

Toward a Mormon Criticism: Should We Ask “Is this Mormon Literature?”

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CONSIDER THE RESTORATION of the gospel as a paradigm for Mormon criticism. Sensing some apostasy from truth, the critic rectifies this falling away through an act of restoration. As Joseph Smith sensed something incomplete about the truths of religion and then became an instrument in restoring this truth, so the Mormon critic, equally sensitive, becomes an instrument in restoring the truth to which he or she is witness. One *feels* a void, then *fills* that void with words. Here Restoration invokes original creation: God’s spirit, brooding on the void, filled it through His word. In this sense Mormon criticism is both restorative and creative, both reactive and active. The Restoration paradigm provides powerful metaphors for criticism: critics can assume roles as prophets and creators, as mediators and seers. It is a heady vision for criticism, but one to which I have been witness, one for which—according to the paradigm—I am constrained to bear testimony.

Richard Cracroft exemplified such a Mormon criticism in his review of the first major anthology of LDS poetry, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*.¹ The apostasy Cracroft identified was the non-Mormon nature of many of the poems included in a putatively Mormon volume. He sensed this regrettable falling away from Mormon spiritual roots in such poems as Lance Larsen’s “Passing the Sacrament at Eastgate Nursing Home.” Here he discerned “no hint of transcendence or greening spirituality,” calling it “a competent, earth-bound (non-Mormon) poem.”² Cracroft

1. Eugene England and Dennis Clark, eds., *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); Richard H. Cracroft, review of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* in *BYU Studies* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 119-123.

2. *Ibid.*, 123.

delineated the criteria for Mormon literature which he felt would restore it to its true potential. Truly Mormon literature would resound with the "distinctively Latter-day Saint voice, the sensibility of the believing poet."³ He spoke of the stewardship of the Latter-day Saint artist centering in a:

deep-felt awareness of mankind's indebtedness to the redemption freely proffered by Christ and of the power God has granted his children to sanctify themselves by overcoming the world. In such a reality Latter-day Saints live, move, and have their being; it is their meat and drink; and it is this covenant theology that has moved Saints, from 1830 to the present, to flee Babylon, sacrifice the world, and cross the spiritual plains to Zion, forging en route an evolving latter-day mythos that becomes the soil—not merely a sprayed-on nutrient—for the Latter-day Saint poet.⁴

As Joseph felt a falling away from truth and then helped fill it with a stream of potent words, so Richard Cracroft has felt a falling away from truth in Mormon letters and would fill that void with his own highly eloquent vision of the LDS "mythos."

Bruce Jorgensen, in his turn, also fulfilled the paradigm of Mormon criticism when he addressed a falling away from the truth, a certain apostasy he sensed in Cracroft's review. Like Cracroft and Joseph Smith before him, Jorgensen, in his 1991 presidential address to the Association for Mormon Letters, filled the void he felt by trying to restore the truth to which he had been witness.⁵

Cracroft's review, bold enough to label a poem by a Mormon author about a Mormon priesthood ordinance as fundamentally non-Mormon, raised a question that had been raised before: What is Mormon literature? But determining the essence of Mormon literature is precisely that falling away from truth to which Jorgensen objected. Labeling works as "Mormon" or "non-Mormon" is an act of uncharitable exclusion. Jorgensen proposed a kinder, gentler criticism, one employing the "ancient and widely understood habit of hospitality as metaphor and ground for Christian (and Mormon) imagination and criticism."⁶ In Jorgensen's vision for criticism, he would restore this ancient custom of hospitality; we would then see ourselves as "a wayside inn, not a court." Rather than making essentialist judgments tending toward xenophobia and ethnocen-

3. Ibid., 122.

4. Ibid., 121.

5. Bruce W. Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," *Sunstone* 16, no. 5 (July 1993): 41-50. Reprinted and slightly revised in *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature*, Lavina Fielding Anderson and Eugene England, eds. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996): 49-68. Also online at the Mormon Literature website: <http://humanities.byu.edu/MLDB/totell.htm>.

6. Ibid., 43.

trism, we should be entertaining guests, hearing new tales. Our criticism, if I am accurately representing Jorgensen, should convey a sense of tolerant community that acknowledges differences in experience and invites these to be starting points for sharing our stories, rather than demarcations of inclusion and exclusion. "Welcome to our common room," should be our invitation to the stranger. "Tell us your story."

Interestingly, in criticizing Cracroft's review, Jorgensen was holding fast to Cracroft's criteria. Jorgensen's criticism was deeply rooted in the Mormon experience and spiritual tradition: not only did he draw upon scriptural evidence from Abraham through the road to Emmaus episode on the issue of hosting strangers, but his tone was characteristic of those key Mormon communication ideals articulated in the Doctrine and Covenants: he spoke with persuasion, with kindness, with gentleness, and love unfeigned.

Cracroft questioned whether Jorgensen also spoke with "pure knowledge" since he saw their positions to be conflicting. In turn, Cracroft answered Jorgensen in his own AML presidential address in 1992, attempting once again to restore the truth to which he had been witness.⁷ This is consistent with the Restoration paradigm. Truth was not restored wholesale to the earth one spring day in 1820 like the ark of the covenant returned to Solomon's temple. Successive prophets and visions have built up truth line upon line, sometimes pronouncing things seemingly in conflict with one another but always in a consistent spirit. And so if Jorgensen and Cracroft disagree, even strongly, they both serve truth by speaking it in love, and in their cheerful banter toward one another, we sense a mutual love unfeigned. That crucial tone of good will, a contrast from the rancor that characterizes some non-Mormon criticism, is an act of charity toward their audiences, allowing us faith in the reconciliation of views that may at first appear opposing.

To me the conflict between Jorgensen and Cracroft is resolved at one remove, at the point at which we see them both practicing Mormon criticism. I believe criticism undergirds the issue of defining our literature (and will keep this as a primary focal point), but there are even greater things afoot. If we will view both literature and criticism within the larger context of the Restoration, then the two positions which Cracroft and Jorgensen represent—fidelity to the Mormon ethos and openness to otherness—become complementary and mutually interdependent necessities in a venture so significant it cuts across lines of Mormon membership: effecting a Zion culture.

7. Richard H. Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *Sunstone* 16, no. 5 (July 1993): 51-57. Also on-line at the Mormon Literature website: <http://humanities.byu.edu/MLDB/attune.htm>.

As Cracroft exemplifies in his passionate eloquence, the sense of a unique vision is empowering. Unless we safeguard our sense of being a peculiar people with noble and lofty purposes, Mormon letters can never achieve its potential significance for Mormon and non-Mormon audiences alike. Inscribed upon the palms of our hands and the fleshy tables of our hearts should be those seminal statements from Spencer W. Kimball and Orson Whitney, the veritable patriarchal blessings for Mormon letters:

For years I have been waiting for someone to do justice in recording in song and story and painting and sculpture [to] the story of the Restoration, the reestablishment of the kingdom of God on earth. . . .⁸

We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own. God's ammunition is not exhausted. His brightest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God's name and by his help we will build up a literature whose top shall touch heaven, though its foundations may now be low in [the] earth.⁹

If we do not regularly revive and refresh the vision in these words, we may be left wandering in Sinai or on some muddy bank of the Platte, forever this side of the promised land where Mormon letters blossom as a rose. Moreover, unless we sustain this vision, a non-Mormon audience will suffer from what we do not contribute to it both by way of literature and criticism. So concerned about the development of our own culture, we sometimes forget that its greatness will in no way be proportional to its insularity. Having Miltons and Shakespeares of our own means providing new Miltons and Shakespeares for the entire world. After all, it wouldn't be Mormon to hoard up truth and beauty for self-consumption like a two-year cache of unground wheat. In keeping the vision of Mormon letters alive, we must keep alive its complete breadth.

That breadth must comprise the unique role possible for Mormon criticism, not just Mormon literature. Mormon criticism begins in the fact that Mormonism itself is a critique of the world it has entered, and its set of claims about God and man and time and eternity provide the basis for a rich critical tradition, as Eugene England has eloquently and powerfully argued.¹⁰

8. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," *Ensign* 7 (July 1977): 3.

9. Orson Whitney, "Home Literature," *Contributor* (July 1888). Reprinted in Cracroft and Lambert, eds., *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), 206. Also on-line at the Mormon Literature website: <http://humanities.byu.edu/MLDB/homelit.htm> [18].

10. See Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature After 150 Years," *BYU Studies* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 131-60, reprinted in Thomas G. Alexander and Jessie L. Embry, eds., *After 150 Years: The Latter-day Saints in Sesquicentennial Perspective* (Provo, Utah: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1983), 97-146. England expanded

Early leaders of the church made specific statements regarding the nature of critical discourse and its relationship to learning and literature of which we should be reminded. Joseph Smith and Brigham Young both encouraged vigorous verbal explorations of truth. From Liberty Jail Joseph mourned,

How vain and trifling have been our spirits, our conferences, our councils, our meetings, our private as well as public conversations—too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters of the called and chosen of God.¹¹

Hugh Nibley clarifies Joseph's meaning of *condescending*: "settling for inferior goods to avoid effort and tension." Such intellectual cowardice Brother Brigham could not abide. With typical verve he affirmed:

That diffidence or timidity we must dispense with. When it becomes our duty to talk, we ought to be willing to talk . . . interchanging our ideas and exhibiting that which we believe and understand affords an opportunity for detecting and correcting errors.¹²

In Nibley's gloss of Brigham, "the expanding mind must be openly and frankly critical, come hell or High Council."¹³

Rigorous critical discourse was seen as a necessary part of what Nibley explains is the grandiose intellectual project to which newly converted Saints have been put to work, "nothing less than the salvaging of world civilization!"¹⁴ We can hear this in the less quoted but equally important parts of Orson Whitney's 1888 Home Literature address. "God had designed, and his Prophet [Joseph Smith] had foreseen, a great and glorious future for that people," said Whitney.

He knew there must come a time . . . when Zion, no longer the foot, but as the head, the glorious front of the world's civilization, would arise and shine

and updated this as "Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects," David J. Whittaker, ed., *Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995), 455-505. This is available on-line at the Mormon Literature website, <http://humanities.byu.edu/MLDB/progress.htm>. An abbreviated version of this same essay may be found in Anderson and England, *Tending the Garden*.

The many iterations of England's essay reflect the way he and others have also followed the Restoration paradigm. Brian Evenson perceived a lapse in some of England's claims, especially about postmodern literary theory, in his "Chaotic Matter: Eugene England's 'The Dawning of a Brighter Day,'" *Dialogue* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 159-62. England subsequently refined and somewhat altered his claims in later versions of his essay.

11. Quoted in Hugh Nibley, "Educating the Saints—A Brigham Young Mosaic," Cracroft and Lambert, *A Believing People*, 229.

12. *Ibid.*, 229-30.

13. *Ibid.*, 230.

14. *Ibid.*, 223.

"the joy of the whole earth"—the seat of learning, the source of wisdom, and the centre of political power, when, side by side with pure Religion, would flourish Art and Science, her fair daughters.¹⁵

Zion's citizens, Whitney foresaw, would be "as famed for intelligence and culture as for purity, truth and beauty. . . . [Joseph Smith] knew that his people must progress, that their destiny demanded it; that culture is the duty of man, as intelligence is the glory of God."¹⁶ Whitney's rousing rhetoric impressed on young saints that they were "on the threshold of the mightiest mission ever given to men in the flesh," a mission, I would emphasize, entailing more than acquiring converts (however important that is). The Restoration comprises the very renaissance of the world and its culture. And, to continue citing Whitney, "It is by means of literature that much of this great work will have to be accomplished; a literature of power and purity, worthy of such a work."¹⁷

Did Orson Whitney see literature as proselyting fare? Yes. But not only! "Literature means learning" he asserted, giving it an important epistemological—not just a proselytizing—purpose.¹⁸ To read Whitney is to understand literature as more of an *activity* than a body of static works. It is what we *do* on the way to a still distant, spiritual-cultural destiny called Zion. The reading and writing of literature become enterprises that are part of the renovation of world culture enabled by the Restoration as it continues unfolding toward Zion.

Our early leaders did not divorce the concept of literature from that of achieving Zion, and this meant not short-changing literature's potential to help saints both teach *and* learn. The urgency in Joseph Smith's and Brigham Young's opinions about rigorous critical discourse came from their understanding of how much the saints needed to grow intellectually, as well as from an understanding of the natural error many Latter-day Saints still make: believing we already *have* all truth because we would claim it. These church leaders saw the reading and producing of literature as a tool to help saints grow to the level of intellectual vitality a Zion society required and with which to approach the full breadth of truth that a Zion world would embrace. They held to this view of literature's role as strongly as to the view that it should serve to record or disseminate Mormon wisdom to the literate and the literary.

"Let us not narrow ourselves up," Brigham warned, for the world, with all its variety of useful information and its rich hoard of hidden treasure, is before

15. Whitney, 204.

16. *Ibid.*, 204.

17. *Ibid.*, 204.

18. *Ibid.*, 205.

us; and eternity, with all its sparkling intelligence, lofty aspirations, and unspeakable glories, is before us.¹⁹

Mormonism aspires to intelligence and culture as ideals towards which we may move only by engaging ourselves in heaven and earth at once in an act of critical faith. Literature is a way of broadcasting our knowledge and experience, but may more fruitfully be seen in light of Brigham Young's and Orson Whitney's comments as learning, as epistemology, as an agency through which this Zion culture to which we aspire is, in the same act, both discovered and achieved.

Given the views of these early church leaders on literature, critical discourse and education in light of the unfolding Restoration and its movement toward a Zion culture, I am better prepared to show how Cracroft's and Jorgensen's seemingly disparate views actually frame the twin requirements for a Mormon criticism and literature. Cracroft urges us to be grounded in the Mormon "mythos" in both our criticism and our literature—which I understand to mean both our culture's history and our Mormon "ethos." He is right, for if our roots are not deep in the soil of Mormon experience and in the spiritual reality of the Restoration, we are only voices in the relativistic maelstrom of modern Babel and Babylon. But to be grounded in the Mormon "mythos" is to be willing to journey into the unknown with faith that in entertaining the stranger, as Jorgensen urges us to do, we might be entertaining angels unawares, messengers of truth who require our patient listening before we know them for who they are.

The production and analysis of literature are too narrowly conceived if these activities are viewed only as a means of disseminating or shoring up what we already have or know. Our early church leaders urged us to deeper kinds of engagement, the kind of interaction with different thoughts and people that will enable us to grow and change, not simply accumulate and dispense (or teach). In entertaining the stranger, we might teach, but we should hope to learn and to develop through exchanges made in good faith. Our Mormon religion, our heritage, and theology and experience are all precious and worthy to be shared; they are equally worthy to be expanded, to be completed, to be broadened in that adventure that can only come through entertaining what is strange to us and by maintaining that humility inherent in the Restoration from its inception: truth comes in installments of light, and sometimes only in the friendly fray of intense critical discourse.

Worries over preserving Mormon identity in literature should center less on whether we are reminding readers of our current cultural configuration than on whether we are maintaining this vision of an emerging

19. Quoted in Nibley, "Educating the Saints," 223.

Mormon identity—one in which we come to understand ourselves more fully during that process of reflection and interaction which occurs in making ourselves known to others and making others known to us. We will see ourselves emerging not just in numbers, but in cultural significance—both to the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and to those outside our fold.

But just as our Mormon roots enjoin openness to the stranger, that same religious heritage constrains the nature of that openness. "Entertaining the stranger" does not necessarily equate with "pluralism" or "diversity" as these terms are sometimes used in today's idiom; acknowledging and seeking truth in all realms isn't tantamount to relativism. To be open in a Mormon way is to be so only in terms of the Restoration: we are to seek wisdom from out of the best books, but faith is to accompany our studies (D&C 88:188); we are to be instructed in things both in heaven and earth, but are required to prove and test all things before holding fast to them as truth (D&C 88:78-80; 1 Thess. 5:21); we seek after what is of good report (within and outside of Mormon areas), but we are to use our powers of discernment to gauge whether the report is trustworthy (Art. of Faith 13; Moroni 7:13-19). A Mormon epistemology governs our openness: knowledge is sought, debated, and expressed by those believing truth can be circumscribed into one great whole; the Holy Ghost is held to be as valid a means of knowledge as empiricism or rational debate; whatever persuades to believe in Christ is held to be of God; individuals are empowered to discern absolutely what is of God in their own lives but are constrained by concepts of stewardship and non-lateral revelation not to generalize this freely to others; the means by which we obtain, discuss, and spread knowledge is understood to have an ethical dimension that we ignore only at the risk of violating our covenants of allegiance and our deepest convictions to be charitable and honor the worth of souls.

Should we ask whether something is Mormon literature? Not unless we are prepared to engage the issue fully, something that cannot be done without recourse to the larger issues this invokes, including both the openness enjoined by Jorgensen and the rootedness in Mormon experience and vision called for by Cracroft. Hopefully I have shown these two positions to be inter-implicating: one cannot be true to the Mormon "mythos" or "ethos" without venturing out, pioneer-like, to engage strange worlds and peoples; similarly, our encounters with strangers are prosperous only through the liberating restraints of our Mormon epistemology.

Of even greater importance than the reconciliation of these two views is that which envelopes them both—the Restoration. Mormon literature, as Mormon criticism, history, education, arts and discourse generally, must be regarded within the encompassing vision and teleology

of the Restoration. To what is all of this leading, after all? Mormon literature and criticism can only progress within a vision of the rise of Mormon culture to its culmination in a Zion culture. Another way of saying this is that the role of Mormon literature and criticism will not be to establish what our culture currently conceives of as Zion (something too apocalyptically distant, I fear, and too simplistically like a cross between the United Order and the Emerald City); rather, Mormon criticism and literature will help to discover and define Zion—to *achieve* this aspiration, not just reflect it. Mormon literature and criticism cannot work toward these ends as long as they are seen statically. Their available potential is linked to their heuristic and explorative capacities, not just their ability to mimetically represent or advertise Mormon experience or religion.

What is Mormon literature? The answer will always change so long as it is a literature living up to its potential for furthering the Restoration. Like those who would read and write it, Mormon literature must be seen as progressing toward our common goal. Perhaps it, like us, can fall away, repent, and move forward to Zion.

Perhaps we have fallen away from the unity of our founders' visions and must be restored to the ideal that our literary enterprise is itself an effort to salvage, perfect, and redeem world culture. This is a vision with heights so high one gasps at the pitch, but then, great doings are only fueled by great visions, and we are believers in the small and simple bringing of great things to pass.

Let us view Mormon letters and criticism as means of engaging the world and the restored gospel simultaneously. This puts us into a precious and precarious position of participating simultaneously in two worlds which are never wholly compatible. There is always the danger of closing oneself to the other side. More frequent, I believe, are two dangers: misrepresenting one side to another and underestimating the utility of one side to the other. Let me illustrate.

As Mormons we fall prey to a certain fallacy of gleaning. Told to search the world for knowledge, we come home with reiterations of things we already knew, like LaRena Homer, the protagonist in Donald Marshall's "All the Cats in Zanzibar," who visits Egypt and the Holy Lands but never really leaves Panguitch.²⁰ If we reduce the world's learning back into Mormon terms without allowing our engagement with the world to change or redefine our essential being, we might as well have stayed in Panguitch with LaRena. I respect John Tanner for his essay, "Making a Mormon of Milton," which criticizes this easy trap of

20. Donald R. Marshall, "All the Cats in Zanzibar," *The Rummage Sale* (Salt Lake City: Tabernacle Books, 1999), 27-35.

dissolving real otherness through assimilation.²¹ Engaging the other is an act of faith, not an exercise in sacking a text for Mormon-looking quotes or attitudes. Our indignation rises when people misrepresent Mormons by putting us into their unsavory terms without respect to our essential identity, yet I must wonder whether Wordsworth might feel equally misrepresented were he to hear our frequent and acontextual use of his "trailing clouds of glory" lines to corroborate LDS doctrine about the pre-mortal existence. We ought to have the faith (and respect) to try to see others' experience and beliefs as they, in fact, experience and believe them. This is both sound criticism and sound Christianity.

The second error I mentioned being possible for the Mormon critic—perched precariously there between two worlds—is underestimating the utility of one group for the other. A good example of this is the dismissive impulse some Mormons have regarding works of "gentile" literature, particularly those which depict evils which Mormons do not approve of. And while I do think another tenet of Mormon criticism is the fundamental respect of a reader's agency (even the agency to bypass art works I hold dear), I admire the way Karl Keller has shown how fiction, even putatively "bad" fiction, can be serving ends that Mormons could identify as their own. He explains how the reading of literature is "a kind of sacrament of the Lord's supper in which one constantly renews his search for anything that is true and good."²² He helps Mormons see that even the worst literature might be morally useful in engaging our critical search for the true and good. More of this kind of criticism could redeem whole literary worlds for some Mormons.

Keller's criticism is also useful because it analogously employs a religious ordinance. Once analogized, the religious concept is made available and useful to that secular reader who may dismiss or ignore religious faith altogether. An atheistic reader, for example, could alter her view of the fundamentally disengaged nature of aesthetics after considering Keller's analogy. Never practicing religion herself, she still could understand that Mormons or Christians generally employ the sacramental ordinance for introspection and may choose to accept Keller's claim that such an experience is genuinely analogous to the reading experience. A Mormon critic knows you don't have to make someone a Mormon to bring him or her good thoughts and things by way of our religion.

In time I hope to further probe the ways by which the religious and secular realms can prove to be resources to one another and how fruitful

21. John S. Tanner, "Making a Mormon of Milton," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 191-206.

22. Karl Keller, "On Words and the Word of God: The Delusions of a Mormon Literature," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 3 (Autumn 1969), 19.

our role as Mormon critics could be in exploiting this reciprocal relationship. To be brief, our middle position between two worlds enables us to consider religion in secular terms and to understand secular concerns in religious terms—each enabling a better understanding of the other. Kenneth Burke has mined a rich vein here in his formidable *Rhetoric of Religion*.²³ He is a model to Mormon critics in exploiting religious language for the secular realm. He does this not out of any missionary zeal, but because he finds religious language such a thorough system, and thus a powerful critical paradigm when applied analogously to other fields. Wouldn't it be uncharitable not to give others our own thorough theology in this same way? We would do well to further investigate and perhaps imitate Burke, making our religion itself available to the world as a thorough and engaging critical paradigm.

Within the paradigm that is the Mormon worldview, I find Restoration a compelling starting place—historically, religiously, and conceptually. Consider the Restoration not merely as a pattern for Mormon criticism, but a vision within whose contemplation Mormon criticism, literature, and culture will together flourish. Let us restore the vision of the Restoration itself, the critical methods which our church fathers enjoined as a means of advancing it, the cultural renaissance it holds out as an ideal, the engagement with worlds beyond familiar Mormon ones that the Restoration requires, and ultimately, the Restoration's consummation in that apex of social, political, religious, and artistic progress we call Zion.

23. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1970).