

Notes on Brigham Young's Aesthetics

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"IF THERE IS ANYTHING VIRTUOUS, LOVELY . . . we seek after these things." Granted. But loveliness by what criteria? We in the Church often presume a common aesthetic; or when conflicts in judgment arise — whether with the "worldly" critic or the division chairman — we throw up our hands at the other's decadent tastes, or worse yet, lack of discernment. Mormonism has yet to form a workable aesthetic, but I would like to propose, modestly, that we begin with Brigham Young. Often stereotyped as stern and insensitive, he may seem the unlikely choice for aesthetician. Yet none has addressed the philosophical issues of art, beauty, and their place in the kingdom with greater clarity than he, despite his well-known and sometimes confusing tendencies toward hyperbole.

Young's teachings are best approached with an awareness of his overpowering discipleship to Joseph Smith, whom he called "the master spirit."¹ It is worthwhile to review certain of Smith's teachings related to man's perception of himself and his place in the cosmos, which would therefore influence his — and later Young's — aesthetics. First, the spiritual in man is strongly associated with the intellectual and rational rather than the mystical, "knowledge is power," and learning in whatever sphere, as a mental discipline, necessarily becomes a rigor of the spirit.² Second, creation is never *ex nihilo*, a kind of romantic conception. Rather, it consists in organizing and arranging a pre-

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¹ *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1854–86), 7:64; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

² See Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1942), pp. 352–53, 288.

existing set of materials more or less according to established celestial patterns.³ Though this view of creation does not rule out the deified imagination, the creator becomes less an originator than a craftsman. Third, humans who are obedient to the gospel, can themselves evolve into gods, ultimately engaging in large-scale creative work. A logical corollary is that the artist or craftsman is — knowingly or unknowingly — apprenticed to his/her maker. In Joseph Smith's conception, humans are the image of God in both physique and aptitude: their urge to refashion their environment suggests in itself their divine lineage.⁴

Disciple to such philosophy, Brigham Young could not have been adverse to education and training in the arts. Indeed, for him, "true science, true art and true knowledge comprehend all that are in heaven or on the earth, or in all the eternities" (14:281; 12:255–57). The adjective is instructive. Science and art cannot ultimately be for their own sakes but are means to apprehend eternal truth — "truth from any source, wherever we can obtain it" (14:197). The watermark of true art is that it extends "the ideas, the capacities of the intelligent beings that our heavenly Father has brought forth upon this earth" (16:160). Can there be false art? Yes, that in which the creator-artist fails to give credit to deity for the internal gesture to which he gives outward shape. "In every particular [of artistic knowledge] . . . they are indebted to the Lord" (19:97). Young rejects the Renaissance-old myth which reached its climax among his romanticist contemporaries of the artist-as-hero who towers above other men. The artist is only a fellow-servant and "from [God] has every art . . . proceeded, although the credit is given to this individual, and that individual" (12:257–58). Instead of genius, he sees a great "Fountain of Intelligence" (7:157–60) which enlivens and enlightens "without respect of persons." As a consequence, "the arts . . . in the so-called heathen nations in many respects excel the attainments of the Christian nations" (8:171).

Progress in the arts — and Young clearly expects it — parallels the progress of Zion: "Every discovery in science and art that is really true and useful to mankind has been given by direct revelation from God . . . with a view to prepare the way for the ultimate triumph of truth" (9:369); "all the great discoveries and appliances in the arts and sciences are expressly designed by the Lord for the benefit of Zion in the last days." Those discoveries would be for the benefit of all mankind, "if they would cease to be wicked, and learn to acknowledge the hand of God in all things" (10:225).

His reference to science and art as complementary, not antithetical, disciplines reflects a basic Mormon rationalism, not only related to Joseph Smith's mind-spirit equation but also to his acceptance of sensory experience as a vehicle for spiritual progress. Smith had said, "God has so ordained that when

³ Ibid. pp. 350–51. Compare also the statement attributed to Smith that "this earth was organized or formed out of other planets which were broken up and remodeled and made into the one on which we live." Franklin D. Richards and James A. Little, *A Compendium of the Doctrine of the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882), p. 287.

⁴ *Teachings*, pp. 346–48.

He has communicated, no vision is to be taken but what you see by the seeing of the eye and the hearing of the ear.”⁵ Young echoes that and expands it; for him things that pertain to eternal life consist in “our minds and understandings expanding by that which we learn by reading, by the seeing of the eye and the hearing of the ear” (16:108). Furthermore, he sanctions the pleasure of the senses. “Everything that is . . . pleasing to the eye, good to the taste, pleasant to the smell, and happifying in every respect is for the Saints” (9:244). “The power of the eye [is] for man to enjoy . . . the power of hearing likewise, tasting, smelling . . . how beautiful they are!” (17:116).

As we examine the many sermon references to the “arts and sciences” in their context, we discover that Young, as was customary in his day, refers to the liberal arts, or even the practical “arts,” i.e. technology, as much as he does the fine arts. An “art” is any fruitful discipline: he praises the artisan along with the artist. He makes arts of soil cultivation (14:39), tempering copper (12:122), and military expertise (9:173), for every true art is a “useful branch” of learning (9:189). As such it must remain segregated from amusements or recreations which include dancing,⁶ theater,⁷ and works of fiction,⁸ but not music or painting.⁹

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁶ Dancing, not necessarily *dance* (an artistic discipline). “We are permitted to do such things because of our ignorance” (9:187); “Instead of going ‘right and left, balance all, promenade,’ go to work and teach yourselves something” — specifically, “the arts and sciences” (16:170; see also 9:194; 10:60–61; 14:117).

⁷ Many of the references in the preceding note also deal with the theater. The essential discourse is “Propriety of Theatrical Amusements” (9:242–45). On the general attitude Saints should hold toward these amusements see “Duties and Privileges” (1:112–114; also 15:222).

⁸ Karen Lynn, “The Mormon Sacred and the Mormon Profane: An Aesthetic Dilemma,” in Steven P. Sondrup, ed. *Arts and Inspiration* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), pp. 44–52, asserts that it was only the content of popular novels that Young objected to. A careful reading of his sermons does not support this thesis: he clearly finds fiction itself inferior as a medium (see 15:222; 9:173; 19:64). “Sell your Dickens’ works,” he wrote to a son and recommended buying history and geography books. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1974), pp. 313–14; see also pp. xiv, xv. Stephen Kent Ehat, “How to Condemn Noxious Novels — by Brigham Young,” *Century 2* 1 (Dec. 1976): 36–58, carefully chronicles the leading brethren’s complex views on fiction during the early Utah period. Like most investigators of this subject, he fails to trace Mormon polemics against fiction back to the formative Nauvoo period. The quintessential declaration of that period, an incisive poem published in the *Wasp*, 21 May 1842, is Eliza R. Snow’s “To the Writers of Fiction.” Apparently a quasi-official statement on the subject, the poem immediately quelled the publication of serialized stories in the *Wasp*. Its sentiments closely correspond with Young’s later views.

⁹ Music is actually as paradoxical for Young as for Aristotle: sometimes it is art, sometimes amusement. Generally, though, when it is not associated with dancing, music is an object of real endorsement, the only fine art among the liberal. He rejects sectarian bans on instrumental music: “Every decent fiddler will go to a decent kingdom” (8:178; see also 9:244; 12:122; 11:111; 9:189; 1:48).

Young endorses painting and music above theater and novel-reading (15:222). See also James L. Haseltine, “Mormons and the Visual Arts,” *DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT* 1 (Summer 1966): 18–19.

It is useful to compare Young's assumptions with Aristotle's. Both men refer to three facets of a (free) man's life: occupation, leisure, and recreation.¹⁰ Occupation, one's job or profession, is never to be an end in itself, but only a means to the pursuit of leisure — time devoted to those things that promote spiritual (or intellectual) progress. It has, unlike occupation, intrinsic felicity and worth. Recreation only affords recuperation from occupational labor and is never its own end: it is merely the play which keeps Jack from getting dull. Occupation is to provide for leisure — not the other way around. Young phrased it this way: "Young men are sent to schools and . . . receive their education and calculate to live by it. Will education feed and clothe you, keep you warm on a cold day, or enable you to build a house? Not at all. Should we cry down education on this account? No. What is it for? The improvement of the mind." (14:83) The pursuit of art in leisure is perfectly proper, for it is the pursuit of the beautiful which leads men to delight in the right things (Aristotle's essence of goodness¹¹). Amusements are for rest and relief, for "the recuperation of our spirits and bodies" (9:195).

According to Young, our purpose here is to organize and reconcile all we find, to "improve upon and make beautiful everything around [us]" (8:83), until the whole earth has been ordered enough for God to receive it back (9:242, 17:53). Beautification is a necessary prelude to redemption, not only restoration to original beauty but increased and improved loveliness (10:313, 177). After all, man was given his abilities in the beginning to use in tending the garden (13:3). And since the Fall he must work even harder to push back the resulting tide of ugliness (disorganization). Young laments that this requisite concern with beautification, which he identifies as "the spirit of progress" (16:66), is not shared by all the Saints. Some "have no taste for it, and they see nothing, hear nothing, and know nothing, only [that] they knew Joseph." Such people, he says, "died when Joseph died" (16:66–67); they are no better off than the wicked, whose punishment is shown in the loss of "taste for acquiring knowledge . . . and improvement" (16:66). Thus, God may punish indifference to the arts by the withdrawal of good taste. Young suggests the sons of perdition will meet with disorganization, the clear first sign of which is that they "decrease in beauty" (18:232).

We return then to the original question: if earth's beautification is man's duty, what are elements of true beauty and good art? Young suggests at least three: overall systematization, simplicity of form, and within it, "endless variety" (9:369).

In every creative act there must be rules, laws, restrictions, and procedures established before the construction commences. Young sees the beauty of a thing not so much in surface features as in these predetermined rules. It is not really the materials but the *laws* of nature that in themselves are "harmonious

¹⁰ I borrow the terminology of Ernest Barker, trans., *The Politics of Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 339–43.

¹¹ "Goodness consists in feeling delight where one should," he says. See Barker, *Politics*, p. 343.

and beautiful" (13:271). Young's image of God examining his own creation is that of a mechanic "admiring the beauty, regularity and order of its motions" (13:234). "God saw that it was good" by the rational contemplation of its governing principles. In turn, he has gathered the Saints "that we may know how to systematize everything that we are engaged in" (11:287). Young says that only when we reduce the arts to sciences can they be "permanent" and "stable"; until then "they are uncertain. They go and come, appear and disappear" (13:306). He complains, "It is hard to get the people to believe that God is a scientific character, that He lives by science or strict law, that by this He is, and by law He was made what He is, and will remain to all eternity because of His faithful adherence to law." (13:306; cf. 8:278))

That same discipline should govern a person's responses to beauty as it does the creation of it. "I do not wish anybody to cherish a wild enthusiasm . . . which is produced by the excitement of animal passions, and makes people weep" (9:103). He does not say that there is anything intrinsically evil to these passions; they are not to be rooted out, only subjected to reason. "When [the passions] are governed and controlled, how beautiful they are!" (17:116). Otherwise, "how can we discipline and control kingdoms, nations, tongues, and people?" (7:152)

Such a discipline finds its manifestation in leanness and severity. These qualities are basic to the Mormon notion of purity itself. The Book of Mormon, for instance, consistently emphasizes "plainness" as a distinguishing feature of the authentic gospel. Young endorses simplicity conspicuously when speaking of women's fashions yet with a consistency that allows us to derive an aesthetic principle: spareness as conservation. Elaborate fashions "waste so much of the substance God has given . . . on the lust of the eye" (18:74). In contrast, orderliness reflects the celestial pattern (16:21; 13:238; 17:157). Were celestial beings of supernal beauty to appear, their dress would seem plain for its lack of ornamentation (12:201-202; 14:221). Young's image of the Garden of Eden is not one of Miltonic luxuriance and abundance, but rather — at least once man has tilled it — more like Versailles.

Some may argue it unfair to compare fashion and art as I have done. But with Young's thought the comparison is just, for he appears concerned with what Erdman calls a "healthy art" after the Greeks, one in which "there is no divorce between ends and means, no split between the instrumental and the beautiful."¹² Tellingly, Young advocates gardening because it teaches "lessons of beauty and usefulness" to the children, diverting their minds from amusements (17:45). "Beautify your gardens, your houses, your farms; beautify the city. This will make us happy and produce plenty" (15:20). For Young, as Mrs. Kenneth Smith has noted, "beauty . . . was a natural and necessary accompaniment of productive work."¹³ But we may take this a step further. No work was really productive unless it also helped to organize and beautify.

¹² Irwin Erdman, *Arts and the Man: A Short Introduction to Aesthetics* (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 42.

¹³ Quoted in Haseltine, "Mormons and the Visual Arts," p. 18.

In such a conception, a flower may be as "productive" as a tree, the arts as "useful" as the sciences.

Though the large-scale structures of God's creation and plan are apparently steeped in divine, unalterable traditions, the details are subject to perpetual variation or permutation. "Constant variety [gives] beauty to the whole," says Young. God's earth is beautiful precisely because there are "no two trees alike, no two leaves, no two spears of grass alike" (11:305) yet "all are crowned with a degree of polish and perfection that cannot be obtained by ignorant man in his most exquisite . . . productions" (9:369-70). The profound interest of God's style seems to consist in what Madox Ford calls a "constant succession of tiny, unobservable surprises."¹⁴ To obtain the proper balance between the fixed and the various Brigham Young like Aristotle and the humanists advocates the fervent study and imitation of nature, "the great school our heavenly Father has instituted for the benefit of his children" (9:370). Though the world might decry the lack of formal training, "we are not as ignorant as they are [because] we study from the great book of nature" (14:39).

Yet the Latter-day Saint artist is obliged to more than imitation. He/she must be filled with the same invigorating spirit that gives growth to nature. This spirit will, in turn, give a certain organic motion to each "cell" of his/her own craft. In the LDS opus strict spiritual discipline must be wedded to the artistic: obedience is neglected at the expense of the "beauty of holiness" (Ps. 29:2). Because people have not been righteous many of the arts known to the ancients have been lost (13:306). The bane of Babylon — that "perfect sea of confusion" (17:41) — is the continual unwillingness to acknowledge and seek the true source of art, the Creator himself (12:207). Even though he, through the fountain of intelligence, dispenses enlightenment impartially, truths of art and science are revealed to the righteous and an angel "knows more about . . . the arts . . . than all the men on earth" (7:278; 10:351). It is not form or structure that produce beauty, but the presence of truth. "If all the female beauty had been summoned down into one woman not in this kingdom, she would not have appeared handsome to me: but if a person's heart is open to receive the truth, the excellency of love and beauty is there." (8:199) Whether among women, fashion, nature, or the arts, what is lovely? "That which is of God," is Young's answer, because "truth gives us beauty" (11:240; 19:40).

It is doubtful that Young would endorse the prevailing Mormon estrangement from contemporary arts or urge cultural fundamentalism. He acknowledges that "all the great discoverers in art . . . have been denounced as fanatics and crazy; and it has been declared by their contemporaries that they did not know what they were saying, and they were thought to be . . . wild and incoherent" (13:271). Innovators thus need not feel apologetic. The power of devising progressive, even revolutionary ideas is often more than invention —

¹⁴ Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London: Duckworth, 1924), p. 197.

it is intervention, God nudging man toward the infinite (13:172). But Young's teachings should prod creators in the Church to work out their own aesthetic salvation with the fear and trembling of perpetual search: progressively revealed truth inherently demands new structures and organizing principles to accommodate it. For, "not only does the religion of Jesus Christ make the people acquainted with the things of God, and develop within them moral excellence and purity, but it holds out every encouragement and inducement possible, for them to increase . . . in the arts . . . for all wisdom and all the arts . . . in the world are from God, and are designed for the good of his people." (13:147)