

Saints-EyeView

Orson Scott Card

On Art, Morals, and Morality

This is not a book review column. In fact, it is devoted to light, if occasionally (I hope) intelligent, comment on Mormons and the way we live. But I can't escape from my own preoccupations, and when a book like John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* puts into clear form ideas that I had long held or suspected or at least wished for, I feel obliged to share it with the one-twentieth of one percent of the Mormon Church that subscribes to *Sunstone*.

In my undergraduate days as a theatre student at BYU, my friends and I had long conversations of the variety commonly known as "deep and meaningful" about art—no, pardon me, Art. (In such conversations, it is never said without the capital letter.) We pondered what Mormon Art was and whether it was possible; what was the difference between good art and bad; what was the obligation of the artist to his audience; and what was the obligation of the critic to art, the audience, and the artist. We reached no good conclusions, but the indecision I arrived at then has remained until my reading of *On Moral Fiction*.

Not that Gardner has all the answers. But he has enough of them that I found myself constantly wanting to read the book to somebody; I ignored my own ban on defacing books and underlined and tagged and starred copiously; I found myself elevated, inspired, and encouraged by the book.

Why? Heavens—I write science fiction, of all things. But writing is writing, and as Gardner points out, you cannot avoid teaching in art—the lessons *will* be learned by the audience, whether you mean to teach them or not, and it is the responsibility of artist and critic to know what lessons they are and make sure the art is good art!

Not that true art is didactic. "Didacticism and true art are immiscible; and in any case, nothing

guarantees that didacticism will be moral. Think of *Mein Kampf*," Gardner says. "True art is *by its nature* moral."

But how do we define morality? Here is the crux of it, for Mormons, I believe. Gardner was not writing to Mormons—he was writing to literary critics, writers, students, and scholars, and in that world morality itself has become discredited as a notion. Instead, in a mistaken application of relativity to art, the literary world regards good and evil as irrelevant to art:

"The language of critics, and of artists of the kind who pay attention to critics," says Gardner, "has become exceedingly odd: not talk about feelings or intellectual affirmations—not talk about moving and surprising twists of plot or wonderful characters and ideas—but sentences full of large words like *hermeneutic*, *heuristic*, *structuralism*, *formalism*, or *opaque language*, and full of fine distinctions—for instance, those between *modernist* and *post-modernist*—that would make even an intelligent cow suspicious. Though more difficult than ever before to read, criticism has become trivial."

With that audience in mind—essentially an atheistic audience, or at least one embarrassed to talk much about God where anybody whose opinion matters might hear—Gardner defines moral art as art that "seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us." He explains that "art builds; it never stands pat; it destroys only evil. . . . [It] is good . . . 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." Art presents evil, but does not applaud it.

Mormons, of course, far too often have another view of moral art. It is art that could be presented in sacrament meeting—art that depicts nothing evil. Or, even more deplorably, it is art that depicts nothing but good.

I have run into this rather often. In my play *Liberty Jail* I attempt to show some of the rather unpleasant motivations that drove otherwise good people away from the Church. (Contrary to some childish oversimplifications I have heard, not all dissension from the Church is necessarily dissension from the gospel—sin is not always at the foundation of dissent, though sadly it is often its culmination.) The play was soundly criticized for showing such men as Sidney Rigdon in an unfavorable light during a time when they still held high position in the Church, as if they only suddenly apostatized, and did not have the seeds of apostasy in them even while functioning in office.

The criticism always boiled down to the idea that I had shown ugly things on stage. I had shown hatred and jealousy and greed and bad manners. Didn't I realize that a true Latter-day Saint artist would not make his audience think of ugly things? It is the duty of the Latter-day Saint artist, I was told, to bring more beauty into the world.

The problem with this is Plato's old error that showing a good man doing something bad is bad, for it corrupts the morals of those watching. Yet perhaps the best argument against this fallacy is to show the absurdity of following it. If art only showed good men doing good and bad men doing bad, it would have no correspondence with reality, because there is no such thing as a wholly bad man (unless the Lord is wrong, and some significant percentage of men really can't repent).

Good men do bad things. In fact, I have known very good men, some of the greatest men I personally know, who have, inadvertently or through momentary weakness, deeply hurt people or made terrible mistakes with far-reaching consequences. This is reality. For if Latter-day Saints look into themselves and see, as most will see, that they are basically good people trying to do right, and if upon realizing that they conclude that they are thus incapable of doing wrong because no artist has ever admitted to them that well-meaning people err, then the artist has reneged his responsibility and his audience is less moral, not more.

In short, it is the duty of the moral artist to affirm, to build, to construct—but one of his tools, one of his building blocks is ugliness. Beauty and ugliness are not opposites. As Gardner says, "The primary intuition of the poet-priest is one of a particular sort of order, an order which is partly sensuous, made up of objects loved or hated, partly

transcendent and abstract, a vague but powerful sense of the general classes of things which *ought* to be loved or hated; in other words, affirmed or blown to bits. What he loves the artist calls beautiful; what he hates he has no word for (not 'ugly,' or 'grotesque,' or 'trivial,' or 'wicked'), he merely wants it *out*."

If a work of art depicts evil and shows it to be painful, unrewarding, negative, destructive, bad, then that work of art is exactly as moral as one which shows good to be beautiful, uplifting, desirable. Art is not moral, because it never shows ugliness; art is moral because it shows ugliness *honestly*.

And yet so much of Mormon art shows good to be bad! That is, it often shows goodness to be puerile, or impossible, or—heaven forbid—boring. A gooey G-rated film that reduces goodness to niceness does as much harm as an X-rated film that makes evil seem rewarding, since both will move an audience to shun the good and espouse the evil.

Yet Mormons have a tremendous potential for creating moral art, as soon as we overcome our preoccupation with morality as a synonym for virtue. We waste too much time attacking pornography when we should be attacking puerility; trying to ban the R-rated film when we should be trying to protect our children from mindlessness and destructive worldviews. Anyone who has seen a predominantly Mormon high school classroom with its appalling lack of respect for the teacher and the subject matter can see that we may be keeping our children from dirt, but we are not providing anything to fill the vacuum. And as a matter of fact, good art does drive out bad as long as a society values

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goodness; only when we reduce art to the level of a political poster (you can't say *that*—it doesn't follow the party line!) does the public turn to whatever trash will, even momentarily, entertain.

That does not mean that I approve of pornography (though I, as every other person I know, have a private definition of what it is); instead my feelings rang in sympathy with Gardner's declaration that "I do object strongly to the cult of sex and violence, and more strongly yet to the cult of cynicism and despair, not that I recommend censorship. I am

convinced that, once the alarm has been sounded, good art easily beats out bad, and that the present scarcity of first-rate art does not follow from a sickness of society but the other way around—unless, possibly, the two chase each other's tails."

"Real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by, and clearly our society is in need of such myths." Mormons can no more live by empty, meaningless art that pretends to be moral because it is devoid of any relation to reality than the rest of the world can live by art that scoffs at morality and presents a view of the world as a meaningless, pointless, undirected accident.

Another tendency that weakens Mormon art is didacticism. I have too often heard the suggestion, always offered with good intentions, "Why don't you write a play (novel, story) that follows a character from the preexistence to this life and on into eternity to show the Plan of Salvation?" I usually answer politely, but my true answer is, "Because we do not live in the preexistence or in eternity, and furthermore I have better things to do with my time than try to rewrite abstract doctrines from the Sunday School manual." It is, in my opinion, far more important for an artist to show the consequences of a man's acts than for him to inform the audience on the theological principles. The artist's business is not facts, but relationships. As Gardner says (and it seems I can quote him on every point), "Life is all conjunctions, one damn thing after another, cows *and* wars *and* chewing gum *and* mountains; art—the best, most important art—is all subordination: guilt *because of sin because of pain*."

Gardner also decries the changing fashions of art—and too often Mormon writers are tempted to join the bandwagon. Writing is made obscure because opaque writing is fashionable; plot is eschewed because no one would dare use suspense now (a tool of the pulps!); the trimmings, the style, the manner of the art becomes so important that the matter of the art is utterly lost. Yet the matter of the art is all-important. If it makes no difference to you whether you write about the day of a cow in Nebraska or the suffering of a man who has been excommunicated because of something he truly meant not to do, then you have no business in art: and if you value your style above the specific morality of your artwork, chances are your art will reflect that egoism and be, therefore, immoral.

Too often artists proclaim that they write only for themselves. "The writer may not care about any reader other

than himself, but his work has no public existence except insofar as the feeling is not mutual. To say that one writes at least partly for others is not to say that one writes for everyone; one writes for people like oneself."

And, in fact, in my own observation the artists who proclaim most loudly that they care only about pleasing themselves are the ones most apt to follow fads and fashions. And even if the artist is being true to himself (whatever that means) sincerity is no guarantee of anything: "We have fallen into a commitment to sincerity rather than honesty (the one based on the moment's emotion, the other based on careful thought)—so that we admire more a poem which boldly faces and celebrates thoughts of suicide than we do a poem which makes up some convincing, life-supporting fiction." Besides, "the artist—even the essentially great artist—who indulges himself, treating his art as a plaything, a mere vehicle for his ego and abstract ideas, is like a man who uses his spectacles to swat flies."

The thrust of Gardner's book, however, is at the critic, whose responsibility it is to write criticism that "praises true art for what it does—praises as plainly and comprehensively as possible—and denounces false art for its failure to do art's proper work." The critic has tremendous power, since it is he who proclaims Lo, here and Lo, there to the audience. If he doesn't point to good artists, they disappear: "Good writers, good painters, or good composers of whom no one ever hears do not, in effect, exist; so that whether or not those good artists are out there, we are living, for all practical purposes, in an age of mediocre art," primarily because of mediocre criticism.

"Most art these days is either trivial or false. There has always been bad art, but only when a culture's general world view and aesthetic theory have gone awry is bad art what most artists strive for, mistaking bad for good." And Gardner condemns us because we, as an audience, seek novelty, oddity, perversion instead of affirmation of good, enlightenment, morality. But Mormons have an opposite problem to beware of: a tendency to seek affirmation at the price of ignorance; cleanliness at the price of growth; comfortability at the price of having anything intelligent or honest to say. And both tendencies are immoral—just because ours is different from the world's does not mean that it must therefore be good. There are many roads to hell, and Mormons have some private ones that are quite well-used.