C. Thomas Asplund: Quiet Pilgrim

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I AM NOT AN HISTORIAN. But my limited exposure to the discipline tells me that writing history involves arriving at definitions of "eras," "cultures," and "movements." In my work in literary theory, I have been trained to be skeptical of definitions; the defining process is invariably predicated upon a subject/object relationship. There is a danger of tyranny since that which defines wields subjective power over that which is defined. I am compelled to carefully clarify my criteria for authority in the interpretive process.

With literature, this is relatively manageable. My subjects and objects—the texts, textualities, readers, writers, language itself, even as they spontaneously construct and deconstruct—are still comfortably complete, intact, and distant. I can play with my subjectivity, appear to surrender it, without threatening my own identity.[1] In history, and particularly in the history I am undertaking here, the question of authority is more daunting, as subject and object become myself (the historian) and a fluid collection of seemingly random spatio-temporal events. I literally feel like an "author" as I attempt to create a meaning from these events, words, and stories, and arrive at an image of a person and his relationship to an era in a contemporary institution in which I now invest considerable personal energy and identity. So I will attempt to define the nature of my interaction with my "object," my father, C. Thomas Asplund.

First is a fundamental shifting of the experience of my life, in which I was object to my parents' creative, subjective influence. As his parishioner, I learned to view my father also as the powerful author of much of my spiritual and religious identity. And as a writer, I am aware that half

1. I am aware that I am making highly questionable distinctions here. Of course, there is history in literature, and the very language with which literature and its criticisms are expressed certainly contains and creates identity.

of my language is received from the source I now scrutinize. I must question my own authoritative ability to read and interpret the object that has so much to do with my own voice. He expressed this complex of relationships much more eloquently than I can, in the opening lines of his "historical" poem, "The Heart of My Father":

> Who knows what an electronic microscope might do to the great
> gulf fixed between faith and knowledge? I suppose that one day
> some
> chemical mechanic under the flickering death of fluorescent tubes
> will find deep within the coiling chemistry of my island body a germ
> of that narrow dirt road
>   which ran through summer's miasma of sweet
>   clover between a beaten windbreak of dusty
>   cottonwoods and an irrigation ditch
>   where once
> my father ran down tripping ruts of clay

In one of his personal journal entries he seems to anticipate my scrutiny, as he offers an apology for the awkward motions of the chronicling of his own life:

> I felt unexpectedly old today—defensive and beside the point. Actually that's the way people feel when they are very young. But I felt tired and unfit and it started to snow. Anyway, the demands were there. Not demands for me—which can be kind of flattering. But the demands that I justify my existence. Maybe that's why I am writing. To justify my existence. It had better be good writing (16 Mar. 1982).

Given the impossibility of achieving rational objectivity in relation to this history, I suggest that my work take the form of a palimpsest, a new text written over an ancient one—once a necessity in a time of scarce writing materials. Historians read these texts with mixed feelings. The new text is worthwhile, but there is always the question of the unknown value of that which was lost. The erasure of my father's life makes my task now possible, not for a paucity of writing materials, but for the reality that we can never be so whole, or so heroic, as we are in our elegies. But I cannot measure the value of whatever text I achieve against the lost light of my father's life.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests a metaphorical relationship in the concrete image of the palimpsest that articulates a relationship between absent and present texts, allows them to become some new thing, valuable in itself for the blurring of lost and present language, and allows me to proceed comfortably and, I believe, fruitfully in my act of definition.

She writes:

> Palimpsest indicates the desire to manifest, by some verbal or textual gesture, the sense of presence, simultaneity, multiple pressures of one moment, yet at the same time the disjunct, the absolutely parallel and different, the obverse sensations of consciousness in reality.[2]

This essay does not adhere to the academic restrictions I've learned, for it is full of desire and empathy, hopefully not stumbling blocks, but tools essential to creating a history which is neither encomium (my temptation as a daughter) nor formal analysis (my prerogative as an academic) but a blending of the two, expressing the "multiple pressures of one moment."

I have chosen specifically to present Asplund most frequently in his own words. But they are words I have chosen and edited. And his own language is often contrived in poetry, and even occasionally in prose, to achieve a desired effect. Mary-Alice Thompson, describing his writing, suggests that his language represents "the people about whom he writes, religious pioneers."[3] Asplund himself wrote to Bob Rees, an early editor of *Dialogue* who had criticized his blending of "purple poetry" with the "plain and prosaic," that "It is not unintentional. I've always felt it as part of a culture which can talk about the Celestial Kingdom and the two-year's supply in the same breath; or perhaps more rightly, with the same breathlessness ... I like to think that in Christian doctrine and Mormon culture, there is a life-love and spirit of generosity which makes sentimentality easy." His words themselves contain historical meaning.

The aim of my inquiry is ultimately to assess the nature of Asplund's leadership in the LDS church in Kingston, Ontario. Undisputedly he assisted in leading the congregation through a period of tremendous growth. When he arrived to join the law faculty at Queen's University in 1968, the congregation, which had struggled through the first few decades of the twentieth century,[4] had purchased a small meeting house at 362 Alfred Street. Tom was called to be a counselor to branch president

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2. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "While These Letters Were A-Reading: An Essay on Beverly Dahlen's *A Reading*," in *The Pink Guitar: Writings as Feminist Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 111.

3. Mary-Alice Thompson, "Tom Asplund's Poem and Children's Story: An Appreciation," *Queen's Law Journal* 17 (Summer 1992): 269.

4. In 1944 a Relief Society was organized in Kingston in the home of M. Leora Todd under the direction of the mission president. Delcie Nobes, a member of the congregation, writes, "We held Sunday School, Sacrament Meetings, and Relief Society meetings [at Sister Todd's home]. She played the piano, the missionaries administered the sacrament, and depending on who was there, they would lead the singing. Ofttimes there would only be four of us present, but sometimes we would have as many as ten or twelve" ("Kingston Ward History," 2, privately circulated).

Hawley Revell on 8 September 1968, and the congregation had about fifty members.[5] Tom then served as branch president from 14 September 1969 to 1972, during which time the branch steadily grew. He served as counselor to the bishop from 1978 to 1980, then as bishop from 1980 to 1981, by which time the ward had built a meetinghouse and enjoyed steady substantial attendance.

In some ways Asplund was a "good" leader; his congregation grew in numbers and stability. He inspired loyalty and love in many of the members of the church in Kingston. But he never achieved that most crucial distinction—upward mobility in the ranks of leadership. Despite his experience and apparent devotion, he was never, except for a brief stint as a stake high council member, promoted. He notes only briefly in his journal a sense of disappointment in his lack of official recognition:

> I railed against my isolation in the Church, with its frustration and loneliness ... Yesterday was stake conference. On a black day that's always good for reminding me of my inadequacies. The only way of escaping the universal inadequacies is to be the one to enumerate them. So I go to be reminded of my inadequacies, and to have that reinforced by the fact that I'm too inadequate even to be one who gets to talk about them (undated entry).

According to Klaus Hansen, who served with him in a branch presidency, Asplund was neither by "temperament" nor "inclination" the kind of person to take charge. He was also, according to Hansen, religiously "skeptical," though "able to counter this skepticism through a religious commitment that was carefully reasoned out."[6] He was reluctant to adhere to regulations regarding the reporting of statistics,[7] distrustful of central authority,[8] and, most poignantly, according to Roy A. Prete, Kingston Ward historian, "never felt reassured about his own salvation."[9] Yet, as he assumed leadership of the ward in 1980 at a time when there was tremendous animosity among several leaders, he was a "conciliator," one who saw the ward as a family and successfully managed to "heal the wounds" in the congregation.[10]

How do I define a leader who was both successful and unsuccessful but who lacked so many of the qualities we associate with effective leadership—ambition, firm authority, stirring vision? Hugh Nibley writes that "true" leadership demands "a passion for equality. We think of great generals from David and Alexander on down, sharing their beans or

5. Ibid., 8.
6. Letter to Marni Campbell, 9 Dec. 1994.
7. Ibid.; Carma Prete, interview, Dec. 1994.
8. Roy A. Prete, interview, Dec. 1994; Asplund journal notes, in my possession.
9. Roy A. and Carma Prete, interview, Dec. 1994.
10. Ibid.

maza with their men, calling them by their first names, marching along with them in the heat, sleeping on the ground, and being first over the wall."[11] He contrasts the "leader" with the "manager," for whom

> the idea of equality is repugnant and indeed counter-productive. Where promotion, perks, privilege, and power are the name of the game, awe and reverence for rank is everything, the inspiration and motivation of all good men. Where would management be without the inflexible paper processing, dress standards, attention to proper social, political, and religious affiliation, vigilant watch over habits and attitudes, etc., that gratify the stock-holders and satisfy Security?[12]

In Nibley's terms, Asplund was a leader, not a manager.

Asplund's focus was on demystifying his role as figurehead and eschewing the temptation to wield power. Roy Prete relates how at one ward council meeting the absent bishop's controversial decision to produce a Christmas nativity pageant was criticized. Asplund, first counselor to the bishop, presided and, when he was asked if the council should vote on the issue, reminded the group that "we had district conference here, we voted to sustain our leaders, and that's all the vote we need." When members of the ward complained about private piano lessons being taught on the church piano, he remarked that perhaps the ward would get a few organists out of the arrangement. Joan Hansen writes of Asplund's propensity for story-telling, specifically his use of the fable of "stone soup" to gently remind members of their responsibility to serve in whatever way they could rather than chastise them.[13]

Asplund was not by nature a rebel, but he was acutely aware of the power struggles that taint organizations, and even more acutely aware of the day-to-day needs of members of the church who were threatened by the power struggles. In his own journal he describes his ambivalence toward and frustration with the lack of attention from central church leadership:

> I have often wondered if in framing various church programs, consideration is given to small branches which have problems of finding an adequate number of willing, capable workers ... with the shortage of executive experience, the burden of initiating and advancing the programs can fall heavily on a bishop or branch president who is already burdened with a formidable work load in fulfilling his direct administrative reporting and meeting responsibilities ... There is a degree of guilt and frustration encountered in fail-

11. Hugh Nibley, "Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (Winter 1983): 12-21.

12. Ibid.

13. Letter to Marni Campbell, 9 Dec. 1994.

ing to carry out and succeed in programs. No priority can be established, since all programs are introduced under the ultimate priority. This applies both to Branch Presidents who don't have the time to bear the full program, or inexperienced executives who struggle with numerous difficulties which the programs could hardly be expected to anticipate ...

I am concerned with the sense of isolation which can permeate many of the outlying areas of the Church. It is manifest in many small ways. The most obvious is the difficulty encountered in receiving supplies and cleaning things through central administration ... I am aware that it might seem more important to provide for a ward of 400 in a central urban area, than a small outlying branch of 100. The question is, which one has the fewest inner resources to rely on when there is a breakdown of communication, supply, or administration.

In my branch, for example, we can rely on a yearly visit by the district president and the intermittent visits by district councilmen, as our only tangible connection with the rest of the Church. Otherwise, we must drive 70-80 miles to attend district meetings, usually under adverse weather conditions. Add to that the difficulty of accounting for small children and branch members who don't have cars. The situation can become somewhat ominous. It would be mitigated if the meetings provided greater resources with which to deal with direct problems (undated entry).

In a more personal journal entry he describes his own one-on-one struggle with the prerogatives of both administrating and ministering in the midst of a cold bureaucratic climate:

There was a phone call the other night. A typical phone call. The tentative voice—describing some slender connection—aunt, years ago, Bishop so-and-so. An attempt to make a connection with the Church that will validate or identify. It is inevitably a strained and distant relationship. Then a quick description of a temporary set back—circumstances beyond control. Then the clincher, "Can you help?" Money. Repayment. I engage in an embarrassed evasion. "I'll have to check on things. I don't know. Things are scarce. I'll let you know." A second call. "Have you found out?" Not yet, I say. And a third call and a fourth. It would be so nice to contemplate, to categorize, find a principle, find a concept. But the problem is much simpler. Am I going to help? Can I judge the sincerity of the need? Do I have the authority to use church funds ... Finally I drop Pat at choir practice and drive to Loblaw's. "She has only two diapers and no milk. My husband won't be paid till Thursday." My aunt in Toronto is a member. Bishop Wilmot? do you know him? City welfare can't help. I buy diapers, milk, bread, apple juice, fruit. $13-14 worth and drive to the Welcome Traveller Motel. Knock on the door. "Are you so-and-so? I have some groceries for you. Drop and run. Why is it all so hard? A little charity. An answer to a scream of need. There's no book or law review article in it. There's not even much satisfaction of heart in such stifled charity. Is there a natural law that says I should help someone who needs? Should I make inquiry about need—be skeptical, or should I be kind and generous? I mean, when you pose it as an issue it all seems so easy and obvious. Why is it so hard to manage? (undated entry)

Ultimately his "leadership style" evolved naturally from his sense of the church's role as being, in the words of Roy Prete, "responsible for socializing and integrating people" and the gospel as comprised of "processes" rather than "goals." Asplund describes this in another journal entry:

> At a point in time at least at a point in the organization of our intelligences a critical point was reached where certain things were necessary to advance their effective life. So God asked for someone to take the responsibility for directing the step. Satan's plan was not accepted because it was a lie and a delusion. It would lead to a frozen world of outer darkness—not because of punishment but because it would fail to be integrative and creative. It would fail because it would fail to join the subject of the process into responsibility, will, faith and priesthood ... the critical point with Christ's plan was to bring us into the process but by a system which would accept our will and faith and responsibility. Beyond the war in heaven and our acceptance as individuals of Christ's plan, it was necessary that the absolute initiation of the creative process had to be accepted and willed by humans. So Adam, by partaking of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, released God from his responsibility alone, and joined in that responsibility.
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> Of existence Descartes said, I think, therefore I am. Jehovah said, I am, and I favor Jehovah. I am, therefore I think. I love, I suffer. In that big womb of an oven Descartes didn't get the full view. Maybe that's what he really meant—I suffer, therefore I am. Not having Jehovah's confidence, I think that is the conclusion I would reach in a warm protective shell with my belly full ... it's easy to be simple in a womb. Outside I no longer "am" without food and comfort, without love and beauty. Perhaps that is the reason for the torment—I think because I'm sitting in the warm womb of civilization with my belly full. In here with only my thoughts it's easy to limit the issues. My dialectic of life might be short, brother. But my apology is likely to be very long (Feb. 1967).

This concern with process, and for the well-being of the communities in which he lived and worked, extended to his professional life. In an issue of the Queen University's law journal dedicated to Tom Asplund, his colleagues find him kind but slightly inept—paralleling his church experience. Associates and students alike describe him as distracted, producing impatience in students who were anxious to achieve "jobs on Bay Street, which would certainly lead to lucrative salaries and early partnerships."[14] Shortly before his death, he was invited by Dean John Whyte, in

14. Heino Lilles, "A Plea for More Human Values in Our Justice System," *Queen's Law Journal* 17 (Summer 1992): 328.

a memo, to accept an offer for early retirement—an offer to which Asplund responded angrily. He describes his distaste for the competition which always seemed to prevail in institutions:

> Somewhere amongst those raging, desperate, irresponsible pangs is the energy that drives. I see it in the eyes of my associates—lovely people all—as long as the lusts are kept in control by feeding them. Beating people is the big thing. Excellence-excel means beating others. Oh, they will tell you that it's just a matter of being the best you can, but excellence means beating others. Winning means being sure that others lose. Ultimate is being one step ahead. The abyss is one step behind. There was the world champion gymnast, smiling prettily, happy, bouncing, feminine (and all that implies) saying through the broad grin, "I just really love to win" and the eyes turn from sparkling to steel glint. And the toothy grin became a grinding grimace. But that's it. The world loves it. The world honors it. The fact that the loser has made the winner is of no consequence (2 Dec. 1985).

His professional colleagues also describe him as someone "determined to make communities strong and just,"[15] "the most empathetic person I have known,"[16] someone who taught that "it is important to remember that the justice system deals with real people, their families, and their futures."[17] Again this duality is paralleled in his church experience. He was well aware of the temptation to engage in competition in his church, yet was reassured by the potential he saw for good in the community: "The thought occurred to me, (I felt as a calming inspiration) that maybe it is the price I pay for the spiritual strength of my children. They seem to have prospered in strength. I pray it is so" (undated journal entry). Ultimately, then, Asplund is a paradoxical figure, committed to a church in which he felt isolated, serving productively as a leader when leadership deeply troubled him. I believe that he explains these paradoxes most profoundly, if not most clearly, in his poetry, which he wrote and published privately. Most of his church and academic colleagues had no idea that Asplund was a published poet until they attended his funeral.

In one prose piece, "We the Saints Salute You," he details the correspondence between Elmer J. Goatesby, hapless branch president in fictional "Purdy's Station," and Bishop Kent Lamb, prosperous bishop in the heart of Zion, former missionary in Purdy's station. Intended to be a piece of humor, it nevertheless betrays his sense of the tremendous lack of understanding the "central" church has for its members in the far reaches. In attempting to recreate the fund-raising "home tour" sug-

15. Quoted in "In Memoriam," *Queen's Law Journal* 17 (Summer 1992): 254.
16. Quoted in ibid., 263.
17. Lilles, 328.

gested by Bishop Lamb in "San Paradiso," the church members in Purdy's Station, who don't have houses, go to a sister's apartment, where they look at the "boiler and the garbage incinerator which are more interesting than you might expect." *Dialogue* rejected the piece because it was perceived as being too critical of rural Saints.

In the poems "Convert Baptism" and "Hymnsong" he portrays the combination of divine and prosaic inherent in the rituals of membership and redemption:

Convert Baptism

As Christ stood stand we now
No muddy Jordan but smooth tile
And white cotton where once a hairy goathide hung
And no dove comes down the slant of brown chapel light
But for a moment witnesses with bent head and fallen hands
Without the world without a word
The congregation stands
Posed on the infinite question

Master is it I?

As Christ stood stand we now
From this grace to grace forward
Pure within this moment
Beyond the water or the word
For as in Adam all men die
Even so in Eve are all men quickened by a common cord

And down we fall in the deaf rush of water
Down in the hole from here to Kolob
Hostages to the running tide of belief
We tumble from Eden and the ecstasy of anticipation
To Gethsemane and the ecstasy of faith

Hymnsong

I have sung these hymns so often
Fragile wisps now frail and broken.
Prayers by word and music we try to soften
Let them hang where gentle hours surround them.

These hymns are traced so lightly I often

Slight them as I worship with my congregation
Confused that to beg eternity such a feeble thing is chosen,
Not scratched in stone as man to man has spoken.

Temples have been piled from generation, stone by stone,
To generation, standing when the sounds and hymns are gone.
Broken walls we pile again to find the wisdom of Solomon
But gone, gone from here is David's harp, and David's song.

And in "Emma Smith Speaks Her Piece" he explores again, with his characteristic faith and doubt, the identity of the founding prophet of the LDS church.

I asked you not to go
But someone got there first
With other words
As they so often do;
So now I speak my piece.

Please, forgive
A wife's proclivity for last words
And fond distrust of those
Who dream
Without sleeping.

Please know
Of all my pains
None is more exquisite than
That inflicted by
This understanding: the only
Reward God gives a true prophet
Is the vision.

In the end nothing was yours,
Not even the mantle.

And please know, too,
That I was less jealous
Of other handmaidens
Than I was of
Other voices.

In two final texts I leave you with the tracings of an erased manuscript—a palimpsest—which nevertheless signify powerfully the universal concern for identity, even as they remind us that any identity is necessarily fleeting, ultimately reducible to an incomplete definition:

> April 14, 1988: Out at the genealogical library tonight to supervise. It is a rather strange enterprise—people sifting through these shadows and dust clouds of information—casting about little towns and churches and parishes for people long gone, and not especially important when they were here. All fuss and detail which is not my temper in the best of times.
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> And then I walked down the hall, past the glass doors in the front. And in the door I saw this shadow, bald and graying, hunched like a sad dog, of no distinguished size or aspect. Is this the kind of thing they are looking for. My shock came almost instantly when I realized that the scurrying shadow was my reflection ... I thought about that reflection. Would some person in a couple of generations be in some library trying to find that shadow—to find the tracings in sand that I have left. Maybe this note will tell them more about me than shadows in a microfilm under an official number.

From "Seasonings"

> In the thin part of the afternoon
> When light, like a loved child,
> Is gone too soon and Earth shrinks small
> And cold like the breast of an aging mother,
> I discover myself on the other
> Side—the thin black back
> Of a mercury mirror, too cold
> For quick, too black
> For silver,
> Where once I stood
> Behind a parent's brooding oaken dresser
> Hiding from an afternoon of childhood.
> Hiding from both
> The fact and the reflection.