

Literary Dimensions of Mormon Autobiography

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AMONG MORMONS, autobiography has been for decades one of the most widespread modes of literary expression and can be related to the larger tradition of the genre in terms of the nineteenth-century origin of the Church. Some of the finest and most moving examples of Mormon autobiography owe their very existence to the admonitions of early church leaders that institutional as well as personal histories should be kept.¹ One thinks immediately of *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* and of the various autobiographical sketches of Joseph Smith, most especially that contained in the "Writings of Joseph Smith" in the Pearl of Great Price. Although *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* was edited possibly rather heavily, it nonetheless stands as one of the greatest monuments to the spirit of self-depiction in the literary history of the Church. In their majestic simplicity, both works are towering examples of self-expository genius, and they paradigmatically represent important characteristics of the tradition that arose in their wake.

This tradition of Mormon autobiography and, indeed, these works themselves stand in marked contrast to the great classics of nineteenth-century autobiography. Whereas Wordsworth, Stendhal, and Newman, among many others, used autobiography as an exploratory means of coming to self-knowledge, Mormon writers have more typically presented themselves directly and unquestioningly. Where many nineteenth-century autobiographies ask the question "What am I?", the statement "What I *am!*" is at the heart of the Mormon presentation. Joseph Smith, in his autobiographical writing, is assured and confident of his understanding of the prophetic calling: writing is not an occasion to explore the ramifications of his spiritual experiences or to seek a spiritual identity, but rather the opportunity to expound these insights to others. Parley P. Pratt is equally clear-eyed and direct. His autobiography does not explore the meaning and significance of

the apostleship, but rather it presents and illustrates it. There are certainly exceptions, but, in general, Mormon autobiographers are remarkably secure in their position. Is this security superficial and facile? Is it the confidence of men and women who simply do not understand some of life's most profound and vexing existential dilemmas? Can this surety be explained as rural naiveté in contrast to the cosmopolitan sophistication of a Wordsworth, a Stendhal, or a Newman? Perhaps in part yes; but more profoundly it is a self-assurance that derives, I think, from faith, convictions that resolve some of life's most fundamental questions and obviate the need for asking others.

Though explainable and indeed understandable, this security and self-assurance may be the greatest single weakness of Mormon autobiography. On the rhetorical level it too often leads to tiring bombast, creating a tone of condescending stuffiness. But more seriously, it artificially limits, in some cases, the depth and breadth of the personality being presented. It is difficult to believe that some characters could have been as shallow and vacuous as they appear in their autobiographies.

Another characteristic of Mormon autobiography is derived from this security and confidence. Since writers were not writing for themselves in the spirit of self-exploration to the same extent as their contemporaries, they were more consciously writing for the benefit of others. In explaining his reason for writing the description of his life that appeared in the *Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith noted: "I have been induced to write this history, to disabuse the public mind, and put all inquirers after truth in possession of the facts, as they have transpired, in relation both to myself and the Church, so far as I have such facts in my possession."² What is particularly noteworthy here is the motivation to inform and instruct others to the extent of the author's competence; it is clearly not, at least not primarily, a quest for the authentic self. Similarly the justification for printing the third edition of *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* is that it ". . . will do much to stimulate the missionaries, teachers, and members of the Church to greater faith and activity."³ The rationale for and explanation of autobiography in terms of its outward reaching effect on others rather than its inwardly strengthening potential carries over to the modern admonition that all members of the Church should compile personal histories, as one prominent Church official recently pointed out, for the benefit of succeeding generations, for the blessing and enrichment of children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.⁴

Mormon autobiography, though, is not entirely alone in focusing attention on the outward impact of autobiography. An acknowledged classic written in much the same mode is the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, a volume that seeks to pass on to others the practical wisdom and keen insight of a singularly enlightened mind. Others as well—among them Augustine, Petrarch, Freud, and Gibbon—in more or less subtle ways have acknowledged that the public's desire to know was part of their motivation for writing. Yet Roy Pascal is right, I think, when he points out that "good autobiography is always more than a mere exposition to the public of something already known to the author."⁵ It is precisely in this context that Arthur Koestler's two-volume autobiography is less than satisfying to many readers: though engaging and intellectually stimulating, Koestler is too sure, too intent on informing the public; he is, at times, too condescending.

Mormon autobiographers writing from a special kind of spiritual security run this aesthetic danger, and indeed some writers sacrifice literary value to their obsession to inform. The element, though, that redeems the most significant Mormon autobiographies, even those clearly written for the benefit of others, is the soul-searing belief—indeed the complete confidence—that the source of the writer's security is transcendent truth rather than individual and personal strength, a characteristic that in some respects links Mormon autobiographies to the great religious and mystic autobiographies of the past.

Just as has been the case with many of these accomplished autobiographies in the long history of the genre, the interary aspects of Mormon autobiography have been too often overlooked, or relegated to an insignificant place within a given critical framework. The practice currently popular among Mormons of referring to autobiography as "personal history" only serves to further obfuscate the literary dimensions of autobiography by strongly emphasizing the historical component. Even readers sensitive to the literary values of a novel or a sonnet manage to ignore the aesthetic qualities of autobiography. Somehow the notion obtains that when it comes to autobiography, one simply remembers and copies oneself down: no invention, no imagination, no creation. This is nonsense, of course. The best autobiographies are revered because they possess in rich abundance many of the literary merits one would expect in any accomplished narrative; and conversely, the weaker autobiographies are usually weak because these qualities are notably lacking.

In pointing to "the limits of language, the slipperiness of experience, the difficulties of both comprehending and re-creating experience," Stephen A. Shapiro has convincingly argued that the autobiographer, like the poet, is a creator and is, moreover, a creator faced with the challenge to do what is nearly impossible: "recapture time, shape the shapeless, make many one and one multiple, transform an inner image into a picture-mirror for others, make the flesh into words and words into flesh."⁶ And certainly the challenge of the Mormon autobiographer is no less demanding.

With attention directed primarily toward aspects of literary worth rather than historical accuracy, one of the most celebrated passages from the entire corpus of Mormon autobiography, Parley P. Pratt's description of Joseph Smith's rebuke to the foul-mouthed guards at the Richmond Jail in Missouri during the winter of 1838-39 emerges with arresting power.⁷

On a sudden he 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 look 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 solemn 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 any other considerations this is impressive literature. The subject itself is significant, and its mediation in language is impressive. The passage, brief though it is, resounds with moral and aesthetic sincerity, and the verbal power forcefully communicates not only the writer's sentiments but also his profoundest feelings. The question may be asked whether this is precisely the way the event, in very point of fact, took place; whether this is the way one of the guards would have described the scene; or even whether this is the way Parley P. Pratt himself would have portrayed the exchange immediately after it took place. Although these questions may be of some interest, they do not lead to significant literary insights. The strength of the passage is independent of its historical veracity: it derives rather from the staggeringly successful evocation of a seminal emotional and spiritual event in the life of the writer. This is the portrait of a soul by means of image and metaphor: although it refers to external reality in telling ways, it makes no attempt to present or to recreate externality.

Annie Clark Tanner recreates another such event in *A Mormon Mother*, that of her courtship and marriage as a plural wife.⁸

He came a few times to see me in the fall, yet when the day was set for our marriage I would have gladly put it off. Perhaps it was because I was so young, having recently passed my nineteenth birthday. I was as happy at home as a girl could be, but Mr. Tanner insisted that a long courtship in cases of polygamy was entirely improper.

On the appointed day I was to come to Salt Lake to meet him and Mrs. Tanner. . . . In the late afternoon Mr. Tanner came, and we were married on the 27th day of December 1883.

After the ceremony, Mr. Tanner and Aunt Jennie, as we familiarly called the first wife, and I took the northbound train. I got off in Farmington and they went on to Ogden. I do not recall any conversation while on the train. Perhaps the feelings of Aunt Jennie accounted for the silence.

It was dark when the train arrived home. . . . The family had finished the evening meal. As I sat down to a glass of bread and milk the thought came to me. "Well, this is my wedding supper." In those few minutes I recalled the elaborate marriage festivals which had taken place in our own family, of the banquets I had helped to prepare and the many lovely brides among my friends. I even began to compare their wedding gowns. I was conscious of the obscurity of my own first evening after marriage.

"What a contrast," I said to myself. "No one will ever congratulate me."

Yet I was sure I had taken the right step and recall feeling confident that something really worthwhile had been accomplished. Finally I broke the silence.

"The experience wasn't half bad."

"You haven't half begun yet," my father replied.

I realized the truthfulness of his remark two weeks later when Mr. Tanner failed to keep his appointment to come to see me. I was so disappointed that it seemed that the very angels wept with me.

This too is good writing. The faith, the anxiety, and even the confusion of a nineteen-year-old young woman at a turning point in her life are movingly elicited but notably without sentimentality or self-indulgence. A spirit's voice, heightened and amplified by the power of literate articulation, cries out for understanding, for an understanding that the sensitive reader willingly accords. To the extent that literature is clear thinking about mixed emotions as W. H. Auden has suggested, this is literature, and literature deserving critical consideration.

Finally, I should like to make some practical suggestions about the reading of autobiographies which, I hope, will facilitate their enjoyment and evaluation. The first is in some ways derived from what I have already said: although the expression "personal history" is popular, and in spite of the fact that it is traditional to read autobiographies—particularly within the Mormon community—from the point of view of history, a certain aesthetic dimension deserves attention. The reader must bring his or her best reading skills to autobiographies in order to appreciate their literary depth: he must be sensitive to image and allusion; he must watch for irony and hyperbole; in sum, he must find the central metaphor of self that unifies and is at the heart of the best autobiographical writing. For example, anyone reading President Spencer W. Kimball's autobiographical sketch, *One Silent Sleepless Night* in a purely historical context without an understanding and appreciation of its aesthetic qualities will miss much of the richness and depth that this slender volume has to offer. Its telescoping of narrated time within its narrative time and its use of many rhetorical devices are skillful and moving. The return of health and the normal perception of time after the painfully prolonged, silent, sleepless night that the book describes are powerfully evoked in its closing lines:

Pain, the ugly, sadistic companion of the past three weeks, has moved out to give place first to the mild-mannered gentleman Distress, which in turn has now given way to the friendly person Comfort. And with comfort comes peace, and with peace a return of memory of a certain Time, the Time with which I was formerly acquainted; the Time which has now rubbed its eyes, taken a deep breath, saluted, clicked its heels, and comes marching its way back into the normal sixty-second minutes and sixty-minute hours and twenty-four hour days.
TIME has been resurrected, peace restored, and life is good again!⁹

There is little here of purely historical consequence, but soul speaks to soul by the power of metaphor and image, and the sensitive reader is made acutely aware of the personal and spiritual moment of the healing process.

My second point is that autobiographies are not necessarily better or more accomplished when they are based on documentary sources or are demonstrably accurate. In autobiography, memory is entirely sufficient because the essence of the genre is not the reconstruction of external reality but the forging of a metaphor of self that communicates insights and values often defying direct exposition.

Thirdly, the reader must respect the limitations of the genre. He must not allow himself to be disappointed by expecting more than can be provided. Although an autobiography typically provides insight that is otherwise inaccessible, there are limits to what the individual can know about himself. There is, in the words of Roy Pascal, "a cone of darkness" at the center of every autobiography.¹⁰ Even in the most psychologically penetrating autobiographies, certain aspects utterly escape description: they are too close to the center of being to be brought into clear focus. Aspects of motivation and mystic or religious insight often lie not only out of the view of the inspecting eye, turned back upon itself, but beyond the capacity of language to suggest. The reader must not expect more than the autobiographer can provide: the autobiographical narrative voice has an unreliability that simply must be accepted.

My fourth and final suggestion is that certain kinds of Mormon autobiography are most rewarding and fulfilling when the reader is willing to participate in the recreation of a personality. Since Mormon autobiographies are often written for the benefit of others, the reader must be willing to look beyond the surface moralizing, which on occasion becomes blatant preaching, to deeper and more revealing levels of personality. What, for example, is the motivation for the moralizing and preaching? Why the seemingly excessive concern with a given issue? Naturally, care must be exercised in order not to do violence to the verbal meaning of the text by prying beneath its surface, but if there is evidence of a fascinating personality lurking behind trite generalizations and prolix admonitions, effort is well rewarded.

Since autobiography may well be the most distinctive and characteristic mode of literary expression among the Mormons,¹¹ anything less than a creatively critical reading that elucidates its literary dimensions fails to come to terms adequately with an especially rich aspect of Mormon culture.

NOTES

¹ In this context, there is no need to distinguish between autobiography in the narrow sense and memoirs, reminiscences and reflections. The sole consideration is that an autobiography is a document presenting the life of an individual or a segment of that life as narrated by that individual. As for the term *Mormon*, suffice it to say that as used here, it denotes the work of an individual for whom Mormon theology made, or makes a difference.

² Pearl of Great Price, 2:1.

³ *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 5th Edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1961), p. 5.

⁴ See, for example, Theodore M. Burton, "The Inspiration of a Family Record," *Ensign*, January, 1977, pp. 13-14.

⁵ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 181.

⁶ Stephen A. Shapiro "The Dark Continent of Literature: Autobiography," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 5 (1968): p. 422.

⁷ Pratt, p. 211.

⁸ *A Mormon Mother* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund University of Utah Library, 1969), pp. 64-67.

⁹ *One Silent Sleepless Night* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975).

¹⁰ Pascal, p. 184.

¹¹ See, for example, Dale L. Morgan, "Literature in the History of the Church: The Importance of Involvement," *Dialogue* 4, No. 3 (1969) p. 28.