City, he related his undergraduate encounter with Pratt’s persecution narratives in the *Autobiography*. He described his anger at the injustices perpetrated against the Saints and his accompanying desire to “avenge” them. To be clear, my friend was speaking hyperbolically and in no way intended to start Mountain Meadows II, but his reaction does suggest that Pratt’s message resonates with at least one Mormon in the present.

**ON THE POETICS OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE: POETRY IN PARLEY PRATT’S *AUTOBIOGRAPHY***

*Joseph M. Spencer*¹

Interrupting one of the many banal travel itineraries that punctuate Parley Pratt’s *Autobiography* is a striking poem written—according to the text—during Pratt’s first visit to Niagara Falls.² Pedestrian though the itinerary is, it is not without narrative importance. The journey in question was set in motion by an event that Pratt makes into something of a centerpiece for the *Autobiography*. Soon after he had been ordained a member of the original Quorum of the Twelve and immediately after he had received his “endowment of power” in the Kirtland Temple, “Elder Heber C. Kimball and others entered my house, and being filled with the spirit of prophecy, they blessed me and my wife,” telling him that—despite a number of difficulties—he would “go to Upper Canada, even to the city of Toronto” to “find a people prepared for the fulness of the gospel.”³

Thus ordained, endowed, and prophetically blessed, Pratt de-

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scribes himself as setting out almost immediately for Canada. But although the reader would expect him to leap, narratively speaking, straight from Kirtland’s spiritual outpourings to the series of miracles that structure his recounting of the fabulously successful Canadian mission, Pratt surprisingly interrupts his journey to Toronto to describe his visit to Niagara—and at some length. What is the function, narratively, of this poetic interruption?

It should first be noted that Pratt’s account of the visit to Niagara is, according to the methods and rigor of twenty-first century historiography, most likely inaccurate. While there is no strong reason to question Pratt’s claim that the encounter with Niagara “made a deep and awful impression” on his mind, the “train of reflection” that he says he experienced—along with the poem in which it culminated—seem to have been retrojectively worked into the event. Of the several contemporary primary sources available, only Orson Pratt’s journal mentions Niagara at all, and then only in passing. No contemporary journal from Parley himself has survived, and a letter he wrote from Canada to the *Messenger and Advocate* ten days or so after his arrival says nothing about the visit. In a letter written a few weeks later, after he had returned to Kirtland, Parley says only that reaching Toronto required “a long and tedious journey, through mud and rain.” A letter from Parley to John Taylor about six months later includes a poem that describes the “four regions of the North” as the place “where Bold Niagaras waters Loudly roar,” but it says nothing about the actual visit to Niagara.

Much more importantly, there is strong evidence that the climactic poem that concludes the account in the *Autobiography* could not have been written (at least in its entirety) before 1838: the third and fourth of the poem’s four stanzas appear in Pratt’s 1840 collection of poems under the title “The Falls of Niagara” and under the inscription “Written in Prison.” Unless Pratt was trying to heighten the

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3Ibid., 141–42.
4Ibid., 142.
5Elden J. Watson, ed., *The Orson Pratt Journals* (Salt Lake City: Elden J. Watson, 1975), 75–76.
6Parley P. Pratt, Letter to Oliver Cowdery, May 9, 1836; Parley P. Pratt, Letter to Oliver Cowdery, May 26, 1836; Parley P. Pratt, Letter to John Taylor, November 27, 1836; typescripts in my possession courtesy of R. Steven Pratt and Matthew Grow.
pathos of his account by alluding to his imprisonment, he did not compose the second half of the poem until some time between November 1838 and July 1839, when he was making the literary best of his unfortunate prison stay in Missouri. Moreover, the first two stanzas of the Autobiography’s poem do not appear in any form whatsoever in the 1840 collection—a fact that makes it unlikely that they had been composed before 1840. Instead, their first appearance was in the Millennial Star in 1841, where (1) they were combined with the third and fourth stanzas of the poem, and (2) the now-completed poem was coupled with the prose narrative introduction that eventually found its way (in the early 1850s) into the Autobiography. In sum, it seems most likely that Pratt wrote the first two stanzas of the poem, as well as the poem’s “introduction,” only in 1841, rather than in 1836.

It thus seems best to conclude that, at least according to the model of historiography prevailing in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Parley P. Pratt’s autobiographical account of his visit to Niagara is, strictly speaking, “unhistorical”: the poem he claims to have put together as he stood before the falls is actually an 1838–39 poem that he expanded in the early 1840s. But the account’s lack of historicity makes it even more imperative to ask about the narrative function of the Niagara experience in the broader Canadian mission story: If Pratt did not write the account as he did in order to recount “what actually happened,” then what does it accomplish nari-

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8Parley P. Pratt, “Reflections on the Falls of Niagara,” Millennial Star 2 (November 1841): 100–101. It should be noted that Pratt here claims that he has excerpted the article “from our private journal.” Because he could not have had access, at the time, to the journals of his fellow-visitors to Niagara, he was apparently referring to his own journal, although no such journal is known to be extant. Even so, the fact that he claimed in 1840 to have written at least part of the poem in prison (in 1838–39) makes it clear that, in producing the Millennial Star article, either (1) he was not entirely faithful to the “original” source he claimed to have been using (if he indeed had one before him), or (2) he was using a journal or other personal record that he had created only since 1838–39. Either way, the account of the event is not, according to the historiographical standards of the early twenty-first century, accurate.
ratively in the *Autobiography*?

At the very least, the role of the Niagara encounter as interruption is quite clear. Breaking a chain of miraculous events—ordination to the apostleship, endowment in Kirtland, prophetic blessing, and the entirety of the mission experience—the event at Niagara seems a misfit in the broader narrative Pratt constructs. The simple explanation would, then, of course be to suggest that Pratt was so overwhelmed by the spectacle of the falls that he could not forbear describing the event. Unable to resist the breathtaking vision of the falls, he disrupted the flow of his narrative to include a rapturous account of the visit.9

However, I would like to explore another interpretive possibility, namely, that the account of the visit—even as an interruption—is essential to the broader narrative in which he construed the mission to Canada as fulfillment of the Kirtland blessing. Indeed, a closer look at the poem and its narrative introduction makes very clear that—in the narrative context of the *Autobiography*—the sublimity of the spectacle is meant to function more as a temptation for Pratt than as a revelation to him.

On this reading, Pratt’s account of the visit to Niagara details a kind of struggle with the temptation that was Romanticism, in which, like the biblical Jacob’s midnight encounter with a mortal enemy (Gen. 32), Pratt is likewise detained by a terrible and fascinating force. Also like Jacob, Pratt holds his foe (Niagara) long enough to wrest from it a kind of renewed existence, a confirmation of sorts of his recently bestowed apostolic office. This reading deserves to be worked out in some detail.

Pratt’s account of his Niagara experience begins with a kind of introduction to the poem, entirely in prose (142–43). After a characteristic description of Niagara as “a lively emblem of eternity,” Pratt describes himself falling into a “train of reflection” that reaches its peak in the poem. Addressing Niagara directly, Pratt attributes to it the desire “to speak in awful pride,” with “mingled feelings of pity and contempt.” The prose ends and the poem begins, then, precisely when Niagara finally claims its voice. The first two stanzas—written, as argued above, in the early 1840s—recount Niagara’s boastful words, first taunting history’s great emperors (“the mighty Pharaohs, the ter-

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9As Ryan Tobler’s examination points out, this reading would make Pratt just one of many nineteenth-century visitors to the falls, many of whom left elated, poetic accounts of the scene.
rible / Alexanders, the invincible Caesars, / The warlike Hannibal”) and thinkers (“the gifted poets, the splendid / Orators, the profound philosophers / Of Greece and Rome”), and then exulting in having, through its unquestionable beauty, “animated” all “the intelligences of olden worlds” to join with “all the sons of God” in “shout[ing] for joy” at its creation (143–44).

It should not be missed that Pratt carefully employs these first two stanzas to present Niagara’s sublime beauty as a source of unfortunate pride on the part of the falls—its overwhelming grandeur being a temptation as much for Niagara as for Pratt. But if the subtle critique in the poem’s first two stanzas is too easily overlooked, the last two (significantly written while Pratt was in prison) unmistakably—if not didactically—secure Pratt’s appraisal of the falls (144). With the first words of the third stanza, Pratt takes back the voice he has poetically lent to Niagara: “But, boast not, O proud Niagara!” He goes on to acknowledge the beauty of the spectacle but privileges the prophetic word concerning the future over the idolatrous object of the present: “There is a voice to speak, long and loud; / ’Tis Michael’s trump, whose mighty blast shall rend / Thy rocks, and bow thy lofty mountains in the dust,” until “Earth / Restored to its original, receives / Its final rest, and groans and sighs no more.” Concluding the poem in the fourth stanza, Pratt describes the roar of the falls as “a funeral dirge” whose boastful taunts are, in the end and despite its pretensions otherwise, merely so much “weep[ing] o’er the miseries / Of a fallen world in anguish deep.”

With the silencing of Niagara accomplished by the third and fourth stanzas of the poem, Pratt narratively accomplishes two simultaneous goals. On the one hand, he finally secures the status of the Niagara encounter as a temptation rather than a revelation. But on the other hand, and precisely through his silencing conversion of Niagara from revelation to temptation, he presents himself as having—in 1836 and on location at the falls (in other words, at the moment of most powerful temptation)—overcome that temptation by preaching to the falls, delivering to Niagara the very message he would go on to present to the people of Toronto. In essence, his message in both locations was that the sounding of the trump was near that would announce the restoration of the whole material world to its original Edenic purity. Pratt’s autobiographical narrative of visiting Niagara thus not only marks the spectacle as a temptation, but also presents Pratt as proving his apostolic fervor (and hence his worthiness for that calling) by
overcoming the temptation and preaching to what he himself called the “wonder of nature.”

A final, historiographical question should at least be mentioned. Historian and philosopher Jacques Rancière has suggested that written history—as a “poetics of knowledge”—is a creative weaving together of three commitments: a “scientific contract,” a “narrative [or literary] contract,” and a “political contract.”\(^\text{10}\) If it is the case, as has often been suggested, that Parley P. Pratt established the model for Mormon autobiography—and thus, by extension, for Mormon self-understanding—how might these reflections on Pratt’s use of poetry in his *Autobiography* open up possibilities for thinking, whether anthropologically or philosophically, about the uniquely Mormon poetics of self-knowledge? This question, I think, deserves attention.\(^\text{11}\)

**THE CONVERSION OF PARLEY PRATT: INVESTIGATING THE PATTERNS OF MORMON PIETY**

*Matthew Bowman\(^\text{1}\)*

**DEFINITIONS**

In the context of the Reformation, “piety” or “pietist” are used to refer to the introspective, mystical, “heart religion” that emerged most profoundly among German Protestants in the seventeenth cen-

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\(^\text{11}\) Is there a possibility that Pratt—perhaps early Mormonism’s most astute reader of the Book of Mormon—was influenced by Nephite historiography? Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 89–213, argues for a similarly three-pronged, complex understanding of Mormon’s historiographical methodology.

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