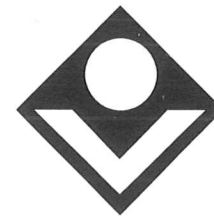

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phesy is spiritual. The past is great, but the future will be greater. The dead letter may be precious, but the living oracle is beyond all price.

It is from the warp and woof of all learning, so far as we are able to master it and make it ours, that the fabric of our literature must be woven. We must read, and think, and feel, and pray, and then bring forth our thoughts, and polish and preserve them. This will make literature.

Above all things, we must be original. The Holy Ghost is the genius of "Mormon" literature. Not Jupiter, nor Mars, Minerva, nor Mercury. No fabled gods and goddesses; no Mount Olympus; no "sisters nine," no "blue-eyed maid of heaven;" no invoking of mythical muses that "did never yet one mortal song inspire." No pouring of new wine into old bottles. No patterning after the dead forms of antiquity. Our literature must live and breathe for itself. Our mission is diverse from all others; our literature must also be. The odes of Anacreon, the satires of Horace and Juvenal, the epics of Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton; the sublime tragedies of Shakspeare; these are all excellent, all well enough in their way; but we must not attempt to copy them. They cannot be reproduced. We may read, we may gather sweets from all these flowers, but we must build our own hive and honeycomb after God's supreme design.

We will yet have. Miltons and Shakspeares of our own. God's ammunition is not exhausted. His brightest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God's name and by His help we will build up a literature whose top shall touch heaven, though its foundations may now be low in earth. Let the smile of derision wreath the face of scorn; let the frown of hatred darken the brow of bigotry. Small things are the seeds of great things, and, like the corn that brings forth the oak, or the snow-flake that forms the avalanche, God's kingdom will grow, and on wings of light and power soar to the summit of its destiny.

Let us onward, then, and upward, keeping the goal in view; living not in the dead past, nor for the dying present. The future is our field. Eternity is before us.

"New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward,
Who would keep abreast of Truth.
Lest before us gleam her camp-fires,
We, ourselves, must pilgrims be;
Launch our Mayflower, and steer boldly
Through the desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the future's portal
With the past's blood-rusted key."

I do not mean to depreciate, or speak slightly of the literature of the past; such of it, at least, as is worthy of the name. Far be it from me to utter one word that might reasonably be so construed. I wish I had power to tell you what I think literature has done for the human race; what men of letters have accomplished in all ages, from Moses to Herodotus, from Herodotus to Shakspeare, from Shakspeare to Goethe and Carlyle; men who have poured the rich treasures of inspired thought and intelligent research into the lap of humanity, giving birth to civilization and filling earth with fame and glory. I would also speak of the press, that modern giant, that great engine of power, scattering far and wide the embers of intelligence, kindling on ten thousand times ten thousand hearth-stones the fires of thought and noble aspiration; the newspaper, that daily history of the world, champion of truth and defender of the oppressed. How mighty its mission, how far-reaching its influence, how invincible its power! Oh, that it should ever be prostituted, dragged in the mire, degraded to ignoble ends! But alas! it often is so. Therefore, choose between the false and true, between the unreal and the genuine. "Seek ye out of the best books"—the best newspapers—"words of wisdom." Write for the papers, write for the magazines—especially our home publications—subscribe for them and read them. Make books yourselves, that shall not only be a credit to you, and to the land and people that

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Writing Literary Mormon Fiction

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When Isaac Bashevis Singer started publishing, he received one kind of response from his literary readers and another from his Orthodox readers. The former complained that he portrayed supernatural events that undercut the realism of his novels, and the latter complained about the sexuality and irreverence in his novels, which they thought were heretical. Mormon fiction is in a similar state; since the first Mormon novels were published around 1900, novelists in the Church have been faced with the same dilemma, being asked to remove spiritual yearning and manifestations in order to publish in New York and to remove sensuality and doubt to publish in Zion.

For example, in 1928 Susa Young Gates and her daughter Leah Widtsoe noted in their jointly authored book, *Women of the "Mormon" Church*, that one "ambitious and gifted" Mormon woman writer was told by an eastern editor, "if you will drop your militant 'Mormon' attitude and just do Western stories straight you will surely succeed" (Baym 26). The writer answered, "Your price is too high. . . . I won't pay it." This editor might have simply meant by "telling it straight" that the writer—whose identity I have not been able to

discover—should not proselytize, but many Mormon writers have had to downplay or remove essential elements of their spiritual life from their literary work in order to be published by major publishers.

In 1942 Widtsoe's husband, John A., reviewed Virginia Sorensen's first book, *A Little Lower than the Angels*. He complained that the book did not portray the "strong beliefs" of the Saints that made them successful pioneers. Instead, Joseph Smith and the other Mormon leaders become "insipid milk and water figures" (380). His other complaint was that because of Sorensen's "eager grasping for modern unlovely realism, some trivial and repulsive episodes are allowed place in the book" (380). His example was a description of bedwetting, which he thought should have been left out. He wondered whether contemporary writers adopt a plan of "constant stark realism" because they are compelled by New York publishers, who think only about profits (380).

In the first example, a Mormon novelist was asked not to bring her faith into the national arena, and in the second another was asked not to bring her realism into the arena of faith. Yet I and other Mormon novelists continue to hope. How might novels based on both literary aesthetics and matters of faith blossom in the current cultural ground of Mormonism?

HISTORY OF THE GULF

The Mormon Literature Database lists 3,281 novels in our history, so members of the LDS Church have written about every kind of novel imaginable. Unfortunately, critics of Mormon novels generally sort them into the two groups described above: those that are correct in orthodoxy and those that are correct in terms of realism and other literary principles.

More than half a century ago, Don. D. Walker wrote that "writers need a tradition, a system of moral values in which they can make meaningful judgments—they need a frame of belief" (qtd. in Mulder 88). Insiders build a fiction on that frame without questioning it, Walker says. Outsiders think of the frame as "merely historical." So he implies that great writers would both believe in the framework and

question it, but this would require insiders to accept outsider fictional rhetoric and vice versa. In 1974, Karl Keller classified Mormon writing as being either historical-regional or didactic, as "jack-fiction" or orthodox (62). In 1978, Edward Geary separated literature created out of dogma from that created out of experience ("Poetics of Provincialism" 15). In his 1991 presidential address to the Association for Mormon Letters, Bruce W. Jorgensen warned against essentialistic criticism, that which admits only orthodox literature into the Mormon canon. He was talking primarily about Mormons who critique literature on the basis of whether it contains correct doctrines and attitudes, but the term could also be applied to writers who consider the presence of non-orthodox materials, such as sex and doubt, to be necessary for good literature. The next year, Richard H. Cracroft said in his presidential address that many Mormon writers miss their audience of fellow Mormons by writing literature "grounded in the 'earth-bound humanism' of contemporary secular society, but reflecting little or no essential Mormonism" (51). He applied the term "sophic" to writing that is literary at the expense of Mormonism's spiritual essence, and the term "mantic" to a more orthodox, faithful literature. All these critics generally expressed hope that someday something would change, but their primary objective was to describe what they observed, that the state of Mormon literary writing, writers, and readers was two camps with a gulf between.

It may be that this geography, in part created by critics, is a distorted landscape. While it is true that it is difficult to write about spiritual matters using what is essentially a neoclassical and rationalist genre, many writers, Mormon and not, have striven to examine spirituality using literary conventions. Predictably, many religious readers disregard this work that has tried to bind body and spirit, either because the spiritual aspect seems superficial or, as Jorgensen said, because the bodies seem too bawdy. These writers have often been read as outsiders by either God-fearing critics or literary critics. Virginia Sorensen, an important Mormon novelist, wrote in 1953 that she hoped the division was disappearing: "Much of the work of the years just past, especially fiction, has had . . . overtenderness on one hand, or has been overembittered on the other, much as the

Mormon-Gentile feeling was for so many years. It seemed for a long time necessary to take sides. Human beings and their humanness seemed smothered in attitudes and diminished by them" (284). Because many Mormons believe in the paradigm of two types of writing, a writer who tries to exist in both landscapes is neither fish nor fowl, not clearly literary nor adequately faithful. Unfortunately, it is not only critics and readers who perceive this gulf and who are biased against contamination from the other camp, but also publishers.

At first glance, Orson F. Whitney's 1888 call for literary excellence, where he said that we would one day have "Miltons and Shakespeares of our own" (300), seems to say that to achieve great art we must have both the literary and the Mormon traditions simultaneously, traditions of earth and of heaven, walking "hand in hand interpreting each other" (297). Because Mormonism is unique, this art will be unique. We "must be original," our "literature must live and breathe for itself" (300). He writes, "[W]e must read, and think, and feel, and pray, and then bring forth our thoughts, and polish and preserve them" (300). This will happen when Zion's sons and Zion's daughters become "as famed for intelligence and culture as for purity, truth and beauty" (298). All good advice. He even suggests that the "fabric of our literature must be woven" from "the warp and woof of all learning, so far as we are able to master it and make it ours" (300). But his sermon also says that we must have "No patterning after the dead forms of antiquity" (300). What are we to do with the long literary tradition—study it or reject it? He imagines the day when literary art will shine on Zion's towers like "rays of light from the same central sun, no longer refracted and discolored by the many-hued prisms of man's sensuality" (297). How can a novelist reject consideration of earthiness and sensuality without undoing the tensional relationship between good and evil in the novel, offering a vision of reality so distorted that the resulting portrayal is shallow? His is a standard more pious than is found governing any of Mormonism's canonized works. Still, I find value in the idea I take from his call to artists—that in order to avoid a slavish connection to ossified literary conventions and traditions, writers of novels that include spiritual considerations must know the warp and

woof of all learning, including that found in both literary and religious traditions.

NOTES TOWARD AN AESTHETIC OF SYNTHETIC MORMON LITERATURE

My aesthetic for novels that are both faithful and literary is that readers vicariously live through characters who act on each other and on the materials of this earth and are in awe of God as much as they are in awe of men and women. Reading a good Mormon novel challenges us spiritually, makes us stretch our souls.

Others have also tried to define what a faithful, literary novel might be like. In "Is It True?: The Novelist and His Materials," Virginia Sorensen writes, "For a good novel is one person's honest report upon life. . ." (283). A little later in the same essay she advises,

Whenever you write about a "peculiar people" you will find yourself under the necessity of holding up the action of your stories, in a way most frowned-upon by the technicians, while you explain how your characters feel about heaven and hell, and why; how they are married and to how many different people and how this happened to happen; how they feel about food and drink; how many of their relationships are complicated, or sometimes enhanced, by the notion that they go on and on forever. (290–91)

The entire essay, well worth reading, discusses how to be literary without becoming elitist and without losing the cultural ground of religious stories.

As I mentioned above, most narratives in the scriptures defy easy categorization into one of the two camps I have described; this is a modern binary that has been imposed on novelists, generally by publishers, but also by critics. Faithful literary fiction is not easily classified, and many writers of this kind of hybrid may have had their work ignored. In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," Nina Baym writes that the canon of the American novel contains few women because the criteria for judgment is created by white, Anglo-Saxon, male critics.

The stories that critics deem excellent are those that pit a male against society or the wilderness, which have both been characterized as female. Novels which don't fit this pattern are not seen as significant. Similarly, faithful literary fiction deviates from the paradigms used to judge both faithful and literary fiction, which exclude wrestling with issues or exclude the non-rational matters of the spirit. Fiction that includes both can easily be seen as ill formed, Other.

Stories in the scriptures are rich portrayals of humans caught in a world where righteous living is not simple and good is difficult to distinguish from evil: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, Abraham leaving his homeland, Abraham and Isaac and Sarah, Jacob and his brothers, Moses and Pharaoh, the wandering of the children of Israel, Saul and David and Jonathon, David and Bathsheba, Esther and the king, Daniel and the king, Paul and Peter and the other apostles of the New Testament, Lehi and his family as they leave Jerusalem, the long warfare between the Lamanites and the Nephites, Joseph Smith and the angel, the Mormon pioneers and their enemies and the landscape, and most particularly, the stories of Christ's life and Atonement, which are full of grace, mystery, and awe. These stories contain murder and charity, sexual lust and occasionally tenderness, greed and generosity, belief and doubt. Most of these stories have a quality of the sublime, beauty with an edge of danger, the fear of losing one's soul.

But the novel is not scripture, nor should it be. It is difficult to write about spiritual essence using what is a rationalist genre. Empirical motivation of character resists the idea of spiritual force. What could enable change in Mormon book culture is the recognition that both faithful and literary fiction have worthwhile goals and that we might afford each other a little latitude.

NOVELS THAT IGNORE THE GULF

Several novelists have tried to make a space for themselves inside our communities, a space that does not align with either camp. Perhaps the most notable are Maurine Whipple and Virginia Sorensen. Whipple's great novel, *The Giant Joshua* (1942), makes vital the

experience of the polygamous settlers of St. George. Whipple builds tension between characters who love beauty and culture and those who love work and practicality, between those who use the odd social structure of polygamy to build love, those who endure physical love as a yoke, and those who use polygamy to indulge in carnality. Her novel portrays all these types as she builds drama out of a people driven by spiritual motives to settle in a land so harsh and difficult that it broke many of them.

Sorensen wrote with sophistication about the complex tensions in established Mormon villages. She wrote about sexuality, family, social practice, faith, and doubt as they functioned in these tight communities. In *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (1963), she invents a narrator who is a naïve observer of human society and who brings readers to profound questions about the nature of personal and communal ethics. Sorensen wrote nine books for adults, including *The Evening and the Morning* (1949) and *The Proper Gods* (1951), and seven books for children, including *Miracles on Maple Hill* (1957), for which she won a Newbery Award. Of her first book, *A Little Lower than the Angels* (1942), her publisher, Alfred Knopf, wrote, "I have seldom introduced a new novelist with the confidence I feel in the author of this remarkable book. It marks the debut, I believe, of a major American writer" (Bradford 16). Wallace Stegner also praised her as "a young writer with a present and a future" (16).

Sorensen grew up in Manti and American Fork, Utah, the daughter of a jack-Mormon and a Christian Scientist, both of whom had pioneer ancestors. Consequently, she had close relations with her extended Mormon family, but she also had a unique insider / outsider view. Her fictionalized account of her youth in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* shows a girl who has a firm place in her family and in the community. She observes prejudice and cruelty, but these are described as problems of an imperfect community, not as forces that might push her out of the community. As an adult Sorensen studied writing under Yvor Winters at Stanford. She lived in many states and in several places outside the US, and her characters, narrators, and the materials in her novels are varied. She once wrote, "I try to find stories that came out of the ground wherever I am" (Bradford

16). Later in her life she became estranged from the Mormons and joined the Anglican Church. She regretted that her books were not read in Utah, which happened at least partly because of the negative review by John A. Widtsoe and because of reader aversion to her content, such as her portrayal of the intimate relationship between Joseph Smith and Eliza Snow. After *Dialogue* honored her work in 1980, she wrote that the recognition as an important Mormon writer by her own people allowed her to feel “all right about The Works being put in place by the unanswerable verdict of General Neglect” (17). Even more poignant is her memory of Utah that she says she carries “helplessly” with her. She writes that she has

a deep consciousness about the so-immediate and yet so-remote past of town after town, valley after valley. Our history here and our legends are so close to us that it is all but impossible to separate ourselves from them. Yet this very closeness—which is intensely personal and has a kind of tenderness about it—often prevents us from seeing it in its reality. (284)

This is not the language of one who names herself an outsider, but the essay also marks her recognition that insiders who get so close to their material that they cannot see it clearly might have a problem writing good novels.

I judge that the most important foundational elements of Sorensen’s experience were her life in a Mormon village (where she felt accepted but also knew she was on the fringe), her extensive knowledge of her own family, her education in the best of the literary tradition, and the fact that she was in a social position of great freedom. The most important influences on Sorensen later on were her estrangement from Mormonism and the decline of her readership, which decline was due to both personal and cultural factors, the latter including official statements by LDS Church authorities and the inability of her audience to see literary purpose in her material.

Maurine Whipple had a similar but harsher experience. She grew up in St. George, Utah, raised by an authoritarian father and a submissive mother, and she absorbed in her gut the tensions from their

unhappy marriage. She was educated at the University of Utah and returned to Washington County, Utah, to teach school. She studied what we now label “recreation management” (Hale 13). Funding dried up for her job and her romantic life floundered, so she became discouraged, almost to the point of suicide (Hale 14). A friend submitted her story, “Beaver Dam Wash,” to the Rocky Mountain Writers Conference in Boulder, and subsequently she was awarded the 1938 Houghton Mifflin Fellowship. With that support she wrote the book that had always been in her head, the epic of the settlement of St. George called *The Giant Joshua*. She was given a room in the St. George library, where she had time, resources for research, and money to support herself while she wrote. For a while, the published book was highly ranked by several national bestseller lists, along with Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Despite its critical praise nationally, the book did not do as well in Utah as she and her publisher had hoped it would. It came out in 1941, the same year as the film *Brigham Young*, which was endorsed by the Church president Heber J. Grant. Whipple’s novel was given only derogatory reviews by Church authorities. Widtsoe admired the epic nature of her portrayal but said that the main story displayed a “life defeated because of polygamy, [and] leaves a bitter, angry distaste for the system” (93). He found this “unfair” because negative marriages are not restricted to polygamy. He wrote, “The evident straining for the lurid obscures the true spirit of Mormonism, and misleads the reader” (93). As a consequence, Sorensen never earned much from royalties for her book, was expelled from her research room in the St. George Library, never finished her second book in what was intended as a series, and felt excluded by her community during most of her mature years.

While Whipple and Sorensen soon felt ostracized by their own people, they were supported by their Mormon culture when they were young. Of course they also felt that they were on the edge of their communities, but they had an accepted identity there. Being invisible may have been a great boon to these bright young women.

In “Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years,” Eugene England describes these two writers and others as members of “a lost generation” of Mormon writers, “expatriates.” He

borrowed the term from Edward Geary, who also listed the following important Mormon novelists as part of that group: Vardis Fisher (*Children of God: An American Epic* [1939]), Paul Bailey (*For This My Glory* [1944]), Richard Scowcroft (*Children of the Covenant* [1945]), Samuel W. Taylor (*Heaven Knows Why* [1948]), and others (“Mormondom’s Lost Generation”). As Geary’s label implies, most of these writers were not comfortable with the Church. England predicted the imminent future when Mormon writers more faithful than these would reach the high literary benchmarks this group set, through the union of faith and literary conventions. Unfortunately, my experience is that a powerful cultural opposition still exists between the two ideals.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Today writers spread across a different landscape, but one that still shows evidence of a fault line dividing writers, readers, and publishers into not two, but three groups: those who focus on a positive view of Mormon culture and generally write in popular genres, a small cadre of those who write in a literary manner using Mormon materials, and a group of literary writers who sidestep the issue and write for the national market, generally omitting Mormon materials and spiritual concerns.

The first category, Mormon writers writing for a faithful Mormon audience, is the largest. In 2015, the LDS Booksellers Association listed as members 180 retail booksellers and 180 wholesalers, most of whom publish and / or distribute popular and faithful Mormon literature—sermonic or informational texts and genre fiction. The LDS Booksellers Association no longer has a website, which could indicate a decline in popularity of these kinds of books, or at least a reduction in the number of publishers who can stay afloat. However, Deseret Book, the largest publisher of Mormon fiction, has 554 novels on its list. These include the genres of speculative fiction, such as *Dragonwatch* (2017) by Brandon Mull; historical fiction primarily by Gerald N. Lund (*The Work and the Glory* series), Dean Hughes (the *Children of the Promise* and the *Hearts of the Children* series), and

Margaret Young (the *Standing on the Promises* series); teen books, including those by Richard Paul Evans (the *Michael Vey* series); romances such as *Love and Loss at Whitmore Manor* (2017) by Anita Stansfield; and mystery / suspense novels, such as *Safehouse* (2017) by Tracy Hunter Abramson. While they also publish through mainstream presses, Young and Hughes and others, in similar manner to Whipple and Sorensen, write fiction that strives for literary excellence while for the most part attempting to present a positive view of Mormon faith and culture.

Publishers that focus on literary Mormon fiction are much fewer. These are those between the rock and the hard place. Signature Books has ten novels on their list, and many of these criticize Mormon culture. These include *The Backslider* (1986) by Levi Peterson, *Dancing Naked* (1999) by Robert Hodgson Van Wagoner, *Murder by Sacrament* (2014) by Paul M. Edwards, *Vernal Promises* (2003) by Jack Harrell, and several others. Zarahemla Books, created by Chris Bigelow, has a unique editorial policy of publishing high-quality work that has not found a home elsewhere. Douglas Thayer, the pioneer after Whipple and Sorensen in terms of faithful literary writing, published several novels with this press, including *The Tree House* (2009) and *Will Wonders Never Cease* (2014). Other authors published by Zarahemla include Angela Hallstrom (*Bound on Earth* [2014]), Todd Robert Petersen (*Rift* [2009]), Jonathan Langford (*No Going Back* [2009]), Coke Newell (*On the Road to Heaven* [2007]), and others. Two others, Cedar Fort Press and Covenant Communications, publish faithful, genre fiction.

Most of the strongest character-driven literary novels fall into a third category, those written by Mormons but for national audiences and generally with sparse Mormon content. These include young adult writer Louise Plummer (*The Unlikely Romance of Kate Bjorkman* [1997] and *A Dance for Three* [2000]); Dean Hughes, who publishes in both the LDS and the national markets (*Four-Four-Two* [2017] and dozens of middle grade novels); Orson Scott Card, who brings characterization and philosophical seriousness to speculative fiction (*Ender’s Game* [1985], *Speaker for the Dead* [1986], and *Lost Boys* [1992]); David Wolverton, who also brings literary conventions

to science fiction and, under the pen name of David Farland, fantasy (*On My Way to Paradise* [1989] and the *Runelord* series); Herbert Harker (*Turn Again Home* [1977] and *Goldenrod* [1973], which deals with the Mountain Meadows Massacre); Anne Perry (*The Cater Street Hangman* [1979]); A. E. Cannon (*The Shadow Brothers* [1990], *Amazing Gracie* [1991], and *Charlotte's Rose* [2002], the story of a Mormon girl who carries her neighbor's baby across the Great Plains); Martine Leavitt (*My Book of Life by Angel* [2012]); Shannon Hale (*Goose Girl* [2003] and *Princess Academy* [2005]); Carol Lynch Williams (*The Chosen One* [2010] and *Glimpse* [2012]); Ann Dee Ellis (*This Is What I Did* [2007] and *The End or Something Like That* [2014]); and numerous other fine Mormon writers publishing for middle grade, young adult, and adult readers in the national market.

Plummer writes about the conditions young women face with subtlety approaching that of Jane Austen, and like Austen she urges them to use good sense to temper emotion and social force. Hughes writes middle grade and young adult stories of boys facing physical and ethical challenges, often as they deal with war. Card writes about the spiritual and cultural consequences of great tragedy. His best work blends materials from anthropology, religion, and social psychology. Perry's detective stories show the power of clear ethical judgment over the greatest sin against free agency and humanity—murder. Williams, Leavitt, and Ellis describe young people who survive often horrible conditions. Most of these Mormon writers write powerful, ethical, and literary work that embodies Mormon / Christian values. But when they write for national markets, they do not write directly about the movement of the spirit, the challenges of faith, or the covenants Mormons make.

Some contemporary novelists with Mormon backgrounds have succeeded in using Mormon materials in their work and still published in the national market, namely Brian Evenson (*The Open Curtain* [2006] and *Father of Lies* [1998]), Brady Udall (*The Lonely Polygamist* [2010]), Judith Freeman (*The Chinchilla Farm* [1989] and *Set for Life* [1991]), and Darrell Spencer (*One Mile Past Dangerous Curve* [2005]). Like Whipple and Sorensen, most of these

authors no longer participate in the Mormon Church. While these few members of a contemporary "lost generation" write about Mormonism, most of our best contemporary novelists write for national markets without reference to Mormonism, and much of what is written and published in the Mormon market is genre fiction with superficial characterization, unambiguous plot lines, and pop culture philosophy.

INCOMPATIBLE THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

For as long as I have thought about it, I have been mystified by the rejection, by most Mormon readers, of the edge of realism that makes them question aspects of their community. I have been frustrated because I thought we were simply involved in a misunderstanding. I assumed that if the nature of the literary novel was explained to any intelligent reader, they would accept that kind of writing. I now think that the problem is more intractable. What is it in Mormon and other religious cultures that makes great, community-refashioning literature difficult to write and read? It could be that some Mormon writers and readers are not learned or spiritual enough. I have also considered that the idea that the Mormon religion contains all truth keeps us from ardently searching for truth in our fiction.

Now I have a different perspective. We have long known that language, ideas, and behavior are codified in communities to show whether a person is a member of the community, or an outsider. These codes are not often talked about, so they are generally invisible. In *Naming What We Know* (2015), Elizabeth Wardle and Linda Adler-Kassner suggest that disciplines have threshold concepts embedded in the way insiders in a given discipline talk about their work that mark the difference between them and novices or outsiders. For example, the idea that works of history uncover what really happened is only expressed by non-historians and beginners in the field. Historians who are insiders in the discipline understand the core concept that historical truth is relative and contextual, the historian's best judgment. Adopting such concepts is a matter not just of understanding but of changing belief systems. The same is true of

both the camp of Mormonism and of the literary tradition. The threshold concepts are different and often incompatible, and they require readers who can perform opposing acts of cognition. For example, to be literary, a novelist must suspend disbelief but also belief, in order to enter a non-dogmatic space. To be Mormon, one must never suspend belief.

While creating complete and precise lists of the core concepts of literary and faithful writing is beyond the scope of this essay, I am going to make a general list. What happens in literary fiction that requires training for a reader? I will give an example from my own novel, and then talk about possible threshold concepts that require one worldview for readers of literary fiction and an opposite one for readers of faith-promoting fiction.

In *Falling Toward Heaven* (2000), the protagonist, Howard Rockwood, a Mormon missionary sent to Houston, falls in love with a woman who listens to some of the religious lessons but clearly does not want to convert. She also falls in love with him, and they have sex the day he is supposed to fly home from Houston to Rockwood, Utah. Each thinks the act of sex will bind the other, make them commit. Howard wants to take her home to Utah; Allison wants to take him to Alaska, where she has a new job. The first Howard's parents know of his transgression is when he shows up at the door of their home with Allison. That night, Howard's father wants them to sleep separately, but his mother, saying the horse has already fled the barn, puts them in Howard's old bedroom, where they are to sleep on an old brass bed with squeaky springs. Downstairs his father stomps across the floor, saying that they are profaning his family home, and Howard's mother calms him, saying all his ancestors were polygamists, so this profanation, if it is such, is nothing new. Howard and Allison, holding still in bed because of the squeaky springs, talk about their relationship, where it might lead, and about Howard's inability to separate himself from believing in a benevolent God. It is a long movement through slow touch and conversation toward sex, which is impossible because of the noisy springs. Here are the paragraphs that would be read one way by readers of faithful fiction and another by readers of literary fiction:

After making love on the floor, they climbed into bed, but Howard couldn't sleep. He slipped out, trying to keep the springs from squeaking. He brushed his fingers across her cheek, then walked to the window. The haystack was hulking and dark, the barn a larger dark shape. The moonlight was white on the sprinklers. His body felt ripe with animal sin. He sat on the floor between the window and the bed where Allison slept. He imagined God stomping back and forth, as if just above in the attic. "The young fool's squandered his chances," he said, "polluted his temple."

Jesus held his hand out in a calming motion. "But, Father." The Holy Ghost fluttered around the room.

Grandmother God—who reminded Howard of Grace Montoya, arms thin as bones, face translucent, hair like a burning halo—leaned back on a dusty couch. "Settle down, all of you," she said. "Give him space to think."

Tangle-haired, Allison turned in her sleep, one arm flung above her head. Howard smelled her musky odor on his own flesh.

"Grandmother God," he prayed, "I'm in a bad way."

"You are a foolish mouse," she said. "But you cooked your own *frijoles*. Now eat them." (Bennion 99–100)

This passage contains signifiers that mark it as a literary novel, and for faithful readers, as an anti-faithful novel. For example the sexuality in most of it, but specifically in the phrase "musky odor" signifies either realism or carnality, depending on the reader. That Howard does not pray to the Father and that there is a Grandmother God signify something psychological, relative to Howard, for a literary reader, and something heretical for a faithful reader. In addition, the literary reader might find the tone objective and non-judgmental, while the faithful reader might find the tone irreverent and might have difficulty with the lack of clear authorial judgment of Howard's sins.

Gathering these concepts together, I suggest that a primary threshold concept for literary readers is the ability to savor ambiguity and

even doubt. A second is the ability to see that in literary beauty there is often an edge of danger. The third is that art is non-purposive, and the fourth that true art transforms the community. The fifth is that novels use language in experimental ways, and the sixth, that novels focus on the process of experience more than they do on the outcome.

I gather these concepts from my own sense of what a literary novel is and from various critics, writers, and philosophers. From Kundera in *The Art of the Novel* (1988), I learn that a primary quality of literary fiction is that, while readers often try to wrench the novel so that it supports their own worldviews, novels are essentially non-dogmatic and resist readers' efforts to find an articulable truth. He writes,

Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire. They can cope with the novel only by translating its language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse. (6)

From Kant I learn that there is a difference between the beautiful—the sensation one might get looking at beds of flowers—and the sublime, which might come from looking at a rugged mountain peak. The sublime requires an edge of fear, danger, or even terror as an organic aspect of that beauty.

From Heidegger I learn that art is not equipment (the means to some end) but is the creation of a new mode of being in a community. In "Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger writes, "To be a work means: to set up a world" (22). The work of art is a thing in the world (paper, canvas, bronze) and it also points to something beyond itself. "The work makes publicly known something other than itself, it manifests something other: it is an allegory" (3). As such, art has a self-existent quality. "The artwork opens up, in its own way, the being of beings" (19). In other words, a true work of art transforms the meaning of existence for the members of the community in which it was created.

From Donald Barthelme I learn that fiction should face the following challenges—"restoring freshness to a much-handled language" and finding a language that is not contaminated by social and political manipulation, one which resists pressure from our "devouring commercial culture" (15). A useful connection can be made between this critique of dead, overused language and Whitney's idea of a literature that lives and breathes and is not based on antique forms.

From Henry James I learn that the main thing of interest in an act is the way the action affects the character. In his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), James writes that the germ of a novel is an interesting character in an interesting situation:

Trying to recover here, for recognition, the germ of my idea, I see that it must have consisted not at all in any conceit of a "plot," nefarious name, in any flash, upon the fancy, of a set of relations, or in any one of those situations that, by a logic of their own, immediately fall, for the fabulist, into movement, into a march or a rush, a patter of quick steps; but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a "subject," certainly of a setting, were to need to be super added. (3)

I also learn from James that a novel is a relativistic view, the angle of vision of one narrator: "The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will" (6). This attention to and love for an individual narrator's view of an individual man or woman or child is central to the enterprise of the novel. Virginia Sorensen writes,

by now it seems that we ourselves, in our very selectivity, in our most complex character-creations who are utterly unlike ourselves, betray somewhat who and what we are. If we have a

truth, it will be there in our work; if we have not a truth, the work will have no value. I have always felt that a novel is seldom an explanation, but rather an exploration. (291)

The risk of exploring an intimate view of a single person's soul, an individual created, not from merely the stereotypes embedded in the worst kind of genre fiction, but from life and from the insights of previous literature, is the unique province of the novel and is the element that makes reading a wonderful novel a transforming experience.

All of these ideas are unsettling or even frightening to readers who have integrated and ingested the threshold concepts of Mormonism but who have not found deep in their own souls contradiction, doubt, and fear. It may be that those uncomfortable qualities do not exist in some faithful and pure individuals, but I doubt it. Some Mormons believe, and reflect these beliefs in their writing, that truth is always truth, never ambiguous; that truth and doubt cannot co-exist in the same mind, and purposefully mingling faith and doubt is heretical. My reading of the scriptures does not support these views, but for some these truths are incontrovertible. Many people of faith, Mormons included, are not drawn to art with an edge of danger, such as sexual, violent, or heretical material. Since our beliefs are based on revelation, the Church community is seen by some as a perfect system, so those who critique the system are acting against God. These people argue that since Mormonism contains all truth, great Mormon artists do not need to look elsewhere to learn truths about human culture, so many of the Saints fear art that challenges the status quo or that upsets or derails us as members of the Kingdom of God on earth. Writing that shows the flaws in our community seems untrustworthy, and writing that might be strong enough art to change the way we see the universe frightens these people. Many, including Whitney himself, see art as a tool for converting the world, not as an entity that is independent of practical use. In addition, some Mormon readers mistrust language that seems non-traditional. Most Mormons believe in repentance and in God's intervention, both of which can be viewed as an escape from the causal link between action and consequence, on which novels are

typically based. In short, for some, the threshold concepts of literary fiction seem to oppose those of Mormonism.

The problem is not merely one of content, but of the context of the action and the attitude of the narrator, so it would be difficult to create a list of what might offend some readers. The literary writer treats sexuality, violence, and doubt with objectivity or irony, typically refusing to add to natural consequences divine punishment for behavior that the faithful reader marks as sinful. This problem becomes even more clear toward the endings of most novels written with Mormon materials. Toward the end of *The Backslider*, the protagonist receives in a urinal a vision of a Jesus who is chewing tobacco. In the end of *The Giant Joshua* the husband of the protagonist leaves her in St. George and retreats to a more civilized Zion, so the ending is painful and ironic. The endings of literary novels do not usually show characters having redemptive epiphanies. Instead, they have ambiguous endings, they aim at individual and self-determined meaning rather than universal meaning. Images of beauty have an edge of danger, and the novel deviates from the predominant vision of the community. Readers of faithful fiction must not merely change their aesthetic taste but also undergo an act of transformation before they can accept the worldview of literary writing. Faithful readers see this change in being as damning to the soul. Until there is a readership that can envision the ways that the aesthetics and conventions of literary writing are not sinful, there will be limited publication of Mormon literary fiction. Because of these opposing expectations, writing for a literary Mormon audience and to a national literary audience that will be sympathetic to spiritual material is like balancing barefoot on the blade of a knife.

This schism between the beautiful and the faithful is a problem not just for Mormon writers and readers, but for religious people worldwide. This difficulty may be in part due to the rise of fundamentalism, which asks followers to believe, obey, and sacrifice without question and sometimes asks followers to protect dogma with violence. Followers should never compromise with their enemies and should subscribe to radical interpretations of the relationship between politics, economics, and religion. For some Mormons this is

the ideal. We are to be perfect, and those who appear to stumble or to question are weak. Writers who traffic in doubt, who show characters who struggle with sinfulness, are also seen as imperfect Mormons and should be ignored or denigrated.

THE NEXT GENERATION: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

I believe my students feel the same pressures I have felt. They are generally rebellious and anxious or careful and anxious. Many write fantasy, where they can address themes that are interesting to them without invisible forces saying either that they cannot write about their spirituality or they cannot write with harsh and disruptive realism.

My most difficult job as a teacher of creative writing is to help students know that they are safe to disclose what they think and feel. Many have never been asked to think carefully and honestly about their own history, so the enterprise often feels hazardous. Many have thoughts or memories that are with them every day that they have never admitted to anyone. Many believe that the appearance of perfection is almost as good as perfection, and that since perfection is unattainable, they might as well settle for appearance. What they do, too often, is imitate the generic patterns of bad genre fiction. Some experiment only within specific lines and do not dally with material that is too sexual, critical, or irregular. Student writers can only grow if their experiments are not proscribed by censorship, including self-censorship.

One of my finest students, Chloe Moller, wrote about the Mormon Panopticon a few years ago in a Mormon Literature class. She had borrowed the idea from Bernadette Barton, who applied Jeremy Bentham's design of a circular prison with a tall central tower from which guards can watch to social conditions in the Bible Belt. Both Barton and Moller describe the powerful influence of the fear that someone is always watching, or may be watching, and suggest that this fear governs those who might want to veer from a central propriety.

More often than not, however, my students are unable even to articulate what is wrong, but they still fear being marked as unfaithful or aberrant. In *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill wrote

Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage which it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time. (129–30)

And of our time. The opposite of eccentricity might be devotion to convention, to obedience. Mrs. Cadwallader in *Middlemarch* (1871–72) defines the attraction to conventionality when she says that everyone should act alike so proper citizens might know when there are lunatics abroad. My students are often like Dorothea in George Eliot's great novel; their vision of possibility is restricted by a haze across their imaginations. People generally have access only to those visions they can imagine.

I wrote above that both Whipple and Sorenson had relatively safe early years. Early in their lives both Shakespeare and Milton also had considerable freedom to study and experiment. Later in their careers they wrote under pressure from royalty, nobility, the Puritans, or other forces, but as a child Shakespeare had good schooling and wandered the lanes and meadows of Stratford, meeting many different kinds of people and watching the diversity of plant and animal life. Later he worked outside community, on the southern bank of the Thames, an unregulated and lawless area of great diversity. Milton had the support of his community at first. He also had a patron, access to good books, and a relatively free environment, at least early in his career. Despite what Whitney said about the forms of antiquity, it is clear that part of Milton's greatness was his classical education, which he used to imitate classical epic and tragedy. In our post-Romantic society, we like to think of the poor and repressed artist who finds inspiration inside himself or herself to achieve greatness, but I wonder how often that really happens during a writer's formative years. What a fledgling writer may need to find her voice is an environment where she can write without fear of unthinking, harsh moral judgement.

My students who want to write using Mormon materials, and I note that there are fewer and fewer of them every year, generally have difficulty conceiving of literature in which spiritual growth requires spiritual danger. Her efforts to write are stillborn if the beginning writer can only conceive of spirituality as a warm fuzziness. So this returns us to the question of how to imagine literary aesthetics and belief as one thing, a unity of body and spirit. Young writers may discover answers if they are not restricted. Possibly the prime quality of Mormonism is that it gives agents freedom to explore reality, to test what it means to have a body, and to experience being a member of a community. As we struggle toward a fictional rhetoric of literary novels that explore faith, giving each other the freedom to make mistakes will be the most important element of our conversations, educations, and critical attitudes.

Many of my students give me hope. Commenting on an early draft of this essay, which I workshopped in class, Luke Bushman described a kind of spiritual literary writing that could be invented in the future. He is not very interested in participating in the apparent conflict over faith and doubt, the literary and the faithful. He writes, "I am most interested in people creating a new vocabulary for experiences with revelation and spiritual witness, even if it is just within the church for now. I'd like to see an exploration of how Mormon literature can become a more permeating power in our community."

Others of my students who read the draft of this essay gave me remarkable advice both about how to construct this essay and how to believe in the future. Julia Chopelas quoted Albrecht Durer on the controversy of religious icons: "For a Christian would no more be led to superstition by a picture or effigy than an honest man to commit murder because he carries a weapon by his side. . . . A picture therefore brings more good than harm, when it is honorably, artistically, and well made." Chopelas gives tentative hope for the future: "As a reader of Mormon literature yourself, maybe you represent a body of people that would be more open to these ideas. Perhaps there are more like-minded readers out there." I am left to hope that as our understanding of spiritual growth continues to progress, so too might our ability to read novels that show people struggling with spiritual growth. Even if they sometimes fail.

Kurt Anderson was able to define even more clearly than I had the nature of the division between literary and faithful writing. He suggests that it is not only that doubt implies imperfection:

I feel like it has much more to do with doubt being cited as the opposite of faith. However, many current authorities of the Church have stated that questioning the principles of the Gospel is certainly not taboo, that it is even necessary to establish a firm faith. "If any of ye lack wisdom . . ." Is that not doubt? Is that not questioning?

He seems to be saying, "What's the big deal here?" which makes me feel both sheepish and hopeful.

Annalee Norton writes about the idea of giving budding writers freedom, which echoes what Orson Whitney said about our literature needing to "live and breathe for itself." She asks, "What would living and breathing be like? Is it really a state of inaction? How does that work with your fear that [the consciousness of] Mormon writers could become Dorothea-obscure?" She draws attention to the fact that Dorothea (the protagonist of *Middlemarch*) "is paralyzed and unable to act because she doesn't know what she can do and is limited." Annalee suggests we should "wait out the paralysis, letting Mormon literature work through the tension like Dorothea does when she's paralyzed in inaction until Casaubon dies." Maybe this paralysis will end sooner rather than later.

These students give me hope that we may grow out of our inclination to split beauty and belief. Every writer is in a tensional relationship with writers who went before and with her own community. If a writer is only interested in smashing his or her cultural tradition, it will ruin the writing. If a Mormon novelist is only interested in perpetuating a static tradition, even the negative elements of that tradition, then she will also write books that might be popular, but not good. Readers, editors, and critics of books will show their disapproval of writers who deviate into polemics or apologetic writing by ignoring them. But when writers are young, just trying out their skills, they must have the freedom to experiment.

One last time, I turn to Virginia Sorensen, whose essay on truth in writing seems essential reading for young Mormon writers. First she talks about distancing oneself from one's particular identity as Mormon. I am not willing to give up my Mormon-ness, as she did, but I can see value in, as she puts it, "finding [my] place and meaning in the world at large" (284). She and I both have multiple identities—as Mormons and as citizens of a country and the world. Sorensen writes,

It is by a series of accidents of birth that I must fill out the blank of myself with such words as "white" and "female" and "American" and "Mormon." Each of these has its own complex of meanings by now, and its own perpetuity, no matter how much I might choose to alter my climate and my clothes and my beliefs and my loyalties. The more passionately I might rebel against any one of them, the more deeply it would, in actuality, be affecting me. It seems to me that most mere rebellion is a young thing, apt to be exhausting and unproductive. When it can at last be calmed down into analysis and understanding, art becomes possible. (284)

I am inclined to give my students freedom so that they do not become rebels, so that their attitudes toward their own culture can be objective without becoming either sentimental or embittered.

It feels like good fortune that I am not worried about the innovative and unusual core of the Mormon religion, about its vision of eternal intelligences, of the impossible infinite union of spirit and flesh, of the possibility to progress without end, and of the implications of those ideas in terms of work, play, sex and other practical considerations as we build communities of believers. Those ideas create an unquenchable fire in the faithful and will exist despite what we do with our life on this earth. In addition, I have faith in what happens when good and sensitive students have a place that feels safe to them. Great literature requires us to be secure enough with our own fallibility that we can afford serious self-criticism, genuine satire of our sometimes mockable efforts at attaining perfection, and the ability to use questioning and even doubt as tools for growth.

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