

Faith, Taste, and History

AMONG tall stories, surely one of the tallest is the history of Mormonism. A founder whose obviously home-made revelations were accepted as more than gospel truth by thousands of followers; a lieutenant and successor who was "for daring a Cromwell, for intrigue a Machiavelli, for executive force a Moses, and for utter lack of conscience a Bonaparte"; a body of doctrine combining the most penetrating psychological insights with preposterous history and absurd metaphysics; a society of puritanical but theatre-going and music-loving polygamists; a church once condemned by the Supreme Court as an organised rebellion, but now a monolith of respectability; a passionately loyal membership distinguished, even in these middle years of the 20th century, by the old-fashioned Protestant and pioneering virtues of self-reliance and mutual aid—together, these make up a tale which no self-respecting reader, even of Science Fiction, should be asked to swallow. And yet, in spite of its total lack of plausibility, the tale happens to be true.

My book-knowledge of its truth had been acquired long ago and intermittently kept up to date. It was not, however, until the spring of 1953 that I had occasion actually to see and touch the concrete evidences of that strange history.

We had driven all day in torrential rain, sometimes even in untimely snow, across Nevada. Hour after hour in the vast blankness of desert plains, past black, bald mountains that suddenly closed in through the driving rain, to recede again, after a score of wintry miles, into the grey distance. At the State line the weather had cleared for a little, and there below us, unearthly in a momentary gleam of sunshine, lay the Great Salt Desert of

Utah, snow-white between the nearer crags, with the line of blue or inky peaks rising, far off, from the opposite shore of that dry ghost of an inland sea.

There was another storm as we entered Salt Lake City, and it was through sheets of falling water that we caught our first glimpse, above the chestnut trees, of a flood-lit object quite as difficult to believe in, despite the evidence of our senses, as the strange history it commemorates. The improbability of this greatest of the Mormon Temples does not consist in its astounding ugliness. Most Victorian churches are astoundingly ugly. It consists in a certain combination of oddity, dullness, and monumentality unique, so far as I know, in the annals of architecture.

For the most part, Victorian buildings are more or less learned pastiches of something else—something Gothic, something Greek or nobly Roman, something Elizabethan or Flamboyant Flemish, or even vaguely Oriental. But this Temple looks like nothing on earth—and yet contrives to be completely unoriginal, utterly and uniformly prosaic. Moreover, whereas most of the churches built during the past century are gimcrack affairs of brick veneered with imitation stone, of lattice work plastered to look like masonry, this vast essay in eccentric dreariness was realised, from crypt to capstone, in the solidest of granite. Its foundations are cyclopean, its walls are three yards thick. Like the Escorial, like the Great Pyramid, it was built to last indefinitely. Long after the rest of Victorian and 20th century architecture shall have crumbled back to dust, this thing will be standing in the Western desert, an object, to the neo-Neolithic savages, of post-atomic times, of uncomprehending reverence and superstitious alarm.

TO WHAT extent are the arts conditioned by, or indebted to, religion? And is there, at any given moment of history, a common socio-psychological source that gives to the various arts—music and painting, architecture and sculpture—some kind of common tendency? What I saw that night in Temple Square, and what I heard next day during an organ recital in the Tabernacle, brought up the old problem in a new and, in many ways, enlightening context.

Here, in the floodlights, was the most grandiose by far of all Western Cathedrals. This Chartres of the desert was begun and largely built under economic and social conditions hardly distinguishable from those prevailing in France or England in the 10th century. In 1853, when the Temple's foundation-stone was laid, London could boast its Crystal Palace, could look back complacently on its Great Exhibition of the marvels of early Victorian technology. But here in Utah men were still living in the Dark Ages—without roads, without towns, with no means of communication faster than the ox-wagon or mule-train, without industry, without machines, without tools more elaborate than saws and scythes and hammers—and with precious few even of those. The granite blocks of which the temple is built were quarried by man-power, dressed by man-power, hauled over twenty miles of trackless desert by man-power and ox-power, hoisted into position by man-power. Like the cathedrals of medieval Europe the Temple is a monument, among other things, to the strength and heroic endurance of stripped muscle.

In the Spanish colonies, as in the American South, stripped muscle was activated by the whip. But here in the West there were no African slaves and no local supply of domesticable aborigines. Whatever the settlers wanted to do had to be done by their own hands. The ordinary run of settlers wanted only houses and mills and mines and (if the nuggets were large enough) Paris fashions imported at immense expense around the Horn. But these Mormons wanted something more—a granite Temple of indestructible solidity. Within a few years of their arrival in Utah they set to work.

There were no whips to stimulate their muscles, only faith—but in what abundance! It was the kind of mountain-moving faith that gives men power to achieve the impossible and bear the intolerable, the kind of faith for which men die and kill and work themselves beyond the limits of human capacity, the kind of faith that had launched the Crusades and raised the towers of Angkor-Vat. Once again it performed its historic miracle. Against enormous odds, a great cathedral was built in the wilderness. Alas, instead of Bourges or Canterbury, it was This.

FAITH, it is evident, may be relied on to produce sustained action and, more rarely, sustained contemplation. There is, however, no guarantee that it will produce good art. Religion is always a patron of the arts, but its taste is by no means impeccable. Religious art is sometimes excellent, sometimes atrocious; and the excellence is not necessarily associated with fervour nor the atrocity with lukewarmness. Thus, at the turn of our era, Buddhism flourished in North-western India. Piety, to judge by the large number of surviving monuments, ran high; but artistic merit ran pretty low. Or consider Hindu art. For the last three centuries it has been astonishingly feeble. Have the many varieties of Hinduism been taken less seriously than in the times when Indian art was in its glory? There is not the slightest reason to believe it. Similarly there is not the slightest reason to believe that Catholic fervour was less intense in the age of the Mannerists than it had been three generations earlier. On the contrary, there is good reason to believe that, during the Counter-Reformation, Catholicism was taken more seriously by more people than at any time since the 14th century. But the bad Catholicism of the High Renaissance produced superb religious art; the good Catholicism of the later 16th and 17th centuries produced a great deal of rather bad religious art. Turning now to the individual artist—and after all, there is no such thing as "Art," there are only men at work—we find that the creators of religious masterpieces are sometimes, like Fra Angelico, extremely devout, sometimes no more than conventionally

orthodox, sometimes (like Perugino, the supreme exponent of pietism in art) active and open disbelievers.

For the artist in his professional capacity, religion is important because it offers him a wealth of interesting subject-matter and many opportunities to exercise his skill. Upon the quality of his production it has little or no influence. The excellence of a work of religious art depends on two factors, neither of which has anything to do with religion. It depends primarily on the presence in the artist of certain tendencies, sensibilities, and talents; and, secondarily, it depends on the earlier history of his chosen art, and on what may be called the logic of its formal relations. At any given moment that internal logic points towards conclusions beyond those which, as a matter of historical fact, have been reached by the majority of contemporary artists. A recognition of this fact may impel certain artists—especially young artists—to try to realise those possible conclusions in concrete actuality. Sometimes these attempts are fully successful; sometimes, in spite of their author's talents, they fail. In either case, the outcome does not depend on the nature of the artist's metaphysical beliefs, nor on the warmth with which he entertains them.

The Mormons had faith and their faith enabled them to realise a prodigious ideal—the building of a Temple in the wilderness. But though faith can move mountains, it cannot of itself shape those mountains into cathedrals. It will activate muscle, but has no power to create architectural talent where none exists. Still less can it alter the facts of artistic history and the internal logic of forms.

For a great variety of reasons, some sociological and some intrinsically æsthetic, some easily discernible and others obscure, the traditions of the European arts and crafts had been disintegrated, by the middle years of the 19th century, into a chaos of fertile bad taste and ubiquitous vulgarity. In their favour, in the intensity of their concern with metaphysical problems, in their readiness to embrace the most eccentric beliefs and practices, the Mormons, like their contemporaries in a hundred Christian, Socialist, or Spiritualist commu-

nities, belonged to the Age of the Gnostics. In everything else they were typical products of rustic 19th century America. And in the field of the plastic arts 19th century America, especially rustic America, was worse off even than 19th century Europe. Barry's Houses of Parliament were as much beyond these temple-builders as Bourges or Canterbury.

NEXT morning, in the enormous wooden Tabernacle, we listened to the daily organ recital. There was some Bach and a piece by César Franck and finally some improvised variations on a hymn tune. These last reminded one irresistibly of the good old days of the Silent Screen—the days when, in a solemn hush and under spotlights, the tail-coated organist at the console of his Wurlitzer would rise majestically from the cellarage, would turn and bend his swan-like loins in acknowledgment of the applause, would resume his seat and slowly extend his white hands. Silence, and then boom! the Picture Palace was filled with the enormous snoring of thirty-two-foot contra-trombones and bombardes. And after the snoring would come the Londonderry Air on the *vox humana*, "A Little Grey Home in the West" on the *vox angelica*, and perhaps (what bliss!) "The End of a Perfect Day" on the *vox treaciana*, the *vox bedroomica*, the *vox unmentionabilis*.

How strange, I found myself reflecting, as the glutinous tide washed over me, how strange that people should listen with apparently equal enjoyment to this kind of thing and the Prelude and Fugue in E flat major. Or had I got hold of the wrong end of the stick? Perhaps mine was the strange, the essentially abnormal attitude. Perhaps there was something wrong with a listener who found it difficult to adore both these warblings around a hymn tune and the Prelude and Fugue.

From these unanswerable questions my mind wandered to others, hardly less puzzling, in the domain of history. Here was this huge instrument. In its original and already monumental state, it was a project of pioneering faith. An Australian musician and early Mormon convert, Joseph Ridges, had furnished the design and supervised the work. The

timber used for making the pipes was hauled by oxen from forests three hundred miles to the south. The intricate machinery of a great organ was home-made by local craftsmen. When the work was finished, what kind of music, one wonders, was played to the Latter Day Saints assembled in the Tabernacle? Hymns, of course, in profusion. But also Handel, also Haydn and Mozart, also Mendelssohn and perhaps even a few pieces by that queer old fellow whom Mendelssohn had resurrected, John Sebastian Bach.

It is one of the paradoxes of history that the people who built the monstrosities of the Victorian epoch should have been the same as the people who applauded, in their hideous halls and churches, such masterpieces of orderliness and unaffected grandeur as *The Messiah*, and who preferred to all his contemporaries that most elegantly classical of the moderns, Felix Mendelssohn. Popular taste in one field may be more or less completely at variance with popular taste outside that field. Still more surprisingly, the fundamental tendencies of professionals in one of the arts may be at variance with the fundamental tendencies of professionals in other arts.

UNTIL very recently the music of the 15th, 16th, and early 17th centuries was, to all but learned specialists, almost completely unknown. Now, thanks to long-playing phonograph records, more and more of this buried treasure is coming to the surface. The interested amateur is at last in a position to hear for himself what, before, he could only read about. Now, for the first time, he can actually hear what people were singing when Botticelli was painting *Venus and Mars*; what Van Eyck might have heard in the way of love songs and polyphonic masses; what kind of music was being sung or played in St. Mark's while Tintoretto and Veronese were at work, next door, in the Doge's Palace; what developments were taking place in the sister-art during the more than sixty years of Bernini's career as sculptor and architect.

Dunstable and Dufay, Ockeghem and Josquin, Lassus, Palestrina, Victoria—their

overlapping lives cover the whole of the 15th and 16th centuries. Music, in those two centuries, underwent momentous changes. The dissonances of the earlier, Gothic polyphony were reduced to universal consonance; the various artifices—imitation, diminution, augmentation, and the rest—were perfected and, by the greater masters, used to create rhythmic patterns of incredible subtlety and richness. But through the whole period virtually all serious music retained those open-ended, free-floating forms which it had inherited from the Gregorian Chant and, more remotely, from some Oriental ancestor. In contrast, European folk music was symmetrical, four-square, with regular returns to the same starting point and balanced phrases, as in metrical poetry, of pre-established and foreseeable length. Based upon plain-chant and written, for the most part, as a setting to the liturgical texts, learned music was analogous not to scanned verse but to prose. It was a music without bars—that is to say, with no regularity of emphasis. Its component elements were of different lengths, there were no returns to recognisable starting-points, and its geometrical analogue was not some closed figure, like the square or circle, but an open curve undulating away to infinity. That such a music ever reached a close was due not to the internal logic of its forms but solely to the fact that even the longest liturgical texts come at last to their Amen. Some attempt to supply a purely musical reason for not going on for ever was made by those composers who wrote their masses around a *cantus firmus*—a melody borrowed, almost invariably, from the closed, symmetrical music of popular songs. Sung or played in very slow time, and hidden in the tenor, sometimes even in the bass, the *cantus firmus* was, for all practical purposes, inaudible. It existed for the benefit not of listeners but of the composer; not to remind bored churchgoers of what they had heard last night in the tavern, but to serve a strictly artistic purpose. Even when the *cantus firmus* was present, the general effect of unconditioned, free-floating continuousness persisted. But, for the composer, the task of organisation had been made easier; for buried within the fluid

heart of the music was the unbending armature of a fully metrical song.

WHILE Dufay was still a choir boy at Cambrai, Ghiberti was at work on the bronze doors of Santa Maria del Fiore, the young Donatello had been given his first commissions. And when Victoria, the last and greatest of the Roman masters, died in 1613, Lorenzo Bernini was already a full-blown infant prodigy. From Early Renaissance to Baroque, the fundamental tendency of the plastic arts was through symmetry and beyond it, away from closed forms towards unbalanced openness and the implication of infinity. In music, during this same period, the fundamental tendency was through openness and beyond it, away from floating continuousness towards metre, towards four-square symmetry, towards regular and foreseeable recurrence. It was in Venice that the two opposite tendencies, of painting and of music, first became conspicuous. While Tintoretto and Veronese moved towards openness and the asymmetrical, the two Gabriellis moved, in their motets and their instrumental music, towards harmony, towards regular scansion and the closed form. In Rome, Palestrina and Victoria continued to work in the old free-floating style. At St. Mark's, the music of the future—the music which in due course was to develop into the music of Purcell and Couperin, of Bach and Handel—was in process of being born. By the 1630's, when even sculpture had taken wing for the infinite, Bernini's older contemporary, Heinrich Schuetz, the pupil of Giovanni Gabrieli, was writing (not always, but every now and then) symmetrical music that sounds almost like Bach.

For some odd reason, this kind of music has recently been labelled "baroque." The choice of this nickname is surely unfortunate. If Bernini and his Italian, German, and Austrian followers are baroque artists (and they have been so designated for many years), then there is no justification, except in the fact that they happened to be living at the same time, for applying the same epithet to composers, whose fundamental tendencies in regard to form were radically different from theirs.

About the only 17th century composer to whom the term "baroque" can be applied, in the same sense as we apply it to Bernini, is Claudio Monteverdi. In his operas and his religious music there are passages in which Monteverdi combines the openness and boundlessness of the older polyphony with a new expressiveness. The feat is achieved by setting an unconditionally soaring melody to an accompaniment not of other voices but of variously coloured chords. The so-called baroque composers are baroque (in the established sense of the word) only in their desire for a more direct and dramatic expression of feeling. To realise this desire, they developed modulation within a fully tonal system, they exchanged polyphony for harmony, they varied the tempo of their music and the volume of its sound, and they invented modern orchestration. In this concern with expressiveness they were akin to their contemporaries in the fields of painting and sculpture. But in their desire for squareness, closedness, and symmetry they were poles apart from men whose first wish was to overthrow the tyranny of centrality, to break out of the cramping frame or niche, to transcend the merely finite and the all too human.

Between 1598 and 1680—the years of Bernini's birth and death—baroque painting and sculpture moved in one direction, baroque music, as it is miscalled, moved in another, almost opposite direction. The only conclusion we can draw is that the internal logic and the recent history of the art, in which a man is working, exercise a more powerful influence upon him than do the social, religious, and political events of the time in which he lives. Fifteenth-century sculptors and painters inherited a tradition of symmetry and closedness. Fifteenth-century composers inherited a tradition of openness and asymmetry. On either side the intrinsic logic of the forms was worked out to its ultimate conclusion. By the end of the 16th century neither the musical nor the plastic artists could go any further along the roads they had been following. Going beyond themselves, the painters and sculptors pursued the path of open-ended asymmetry, the free-floating musicians turned to the exploration of

regular recurrence and the closed form. Meanwhile, the usual wars and persecutions and sectarian throat-cuttings were in full swing; there were economic revolutions, political and social revolutions, revolutions in science and technology. But these merely historical events seem to have affected artists only materially—by ruining them or making their fortunes, by giving or withholding the opportunity to display their skill, by changing the social or religious status of potential patrons. Their thought and feeling, their fundamental artistic tendencies were reactions to events of a totally different order—events not in the social world but in the special universe of each man's chosen art.

TAKE Schuetz, for example. Most of his adult life was spent in running away from the recurrent horrors of the Thirty Years War. But the changes and chances of a discontinuous existence left no corresponding traces upon his work. Whether at Dresden or in Italy, in Denmark or at Dresden again, he went on drawing the artistically logical conclusions from the premises formulated under Gabrieli at Venice and gradually modified, through the years, by his own successive achievements, and the achievements of his contemporaries and juniors.

Man is a whole, but a whole with an astounding capacity for living, simultaneously or successively, in watertight compartments. What happens here has little or no effect on what happens there. The 17th century taste for closed forms in music was inconsistent with the 17th century taste for asymmetry and openness in the plastic arts. The Victorian taste for Mendelssohn and Handel was inconsistent with the Victorian taste for Mormon Temples, Albert Halls, and St. Pancras Railway Stations. But in fact these mutually exclusive tastes co-existed and had no perceptible effects on one another. Consistency is a verbal criterion, which cannot be applied to the phenomena of life. Taken together, the various activities of a single individual may "make no sense," and yet be perfectly compatible with biological survival, social success, and personal happiness.

Objective time is the same for every member

of a human group and, within each individual, for each inhabitant of a watertight compartment. But the self in one compartment does not necessarily have the same *Zeitgeist* as the selves in other compartments or as the selves in whom other individuals do their equally inconsistent living. When the stresses of history are at a maximum, men and women tend to react to them in the same way. For example, if their country is involved in war, most individuals become heroic and self-sacrificing. And if the war produces famine and pestilence, most of them die. But where the historical pressures are more moderate, individuals are at liberty, within rather wide limits, to react to them in different ways. We are always synchronous with ourselves and others; but it often happens that we are not contemporary with either.

AT Logan, for example, in the shadow of another Temple, whose battlemented turrets gave it the air of an Early Victorian "folly," of a backdrop to Edmund Kean in *Richard III*, we got into conversation with a charming contemporary, not of Harry Emerson Frostick or the late Bishop Barnes, but of Brother Juniper—a Mormon whose faith had all the fervour, all the unqualified literalness, of peasant faith in the 13th century. He talked to us at length about the weekly baptisms of the dead. Fifteen hundred of them baptised by proxy every Saturday evening and thus, at long last, admitted to that heaven where all the family ties persist throughout the æons. To a member of a generation brought up on Freud, these posthumous prospects seemed a bit forbidding. Not so to Brother Juniper. He spoke of them with a kind of quiet rapture. And how celestially beautiful, in his eyes, was this cylopean gazebo! How inestimable the privilege, which he had earned, of being allowed to pass through its doors! Doors forever closed to all Gentiles and even to a moiety of the Latter Day Saints. Around that heavenly Temple the lilac trees in full scent and the mountains that ringed the fertile valley were white with the snowy symbol of divine purity. But time pressed. We left Brother Juniper to his paradise and drove on.

That evening, in the tiny Natural History Museum at Idaho Falls, we found ourselves talking to two people from a far remoter past—a fascinating couple straight out of a cave. Not one of your fancy Magdalenian caves with all that modernistic art-work on the walls. No, no—a good old-fashioned, down-to-earth cave belonging to nice ordinary people three thousand generations before the invention of painting. These were Piltdowners whose reaction to the stuffed grizzly was a

remark about sizzling steaks of bear-meat; these were early Neanderthals who could not see a fish or bird or four-footed creature without immediately dreaming of slaughter and a feast.

“Boy!” said the cave lady, as we stood with them before the solemn, clergyman-like head of an enormous moose. “Would *he* be good with onions!”

It was fortunate, I reflected, that we were so very thin, they so well-fed and amiable.

THE TARANTULA OF LUVE

Luve, it is deeper nor us, this bane
Our problem, ecstacie, this passion
Semple and eyetooth pain
In its ain labyrinth—the classic situation.

Here the tarantula is king
Mated wi despair and fed on hopes—
And spins their fell conjunction in
Our ravelled horoscopes.

What use the talk, the torment
The minotaur's rank braith upon us—?
And Goddess, God and our bairns' bairns
E'en nou greitan for us. . . .

Sydney Goodsir Smith