

Insights from the Outside: From a Commentator's Note Pad

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AT THE SECOND ANNUAL MEETING of the Association for Mormon Letters, as at the first, two literary concerns seemed to have emerged. Not so surprisingly, at the bottom of both these issues was the question of the relationship between literature and dogma. Since dogma and Church fiat control much of what the faithful write, could Mormon letters, it was asked, break through the mold of teleological and eschatological givens to become a literature of significance outside its own confines?

The other concern questioned whether Mormon literature was, because of its "Mormonness," too exclusive in its subject matter and too facile in its world view to be meaningful to a non-Mormon audience. Would a Mormon literary work be intellectually, emotionally and aesthetically "accessible" to readers who do not relate to Mormonism? Even editors Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert in their anthology, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-Day Saints*, seem to have these concerns in their mind when they say that "Mormons characteristically continue to see the world through a paradisiacal glass, brightly," and that essentially "Mormon writing is outside the mainstream of modern literary fashion."¹

In the first of these arguments, I fail to see how one could set aside—even sublimate—one's past, one's culture, in a sense, one's being, and compose a literary work that's the life blood of one's spirit, as Milton would have said. Indeed, why should one disregard one's teleog-

ical or religious predilections? Would Milton be more Milton if he disregarded his strong, sometimes even perverse, theological convictions? Or is his theology the very bedrock of his literary genius? More fundamentally, could a writer neglect the very stuff of his being and yet somehow remain himself and whole? Perhaps this question of the relationship between dogma and literature was best answered by novelist V. S. Pritchett. In a letter to fellow novelist Graham Greene, he appropriately argued:

You point to the dangers of the religious groups who wish to impose a certain spiritual life; but there are the political groups too, the totalitarian, the socialist, the liberal, and also the huge jelly fish composed of deadly, transparent people who believe they belong to no group at all, which desire to impose upon the writer.²

Of course this imposition by a group is not just inevitable; it is the very condition of human existence. As inevitably, the Mormon writer brings his unique experience to probe and define the complexities of the human condition. It is through this singular experience that he asserts his individuality, indeed his humanity. This experience defines his being. If one takes away from him the memory of the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, the tragedy and the heroism of the exodus of his ancestors, as well as the everyday details that made Zion happen, it is like blotting out the story of Christ from a Christian's

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consciousness, or like rooting out the fact of slavery from the racial memory of the American black. Bereft of his "Mormonness" which saturates all levels of his conscious and unconscious mind, the Mormon writer is naught, unfit both as subject matter and creator of literary works. What Carl Becker said of the historian is even more apropos of the writer: "The historian and his concepts are part of the very process he would interpret . . . he is not outside history as the chemist is outside chemistry."³ The writer's subjectivity is what quickens his art.

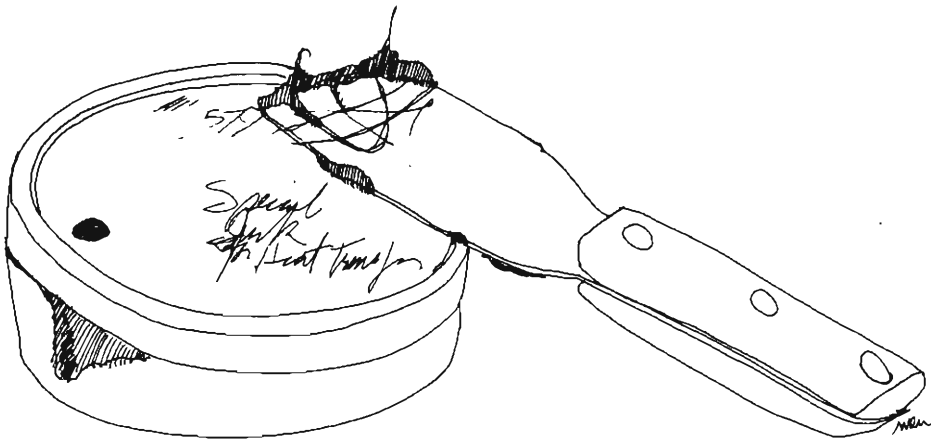
For the Mormon writer, the creative center of this subjectivity lies not so much in what he shares with the rest of mankind but in that unique Mormon experience which he shares with fellow Mormons. He does not however forsake the literary symbols and metaphors to which he is generally heir; to these he adds other symbols and metaphors from his own Mormon experience. To the problems of human existence he brings an affirmation of faith and vision which had lighted the path of his own ancestors.

If to every writer's credo there is a source of life-giving inspiration which sustains his art, then to the Mormon writer the wellsprings of his art lie in his dogma. All of this in no sense makes Mormon literature any more inaccessible to the readers than is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God" to the readers of our generation or, for that matter, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is to non-Indian readers or Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country* is to readers who have not enjoyed the fleshly companionship of a geisha. The subject matter of

all literature, in any age or clime, deals both with the universe in which we live and with the predicament and exaltation of human existence. Whether the characters have an unpronounceable Russian or an incomprehensible East Indian name, or whether the flora and fauna of the setting have anything in common with the native American genus or species is not of much consequence to a reader's imaginative involvement with a work of art. Ultimately all literature becomes vital at the imaginative level which, in turn, is essentially vicarious, but no less real.

Thus the Mormon writer, like any other artist, imparts to his works a sense of his own values or vision. The vision sometimes may be too simplistic or too complex, too dismal or too optimistic, but in no way can the writer separate the substance of his writing from the substance of his being, whether he be a Mormon or Hindu, a raving liberal or diehard radical. That is as it should be, for the reader can experience every kind of emotion and can recognize every kind of idea. But whether he will equally enjoy all works of art alike or subscribe to all ideas is a different argument altogether.

It is a truism that even though literary works give aesthetic pleasure and engender feelings of empathy, they do not necessarily create an identity of views in the readers. For instance, who would not be moved by the way Alma, the old man in Herbert Harker's recent novel *Turn Again Home*, meets his end, which he imploringly seeks, at the hands of Hickory Jack. Alma had wanted to see his own blood flow as an act of atonement for his part in the Mountain Meadows



massacre. The pain of living had been too much for him, but the irony of ironies was that Hickory Jack, in the act of helping Alma expiate his own sin, had shot Alma point-blank. "I forgot he wanted to see the blood," Hickory Jack intoned in recollecting the incident.⁴ An utter sense of waste pervades the ending of the novel. To revert to the question: how crucial is it to one's aesthetic enjoyment of the novel to be aware of the doctrine of blood atonement which some saints subscribed to in the agonizing days of the early persecution of Mormons?

In the foregoing discussion I have not dealt with the general quality of Mormon literature nor the achievements of its significant writers. The literary merit of a work is independent of whether it falls within the realm of Mormon literature or some other literary classification. A work must be able to stand scrutiny in terms of well recognized canons of criticism. A Mormon writer's inherent right to his subject matter is no passport for him to be judged differently—or indifferently. In this context of a critic's prerogatives the participants at this second annual symposium have discussed their several topics. Their right is the right of the critic, but they can in no way impinge upon the prerogatives of the writer.

At this point, I can do no better than narrate an incident which Booker T. Washington mentions in his famous Atlanta exposition address. A ship which had lost its bearings at sea, on sighting a

friendly vessel, signaled: "Water, water; we die of thirst!" And the other ship replied, "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second, third and fourth plea for water was similarly answered. The captain of the distressed vessel, finally heeding the injunction, let down his bucket to come up with fresh thirst-quenching water from the Amazon.⁵ Likewise, the Mormon writer should cast down his bucket into the life-giving waters of his own culture and into the stream of his own inner self. He can do no less; to do otherwise would be to betray himself and his craft.

NOTES

¹ Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert, "Introduction," *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-Day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), p. 5.

² V. S. Prichett, *Why Do I Write* (London: Percival Marshall, 1948), p. 34.

³ Carl Becker, *Detachment and the Writing of History: Essays and Letters of Carl Becker* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 21.

⁴ Herbert Harker, *Turn Again Home* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 244.

⁵ Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Exposition Address," *The Rhetoric of Black Americans*, eds. James Golden and Richard Rieke (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill Publishing Co., 1971), p. 113.

For whether the man of religion likes it or not he needs and uses the resources of art to arrive at, to define, and to communicate his deepest insights. And whether the artist likes it or not his deepest insights ring with religious overtones.

-MARDEN CLARK
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