# Rem(a)inders: Mormon Pioneers' Life Writings

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Abstract

Understanding that literature, history and memory interweave, this essay aims at showing the importance of nineteenth-century Mormon personal literature as both historical documents and literary texts, and, at the same time, emphasizing its importance for conveying and maintaining values and collective memories, which ultimately provide the group with a sense of identity.

Keywords: Collective memory. History. Life Writings. Mormonism. Group Identity.

"Why hath this lady writ her own life?" (CAVENDISH quoted in BEECHER, 2000, p. xiv, xv) This impelling rhetorical question, posed by Margareth Cavendish in seventeenth-century England, continues to echo and enlighten the discussions about personal writings today. Indeed, in approaching the life writings of Mormon pioneers in nineteenth-century America, some other questions are inevitably suggested by Cavendish's: Who did they write for? What role(s) did life writing play in their lives? How do their personal writings reflect their experience both at the individual and at the collective levels? What contributions did their personal writings bring to present LDS community? How should personal writings, as a distinct literary genre, be approached?

As Beecher (2000, p. xiv, xv) states, in writing her own life, Cavendish's hope was that her text would both reveal and preserve her identity. Although, unlike Lady Cavendish's, the Mormon pioneers' life writings were not meant for publication, they too reveal and preserve their authors' identities and stand as both remainders and reminders – since with the passage of time they are ultimately what lasts, the sources that give access to the past and make its unveiling and (re)construction possible.

LeGoff (1992, p. 95, 96) claims that the so-called functional places, represented among others by autobiographies – and here I propose that they should embrace other sub-genres of personal writing as well, such as journals, diaries, letters – supply material for history, as long as those writings are transformed into testimonies that provide the perception of a multiple time, which, differently from the general records of official history, seems to operate through superposition.

In his book *História, memória e literatura: o testemunho na era das catástrofes*, the Brazilian historian Márcio Seligmann-Silva states that the witness should be understood not only in the legal and historical sense – often referred to in literary studies – but should also be interpreted as a survivor, as one who has undergone an extreme, radical situation, which somehow signified overcoming death, problematizing the relation between language and the "real" (SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2003, p. 8). In his reflections upon testimony, Seligmann-Silva calls attention to the aporias between the processes of remembering and forgetting and how they develop in the debate between

memory and history. He declares that "to remember and to forget are two dynamic and inseparable factors" (SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2003, p. 15). Resistance and preservation are, thus, separated by a very blurry line. In fact, as quoted by Seligmann-Silva, Nietzsche maintains that

> Joy, good conscience, the fortunate act, trust in what is to come – all this depends, for each individual as well as all peoples, on the existence of a line that divides the clear and visible from that which is dark and cannot be clarified, on what one knows how to forget and knows how to remember at the right moment, on what people feel as a strong instinct when it is necessary to feel in a historical or non-historical way...the ahistorical as well as the historical are equally necessary for the health of every individual, people, culture (NIETZSCHE quoted in SELIGMANN-SILVA, 2003, p. 60-61).[1]

Widely recognized as the century of ideology and power, the nineteenth century was the background for many remarkable social and historical events that profoundly affected and influenced the lives of thousands of people all over the world, particularly in the United States. Politics, economics, the frontier, transportation and communications, religious freedom, civil rights, domestic life and gender roles are some of the many relevant issues that not only are intrinsically connected to the notions of ideology and power but that also underwent radical changes throughout that century.

As Mormon history dovetails with general American history, and considering the fact that the latter underlies Mormon pioneers' personal life writings, in order to set the scene for the personal writings in discussion – which ultimately help in the reconstruction of a global history – a brief overview of the history of Mormonism is presented as it inserts in American history.

The history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the so-called Mormons, had its beginning during the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening, in an area in western New York State. Joseph Smith, then a fourteen-year-old boy, influenced by the current religious excitement, claimed to have had a vision in which he saw two distinct personages – God, the father, and His son, Jesus Christ. Although Smith found support in his family, the community's reaction was rather of repulse. In fact, Smith's declaration of this vision represented serious departures from current theological assumptions: first, the negation of all other creeds and sects; second, the assertion of the existence of God and Jesus Christ as two distinct physical beings, rather than one spiritual one, the composition of the Christian godhead. As a result, the pattern for the rest of Joseph Smith's own life was established: opposition, persecution, threats, violent attacks, and frequent incarcerations. Analogously, the history of the Mormons as a people was significantly marked by persecutions and intolerance. In fact, as ancient God-fearing peoples seeking to obey what they believed were divine commandments, the Latter-day Saints left everything behind and undertook a trek in search of a promised land. Following the prophet not only required a disposition for renouncing temporal stability, but also the determination and stamina to face opposition and persecution. However, for the believers, the exodus established both the physical and spiritual path for the fulfillment of God's promises concerning His people as chosen. Like those ancient prophets, Smith claimed to have received sacred revelations concerning a land of promise.

Misunderstood and persecuted by the hegemonic religious groups, Smith and his followers departed in search of a "promised land" where they too could enjoy religious freedom. The exodus westward first reached Kirtland, Ohio, where significant doctrinal orientations were undertaken, the priesthood established, the first temple erected, and

the official record of church history begun. In addition, it was in Kirtland where church members were instructed to keep personal records.

By following the Puritan tradition of writing autobiographies, the Latter-day Saints managed to, at the same time, manifest their faith and, in light of such, justify their actions. Moreover, both the Bible and *The Book of Mormon* were sacred books written by prophets who recorded their religious and secular (hi)stories. Not only did these books serve as a pattern for the Mormons but they also contained admonitions regarding the importance of record-keeping. In addition, as Beecher argues, the injunction contained in *The Doctrine and Covenants* – "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you" (D&C 21:1) – "has been interpreted in practice to apply to Latter-day Saints individually as well as institutionally" (BEECHER, 2005). The Saints were forced to abandon the city and move to Missouri, and later to Illinois, but their "novel religion, their occasional experiments on communitarianism, their ability to vote in a bloc, their very separatism, made them targets for suspicion and hostility" (LIMERICK, 1988, p. 282).

As a result, in June of 1844, non-Mormons in the neighborhood countries attacked Nauvoo and arrested Joseph Smith, the prophet, and other leaders. On June 27, 1844, a mob attacked Carthage's weakly defended jail and murdered both Joseph and his brother. Feelings of fear, grief, and desolation overcame church members. Shortly afterward, "loyalties and confidence were transferred from Joseph Smith to Brigham Young and other members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles" (PETREE, 1999, p. 34).

Having been forced to flee the city, the members of the church abandoned their houses, their comfortable lives, their magnificent temple, and very often family and friends never to be seen again. Following the instructions of their new leader, Brigham Young, the "American Moses", they then started their long journey to the Rocky Mountains.

The Mormon trail, along with the Oregon and the California trails, was a fundamental means of the colonization of the American West. More important than the uniqueness of the organization of the Mormon trail, which Tindall defines as "better organized and less arduous than most of the overland migrations of the time" (TINDALL, 1989, p. 308), was the very nature of the trail. While the Oregon trail members were lured by land, and the California settlers were enticed by gold, the Mormon pioneers were moved by faith. For them, gathering to Zion was a divine command. As Limerick points out, the role of the trek in the Mormon experience surpasses history and acquires the power of myth, "to the Mormons, this relocation fit smoothly into their providential history: God's chosen people had once again undergone persecution and then been rewarded with a refuge and a homeland, a North American Zion" (LIMERICK, 1988, p. 282-283). Wallace Stegner remarks that "For every early Saint, crossing the plains to Zion in the Valleys of the Mountains was not merely a journey but a rite of passage, the final, devoted, enduring act that brought one into the Kingdom"(STEGNER quoted in BASHORE, 2005).

Not only did Mormon pioneers have to face the challenges of persecutions and of an overland trail but also serious political disputes. As the first pioneers reached the valley, the region was still part of Mexico and was only acquired in 1848 under the Mexican Cession. In 1849, Mormon settlers, willing to set up a government that would be recognized by the United States, proposed the creation of the State of Deseret. Brigham Young retained both religious and political leadership, since he was the President of the Church and the Governor of the Provisional State. In September 1850,

the Utah Territory was created by Act of Congress and, in February of the following year, Young was inaugurated as the first Governor of the Utah Territory.

In 1857, reports on the conduct of Mormons induced President James Buchanan to fight them because of polygamy, one of the "twin relics of barbarism" (the other being slavery), by giving Utah territory a new, non-Mormon governor. Anticipating that Mormons would resist the replacement of Governor Brigham Young, Buchanan ordered an army of some 2,500 men, under General Albert Sidney Johnston, to the Great Salt Lake City. The lack of formal notification of the administration's intentions caused Young and other Mormon leaders to interpret the army's arrival as religious persecution and to adopt a defensive posture, declaring martial law and issuing an order forbidding the entry of U.S. troops into Utah. Richard D. Poll (POLL, 1985) remarks that "Memories of earlier persecutions were invoked to build morale and prepare the people for possible further sacrifices". The confrontation, known as the Utah War, proved to be unnecessary since the alleged Mormon rebellion never occurred and Young soon relinquished his gubernatorial office and established a comfortable working relationship with his successor, Alfred Cumming. In 1861, when the Civil War broke out, the army was called east.

Plural marriage was the Church's most controversial and least tolerated practice and was chiefly responsible for establishing the Latter-day Saints as a "people apart". The practice, although incorporated for a brief period of time, had a profound impact on the group's self-definition. During the 1870s and 1880s, the territory was severely punished by a number of repressive laws. In 1890, Wilford Woodruff, the fourth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, signed a Manifesto officially banning polygamy from the church. It was only on January 4, 1896, after the Mormons formally abandoned the practice of polygamy and included the decision in the Utah Constitution, that the state of Utah was annexed to the United States of America.

As mentioned before, Latter-day Saints were strongly advised to keep personal records. Beecher (2005) calls attention to aspects concerning their content and style:

> Drawing on the literary tradition of the previous three centuries, early LDS biographers took as models the "life and times" forms, depicting the public achievements of Church leaders. Usually the works reflected the double value placed on Latter-day Saint individuality and community by merging the life of the individual with the history of the movement. Often didactic, these works were defensive in tone, tending to conceal as much as they revealed about the character and experience of the subject. Sensitive facts were either omitted or passed over lightly: a man's excommunication, his plural wives, an altercation with a fellow churchman, or an unsuccessful venture. Sometimes, of course, such facts were already known; in that case, the biographer's role often became one of explaining them away.

Many are the factors which cause personal writing to be analyzed as a distinct literary genre that requires its own parameters for analysis. First, it is a genre that reveals and preserves their authors' voice and identity and, functioning as rem(a)inders, such texts stand not only for the epistemological foundations of the writer but for that of the culture of the past that it stands for, since it is representative of literary and cultural norms, working gender roles, socio-cultural influences on personal relationships, and psychological impulses that the authors perhaps neither defined nor cared to understand (PETREE, 2002, p. 3-4). In this sense, it is not only important but rather necessary to understand the relevance of the question of memory as a social phenomenon, which is enlightened by the contributions of modern thinkers such as Halbwachs, LeGoff, Hobsbawm, and Connerton, who help us understand,

among other things, how history – its inherent notions of time (past, present and future) – identity, literature and memory interweave.

Mormon personal literature constitutes both a source of historical documents and literary texts that is fundamental for the conveyance and maintenance of values and the group's collective memories. As Austin (1995) states, "Mormons have always been a people driven by the need to tell their story". Narratives and commemorations of various kinds convey and maintain Latter-day Saints' historical past, their values and their collective memory. Every "place of memory" (LEGOFF, 1992, p. 95) of the Mormon culture – pageants, plays, films, books, sacred music, lectures, museums, archives, libraries, edifices, monuments, and celebrations – brings the past into the present, and proclaims the importance of the pioneer heritage in the lives of the Saints and their American counterparts. The church, as a social institution, plays a major role in the maintenance of historical memory, since it both stores memories and provides interpretations for them. This process enables individuals to gather as a people to "remember in common" the deeds and accomplishments of long-departed members of the group through commemorations and festive meetings (HALBWACHS, 1992, p. 25). Personal writings fit the group that LeGoff names as "functional places", and once transformed into testimonies, they furnish the material for the reconstruction of the past. Specifically in regard to its pioneer legacy, Mormon life writings have a significant value, as they at the same time store memory – on which history draws and nourishes in return – and seek to preserve the past in order to serve the present and the future (LEGOFF, 1992, p. 99). Their contribution to the reconstruction and maintenance of a community's collective memory is undeniable.

Life writings, being historical documents, contribute at the same time to the rescue and the establishment of a collective memory, which provides community with cohesion and a sense of identity, since individuals appropriate the group collective memory and relate to it as their own (HALBWACHS, 1992, p. 24). Indeed, all over the world, members of the church – no matter what their nations, cultures, or races – share a sense of identity that can be attributed to their adoption of a common "psychological ancestry" connected to the Mormon pioneer heritage. The constant influence and quasi-omnipresence of their pioneer forefathers through reminders of various kinds – whether visible or invisible – together with shared transmitted traditions that assure certain values and norms of behavior, provide a common background for the Latter-day Saints.

As Southern Pulitzer-prize winning author, William Faulkner once declared:

> There is no such thing as was. To me, no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as was, because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment. All of his and her ancestry, background, is all a part of himself and herself at any moment. And so a man, a character in a story at any moment in action, is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him; and the long sentence is an attempt to get his past and possibly his future into the instant in which he does something . . .

The Mormon pioneer experience provides the Saints with a sense of identification and belonging. It is a mirror that reflects present-day Mormons in another time. Whether their bonds to the pioneer experience are established by blood or by culture, individuals who partake in the Mormon culture have in the pioneer legacy a reference for the Mormon interpretation of self. Mormon pioneers' personal writings serve to reconstruct the historical past, convey collective memory, transmit tradition and build a sense of identity.

As Maureen Beecher claims, literary canon should expand in order to allow Mormon personal literature a place (BEECHER, 2000, p. xiv), and that not necessarily means to endorse it, but rather to consider its contributions to literary, historical and sociological inquiry.

NOTES

[1] Quoted in Portuguese by Seligmann-Silva (2003, p. 60-61) from NIETSZCHE. Unzeigemässe Betrachtungen II: Vom Nutzen and Nachteil der Historie für das Leben. In: COLLI, Giorgio; MONTINARI, Mazzino (Eds.). *Kritische Studienausgabe*. Munich: DTV; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988. 252p. Translation into English by the author of this essay.

Resumo

> Entendendo que literatura, história e memória se entrelaçam, o objetivo deste ensaio é mostrar a importância da literatura pessoal mórmon do século dezenove como documento de caráter histórico e literário e, ao mesmo tempo, enfatizar sua importância para a transmissão e manutenção de valores e memórias coletivas, os quais proporcionam ao grupo um senso de identidade.

Palavras-chave: Memória coletiva. História. Literatura pessoal. Mormonismo. Identidade de grupo.

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