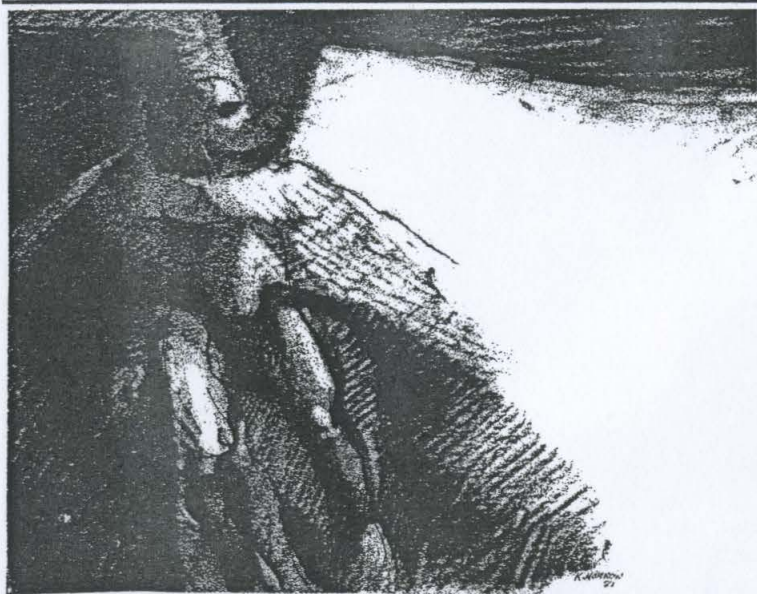

MSS



FALL 1984

Volume IV • Number 1, 2

A Tribute to John Gardner

EDITED BY JOHN GARDNER, L.M. ROSENBERG AND JOANNA HIGGINS

This issue is dedicated to John with love and remembrance.

Our thanks for a generous supporting grant from
the National Endowment for the Arts.

John Gardner

Mel Konner

On August 14, 1979 I wrote to John Gardner one of those unfortunate letters that unknown, usually young writers address to well-established ones whom they admire but do not know. Such missives are frequently serious enough to be funny, and are full of a strange intensity composed partly of resentment but mainly of longing. Mine was no exception, and neither its brevity, nor its lame attempt at lightness, nor its expressions of admiration, gratitude, even concern toward my hoped-for reader really did much to mitigate the weight of its twenty or so solipsistic sentences.

I had previously sworn off this sort of letter, having been disappointed more than once. But my first novel, my short fiction and my children's story had been rejected so many times that I was ready to try once again to make contact with a writer instead of a publisher. I had formed (and still have) the impression that young non-commercial fiction writers nowadays get their first breaks through schools or programs for writers, and I have never had the remotest contact with any such programs. I was a junior professor of anthropology who had more or less given up on the academic world and was planning to go to medical school. I had a wife and a one-year-old daughter and, at the age of thirty-three, I had been trying to write fiction for fifteen years. Two New York agents — first Wendy Weil, then Elaine Markson — had taken pity on me and my novel, but their most heroic efforts had been fruitless.

Into this dismal and airless creative space that summer came a breath of fresh air borne by the Sunday New York Times: an article based on interviews with John Gardner, whose fiction I had loved. As in his book *On Moral Fiction* and as is so uncommon among famous writers, he went beyond himself in these interviews.

He declared that, although it took him away from his writing, he absolutely had to help younger writers, or else "burn in hell for a thousand years."

I remember staring at the photograph of the strange-looking man with the white hair on the motorcycle and wondering if his declaration could possibly, conceivably, remotely include me. I thought of ending my letter to him, "So you'd better help me, or else you'll burn in hell for a thousand years." But instead I wrote quite soberly, "I am trying to write a moral fiction. Your comments can make a major impact on me. They will be gratefully received, conscientiously responded to, and long remembered. I know you have more important and more lucrative things to do with your time. I admit it may make me uneasy to think that there may be a paragraph or two less of Gardner because of the time he spent reading Konner. I just want you to know that if you do give me the time, I will be very far from taking it for granted."

I must have re-read it ten times, sitting at the typewriter of the old house we had rented in Barnard, Vermont. The house was of wood, with big naked planks and beams inside and out, and it stood on one of the lesser wooded hills in the Green Mountains; so I can perhaps be forgiven a sense that I was a part of the natural world, much like a character in a Gardner novel, and that this would assure me luck with him. I clipped the letter to my manuscript — a volume of short fiction — and took it down to the tiny Barnard Post Office.

For a few weeks I put it out of my mind. Would the prose master of *Grendel*, the poet of *Jason and Medea*, the angry critic of *On Moral Fiction* write to me? Not likely. Here was a man who cast a narrow critical shadow. My chances of finding shelter in it would not be great. Still, from one to about three months after I wrote — we were now back in Cambridge and it was getting on toward winter — I searched the mail expectantly more or less every day. After that, I did not lose hope completely, but I was preoccupied with other things: applying to medical school, writing a non-fiction (or at least not intentionally fictional) book about human nature, lecturing, living.

In December I was in Baltimore being interviewed for admission to the Johns Hopkins Medical School, and I returned a

call from home to find out that there was a letter from John Gardner. My wife — Marjorie Shostak, also a writer — was almost as excited as I was. The envelope was thick and had arrived torn open. She apologized; she had already read a bit of it. Could she open it and read the rest? Even the thickness seemed relevant — the way it does to medical school applicants who presume that acceptance is somehow thicker.

She read it to me — at least most of it — over the long-distance telephone — almost five closely typed pages. No medical school in the world could have written me anything remotely as satisfying as that letter. When I got home I saw for myself: It existed; it was real. And it was friendly. And long. In it were things every young writer dreams of hearing from a famous man: praise, acceptance, advice, a completely unexpected offer of publication (I had up to then had no idea that he had started a magazine;) but also and most prominently, constructive, detailed, superbly helpful criticism. The first five and the last two paragraphs contain the praise, advice and acceptance, and will probably be most meaningful to the reader who is unfamiliar with the story he discussed in detail. But the intervening three pages contained criticism of that story so thoughtful and so generous in its specificity that even I had to wonder whether the story was worth it. (Raymond Carver, in his foreword to *On Becoming a Novelist*, describes a precisely similar reaction to John Gardner's criticism of his stories.) This in effect was his first important lesson for me: If it is worth anything, then it is worth the most painstaking, the most dedicated, the most obsessive revision.

Despite my doubts, I was going to try to live up to the confidence expressed in the letter and, without being obsequious, to follow the advice. His last paragraph began, "Let me say this, which may or may not impress you" I was impressed. I was on a high that would last for months. What does a publication signify except acceptance by some editor? This was acceptance by John Gardner. He put me in a class with the unpublished Joyce Carol Oates and the unpublished William Gass. "I would like to be your promoter and publisher, the man who gets secondary credit for your fame. What I ask of you is this: that you take six months — forget your fucking ambition — and rewrite the story, get everything exactly,

brilliantly right. Call me, write me, do anything you like I would like to develop a stable of writers (New Yorker style). I'd very much like you to be part of that stable What can I say? Think about it."

I thought about not much else for quite some time. Below the salutation ("Best, John Gardner") was another message: "Phone (late at night, never in the morning) :" with a number. How I regret now never having used that number I was too timid to take seriously his having left a door ajar into his own life; too timid, too respectful of his privacy, or too unwilling to break, for myself, his great-writer magic spell.

It took me three weeks to get the courage just to write to him. "Receiving your letter was one of the most important things that has ever happened to me; and I mean by that the sort of things one can count on the fingers of, at most, two hands. Writing in a vacuum begins as a sort of gasping for breath but ends as an adaptation Air frightens you" And near the end of the letter I said something I feel even more strongly now: "For you to be this generous with someone like me, someone you don't know, someone who writes to you out of the clear blue sky you must be a remarkably generous man."

His subsequent letters, like the first, were full of detailed advice and criticism. He frequently called for removal of blemishes in what should be the seamlessness of "the fictional dream," even if these were not errors but mere distractions; for realized setting or event or conversation that would make things that had merely been stated seem inescapably true (what he calls in *The Art of Fiction* "moment by moment authenticating detail;" for boldness in both event and setting; and for simplicity in the face of unnecessary intricacy or intellectualizing ("Simplicity is best. Be Tolstoy. If you can't be Tolstoy be Jesus.")

None of these suggestions is exactly unprecedented in the annals of editing and criticism. But he had a way of saying these things that made you hear them for the first time. He was a born teacher; and his suggestions carry that special weight of authority that comes from the genuine wish on the part of the master that you, the acolyte, should come to thrive and grow — what is called in current psychobabble by the regrettably debased word "caring.

That wish included too the peculiar affection of the master for the initiate that is really the love of the craft itself — the hope that here may be someone who can carry the craft forward, an ally in the “tragi-comic holding action against entropy” that, by his definition, art comprises.

The reader will note, and perhaps be as surprised as I was, by his willingness to wrangle with me over details where I did not promptly take his advice. He dwelt on these more than tolerantly, using each as a basis for a dialogue on technique or character or philosophy. In several cases he conceded that I was right, or gave in to me without agreeing; in one case he switched his view after I conceded, deciding that I had been right in the first place. Unbelievably, he respected me, and he showed that respect in every line of each of his letters. In *On Becoming a Novelist* he says, “No one can really tell the beginning writer whether or not he has what it takes. Most people the young writer asks aren’t qualified to judge.” I had had that problem up to then, but I did not have it any longer; to me, at least, he was qualified. And, after much revision, one of his letters ended with the unforgettable words: “Wonderful, amazing story. Heartfelt congratulations and a slight stitch of envy.”

I got the news of his death from the front page of the New York Times one morning at a kiosk as I was on the way to the hospital — much as my character Karkov got the news of a death that would change his life. Since I was assigned at the time to the Emergency Ward, I could have vivid visions of his arrival after the accident; these were not at all pleasant. In the small hours of the morning, during a lull in the human chaos, I went to the chapel — the only quiet, and certainly the only beautiful spot in the hospital — and wrote to L.M. Rosenberg; from the heart. I could not pretend to have had a deeply personal loss, but on the other hand I had lost the only teacher I had ever had, as a writer, and the only connection to that lofty world of literature that was, perhaps, the most important thing in my life.

Not long after his death Anne Bernays wrote a sensitive magazine piece speculating on a possible suicidal element in his accident. I could almost hear Peter Mickelsson muttering in the background against psycho-analysis — even while he nodded reluctant

assent to its piece of the truth. Yet there is something about the relationship of a passionate, sensitive man to the world — something about being alone, something about challenging God, something about risk — that cannot, of course, be encompassed by so neat a formulation. From the first page of his first letter he had cautioned me against holding back, “for fear that you might seem common, a sort of adventure writer — Conrad or Faulkner — to say nothing of Homer or Shakespeare — would slam right in.” I did not know John Gardner, but I know his books; they have an almost Jamesian intelligence, to be sure — but they also have adventure.

And they are full of lessons I am still trying to learn. Fortunately not only for me but for every writer, he left, in addition to many examples of brilliant writing, three books of advice. As I read *On Moral Fiction*, *On Becoming a Novelist*, and *The Art of Fiction*, I feel almost as if I am reading more of his letters to me. And of course, I reread the letters too: “slam right in”; “simplicity is best”; “a vivid and continuous dream”; “entertainment for the soul” These are things I am still striving for and, of course, always will be.

In *On Becoming a Novelist* he warns against doing what I did — being out of touch with the community of writers. For me he was a lifeline to that community, and his memory still is. Near my typewriter I keep a copy of the memorial ad placed in a newspaper by his publisher: “John Gardner: Novelist, Poet, Teacher” I will always be grateful to them for recognizing that third sturdy pillar of his work. Just as his fictional and poetic genius live on the pages of *Grendel* and *Mickelsson’s Ghosts* and *Jason and Medea*, so his genius as a teacher lives on in the minds and work of the many writers who were touched by his pedagogical generosity. And I envision him not (of course) “burning in hell” but as a palpable figure resembling his own god Thor — surveying the all too mortal literary scene, swinging his hammer down and down against all that is cheap and phony (whatever its pretensions), and gazing on those of us who are trying, however clumsily, to write something good, with a look that conveys something between tolerance and love.

December 9 1979

Dear Mel Konner,

It's been a long time since you sent me *Whales*¹ which I don't think I even wrote to you to say I'd received. I've been busy — many students, much administrative work, my own writing, and so on — but at last I've had time to read the collection, twice now. Writing to you about the stories is extremely difficult for me, and I may as well tell you why at once. You write extraordinarily well, in some respects, as I'm sure you know and for that reason I can't help fearing that what you want is simply help getting published, not criticism, though I think criticism (and *then* publication) is what you need. It's hard to put one's whole heart into criticizing a writer's work if one suspects the writer doesn't want to hear

To make what follows more palatable, let me start with this. I am reviving my old magazine, *MSS* — publication begins in the spring, and in January a retrospective will come out (stories from the old mag; Bill Gass, Joyce Carol Oates, John Hawks (sic), and so on). I'm very much interested in publishing fiction of yours, especially the long story I'll concentrate on here, assuming it hasn't already been published.

First some general remarks. Here are my general principles on fiction: I think a story should create in the reader's mind a vivid and continuous dream. That is, there should be enough details of setting, gesture, etc., to give the reader a fully elaborated basis for his envisioning, all as concrete as possible; and nothing in the writing should distract the reader from what he's seeing in his mind — no mistakes of sentimentality, mannerism, frigidity, sentence rhythm, accidental rhyme, faulty construction scene-by-scene, and so on. And when all that is done, the story must also satisfy another condition: it must seem to the reader to fulfill itself — fulfill its promise — and feel richly satisfying as, for lack of a better word, entertainment. I mean the entertainment of the soul (a resonant, powerfully worked out theme) and entertainment of more trivial kinds (sentences the reader enjoys reading, just because they're so

good; textures, metaphors, etc., that make the story stand out above other stories).

You're pretty good at all these things, though in my opinion not quite as good as you should be. My main reservation about most of the stories is that they tend toward Hemingwayesque understatement. You avoid head-on drama, choosing instead delicate and attenuated situations, stories by suggestion as in "Uhuru Sutra." One can't help thinking as one reads this story (and I'm sure this would be true of any reader you could get to tell you the truth about the story) that something exciting is going to happen. Only it doesn't. It seems to me that (in this story, for instance) you keep missing opportunities, or rather choosing not to take opportunities for fear that you might seem common, a sort of adventure writer. Take setting. You suggest it, holding yourself in — yet you're dealing with a setting exotic to most readers, one the reader wants to know more about. You're asking the reader to be intensely sensitive (to plot and character as well as setting); you deny him the joys of, say, a circus — all its smoke and smells and colors and thrills. Why? Conrad, Faulkner — to say nothing of Homer or Shakespeare — would slam right in. Anyway, the result is that the reader looks forward, as he moves through the opening scenes, to more than you grant him, and when he finishes, even if he admits, academically, that the story's intelligent and good-for-us, he feels still hungry. If his mind hasn't been twisted by too much education, he feels, Yes, good, very good, but where's the *story*.

You don't always write like this, of course, and the striking example of where you don't is the long story you've called "Thy Will Be Done on Earth."² This is the story I'd like to dwell on and would like, if you can agree with me on how it needs fixing, to publish in *MSS* (for money; we pay competitively as little mags go — better than most of the well-known ones, though not up to the standard of the slicks — *Atlantic*, etc.). I hope you haven't already published it, partly because I think it could be a magnificent story and isn't yet, and partly because I'd be overjoyed to publish the story it's trying to be. I'll comment unsystematically taking the problems as they appear or jumping around if I forget what I was saying.

First I don't like the title. I can't really tell you why. These things are pretty irrational. A title is the first announcement to the reader of what the story is going to be, and this title is misleading. (I expect maybe a fine, gentle story about monks or a minister with cancer. I told you, it's irrational.) More important, the title is somehow blunt, too easy, too likely to call up in the reader a stock response. In my opinion a title shouldn't be too self-consciously heavy. Neither, of course, should it be faggotized (I've tried to think of a better word than faggotized, and I hope you will strip that word of its nastiness; I mean not homosexual but falsely elegant, prissily apologetic). A title, if the story is a good, solid one — as this one is — should be as solid and plain as the ground.

The first spot in the story that I feel just a little uneasy about is the one on p. 31 paragraph beginning "Within seconds" What troubles me here is awfully tricky to express; I hope you'll try to feel out what I'm saying, try to see the story through my eyes (any stranger's eyes) and see if what bothers me bothers you. Vulgorov's action, shouting at the top of his voice, may be full (sic) appropriate to his character as we come to understand it later (I'm not even sure of this), but at this point in the story we don't know him well enough to believe it entirely. There are, I think, two ways to deal with what's wrong. 1) Give us more detail about Vulgorov's gestures, facial expression, or whatever — nail down the image or series of images so that we have no doubt that what you say is happening really is happening. Vulgorov's encounter with the secretaries you present in literary, metaphorical terms (nice writing, but that's not the point), so that we don't even know exactly what has happened between him and the secretaries. The rumor, you tell us, "at last coiled in his ear," and "he flew immediately into a righteous rage," apparently a rage aimed at the secretaries. But I don't know exactly what their part in it was. Did he hear the rumor elsewhere — hear that the secretaries were talking about him, then run to their office and yell at them? Did he hear it directly from the secretaries? (Is that why he showed surprise, then yelled?) Is it that after yelling at the secretaries — forgetting himself and snapping out like a dog — he felt embarrassment and out of *that* emotion went in to yell at (to) the Chairman (in other words,

was it partly guilt that raised his voice when he reached the Chairman's office?) In other words, the scene is not concrete enough to explain itself and this be convincing, the thoroughly probable action of a certain kind of character. Or 2: You could have Vulgorov strike at the Chairman in a different way — hissing, leaning over his desk, or whatever. (The first choice is preferable, I think.) Anyway, I'm not convinced, though I want to be. I just don't see the scene with crystal clarity and since the scene is of a kind certain to make me (or any reader) embarrassed for the character (or for the writer, whatever), and certain therefore to make him draw back self-protectively it can only work if the reader sees it as absolutely true, inescapable. Put it this way: in any story, a tragic ending is powerful only if we're convinced that there was no way to get around it — convinced that we weren't manipulated into the tragic outcome. Similarly, a comic ending — a joyful triumph — is really satisfying only if it seems honestly achieved. If we're not convinced, we resist the work, even hate it. In exactly the same way, but on a lesser scale, we accept extremely embarrassing behavior from a character only if the writer persuades us that the behavior really took place. With the line "You're joking," proposed the Chairman, we're back in the realm of the acceptable. (A splendid line, in fact.) The paragraph on p. 32 beginning "Richard Stephens complied" is also fine. Here you present important material abstractly, telling us the Chairman's reasons without really dramatizing them, but it's ok because it's not behavior we cringe from.

On p. 33 I'm troubled by "ill-compatible." (I wouldn't die over this one, so I won't elaborate. Briefly it seems to me too awkward for Vulgorov.)

On p. 39 I'd cut "dark" from the final phase in part I, "dark fear" You don't seem to realize how powerfully you've already done the job. Fear will do alone. Dark fear seems sentimental pushing.

On p. 40. I'm displeased by "equally rarely right" for two reasons, first because it's cacophonous (or however you spell it), second because the statement seems to me doubtful. In my experience as a

teacher, student hatred of a professor is usually, though not always, right.

On p. 46 I object to the italics. I'd put a dash after "libraries" maybe, then let it stand, no italics.

Big problem, for me, with section IV p. 55 This is extremely important information, but it's a shift in story-telling method and therefore obtrusive, clumsy. I think it's information that should be worked in, not simply rammed in. It's as if, in a narrative poem, the writer were to drop his rhyme scheme for a while, just to put in something his narrative can't do without. There's no reason, I think, that it can't be placed within the continuing drama of the story, either as character meditation (during the long night when he worries about what's going to happen to him) or, preferably, as an authorial aside or cutback or whatever. Anyway, your method calls attention to itself. You have several things in this story that fill in background – Evelyn's past, Susan Ross' encounter with Stephens – which you manage to make part of the developing story. Vulgorov's childhood you slam in out of nowhere. I think I understand the justifications that went through your mind, but I don't buy them.

Another big problem, for me, is section VI. I have so many objections to it I'm not sure where to start. First, maybe, is that it looks too dogmatic, a sermon on women's rights. You've already done this beautifully in the meeting of Susan Ross and Stephens, but there the feminist question is dramatized. (I think even there it's a touch overdone: you make Stephens too easy a straw man. Nevertheless, it's a fine scene.) I like the bar scene up to the entrance of the three young men. Then I get uneasy, partly because the three young men don't come through for me as characters, partly because I don't really (sic) why the scene needs to be there. It seems to do several things, none of them in need of doing. 1 It gives hints to who maybe really did the murder – a matter of no real importance in the story. 2. It lets the men spout their sympathetic feminism, but not in a way I believe. (I'm suspicious of young men who claim to be sympathetic to the plights of women.

If I'm to believe what they say I need to see the hint of falsity in it – they survive in the system, the women don't; and I'm sure they're not really as concerned as they pretend. Those for whom things are more or less ok are only superficially concerned about those for whom things are not. But I wander from my point.) Vulgorov is the heart of the story, his failure to recognize Evelyn for what she is, his fall from his own Greek vision of life, his too-intellectual, too-self-involved panic. (I'd also get rid of the Viet Nam references, since they date the story as nothing else does.) I can't quite explain why the whole scene after the three young men come in seems contrived, but it does. Every other scene seems thoroughly convincing and advances the story This one is pale and puzzling. We don't really learn much about Evelyn – certainly not what happened the night she died. We don't care about the three young men. What Susan has to say we've already seen in the scene with Stephens. We learn that Evelyn leaves her door open, but I'm not sure how important that really is; one way or another, the murderer got in. And we learn that Jerry knows something about who really did the murder, only then we find it was a red herring. We learn, too, that Evelyn hates Vulgorov, but I'm not sure how important that is either. A very strange scene.

On p. 68 I'd cut the paragraph beginning "This awkward piece of logic" since it doesn't need saying.

From there on, the story's fine.

As I guess I've made clear, I'm left with the feeling that the story doesn't know what it's up to, in other words, it's confused. What counts in every story is *what feels like it counts*. The story gets us emotionally involved with a question of some kind, and the moment we are in that way hooked, that question is the one we want to deal with. In this story we quickly learn that Vulgorov is a brilliant classicist who sometimes gets carried away with his emotions. He loves the classic because they're *about* emotion, and he loves the profession because it deals with emotion intellectually. His tragedy is that, without realizing it's happening, he's let his intellectual control cut him off from emotion. The murder triggers

a crisis for him: a powerful upsurge of emotion he can't deal with (his intellect does him no good against newspaper people or the students who dislike him, and he can't protect himself from the police partly because he can't tell what they're thinking). What he will learn in the end is that he missed the opportunity of loving a girl very much like him, an intellectual who loves the classics because they're moving. A part of his problem is his antifeminism: he scorns Daphne because she cries too easily, and he would have appreciated Evelyn if he'd been awake to women's powers — that's as much as feminism has to do with the story Evelyn's openness — her open door — contrasts with Vulgorov's closedness (good!), but the story of the contrast is only partly told. If the story is really about Vulgorov (and it is) what we need to know is: What is Vulgorov's relationship with his wife and kids? (Why is it right that he should have fallen in love with Evelyn? We know, of course, nothing about Vulgorov's marriage.) How, exactly, does Evelyn contrast with Susan Ross? (Susan makes the statement — resigning. What exactly does Evelyn do, and what does it mean about her?) At one point Vulgorov has sexual fantasies about Evelyn (p. 59). How come it doesn't awaken him to her larger virtues. (I am a professor sexually faithful to my wife. If a female student arouses my sexual interest I quickly transform that interest into teacherly concern. How come Vulgorov doesn't? The answer you give in the story seems too easy: he's a male chauvinist who sees women as objects. Trouble is, the censoring device would instantly interfere, transferring sexual attraction to something more Platonic).

I guess what it comes down to is this: when you write in a more or less Hemingwayesque style, icily holding back, I believe you but I don't find the story significant. When you write in a full-fledged Tolstoyan way, delving into character trying to trace out, as Aristotle says, "the potential which exists in character and situation," I don't believe you, though my admiration increases. "Thy Will Be Done" could be a splendid story — a great story — if you could uncloud your mind, drop all propaganda, and make it what it wants to be, the story of Vulgorov. You need to think: What does Vulgorov's story need? His relationship with his wife is imperative (also the kids). As for Evelyn, that's tricky It's important

for the story — Vulgorov's story — that her real nature comes clear only when Sgt. Mulvey reveals it. That's the story's shock. Hence you can't write in scenes which show us how Evelyn really was. In the midway Evelyn scenes you've written (especially section VI) you've hinted without tipping your hand, and that's good, except that the scenes have no bearing.

Let me say this, which may or may not properly impress you. In the old days, when I was twenty-three, I wrote letters like this to Joyce Carol Oates and William Gass, both as yet unpublished, asking them to rethink stories they'd sent to MSS. All that was different was that the grammar wasn't so good. I would like to be your promoter and publisher, the man who gets secondary credit for your fame. What's wrong with you is what was wrong with them: you don't think hard enough yet. What I ask of you is this: that you take six months — forget your fucking ambition — and rewrite the story, get everything exactly brilliantly right. Call me, write me, do anything you like. For all this labor I will pay you, when I publish you, only \$500. But think of the prestige! (In due time, MSS means to compete with *The New Yorker*.) I would like to develop a stable of writers (New Yorker style). I'd very much like you to be part of that stable. The idea is that people begin to buy the magazine because they expect certain writers whose work they love to be published there. One should be able to talk of an MSS writer as one talked, once, of a Saturday Evening Post writer or as one talks now of an Atlantic or New Yorker writer MSS is published and distributed by the New London Press and Houghton-Mifflin. What can I say? Think about it.

Best,
John Gardner

Phone (late at night, never in the morning): 717-853-3072.

February 10, 1980

Dear Mel Konner,

Some quick reactions to your letter (because as always I'm snowed in mail and mss for MSS):

Of the titles you suggest, "The Story of a Death" seems much the best, though it suffers from double-entendre (death of the spirit of Vulgorov as well as death of a maiden); "Winter in Bolton" is also good; in fact it was my first choice, and in some moods I find it still is. But it's a little misleading in that if I picked up a story called "Winter in Bolton," I wouldn't expect the kind of story I get, and I'd feel a little put upon by the symbolic. Simplicity is best. Be Tolstoy. If you can't be Tolstoy be Jesus.

I'm uneasy about your idea of "using a different narrative style" in laying in the childhood of Vulgorov. The problem is that it will stand out, hence seem arty, not smoothly, effortlessly worked in as if it had just grown there along with the rest of the story. One of the rules, remember, is that the dream in the reader's mind must be continuous: the reader must not be jerked out of one world into another — or if he is, there'd better be some awfully good reason. I think the reason one is, as you say, "a bit attached" to things like stylistic shift is that they're catchy; the reader or critic will surely notice them, and one likes to be noticed. But I think the art in great fiction is noticeable only by its seeming ease and inevitability. My inclination, if I were writing the story, would be to present everything the same way. You mention my handling of the childhood of Armida; but *Suicide Mts*³ is a tale, and tale conventions are not the same as those of realistic fiction. All this, however, may be wrong. I can't tell whether or not a device will work in advance. (That is, I can't tell in advance whether .)

Your remarks on *Uburu*. I agree that a story can be wonderfully subtle, that a story about an American girl who rejects a marriage proposal from an English lord can be as interesting as anything

else.⁴ But whatever the story it has to be dramatized. The writer has to show the reader, sentence by sentence, moment by moment, what is important, what is happening — in other words, as you say, you need to show that what happens in *Uhuru Sutra* really *is* an adventure.

I'm returning "A Woman After Thirty" It's good hearted, but you're a much better prose writer than poet, in my uninformed opinion. I showed it to Liz Rosenberg, poetry editor of MSS, and she stopped at "O empty me." Seems a reasonable thing to do.) I eagerly await a revision of the Vulgorov story

Best,
John Gardner

April 21 1980

Dear Mel Konner

I have your revised version of "The Story of a Death." I have to go off on a reading tour tomorrow, so I'll be a while getting back to you, but I want you to know I think your story is simply terrific, though flawed. I'd like to work with you on the flaws (as I think them), with the understanding that I certainly want this story if we can come to agreement, more or less. As pure story — ignoring the minor faults in the telling — it seems to me the best thing we've gotten so far for MSS.

So I'll be in touch. I apologize for the delay. Thank you for sending it back.

Best,
John Gardner

May 21 1980

Dear Mel Konner,

The story is, as I've told you, simply terrific. Questions and suggestions: Maybe *Winter in Bolton* is a better title after all. Ok with you?

13,8ff.⁵ The last three lines, beginning after the semicolon, don't work for me. They seem manipulative, that is, a way of wrenching the story to what needs to follow, the review of Karkov's life. Karkov's standing in his house, worrying, staring out the window and finds himself reviewing his life — fine. But the explanation you give (and you're right, some explanation is necessary) doesn't carry conviction. He's seeing his life pass in front of his eyes, you claim, like a dying man. (By the way, your language is obscure enough that I had to stop to figure out that that's what you meant.) Anyway I don't believe the explanation. More likely he goes back over the past because he thinks he might have done something differently or, more likely still, because he feels self-pity, that sense we all get sometimes of how fine we were once, and how lo!, it's all turned to this! Anyway, a more convincing reason is needed.

13, 8 up and 7 up: the "so" can be read in two ways, i.e., "the nuns told him his father was a count" or "the nuns told him to keep quiet about his father's being a count" — and same for second *so*. Always use language with maniacal precision, no double entendres but intended ones. And at 6 up I'm puzzled by "learned from a Russian soldier" Did the boy tell this particular Russian that his father was a communist and *then* find out he was the wrong kind? Or what? Clarify if necessary

16, beginning of section IV Problem of point of view The language suggests Karkov thinking. "if not exactly smutty minds" seems Karkov's language, not the narrator's. But this is material Karkov can't fully know Establish solidly the authorial p.v. — greater objectivity perhaps instead of "him" use "Karkov" and so on.

17 10 up and following: I've sensed a kind of homosexual

effeminacy in Karkov ever since his panicky explosion in the chairman's office. Is that an intended part of his characterization (not that I mean you should push it harder or introduce it if it's not meant to be there), then the students would certainly notice — again, not that anything much should be made of it. But if they do think him a touch faggoty it will certainly go into their account here. (Forgive "faggoty" — I hate such language; I mean to be talking from the students' diction, but as I read it over it sounds like mine. No no!)

22, 4 up. "miniskirts" suggests 50's to me. Meant to? (I'd make 'em just short and duck the dating.) Stephens' "ultramini" later is fine. *He* can be dated.

27-28. I have trouble with Grenier He comes off as a pretty awful little man, which doesn't quite fit with Ev's feelings of confidence as she goes to see him and which, in any case, damages the story by making it seem too preachy — all men are creeps. I think he could perhaps say everything he says here, but I wish he'd say it a little more apologetically not come off as such an out-and-out bastard, because right after this Stephens is going to come off in the same way, and later, over drinks, Ev and Susan are going to express general hatred of men (for the moment). The better Grenier is, the better

It's possible in the Stephens scene you might want to introduce one or two more gestures for Stephens so we understand more fully what kind of man he is, hence not take him as too stereotypically chauvinist. (Up to you.)

34, 9 or so on: I'd shorten this greatly It's important to establish that Karkov has these thoughts about Ev, but I think it's bad authorial taste to labor them so. I'd pull out of the character's mind and summarize. Writing the scene as you do, I think you seem to be joining the wrong writing crowd. You can get the same strong effect — Karkov's thinking of Ev as a sex object pure and simple (a feeling to be reversed in the story's final pages) without seeming to indulge yourself as would a lesser writer

35 7 up: I don't understand the line "I care." Is it an ironic question?

41 4: What's a Volkswagen-Porsche? (I'm ignorant.) Is it significant that it changes to a plain Volkswagen later?

45 middle. Problems – typo? repetitions of smudge.
48, 7 up and 6 up: “being as it was” sounds colloquial and sub-standard. Cut?

I return the ms in case I missed any pencilled comments. (In fact I know I passed over some in silence.) Wonderful, amazing story! My heartfelt congratulations and a slight stitch of envy

Yours,
John Gardner

P.S. Can you send Contrib Notes?
JG

September 20, 1980

Dear Mel Konner,

I've been out of touch a while; sorry. Tried to write this summer, had to teach here and there, etc.

All your changes were fine with me. I dropped the insert I badgered you into on p. 17. You were right all along. And I cut your addition “enunciating clearly,” p. 32, because whether it was your idea or mine, it undercuts the power of the put-down. I've thought about the title question a lot, and I think I finally prefer “Winter in Bolton” for its heaviness, the way it falls with a gloomy thud, whereas “A Winter in Bolton” is more sighing and distant (and you're right, less visibly symbolic: but this story is so powerful it can take the bolder course, I think). I don't think I ever made clear to you what's wrong with the so constructions on p. 13: it's that the so's are indefinite in reference. (Did the nuns warn him that his father was a count or that he shouldn't tell the soldiers? Did his mother warn him that his father was a communist or that he

shouldn't tell the nuns?) It's true that the reader can figure out the answers, but that's not the point; the point is that the writing is careless at this moment – flawed, imperfect. And one can't allow that in oneself. Can you suggest a better revision? (Even if it takes a few more words, correctness and precision, especially in this story, are important.)

Your biographical note is fine. May I cut “more than” before “two years in Africa?” Too fussy, a touch self-conscious, like the proud child who, when asked his age, says not “six” but “six and a half.” (Otherwise lie and say *three*.)

MSS has not yet come out – trouble with the publisher, now over since I've fired him and taken it on myself. First issue should be out in a month at most. Second issue (1.2) mid-winter third (1 3) spring. I hope to get “Bolton” one or two illustrations. (Fear not: I'll make 'em be dignified and smart.)

I still have one problem which your letter first brought to my attention. I think you're right to remove most of the *dating* details (like “stoned” for “drunk,” etc.), but it clearly is true that the story belongs to the sixties – and in fact it's enhanced for us in many ways if we see it as a story of something that happened in the sixties. (At one point, top of p. 41 you explicitly refer to the pastness of the story – “a social epoch charged with warmth and belief” – and various other unremovable details (“a hippie”) insist on this.) The more I thought about this, the more it seemed to me that the story should, very early on – first or second sentence if possible – set its time. I thought for instance (momentarily ignoring how it fucks up the sentence rhythm) of something like, “in the pages of one of the largest selling dailies of that time,” or “ . . . at the time of this story” etc. (I wasn't trying for a good, finished sentence, just a place where, with revision for rhythm, etc., one might plant the information. I became confused. Karkov gets the news not from a Bolton paper, it seems, but from a big-city paper, which he finds at, oddly enough, a kiosk – as in a big city, not the little village of Bolton. Do small towns ever have newspaper names like *The Photo-Courier*? I like it that he finds the paper at a

kiosk, and if you can justify it (even if only in your mind) good. Might it be (he said, snatching wildly) that Karkov gets the news when he's visiting Boston and thus sees it in a major daily not the small local paper? And if that's possible, can (and should) "at that time" conceivably be worked in with the smoothness of Nature's ways?

Let me know what you think.

Best,
John Gardner

June 2, 1982 [handwritten]

Dear Mel —

I'm always glad to see work from you. My mail pile is enormous, so if I still have things of yours, forgive.

Best
JG.

Notes

¹A collection of stories (unpublished) Mel Konner had sent with his first letter of August 14, 1979 —Ed.

²Original title of the story "Winter in Bolton"—Ed.

³A novel by John Gardner, *In The Suicide Mountains*, published by Alfred Knopf.—Ed.

⁴Reference is of course to "The Portrait of a Lady" by Henry James, a novel J.G. loved.—Ed.

⁵In reprinting this letter we have cut almost a full page of smaller, incidental notes and details on "Winter in Bolton."—Ed.