

Inadvertent Disclosure: Autobiography in the Poetry of Eliza R. Snow

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THREE TURNING POINTS MARK THE EARLY LIFE OF ELIZA R. SNOW: the 1826 publication of her first newspaper verse, her 1835 baptism as a convert to Mormonism, and her 1842 sealing as a plural wife of the prophet Joseph Smith. The convergence of these three entities—poetry, religion, and conjugal love—during the turbulent summer and fall of 1842 in Nauvoo created a brief personal literature unique in the corpus of her works.

Eliza Snow in Nauvoo was not the revered “Sister Snow,” dynamic leader of Utah Mormon women, prominent as wife of President Brigham Young. In Nauvoo she was next to nobody. Her family, respected citizens in their Ohio home, were undistinguished in Mormon hierarchical circles. Lorenzo, who with his sister would eventually rise to prominence, was then a young bachelor missionary. Leonora, their older sister, separated from the father of her children, would marry Isaac Morley in early and secret polygamy; her obscurity was necessary. The Snow par-

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ents, Oliver and Rosetta, would leave Nauvoo, he because of alienation from the Prophet and the cause, she because it was her duty to follow her husband. The younger children would accompany their parents.

Eliza, then, when she wrote these poems was a lone woman in Nauvoo, distinguished only by her one visible talent, her ability to versify. In a society which assigned a woman status according to her connection with men of note, the thirty-eight-year-old spinster had none. She had few close friends, male or female, and her involvement with the Relief Society, formed in the spring of 1842, reflected her literary skill more than any social or religious prominence. Her marriage to Joseph Smith that summer remained her secret and did not alter her social status. Even her brother Lorenzo's return from a remarkably successful mission provided her little of either status or company. In 1843 she would conclude her school and move to Lima, to live in obscurity in her sister Leonora's household.

In all her displacement, poetry was Eliza Snow's chief occupation, her one claim to the kind of recognition that had been hers during her Ohio upbringing. Among Nauvoo women, she was in this way unique. Other women left us letters and a few diaries; only Eliza published prolifically throughout the five-year period. This article will explore the direction her verses took for that one season of personal turbulence and what they reveal of her inner self.

The poetry for which Eliza Snow had gained reputation both before and after her 1835 conversion to Mormonism had been very public stuff: "high themes—in strains sublimely high, / Poured forth in Zion's praise," a contemporary admirer phrased it (Bard 1841). She had written always with a specific audience in mind, a particular newspaper to reach a known body of readers, and usually to celebrate some momentous occasion, plead some cause, or present some moral lesson.¹ Prior to her conversion, she had written under various pseudonyms—Narcissa, Tullia, Pocahontas among them. She later explained to a similarly hesitant fellow poet, however, that although in her youth she had "*deeply scorned*" any notoriety for her verses, once converted, she was counseled—one presumes by Joseph Smith, who early dubbed her "Zion's poetess"—that her "*duty, not a love of fame*" required her to acknowl-

¹ One rare exception was her 1838 composition, "The Gathering of the Saints and the Commencement of the City of Adam-ondi-Ahman." Having summoned her "slumbering minstrel"—she had not composed since leaving Kirtland and the *Ohio Star*—she explained that "Though *here* no letter'd pinions wait to bear / Thy lisping accents through the distant air; / The heavens, indulgent, may perchance to bend, / And kind angelic spirits condescend / To catch thy notes, and bear thy strains away / To regions where celestial minstrels play." The poem was later given prominence at the beginning of her first volume of collected verse.

edge her work.² The Mormon poems, beginning with the 1835 hymn "Praise Ye the Lord," all bore her name, whether they appeared in the gentile *Quincy Whig* (whose editor misread her signature, so she appears there as Eliza K. Snow) or in the LDS periodicals: the *Times and Seasons*, *Nauvoo Neighbor*, the *Wasp*, or, overseas, the *Millennial Star*. In her admonitions to or defense of the beleaguered Saints, she always acknowledged authorship.

While it provided her coreligionists with support in their suffering, Eliza's public poetry gave her a too-easy visibility, a too-facile fame. Before she had matured as a person, she was noted as a versifier of the people's sentiment. She passed as a poet from obscurity to publicity without investigating her inner resources, without exploring, in her writing, at least, the depths of her own soul.

But following her necessarily secret marriage to Joseph Smith, Eliza began to publish, under various guises, personal poems indirectly connected to that event. Often recorded first in her journal, most of them then appeared in one of the Nauvoo papers, their connection to her marriage or its principals sufficiently obscure as to disguise their reference to Joseph in other than his public stance. Considered together, however, they reveal something about Eliza and the secret places of her heart and mind.

Eliza wrote the first statement of her marriage in prose, not poetry, in her journal on 29 June 1842, the day of her wedding. Purposely

² See "Lines Addressed to Mr. Huelett," by Eliza R. Snow (1842-44).

When young in years,—in all a child—
 With thought untrain'd, and fancy wild
 'Twas my delight to spend an hour
 Beneath the Muse's fav'rite bower;
 While then I fan'd Parnassus' fire
 The letter'd pinions ask'd my lyre;
 I *deeply scorn'd* the Poet's fame
 And from the world withheld my name.
 But when from the eternal throne,
 The truth of God around me shone;
 Its glories my affections drew
 And soon I tun'd my harp anew:
 By counsel which I'd fain abide
 I laid fictitious names aside:
 My *duty*, not a love of fame
 Induc'd me to divulge my name.

"Mr. Huelett," who published only one poem under that name in a Nauvoo newspaper, is presumably Sylvester Huelett, an associate of Eliza's during her stay with her sister Leonora Morley in Lima, Illinois.

vague, confessing nothing of what has transpired, she resorts to nature imagery to express her feelings: "While these thoughts were revolving in my mind, the heavens became shadowed with clouds and a heavy shower of rain and hail ensued, and I exclaimed 'O God, is it not enough that we have prepossessions of mankind—their prejudices and their hatred to contend with; but must we also stand amid the rage of elements?'" The pathetic fallacy suggested by the sudden storm had been a frequent metaphor for Eliza, especially in her heroic poems, her public celebrations. Her second published poem reads in part,

The pathos of that day, big with event
The storm thick gath'ring, and the threat'ning clouds
Bursting. . . (1826)

and references to such squalls as portending evil continue. An 1839 poem sees "Clouds of gloom and nights of sadness" as a response to suffering, another in 1840 (4 Jan.) speaks of "persecution's wave," and yet another in 1841 sees unauthentic humans dashed against fellow humans "like the tremend'ous ocean-wave / When mad'ning storm, the swelling surges lave." But the use of water in its less angry forms increases as the poems progress. In November 1840 "Seas and streams. . . mutually congealed" bespeak an American paradise where "existence almost seems / With non-existence seal'd." By 1842, the softer use prevails, as in the following, recorded in Eliza's journal on 18 September and published in the *Wasp* on 10 December, an epithalamion honoring the wedding of Eliza's friend Elvira Cowles and widower Jonathan Holmes:

Like two streams, whose onward courses
Mingling in one current blend—
Like two waves, whose gentle forces
To the ocean's bosom tend.

Like two rays that kiss each other
In the presence of the sun—
Like two drops that run together,
And forever are but one.

While ostensibly directed to her friends, the poem cannot but reflect Eliza Snow's sense of marriage, coming as it does two months after her own sealing. Convergence of man and wife into a benevolent oneness suggests that some peace has come to Eliza in the wake of her

turbulent wedding day. Gentle waters are quieting, life-giving, while warm rays of light converging in the sun connect the couple to the divine source of all blessings.

Even more suggestive of Eliza Snow's feelings about her marriage is the earlier "Bride's Avowal," published on 13 August 1842 and inscribed in print "to Miss L. for her bridal morning." The bride persona, it will be recognized, speaks with Eliza's voice:

My lord, the hour approaches,
 Our destinies to twine
 In one eternal wreath of fate;
 As holy beings join.
 May God approve our union,
 May angels come to bless;
 And may our bridal wreath be gemm'd
 With endless happiness.
 My bosom's best affections
 I never could resign,
 Until thy goodness drew them forth;
 And now my heart is thine.
 Confiding in thy guardian care,
 I cheerfully forego
 All else of happiness, to share
 With thee, in weal or woe.
 The world has smil'd upon me—
 I scorn its flattery;
 For naught but thy *approving look*,
 Is happiness to me
 I would not sell thy *confidence*,
 For all the pearls that strew
 The ocean's bed, or all the gems
 That sparkle in Peru.

"My lord," the bride addresses her husband. The original salutation, "Dearest," was replaced in the poem between the 1842 printing in Nauvoo and its publication in the 1856 collection, possibly reflecting the poet's later awareness of contemporary interpretations of the temple-taught relationship of man and wife. It reiterates the place of Joseph in Eliza's world: he was God on earth to her. But the concept of celestial marriage, as in "eternal wreath" and "endless happiness," were in the original version, composed a year before the revelation on celestial marriage was dictated for publication. The image of a wreath sug-

gests the “eternal round” of Mormon usage, but the notion of God approving the marriage and angels coming to bless are standard wedding rhetoric.

In the second stanza I find strong connections to Eliza’s earlier relationship to Joseph, reflected in her 1839 poem “Narcissa to Narcissus.”

Deaf was my ear—my heart was cold:
 My feelings could not move
 For all your vows, so gently told—
 Your sympathies and love.

But when I saw you wipe the tear
 From sorrow’s fading eye,
 And stoop the friendless heart to cheer,
 And still the rising sigh:

And when I saw you turn away
 From folly’s glittering crown,
 To deck you with the pearls that lay
 On wisdom’s fallow ground:

And when I saw your heart refuse
 The flatt’ring baits of vice,
 And with undaunted courage choose
 Fair virtue’s golden prize:

And when I saw your towering soul
 Rise on devotion’s wings:
 And saw amid your pulses, roll,
 A scorn of trifling things,

I loved you for your goodness sake
 And cheerfully can part
 With home and friends, confiding in
 Your noble, generous heart.

Narcissa, Eliza Snow’s first published pseudonym, is given an appropriate consort here. In the counterperson she sees “your goodness” in qualities of character observed from a distance. Considering the date—1839, a period when Joseph was imprisoned and Eliza was with her family—it seemed possible that Narcissus was Eliza’s adored younger brother and kindred spirit, Lorenzo. However in the final stanza the

poet connects herself with the admired one, providing evidence of her sacrifice of an earlier life, presumably at his suggestion. That detail does not fit the younger Lorenzo, who followed, not led, her into the Church. "Confiding in thy guardian care" of "The Bride's Avowal" echoes the earlier "confiding in / Your noble, generous heart" and suggests quite firmly that, despite the date—he had then no official link to Eliza—Narcissus is Joseph Smith, with all that implies of her early admiration of and affection for the man as well as the prophet.

"His was an honest face," Eliza later remembered as her first impression of the young prophet. After her conversion and baptism five years later, she lived in Kirtland with the Smiths. Recalling her opinion of Joseph from that time, albeit in a public statement, she wrote in the 1870s of having had

ample opportunity to mark his "daily walk and conversation," as a prophet of God; and the more I became acquainted with him, the more I appreciated him as such. His lips ever flowed with instruction and kindness; and, although very forgiving, indulgent, and affectionate in his temperament, when his God-like intuition suggested that the welfare of his brethren, or the interests of the kingdom of God demanded it; no fear of censure—no love of approbation could prevent his severe and cutting rebuke. Though his expansive mind grasped the great plan of salvation and solved the mystic problem of man's destiny—though he had in his possession keys that unlocked the past and the future with its succession of eternities; in his devotions he was humble as a little child.

The Narcissa / Narcissus poem echoes these observations.

Poignant from a present point of view, with its valuing of independent womanhood, and in hindsight of Eliza's own more mature years when she espoused "noble independence in her heart," the lines of the 1842 "Bride's Avowal" suggest that the bride "resign" all affections and "cheerfully forego / All else of happiness, to share / With thee, in weal or woe." Eliza had already disavowed her earlier suitors from Ohio times, a reality reflected in the Narcissa poem, and now here devalues the world's flattery, presumably that awarded her for her poetry. Later her understanding of women's privilege and responsibility evolve further. But for now, the prize she claims in return is appropriate: "thy confidence," implicit trust, the ultimate bond between wife and husband, the common essential of intimate relationship. This is the bride's pearl of great price, as Joseph himself was "the crown of my life."

The timing of Eliza's marriage to Joseph Smith could not have been more inopportune—almost a year before Emma Smith had acknowledged plural marriage, but not before its counterfeit, John C. Bennett's "spiritual wifery," was noised abroad. Whisperings spread malice about the Prophet, and Eliza saw enemies where once had been friends. The

following lines, published 10 September 1842, suggest her black-and-white view of her associates, according to their loyalty to Joseph:

O can a gen'rous spirit brook
 With feelings of content:
 To see an age, distrustful look
 Oh *thee*, with *dark intent*!

I feel thy woes—my bosom shares,
 Thy spirit's agony:—
 How can I love a heart that dares
 Suspect *thy* purity?

I'll smile on all that smile on *thee*
 As angels do above—
 All who in pure sincerity
 Will love *thee*, I will love.

Believe me, thou hast noble friends
 Who feel and share thy grief;
 And many a fervent prayer ascends
 To heav'n, for thy relief.³

The sympathy of many “noble friends / Who feel and share thy grief” pales beside the more intimate empathy of the poet herself: “I feel thy woes—my bosom shares, / Thy spirit's agony,” as her “pure sympathy” contrasts with the “dark intent” of the evil-wishers.⁴

But the problem is more complex than the simple division of the local citizens into “for” and “against” camps as reflected here. The following poem, published 20 August 1842 and addressed though it be to both Joseph and Emma, is demonstrably written only to him and responds in its first two lines to the phrenological reading, Joseph's second, which had recently been published (Crane 1842).

³ On 23 June 1843 Eliza recorded the poem in her Nauvoo journal with the following explanation: “Yesterday I was presented with the following lines, which had been sent to press without my knowledge, & of which I had retained no copy.” Since William Smith was editor of the *Wasp*, it is possible he had received the verse from his brother Joseph, to whom Eliza had given it. As printed it is signed simply “E.”

⁴ Authors Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery place this poem so that it implicates Emma Smith as the soul “who dares suspect thy purity,” implying her distrust of her husband (1984, 137). While that interpretation is possible, it limits the poem, whose reference could as easily fit the Law brothers, and Sidney Rigdon, the whispering and disgruntled Saints, and the whole gentile community.

Since by *chance*, the “key bump” has been added to you
 With its proper *enlargement* of brain,
 Let me hope all the thunderbolts malice may strew,
 Will excite in your bosom no pain.

But I think if an angel were station’d in air,
 For a season, just over our heads,
 With a view of things passing; his optics would stare
 To behold the vague scenery that spreads.

He’d be apt to conclude from the medley of things;
 We’ve got into a jumble of late—
 A deep intricate puzzle, a tangle of strings,
 That no possible scheme can make straight.

Tell me, what will it be, and O, where will it end?
 Say, if you have permission to tell:
 Is there any fixed point unto which prospects tend?
 Does a focus belong to pell mell?

From the midst of confusion can harmony flow?
 Or can peace from distraction come forth?
 From out of corruption, integrity grow?
 Or can vice unto virtue give birth?

Will the righteous come forth with their garments unstained?
 With their hearts unpolluted with sin?
 O yes; *Zion, thy honor will still be sustained.*
And the glory of God usher’d in.

The term “key bump” did not occur in the phrenological report of Joseph’s skull, however the highest rating in the category given most weight, and the first listed, was “amativeness,” described by the phrenologist as the tendency to be “passionately fond of the company of the other sex.” It is hard to imagine Eliza Snow publicly noting Joseph’s sexual propensities—certainly there is nothing from her extant about anyone’s libido, let alone the Prophet’s. However, another interpretation of the term is hard to discover, since this rating is borne out in an earlier reading as well (Bitton and Bunker 1974). Phrenology was the current fad in Nauvoo—Brigham Young and Willard Richards both had readings, both published (Young rated seven in amativeness, Richards eight, compared with Smith’s eleven). Eliza herself, however, never submitted

to a phrenological reading either in Nauvoo or later in Salt Lake City (though one was done posthumously, from a photograph), suggesting her disdain for the pseudo science. Possibly, then, she meant the reference humorously. Certainly the poem can be read so at the beginning, though it seems to move with increasing seriousness as it progresses.

What Eliza Snow is addressing in this poem is not sexuality, nor even, directly, polygamy, but the confusion that results when “malice” strews its “thunderbolts.” High among her values are harmony, peace, integrity, and virtue; instead she finds around her confusion, distraction, corruption, and vice. And there seems no relief ahead, no exit. There is not even a temporary footing, a place to dig in the heels—no “fixed point” in this moving world. Not even a time frame; no assurance that this, too, shall pass. The ironic twist, probably not intended in the poem, is that it was, by Joseph’s assertion and in Eliza’s belief, Jove himself who hurled the thunderbolt—plural marriage was divinely instituted, the Prophet maintained.⁵ The final stanza calls into question the ability of the obedient to maintain their purity, of even the righteous to remain sinless. No answer follows; only a typically Elizian affirmation, in the passive voice, that Zion will be somehow sustained and “the glory of God usher’d in.” One can hardly believe that even the angel watching could have made such an assertion in the face of such overwhelming evidence of godless disarray.

In similar vein, reflecting the internal response to the external “pell mell,” Eliza poured out the following in a 23 September 1842 journal entry, which was never published (and from the tenuousness of its last two quatrains, I suspect never finished):

To stand still and see the salvation of God seems to be the only alternative for the present. While reflecting on the present, and its connexion with the future; my thoughts mov’d in the following strain: . . .

O, how shall I compose a thought
 When nothing is compos’d?
 How form ideas as I ought
 On subjects not disclos’d?

If we are wise enough to know
 To whom we should give heed—
 Thro’ whom intelligence must flow
 The church of God to lead,

⁵ This is not to ignore other references in Eliza Snow’s poetry to “Satan’s thunderbolts.” The double meaning serves more to enrich the meaning than to alter it.

We have *one* grand position gain'd—
 One point, if well possess'd—
 If well established—well maintain'd,
 On, which the mind may rest.
This principle will bear us up—
 It should our faith sustain,
 E'en when from "trouble"'s reckless cup
 The dregs we have to drain.

What boots it then, tho' tempests howl
 In thunders, round our feet—
 Tho' human rage, and nature's scowl
 By turns, we have to meet.

What though tradition's haughty mood
 Deals out corroding wrongs;
 And superstition's jealous brood
 Stirs up the strife of tongues.

There is no resolution to this attempt; not even the usual assuring affirmation of faith. "What though?" is not answered with Eliza's typical "God will provide" response at the end. And yet the second stanza seems to assure that "*this principle* will bear us up." However tempting it may be to presume the later use of "the principle" as euphemism for polygamy, the context does not permit. The times demonstrate the destructive, not the supportive properties of that "principle," and the grammar of this use indicate another interpretation: "To whom we must give heed— / Thro' whom intelligence must flow / The church of God to lead" is the guiding principle of restored religion. "My heart is fix'd. I know in whom I trust," Eliza wrote in her Nauvoo journal 16 November 1842, reflecting her thoughts at conversion. Joseph had been then, and still is, she affirms again, the proper connection to God, the "whom" in whose control lay her future.

This present poem, however, sows a seed of doubt in the system: that the principle *should* "our faith sustain" suggests that, at this writing, faith is wavering. Things are no better. The tempest that greeted Eliza's wedding is again howling and thundering round her feet; nature scowls, and neighbors are gossiping, still bound by superstition and tradition. No, she would not finish these ideas, nor publish them. In Eliza's catechism, it is wrong to doubt, especially in public. There are no entries in her journal for the next three weeks.

The next cluster of poems, entered 16 November 1842, contains one that seems to belie the tumult of its predecessors. Its date of composition is uncertain, however its message brings peace after the internal struggle of the last two poems.

In an 18 May 1846 diary entry Eliza would state, "Surely happiness is not altogether the product of circumstances"; in her journal now she makes some strides towards that conclusion. The triteness of the next title, "True Happiness," appearing in her journal on 16 November 1842, and the clichéd rhymes and stanza forms are deceptive. The implication here of the supremacy of private revelation over public pronouncement is a foreshadowing for Eliza; at this point it suggests at least a refocusing of faith.

The noblest, proudest joys that this
 World's favor can dispense,
 Are far inferior to the bliss
 Of conscious innocence.
 The joy that in the bosom flows,
 No circumstance can bind;
 It is a happiness that knows
 No province but the mind.

It makes the upright soul rejoice,
 With weight of ills opprest,
 To hear the soothing, still small voice
 Low whispering in the breast.
 The favor of the mighty God,
 The favor of His Son,
 The Holy Spirit shed abroad,
 The hope of life to come,
 Are higher honors, richer worth,
 Surpassing all reward—
 Than kings and princes of the earth
 Have taken or conferr'd.
 And when, in Christ, the spirit finds
 That sweet, that promis'd rest,
 In spite of every power that binds,
 We feel that we are blest.

Though vile reproach its volumes swell,
 And friends withdraw their love;
 If conscience whispers, "All is well,"
 And God and heaven approve;

We'll triumph over every ill,
 And hold our treasure fast;
 And stand at length on Zion's hill,
 Secure from every blast.

Until the end of the third stanza Eliza scrupulously avoids the "we" voice more typical of her poetic sermons. Not referencing herself directly, she still owns the sentiments personally. And certainly they apply: her secret marriage has placed her in jeopardy of condemnation, both her own and others'. "Conscious innocence" affirmed by the "still small voice / Low whispering in the breast" is not what her associates expect and not even the absolute obedience to the prophetic utterance that has heretofore guided her. "Innocence" itself, unaware as Blake's lamb, has matured through such turmoil as Eliza has experienced since her baptism into the "conscious" or self-determined innocence capable of the splendor of his "tyger." Aware of the favor of God, indeed of the entire Godhead, "the upright soul" rejoices. Within itself the spirit finds release from the "jumble," the "puzzle," the "tangle," and "pell mell" of the earlier poems. The too-facile conclusion which then so unsatisfactorily silenced that outcry is here confirmed with reason and personal conviction. "*All is well*," the poet writes, and Eliza underlines. Triumph is as yet in the future, but we will, she assures, stand "at length," secure on Zion's hill. There, and then, "in Christ, the spirit finds / That sweet, that promis'd rest."

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