

Rendering the Ineffable Effable: Treating Joseph Smith's First Vision in Imaginative Literature

The historical and imaginative renderings of the First Vision suggest individual patterns for seeking divine direction and drawing believers closer to the ultimate goal of knowing God.

Richard H. Cracroft

Just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*¹

This attempt by Joseph Smith Jr. to render effable the sublime and ineffable, to contain in words the appearance of the Father and the Son to him on that long-ago spring morning in 1820, has become not only the foundational document and “fountainhead” of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ,² but also a touchstone of faith and orthodoxy for the Latter-day Saints.³ James B. Allen asserts that for faithful members “belief in the vision . . . is second only to belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth.”⁴

The First Vision is the mucilage of Mormonism, especially as Joseph related the experience in his 1838 dictation. This telling of the First Vision would become part of the *History of the Church* and, as canonized in 1880 and included in the Pearl of Great Price, the unifying dynamic common to every Latter-day Saint. All of Joseph Smith's subsequent revelations, as well as those of his successors in the First Presidency, reverberate with that first vision and its complex of significances.

Joseph Smith's account, evolving as it did over time and through numerous tellings, is a powerful literary *tour de force* that centers Joseph's "charismatic authority"⁵ and authenticates and presents compelling evidence for his divine call to prophethood. It also reifies what Harold Bloom has called Joseph Smith's "authentic religious genius" and his "uncanny" religion-making sensibilities as "the most gifted . . . of all American prophets."⁶

As the body of Saints would gradually come to understand, the First Vision also reestablishes the doctrine of an anthropomorphic God and theomorphic humankind. The Vision clarifies the being and relationship among the personages of the Godhead and elucidates the pattern of relationship between the Godhead and human beings through continuing revelation—revelation that comes not only from God to his prophets, but also from God to individual men and women, thereby promoting in every believer the faith-vitalizing expectation of his or her own Sacred Grove experience.

The First Vision is integral to the story of the Latter-day Saints and to their very existence as a people. Repeated and heartfelt recitations of the event, together with testimonies sought, gained, and uttered regarding its divinity, have, over time, transformed the First Vision into the kind of "profound" story that presents—posits cultural commentator Neil Postman—an "organizing framework" and direction for a people and enables them to "make sense out of the world" by providing "a . . . theory about how the world works."⁷

In the century and a half since Joseph Smith was martyred, only twenty-four years after his first vision, several generations of poets, dramatists, and writers of fiction have attempted, with varying success, to come to grips with the Vision literarily. These writers have returned each new generation to the Sacred Grove to recount, redact, review, and rerender Joseph's experience in ways appropriate to changing times and literary purposes.

As the following survey of LDS poetry, drama, and fiction about the First Vision demonstrates, the Vision continues to reverberate among the Latter-day Saints. It serves not only as a foundational document and doctrinal exegesis, but, increasingly, also as a springboard to personal and universal revelation commensurate to the spiritual needs of those generations of Saints "which knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8). The lives of those Saints continue to be affected

by his adventures with Deity and by the implications of Joseph's vision for every faithful Latter-day Saint.

I

In *Religion in America*, his intriguing study of Joseph Smith and Mormonism, Harold Bloom prophesies that "a major American poet . . . some time in the future will write [the Mormon story] as the epic it was." In fact, he asserts, "nothing else in all of American history strikes me as *materia poetica* equal to the early Mormons, to Joseph Smith," and to his followers,⁸ and he calls for "strong poets, major novelists, [and] accomplished dramatists [probably Gentiles] to tell [Joseph's] history."⁹

William Mulder long ago anticipated Bloom's call for a Mormon epic with some hardheaded reality about the challenge of rendering the ineffable effable, about transforming into other forms of literature the powerful stuff of Mormonism and the matter of the First Vision. Mulder wrote, paraphrasing writer-critic Bernard DeVoto, "God, the best storyteller, made a better story out of Joseph and the Mormon wandering than fiction will ever equal."¹⁰ In fact, so strong is the personality of Joseph Smith and so authoritative and definitive is his rendering of the Sacred Grove experience, that subsequent attempts at retelling the First Vision usually pale and shrink before the power of the original and cause one to ask why anyone would venture to retell, refurbish, or rerender the event.

The challenge is formidable: To capture, in the right words and tone without diminishing or sentimentalizing, trivializing or hyperbolizing, that awe and grandeur that approximate the supernatural experience itself; to render effable the spiritual ineffable; to transform a timeless, vertical event that has become sacralized and mythologized and thus heroic into an accessible and credible horizontal literature. All of this signals an ambitious undertaking that is unlikely to be realized by mere mortals.

Joseph Smith himself refined his written account of the First Vision through his 1832, 1835, 1838, 1842, 1843, and 1844 recountings of the event,¹¹ though he never attempted to render his Sacred Grove experience in any other literary form. However, he may have attempted—probably with the assistance of W. W. Phelps,

if Phelps was not, as I suspect, the actual author—to render in ballad stanzas his 1832 vision of the Lord that is now published as Doctrine and Covenants 76. The ballad is entitled “The Vision”:

I, Joseph, the prophet, in spirit beheld,
 And the eyes of the inner man truly did see
 Eternity sketch'd in a vision from God,
 Of what was, and now is, and yet is to be.

 And the glory of God shone around where I was;
 And there was the Son at the Father's right hand,
 In a fulness of glory and holy applause.¹²

It becomes painfully evident that the strained verse does not rise to the grandeur of its subject. The poem also demonstrates that the poet, anticipating the problem to be faced by future generations of Latter-day Saint (or gentile) writers, is himself subject to historical tyranny—that is, he cannot free himself, even for imaginative, artistic purposes, from the assertive facts of “how it really was.” If the ballad was indeed written by Joseph, his intent in recasting in verse his vision of the three degrees of glory was doubtless the same as most future writers’ intentions in recasting and retelling the First Vision—to teach the uninformed, to remind the believer, to inspire, and to testify. And further, the writer attempts to achieve all of that without irreverencing or disrespecting the original sacred account, without sounding a dissonant note in the minds of faithful Latter-day Saints who resist others’ attempts to alter and thus profane the truths that Joseph saw and recorded.

II

Latter-day Saint writers ventured, at first slowly, then increasingly, to transform Joseph’s first vision into other forms of literature. Joseph Smith’s account of the Vision and George Manwaring’s hymn “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer,” first published in 1878, long imposed a virtual monopoly on the subject. Manwaring’s hymn remains the standard poetic alternative to Joseph’s own prose account of the First Vision. The hymn, inspired in part by one of C. C. A. Christensen’s paintings, “The First Vision,”¹³ has become for many the initial and enduring entry into the Vision. The lyrics set for all time, in beloved narrative verse, the received standard tone

in dealing with the event, a tone reminiscent of W. W. Phelps's laudatory "Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah!" whom "kings shall extol . . . and nations revere."¹⁴ "Joseph Smith's First Prayer," apparently heavily revised by the editors of *The Juvenile Instructor* in which it first appeared,¹⁵ continues to illuminate the Sacred Grove:

Oh how lovely was the morning!
Radiant beamed the sun above.
Bees were humming, sweet birds singing,
Music ringing thru the grove.
When within the shady woodland
Joseph sought the God of love.

Humbly kneeling, sweet appealing—
'Twas the boy's first uttered prayer—
When the pow'rs of sin assailing
Filled his soul with deep despair;
But undaunted, still he trusted
In his Heavenly Father's care.

Suddenly a light descended,
Brighter far than noon-day sun,
And a shining glorious pillar
O'er him fell, around him shone,
While appeared two heav'nly beings,
God the Father and the Son.

"Joseph, this is my Beloved; Hear him!"
Oh, how sweet the word!
Joseph's humble prayer was answered,
And he listened to the Lord.
Oh, what rapture filled his bosom,
For he saw the living God.¹⁶

Because of the primacy of Joseph's own account and the popularity of Manwaring's hymnal rendering, the First Vision, which was reprinted as the long-standing missionary tract *Joseph Smith Tells His Own Story*, remained virtually undisturbed by LDS or gentile authors until well into the twentieth century.

Joseph Smith Jr. himself was often *materia poetica* during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and figured in such various poems as Hannah Topfield King's "An Epic Poem," Louisa L. Greene Richards's "The Three Josephs," and Orson F. Whitney's ambitious but turgid *Elias: An Epic of the Ages*.¹⁷ But not until

Alfred Osmond's epic-length poem, *The Exiles* (1926), do we discover the first of three poetic, decidedly orthodox, and very respectable treatments of the First Vision. Osmond, then professor of English and department chair at Brigham Young University, couched his rendition of the Vision in the oracular jogging rhythms and stanzas of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's popular "Song of Hiawatha," enabling the poem to move towards its inevitable climax with cadenced certitude and power:

Kneeling down to ask the Father
 For the wisdom that he needed,
 He was forced into a conflict,
 With an agency of evil
 That was seeking to destroy him.

 Just how long the struggle lasted
 He perhaps could never answer;
 But when on the verge of falling
 In the hands of his opponent,
 He beheld a light descending
 Brighter than the sun at noonday.
 When it circled round about him,
 He beheld two persons standing
 In the brilliant light above him.
 God the Father, introducing
 His Beloved, the Redeemer,
 Told the boy that he should listen
 To the teachings of the Savior.
 Simple, frank, yet firm and fearless
 Is the strange, supernal story
 Of the boy who sought for wisdom
 In the grove where he encountered
 All the potency of evil;
 And when he was weak and helpless,
 Saw the brilliant light descending,
 Saw the glorified Redeemer,
 Saw the presence of the Godhead,
 And was told he had a mission
 To perform among the people.¹⁸

In 1979, a half-century after Osmond's now-forgotten poetic saga, R. Paul Cracroft published his important, but also virtually ignored, book-length epic, *A Certain Testimony*.¹⁹ In his powerful redaction of the Book of Mormon and its relationship to the Restoration, Cracroft introduces, in Miltonic blank verse, Joseph Smith's role in the book's history through Cracroft's own rendering of the

First Vision. Cracroft's skillful orthodox poetic treatment of the First Vision varies little from Joseph's account, although his Joseph recounts the Vision to his parents, whom Richard Bushman claims were apparently left for some time in the dark regarding specific details of the Vision.²⁰ Blending Miltonic cadences and modern diction, Cracroft's Joseph tells his family:

But at my terror's height
I saw a shaft of light above my head.
. . . Inside that light I saw
Two men I can't describe except to say
They looked like angels ought to look. One spoke—
He even knew my name!—and said of Him
Who stood beside Him in the pillared light,
"Beloved is my first begotten Son
Who rules the Heavens with me. Hear ye Him!"
.
The vision broke as fast as it had come.
I found myself supine, the leaves a-dance
Where stood the shaft of light, the grove at peace—
As I had found it when I came. I tell
You this in testimony of the truth
I've learned: that if God's Church can yet be found
On earth, *my* hand will help to raise it up.²¹

The third noteworthy twentieth-century poetic treatment of the First Vision is found in four short poems by Elder S. Dilworth Young in "The Vision" section of his book-length sequence of poems *The Long Road: From Vermont to Nauvoo*.²² In "Questions (Winter 1819-20)," young Joseph Smith asks a number of rhetorical questions ranging from "How does one know when destiny / Begins a new course?" to

Of all the churches which is truly
That of God?
How does one know which pastor
Has the truth?²³

In "The Place," the second poem in "The Vision," Young follows the boy to the woods the lad knows best, to places that "heal and comfort / And make whole." And in "The Vision," he continues,

There, on that spring day
He found a place
No eye could see
And, falling on his knees,
Began to ask of God
The truth.



S. Dilworth Young

Following Joseph's confrontation with Evil, Young announces the Vision with one terse line: "God Spake!" Then, alternating between clipped, terse lines and lyrically soaring lines, he relates:

Two Beings stood in air
Above his head.
Transcendent glory from Them shone
Their brilliance brighter than the sun.²⁴

One spoke:
This is my Beloved Son,
Hear him!
Like some vast organ swell
His voice ran pure and free

Echoing through the forest,
Filling the vast reaches of eternity.
Gone now was fear,
Terror was no more.
The boy spoke as a boy,
A simple question asked:
Which church is right?
Swift was the reply:
In my sight all have
Gone astray;
None are right.²⁵

The fourth poem in the group, the best of the sequence, follows Joseph "Out of the Forest." The youth leaves

These forest woods,
Made sacred by this visit,
This revelation of the great eternal God
And his exalted Son.

And so the illuminated young man threads "His lonely way / Toward his destiny." Young notes with unadorned power, "In such a simple way / Eternal work begins."²⁶

III

In imaginative fiction as well, Joseph Smith's 1838 account of the First Vision casts a long if infrequent shadow. In Lily Dougall's *The Mormon Prophet* (1899), a little-known, but surprisingly well-written, novel, Joseph Smith is a central and complex character

endowed with seductive psychological and hypnotic powers.²⁷ Joseph appears in other works of fiction—fleetingly in Judith Freeman’s *The Chinchilla Farm*;²⁸ heroically and tenderly in Dean Hughes’s historical novel for young readers, *Under the Same Stars*;²⁹ briefly but movingly in Sharon Downing Jarvis’s *The Kaleidoscope Season*;³⁰ tangentially but meaningfully in Virginia Sorensen’s story of Nauvoo, *A Little Lower Than the Angels*;³¹ importantly in Paul Bailey’s *For This My Glory*;³² and pivotally in Ruth Louise Partridge’s impressive, but virtually unknown, historical novel, *Other Drums*. In this book, Joseph alludes to the First Vision while confessing to Nancy Rigdon that he had plunged into wild currents: “I opened the sluices myself in a wood when I asked wisdom of God as my Bible advised me.” He adds, sagely, “Never pray to God for enlightenment, Sister Nancy, unless you are prepared to take the consequences.”³³

Most writers of modern fiction who venture to employ the First Vision in their stories do so in order to ground their tales in Mormon substrata and thereby create a historic and spiritual foundation that helps explain their characters. In such fiction, the First Vision becomes, as in Mormonism, a touchstone for the characters’ faith in Joseph Smith and the Restoration. Typical of such application is an episode in Maurine Whipple’s novel, *The Giant Joshua*, in which Apostle Erastus Snow introduces the First Vision into his ritual catechizing of St. George Saints. The Saints’ “Sunday evening sing-and-story tell” begins with Snow’s query, “All those here . . . hold up their hands . . . who saw and knew . . . the Prophet Joseph!” After Sister Eardley’s testimony that “the Prophet Joseph . . . warn’t like no ordinary man. There allus seemed to be a light somewheres inside of him—like a candle behind his eyes,” Snow asks, “How old was Joseph when he had his first vision?”

A man’s reply this time: “He was fifteen, and it was 1820, the year of the great religious revival, and he read in the first chapter of James, . . .”

“Where was this?” . . .

“Manchester, New York—Joseph retired to the sacred grove and kneeled down . . .”

The old, old story, but Clory was suddenly feeling the “thick darkness that gathered around,” and hearing the voice from out the blinding light: “This is my beloved Son. Hear Him.”³⁴

Courtesy Eugene England



Maureen Whipple

As with the poetic treatments, most of the fictional renderings of the First Vision are made for didactic and inspirational purposes, for proclaiming and establishing the truth of the Restoration as embodied and illustrated in the Vision. With such didactic intent, two contemporary LDS writers of fiction, Cecilia Jensen and Gerald N. Lund, have woven Joseph Smith's 1838 account almost literally and seamlessly into their fiction. Cecilia Jensen, in her carefully researched and well-written novel, *Joseph in Palmyra*, published privately as the first of a trilogy on the Prophet Joseph (all written, amazingly, in her late eighties), utilizes Joseph's recountings exactly but enriches her account with a plethora of historical, anthropological, and imagined detail gleaned from recent scholarship and her own creative vision. In this sampling of Jensen's Joseph Smith, Joseph tells his family about his vision on the evening following the event:

"Father . . ." Joseph looked from one to the other parent. "Mother . . . This morning I saw the Father and the Son. The living God and his Son, Jesus Christ. They appeared to me." From the utter silence he gathered that no one comprehended what he was telling them. Perhaps it would be better to start at the beginning.

Joseph then recounts in considerable detail his spiritual struggles, his attendance at Dr. Lane's revival meeting, his determination to pray for wisdom, his visit to the grove, and the ensuing events. He continues his narration:

"At that moment," he continued softly, "I saw a light above me: a pillar of light exactly over my head, brighter than the sun. At that moment I found myself released from that awful power."

No one spoke. In the intense silence, he went on. "As the light drew nearer, the brightness increased. And when it reached the treetops the whole area came alive with light. I expected the leaves and boughs to just burn up. But when this did not happen, I thought I would be all right. Descending slowly, the light rested on me."

He paused, wishing he had words to describe the experience. Then he continued. "It produced a peculiar sensation throughout my whole body. Immediately my mind was caught away from the natural objects about me. I was caught up in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages, who looked exactly like each other."

. . . "One called my name, and then pointed to the other, and said, 'This is my beloved Son. Hear him.'" . . .

. . . In the shadowy candlelight, Joseph saw the awe in their faces.³⁵

Courtesy Eugene England



Gerald N. Lund

Using a technique similar to Cecilia Jensen's, Gerald N. Lund, in *Pillar of Light*, volume one in his widely read landmark saga of the Restoration, *The Work and the Glory*, has Joseph recount the First Vision in words lifted from Joseph's 1838 account but including some details taken from earlier accounts. This technique troubles Eugene England in his *This People* review of the book but immediately placates the majority of readers, who would be as unlikely to tolerate another rendering of Joseph's

vision as Southern Baptists would be to suffer linguistic liberties with the New Testament words of Jesus Christ.

In *Pillar of Light*, Lund's Joseph Smith tells the story of his first vision to Nathan Steed. The conversation characterizes Joseph, but more importantly for Lund's prefaced purpose for the saga, it characterizes young Nathan Steed and, later, each member of the Steed family through their varied responses to Joseph's theophany. Lund's purpose is to lead readers to confront the question How would I have responded to Joseph Smith, if I were there and if he had told me he had seen a vision?

Lund, with more skill than anyone to date and without doing violence to the reader's respect for the Prophet Joseph, brings the revered, historical Joseph into conversation with a fictitious and believable Nathan Steed, who vicariously serves in the reader's stead (thus *Steed?*), and melds canonical text with imagined conversation and Nathan's imagined responses to quicken a familiar text with personalized meaning.

Joseph begins his account by telling young Steed, "I'll not ask you to believe what I'm about to tell you, Nathan." He describes the camp-meeting fervor in their neighborhood in 1820, his reading of James 1, and his determination to ask God which church he should join:

"And?" Nathan pressed.

"By now it was early in the spring of 1820. . . . It was a beautiful clear morning. I went into the woods, and making sure I was alone, I immediately knelt down to pray."

. . . "To my amazement, I found I couldn't utter a word. It was as though my tongue was swollen in my head."

Nathan blinked. This was not what he had expected to hear.

"Suddenly I thought I heard footsteps behind me, someone walking towards me in the dry leaves. I was startled. I whipped around." Now at last he looked up, directly into Nathan's eyes. "No one was there."

Nathan felt a sudden chill run up and down his spine.

After describing the onslaught of the powers of darkness, Joseph continues, "At the very moment of my deepest despair, as I was about to abandon myself to destruction, at that precise moment, I saw a pillar of light."

Nathan's head snapped up.

Joseph went on steadily now, speaking slowly but with great earnestness. "It was exactly over my head. It was far brighter than the sun at noonday. The light was so intense I thought the very leaves would burst into flame. It descended gradually until it fell upon me. Instantly, the moment the light touched me, I was delivered from the enemy which held me bound."

"When the light rested upon me, I saw two personages—" He stopped, noting the expression on Nathan's face. "I saw two personages," he continued firmly, "whose glory and brightness defy all description. They were standing above me in the air."

Now it was Nathan who involuntarily passed a hand across his eyes. A pillar of light? Two personages?

"The one spoke," Joseph continued, softly now, and more slowly, as though giving Nathan time to digest the words. "He called me by name. 'Joseph,' he said, 'this is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!'"

He stopped, watching Nathan closely.

Nathan's mind was reeling. "Are you saying . . ." He faltered, overwhelmed. "You mean you saw . . ." He could not bring himself to say it.

Joseph nodded with the utmost solemnity. "I saw God and I saw his Son, Jesus Christ." He sighed, suddenly weary. "I know how that must sound to you. But I say again, Nathan, and I say it with all the power of my soul: I saw the Father and I saw his Son." . . .

Nathan leaned back, totally astonished. He could only nod.

Lund then turns Joseph into the teacher, varying from the historic account to lead Nathan through what have become the received standard LDS lessons to be learned from the Vision:

"What did *God* look like?" Nathan's voice was barely a whisper. "I mean, was he a—" He stopped, groping for an adequate word.

"A person?"

"Yes."

"Yes, Nathan. Most assuredly yes, though a personage of glory and majesty beyond belief. But yes, Nathan, God is a person. When he said he created man in his own image, I know now what he meant. He looks like us—" He shook it off. "No, *we look like him!* He is a person. He is our Father." . . .

He stopped. In the distance a meadowlark was calling out its last evening song. The breeze was picking up now, making a soft rustling noise as it danced across the meadow. The stream gurgled cheerfully as it ran past them. But Nathan was aware of none of this. His mind was a wild tumble of thoughts and emotions.³⁶

In *Pillar of Light* and the six succeeding volumes to date, Lund has done a credible job of freeing himself from the chains of historical tyranny at least enough to render the First Vision believable and profoundly moving for another *fin de siècle* generation. Lund's unobtrusively imaginative yet orthodox revisiting of the Sacred Grove revitalizes the Prophet Joseph as an attractive heroic figure who is also believable and inspiring—and blessedly unhampered and undiverted by the anachronistic chains of modern psychology.

IV

In recent years, the First Vision and the revelatory mode so important to the dynamics of Mormonism have begun to suggest

to writers fresh applications of the Vision in the lives of the Latter-day Saints. For example, although former Mormon Vardis Fisher, in his prize-winning, but unsympathetically skewed, *Children of God* (1939),³⁷ follows Joseph's narrative sequence in recounting the First Vision, his essentially poetical handling of the Vision suggests the possibility of additional uses of and meanings in the experience. Fisher introduces readers to a Joseph who is "moved to deep astonishment" at the overwhelming religious fervor that suddenly finds him praying with "strange deep passion"

kneeling here in leaf-depth, and speaking in impassioned wonder to a great blue pasture with its solitary golden sun. After a little, he knew there were tears in his eyes and tears wet and running on his cheeks as the whole world listened to the anxious humble asking of his voice.³⁸

Then the struggle: "There was soft and unreal music in his ears as light and darkness fought to possess his mind. . . . And then very softly his eyelids closed upon the awful terror in his eyes." Then the vision bursts upon him:

He saw first an intimation of brightness far out in the universe; it grew like the softness of morning, like a gentle flowering out of utter darkness, as if heaven were overflowing the wastelands of night as brilliance spilled from God's robe as He walked. For a long moment the light spread and gathered strength and then suddenly fell downward in a broad beam of terrible splendor, in a great and blinding pillar that touched the earth and lay far out in a white column of eternity. Then, with startling swiftness, two persons appeared in this stupendous shaft of light, the Father and the Son; and they were exactly alike in countenance and in the incandescence of their glory. They walked down the beam as down a highway of light; and one called the prostrate lad by name and pointed to his companion and said, "This is my beloved Son. Hear Him!" The Son spoke. He declared in the voice of a great organ that all the creeds of earth were an abomination in His sight. . . . The voice died away in echoes that rolled in solemn music, and the highway of light slowly faded, with Father and Son standing as vanishing silhouettes against the infinite. The light closed like a shutter to a thin wraith of holiness and slowly withdrew to the lone glittering point of a star.³⁹

Vardis Fisher's poetic and engaging liberties with the First Vision prefigure the tendency, quickened in recent years, to push the historical boundaries and the received meanings of the Vision in order to probe the Sacred Grove experience for yet deeper

symbolic and mythic meanings. Most importantly for the Latter-day Saint, however, is the democratizing and universalizing of the experience, the likening “of the scriptures unto us,” as Nephi counsels, “for our profit and learning” (1 Ne. 19:23). Latter-day Saints trace in the Vision the pattern of God’s relationship with his individual children at work in human lives, entering via the Vision into one’s own Sacred Grove, and treading in Joseph’s footsteps toward gaining that “testimony of Jesus, which is,” says John the Revelator, “the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10).

For example, in “Times of Refreshing: 1820,” poetry enables Allie Howe to approach the Vision from a different angle to portray nature in poetic harmony with the Vision as harbinger of the Restoration:

A wisp of the new morning
Washes across his face
And turns him
To wooded temples. . . .

Where, she continues,

Ancient in days, the awakening mother
Lifts
Against his suppliant knees;
And a breath above,
Reigning all the space around,
The Holiest of Holies
Unveil

And Joseph sups from Their Presence.⁴⁰

Robert P. Tristram Coffin, who published his poem “The Mormons” in 1939, was in the vanguard of those who treat the First Vision as an entry to other meanings. In the “Mormonism is over” impulse of literature of the 1930s made popular by the so-called Lost Generation of expatriate Mormon writers, gentile Coffin embodies the Vision as the invigorating force of Mormonism, a force continued in Brigham Young but dissipating as the Latter-day Saints settle into the staid and visionless period of accommodation:

Joseph Smith, when he was young,
Saw a golden censer swung,

In the sunset saw two wings
Full of eyes and shining things.

Among the pumpkins in a field
 He found a great book, seven-sealed.
 Treading furrows Joseph trod
 Walked a twilit, comely god. . . .

But the vision fades and

. . . the new age caught them up,
 Stilled the psaltery, drained the cup.

Mormon's wings grew heavy lead,
 And he sank his graying head . . .

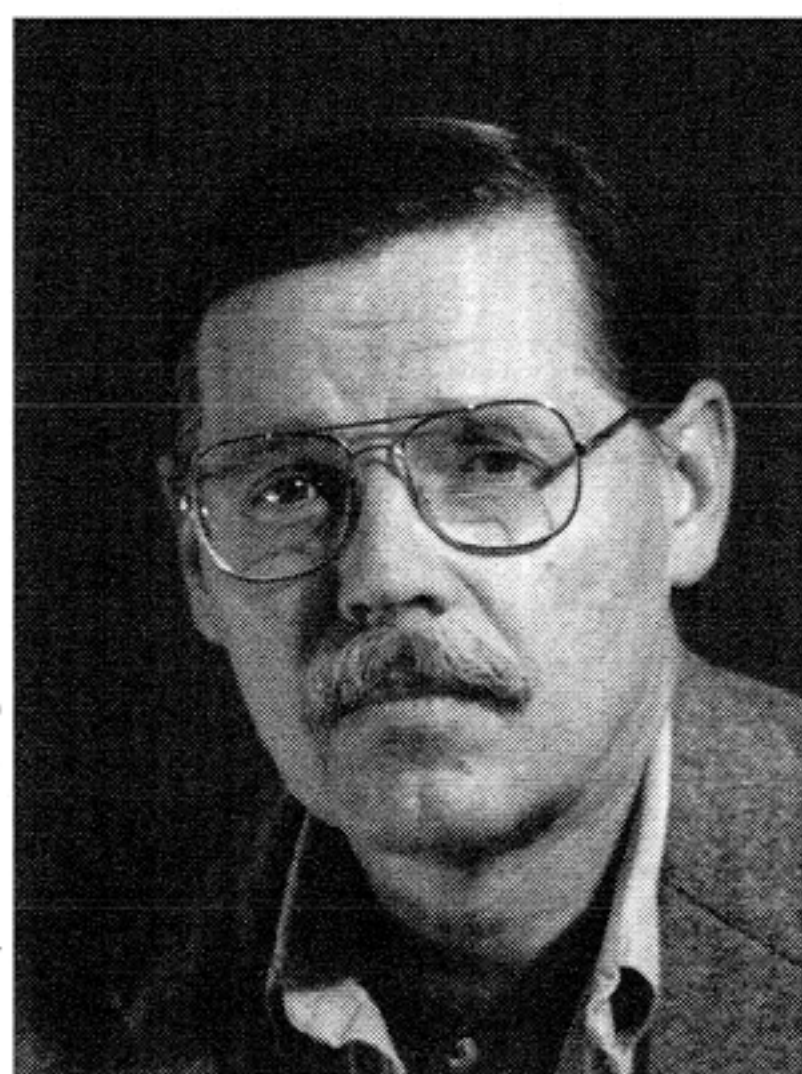
All the million eyes grew dim
 With the age that crept on him.

Gone the tents and wives and pride,
 And the youngest god had died.⁴¹

Latter-day Saint poets, reflecting the post-World War II reinvigoration and spread of Mormonism, have also begun in recent years to infuse their poems with the visionary spirit, to probe for broader implications of Joseph's experience in individual lives. In his ballad "The Light Come Down," Bruce Wayne Jorgensen extends the borders of the First Vision by shrinking the canvas and narrowing the focus. In this deceptively simple and multilayered ballad, Jorgensen undertakes to retell the Vision in a folk song:

Just a dusty country boy
 Praying in the trees,
 Knocked out flat and speechless,
 Again upon on his knees
 And the light come down,
 Lord, the light come down.
 Sharper than suns he sweated in,
 It slapped that April mud,
 It withered the one that threatened him
 And stunned him where he stood.
 Yes, the light come down,
 Lord, it did come down.
 And he was just fourteen,
 Mixed up, and read your book
 And took you at your word
 and asked—and Lord,
 You let the light come down,
 O Lord, a comin down.

Courtesy Bruce W. Jorgensen



Bruce Wayne Jorgensen

Then, placing Joseph and his vision in the larger context of God's dealings with his mortal children, Jorgensen continues:

Old Adam had a farmer's son
And Abraham did too—
All made of mud but you made em good
And brought em home to you,
For the light come down,
It always did come down.

Jorgensen then urges the Lord to

. . . look down on country boys
That stink and puzzle and pray,
And strike the light to blind their sight
And make their night your day.

Finally, integrating the First Vision with all of God's children who seek light, Jorgensen concludes,

And bless you, Lord, for country boys,
Each hungry mother's son
Treading the furrow his father plowed
Just like your single son
When you and him come down,
When you the light come down.⁴²

Perhaps the most imaginative and complex poetic rendering of the First Vision is found in Emma Lou Thayne's three-part pantoum (a complex poetic form), "Meditations on the Heaven," where she transforms the advent of Halley's Comet into Joseph's Vision and into the painting depicting the Vision that hung in the Emigration Ward chapel of her youth:

Angel wings are on the beach
I found one shining in the sand
One late night looking for the comet
We'd been told would be near Pleiades

Thayne transforms the "ancient icon [of angel wings] like the comet's head" into a "celestial body grounded for our view," which becomes, in turn, an icon representing the light of Joseph Smith's first vision, the images unfolding in the repeated lines characteristic of the pantoum:

Suppose he really saw the vision, God, the angel
My church owns the story: Joseph in the grove, fourteen

Courtesy Eugene England



Emma Lou Thayne

A supernatural sight of extraordinary
 beauty and significance
 While praying for a truth that had
 eluded others
 My church owns the story: Joseph in
 the grove, fourteen
 Not unlike Joan, young Buddha, or
 Mohammed
 While praying for a truth that had
 eluded others
 From unusual encounter the gift more
 than surprising

 It had to be believed, the unbelievable

Suppose he really saw the vision, God, the angel
 More than white on black that no one else could see
 A supernatural sight of extraordinary beauty and significance.

In section three, “The Comet Is Remembering,” Thayne fuses the comet, the First Vision, and her own youthful memories of a chapel painting of the Sacred Grove to describe the First Vision. The Vision burns with layered density at center of her being, more real than reality:

Not until today this small comet in my scalp:
 The clattering of memory: the painting
 In the chapel of my childhood against the organ loft:
 Joseph kneeling at the elevated feet of the Father and the Son.

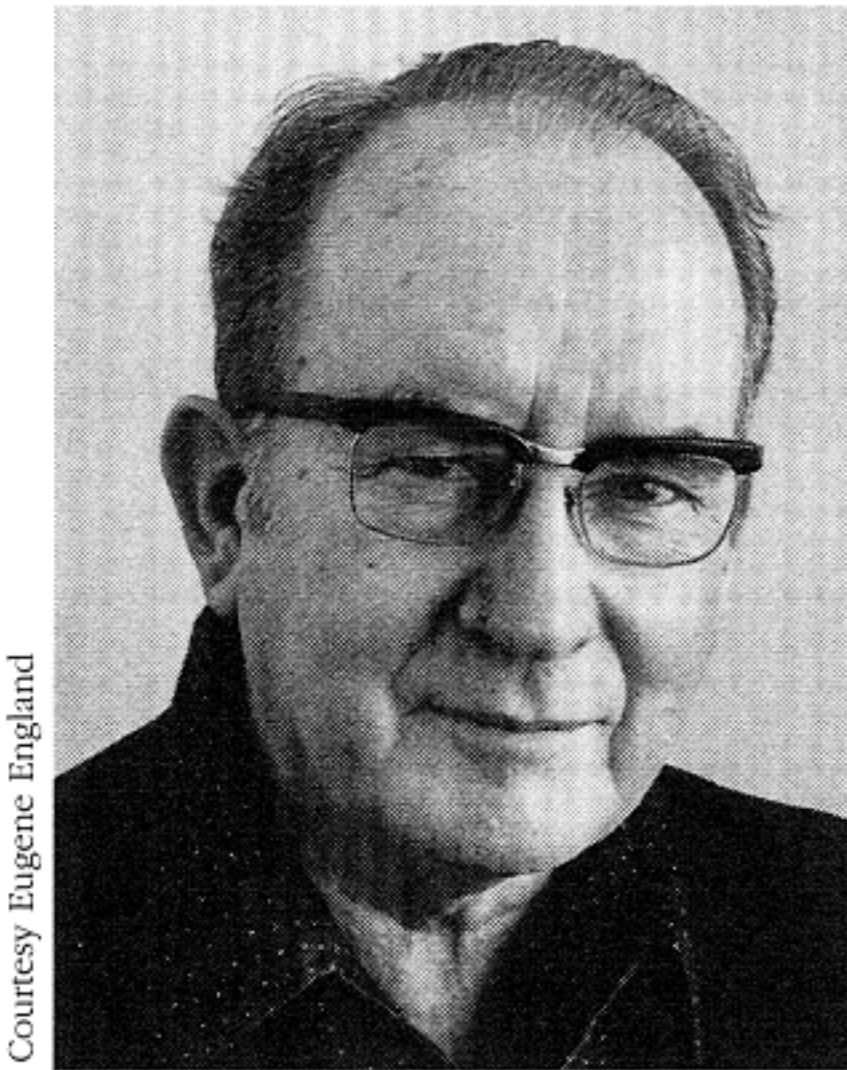
 . . . it rose indigenous as music.
 Did the artist put it in—the vision—or did I?
 In the Sacred Grove, sun streaming on the boy at prayer.

 More real now than the Sacred Grove I occupied one grown-up
 Sunday
 Not until today this small comet in my scalp:
 Indelible on knowing, like the features of a mother giving milk:
 In the chapel of my childhood against the organ loft:
 the vision.⁴³

Thayne the artist fuses in herself the complex of comet, the heavens, the actual and the artistic Sacred Grove, the storied Vision and the artistic Vision to reify indelibly and very personally in her own soul Joseph Smith’s awesome experience. Thayne’s poem is the finest kind of effable artistic expression of an ineffable experience.

V

While playwrights such as Susan Elizabeth Howe, in *Burdens of Earth*,⁴⁴ and the late Clinton F. Larson, in *The Mantle of the Prophet*,⁴⁵ do not recreate the First Vision, their work is informed by the dramatic visionary patterns set in motion in the Sacred Grove and replicated in the lives of Joseph's followers. These followers can say of Joseph's visions and their continuing influence on Latter-day Saints, as Brigham Young says to the recently deceased Joseph, in *Mantle of the Prophet*, on receiving Joseph's actual and spiritual mantles,



Courtesy Eugene England

Clinton F. Larson

Joseph, I feel your ghost, and you have
delivered me
Over the veil into the velvet planes . . .
Before me the people feel the breath of your being:
.
And they weep for the mission before us
And the scroll of the covenants you wrote upon . . .
Joseph, . . .
. . . you are with me in the mission
You brought me to, that I cannot deny.⁴⁶

This same spiritual presence of Joseph's vision becomes a kind of visionary template overlaid on mundane mortal dailinesses and informing much of contemporary Mormonism and, naturally, Mormon imaginative literature. Wherever one looks in contemporary LDS fiction, one finds, at the crux of these fictions, the expectation or at least the possibility of supernal intervention that replicates the pattern initiated in Joseph's first vision.

It is surprising to realize how many modern LDS writers evoke visions, dreams, and appearances in their fictions—whether in the comical appearances of angel-in-the-rough Moroni Skinner to his backsliding grandson in Samuel W. Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why* (1948); or in Amy's "say-so or sense?" dream or her moving end-of-book vision of her late husband in Eileen G. Kump's *Bread and Milk* (1979).

Visionary appearances occur in Nephi Nicholes's dreams of his future wife in Jerry M. Young's novel *Eleña* (1992); in Julie's discomfiting apotheosis in Margaret Blair Young's *Salvador* (1992); and in the visions of several of Levi S. Peterson's characters—from Paul's epiphany in "Road to Damascus" and Arabella's vision of the face of God in "Canyons of Grace" to the vernacular Nephite in "The Third Nephite" or Frank's antitype vision of the Cowboy Jesus in *Backslider* (1986). Recently, and more controversial, are the Mormon-like, revelatory angelic appearances in Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*.

However, the point is clear: contemporary Mormon fiction (and fiction about Mormons) is informed and activated by Joseph Smith's first—and subsequent—visions. In fact, the vision has become characteristic of seeing the world Mormonly.

Orson Scott Card, the most prolific modern LDS fictionist, embodies and illustrates the concept. Card's *Lost Boys* (1992), his first so-called mainstream novel, is centered and concluded in supernal realities. In his *Tales of Alvin Maker* series,⁴⁷ Card transforms the whole religion-engendering story of Joseph Smith into a fantasy world driven by magic and folklore. Alvin Miller Jr., the seventh son of a seventh son, divinely empowered Maker, and destined adversary of the Unmaker, experiences an initiating and focusing vision in which he sees the Shining Man at the foot of his bed. In *Red Prophet*, we learn a rational explanation of the vision from the visionary Shaw-Nee Indian Prophet, Lolla-Wossiky, but only after Alvin's "first" vision has launched the youth into self-discovery and initiated a number of remarkable revelations and white-magic miracles. In a related kind of imaginative soaring, Card, in his *Memories of Earth* series, has transformed the books of First Nephi and Alma, including several of their visions, into a parallel science fiction fantasy. Some of the volumes feature Nefi/Nephi, his brothers (good and bad), father, and, differently, a powerful matriarch in an imaginative recasting of the familiar account.

Though it is not described, the First Vision is likewise obliquely important in Card's important historical novel, *Saints*.⁴⁸ Dinah Kirkham Handy Smith, an English convert to Mormonism and later teacher of the Smith children and plural wife to Joseph, undergoes her own vision. In the same evening that Elder Heber C.

Kimball has related Joseph Smith's first vision, Dinah has her own vision, in which she sees "the face of God, the perfect man"; but the face becomes the face of Joseph Smith, in distant America:

Father, she said softly. Father, Father, Father. She was a young farmboy lying on a bed in his father's house in America, longing for something, knowing it would not come, expecting it to arrive any moment.

The feeling grew and grew until she could not bear it. The light also grew within her, until at last she could see it, a whiteness spreading from her to fill the room. She heard her words become audible, and she finally realized that her angel would not come and stand outside her in the air, that the angel would be within her, and her own lips would speak the message she was meant to hear.⁴⁹

Through her own affirming vision, Dinah gains the testimony of the Restoration she has hitherto resisted. She gains that knowledge by retracing the same visionary path to light and truth that Joseph Smith's first vision exemplifies and patterns for his people.

VI

In 1847, three years after Joseph Smith Jr.'s death and twenty-seven years after the First Vision, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, after attending a Mormon service in Lowell, Massachusetts:

Once in the world's history we were to have a Yankee prophet, and we have had him in Joe Smith. For good or for evil, he has left his track on the great pathway of life; . . . [and] "knocked out for himself a window in the wall of the nineteenth century," whence his rude, bold, good-humored face will peer out upon the generations to come.⁵⁰

Joseph Smith continues to "peer out" at millions through the window of his first vision, a window of faith that also enables millions to peer in, to confirm Joseph as Prophet of God. While his recounting of that event in the Sacred Grove remains the central access to Mormonism, Joseph's narrative, together with the growing number of imaginative renderings and uses of that narrative, will continue to suggest individual patterns for seeking divine affirmation and direction.

Thus the First Vision and its various treatments in Mormon (and gentile) letters continues to enable Latter-day Saints to soar on eagle wings of effable words and images to ineffable heights of insight, illumination, faith, and testimony. The First Vision, as recorded by

Joseph Smith Jr. and applied by writers of poetry, drama, and fiction, enables individual believers to come nearer to the ultimate goal of knowing God, at the same time enabling "millions," as the Saints sing in the hymn, to "know 'Brother Joseph' again."⁵¹

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NOTES

¹Joseph Smith—History 1:16–17; italics in original. See also Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 3–8; Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–94; Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: The First Vision in Its Historical Context* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971); and Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Circumstantial Confirmation of the First Vision through Reminiscences," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 373–404.

²Milton V. Backman Jr., "First Vision," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:515. See also Backman, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*; and Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 49–59.

³See James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's 'First Vision' in Mormon Thought," *Dialogue* 1 (autumn 1966): 29–45; and Neal E. Lambert and Richard H. Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding: Joseph Smith's First Vision," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 31–42; James B. Allen, "The Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61; and Marvin S. Hill, "A Note on Joseph Smith's First Vision and Its Import in the Shaping of Early Mormonism," *Dialogue* 12 (spring 1979): 90–99.

⁴See Allen, "Significance of the First Vision," 29; Lambert and Cracroft, "Literary Form and Historical Understanding," 31–42; Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental," 43–62; and Hill, "Note on Joseph Smith's First Vision," 90–99.

⁵Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 97.

⁶Bloom, *American Religion*, 82, 110, 127.

⁷Neil Postman, "Learning by Story," *Atlantic Monthly* 264 (December 1989): 122–23.

⁸Harold Bloom, *Religion in America* (New York: Touchstone with Simon and Schuster, 1993), 79.

⁹Bloom, *Religion in America*, 127.

¹⁰William Mulder, "Mormonism and Literature," in *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 136.

¹¹Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:6-7, 127, 272-73, 429-30, 444, and 448-49.

¹²"From Joseph Smith to W. W. Phelps, Esq.: A Vision," *Millennial Star* 4 (August 1843): 50-55. First published in the *Times and Seasons* 4 (February 1, 1843): 82-83. Also found in N. B. Lundwall, comp., *The Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), 156-64; and in Cracroft and Lambert, *A Believing People*, 184-92.

Michael Hicks points conclusively to Phelps as probable poet of "The Vision." See "Joseph Smith, W. W. Phelps, and the Poetric Paraphrase of 'The Vision,'" *The Journal of Mormon History* 20 (fall 1994): 63-84.

¹³Karen Lynn Davidson, *Our Latter-day Hymns: The Stories and the Messages* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 54.

¹⁴William W. Phelps, "Praise to the Man," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 27 (hereafter cited as *Hymns*).

¹⁵Davidson, *Our Latter-day Hymns*, 55.

¹⁶George Manwaring, "Joseph Smith's First Prayer," in *Hymns*, 26.

¹⁷Orson F. Whitney, *Elias: An Epic of the Ages*, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1914).

¹⁸Alfred Osmond, *The Exiles: A True and Tragic Story of Heroic Struggles and Masterful Achievements* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1926), 20-21.

¹⁹R. Paul Cracroft, *A Certain Testimony: A Mormon Epic in Twelve Books* (Salt Lake City: Epic West, 1979).

²⁰Bushman insists that Joseph's failure to tell the Vision to his parents "gave Lucy a misunderstanding of the sequence of Joseph's vision that she had trouble correcting" and forced her to resort, in her own history, to citing Joseph's already extant description of the Vision. Bushman, *Beginnings of Mormonism*, 58.

²¹Cracroft, *A Certain Testimony*, 12:411-12.

²²S. Dilworth Young, *The Long Road: From Vermont to Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 16-21.

²³Young, *The Long Road*, 17.

²⁴Young, *The Long Road*, 18.

²⁵Young, *The Long Road*, 19.

²⁶Young, *The Long Road*, 20.

²⁷Lily Dougall, *The Mormon Prophet* (New York: D. Appleton, 1899), 24.

²⁸Judith Freeman, *The Chinchilla Farm* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 79.

²⁹Dean Hughes, *Under the Same Stars* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 16.

³⁰Sharon Downing Jarvis, *The Kaleidoscope Season* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 306-7.

³¹Virginia Sorensen, *A Little Lower Than the Angels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942).

³²Paul Bailey, *For This My Glory: A Story of a Mormon Life* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 128-33.

³³Ruth Louise Partridge, *Other Drums* (Provo: privately published, 1974), 271-72.

³⁴Maurine Whipple, *The Giant Joshua* (Salt Lake City: Western Epics, 1976), 75-76.

³⁵Cecilia Jensen, *Joseph in Palmyra* (Orem, Utah: Keepsake Publishing and The Book of Mormon Research Foundation, 1993), 19-21.

³⁶Gerald N. Lund, *Pillar of Light: A Historical Novel*, vol. 1 of *The Work and the Glory* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 52, 55-58; italics in original.

³⁷Vardis Fisher, *Children of God* (Boise: Opal Laurel Holmes, 1937).

³⁸Fisher, *Children of God*, 7.

³⁹Fisher, *Children of God*, 8.

⁴⁰Allie Howe, "Times of Refreshing: 1820," *BYU Studies* 20, no. 4 (1980): 350.

⁴¹Robert P. Tristram Coffin, "The Mormons," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 51-54.

⁴²Bruce Wayne Jorgensen, "The Light Come Down," in *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, ed. Eugene England and Dennis Clark (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 260-61.

⁴³Emma Lou Thayne, *Things Happen: Poems of Survival* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 61-63.

⁴⁴Susan Elizabeth Howe, *Burdens of Earth*, in *Sunstone* 11 (November 1987): 12-33.

⁴⁵Clinton F. Larson, *The Mantle of the Prophet and Other Plays* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966).

⁴⁶Larson, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, 44-45.

⁴⁷Orson Scott Card, *Seventh Son* (New York: TOR, 1987); Orson Scott Card, *Red Prophet* (New York: TOR, 1988); Orson Scott Card, *Prentice Alvin* (New York: TOR, 1989).

⁴⁸Orson Scott Card, *Saints* (New York: TOR, 1984); first published under the title *A Woman of Destiny* (New York: Berkley Books, 1984).

⁴⁹Card, *Saints*, 206.

⁵⁰John Greenleaf Whittier, "Whittier Attends a Mormon Conventicle," in *Among the Mormons: Historic Accounts by Contemporary Observers*, ed. William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 156-59.

⁵¹Phelps, "Praise to the Man," in *Hymns*, 27.