

# BOOKS

## The Agent of Love and Ruin

BY TONY TANNER

**THE SUNLIGHT DIALOGUES.** By John Gardner. Illustrated. 673 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$8.95.

John Gardner has shifted his fictional locale. Having written about a medieval monster in his last novel, he has set about unraveling a murder mystery and family saga in his most recent one. But he has not changed the focus of interest of his fiction as much as might be supposed. In *Grendel* (1971) Gardner gave us the meditations of Beowulf's beast as he hurled his grieving energies against the maddening fabrications of man—civilization, art, religion—but few readers will have failed to hear very recognizable American accents in the beast's speech, for *Grendel* is really part Huckleberry Finn, part Henry Adams, with, perhaps, some of the author's own boisterous aggression mixed in. *Grendel* has some very American problems on his mind when he isn't devouring knights or ruining mead halls. Nagging at him is the question of whether he inhabits an "expanding universe" or an entropic one that will end in "a sea of black oil and dead things. No wind. No light. . . . A silent universe." An old priest tells him that while "things fade" and "alternatives exclude," the ultimate wisdom resides in perceiving that finally "*nothing* is lost"; but the dragon at the center of the earth gives *Grendel* a whiff of the futility at the core of things and leaves him with a lasting vision of meaningless waste.

The humans *Grendel* encounters seem to take refuge in patterns, systems, theories, and creeds, and like the good American outsider that he is, *Grendel* is profoundly suspicious of *all* patterns and systems. A life dedicated to pattern smashing, however, can only bring him to the unmeaning void. He is not, as you will gather, a beast notably at peace with himself. So he gnashes away at impossible and unacceptable alternative visions of life. And in nothing is he more characteristically American than this—that he is a com-

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pulsive verbalizer who is deeply suspicious of language. Here are some of his last thoughts: "The mind lays out the world in blocks, and the hushed blood waits for revenge. All order, I'm come to understand, is theoretical, unreal. . . . I have seen—I embody—the vision of the dragon: absolute, final waste." Which leads us right into *The Sunlight Dialogues*.

The scene has changed—mead halls and monsters have given way to con-



John Gardner

temporary America—but all the essential problems remain. In Batavia, New York, 1966, the mind that most conspicuously seeks to lay out the world in blocks belongs to Police Chief Clumly, while the vengeful blood erupts most significantly in Taggart Hodge, trickster, murderer, man of love, psychopath, challenger of all stable notions of order—the "Sunlight Man." On one level the tension between the two men is the wary maneuvering between a cop and a criminal, on another it is a dialogue between the "philosopher" and the "magician," and at a yet further remove we can apprehend a struggle between those two versions of the cosmos that vexed the mind of *Grendel*.

But this may make the novel sound more programed and schematic than in fact it is; so perhaps it would be more just to approach it initially in a conventional way. There is first of all an old family, the Hodges. The senior Hodge incorporated the ideals and beliefs of an older America. His familial and political life were of a piece, and in both spheres he revered, created, and sustained life. But the times changed—"decayed to ambiguity"—and the fragmentation of the patriarchal unity is discernible in his three sons. One is a man who conscientiously repairs and shores up but never builds; another is a dreamer "blind to the accelerating demolition all around him";

the third is—the Sunlight Man, unstable genius, a man whose excessive love spreads ruin. And the wives—one is emotionally dead, another fairly serene, the third hopelessly insane. There are children, too, in whom the problems have gone further. Around this interesting and complex family Gardner has created a whole community, and he has given himself the space to establish the unique inner life of each figure with a convincing density of detail. The result is an impressive range of characters, each one clearly differentiated and, for the most part, made entirely plausible (a conspicuous, though minor, failure is a hippie named, I regret to say, Freeman). I can't offhand think of a contemporary novelist who could, for example, render so compellingly the inner life of an aging blind woman and of an uneducated adolescent Indian. The plot is triggered when the errant Taggart Hodge, long thought lost, returns to his native town—unrecognized and all but unrecognizable. For the community he is an antic stranger, and when Police Chief Clumly arrests him for writing "LOVE" across the road in white paint, one has no anticipation of the powerful narrative about to unfold, which among other things reveals the different and often terrible ways in which LOVE moves through people's lives.

There is a wealth of authenticating, localizing, concretizing detail in the book, and it serves an important purpose. In a novel that shows people in their different ways drawing towards patterns and schemes and theories, these details are a constant reminder of singularity, "thisness," and the whole realm of the accidental. By opening up vistas of particulars all around us, Gardner discourages us from capitulating to any of the patterns of speculation with which, at times, the book tends fairly to hum. For Police Chief Clumly drifts or sails into a sea of "metaphysics" from the moment he arrests the Sunlight Man. True, he has a crime to solve, and soon he has more; but he has a larger problem. Why is it that the Sunlight Man obsesses him? What is it in him that makes Clumly feel he is "the sum total of all Clumly had been fighting all his life"? Clumly, of course, speaks for the law, for the existing structures, for the walls of the community. Such a position stresses the importance of conformity and order. But as the dragon told

Grendel: "The essence of life is to be found in the frustrations of established order. The universe refuses the deadening influence of complete conformity." Here indeed is a problem. The order that man puts up in an attempt to combat the eroding tides of nature's processes ironically accelerates the entropy it seeks to frustrate. Right from the prologue of this novel—in which, indeed, the word "entropy" is used—we are given the sense of a community in twilight decline, lapsing toward sleep and stagnation. Things are in disrepair, buildings are collapsing, junk is accumulating, the light is fading, love grows cold, senility and death are in the air. It seems to one man that the whole world must be tired; another sees quality giving way to quantity. The universe of the silent, level lake seems nigh. Enter the Sunlight Man.

He is a "skylight smasher," an opener of doors (prison doors among others, with equivocal, indeed disastrous, results), a compulsive conjurer, playing with words as he plays with magical effects, dizzying people with lithe and rapid talk just as he can confound them physically with his tricks. As sad as he's mad, he is as pathetic in his way as is the monster Grendel (to whom, incidentally, he once compares himself)—like him excluded from a



Drawings from *The Sunlight Dialogues*

society whose manifest limitations madden him, yet one that part of him craves to join. Among other things he is determined to reveal that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Police Chief Clumly's philosophy.

To this end he arranges four "dialogues," in which, along with magic side-effects to disturb Clumly's empiri-

cal/rational approach to life, the Sunlight Man tries to initiate the Police Chief into a new way of regarding reality, based for the most part on his version of the ancient Babylonian attitude toward existence. We are not intended to take these sermons at face value—as someone says to the Sunlight Man, "You duck out of everything with talk"—just as we are not meant to infer from Clumly's stubborn taciturnity that he is wrong. As the Sunlight Man says, beyond a certain point neither intuition nor intellect can deal with the world. Yet whatever he is—"fundamentally evil" or "a crackpot philosopher who'd slipped out of the society he lived in and detested it for surviving without him"—the Sunlight Man, as a voice, a presence, an agent, makes against rigidity, frustrates order, disturbs conformity. From this point of view he is a force working against entropic sleep.

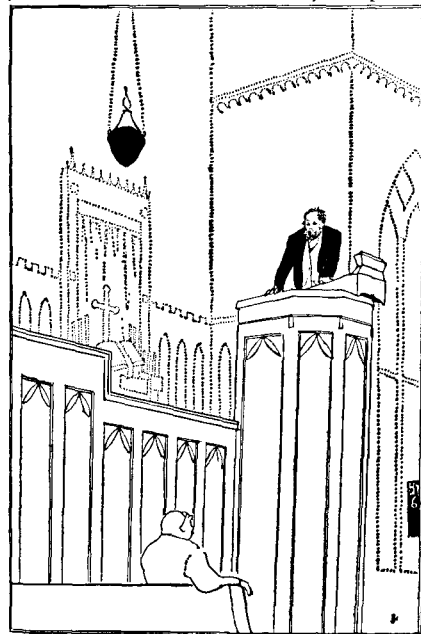
But Gardner is no sentimentalist (or only at moments), and he displays the "waste" that "teems" around the Sunlight Man as a result of both his love and his theories. The Sunlight Man as a result of both his love and his theories. The Sunlight Man is aware of a benign cultural order in which he does not believe and an indifferent cosmic order in which he does. This makes action difficult for him, and he opts for deliberate absurdity. Madness this may be, but it is only an extreme form of an attitude that is very common in America today.

The danger is—and the book is about this too—that if a man is to abandon the limited and partial constructions of the cultural order in the name of more truth, more reality, then a new era of extremism—based on unreason or too much reason—may be ushered in. "From this point forward there'll be Hitlers for a thousand years," declares the aging patriarch, like Oedipus at Colonus.

Seen in this light, the plodding endeavors of Police Chief Clumly take on a new value. In solving his case, he will not take shortcuts. He insists on establishing all the connections—it's his way of aiming at "the whole truth." "Everything's always connected. . . . There can't be order otherwise. It's all some kind of design." Even if you can't see the design. Such is the brave, blind faith of Clumly, a faith that is tenacious and myopic enough to survive the mockery that Grendel's dragon leveled at all men's belief in "shapes."

The Sunlight Man has been touched by fire, sun. But it is a truth that human kind licking through the suburban pavements. D. H. Lawrence said that civilized man lived inside a painted umbrella, which the artist slashes open

to let in reality. Just so, the Sunlight Man wants to break open the skylights and let in the unmediated, unfiltered sun. But it is a truth that humankind cannot bear too much sunlight, for the naked glare can be as dangerous as the total deprivation of solar rays. We are creatures of half-lights, just as we are creatures of half-truths of equal importance, and we can only hope to



find life, not in one or the other extreme, but in the dialogue between Clumly and the Sunlight Man.

By the end of the book Clumly has learned a lot, and, not surprisingly in a John Gardner novel, his mind turns to physics. He is giving a farewell speech: "It's a little like the Einstein universe, as I understand it, which is reaching outwards and outwards at terrific speed, and the danger is—if I've got this right—the danger is, it can get cold. Turn ice. Ladies and gentlemen, we mustn't let that happen, I feel." The apostle of the inflexible rigors of the law has grown into the spokesman for the holiness of the heart's affections. It is another comment on the achievement of this novel that we can accept a small-town American cop talking metaphysics and feel, not that realism has lost, but that fiction has gained.

Of course, Gardner's novel can be faulted. Just as he shares with John Updike (and many other American writers) an obsession with entropy, so he reveals something of Updike's straining for self-vaunting but redundant simile. They should both be banned from using the word "like" for a decade. It could also be argued that some of the very long tirades detach themselves from the speakers' characters and swarm around like unattached mists of angry words. But these cavils are minor compared with the high degree

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of success achieved by this ambitious novel. It is a major fictional exploration into America, no less—the America that is vanishing and the problematical America of today. And without abandoning its fictional premises, it draws us into a sobering meditation on the possible shapes of our immediate future. It tells no lies yet ends with a refusal to accept despair. It does all this at the same time as it involves us in an absorbing and intricately interwoven story. This is a great deal for any one novel to do, and it should be recognized immediately for what it is—a very impressive achievement. □

### A Life in the Theater

BY ALEX SZOGYI

**DON'T PUT YOUR DAUGHTER ON THE STAGE.** By Margaret Webster. Illustrated. 391 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$10.

Margaret Webster's incredibly busy life touched ours in America meaningfully and in many ways as she shuttled back and forth between her native England and the American coasts. (Appropriately, she was born here when her father, Ben Webster, was doing a play on Broadway.) In the various guises of actress, director, producer, one-woman theater impresario, purveyor of Shakespeare and the classics to a new world beyond New York, and most especially educator in the best sense of that much maligned word, she successfully enacted the most varied creative roles in the complex world of theatrical experience.

Just a few months before her untimely death, her latest volume of memoirs—her fourth—*Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage* appeared. The book has a most curious ring of truth; it radiates a prescient sense of herself as she recounts the ways she tilted at the windmills that stood in her theatrical path. "By nature a truth-teller," Miss Webster, in a strong, hearty style, sums up in this volume her "transatlantic schizophrenia." At first she re-enacts her earliest incarnation, as Dame May Whitty's loving daughter and Maurice Evans's gracious sidekick. She loved and doted on her famous actress mother, who slowly mellowed and aged like a vintage wine. Maurice Evans was her other touchstone to success. She directed him in *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part I*, *Hamlet*, and *Twelfth Night*. So many of the famous Shakespearean produc-

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tions that remain memorable were hers, including Paul Robeson's *Othello*.

The most amusing moments of her book are devoted to her sudden, exciting encounter and years with Rudolf Bing of the Metropolitan Opera. From the very first, when she was summoned by Sir Rudolf to direct, despite her better judgment, his initial production at the old, beloved opera house, she became mistress of the Verdi spectacles, *Don Carlo*, *Aida*, and *Macbetto*. Aching to direct Mozart, she was nevertheless relegated to making sense of Verdi's flamboyant libretti. She analyzed them, made "horse sense" of them, sought to communicate her understanding to the artists of the opera house. She battled with the great voices, crusaded to make opera more accessible, winning the loyalty of the chorus who loved and understood her. The stars resisted her, and she sheds considerable light on the reasons why grand opera was so rarely grand. We witness her single-minded determination to bring order to a chaotic world of primeval instinct and gorgeous sound. One realizes anew that the Marx Brothers' vision in *A Night at the Opera* was perilously close to the truth.

The book also tells what it was like to be hounded during the McCarthy era with a constant fear and trepidation of losing one's job through the dangers of unproved insinuation. Her understated accounts of how it felt to be attacked without reason remind the reader most forcibly of what so many decent human beings suffered in the theater, as elsewhere, during those dismal years.

She toured the length and breadth of the United States in her one-woman show, a portrait of the Brontës. Ambassador plenipotentiary of the theater arts, she gave countless lectures to untutored, potentially enthusiastic audiences, initiating them into a theatrical experience. With her great friend, Eva Le Gallienne, she fought the good battle to give America a classical theater worthy of the name and to bring this theater to the eyes, ears, and consciousness of a nation perhaps not yet fully ready for it. Along the way, she became the conscience of university theaters, insisting that theater training had to be relevant to the life of the theater itself.

Her book cuts deeper than its milieu. For theater, as is often forgotten, can be life's most eloquent offshoot—and Miss Webster, the fifth-generation representative of Websters on world stages, the final flowering of a long and distinguished theater tradition, vibrantly demonstrated that working in the the-

ater was the ultimate fulfillment for those who gave it their very souls. In the epilogue to her book, she assesses the meaning of her life by sharing G. B. Shaw's credo: "This is the only true joy in life: the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap-heap; the being a force of nature, instead of a selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

She echoes the old saying to the effect that you never grow up until your mirrors turn into windows. Like Auden, Calder, the Lunts, to cull artists from disparate worlds, she gave indications of having reached a higher awareness. Her mother had reached it before her, with more time to do it. Here and there in this most moving book we intuit that remarkable state of an artist who has come to meaningful terms with her existence. Her book transcends most theater memoirs by its involvement beyond ego. It points to a saner world and makes us glad she waged the battles that she did. □

### The Devil Wore Spats

BY WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

**THE JOHN COLLIER READER.** By John Collier. 571 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$10.

It is twenty-one years—twenty years too many—since we have had a book from John Collier, and that, *Fancies and Goodnights*, a collection of fifty of his stories, was in considerable part drawn from two earlier collections. This is one writer, evidently, who is determined that his admirers won't suffer from a surfeit of his work. But twenty-one years are twenty-one years, and famished Collierites, not to speak of a new generation of readers who ought to be Collierites, will settle down happily with this new volume—and no matter that very little of its contents are, strictly speaking, "new." It brings together in a handsome format his novel of a sensitive and attractive chimpanzee who fell in love with her master and ultimately became *His Monkey Wife*, written at the end of the 1920s and redolent in its luxuriant style and whimsical ironies of that vanished epoch, and forty-seven of his stories, six of them in book form for the

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