

God Damn the Bicentennial: A Patriotic Essay by John Gardner

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A Realistic American Dream

Few would assert that John Gardner (1933-1982) had a profound impact on political theory in the twentieth century. Known primarily as a novelist and a writer of nonfiction about writing, many of his works nevertheless have political slants to them. *The Wreckage of Agathon* and *Grendel* were both “politically and philosophically timely books,”¹ as historian Gregory Morris described them. However, more notable was *October Light*, Gardner’s “Bicentennial ” novel which echoes some of his own political views. The clearest articulation of Gardner’s political standpoint was in the October 29th, 1975 *New York Times*² article entitled “Amber (Get) Waves (Your) of (Plastic) Grain (Uncle Sam);”³ the original manuscript, which was initially titled “God Damn the Bicentennial: A Patriotic Essay,” is reprinted below. In the essay, Gardner positions himself between the blind patriots and the demythologizing nonbelievers, and proclaims the essential virtue of the American dream while bemoaning the commercialization of said dream.

John Champlin Gardner, Jr. started life in New York as the child of a dairyman/preacher and a teacher. His undergraduate education took place at DePauw University and Washington University. He received his Ph. D from University of Iowa and held various professorships until his death in 1982 from a motorcycle accident. His other major works include *Nickel Mountain*, *The Sunlight Dialogues*, *On Moral Fiction* and a translation of *Gilgamesh*.⁴ He was also said to be one of Jimmy Carter’s favorite authors.⁵

The impetus to write his patriotic essay was the upcoming publication of his new novel *October Light*. “I heard that everyone else was doing a Bicentennial book, so I thought I’d better do one, too.”⁶ The essay introduced the themes that would be central in

¹ Gregory L. Morris, *A World of Order and Light: The Fiction of John Gardner* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press).

² John Gardner, “Amber (Get) Waves (Your) of (Plastic) Grain (Uncle Sam),” *New York Times*, 29 October, 1975, 37.

³ Republished in John Gardner, *On Writers and Writing*, ed. Stewart O’Nan, Introduction by Charles Johnson (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing).

⁴ John M. Howell, *Understanding John Gardner* (Columbia SC.: University of South Carolina Press), 1-4.

⁵ *On Writers and Writing*.

⁶ Morris, 143.

the novel, and both were written while he was teaching in Bennington, Vermont.⁷

“Gardner’s complaints [in the essay] are the complaints of James Page [one of the main characters of *October Light*], like Gardner a patriot and, like Gardner, nettled by the historical lamination of America’s heroes.”⁸ John M. Howell describes the further reflection in the character of Gardner’s “satirical response to social and political values” in the way that “in addition to television, James hates foreign cars, the state of California, Coca-Cola, ‘store-bought ice cream,’ and the commercialization of Christmas. And...he is offended by the commercial exploitation of the Bicentennial of 1976.”⁹ Each chapter, however, starts with a quote from one of the Founding Fathers. The themes which Gardner had written into the novel were the basis for his Bicentennial essay as well.

The Bicentennial which Gardner damned celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of the Independence. While Gardner considered this a “sensible time for us to pause and take stock” of America’s political situation, the nation mostly used it as a commercialized celebration of idealized American ideals filled “with clowns and cupcakes [and] rock and roll versions of The Star-Spangled Banner.” However, the Bicentennial also witnessed a vast rejection of American ideals, claiming, “that the American Dream is dead.”

Gardner argued against both the hyper-patriotism (“The serpent on the Right”) and the trashing of the Founding Fathers (“The serpent on the Left.”) He found the glazed over versions of the symbols of America and the incessant exploitation of the Bicentennial for commercial gain disgusting. (One can figure that Gardner would sigh heavily at the ad that appeared just six pages before his article in the *New York Times*, offering “Bicentennial Spirits” for just \$17.76 a case.)¹⁰ To combat the blind idealism, he paints pictures of the great men who founded the nation as the mortals that they were, with all their faults. Not even great men like Jefferson and Lincoln were perfect, and thus the country is sometimes ruled by flawed men. This was coming off of a period of extended dissatisfaction with the U.S. during the war in Vietnam.

One could mistake his sentiments as anti-American, but Gardner’s pride is not in the plastic Uncle Sam, but the greatness of the American system. The American dream is not dead. It still guarantees the liberal platform “humankind’s inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – coupled with a system for protecting human rights.” In language reminiscent of FDR, Gardner speaks of how people all over the world, inspired by American ideals, realized they had a “right to a more or less decent existence.” In addition to liberalism, Gardner shows his roots as a democratic realist. The fact that the majority is indifferent when it comes to politics is acceptable. “The most vulgar and unpatriotic thing

⁷ Morris, 145.

⁸ Morris, 143.

⁹ Howell, 122.

¹⁰ “Untitled Advertisement,” *New York Times*, 29 October, 1975, 31.

you can do – worse even than putting on a three-cornered hat – is indiscriminately [sic] ‘get out the vote,’ making every citizen pull his voting-booth lever, whether or not he gives a damn.”

The system still works, though. It doesn’t work all the time, certainly and is far from perfect. Cynics cite crimes against minorities like blacks and the American Indians, but that does not detract from the greatness of the nation. All that matters is that “the American system provides, at least so a visionary goal, fair, legal means of fighting. And fighting to capture or keep what we’ve learned to call our Rights is what this country – and now the world – is about.” Gardner postulates that the current system is the best available, and has an interest in maintaining it, a basic democratic realist perspective. The American dream provides a workable ideal and the opportunity to achieve the liberal ideals which let Americans be “guaranteed by law, to live, to be free, and to struggle for happiness,” and that makes the U.S. “one of the most decent this planet has ever known.”

John Gardner is indeed a patriot. He believes whole heartily in the ideals of the United States. His acute observations regarding the social and political culture are evident here and were the essential quality that propelled him as a novelist. He was “that species of poet-philosopher on whom nothing in the social world was lost.”¹¹ He may not have been a leading voice in politics, but as a patriot, Gardner leaves us with justification for waving the American flag with pride.

¹¹ On Writers and Writing.