

The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years

By Eugene England

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I ASK YOU to consider the following: Mormonism is a genuine religious movement, with persistent and characteristic religious and cultural experiences growing out of a unique and coherent theology and a true and thus powerful mythic vision, and it has already produced and is producing the kinds and quality of literature that such experiences and vision might be expected to produce; it is, in fact, right now enjoying a kind of bright dawning, if not a flowering then certainly a profuse and lovely budding, in its literary history.

Many of us, at least until recently, could be excused for not knowing there is a Mormon literature. A serious anthology of Mormon literature, providing a full view of the quality and variety over our nearly 150-year history, was first published only a few years ago. That was Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert's *A Believing People*.¹ At about the same time, these two scholars inaugurated, at Brigham Young University, the first course in Mormon literature. The Association for Mormon Letters, the first professional organization intended to study and encourage Mormon literature, is only a few years old. We have as yet no scholarly bibliography of Mormon literature, no full-scale literary history or developed esthetic principles, little practical and less theoretical literary criticism. The most basic scholarly work—the unearthing and editing of texts, development of biographical materials, and serious literary analysis of our acknowledged classics—is still largely undone.

But then again, many things are happening, and perhaps there is now less excuse for any continued ignorance or inaction. The anthology has had a second printing, the Mormon literature class continues to prosper, and Mormon classics are being used in other literature and humanities courses. New journals like *Exponent II*, *Sunstone*, and *Sunstone Review* are succeeding and are following the older *Dialogue* and *BYU Studies* in publishing good Mormon literature and criticism. Official Church magazines like the *Ensign* publish serious Mormon stories and poetry more often than previously. We have seen the publication and widespread approval of the biography of Spencer W Kimball, the first Mormon study of a general Church leader

that meets the essential criterion for genuine literary biography phrased by Virginia Woolf, “those truths which transmit personality.”² And now others are being published that do the same for past Church leaders.³

In the last few years three books by established Mormon poets (Clinton Larson, Ed Hart, and Marden Clark) have been published, and some impressive younger poetic voices have appeared in the journals.⁴ Douglas Thayer has expanded his range to an experimental novel (still in draft) dealing with the development of consciousness of evil and redemption in a young Mormon. Bruce Jorgensen has written a well-crafted, mature story on baptism and initiation that is fine literature, not merely Mormon.⁵ Bela Petsco has published a collection of stories centered in missionary experience.⁶ The small body of serious Mormon drama has been augmented by performances of Thomas Rogers’s *Reunion*, a study of classic Mormon family conflicts. Ed Geary, working to stretch and develop the genre I think most congenial to the Mormon vision and experience, the personal essay, has made good on his earlier promise in “Goodbye to Poplarhaven”⁷ with an even better exploration of Mormon consciousness, called “Hying to Kolob” that is fine literature accessible to both Mormons and others.⁸ So my hope is high: “The morning breaks.”

But, you may rightly be saying, one, or even three, bursting forsythia do not make a spring—nor a Larson and a Thayer and a Geary a flowering of literature, Mormon or not. And others of you might ask, “What is this ‘Mormon’ literature anyway—something like ‘Lutheran’ literature or ‘Christian Science’ literature?” If you have been exposed to some of the agonizing that has been going on for some twenty years about our not having an obviously impressive literature, you might ask, “Aren’t we too young a culture or too small a community to expect to have a literature—or aren’t Mormons too superficially happy, too anxiety- and conflict-free, to produce a literature, or too busy, or too smug, or too anti-intellectual, or too materialistic, or too censored?” The answer to all these questions is “No.” We do in fact have a literature—one whose shape, dimensions, and quality are becoming more and more apparent and impressive. These questions and anxieties are now simply outdated; reality has long passed them by, and good theoretical thinking has caught up with them. The real question now is not how good is what we have, but *how* is it good, how, in fact, do we *judge* how it is good? And how do we prepare better to respond to it and to encourage more of the good?

But some might still be saying, “Suppose we do have some good writers. Why talk about *Mormon* literature rather than American literature or, better yet, just literature? Shouldn’t our writers just do their best, write honestly and well about the universal human concerns, and address themselves to mankind in general?” Perhaps, but let me suggest another case: Shakespeare and Milton had access to audiences, a *literate* community, smaller than that which is now made up of well-educated English-speaking Mormons (which is probably approaching three million); does it in any way count against those great poets that they spoke directly and consciously to that limited audience from a base in particular problems, perspectives, and convictions that were essentially English? Or does it count against Dostoevski that he was consciously, even self-consciously, Russian, or Faulkner that he was consciously Southern?

The only way to the universal is through the particular. The only honesty, ultimately, is honesty to that which we know in our own bones and blood and spirit, our own land and faith, our own doubts and battles and victories and defeats. Mormonism cannot be separated from these things because, unlike religions such as Lutheranism or Christian Science, it makes a large number of rather absolute claims about the nature of the universe and God and human beings, about specific historical events, past and future, about language and form and content—and because it is grounded in a sufficiently unusual and cohesive and extended historical and cultural experience growing directly from those claims that it has become like a nation, an ethnic culture as well as a religion. We can speak of a Mormon literature at least as surely as we can of Jewish or Southern literature. And it is as legitimate, as promising, for a writer to be consciously Mormon as it has been for Flannery O'Connor to be Southern Catholic or for Isaac Bashevis Singer to be emigre Polish and Jewish.

Mormon writers have much to learn from both of these writers: skills and vision, of course, but also how not to be so universal they lose contact with their roots, so antiparochial they adopt the worst kind of parochialism—that of not knowing oneself and one's own generic community. They can learn from them how to translate religious commitment and the tragedy of religious struggle and paradox into honesty and craft, into Active creations rather than packaged preachments. As O'Connor has said: "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction."⁹ But of course her special Catholic vision, however effectively pointing beyond itself to the universal, cannot be adopted by the Mormon writer. The Mormon vision has unique and equally powerful implications for both form and content. What are they? Just what is *Mormon* literature?

I think Karl Keller is right in suggesting that Mormon writers—possibly due to that parochial antiparochialism I mentioned and an understandable aversion to didactic, simplistically preachy Mormon writing—have produced fiction that is by and large irrelevant to the doctrinal interests of Mormonism. He calls most of what we've written "jack-fiction."¹⁰ In contrast to Flannery O'Connor many Mormon writers seem to have strained, in the fashion of various schools of emancipated realism, to be far from orthodoxy. Even the "orthodox" have not written imaginative visions of the possibilities of our theology; it is not really *Mormon* fiction. By way of contrast this is O'Connor describing what she feels she must work out imaginatively in *her* fiction:

It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident. It makes a great difference to his novel whether he believes that we are created in God's image, or whether he believes we create God in our own. It makes a great difference whether he believes that our wills are free,

or bound like those of the other animals.¹¹

Surely we could make an equally specific list for a Mormon writer. But notice that neither O'Connor nor Keller are suggesting some sophisticated form of packaged message. Any artist's first responsibility is to the form, the embodiment, the word made flesh. If he or she cannot do justice to the visible world and make of it fictions that are believable, he or she cannot be trusted to bear witness to the invisible world; like Flannery O'Connor, Mormon writers must see and imagine steadily and whole—and in convincing formal structures—the surface, including oppositions and evil, the terror in natural human experience, before they can see and imagine how the supernatural supports or intrudes upon that surface.

But if Keller is right, we may have a major explanation for the unfulfilled promise of Mormon fiction. It has effectively imagined the Mormon past and some of the conflicts inherent in contemporary Mormon public and private life but has left Mormonism's unique God and the dramatic and unusual Mormon view of man's cosmic dilemma and destiny out of the picture. The fact that some are making a beginning in those new directions is a major reason I expect the dawning of a brighter day.

Let me try here to expand our awareness of fruitful possibilities in these new directions. And though it is ultimately impossible to separate form and content, and dangerous to try, let me begin with a few comments on form. In the "King Follett Discourse," itself a classic piece of Mormon literature, Joseph Smith refers to "chaotic matter—which is element and in which dwells all the glory."¹² That helps bring into imaginative focus the hints throughout scripture and the writings of Mormon thinkers that suggest a certain metaphysics of form; order is wrought from a pluralistic chaos but a chaos that is *potent*, genuinely responsive to the creative powers of God and man embodied in mind and language, characteristics God and his children share as literally related beings. The Doctrine and Covenants, section 88:6–11, ties together the divine mind and cosmic creative power of Christ with man's perception through the media of physical and spiritual light, which are pronounced to be fundamentally the same. All this suggests the seeds of a philosophy of form at least as interesting and defensible as the epistemological skepticism that has contributed to the breakdown in structure characteristic of modern literature. A truly Mormon literature would stand firm against secular man's increasing anxiety about the ability of language to get at the irreducible otherness of things outside the mind—to make sense, and beauty, of that "chaotic matter—which is element."

If Mormon writers take seriously their faith that language is a gift from God the creator, a gift that gives them access to the "glory" that dwells in matter and in other intelligences, including God's, they can confidently use language, not like others merely to imitate (albeit with compassionate despair) the separated, meaningless, raw elements and experiences of a doomed universe but to create genuinely new things, verbal structures of element and intelligence and experience that include understanding and judgment as well as imitation and empathy. We can, like our contemporaries, create of words what Wallace Stevens called "things that do not exist without the words,"¹³ but we can do so without his undermining fear that what he was doing was merely an ephemeral human activity, a game to occupy until final

doom; we can be sustained by the faith that what we are doing is rooted in the nature of the cosmos and shared by God. In other words there should be in Mormon writers a special respect for language and form, attention to their tragic limitations but also to their real possibilities. This would mean, I would think, a rather conservative respect for proven traditional forms until they are genuinely understood and surpassed. At least it would mean unusual resistance to the flight from form, from faith in language, toward obscurity and proud assertion of the purely personal vision that afflicts much writing in our time and energizes the popular form of criticism called “deconstruction.”

Now what about content? Obviously, Mormon literature will draw, as much of it already has, on certain specially evocative characteristics of Mormon history and scriptural narrative. I don't mean irrigation and polygamy and Lamanite warriors but rather a certain epic consciousness and mythic identification with ancient peoples and processes: the theme of exile and return, of the fruitful journey into the wilderness; the pilgrim traveling the dark and misty way to the tree of salvation; the lonely quest for selfhood that leads to conversion and then to the paradox of community; the desert as crucible in which to make saints, not gold; the sacramental life that persists in spiritual experience and guileless charity despite physical and cultural deprivation; the fortunate fall from innocence and comfort into a lone and dreary world where opposition and tragic struggle can produce virtue and salvation. Much remains to be done with these. And it would be *Mormon* literature—though, of course, not exclusively so, since we share forms of these mythic truths with various others.

Then there are certain contemporary implications of our underlying cultural heritage and beliefs that provide unusually rich, though again not unique, dramatic possibilities: for instance, both the unusual sense of order and also the openings to tragic failure provided a life by the making of covenants, of promises to self and God in baptism and weekly communion through bread and water; or the fearful, solemn, and nobly exciting dimension given marriage by promises of obedience and fidelity and consecration made before God and angels on holy ground. What can be done with a physical and mental landscape peopled perhaps even more literally than Isaac Bashevis Singer's with devils, with embodiments of ultimate, intransigent evil who mock and betray, and also peopled with translated beings from ancient America who bemuse folklorists and bless simple folk from Panguitch and Downey, and also with angels who bring glad tidings to wise and holy men and women and children, who are thus inspired to speak great and marvelous, unspeakable things? And what can be done with the Mormon animism that hears the earth groan with its wickedness or the mountains shout for joy, that moves people to bless oxen and crops, even automobiles and trees? What can be made of the spiritual literalness that hears a daughter calling for help on the other side of the world or takes in stride faithfulness that is stronger than the cords of death and brings dead friends and family on privileged visits back to comfort and instruct?

Fine non-Mormon poets, W. S. Merwin for one, have written beautifully of the deep yearning we have for the miracle of a loved one's return to us—and of the strange possibility.¹⁴ Mormons with a more literal belief have the resources to do as

well and better, if they have the courage of their convictions and the discipline to work as hard to create an honest visible world that the invisible world can break through; it is because for Mormons, as for Gerard Manley Hopkins, “the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”¹⁵

But there is even a deeper layer, as yet hardly touched in Mormon literature but with, I believe, the greatest potential for uniqueness and power, the one suggested directly by Flannery O’Connor’s list. It would require more theological literacy and more imaginative response to our theology. Karl Keller, in the essay mentioned earlier, suggests that Mormon writers should begin with careful reading of Sterling McMurrin’s *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, which he calls “essentially an outline of esthetic possibilities of Mormon articles of belief.”¹⁶ I would recommend Joseph Smith and B. H. Roberts, and John Widtsoe and Hugh B. Brown and Truman Madsen and, yes, Brigham Young and Joseph Fielding Smith and Spencer W Kimball and the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price and, from the Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 2 and Alma 42, and so forth. And what would that do for a Mormon writer, other than tempt him toward a suicidal didacticism? It could nurture his imagination with the most challenging and liberating set of metaphysical possibilities and paradoxes I have been able to discover in all human thought. Consider only a few, beginning with the keystone: that human beings, like the gods, are at core uncreated and underived, individual intelligences, without beginning or end; they are possessed of truly infinite potential, literal gods in embryo, but are bound inescapably in a real environment of spirit and element and other beings that impinge upon them and that, as they learn successfully to relate to the environment, exact real costs in suffering and loss and bring real joy in relationship and growth. Freedom, for a Mormon writer—or fictional character—is not a mysterious illusion, as it must be for traditional Christians with their absolute, omnipotent God, nor is it a pragmatic tautology, as it must be for existentialists who define existence, however temporary, as freedom. Freedom is ultimate and inescapable responsibility in a real world that is neither a shadow of something more real lying beyond it that God determines at will nor a doomed accident.

The consequences for dramatic action and lyric reflection seem to be considerable: for one thing, as I think Truman Madsen has said, “Suicide is just a change of scenery.” For another, as the Mormon theologian B. F. Cummings put it, “The Self is insubordinate, wandering, imperially aloof, solitary, lonely, withdrawn, unvisited, impenetrable”; it “cannot escape from existence nor can it escape from the awareness of its existence” nor from the “inevitable sense of solitude,” that is “born of the very fact of individuality,” of “being an eternally identical one.”¹⁷ Put that together with the equally firm teaching that man without God is nothing, less than the dust of the earth (for the elements are at least obedient to God’s creative will), that mortals are utterly dependent on God, who sustains, moment by moment, their existence in mortality though not their eternal essence and who provides the only way of salvation through relation to his Son. And put it together with that strange paradox of Atonement, the fortunate fall: each individual *must* lose innocence, experience opposition and sin, know failure, struggle with justice and guilt, before he or she will let Christ break the bonds of justice, tear down barriers within to bring the

bowels of mercy—and so accept himself in love and thus have strength to develop the conscious, intelligent virtues of Christ. And put all this together with the idea that, imperially alone and impenetrable as the individual is, he and she cannot fully and ultimately realize their own true nature and achieve their fullest potential and joy except in the ongoing achievement of an eternal, fully sexual, companionship—an idea authenticated by the Mormon image of God as being God precisely and only in such a female and male oneness.

I am *not* proposing a formal creed for Mormon writers. I am merely suggesting that there is available to Mormon writers, part of what they in fact already are, a rich loam—a topsoil of historical experience, mythic consciousness, and unique theology—as rich as that available to any other writers, more rich than that of most of their gentile contemporaries. To change the image to one that has characteristically been made into a Mormon cliché, I suggest we put down our buckets where we are rather than complaining of thirst or rowing so madly for foreign shores. Even if rooting ourselves in that rich topsoil would tend to limit us to a Mormon or traditional Christian audience—and I am not, on the example of O'Connor and Singer, ready to grant that—even so, that is a large enough and worthy enough audience, and one that needs as much as any to be served by the values that literature can provide. We in the Mormon community need to be brought out of our existential loneliness, to experience what other Mormons feel, to understand imaginatively and share with each other our fears and doubts and joys and visions and small victories in the communal and individual working out of our salvation. For those who believe the gospel is true in any essential sense, there need be no greater ambition for Mormon literature—at least to begin with—than to speak truly and well, about what is essential, to Mormons.

THESE SUGGESTIONS I have made about a definition of Mormon literature and about a Mormon esthetic are, again, only preliminary, but even with this small beginning we have, I think, enough on which to base some useful outlines for a literary history. Let me suggest, based on this definition, one scheme that may be helpful conceptually and may evoke further study. One way of seeing our literary history is in terms of three fifty-year periods and three kinds of rebels. During the first fifty years or so—into the 1880s—a uniquely Mormon, nontraditional literature was produced by men and women caught up in the restored gospel's rebellion against the world, against Babylon. For them it was literally and ecstatically true, as one of their fine hymns expressed it, that “the morning breaks, the shadows flee” and that “the glory bursting from afar, wide o'er the nations soon will shine.”¹⁸ They rejected, with powerful arguments, the economic, political, and moral conditions of England, Europe, and America; and with incredible courage and self-sacrifice they built genuine alternatives that continue to thrill us. And, I submit, they produced an extraordinary and valuable literature about their feelings, thoughts, and experiences, literature we have too long neglected but are beginning to recover and appreciate—to learn how to appreciate—as we should.

Many of us who study literature professionally have become increasingly uneasy in the past twenty years about the inadequacy of formalist criteria, that is, those

concerned mainly with esthetic qualities—such as structure, style, organization—the matters emphasized in the New Criticism that held sway in mid-twentieth century literary criticism. We have discovered their inadequacy to account for our experiences—and that of our students—with certain literature, such as that, for instance, called to our attention as ethnic or women’s literature, some of which has powerfully affected us despite its apparent lack of great formal or esthetic qualities. We have been brought slowly to recognize that there are also, in good literature, important social and religious and moral values. These are sometimes bound inseparably with the formal perfections; they sometimes provide some compensation for lack of formal training or traditional stylistic ability; and sometimes these values actually push naive or inexperienced writers toward formal qualities they did not consciously work for. For instance, in the powerful reminiscences of Mary Goble Pay,¹⁹ the moving formal purity of understatement comes, I believe, from her own religious and moral qualities and the religious and moral extremity of the situation, not from any literary training or models, most of which would have been bad anyway. Ironically, it has been mainly non-Mormon scholars who have done the most to help us deal with these new problems and possibilities. Critics like Yvor Winters, Ian Watt, Wayne Booth, Robert Scholes, E. D. Hirsch, and John Gardner have explored some of the neglected social, moral, and religious values in literature and the critical means for understanding and evaluating literature in terms of them. If we are to evaluate properly, or ever understand and appreciate, our Mormon literature, particularly in its first fifty years, we must build on their work.

The second fifty years, from about 1880 to 1930, is a barren period in Mormon literature with, I believe, hardly anything of lasting value published or written (at least in the usual literary genres). But there are important literary as well as historical questions to be answered by a study of that period, questions about the nature of the Church after the disappointment of the popular expectation of Christ’s coming in 1890, the Manifesto of that year (in the view of many a capitulation to the government and secular American society), and the period of accommodation to American styles and values that followed statehood in 1896. Historians and literary critics need to work together to understand the relations between Church and culture in this difficult period. And one phenomenon they will need to look at carefully is that during this time there was an outpouring of poems, stories, and novels, mainly in the Church magazines and press, that were known as “home literature” and were designed for the edification of the Saints. At first look, many have assumed that such literature was so bad and so deadening an influence on Mormon literary culture in general because it was too Mormon; I believe it was not Mormon enough. Edward Geary is right in making a distinction that applies to that literature and from which we can learn some lessons that apply directly today, when we face the same dangers as well as the equally great danger of overreaction to those dangers. In his landmark essay on Mormon regional fiction, Geary notes that the home literature movement, which began in the 1880s, was an explicit instrument for spreading the gospel, one which, in Apostle and poet Orson Whitney’s words, “like all else with which we have to do, must be made subservient to the building up of Zion.”²⁰ In explaining why that movement has not met Elder Whitney’s hope that Mormonism would

produce “Miltons and Shakespeares of our own” Geary writes:

It is one thing to ask the artist to put his religious duties before his literary vocation or to write from his deepest convictions. It is quite another to insist that he create from a base in dogma rather than a base in experience. . . . [Home literature] is not a powerful literature artistically, nor is it pure. In most cases its distinctive Mormon characteristics are only skin deep, masking an underlying vision which is as foreign to the gospel as it is to real life.²¹

For example, think of the popular, entertaining, and “edifying” *Saturday’s Warrior*, with its slick sophistication, its misleading if not heretical theology, and its stereotyping toward bigotry in the social references—under the skin as foreign to the gospel as to real life. Geary continues, “The early home literature borrowed the techniques of popular sentimental fiction and the values of the genteel tradition with a superficial adaptation to Mormon themes, and this practice continues only slightly modified.”

You can easily see the continuing influence of that movement in the official magazines and in Church press novels of today; but it is perhaps at least as unfortunate that the reaction against that movement, however well intentioned, also too often fails to see the superior Mormon literature available or the importance and possibility of trying to produce it. We forget Geary’s distinction—that though it is illegitimate and destructive to insist that a writer create from dogma rather than experience it might well be legitimate and valuable to ask him, as I think the Church properly does, to put his religious duties before his literary vocation and to write from his deepest convictions.

After that long hiatus in the middle of Mormon literature, we have had a period of about fifty years of considerable output and much quality, but by two quite different kinds of rebels from two *literary* generations that overlap. The first of these began most prominently with Vardis Fisher in the 1930s and has lingered, in Samuel Taylor, up into the early 1970s; it has been aptly characterized by Ed Geary as Mormondom’s “lost generation.”²² And Geary has shown that the writers were, like American literature’s “lost generation” of twenty years before, defined by various degrees of rebellion against their “provincial” culture, by a patronizing alienation infused with nostalgia for a vanishing way of life that would not let them turn completely away to other loyalties and subject matter, even when they became in one way or another expatriated. They were the first generation of the twentieth century, growing up when Mormon isolation was breaking down, rural Mormondom was depopulating, and urban Mormonism was apparently becoming crassly materialistic. It was easy for them to see the Church, however heroic in the nineteenth century, as failing, the Mormon experiment as rapidly ending. And they saw themselves as the first well-educated generation of Mormonism, able to look with some amusement upon the naivete of Mormon thought.

Such rather adolescent alienation has persisted in many intellectuals of that generation. It has persisted despite the refutations provided by historical analysis that recently has been done—and despite the achievements that were being made even *during* that period in such areas as well-written theology and history, by B. H. Roberts, John A. Widtsoe, and others.

The “lost generation” of writers, and those who shared their sense of Mormonism’s decline, actually thought there would not be another generation after them. And as late as 1969 Dale Morgan, writing on Mormon literature, could say, “A lot of the urgency has gone out of [the Mormon] sense of mission as the millennial expectation has subsided and the powerful ‘gathering’ phase of Mormon history has run its course.”²³ That was written just before the remarkable new missionary energies, the growth to genuine world status and millennial vision, that have come in the 1970s. As Geary writes, “From the viewpoint of the present, expansionist period in Mormon history, the dead-end vision [of the lost generation] seems rather quaint.”²⁴ But he adds a warning—that each generation has its own provinciality, that just as the views of those writers of the 1940s now seem as naive to us as their parents’ views seemed to them so our own views may appear naive to our children. It is certain that despite my criticism of various kinds of provincialism I have my own kind. My best hope is to help us all guard against provinciality by suggesting additional possibilities, more and better perceived options, for our thinking about Mormonism and its literary tradition.

One other option, less provincial, I believe, because more inclusive than that of the Mormon novelists of the 1940s, is the direction taken by the third literary generation of rebels in my historical scheme. It is the second one within the past fifty years of renewed life in Mormon literature after the empty—or perhaps, given the harvest that followed, what could be called the “fallow”—middle fifty-year period. This generation overlaps with the “lost generation” somewhat and is, I believe, the one coming into flower right now, carrying my hope for the “dawning of a brighter day.” These writers are characterized by various kinds of degrees of sincere commitment to the unique and demanding religious claims of Mormonism as well as to its people, history, and culture. Yet they are as clear-sighted and devastating in their analysis and criticism of Mormon mistakes and tragedies, both historical and present, as were the “lost generation”—in some cases more incisive because less naive and more emphatically involved themselves in Mormon conflicts and mistakes.

For instance, Richard Bushman, in his important essay ten years ago called “Faithful History,” suggested some innovative, characteristically Mormon, approaches to writing history; one of those sees the fundamental dramatic tension in religious history not (in the way most Mormon history has been written) as that between an all-righteous Church and an evil world but (as in fact most scriptural history is written) as that between God and his church: “In the second, the Lord tries to establish his kingdom, but the stubborn people whom He favors with revelation ignore him much of the time and must be brought up short.”²⁵ Here is one area where Mormon literature is perhaps ahead of Mormon historiography, because many of this latest generation of what I have called “rebels” are writing with just that perspective, focusing, like the prophets, on the struggles with faith and righteousness—among the so-called chosen people as well as in the world. But, with these (unlike the “lost generation”), there is no patronization, no superior pointing of fingers, but rather full identification; they draw much of their power of specification from their own experience, their own conflicts and failures—and also the redemptive charity

that comes from their own genuine attempts in their own lives to repent, to live out the conflicts and sacrificial duties faith demands. Bushman concludes his essay with a suggestion that the finest Mormon history would be written not by writers who simply transfer various Mormon ideas or perspectives into their work or merely use certain techniques they think are Mormon, but by real changes in *all* things that shape their vision of the world in response to the self within, which they encounter in moments of genuine faith. In a challenging inversion of the traditional Mormon axiom about being saved no faster than we gain knowledge, Bushman suggests that a Mormon cannot improve as a historian (I would add writer) without improving as a human being—in moral insights, spiritual commitment, and critical intelligence: As writers, “we gain knowledge no faster than we are saved.” I believe this latest generation’s growing quality is related to that kind of wholeness; they are finding out, tentatively and awkwardly, but surely, what it can mean for an artist to be a Latter-day Saint—a genuine follower of Christ.

IT OUGHT TO mean something for Mormon literature that Mormonism *begins* with a *book*. But that book is one which has been laughed at, vilified, and ignored—as well as one which has dramatically changed the lives of millions of people. Most surprising, despite its obvious verbal weight and complexity, the Book of Mormon has until fairly recently not been carefully read as a *literary* text, even by Mormons. Ironically it was a *non-Mormon*, Douglas Wilson, who ten years ago reviewed this rather amazing situation and predicted that critical scrutiny from an “archetypal” perspective would be very productive.²⁶ That work has now begun and is proceeding apace: Bruce Jorgensen, Dilworth Rust, and George Tate have done some exciting work on the controlling mythic structures, the power and unity of the typological patterns (to use a concept from the book’s narrators themselves) and their controlling vision, centering on Lehi’s dream as an archetypal source for much of the history and teaching of the entire book. Others, such as Robert Thomas, Jack Welch, and Steven Sondrup, have looked at specific poetic structures and at the rhetorical consistency and power which even we who are the book’s defenders, trained in quite a different rhetorical tradition than that of the Hebrews, or the nineteenth century, have tended to be somewhat uneasy about. Steven Walker has even set about to convince us that in rhetorical concentration the Book of Mormon compares favorably with the King James Bible, even when we include all those “And it came to passes” and “Look and behold.”²⁷ And not only that, but John Seelye, the fine Melville scholar, has joined with Dilworth Rust in a project to prepare and publish with a national press a “Handbook of the Book of Mormon as Literature.”

But what of the other early writings, those indubitably by Joseph Smith himself? Let me spend a moment on “The King Follett Discourse,” perhaps the best piece of discursive literature yet produced in the Church and one of the finest anywhere. Fortunately, historians have stepped over into the neglected stewardship of literary scholars to give us a professionally amalgamated and edited text and have very helpfully provided the historical and philosophical background that enables us better to understand the sense of personal vulnerability and of cosmic import that thrills

us in the sermon itself. But there still remains the task of literary analysis and judgment that would promote wider reading of this valuable text and better understanding of its powerful literary qualities: the loosened and spontaneous, characteristically Mormon, version of Puritan sermon structure, the laying of a foundation stone for a Mormon esthetic in references to the glory that dwells in matter, the creation of enduring Mormon symbols, both visual and sensual, such as Joseph's dramatically removing and using his own ring as an image of eternal personal identity, his talk of the taste of good doctrine and of the paradoxical *burnings* (in the breast of the righteous *and* in the mind of the damned). And finally this:

You never knew my heart. No man knows my history. I cannot do it. I shall never undertake it. I don't blame you for not believing my history. If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself. I never did harm any man since I have been born in the world. My voice is always for peace. I cannot lie down until my work is finished. I never think evil nor think anything to the harm of my fellowman. When I am called at the trump and weighed in the balance, you will know me then.²⁸

We have here a piercing cry from a person discovering himself, whom we do not yet know as fully as we might if we knew him as a great writer.

In that sermon Joseph Smith also establishes—both through the theology and his literary creation—what seems the most promising central theme for Mormon literature: the search for self. I do not mean the unconscious revelation of various selves of the author, or the creation of personae, or the investigation of identity crises, all popular themes in recent literature, but rather the author's own successful search for and creation of his best personal resources in the process of his own writing. Mormon theology, as I have already suggested, provides the most radically individualistic doctrine of self accepted by any religion or philosophical persuasion. The Mormon ontology of self, contained in the doctrine of eternalism, is uniquely powerful to energize and direct the quest for self. That is why I believe Mormon theology is, *all other things being equal*, an exceptionally positive aid toward better literature—and why the best Mormon literature would tend to be characterized by that quest, like, for instance, those fine examples from the first generation, Mary Goble Pay's reminiscences and Eliza R. Snow's "Pioneer Diary."²⁹

But we have yet to explore in our recent literature, our fiction and poetry and drama, the most demanding spiritual frontiers for *modern* Mormons, possible equivalents to those Brigham Young found—and created—on the physical frontiers of our beginnings as a people that produced the authentic personal literature of that time. One place that definitely *can* stimulate an authentic search for self that can be true to our theology, as well as our deepest reality and needs, is the mission field. I mean of course not that pale, demeaning search most often meant in our time when someone says that horribly self-indulgent, "I want to get in touch with my real self," and then, too often with expensive self-help therapy, defines himself by his worst imaginings, doubts, and desires, as if his truest self were a static minimum, his lowest common denominator, which he must then conform to. I mean rather that discovery of one's inner dynamic, his creatable and creative core, his eternally

grounded potential, his swelling, growing seed-self.

With such a focus the missionary experience, as reality and archetype, can do more for Mormon life and letters than serve as an exotic area for exploring religious identity crises. Of course, it is natural and necessary that modern Mormon writers find their true subject matter and their craft in their own way. But there are useful models: what I am suggesting has already been done remarkably well in some missionary diaries, such as that of Joseph Millett. He gives us a day-by-day account of his discovery and development of self as an eighteen-year-old called on a mission in 1852, who made his way alone and mainly afoot across the continent to Nova Scotia, found his Savior on his own, learned the gospel, developed his own resources, and lived a life of remarkable spiritual perception and of pure service. An entry at the end of his journal, chosen from an earlier experience to summarize his life, captures the central moral vision and sense of self acquired by one who has lived a true religion. His life is capped both religiously and artistically by his telling of this story from the hard days of his settlement of Spring Valley, Nevada, where he was called to pioneer by Brigham Young after returning from his mission and where his daughter had died and many had suffered great sickness and hunger:

One of my children came in, said that Brother Newton Hall's folks were out of bread. Had none that day. I put... our flour in sack to send up to Brother Hall's. Just then Brother Hall came in. Says I, "Brother Hall, how are you out for flour." "Brother Millett, we have none." "Well, Brother Hall, there is some in that sack. I have divided and was going to send it to you. Your children told mine that you were out." Brother Hall began to cry. Said he had tried others. Could not get any. Went to the cedars and prayed to the Lord and the Lord told him to go to Joseph Millett. "Well, Brother Hall, you needn't bring this back if the Lord sent you for it. You don't owe me for it." You can't tell how good it made me feel to know that the Lord knew that there was such a person as Joseph Millett.³⁰

That way of telling that experience not only created a new version of what it means to find oneself through losing oneself but *embodied* it movingly in real experience, authentically and artistically recreated it in words—certainly fine literature.

WHILE THE FIRST generation's contribution was mainly in sermons and diaries, the "lost generation's" literary achievement was almost totally in fiction. The finest examples are Maureen Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* and Virginia Sorenson's *The Evening and the Morning*.³¹ *Joshua* is the richest, fullest, most moving, the truest fiction about the pioneer experience of anyone, not just Mormons. But Whipple finally remains too much a part of that second major generation of Mormon writers, like them properly energized by her independence and disillusionment with her people and church but not finally reconciled to her characters and subject in the way great art requires, and the novel falls off badly in the last hundred pages—her powerful theme of human struggle and her fine central characters are a victim of the sentimental Emersonian Romanticism she substitutes for a genuine Mormon theology, and finally the muscular plot is betrayed by melodrama. But if it

is true, as some say, that one cannot understand the Mormon experience without understanding the struggle of the Dixie Mission—the human cost and the faith that was willing to meet the cost and the human results won in the struggle, then we have in *The Giant Joshua* a most direct and perceptive means for understanding Mormon experience; it is our finest fictional access to our roots as Mormons and as Rocky Mountain, high-desert people our most profound imaginative knowledge of the spiritual ancestors of all Mormons, the Dixie pioneers.

Virginia Sorensen’s novel, if not quite as remarkable as Whipple’s flawed masterpiece, is certainly the best novel yet about twentieth-century Mormon experience. Sorensen shares some of Whipple’s “lost generation” flaws, such as a certain patronizing attitude toward Mormon thought, which she obviously doesn’t understand too well. It occurs to me for instance that Sorensen, and her protagonist Kate Alexander, understand sin very well, its complex beginnings in small, tragic misunderstandings and impulses, its way of continuing even when the pains and costs become much greater than the pleasures and rewards. But Sorensen does not seem to understand the Atonement—the processes, costs, and unique Christian resources that make up repentance. On the other hand, our first generation seems to have understood the Atonement quite well, at least its power in their initial change, as they came out of the world into Zion, but they apparently did not understand much about individual sin—the “mystery of iniquity”—and its continuing challenge in their lives. My greater hope for the third generation of writers is that they understand sin well enough—both that of the world and their own—and they also understand the Atonement and can struggle to make its grandeur part of their art. Sorensen once identified herself with writers “‘in the middle’—incapable of severe orthodoxies”³²; I think the greatest Mormon literature will be written by those who, like the first generation, are capable of severe orthodoxies, but who are also able to transcend the narrowness and limitations orthodoxy implies into new freedom, enlarged possibilities. Some are learning this, and one fine place for them—and their potential audience—to learn is from *The Evening and the Morning*. As Ed Geary has commented, we are not likely to have better novels than those of Whipple and Sorensen until we learn what they have to teach.³³ One besides Geary who is helping us is Bruce Jorgensen, who has written—about *The Evening and the Morning*, why it is Mormon and what it achieves—one of the subtlest and most useful pieces of literary criticism I have read.³⁴

EILEEN KUMP IS one in the *third* generation who has shown her ability to learn from her Mormon literary tradition and go beyond; her few slowly crafted short stories, especially “The Willows” (on a smaller scale than *Giant Joshua* but without its problems), reach the heights of Whipple’s achievements with fiction as a mode of historical apprehension.³⁵ Doug Thayer and Don Marshall have shown what they have learned in remarkable meditations on initiation into the complexities of inner evil and of the demands of outer reality, including one’s family and community.³⁶ And younger writers of fiction are coming along with authentic skills and also the grounding in Mormon thought and conviction that I think characterize the third generation. I will mention only one example, the finely tuned, uncompromising but

compassionate story about a young Mormon mother published recently by Dian Saderup.³⁷ These writers still have some things to learn from the second generation, mainly about handling significant Mormon materials on a large canvas, the size of a novel.

That process of learning from but moving beyond the second generation has in some ways been more fully accomplished by our poets, but they still face some of the same great challenges and could also use much more of our support and help. Clinton Larson was the first real Mormon poet, the groundbreaker for the third literary generation in achieving a uniquely Mormon poetic, and is still, by virtue of both quantity and quality of work, our foremost literary artist. He is a writer I respect and love for both his genius and his personal sacrifice in making his difficult and costly way essentially alone. Certainly only a part of his work is first-rate, but he has produced a significant number and variety of poems that will stand with the best written by anyone in his time: for instance “Homestead in Idaho,”³⁸ which captures with great power unique qualities of our pioneer heritage—that intense, faith-testing loneliness and loss, that incredible will to take chances and their consequences, even to be defeated, the challenge posed by experience to our too easy security within the plan, the seeing how the tragic implications of our theology are borne out in mortality. And Larson’s range goes all the way from that long narrative work to a perfectly cut jewel like “To a Dying Girl.”³⁹

To a Dying Girl

How quickly must she go?
 She calls dark swans from mirrors everywhere:
 From halls and porticos, from pools of air.
 How quickly must she know?
 They wander through the fathoms of her eye,
 Waning southerly until their cry
 Is gone where she must go.
 How quickly does the cloudfire streak the sky,
 Tremble on the peaks, then cool and die?
 She moves like evening into night,
 Forgetful as the swans forget their flight
 Or spring the fragile snow,
 So quickly she must go.

“To a Dying Girl” develops, with the ultimately irrational, unanalyzable poignancy of pure lyricism, the same theme that preoccupied Emily Dickinson in her finest work—the incomprehensible imperceptible change of being from one state to another, symbolized most powerfully for her in the change of seasons but felt most directly in the mysterious, adamant change of death. Her best work on this theme, such as “Farther in Summer than the Birds” and “There’s a Certain Slant of Light,” lives in the mind as a constant antidote to both sentimentality and despair about death’s change. Larson uses a wider multiplicity of images (“She moves like evening into night, / Forgetful as the swans forget their flight”), but with similar metrical brilliance, varying the line lengths to bring up the rhymes in special intervals and dropping the first slack syllable from certain of his pentameter lines in order to image

the balanced hesitation and release of emotion he wants to create. Read it a few times and it will live in your mind as surely and deservedly as Dickinson's best work.

Two poems by younger poets show characteristic third-generation devotional Mormon themes and the variety of stylistic handling. See Linda Sillitoe's "Letter to a Four-Year-Old Daughter," *BYU Studies* 16 (Winter 1976): 234, and the following by Bruce Jorgensen:

A Litany for the Dark Solstice

Dead of winter,
 Dead of night,
 Neither center,
 Left, nor right.
 Teach me error
 Within reason;
 Stay me with terror
 Out of season.
 When I have most,
 Whirl it as dust.
 Salt be the taste
 Of all I love best
 In earth, and rust
 Be the iron I trust.
 In my distress,
 Bless me to bless.
 On urgent water,
 Gone oar and rudder,
 Still me this rest:
 Break me to Christ.

The differences I have described between the first and third generations are well exemplified in the differences between the essays produced by the two groups. The first generation was too uniformly embattled against the outside world for the kinds of complex revelations of personal feelings and differences, or the subtle examinations of more universal problems existing *within* as well as without the Church, that characterize the modern Mormon personal essay. Only a beginning has been made at describing this genre and evaluating its examples, but we have Mary Bradford's provocative analysis of what has been written⁴⁰ and Ed Geary's and Laurel Ulrich's and others' experiments with the form. The experiments show how the essay can work not so much to convey information as to give the reader vicarious experience (like other forms of imaginative literature) and yet still retain its unique abilities to deal directly with the most challenging dimensions of Mormon theology.

For instance, as Clifton Jolley has pointed out,⁴¹ Mormon thought exposes those who know it and take it seriously to the consequences of living in an ultimately paradoxical, because nonabsolutistic, universe, where opposition "must needs be" or otherwise there is no existence, where God cannot achieve his purposes through

his will alone and therefore has problems and suffers, not only through choice but through necessity, because he has perfect power to bring salvation with our cooperation—but not without it. The consequences include terror and awful responsibility as well as the hope of exciting eternal adventure. The Mormon personal essay can have both a substantive and a formal advantage over any other approach to the terror of life because, while lacking somewhat the *indirection* in other forms, it can combine many of those forms' other virtues (the rich textural element of fiction, for instance) without separating itself from the directness and responsibility involved in dealing with the *literally* true, as well as *fictively* true, experience. As Jolley writes, "The personal essay is utterly responsible, its point of view is owned. In it, one may take neither comfort nor refuge in the satisfactions of pose or form; one must face the beast, naked and alone."⁴² I have faith that the personal essay, developed into new dimensions and powers by Mormon writers, may serve as our most productive genre, the one best tuned to the particular strengths and tendencies of Mormon thought and experience, including of course the search for self; it provides naturally for the widest possible appreciation by Mormon readers and the widest involvement by Mormon writers because of its accessible but powerful form, and it may well be our most important contribution to the wider world literary culture.

NOW LET ME conclude with some problems and possibilities. I realize that the challenge of properly relating scholarship and artistic achievement to moral character or religious faith—of connecting truth and goodness to beauty—is a huge and treacherous one, one that has not been met with very great success by many, past or present. But I find, even at Brigham Young University, a surprising lack of interest in trying to meet the challenge, an almost secularist distrust, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, of any attempt to directly apply gospel perspectives and standards to scholarship or artistry. Part of that distrust stems from a very proper revulsion (which I share fully) at seeing such combinations made naively or superficially or self-righteously, but we are untrue to our professional responsibilities as well as our faith if we do not somehow come to terms with the charge given us by the chairman of the BYU Board of Trustees, President Spencer W. Kimball, in his "Second Century Address":

We surely cannot give up our concerns with character and conduct without also giving up on mankind. Much misery results from flaws in character, not from failures in technology. We cannot give in to the ways of the world with regard to the realm of art. . . . Our art must be the kind which edifies man, which takes into account his immortal nature, and which prepares us for heaven.⁴³

I feel certain President Kimball was not talking about simple piety, superficial Mormonism of the kind our home literature has fostered. Later that day when he asked the Lord to "let the morality of the graduates of this University provide the music of hope for the inhabitants of this planet,"⁴⁴ it was a beautiful and lucid but also very challenging moment that we have not yet come to terms with. And we *will* not if we on the one hand resist that charge as too pious and unacademic for serious scholars or on the other hand think it only has to do with the Word of Wisdom and

dress standards, rather than the serious and extremely difficult moral issues our graduates will face in the world—such as the increasingly shrill and violent struggles of various groups for and against certain “rights,” the overwhelming hopelessness of the poor and ignorant and suppressed, and “the wars and the perplexities of the nations” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:79). President Kimball was speaking in a great tradition of the latter-day prophets, a tradition we sometimes forget. Listen to Brigham Young:

There is not, has not been, and never can be any method, scheme, or plan devised by any being in this world for intelligence to eternally exist and obtain an exaltation, without knowing the good and the evil—without tasting the bitter and the sweet. Can the people understand that it is actually necessary for opposite principles to be placed before them, or this state of being would be no probation, and we should have no opportunity for exercising the agency given us? Can they understand that we cannot obtain eternal life unless we actually know and comprehend by our experience the principle of good and the principle of evil, the light and the darkness, truth, virtue, and holiness—also vice, wickedness and corruption?⁴⁵

Or listen to Joseph Smith:

The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O Man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss and the broad expanse of eternity.⁴⁶

Nothing superficial or pious or sentimental there; it would be hard to find better statements of what the greatest, the most *challenging*, literature and other works of art succeed in doing. And for these purposes the kind of art I have been describing and proposing to you—that is, genuine Mormon literature—is, I believe, one of our richest and most direct resources. Such literature has unique and long-proven ability to teach not only moral rigor and sensitivity but to teach specific moral intelligence. But we who are the teachers, the critics, the literate audience must not be overly optimistic, too easy in our criticism, slothful in our expectations of what a truly Mormon literature will be and will cost. I trust I am not guilty of those faults here: I have really been trying to show that it is not easier to be a good Christian or Mormon writer, but more difficult; piety will not take the place of inner gifts or tough thinking or hard training and work.

The dangers of mixing religion and art are clear and present—from both sides. Literature is not a substitute for religion and making it such is a sure road to hell; and just as surely religious authority is no substitute for honest literary perception and judgment—and didactic, apologetic, or sentimental writing, however “true” in some literal sense, is no substitute for real literature in its power to grasp and change. In the direction of such sentimentalism lies spiritual suicide. We must stop rewarding the “pious trash” as Flannery O’Connor called much Catholic literature—a phrase that well describes much of our own; and we must, on the other hand, also stop awarding prizes to those stories which, for instance, in reaching for unearned

maturity, use sexual explicitness or sophomoric skepticism as faddish, but phony, symbols of intellectual and moral sophistication and freedom—or merely to titillate their Mormon audience. Various forms of Scylla and Charybdis threaten all about, and we must proceed with some caution along straight and narrow courses.

But we should also have the courage of our supposed convictions. People outside the Church are calling Mormonism such things as the only successful American religious movement or recognizing Joseph Smith as the most interesting religious mind in America or Brigham Young as one of the world's most impressive empire builders and practical thinkers. Many of us have even stronger convictions about the inherent greatness and interest of our heritage and its people. We now need to be willing to do the scholarship; to recover and explicate the texts; to write the biographies, the literary criticism, the theory; to teach—even to do the simple reading—that will help bring to full flower a culture commensurate with our great religious and historical roots.

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