

# Notes and Comments

## THE RELEVANCE OF LITERATURE: A MORMON VIEWPOINT

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*This essay was read May 5, 1969, at the annual awards banquet of the English Department at Brigham Young University. Professor Hart, a member of that department, has just completed a book, MINOR LIVES (an edition of biographies from the writings of John Nichols), which will be published early next year by Harvard University Press.*

A short time ago, in *Brigham Young University Studies*, I published an article about Japanese and English poetry; I ended it with the statement that poetry in both languages carries the hallmark "Made on Earth by Man." A week or so later I received a letter from a member of the Church in California. He had read my article, and noting my interest in Japanese things he sent me a paper written by his son on the history of the Mormon Church in Japan, which I was very happy to get because I have a deep and continuing interest in everything Japanese. His letter, however, concluded with the statement that the paper he was sending me stressed "Made on Earth by God."

For a long time I considered the tone of the letter. I decided finally that my correspondent had intended merely to find a graceful transition from my article to the one he was sending, that he had not meant his statement as a rebuke. But the possibility of this latter interpretation stuck in my mind. What if he had meant to say that my emphasis on the creative works of man was a misapplication of effort, perhaps even almost a blasphemy to direct any effort away from the praising of God? Regardless of whether the question had been intentional, it had arisen. And any question that can

be asked, demands an answer and poses a challenge, just as to a mountain climber the mere presence of a mountain is the challenge. I continued to turn the matter over in my mind, and my thoughts here are largely the result of ideas that began to assemble themselves in response to the question. They become, in effect, a kind of justification for my life's work.

The things we call art are, by definition, the works of man, called thus to distinguish them from nature. People have, historically, valued art because of the very fact that, having passed through the mind of a man, it becomes a human interpretation of an object, an idea, or an event. In defense of this activity, I first asked myself the question: Is there anything in specifically Mormon beliefs that would preclude artistic pursuits on the part of church members? Or from a more positive position, an even better question: Are there specific Mormon beliefs that contribute to a justification of a career in the arts?

In approaching these questions, I felt I should be quite basic, and I could find nothing more basic than the Mormon concept of God: a God who not only loves his children as does an earthly father but who is, as well, their literal spiritual father. Proceeding from this, I asked: What kind of an earthly father is jealous of his children's accomplishments and advances or is wrathful if they do something worthwhile on their own? Is our Father in Heaven, then, likely to be angered at his children's presumptuousness if they become capable of creative thought or action and growth toward understanding? Perhaps the best answer is another question: Isn't every accomplishment of a man likely to be the occasion of his Father's rejoicing? One would certainly have to go to some other religion than Mormonism to find a concept of a god (not the loving Father) who frowns upon all the efforts of man, dismissing them with hautiness as puny and insignificant.

Related to the Mormon concept of God is the Mormon explanation of why man is on earth to begin with. We do not see ourselves as mere pawns and playthings at the mercy of the caprices of a higher being; rather, we see ourselves and God together working in harmony with irrevocable law. We are here to undergo the experience of mortality in order to learn what that experience has to teach; and we are to undergo that experience not only that we might suffer, but that we might find joy. Most of the rest that I have to say will be an exploration of the ways in which art (or specifically literature from now on) contributes to man's joy. And lest my statement about finding joy in literature mislead you into thinking I am going to approach the subject from the point of view of how it pretties up life, let me say immediately that I am not. I wish, in short, to look at literature not as decoration, but as a meaningful and functional part of life itself.

I want to begin looking for the ways by which literature contributes to joy by asking what joy is and how we come by it. For this purpose, I shall omit here the approaches to this subject that are familiar in a theological framework, although doing this is deceptive since our theology informs us that there is no clear and distinct separation between spiritual and temporal meanings. But this fact itself imposes an even greater responsibility to ex-

amine things on the path along which we are going, as being a trail that is less well explored than others.

If we assume that man's purpose on earth is to fulfill in reality all the potential that he had when he came here, then joy must be the gauge, as well as the reward, of our approach to fulfillment. The problem for man, thus, is to become that which he is capable of becoming. Literature is one way of becoming. I do not claim that it is the only way, nor even that it is at all times the best way: only that it is one way and a good way. Writing is one means that an author possesses to become himself, and he can become that self only by writing. Would Shakespeare be Shakespeare if he had written no plays? Would Milton have been Milton if he had not written *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*? Shakespeare became Shakespeare and Milton became Milton only as they realized their potential for creating their various works. By the same reasoning, we who have not yet completed our life's works are not ourselves yet. You are not you yet; you are still in the process of becoming you, and you will not be you until you have made those things and done those things which, when they are made and done, will define you to yourselves and to the world. Nothing but discovering and being that self will bring joy. A person who feels that he has within himself a talent that lies undeveloped, a seed that has never burst through its husk and grown, a light that is hidden under a bushel: such a person has not become his complete self and will feel incomplete or crippled in soul and therefore deprived of a joy. And man is that he might have joy.

The myths and the literatures of the world are full of the symbols of man's search for himself. In the Egyptian myth of Osiris, Isis must go in search of the dismembered parts of his body and put them together to make him whole. Most of the voyage stories involve travels in search of self: such were the voyages of Odysseus, of Huckleberry Finn, of Marlow into the Heart of Darkness, painstakingly selecting and interpreting scattered fragments of life and putting them together to make them form a whole picture. In this manner, literature (or art in general) is a close ally of religion in that both attempt to synthesize the disparate experiences of life into a unified whole. If this synthesis does not take place, a man is not a whole person, but a conglomeration of unclassified odds and ends, incomplete and unhappy.

Fortunately for men, the force that drives them to become themselves, to become one, is a strong force. It is, in my opinion, even stronger than the desire for self-preservation; and this opinion is demonstrable, for instance, in the life of someone like Joseph Smith, who chose to maintain the wholeness and integrity of his being even at the expense of life itself. This force that urges one to maintain or to attain his wholeness is, it seems to me, the source that we must turn to for an explanation of man's creative efforts. "This ache for being is the ultimate hunger," wrote D. L. Lawrence.<sup>1</sup>

Various explanations have been set forth as to why man creates art.

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<sup>1</sup>From "Manifesto," fourth poem from the end of *Look! We have Come Through!* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1920), p. 145.

W. H. Auden once said, for instance, that the artist is a misfit and that it is this that keeps him at his proper trade, which he might otherwise abandon.<sup>2</sup> If he were to find contentment, he would no longer utter the cry of anguish that becomes art. Aristotle introduced the therapeutic justification, which has been considerably amplified by present-day critics to include other types of therapy as well as catharsis. From this viewpoint, art is seen as the letting out of poisonous evils either from the mind of the writer or of the reader, or both. It has always seemed to me, however, that these and other similar theories leave a lot unexplained, though they have an obvious but nevertheless limited validity. I suspect that the greatest practitioners of literary art in English—Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton, for instance—were pushed into writing by something deeper, the necessity to become themselves, to synthesize their worlds of experience into meaningful wholes, and that there was no other way for them to do this than by writing their works. I believe that the explanation of art as the search for being can be extended to all manifestations of art, and that it is the only theory that explains all such phenomena satisfactorily.

Even on the most primitive level, human beings must reach, through art, toward some form of being beyond the requirements for survival. An Indian blanket is no warmer because of the pattern woven into it. And no matter what the explanation of how it came to be put there (such as ritual significance) the effect is the realization of a richer being on the part of the person who uses it. Quite obviously, people in the most straitened circumstances can do something creative to their surroundings: even students living on meager means. The common things a person chooses to have around him, from saltshakers to cars, create an environment which is either an emanation of himself or alien to his being. Every person has to be an artist in order to live well. The subtle things over which one has a choice in his environment are far from important to his well-being and growth than are those things over which he has no control. Don't bring ugliness into your life in the form of a glass, and have to look at it and handle it every day, just because peanut butter came in it. Above all, do not let dishonesty creep into your surroundings in the form of things that pretend to be something that they are not: of boards masquerading as bricks, for instance. These things are corruptions that we do not have to tolerate. If we do tolerate them, and if we live among them long enough, we cannot help participating in their sham.

Thus it seems to me that being honest is a rule of life that extends to literature, and it is the first rule a person must follow if he is going to search for his true being either in his own writings or in the writings of others. Dishonesty in writing is the worst kind of perjury, because here a person is lying to himself about himself. The results, in terms of craftsmanship, appear in many forms. sentimentality, false figures of speech, irrelevant rhythms,

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<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of this see Robert B. Heilman's introduction to the Modern Library ed. of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1950), p. xx, n. 1. This note is omitted from the more recent ed. (1969).

all are distortions of the truth about life. If a person is basically honest and has any kind of sensitivity to language, he has a pretty good chance of discovering something worthwhile in his attempt to say what he thinks; but if he is not basically honest, no amount of skill in craftsmanship can cover the deficiency.

So by all means write. And don't worry about writing about your own experiences since all writers draw upon their own experiences. It is often only through writing about something that has happened to us that we find what it means; and we can find what the experience means in writing only by placing it in some kind of position where we are forced to look at it objectively, as though it were happening to someone else. If the writer can do this, he can often see the relevance of an isolated experience to a total picture of life. In this way he has gathered up a fragment and put it into place in a way that will make his being more complete and whole. Without the effort at composition, a fragment of experience might have lain forever detached and meaningless. More often than not the writer, again assuming that he is proceeding honestly, does not know how the pieces fit together until he is through. If a writer discovers nothing in the course of his composing it is not likely that he will startle any readers with the suddenness of a discovery.

If writing is a means of achieving being, so also is reading. We cannot hope to achieve in one short lifetime all possible discoveries by means of our own writing. Fortunately, if another writer has been honest also, in his approach to his writing, we may well learn from him how to put scattered, meaningless pieces together to make whole patterns. In the process, we are likely to learn to extend sympathies toward those to whom our sympathies might not flow of their own accord. Thus the range of our understanding is extended. The closeness of literature to religion seems at this point to be quite apparent. If we are to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, we must first have the capacity to imagine what it would be like to have it done to us. Is it really possible to live Christianity, to put oneself in the place of another, without this imaginative capacity? And is not anything — literature, for instance — that extends our imaginative capacity, therefore of the utmost relevance to Christianity? Remember that when Jesus himself was on earth he taught most characteristically by means of the literary device known as the parable, not by means of an abstract philosophy or theology. In an age of unrest, mistrust, hatred, and alienation, anything that produces sympathy, understanding, and accord must be given a high priority as far as relevance is concerned.

Nor need we fear that we are displeasing Deity if we attempt to create something on our own. We stand condemned for failure to use our talents if we do not. Surely a people who see themselves as eventually organizing and peopling worlds will not object to beginning the apprenticeship here on earth. From this point of view, everything that man accomplishes helps bring to pass God's work. The stamp on a work of art, "Made on Earth by Man," is, therefore, one that needs no apology, if it is done honestly and well, since it tends also to the glorification of God.