

Three Essays: A Commentary

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MORMONS ARE PERHAPS not as interesting to other people as they think they are. True, we have our history of strange practices and our epic migration to recommend us to the wider community, but the rationale for those practices and that migration, the uniquely Mormon, nuts-and-bolts doctrines such as endowments, eternal progression, prospective Godhood, and so forth, have never engaged the popular imagination in the same way. It's useful to be reminded occasionally that the story of the vision and the gold plates is, to many people, not only implausible but banal. I mention this at the beginning of the commentary because it seems central to the question all three papers deal with, which is whether Mormonism is capable of generating an art that is interesting or intelligible to anyone but Mormons?

Edward Geary points out that the novels written during the 1880s and thereafter and meant for home consumption were not very good novels, but that the novels written by a later generation of Mormon writers and meant for a wider audience have not been entirely successful either. One is tempted to wonder if the reasons might not be basically the same. Professor Geary indicates that the best of the Mormon regional novels are flawed by technical and conceptual problems: *Children of God* because Fisher can't decide whether to depict Joseph Smith as a prophet or a charlatan; *The Giant Joshua* because Whipple reduces Mormonism's supernatural basis to a humanistic one; Virginia Sorenson's novels because the author's ambivalence toward the Church allows a deadly sentimentality to creep in. It is suggested that these flaws are built into the material

itself, that the relationship of even marginal Latter-day Saints (which the regionalists all seem to be) to their peculiar subject matter, and the subject matter itself, makes aesthetic weaknesses inevitable. Peculiar beliefs create peculiar motives and anxieties, and when these occur in fiction, the result can be as specialized and therefore as limited as the results of dramatized orthodoxy in the doctrinaire novels. A character who rejects, say, the doctrine of sealing in the temple, leaves the church and suffers withdrawal symptoms the rest of his life, is as inaccessible to a reader who has never shared these beliefs as a character in a Nephi Anderson novel who meets and marries an old friend from the pre-existence.

Professor Geary confronts the question of accessibility with commendable directness and suggests that there is no reason why Mormon characters should be any more arcane than Jewish characters in Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories: Treat the characters and the issues peculiar to them in psychological rather than doctrinal or historical terms and the problem will be solved. Possibly, but to that wider audience the grip on a character's mind of the endowment ceremony, for instance, may seem more idiosyncratic and more arbitrary than the folkways of Polish Jews, and therefore of no more than passing interest; the doctrine and the psychology shaped by the doctrine are not easily separated.

Still, he may be right, and if so, the regional novelists, Mormon writers to one extent or another disaffected with Mormonism and thus forced to see it in a context wider than itself, may be the only writers capable of making the Mor-

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mon novel something more than a coterie literature. There is a winsome irony in that.

George Tate's paper involves that wider audience and raises the question of how Mormonism might be taken seriously by a novelist who knows little of the doctrine and who doesn't believe it matters very much whether Joseph Smith's vision was real or not. Although it strikes me that to call *Paradise Recaptured* a Mormon novel is a little like calling *Ulysses* a Jewish one, the designation is Laxness', not Tate's. In any event, it is useful to see how Mormonism, as a cultural phenomenon if not a doctrinal one, feeds the imaginative purposes of an artist who does not have to come to terms with it emotionally. Predictably, it is the social structure of the Church—its most visible outward aspect—that Laxness finds most interesting. That this social structure with its material prosperity had a visionary source enhances it, one gathers, in the same way other utopian programs are enhanced if their founders have a tinge of personal mysticism.

Laxness uses the Mormon mythos in a way that it is hard to imagine a Mormon writer using it, as a metaphor for something else, and it is possible to say that for this reason he has not quite got it right. Apparently he found in the Mormon story a literal acting-out of the idea of a spiritual odyssey, a quest for an ideological promised land; Mormonism happened to supply an ideology whose results he found attractive, irrespective of its metaphysical claims. His way of accommodating the ambiguity of Joseph Smith is also characteristic of a non-Mormon writer with nothing at stake. By construing him as an artist and the vision as a creative act analogous to the writing of a novel, Laxness has tempered the meaning of "vision." Novelists believe in the reality of the fiction they are creating; likewise visionaries in their schemes and programs. In this way and not on its literalness should the validity of Joseph Smith's vision be judged. The question of fraudulence is not an issue at all. The successful outcome of Mormonism as a social system vindicates everything. A resolution of this sort will be less than satisfactory to readers more aware than Laxness is of the implications of doubt in the Mormon psyche. But perhaps that

very ignorance, Laxness' and that of most of his readers, makes the specialized topic accessible in a way that is closed to the regionalists. It is possible, one suspects, to know too much.

Bruce Jorgensen's paper is in some ways the most personally interesting of the three. It throws into sharp relief one of the themes in Edward Geary's paper—that of the writer who cannot live with the Church but cannot leave it alone either. If I have a fault to find with the essay, it is that—knowing no more of David Wright than Jorgensen tells me—I can't discover in his quotations, admittedly restricted to his juvenilia, anything that suggests why he should be considered a remarkable writer. But apart from the quality of his work, which a wider sampling might improve, Wright as an emblem is both fascinating and illuminating in what he reveals about the whole question of a Mormon art. An event that embitters the artist—in this case the death of a brother—drives him from the Church that would palliate that bitterness and precipitates a career spent in documenting the separation. The paper could have been titled "The Vocation of a Black Sheep."

Wright's compulsion to "excavate his childhood" and remake it in words can be called something besides self-indulgence, though it is certainly self-indulgence. It is the creation of a self in the image the artist wants to be perceived by others, that is by readers. In Wright's case that self—that character in a self-perpetuating fiction—is a Mormon boy in the process of losing the faith, and the loss is what makes the story. Jorgensen suggests that there is no good reason why a writer can't also keep the faith, which may be true enough; but it seems clear from the evidence he has adduced that Wright's resistance to the Church—the long process of separation from it—has provided not only the subject matter of his work but also the pretext for it. To judge from the paper, if he had been able to "keep the motions of faith," he wouldn't have written at all.

All three papers supply an answer, however tentatively, to the question of whether there is a genre of literature that can be called Mormon fiction, apart from the exhortatory novels and stories of the

home literature movement. The answer seems to be that yes there is, but that only non-Mormons and black sheep have so far written it. It is probably not surprising that the best novels were the ones written by "third-generation" Mormons, whose relationship to the Church is problematical, or, as Geary puts it, for whom Mormonism was something to be outgrown. Conflict is one of the conditions of any art, and perhaps the supreme condition of the novel. For Mormon writers, the conflict most immediately at hand is the attempt to reconcile belief with a widening experience. That the heritage is "something to be outgrown" seems to be the premise on which these novelists chose to write at all. Though it

bends the term somewhat to speak of Laxness' book as a "Mormon novel," it may well serve as an example of what the Mormon novel must do to reach the audience outside its own community. Fewer people than we might think find it terribly important to take a stand on whether Joseph Smith really saw God or was visited by an angel. But a Mormon novel is by definition about people who do find it important and whose behavior is determined by which way they decide. How to make such people intelligible to anyone else remains the dilemma of the Mormon novelist, and perhaps Laxness has shown us that to do it one must be first a novelist and only then, if at all, a Mormon.

