



## Square Halo Books

### *The Painter of Lite*<sup>TM</sup>

Last night, after the kids' final day of school and a hard slog at work, our family sat down to watch *Jurassic Park III*, the kind of movie we call E.T. ("entertaining trash"). Like most Hollywood sequels the film is full of recycled scenes—mainly dinosaurs energetically masticating just about any piece of flesh that comes their way—but one episode was particularly memorable. During a harrowing encounter with yet another super-sized reptile, one of the terrorized human beings manages to place a call on a satellite telephone. The call is answered by a three year-old in a suburban American home, but instead of going to give the phone to his mom, he gets distracted by the television, which is showing the children's program featuring Barney the cuddly purple T. Rex. While the bloodcurdling sounds of human screams and dinosaur roars come out of the phone, the boy is transfixed by the sight of Barney, who is galumphing about the TV screen to the rhythms of a happy song.

Reflecting on the pleasure I took from that scene, I decided that it was a salutary warning about the difficulty of writing about sentimentality and popular culture. The sheer fun of beating up on artistic kitsch is hard for some of us to resist, and in my title I have succumbed to temptation. The reference, for those who have been living in a different galaxy, is to the painter and marketing genius Thomas Kinkade, who styles himself *The Painter of Light*<sup>TM</sup>. Kinkade's saccharin, soft-focus paintings of Cotswoldy cottages, glowing gardens, misty lighthouses, and quaint villages have been reproduced over ten million times, and now adorn not only people's walls, but also La-Z-Boy recliners, screen savers, and coffee mugs all over the world. But Kinkade isn't satisfied with his role as artist: he has invested his work with the aura of patriotism and the intentional language of a Christian missionary. When you buy one of his works, whether it is a mug or one of the mass-produced prints that are then "highlighted" by "trained master highlighters," Kinkade wants you to believe that you are furthering the work of the Kingdom.

The critics, on the other hand, are not impressed. They have called Kinkade "a male Martha Stewart" and dubbed his work "art as a Happy Meal," "cultural Prozac," and the painterly equivalent to Beanie Babies.

The problem with comments like these is that they run the risk of backfiring, amounting to little more than a bloodsport of the cultural elite. After all, in America there is an ingrained populism which holds that ten million people can't be wrong. And it is hard to

argue with a number that large; Kinkade has connected with some deep human need.

However, it would be a mistake to reduce the discussion of sentimentality to a conflict between earnest populists and alienated elites. There have been popular artists, like Shakespeare and Michelangelo, who never seemed to indulge in sentimentality, while some sophisticated artists, such as Raphael and Dickens, can't be thought of apart from it.

In the eighteenth century, idealist moral philosophers used the word sentimental to express a sense of refinement and sensitivity. The idealists were Enlightenment figures who believed in the innate goodness of man; they felt that the cultivation of emotion allowed that goodness to gain greater social force. Nineteenth-century novelists like Dickens and Thackeray were deeply influenced by this way of thinking, but within fifty years of its coining, the word was being held up to ridicule.

The word sentimentality is now a term of opprobrium, but it is notoriously hard to define. Of course, that hasn't prevented it from being the source of a few witty epigrams. The Zen scholar R. H. Blyth once noted: "We are being sentimental when we give to a thing more tenderness than God gives to it." That's good, but as usual Oscar Wilde hits closer to the mark: "a sentimentalist is one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it."

Some thinkers have tried to characterize certain emotions as inherently sentimental, but I am convinced by Mark Jefferson, who argues in a brilliant essay, "What's Wrong with Sentimentality?," that the phenomenon resides not so much in the emotion itself as in the disjuncture between emotion and object. The heart of the problem is that of a misrepresentation of the world in order to indulge certain emotional states. For Jefferson, sentimentality is the product of moral choice. Our vision of the world is shaped by many small choices, which can include a tendency to ascribe "qualities of innocence" to certain objects. Sentimentality, he concludes, ascribes "sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness, and vulnerability" to a select group of things.

Sentimentality, Jefferson admits, can be harmless. A penchant for Hallmark cards and posters of kittens playing with balls of yarn is not in itself a mortal sin. But when the misrepresentation of the world takes on a particular consistency and brittleness, darker consequences are possible. "The unlikely creature and moral caricature that is someone unambiguously worthy of sympathetic response has its natural counterpart in a moral caricature of something unambiguously worthy of hatred," Jefferson concludes.



Which is why some observers have noted a relationship between sentimentality and brutality. The example that is usually trotted out here is that of the Nazi doctors, men who could shed tears over a string quartet one moment and then butcher a human being the next. It's a compelling story, but I would contend that it is such an extreme example as to do more to blind us to the quotidian dangers of sentimentality than to enlighten us. To the extent that anything is considered innocent—whether it be a race, nation, class, ethnic group, religion, or what have you—it is held up as something pure, something that can only be tainted or displaced by outside influences. When we are too tender about something we can easily become too violent in seeking to defend or preserve it.

To return to my earlier example, what scares me about Thomas Kinkadee is not so much the treacly emotion he seeks to evoke or his inveterate prettifying of nature, but the political subtext underlying his iconography. The only folk who could ever have inhabited his cottages and lighthouses are prosperous white folk. Nearly all of his paintings are of a world circa 1800-1914, with perhaps a small percentage depicting a world between 1914 and 1960. He likes to say that he is a painter of “memories and traditions,” but he is highly selective in what he chooses to remember, and that choice bears an unnerving resemblance to a world that is comfortingly pre-modern and Anglo-Saxon in composition. The views of these homes are always from the outside looking in, the point of view as a yearning gaze at windows glowing with light and wisps of smoke rising from chimneys. Here Kinkadee demonstrates his genius, because he leaves us free to imagine the idealized world within.

The essence of Kinkadee's sentimentality is the packaging of nostalgia. It's an oxymoronic idea, but it has become a major part of our cultural life, as Florence King has noted: “True nostalgia is an ephemeral composition of disjointed memories... but American-style nostalgia is about as ephemeral as copyrighted *déjà vu*.”

Kinkadee's patriotism and his attacks on the horrors of artistic modernism are standard-issue conservative notions. When it comes to theology, however, he is a little more original. The majority of his expressions of faith are fairly conventional, solidly within the evangelical mold, but his theological defense of the world depicted in his paintings is that “I like to portray a world without the Fall.” I have yet to encounter any evidence that Kinkadee cites scriptural or other warrant for this *modus operandi*. The Bible, as a narrative, seems fairly explicit about there being a Before and an After. Moreover, Christ's message was not to pretend the world isn't fallen but to take up our crosses and follow him through suffering and sacrifice. To create a body of work illustrating a world without the Fall is, for a Christian, to render Christ superfluous.

The more I've thought about it, the more it seems to me that Jesus took every opportunity he could to counter sentimentality. At

just about every juncture when those around him are tempted to rely upon sentiment, he brings them up short. To the announcement that his mother and brothers have arrived at the edge of the crowd—a Hallmark moment if ever there was one—he replies that only his disciples are his mother and brothers. And the one recorded instance when Jesus weeps takes place after he has deliberately delayed coming to see the dying Lazarus. In John's recounting of the story, Jesus is clearly moved by the suffering of the man's family, and perhaps his awareness of this death and resurrection as proleptic of his own passion. But whatever emotions he was feeling—grief, pity, regret—they were inexorably shaped by the reality of the Fall.

Kinkadee's apologetic seems to fit the definition of sentimentality as the “misrepresentation of the world in order to indulge certain emotional states.” That he is tapping into a deep human need seems unquestionable. But the response that he and many other purveyors of subcultural religious kitsch provide to that need is both inadequate and dangerous.

Conservative Christianity does not have a monopoly on sentimentality. There are myriad forms of it out there. For the past few months, I have followed in my local newspaper the saga of a stranded orca in the Puget Sound, complete with tales of how the orphaned creature has adopted a pet log as a friend and companion. Yesterday's paper recounted the orca's safe capture, in preparation for an attempt to reunite it with its pod. The other front-page story was that of the Washington Supreme Court ruling that a set of human embryos caught in a custody battle may be destroyed. Today the orca is back on the front page; the embryos are not.

There are times when criticizing sentimentality seems like overkill. But it would be wrong simply to dismiss the phenomenon—and the specific instance I've been discussing, religious kitsch—as nothing more than examples of harmless mediocrity. The great theologian, Cardinal Henri de Lubac, once wrote: “There is nothing more demanding than the taste for mediocrity. Beneath its ever moderate appearance there is nothing more intemperate; nothing surer in its instinct; nothing more pitiless in its refusals. It suffers no greatness, shows beauty no mercy.”

Perhaps, at its best, sentimentality strives for something approximating the theological virtues of hope and love. But in refusing to see the world as it is, sentimentality reduces hope to nostalgia. And in seeking to escape ambiguity and the consequences of the Fall, it denies the heart of love, which is compassion. Unless compassion means the act of suffering with the other *in their otherness*, it becomes meaningless. Well-intentioned as the purveyors and consumers of sentiment may be, they still want the luxury of an emotion without having to pay the price for it.