

REVIEWS

Mormon Arts—A Contradiction: A Review Essay

Arts and Inspiration: Mormon Perspectives. Edited by Steven P. Sondrup. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980. 157 pages. \$8.95.

Reviewed by KARL KELLER, professor of English at San Diego State University and a former member of the Board of Editors of *Dialogue*. He has published books on the Puritans and on Emily Dickinson and is at work finishing two books, one on Walt Whitman for The Johns Hopkins University Press and one on the Church for Doubleday, *The Mormons are Coming, the Mormons are Coming*.

Bernard Shaw once quipped that a Catholic university is a contradiction in terms. And one would think that it is likewise a contradiction in terms to refer to Mormon arts. To prove that this is not so is the purpose of Steven Sondrup's little collection of essays.

Can the spirit and the senses unite to make fine works of art? Can dogma and artistic forms work peaceably together? Can the Church yield to the modern? Can a Mormon make it in the marketplace? Why the lack of mutual support: the Church indifferent to the arts, its artists indifferent to the Church? Why bother? These are all questions that have been raised before, but Sondrup's contributors take us through them once again with feeling, sometimes attractively, sometimes poorly.

A total outsider might wonder at all the worrying over such an issue, like the tongue over a tooth that just will not come in right. Until he recognizes, of course, that among fundamentalist faiths Mormonism is a very pushy religion, even in the area of the arts ("anxiously engaged in a good cause"), even when it wants its

thin production of the arts to look good ("anxiously engaged in a good cause"), and even when its talk about such matters is flashier and more solid than its actual creations are ("anxiously engaged in a good cause"). Mormons want that tooth to come in, to come in right, even when it may not be there yet.

Then that outsider would probably sense how practically all Mormons see this in terms of a "problem." And since Mormons like to think of themselves as problemsolvers, then there must be a solution somewhere. The "problem" of "arts and inspiration" to which these anxious solvers address themselves (oddly enough very few here see the "problem" in terms of arts *versus* the inspiration!) is articulated in one way by those who are in positions of church authority or supporters thereof and in quite another way by those, who see the arts leading the Church to enlightenment. These are, of course, at odds with each other, though the participants in such a fine debate don't always seem to recognize that fact, but try to walk both sides of the tracks: a life of art, a life of inspiration.

Sondrup has his book start out with comments by that self-appointed Apostle to the Arts, Boyd K. Packer. Packer shows, however, that he knows virtually nothing about the arts, even while he claims that God speaks to him on such matters, and when he says he has been "called" to "warn" Mormons to create more spiritually and to create solely for the Church and its plan. To recommend the singing of Church hymns over all other art forms, to sell C. C. A. Christensen over all other painters in the history of the world, and to try to badger English professors to teach Orson F. Whitney as one of the best poets in literary history is

just plain silly. It seems that everything else, to Packer, is "degraded"; it seems that everyone else is "climbing the wrong ladder." His motto is that everything artful in the Church must be "appropriate."

Other writers in this collection of commentaries do not seem to see that they are not part of the solution but part of the problem. Most of these writers posit a fake opposition between "the world" with its arts and "the Church" with its arts, following a century or more of church-authorized paranoia about such things. No such entities exist, of course. The arts are always in and of and by and about and for this world, and then they may be projected onto some heaven afterwards for whatever spiritual ends one may have in mind. That intelligent but equivocating meliorist Wayne Booth says on this point: "The best hope . . . is [for the Church] to cultivate an artistic culture that will, by its nature, counteract what 'the world' offers," but must these be made enemies thus? Karen Lynn, in what is far and away the best essay in this book, answers this by saying: "The arts cannot be central to Mormon life no matter how many times we may claim otherwise," to suggest that they are one and the same or they are nothing. "Mormon culture" *vs.* "the world" sets up two monsters with no faces; better, it seems to me, to drop the whole cosmic drama which Packer and many others work hard to sustain and talk about something else: how to create rather than how to fight the world or help the Church or accommodate the two or merge the two.

Another error which mini-authoritarians fall into is to cite hot scriptures to justify the existence of the arts or to cite hot features of the arts to justify the existence of religion. "The status of the scriptures in the Mormon community," writes Karen Lynn, "works against an unequivocal endorsement of subsequent creativity." The favorite citation of Mormon critics is the weatherworn one that Edward Hart in his essay works over once again: "Man is that he might have joy," taking joy, if you are esthetically-minded, to mean esthetics, when it may mean no such thing. One needs scriptural sentences to justify that which one individ-

ually finds joy in doing, and so one cites it, hoping no one will see the equivocation but will somehow sense one's own interest to be God's interests. Another art-scripture exercise that goes on in these essays is to find dance mentioned in the Old Testament and then feel okay about dancing in 1980; or to find singing mentioned in the *Doctrine and Covenants* and then feel okay about singing in 1980; or to find joyous shouting mentioned in various places in the Bible and to feel okay shouting joyously in 1980 (though nothing rock or New Wave or bright or broad or wild, please!) At this late point in the development of human thought, does one really need scriptural precedents for being creative, for being oneself, for adding to the Creation, as Debra Sowell does here in order to dance well or Reid Nibley does here in order to play piano well or Ruth Hoen does here in order to sing well?

The funniest critics here are those who see "the world" coming to an end, following scriptural and authorized apocalyptic talk, and creative Mormons are needed to make a "new world" or even "new worlds." The whole universe, apparently, will hang as by a thread and the more sensitive, artful-craftful Mormons will make the new thing beautiful. Millennializing the arts, however, places an enormous burden on them and may eventually encourage hyperbolizing the trivial and arrogating the approved or just stop things altogether. Composer Merrill Bradshaw is a genuine quack millennialist in his essay: "We are faced with the challenge of doing for the kingdom, and thus for the thousand years of the Millennium, what Athens did for Greece, or the Medicis for Florence, or the Elizabethan Age for England . . . And we shall achieve it!" When meek Mormon musicians inherit the universe, according to the less-than-meek Bradshaw, smiling, "We must supply *all* the music of a kingdom, . . . cover *all* the needs of the kingdom When the time comes, we will have to learn new modes of entertainment. What a splendid challenge!" Wonderful if this can be done, but maybe one should wait for a little more evidence that it *can* be done. Hope, after all, is lies until

you make it true. This lying to oneself is a form of Mormon dishonesty which Wayne Booth, Nicolas Shumway, Karen Lynn, Reid Nibley and Edward Hart deplore in their comments. To announce, as Packer encourages one to do, that one is great or that one will be great, or that the Church is great and will be great, is neither here nor there. One cannot fake it.

Now for the other side of the tracks. "There can never be a great Mormon art growing out of directives from Church leaders," writes Trevor Southey. "I cannot yield [my freedom] to any institution—and here I see danger, in anyone's having the Church dictate a stand. Art is a process of continuous growth, and any stipulated stand is outdated and obsolete almost before its utterance is complete." There is immense health in such a statement. The good artist must go ahead and do his work; to him the Church and the world are the same irrelevant thing, perhaps even the same enemy. Some others in Sondrup's book feel the same way. "The Mormon writer is most crippled," confesses novelist Herbert Harker. "His canvas is flat." "Either take that risk [of offending the Church hierarchy or of making artistic mistakes]," concludes Wayne Booth, "or do not expect to produce a great Mormon artistic culture." Karen Lynn puts it best: "It may be that the arts will achieve legitimacy [in the Church] if, and only if, the faith is seriously threatened."

What this second group of writers intends, in the long run, is to place the focus where it clearly belongs, on the artist himself/herself—not on inspiration (whatever *that* is) or on the arts in general (whatever *they* are) or on the Church (whatever it *thinks* it is) or on a specific art, but squarely on the artist. An institution like the Church does not necessarily produce great men; institutions, Emerson said, reversing the emphasis, are "the shadow of great men." First the artist and then everything else.

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, William Blake wrote: "A poet, a painter, a musician, an architect: the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian"—implying that when one is one of these, one is *already* a Christian. Grant Johannesen was probably the greatest pianist to come out of Mormonism. The fact that he was a great musician ought to have been sufficient for one to then say he was a great Mormon. I don't remember his ever saying anything about the connection between his phenomenal skill and his background, or remember his playing especially in the Church or "for the Church." He didn't have to. He was the best he could be—and that was very good indeed. Similarly, the Vardis Fisher of the Vridar Hunter tetralogy is probably the best fiction-writer to come out of Mormonism. He was, to extend Blake's daringly fine reasoning, very good at his art and therefore a good human being/Christian/Mormon—these are the same. Fisher did not have to talk about being "a Mormon writer," only to write well. The rest of the label became irrelevant, assumed, appropriate. And for one more example among many that could be given on this point. May Swenson is perhaps the best poet to come out of Mormonism. Her wonderful poetry says it all. I doubt that any of these accomplished artists waited for "inspiration" for their arts in any of the senses mentioned in Sondrup's book. They simply became their best as artists and so became *inspiring*—an important difference.

I like Sondrup's book best when someone like Wayne Booth stops talking about being a Mormon critic and simply goes ahead and is a very good critic—which he is. Or when an artist like Trevor Southey stops talking about his Mormon art and simply shows us some of his fine paintings—and they are fine. The art will speak for itself. But I dislike Sondrup's book a great deal when it says (and this is 90% of it) that a Mormon criticism of the arts will somehow generate Mormon arts.