

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

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WHITHER (MORMON)
SCHOLARSHIP?

REMBRANDT, "THE PHILOSOPHER IN MEDITATION"

Mormon scholarship is in danger of becoming a new scholasticism, a closed system unable to converse with the world. I am interested in seeing Mormonism searched out by scholarship that converses with the world.

THINKING TODAY about scholarship—the unexpected turns it takes and its unpredictability, but mostly the thrill of it, defining a new and unsolved problem, wrestling with it, probing new avenues, seeing the disparate parts suddenly coming together, seeing new and larger questions emerge out of it:

Could a man be drunk forever,
On drink, or love, or fights,
Lief would I rise at mornings
And lief lie down at nights. . . .

But for certain types (whose kinky gene is not universally distributed among the populace), there is no high like the high of new learning and of thinking amazing thoughts. Aristotle got it right about the pleasure of knowing. And it is a human activity, accessible to all on the same grounds.

But with all that, it is amazing, simply amazing, to see how much scholarship turns out to be a contest with authority, where Jack becomes the Giant Killer in order for Jack to become the Giant. Take, for example, B. F.

Skinner. In 1959 he was the Giant in psychology. Jack was Noam Chomsky, freshly out of graduate school, who, in reviewing Skinner's opus magnum *Verbal Behavior*, decimated it and destroyed its foundations. Thenceforth, Chomsky was the Giant whom everyone followed or tried to dislodge as King of the Hill.

Is this what scholarship is about, being the King of the Hill? There is more than a little of it in Darwin, who was near despair when he found out that he had been scooped by another naturalist half way around the world, by Wallace, who had reached Darwin's conclusions before Darwin had.¹ And James Watson's pursuing the structure of DNA is the story of the thrill of science and new knowledge mingled with passion, driven by ambition and personal quirks, and marked by the clash of authorities—personal authorities, cultural authorities, and scientific authorities.²

But such contests with authorities on the personal level are small compared to the ideological struggles of the current culture wars in academia, where the gods of scholarship are pressed into service like coolies on the dikes of the various forms of political correctness. Again Chomsky provides an example. Not content to have slain the Giant Skinner, he devoted the last of his career to contending with the Ultimate Giant—the U.S. State Department. Politics is where people play the real game of King of the Hill.³

But after Jack becomes the Giant, then what? Why, Sisyphus strikes again—Sisyphus condemned to roll his rock to the top of the mountain, only to have it escape each time and roll back down as his foot slips or as he sneezes or swats at a fly. All is to do again. Scholarship, and scientific knowledge in general, for all of its power, is a Sisyphean project.

Really? How so?

In the modern world, the knowledge factory depends on the power of the individual disciplines, each with its set of governing concepts, methods, and standards of evidence. These intellectual engines make new knowledge solid. But at the same time, each discipline generates problems beyond the scope of that discipline and which cannot be resolved with the tools of the discipline.

The result is a dissonance, a malaise, where science (*scientia*, that which is known), starts to turn out of round. Example: a graduate student in microbiology is defending his dissertation and is giving a virtuoso demonstration of her mastery of the tools of his discipline. And then the last question: "Would you have any

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scruples about putting your knowledge of microbiology to the service of germ warfare?" The answer is quick and matter of fact: "No. But that is not my kind of question. I am a scientist." I blink. Here is a Sisyphean situation—science as a human enterprise carried on while excluding the human questions, the general questions, the questions general to all human beings. His knowledge is adequate for his laboratory, for conversations with other microbiologists, and for playing King of the Hill, but not for deliberations in God's world where people live and choose.

ANOTHER mode of scholarship, however, is more congruent with human activity. Young Werner Heisenberg, choosing a career in 1920, could have opted for math or music. Instead he chose physics, being the discipline by which he could best penetrate to the "central order" of the natural world and human life. This drive moved him to associate with a small, international group at Niels Bohr's laboratory in Copenhagen, the group which was laying the foundations of quantum physics. But one can get to the center from any point on the circumference, and each new breakthrough in physics generated two tasks. With each new breakthrough they made in quantum physics, they had to persuade the rest of the profession, dominated by the authority of the reigning positivistic mode, of the validity of a

new physics that accounted for unseen things. And then they had to explore the implications of the new knowledge (actually, the new way of seeing things) for other fields. The research in physics was not multi-disciplinary—it was carried on by the mastery of the tools of only one specialized discipline—but interpreting the results was possible only after discussions, continuing discussions, of the connections of the new physics to chemistry, language, religion, politics, ethics, and philosophy.⁴

What emerges out of this approach to scholarship is the notion that no one field can dominate human knowledge, and therefore, no one field can be King of the Hill. Scholarship as a human activity thus becomes an extended conversation and exercise in synthesis: never definitive, always growing as it is drawn by the goal of *humanitas*—understanding what it is to be a human being. This notion, I have found, does not go down easily with tough-minded specialists ensconced within their fields; nonetheless, I opine that the current malaise within higher education increases to the degree that *scientia* loses contact with *humanitas*, the degree to which objective knowledge loses contact with its implications for individuals and societies in their human tasks. The greatest unmet need of current scholarship generally is the exploration of its specialized knowledge within a wider human context.

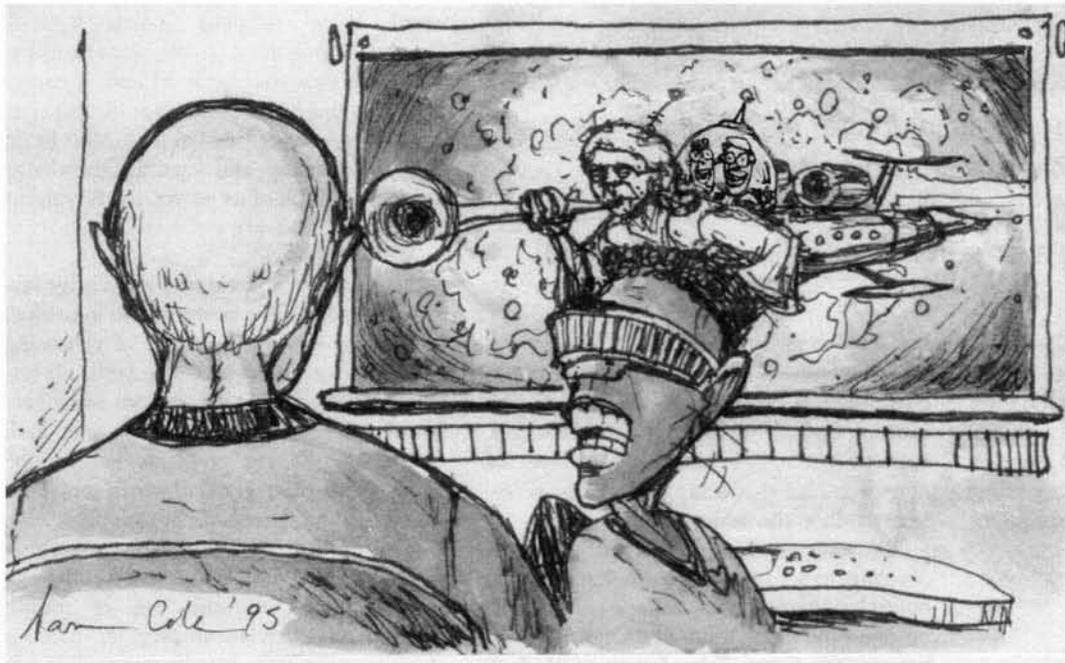
HOW do things stand with Mormon scholarship? Not much differently. There are Mormons who do scholarship in all of the various disciplines—they play by the same rules as everyone else, they participate in the same dynamics, and they produce the same kind of knowledge. Such is not the case, however, when Mormons do scholarship about Mormonism or directly related subjects.

Mormonism is one religion that makes an exclusivist claim about holding the key to the course of human life. In this it is like a discipline that believes it has finally been dealt the trump card and cries, "Eureka! The mighty secret's found." (I have heard such cries from colleagues in biology and physics.) But such a faith-cry from Mormonism is moot until its implications for all areas of human life have been searched out, and the searching is done by, well, by searchers, explorers, inquirers; that is to say, by scholars and scholarship. It is not enough to invoke revelation—we still have to say what revelation *means*.

This granting of legitimacy to individual searchers raises the anxiety level of some people in the Church, which in turn produces a different kind of scholarship. The more hierarchical Mormonism has become, the more it has become an authority-based faith that rests upon icons—the icon of a certain view of history, for example, or the icon of an infallible prophet. Whenever a claim is

raised that differs from the official view (the icon), the first duty, the immediate and only duty, is to defend the icon. There are prominent examples of Mormon scholarship whose purpose appears to be that of giving scholarly permission to people to believe what they already believed on subjective grounds and of answering and repulsing any perceived attacks on the Church.

The result is a new scholasticism and a new version of King of the Hill. The medieval scholastics could write sums of theology—witness Saint Thomas Aquinas, who raised and definitively answered some ten thousand questions about every aspect of the world. He was hardy enough to undertake any task of the intellect, except that of examining his own standing ground, i.e., the revelation providing the premises



"It's two Mormon missionaries wanting to know if they can take a minute of our time to share an important message."

from which he reasoned and which thus became the impermeable wall around a closed system. The figure for this kind of scholarship is not Sisyphus, but Procrustes, the robber chief of antiquity, who had a bed in his cave upon which he placed every prisoner taken by his band. If the prisoner was too short for the bed, he was stretched out, or if too long, chopped off. One could not know the length of anyone going into the cave, but one could be entirely sure of anyone coming out.

The result of a Procrustean scholarship is the inability to communicate with people outside of the walls. I have heard luminaries of Mormon scholasticism address professional groups—for example, a group of a hundred counselors and psychotherapists about a “Mormon view” of psychotherapy—and give wonderful talks understandable to any sacrament meeting but totally baffling to the diverse group of professionals they addressed. Procrustes is convincing only to people who already admire the size of his bed.

AFTER reflecting thus, I am now aware of several things I am interested in and several I am not.

I am not interested in scholastic scholarship, that which speaks only to people within a ghetto; whatever the ghetto might be. Nor am I interested in scholarship that seeks primarily to confront authority. Br’er Rabbit never comes off best in his confrontation with the Tar Baby. I am interested in encouraging and participating in scholarship that is (a) solid enough to command respect by specialists within the discipline, and (b) understandable to interested and literate people who are not specialists in the discipline but who are concerned with religious questions, both in and out of the Mormon fold.

I am prompted in these feelings by several considerations. The first is that the past thirty years, one of the greatest periods of change in world history, have been marked by a dearth of vivifying material coming out of the correlated, central Church. My feelings toward the general authorities are benign, and I have no desire to add to the burdens they carry. Moreover, I feel to support them when I am asked to do so. I feel no mission to “set the Church right” nor to come to its rescue when it has no need of being set right or rescued. It is nonetheless true that I have lived most of my life in the intellectual, social, and spiritual currents of the modern world, those of the great, broad, secular world for which Jesus died. I still thirst after *scientia*, that which is known, as it relates to *humanitas*, that which it is to be human, and I am interested in

seeing how they relate to Mormonism and what can be drawn out of Mormonism that might inform them. ☞

NOTES

1. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* (W. W. Norton: New York, 1959), 243.

2. James D. Watson, *The Double Helix* (New American Library: 1968).

3. See Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (South End Press: Boston, 1979).

4. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond* (Harper and Row: New York, 1971) is in fact Heisenberg’s intellectual autobiography and consists of his reconstruction of all of these kinds of conversation.



A BIRTH OF TWO MINDS

In bed, your heart beats
the rhythm of your breathing
into my ear. I lace my fingers
through yours, the shadow on
the ceiling of our hands a child
who sails on open oceans
of the moon. You say you want
to be the water, your mind
pregnant with a face
that flowers in your eyes.

I see a world that waits
for everyone to fall in the well
of its wounds. I can see only
the children of my childhood,
armed with the swords of their words.
I would be afraid to hold him
to the sky, to let him fly
from the nest of my arms
only to be taken down by their stones,
afraid to lose him on a crowded
sidewalk where he’d listen
to the shuffle of shoes, to car horns,
to the overhanging hum
of street lamps for some truth.

Your hope is a spring sun that
slices through clouds and sobers me.
You make me believe in the rivers of our
bodies that slide together and spill
over one planted seed, our chance
to grow something good
in the long burned fields of Eden.

—DOUG MCNAMEE