

# On the Way to Becoming an Authentic Reader

*Richard H. Cracroft*

Not long before his death, the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas reflected, “My education consisted of the liberty to . . . read indiscriminately and all the time, with my eyes hanging out.”<sup>1</sup> I confess, eyes still hanging out at age sixty-six, that it was likewise with me! And like Herman Melville, who dated his life from his first indiscriminately indiscriminate immersion in books,<sup>2</sup> I date my intellectual and spiritual life—I’ve never made much distinction between the two—from the books I’ve read. I learned personal integrity, moral values, democracy, fair play, pluck, and the inevitable triumph of good over evil from my father’s many volumes of Horatio Alger, *The Motor Boys*, and *Tom Swift*; I learned inductive and deductive logic and courage (and almost everything I knew about women until I married the best of them) from my sister’s volumes of *Nancy Drew* and from my own accumulated volumes of the *Hardy Boys*; and I learned gridiron grit, moral courage, and prowess from those much-perused, hallowed tomes *Touchdown to Victory*, *A Minute to Play*, *All-American*, and *Ros Hackney, Half-back*. I humbly confess that which few know: I am Ros Hackney.

In my early teens, however, I became D’Artagnan in Dumas’s *Three Musketeers*; then I was Edmond Dantès, the Count of Monte Cristo, and Tony of the Iron Hand, and Robin Hood. And I rode with *The White Company*; swung my way through *Tarzan*, *Lord of the Apes*; and thrilled my way through *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, *Dracula*, the *Complete Sherlock Holmes*, and all of Edgar Allan Poe; and found late-night freedom in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *King Solomon’s Mines*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and Booth Tarkington and Rudyard Kipling; and I bombed Tokyo with Eddie Rickenbacker in *Seven Came Through*. Yes, I traveled widely at 1067 East 4th South, Salt Lake City.

My lack of discrimination led me, too early, to Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, and several questionable books among my father's Book-of-the-Month-Club selections at the same time that I was relishing the short stories in my mother's monthly *Relief Society Magazine*—all lump-in-the-throat products of the “suddenly-she-realized” school of Mormon literature. But my concerned mother's more discriminating tastes led me, via gifts, to *The Robe*, *The Big Fisherman*, *The Silver Chalice*, *Quo Vadis*, and *Ben Hur*, sword-and-faith novels much to my liking. Then I saw Jose Ferrer's thrilling film performance of Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*. I read, memorized, and acted the play again and again with my tolerant friends, and my literary tastes soared. I have never forgotten Cyrano's impromptu balladizing as he confidently dueled:

Lightly I toss my hat away,  
 Languidly over my arm let fall  
 The cloak that covers my bright array—  
 Then out swords, and to work withal!  
 .....  
 Hark, how the steel rings musical!  
 Mark how my point floats, light as the foam,  
 Ready to drive you back to the wall,  
 Then, as I end the refrain, thrust home!<sup>3</sup>

My reading became more focused during my Swiss-Austrian mission, where I read late into the night, devouring the standard works, *auf Deutsch und auf Englisch*, along with some thirty-five Church books (duly noted in my journal) sent me faithfully by my indulgent mother, and a dozen volumes of Goethe, Schiller, Erich Kästner (*The Parent Trap*), and German poetry. It was a different era then, and I had an understanding mission president, who, encouraging my bad poetry, named me the mission poet laureate—I don't think I had much competition.

Back home, married, in college, and a self-anointed English major, I found the malady lingered on—but now more prescribed and very literary. Yes, once, alone and bored while on sentry duty in the military, between one and four A.M., I gorged, thrice, a yellowed and waterlogged issue of *True Romance*, left by earlier sentries. Yes, I read on my honeymoon, and it was infectious: in our first years of marriage, my brand-new wife and I read, individually but simultaneously, all of Ernest Hemingway. So it has continued, lifelong. In a routine as regular as saying my prayers, brushing my teeth, and turning off my hearing aids, I have read every night of my life, from thirty minutes to four hours—from Salt Lake City to X'ian and from Zürich to Londontown; by lamplight, candlelight, firelight, propane lantern, or flashlight; in every bed, miserable sleeping bag or tent that I have ever occupied. All of this will be sworn to—or at—by my long-suffering

wife, Janice, who bravely conceals the fact that she hasn't had a good night's sleep in a darkened room in forty-three years.

In fact, it was while reading by flashlight in bed when I was sixteen that I first became aware of the problem I am addressing and undertaking to solve in this essay: the tension that each of us experiences between *religion*—with its spiritual, eternal, and supernal focus—and the very human, earthly, and earthy *humanities*.

On that night in 1952, I was reading an expensive 35¢ paperback edition of Nevill Coghill's translation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which I had picked up after work at the magazine shop (I have it still). At dinner, Mom and Dad recognized my acquisition as a "classic"—a classic being a book which, according to Mark Twain, "people praise and don't read."<sup>4</sup> When Mom sounded "lights out" at about 10:30 P.M., I had complied, as usual, by putting down my book, saying my prayers, turning out the light, and settling into bed—for I was a good boy. Then, stealthily, as was my wont, I pulled out the flashlight from beneath the mattress and began the most delicious minutes of my day. Mother obviously indulged me in this clandestine activity, as the number of batteries I required for my nightly reading was prodigious, and she quietly kept my flashlight supplied.

On this particular night, however, I ran headlong into the earthly humanities, stumbling, at 12:15 A.M., and without the slightest warning, onto "The Miller's Tale." As I read of the bawdy trick played on the old man by his naughty young wife and her lascivious lover, I was at once stunned, delighted, titillated, and shocked. And I began to laugh, long and low. But not low enough. Suddenly my mother appeared in my room like a specter—be-negligeed, be-Mentholatumed, and be-curlered—and began scolding me for my after-midnight offense. She demanded to know what I was laughing at. Hesitantly and half-apologetically, I read my mother much of the tale, including the offending but hilarious lines. Mother, angelically gowned embodiment of Propriety, Purity, and Piety, vividly portrayed the human dilemma of Carnality warring with Spirituality, of the Profane battling the Divine. Then, Mother's humanity triumphed over her spiritual scruples, and she began to laugh, and laugh, and laugh, with mighty abandon, at age fifty-four, in 1952, at a ribald but very human story written six hundred years earlier. "It's scandalous," she chortled. "But it's a classic," she rationalized, clearly torn by the old battle raging within between the assertive, alluring, human flesh and the holy, sweet, but decidedly calmer joys of the Spirit; between humanities and religion. Then clucking, "Don't stay up too late," she left me alone in bed with Chaucer and fled to her own bed and, I'm sure, prayers for her son's spiritual welfare, while I returned to the very human road to Canterbury.

Although my mother turned her back on the confusing ambiguities raised by her sixteen-year-old boy reading Chaucer's ribald tale, the old, old war between the flesh and the Spirit is not so readily dismissed. For most of us, Alexander Pope's humanist charge to "know then thyself, presume not God to scan, / The proper study of Mankind is Man"<sup>5</sup> collides head on with Lorenzo Snow's profoundly theocentric couplet, "As man now is, God once was: / As God now is, man may be,"<sup>6</sup> which makes the proper study of mankind not man, but God, and raises the question, is the term "a Latter-day Saint humanist" an oxymoron?

One morning circa 1977, a very driven lady, I'll call her Sister Grundy, descended upon my department chairman's office, threw down the gauntlet in the form of a long list of books currently being taught by BYU professors of English, myself included, and demanded that we so-called Latter-day Saint humanists cease and desist in exposing young minds to "godless filth and trash." In her unassailable estimate, these wicked books fell far short of our own humanities standard, which is, as BYU Professor of English Edward Geary has stated, to "celebrate human dignity" and "prepare readers for lives of virtuous action";<sup>7</sup> and these books seemed to fall woefully short of meeting that which she considered the spiritual standard against which any book read at BYU should be measured: "Worthy to be read to the Brethren in the Temple on Thursday morning." Sister Grundy had taken the trouble of sending the book list, along with specific, underlined passages from the books and the names of the teachers who taught them—that is, nearly every member of the English faculty—to the First Presidency. She assured me that I would be "hearing from them shortly." Bless the Brethren, I never heard a word.

So there I sat, a sitting stake president, looking at a list of books that I cherished as literature, which Dr. Neal Lambert and I have often defined as the significant expression of significant human experience, books laden with passages that were indeed, as Sister Grundy's "gotcha" highlighting clearly demonstrated, wrenched from context and quivering nakedly before me, full of profane words and offending paragraphs that I surely would not want to read to my children in family home evening much less to the Brethren in the temple. The Latter-day Saint humanist dilemma.

If you have had your thumb or nose in much imaginative literature or art, you have probably experienced similar confrontations—with a parent, a roommate, a seminary teacher, or your own conscience. At some point, every spiritual man and woman must come to grips with the inevitable clash that occurs occasionally between one's humanities and one's spiritualities. Each of us must rationalize, justify, and explain, if only to oneself, spending precious mortal moments with imaginative literature—or, for that matter, enjoying paintings, sculpture, opera, or music—which could not be comfortably received by the Brethren on Thursday mornings in the

temple, or by ourselves in the solitude of our souls. “As if you could kill time,” Thoreau asserts in *Walden*, “without injuring eternity.”<sup>8</sup>

At some point, as professor, department chair, or dean, I have received complaints about the contents of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Roughing It*, *Tom Jones*, *Don Quixote*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *King Lear*, *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, *Ceremony*, *The Tin Drum*, *The Odyssey*, *Faust*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Macbeth*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Giant Joshua*, *Metamorphosis*, and *Sons and Lovers*—and you may here insert the names of a hundred other works of literature that, in their unblinking examination of the catastrophic, fallen human condition, have trodden upon someone’s cherished spiritual beliefs and values or upset another’s delicate moral equilibrium—and will do so again, somewhere, today.

As I tried to explain to Mrs. Grundy, I admire each of the books she was attacking; I find in them something of inestimable value that enables me to overlook the words or phrases or situations foreign to my sensibilities and worldview. I told her that these very human books have taught me valuable insights and truths, that I believe they teach our students something that cannot be learned as well any other way. I tried to explain that wrenching words and passages from their contexts and labeling them as offensive was akin to walking out on the Oberammergau Passion Play during the Crucifixion scene because of the R-rated violence—she’d be missing the point. I reminded her, in many futile words, that we walk in twilight in a fallen world and that it is “a contradiction in terms,” as Cardinal John Henry Newman pointed out long ago, “to attempt a sinless literature of sinful man.”<sup>9</sup> I took the high road and urged Sister Grundy to trust Latter-day Saint students to read with eyes of faith the literary expressions of sinful men coping with the human condition, to trust that as they venture into experience they will be guided by the Holy Spirit, even without their knowing it, in winnowing and sifting their experiences, culling the good from the evil, the gold from the dross, and understanding them both; and I urged her to trust faithful Latter-day Saint teachers of goodwill to teach human and spiritual values and truths by that same Spirit. Alas, Sister Grundy and I were like two ships passing in the night or, in German, *eine Aneinandervorbeisprechung* (speaking by one another), and she went her way, apparently unwilling to extend that trust and shaking her head at my wrongheaded defense of profanity and immorality.



Now, some twenty-five years after Sister Grundy’s visit, I’d like to offer five steps that a Latter-day Saint reader can take to overcome the “carnal,

sensual, and devilish" (Moses 5:13) with which we mortals are beset and to calm the tempest between the flesh and the Spirit, between the humanities and divinity. I hope that the result will be that each of you will leave this essay well on the road to becoming an authentic reader<sup>10</sup>—one who reads good books well, with a fine balance of humanist sensitivity and spiritual insight, and thus becomes a better human being and Latter-day Saint.

**Step 1.** Henry David Thoreau labels the first step in his "Reading" chapter of *Walden*: "To read well," he writes, "that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise."<sup>11</sup> The first step, then, is to *read well in books which are both good and true*—an admonition that the authentic reader select judiciously "out of the best books" (D&C 88:118), books that have the potential to enlighten, enrich, and ennable and that are "of good report [and] praiseworthy" (A of F 13)—and, if read authentically, most books are. Sir Francis Bacon's counsel still pertains: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few are to be chewed and digested."<sup>12</sup>

**Step 2.** Step two follows naturally; we *avoid reading that which can harm the soul and repel the Holy Spirit*. Here, Sister Grundy would perk up her ears and shout, "Told ja!" In this fallen world, personal purity is hard won and hard preserved. While reading the literature of the world will occasionally appeal to the "carnal, sensual and devilish" in our nature, the authentic reader, mindful of his moral balance, selects his reading judiciously, according to his own strengths and cognizant of his own weaknesses; should he encounter surprises, he consciously makes the effort to control and direct his spirit, in his own way and at his own pace, and, if so prompted, will follow Joseph out the door, leaving Potiphar's wife with his cloak.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell unknowingly showed me how a disciple handles the sudden intrusions of the world. Not long after he was called to Apostleship, Elder Maxwell attended a performance of a play by Clinton F. Larson staged in a theater-in-the-round at BYU. As the performance proceeded, we viewers were all startled when, to emphasize the temptations of the fallen world, the director introduced a half-dozen provocatively and garishly attired belly dancers dancing to loud and raucous music. The shocking dissonance was exactly the effect that the director wanted, and it made his point well. Still, I was startled and a bit shocked, and thinking, "Oh-oh," I looked over at Elder Maxwell, seated nearby, wondering how a newly ordained Apostle would react to a situation he had innocently and unexpectedly found himself in. He did not arise and walk out, nor did he raise his arm to the square. Instead, he seemed to be reading intently, by the dimmest light, his program. The play made the spiritual point that Dr. Larson desired, and afterward I stood with Elder Maxwell and heard him

sincerely compliment the playwright on the powerful effect of the drama. Elder Maxwell had spontaneously averted his soul from apparent worldly intrusion, and unwilling to toss out the baby with the dirty bath water, he stayed to enjoy the protagonist's "mighty change." I realized that Paul's assertion that "unto the pure all things are pure" (Titus 1:15) was not a condition to be achieved, in any circumstance, without conscious and determined effort.

**Step 3.** Elder Maxwell exemplified another key to being an authentic reader, for step three is, in reading, as in daily life, *learning how to discern and respond to the gift of the Holy Ghost*. Brigham Young, while counseling the Saints in 1867 to "read good books," added, "although I cannot say that I would recommend the reading of all books, for it is not all books which are good. Read good books, and extract from them wisdom and understanding as much as you possibly can, aided by the Spirit of God, for without His Spirit we are left in the dark."<sup>13</sup> Brother Brigham, knowing that the mortal journey is fraught with ambiguity and that which one person finds "good," "true," or "of good report," another may find vile, false, and reportable, told the Saints in 1853, "It is your duty to study to know everything upon the face of the earth, in addition to reading [the scriptures]. We should not only study good, and its effects upon our race, but also evil, and its consequences."<sup>14</sup>

The key to selecting our reading is learning just how much of this world we can process without losing our delicate in-the-world-yet-not-of-the-world balance. Learning to walk with the Holy Ghost, to rely on what Emerson called "this wise Seer within me"<sup>15</sup> is, of course, the study of a lifetime and one of our great challenges as mortals. Brigham Young said, "The greatest mystery a man ever learned, is to know how to control the human mind, and bring every faculty and power . . . in subjection to Jesus Christ; this is the greatest mystery we have to learn while in these tabernacles of clay."<sup>16</sup> During our journey as "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb. 11:13; D&C 45:13), the Holy Ghost, when invited and encouraged, assists us in reading authentically and turning our reading into a holy act.

**Step 4.** Step four occurs when the authentic reader, guided by the Holy Ghost, *catches the vision of the plan of God, is converted, and comes to see everything by the light of that plan*. I stumbled onto the plan of salvation one wintry Sunday afternoon in 1950, when I was fourteen. Passing the time between roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and Sunday evening sacrament meeting, I took up my father's triple combination, counted the relatively few pages comprising the Pearl of Great Price, and decided I would try to read an entire standard work in one afternoon. I did, and, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, I stumbled suddenly and without warning, like

Keats “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” onto a new world. That afternoon’s reading—attentive, authentic, and inadvertent—laid the philosophical foundation of my being and changed my life—and has greatly affected my reading. I learned later that we call that experience *conversion*.

From the moment I read, “Behold, I am the Lord God Almighty, and Endless is my name” (Moses 1:3), the Holy Spirit excited my imagination, already primed by my voracious reading habits, and I was suddenly reading the adventures of Moses and Abraham, Adam and Eve, Noah, Enoch, and Joseph Smith Jr. with the same attention, absorption, and excitement I brought to the adventures of Robin Hood, Ros Hackney, and Ben Hur. The living room at 1067 East 4th South dropped away, and I was there, with Moses, viewing worlds without number; I was one of the Grand Council watching the great immortal drama unfold before my mind’s eye; I thrilled at hearing the Only Begotten say, “Here am I, send me”; I shouted with the two-thirds at the dramatic words, “I will send the first” (Abr. 3:27). With Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, Noah, and Enoch—and, a few pages later, Joseph Smith Jr.—I thrilled at the dramatic “Enter, Satan, Stage Center,” viewed with them the great Alpha and Omega vision, and imagined that I could see, in my soul’s eye, something like the glory of the Father and the Son and hear, with all of them, the powerful introduction “This is my Beloved Son, hear Him” (JS–H 1:7); with them I heard the Lord give the command to “awake and arise” and be about teaching all men, everywhere, his “plan of salvation” (Moses 6:62).

As I closed that book and returned to that Salt Lake City living room, everything looked the same, but everything was different, for through authentic reading I had read and envisioned and experienced for myself the plan of God; it was indelibly imprinted on my heart and mind and soul; and, though I would often be momentarily sidetracked, even when my erring humanity pushed it to the back of my consciousness, the plan haunted me and colored everything and directed my decisions and my course: I would spend the rest of my life trying to teach the reality and beautiful sense of these visions as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price, which I first partook of as a youth in a Sunday living room in which words on a page became alive, illuminated by the Holy Ghost. I found that this new point of view—this new understanding of the plan of life—illuminated everything I have since read and placed the journeys of fictional and real characters in a new perspective.

**Step 5.** One’s personal vision of and commitment to the plan of God—undergoing conversion—brings the authentic reader to step five: a *constant awareness of cosmic irony*. Latter-day Saints or believing men and women who have emerged from their private Sacred Groves must learn to walk the

mortal walk *cockeyed*—if you'll allow it—with one eye cocked to the pressing daily realities of this life, to the here and now, the temporal, while the other eye is cocked to the reality of infinity, the eternal now, the out-there. The authentic reader learns to read mortality like the youth in 2 Kings who is allowed to envision beyond the threatening armies the mountain “full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha” (2 Kgs. 6:17).

This haunting awareness of otherworldly reality in the midst of present worldly reality is the sense of cosmic irony. It dogs most of us believers on our mortal journey, as caught by Eliza R. Snow's profoundly true lines, “Yet oftentimes a secret something Whispered, ‘You’re a stranger here,’ And I felt that I had wandered From a more exalted sphere.”<sup>17</sup> Cosmic irony is seen in the sense of the cosmic incongruity I experienced recently while driving behind a Phoenix delivery truck bearing the banner “The Father and the Son Home Furnishings,” or, in Utah, “Kolob Mortgage and Loan.”

*Irony* describes the micro-jokes with which human life is fraught—the funny and sad differences between expectations and realities, the painful incongruity between *is* and *ought to be*—the wisdom in the comment by William Hazlitt, the great English essayist, that “Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be.”<sup>18</sup> Cosmic irony cranks mortal irony up a notch and describes the macro-joke, the gap between man as he is and the divine man he can be; or, as Robert Frost puts it, cosmic ironically, “Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee / And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.”<sup>19</sup> Constant awareness of the plan, of divine purposes and eternal inevitabilities, enables us to negotiate the tension between earthly passages and heavenly strivings, to keep our feet firmly planted in mortality but our vision and direction informed by a divinely directed homing Liahona.



One summer evening in 1952, when I was sixteen, I bought a paperback book titled *Immortal Poems of the English Language*, edited by the minor poet Oscar Williams. I devoured the book, cherished it, and ran, late one evening and without warning, into William Wordsworth's “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” a poem that thrilled me with what I sensed was a poetic reaffirmation of my experience with Abraham, Moses, Joseph Smith, and the plan of God. Wordsworth, feeling the “prison-house” growing around him and shutting him off from his earlier intimations of immortality, sighs, “But yet I know, where'er I go,

/ That there hath past away a glory from the earth." Then he declares that glorious premortal state, in words almost as familiar to Latter-day Saints as "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents" (1 Ne. 1:1):

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
 And cometh from afar:  
 Not in entire forgetfulness,  
 And not in utter nakedness,  
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
 From God, who is our home.

As we grow, he laments, we forget our origins, and our intimations of that earlier state "fade into the light of common day." Still, lifelong, we catch fleeting and haunting glimpses of our eternal home:

Though inland far we be,  
 Our souls have sight of that immortal sea  
 Which brought us hither.<sup>20</sup>

I thrilled—and still do, fifty years later—sensing in Wordsworth a haunted fellow cosmic ironist. In this volume, I found others similarly haunted, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," and proclaimed that the world is renewed daily, "because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."<sup>21</sup> I heard in them an echo of the Pearl of Great Price, that "all things are created and made to bear record of me" (Moses 6:63).

For the authentic reader, the juncture between literature and faith becomes seamless, and working lifelong at mastering these five steps, she becomes a kind of divinely inspired inventor and re-inventor of herself. Full of anticipation and spiritual insight, and mindful of cosmic realities and of what Wordsworth calls "the vision splendid,"<sup>22</sup> she overlays on her reading a literary criticism guided by and grounded in an increasing sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, and she can find expanding layers of spiritual meaning and worth in even the commonest and most profane book. She becomes a capable and confident authentic reader, one who has learned, in Bloom's words, "to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests."<sup>23</sup> To accomplish this end, Bloom suggests, "there is no method but yourself, when your self has been fully molded."<sup>24</sup> Such is the authentic reader, "fully molded," fully realized, fully able to see life and literature and art, not only from an expansive and ennobling human perspective, but from that whole view a mortal obtains when touched by the larger, eternal perspective. Such an authentic reader becomes like a full-and-dripping sponge, which, when touched, will cause all who touch him or her to come away with fingers moist with knowledge and goodness, truth and beauty—

with the essence of the Holy Spirit. Withal, such a reader is better prepared than I was to respond to, even enlighten and inspire, the Mr. and Mrs. Grundys of this fallen-yet-wonderful and aspiring world.



At this point, you are thinking, “He just ruined my comfortable reading of Agatha Christie or Tom Clancy,” or, worse, you’re thinking, “Thanks, Cracroft, I’ll never again be able to just enjoy a book.” Relax, and keep on reading—authentically—and you’ll inch toward bona fide authenticity. None of us will become the authentic reader overnight. We’re all aiming celestially; so let’s aim, like Don Quixote, for the stars literarily—or at least aim for the back of the head.

In 1955, influenced by Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and Joe Lewis, I took a boxing class at the University of Utah. A week or two into the course, as I was sparring with my assigned sparring partner, I suddenly became aware that I was being closely observed by our ancient, featherweight boxing instructor. He called me aside, asked me my name, and growled, “Cracroft, you’ve got the build, the stance, and the moxie, but you’re pulling your punches; you’re aiming for the tip of his nose. You may tickle his nose, but you’ll never deck him. You’ve got to smash right through to the back of his head. Oh, you won’t reach it,” he grinned, “but he’ll feel like you did.” Inspired by these poetic words, I stepped back to my sparring partner, who looked a bit frightened, and we sparred. I moved in very close and, feinting right, I launched a left jab—I’m left-handed—throwing everything I had into it and aiming, of course, for the back of his head. To my carnal delight, I landed as hard a blow as I had ever delivered. My padded fist did not reach the back of my partner’s head, but en route it broke his nose, blacked both eyes, and knocked him down and just about out. “That’s the idea,” my wiry instructor chuckled, and he gleefully marked an A in his book. My bleeding sparring partner, unwilling to turn the other cheek, went to the showers and, being a poor sport, refused to spar with me again—ever.

I learned that in becoming a punishing boxer, or an authentic reader, or a Latter-day Saint, we obtain better results if we go for broke, aim high, aim for the back of the head or at gaining the highest rung on the celestial ladder. Oh, we may not get there, but we’ll get much further than if we had aimed low and comfortably. So it is with reading authentically.

Well, it’s time for me to get back to my books, and you to yours. As usual, I am presently undergoing four books. Cigar-smoking Mark Twain insisted that he came into this world asking for a light. I came into this

world waving a valid Salt Lake City Public Library card and asking my mother to please stop blocking the light. I plan to exit this world asking, like Goethe, for “*mehr Licht*” (more light)<sup>25</sup> and caught with my thumb in a book. If at that moment I happen to be reading a spy novel, I hope my wife will replace it with my well-thumbed copy of the Book of Mormon—after all, first impressions are important. In any case, I hope my demise won’t be for a millennium or two, for I have “miles to go before I sleep, / [And books to read that will not keep].”<sup>26</sup> And so do you.

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2. Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne, June 1, 1851, quoted in Edwin Haviland Miller, *Melville* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), 187.
3. Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, trans. Brian Hooker (New York: Bantam, 1959), 34–35.
4. Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing, 1897), 241.
5. Oscar Williams, ed., *Immortal Poems of the English Language* (New York: Pocket Books, 1952), 160.
6. Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow: One of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884; reprint, Salt Lake City: Zion’s Book Store, 1975), 46.
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8. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 50.
9. John Henry Newman, quoted in Jeffrey R. Holland, “Some Humane Thoughts from the Humanities” (address given to the BYU College of Humanities, Provo, Utah, October 21, 1993), 3.
10. I am indebted to Harold Bloom for the term “authentic reader.” *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 24.
11. Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.
12. Sir Francis Bacon, “Of Studies,” in *The College Survey of English Literature*, ed. Alexander M. Witherspoon and others, shortened rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 321.
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