

Telling It Slant: Aiming for Truth in Contemporary Mormon Literature

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EVER SINCE MORMONISM'S FOUNDING PROPHET declared that "No man knows my history," writers have been left to imagine it and all its consequences. In short, the Mormon experience is the stuff of literature. Contemporary Mormon writers (by whom I mean freelancers, whether deep in the fold or on its edges) are bringing fresh themes, talents, and techniques to their imaginings, resulting in a cornucopia of good reading. It is hard to keep up with current production, let alone catch up with what has been happening since *Exponent II* and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and *Sunstone* and *Brigham Young University Studies* came on the scene and Signature Books, Aspen Books, and Gibbs Smith gave us an alternative press, along with some daring departures on the part of the University of Utah Press. And that is just the fruit of one half of Mormonism's two cultures (to borrow a phrase from C. P. Snow)—the critical, reflective, thinking half, the half that gave us a kind of second renaissance in Mormon letters in such collections as *A Believing People*, *Greening Wheat*, *Harvest*, and *Bright Angels and Familiars*, not quite the standard works but almost as well known.

It may be time for a Mormon equivalent of Kenneth B. Murdock's little book on *Literature and Theology in Colonial New England*, a landmark work which gave colonial literature a belated place in the sun as Murdock demonstrated how Puritan religious thought and experience, against the background of seventeenth-century English literature, found expression in their poetry, their histories and biographies, and their personal narratives—

not a bad model for our own effort to see the connections between Mormon life and letters.¹

But Murdock had a book to expand on it, and I have some fifteen pages. Besides, Eugene England covered the ground in his Charles Redd lecture more than ten years ago, a commanding survey he called "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years."² More than an outline of Mormon literary history, it is an interpretation, a critique, and a charge, reminding me in its timeliness of Ellery Channing's great address, "Remarks on a National Literature," in 1830, a time of heightened nationalism in the United States—and the very year Mormonism (and Emily Dickinson) were born. It strikes me that Mormon writers (again the thinking half of our two cultures) are equally self-conscious in striving to define and establish their literary identity today.³ So Gene's lecture has done our work for us up to 1980, as his continuing reviews and essays have been doing it for the 1980s, another productive decade in Mormon literature.

So what is left? Perhaps a brief retrospective look at a Symposium on Mormon Culture held as the plenary session of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters in Logan in 1952, more than forty years ago, and thirty years before Gene's prospectus. On that occasion Juanita Brooks of Dixie College presented a portrait of St. George, Utah, Leonard Arrington of Utah State Agricultural College spoke on "Trends in Mormon Economic Policy," Gaylon Caldwell of Brigham Young University presented a paper on "The Development of Mormon Ethics," and I, a still unordained Harvard ABD (all but dissertation) teaching at the University of Utah, presumed to put "Mormonism and Literature" in historical perspective. Symposium papers circulated in mimeographed form for a while, eventually finding their way into various publications. Mine got buried in the "Notes and Comments" column of the *Western Humanities Review* in the winter of 1954-55. Karl Keller noticed it some years later and, in a provocative article of his own on "The *Delusions* of a Mormon Literature" (italics mine) in *Dialogue's* special literary issue in 1969, gave it an approving footnote. It was the best introduction so far, he said, to "the paucity and possibilities of a Mormon literature."⁴ Five years later Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert

1. Kenneth B. Murdock, *Literature and Theology in Colonial New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963).

2. Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years," *Brigham Young University Studies* 22 (Spring 1982); also in Thomas G. Alexander and Jessie L. Embry, eds., *After 150 Years: The Latter-day Saints in Sesquicentennial Perspective* (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1983).

3. Bruce W. Jorgensen, "Digging the Foundation: Making and Reading Mormon Literature," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Winter 1974): 50-61.

4. Karl Keller, "On Words and the Word of God: The Delusions of a Mormon Literature," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Autumn 1969): 14.

resurrected the piece in their pathbreaking collection *A Believing People*, the essay positioned not too uncomfortably between Orson F. Whitney's 1888 *Contributor* essay on "Home Literature" and P. A. Christensen's "Mormonism: An Eternal Quest," taken from his *All in a Teacher's Day*.⁵ Not bad company really.

Now after that prologue I should reproduce a few paragraphs from that hardy perennial from which we can go on to see what has happened since.

It is not without significance that Mormonism, beginning with a book, had to make its appeal to a literate following. The proselyte had to be able to read. The Saints, be it remembered, equipped their ideal community not only with a temple and a bishop's storehouse, but with a printing press, and they appointed not only elders and bishops and teachers as their ministering officers, but an official printer to the Church. Even Winter Quarters [Iowa] had a press where was struck off what is believed to be the first printing west of the Mississippi, an epistle from the Twelve to the scattered Saints. And a people uprooted, on the move across Iowa and the great plains, carried Webster's blue-backed speller with them and heard their youngsters diligently recite their lessons in the dust of rolling wagons. Once established in Salt Lake Valley, they made an urgent request for a federal appropriation of \$5,000 for a territorial library; and within short years they were promoting lyceums, a Polysophical Society, a Deseret Dramatic Association, a Universal Scientific Society, a Library Association, and an Academy of Art.

It is not without significance that Joseph Smith himself, whether viewed as the divinely inspired translator or as a transcendental genius, was the product of a literate background, both in terms of an average New England schooling with its available village culture and of his own family, particularly the maternal side: his grandfather Solomon Mack had published in chapbook form a highly readable spiritual autobiography. It is not surprising that around the Prophet's millennial standard gathered school teachers and college graduates, men as gifted as Oliver Cowdery and Willard Richards, the Pratt brothers—Parley and Orson, Orson Spencer, John Taylor, William Phelps, Lorenzo Snow, and his talented sister Eliza, persuasive orators and fluent writers who founded and edited capable periodicals like the *Millennial Star* in England, the *Messenger and Advocate* in Kirtland [Ohio], the *Evening and Morning Star* in Independence [Missouri], the *Mormon* in New York, the *Seer* in Washington, the *Luminary* in St. Louis, the *Nauvoo Neighbor* and the *Times and Seasons* in Nauvoo [Illinois], and the *Frontier Guardian* in Kanesville [Iowa]—some of them brilliant, all of them fearless and eloquent. Their tradition, militant and aspiring, persisted in the columns of the early *Deseret News* and in the

5. Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, eds., *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press 1974).

pages of the *Contributor* and the *Young Woman's Journal*, to give way at last to genteel moralizing, a tone and manner characteristic of today, with persecution subsided and the dream collapsed.

Clearly, Mormonism had literate beginnings which developed early into a distinctive literature, a rich legacy forgotten in the mediocrity of present-day Mormon expression. That legacy, to be sure, must be sought in more than belles lettres; it must be sought and recognized in the beginnings of literature, the raw materials out of which pure letters rise: in an oral tradition of salty anecdote and imaginative legend, in colorful and vigorous sermons that make the *Journal of Discourses* such fascinating reading, in personal diaries and letters which reveal the soul-searching triumphs and defeats of the convert, immigrant, and settler, in hymns breathing aspiration and desire—together, intensely moving expressions of a faith fed by millennial dreams and nourished by irrigation. These, a subliterature if you will, come closer to exhibiting the genius of Mormonism as a force and movement than the more formal literary types thrice removed from their original inspiration. It is in these themes and modes, these beginnings of literature, we should attempt to find what is, or has been, characteristic of Mormon literature and what may hold promise for the future. . . .

The burden of creating a Mormon literature in the future rests as heavily on the reader as on the writer. If a look at the Church counter in local bookstores fills us with dismay and we accuse Mormon writers of having thrown away their pens in favor of pastepot and scissors, we may well inquire whether a supine readership is after all not to blame. One of the major threats to Mormon literary growth is what may be called the uneducated literacy of the Church membership, a greater danger perhaps than downright illiteracy because adult minds, capable of growth, have been arrested, in the official literature, at the level of the Sunday School lesson and never treated to the stimulation of the mature writing the whole Mormon tradition should have ripened by our time. Mormonism is perfectly capable of its own *Christian Century* and *Commentary*. Scores of Church members are writing with distinction in their special fields, but the official literature does not recognize them because of another major threat to Mormon literary growth: the attempt to endow certain writings, however mediocre in style and spirit, with an authority extraneous to the work itself. The official preface is fatal to Mormon literary production because it invests unworthy works with false prestige while on the other hand better work not so recognized goes unread. Literature should establish its own authority. The best of Joseph Smith's revelations, linguistically speaking, have the authority of good literature; they are literature converted into authority when they speak truth unforgettably. Not "Was it inspired?" but "Is it inspiring?" is the better touchstone of authenticity.

...

Mormon literature will move toward the promise of its highly articulate beginnings when Mormon readers demand of Mormon writers

authentic voices, whether in fiction, in history, in biography, or in missionary tract—the authority of good writing, of truths made memorable.⁶

A document so dated calls for a sequel, an account of what's happened in the forty years since that symposium and since those literary ancestors of the 1940s (Sorensen, Whipple, Kennelly) Edward Geary calls "Mormondom's lost generation,"⁷ to see whether contemporary Mormon writers, like historians writing the "new Mormon history," have brought new viewpoints and professional skills to their work as they move beyond the clichés of Mormon faith and experience. We want to know how in fiction, for example, we get from Nephi Anderson's *The Romance of a Missionary* to Franklin Fisher's *Bones* and Levi Peterson's *Backslider*; how in poetry we get from Eliza R. Snow's "O My Father" to Carol Lynn Pearson's *Mother Wove the Morning* and Emma Lou Thayne's *Poems of Survival* and Clinton Larson's "To a Dying Girl"; how in drama we get from *Saturday's Warrior* to Tom Rogers's *Huebener*. We want to know how in personal narrative and reminiscence we get from *The Boys of Springtown* to Ed Geary's *Goodbye to Poplarhaven* and Virginia Sorensen's *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* and Wayne Carver's "Plain City: Portrait of a Mormon Village." We want to know how in short fiction we get from the stories in the *Era*, the *Ensign*, and the *Relief Society Magazine* to stories by Linda Sillitoe, Pauline Mortensen, Judith Freeman, Phyllis Barber, Doug Thayer, Don Marshall, Neal Chandler, Walter Kim, Michael Fillerup, and John Bennion. We want to know in criticism how we get from John A. Widtsoe's dismissal of Virginia Sorensen's *A Little Lower Than the Angels* to Bruce Jorgensen's illuminations of *The Evening and the Morning*. And finally we want to know how in stories for children and young adults we get from *The Juvenile Instructor* and *The Children's Friend* to Ann Cannon's *Cal Cameron by Day, Spider-Man by Night*.

As I see it there have been two, possibly three, palpable developments in contemporary Mormon writing: first, an emboldened treatment of a broadened subject matter, going far beyond, in time, the warmed-over servings of the pioneer past and, in space, beyond the confines of the Wasatch, the newer interest centering as much on the contemporary urban as the traditional rural scene, whether in Zion or among the Saints of the diaspora or the cultures encountered in mission fields abroad. And as part of this breadth and boldness has come an appreciation of the androgynous in men and women and an honest handling of sexuality, whether in married or forbidden love, the expression of it as poignant and painful as on occasion it is beautiful.

6. William Mulder, "Mormonism and Literature," in Cracroft and Lambert, 108-11.

7. Edward A. Geary, "Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Autumn 1977): 89.

A second development is the writers' realization that in treating Mormon themes "technique is discovery," Mark Schorer's term for that reconciliation of form and content that makes the *way* a thing is said ultimately *what* is said.⁸ It is that triumph of style that transforms the ideas of the Declaration of Independence from platitudes into imperishable prose.

A third development is a growing body of literary criticism as a necessary adjunct to artistic advance in contemporary Mormon letters. A key to a Mormon aesthetic may lie in Karl Keller's dictum that "not art filling a religious purpose, but religion succeeding in an aesthetic way" should be the aim.⁹ In this way Mormon literature, like any other literature, can become, as Ezra Pound puts it, "the news that stays news."¹⁰ In short, today's Mormon writers are telling the truth, their truth, but telling it, as Emily Dickinson would have it, slant.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind—¹¹

"God's altar," says the Preface to the *Bay Psalm Book*, "needs not our polishings,"¹² yet the altar, which I take to be a metaphor for divine truth, that Truth that dazzles, may be sighted, if it is to be seen at all, from as many angles as talents allow until that day we "get our eyes put out" by that waylaying light Dickinson fears is "Too bright for our infirm Delight."

"The Law," says a Hebrew proverb, "speaks in the tongues of men." Thomas Adams, the seventeenth-century English preacher known in his day as "the prose Shakespeare of Puritan divines," declared that "God doth sometimes draw men to him . . . by their own delights and studies . . . as fishermen fishes, with such baits as may be somewhat agreeable to them. . . . Doth Augustine love eloquence? Ambrose shall catch him at a sermon."

8. Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," in Ray B. West, Jr., ed., *Essays in Modern Literary Criticism* (New York: Rinehart, 1952), 189.

9. Keller, 17.

10. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (Norfolk: New Directions, n.d.), 29.

11. Emily Dickinson, Poem 1129, in Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 792.

12. *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* (Cambridge, MA, 1640); see also *The Bay Psalm Book*, rpt. ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1973).

Adams wanted his hearers to "conceive things more spiritual and remote by passions nearer to sense."¹³ The American Puritans themselves practiced a range of literary strategies, from William Bradford's plain style to Edward Taylor's colonial baroque, to prepare the heart for that grace they hoped would prove irresistible. Cotton Mather, despite some misgivings about the immorality of Homer's gods, expanded the range of permissible literary allusion from the biblical to the classical and, in his handbook for the ministry, whom he did not wish to have "a soul that shall be wholly unpoetical," advised his young charges to peruse Horace's *Art of Poetry* and to discern "the beauties and rare antiquities of an Homer and a Virgil. . . . Everyman," he tells them, "will have his own style which will distinguish him as much as his gait."¹⁴

So my narrowed objective is to see in a very few examples by what literary circuitry contemporary Mormon writers seem to be achieving their successes as they approach God's altar. And there are as many slants or strategies, of course, as there are forms and styles.

There is the slant of form itself—the forms of fiction, poetry and drama, of sermon and meditation, of personal narrative and the personal essay, of folk-tale and oral telling, and the multiplied possibilities of structure within those forms. There is the slant of voice and tone and point of view; the slant of mood and mode, of humor and satire, parable and allegory, irony and anger. And there is the slant in all the possibilities of language itself, the instrument, of course, for all the other slantings—the figures of speech, sign and symbol, metaphor and image, both visual and auditory. Like Emily Dickinson, the Mormon writer dwells in possibility, possessing, like E. A. Robinson's "Rembrandt," if craftsman enough, "a tool too keen for timid safety."¹⁵

Language as wit, for instance, runs rampant in Dennis Clark's "Answer to Prayer," ringing all the changes on the Federal Archives and Records Center where Ev, as beset by concupiscence as he is by punning, is part of "the work farce"; the pun and idea of farce pervade the story.¹⁶ A chief delight in Neal Chandler's ironically titled *Benediction* is the way he puts a new spin on clichés of Mormon thought and diction, working

13. William Mulder, "Style and the Man: Thomas Adams, Prose Shakespeare of Puritan Divines," *Harvard Theological Review* 48 (Apr. 1955): 136-37.

14. Cotton Mather, *Manuductio ad Ministerium* (1726), extracted in Milton R. Stern and Seymour L. Gross, eds., *American Literature: Colonial and Federal to 1800* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 129-34.

15. Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 590.

16. Dennis Clark, "Answer to Prayer," in Levi S. Peterson, ed., *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories* (Midvale, UT: Orion Books, 1983), 157-74.

them into startling secular contexts, now comic, now sinister, that give familiar words and phrases new currency. Thus we get "the spiritually attuned public relations and marketing specialist" in a corporation merchandising "free-market Christianity," and we get "a sort of spiritual wellness spot check" in a teenager's interview with his bishop. We get "doctrinal punch" at Mormon socials, a smug Sunday school teacher sounding "like Dan Rather in the last days," a student "pure and unspotted from math," an executive's "zippered leather scripture case . . . so immense, so oiled and polished to so deep an Abyssinian hue, it seemed worthy of the golden plates themselves." In Chandler's creative combinations and applications, a pyramid scheme with a strong resemblance to Amway becomes "God's own plan . . . the only divinely authorized plan for financial success in this life or the next."¹⁷ And everyone of course is familiar with what Elouise Bell can do with zucchini.¹⁸

Chandler's *Benediction* is an example of telling it slant, in this instance the slant of satire, with the consummate craft I find the rule rather than the exception today. Its humor is irreverent but affectionate, not disdainful, even when most devastating. Hypocrisy, cant, venality, "general authority," smugness, and bigotry among the powerful are easy targets for the aroused satirist. More difficult objects are the tender-minded faithful unaware of their own vulnerability who would be perplexed at being made fun of and whom the satirist needs to handle with care. In some stories there is no laughter, only wonder and compassion, when a character is in travail, frustrated, disappointed, faced with loss, experiencing pain. Then there is no satiric penetration of the crust of Mormon dogma or tickling of the soft underbelly of Mormon sentimentalism. Only pathos. Such stories are not faith-promoting so much as life-enhancing.

Humor with a bite is no stranger to contemporary Mormon literature. Bert Wilson and Dick Cracroft called our attention to "The Seriousness of Mormon Humor" and "The Humor of Mormon Seriousness" in an engaging pair of complementary articles in *Sunstone* a good while ago.¹⁹ There is a motherlode of folk humor in the Mormon experience, with an especially rich vein of it among Scandinavian convert-immigrants who cope with sin and syntax in cycles of stories centering on the Word of Wisdom, polygamy, domestic troubles, natural calamities, testimony meetings, irrigation, Indians, and the Brethren, the hierarchy "vit all dat authority dey hass unter

17. Neal Chandler, *Benediction: A Book of Stories* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), *passim*.

18. Elouise Bell, "Zzzzzucchini," in *Only When I Laugh* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 1-3.

19. William A. Wilson, "The Seriousness of Mormon Humor," and Richard H. Cracroft, "The Humor of Mormon Seriousness," both in *Sunstone* 10 (1985).

deir vest." The coin of Ephraim's humor especially, the "town that laughs at itself," still circulates. I must limit myself to just one anecdote to illustrate how style and structure can operate at both the folk and formal levels.

When Lars Larsen is accused of stealing water and is confronted with one witness who says he was just fifty yards away when he saw Lars take the water and another who was sixty yards away "and he seen you," Lars tells the justice, "Dey are both liars. Dey vas more dan two hunnert yards away ven I steal dat vater." "Then you did steal the water?" "Dat," says Lars, "remains for de jury."²⁰

In the title story of Virginia Sorensen's collection *Where Nothing Is Long Ago: Memories of a Mormon Childhood*, Brother Tolsen kills a neighbor caught stealing water, one of those shovel murders not uncommon in irrigation country. Brother Tolsen turns himself in to Bishop Peterson and is acquitted by a jury to whom "stealing water is stealing life itself." When years later Brother Tolsen dies, Virginia as narrator, a young girl at the time of the murder, thinks, "Well, another one is gone; soon there won't be a real Danish accent left in the whole valley." One other memory lingers: after the trial the young Virginia is driving along with her family and sees Brother Tolsen out irrigating:

Dad and Mother waved and called to him. He lifted an arm to answer, and I saw that he held a shovel in the other hand. "I wonder if he bought a new shovel," I said suddenly. For a minute, the air seemed to have gone dead about us, in the peculiar way it sometimes can, which is so puzzling to a child. Then Mother turned to me angrily. "Don't you ever let me hear you say a thing like that again!" she said. "Brother Tolsen is a good, kind man!"

"So until this very hour," Virginia confesses, "I never have."²¹

We have moved from the crude humor of "Dey vas more dan two hunnert yards away ven I steal dat vater" to the unintended irony of a young girl's "I wonder if he bought a new shovel." In such literary re-creations of the Scandinavian Mormon past, the humor has undergone a sea change, to be sure, but the indigenous anecdote and the elegant reminiscence serve the same function: they are the tie that binds, the descendant learning to cope and accommodate through irony as once the ancestor did through humor.

Humor at its various levels and in its various guises is surely one of

20. Lucille Johnson Butler, "Ephraim's Humor," M.A. thesis, University of Utah; William Mulder, "A Sense of Humor: Scandinavian Mormon Immigrant Humor," *Juanita Brooks Lectures in American History and Culture* (St. George, UT: Dixie College, 1985).

21. Virginia Sorensen, *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), 3-14.

Mormonism's strong suits. The personal narrative, so akin to the spiritual bookkeeping of Puritan autobiography, is certainly another, endemic in the conversion experience, the struggle between faith and doubt. Related to it is the personal essay, another form congenial to the Mormon experience, as in Eugene England's *Dialogues with Myself* and Mary Bradford's "Personal Essay about Personal Essays."²² Terry Tempest Williams has used the form to excellent advantage as she reads the natural and human landscapes in her natural history writings and in her moving personal account of "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," about the victims of the fallout of nuclear testing in Southern Utah.²³ Clifton Jolley describes the personal essay as "the beast," because the writer who chooses it, he says, "with neither comfort nor refuge in the satisfactions of pose or form . . . must face the beast [i.e., the truth about oneself] naked and alone."²⁴

We can see the possibilities of "telling it slant" by taking an extended look at Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's confession of her struggle to reconcile faith and doubt, a struggle I find reminiscent of Anne Bradstreet's, whose "heart rose" with anxiety, we may remember, when she first glimpsed New England's bleak and wintry shore. In her essay "Lusterware," Laurel, our new Pulitzer celebrity, develops an image that entirely controls it.²⁵

Laurel's opening startled me: "I have been thinking lately," she begins, "about an Emily Dickinson poem I first heard twenty-five years ago in an American literature class at the University of Utah. I remember feeling intrigued and somewhat troubled as the professor read the poem since he was reported to be a lapsed Mormon. 'Was that how it felt to lose faith?' I thought." I was that professor, and I need to repeat the whole of that poem to appreciate its impact on her as well as to see what she does with it:

It dropped so low—in my Regard—
I heard it hit the Ground—
And go to pieces on the Stones
At bottom of my Mind—
Yet blamed the Fate that flung it—less
Than I denounced Myself,

22. Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Midvale, UT: Orion Books, 1984); Mary L. Bradford, "I, Eye, Aye: A Personal Essay on Personal Essays," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11 (Summer 1978): 81-89.

23. Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 281-90.

24. Clifton Jolley, "Mormons and the Beast: In Defense of the Personal Essay," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11 (Autumn 1978): 137.

25. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Lusterware," in Philip Barlow, eds., *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars* (Centerville: Canon Press, 1986), 195-203.

For entertaining Plated Wares
Upon my Silver Shelf—²⁶

"Since then," says Laurel, "I have lost faith in many things, among them Olympia typewriters, *New York Times* book reviews, and texturized vegetable protein; and yes, like most Latter-day Saints I have had to reconsider some of my deepest religious beliefs . . .

I have always been a somewhat skeptical person [but] as I have grown older, I have become less fearful of those "stones at the bottom of my mind." In fact, I am convinced that a willingness to admit disbelief is often essential to spiritual growth. . . . Though a few people seem to have been blessed with foam rubber rather than stones at the bottom of their minds (may they rest in peace), sooner or later most of us are forced to confront our shattered beliefs.

Laurel finds Emily Dickinson's "little poem" helpful. She had not fully grasped the image of "Plated Wares" until she learned about lusterware, "the most popular 'Plated Wares' of Emily Dickinson's time":

In the late eighteenth century British manufacturers developed a technique for decorating ceramic ware with a gold or platinum film. In one variety, a platinum luster was applied to the entire surface of the object to produce what contemporaries called "poor man's silver." Shiny, inexpensive, and easy to get, it was also fragile, as breakable as any piece of pottery or china. Only a gullible or very inexperienced person would mistake it for true silver.

Now we have the necessary information for appreciating Laurel's metaphorical distinction between a genuine and a superficial belief which is central to the rest of the essay. Here's an inkling of her application of the image:

All of us have lusterware as well as silver on that shelf we keep at the top of our minds. A lusterware Joseph Smith, for instance, is unfailingly young, handsome, and spiritually radiant; unschooled but never superstitious, persecuted but never vengeful, human but never mistaken. A lusterware image fulfills our need for an idea without demanding a great deal from us. There are lusterware missions and marriages, lusterware friendships, lusterware histories and yes, lusterware visions of ourselves. Most of these will be tested at some point on the stones at the bottom of our minds.

26. Emily Dickinson, Poem 747, in Johnson, 792.

Laurel then proceeds to describe at length several painful testings of her own, including agonizing differences with her bishop. Toward the end she gives an account of a three-day unofficial conference at Nauvoo which left her despairing of any hope for peace for herself or change in the church until, unbidden, on the banks of the Mississippi, she seemed to hear that voice recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 128 as "a voice of gladness! a voice of mercy from heaven; and a voice of truth out of the earth." "I am not talking here about a literal voice," she says, "but an infusion of the Spirit, a kind of Pentecost that for a moment dissolved the boundaries between heaven and earth and between present and past. I felt as though I were re-experiencing the events the early Saints had described. I am not a mystical person," she continues. "In ordinary decisions in my family I am far more likely to call for a vote than a prayer, and when other people proclaim their 'spiritual experiences' I am generally cautious. But I would gladly sift through a great trough of meal for even a little bit of that leaven."

In her conclusion Laurel gives her central image a cautionary turn: "The temptations of skepticism are real," she says. "Sweeping up the lusterware, we sometimes forget to polish and cherish the silver, not knowing that the power of discernment is one of the gifts of the Spirit, that the ability to discover counterfeit wares also gives us the power to recognize the genuine." There is not a superfluous word nor a misplaced sentence in the whole of the essay and no straining of the metaphor. A firm sentiment and sure sense of self, its vulnerabilities as well as its strengths, clothe the essay's moral armature. The figure breathes and walks.

I have dwelt at length on Laurel's essay to make her experience palpable, a crisis of belief in aesthetic terms not unlike the poetry of crisis and conversion in Jonathan Edwards's *Personal Narrative*. Have we here an example of "faithful literature," counterpart to Richard Bushman's "faithful history"?

A bare patch in the Mormon literary landscape, it seems to me, is the meditation. I do not mean the word as loosely applied to a meditation on whatever, a way of accommodating informal thoughts on love or time or faith or friendship and so on. I mean in a sense closer to Thomas Hooker's seventeenth-century definition: "Meditation is a serious intention of the mind whereby we come to search out the truth, and settle it effectually upon the heart."²⁷ Such meditation is a strenuous intellectual discipline, not mere daydreaming. As a boy I remember a copy of Orson F. Whitney's *Saturday Night Thoughts* in the built-in china cupboard that served as our bookcase. It was, I realized later, a Mormon version of that Puritan "preparation of

27. Thomas Hooker, *The Application of Redemption* (1659), excerpted in Russel B. Nye and Norman S. Grabo, eds., *American Thought and Writing*, Vol. 1: *The Colonial Period* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 107-11.

the heart" that had to precede communion. Here may be Mormonism's entry into that world of contemplation marked by great devotional literature, a mood and mode that gets crowded out in our almost obsessive and unreflective religious activism.

The lapse here may be linked to the lack of style and structure in Mormon sermons at every level—ward, stake, general conference. I would not want artifice to supplant sincerity or sophistication to displace substance, but in the sermon, if it is to become part of Mormon literary inheritance as it was in the days of Brigham Young's discourses, once more the way a thing is said is ultimately what is said. The meetinghouse with its plain style heritage may not be the place for eloquence (I do not undervalue the apprenticeship of the 2 1/2-minute talk or the spontaneity of the missionary farewell or the extemporaneous remarks at sacrament meeting), but is there hope for the Tabernacle with its ghostly echoing of the rude but resonant eloquence of the discourses of the pioneer generation and the structure and not unpolished addresses during those interludes when a Widtsoe, a Talmage, a B. H. Roberts, or a Hugh B. Brown took the pulpit? The temple service with its prescribed liturgy is now enhanced, I am told, by multi-media presentations but still without the elevated sacramental poetry one imagines better suited to the ceremony. In Mormon services, I am afraid, as far as the Word is concerned, the hungry sheep look up and are not fed.

We may not have a very literary liturgy, but we do have, inherent in doctrine and evolving in practice, a literary aesthetic and a growing body of discerning literary criticism crucial to the continuing health of the literature itself. James Russell Lowell in his day cautioned overzealous literary nationalists that a national literature needed more than patriotism—it required critical standards. Just so Mormon literature needs more than piety. The defense of the faith and the Saints for several generations took the form of that "Home Literature" I have already mentioned, predictably didactic. Stephen L. Tanner urges us in "The Moral Measure of Literature" to "stop fretting over the legitimacy of moral criticism and get on with the business of learning to do it well."²⁸ Mormon literary criticism, knowingly or not, seems to agree with Irving Howe, as I do, that "literary criticism, like literature itself, can be autonomous but hardly self-sufficient. . . . A work of literature," he insists, "acquires its interest for us through a relationship, admittedly subtle, difficult and indirect, to the whole of human experience."²⁹

The critical reviews and essays in *BYU Studies, Literature and Belief*,

28. Stephen L. Tanner, "The Moral Measure of Literature," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21 (Summer 1981): 284.

29. Irving Howe, *A World More Attractive* (Freeport, 1970), x.

Dialogue, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*, *Wasatch Review International*, and such secular allies as *Quarterly West* and *Weber Studies*, and the prefaces and introductions to the collections I have already mentioned, together with the critical papers delivered at annual Association for Mormon Letters meetings, have created an educated symbiotic relationship between writer and reader, mutually supportive and nourishing. There was nothing like it in the church in my growing up. Our literary window was one-way, perversely not enabling us to look out. Today that window lets in light and air from the larger world of letters against which we can measure our own.

We are ready, it seems to me, for an anthology of distinctly Mormon literary criticism, counterpart to the collections of Mormon historiography our colleagues in history have already produced such as Davis Bitton and Maureen Beecher's *New Views of Mormon History*, Davis Bitton and Leonard Arrington's *Mormons and Their Historians*, Michael Quinn's *The New Mormon History*, and George D. Smith's *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History*. Borrowing from Eliot we could call it *Tradition and the Individual Talent: Essays in Mormon Literary Criticism*. Its contents are now scattered among the periodicals I have mentioned, waiting to be collected.³⁰

Plato's doctrine of the soul or Sterling McMurrin's *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (1965) should probably preface the volume as an introduction to Mormon aesthetics. If souls have a pre-existence, then artist and audience have a slumbering memory of the good, the true, and the beautiful, requiring only to be awakened, with works of literature and art (including the performing arts) the means of that awakening. Art indeed is less cognition than recognition. We have a "double witness," says Robert Rees, "when our awareness of things either terrestrial or celestial is quickened by the aesthetic as well as by the spiritual imagination."³¹ Given this concept the creative process is more discovery or disclosure than invention, and when the artist feels the work is "right," he will, says Merrill Bradshaw, have a sense of a "celestial kiss,"³² which I take to be a sensory experience of artistic grace not unlike Jonathan Edwards's "sense of the heart," palpable, to use Edwards's own figure, as the taste of honey on the tongue.³³ In critical discourse we may be a bit embarrassed to apply the "celestial kiss" test, but the creative process is as mysterious as Joseph Smith's practice of

30. Lavina Fielding Anderson informs me that such an anthology is already underway.

31. Robert A. Rees, "The Imagination's New Beginning: Thoughts on Esthetics and Religion," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4 (Autumn 1969): 25.

32. Merrill Bradshaw, "Toward a Mormon Aesthetic," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21 (Winter 1981): 95.

33. Perry Miller, "Jonathan Edwards on the Sense of the Heart," *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (Apr. 1948): 123.

burying his face in a hat to read a luminous stone. Empirically rather than Platonically speaking, of course, Mormon writers are no more privy to God's purposes than scientists, theologians, or philosophers, though like them they are free to speculate about the mysteries. But they fall flat when they attempt to affirm the truth or falsity of the great non-empirical, which is to say metaphysical, questions like pre-existence and immortality in preachments rather than through the spiritual struggles of the characters who people their stories, plays, and poetry.

To conclude: I believe with George Santayana that "the chastity of the mind should not be yielded easily nor to the first comer." Although I find myself badly out of step with institutional Mormonism, often distressed to the point of anger with the conduct of the corporate church, I feel myself in tune with the Mormon *experience*, by which I mean the sum of Mormon history and culture as lay members have lived it and lay writers have striven to describe, critique, and celebrate it. I am drawn less to the sacred texts of Mormon theology handed down from on high than to the subtexts of writers who wring their truths from their daily pacing beneath the checkered canopy of Mormon belief, writers who exemplify what Robert Frost once described as "the will braving alien entanglements."³⁴ I relate to those writers who, experiencing all those tensions Levi Peterson names in his preface to *Greening Wheat* and entertaining all those aspirations Gene England holds out in his panoramic "Dawning of a Brighter Day," cry out, in voices as unique as their individual talents, cry out with that father recorded in St. Mark who sought a cure for a son racked by fits, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!"

Whatever my leaning toward Lucretius and his *Of the Nature of Things* as opposed to Christian and hence Mormon cosmology, I have one sure conviction about the kind of literature I have been talking about: like Chandler's precocious teenager Emmett, looking straight into the eyes of authority in his interview with the bishop and saying he thought he would like to become a writer, this literature, as Chandler says of Emmett, is "really on to something."³⁵

34. Robert Frost, "The Constant Symbol," introductory essay to *The Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Modern Library, 1946), xvii.

35. Chandler, 5.