



# THE IMAGINATION'S NEW BEGINNING: THOUGHTS ON ESTHETICS AND RELIGION

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... How cold the vacancy  
When the phantoms are gone and the shaken realist  
First sees reality. The mortal no  
Has its emptiness and tragic expirations.  
The tragedy, however, may have begun,  
Again, in the imagination's new beginning,  
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must  
Say yes, spoken because under every no  
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.

—Wallace Stevens, *Esthétique du Mal*

Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:  
The imagination that we spurned and crave.

—Wallace Stevens, "To the One of Fictive Music"

While it is true that there has been no substantial literary tradition among the Mormons, there are indications that one is beginning. For the first time there is a sufficient number of Mormon scholars and critics who can help establish the climate for a legitimate literature and there are more and more creative writers who are turning their talents to Mormon subjects. Therefore, it is not my purpose to lament the fact that a Mormon literature does not now exist. Rather, I choose to discuss how the literary esthetic can serve religion and how a rebirth of the imagination can and should serve the Church today. For if anything would militate against acceptance of an emerging Mormon literature it would be our continued distrust of the imagination.

Perhaps the building of an empire and the securing of a faith required pragmatists and realists, who by their very natures were suspicious of the imagination. Those acquainted with the records of pioneer life in The Great Basin recognize that the spoken and written word had to be clear and direct in order that the kingdom even survive. Those few who were inclined to be literary often did not have the leisure to be so. As an editorial in the *Women's Exponent* for 1914 observed: "The hardships of pioneer life are not generally very conducive to the cultivation of the finer qualities of the mind and soul. The making of new homes and conquering desert wastes naturally calls forth all one's energy, and the tired work-worn body would

naturally require all the faculties of the mind to assist in providing life's necessities."

Those who were literary often found themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to justify themselves to suspicious and unsympathetic peers. An article in the *Women's Exponent* for 1884 gave a witty if impassioned answer to a criticism of literary women:

[If] You must know the truth . . . these Pariahs [literary women] of society (like myself) have always known that while their associates looked down upon them and spoke sneeringly of them, they were their superiors mentally. But I think, too, like Carlyle's Sandy McPhearson, the associates can never be made to understand this solemn fact, and — that's where the shoe pinches (oh, excuse the slang).

But I'd just like to tell these people what the term, "literary woman," means, in Utah, at least. It means a woman who has read a little and don't give herself up to such superstitious folly as giving fried mice to children with the whooping cough, and who struggles bravely against broken looking glasses and overturned salt. . . .

The term includes women who mind their own business, and never have time to pick up their bonnet and run over to the neighbor's house to tell and be told everybody's business, and to say anything but their prayers.

The lack of interest in serious literature does not mean that the pioneers were not imaginative or creative; in certain ways they were marvelously so, as evidenced by their chapels, tabernacles, and temples. Nor were they as uncultured as they are sometimes depicted. For example, the 1855-56 dramatic season in Salt Lake City included such plays as *She Stoops To Conquer*, *Othello*, and *Richard III*.

Yet whatever interest there was in literature tended to be moral rather than esthetic. Even Susa Young Gates, who in some respects had sophisticated literary tastes, felt that novels with characters who lacked reverence, chastity and honesty were evil and to be avoided. With the exception of *Les Miserables* she dismissed the entire French fiction of her time. "French novels are so permeated with the unchaste atmosphere of the French people, that . . . one would gladly forego all knowledge of even their very names."<sup>1</sup>

Such standards of literary judgment did not vanish with the frontier. In the *Improvement Era* for 1917 Osborne J. P. Widtsoe made the following suggestion: "Read with the view and purpose of finding the message. . . . Read, then, I repeat again, to discover the author's message; find that above all things; and though I may perhaps get myself into trouble by saying this, I will venture it, that if you find a book on the reading course which does not have a message . . . report it to the chairman of the reading course committee, and let him correct the evil." Today women throughout the Church engaged in the study of serious literature are told that there is no such thing

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<sup>1</sup>"The Influence of Fiction on Education," *Young Woman's Journal*, XI (Nov., 1900), p. 499. I wish to thank Leonard Arrington for generously allowing me to use his files on Mormon literature.

as literature for literature's sake. This unfortunate deemphasis on esthetics tends to make literature lessons little different from Sunday School lessons.

I am not suggesting that literature cannot have a message or a moral. All art has meaning and that meaning is important. As Susanne Langer says, "There is nothing the matter with an ardent moral idea in poetry, provided the moral idea is used for poetic purposes."<sup>2</sup> But in finding the "message" of a work of literature we may come away content that we have understood everything about that work. In his essay "On Poetic Truth," Wallace Stevens says, "It would be fantastic to suggest that the overt meaning, what the poem seems to say, contributes little to the artistic significance and merit of a poem. . . . The 'something said' is important, but it is important for the poem only insofar as the saying of that particular something in a special way is a revelation of reality."<sup>3</sup> To come away with only the message of a work of literature is to come away with partial meaning, is to come away with shadow instead of substance. To see only what is obvious is to see less of that which is spiritual and beautiful, or,

. . . to see [only] what one sees,  
As if sight had not its own miraculous thrift,  
To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone,  
As if the paradise of meaning ceased  
To be paradise, it is this to be destitute.  
This is the sky divested of its fountains.<sup>4</sup>

The attitude that literature and life cannot (and indeed should not) be enjoyed on a purely esthetic level reflects an erroneous view not only of literature, but of the Gospel as well. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated that an article of our faith was a belief in seeking after things that are lovely, and of good report or praiseworthy. Ideally, beauty is not separated from truth. As we are told in I Chronicles 16:29, "Worship the Lord in the *beauty* of holiness." Father Lehi states that we exist *that* we might have joy. Sound in literature is intended for our joy as it is in music; form in literature is intended for our joy as it is in the graphic arts; movement in literature is intended for our joy as it is in dance. Poetry doesn't need a reason for being any more than does a flower; as Emerson said, "Beauty is its own excuse for being."

We have also lost (or perhaps never gained) an ability to use symbols. We wear symbols next to our bodies hardly aware of the meaning they hold; we repeat metaphorical and symbolic language in temple ceremonies unaware of the multiple meanings they contain. We are like those who Jesus said have eyes but don't see and ears but don't hear.

Somewhere along the way we have forgotten the kinship between the poetic imagination and religious experience. Perhaps this comes in part

<sup>2</sup>*Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York, 1953), p. 233.

<sup>3</sup>*Opus Posthumous*, Samuel French Morse, ed. (New York, 1966), p. 237. No writer in the twentieth century has written as much or as eloquently on the poetic imagination as has Wallace Stevens.

<sup>4</sup>*Esthétique du Mal*, IX, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1967), pp. 320-21.

from our neglect of the Scriptures and our refusal to give ourselves to their poetry and language. When Jeremiah speaks of his testimony, he uses a poetic metaphor: "His [God's] word was in my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay." (20:9) We are struck here both by the beauty and the truth of Jeremiah's statement. All our attempts to say just what a testimony is fall short of this simple poetic statement.

When Nephi closes his testimony he does so in a way that pleases us both spiritually and esthetically:

I glory in plainness;  
I glory in truth;  
I glory in my Jesus,  
for he hath redeemed my soul from hell.  
(II Nephi 33:6)

The parallel structure, the repetition, the use of the possessive ("my Jesus") speak to the eye and ear as well as to the spirit.

Not all such illustrations are found in the Scriptures, however. Take for example the following couplet by Robert Herrick:

God's hands are round and smooth, that gifts may fall  
Freely from them, and hold back none at all.

Herrick engages our imagination in contemplating an object we might otherwise never have considered. The sound and the imagery (of "round" and "smooth") suggest something not only about God's hands, but about the quality of His love, something which is confirmed by our spiritual sense.

An additional example can be found in Gerard Manley Hopkins' sonnet, "God's Grandeur." After speaking in the octet about how a world "charged with the grandeur of God" has been soiled by man's sin and insensitivity, Hopkins concludes:

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black west went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Hopkins uses many devices to body forth his central poetic and religious idea. Alliteration and assonance are employed with such skill that we are scarcely aware of how totally Hopkins uses sound to convey sense. Alliterative pairs (nature-never, deep-down, last-lights, brown-brink, west-went) give way to combinations of words beginning with *b* or *w* (black-west, brink-eastward), which culminate in the almost totally alliterative last line.

The caesura, or pause, is used effectively in several key places (as with "morning" and "springs"), but especially in the last line — "with *ah!* bright wings" — as the poet sees the wings of the Holy Ghost reflecting the light of the sun (Son of God) to a darkened world. The "*ah!*" expresses wonderment

and surprise, as if the poet himself were unprepared for the vision which he sees.

Finally, Hopkins uses diction to expand the possibilities of his poetic expression and to make his meaning more concrete. Why a "bent world"? Undoubtedly, Hopkins intends two meanings here: the world is bent because it is round, partly in darkness, partly in light, but it is also bent morally because of man's callousness and his rejection of Christ (which are emphasized in the octet). "Broods" also has multiple meaning. Hopkins intends to convey not only the idea that the Holy Ghost solemnly ponders man's fate, but that he is like a bird (enforced by "warm breast" and "bright wings") hovering over its young. This further suggests Christ's metaphor of Himself as a mother hen who gathers her chickens under her wings. The Holy Ghost broods over the fallen children of God, nurturing and preparing them for Christ. Ultimately these devices work poetically to convey the idea that the real grandeur with which the world is charged is God's love and the love of His Son.

Although the esthetic and the spiritual are not the same, and although we can have one kind of experience without the other, there is a way in which they are similar. As Wallace Stevens says, "The wonder and mystery of art, as indeed of religion in the last resort, is the revelation of something 'wholly other' by which the inexpressible loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched. To know facts as facts in the ordinary way has, indeed, no particular power or worth. But a quickening of our awareness of the irrevocability by which a thing is what it is, has such power, and it is, I believe, the very soul of art." And, "The affinity of art and religion is most evident today" in that "both have to mediate for us a reality not ourselves."<sup>5</sup> Our need for affirming and ordering our lives is satisfied to a large extent by religion and art, ultimately and preferably as united and complementary forces.

When our awareness of things either terrestrial or celestial is quickened by the esthetic as well as by the spiritual imagination, we have what might be called a double witness, by which the truth is made more profound and more penetrating and our sympathies are both broadened and deepened. That art can do this suggests that it may be part of God's plan to draw us closer to one another and back to Him. If this is true then we should seek to multiply the number of times we are touched esthetically, just as we should seek to multiply the number of times we are touched spiritually.

For the imagination to have a new beginning in us, we must be willing to act on the faith that it can affect us in a significant way. We must also give our attention to those in our culture who are speaking to us about our religion through literature. If we give attention both to our imaginative capabilities and to those who speak to them, we may yet have a literature worthy of our religion.

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<sup>5</sup>"On Poetic Truth," *Opus Posthumous*, pp. 237-38.