As a psychologist, Gardner is strangely silent on two modern figures who would seem to be indispensable to his study. Sigmund Freud is mentioned only casually and in passing; Carl Jung is not alluded to by name at all. Freud's notion of the neurotic foundation of art is well known, if not notorious, and is understandably repugnant to Gardner's cognitive discipline. Jung, though, with his emphasis on the collective unconscious as a repository of symbols and myths, would seem to be more relevant, if not more congenial, to the study at hand. But despite his famous attribution of the artistic impulses to the deep recesses of the psyche, Jung places those impulses outside the proper realm of psychology and even asserts that the attempt to *explain* the relationship between the art object and the creative process is invalid *because* it is scientific. "The creative aspect of life which finds its clearest expression in art," he writes, "baffles all attempts at rational formulation . . . . creative art will forever elude understanding." And again: "Creative man is a riddle we try to solve in vain." However hostile it may be to Gardner, one suspects that Jung's respect for the privacy and mystery of the creative imagination has more appeal to the artists themselves than the project which would explain them. Henry James once wrote that all we can "see of the charm-compeller is the back he turns to us as he bends over his work." In this context, we might ask whether anything was really learned by viewing the *other* side of the moon. □

Creative Writing 101

Mary Morris: *Crossroads;* Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

Chuck Wachtel: *Joe The Engineer;* William Morrow; New York.

by Eugene England

The authors of these two books seem to be nice, earnest young people, and their work already has been highly praised. Part of the reason behind this praise is clear: these first novels, both about failing marriages, about "finding oneself," about vulnerability in the irrational but implacable rush of urban life, are fetchingly "with it." These writers give us cool, knowing humor, convincing New York local color, satire on various forms of Manhattan chic, from grubby to professional, and trendy experimentation with point of view. And, as the promotional copy insists, both are "compassionate": they want to say something important about being human.

Dr. England is with the English department at Brigham Young University.

But ability, knowledge, even what is misnamed compassion, are not enough. Apparently, young writers have heard in their writing classes "Show, don't tell," to the point where they have forgotten that language *must* tell (subtly, precisely, of course); thus, they seem unable to tell their readers what the lives of their protagonists mean. They can only show what it looks like. If an author believes that pain and futility are imposed upon us by the system, the universe, fate, *something* outside us and that therefore our basic moral responsibility is sympathy, then he or she cannot make essential judgments about characters nor give readers what they need to make their own judgments about "life" or to endure it. And if an author thinks breadth and intensity of experience is all that literature should provide, then he will not give understanding. Great literature has always provided both show *and* tell, sympathy *and* judgment, both experience *and* understanding. Too many in our time, including Morris and Wachtel, have forgotten.

But both do deserve some praise, especially Mary Morris, who has more skill and, I think, more independence from current fashion than Chuck Wachtel. *Joe The Engineer* has been compared to *Marty* and, indeed, it gets inside the stereotypical New York workingman's confined, bar-to-bed-to-boredom existence. Marty was able to reach past that quotidian reality and order it into meaning with a decision for marriage—to a plain, unsexy, brighter woman. Joe also attempts to "search for himself and for salvation from a life of futility," but he seems unable to make *any* decision, even to save his marriage—to a brighter, more ambitious, and decisive woman.

Wachtel reveals all the forces arrayed against Joe—his narrow family conditioning, traumatic Vietnam service, limited intelligence and perspective. And Wachtel is good at conveying both the honorable working life of Joe (and of his wife, a waitress) and also his undirected yearning for something more:

> Sometimes when he's walking around like this in somebody's basement, he walks out of himself for a while and just wanders around in their lives. He stops being a person who . . . is completely absorbed in the things they do and own. He likes the feeling. He becomes a ghost.

"[Chuck Wachtel is] solidly in the tradition of the best American proletarian writers. *Joe the Engineer* is a passionate, political—and important—book."
—***Village Voice***

Wachtel obviously *wants* to tell us something about how to make sense of life's seemingly random, fated particulars. His failure is not in purpose but in means.

Morris has better means. Her first-person narrator/heroine, Debbie, gets into our hearts quickly. Debbie's voice is a fine element of her characterization —fluent, witty, slightly obtuse, off-balance, occasionally brave, often fright-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ened, sometimes out of control. Morris gives her a device that works well both to provide humor and to reveal essential character—an unexpected undercutting or change of direction at the end of a paragraph or the beginning of the next: "If my life with Mark was one of simple, changeless passion, my life after he left me became equally simple—a rather straightforward and primitive desire for revenge." And Morris periodically succeeds in getting her own language and vision into her narrator's voice without intruding: On meeting the woman who has seduced her husband, Debbie reports: "She was transparent and tough as a spider's web and with about as much substance. I memorized her, the way a spy memorizes his instructions before setting them on fire."

Morris is perhaps best with anecdotes, little scenes of sudden revelation, like this one a few days after Debbie's husband left her:

> I found a wet puppy shivering in the rain. I took the dog by its clutch collar and led it to the address on its tag. I rang the bell, and a tall, heavyset woman in black toreador pants stormed down the stair, shouting at me. 'What're you doing? Why did you ring that bell?' When she saw my face distort and saw her shivering hound, she began apologizing and even ran after me a little way as I dashed down the street. In the end, it was the dog and his screaming mistress who made me feel lost and destitute in the world, more than Mark and the note he'd left on the kitchen table.

But Morris, like Wachtel, suffers from a lack of careful thinking and workmanship, of intelligent fitting of means to desired end. This failure of both writers is most evident perhaps in their attempts at using an innovative point of view. Wachtel uses a narrative voice that tries to have it both ways, moving from his own exterior vision into Joe's mind and voice and back out: "Joe The Engineer's sitting on one of the two toilets in the men's room of Mary's Bar and Grill trying to figure out why some things stick in his mind while others pass freely and, dammit, untraceably out of it." The present tense is sometimes intended to give Joe's experience timeless universality, the omniscient voice to give it meaning, and the moving into Joe's consciousness to promote sympathy. But the unusual tense is usually irritating and, like Wachtel's intrusive voice, often productive of platitudes rather than intelligent commentary: "Joe never felt particularly close to Sonny, but he was a star in the constellation of adults that formed around him when he was growing up. When one goes out it always gets darker." And by giving his voice and mind over to Joe's, Wachtel not only is guilty of condescension but also pays the price of imitative form: trying to use language merely to *imitate* experience—crudeness to copy the crude, incoherence to suggest life's irrationality, and boring, meaningless repetition to reproduce its absurd blankness—surrenders the powers of language to chaos. Language can do more; it has built the magnificent heritage of our literature by doing so. What one wants is not mere imitation of life—however apt or unusual, "broadening." What one wants from reading is *understanding*, and the author must help.

Morris tries for understanding by moving in the opposite direction from Wachtel: she starts with a sympathetic first-person narrator who is limited somewhat in her ability to provide understanding by the very blindnesses and perversities that help win our sympathy. Then Morris tries to transcend that limitation by inserting her own perspective and reaching for large meanings beyond the ability of Debbie to express. But the edges of the patches show; the occasions where she wants to show more than her narrator sees and to judge her are too obvious—and Morris's own moral confusion and ambivalence too pervasive—to permit us more subtle judgments. And, although she tries to extend Debbie's small revenge to universal significance with a *Moby-Dick* reference or two, it is simply unbelievable that Debbie would know the book well enough for portentous reflections and dreams about white whales, which are obviously those of an English teacher like Morris.

You simply can't have it both ways. Yes, as masters like James and Conrad have shown, a writer can increase sympathy by locating his narrative point of view in a central consciousness; but the further that consciousness is removed from the quality of thought and language *the writer* is capable of, the more he is hobbled. Point of view must be responsibly maintained by the author. Irresponsibility is shown when Morris and Wachtel, having given up straightforward, intelligent narration and careful, subtle, moral assessment, compensate with efforts for meaning that are merely sentimental or pretentious. These authors simply cop out concerning the central issue of their books: their sympathetic protagonists' ability to control and take responsibility for their own lives.

For instance, it is baffling how Morris and Wachtel can see so clearly the destructive effects of casual or lustful sex on their characters and yet not hold them

Send for your complimentary copy of The Rockford Institute's Annual Report featuring the work of the eminent artist and designer Warren Chappell.

Mail this coupon to:
The Rockford Institute
934 North Main Street
Rockford, IL 61103

Name

Address

City State Zip

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

responsible. Yes, I know that sexual encounter has become the chief means of expressing freedom and control of one's life, of finding "meaning," even simple adventure, in a world that seems increasingly regimented and senseless. And I know that every "with it" author and director must show us this in wonderful detail. But there is a terrible irony, unrecognized by Wachtel or Morris, in showing protagonists who engage in sexual adventure as an expression of liberation and self-direction and at the same time implying, even claiming, moral justification for them on the ground that lust is irresistible. Each shows graphically the devastating effects of infidelity—the loss of self-respect, even of self, the wounds and corrosive jealousies despite all the claims for tolerant maturity—but makes no connection between that and the failure of the hero's "search for himself and for salvation from a life of futility."

Ultimately, the failure is in the authors themselves. Before Wachtel can give us hemmed-in blue-collar protagonists able to emerge as significant and self-directed, he must himself believe in both individual responsibility and meaningful connections; he must understand that persons *can* control themselves and their appetites, can make covenants and keep them. Since for Joe there is only lust, whether with his wife or a casual pick-up, his "screw-ups" are merely literal. And Morris cannot help us understand how a woman can find herself if she simply empathizes with her heroine's confusion, as exemplified by the account of Debbie's first casual, uncontrolled (and supposedly uncontrollable) sexual encounter after separating from her husband:

> I didn't want to go but I found myself walking, climbing the stairs.... The whole house, I suddenly realized, was done in yellow wall-to-wall carpeting. I thought to myself, I can't make love with yellow carpeting everywhere. And suddenly it was the carpeting and not the arms of an eighteen-year-old boy I couldn't bear.

As the understandable confusion of a newly deserted woman this might be passable, but it continues throughout the novel. Sex is treated as either overpowering or a willed solution to problems ranging from loneliness to boredom. It is neither, of course, but rather a confirmation of unconditional as well as romantic love and thus an expression of willingness to bear responsibility for what love produces, including children. Sexual intercourse is the ultimate expression of the individual in relationship and of our ability to create new things, including life, in such relationships; when that expression is made in a context that does not include total fidelity to the partner and readiness (including stable marriage) to accept *all* the implied results then it is inherently corrupt and corrupting. The evidence of all major moral codes, of history, and of great literature support that conclusion and its consequences. Morris and Wachtel give further evidence, but they do not accept the consequences. □

Historians as Used-Car Salesmen

Ground Zero: *What About the Russians—and Nuclear War?* Pocket Books; New York.

Geoffrey Barraclough: *From Agadir to Armageddon;* Holmes & Meier; New York.

by Alan J. Levine

What About the Russians—and Nuclear War? is the work of the disarmament organization Ground Zero, a volume crafted—of course—to support the nuclear-freeze movement. It has been said that an elephant is an animal designed by a committee; this book, created by dozens of people under the loose direction of Earl and Roger Molander, is in the elephant tradition, with all the irregularities that that implies. It is also a contribution to a less glorious tradition—that of twisting history for political purposes. On the whole, this book is not as awful as it could have been, given its political orientation. Which does not mean, however, that it is good. It is not grossly inaccurate; it is slanted and simplistic, which may be much worse.

Ground Zero's interpretation of the Soviet regime contains a curious contradiction. It argues that the Soviet regime is a logical end product of an inflexible, monolithic Russian tradition, emphasizing Russian rigidity and changelessness, but it suggests that the Soviet regime itself is more flexible than it is usually given credit for. It attributes Soviet foreign policy to the alleged necessities and influences of Russian history. Russians, ever since the Mongol conquest, have been obsessed about invasions, with which they have been often menaced:

> The frequent invasions have created an obsession about security on its borders. The response has been expansion into adjacent areas where possible, epitomized in the Soviet determination to retain its buffer of Eastern European satellite states and its near-paranoia at the prospect of Western European deployment of cruise and Pershing missiles, which could overfly those European borders with ease.

According to Ground Zero, Russians are xenophobic and feel inferior to Western Europeans. The unattractive side of the Russians derives from this tragic insecurity.

This notion of Russian history, which comes close to arguing that Stalin's monstrous regime was practically the Russian norm, is ridiculously simplistic. It is a readily verifiable fact that Russia has suffered much less from invasion in modern times than most continental European

Dr. Levine is a historian in New York.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED