



## ON WORDS AND THE WORD OF GOD: THE DELUSIONS OF A MORMON LITERATURE

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*"A poet, a painter, a musician, an architect: the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian."*  
—William Blake

Observers of the Church must think it odd that for all the Church's emphasis on the spiritual worth of intelligence and knowledge and in spite of the Church's commandment to read "the best books," there is no literary tradition in the Church, no serious use of literature in the Church, and barely a sign of interest in the emergence of a Mormon literature. One of the mysteries of literary life in America is why Mormons have contributed so little to it. To make mention of a Mormon literature is to make a joke.

The conventional reasons for this poverty are unconvincing: that we have been too busy conquering the frontier; that we are too involved being our brothers' keepers; that we get our esthetic kicks in more spiritual ways; that we are literate but uneducated; that we lack a press and a public; that we have no critical experience and therefore no critical standards.

The real reason is that we have consistently denied to ourselves a literature. We have, for instance, always denied to Joseph Smith status as writer. In our hagiography, we learn to love the Word of God but not the words of Joseph Smith. This is unlike the Jews, to whom the words of the prophets were not only the Word of God but also the words of the prophets, making them in their love of The Word's words "the people of the book"; and one of the results is a supreme literacy and from Spinoza to Saul Bellow a long and lively literary tradition. Such a denial is also unlike the Catholics, to whom the Church Fathers were first of all writers, communicators, explicators, epistemologists of The Word, with a resulting literary tradition from Augustine to Flannery O'Connor. And our denial is unlike the Protestants, to whom special revelation has ceased and who are therefore free to write about The Word on their own, in an attempt to discover through meditation on words a place for themselves in the schemes of salvation; so from John Bunyan to William Faulkner literature has served the Protestant for self-examination and for revelation.

But Mormons, having revelation which ostensibly precludes inquiry and having a frame of belief that ostensibly excludes the esthetic, have been left without a very large body of literature. For all the verbiage that makes up the life of the Church, we do not seem to have much faith in words as a creative force, in writing as a creative act, in literature as a part of an on-

going creation. For all of our Bible literalism, we tend to mistrust words as experience. And for all of our hanging on every word that our modern prophets say, we tend to render expression as simple message. To us a phenomenon like the gift of tongues is instant Berlitz rather than the love of letters.

To be sure, we have an "unconscious" literature — folk tales, legends, journals, discourses, hymns: what William Mulder calls "the raw materials out of which pure letters rise"<sup>1</sup> — but little "conscious" literature, little *intended* literature. It is valuable to understand why.

Like many other religious groups in our society, we deny ourselves a literature largely on three conventional grounds: our puritanism, our paranoia, and our apocalypticism. And because we hold to the idea that literature should conform to the conventions of a society controlled by these Mormon tenets of morality and taste, we reduce the possibility of a body of Mormon literature.

For example, imaginative literature for the Puritans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the tradition out of which most early members of the Church came) was a concession to the flesh, an expedient of words required only because man's spiritual sense is still so imperfect. Though they loved words as perhaps no other group on this continent has, there was within them the fear that to delight in anything imaginative is to give oneself over to his senses, and of course one's senses could lead to sensuality, sexuality, sin. But where the Puritan writers overcame such fears, we haven't. With this puritanical suspicion of literature, the reading and writing of fiction, for example, was condemned in the early days of the Church:

You do wrong in reading novels because you subject your purity of mind to a fearful trial. It is hard to discriminate between the good and the evil in novels. The novel appetite being once formed, it craves all. A hellish seduction characterizes this kind of reading. The unhappy being who takes the first steps becomes enamoured of the pleasure it affords. Other reading becomes dull and lifeless. Only one successful attempt has been made to write a novel in which woman is not a prominent character and lust one of the ingredients of the plot. . . . Human nature loves to coast along the borders of infamy and crime. Open vulgarity and obscenity are forbidden by reigning custom, but novel-writers, by means of honied words and artful plans, lead the mind just far enough to give it courage in its own imaginative powers and then leave it in the most dangerous situation. . . . Where the novel-writer leaves off, the devil commences, and instills far more polluting thoughts than the literal construction of the word implies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Mormonism and Literature," *Western Humanities Review*, IX (Winter, 1954-55), 85-89. Mulder's is the best introduction to the paucity and possibilities of a Mormon literature, but also see G. Eugene England, "Modern Literature and Religious Experience," Salt Lake Institute of Religion Forum, April 4, 1969; Robert C. Elliott, "In the Realm of Literature," *The Improvement Era*, XXXIV (1931), 133-35; Samuel W. Taylor, "Peculiar People, Positive Thinkers and the Prospects of Mormon Literature," *Dialogue*, II (1967), 17-31.

<sup>2</sup>This is from *The Contributor* (1850). See Gean Clark's discussion, "A Survey of Early Mormon Fiction" (unp. thesis, BYU, 1935).

And in our own century, too, literature continues to be suspect in the Church on largely puritanical grounds:

Along with the printing and circulation of good ideas, of course, there has also been the printing and circulation of bad ideas. Some of the things we see in print cause us to give thanks for the glory of God and the intelligence of man, and some of the things we see in print make us ashamed — ashamed of our own kind. Filth has been circulated in the name of realism. Vicious suggestion has been circulated in the name of liberalism. Too many have found it profitable to peddle pulp that has excited the imagination and poisoned the minds of our youth — to popularize a type of literature which is called “frank,” but which is really rotten; which is called “realistic” but which is really immoral backwash.<sup>3</sup>

As with the Puritans, to us the real power of a piece of writing comes from the truth it contains and the divine efficacy of that truth, and not from sensuous involvement in worlds created by words.

In addition, our puritan condemnations have become a kind of paranoia about literature. Though the devil still appears to Mormons in isolated missionary situations and in rural Idaho, we have had the need to incarnate him in such visible places as Communism, college campuses, and literature and the arts. This is a cop-out, and it severely reduces the role literature can play in the Church. To us, literature has become one of the most effective tools of Satan. Thus paranoid about literature and the arts, we exclude almost all Gentile drama from our half-hearted stages, we domesticate the bawdy Shakespeare and the ambiguous Hawthorne and the skeptical Robert Frost in Relief Society discussions, and we eschew things seriously literary in our meetings and our homes. The devil lurks behind covers of books. But to worry about every “evil” idea that may touch one’s mind from a book of essays by, say, Eldridge Cleaver or Ronald Laing, or to worry about every “evil” picture painted by the fiction of, say Henry Fielding or William Burroughs, or to worry about the “evil” words and characters in plays like *Volpone* or *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is to live in constant fear of literature, of words, of The Word. All one can do after such fear in an effort to keep himself unspotted from the things of the world is to read only the antiseptic *Era* and the bowdlerized *Reader’s Digest Condensed Books*.

This puritanism and paranoia in us culminate in a kind of apocalypticism in which we see the productions of the world (and literature and the arts in particular) as evidence of the final end of this dispensation of time. In their crudeness, their immorality, their attacks on the things of God, their attempts to undermine the lives of moral men, they show, after all, that things couldn’t get much worse. So the end must surely be imminent. We therefore often watch with detached amusement the trashy torrent of periodicals in drug-stores and bookstalls, the flood of profligate and perverse fiction that best-sells or sells underground, the stream of increasingly nude and crude shows from Broadway, Hollywood, and college campuses, knowing in our heart of

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<sup>3</sup>Richard L. Evans, “A Testimony in Print,” *The Improvement Era*, XLVIII (1945), 265.

hearts that they all signal the end of an era and the coming of Christ to rescue those who have remained aloof and cleancut. And the worse the literature of our time gets, we seem to feel, the sooner the end. This militates against acceptance of the world, our lives in the world, the senses in us that lure us into a love of the world, and the art of literature that our sensuous love of the world naturally results in.

Thus for all of our pretensions to learning and culture in the Church, in our puritanic-paranoid-apocalyptic fundamentalism we have become reactionaries against literature rather than lovers of it. "We shall yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own," proclaimed Apostle Orson F. Whitney in 1888. "God's ammunition is not exhausted. His highest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God's name and by His help we will build up a literature whose top shall touch heaven, though its foundation may now be low on earth."<sup>4</sup> "Could there be among us embryo poets and novelists like Goethe? . . . There may be many Goethes among us even today, waiting to be discovered. Inspired students will write great books and novels and biographies and plays. . . . For years I have been waiting for someone to do justice in recording in song and story and painting and sculpture the story of the restoration . . .," exclaimed Apostle Spencer W. Kimball in 1967.<sup>5</sup> But the reactionary theology that has evolved in the Church has made such a hope unlikely.

Instead, we refuse to take literature seriously, especially the writing of it, under a series of greenhorn notions. We have for the most part confused literature with apologetics, as if literature ever had very much in the world to do with defense. Literature cannot be theological tracts, with dogma abstracted, ideas preached, salvation harped on. Apologetics makes religion trite, whereas literature asks us to read life naively, freshly, newly, brightly. The good writer is, after all, not a conveyor belt of authoritative ideas, not even an interpreter, but himself a creator of worlds — worlds which don't exist but to which one can nonetheless go. Literature is seldom written, and can be seldom written, in the service of religion. It is something else. But the fact that religion has no business in literature and that literature has no place in the Church does not invalidate either as a way of life and mind. They are simply two different kinds of life and mind.

Another delusion that prevents a valid Mormon literature is thinking of literature as communication. We seem to be unable to get beyond the idea that the primary function of a work of literature is to communicate something. If a work of literature doesn't carry "the Mormon message," we are tempted to judge it poor literature. But significantly, when thought of as having a message, a moral point, a communication to make, most literature is going to be thought of by the Church as being irrelevant, perverse, untrue, pornographic, for as a work explores personal experience or a personal point of view, it will naturally diverge from the authoritative doctrinal norms of

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<sup>4</sup>"Home Literature," *The Contributor*, IX (1888), 297.

<sup>5</sup>"Education for Eternity," *BYU Speeches*, Sept. 12, 1967.

the Church. Literature does *not* have meaning; rather it provides one with the Christian exercise of getting into someone else's skin, someone else's mind, someone else's life. That is why it can be largely irrelevant what a work says. What is more important is the new life the work creates in you.

A Latter-day Saint who has no tradition in literature, who gets no training in the reading of literature, who has no sense of the esthetic experience as a corollary to the Christian experience, will find perversion, distortion, untruth, absurdity in almost everything he reads.

Literature must be thought of not as the saving of others but as itself a kind of salvation. The poet, for instance, takes silence and fills it with structured sound. Just as God makes man a creator of his own life by remaining essentially silent, so man makes a creator out of himself when he discovers silence and fills it with delight. Put nothingness before the creative spirit and it will etch itself there. Likewise the novelist takes empty space and, with devices like narration, conflict, climax, he creates *time*. Just as God gave man the time of this life at his point in space, so the writer goes through the exercise of creating life by devising believable characters and moving them convincingly. By creating the way he does, the writer of fiction is affirming time, life, existence.

This is all imaginative, of course, but it is a process that is an exercise like the exercise of faith: in the absence of evidence, if we have faith, we imaginatively project a moral universe beyond our own senses. Working the way faith does, the esthetic experience of writing is in itself a spiritual exercise. A writer doesn't really need to worry about the "meaning" of his work, for no matter what it says, if the art of the work is good, the sensitive reader will regain his faith in man as creator and will regain his faith in the Creation. It is therefore not so important what a work of literature *says* as what it *does* to the reader.

In this sense, the greatest "religious" novel would then be one that (like the "immoral" *Tom Jones*, the "absurd" *Catch-22*, or the "bawdy" *Sot-Weed Factor*) can seduce me into living another's life. Because this exercise of *otherness* is a moral one, the greatest "religious" poetry would then be that which can involve me by means of shocking imagery and contorted syntax in the wrestling with one's soul (as I find in the poetry of Emily Dickinson), or which can involve me by means of sound in the creation of a fictive world where time dissolves into immortality (as I find in the poetry of Wallace Stevens), or which can involve me in the apocalyptic process of prophesying a new world (as I find in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg). And the greatest "religious" drama would be that which can include me imaginatively in another world where I can experience what others (imagined though they be) experience in their lives. Such fiction, poetry, and drama would be: not art filling a religious purpose, but *religion succeeding in an esthetic way*. The difference is an important one. Knowing it could have prevented the embarrassing present state of Mormon writings, and knowing it can help us begin to create a fine body of Mormon literature.

But concerned like all men with the primary world, the world in which



we conduct our empirical and practical lives, we find it difficult to accept and understand the secondary world, the world in which the imagination frames its own laws. Entry into this secondary world requires labor and thought and demands special skill. It is an experience, as W. H. Auden says, in which

A sentence uttered makes a world appear  
Where all things happen as it says they do.

To be sure, we live in the empirical world, but with sensory evidence that is hard to refute; there is in every mundane life a treasure island.

The possession of these two worlds is not madness, but a happy state, unless of course each longs to kill the other. The two worlds live in peace in the balanced man; in the unbalanced life, one dominates over the other, a condition I think we have in the Church in our insistence on utility and message. The two worlds are fairly fixed in their independence, with ideas having their life in the primary world and images, tone, irony, forms, sound, performance, and a multitude of other effects in the secondary. Just as "The unspiritual man," according to Paul, "does not . . . understand [spiritual things] because they are spiritually discerned," so the merely practical man cannot read or write literature, for that is imaginatively discerned.

A final delusion that denies us a literature of our own is the insistence on sweetness and light in the things we read and the things we write. This delusion, more than any of the others, has been held by most editors and contributors to *The Improvement Era*, *The Relief Society Magazine*, and *The Instructor*, so that almost everything that is published in the Church is a non-literature, a non-entity, even (as literature) nonsense.

What is not understood, it seems to me, is that literature is essentially anarchic, rebellious, shocking, analytical and critical, deviant, absurd, subversive, destructive. It attempts to destroy institutions, it challenges individual settled faith, it will disrupt all of life. The meek and the mild should not read it. The strong will be upset and uprooted by it. But it provides the service of making surer the grounds of one's belief. This process of "destructiveness" often goes by such euphemisms as "soul-searching," "mind-expanding," "challenging," etc. As Gwendolyn Brooks puts it,

Does man love Art? Man visits Art, but squirms.  
Art hurts. Art urges voyages —  
and it is easier to stay at home,  
the nice beer ready.

Because of this "destructive" feature of literature, I have to admit that I hate starting the study of a new novel, a new poem, a new play, because I know that one or another of my religious/moral/intellectual assumptions may be questioned, challenged, disproved, destroyed. To read sensitively is to come under serious attack. In wrestling with each new work of literature (like Jacob, who also got his reward!), I have to shift the grounds of my belief, and I find this painful — but productive. Challenged by art, I do not defend my faith, however, nor do I search for that which will keep it intact, but I let it come under constant re-examination, even risking its annihilation.

This process is faith-destroying, not faith-promoting, but the destruction of flabby assumptions is nonetheless a strengthening process. Writing is the process of self-examination/world-examination/existence-examination, the search for self, the persistence amid discovered meaninglessness, a "destructive" re-examination of the grounds of one's own belief. Likewise, the reader of literature is constantly re-examining his faith and learning where it is insubstantial and superficial.

The reading of literature of this nature is therefore a kind of sacrament of the Lord's supper in which one constantly renews his search for anything that is true and good. And one is inevitably humbled by the process, for, with his assumptions about his personal worth and his world's progress shattered, he is shocked into a recognition of the ultimacy of his dependence. (All of which affirms our paradoxical dictum, "Adam fell that men might be; and men are that they might have joy": in the reduced human condition of the Fall, man is in a hell of a world, a non-spiritual world, a world of the senses, where delight is possible and dependence on something/someone beyond the world an absolute necessity: this is joy.) Literature is a factor in the Fall of Man, it works to bring about his fall; but because the fall of man is a primary factor in man's salvation, literature is important to the process of salvation, if negatively valuable. And the more "destructive" the better: the more he is uprooted, challenged, hurt, subverted, the stronger he can become. Though a wounded man is not necessarily healthy, a spiritually healthy man is one who knows he is weak and knows where strength lies. Literature is in this way a builder of testimonies. But anyone who doesn't know how this is so will miss the point of it all. He will not write anything great, he will not read anything great.

In sum, a great work of *Mormon* literature will be like all great works of literature; it will be one that transports me into its fictive world, that gets me into the minds and skins of its characters, that shows me another style of life with me in it, that makes me (if only momentarily, though also possibly permanently) something *other* than I now am.

A great work of *Mormon* literature will be like all great works of literature; it will be one that affirms existence by showing its author working at playing the role of godlike creator so that I might have an example to follow in creating something godlike out of my own life; the example of skillful creation inspires the skillful creation of one's own life.

A great work of *Mormon* literature will be like all great works of literature; it will be one that makes me wrestle with my beliefs and which stimulates me by the example of the author's own effort to re-create my own life on surer grounds of belief. It will be one that doesn't program life for me, but leaves me free from constricting assumptions to wrestle, rebuild, and search for meaning.

Only a few of our writings, it seems to me, begin to meet these criteria, some of them represented in this issue of *Dialogue* and in issues to follow. But the list is small and tentative.

Perhaps when we realize that literature cannot be written or read in

the service of religion but that like religion it is an exercise in otherness, an exercise in faith, an exercise in renewing our grounds of belief, *then* we will have an important body of Mormon literature. But I think that by and large we have not yet grown up to this realization. We have not yet figured out how God could become The Word.

