"After the Body of My Spirit": Embodiment, Empathy, and Mormon Aesthetics

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Nearly thirty-five years ago, Merrill Bradshaw wrote: "It seems almost unbelievable that after all these years of the development of Mormon thought we still have no genuine Mormon aesthetic theory."[1] Such a statement might initially strike the reader as a bit out of date considering the abundance of writing on Mormon aesthetics since Bradshaw penned those words.[2] However, that very abundance illustrates the existence of an ongoing conversation about Mormon aesthetics that reflects the difficulty Bradshaw mentions. Additionally, there is a larger question embedded in Bradshaw's words: Is there—or can there ever be—genuine Mormon aesthetic theory? The word "genuine," of course, is problematic, as is the term "Mormon aesthetic." What is a "genuine Mormon aesthetic" and what does it look like? How is it practiced? What does it value? The answers to these questions, as Bradshaw suggests, are not easy to come by. Given the multiplicity of both individual responses to art and the proliferation of aesthetic theories generally, is it any wonder, one may ask, that Mormon aesthetic theory has not yet achieved what Bradshaw assumed it could?

Of course, Bradshaw's questions reflect a larger concern of Christian thought generally. Mainstream Christianity, too, has had a tumultuous history regarding art and aesthetics, in part because Christianity has a long tradition of rejecting certain types of art that seem to celebrate or arouse various bodily sensations. Such art, it is assumed, is more likely to lead one to sin rather than to enlightenment.[3] In its final session, for example, the Roman

Catholic Church's Council of Trent issued the following statement on religious imagery:

> Moreover, in the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the sacred use of images, every superstition shall be removed, all filthy lucre be abolished; finally, all lasciviousness be avoided; in such wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust; nor the celebration of the saints, and the visitation of relics be by any perverted into revellings and drunkenness; as if festivals are celebrated to the honour of the saints by luxury and wantonness.[4]

Note especially the acknowledgement (and condemnation) of the fact that at least certain kinds of beauty can excite lust and that the artist is to avoid creating any images that might arouse any or all of the so-called "baser" emotions such as "lust" and "lasciviousness." Such was the Catholic Church's preoccupation with avoiding sin that it prescribed very specific limits for what kind of beauty could be acceptably rendered in a painting. This preoccupation, of course, is not unique to Catholic thought, nor is it restricted to the distant Christian past.

Most compelling about the above passage, however, is the association of beauty with bodily sensations. The body and its attendant sensations have traditionally been sites of anxiety and fear for most strains of Christianity, not just Mormonism, a fact recognized and even occasionally lamented by contemporary Christian theologians. Father Thomas Ryan, for example, suggests that Christianity has disclaimed the human body and that Christians would benefit from reclaiming the body and reintegrating it into Christian theology.[5] Ryan's suggestion recalls one of Aquinas's assertions regarding the body/soul dichotomy in *On Being and Essence*, where he claims that both the body (what Aquinas terms "matter") and the soul (what Aquinas terms "form") are essential to the composition of a human being. Aquinas's paradigm should be familiar to Mormons since Mormonism, too, conceives of the soul as a combination of body and spirit.[6]

If, then, Mormon thought conceives of the body and the spirit working in concert, why does Mormonism exhibit such trepidation

about the body itself, specifically about the sensorium the body makes available to us? And how does such trepidation inform (or influence the development of) Mormon aesthetic theory? While Mormon doctrine clearly indicates that the body and spirit are to work in concert in order to achieve the eventual perfection of the soul, it is also true that there is a fundamental tension between the body and the spirit inherent in Mormon thought. In part, such a conflict is understandable: Mormon doctrine, like much other Christian doctrine, teaches that the postlapsarian body is subject to appetites that are more difficult to control once the body has undergone the transformation from Edenic to fallen vessel.[7] The fear that the body and its attendant feelings and sensations can lead us astray is one concept that has limited Mormon thought about art, affect, and aesthetics. Tensions between the bodily and the spiritual as well as between aesthetics and values are, of course, unique to neither Mormonism nor Christianity, but for the purposes of this article, I confine myself to the tensions inherent in the relationship between Mormon values and aesthetic theory more generally.[8] In doing so, I argue that Mormon theology enables the establishment of an aesthetic framework that privileges a kind of bodily empathy that is resolutely physical and therefore universal. This aesthetic framework is deeply intertwined with Mormon doctrine generally and with the specific, stated goal of Mormon temple worship: to bind together the entirety of the human family.

To accomplish the establishment of this new aesthetic, I begin with three assertions:

> 1) *Current Mormon aesthetic ideas/theories are insufficient because they are generally values-based, meaning that most works of art are evaluated less for aesthetic considerations and more for whether they conform to Mormon ideology and LDS Church standards or are "uplifting" in a general sense.*[9] Such an approach to art encourages, I would suggest, the diametric opposite of what much art proposes to accomplish: the mediation (and perhaps the collapsing) of the distance between created object and feeling subject.[10]
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> 2) *Values-based criticism prevents us from seeing art as a broad expression of human experience in all of its variety and complexity.* It therefore

alienates us from a vast array of human experience and emotion with the corresponding consequence that we become more likely to alienate ourselves from those with whom we are supposed to seek communion, i.e. the entire human race.

3) *A possible solution to the problem of what we might call "the dilemma of alienation" is to conceive of an aesthetic based on empathy, specifically a particular kind of bodily empathy that I believe is embedded in Mormon theology but which most Mormon scholars don't apply to the arts.* If we employ an aesthetic paradigm that both sufficiently accounts for and incorporates bodily sensation, we become more empathetic, more understanding, and less restrictive, thus allowing us to experience, process, and understand a broader (and perhaps deeper) range of emotion and human experience expressed by any given artistic object. We will also then be able to experience, process, and understand this broader palette of emotions in lived experience as well as in art.

I begin with an exchange by now well-known in the realm of Mormon aesthetics: the dialogue between Bruce Jorgensen and Richard Cracroft, two presidents of the Association for Mormon Letters who, in the respective years of their tenures, 1992 and 1993, gave inaugural addresses about the state of Mormon letters. The exchange is important in the history of Mormon aesthetics for a number of reasons, but I want to focus on a question that Jorgensen raises in response to Cracroft's review of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, edited by Eugene England and Dennis Clark. Among other things, Jorgensen takes issue with Cracroft's observation that many of the poems in the collection lack a cohesive, unifying, and distinctive Mormon voice and raises the question that is fundamental to the issue of whether there is or can be any sort of cohesive Mormon aesthetic: "I think the central question of all story—and thus possibly of every form of human culture—is just this: How shall we greet the Other? Shall we devour, or annihilate, or welcome?"[11]

Jorgensen's question highlights, perhaps unintentionally, one of the central ironies of Mormon history and theology. On the

one hand, Mormons emphasize their uniqueness, their "peculiarity," and the establishment of the "one true church" in the face of persecution; on the other hand, Mormonism has for its chief goal the uniting of the entire human family through its temple ordinances as well as its insistence on charity (what Mormons define as "the pure love of Christ"), service, and, in the words of one LDS leader, empathy, or "the gift to feel what others feel."[12] Terryl Givens succinctly summarizes these incongruities: "After predicating their very existence on the corruption of all other Christian faiths . . . and asserting their unique claim to be its 'only true' embodiment, Latter-day Saints are chagrined when they are excluded from the very community of believers they have just excoriated."[13] Givens thus raises a fundamental question for both Mormon theology and Mormon aesthetics: Can the fundamental tension between exclusivity and inclusivity inherent in Mormon thought be resolved to such a degree that a more nuanced, more complex, and more empathetic view of art can emerge?

I believe the answer to that question is yes, but only if Mormon critics recognize, value, and employ a paradigm of empathy that Mormon doctrine supports but that most Mormon critics seem unaware of. This paradigm of empathy is resolutely tied to the body, both in terms of how Mormon doctrine views it and the somatic responses it experiences when exposed to art. Such a combination of the body as divine gift and as feeling/sensory organ may initially strike the reader as incongruous, but there is evidence both that the body is the central vehicle of Mormon theology and that the body is that central vehicle because it is the organ and instrument of empathy.

Traditionally, the body has been seen in Mormon theology both as a reflection of God's design and as a link between humanity and God, especially where Mormon doctrine asserts that God has a perfect and incorruptible body and that mankind may also eventually possess such a body. Conversely, Mormon doctrine also asserts that God once possessed an imperfect, corruptible body just as we do now. Joseph Smith, in the King Follett sermon, states as much:

> God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! … It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did.[14]

The phrase "exalted man" clearly links God's past and man's future, but further, Smith's other claim that "we may converse with him as one man converses with another" implies that two embodied beings will inhabit a physical space and be able to communicate with each other because they have bodies. One consequence of having bodies in the afterlife, then, is that bodies allow us to directly communicate with God, suggesting that a kind of embodied discourse will be one way (perhaps the primary way) that humans commune with God. This arrangement further suggests that God would have it this way—that he values this particular form of communication since, presumably, he could have chosen to communicate with human beings in the afterlife in myriad ways and he chose this particular mode.

The embodied God of Mormon theology also further cements the relationship between empathy and aesthetics. James Faulconer, commenting on God's body, states:

> [O]ur experience of the body, the only standard we have for understanding embodiment, suggests that to say that God has a body is to say that his omniscience and omnipotence must be understood in ways quite different from traditional Christianity because embodiment implies situated openness to a world. In other words, divine embodiment also implies that God is affected by the world and by persons in his world.[15]

Faulconer's notion of God's "situated openness" suggests that God, as an embodied personage, values his own body because it allows him to perceive and interact with the world and the people in it in a particularly empathetic, even affective way. Faulconer himself implies this when he states that "divine embodiment also

implies that God is affected by the world and by persons in his world." Such an assertion leads to another conclusion: that God not only deliberately chose to be embodied, but also that he may have done so in order to be able to react with and respond to his world and its inhabitants in a particularly bodily/affective way.

Eugene England takes a tack similar to Faulconer's, even if it is ultimately less body-centered, though England does still posit an empathetic rather than a punishing God. In one article, he suggests that Mormon theology and early Church commentary may allow for a conception of a more empathetic God than what is traditionally conceived of by most Christians. At one point, attempting to differentiate Mormonism's view of God from what he calls a more "evangelical" view, England asks: "if believing in an absolutistic, punishing God tends to make us more judgmental and punishing, does believing in a weeping, genuinely compassionate God tend to make us more compassionate?"[16] England doesn't necessarily believe that it does, but his conception of an empathetic God does, on some level, align with Faulconer's God in the sense that both authors tend to think of God as being intimately and emotionally concerned with human affairs.

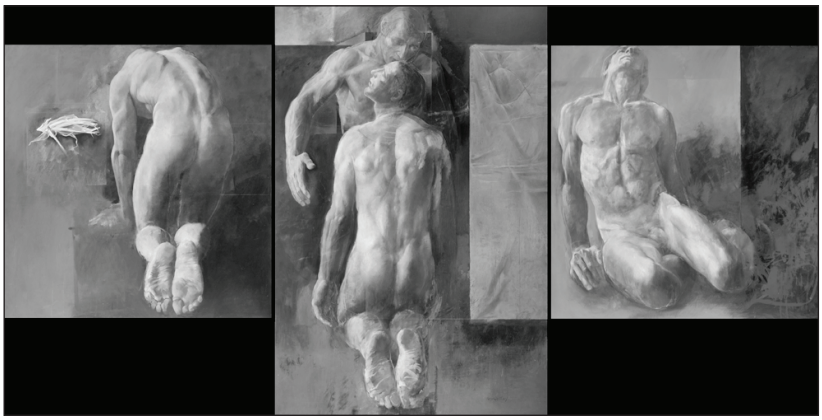
While England's and Faulconer's conceptions of an empathetic God appear to align generally, it is nonetheless also important to point out the historical tension between Mormonism's view of the body and mainstream Christianity's. Faulconer writes, "[T]he earliest latter-day discussion of divine embodiment is best understood as a rejection of traditional Christian doctrine concerning God and the metaphysics that makes that doctrine possible and perhaps even necessary."[17] Additionally, he reminds us that Joseph Smith believed that "[t]hat which is without body, parts and passions is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones." Faulconer's line of thinking is also echoed by Stephen H. Webb's claims about how Joseph Smith viewed matter generally. In his recent work, Webb writes, "While Luther's 'Here I stand' put the emphasis on the 'I,' Smith put the emphasis on the ground beneath his feet. Physical matter is so trustworthy and good that it is capable of taking innumerable forms in countless worlds, each with their own spiritual drama."[18] For Webb, as for

Faulconer, Joseph Smith, rather than viewing matter and flesh as dross or unclean, instead conceives of them as central to Mormon theology and, indeed, to the salvation of humankind.

On the other hand, however, David Paulsen, in his "Divine Embodiment: The Earliest Christian Understanding of God," asserts that Joseph Smith's concept of God closely adheres to early Christian beliefs about God as an embodied person and further claims that the "later Christian loss of the knowledge that God is embodied resulted from the attempt of early Christian apologists to reconcile their beliefs with their dominantly Greek culture."[19] Whether one sees Mormonism continuing an established Christian trend or breaking new ground, it's clear that early Mormonism believed embodiment to be not only a fundamental quality of God but also an essential component of human experience.

If, then, the Mormon God can be conceived of as not only the giver of laws but also as a divine empathizer, a being who seeks both communion and empathy with human beings in a decidedly bodily way, what are the implications for Mormon aesthetic theory? How ought Mormons respond to art? How are Mormons to understand and interpret art? To suggest there is only one way to do so is, of course, absurdly myopic, but I believe that re-conceptualizing the Mormon view of art to incorporate bodily empathy may allow for both a more fully realized and a more deeply and fundamentally moral aesthetic experience than a traditional values-based approach to art.

Perhaps an even more urgent question than the ones asked above is this: What does an aesthetic based on bodily empathy look like and to what moral end(s) might it point us? Mormon visual arts provide many works that can help answer that question, but considering the fact that the body itself is a key component of bodily empathy, it may prove fruitful to examine the work of an artist who takes for his subject the human body itself. The work of Trevor Southey, which often contains nudes, provides numerous opportunities to ground a theory of bodily empathy in a concrete work of art. Southey, a member of the Art and Belief movement that began with a group of Mormon artists in the 1960s, is known in part for his renderings of the human body. As such, his work



Prodigal *by Trevor Southey. Reprinted with permission from the artist.*

both demonstrates and encourages an awareness of physical bodies and their relationship to the viewer.

Southey's painting *Prodigal* consists of three panels, the frames of the left and the right horizontally-oriented panels slightly intruding on the center, vertically-oriented one. It seems a relatively safe assumption, given the title of the piece and the figures in the painting itself, that the series of images that confront the viewer is meant to convey a visual (re-)telling of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–31). Moving left to right, the first panel depicts a nude figure, hunched over, perhaps in shame, perhaps in supplication, facing away from the viewer. We are shown, too, an image of a corn husk just to the left of the hunched figure, recalling the words of Luke 15:16: "And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat." One of the most striking things about the painting is the fact that all four figures in the painting are nude. Because the original parable makes no mention of any of the participants lacking clothing, we can only assume that Southey has deliberately departed from the narrative of the parable, perhaps for more than one reason.

In the painting's central panel, we see the moment before the forgiving father embraces the prodigal son. Note the son's physical position, still with his back to us, on his knees, an attitude of

humility and sorrow, perhaps, more than the despair and shame that the painting's first panel demonstrates. The father, placed slightly above the son, has his right arm outstretched, ready to embrace the repentant child. The nudity in this panel, and indeed, the entire piece, allows us a more intimate, more privileged view of the son's (and father's) unadorned emotions. Without the mediating and masking effect of clothing, both the son's body and its positions facilitate the viewer's ability to identify in a bodily way with the son's emotional states.

The final panel of the painting presents another image of the son's nude body. Here, he is facing the viewer, not hiding himself from the viewer's sight. His head is thrown back, chest out, his legs folding under him. The expression on his face is difficult to read, notably because the head is tilted so far backward, but the expression that is visible along with the position of the body indicate that a change in emotional states has taken place. Here, the body, though dynamically posed, signals a different emotion, perhaps relief, perhaps languor, but certainly a more open, less troubled state than the body in the first panel. If one "reads" the painting's panels from left to right, there is clearly a movement from a "closed" or abject bodily position to the more open one in the far right panel. This movement symbolizes many things: the journey from shame/guilt to forgiveness, the redemptive power of bodily contact that signals acceptance and/or love, and the organic nature of the physical, bodily manifestations of a range of emotions.

That Southey's work triggers a kind of bodily empathy is confirmed by recent forays into empathy theory that suggest the way our bodies process data encourages empathy. Matthew Botvinick, et al., for example, discovered that viewing others' facial expressions of pain stimulated cortical areas in the brain that are also involved in the firsthand experience of pain.[20] Other research supports both the empathetic and bodily nature of emotions, especially as it is tied to language. As far back as the 1970s, there was a movement among certain critics to equate the body with what it experienced (e.g., poetry) and to bind the body inextricably to the surrounding environment, one component of which

was poetry. John Vernon, for example, in his *Poetry and the Body*, claims, "Language may actually be one of those things 'made of other stuff than we are,' but it also is involved with my body and so with matter."[21]

The work of other theorists further affirms the notion that the body is deeply involved in processing, perceiving, and apprehending any object that its senses can perceive. Paul Ekman, for example, claims that when we perceive or "apprehend" what he calls an "emotional object," an object or event that affects our emotional faculty, our first response is a postural/facial one (in other words, a physical one), which then simultaneously triggers an autonomic response *and* what he calls an "emotional state."[22] Additionally, Silvan Tomkins conducted a variety of experiments that recorded various physiological reactions to stimuli and advanced the idea that seven emotional expressions (startle, fear, interest, anger, distress, laughter, and joy) are innate responses of the body that are elicited by the central nervous system. As Jack Thompson summarizes, Tomkins argued that "voice, visual, and skin feedback may play a co-equal role with somatic muscle feedback in determining a specific emotional state. For example, hearing yourself scream increases your sense of terror, or feeling yourself blush increases your sense of embarrassment."[23] For my purposes, the significant phrase is "hearing yourself scream increases your terror." Tomkins posits that vocalization increases (we might say, intensifies) the already felt emotional "sense." The connection Tomkins makes between bodily actions such as screaming or feeling oneself blush and the heightened sense of the particular emotion that the physical action causes substantiates and supports the fact that the physical body is an instrument of empathy.

The relationship between the body and morality is further cemented when, in addition to modern science, we examine the myriad ways in which the body and its constituent parts function in scripture and Mormon practice. Note, for instance, the emphasis on bodily sensation when describing any number of spiritually significant phenomena: the Holy Ghost is, in many places, described as a "burning in the bosom,"[24] the Lord commanded Joseph Smith

to let his bowels be "full of charity for all men," the sacrament prayers use the bodily aspects of Christ, not the spiritual, as a call to remembrance of both him and the baptismal covenants that each member has made, and, perhaps most significantly for my purposes, the Atonement itself is described in distinctly bodily terms, in Doctrine and Covenants 19, especially in verse 18: "Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink." I shall return to the importance of such a bodily, sensual description of Christ's sufferings later, but it is worth suggesting that one reason Christ's sufferings are described in such bodily terms is so that we may be able to empathize with, understand, and feel grateful for his suffering on our behalf precisely because our body allows us to experience pain, suffering, and bitterness, even if in a lesser sense than did Christ's [body].

There is another moment in Mormon scripture that incorporates both Christ's embodiment and its accompanying empathy. This occurs in the book of Ether when the Lord reveals himself to the brother of Jared. In Ether, chapter 3, the brother of Jared, in preparation for a journey to the promised land, has "molten" sixteen clear stones out of a rock on Mount Shelem and has prayed to have the Lord touch them with his finger in order that they might light the Jaredites' way across the ocean. Perhaps most astonishing about what occurs next is not that the Lord reveals himself to the brother of Jared (quite an event, nonetheless), but that the first information he provides to the dumbfounded brother of Jared is that he, the brother of Jared, is like Christ in that they both possess a body. Verses 15 and 16 read:

> And never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast. Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image.
>
> Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even

> as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh.

Christ reveals many things in that passage, but several aspects of this encounter are especially important to note. First, as he tells the brother of Jared, no one has ever had the level of faith in Christ that the brother of Jared exhibited during his prayer. And, as a reward for this, the great truth that the Lord first teaches the brother of Jared is the truth of both the Lord's and the brother of Jared's fundamental physicality. Note that it is not enough for the Lord to essentially repeat what he has said in Genesis and other texts, that humans are crated after his own image. In this instance, Christ goes further, telling and showing the brother of Jared that his essential bodily-ness has both a spiritual and physical element.

This passage recalls the writing of some early Church figures, notably Orson Pratt, who, among others, claims that all spirit is matter, simply more refined matter. Speaking of the Holy Ghost in once instance, Pratt claims that:

> The Holy Spirit being one part of the Godhead, is also a material substance, of the same nature and properties in any respects, as the spirits of the Father and Son. It exists in vast immeasurable quantities in connexion [sic] with all material worlds. This is called God in the scriptures, as well as the Father and Son. God the Father and God the Son cannot be everywhere present; indeed they cannot be even in two places at the same instant; but God the Holy Spirit is omnipresent—it extends through all space, intermingling with all other matter, yet no one atom of the Holy Spirit can be in two places at the same instant, which in all cases is an absolute impossibility.[25]

According to Pratt, understanding that the Holy Spirit is material is absolutely necessary to understanding its operation: its "immeasurable quantities," its material, physical construction, and organization, allow it to be "in connexion" with all created, material worlds, thus allowing for the presence of God ("God the Holy Spirit") all through space, which is only possible because the matter that constitutes the Holy Spirit is able to intermingle

with all other matter. The insistent claims of early Church leaders regarding the Godhead's physical aspects are clarified by such passages as the one above and confirmed by Doctrine and Covenants 131:7–8, in which Joseph Smith writes: "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter." We see here that even spiritual essences, such as the spirit body that Christ reveals to the brother of Jared, are nonetheless formed of matter. Further, the fact that Jesus Christ possesses a body of spirit that will then become flesh is a revelatory reversal of the progress of the brother of Jared. Jesus Christ appearing as he is, as a "spiritual" body (a body that is nonetheless material, as indicated by Pratt's words), tells the brother of Jared that he will shortly take upon himself a body of "flesh," while simultaneously showing the brother of Jared what he can become: a more refined body.[26]

But what does this mean in the larger context of Mormon embodiment and its role in empathy and aesthetics? If we turn from a "bodily" moment to another, decidedly unembodied one, an answer about the fundamental part the body plays in Mormon theology emerges. In the book of Alma, the Zoramites believe, among other things that disturb Alma, that God is a spirit, now and forever. Alma 31:15–16 reads:

> Holy, holy God; we believe that thou art God, and we believe that thou art holy, and that thou wast a spirit, and that thou art a spirit, and that thou wilt be a spirit forever. Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren, which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers; but we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children; and also thou hast made it known unto us that there shall be no Christ.

Note the correlation in these two verses between the belief that God is a spirit and that there is to be "no Christ." Then, recall Alma's description of what the Zoramites do after saying their

public, rote prayer (from verse 23): "Now, after the people had all offered up thanks after this manner, they returned to their homes, never speaking of their God again until they had assembled themselves together again to the holy stand, to offer up thanks after their manner."

This section of Alma has traditionally been used to warn of the evils of excessive pride, particularly since Alma is careful to note that not only are the Zoramites incorrectly informed about both the existence of Christ and his physical body, but they are also proud and their hearts are "lifted up unto great boasting" (verse 25), not to mention the fact that they were also decidedly materialistic ("their hearts were set upon gold, and upon silver, and upon all manner of fine goods," [verse 24]). However, I wish to suggest an alternative reading, one that, ironically, illustrates the importance of embodiment in Mormon theology. Note, for instance, the correlation between the Zoramites' words at the Rameumptom and Alma's description of their habits once they had finished speaking; the Zoramites deny that God has a body and that Christ will appear and, directly afterward, they return to their homes and never speak of God again. I believe that Alma is here making a connection between the belief in a God of spirit rather than of flesh and a lack of speaking about God himself. One implication of the above passage, in other words, may be that not believing in an embodied God leads one to forget God, or at least, as the verse says, deliberately avoid speaking about him. This idea may be lent additional support if we again recall the sacrament prayers of the LDS Church, prayers that specifically and demonstrably state that in order to obtain the spirit of Christ and take upon one his name, one must first remember and commemorate his flesh and blood.

And why, ultimately, was it so important for the brother of Jared to know that Christ possessed a spirit body and would soon possess a body of flesh? To answer this question, we must return to Doctrine and Covenants 19. The description of the physical agonies that Christ endured during the Atonement perhaps holds the key to his pressing need to inform us of his essential physicality. Note the description of his suffering: "to tremble

because of pain and to bleed at every pore." Such a description, I would suggest, is aimed specifically at hearers who possess their own body, who understand on a physical, sensory level what bodily suffering is, and who are able to empathize with the Son of God as he describes his physical trial. Christ is careful to say that he suffered both "body and spirit," but his descriptions of his suffering are resolutely physical in order that humanity might understand, via bodily empathy, what he suffered for them. This leads to two conclusions about the physical body of Christ as it is revealed to the brother of Jared and to us: 1) the importance of our understanding the resolutely physical, tangible nature not only of celestial bodies but also of our experiences in the "life to come" and 2) the irrefutable role the body plays in cultivating and teaching empathy, both for our fellow human beings and for Jesus Christ. It is this second point that supports my claim that Mormon aesthetics would do well to embrace bodily empathy. We are continually told in the scriptures that we must have empathy with—and further, sometimes must mirror the emotional states of—other members of the human family. We are told by Paul to "weep with them that weep" (Romans 12:15), Alma preaches to "mourn with those that mourn" (Mosiah 18:9) as part of the baptismal covenant, and Christ teaches that his followers must feed the hungry and give drink to those who are thirsty. The fact that we are able to feel hunger, thirst, and the emotion of sorrow ourselves as it relates to mourning indicates that the body is the chief instrument of empathy.

From the evidence above, it is clear that the seeds of a new Mormon aesthetic lie within Mormon doctrine, an aesthetic that is based more on empathy and bodily sensation than on "values," whatever those values may constitute. One reason Mormon aesthetic thought resists the implications of the bodily may have to do with the continuing tension in Christian theology generally between the spirit and body. Despite Mormonism's insistence on the undeniable importance of the body to its core theology, it nonetheless remains simultaneously skeptical, even fearful, about the body and its sensations. Benjamin E. Park reminds us of the ongoing tension between the spirit and the body in early America:

> Rebelling against the strict boundaries set for bodily desires established by early Puritans—even if those boundaries were more embracing than Puritanism's Victorian descendants—Americans reappraised traditional morals. Coupled with the increasing Romantic tensions of the argument that humanity was innately good, early Americans wanted freedom from traditional cultural mores. These liberating beliefs, however, remained at the folk level and were often denounced by the clergy. Even if an increasing number of people yearned in private to follow their bodily impulses, public discourse continued to emphasize control and restraint.[27]

One might be able to make the same comment about contemporary Mormon views of the body that Park does about nineteenth-century public discourse: that it emphasizes control and restraint. Park goes on, however, to remind us of Parley P. Pratt's pamphlet, "Intelligence and Affection," in which Pratt makes a theological defense of human affections and emotion. As Park states:

> Pratt argued that natural bodily impulses were to be cultivated and amplified, not restricted or evaded. He taught that persons who view "our natural affections" as "the results of a fallen and corrupt nature," and are "carnal, sensual, and devilish" and therefore ought to be "resisted, subdued, or overcome as so many evils which prevent our perfection, or progress in the spiritual life . . . have mistaken the source and fountain of happiness altogether." Instead, the apostle claimed that any attempts to repress natural inclinations "are expressly and entirely opposed to the spirit, and objects of true religion."[28]

Pratt recuperates the assumed "corrupt" natural affections and, by doing so claims that resisting these natural affections is a mistake because they are the "source and fountain of happiness altogether." Pratt here directly confronts the assumptions that the body and its affections lead one to destruction rather than happiness and joy. Interestingly, Pratt also aligns the natural affections with the spirit of true religion, suggesting that the elements and phenomena of

the body are expressly provided to us in order that we may achieve happiness, not commit sin.

The fear of sin may, in fact, be at the root of the Mormon resistance to embracing a different aesthetic framework. The body in Mormon doctrine, though it is recognized as an exalted part of the resurrected soul (what Mormon theology defines as a combination of the body and the spirit), is also often presented as a gateway to sin and evil. Boyd K. Packer, in a general conference address entitled "Ye Are the Temple of God," speaks to Mormon youth and tells them, among other things, that

> Normal desires and attractions emerge in the teenage years; there is the temptation to experiment, to tamper with the sacred power of procreation. These desires can be intensified, even perverted, by pornography, improper music, or the encouragement from unworthy associations. What would have only been a more or less normal passing phase in establishing gender identity can become implanted and leave you confused, even disturbed. If you consent, the adversary can take control of your thoughts and lead you carefully toward a habit and to an addiction, convincing you that immoral, unnatural behavior is a fixed part of your nature.[29]

Here, Packer suggests that the body, for all of its positive qualities, can be enticed to participate in acts that the LDS Church deems sinful. Such a position is consistent with Christian teachings generally but also recalls Park's commentary about the tension between recuperating the body as a divine repository of affections, impulses, and emotions on one hand and viewing its passions as more likely to be sinful than elevating on the other. Such suspicions about the body undoubtedly contribute to the development of the values-based aesthetic that many strands of Christianity, not merely the LDS Church, espouse. However, in light of both scriptural and scientific evidence, it is clear that Mormon theology and Mormon scripture, not to mention the field of human physiology, view the body as a repository of feelings and responses that function, at least in part, to increase our empathy for others.

The tension between these two views of the body is resolved somewhat by the Book of Mormon prophet Alma. In Alma 7:12,

Alma asserts, among other things, that Christ "will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities." In this passage, it's clear that according to Alma, the body of Christ will become the instrument of empathy; taking on flesh will lead him to "know" the infirmities of his people in order that he may know how best to succor them. By extension, human beings, who are called upon by most Christian churches to consider Christ as their exemplar, are able to utilize their own bodies, indeed, can embrace their own bodily-ness, in order to emulate Christ as best they can. Such an embracing of bodily awareness would encourage them to apprehend and comprehend works of art in such a way as to construct both understanding of and empathy toward our fellow human beings.

This particular kind of bodily empathy also aligns with a core aspect of Mormon belief and practice. As a doctrinal matter, Mormons privilege the communal; in fact, many of their rituals, particularly in the temple, result in, as one Mormon leader puts it, "husbands and wives [being] sealed together, children [being] sealed to their parents for eternity so the family is eternal and will not be separated at death."[30] Further, much of the work that Mormons do in the temple revolves around sealing generations of families to one another. Such doctrines and practices affirm the importance of community, not only in the worldly sense but also in the eternal sense. If, as some Mormon leaders teach,[31] the purpose of both the gospel of Jesus Christ in general and temple ordinances in particular is to link every member of the human family to one another, an aesthetic framework that permits and even encourages empathy would, among other things, align with Mormon doctrine's emphasis on the communal.

An aesthetic grounded on bodily empathy could bridge, albeit imperfectly, the gap between Mormonism's sense of exclusivity (understandable, given its reformational beginnings) and the supposed universality of Christ's gospel. One consequence of not only values-based aesthetic frameworks but also a wariness of, in

Mormon terminology, "the world" is that many Mormons tend to want art to be exemplary rather than "merely" expressive. If, however, Mormonism can come to view art as an expression of human feelings, desires, passions, and ideas rather than as works that may or may not be contrary to its values, it can begin to formulate an answer to Jorgensen's question by deciding that it will welcome the Other, not devour or annihilate it.

Notes

1. Merrill Bradshaw, "Toward a Mormon Aesthetic" paper presented at "A Mosaic of Mormon Culture," a sesquicentennial symposium at Brigham Young University, October 2–3, 1980. The paper was later published in *BYU Studies* 21, no. 1 (1981): 91–99.

2. See, for example, Eugene England and Lavina Fielding Anderson, eds., *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996); Thomas J. Lefler and Gideon O. Burton, "Toward a Mormon Cinematic Aesthetic: Film Styles in *Legacy*," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 2 (2007): 275–304; Levi Peterson, "'Astonished Each Day': An Interview with Richard J. Van Wagoner, Utah Artist," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 2 (2006): 135–46; Barry Laga, "Making the Absent Visible: The Real, Ideal, and the Abstract in Mormon Art," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 2 (2007): 47–77. See also a discussion of Mormon aesthetics and criticism among the following authors: Bruce Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," *Sunstone* 16 (1993): 41–50, reprinted in England and Anderson, *Tending the Garden* 49–68; Richard Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *Sunstone* 16 (1993): 51–57; and Gideon O. Burton, "Should We Ask, 'Is This Mormon Literature?': Towards a Mormon Criticism," *The Association for Mormon Letters Annual* (1994): 227–33, reprinted in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32, no. 3 (1999): 33–43. And for a perspective on RLDS art and symbolism, see Bryan R. Monte, "Seal, Cross and Nautilus: RLDS/Community of Christ Art and Architecture," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 4 (2011): 45–65.

3. For one interesting study among many of the tensions between religion and the arts, see Peter C. Herman, *Squitter-Wits and Muse-Haters: Spenser, Sidney, Milton, and Renaissance Antipoetic Sentiment* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996).

4. J. Waterworth, ed. and trans., *The Council of Trent: The Twenty-Fifth Session* (London: Dolman, 1848), 235–36.

5. Thomas Ryan, ed., *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2004), vii.

6. See, e.g., Doctrine and Covenants 88:15. Also see Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1080 as well as Joseph Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

7. See, for example, *Come Unto Me: Relief Society Personal Study Guide 3* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1991), 143: "As part of the test of mortality, our bodies have desires, appetites, and passions which we must learn to discipline and control. When these desires are kept within the bounds the Lord has set, they enhance and enrich life. If they are undisciplined, they can destroy both our bodies and spirits."

8. Readers interested in a more wide-ranging discussion of religion and aesthetics may want to consult the following works: Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004); Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2001); and Daniel Gold, *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion: Modern Fascinations* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003).

9. See, for example, Quentin L. Cook, "Can Ye Feel So Now?" https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/can-ye-feel-so-now?lang=eng (accessed August 24, 2015); Gene R. Cook, *Raising Up a Family to the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993); and Ezra Taft Benson, *Come, Listen to a Prophet's Voice* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990).

10. It is not my intention here to attempt the impossible task of elucidating the subject/object relationship and the variety of theoretical approaches to this complex dynamic. However, considering this essay's emphasis on and argument for a bodily aesthetic, recalling Merleau-Ponty's work and its re-envisioning of the subject/object relationship by focusing on the body as a sensate processor of stimuli, rather than solely on the mind, may perhaps be useful. See especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2013).

11. Bruce Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," *Sunstone* 16 (1993): 43.

12. Lynn A. Mickelsen, "The Atonement, Repentance, and Dirty Linen," October 4, 2003, https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2003/10/the-atonement-repentance-and-dirty-linen?lang=eng (accessed August 24, 2015).

13. Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 58.

14. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 345–46.

15. James E. Faulconer, "Divine Embodiment and Transcendence: Propaedeutic Thoughts and Questions," *Element* 1, no. 1 (2005): par. 36, http://www.smpt.org/docs/faulconer_element1-1.html.

16. Eugene England, "The Weeping God of Mormonism," *Element* 1, no. 1 (2005): par. 31, http://www.smpt.org/docs/england_element1-1.html.

17. Faulconer, "Divine Embodiment," par. 10.

18. Stephen H. Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 255.

19. David Paulsen, "Divine Embodiment: The Earliest Christian Understanding of God," in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo: Brigham Young University Press and FARMS, 2005). Available online at http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1100&index=10.

20. Matthew Botvinick, et al., "Viewing facial expressions of pain engages cortical areas involved in the direct experience of pain," *NeuroImage* 25 (2005): 312–19.

21. John Vernon, *Poetry and the Body* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 13.

22. Paul Ekman, "Expression and the Nature of Emotion," in *Approaches to Emotion*, edited by Klaus R. Scherer and Paul Ekman (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1984), 319–44. My discussion of Ekman is informed by *The Psychobiology of Emotions*, edited by Jack George Thompson (New York: Springer, 1988), 276.

23. Thompson, *The Psychobiology of Emotions*, 278–79. Tomkins's research can be found in Silvan S. Tomkins, "Affect Theory," 163–95. See also Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness, Volume I: The Positive Affects* (New York: Springer, 1962).

24. See Doctrine and Covenants 9:8. See also further commentary on the notion of the "burning" bosom in Dallin H. Oaks, "Teaching and Learning by the Spirit," *Ensign*, March 1997, accessed August 28, 2015, https://www.lds.org/ensign/1997/03/teaching-and-learning-by-the-spirit?lang=eng.

25. David J. Whittaker, ed., *The Essential Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 54.

26. For a slightly different but cogent interpretation of this scene, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 241–44.

27. Benjamin E. Park, "Salvation through a Tabernacle: Joseph Smith, Parley P. Pratt, and Early Mormon Theologies of Embodiment," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (2010): 23.

28. Ibid., 23–24.

29. Boyd K. Packer, "Ye Are the Temple of God," https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2000/10/ye-are-the-temple-of-god?lang=eng (accessed August 26, 2015).

30. Richard H. Winkel, "The Temple Is about Families," https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2006/10/the-temple-is-about-families?lang=eng (accessed August 26, 2015).

31. See, e.g., John A. Widtsoe, "The Worth of Souls," *The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine*, October 1934, 189. "We agreed, right then and there [in the pre-existence], to be not only saviors for ourselves but . . . saviors for the whole human family."