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Toward a Mormon Aesthetic

Merrill Bradshaw

It seems almost unbelievable that after all these years of the development of Mormon thought we still have no genuine Mormon aesthetic theory. Most Mormon thinkers have either avoided the subject or simply adopted one or another of the theories proposed by the thinkers of the world. If, as we proclaim, Mormons have a distinctive view of man and his reason for being in the world, then it seems almost inevitable that this view of man, this set of reasons would give rise to some new insights about our sense of beauty, of our purposes in the arts, of our relations with our artists. It would be easiest if somewhere in the scriptures the Lord had revealed our aesthetics, but this has not been done. There seem to be few artists who are eager to have that done, fearing the authoritarian imposition of some aesthetic principle that might hamstring their work. In the absence of such revelation, we must look to our artists and philosophers to develop such a theory. But it must get beyond the level of mere personal opinion, secondhand philosophy, or utilitarian contingencies; and it must relate in both root and branch to solid, undeniably Mormon philosophy.

I hasten to add that I cannot claim any competency as a philosopher. This is truly a field for the trained philosopher. Of my qualifications I can only say that I have been active in the arts for many years and I have a gnawing impatience to see our aesthetic develop. To lend my weight to the accomplishment of this task I will present four ideas that appear to me to have far-reaching implications for a Mormon Aesthetic, leaving the formal development of such a theory to those whose training and abilities have prepared them for the task.

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IDEA NUMBER ONE: THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY

Picture in your mind, if you will, a vision of the soul of man, having lived with the gods before his entry into earth life, having experienced the joy of life with God, and having come to earth with little memory of what took place in that premortal realm. Picture further that the soul of man longs for the joy experienced there and has a hunger to return to live with God, even though he may not recognize the source of that hunger. As the soul encounters various situations and events in this life, he is reminded of the ultimate beauties of his pre-earth experiences. These reminders are the basis of our sense of beauty.

This is not a scenario invented by a Latter-day Saint, but rather the synopsis of a myth Plato ascribes to Socrates in his dialogue with Phaedrus. As a Mormon, with a background of mostly guarded response to Greek philosophers, I have been amazed at how comfortable that idea feels. Its parallels with the Mormon cosmology are so startling that one almost asks if Plato were some sort of prototype Mormon several centuries ahead of his time. As I have examined our Mormon understanding and experience in relation to the Phaedrus myth, however, I have come to recognize that it gives but a glimpse of the soul of man and his potential for recognizing and understanding beauty. Nevertheless, the approach suggested by Plato has been useful in my finding the way to my own views of the subject.

For Mormons, the premortal state is much more than Plato's approach to Ultimate Reality. Ultimate Reality is not an abstract entity that is devoid of relationship to the senses. As he considers the eternal (both pre- and post-mortal), the Mormon longs for a situation where the senses are extended, perfected, and intensified so that experience can produce a fulness of joy. The joy that was experienced in the premortal state, that we experience now in our mortality, and that we will experience in life after earth is not an abstract contemplation, but an all-encompassing, sense-thrilling, "even unto the consuming of my flesh" (1 Nephi 17:48) experience that is beyond our mortal mind to grasp in its entirety. In its ultimate sense it can take place only when our bodies are resurrected and perfected. What we experience here in mortality is really a foretaste, an incomplete pre-experience of the perfection that is to come. It is intimately bound to our objective of eternal exaltation with a perfect being whose love, understanding, and wisdom are all directed toward providing his children with a fulness of joy. What we hunger for in this life is thus not merely a return to an abstract situation where we were once

treated to a blissful experience, but most importantly a return with dignity, glory, and exaltation to the intensity of a real existence with God in a condition where we will enjoy all of our human attributes raised to the perfect level of their divine prototypes.

Mormons, then, are not mistrusters of the senses. They do not despise sensuous experience except as it may mislead the spirit of man to do things so shortsighted that they make his return to God impossible. Mormons envision the perfection of the senses as an eternal objective to strive for, not as an earthly delusion that we must avoid. The resurrection will not remove sensuous experience from us but rather enable us to experience it in an eternal dimension of intensity, completeness, and purity.

We learned of the whole plan while yet there in God's presence before coming to earth. The presentation of the plan was so compelling and exciting that we shouted for joy. We were happy to be allowed the privilege of mortal experience as a preparation for the still fuller experience to come. As we left that realm to come here into the flesh, our spirits brought with them some half-hidden memories of the nature of the celestial. These memories are mostly dormant within us, but from time to time we encounter things, people, situations, and experiences which awaken them within us. We are not always aware of their eternal significance nor their celestial source, but nevertheless we relate to them warmly because in their organization, their aspect, or the perfection implied by their inner relationships they remind us of what we already knew before we came here and will know again more perfectly after we leave earth. When this happens to us, we experience beauty.

The notion of the celestial as the model toward which our perception strives should not be taken in too narrow a sense, however: the Mormon concept of what is eternal, celestial, or spiritual extends far beyond the bounds of the typical Sunday School class discussion or the simplistic moralizing that is often thought of when people mention religion. It extends to include not only those things normally thought of as sacred, but also more mundane things which take on spiritual significance when viewed in an eternal perspective. Thus this concept of beauty is not limited to the pious, the self-righteous, or the sacred. In fact, some of the most beautiful experiences we have occur when things previously seen as profane or unworthy of our attention are viewed in the light of the celestial models they have come from or may become. The reminder of celestial value may come from less than celestial objects and even from the contrast of decidedly noncelestial experiences.

For this reason shallow ideas of beauty that are repugnant to some of us often need only be untwisted or extended to make clear their celestial roots. It is not because we consider the human body ugly that many distrust the use of the nude in art. What repels us is the possibility that its divine beauty may be twisted into lust and entice someone into improper thoughts and actions. The ultimate perfection of the body is what is longed for in the resurrection where all of us hope that the imperfections, real or imagined, of our faces, shapes, or functions will be adjusted to be in line with their celestial models.

Beauty thus perceived in its relation to the celestial is a great gift of the Spirit. When we observe something and relate it to the heavenly because it fills a spiritual hunger, we are enticed to come to Christ. Beauty, properly conceived and realized, draws us heavenward and thus, ultimately at least, inspires us to become ready to receive the ultimate joy of God's presence.

The relationship between that presence and the joy that we hunger for is made a little clearer in some of the recorded instances where it has been experienced. One of those instances was the dedication of Solomon's Temple. The chronicler reports that everyone had prepared both spiritually and temporally for the occasion. When the hundreds of musicians reached the climax of the music and all were united in praising God, the "bright cloud" of the presence of the Lord entered the temple and filled the house. The priests were so intensely moved by the experience that they couldn't even stand to minister. (2 Chronicles 5:11-14.) Have not many of us had similar experiences with the arts when the beauty was so overpowering that it caused tears, a tingling up and down the spine, deep introspection, and feelings of swelling and warmth in the breast? What this suggests is that the ultimate experience of beauty is so closely related to joy that we have difficulty distinguishing the difference. When we experience joy it is beautiful; when we experience beauty it brings us joy. This joy is the object of all art and the portrayal of it is art's reason for existing. It may be man's reason, too: "man is that he might have joy!" (see 2 Nephi 2:25).

IDEA NUMBER TWO: THE CREATIVE PROCESS

I have given some preliminary views of the creative process in other writings and at other times. Suffice it to say here that I have described it as more a process of discovery than of invention, of embodying within the notes of my art form a spiritual gesture that is born deep within my soul. I have even suggested that the source of

this gesture might be in a pre-existent “existence” for the piece of art being created. How else do we explain that certain feeling that something is not yet right about a piece even though it is theoretically correct? How else to explain that feeling of being “at home” when a piece is finally finished? How else to explain those flashes of insight that suddenly appear “out of nowhere,” as it were, and point the way to a completion of a work, a way that defies theory, logic, organic growth, and yet is completely and absolutely right?

There are some parallels between the artist’s embodiment of the spiritual gesture and the way a human spirit is embodied when it comes to earth. We know from the report of the Brother of Jared that the spirit, even before birth, looks like its temporal embodiment (Ether 3:6–20). This suggests that the body, as it grows, does so in response to the attributes of the spirit that it is embodying. Otherwise, the body would grow up resembling not so much the spirit that lives within it as whatever the accidental combinations of genes and chromosomes might cause. We know that there are some cases where the body is less perfect than the spirit it embodies, but we view these imperfections as temporary earthly inconveniences that will be corrected when the spirit and body are united inseparably to receive a fulness of joy.

I have to mention another part of the creative process. When one finally reaches the “right” solution to a piece, there is a type of pleasure in the feeling that goes with the solution that I can only describe as a “celestial kiss.” There is a sensuous pleasure in the rightness of a piece of art, yet it is not carnally sensuous for it does not distract the senses to their own pleasure. It is spiritually sensuous in that it attracts the spirit to the delectation offered by the celestial and its potential. The pleasure is real, inward, and overpowering. It is the genuine reward that comes at the end of the creative process and is more important to the artist than applause, money, or commendation.

What I am leading to here is speculative, of course, but has been very helpful and stimulating in trying to fathom what happens when we try to create. If pieces of art do, in fact, have a pre-existence in the world from which we came, and if the creator–artist is in fact discovering what he already knew there, then some of the experiences we have when creating make good sense. Dennis Griffin has said, “There is a place inside that seems to know what it is that needs to be expressed.”¹ This “place” does not generate ideas nor extend them

¹Dennis Griffin, assistant professor of music, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, in “The Creative Process,” an unpublished MS in the possession of the author, p. 1.

nor bring them from theoretical possibilities into clear reality. Rather, it says "yes" or "no" to what the artist has concocted. Many of the artists with whom I am acquainted have mentioned this type of experience at one time or another. What seems to happen when we create follows a scenario that goes something like this: The artist, having left the previous existence where he knew gods, people, plans, and possibilities for this life, begins working to create a piece of art. In the process he encounters something that strikes "home," as it were, and he feels an intimation of something he has already known beginning to take shape. As he labors with his intellect, intuitions, and technique, he comes up with many alternatives and partial embodiments of the spirit he has encountered. Each of these in turn is referred to this "place" inside of him that "knows what the piece is" and the spirit, when properly moved responds with confirmation when the right alternative is worked out. When enough of these alternatives have been accepted and integrated into a work that is unified, precise, and whole, it matches the spirit that gave it birth and the artist receives that celestial "kiss" of joy from his work.

Thus the work of creating resembles groping through the veil to gain a sense of what is on the other side of it. What we know, however—and this should never be forgotten—is that what is on the other side is more nearly perfect than any earthly embodiment can possibly be. What is of the earth is temporary, imperfect, and dull by comparison. Still when we do our art well, our temporary, imperfect creation can take on a deep significance for us because it calls to our memories the half-remembered eternal things that are at the core of all earthly things.

IDEA NUMBER THREE: ART AND SUBJECT MATTER

I am not going to discuss the old problem of whether the value of a work of art is determined by its subject matter. Rather, I would like to mention some aspects of the relationship between subject matter, the nature of creativity, and the art that is thus produced. On the surface of things it seems obvious that some subjects are more stimulating to creativity than others, at least to each individual artist. How often does an artist reject a certain subject because he esteems it too insignificant to be worth his effort? How often does another subject engage his whole energy and attention? Why does one subject do this when another will not? While some of the answer may be found in the values system of the individual artist, does it not come even

more from the nature of the relationship between the subject matter and the spirit to be embodied? This may also explain why a subject rejected on one occasion may be used very effectively on another.

We do not choose to embody in our art that which we consider to have no value. In the act of choosing a subject the artist says, "This has value that justifies my effort." But when the artist is trying to embody a spiritual gesture, the relationship between the gesture and the subject will justify the effort and the choice. The subject matter of art is the celestial, and for Mormons, at least, that gives it ultimate value. Thus art demands a level of dedication and effort not less consuming than that of reaching the celestial level in any other endeavor. Even when the surface of a work of art contains subjects that may seem trivial or unworthy at first glance, the central celestial gesture of the piece may place those things in an eternal perspective that gives them significance beyond their superficial character.

This brings up a problem frequently encountered in Mormon art: Can the Mormon artist deal with such delicate subjects as adultery, illicit love, Satan worship, demonic possession, etc.? And can a Mormon audience tolerate such things? Too often the answer is simplistic: "These things are 'dirty' and if you even think about them you pollute your mind!" Too often in artistic efforts they are dealt with in the same simplistic way and the whole experience remains "dirty." But it appears to me that if these things are dealt with in their relationship to the celestial and in their effects upon our achieving the bright goals we all cherish it would be possible for the Mormon artist to lift his audience to spiritual levels where the contemplation of such subjects would strengthen against their being overcome by these evils.

In light of what has been said above, one of the differences between art and entertainment becomes clear. Entertainment's primary concern is the pleasure of the audience. Art, in contrast, seems to concentrate upon the central values of the human experience. Although it is obvious that there are many gradations of value between these two extremes, it must also be clear that there are few pure examples of either end of the spectrum. The artist gets his satisfaction from the "celestial kiss" that accompanies his achievement of the embodiment of the spiritual gesture in his place. The entertainer finds his satisfaction in the pleasure and acclaim of his audience. Here, also, the pure example is rare, and most artists and entertainers get satisfaction from a mixture of sources. It thus appears most artists have a bit of entertainer in them and most entertainers relate to the artists' motivations, too.

What it comes to at its center is still this: The subject of art is the celestial. The celestial provides the spiritual gestures; it inspires our best efforts; it rewards them with spiritual satisfactions. If we settle for anything less, we are bound to have disappointments.

IDEA NUMBER FOUR: THE ARTIST AND HIS AUDIENCE

Of all the effects of the lack of a Mormon Aesthetic, the most dangerous is the widening gulf between the artist and his audience. To some extent, this is traceable to the widening of the gulf in Western society in general. But to find the gulf so wide in a society where so many values are shared on such a profound level is indeed distressing.

It is the function of an aesthetic theory, whether explicitly stated and followed by both artist and audience or tacitly agreed upon because universally felt, to prevent such a gulf from occurring. The gulf is really a communications gap, for neither artist nor audience desires the gulf and many members of each side do not understand the other. If the beautiful is really rooted in the celestial, and if the artist is indeed trying to embody spiritual things from the heavenly realms, and if the audience is truly seeking celestial life and glory, there should be little friction between artist and audience in our society. But it is obvious to even the most casual observer that this relationship often falls far short of the ideal.

Too often the artist is caught up in the secular necessities of existence and must create for reasons other than the embodiment of the spiritual in his art. Too often his technique is not adequate to deal with the potentials that exist or with the possibilities that are revealed to him as he gropes through the veil. Too often the "place inside" must settle for "the best I can do at this time" when it would be delighted to have the perfection of the celestial model. Too often the celestial ideal is not even sought and through weakness or laziness or lack of preparation (which is laziness over an extended period of time) its vitality is lost.

Too often the member of the audience is caught up in his own prejudices and expectations for the things he already knows. Too often he is not willing to open up his heart to the products of his brother's creativity. Too often he misunderstands what the artist is offering him and takes it in the wrong spirit and thus is not edified. The goal of the member of the audience should be the "bright cloud" and the overpowering experience of the feeling of celestial

value. Prejudice, narrowness, ineptitude, lack of experience, and bad spirit all keep him from that experience.

The old idea that in the arts we are entitled to "like what we like" is so completely foreign to any kind of effective communication that it should be forbidden with the same fierceness we use on tobacco. It is a product of the same spirit that seduces us to take offense at something said by the Brethren, to go fishing on Sunday, to read a pornographic magazine. It makes it impossible for the artist to reach his audience; it makes it impossible for the person who adopts it to be edified by anything, for his loyalty to his stiffened prejudices prevents any light from penetrating his black attitude.

How then does a Mormon reach his potential as a member of an audience? This potential is reached by seeking to receive the celestial gesture in whatever form or guise it may be presented to him. This means he must not simply allow the piece of art to be in his presence as he nods in assent. He must take it to his spirit and try it on for "celestial size," seeing if it will produce the same "celestial kiss" that the artist felt when he was embodying the spirit in it. He must see beyond the surface to find that central celestial essence of the work. When he finds it, he will see that "he that speaketh and he that listeneth" can really be "edified together" (see D&C 50:22).

The artist and the member of his audience are really not opponents in a battle. Rather, they are travelers along a road to eternal life, both striving toward glory. They have common experiences, common objectives, common understandings of life and its goals and processes, and a spirit that they share from a higher source. The art that they share along that road should be a delight to both of them, a lift towards the goals they share, a foretaste of the joy toward which they both aspire. A Mormon Aesthetic should help both of them to understand this.