

## Remembering Gene and His Generation

Robert A. Rees, ed. *Proving Contraries: A Collection of Writings in Honor of Eugene England*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005, 310 pp., \$32.95.

*Reviewed by R. John Williams, doctoral candidate in comparative literature at UC Irvine*

In the spirit of Eugene England, I would like this review to read something like a personal essay. So I'll start with something personal. I'm writing this review for two important reasons, one noble, and the other less so: First, Gene was one of my professors during my undergraduate days at BYU, the first, and perhaps only professor I had there who truly challenged his students, moving us out of our comfortable intellectual certainty as young confident Mormon know-it-alls. Second, to be frank, this book costs \$35, and I'm a relatively young Ph.D. graduate; offering to write a review was one way of getting a free copy of the book without stretching the wallet.

These two reasons are in some ways related, and it might even be Gene's fault. What if I had not experienced the exhilarating motivation of Gene's gentle but demanding questions in class? What if I had not found the depth and energy of Gene's intellectual "dialogue" with literary greatness? Would I have gone into academia as I have? The truth is, I was headed for law school and would probably have made a fine lawyer. But I also have to give some credit to the administration at BYU, as it was not only what Gene did in class—but also what he had been restricted from doing—that provided that extra bit of motivation. Gene had wanted us to read things he could not assign at BYU (where his tenure proved more "contrary" than he ever thought it would), and this censorship fascinated me. How could such a gentle, Christlike, and intelligent teacher meet with such resistance at the Lord's university?

I can distinctly remember walking up to the Harold B. Lee Library reserve desk, where I requested the article in which he had argued that polygamy was hardly a celestial law and that we would do well to stop thinking that it was. He had placed it there after being told that he could not distribute it to his class. It was fine, the administration told him, if one of us sought it out on our own, but he was not allowed to *require* us to read it. So I read it. And then everything else Gene had written. And then every back issue of *Dialogue* I could get my hands on. It was as if I were tapping in to a vast, pulsing energy, something rigorous and exciting and true. So now I am a poor graduate student with an intellectual debt to one of the great Mormon liberal fathers, and I love it.

The book itself is a series of brilliant and thought-provoking essays and poems on a wide array of subjects, all of them written "in honor" of Gene. As is the case with the *festschrift* genre in general, the phrase "writings in honor" is employed with some elasticity, as the essays and poems range from directly remembering Gene (as in writing about Gene, to honor his memory) to writing simply *alongside* Gene (including essays that Gene himself may have critiqued at some point), to writing on topics that may have simply interested Gene (writing in his wake, as it were, without directly referring to him at all). If one omitted the occasional reference to Gene, the photographs, and a few of the essays that directly remember him, the volume would read something like a normal, if better-than-average, issue of *Dialogue*. In fact, I think this is why the book costs \$35: I am not the target audience. Generally, the people who will buy this book are "average" *Dialogue* readers—those who, like me, remember Gene with fondness, but unlike me are generally over age fifty and own nice homes somewhere in the Western states.<sup>1</sup>

This was not always the case. Back in 1987, when Gene was actively teaching and publishing and when *Dialogue* conducted a readers' survey, those same readers were in their mid-thirties. It may be that the \$35 price tag has quite a bit to do with the nice, acid-free paper, the excellent binding, the photos, and the classy dust jacket. But in another sense, the price simply reflects the buying power of its target audience whose members have not only enjoyed the fruits of Gene's brilliant intellectual and spiritual work but have also moved into another stage of their own intellectual, spiritual, (and financial) journeys, a kind of superannuated "memoir" stage. R. W. Rasband, in a review of this same book for the Association for Mormon Letters, writes, "As I look over the table of contents I can't help but notice that the majority of contributors are at or near retirement, the same age that England was. This saddens me because a truly remarkable generation of independent Mormon thinkers is passing, and I honestly can't see who is going to replace them in today's more homogenized church culture."<sup>2</sup>

But no matter who assumes the reins of "independent" Mormon scholarship in the future, one can be relatively certain that the venues for that intellectual activity will seldom involve *paper*. The "next generation" of Mormon scholars do not, as a general rule, shell out \$35 for essays in honor of the previous generation (which is not to say that they shouldn't). They do not, unfortunately, even subscribe to *Dialogue*. Whoever these next Mormon intellectuals are, they are connected to digital networks, computer screens, and online discussion groups. One finds them woven into the fabric of online "threads," moving through cyberspace with relative anonymity. They show up at online sites like Times and Seasons, Exponent II Blog, By Common Consent, Feminist Mormon Housewives, Millennial Star, and a host of other blog-like discussion sites.

Having perused many of these online sites myself and even contributed to

these discussions on occasion, two things strike me as interesting: First, how exciting, heated, wonderful, and brilliant some of these discussions can be on the one hand, while sometimes slipping into a kind of quasi-intellectual form of "self expression" rather than true "communication" and "dialogue" on the other. And second, how seldom, if ever, those participating in these discussions realize the enormous wealth of foundational intellectual work already done in forty years of *Dialogue* publications.<sup>3</sup> While some may argue that each generation must work out these problems on its own, I would contend that there is incredible value in digging into the discursive past. Trolling through these online forums, I have often wondered things like, "Wasn't that Michael Coe's point back in 1973?" Or, "Wouldn't this person benefit from Gene's *Letter to a College Student* from 1974?" Or even, "Isn't there a great article on that topic in the current issue of *Dialogue*?"

My point, then, is that *Proving Contraries* should be read as something like an open portal to an important and rigorous intellectual past, one that seems to be increasingly forgotten, in our blog-saturated culture. One might turn, for instance, to Armand Mauss's succinct explanation of a transformation that has occurred in Mormon public discourse over the last half-century. In his essay "Feelings, Faith, and Folkways," Mauss notices that whereas speakers in Mormon chapels might have at one time "reached under the lectern in search of the books of scripture often available to pulpit speakers," that same move today is characterized more by a reach for that "dependable box of Kleenex tissues" (23). This change in pulpit-style discourse, Mauss argues, "symbolizes the triumph of feeling over understanding" in today's church; "of a softer worship over a harder one; perhaps of an evangelical—or even Pentecostal—homiletic over an analytical style; of personalized adaptations of scripture over appreciation of historical context. It represents the triumph of the heart over the head in popular Latter-day Saint religious expression" (24).

One might also turn to Margaret Blair Young's contribution, "Gene—Sorry I Missed You (P.S. I still do)," in which she recounts a fascinating personal journey toward a "writing life" that began when Gene pushed her "to finally tell the hard stories my heart had learned so well" (188). One might delve into Lavina Fielding Anderson's fascinating essay on "Joseph Smith's Sisters," in which she turns her attention to three of the "obscure historical characters in LDS history," thus reminding us that "Brother" Joseph was not only the leader of a burgeoning church, but a member of a family as well. Wayne Booth's essay, "Are We Losing Democratic Education?" is a testament to his renewed interest in Mormonism and his ongoing commitment to more egalitarian institutions of education, both of which were important for Gene, whom Booth considered a close friend.

There are similarly works of breathtaking poetry, hard-hitting drama, and vivid, soul-searing literature by writers like Emma Lou Thayne, Tim Slover, and Douglas Thayer. In short, *Proving Contraries* is a brilliant monument to the work