



## LITERATURE IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH: THE IMPORTANCE OF INVOLVEMENT

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Against my better judgment, I have been persuaded to discuss the place of literature in the history of the Mormon Church in the context of this special issue of *Dialogue*. That the topic is too large to be dealt with in small compass is evidenced by the views of the various writers who in these pages explore some of its aspects — including the fundamental question whether such a thing as Mormon literature even exists.

That there is a Mormon literature is beyond question, and it effectively begins with the Book of Mormon, which must be regarded as one of the curiosities of American literature. The Book of Mormon lives on because of its religious vitality, the emotions it evokes in believers, the sense of nearness to God they derive from it; not, it would seem, from any inherent literary values. I had better qualify that: Not from any literary values that non-believers can find in it. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the Book of Mormon is brimming over with literary values, as far as the Saints are concerned. Still, non-believers do not read the Book of Mormon as they read the Bible, for the profundity of its ideas, for the grace and power of its language, for its insights into the human condition. Its merits otherwise, whether as history or as fiction designed to be read as history, do not concern us here.

As with the Book of Mormon, so also with the other distinctively Mormon scriptures, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. None of these works is now, or seems ever likely to become, a part of world "literature" short of that near-total conversion of the planet which is now, as it has always been, the Mormon dream.

The direct involvement of the Mormon people with these books is obvious, and I think that is a useful way of looking at all Mormon literature, by conceiving of it as a literature of involvement. A significant point of entry may be Mormon hymnody. Although historians have paid some attention to them, Mormon hymns have had relatively little attention from literary scholars thus far, and surely this is to be regretted.<sup>1</sup>

The literary values in the Mormon hymns are incontestable. They may be deficient as poetry, and they may concentrate and sentimentalize Mormon experience almost beyond recognition, especially as passing time robs them of immediacy (present-day Mormons do not have the gut-experience of black-face mobs or of expulsion and exodus common to those who wrote the hymns

or the congregations that first sang them), but they have great evocative power. Because of their very nature, however, no universal acceptance of these hymns is conceivable. Christian hymns, reflecting the whole spectrum of Christian experience, make up a considerable part of the Mormon hymn book, but there have been almost no reverse borrowings. Perhaps the only Mormon hymn that is sung outside the Mormon community is John M. Macfarlane's "Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains," and the reason for its broader acceptance is that it is a simple Christmas carol. Admit it, we are not likely at any very early date to find a Baptist congregation singing "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning," George Manwaring's celebration of Joseph Smith's "First Vision," or to hear Methodists joyfully chorusing W. W. Phelps' "Praise to the Man Who Communed with Jehovah," or William Fowler's "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet," to say nothing of Ruth May Fox's "MIA, We Hail Thee." The more distinctively Mormon the hymn, the less general its appeal. If we are to find universals in Mormon hymnody, we have to seek a different approach, finding keys to Mormon feeling and thinking, and relating these to what I regard as literature's primary concern, the terms on which men live, everywhere in space and time.

As a literary form, Mormon hymns belong to a classification all their own, because it is difficult to isolate the emotional impact of the lyrics from that of the music, even though some of the hymns have been sung to different tunes at different times, showing that textually they have their own survival qualities. Still, they are so participatory, both in the circumstances of their creation and in their continued existence, embracing and enlivening the community as does nothing else in Mormon literature, as to perfectly exemplify the involvement factor in that literature. That same involvement is found in the personal narratives and diaries, the journalism, the polemical works (including most of the histories), the poetry, and even the fiction.

But let us look at one of the poets. Eliza R. Snow, "the sweet singer of Israel," may serve as an interesting example. Eliza Snow did not limit herself to the writing of poetry, but as a literary figure on the Mormon cultural horizon, that is her role and her significance.

How accomplished a poet was she? Some time ago, I put this question to a friend, herself a gifted poet, and the answer I got was that Eliza was essentially a versifier, as might clearly be seen if she were compared with her contemporary, Emily Dickinson. I have thought since that it would be a genuine contribution to Mormon culture if someone would undertake a study of the lives of these two women — not just the poetry but the whole interaction of their lives with their times. Such a study would not necessarily improve our estimate of Eliza's poetry, but we might end by understanding

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<sup>1</sup>See D. Sterling Wheelwright's unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "The Role of Hymnody in the Development of the Latter-day Saint Movement" (University of Maryland, 1943), and Howard Swan's "Music Among the Mormons" in his *Music in the Southwest, 1825-1850* (San Marino, Calif., 1952). Favorite hymns of the Utah Church have been studied by George D. Pyper (1939) and by J. Spencer Cornwall (1961), and a parallel work for the Reorganized Church is Roy A. Cheville's *They Sang of the Restoration* (Independence, 1955). None of these books takes a primarily literary approach.

it better. Because she was caught up quite early in the continental drama of Mormonism's turbulent early years, Eliza's was a life of social involvement, whereas Emily became essentially a recluse. How much does the social involvement count for (beyond its effect upon the poetry, the function demanded of the poetry)? At what point are life and literature separable? I doubt that students of Emily Dickinson would take much interest in the findings, but I think such a study would have a definite place in a cultural inventory of Mormonism.

The problem of social involvement and its effect upon literature is clearly seen in what is perhaps the most characteristic form taken by Mormon folk literature, the autobiography. Let no one dismiss Mormon autobiography as an inferior literary form; in the end, it may outweigh in value all the rest.

Autobiography is in any case a fascinating literary genre. It may be fiction as much as fact (and among the Mormons it may be the most distinctive kind of fiction), if only because no one can ever record an absolutely true account of his days. Even to record a single day defeats all of a man's ingenuity; everything thought and felt and done or not done from the rising to the setting of the sun — not a fraction of this can be got down on paper, as even James Joyce might have been disposed to agree. There is compression, suppression, and distortion; anxiety, yearning, wish-fulfillment, deprivation, realization; these and a thousand things more, the whole day through. How much more must this be the case then with autobiography, when a whole life must be summed up in the briefest of terms — brief even if the autobiography runs to many volumes.

Carlos Baker has Ernest Hemingway in view in a recently published biography, but what he says about Hemingway's nominally factual war correspondence of 1944 seems to me directly relevant to the point I have been making about autobiography:

Virtually everything he wrote for *Collier's* that summer was a melange of personal observation and materials gleaned from a wide variety of other sources. None of his despatches was completely accurate. He seemed to be far more concerned with the feel of things than with the facts. As a lifelong purveyor of fiction, he could not resist the temptation to fictionalize. He invented dialogue like a novelist. As in his NANA despatches from Spain, he often omitted the names of his companions, leaving the impression that he was alone in feats of derring-do. He sometimes contrasted his own modest conduct with the infamous behavior of others. He was always compressing, foreshortening, overdramatizing. . . .

A remarkable passage in Parley P. Pratt's *Autobiography* comes to mind. The scene is Richmond Jail, in Missouri, in the winter of 1838-1839, Joseph Smith and his fellow prisoners having been subjected for hours to "the obscene jests, the horrid oaths, the dreadful blasphemies and filthy language of [the] guards. . . ." Pratt reports that:

On a sudden [Joseph] arose to his feet, and spoke in a voice of thunder, or as the roaring lion, uttering, as near as I can recollect, the following words:

"SILENCE, ye fiends of the infernal pit. In the name of Jesus Christ I rebuke you, and command you to be still; I will not live another minute and hear such language. Cease such talk, or you or I die THIS INSTANT!"

He ceased to speak. He stood erect in terrible majesty. Chained, and without a weapon; calm, unruffled and dignified as an angel, he looked upon the quailing guards, whose weapons were lowered or dropped to the ground; whose knees smote together, and who, shrinking into a corner, or crouching at his feet, begged his pardon, and remained quiet till a change of guards.

I have seen the ministers of justice, clothed in magisterial robes, and criminals arraigned before them, while life was suspended on a breath, in the Courts of England; I have witnessed a Congress in session to give laws to nations; I have tried to conceive of kings, of royal courts, of thrones and crowns; and of emperors assembled to decide the fate of kingdoms; but dignity and majesty have I seen but *once*, as it stood in chains, at midnight, in a dungeon in an obscure village of Missouri.

Beyond all doubt this is effective writing, making the reader sit up and pay attention, and burning an image into his mind; on such grounds, the passage must be accounted literature. Is it also history, the whole truth? Would any uninvolved onlooker have seen this happening in Pratt's terms? Did he himself see it in quite the same way at the time? These are more difficult questions.

Moreover, the literary side of Mormon history has scarcely begun to be studied yet; that is, the literary aspects of the formal written history, wherever found. The job should be undertaken; we will not really understand the history as history until we have had a look at some of the mechanics of the writing. It would certainly be instructive to have a close look at Joseph's own autobiography, the existing manuscripts studied for textual variations as Thomas Jefferson's are. The "facts" quite aside, we will not understand Joseph Smith himself very well until his literary aspects have been thoroughly assessed.

But I was commenting on Parley P. Pratt. His *Autobiography* received a discerning look from R. A. Christmas in the very first issue of *Dialogue* (Spring, 1966) and I would urge readers to reread Mr. Christmas's article in the light of what I have just been saying. Pratt is an interesting figure otherwise. Among the early Mormon writers, none exceeded him in sheer virtuosity, I suspect. From a study of his works, he emerges as the writer's writer, for he was always working at his job. Pratt did not write for the sake of writing, though; he wrote primarily for the sake of his message (our theme of involvement, again). He wrote tracts; he wrote a journalistic kind of history; he wrote autobiography and poems, hymns and theological disputations; he addressed proclamations to Queen Victoria and to the people of the Pacific; he wrote broad satires and letters (purportedly by non-Mormons, pseudonymously); and always with ingenuity and zest, enjoying what he was doing. I think we will understand Mormonism itself better when we gain a full understanding of Parley P. Pratt.

With so appealing a subject, it is easy to forget that I am primarily interested at the moment in Mormon autobiography as folk literature, as perhaps the most characteristic form of Mormon literary expression. (Many more Saints addressed themselves to their autobiography, their "journals," than ever tried their hand at hymn-writing or defenses of the Saints and the faith, for example.) Pratt's is a formal Autobiography, as formally published, and the passing years have brought the publication of many more, but one tends to think of them as manuscripts, written in old-fashioned ledger journals by the light of a candle, or perhaps a kerosene lantern. Some truly superb specimens of the genre have come to light, just how superb only a few have yet realized.

One of the best, I think, is Hosea Stout's, published in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* in 1962. This autobiography was never completed and principally describes Stout's boyhood and young manhood, down to the time he first met up with the Mormons. In its artlessness, it achieves the status of high art, as in its pages dealing with childhood in a Shaker community, or the impression made by the mid-western prairies on one brought up amid oak clearings.

Similarly, I do not think anyone can really understand the inwardness of the early Mormon experience, the texture of Mormon life, who has not read the reminiscences of the Thomsonian doctor, Priddy Meeks, published in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* in 1942. Stout and Meeks are prize exemplars of the Mormon experience as American experience.

Another jewel beyond price is Abner Blackburn's still-unpublished reminiscences. Blackburn brings to the Mormon literary and historical record an element that has been sadly lacking in it, what with human nature, in Wallace Stegner's phrase, wrapped in piety like sausages put up in lard. Blackburn recounts the initial march of the Mormon Battalion from Council Bluffs to Fort Leavenworth, to "fit out for the war," in these terms:

their wear no provisions [at] the Bluffs and we had to beat our way partly to the fort of several days journey. no cooking utencils or convencies. The soldiers made dough and wrapt around sticks and held it over the fire to bake. the farmers along the rout thought we wear a rough sett. Chickens Ducks Pigs and all kinds of vegetables sufferd without price. some of those fellows would steal anny thing. one set of thieves carried [off] several bee hives while the oners wear at dinner. one soldier drove off a cow and milked her to the fort and then sold her for whiskey. Arrived at the fort. made all preparation to goe. we had to be sworn into the service. the officer read the military law to us. it was death to desert and death for several other offences. their was a company of Misourians herd the law read. they said if the Mexecans did not get them the military law would sure. that was to much of a gammet for them to run. so they threw up the sponge and went home. Drew our arms and acouterments and bounty money layd in a suply of clothing and other necessaries for the trip across the wide plains to Mexico and Montezumas Halls [and] started this 15 of August 1846. . . .

[Eventually approaching the New Mexican settlements, the Battalion] Camped one afternoon about three o'clock. Presently there



rode up several Spainards. Amongst them was a Spanish Hidalgo and his daughter with their rich caprisoned horses and their jingling uniform. The sinaretta lit off her horse like a nightengale.

The whole camp was there in a minute. Their gaudy dress and drapery attracted all eyes. The dress of the Senuretta is hard to describe. All the colors of the rainbow with ribbons and jewelry to match. She was the Rodope of the great American plains. We gave them presents and made them welcome to our camp and also to martial music as a greeting.

The damsel was struck with our drummer boy, Jesse Earl, and his violin. He played "the girl I left behind me." She could not contain herself and with her companeros started a dance and made the dance fit the tune.

She was beautiful, graceful and slender  
Her saddle was spangled with gold  
Whose gleam her eyes dark splendor  
Outshown a thousand fold

Upon the drum she took a seat  
Her image made the fifer smile  
She showed her pretty ivory feet  
And slender ankles all the while

She took a fancy to our drummer boy. The attachment was mutual; but his admiration cooled off somewhat when she appropriated his handkerchief and pocketknife. After taking the whole camp in they made their departure for their beautiful hacienda. After this the camp was as dead as last years pancake.

Will anyone gainsay me? This is not merely history; it is literature of a high order. As far as the discovery of Mormonism is concerned, the best may be yet to come, as the buried folk literature slowly emerges into view.

Thus far I have restricted this discussion to autobiographies from the pioneer period. The restriction is not a necessary one, however. Perhaps it is for the valiance of her spirit and the sensitive reflection of a rare life, rather than for the distinction of the prose that I vividly remember, after almost thirty years, Annie Clark Tanner's *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography* (Salt Lake City, 1941). This book has been closely held within the Tanner family; the only institutionally-owned copies I know of are those in the Church Historian's Office, the Brigham Young University Library, and the Salt Lake Public Library. This work may well be one of the monuments of Mormon literature, and thus far it is almost totally unknown in that literature. If by saying this much and no more, I persuade others to search out the book and savor its quality, I shall have done well.

Another autobiography of genuine distinction is one written by that ornament to her sex, Juanita Brooks of St. George. Thus far she has published it only in part, and in so unlooked-for a place as the *Journal of American Folklore*, but the three chapters relating some episodes of her girlhood at Bunkerville, Nevada, just after the turn of the century have lately been conveniently reprinted in John Greenway's *Folklore of the Great West* (Palo Alto, 1969). It would be hard to conceive of any writing more consist-

ently Mormon in its texture and its preoccupations than Mrs. Brooks' recollections; it is also personal history that fully attains to the dignity of literature.

My emphasis upon autobiography raises interesting questions about the future, the kind of literature the Mormon community can anticipate. There will be writing (and rewriting) of the past to answer present or developing need. How much will this be a literature of involvement? To the extent that accommodation succeeds conflict in Mormon life, some of the well-springs of literature will run dry. As Bernard DeVoto remarked, the volcanic early stage of Mormonism is in many ways more interesting than the hardening and cooling stage which has followed. What might be some themes of the future? One constant is bound up with the Church's continuing sense of mission, the conversion of all the convertibles. Yet a lot of the urgency has gone out of this sense of mission as the millennial expectation has subsided and the powerful "gathering" phase of Mormon history has run its course. Most Church members accept the idea that these are "the last days," but there is not much immediacy about it; the end will not come a week from next Thursday, or before your daughter graduates from high school. Most certainly not before you have to settle with the bank for that money you borrowed.

There is still plenty of conflict, actual or potential, to be found in Mormon life. A fundamentalist might write a touching and disturbing autobiography, dealing with his sincere efforts to "live his religion" in nineteenth century terms amid the cross-currents of twentieth century Mormonism. Have we seen the last, or even the real beginning, of the struggle for racial equality within the Church? Or for that matter, for sex equality? These are merely the more obvious possibilities. Consider the problems that may beset members of a family-and-children-oriented church in an increasingly overpopulated world. And there is always The Bomb to make life more interesting in an uninteresting sort of way.

The point is, the raw stuff of literature is going to be around for a while. Mormon history, Mormon involvement with history, steadily secretes the stuff. There is going to be, as there is now, a Mormon literature, and on the whole, I think the best is yet to come.