated on Counter-Reformation developments in theology, doctrine, and dogma, or on the Church and its institutions. Few have been concerned with the religious life of the lay Christian or the lower classes in general. The result has been a lingering vacuum of scholarship that haunts those who desire a more comprehensive understanding of this vital period. The two books reviewed here challenge some aspects of traditional scholarship and together move to fill the