



"Truth is the Daughter of Time": Notes Toward an Imaginative Mormon History

Robert A. Rees

"Our understanding of any significant movement in human affairs can hardly be said even to approach completeness until the evidence from literature is in."

—Seymour L. Gross

"... Clio . . . has a dignity and integrity revealed all the more clearly by the passions of the arts."

—Robert A. Lively

In a 1969 review-essay entitled "The New Mormon History," Moses Rischin spoke of the sophistication with which scholars both within and without the Mormon culture were beginning to examine the Mormon past. He added, "This seems only the beginning. A giant step from church history to religious and intellectual history seems in the offing. As Mormon continuities and discontinuities are reassessed from entirely new perspectives and with a potentially greater audience than ever before, other Americans and Mormons may better come to understand themselves."¹

The interest of Mormon historians in the new perspectives Rischin speaks of was manifest at the 1969 meeting of the Mormon History Association. That meeting was dedicated to "New Approaches to Mormon History," and included papers on what historians could learn from social science, philosophy, and literature. This interest is a reflection of a wider concern by American historians who have turned to other disciplines in an attempt to find new windows into the past. As the eminent historian Lynn T. White, Jr. said recently, "I don't think of history as just a discipline to be found in the history department. We're all studying aspects of the same human phenomena — those of us in history, social psychology, anthropology, linguistics, economics, et cetera." Since, as White says, "the total study of man must be

¹*The American West*, 6 (March 1969), 49.

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a synthesis,"² the most imaginative and provocative Mormon history will undoubtedly be written by those historians who turn to other disciplines for new insights. The following discussion provides some ideas as to how one discipline — literature — can help the historian in his difficult task of interpreting the past for the present.

History has always been more respectable among the Mormons than has literature. When Brigham Young complained about people reading novels ("falsehoods got up expressly to excite the minds of youth") he said that it was the historians and other teachers who could counter the evil. In this same 1872 Conference address he went on to say that if it were up to him he would completely do away with novel reading, which, from all he could tell, was rampant in every nook and cranny of Deseret: ". . . it is in my house, in the houses of my counselors, in the houses of these Apostles, these Seventies and High Priests, in the houses of the High Council in this city, and in the other cities, and in the houses of the Bishops."³

According to recent studies of the Mormons in nineteenth-century fiction by Leonard Arrington and Jon Haupt, Brigham had some justification for distrusting a fiction which viewed the Saints as "ignorant, loud, uncouth, and lazy," as "inveterate smokers, drunkards, and sexual perverts," and as "snakes or as ugly toad-like creatures [who were] the essence of evil" and "an excrescence on an organic body politic."⁴

²As quoted by Mark Davidson, "The New History: Can It Free Us From the Past?" *The UCLA Monthly* (Published by the UCLA Alumni Association), 2 (November 1971), 3. An example of the use of other disciplines by historians is John Demos' attempt to interpret the Salem witch trials by using anthropology and psychology: "Underlying Themes in The Witchcraft of New England," *American Historical Review*, 75 (1970), 1311-1326.

³"The Order of Enoch," 42nd semi-annual conference, 9 October 1872. *Journal of Discourses*, XV, 222, 224.

⁴"The Missouri and Illinois Mormons in Ante-Bellum Fiction," *Dialogue*, 5 (Spring 1970), 47, 48. Two other recent studies are worthy of note: Arrington and Haupt, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth Century American Literature," *Western Humanities Review*, 22 (Summer 1968), 243-260; and Neal Lambert, "Saints, Sinners and Scribes: A Look at the Mormons in Fiction," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 36 (Winter 1968), 63-76.

Historians interested in examples of how literature can serve history should examine such works as the following: Nelson Blake, *Novelists' America: Fiction as History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969); A. T. Dickinson, Jr., *American Historical Fiction* (New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1958) — lists and briefly annotates novels published in the U.S. between 1917 and 1956 which deal with some aspect of American history. The index lists a number of novels relating to Mormonism; Roy W. Meyer, *The Middle West Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) — see especially Chapter Three, "The Pioneering Venture: The Farm Novelist as Historian"; Ernest Leisy, *The American Historical Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950); Robert A. Lively, *Fiction Fights the Civil War: An Unfinished Chapter in the Literary History of the American People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957); Nicholas J. Karolides, *The Pioneer in the American Novel: 1900-1950* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); Thomas Elliott Berry, *The Newspaper in the American Novel: 1900-1969* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1970).

Social Scientists have also been turning to literature as a source of insight: David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction: 1798-1860, A Study in Social Values* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957) — "essentially this is a historical analysis of certain ideas associated with homicide"; Gordon O. Taylor, *The Passages of Thought: Psychological Representation in the American Novel: 1870-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Nick Arron Ford, *The Contemporary Negro Novel: A Study in Race Relations* (College Park, Maryland: McGrath, 1968).

While a distrust of literature in an isolated frontier society is understandable, it clearly is not so in a sophisticated twentieth-century society. And yet there is still a good deal of evidence that we reject the vision of the creative writer, especially when that vision is directed at an examination of our life and culture. Nowhere is this distrust more apparent than in our view of history. With several recent exceptions, one looks in vain for evidence that Mormon historians have been even slightly aware of *belles lettres*. And because this is so, we do not have as full an understanding and apprehension of our history as we should have.

While literature and history are distinctly different disciplines, they are more compatible than they are often made out to be. To begin with, they use common sources, such as diaries, autobiographies, journals, letters, and essays, which have both literary and historical value. Both historians and creative writers engage in historical research. The historian tries to get as much information as possible and to insure the accuracy and reliability of that information. His concern is with separating fact from fiction. The novelist often uses fact to make fiction. He may use historical fact either as a framework for his imagination or to give his story verisimilitude. With the advent of realism and naturalism in fiction we have some novels that have been as carefully researched as volumes of history. Although Stephen Crane never participated in the Civil War, his novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, could be read as a semi-historical account of the battle of Chancellorsville. In fact, so true to history was his account that some Civil War veterans were certain they had known Crane in the war.

In speaking of his novel about the IWW martyr Joe Hill, Wallace Stegner says, "I took every bit as much pains as I would have taken if I had intended to write a history, and I think that when I started to write I knew as much IWW history as anybody in the world and could judge its passions and its ambiguities almost as impartially. . . . A pretty historical book, in its way. Nevertheless, I took pains in a foreword to label it 'an act of the imagination,' which is what I wanted it to be."⁵

Both the historian and the creative writer use imagination to construct the narrative with which they bind their materials. Since he is working with incomplete, fragmented, and often contradictory materials, the historian must rely on his imagination in his reconstruction of the past. As Nelson Blake says, "Without imagination the historian could not see any patterns of meaning in past occurrences."⁶ But too much imagination in a historian is dangerous, a point that Mormon novelist Vardis Fisher makes about Mormon historian Fawn Brodie's biography of Joseph Smith.⁷

The way in which literature and history complement one another is perhaps best summarized by Wallace Stegner in his essay "On the writing of History": "*Calliope* and *Clio* are not identical twins, but they *are* sisters.

⁵*The Sound of Mountain Water* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 207.

⁶*Novelists' America: Fiction as History, 1910-1940* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969), p. 261.

⁷Fisher observes, "Her Book is almost more a history of the early church than a biography of Joseph, and almost more a novel than a biography, because she rarely hesitates to give the context of a mind or to explain motives which at best can only be surmised. It is this reviewer's notion that she will turn novelist in her next book, and that she should." *New York Times Book Review*, 25 November 1945.

History, a fable agreed on, is not a science but a branch of literature, an artifact made by artificers and sometimes by artists. Like fiction, it has only persons, places, and events to work with, and like fiction it may present them either in summary or in dramatic scene. Conversely, fiction, even fantastic fiction, reflects so much of the society that produces it that it may have an almost historical value as record."⁸

If there are similarities between history and literature, there are also important differences. The creative writer, for example, is never interested in the facts in and of themselves. They are merely means to an artistic end. Shakespeare based his history plays on such works as Plutarch's *Lives* and Holingshead's *Chronicles*, and yet had no qualms about departing from these sources or inventing his own historical situations when it suited his dramatic purpose. Sometimes the artist tries to make imagined fact appear as historical fact. As Thomas Wolfe says of the hero of his novel *You Can't Go Home Again*: "He knew that there was scarcely a detail in George's book that was precisely true to fact, that there was hardly a page in which everything had not been transmuted and transformed by the combining powers of George's imagination; yet readers got from it such an instant sense of reality that many of them were willing to swear that the thing described had been not only 'drawn from life,' but was the actual and recorded fact itself."⁹

At other times novelists seem almost irreverent of history. When told that his novel *The Fixer* presented an exaggerated picture of the treatment of Jewish inmates in Russian prisons, Bernard Malamud replied, "That's all right, I was disinventing history to give it a quality it didn't have."¹⁰

All of this simply emphasizes the fact that literature and history are two different ways of viewing reality. Each is not only valid, but necessary, for together they constitute a more complete vision than either does separately. Even though, as La Rochefoucauld says, "History never embraces more than a small part of reality," that part is considerable. Our faith in life comes to some extent from the fact that we can reconstruct the past through historical evidence. The factual record of man's triumphs and failures is one of our greatest legacies. But art attempts something different; it uproots itself from the "real" world. As Wallace Stevens says, "The genuine artist is never 'true to life.' He sees what is real, but not as we are normally aware of it. We do not go storming through life like actors in a play. Art is never real life. The poet sees with a poignancy and penetration that is altogether unique. What matters is that the poet must be true to his art and not 'true to life,' whether his art is simple or complex, violent or subdued."¹¹

Because the literary artist has a different angle of vision from the historian, literature is one of the objects the historian must consider studying. It is, in the words of Ernst Cassirer, "one of the *dissecta membra*, the scat-

⁸*The Sound of Mountain Water*, p. 205.

⁹New York: Dell, 1960, p. 330.

¹⁰"One Man Stands for Six Million," *Saturday Review*, 49 (10 September 1966), 39.

¹¹"On Poetic Truth," *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1966), pp. 237-38.

tered limbs of the past" which he must "attempt to fuse together . . . and to synthesize . . . and mold . . . into new shape."¹²

The historian can also learn from the literary critic how to interpret works of literature as well as literary aspects of historical documents. An ability to perceive imagery, symbolism, metaphorical language, and irony would make the historian a more skillful interpreter of his materials. As Seymour L. Gross says, "Literary criticism can bring to the surface what otherwise might lie buried in the culture's subconscious."¹³ The revealing studies of the imagery in the Federalist Papers are only one example as to how the historian can use the tools of the literary critic.

Since, as Cassirer points out, "It is the richness and variety, the depth and intensity, of his personal experience which is the distinctive mark of the great historian,"¹⁴ that historian who adds to his life the dimension of literature and the poetic imagination will be a more valuable historian.

The Mormon historian seeking insight into what it was like to live under the United Order might read not only Carol Lynn Pearson's *The Order Is Love*, but Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, a fictional account of the Brook Farm experiment. He might understand some of the problems concerned with living in Nauvoo by reading Samuel Taylor's *Nightfall at Nauvoo* as well as Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* and Herman Melville's *Confidence Man*. (In fact, some of Taylor's characters would fit nicely into Melville's tale.) He might understand more about life in a small Mormon town through the stories of Virginia Sorenson or the poetry of David Wright as well as through such chronicles of American life as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*.

No Mormon historian can afford to neglect those few writers of talent who have emerged in this century to write about things Mormon: Bernard DeVoto, Virginia Sorenson, Vardis Fisher, Maurine Whipple, Samuel Taylor, and Wallace Stegner, to name only the best known. These writers who have turned their imaginations on the Mormon past generally have not been well received by Mormons, even though their writing has, for the most part, been positive. Each of these writers of fiction as well as a growing number of young poets, dramatists, novelists, and short-story writers, could teach the historian to apprehend (and perhaps even more fully *comprehend*) an era.

An example of what I am talking about can perhaps best be seen by comparing the treatment of an historical incident (the tarring and feathering of Joseph Smith in Hiram, Ohio, in 1831) by a historian and a novelist. The first example is from B. H. Roberts' *Comprehensive History of the Church* and the second from Vardis Fisher's historical novel, *The Children of God*.

B. H. ROBERTS

On the night of the 24th of March, after long watching over one of his babes, the Prophet at the solicitations of his wife lay sleeping

¹²*An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 177.

¹³"Stereotype to Archetype: The Negro in American Literary Criticism," in *Images of the Negro in American Literature*, ed. Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 1.

¹⁴*An Essay on Man*, p. 187.

on a trundle bed to get a little sleep. The next thing he was conscious of was the screams of his wife, and found himself in the hands of a dozen ruffians and being carried out of the house. Naturally he did not submit quietly, but resisted with all his might. He was overpowered, however, and beaten and choked into insensibility. Recovering from this first attack, he was carried past the orchard towards the meadow.

On the way he saw Elder Rigdon stretched out upon the ground, and apparently dead. He expected the same fate for himself, but expressed the hope to his captors that they would not kill him. There seemed to be some uncertainty among the mob on this point. A consultation³ was held, after which the Prophet was again assaulted, his clothing torn from him, his body scratched and beaten, and covered with tar and feathers. In the brutal process one man tried to force the tar paddle into his mouth; another a phial, supposed to contain aqua-fortis, but broke it in his teeth. All this was attended with horrible oaths and imprecations such as might be expected from fiends incarnate engaged in such a lawless, brutal proceeding.

³The consultation had was in respect of a horrible mutilation upon the Prophet's person. (See *Autobiography of Luke Johnson, Millennial Star*, vol. xxvi). [Roberts' footnote.]¹³

VARDIS FISHER

He was soon awakened by violent screams. He sprang up, full of sleep and weariness, and ran to another room where Emma, like a ghost in her nightgown, was shrinking against a wall and staring at several men.

"Joseph, they're going to murder us! O my God!"

In the next moment the mob surged forward out of darkness and Joseph found himself in a desperate struggle. One man had both hands in his hair, another seized his drawers and pulled them off, and a third tried to choke him. With all his strength he broke free and struck a blow that knocked one of the men down.

"God damn you!" a man howled. "Stop that or we'll kill you!"

* * * * *

With two men on either side, clutching his arms, Joseph was led away over the cold earth. They took him to a small meadow. One said:

"Hey, put some drawers on him or he'll take cold!"

"Sure, we don't want him to get sick. God wouldn't like his little prophet to get the sneezes."

"Let the bastard get cold. He'll be dead in a jiffy anyhow."

A man came up out of darkness and peered at Joseph. "Well," he said impatiently, "we going to kill him or ain't we? Let's get it over with."

Most of the men had gathered in council a few yards away and were talking earnestly. Wondering if he could make a dash for freedom Joseph moved a little; and at once a dozen hands tightened on his flesh. One of the men smote him in his groin and cried: "Don't try none of your catty-cornered tricks or I'll make a steer out of you!"

"That's an idea I like," said the man who came up to look. "Why don't we cut him?"

A third man now edged through, and stared at Joseph who,

³*Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), Vol. I, pp. 280-81.

stark naked, was shivering from the cold. "Why don't you call on God?" the man asked. He squared off; and before Joseph could guess his intent or dodge, the man struck him a vicious blow on his nose. Blood ran across Joseph's upper lip and made a red line of his mouth and trickled to his chin.

"If you'll let me go," he said, his teeth chattering, "I'll leave Ohio."

"Oh, will you! You lousy bastard, you'll leave in a coffin."

"Hey!" roared a man to those in council. "Make up your minds!"

Another now came up out of darkness with a rope. He rubbed the rope across the blood on Joseph's mouth. "Well, why don't we hang him? What's all the waiting for?"

"Mebbe we're going to castrate him. They ain't decided yet."

* * * * *

"Hey, ain't we going to hang the son-of-a-bitch?"

"No," said Simonds. "Just hold him fast. We're going to soak him with tar."

"But he'll wash the tar off and preach louder than ever!"

"Shut your head. Just hold him, I tell you."

"Let's fill his belly with tar."

"And his eyes and his ears."

"No, let's castrate the bastard or hang him!"

"Make him bleed all over," said a man, quietly observing, "and then fill the wounds with tar."

And while Joseph fought to keep the ladle out of his mouth and eyes, flinging his head from side to side, hands were busy over his naked flesh gouging small wounds and pouring tar into them. He groaned from the agony and beat his head on the frozen ground. Simonds called for more tar; and when it came, men poured it over Joseph from his head to his feet, and then rolled him over and poured it over his hair and down his back and legs. While the tar was being poured, a man with a ladle smeared it and thrust into armpits and between thighs.

"Fill his hair good," said Simonds.

Two men lifted Joseph's head a little, and a third brought a bucket down over it like a bonnet, and tar flooded him in a black tide.

"Bring the feathers."

Men sprang forward, bringing with them great bags of feathers. These were poured in a pile on the earth; whereupon, men grasped Joseph by his head and his feet and lifted him and laid him on the pile; and while they worked, other men seized handfuls and thrust them against his face and ears and hair.

Joseph was so nearly unconscious that when the men left him he did not hear them go; and for an hour he lay [t]here like a dead man. When he stirred he could feel only dark pain or a vast heaviness as if he were imprisoned in liquid earth.¹⁶

The differences between the two accounts are obvious. What Roberts relegates to a euphemistic footnote, Fisher dramatizes into life. In Roberts' account we have to guess what the "horrible mutilation" is; in Fisher's we are made to feel the terror which Joseph must have felt from fear of impending castration. We come away from the novelist's account believing that that is indeed how it might have happened.

¹⁶*Children of God: An American Epic* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1939), pp. 94-98.

In the Autumn 1969 issue of *Dialogue* I spoke of what I saw as the beginnings of a genuine Mormon literature. The poetry, fiction, and drama that have been published since then, as well as that contained in this issue, further confirm that belief. A New Mormon Literature is emerging at the same time that we have the beginnings of a New Mormon History. Historians and writers, working together, can help establish a climate of historical and creative writing that will open our past in new and exciting ways. The new Mormon historian in uncovering and interpreting more and more historical data (though most remarkably in the new ways of approaching his material) can provide the literary artist with the raw materials out of which plays, poems, stories and novels will be written. And the literary artist, by resurrecting the past through the imagination, can provide the historian with a view that will help him to penetrate the myths and misconceptions which prevent us from seeing our past and therefore from seeing ourselves.

The possibilities of this cooperative effort are perhaps best articulated by Wallace Stegner in his essay on "History, Myth, and the Western Writer": "I hope we will find ways of bringing some of the historic self-reliance and some of the heroic virtues back into our world, which in its way is more dangerous than Comanche country ever was. . . . In the old days, in blizzardy weather, we used to tie a string of lariats from house to barn so as to make it from shelter to responsibility and back again. With personal, family, and cultural chores to do, I think we had better rig up such a line between past and present."¹⁷ Historians and literary artists should, in joining hands, rig up such lines, which can lead us to a greater understanding of the past and, consequently, of one another and of ourselves.

¹⁷*The Sound of Mountain Water*, p. 201.

