Popular and Literary Mormon Novels: Can Weyland and Whipple Dance Together in the House of Fiction?

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The two major streams in Mormon fiction seem to be radically at odds with each other, but an occasional dance together might lessen divisiveness.

John Bennion

The Two Windows

In "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," his 1991 presidential address to the Association for Mormon Letters, Bruce W. Jorgensen reacted to essentialistic criticism—that which admits only literature of the orthodox into the Mormon canon.[1] Readers, Jorgensen said, should open their hearts and minds to the stranger and the uncircumcised, delaying judgment until the whole story is heard and then delaying even longer. The next year, Richard H. Cracroft said in *his* presidential address, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," that many Mormon writers miss their audience by writing literature "grounded in the 'earth-bound humanism' of contemporary secular society, but reflecting little or no essential Mormonism."[2] Cracroft divides literature into the *mantic*—that which reaches toward God—and the *sophic*—that which reaches toward the wisdom of men.

This debate is not new. Long before these lectures, critics followed a tradition of dividing Mormon literature into two or more camps. Although each critic crafts terms carefully, trying to be objective, the implication is always that one kind of literature is superior and the other inferior. In 1982, Eugene England differentiated between "home literature" and that written by the "lost

Courtesy Eugene England
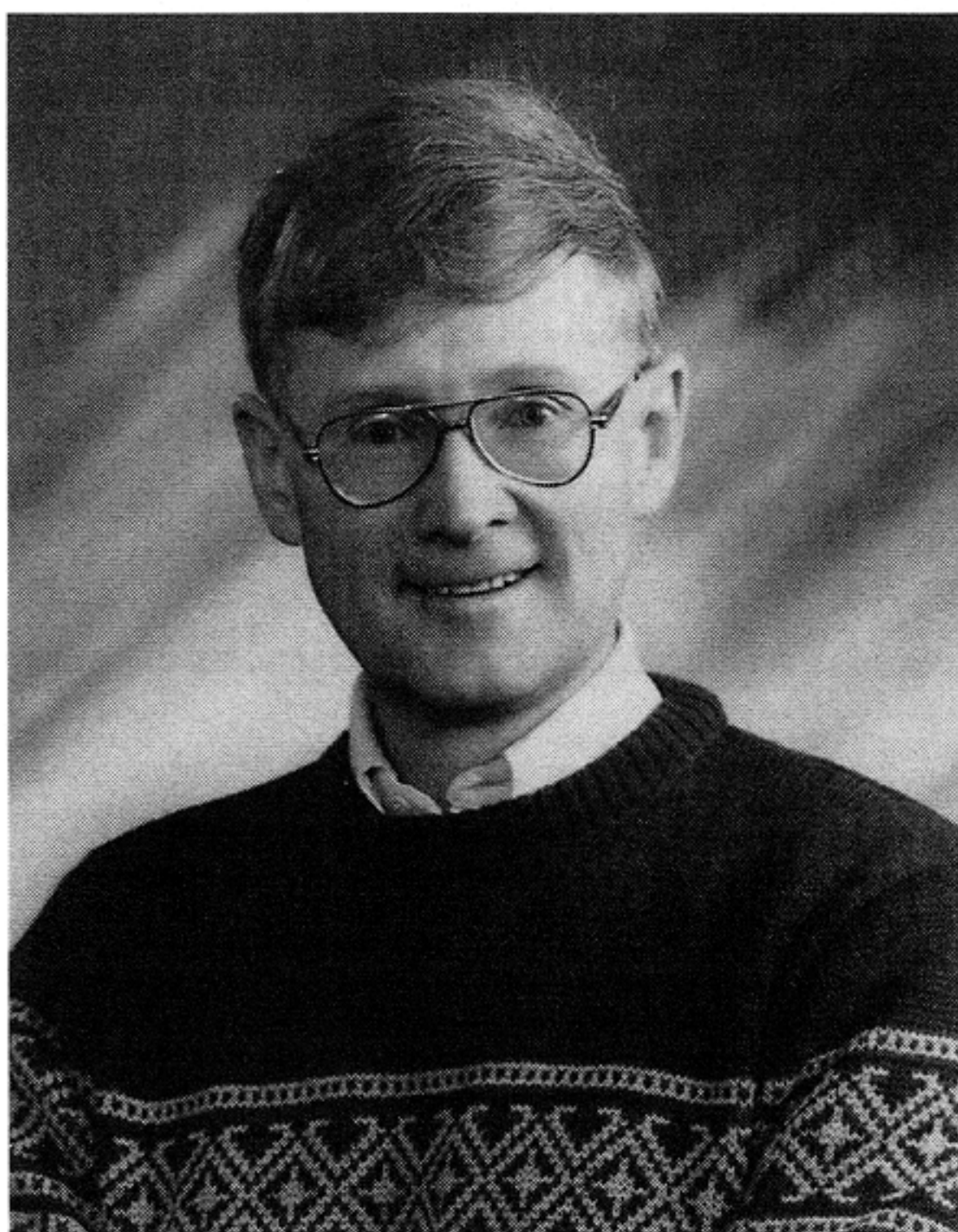
Jack Weyland

generation" of Mormon writers.[3] In 1978, Edward Geary separated literature created out of dogma from that created out of experience.[4] In 1974, Karl Keller classified Mormon writing as being either orthodox or "jack-fiction."[5] 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."[6] Insiders build fiction on that frame without questioning it, Walker says. Outsiders think of the frame as "merely historical."[7] I see the same opposing attitudes in my students, who are readers either of Jack Weyland and Gerald N. Lund or of Maurine Whipple and Levi S. Peterson.

Each of these readers separates the sheep from the goats by privileging one side or another of their binary oppositions. In addition to being unbalanced, the terms are also definitionally fuzzy, which can be shown by trying to place actual novels in the categories. Is the work of Walter Kern, who was raised Mormon but is now "lapsed," insider or outsider fiction? Are Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua,* Samuel Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why,* Margaret Young's *Salvador,* and Levi Peterson's *The Backslider* mantic or sophic? Characters in all these works wrestle with figurative or literal angels, but all have a humanistic bent.

Despite the ambiguity of these critical categories and terms, Mormon readers and publishers feel a definite difference between the works of popular fiction written by the camp of Weyland and the works of literary fiction written by the camp of Whipple. We still bemoan either the weakening influence of popular, sentimental forms or the damning influence of humanism, feminism, and other isms. From opposite windows of the house of fiction, we continue to praise our view of the drama of experience, proclaiming other

positions as simplistic or faithless, sentimental or cynical, unsophisticated or tainted with the philosophies of men.

We may sense something familiar in the fictions of the opposite camp—perhaps similar structure, recognizable experience, and common language—but they also smell slightly off, like week-old meat. Perhaps it is time to establish an aesthetic that values the distinctive nature of both popular and literary forms—a split perspective that will allow readers to relinquish their desire to measure each form against the other. Let me explain.

Maurine Whipple

Courtesy Eugene England

In "Literary Fiction Versus Popular Fiction," Jonathan Penner discusses a national manifestation of a similar debate. Of elitist literary readers he writes, "Confidently—yet also vaguely—we feel that fiction is of two types. There's real fiction, *serious* fiction. And then there's junk."[8] He says that this hasty judgment, based on "absolute value," does not explain why so much serious fiction is rotten and why so much junk sells millions of copies. He suggests that it is more useful to examine "distinctive nature"—the ways in which each form is uniquely pleasing to readers.[9]

Penner defines and exemplifies the two genres of fiction, showing the problems that arise when the two are equated and judged by one standard. He writes, "In fact, literary and popular fiction *cannot* compete. Competition implies similarity. Male walruses compete for mates, but only with other male walruses. At county fairs, pies aren't judged against poultry. All readers sense that literary fiction and popular fiction are radically different enterprises."[10]

Because mantic, home, dogmatic, orthodox, insider fiction is often rooted in popular national forms and sophic, lost-generation, experiential, jack, outsider Mormon literature often grows out of national literary forms, Penner's analysis is instructive.[11] Have the

two streams of Mormon literature persisted separately because they are "radically different enterprises"? The practical reality of Mormon publishing indicates that this is true. Aspen, Bookcraft, Covenant, and Deseret Book have a distinctive publishing list, as do Signature Books and various university presses that have in the past published Mormon literary novels. In the following sections, I will analyze examples of Mormon fiction using methodology similar to Penner's.

Examples and Characteristics of Popular Mormon Fiction

For examples of popular fiction, I choose Jack Weyland, Gerald Lund, and Orson Scott Card, all successful writers of popular Mormon fiction.[12] Weyland's aim is to write books that will act as maps to young people as they chart their way through serious social challenges: selection of marriage partners, death of loved ones, drug addiction, sexual abuse. There are excursions into the moral wilderness,[13] but readers can be confident that the narrator and one or more of the characters have a reliable map that clearly marks good and evil and will lead everyone back to safe ground.

One example is Weyland's *Stephanie,* which portrays a young woman with a serious drug problem. Weyland takes her from addiction to recognition of her illness to recovery at a drug and alcohol abuse center to membership in an AA group, but he's still not finished. A literary writer might end the novel there,[14] leaving her recovering but stranded outside the portals of the Church, but for Weyland she's not *home* yet. She's still a member of a group that smokes and swears, obvious strangers and foreigners to Weyland's Mormon audience. The narrator must lead her out of that group and fully back into the Church, where she has the promise of marrying a returned missionary in the temple. My academic training makes me want to mock this kind of extended plot, but Weyland's books sell like peanuts at a circus. It strikes me as simpleminded elitism to say that all Weyland's readers are ignorant, that they cannot tell the difference between the vital and weak in literature.

Lund's remarkably popular works show characters who wander across the physical landscape, moving with the Church from New York to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. The physical journey is

parallel to a spiritual one; the fictional tension is between doubt and faith. The characters are challenged with physical and spiritual danger, but readers know that the wanderers will generally arrive spiritually intact. Readers of both Weyland and Lund enjoy texts that strengthen familiar values.

The physical and spiritual journey out and back is found also in Orson Scott Card's *Lost Boys,* a work that is closer in harsh realism to literary fiction than either of the others. But the shape is that of popular fiction: a Mormon couple makes an excursion into the evil world of dishonesty, power games, sexual abuse, hypocrisy, and humanistic intellectualism. They must find a pathway through a dangerous wilderness. But at the end no one is left stranded. Even the murdered boys are safe at last in heaven.

Characteristically, these popular fictions generally involve an excursion into a strange and dangerous world and a return to a safe one; characters whose faith and spiritual strength are tested and magnified; clear marking of good and evil; a heroic protagonist, usually one who is unambiguously good; knowledge that the reader is in the hands of a safe, orthodox, and reliable narrator; a focus on the plotted outcome—on bringing the protagonist back home—rather than on the process of exploring the world (often miracles are necessary to achieve this goal); a narrative based on universal and unquestioned principles; and a theme revolving around simple and well-defined issues.

In his AML presidential lecture, Cracroft summarizes many of these qualities: "The Latter-day Saint sees as his or her mission the preparation of a Zion people (beginning with their own families) for the second advent of Jesus Christ. Enroute, the Saints must walk by faith, not skepticism and doubt, learning, as Brigham Young called it, to be 'righteous in the dark.'"[15] Readers are drawn to fiction that mimics this persistent return home, he suggests, and Mormon writers should respond to that interest:

> This people deserves a literature grounded in Mormon metaphors, exuding their essences, mirroring their dualistic world, establishing their vision of themselves as pilgrims wandering by faith across a twilight stage, buffeted by the forces of evil, seeking the forces of good, and wondering at the shadows and ambiguities to be found between these bewildering parentheses in eternity.[16]

In Cracroft's view, a proper Mormon fiction has lofty purposes—to help build a Zion people, to show the Saints how to walk by faith, and to establish rather than fragment the Mormon world view. He is right that one quality of popular Mormon fiction is its faith-promoting, mantic nature. However, popular Mormon literature has other qualities: it is recreational, easily digested, and unambiguous. Despite the explosion of Mormon novels in the past two decades, few mantic fictions that are also difficult or morally ambiguous have been published by popular Mormon presses.[17]

As I read popular Mormon fiction, I am moved by the reaffirmation of my culture. I admire the devotion of the boy to the abused girl in *Sara, Whenever I Hear Your Name,*[18] the creative and vigorous faith of DeAnne and Step in *Lost Boys,*[19] the trials of Mara in *The Earthkeepers.*[20] But I must use my training in popular genres—my years of reading science fiction, mystery, suspense, and romance—before I can enjoy these works. Even then my literary training sometimes takes over and I cannot suspend disbelief. However, it does not follow that Weyland, Lund, and other popular writers should be measured against an aesthetic that promotes harsh realism, humanistic philosophy, doubt, and open-ended structure.

Examples and Characteristics of Literary Mormon Fiction

In *The Giant Joshua,*[21] a Mormon example of what Penner calls serious fiction, one of Maurine Whipple's purposes is to explore the difference between principle and practice among the pioneers. Her process necessarily shows the cracks at the base of traditions that readers thought sound. Clory and the other pioneers travel from Salt Lake City to the wilderness of newly settled St. George. As they move southward, moral and physical survival both become more complex: what is the duty of a wife toward a selfish, noble, domineering, emotional, cruel, and loving man? Clory's faith at the beginning of the novel is transformed by her experiences with polygamy into something complex and even vague. The pattern of the novel is a physical and a moral journey away from a sure, stable, and safe place into a foreign wilderness that transforms the characters and the reader in ways even the writer could not predict.

Levi Peterson's *The Backslider* is another example of literary fiction. Frank Windham wanders the wilderness of southern Utah but also wanders a moral and spiritual wilderness. The novel opens with Frank's bargain with God over his girlfriend. "Actually it was Frank's bargain, God having never confirmed it. That was the way with God. He never offered Frank any signs, he never gave him any encouragement. He left him penned up with his own perversity like a man caught in a corral with a hostile bull."[22] Frank loses his girlfriend and determines to become a sinner, a rebel against God.

The course of the book details his efforts to hide himself from God, but he cannot. He marries a Lutheran woman, who is a true and compassionate Christian. Toward the end of the novel he baptizes her a Mormon, but he still fears God. After the baptism, Frank has changed out of his white baptismal clothing and is standing at the urinal when he has a vision; Jesus appears to him in the form of a tobacco-smoking cowboy. Frank says to him, "I love the world. . . . I love my wife and my little kid that hasn't been born yet and I love a big truck under me and I love sunrise out over the Escalante breaks and I love the sound of the diesels running the pumps in the middle of the night. That's what I love. I hate God." Jesus says to him, "Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Myself, I love God." The figure representing Jesus reminds Frank that he is married to a good woman. "Why don't you just settle down and enjoy her like a husband would who has some good sense?"

This scene bothers most Mormon readers, who do not believe that Jesus should be rendered as an ambiguous character, one who swears and smokes but whose face is as "kind as an August dawn."[23] Readers are not taken carefully home by Peterson; his novel gives Mormon culture a sharp shake by the shoulders.

These examples show that, instead of one sure voice, we have in literary fiction at least two or three contrary voices. In Whipple and Peterson, the traditional voice of the community is opposed by the voice of individuality, wandering free in a physical universe. "But," many of my students ask, "why read such irreverent fiction?" Like popular fiction, Mormon literary fiction has a moral purpose: through careful consideration of experience, writers observe the deconstruction of unreliable practices and principles. The works of

Whipple and Peterson illuminate the flaws that all Mormons can rightly criticize—authority when it has become authoritarian, patriarchy that is abusive, purity that is merely bigotry.

Characteristically, authors of these literary fictions begin in an unstable world that is slowly transformed around the reader; imitate life by presenting good and evil in a complex manner; permit no figures to be heroic; use only characters with mixed qualities; construct narratives so that the reader expects to be surprised, led into a strange place, and left there;[24] and focus on the process of experience, on the development or degradation of the character, on the ways people fall in love, meet opposition, sin, overcome, and survive.

In *The Art of the Novel,* Milan Kundera, one of the champions of literary fiction, writes, "As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good from evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize."[25] The universe became uncertain, Kundera implies, because of the historical shift from trust in inherited tradition to trust in experience as the world entered the empirical age—the age of the novel. Cervantes moves readers toward the light of agency and self-reliance instead of stagnation in the darkness of the Middle Ages. He does this by raising central questions about contemporary culture.

Kundera also describes a concept that is problematic for me and for most Mormon readers—God's departure from a position of authority over the universe. However, I can agree with his criticism of the human-created structures of ritual, dogma, power, and authoritarianism, which Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers, the reformers, and Joseph Smith also rejected. So while I know that God is still with us, I believe that in his act of giving us free agency, God has thrust us into a world similar to the one Kundera describes, where we must sort through opposing claims.

Kundera writes further that "the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity; the single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parceled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world."[26]

Once again, I cannot go all the way with Kundera. All truth is not relative. My faith is founded on universal truths. However, Kundera's statement does describe the way humans come to many truths. Even within the gospel we often judge between paradoxical opposites: the last shall be first, the best leader is a servant to all, the meek shall inherit the earth, cleave unto a spouse but love God first, consecrate all your time and possessions to God but provide for a family, love the sinner but hate the sin. God's children grow by being forced to decide between alternatives.

Often both alternatives are a mixture of good and evil—or at least a choice between a greater and a lesser good. Life is a fearful enterprise, the hazardous walk of faith described by Cracroft. Often my good friends in my ward fear novels that thrust readers into this confused world. Their ardent desire to return to God's presence causes them to shun fictions that deal ambiguously with good and evil. Why should those good people learn to read literary fiction?

Kundera 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."[27] He then makes a blanket condemnation: "Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire."[28]

Again, I agree in general but not in particular. The gospel I know teaches that we will all be judged after the pattern of our own judgment and that we must be as wise as serpents but as harmless as doves. In my relations with my family, my colleagues at work, and the members of my ward, I work to judge *after* I understand. If, for example, a man is an alcoholic, as my father was, it is essential that I understand before judging. As a teenager, watching my father's erratic and embarrassing behavior, I was unable to suspend harsh judgment, but now, as an adult, I can understand that he had a disease. I can hope that now, after his death, he is working through his problems. Such novels as *Under the Volcano*[29] and *Naked Lunch*[30] have taken me into the world of addicts and returned me, shaken but relatively unscathed. They have given me the gift of compassion for those afflicted by this disease.

I cannot go far with Kundera, but he does describe a truth about the world in which we live, a world in which God's children have become "as Gods, knowing good from evil, placing themselves

in a state to act, or being placed in a state to act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good" (Alma 12:31). The Latter-day Saint doctrines of free agency, eternal progression, and continuing revelation make it possible for us as a people to embrace a genre that rejects "dogmatic discourse."[31]

In popular fiction, truth is easily understood; good and evil are clearly marked. But in literary fiction, outcomes are uncertain and characters ambiguous. The reader is invited by literary fictions to judge between relative truths and to question former truths. The focus is not on a didactic outcome but on the experience of the characters, the career of their lives. When readers try to use the conventions of popular fiction to decode ambiguous fiction, they read good and evil into the characterization. Kundera writes that "they require that someone be right: either Anna Karenina is the victim of a narrow-minded tyrant, or Karenin is the victim of an immoral woman; either K. is an innocent man crushed by an unjust Court, or the Court represents divine justice and K. is guilty."[32]

Literary fiction will not settle for that kind of dichotomy. It allows us instead to observe a realistically ambiguous situation from two or more viewpoints at once. Readers of this kind of fiction have the opportunity to grow in charity for fallible human beings and to exercise choice between tangled alternatives, just as they do in life. Literary novelists and readers "face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths"; the novel is not a "moral position" but an "inquiry."[33]

All of us wish at times that our children could inhabit a universe where choices are easy and all issues clear. The fact remains that God, in His wisdom, has thrust us into a world where choices are difficult. We must choose between a welter of political philosophies, many of which seem moral and good. We must be businesspeople in conditions where ethical choices are confounded by contradictory laws, shady but accepted business practice, and aggressive competition. Sifting between degrees of good and bad in contemporary philosophy and literature is also difficult. Choices in this life are not always clearly marked with a luminous glow, and even when they seem to be so marked, we find, as fallible humans, that we occasionally mistake our conditioned instincts for the

illumination of the Holy Ghost. We live in a universe that God designed to be difficult—a test of our mettle—and realistic, literary novels can help us learn about existence in the universe.

The literary novel is an experiment in existence, in being. It is moral, not because it spells out answers and defines abstract principles, but because it requires moral decisions in a fictional universe that approaches the complexity and ambiguity of the universe we find ourselves in.[34] Admittedly, some of the authors of this kind of literature are not moral people. They may even desire to promote values foreign to our own. But, partly because of the aesthetic requirement of balance (a novel is no sermon or persuasive essay), careful readers can still grow morally by being forced to decide in the world of the literary novel.

I first encountered this type of Mormon literature when reading the stories in *Under the Cottonwoods* by Douglas Thayer.[35] These stories are internal dramas and trace the motions of conflicted souls—a returned missionary debates whether he should kill a deer, a Vietnam vet tries to heal himself, a boy who has fornicated prepares for priesthood meeting. These narratives, which dissolve the distinction between mantic and sophic, taught me patterns for moral wrestling. Whipple continued my education with *The Giant Joshua.* Clory wavers between independent and potentially destructive will and obedience to religious authority; her struggle matches my own in a culture that wants safe but also great works of literature. Reading about her life, I am better able to live my own. Like Frank Windham in *The Backslider,* I have occasionally feared God and mistrusted Christ's ability to transform my earthy self. The cowboy Jesus soothes my own troubled soul as he soothes Frank's.[36]

The Two Aims

Each of the two genres fulfills a distinct but different narrative aim. Popular fiction, as its label indicates, is literature of the people. It stresses solidarity of cultural values at the expense of serious questioning of those values. Literary fiction stresses complexity and ambiguity at the expense of reverence for tradition. One designs to shore up community; one shows how experience deconstructs

some communal values and strengthens others. Both aims are worthy, and critics of American literature—the broad category into which most Mormon literature fits[37]—have long differentiated between the tendency to reinforce community and the tendency toward allowing wildness or wilderness to disrupt community. By stepping back and viewing more broadly the national literature that influenced our Mormon literature, perhaps we can learn further how to make space in the Mormon canon for both ways of writing and reading.

One of the first to articulate these two aims or tendencies was Walt Whitman, who was hopeful that the impulse toward shoring up community and the impulse toward individual independence would converge in one great literature. In "Democratic Vistas" he issues a call for a national literature based on democracy, not feudalism.[38] This new literature, writes Whitman, should express the national character in terms of two opposing and important values: political democracy, or working together as a people, and self-reliance, or frontier independence. He names these two vistas *patriotism* and *individualism* and hopes that a third value will arise dialectically from the tension between these two.

More recent critics have described a similar split. In *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Roy Harvey Pearce writes that all American poetry is Puritan.[39] By this he means that all poets have a compulsion to relate their sense of inwardness with their sense of having a role in the world at large. He says that poets are conservative in wanting the dignity of the community to survive but antinomian in terms of fighting against certain cultural values. What he says of poets is also true of novelists such as Hawthorne, whose writing embodies the tension between communal and individual values. I find it interesting that Pearce discovers both tendencies in single works—a point that I will discuss shortly.

Phillip Rahv, in *Image and Idea,* divides American writers into "palefaces" and "redskins."[40] Palefaces are solemn and clerical; they view experience in terms of discipline. They write symbolically, allegorically, morally, and according to a "refined estrangement from reality."[41] The prime example in novel writers is Henry James. Redskin writers consider the lowlife of the frontier or city.

They are naturalistic, anti-intellectual, vital, aggressive, crude; they see life as opportunity and consider themselves one with the environment. One example is Mark Twain. "At the one pole," Rahv writes, "there is the literature of the lowlife world of the frontier and of the big cities; at the other the thin, solemn, semiclerical culture of Boston and Concord."[42] He writes further that "the process of polarization has produced a dichotomy between experience and consciousness—a dissociation between energy and sensibility, between conduct and theories of conduct, between life conceived as an opportunity and life conceived as a discipline."[43] Popular Mormon literature often hearkens back to the communal, paleface, Puritan strand in American literature; and literary Mormon literature, written by sophic questioners, finds affinity with individualistic, redskin, antinomian writers.

Tony Tanner notes in *City of Words* that individual writers suffer from two opposing fears—isolation and entrapment.[44] As humans, they fear being alone, but they also fear being controlled by the community. As writers, they fear formal chaos, lack of any patterning, while at the same time they fear forms that might have the strength to smother their individual, unique voices. I am reminded of the characters invented by Saul Bellow, such as the protagonist in *Henderson, the Rain King*[45] or Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day.*[46] Both are torn between their desire to act independently, free of ethical constraints, and their desire to be known and loved, intimate with some other humans.

American Mormons and Mormon writers have both these desires. Ours is naturally and properly a variety of American literature, and especially literature of the West, where the tension between community and wilderness is a powerful fictional force.

Room for Both at the Inn

As with most neat abstract analyses, the real-life situation is more complex. The conventions that define popular and literary fiction are clear and well distinguished, as evidenced by the publishing lists I referred to earlier; Deseret Book will never publish Levi S. Peterson, and Signature Books will never publish Jack Weyland. But is this oppositional relationship also symbiotic, where

each form defines the limits and aspects of the other? Even though the two forms can be easily distinguished in general, few examples are purely mantic and popular or purely sophic and literary. No individual work perfectly entertains the stranger; no novel secures the home culture unchanged. Popular fiction that allows no excursion into the unfamiliar world has no tension; literary fiction that allows no firm framework is valueless, having no moral center.

In most popular texts, the voice of the stranger is present, if buried. Most literary fiction works against the voice of the community. For these fictions to work, the voice of community must be clearly and sympathetically defined. Especially in literature, there must needs be opposition.[47] I believe that a healthy tension, a kind of yin and yang, exists between popular and literary fictions—each type is defined and beneficially complicated by the other. Neither the purest popular fiction nor the rankest literary fiction can survive without the other to work against. But, like two sisters in a single bedroom, both remain convinced that they would like to try taking solitary dominion.

Like the greedy sister, some of us writers and critics privilege our human need for the humanistic, open-ended tendency in literature—which meets our need to question existence, explore the world more fully, ask "what if," and voice fear of being trapped in institutions. Others of us privilege the tendency toward popular forms—which assumes a community of Saints, defines ways of living in but not of the world, and voices our fear of losing self in the wilderness of doubt. Does the kind of story we hunger after depend on the kind of person we are? Or do all humans need both kinds of stories?

In my own life, a diverse array of stories has formed my reading character. Science fiction makes me angry at faceless institutions. Sentimental Mormon fiction occasionally moves me, surprising me out of my training. The novels of Levi S. Peterson, Maurine Whipple, and Virginia Sorensen teach me love for inner and outer wildness and anger at unrighteous dominion. Personal testimonies from the *Ensign,* which are significant cultural stories, make me feel that a benevolent God cares for the worldwide community of Saints. The Book of Mormon transformed my life and

urged me onto my mission. British fiction shows me that there are more responses to community than the western American desire to escape. Mormon and western history teaches me skepticism toward apologistic history and land developers. Postmodern fiction teaches me mistrust of and love for language. I would be less myself if I lost any of these stories, if either my hunger for the community of Saints or my appetite for wildness and individual agency were stinted. Am I an oddball?—a dangerous question. In the rest of this paper, I will explore why it may be that both of these manifestations of deep human impulses are culturally precious.

Why We Need a Balanced Narrative Diet

Constructionist psychologists have studied how narratives create social identity. In "Transformations: A Blueprint for Narrative Changes in Therapy," Carlos E. Sluzki claims, "Our social world is constituted in and through a network of multiple stories or narratives."[48] Our cultural narratives establish "the frames within which we become aware of self and others, within which we establish priorities, claim or disclaim duties and privileges, see the norms for appropriate and inappropriate behavior, attribute meanings, and order events in time."[49] Sluzki simply states what writers have known all along: our perspective on reality is constituted by the stories we tell and hear. William A. Wilson's "In Praise of Ourselves: Stories to Tell" proposes that a variety of written and told stories gives meaning to our lives, but that the "most essential of these stories may be those we tell about our own experiences and narrate primarily in family contexts."[50]

Miller Mair in "Psychology as Storytelling" pronounces that stories are essential to being: "We live in and through stories. They conjure worlds. We do not know the world other than as story world. Stories inform life. They hold us together and keep us apart."[51] Latter-day Saints form their identity with reference to the great stories of Mormon culture: the journey of Lehi and his family into the desert and across the ocean, the rise and fall of the Nephite and Lamanite nations, the visit of God and His Son to Joseph Smith, the travails of the pioneers.

How exactly do stories form our psyche? Developmental psychologists have theorized that natural movement between stability and crisis is essential to the construction of the identity during adolescence. For true identity formation "adolescents must not only affirm a set of commitments, but also relinquish some fantasized, glamorous possibilities of what they once thought they would become as unrealistic, impractical, and unattainable."[52] Both the set of commitments and the soul searching, both the possibilities and the release of those possibilities are necessary for growth of an individual. We often think of formation as only occurring in youth, but if souls eternally progress, perhaps we continue to reform our identities even as adults. Perhaps we need experiences and narratives that form identity inside a stable communal cocoon and others that urge us to shed old self-concepts and grow into new beings.

Our Hunger for Affirmation of Community

What kinds of stories build our concept of stable community? Edgar C. Snow Jr., in "One Face of the Hero: In Search of the Mythological Joseph Smith," writes that on a Young Men's outing he rediscovered the powerful and unifying force of our cultural stories:

> While standing in front of a crackling fire, I told many tales, including the discovery of the golden plates, the escape from Liberty Jail, and the shootout at the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum. To my amazement these stories became magical spells holding the gaze of all present. I felt somehow during this ritual of storytelling that we became one organism much the same way a congregation may feel spiritual oneness during a church conference while standing in unison singing "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet."[53]

This illustrates the use of story described by Cracroft—that which establishes one's identity as a Latter-day Saint, a member of a Zion people. Snow writes that such "life-affirming"[54] stories have the power of living myths. They "reconcile us to the mysteries of existence and awaken our own inner spiritual potential."[55] They fulfill our need to receive "transcendent truths—difficult to articulate—in the form of a story and/or a ritual which is not only easy to articulate, but which explains the ineffable through tangible symbols."[56]

In our telling of the First Vision and the trials accompanying the organization of the Church, we often make the Prophet Joseph Smith and other leaders and pioneers into heroes. Snow says that Joseph Campbell's articulation of hero-myth patterns can illuminate why we need to tell stories this way. He uses language reminiscent of Cracroft's description of the Mormon journey through a foreign world, where the "hero represents everyone in his or her individual quest for personal identity and happiness."[57] Snow points out that Campbell's heroes symbolically discover the inner world of their own psyche and invite listeners to follow their own call to adventure. The hero's call is a call to leave the ordinary world to seek an authentic life. The trials are our inner fears of self-discovery. The boon recovered is the wholeness of our soul. Our return to the ordinary world with a self-actuated soul inspires others to make their own journey.[58]

I suppose that some readers will rise and shout that novels by Weyland, Lund, and other popular writers fall far short of the depth and quality of the Restoration story. But Snow describes a natural descent from the Joseph Smith story to a variety of other narratives. He writes that "new Mormon converts often narrate their conversion experience along the lines of the first vision story and see themselves as bearers of a great boon to a reluctant world."[59] And it is not just converts who benefit. "More seasoned Mormons often find that they are spiritually reawakened when they hear the new convert's story of hero-quest and reflect on their own conversion and experience a renewal engendered by the teller of the conversion faith-story."[60] I suggest that, just as someone's conversion story is often told after the pattern of the First Vision, some popular Mormon fiction is narrated along the lines of a conversion story.

This movement from revelation to true conversion story to fictional conversion story in Mormon literature is similar to the descent that produced the first British novels. Both popular Mormon and early British novels, such as the work of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, have avowed moral purposes. J. Paul Hunter in *Before Novels: The Cultural Roots of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* writes that the true ancestors of early novels are not the romances from which they borrowed structure,

but didactic and journalistic writing from which they borrowed technique and rhetorical purpose.[61] The first novels descended from authentic spiritual autobiographies through studies of fictitious cases. Both the ancestor and the descendant form had similar writerly purpose and readerly effect, just as didactic and fictional Mormon forms have similar aim and effect—to shore up faith by establishing a Zion community.

The Moral Benefits of Ambiguous Fictions

As already discussed, the moral purpose of literary fiction is different from that of popular fiction. Once, in a class, Arthur Henry King described how we experience well-made stories. He said that he never reads or hears the story of the prodigal son without weeping. He identifies with the father's sorrow and joy, the son's lust for experience and his subsequent repentance, the brother's industry and jealousy. The detail in the parable enables a reader to experience vicariously the characters' anguish. The complexity of detail and emotion produces the illusion of reality—enables the story to live in the reader's head. This order of realistic story produces hope out of despair, security in the context of danger, and confidence after betrayal.[62] As we walk through this wilderness in which rattlesnakes, badger holes, and scorpions lurk, we may need to cast our eyes up to heaven and back to earth in a wary pattern. In a dangerous world, we need both sophic and mantic fiction.

Stories like the prodigal son allow us to live for a time in a stranger's head, an astonishing gift that helps us obey the second great commandment—to love our neighbor as ourselves. In the parable of the good Samaritan, Christ designs another story full of pain and hypocrisy to show that our neighbor is often a stranger. As Jorgensen claims, reading gives us the opportunity to practice Christian charity toward a variety of characters.

As discussed earlier, another moral benefit of literary fiction is that such stories force readers to discover good and evil themselves. This form of fiction gives a different kind of experience than does didactic fiction. It focuses not on predictable or even desirable outcomes, but on the process of struggle; by reading

ambiguous fiction, we vicariously participate with the characters as they make difficult social and moral decisions. Popular faithful fiction focuses on plot and a secure dogmatic structure, giving us the answer from the beginning. Such stories give security and reestablish the boundaries of a familiar world. Reading literary fiction allows us to expand, to perceive new universes.[63]

"The Eye Cannot Say 'I Have No Need of Thee'"

On my shelf, the works of Jack Weyland, Gerald Lund, Levi Peterson, Orson Scott Card, Virginia Sorensen, and Maurine Whipple stand side by side. All, in different ways, are cultural phenomena. Weyland, Card, and Lund have sold hundreds of thousands of books. Each new book appeals to a large number of Latter-day Saints. After more than half a century, Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* remains provocative and enriching to new groups of readers. Like Orson F. Whitney, I hope that more books—books even better than these—will be written and that more bookshelves will contain books from both camps. I have two proposals toward this end: that we develop a popular Mormon aesthetic and that we write more novels which blur the distinction between the literary and the popular.

A tool for improvement of any genre is close and careful criticism, but despite the current explosion of popular Mormon fiction, the bulk of analysis has been written by literary critics using the aesthetics of literary fiction. Exceptions are emerging. Richard Cracroft's column "Book Nook" in *Brigham Young Magazine* and Eugene England's "Worth Reading" in *This People* each distinguish between the good and the bad in both popular and literary Mormon literature. *Wasatch Review International* publishes reviews and criticism of both forms. Similar discussion occurs on the many e-mail lists that examine Mormon literature. Perhaps we can add this new work to that already done by Keller, Bradford, Geary, England, Mulder, Cracroft, and numerous others to build toward a cohesive aesthetic of popular Mormon fiction. This aesthetic should recognize the basic structural/rhetorical difference between the two forms.

At the core of good literary fiction is opposition between two or more voices, so a central aesthetic principle of this divided fiction is balance. At the core of faithful fiction is the mythic voice of the community of saints. How do we consider fiction constructed to shore up that voice—fiction that borrows pattern and convention from both popular national genres and from our deepest cultural narratives, such as conversion stories and the Joseph Smith stories? We have a great need for a popular review of Mormon literature—a journal, accessible to a wide readership, which would help readers distinguish between poor and high-quality popular fictions.

Literary Mormon novelists create a unique hybrid also, in trying to graft Mormon culture into a genre that is generally empirical and godless. The result is often bizarre. For example, when Maurine Whipple tries to describe the motion of the Spirit, she uses such vague and misleading phrases as "the Great Smile."[64] Cracroft may be right that literary writers miss their audience and distort their material by ignoring deep Mormon culture, but it is excruciatingly difficult to translate spirituality into a humanistic and rationalistic medium. Literary Mormon writers might concern themselves with this question and explore ways of writing intimately about spiritual struggle.[65] Perhaps we can learn technique from magical-realist and other postmodern writers who step outside rationality. Christian writers such as Flannery O'Connor have long served as models, but we can turn to others. For example, Kierkegaard writes in *Fear and Trembling: And the Sickness unto Death* that true Christians fear not pain and death, but the second death: separation from God. This Christian existentialist describes dozens of ways in which people separate themselves from their true selves before God. His sketches read like outlines of plots for spiritually oriented literary fiction.

So we might, through careful criticism and careful writing, gradually achieve a compromise between faithful and literary writers and critics, beginning by recognizing that each is different and each culturally precious. I am encouraging a grudging friendship, an occasional dance where readers of faithful and literary fiction each take turns leading (and not with a strong right). Through such efforts, we might overcome the divisiveness that dominates

much discussion of Mormon literature. The stories I treasure are from both genres: *The Giant Joshua* with its spirituality and realism; *Saints* with its picture of Joseph Smith as both hero and human; *Backslider* with its cowboy Jesus, a mediator between God and humankind; Weyland's and Lund's portraits of faithful people struggling in a frightening world. I want all of these stories.

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NOTES

[1]Bruce W. Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 40–50.

[2]Richard H. Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 51.

[3]Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years," *BYU Studies* 22 (spring 1982): 141–44. The term "home literature" was originally applied to a body of literature that flourished in the period from 1880 to 1930—"an outpouring of poems, stories, and novels, mainly in the Church magazines and press," that was "designed for the edification of the Saints." England, "The Dawning," 141. "The early home literature borrowed the techniques of popular sentimental fiction and the values of the genteel tradition with a superficial adaptation to Mormon themes." Edward A. Geary, "The Poetics of Provincialism: Mormon Regional Fiction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11 (summer 1978), quoted in England, "The Dawning," 142.

The "lost generation" refers to a group of writers, beginning with Vardis Fisher in the 1930s, who were "defined by various degrees of rebellion against their 'provincial' culture, by a patronizing alienation infused with nostalgia for a vanishing way of life that would not let them turn completely away to other loyalties and subject matter, even when they became in one way or another expatriated." They saw the Mormon culture changing from rural to urban and felt that the "Mormon experiment was rapidly ending. They saw themselves as the first well-educated generation of Mormonism, able to look with some amusement upon the naiveté of Mormon thought." Geary, "The Poetics of Provincialism," quoted in England, "The Dawning," 143.

[4]Geary, "The Poetics of Provincialism," 15.

[5]Karl Keller, "The Example of Flannery O'Connor," *Dialogue* 9 (winter 1974): 62. All these examples are of literary critics performing analysis; the Mormon tradition has had a paucity of critics of popular, orthodox literature.

[6]Don D. Walker, quoted in William Mulder, "Mormonism and Literature," *Western Humanities Review* 9 (winter 1954–55): 88.

[7]Walker, quoted in Mulder, "Mormonism and Literature," 88.

[8]Jonathan Penner, "Literary Fiction versus Popular Fiction," *AWP Chronicle* 26, no. 6 (1994): 15.

[9]Penner, "Literary Fiction," 15.

[10]Penner, "Literary Fiction," 15.

[11]I do not suggest that insider, mantic fiction always fits in the popular genre or that outsider, sophic fiction is always literary. I simply suggest that there are instructive similarities between the corresponding national and Mormon forms. One example of direct popular influence is Jack Weyland's *Charley,* which was published soon after *Love Story* and which has structural similarities to that work. The popular influence of home literature is discussed briefly in England, "The Dawning," 141–42.

[12]"Well," said Cracroft over lunch after hearing this paper delivered at the Association for Mormon Letters section of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association meetings (RMMLA), "you've certainly stacked the deck on this one." The deck was stacked from the beginning by our desire to look at popular fictions according to the light of a literary aesthetic.

[13]In the margin of an early draft of this paper, Jorgensen wrote, "On paved tracks, with guardrails, picnic tables, and pit toilets."

[14]Such a writer—and I am one—would also rewrite the bulk of it for a more earthy realism.

[15]Cracroft, "Authentic Mormon Voice," 53.

[16]Cracroft, "Authentic Mormon Voice," 53.

[17]Exceptions are Margaret Young's *Salvador* and much of Orson Scott Card's work. Still the question remains: who will publish and read literary mantic fiction, such as the stories of Job or Abraham translated into modern terms?

[18]Jack Weyland, *Sara, Whenever I Hear Your Name* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987).

[19]Orson Scott Card, *Lost Boys* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

[20]Marilyn Brown, *The Earthkeepers* (Provo, Utah: Art Publishers, 1979).

[21]Maurine Whipple, *The Giant Joshua* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941; reprint, Salt Lake City: Western Epics, 1976).

[22]Levi S. Peterson, *The Backslider* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 1.

[23]Peterson, *Backslider*, 354–55.

[24]"Makes the reader a stranger in a strange land?" wrote Jorgensen in his margin notes.

[25]Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 6.

[26]Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 6.

[27]Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 7.

[28]Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 7.

[29]Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965).

[30]William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove, 1959).

[31]Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 7.

[32]Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 7.

[33]Kundera, *Art of the Novel*, 6–7.

[34]Not all ambiguous fiction forces moral decisions, but the work of the best Mormon literary writers does. I am referring specifically to fiction by Maurine Whipple, Virginia Sorensen, and Levi Peterson. Not all faithful fiction reinforces positive principles, either; some is sexist, violent, or propagandistic of popular national philosophies.

[35]Douglas H. Thayer, *Under the Cottonwoods and Other Mormon Stories* (Provo, Utah: Frankson Books, 1977).

[36]Some literary elitists might say that the mass of Mormon readers will never become sophisticated enough to be morally instructed by these works. I have faith that careful essays and careful education will prove them wrong.

[37]Certainly, as the Church continues to grow worldwide, there is Mormon literature from cultures other than American and in languages other than English being written, but this essay focuses on a discussion of American Mormon literature.

[38]Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," in *The Works of Walt Whitman: The Deathbed Edition,* vol. 2, *The Collected Prose* (reprint, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), 208–63. Whitman's tone is much like the statement by Orson F. Whitney: "We shall yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own." Quoted in Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 1.

[39]Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

[40]Philip Rahv, "Paleface and Redskin," in *Image and Idea: Fourteen Essays on Literary Themes* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books, 1949), 1–5.

[41]Rahv, "Paleface and Redskin," 2.

[42]Rahv, "Paleface and Redskin," 1.

[43]Rahv, "Paleface and Redskin," 1.

[44]Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950–1970* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[45]Saul Bellow, *Henderson, the Rain King: A Novel* (New York: Viking, 1959).

[46]Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (New York: Viking, 1956).

[47]This contrasting quality of good literature was described by Welsh poet and short-fiction writer Leslie Norris in "Without Contraries Is No Progression," his 1991 Maeser lecture at BYU.

[48]Carlos E. Sluzki, "Transformations: A Blueprint for Narrative Changes in Therapy," *Family Process* 31 (September 1992): 218.

[49]Sluzki, "Transformations," 219.

[50]William A. Wilson, "In Praise of Ourselves: Stories to Tell," *BYU Studies* 30 (winter 1990): 7.

[51]Miller Mair, "Psychology as Storytelling," quoted in Robert A. Neimeyer, "An Appraisal of Constructivist Psychotherapies," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 2 (1993): 226–27.

[52]Laura E. Berk, "The Self and Social Understanding," *Child Development* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991): 445.

[53]Edgar C. Snow Jr., "One Face of the Hero: In Search of the Mythological Joseph Smith," *Dialogue* 27, no. 3 (fall 1994): 233.

[54]Snow, "One Face of the Hero," 233.

[55]Snow, "One Face of the Hero," 234.

[56]Snow, "One Face of the Hero," 234.

[57]Snow, "One Face of the Hero," 236.

[58]Snow, "One Face of the Hero," 236.

[59]Snow, "One Face of the Hero," 243.

[60]Snow, "One Face of the Hero," 243.

[61]J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990).

[62]I have heard mantic and allegorical readings of the prodigal son story. The son who remained behind will gain the father's kingdom, while the prodigal son already has his inheritance—he is forgiven but will not receive all that the father has. This reading is not the one that makes me weep. It is the other reading, the story of the father forgiving one son and mediating with the offended son, that moves me.

[63]For an extended argument of the moral virtue of ambiguous fiction, read Tory Anderson, "Just the Fiction, Ma'am," *Wasatch Review International* 1, no. 2 (1992): 1–9.

[64]Whipple, *Giant Joshua,* 633.

[65]We also need publishers who will publish mantic literary fiction.