

One View of the Garden

By Eugene England

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CRITICAL ISSUES

A DISTINGUISHED LITERATURE has long been expected by Mormons, even prophesied by their leaders. As early as 1857, with the church less than thirty years old and most Mormons living at a subsistence level just ten years after the forced trek into the Great Basin wilderness, John Taylor, apostle and future church president, promised that "Zion will be far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to learning of every kind. . . . God expects Zion to become the praise and glory of the whole earth, so that kings hearing of her fame will come and gaze upon her glory."¹ In 1888, as part of his effort to encourage creation of a native Utah literature that would be by Mormons, about Mormons, and for the edification of Mormons, Orson F. Whitney predicted, "We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own. . . . 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 earth."²

However, nearly ninety years later, in 1976, another apostle, Boyd K. Packer, quoted Whitney and expressed regret that "those foundations have been raised up very slowly. The greatest poems are not yet written. . . . The greatest hymns and anthems of the Restoration are yet to be composed. . . . We move forward much slower than need be."³ The next year LDS church president Spencer W. Kimball, in an issue of the *Ensign* devoted to the arts, expressed similar disappointment but also continuing expectation:

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, the struggles and frustrations; the apostasies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions of those first decades; of the exodus; of the counter-reactions; of the transitions; of the persecution days; of the miracle man, Joseph Smith, of whom we sing "Oh, what rapture filled his bosom, For he saw the living God."⁴

It is remarkable that what many see as the first major blossoming of a mature Mormon literature commenced about the time of these two addresses by Elder

Packer and President Kimball. It is also remarkable that the issues they raised or implied about why the prophesied success had come so slowly have continued to be central to critical debates among Mormons about the nature and quality of their writers' literary heritage and contemporary achievement. Richard H. Cracroft—who could be called the father of modern Mormon literary studies for his pioneering work in the early 1970s in producing the first anthologies⁵ and starting the first Mormon literature classes—has strongly objected to the recent directions in most Mormon literature as being too imitative of flawed contemporary, critical and moral trends and thus untrue to Mormon traditions and values.⁶ In this concern, he echoes the earlier warning and counsel of Elder Packer to Mormon artists that too many “want to please the world” or to “be in style,” and so our artistic heritage grows “ever so gradually.” Elder Packer had said, “Let the use of your gift be an expression of your devotion to Him who has given it to you.”⁷

At the same time, critics like Bruce W. Jorgensen have called for a Mormon literature that is distinguished not so much by specific doctrinal content and didactic purposes as by its powerfully conveyed love of the world God has given us and by its unusual hospitality to diversity of both content and style—thus showing devotion to Christ in manner and range as well as specific substance.⁸ This stand seems to me consonant with President Kimball's 1977 call for a literature that includes the full range of Mormon experience: “struggles and frustrations; apostasies and inner revolutions and counter-revolutions...counter-reactions...persecution days...miracle man... rapture.”⁹ Certainly one explanation for the general failure of Mormon literature to that point to fulfill such expectations was that it had remained too timid, too narrowly conventional. It had been satisfied with the safe middle ground of experience and with a non-risk-taking authorial voice, so it was not courageously dealing with the extremes of “apostasy” and “rapture” that President Kimball seems to be calling for.

The debate presently articulated most forcibly by Cracroft and Jorgensen dates back at least twenty years. In 1974, in the introduction to their landmark anthology, *A Believing People*, Cracroft and his co-editor Neal Lambert wrote, “Readers must never forget that for the Latter-day Saint, his church, as the Doctrine and Covenants declares, is ‘the only true and living church on the face of the whole earth,’ and a literature, or a criticism of a literature, which fails to examine Mormonism on these terms is not only unfair, it is futile.”¹⁰ That same year Karl Keller claimed that “more alarming than the paucity of qualified works of fiction in the Church is the lack of fictional exploration of the theology itself. Mormon fiction is by and large jack-fiction; it does not live by the principles of the Church.”¹¹

Keller's trenchant term, “jack-fiction,” captures the paradox at the heart of this debate. Everyone wants literature that is uniquely Mormon, even “orthodox”—but which is also skillful and artful; the problem is that focusing too much on either orthodoxy or art seems to destroy the other. “Jack-fiction” derives from “jack-Mormon,” in modern times the term for someone attached, even very strongly, to Mormon culture and sometimes quite “orthodox” in moral behavior, but not really conversant with or deeply committed to the theology nor an “active” participant at church. Most Mormon literature to 1974 had failed to be good literature—even,

Keller says, that which had tried to be most orthodox—because it had been only superficially Mormon.

Keller ended his call for a genuinely faithful Mormon literature by predicting, “When someone becomes capable of creating imaginative worlds where Mormon theological principles are concretely true, then we will have a writer of the stature of Flannery O’Connor. Because she was a Catholic, she said, she could not afford to be less than a good artist.”¹²

To fulfill this hope, of course, Mormon writers need some theological literacy. B. H. Roberts,¹³ whom some consider Mormonism’s finest historian and theologian, provides an extensive overview in *The Truth, The Way, The Life* and a concise explication of what is most dramatic and unusual in Mormon thought in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet-Teacher*. Others could be added: Joseph Smith, of course, especially the King Follett Discourse (uncreated being and godlike potential);¹⁴ Doctrine and Covenants 88 and 93 (God’s relation to nature and to human agency); 2 Nephi 2 (the doctrine of essential opposition in everything) and Alma 42 (how the atonement works) from the Book of Mormon; Brigham Young’s sermon, “The Organization and Development of Man” (our basic need for eternal progression);¹⁵ John A. Widtsoe, Joseph Fielding Smith, Hugh B. Brown, Spencer W. Kimball, Lowell Bennion, Truman Madsen, Margaret and Paul Toscano, Blake Ostler, Melodie Moench Charles, and many others.

Theological ideas can be, and sometimes have been, reduced to a formal creed that tempts Mormon writers toward didacticism, but they are also an extraordinarily rich resource for empowering the imaginative worlds of Mormon literature. This resource is multiplied by the dramatic and mythically potent Mormon history and the ethically challenging opportunities and demands of service, covenant-making, and charismatic experience in the Mormon lay church.

Mormon writers, then, certainly have at hand sufficient matter with which to produce a great literature. But does Mormonism also provide insight into the resources and limitations of the *means* of literature: language, form, style, genres, critical perspectives? From the beginning, Mormons have produced many of their writings, including some of their best, in forms that until fairly recently have been dismissively called subliterary: diaries, letters, hymns, sermons, histories, and personal essays. In the last twenty years, poststructuralism and various forms of ethical criticism have helped us see beyond such distinctions and provided tools for identifying and appreciating the different but equal values of many kinds of literature. In 1974 Cracroft and Lambert unapologetically filled half of their anthology with early Mormon work in unusual genres, much of which they had recovered through their own research, and they provided useful original attempts at evaluating these genres in their introductions and notes. Partly in response to that anthology came my own belated but grateful conversion from sole dependence on my formalist training, and I began to try to develop new tools of appreciation for my own heritage.¹⁶ Mormon academic critics have been trained in and have made use of all the modern theoretical approaches, from the New Criticism of the 1940s and 1950s to the postmodernism that has developed since the late 1960s. No systematic criticism has emerged that successfully identifies Mormonism with any one theory.

of language or poetics. Mormon theology, in fact, encourages a remarkable and fruitful openness in relation to current controversies about the nature and power of language—and thus of human thought and literature. On the one hand, postmodernists find much that is congenial in the Mormon sense of an ongoing, continually developing universe in which God is a genuine and nonabsolute participant. In fact, God is himself in important ways a creature of language and its limitations. Doctrine and Covenants 1:24 informs us that God definitely speaks to us through his prophets but does so “in their weakness, after the manner of their language,” which seems consistent with contemporary ideas about how language functions relative to the world view and rhetorical resources of the speaker and the “discourse community.” This scripture confirms that there is no way to get “outside” of nature and language for an absolute and therefore universally compelling “meaning.” Doctrine and Covenants 93:24 further claims that “truth is *knowledge* of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come,” suggesting that truth is always relative to the knowers involved (including God), a position central to the thought of postmodern philosophers and literary critics.

On the other hand, in the King Follett Discourse, Joseph Smith refers to “chaotic matter—which is element and in which dwells all the glory.”¹⁷ I understand this to mean that God and humans can bring order from a pluralistic chaos that is *potent*, meaning that by its nature it is genuinely responsive to creative powers embodied in our minds and language. Because God created the world that we know from such a potent chaos and because his mind and ours can make connections to each other and to the world through the powers of language, we can create metaphors that not only closely imitate experience but also increase our ability to understand experience. Language is ultimately tragic, because it cannot perfectly embody or communicate reality, but we must respect what it *can* do.

A Mormon theory of language, then, can accede fully neither to a naive platonic realism nor to an absolute postmodern nominalism. It is based in faith—faith that God is personal, embodied, creative, and language—using, closely related to us in mind and feelings, and sufficiently expressed in our organic, changing universe to be understood, at least in part, and to be trusted; faith that while language is limited and relative, it is not merely an ephemeral human creation nor an ultimately meaningless game to occupy us until the final doom but is rooted ontologically and shared by God.¹⁸

HISTORICAL PERIODS

Foundations, 1830–1880

IT SEEMS IMPORTANT, when discussing Mormon literature, to remember that Mormonism begins with a book. The Book of Mormon has been vilified and laughed at by other Christians and ignored by literary scholars and critics, but over five million copies, in over eighty languages, are now published each year. It has changed the lives of millions of people. Most of them do not think of it as literature, but it has the verbal and narrative power, linguistic and historical complexity, ethical

and philosophical weight, and mythic structure of a great epic.¹⁹ (See Richard D. Rust's essay in this volume.)

Joseph Smith was involved as author or translator in many other works, many of them also of high literary merit. Doctrine and Covenants 19, 76, 88, and 121, and his accounts of his first vision have been appreciated as fine literature as well as scripture. (See Cracroft and Lambert's essay in this volume.) His literate and personal letters and diaries have been definitively edited by Dean C. Jessee; unfortunately, most of his sermons, recorded from memory or in longhand, are too fragmentary to allow much development of literary scope, except for the remarkable King Follett Discourse, which is by far the most fully recorded and also the most doctrinally innovative and artistically impressive. Because of the advent of shorthand, we have a much fuller record of the unusually practical and personal tradition of pioneer orators influenced by Joseph Smith, especially the over 800 sermons of Brigham Young.

Early Mormons, like their mainly Puritan forebears, were both anxious about their salvation and moved to record their joy and success in finding it. In addition, Mormon theology inclined them to think of themselves as eternal, uncreated, and godlike beings, coming here to mortality from a premortal existence to continue working out their salvation in fear and trembling. They were encouraged by church practice and frontier American culture to bear witness both publicly and privately about their hardships, feelings, and spiritual experiences and thus to take an abiding interest in the formation of their own character; consequently, they produced, often at great effort and in amazing detail, diaries and personal reminiscences. Good examples, showing a wide range of sophistication and experiences, are (1) Wilford Woodruff's nearly daily record of over sixty years, which provides both a rich source of ecclesiastical and cultural history and also intimate insights into the development of an apostle and church president; (2) Eliza R. Snow's "Trail Diary," our best source for the horrendous crossing from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Council Bluffs, Iowa, after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith and of the unique spiritual outpourings to the women there during the winter and spring of 1847; and (3) Mary Goble Pay's reminiscence of the 1856 handcart tragedy, uniquely moving in its understated purity, which demonstrates how the character of an untrained narrator and powerful events honestly recorded can combine to produce great writing.²⁰

Like diaries, letters provide the changing moral context of spontaneous, unrevised thought, day-by-day decision-making, and the consequences. Such directness often makes diaries and letters "truer" than the usual histories (which can be falsified by generalization) because we see in them what Stephen Vincent Benet called people's "daily living and dying beneath the sun."²¹

There were also some significant achievements in traditional literary forms in the first period. Eliza R. Snow was an accomplished versifier before she converted to Mormonism, but she turned her talent to long, didactic poems about Mormon history, leaders, and beliefs. She also produced some fine short lyrics and a number of hymns. The *Poems* were published in two volumes, 1856 and 1877, and the hymns are still a highly valued part of the Mormon hymnal, especially "O My Father," which reveals the unique Mormon doctrine of a Heavenly Mother as divine

partner to God the Father. Also during this period, W. W. Phelps and Parley P. Pratt wrote fine hymns, and John Lyon published *The Harp of Zion: A Collection of Poems, Etc.* Pratt also wrote the first Mormon fiction, as well as some of the most important and literate early tracts. His “Dialogue between Joseph Smith and the Devil,” first published in the *New York Herald* in January 1844, and reprinted in Cracroft and Lambert’s anthology, though mainly a didactic effort to improve the Mormon image and teach some doctrine to its gentile audience, is witty and imaginative in its setting, argument, and lively dialogue. His *Autobiography*, still in print today, has sections that are carefully shaped, self-conscious personal narratives much like good short stories; and some passages, such as his description of Joseph Smith rebuking the guards in Liberty Jail, rise to great eloquence. (See R. A. Christmas’s essay in this volume.)

Home Literature, 1880–1930

ALTHOUGH THERE IS evidence that Mormon pioneers read fiction, even during their treks, church leaders in the first period recommended sermons and history because they dealt in “truth” and regularly denounced novel reading as a waste of time and worse, the encouragement of “lies”—reservations that were understandable when popular cheap thrillers called “dime novels” flooded Utah after the railroad was built in 1869 and few classics were available inexpensively. In the 1880s some Mormon leaders began an important movement to solve these problems by encouraging and creating fiction, drama, poetry, and essays that explicitly set out to teach Mormon faith and doctrine.

The leader was Orson F. Whitney, popular poet, essayist, bishop of a Salt Lake City ward, and later an apostle, who in 1888 expressed hope for a fine and virtuous “home literature” and then worked to fulfill his own hope. He saw second-generation Mormon youth, often lacking a direct conversion experience and thus vulnerable to “the world,” as his primary audience. Other prominent leaders, such as B. H. Roberts of the First Council of the Seventy, Emmeline B. Wells, editor of the *Woman’s Exponent* and later general president of the Relief Society, and Brigham’s daughter Susa Young Gates, joined him. The result was a virtual flood of moralistic and faith-promoting stories and poems that became the staple of official church periodicals down to the present.

Poets like Josephine Spencer and Augusta Joyce Crocheron published didactic and narrative poems, Charlie Walker recited and published some of his southern Utah folk poetry, and Whitney published hymns, lyric poetry, and a book-length poem, *Elias: An Epic of the Ages* (1904). Susa Young Gates published a fairly successful novel, *John Stevens’ Courtship* (1909), and B. H. Roberts wrote a novel, *Corianton* (1902), that was turned into a play performed on Broadway in New York. (See Cracroft’s essay in this volume.)

The most able, prolific, and influential of the early home literature writers was Nephi Anderson, and his most popular work was the novel *Added Upon*. First published in 1898, it was reprinted over forty times, most recently by Bookcraft in 1992, the only fiction from the period that is still read. Although Anderson himself

recognized its limitations and revised it twice, the novel fulfills his own criterion that “a good story is artistic preaching.” The novel follows a small group of individuals, including two lovers, from the premortal existence through mortal life and into the postmortal spirit world. Versions of this formula have endured in musicals like Doug Stewart’s and Lex De Azevedo’s *Saturday’s Warrior* (1974) and Carol Lynn Pearson’s *My Turn on Earth* (1977).

A number of works of nonfiction written during the period, because of their intellectual and literary excellence as well as their prestigious authorship and faith-promoting power, have continued to be valued and carefully read: B. H. Roberts’s *Joseph Smith, the Prophet-Teacher* (1908; reprinted 1967) and his six-volume *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1930) dramatically but with unusual objectivity organized the thought of Joseph Smith and retold the history of Mormonism in its first century. James E. Talmage, an apostle, wrote *The Articles of Faith* (1899) and *Jesus the Christ* (1915), works that combine intellectual power with stately, moving personal testimony; both have continued constantly in print and justly achieved almost scriptural status among Latter-day Saints.

The forms and formulae of home literature that were developed in this second period still thrive, thanks to the encouragement of official Mormon publications (the *Friend*, *New Era*, and *Ensign*), the church-owned publisher, Deseret Book, and its cousin, Bookcraft, which aspires to wide and near-official acceptance by church leaders and general Mormon readership.

Richard H. Cracroft has led out in arguing that the future of Mormon literature depends on writers learning from Nephi Anderson’s “steady progress from artless dogma to gently dogmatic art” to produce a steadily more sophisticated and artful work that is still, in its direct focus on Mormon moral and spiritual values, essentially didactic. However, others feel that primary emphasis on the didactic keeps Mormon literature from being either excellent artistically or powerful morally and spiritually. In debating the competing claims of instruction and delight in literature, Mormon voices are joining a conversation that began with the Roman writer Horace and has continued through such notable critics as Sir Philip Sidney, Samuel Johnson, Yvor Winters, and Wayne Booth. Most thinkers in this tradition have understood that the more directly literature teaches, the less delightful and persuasive it becomes. In contrast, a vivid and honest story, interesting and complex characters, powerful images, and affecting rhythms and sounds can often move the reader into new dimensions of moral understanding and religious experience. (See the essays of Karl Keller and Tory Anderson in this volume.)

The Lost Generation, 1930–1970

IN CONTRAST TO the “home” literature aimed directly at Utah Mormons, the 1930s and 1940s saw the first flowering of an artistically excellent Mormon literature that was published nationally and gained national recognition. But its authors’ reaction against the provinciality and moralism of Mormon home literature tended to mar their work with critical or patronizing attitudes that led many

Mormons to reject it. Edward A. Geary compared them to America's "lost generation" of Hemingway, Stein, and other post-World War I expatriates. (See his essay in this volume.) The main figures were Vardis Fisher, who won the Harper Prize in 1939 for *Children of God: An American Epic*, which covers most of nineteenth-century Mormon history; Maurine Whipple, who won the Houghton Mifflin Literary Prize in 1938 and published *The Giant Joshua* (1941), based on the settling of Utah's Dixie; and Virginia Sorensen, who also first wrote a historical Mormon novel, *A Little Lower Than the Angels* (1942), but then did her best work set in the time (the early twentieth century) and place (Sanpete Valley) of her own youth. Among these works are what many consider the best Mormon novel, *The Evening and the Morning* (1949), and her set of personal essay-like autobiographical stories, *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood* (1963).

Geary's pioneering essay identified about twenty nationally published works by a dozen regional authors who responded to what they saw as cultural breakdown. Richard Cracroft has praised Samuel W. Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why* (1948), of this period, as the best Mormon humorous novel²² and has also identified other more recent novelists who also seem to him to fit the "lost generation" characteristics.²³ B. W. Jorgensen has traced "lost generation" qualities in expatriate Mormon short story writers of the period who continued publishing into the 1970s.²⁴

It seems useful to identify two nonfiction writers as part of this literary period; though quite different from each other, they shared the "lost generation's" impulse toward more realism in the Mormon past and were also, in different ways, rejected by Mormons. Fawn Brodie's thoroughly researched *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (1945) introduced the psychological approach she became famous for. Having more the strengths of a novel than of biography, her book was written with the perspective that Joseph Smith was a powerful charismatic genius but also a charlatan, an approach for which she was excommunicated. Juanita Brooks's *Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950) was the first work to deal thoroughly and openly with the most tragic event of Utah history. It became a model for the New Mormon History, a whole movement of less didactic biography and historiography by faithful Mormon scholars. Brooks was ostracized by many Mormons but, unlike Brodie, remained a devout Latter-day Saint and, as her biographer Levi S. Peterson has argued, provided an important moral, intellectual, and spiritual service for her community. (See his essay in this volume.)

*Faithful Realism, 1960–present*²⁵

SINCE ABOUT 1960, overlapping with some of the major "lost generation" figures, an increasing number of Mormon writers have, I believe, been able to learn from both the achievements and limitations of previous periods and produce works that can both teach and delight, as the best literature always has. They are realistic and even critical about Mormon experience but profoundly faithful to the vision and concerns of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

Their spiritual father is Clinton F. Larson, who was influenced by the craftsmanship and the religious intensity of T. S. Eliot and other modern poets in the 1930s

and 1940s, as well as the mentoring of Brewster Ghiselin, a fine young poet at the University of Utah. In the midst of this apprenticeship, Larson served as a Mormon missionary under the eloquent, urbane, and spiritually direct Hugh B. Brown, later an apostle. These influences helped him depart both from the didactic and inward-looking provinciality of the first 100 years of Mormon literature and the elitist, patronizing provinciality of his contemporaries in the “lost generation.” He began in the 1950s to write and, in the 1960s, regularly to publish a unique Mormon poetry of modernist sensibility and skill but also of informed and passionate faith. Grounded in Mormon theology, history, and contemporary life and thought, able to both criticize and affirm, Larson was devoutly part of rather than standing apart from his Mormon people.

Larson also helped the new tradition of faithful and realistic Mormon literature along by founding the first Mormon scholarly and literary periodical, *BYU Studies*, in 1959 and contributing his poetry regularly there and to *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, founded in 1966. His colleagues at Brigham Young University (Edward L. Hart, Marden J. Clark, and John S. Harris) and Mormon poets elsewhere (Carol Lynn Pearson, Lewis Horne, and Emma Lou Thayne) developed in their own ways in the 1960s and 1970s; but all were influenced by Larson. This influence may not have been as direct as specific style or subject matter, but he had liberated them by being the first to create a poetry deeply grounded in Mormon theology and experience, yet responsive to personal vision and feelings rather than merely to didactic or institutional purposes.²⁶

Younger poets in the 1980s and 1990s have come even more thoroughly under the influence of contemporary American and other poets; they have produced poetry that, in its challenges to traditional forms and methods as well as its interest in current issues like feminism, multiculturalism, and postmodernist anxiety about language itself, seems to some not Mormon at all, although many readers, in contrast, find that their poetry takes the faithful realism Larson first created in interesting new directions valuable both to Mormons and others. Such skilled Mormon poets, appearing regularly in national periodicals, include Linda Sillitoe, Susan Elizabeth Howe, Lance Larsen, and Kathy Evans.²⁷

Douglas Thayer and Donald R. Marshall, who were students and later teachers at Brigham Young University, became the first to explore Larson’s new directions for a Mormon literature in fiction. Departing from the mode of expatriate Mormon writers still publishing nationally into the 1970s, they began to write skillful stories that explored Mormon thought and culture in a critical but fundamentally affirmative way. Marshall published two collections of stories and sketches: *The Rummage Sale: Collections and Recollections* (1972) and *Frost in the Orchard* (1977). His technical experimentation ranges from stories based entirely on lists or letters to sophisticated work in point of view (“The Weekend”) and symbolism (“The Wheelbarrow”). Thayer began publishing stories in *BYU Studies* and *Dialogue* in the mid-1960s, and his influence has perhaps been wider and more lasting. According to a younger Mormon writer, John Bennion, who has published a fine collection that includes experimental contemporary styles and subjects, “Thayer taught us how to explore the interior life, with its conflicts of doubt and faith, goodness and evil, of a believing Mormon.”²⁸

Conflict is, of course, the very essence of fiction, and contemporary Mormon writers have found how to reveal and explore the conflicts inherent in Mormonism's complex theology and its rich history and cultural experience. Thayer's *Summer Fire* (1983) examines the challenge and possibility of redemption in the conflict posed by an innocent and self-righteous Mormon youth's exposure to evil on a Nevada hay ranch. His second collection, *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone and Other Stories* (1989), both exploits and exposes the romantic fallacies in male response to the seductions of wilderness which have produced a conflict, even in Mormons, between heroic manhood and the values of family and community.²⁹

Levi S. Peterson, who acknowledges his debt to Thayer for teaching him to write in a simple and direct style about Mormon experience, has produced two outstanding collections, *The Canyons of Grace: Stories* (1982) and *Night Soil: New Stories* (1990), as well as a novel which some consider the best yet by a Mormon, *The Backslider* (1986).³⁰ All of Peterson's writings explore in some form the conflicts in Mormon experience and popular thought between the Old Testament Jehovah of rewards and punishments and the New Testament Christ of unconditional acceptance and redemptive love.

Mormon fiction of the past twenty years has most fully realized the hopes of Elder Packer, President Kimball, and many others for an excellent but genuinely and uniquely Mormon literature. Both its quantity and its quality have steadily increased. Dozens of skilled Mormon writers regularly employ a great variety of methods and perspectives. Those continuing or improving on the home literature tradition include Shirley Sealy, Jack Weyland, Brenton G. Yorgason and Blaine M. Yorgason, Carol Hoefling Morris, Susan Evans McCloud, and Gerald Lund. Others, who are publishing excellent work nationally, communicate some degree of expatriate feeling. They include Laura Kalpakian, Judith Freeman, and Walter Kirn. But there is another, quite large group of faithful Mormon writers of what I call "the new Mormon fiction"³¹ who are both publishing nationally and gaining a growing audience of appreciative Mormon readers. Good examples are Linda Sillitoe and Michael Fillerup, both of whom explore feminism and multicultural issues from a Mormon perspective; Lewis Horne and Neal Chandler, who live and write about Mormon life outside the Wasatch front; and Phyllis Barber and Margaret Blair Young, who have growing reputations for both their story collections and their novels.

Perhaps the most prolific and innovative among these faithful realists (certainly the most widely read and honored) is Orson Scott Card, who began as a Mormon playwright in the 1970s but then wrote traditional science fiction without Mormon reference and reached the very top of his field with Hugo and Nebula Awards two years running in 1986 and 1987. However, he turned back to openly Mormon works, beginning with a historical novel, *A Woman of Destiny* (1984; reprinted as *Saints* in 1988) and continuing with a fantasy series, *The Tales of Alvin Maker* (4 volumes to date, 1987–95), based on the life of Joseph Smith; straight-forward Mormon science fiction stories in *The Folk of the Fringe* (1989); a science fiction series, *Homecoming* (5 volumes, 1992–95), based on the Book of Mormon; and a novel of contemporary Mormon domestic and spiritual realism, *Lost Boys* (1992).³²

Although fiction is the area where Mormons are just now best fulfilling the prophetic hopes for Mormon literature and beginning to have some impact on national and world literature, it seems to me that the personal essay has the greatest potential for making a uniquely valuable contribution both to Mormon cultural and religious life and to that of others. Our theological emphasis on life as a stage where the individual self is both tested and created and our history of close self-examination in journals, sermons, and testimony-bearing provide resources that have mainly been realized in sermons and autobiography but that increasingly find expression in powerful informal essays and personal and family oral storytelling.

Through the work of William A. (Bert) Wilson, the preeminent Mormon folklorist and one of the foremost and most innovative of American folklorists, we can not only appreciate Mormonism's rich oral narratives and humor but also understand their continuing crucial role in expressing our basic values and concerns. (See his essay in this volume.) The revered Brigham Young University English professor P. A. Christensen produced two volumes of informal essays, *All in a Teacher's Day* (1948) and *Of a Number of Things* (1962) and various other Mormons have written effective literary, religious, and historical essays with personal dimensions. However, it was Edward Geary, with "Goodbye to Poplarhaven" (*Dialogue*, Summer 1973), who first revealed to his own community the great potential of the Mormon personal essay as an art form.

Stimulated in part by *Dialogue's* establishment in 1971 of a regular section, "Personal Voices," and the example of Geary and others, writers developed this form rapidly. Personal essays also began to appear occasionally in *BYU Studies*, and often in new periodicals that started up in the 1970s: the *Ensign*, *Exponent II*, and *Sunstone*.³³ By the late 1970s and early 1980s, edited or individual collections were appearing and attracting some critical attention. (See Mary Bradford's essay in this issue.)

By the mid-1980s some Mormon writers were extending the range of the personal essay form to consider such issues as feminism and ecology, to include diverse voices in the same essay, and to experiment with other elements usually confined to fiction. Some have found national publishers. Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991) received awards and excellent reviews nationally and was awarded the Association for Mormon Letters Prize in 1992 for the personal essay. (See Cecilia Konchar Farr's and Phillip Snyder's essay in this volume.) Phyllis Barber won both the 1991 Associated Writing Programs Award in "Creative Non-Fiction" and a 1993 Association for Mormon Letters award for *How I Got Cultured: A Nevada Memoir*; essentially a collection of avant-garde personal essays. Most recently, prize-winning poet Emma Lou Thayne and Pulitzer Prize winner social historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich have combined their essays in a unique collection, *All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir* (1995).

Drama should be a prominent Mormon literary form, for some of the same theological, cultural, and historical reasons that explain the importance of the personal essay. However, despite strong support for popular dramatic productions beginning in Nauvoo and continuing in the Salt Lake Theatre of the later nineteenth

century and the “roadshow” tradition in twentieth-century Mormon wards, it was not until the 1960s that there was much realistic drama written by Mormons about Mormon experience.³⁴ The first were mainly “closet dramas,” such as Clinton F. Larson’s *The Mantle of the Prophet*, and musicals. By the late 1970s, however, fine Mormon dramas were being quite regularly written and produced at BYU. Of these probably the best single achievement is Robert Elliott’s *Fires of the Mind*, published in *Sunstone*’s first issue (Winter 1975, 23–93). However, the finest body of work is by Thomas F. Rogers, who has produced a number of plays of high quality, though I believe his best is still *Huebener* (1976, published in Rogers’s collection, *God’s Fools*, 1983).

James Arrington inaugurated a productive series of one-person plays in the late 1970s with his *Here’s Brother Brigham* and *Farley Family Reunion*, the latter being still regularly performed, available on video, and considered by some as perhaps the best of authentic Mormon drama. The most promising younger playwrights are Susan E. Howe (*The Burdens of Earth* and *A Dream for Katy*), Tim Slover (*Dream-builder* and *March Tale*), Neil Labute (*In the Company of Men* and *Sanguinarians*), and Eric Samuelson (*Accommodations* and *Gadianton!*).³⁵

Some Mormon writers of the fourth period are achieving success, both locally and nationally, in high quality children’s and young adult literature. Fine examples of the former are Steve Wunderli’s *Marty’s World*, illustrated by Brent Watts (1986), Phyllis Barber’s *Legs: The Story of a Giraffe* (1991), and Michael O. Tunnell’s three books, *Chinook!*, *The Joke’s on George*, and *Beauty and the Beastly Children*, which together won the AML prize for 1993. Examples of better quality books by Mormons for young adults are Donald R. Marshall, *Enchantress of Crumbledown* (1990); Ann Edwards Cannon, *Amazing Gracie* (1991); Louise Plummer, *The Unlikely Romance of Kate Bjorkman* (winner of the AML prize in 1995); and Dean Hughes, *Jenny Hailer* (1983) and *Go to the Hoop!* (1993).

The future of Mormon literature is potentially both bright and vexed. On the one hand, a number of new periodicals and presses,³⁶ together with increasingly popular classes in Mormon literature at BYU, are rapidly expanding the audience for good Mormon literature. Good criticism, both theoretical and practical, is regularly fostered, especially by the Association for Mormon Letters,³⁷ and there are regular book review columns³⁸ and new electronic resources available to those interested in Mormon literature, including AML-List, a discussion group, and a website which includes examples of literature, author biographies, and bibliographies.³⁹ With the recent successes of Orson Scott Card and Terry Tempest Williams, the national publishing market’s unaccountable resistance to Mormon writing may be lessening. Anne Perry, a British LDS convert who regularly publishes Victorian mysteries to critical acclaim, has moved from expressing her Mormon convictions only in the powerful underlying moral climate of her work to somewhat more open references to Mormonism (see *Bethlehem Road*, 1991); she is also under contract for a fantasy trilogy based on two women’s spiritual quests.

On the other hand, the potentially creative tension between the two poles of Mormons’ expectations about their literature—orthodox didacticism and faithful realism—seems at times to be breaking down into invidious judgments, name-

calling, and divisions. The recent tendency toward mutually exclusive forums, periodicals, and presses, will, I fear, impede our progress toward becoming a rich, diverse, mutually tolerant literary community capable of cooperating in the artistic achievements that have been prophesied.

Mormon literature will always have a difficult burden—to describe a unique set of revealed truths and historical and continually vital religious experiences and to do so both honestly and artistically. We seem to understand this better about other art forms than about literature, where the temptation is greatest to assume that a good “message” is enough. Most Mormons can see right away that a painting of Joseph Smith’s first vision done badly would demean the experience or that a clumsy or sentimental musical score on the suffering of Christ in Gethsemane would be a kind of blasphemy, but a “faith-building” story or one based on “real experience,” however badly written or merely sentimental in its appeal, is often received uncritically.

Faithful Latter-day Saints, as well as cultural Mormons, are developing the skill and courage to write well in all the genres. The challenge they face—which must be faced as well by their readers, both Mormons and others—is to unite the extremes of experience Brigham Young described: “We cannot obtain eternal life unless we actually know and comprehend by our experience the principle of good and the principle of evil, the light and the darkness, truth, virtue, and holiness, also vice, wickedness, and corruption.”⁴⁰ To gain such comprehension, we must be willing, both as writers and readers, to do as Joseph Smith did—and called us to do: “Thy mind, . . . if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity.”⁴¹ A literature to match the high religious achievement of the restoration Joseph Smith began requires the breadth and the depth he achieved: literary skill, moral courage, lofty visions, generosity, and spiritual passion. Mormon writers, if they are true to their sacred and powerful art of language as well as their sacred and powerful religious heritage, can aspire, Elder Packer promised in 1976,⁴² to enjoy the promise by Christ to Joseph Smith: “Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you . . . ask, and ye shall receive” (D&C 88:63).

NOTES

1. In Spencer W. Kimball, “The Gospel Vision of the Arts,” *Ensign* 7 (July 1977): 3.
2. Orson F. Whitney, “Home Literature,” in *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), 300.
3. Boyd K. Packer, “The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord,” 1976 *Devotional Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1977), 268; reprinted in Steven P. Sondrup, ed., *Arts and Inspiration: Mormon Perspectives* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 5–6.
4. Kimball, “Gospel Vision of the Arts,” 5.
5. Cracroft and Lambert, eds., *A Believing People: The Literature of the Latter-day Saints and Twenty-two Young Mormon Writers* (Provo, UT: Communications Workshop, 1974).
6. Cracroft, “Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature,” *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 51–57; see also his review of *Harvest: Contemporary*

Mormon Poems in BYU Studies 30 (Spring 1990): 119, 121–23.

7. “The Arts and the Spirit,” 10, 16.
8. Bruce W. Jorgensen, “To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say,” *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 41–50, condensed in this volume.
9. Kimball, “The Gospel Vision of the Arts,” 5.
10. Cracroft and Lambert, *A Believing People*, 5.
11. Karl Keller, “The Example of Flannery O’Connor,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Winter 1974): 62.
12. *Ibid.*, 68.
13. Roberts’s comprehensive theology, *The Truth, The Way, The Life* was published in two editions in 1994, one edited by John Welch et al. (Provo, UT: BYU Studies) and one by Stan Larson (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates). See also Sterling M. McMurrin’s *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965) and Roberts’s *Joseph Smith, the Prophet-Teacher* (Princeton, NJ: LDS Deseret Club, 1965), with an introduction by McMurrin.
14. Stan Larson, “The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text,” *BYU Studies* 18 (Winter 1978): 193–208.
15. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Book-sellers Depot, 1855–86), 2:90–96.
16. See Eugene England, “Great Books or True Religion? Defining the Mormon Scholar,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Winter 1974): 36–49; reprinted in *Dialogues with Myself* (Midvale, UT: Orion Books, 1984), 57–76.
17. Larson, “The King Follett Discourse,” 203.
18. For a discussion of the relations between religious thought and postmodern philosophy, see James E. Faulconer, “An Alternative to Traditional Criticism,” *Proceedings of the Symposia of the Association for Mormon Letters, 1979–82* (Salt Lake City: AML, 1983), 111–24; and Faulconer, “Protestant and Jewish Styles of Criticism: Derrida and His Critics,” *Literature and Belief* 5 (1985): 45–66; for a critique of my earlier and more naive reflections on these matters, see Brian Evenson, “Chaotic Matter: Eugene England’s ‘The Dawning of a Brighter Day,’” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Winter 1994): 121–23.
19. See also John W. Welch, “Chiasmas in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10 (Fall 1969): 69–84; reprinted in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, Religious Studies Monograph Series, No. 7 (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 33–52; Bruce W. Jorgensen, “The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert, Religious Studies Monograph Series, No. 5 (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 217–31. Richard Dilworth Rust’s book, tentatively titled “Designed for Our Day: The Book of Mormon as Literature,” has been accepted for publication in early 1997 by Deseret Book and FARMS.
20. Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898*, typescript, ed. Scott G. Kenny, 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983–85); *Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1995); Mary Goble Pay’s manuscript, in the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, was published in full as “Death Strikes the Handcart Company,” in Cracroft and Lambert, *A Believing People*, 143–50.
21. The best collections of letters are Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984); Jessee, ed., *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co. in collaboration with the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974); Elizabeth Wood Kane (not a Mormon), *Twelve Mormon Homes Visited in Succession on a Journey through Utah to Arizona* (1874; Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1974); George S. Ellsworth, ed., *Dear Ellen: Two Mormon Women and Their Letters* (Salt Lake City: Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1974); and Constance L. Lieber and John Sillito, eds., *Letters from Exile: The Correspondence of Martha Hughes Cannon and Angus M. Cannon*,

1886–1889 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1989).

22. Richard H. Cracroft, “‘Freshet in the Dearth’: Samuel W. Taylor’s *Heaven Knows Why* and Mormon Humor,” *Sunstone* 5 (May-June 1980): 31–37. *Heaven Knows Why* was reprinted by Aspen Books in 1994. Two other important novels by Taylor are *Family Kingdom* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951) and *Nightfall at Nauvoo* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

23. See his “Literature, Mormon Writers of: Novels,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), 2:842–44.

24. For the best review of such writers as Ray B. West, Jr, Wayne Carver, and David Lane Wright (who though not an expatriate was “lost” to the Mormon literary community by his isolation and early death), see Bruce W. Jorgensen, “A ‘Smaller Canvas’ of the Mormon Short Story since 1950,” *Association for Mormon Letters Annual*, 1983 (Salt Lake City: AML, 1984), 10–31, with its excellent bibliography and his “The Vocation of David Wright: An Essay in Analytic Biography,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11 (Summer 1978): 38–52. See also his “Literature, Mormon Writers of: Short Stories,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:842–44.

25. Cracroft uses the term “faithful realism” to describe the recent group of Mormon novelists he most admires in his “Literature, Mormon Writers of: Novels,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:839. With his permission, I adopt it here to characterize the entire recent period of Mormon literature.

26. See Eugene England and Dennis Clark, eds., *Harvest: Contemporary, Mormon Poems* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), “Notes on Poets,” for bibliographies of these poets, all of whom have continued publishing regularly, as well as of younger poets who developed in the 1980s and 1990s.

27. See the editors’ commentaries in *Harvest*, and, for a more negative view of the younger poets, Richard Cracroft’s review of *Harvest* in *BYU Studies* 30 (Spring 1990): 120–22.

28. My notes on Bennion’s lecture at Brigham Young University (102 TNRB, 9:15 a.m., 11 Sept. 1991). Thayer’s first collection was *Under the Cottonwoods and Other Mormon Stories* (Provo, UT: Frankson Books, 1977). See also John Bennion, *Breeding Leah and Other Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990). A story like Bennion’s “Dust” is both characteristically Mormon in its protagonist’s guilt-ridden response to the apocalyptic implications of his work on nerve gases and avant-garde in the stylistic disjunctions Bennion learned from his teacher Donald Barthelme. Other avant-garde Mormon writers include the postmodernist, occasionally minimalist, Darrell Spencer, who is publishing widely in prestigious magazines like *Epoch* and has two collections, *Woman Packing a Pistol* (Port Townsend, WA: Dragon Gate, 1987) and *Our Secret’s Out* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), and Brian Evenson, who has appeared in *The Quarterly and Nomad* and has also published a collection of short stories, *Altmann’s Tongue* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

29. See Bruce W. Jorgensen, “Romantic Lyric Form and Western Mormon Experience in the Stories of Douglas Thayer,” *Western American Literature* 22 (Spring 1987): 43–47, and my “Douglas Thayer’s *Mr. Wahlquist in Yellowstone*: A Mormon’s Christian Response to Wilderness,” *BYU Studies* 34 (Fall 1994): 52–72. In my judgment, Thayer’s “The Redtail Hawk,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Autumn 1969): 83–94, reprinted in *Mr. Wahlquist*, is the finest Mormon story and one of the finest twentieth-century American stories, thanks to its sophisticated use of point of view and its profound theme.

30. See my “Wilderness as Salvation in Peterson’s *The Canyons of Grace*,” *Western American Literature* 19 (Spring 1984): 17–28, my review of *Night Soil*, *Weber Studies* 8 (Fall 1991): 99–100; and my essay, “Beyond ‘Jack Fiction,’” in this volume.

31. See my “The New Mormon Fiction” and the notes on contributors and the list of “Other Notable Mormon Stories and Collections” in my *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xi–xx, 333–48.

32. See my discussion of Card in “Beyond ‘Jack Fiction,’” in this volume and my “Speaker for the Dead and the Different,” in *This People*, Summer 1993, 40–50.

33. Excellent early essays include Karl Keller's "Every Soul Has Its South," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (Summer 1966), and Carole C. Hansen's "The Death of a Son," *ibid.* 2 (Autumn 1967), but they did not become part of a continuing body of influential work. Geary collected his essays in *Good-bye to Poplarhaven: Recollections of a Utah Boyhood* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985). His *The Proper Edge of the Sky: The High Plateau Country of Utah* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992) is an experimental combination of personal reflection with natural and cultural history.

34. For a listing and fine short history of Mormon drama, see Robert A. Nelson, "Literature, Mormon Writers of: Drama," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:837–38.

35. Brigham Young University's Film and Theatre Department, with its willingness to sponsor playwriting classes and produce student and faculty works, has been an important outlet, although its works have not been readily exportable to a larger Mormon audience. In 1994–96, for example, Mormon-written and Mormon-produced plays on BYU boards have included *Prodigals* by BYU student Adam Boulter, which deals with the theme of free agency in a futuristic non-Mormon culture; student James Bell's *Prisoner*, based on the Vietnam captivity of Lieutenant Gerald Coffee, which was selected nationally as the best new student play of 1994 and subsequently received a performance at the Kennedy Center; BYU professor Charles Whitman's *Montpelier Farewell* (1995), which explores Mormon theology, and social issues in his hometown of Montpelier, Idaho, from the perspective of a non-Mormon family; student Adam Blackwell's *Blind Dates* (1995), a play set in an Eastern city about the challenging social issue of date rape; and student Scott Livingston's *Free at Last* (1996), a drama on the theme of blacks first receiving the Mormon priesthood, and most recently (June 1996) Eric Samuelsen's historical drama, *The Seating of Senator Smoot*. *Sunstone's* commitment to publishing a Mormon play every year or so has reached the largest audience in permanent form. Recent examples are *Accommodations* by Eric Samuelsen (June 1994), about the conflicts within a Mormon family about caring for its aged members, and *Bash: A Remembrance of Hatred and Longing*, about violence against homosexual Mormons, by Neil LaBute (Dec. 1995).

36. In addition to the *Friend* and *New Era* (the *Ensign* stopped publishing fiction and poetry in the 1980s), short stories, personal essays, and poetry appear in the well-established unofficial journals such as *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Exponent II*, and *Sunstone*, and in such newer periodicals as the refocused *This People*, *Zarahemla: A Forum for Mormon Poetry*, and *Latter-day Digest*. *Wasatch Review International*, founded in 1992, concentrates on new fiction and poetry. Deseret Book, Bookcraft, and Covenant Communications continue to publish mainly didactic "home literature" and are thus reaching a wide audience of young readers, though they have also reached out toward faithful realism in the work of Carrol Hoefling Morris and Gerald Lund. Signature Books is the main publisher of the writers of the fourth period, with strong contributions from Aspen Books and an increasing number by national publishers.

37. This professional association, founded in 1976, sponsors an annual symposium in January and a conjoint session with the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association in October. Its proceedings contain many of the best essays in Mormon literary criticism, and its quarterly *Newsletter* includes short reviews of most new books of Mormon literature. It also encourages Mormon writers by sponsoring regular readings of new work in members' homes and through its annual awards in the novel, short fiction, poetry, personal essay, and criticism. The association also awards honorary, life memberships, with a handsome plaque, to distinguished contributors to Mormon letters.

38. See Richard H. Cracroft, "Alumni Book Nook," *Brigham Young Magazine*, since March 1991, and my "Worth Reading," *This People*, since 1988.

39. AML-List, sponsored by the Association for Mormon Letters can be accessed by sending a query to its moderator, Benson Parkinson (BYPARKINSON@cc.weber.edu). The Mormon Literature Website (<http://humanities.byu.edu/MLDB/mlithome.htm>) is maintained by Gideon Burton, who is working, in cooperation with *BYU Studies*, to include and keep current a complete bibliography of Mormon literature.

40. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:237. Elsewhere Brigham Young insisted humans must “learn the nature of mankind, and to discern that divinity inherent in them... We should not only study good, and its effects upon our race, but also evil, and its consequences,” *Discourses of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1925), 394.

41. Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1902–12), 3:295.

42. Packer, “The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord,” 281.

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