

Chaotic Matter: Eugene England's "The Dawning of a Brighter Day"

Brian Evenson

MORE THAN TEN YEARS AFTER THE ORIGINAL appearance of an essay might be too long to wait to respond to it, but the republication of Eugene England's "Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 years" as the inaugural essay of *Wasatch Review International* (vol. 1 [1992], no. 1) calls for a response. England's words originally referred to a particular historical moment in Mormon literary development and to draw attention to an emerging literature. If they can now be used again ten years later to describe the current state of Mormon letters, then I believe Mormon letters have made less progress than one would have hoped.

Says England, "A truly Mormon literature would stand firm against secular man's increasing anxiety about the ability of language to get at the irreducible otherness of things outside the mind—to make sense, and beauty, of that 'chaotic matter—which is element'" (9). I doubt that a fallen, mortal language can ensure our ability to interpret the world. We are mortal and fallible, as is our language, and any sense we make of the "otherness of things" through literature must be tentative, subject to revision, ambiguous, and incomplete.

England defines literature which uses language to make sense and beauty of the external world to be "A truly Mormon literature." However, Mormon literature is not—nor should it be—homogeneous in its goals. Sense and beauty are fine and good, but there are other ways of writing and reasons for writing which are just as valid. Like Jewish literature, Mormon literature as a category should have room not only for an I. B. Singer but also a Harold Bloom, not only a pious Moses Maimonides, but also a raucous Philip Roth. Potentially, there are as many Mormon literatures as there are types of Mormons, as there are levels of belief and activity in the church. In any level of belief, there will always remain a

degree of senselessness—a handful of objects (usually the majority of objects) which remain stubborn, cannot be made sense of, and which rightly refuse to be made beautiful. To limit ourselves to the beautiful and the comprehensible is to cripple ourselves. Certainly neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon limit themselves in the same way—at least not in our mortal understanding of them. To talk about a “true” Mormon literature standing “firm” against anything is to work from a principle not of description but of proscription. It is to translate the imagined dichotomy of “Mormon church/secular world” into literature, constructing a principle for separating the literary wheat from the tares which does not have the support of revelation to affirm it (nor for that matter the support of contemporary ways of understanding literature).

While we know there exists William James’s Truth with a capital “T” in religion—so we who are Mormons profess to believe—there is nothing of the kind *innately within* autonomous fictional worlds springing from a mortal writer’s imagination, no matter what their religion. There are in fiction only individual truths—a multiplicity of them. Literature which tries to express, unmixed and clearly, a universal and institutional truth verges on propaganda, as England himself points out. Truth exists not within literature but potentially both in front of it and behind it, in the mind of the author and in the mind of the reader. The work itself serves as a template on which codes for truth can be inscribed, but only as codes, and only in a landscape which hides them from the reader. The truth the reader draws from the work will not be identical to the truth of the author. When an author does attempt to construct the truth on the page in a way that it cannot be mistaken, literature becomes propaganda. Thought is stopped.

Literary work thus itself exists as “chaotic matter” which the reader must organize through his own internal beliefs. A truly Mormon literature of any value does not stand firm against anything or teach anything in and of itself—it rather provides the tools for the individual to teach herself. Or potentially to misteach herself.

England perhaps should not dismiss deconstruction so hastily, for it is a critical school which is widely misunderstood. Deconstruction intends to undermine false assumption and false stability, to reveal assumptions lying behind positions and to reveal that no matter how hard language tries to say a particular thing, paradox and ambiguity remain. It is not so much a destruction as a refiner’s fire (though in American criticism it has wrongly become a synonym for nihilistic destruction). As such, it means to reveal the underlying ideological structures for what they are, to open works whose meanings have become culturally fixed, to alternate formulations. It is not, as England suggests, a “flight from form,” but a revealing of the flaws in form and content—a revealing of

the fact that our language is mortal, fallible, imperfect, rather than a covering up of that fact.¹

The best Mormon literature—and the only type of Mormon literature which has a possibility of being read outside of its specific culture in the same way that great Jewish or great Catholic literature is—is precisely a deconstruction, a revelation of assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of structures of Mormon life, flaws that remain unresolved and which if they are to be resolved must be resolved outside of the confines of the text, in the mind of the reader. Literature is a trial which can either improve faith or destroy it—a test for the reader, if you will. Truly great literature, both Mormon and gentile, must possess the profound ambiguity present in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*. Readers of Mormon literature do, as England suggests, navigate a course between "various forms of Scylla and Charybdis," but it is not a course as "straight and narrow" as he suggests: the reading of Mormon literature itself is that which tests the strength of the ship, of the spirit, to withstand the seductions of a text.² Literature does not need to steer its ship straight so much as to test the reader's ability (and desire) to steer his own ship straight.

A fine example is Flannery O'Connor. England quotes O'Connor throughout his article—her letters, not her fiction—discussing her Catholicism and its importance to her writing. O'Connor's fiction, however, makes quite clear that it means something different to O'Connor to be a Catholic writer than it does to most Mormons to be "Mormon" writers.³

1. Since this time, England's views on theory and the gospel have become much more astute. In a recent article, "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," in *Mormon Americans: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States* (Provo: BYU Studies, forthcoming), England acknowledges the validity of poststructuralism for understanding certain types of Mormon literature and presents an image of deconstruction that is much more scholarly and aware.

2. This is also the point of a Mormon university: not to cover up or set aside works that might potentially disagree with our beliefs, but to give us a community to read these works in which we can help one another navigate through the rocks. The reason such a large number of former BYU students who pursue advanced degrees at other universities lose their faith is that we have not adequately prepared them to navigate on their own the difficult texts which they will be confronted with in graduate school. We do a great disservice when we dismiss an author or a theorist with pat or superficial responses because we are not certain he or she fits into the immediate context of our beliefs. Rather we should let upper division students know what they will be confronting and provide them with the tools and support they need to confront the challenges productively and dialogically without losing their faith.

3. There are of course exceptions, Mormon writers who have views of the relationship of religion and literature as productive as that of O'Connor. Several, but by no means all, of the authors in England's recent anthology of Mormon literature, *Bright Angels and Familiars* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), and in *Wasatch Review International, Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, and similar magazines, might be productively considered in this regard.

Religion in general and her specific religious position are often ironized in her work, and certainly are never preached. Her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, for instance, suggests how religious belief can justify murder for a young boy. Her Catholicism is rarely apparent on a surface level. Her beliefs do not limit her works to a certain acceptable, "safe" standard or to a certain group of relevant objects, as so much of Mormon literature limits itself; rather, they provide challenges for her beliefs, create a world in which beliefs of all kinds can make an appearance and can be treated with objectivity. As O'Connor says, "I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it frees the storyteller to observe."⁴ O'Connor creates her world, but lets the world live on its own terms. It is an observed world. We need to stop worrying about conveying meaning and belief in literature—about establishing a political stance, about supporting or criticizing the LDS church and our culture—and begin observing. When we observe accurately, meaning and belief will let themselves be communicated in their own varied terms much more effectively, eccentrically, and widely than any forcing we try to do.

As Mormon literature becomes willing to convey the collision of differences, it becomes worth reading. When it no longer serves as a missionary tool for a lifestyle or for a religion (in however abstracted a sense) but participates in the dialogical interaction of individuals with the world around them, then it takes on more than a limited value. An aesthetics of Mormon literature cannot be an unmixed expression of orthodox Mormon values and still remain a viable aesthetic. At most it might be the transformation of Mormon values into artistic organizing principles which dictate the initial conditions of the artistic world but do not impede the development of that world along organic lines. An artistic creation must provide the reader room to define and/or redefine her own values, through collision with different and similar value systems. We see suggestions of this tolerance in *Wasatch Review International*, and more than suggestions in work by Mormons publishing for national markets. But there is doubtless still a long way to go if we are to coalesce a Mormon literature having value on more than just a local level.

4. Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *The Living Novel: A Symposium*, ed. Granville Hicks (New York: Macmillan, 1957).