

*Zion is an abstraction until someone creates metaphors for it:
wide streets with sparkling water running down the gutters,
a specifically ordered commonality of property,
a community characterized by productive diversity. . . .*

*Zion is not something that will simply come, nor is the Millennium.
The only Zion we will know, we will create through the metaphors we use.*

WILL WE FIND ZION OR MAKE IT?: AN ESSAY ON POSTMODERNITY AND REVELATION

By Scott Abbott

EARLY IN UMBERTO ECO'S NOVEL, *FOUCAULT'S Pendulum*, the narrator describes the effect on him of that famous pendulum that first demonstrated the earth's rotation:

I knew the earth was rotating, and I with it, and . . . all Paris with me, and that together we were rotating beneath the Pendulum, whose own plane never changed direction, because up there, along the infinite extrapolation of its wire beyond the choir ceiling, up toward the most distant galaxies, lay the Only Fixed Point in the universe, eternally unmoving. . . . The Pendulum told me that, as everything moved—earth, solar system, nebulae and black holes, all the children of the great cosmic expansion—one single point stood still: a pivot, bolt, or hook around which the universe could move. And I was now taking part in that supreme experience. I, too, moved with the all, but I could see the One, the Rock, the Guarantee, the luminous mist that is no body, that has no shape, weight, quantity, or quality, that does not see or hear, that cannot be sensed, that is in no place, in no time, and is not soul, intelligence, imagination, opinion, number, order, or measure. Neither darkness nor light, neither error nor truth.¹

In the course of Eco's novel, the narrator and two colleagues, disbelieving in "the One, the Rock, the Guarantee," playfully construct a grand conspiracy theory to act as the fixed point, the guarantor of meaning and truth in history. Knights Templar, Rosicrucians, and Freemasons become the movers of

history, possessors of occult keys to absolute truth. As the novel ends, however, the three conspirators have been captured by their own exquisite philosophical construction. Devotees of the occult have taken the construction as truth; and to force the final truth from one of the constructors, they wrap the wire of the pendulum around his neck and finally, when he refuses to divulge the supposed secret, hang him.

Then . . . Belbo's body, through a grisly addition and cancellation of vectors, a migration of energies, suddenly became immobile, and the wire and the sphere moved, but only from his body down; the rest—which connected Belbo with the vault—now remained perpendicular. Thus Belbo had escaped the error of the world and its movements, had now become, himself, the point of suspension, the Fixed Pin, the Place from which the vault of the world is hung, while beneath his feet the wire and the sphere went on swinging from pole to pole, without peace, the earth slipping away under them, showing always a new continent. The sphere could not point out, nor would it ever know, the location of the World's Navel.²

Eco's novel provides images for the abstractions of postmodern or postmetaphysical thought. First, the age-old desire for metaphysical certainty. Second, the postmodern argument that truth is made, not found, that supposed grounded, certified, natural truths are in fact arbitrary, contingent, constructed. Third, the image of Belbo hanging from the wire of the pendulum, his head now the new fixed point, in its mediation changing the motion of the pendulum and thus denying access to the World's Navel, is a strong metaphor for the postmodern argument that even were metaphysical truth to exist, it would always be mediated through human language.

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*This language that is our only means of knowing is a “mobile army of metaphors.”
One metaphor points to another in an endless chain, and there is no means of transcendence.
We live in a prison house of language. The contingency of our languages, our selves,
and our communities involves no lamentable loss,
but rather represents a gain in freedom and responsibility.*

CONTINGENCY AND LANGUAGE

*Our understanding of our reality—and hence even
of our religious truths—is contingent upon the
language we receive from the world around us.
Yet language is made, not found.*

THIS language that is our only means of knowing is, to quote Nietzsche, “a mobile army of metaphors.” One metaphor points to another in an endless chain, and there is no means of transcendence. We live in what Nietzsche calls a prison house of language, in a world made by language and thus dependent on or contingent on language.

Richard Rorty argues in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* that our languages, our selves, and our communities are contingent, although there is no reason to lament with Yeats that “the center cannot hold,”³ but rather reason to celebrate the concomitant gain in freedom and responsibility:

If we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that *the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary*, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. What is true about this claim is just that *languages are made rather than found*, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences. . . .

What the Romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change. What political utopians since the French Revolution have sensed is not

that an enduring, substratal human nature has been suppressed or repressed by “unnatural” or “irrational” social institutions but rather that changing languages and other social practices may produce human beings of a sort that had never before existed.⁴

Rorty is often attacked as a relativist, as one who has jettisoned access to the basic truths that must inform ethical decisions. He might answer that in one sense an awareness of contingency in fact enables ethics, delivering us from the dominating, dehumanizing insistence on exclusive views of absolute truth. The history of such dominations, including Hitler’s totalizing metaphysics, is sobering. In other words, historical claims of access to the fixed points of truth have themselves produced conflicting sets of ethical standards even more unsettling and potentially destructive than the productive sense for contingency Rorty advocates.

Theologian John Dillenberger has addressed this problem of truth and violence, of paradoxically attempting good but achieving a greater evil:

How to believe in a single eschatological coherence without acting as if it existed is humanity’s lot and task. . . . The translation of vision into particular actualities demands the recognition that such achievement is beyond reach and that the direct effort to do so frustrates and distorts what might be achievable. That Pascal knew so well when he said, “Man is neither brute nor angel; and he who would act the angel will end by acting the brute.” The direct translation of vision into action is exactly the boundary that cannot be crossed, the essence of the rent in creation which we cannot attempt to expunge, except at greater peril.⁵

Contingency seems to fly in the face of the truth claims of

religion; but in a surprising essay on "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," Paul Ricour suggests that religions owe a debt to Nietzsche and Freud and others who have cleared the ground for a new faith:

We must acknowledge that the critique of ethics and religion by the "school of suspicion" has been an asset. From it we have learned to question the authority of a weak superego too easily identified with the will of God and to recognize that the commandment which gives death but not life is merely a projection of our own weakness.⁶

CONTINGENCY AND ETERNAL TRUTH

In some ways, the postmodern notion of contingency parallels the LDS notion of a veil that separates us from the premortal world. Blessed by the veil of language, we are forced to expand our abilities by continually seeking a better understanding of deity.

RICOUR and Dillenberger investigate the interface between religion and postmetaphysical thought extensively and insightfully, but I would like to move on to ask their basic question once again, this time in a specifically LDS context: What can our revealed religion gain from a philosophy that denies every sort of transcendence?

First, I should mention some obvious and powerful differences between LDS theology and postmodern thought. Our scriptures, we believe, are divinely inspired. We speak of an Adamic language and the gift of tongues. And we call our beginning "the Word." (John 1:1.) Doesn't this negate a supposed contingency of language?

We believe we are coeternal with God: intelligences; spirits; corporeal human beings; and, finally, gods. How could we then speak of a contingency of self?

Central to our thought is the concept of Zion, of a people consecrated and led by prophetic political/religious leaders, a community in which there are no poor, a community in which each receives according to needs, in which individual growth and community growth are mutually advantageous. Doesn't Zion repudiate a contingency of community?

Further, our scriptures are replete with assertions concerning truth:

And truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come; And whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning. The Spirit of truth is of God. I am the Spirit of truth, and John bore record of me, saying: He received a fulness of truth, yea, even of all truth; And no man receiveth a fulness unless he keepeth his commandments. He that keepeth his commandments receiveth truth and light, until he is glorified in truth and knoweth all things. (D&C 93:24–28.)

I could go on and on giving examples from our theology that demonstrate that truth is indeed out there in the presence and person of our creator. So why bother with the postmodern

concept that truth is made by humans, not found?

My point will be that even if truth is "out there," as we believe, it is largely inaccessible in our present condition, and it is to our advantage to recognize that inaccessibility.

A few quick examples:

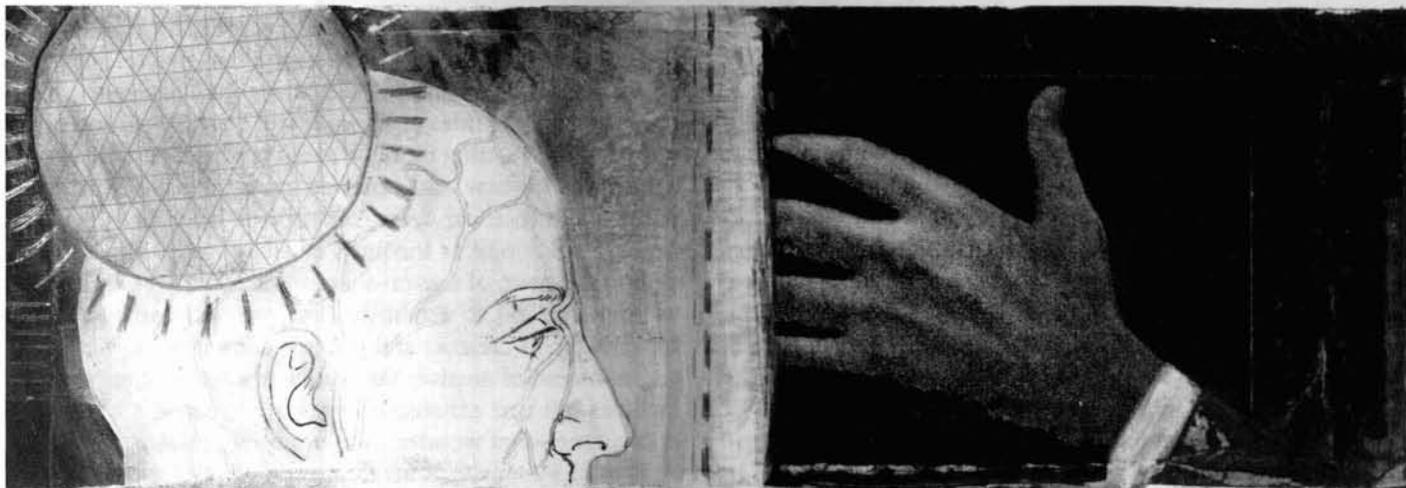
There is a veil between us and the pre-mortal life, between us and God's presence. Is it perhaps the purpose of that veil to let us experience the exigencies of contingency? Are our attempts at masking that contingency through various methods of reduction, possession, mastery, or totalization attempts to bypass that important experience? (*Reduction* of the majesty and mystery of God to something we can fit our minds around. *Possession* of a dogmatic God for the purpose of dominating others. *Mastery* instead of humility. The pretense of *totalization* to gain control and power.)

Don't we believe in a creative God who makes truths? And don't we believe, heretics that we are, that at some time God had to learn to be a maker of truths, not *ex nihilo*, but a maker all the same? As we learn to be like our Heavenly Parents, must we not learn to make truth as they do? Would that be possible without a veil? Would we not otherwise simply mirror the existence we saw clearly in God's presence? Isn't it possible that we live this life not to discover through revelation what transcendent truths exist, but rather to learn by creating contingent truths, having to live with them, exploring what serves us well and what doesn't, developing ideas and customs and languages that make us more human—in fact, even working out what it is to be human? Why would God leave us so alone if we were best served by divine presence, by truth, by totality?

There is, of course, a second side to this story. We may sense, in blessed moments, that we are not left entirely alone. While God created the veil, God may also part it to offer us a divine hand of fellowship. The Spirit speaks heat and light to our souls. Still, we are left to respond contingently to even the most glorious revelations of a transcendent deity.

Our understanding of such experiences is obviously both facilitated and limited by our language, our traditions, our prejudices. In the very short history of the latter-day Church, we have hundreds of examples of change, of progress and regress as we redescribe our visions of God and ourselves. Those redescrptions must always be done in language, in a language reeking of history and culture.

Take, for example, our most sacred latter-day story—Joseph Smith's First Vision, his marvelous, direct encounter with God. Joseph recounted this event in at least four different ways, obviously struggling to describe his vision, to create a new set of metaphors for the being or beings he had encountered. It is inspiring to observe just how assiduously Joseph worked to understand the nature of God in the years after his vision, how the traditional trinitarian God who had dominated his mind at the time of the vision gradually gave way to a sense of Father and Son as distinct beings. Of course Joseph did not leave his image of God absolutely open to change; one version of the First Vision was indeed canonized. Yet Joseph Smith's search is instructive, as is our wonderfully open canon, an openness that might inspire us to continue framing metaphors



CHRIS THORNDICK

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From the concept that truth is made by humans, not found?
Even if truth is "out there," as we believe, it is largely inaccessible in our present condition,
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to help us understand God.

But don't we already know who God is? Roger Keller, whom I first met in Nashville where he was an administrator of Scarritt College, a Methodist graduate school, and who is now a professor at BYU, has as good an answer as I have heard anywhere. He suggests that he converted to Mormonism because here, in contrast to the perhaps 5 percent of truth taught by other great religions, he found 6 percent of the truth. A sense for what we don't know, like the knowledge of ignorance Socrates must inculcate in his interlocutors before he can teach them, is indispensable if we are to continue to learn about our Lord.

The Jewish tradition is replete with examples of how new metaphors aid in approaching God. Consider, for instance, Arthur A. Cohen's description of a rather startling metaphor:

I prefer the gentle and exceedingly simple formulation of Saint Silvester: "God is like an onion. He is very simple and he makes one cry."

The onion is all of a piece, it is generally recognized. There is nothing different at its core than what appears at its surface. Nothing new is revealed if we begin to remove its layers. Nothing at all. We weep, however, as we pare away each layer.⁷

Another metaphor, this time a burning bush, reminds us of God's wish for us to approach and to keep our distance: "Moses . . . do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground . . . and Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." (Ex. 3:5-6.)

Two examples show Joseph Smith's own humility before the face of God:

28 April 1842 (Thursday Afternoon). Upper Room,
Red Brick Store.
Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes

[Joseph] said the reason of these remarks being made was, that some little things was circulating in the Society, that some persons were not going right in laying hands on the sick, &c. . . . these signs such as healing the sick, casting out devils &c. should follow all that believe whether male or female. . . . if the sisters should have faith to heal the sick, let all hold their tongues, and let every thing roll on. . . . Who knows the mind of God? Does he not reveal things differently from what we expect?

Respecting the females laying on hands, he further remark'd, there could be no devil in it if God gave his sanction by healing—that there could be no more sin in any female laying hands on the sick than in wetting the face with water[.] It is no sin for any body to do it that has faith, or if the sick has faith to be heal'd by the administration.⁸

This wonderfully pragmatic statement demonstrates Joseph's own desire not to reduce, possess, or master the mind of God and his willingness to change what others saw as truth in the service of what works. He here creates a new ritual practice—or supports a practice already created by faithful women—of women healing by the laying on of hands. In subsequent history the practice has reverted back.

There is also the remarkable passage in Joseph Smith's letter of 27 November 1832 to W. W. Phelps that shows Joseph willing to live in the dialectic between his intense longing to escape the strictures of language and his pragmatic desire to publish the *Star*:

Oh Lord when will the time come when Brothe[r] William thy Servent and myself behold the day that we may stand together and gaze upon Eternal wisdom engraven upon the heavens while the majesty of our god holdeth up the dark curtain we may read the

round of Eternity to the fullness and satisfaction of our immortal souls Oh Lord God deliver us in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were totel darkness of paper pen and ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect language I would inform you that I have obtained ten subscribers for the Star. . . .⁹

Most, if not all of our revelation, if we investigate it closely, involves very human attempts to work through problems in a condition of contingency. Even if, as we believe, revelation does occur through the intervention of the Holy Ghost, even if the Church is indeed led by Jesus Christ, such revelation and guidance are always in the context Joseph Smith described as studying it out in our minds. Elder Bruce McConkie's description of the revelation allowing blacks to hold the priesthood is a case in point. He writes that the revelation only came when President Kimball asked the right questions. It was made possible by open debate among the general authorities. And it led to the understanding that earlier revelation, the Book of Mormon scripture proclaiming all alike before God, black and white, male and female (2 Ne. 26:33), had not been understood.¹⁰ Such studying out surely has an element of finding truth, but does it not also involve a courageous making of truth?

A POSTMODERN/LATTER-DAY WEDDING

By recognizing—even celebrating—our contingency, we accept responsibility to make Zion from the materials around us, both in metaphor and reality.

WHAT are the advantages of emphasizing made truth over found truth? Circumspection, humility, openness, tolerance, and, surprisingly—where many might suspect loss of will or commitment—a new responsibility. We will pay closer attention to the metaphors we have created and by which we live and will recognize them as both productive and destructive. Taking responsibility for those metaphors, we will forge new ones and get rid of old ones. Elder B. H. Roberts wrote that Mormonism

calls for thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of the truth, but will develop its truths; and enlarge it by that development The disciples of 'Mormonism,' growing discontented with the necessarily primitive methods which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take profounder and broader views of the great doctrines committed to the church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cart them in new formulas; cooperating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to give to the truths received a more forceful expression and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder states of its development.¹¹

Consider what we lose, for example, by limiting our metaphors for morality to chastity, or by glorifying knowledge over faith, or by defining all differences of opinion as contention, or by being satisfied with the negative assurance that

"they will never lead us astray," or by propagating military and sexist metaphors. What do we lose or gain by creating metaphors like "iron-rod and liahona Mormons," or like the metaphors that are the titles of *Dialogue* and *SUNSTONE* and of this symposium: "Plotting Zion"? Haven't we been enriched at this conference by new and renewed metaphors of Zion: metaphors of geometrical order, of work or labor as opposed to capital, of iniquity as inequity, of a handful of rice, of Jesus among the poor, of feet-on-the-ground theology? Rather than waiting for God to establish Zion, we will own up to our stewardship as creators and not just conservators. We will be active instead of passive. We will have a sense of mission that includes but isn't exhausted by proselytizing. We will experience a renewal of wonder, awe, humility, curiosity, creativity.

Harold Bloom, in *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, says that "The sage must rise to the agon, as Abraham and Jacob did, and so behave pragmatically as if he were everything in himself, while knowing always that, in relation to the Lord, he is nothing in himself."¹² Of course we long for absolute truth, and divine presence, and intellectual and political history show that that has always been the case; but the same history shows that, with the exception of the city of Enoch, which we know only through the briefest narratives, the moments when perfection is achieved are moments of totalitarianism, and not in fact the utopias we had in mind. We are religious in part because of a longing for oneness with God and for the promises of transcendent unity. The thrill of religious ecstasy, of possession by the Holy Ghost, is one of our most powerful experiences, compared often and with reason to sexual ecstasy; but these moments, however wonderful, are fleeting. Transcendent experiences give direction but not form to our lives. And even the transcendent directions from God must be interpreted by humans, leaving us, in a sense, awash in contingency. But that state of ambiguity, in my opinion, is better than being awash in dogmatism. It is in humility that we refer to most of our personal revelations as promptings.

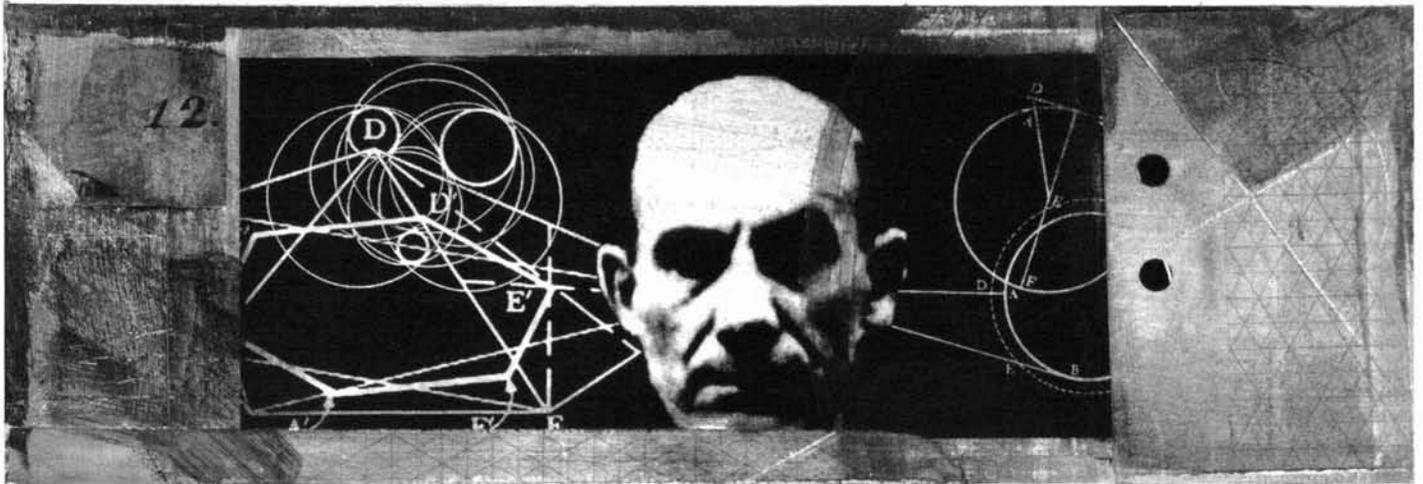
Elder Stephen L. Richards, in an essay reprinted in *Line upon Line*, a collection of essays on developments in Mormon theology, expressed strong feelings about supposed knowledge of truth:

I fear dogmatism. It is a tyrant guilty of more havoc to humankind than the despot ruling over many kingdoms. . . .

In matters of church government and discipline, the judgment of presiding officers is mandatory and controlling. In matters of individual guidance to members, their counsel is directory and persuasive only. In the interpretation of scripture and doctrine, they are dependent on their knowledge and experience and inspiration. . . .

The very elasticity of prayers, ceremonies, and procedure is additional evidence to me of the adaptability of our religion to human needs and therefore of its divinity. . . .

Dogmatism and bigotry have been the deadliest enemies of true religion in the long past. They have



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made it forbidding, shut it up in cold grey walls of monastery and nunnery out of the sunlight and fragrance of the growing world. They have garbed it in black and then in white, when in truth it is neither black nor white any more than life is black or white, for religion is life abundant, glowing life, with all its shades, colors, and hues, as the children of men reflect in the patterns of their lives the radiance of the Holy Spirit in varying degrees.¹³

WHEN I returned from my mission I was sure what truth was and that it was something to be found, not made. In a fireside talk I gave to adults in my home ward, I used passages from the Doctrine and Covenants to describe that truth and the Zion that would someday, through the will of God, come to be. In retrospect, the talk was fervent and committed, and it was abstract and bare. I was committed to a concept. Today I find myself much more skeptical of found truth, more committed to making truth, not *ex nihilo*, but in the context given by my understanding of the scriptures and the rich religious heritage we share.

Zion is an abstraction until someone creates metaphors for it. What are the metaphors we will live by: wide streets with sparkling water running down the gutters, a specifically ordered commonality of property, a community characterized by productive diversity, a homogenous mass of people who have a consolidated meeting schedule and correlated instruction? Zion will not simply come, nor will the Millennium—they must be created. Zion, at least the only Zion we will know, is

now. It is the Zion we create through the metaphors we use.

I am suggesting finally, that we wed those strangest of bedfellows—postmodern contingency and latter-day revelation, that, like Abraham, “[b]y faith [we] sojourn in the land of promise, as in a foreign land” (Heb. 11:9).

NOTES

1. Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 5. Note that these attributes of the fixed point are drawn from theological descriptions of the nature of God intended to describe God as absolute and unlimited in every sense. Compare that to LDS descriptions of a more definite, and thus philosophically limited God, a God of body, parts, and passions.

My thanks to Steven Epperson, whose ideas and even words are evident throughout this essay.

2. Eco, 597.

3. William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” in *Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 91.

4. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7.

5. “The Diversity of Disciplines As a Theological Question: The Visual Arts as Paradigm,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 48:2, 235.

6. Paul Ricour and Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 68.

7. Arthur A. Cohen, “Myths and Riddles: Some Observations about Literature and Theology,” *Prooftexts* 7 (1987): 107–22.

8. Lyndon Cook and Andrew Ehat, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1980), 115–16.

9. Dean C. Jessee, comp. and ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 261–262.

10. Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 159–171.

11. B. H. Roberts, “Book of Mormon Translation,” *Improvement Era* 9:712–13.

12. Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 22.

13. Stephen L. Richards, “Epilogue: Continuing Revelation and Mormon Doctrine” in Gary James Bergera, ed., *Line upon Line* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 183–85.



INSOMNIA: FRENCH KNOTS

When all else fails, read *Colonial Homes*—
 give yourself over to Lenox and Henredon.
 Armstrong: so nice to come home to.

When all else fails, heat the kettle—
 use up the last of the spice tea,
 made from Mrs. Gould's old Lamoni recipe.

Consider the half-embroidered table cloth
 begun on eight-hour car trips to Missouri
 before Dad died.

Consider hauling it out of the closet,
 fiddling with the French knots
 in the daisies—
 Chevrolets and chevrons
 (an officer of the National Guard,
 he never fought in France)

When all else fails.

Is it past time to open Proust,
 unlock imagined panels
 between our padded cells,
 this time
 going beyond the madeleines,
 past the budding grove,
 past Odette?
 Too late despite the discount rate
 for calling mothers,
 sisters in Germany,
 Emily, Diana, Madame Jeanne.

When all else fails, wash your hair.
 Wash the afghan (where the cat sits)
 over the chair.

Find the old scrapbook in the basement.
 Lose yourself remembering Dingle,
 Connemara, Yeats's tower
 (Adriana, the Italian lakes—
 the Jewish artist's little daughter
 with pink hair ribbons
 and a future in science).

When all else fails, set out thistle seed
 for tomorrow morning's finches.
 Think of something to thaw for dinner.
 Observe the Boating Party on the poster:
 the little dog among the grapes and bottles,
 about to be kissed.

When all else fails: when the past is missed.

—ROSEMARY A. KLEIN