



9-1-2014

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## Recommended Citation

Harrell, Jack (2014) "Toward a Mormon Literary Theory," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 53 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol53/iss3/3>

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# Toward a Mormon Literary Theory

*Jack Harrell*

Last year I walked into a literary theory course on the campus of Brigham Young University–Idaho. The teacher was a colleague of mine, Jeff Slagle, a gifted young professor well-versed in criticism and theory. I was auditing the course that semester, revisiting theories and approaches I'd first encountered years before as a BYU undergraduate. The main text for the course was *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, and the names on the reading list were familiar—Cleanth Brooks, Louis Althusser, Wolfgang Iser, Jacques Derrida, Annette Kolodny, Henry Louis Gates Jr. But this was dense material—complex writing, challenging ideas, texts that can forever change the way a person thinks and reads. Just as I had experienced at BYU, taking similar courses from Bruce Young and Cecilia Konchar Farr, I found value in each of the texts Jeff assigned—feminists extolling the roles of women, cultural critics challenging modern materialism, language theorists writing of the presence or absence of extralinguistic reality. As a reader and thinker, and as a Mormon, I found great worth here, new vistas that demanded constant reexamination of past certainties.

I had come to Jeff's class with a question, though just an inkling at first. Sitting there on the first day, I wondered, "Is there a *Mormon* literary theory?" Is there an approach to literature, or a criterion for judgment, that could function as a unique theoretical lens, that could be called *Mormon*, that could offer a new perspective, or even a fresh synthesis of previous theories, to add to the ongoing conversation about the evaluation and appreciation of literature? I talked with Jeff about this, and I brought the question to the rest of the class. Perhaps a Mormon literary theory did exist. Or perhaps an implicit approach had already

## Jack Harrell

In January 1991, I stepped into Eugene England's Literature of the Latter-day Saints course. At the time, I hardly knew such a thing as Mormon literature or criticism existed. England soon introduced our class to a rich legacy of work that opened my mind to the potential for creative literature among the Latter-day Saints. Beginning with Parley Pratt's short fiction "A Dialogue between Joseph Smith and the Devil," published in 1844, England showed us that Mormon creative writing was as old as Mormonism itself. He also taught us that truth could be effectively communicated through fiction. In the years since, I've heard many people say, "I don't read fiction; I'm only interested in the truth." Experience has shown me that the person who says this misunderstands both fiction *and* truth.



My research for this paper took me through decades of Mormon writings. Time and again I marveled at the substantive work of those who came before us. Yes, the decade of the 1970s was "The Dawning of a Brighter Day," as England wrote in the pages of *BYU Studies* in 1982, a period of exciting literary growth among Mormons, but every decade of Mormonism has had its proponents of literature and thought. The intellectual life of the early Saints in Nauvoo featured formal public debating sessions. Early Utah periodicals regularly sponsored poetry, fiction, and essay contests. In 1948, P. A. Christensen published his collection of essays *All in a Teacher's Day*. I don't think a Mormon lover of literature today could gainsay the things Christensen said way back in 1948. Yet it seems that every generation must learn the same lessons for itself.

I wouldn't dare to predict the future of Mormon literary theory. Perhaps Mormons are simply too practical to develop an across-the-ranks interest in such esoteric pursuits. But Mormon theology, faith, and culture, I believe, are strong enough to bear the weight of this effort. If Mormons don't advance in literary studies, I believe the fault will rest with us, not the religion.

taken shape among Mormon readers, a de facto Mormon literary theory that had yet to be delineated.

I wrote a short speculative paper on this topic for Jeff's course, one I presented at the 2013 annual conference of the Association for Mormon Letters (AML). The thesis for my paper was that no such theory existed, as far as I knew, but its ingredients were all around us—in Mormon theology itself and in the writings of Mormons who had studied and celebrated literature since the beginning of the Church. After presenting my paper, I knew I had to take the next step: I had to go beyond speculation and do a thorough literature review. If a Mormon literary theory existed, I would find it—whether explicitly defined or implicitly applied.

### A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF LDS LITERARY CRITICISM

My own experience with Mormon literature and criticism began at BYU in January of 1991, when I walked into another classroom: Eugene England's Literature of the Latter-day Saints course. At the time, I was twenty-nine years old, a husband, a father of three, and a late bloomer on the college scene. Having joined the LDS Church eight years before, I had read every Mormon book I could get ahold of, but I had yet to read anything that could be called "Mormon literature." The first assignment Professor England gave was his 1982 *BYU Studies* publication "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years," an essay that came as a revelation to me—as it did for most of the students in the class. Mormon literature, England explained, was substantial enough to divide into four periods: "Foundations," "Home Literature," the "Lost Generation," and "Faithful Realism." England wrote of the candid poetry of the Mormon pioneers, the didactic novels that followed Elder Orson F. Whitney's statement "We will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own,"<sup>1</sup> and reasons why the personal narrative was particularly suited to contemporary Mormon writers. But England didn't merely delineate genres and periods. He situated Mormon literature in a philosophical framework that justified its significance. "Unlike religions such as Lutheranism or Christian Science," England said, Mormonism "makes a large number of rather absolute claims about the nature of the universe and God and human beings, about specific historical events, past and

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1. Orson F. Whitney, "Home Literature," in *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Richard H. Cracroft and Neil E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), 206.

future, about language and form and content.”<sup>2</sup> England made a promising case for LDS literature, for works expressing a uniquely Mormon worldview, giving the Church and its religion a human and literary face. This wasn’t just partisan praise. England’s essay met the highest of scholarly standards: it was a reasoning- and evidenced-based assertion that a Mormon literature existed, as well as a Mormon criticism.

England’s LDS literature course, the theory courses I took from Professors Young and Farr, and the creative writing courses I took from Bruce Jorgensen and others at BYU prepared me well for the years to come. After graduate school, I continued to study Mormon literature and began my teaching at Ricks College, which soon became Brigham Young University–Idaho. I published a Mormon literary novel and a collection of short stories. I took part in the Association for Mormon Letters, which England had founded in 1976. And for five years I coedited *Irreantum*, AML’s official journal, publishing the best in contemporary Mormon poetry, essays, stories, and criticism. This was the path that led me to Jeff Slagle’s class and to the question, “Is there a Mormon literary theory?”

Having determined to do a literature review, I knew I had to begin with the works of Eugene England himself. Lest anyone accuse me of a bias concerning England’s role in Mormon literature and criticism, I’ll reference his colleague of many years, Richard Cracroft. In 2001, shortly after England’s death, Cracroft wrote a tribute to his friend and former colleague, saying that “Gene’s remarkable contribution to these ends [the blossoming of Mormon literature] constitutes the single major literary force and influence during the last quarter century—an era in which Mormon letters, slow aborning, stood up, stretched, and self-consciously fluffed its youthful feathers. And . . . Eugene England was the principal fluffer!”<sup>3</sup> Cracroft called England’s 1996 book *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature*, coedited by Lavina Fielding Anderson, “the basis for Mormon literary studies of the twenty-first century.”<sup>4</sup>

In truth, England and Cracroft stood together as pioneers in this work. Six years before England’s death, he wrote that Cracroft “could

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2. Eugene England, “The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 2 (1982): 133.

3. Richard Cracroft, “Eugene England and the Rise and Progress of Mormon Letters,” *Sunstone* 121 (January 2002): 42.

4. Cracroft, “Eugene England and the Rise and Progress of Mormon Letters,” 43.

be called the father of modern Mormon literary studies for his pioneering work in the early 1970s in producing the first anthologies.”<sup>5</sup> In 1974, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert had published *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*, a book “designed for a course in Mormon Literature at Brigham Young University.”<sup>6</sup> That course, which Cracroft taught, was the first of its kind. The following year, Cracroft and Lambert published another anthology, *22 Young Mormon Writers*. Over the next thirty-five years, six more anthologies of Mormon writing would follow—three of them edited or coedited by England. *Greening Wheat: Fifteen Mormon Short Stories*, edited by Levi Peterson, appeared in 1983. England joined with Dennis Clark to published *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* in 1989. England published *Bright Angels and Familiars: Contemporary Mormon Stories* in 1992. And this century has seen the publication of *Dispensation: Latter-day Fiction*, edited by Angela Hallstrom in 2010, and Tyler Chadwick’s *Fire in the Pasture: Twenty-first Century Mormon Poets*, in 2011.

Even before I began my review of Mormon criticism, I was familiar with the only two existing histories of Mormon literature. Terryl Givens, in *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture*, dedicated two insightful chapters to Mormon literature. Throughout the book, Givens refers to an extraordinary notion in Mormon theology, one that sets it apart from any other faith—a “radical paradigm shift instituted by Joseph Smith,”<sup>7</sup> Givens calls it. Joseph’s many revelations, his angelic visitations, the literal heft of the golden plates, even the nature of God as revealed in the First Vision contribute to a “collapse of sacred distance, . . . the concretization of the abstract.”<sup>8</sup> Givens reminds us that Parley P. Pratt went so far as to assert that “God, angels, and men are all of one species.”<sup>9</sup> This is a view that is radically different from traditional Christianity, which asserts in The Westminster Confession of Faith that God is “infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy,

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5. Eugene England, “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects,” in *Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the United States*, ed. David J. Whittaker (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995), 457.

6. Cracroft and Lambert, *Believing People*, 5.

7. Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xv.

8. Givens, *People of Paradox*, 28.

9. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (1855; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 40.

most free, most absolute.”<sup>10</sup> “But central to Joseph Smith’s thought,” Givens explains, “is the collapse of the sacred distance that consigns man and God to existentially and ontologically separate spheres.”<sup>11</sup> The consequence of this, for everything about Mormonism, Givens observes, is “a culture that sacralizes and exalts the mundane even as it naturalizes and domesticates the sacred.”<sup>12</sup>

Givens’s insights into Mormon culture are invaluable. But the more exhaustive history, not surprisingly, comes from Eugene England, in his “Mormon Literature: Progress and Prospects,” from the 1995 BYU Studies publication *Mormon Americana*. Here he expands his earlier analysis of the four periods of Mormon literature, seeing the first 150 years of Mormon literature “in terms of three fifty-year periods and three kinds of rebels.”<sup>13</sup> In the first fifty years, the early pioneers rebelled against Babylon, the world in general. In the second fifty, the Utah Saints of the “Home Literature” period rebelled against the “worldly literature” to be had outside of Zion, creating their own literature for their own consumption. In the third period, the “Lost Generation” rebelled against a seemingly naïve and provincial Mormonism its writers felt bound to outgrow.

The Foundations period of Mormon literature (1830–1880) was “an initial outpouring . . . of largely unsophisticated writing, expressive of the new converts’ dramatic symbolic as well as literal journeys to Zion.”<sup>14</sup> That period saw the remarkable sermons and writings of Joseph Smith, the pamphlets and books of Orson and Parley Pratt, the poetry of Eliza Snow, and countless letters and conversion narratives from ordinary Latter-day Saints. This was a period that prized poetry, even if it disparaged fiction. In 1856, Franklin Richards, president of the European Mission, said, “It is the duty and privilege of the Saints . . . to procure and study the poetical works of the Church, that their authors may be encouraged and the spirit of poetry cultivated in the bosom of the readers.”<sup>15</sup> Three years earlier, in 1853, “Church funds were used to

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10. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (London: Tyler, 1647); available at [http://www.reformed.org/documents/shaw/index.html?mainframe/documents/shaw/shaw\\_o2.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/shaw/index.html?mainframe/documents/shaw/shaw_o2.html).

11. Givens, *People of Paradox*, 161.

12. Givens, *People of Paradox*, 42.

13. England, “Dawning of a Brighter Day,” 140.

14. England, “Mormon Literature,” 462.

15. Franklin Richards, “Poems by Eliza R. Snow,” *Millennial Star*, February 16, 1856, 106.

pay for the publication and distribution costs of the first book of LDS poetry,<sup>16</sup> *The Harp of Zion*, by the “Scottish bard” of Mormonism, John Lyon. Between 1853 and 1854, this anthology sold a thousand copies in Britain alone.<sup>17</sup>

The next period in Mormon literature, Home Literature (1890–1930), was sparked by Orson F. Whitney’s call for “Miltons and Shakespeares of our own.” This era saw a great deal of poetry and nonfiction, as well as a surge in fiction written to counter the “*lying* novel, that is calculated to lead the mind to lightness and lechery.”<sup>18</sup> Speaking of the potential for writing and creativity among Latter-day Saints, Whitney asserted that “God’s ammunition is not exhausted.”<sup>19</sup> Whitney and others, such as B. H. Roberts, Emmeline B. Wells, and Susa Young Gates, published in Church periodicals like the *Juvenile Instructor*, the *Contributor*, *Women’s Exponent*, *Utah Magazine*, and *Young Woman’s Journal*. However, despite the thousands of pages written in this era, Eugene England damns it as a period of “highly didactic fiction and poetry designed to defend and improve the Saints but of little lasting worth.”<sup>20</sup>

The next period (1930–1970) brought “the first flowering of an artistically excellent Mormon literature that was able to be published nationally and gain national recognition.”<sup>21</sup> Authors such as Vardis Fisher, Maurine Whipple, and Virginia Sorensen published award-winning novels with Boston and New York publishers. Writing in 1977, Edward Geary dubbed this period the “Lost Generation,” borrowing the term used for American writers whose values had been shaken by World War I. Geary said the works of the best Mormon writers in this period “resemble the works of the so-called ‘lost generation’ of the 1920s in their ambivalence towards a tradition which seems to have failed yet which still offers the only available spiritual anchor against a tide of meaninglessness.”<sup>22</sup> According to Geary, members of the Mormon Lost Generation “grew up when regional isolation was breaking down and rural Mormondom

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16. Thomas E. Lyon, “Publishing a Book of Mormon Poetry: *The Harp of Zion*,” *BYU Studies*, 27 no. 1 (1987): 85.

17. Givens, *People of Paradox*, 167.

18. William W. Phelps, “Letter No. 12,” *Messenger and Advocate*, November 1835, 223.

19. Whitney, “Home Literature,” 206.

20. England, “Mormon Literature,” 462.

21. England, “Mormon Literature,” 469.

22. Edward A. Geary, “Mormondom’s Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 1 (1977): 92.

was experiencing widespread depopulation.”<sup>23</sup> He further states, “There is a pervasive view in these writers that Mormonism is something to be outgrown.”<sup>24</sup> Their goal was “not to create an altogether new literature or an art subservient to the building up of Zion [as those in the Home Literature period had attempted] but to capture in their fiction the life of their region as the New England and Midwestern regional writers had done and as the Southern writers were beginning to do.”<sup>25</sup> England adds that “urban Mormonism was apparently becoming crassly materialistic. It was easy for them [the Lost Generation] to see the Church, however heroic in the nineteenth century, as failing, the Mormon experiment as rapidly ending. And they saw themselves as the first well-educated generation of Mormonism, able to look with some amusement upon the naiveté of Mormon thought.”<sup>26</sup> In these first three periods of Mormon literature we see forces that remain with us today—the didactic, insular writing popular in the contemporary commercial Mormon bookstore and the more complex literary writings of disaffected writers who believe they have outgrown the nursery of their once-beloved Mormonism.

For England, the fourth period, which he calls “Faithful Realism” (1960–present), stands as a compromise. He cites Clinton Larson, the founder of *BYU Studies*, as “the spiritual father”<sup>27</sup> of this period, as someone who wrote “a unique Mormon poetry of modernist sensibility and skill but also informed and passionate faith.”<sup>28</sup> Incidentally, this was the era that England focused on in his Literature of the Latter-day Saints course when I took it, featuring writers like Levi Peterson, Doug Thayer, Margaret Young, Thomas Rogers, Susan Howe, and Lance Larsen. As Givens puts it, “These writers demonstrate the seriousness of intent of the Lost Generation, but rely mostly upon humor and irony to interrogate affectionately their own culture’s paradoxes.”<sup>29</sup>

My literature review took me through a dozen books and scores of articles in *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, *Irreantum*, *The Proceedings of the Association for Mormon Letters Annual Conference*, and elsewhere. Much of this literature, in the footsteps of England, comments on the

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23. Edward A. Geary, “The Poetics of Provincialism: Mormon Regional Fiction,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11, no. 2 (1978): 23.

24. Geary, “Poetics of Provincialism,” 23–24.

25. Geary, “Poetics of Provincialism,” 15–16.

26. England, “Dawning of a Brighter Day,” 143.

27. England, “Mormon Literature,” 471.

28. England, “Mormon Literature,” 472.

29. Givens, *People of Paradox*, 307.

history of Mormon writing and its potential—realized or not. A great deal of effort is made to explain why Mormons have not lived up to Orson F. Whitney’s prophecy, while just as much energy is applied to point the way toward that goal. Women writers, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, drew connections between Mormonism and feminism, as did Stacy Burton in her 1995 essay “Rethinking Religious Experience: Notes from Critical Theory, Feminism, and Real Life.”<sup>30</sup> Some writers, such as Robert Bird, make connections between Mormonism and postmodernism, asserting that “Mormon postmodernism affirms the intrusion and influence of one world upon another.”<sup>31</sup> The most perennial topic in Mormon criticism is the question, “What is Mormon literature?” This question saw special prominence in a dialogue between three pioneers of the Faithful Realism period—England, Cracroft, and Bruce Jorgensen.

After the publication of England and Clark’s *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, Cracroft wrote a review for *BYU Studies* in which he said that too many of the later poems in the book, the contemporary poems, “could have been written anywhere in Western culture.”<sup>32</sup> Cracroft further declared that “the educated modern Mormon poet has assimilated the secular culture and modes of poetry, repressing and replacing soaring spirituality with earth-bound humanism.”<sup>33</sup> Later, in an AML presidential address, Cracroft would say, “Lacking a firmly founded center stake, then, Mormon criticism, like Mormon literature, is unsettled and uncentered, too prone to follow Corianton in a-whoring across distant and exotic horizons after the shallow attractions of blind secularism, visionless and perverse fault-seeking, skeptical and compromising humanism.”<sup>34</sup> England himself would later summarize the argument, saying that Cracroft “strongly objected to recent directions in most Mormon literature as being too imitative of flawed contemporary critical and moral trends and thus untrue to Mormon traditions and values.”<sup>35</sup>

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30. Stacy Burton, “Rethinking Religious Experience: Notes from Critical Theory, Feminism, and Real Life,” *Dialogue* 28, no. 4 (1995): 67–88.

31. Robert Bird, “Mormon Postmodernism: Worlds without End in Young’s *Salvador* and Card’s *Lost Boys*,” *Dialogue* 32, no. 3 (1999): 56.

32. Richard Cracroft, review of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*, ed. Eugene England and Dennis Clark, *BYU Studies* 30, no. 2 (1990): 119.

33. Cracroft, review of *Harvest*, 122.

34. Richard Cracroft, “Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature,” *Sunstone* 91 (July 1993): 54.

35. England, “Mormon Literature,” 457.

In his 1991 AML presidential address, Bruce Jorgensen responded to Cracroft's review of *Harvest* with a talk entitled "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say." Jorgensen said that stories which seem alien should be heard before being judged. Applying a metaphor of ancient hospitality, he said, "The stranger/guest is always, if the means are available, washed, sometimes bathed and clothed in clean garments, and fed to repletion—all this before being asked his name and story."<sup>36</sup> Where Cracroft called for a certain kind of Mormon story and decried those written after "the world," Jorgensen invited all stories, saying, "A Mormon criticism will surely not judge very quickly by superficial elements such as the presence of the always-ready-to-hand clichés of pop Mormon 'spirituality' or 'virtue,' or, negatively, by the presence of topics we disapprove or words we must not say."<sup>37</sup>

Joining the discussion, Gideon Burton later attempted a middle ground in his essay "Is This Mormon Literature?" Burton said, "'Entertaining the stranger' does not necessarily equate with 'pluralism' or 'diversity'; acknowledging and seeking truth in all realms isn't tantamount to relativism."<sup>38</sup> According to Burton, "Cracroft urges us to be grounded in the Mormon 'mythos' in both our criticism and our literature. . . . He is right, for if our roots are not deep in the soil of Mormon experience and in the spiritual reality of the Restoration, we are only voices in the relativistic maelstrom of modern Babel and Babylon. But to be grounded [thus] is to be willing to journey into the unknown with faith that in entertaining the stranger, as Jorgensen urges us to do, we might be entertaining angels unawares, messengers of truth."<sup>39</sup>

In many ways this debate continues as established decades ago, when Home Literature Mormons strove to assert Zion through moralistic pablum, while the Lost Generation expatriated from the fold and exchanged faith for artistry as though the two were mutually exclusive. Sadly, it seems that the discussion in this century has lost both depth and muscle. What remains are publishers' book reviews and knee-jerk commentaries on the "Bloggernacle," the Mormon blogosphere concerned

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36. Bruce Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," in *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature*, ed. Eugene England and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996): 55.

37. Jorgensen, "To Tell and Hear Stories," 63.

38. Gideon Burton, "Toward a Mormon Criticism: Should We Ask 'Is This Mormon Literature?'" *Dialogue* 32, no. 3 (1999): 40.

39. Burton, "Toward a Mormon Criticism," 39.

with Latter-day Saint matters. No Englands or Cracrofts remain to stir up the fight for or about the future of Mormon literature.

My literature review yielded a great deal of Mormon *criticism*—reaching back to the 1940s<sup>40</sup> and 1950s.<sup>41</sup> But nowhere did I find a Mormon literary *theory*—though many writers called for one. Richard Cracroft said, “There is no solid center to Mormon criticism.” He added, “We need, for a change, an alternative criticism, a Latter-day Saint criticism centered in the gospel, in Mormon faith, not in the Sophic creeds of secularism.”<sup>42</sup> In the 1984 book *Dialogues with Myself*, Eugene England said he had “become increasingly uneasy in the past twenty years about the inadequacy of formalist criteria (I mean those concerned with aesthetic qualities—structure, style, organization, etc.)”<sup>43</sup> England felt that formalism—the 1950s’ New Criticism of Cleanth Brooks and John Crowe Ransom—failed to recognize significant ethical and social qualities worthy of note, especially regarding the less-sophisticated literature of early Mormons. England further said, “No systematic criticism has emerged that successfully identifies Mormonism with any one theory of language or poetics.”<sup>44</sup> Richard D. Rust, in his essay “Virtuous, Lovely, or of Good Report: Thoughts on a Latter-day Saint Criticism,” called for “methods of criticism implied in scripture and latter-day prophetic statements.”<sup>45</sup> Many writers called for such a theoretical framework, but none articulated a coherent approach.

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40. Dale L. Morgan, “Mormon Story Tellers,” *Rocky Mountain Review* 7 (Fall 1942): 1–7. This short-lived journal of criticism and original writing should not be confused with the current journal of the same name published by the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association. This article was republished in *The Rocky Mountain Reader*, ed. Ray B. West Jr. (New York: Dutton, 1946), 404–13, and can also be found in *Dale Morgan on the Mormons: Collected Works, Part 1, 1939–1951*, ed. Richard L. Saunders, *Kingdom in the West: The Mormons and the American Frontier*, vol. 14 (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 149–58.

41. William Mulder, “Mormonism and Literature,” *Western Humanities Review* 9 (Winter 1954–55): 85–89.

42. Cracroft, “Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice,” 55, 56.

43. Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1984): 61.

44. England, “Mormon Literature,” 461.

45. Richard D. Rust, “Virtuous, Lovely, or of Good Report: Thoughts on a Latter-day Saint Literary Criticism,” paper delivered at Literature and Belief Colloquium, March 31, 1995, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

## CRITICISM AND THEORY: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

*The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* offers this definition of *literary criticism*: “Reflective, attentive consideration and analysis of a literary work.”<sup>46</sup> Such consideration could run the gamut from book reviews, publishers’ statements, or readers’ blogs (on one hand) to erudite analyses (on the other hand) performed through a complex theoretical lens, such as deconstruction or postcolonial studies.

In common usage, the word *theory* can be a synonym with *conjecture*. In science, the word is often taken to mean a widely accepted and tested statement used to make predictions or describe the natural world. Similarly, in literary studies, “*theory* has traditionally referred to a set of general principles applicable to the classification, analysis, and evaluation of literary works.”<sup>47</sup> As Holman and Harmon put it in their *Handbook to Literature*, theory “attempts to arrive at general principles and to formulate inclusive aesthetic tenets.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, *The Bedford Glossary* says, “Whether or not critics openly draw on particular theories of literary interpretation, their readings are usually informed by some theory about literature that provides a basis for their questions and conclusions.”<sup>49</sup> I found this true of the Mormon criticism I read, in which the readings were informed primarily by formalist, historical, feminist, or ethical approaches. *The Bedford Glossary* cautions: “Critics who operate without a theoretical framework are vulnerable to the charge of making arbitrary, idiosyncratic, or impressionistic judgments.”<sup>50</sup> This was especially true of the many blogs, book reviews, and conference papers I read.

Put simply, *criticism* is the act of examining works, whether or not through a specific theoretical lens, while *theory* calls for a framework from which literature is examined—feminist theory, deconstruction,

46. Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, eds., *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford, 2009), s.v. “Literary Criticism.”

47. Murfin and Ray, *Bedford Glossary*, s.v. “Theory.”

48. William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, eds., *A Handbook to Literature*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2000), s.v. “Theoretical Criticism.” For a useful anthology written by Latter-day Saint professors of English summarizing several of the main theoretical approaches to literature, see David Cowles, ed., *The Critical Experience: Literary Reading, Writing, and Criticism*, 2d ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1994).

49. Murfin and Ray, *Bedford Glossary*, s.v. “Theory.”

50. Murfin and Ray, *Bedford Glossary*, s.v. “Theory.”

or reader-response, for example.<sup>51</sup> In short, *theory* is a lens, a rationale through which texts can be read, interpreted, judged, and valued.

### A THEORY ROOTED IN MORMON THEOLOGY

In a 1974 *Dialogue* article entitled “The Example of Flannery O’Connor,” Karl Keller discussed the lessons Mormon fiction writers can learn from O’Connor, a writer whose novels and stories were deeply rooted in her Catholic theology. Though her works were religious—above and below their surfaces—they were void of didacticism or propaganda. Comparing O’Connor’s work to Mormon fiction, Keller said, “The usual complaint is that Mormon fiction tends to two extremes, the historical-regional and the didactic.”<sup>52</sup> He’s speaking here of the same dichotomy discussed above—didactic Home Literature on one hand and skeptical Lost Generation writing on the other. Keller says, “The one articulates the teachings of the Church only incidentally and has as its subject the life-style, the manners, the ethics following from and incidental to the theology, without coming close to the doctrinal heart, the intellectual core, of the Church. The other type of fiction, the didactic, sells the Church without making it very believable. It cannot be read in this world.”<sup>53</sup>

Sadly, Keller concludes that it’s “virtually impossible to deduce a theology from works of Mormon fiction.”<sup>54</sup> What Keller asks of Mormon fiction—that it be based in Mormon theology—should be expected of a Mormon literary theory as well. Keller offers a solution for Mormon fiction writers, one useful for Mormon literary critics: “A particularly good source for material . . . is, I believe, a work like Sterling M. McMurrin’s *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*. Whatever its philosophical intent, it is essentially an outline of esthetic possibilities of Mormon articles of belief.”<sup>55</sup> England echoes this endorsement: “Mormon writers, to achieve the theological literacy needed to create their unique imaginative worlds, should read Sterling M. McMurrin’s *The Theological*

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51. Harmon and Holman, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v. “Criticism.”

52. Karl Keller, “The Example of Flannery O’Connor,” *Dialogue* 9, no. 4 (1974): 62.

53. Keller, “Example of Flannery O’Connor,” 62.

54. Keller, “Example of Flannery O’Connor,” 63.

55. Keller, “Example of Flannery O’Connor,” 69–70.

*Foundations of the Mormon Religion.*<sup>56</sup> To this recommendation can be added many recent works on theological and philosophical expressions of Mormon thought and experience. What aspects of Mormon theology, therefore, would be relevant to a basis for a literary theory?

### THE MORMON COSMOLOGY

In Mormon teachings, God the Father and his Son exist as embodied eternal beings: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also” (D&C 130:22). The God of Mormonism does not precede all existence, nor is he a deity from whom all things spring, *ex nihilo*. The Mormon God, having not always been God, obeyed the same principles of eternal progression he now teaches his children. As Joseph Smith is reported to have said in the “King Follett Discourse,” “God that sets enthroned is a man like one of yourselves—that is the great secret.”<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, the God of Mormonism lives in time. Kent Robson’s entry “Time and Eternity” in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states, “Scriptural passages that ascribe eternity to God do not say or imply that God is independent of, or outside of, or beyond time. Nor do they say, with Augustine, that God created time out of nothing.”<sup>58</sup> In LDS understanding, Robson says, “eternity is time with an adjective: It is endless time. Eternity is not, as in Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, supratemporal or nontemporal.”<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Robson reasons from the book of Abraham to say, “It is presumed that God, angels, men, and prophets reckon time differently.”<sup>60</sup> These notions—of a temporal, corporal, progressing God—radically set Mormonism apart from traditional Christianity and, therefore, much of Western thought.

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56. England, “Mormon Literature,” 459. First published in 1965, this work by McMurrin was insightfully and sympathetically reviewed by Truman Madsen in *BYU Studies* 9, no. 1 (1968): 103–9.

57. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton,” Joseph Smith Papers, available at <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton&p=3>; see also Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 357.

58. Kent E. Robson, “Time and Eternity,” in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1478.

59. Robson, “Time and Eternity,” 1478.

60. Robson, “Time and Eternity,” 1479.

Rather than viewing God as absolute and existentially apart from humanity, Mormonism espouses a God who is a literal Father, a God who needs our cooperation if our own salvation is to occur, a God who is affected by our victories and tragedies, as Mormon scripture illustrates: “And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it” (Moses 7:28). This not the absolute and detached God of traditional Christianity; instead, this is the God whom England called “the weeping God of Mormonism.”<sup>61</sup>

What of humanity in Mormon cosmology? England explains, “All human beings are fundamentally uncreated, noncontingent intelligences with infinite potential, literally gods in embryo. Like God, we are indestructible but bound forever in a real environment of spirit, element, and other beings that both limit and make demands on us and also make genuine joy and eternal progression possible.”<sup>62</sup> In the universe of Mormonism, human “freedom is not an illusion but is of tragic proportions. God did not make us or the world out of nothing and cannot force salvation upon us, and our choices have real consequences for good and evil.”<sup>63</sup>

In the Mormon cosmos, paradox abounds. B. H Roberts said, “There are eternal opposites in existence, light—darkness; joy—sorrow; pleasure—pain; sweet—bitter; good—evil; and so following. Evil is an eternal existence, the necessary co-relative of the good, uncreate and may not be referred to God for its origin.”<sup>64</sup> In England’s words, Mormonism presents us with “an ultimately paradoxical, because nonabsolutistic, universe, where opposition ‘must needs be’ or otherwise there is no existence, where God cannot achieve his purposes through his will alone and therefore has problems and suffers, not only through choice but through necessity, because he has perfect power to bring salvation with our cooperation—but not without it. The consequences include terror and awful responsibility as well as the hope of exciting eternal adventure.”<sup>65</sup>

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61. Eugene England, “The Weeping God of Mormonism,” *Dialogue* 35, no. 1 (2002): 63–80.

62. England, “Mormon Literature,” 459–60.

63. England, “Mormon Literature,” 460.

64. Brigham Henry Roberts, *The New Witnesses for God: The Book of Mormon, Volume 3* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 228.

65. England, “Dawning of a Brighter Day,” 153.

Finally, in this Mormon cosmos of paradoxes, of spiritual beings housed in corporeal bodies, two additional paradoxes hold sway, both arising from the notion that gods, angels, and people are sexed beings. The first paradox is this: the sexes are different in their characteristics but equal in their worth. The second paradox was best defined by Benjamin Cummings in his book *The Eternal Individual Self*: “Each being is a distinct identity, an eternally existing individual. He does not trace his origin back to some undifferentiated ‘mass’ of being, nor is he destined for ultimate absorption into any sort of undifferentiated state.”<sup>66</sup> This “cosmic loneliness,”<sup>67</sup> as Cummings names it, causes us to seek “affiliation.”<sup>68</sup> Thus the paradox: we are alone, yet we need one another. Among the covenants Mormons make with God and each other, the highest is marriage. In England’s words, “Eternally separate and impenetrable as each of us is, we cannot realize our fullest nature and joy except in the fully sexual unity of an eternal marriage—an idea, together with the divine equality of the sexes, given the very highest status in the unique Mormon understanding of God being God only in the male and female oneness of Heavenly Parents.”<sup>69</sup>

The Fortunate Fall into a lone and dreary world; Christ’s atonement; opposition that “must needs be”; the eternal nature of good and evil; the materiality of matter *and* spirit; the eternal individuality of the self; the need for affiliation through marriage, family, and friendship—what do these tenets have to do with the reception, judging, and valuing of literature? If Mormons see the world differently than others, it may be reasoned that Mormons read—and should read—differently as well.

### A MORMON LITERARY THEORY: ONE APPROACH

What then of a Mormon literary theory? How should it be defined? What follows is not a once-and-for-all answer. Instead, it’s a possible framework. I propose a theory grounded in Mormon cosmology; a theory that accounts for the mythic proportions of Mormon thought; that seeks to build culture, specifically a Zion culture; that values language and “The Word” and the redemptive power of art; that utilizes

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66. Benjamin F. Cummings III, *The Eternal Individual Self* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1968): 61.

67. Cummings, *Eternal Individual Self*, 70.

68. Cummings, *Eternal Individual Self*, 121.

69. England, “Mormon Literature,” 460.

elements of ethical criticism as it assumes an inherently moral force in literature; and that aligns with the current movement called “Post-Postmodernism,” or the “New Sincerity.”

### The Mythic Proportions of Mormonism

England wrote that Mormonism involves “a certain epic consciousness and mythic identification with ancient peoples and processes: the themes of exile and return, of the fruitful journey into the wilderness, the pilgrim traveling the dark and misty way to the tree of salvation; the lonely quest for selfhood that leads to conversion and then to the paradox of community; the desert as crucible in which to make saints, not gold; . . . [and] the fortunate fall from innocence and comfort into a lone and dreary world where opposition and tragic struggle can produce virtue and salvation.”<sup>70</sup> In this sense, Mormon literary theory would draw unabashedly from mythic or archetypal critical approaches founded by Carl Jung, Northrop Frye, and others.

In literary terms, a *myth* is a dramatic or narrative embodiment of a people’s perception of life’s deepest truths, while an *archetype* is a character, setting, or plot element with ancient and universal significance. Frye described an *archetype* as “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole.”<sup>71</sup> According to T. S. Eliot, the mythic vision of literature “becomes available only to or through the poet.”<sup>72</sup>

Very much out of vogue today, mythic criticism “explores the nature and significance of the archetypes and archetypal patterns in a work of art.”<sup>73</sup> For the Mormon, who identifies him- or herself with Adam or Eve, Abraham, the Mormon pioneers, or other scriptural or historic characters and their quests, an archetypal approach is second nature—one result of following the words of Nephi in the Book of Mormon, who said, “I did liken all scriptures unto us” (1 Ne. 19:23). The work of Northrop Frye, especially his 1957 book *Anatomy of Criticism*, was exactly the kind of structuralist approach that fell victim to the poststructuralism of the

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70. England, “Dawning of a Brighter Day,” 136.

71. Northrop Frye, quoted in Holman and Harmon, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v., “Archetype.”

72. T. S. Eliot, quoted in Holman and Harmon, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v., “Archetype.”

73. Holman and Harmon, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v. “Mythic Criticism.”

1960s and 1970s, being itself a “conception of literature as constituting a total order or universe.”<sup>74</sup> The fragmentation of postmodernism, especially its “incredulity toward metanarratives,”<sup>75</sup> pushed the study of myths and archetypes to the margins. But the myths and archetypes themselves remain. They wait patiently, ready to be mined once more. A Mormon literary theory surely would seek and value those elements of literary texts that are rich in mythic significance—whether they come in the form of narrative, plot, character, or setting.

### Building Culture, Building Zion

Matthew Arnold, the nineteenth-century British poet and cultural critic, advocated an “endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Spencer W. Kimball said, “Our art must be the kind which edifies man, which takes into account his immortal nature, and which prepares us for heaven, not hell.”<sup>77</sup> Because the Mormon universe is neither nihilistic nor determined, Mormons feel responsible to make something of themselves and the world around them—“to dress . . . and to keep” their gardens (Gen. 2:15).

In this way, Mormonism aligns with a Renaissance spirit, whose fundamental message was that “human beings [are] glorious creatures capable of individual development in the direction of perfection.”<sup>78</sup> In 1486, Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola gave his “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” declaring that God had said to Adam, “Constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, [thou] shalt ordain for thyself the limits of thy nature.”<sup>79</sup> The Renaissance itself had broken forth from a medieval cosmology

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74. Vincent B. Leitch and others, “Northop Frye,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 1302.

75. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, *Theory and History of Literature* 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

76. Matthew Arnold, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2B, *The Victorian Age*, 2d ed. (New York: Longman, 2003), 1582.

77. Spencer W. Kimball, “Second Century Address,” *BYU Studies* 16, no. 4 (1976): 454.

78. Holman and Harmon, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v. “Renaissance.”

79. Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 225.

based on the Great Chain of Being, which urged individuals to remain and serve well in their fated station.<sup>80</sup> But Mirandola said, “Let a certain holy ambition invade our souls, so that, not content with the mediocre, we shall pant after the highest.”<sup>81</sup> Renaissance humanism exalted man and brought about the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Enlightenment, the discovery of the New World, and the Copernican solar system. The Romantics who followed championed the individual as well. Emerging in the nineteenth-century American Romantic context, Mormonism gave divine approval to the value and growth of the individual human soul, elevating human progression to the notion of eternal progression.

No one championed the growth of the individual—the individual *and his friends*, his whole community—better than Joseph Smith, who said, “Friendship is one of the grand fundamental principles of ‘Mormonism’; [it is designed] to revolutionize and civilize the world, and cause wars and contentions to cease and men to become friends and brothers.”<sup>82</sup> As BYU English professor Gideon Burton states it, “The Restoration comprises the very renaissance of the world and its culture.”<sup>83</sup> Burton further says, “Our literary enterprise is itself an effort to salvage, perfect, and redeem world culture.”<sup>84</sup> But when Burton advocates “culture,” he is not merely advancing a decadent, overripe sophistication. “Mormon literature and criticism can only progress,” Burton says, “within a vision of the rise of Mormon culture to its culmination into a Zion culture.”<sup>85</sup> As Richard Cracroft said, “The Latter-day Saint sees as his or her mission the preparation of a Zion people;”<sup>86</sup> Mormonism demands “cross[ing] the spiritual plains to Zion, forging enroute an evolving latter-day mythos that becomes the soil—not merely a sprayed-on nutrient.”<sup>87</sup> A Mormon literary theory would champion literature, education, and culture, and value any text that builds and develops individuals, friendships, communities, and, thus, Zion itself.

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80. Siniša Malešević and Mark Haugaard, *Ernest Gellner and Contemporary Social Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 86.

81. Mirandola, “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” 227.

82. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 5:517.

83. Burton, “Toward a Mormon Criticism,” 38.

84. Burton, “Toward a Mormon Criticism,” 41.

85. Burton, “Toward a Mormon Criticism,” 41.

86. Cracroft, “Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice,” 53.

87. Cracroft, “Review of *Harvest*,” 121.

## The Word

Fundamentally, every literary work is made of words. St. John 1:1 calls Jesus Christ “the Word,” a translation of the Greek “logos,” applied by Hellenistic philosophers to indicate “word, speech, discourse, [and] reason.”<sup>88</sup> In this sense, Christ is language and reason itself, making communication and meaning possible. *Lectures on Faith* asserts that words make faith possible as well: “It is by words, instead of exerting his physical powers, with which every being works when he works by faith. . . . Faith, then, works by words.”<sup>89</sup> In Hebrew, *Memra*, “the Word,” as in “the Word of the Lord,” is “the creative or directive word or speech of God.”<sup>90</sup> The creation narrative in the book of Abraham tells us that the Gods “said: Let there be light,” “called the light Day,” “ordered the expanse,” and “pronounced the dry land, Earth” (Abr. 4:3–10, italics added). A Mormon literary theory would acknowledge the remarkable power of words that make reasoning, faith, and creation possible.

Mormonism began with a book, with words given by revelation “after the manner of [our] language” (D&C 1:24). A Mormon literary theory would view words and language as centered in Christ and would privilege meaning and reason: “A truly Mormon literature would stand firm against secular man’s increasing anxiety about the ability of language to get at the irreducible otherness of things outside the mind.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, England said, “Mormon writers [should] take seriously their faith that language is a gift from God. . . . There should be in Mormon writers a special respect for language and form, attention to their tragic limitations but also to their real possibilities.”<sup>92</sup> Truly, a Mormon literary theory would respond with a skepticism all its own regarding the “prison-house of language.”<sup>93</sup> Learning exactly what it means for Christ to be “the Word”—to be the origin of language and reasoning itself—is a formidable task, to be sure. But the difficulty of the task should be enough to recommend it.

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88. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1st ed. (online version), s.v. “Logos.”

89. N. B. Lundwall, comp., *A Compilation Containing the Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.), 61 (Lecture Seventh, paragraph 3).

90. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906 ed., s.v. “Memra,” <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/directory/M/10532?page=4>.

91. England, “Dawning of a Brighter Day,” 136.

92. England, “Dawning of a Brighter Day,” 136.

93. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

## The Redemptive Power of Art

In the creation of the universe as Mormons envision it, God took unorganized matter and created worlds. Similarly, the writer takes the unorganized “matter” of random events and shapes them into something meaningful, such as a story.<sup>94</sup> Christ is not just “Logos”—reason and language—he is also the Redeemer. “To redeem” means to restore, to pay off. What does a writer do in creating a story or poem? He takes experience—his own, others’, or imagined experience—and shapes it into something meaningful. The best writing is a gift from one person to another. But more than that, good writing *redeems*—or *buys back*—experience and transforms it into something greater. Consider what might happen if I chose to write about my own late father, a man who was a drinker, a liar, and a cheat. What should I do with such a man’s experiences? I could forget them, I could repress them, I could bitterly shout them from the housetops. Or I could do something nobler: I could redeem them by transforming them into literature. Writing calls for reflection, revision, plotting, the crafting of language, finding metaphorical implications. Through the writing process, layers of meaning emerge. If I genuinely invest in this task, soon my father’s deeds no longer appear one-dimensional. His character becomes more human, more complex and interesting.

This is not just a smoothing over, a cleaning up of ugly reality—the way we write obituaries or the way some people keep journals, telling only the good stuff. This is redemption—fall *and* atonement. When such stories resonate with readers, they find catharsis, redemption. What was once base and toxic in experience comes to serve a higher purpose: the weight of the conflict brings gravity to the subsequent redemption. In Mormonism, the Atonement of Christ is the central act of our existence, an act that offers salvation and exaltation to the entire human family. In small ways, then, literature can also atone, can close the emptiness between us. Art and literature can serve as atonement with a small *a*. Inasmuch as a work of literature is redemptive—and I assert that all great literature is—it would be valued by a Mormon literary theory.

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94. See Jack Harrell, “Making Meaning as a Mormon Writer,” *Sunstone* 169 (December 2012): 6–8.

## Ethics and Literature

John Steinbeck writes in *East of Eden*, “All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil.”<sup>95</sup> He goes on to say, “Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last. . . . There is no other story.”<sup>96</sup> Similarly, David Foster Wallace, in his remarkable 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech entitled “This Is Water,” spoke of the verities—love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things—that have been “codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story.”<sup>97</sup> While it is true that literary works portray liars, thieves, adulterers, murderers—every shade of wrongdoer—these individuals are typically the antagonists of their stories, not the protagonists. Even when readers are led to sympathize with the worst of humanity, such characters are not portrayed as healthy or ultimately admirable—indeed, cannot be. Ronald B. Tobias of Montana State University said it this way, “Either directly or indirectly, fiction tells us how to behave and how not to behave, what is right and what is wrong.”<sup>98</sup>

According to Marshall W. Gregory of Butler University, “For roughly 2500 years, ethical references constituted the starting point (and often the ending point) for most literary commentary.” But throughout the twentieth century, says Gregory, “at the academic and professional levels ethical criticism was killed, crushed, annihilated.” This occurred through a shift in focus to the text rather than its impact, and through poststructuralist fragmentation: “The higher the prestige of other modes of criticism ascended—first, New Criticism, and, second, postmodernism—the lower the prestige of ethical criticism descended.”<sup>99</sup>

Of course, ethical questions themselves didn’t vanish, nor did the frequency or intensity of the ethical mandates springing from every corner of criticism. Value judgments about what to read and why, which voices to advance or censure, what forces to deem oppressive or liberating

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95. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 413.

96. Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 411.

97. David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 107.

98. Ronald B. Tobias, *20 Master Plots and How to Build Them*, 1st ed. (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest, 2003), 38.

99. Marshall Gregory, “Redefining Ethical Criticism: The Old vs. the New,” *Journal of Literary Theory* 4, no. 2 (2010): 273–74.

abounded under the banners of *rhetoric* or *politics*—veiling, however slightly, their ethical or moral injunctions.

Nevertheless, Gregory believes the tide is turning: “In this first decade of the 21st century, intellectual room for a renewed ethical criticism is expanding as the credibility of postmodernism is shrinking.”<sup>100</sup> Certainly a Mormon literary theory would align with the best methods of ethical criticism—regardless of whether or not that approach is in vogue. Gregory concedes there is real work to be done here: “Analyzing the ethical content of literary art is a much more complex intellectual challenge than most ethical critics have ever understood.”<sup>101</sup> A critic cannot simply “run on brainlessly and tediously about [teaching] lessons.”<sup>102</sup> Speaking in terms that resonate with Mormon thought, Gregory says, “Works of literary art have a kind of agency about them that belies their fixed structure.” He speaks of three kinds of invitations made by a work of literature. The first is “*invitations to feeling*. Every work invites its readers to respond in specifically emotional ways to the represented content: dread, suspense, indignation, gratification, curiosity, and so on.” Second, there are “*invitations to belief* [that ask the] reader to believe certain facts or notions that the effects of the work depend on.” And, third, each work of literature calls for “*invitations to ethical judgment*. At a fundamental level, readers interacting with artistic representations have to make judgments about who the good guys and the bad guys are, whose successes are deserved and are therefore gratifying, whose actions, thoughts, and speech demand disapproval, whose inner selves hang uncertain in the moral balance, and so on.”<sup>103</sup>

Eugene England advocated a connection between Mormon literature and ethical criticism as far back as 1982: “Critics like Yvor Winters, Ian Watt, Wayne Booth, Robert Scholes, E. D. Hirsch, and John Gardner have explored some of the neglected social, moral, and religious values in literature and the critical means for understanding and evaluating literature in terms of them. If we are to evaluate properly . . . , we must build on their work.”<sup>104</sup> In a 1999 essay called “Danger on the Right, Danger on the Left: The Ethics of Recent Mormon Fiction,” England began

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100. Gregory, “Redefining Ethical Criticism,” 278.

101. Gregory, “Redefining Ethical Criticism,” 289.

102. Gregory, “Redefining Ethical Criticism,” 283.

103. Gregory, “Redefining Ethical Criticism,” 289–90, 291, emphasis in original.

104. England, “Dawning of a Brighter Day,” 141.

with a gloss of the first Mormon short story, Parley P. Pratt's "A Dialogue between Joe Smith and the Devil." After summarizing and then praising the story, England says, "Ethical fiction . . . gives the Devil his due, brings opposites together metaphorically."<sup>105</sup> But England is not advocating didacticism: "Good ethical fiction [cannot] be produced by mere commitment to ethical positions, by an ideological design, one that is either already in favor of certain didactic premises or already against them, with either a right-wing or a left-wing cultural agenda. That leads directly to ethical manipulation."<sup>106</sup> Writing that is beholden to social agendas is propaganda, not literature. Political partisanship, institutional policy, and commercial promotion have their place. But literature and art, by definition, are more complex than dogmatism.

There's a paradox here. Though literature may deal with morality in a broad sense, it is not bound to political or institutional values. Literary critic Jonathan Culler says literature is "based on the possibility of saying anything you can imagine. This is central to what literature is: for any orthodoxy, any belief, any value, a literary work can mock it, parody it, imagine some different and monstrous fiction."<sup>107</sup> Culler further says, "Literature cannot be reduced to [a] conservative social function: it is scarcely the purveyor of 'family values.'"<sup>108</sup> Therefore, a Mormon literary theory would have to make the distinction between art and propaganda, would have to know the difference and be able to articulate it.

My own late colleague, former BYU–Idaho professor Stephen K. George, was in the advanced company of those advocating a new ethical literary theory. Publishing his book *Ethics, Literature, Theory: An Introductory Reader* in 2005, George wrote of the current "lively discussion among scholars, artists, and teachers concerning the 'moral' role of literature, a debate that extends back at least to Plato and continues today with Wayne C. Booth, Marshall Gregory, Richard A. Posner, and others."<sup>109</sup> Surely a Mormon literary theory would be unafraid to take up the difficult—and perhaps unpopular—task of ethical literary

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105. Eugene England, "Danger on the Right! Danger on the Left! The Ethics of Recent Mormon Fiction," *Dialogue* 32, no. 3 (1999): 14.

106. England, "Danger on the Right!" 18.

107. Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Lanham, Md.: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39.

108. Culler, *Literary Theory*, 40.

109. Stephen K. George, *Ethics, Literature, Theory: An Introductory Reader* 2d ed. (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2005), xv.

criticism in order to advance the conversation about what works are worth reading, and are good reading, and what works are not.

### Postmodernism

One might ask, how can such meaning-centered, ethically based, humanistic notions as I've advanced here find a place amid contemporary post-structural theories with their "criticism of humanism"?<sup>110</sup> Our current climate is deeply influenced by Derridian deconstruction, in which "the signifier (word) is disconnected from the signified (concept)."<sup>111</sup> In such a context, "meaning is sliding, abyssal, undecidable."<sup>112</sup> What happens to truth, ethics, and culture in such an environment?

Or one might simply ask, "Isn't deconstruction deeply problematic from a Mormon standpoint?" True, deconstruction unravels meaning and language itself, but such is not completely at odds with concepts dear to Mormonism. The Book of Mormon frequently addresses problematic issues concerning language.<sup>113</sup> Moroni seemed especially concerned with his "weakness in writing" (Ether 12:23, 40), saying, "when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words" (Ether 12:25). While much mainstream Protestantism views scripture as immutable, relying on "biblical inerrancy,"<sup>114</sup> Mormonism, since its beginning, has allowed for continuing revelation as well as ongoing revisions of sacred texts—from the several versions of Joseph's First Vision<sup>115</sup> to the most recent changes in the LDS standard works.<sup>116</sup> In 2 Nephi 2:11, we read

110. Leitch and others, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 22.

111. Leitch and others, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 22.

112. Leitch and others, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 23.

113. See 1 Nephi 1:2; Mormon 9:34; and Mosiah 28:14.

114. International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Dallas Theological Seminary: Mosher and Turpin Libraries, 1978, <http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI.shtml>.

115. "The Church records created during these turbulent years [the early years of the Restoration] include eight documents in which Joseph Smith recorded details of his initial vision experience. Three of these, with minor differences, are duplications of a previous one." Dean C. Jessee, "The Earliest Documented Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 3.

116. "Church Releases New Edition of English Scriptures in Digital Formats," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/press?lang=eng>.

that “all things must needs be a compound in one.” Can one find anywhere a more concise summation of deconstruction? For the Mormon as well as the student of deconstruction, all things, including words and language, have two faces. The same knife used by the surgeon to heal can be used by the murderer to kill. Postmodernism has much in common with “the Mormon sense of an ongoing, continually developing universe in which God is a genuine and nonabsolute participant, himself in important ways a creature of language and its limitations.”<sup>117</sup>

Writing in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch says that “Post-structuralist theories of language . . . bring traditional mimetic, expressive, didactic, and formalist theories into crisis but do not invalidate their claims.” Leitch concludes that “a reading or interpretation of a text does not prove but persuades: it is more or less compelling, productive, original, or useful.”<sup>118</sup> In other words, though notions of truth may be slippery, persuasion is still possible, which is the same assertion made in Doctrine and Covenants 121:41: “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, *only by persuasion*” (italics added). Perhaps a Mormon literary theory cannot prove anything, but it can seek to persuade—which is all any theory can do.

### The New Sincerity, or, Post-Postmodernism

A final appeal for a Mormon literary theory cannot reside in postmodernism, however, since, as Fredric Jameson points out, one defining aspect of the postmodern is “the disappearance of a sense of history,”<sup>119</sup> a “perpetual present.”<sup>120</sup> Indeed, Christopher Butler says in his book *Postmodernism: A Brief Insight* that “much postmodern analysis is an attack on authority and reliability—in philosophy, narrative, and the relationship of the arts to truth.”<sup>121</sup> Butler concludes, “The best that one can say here, and I am saying it, is that postmodernists are good critical deconstructors, and terrible constructors.”<sup>122</sup> Such is far from a hand-in-glove philosophical fit for a Mormon literary theory.

117. England, “Mormon Literature,” 461.

118. Leitch and others, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 23.

119. Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in Leitch and others, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1860.

120. Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 1860.

121. Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Brief Insight* (New York: Sterling, 2010), 143.

122. Butler, *Postmodernism*, 151.

Postmodernists speak pejoratively of “logocentrism,” their term for a “fundamental error of mistaking . . . an arbitrary and artificial construct for a verifiable event.”<sup>123</sup> But a new movement is afoot. Some have begun to argue that postmodern skepticism has gone far enough, that its retreat into mere irony and linguistic play has made literature and culture hollow at best, totalitarian at worst. Listen to David Foster Wallace: “I’m going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture.”<sup>124</sup>

It is in this spirit that some are calling the present moment “Post-Postmodernism” or, in the words of others, the “New Sincerity.” We are now seeing a generation of thinkers who concede the major tenets of poststructuralism: they recognize that culture, literature, governance, and institutions are reducible to language; that language is constructed of arbitrary signifiers; and that one must search in vain for the transcendental signified. This generation has breathed this air their whole lives. However, being born into the postmodern condition of “incredulity toward metanarratives,”<sup>125</sup> they also know that they must still *do* something, they must *build* something, and *believe* in something if they are to make art, literature, and lives that are worth living.

The late David Foster Wallace was one of the prominent voices in this movement. Wallace made a distinction “between the Logical Appeal and the Ethical Appeal.”<sup>126</sup> In his work of nonfiction, *Consider the Lobster*, Wallace said this: “What the Ethical Appeal amounts to is a complex and sophisticated ‘Trust me.’ It’s the boldest, most ambitious, and also most democratic of rhetorical Appeals because it requires the rhetor to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but of his basic decency and fairness and sensitivity to the audience’s hopes and fears.”<sup>127</sup> Adam Kelly recognizes that “the gift of trust is always open to abuse,”<sup>128</sup> but the post-postmoderns are willing to

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123. Harmon and Holman, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v. “Logocentrism.”

124. David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 171.

125. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

126. Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Herring (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media, 2010), 144.

127. David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Back Bay, 2007), 77.

128. Kelly, “David Foster Wallace,” 144.

exercise their conviction that sincerity, trust, faith, action, and discussion can rise above postmodern irony.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of a Mormon literary theory would be this: faith in meaning itself, faith in *logos*. Such faith aligns with the particular philosophical moment in which we live—a moment and movement that accepts agency and accountability, that rejects nihilism and determinism, that challenges the victim-forging constructs of postmodern “subjectivity” that have found such purchase in critical theory—especially those of ethnic, gender, and sexual studies. As Christopher Butler writes, “The term preferred by postmodernists to apply to individuals is not so much ‘self’ as ‘subject,’ because the latter term implicitly draws attention to the ‘subject-ed’ condition of persons who are [bound] by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominate in the society they inhabit.”<sup>129</sup> Such a rhetorically constructed surrender of agency and accountability is antithetical to Mormonism and is antithetical to a Mormon literary theory, just as it is alien to the thoughts taking hold among those of the New Sincerity.

## CONCLUSION

Of course, the application of a Mormon literary theory would not be limited to Mormon texts: “Since Mormonism—like Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, or existentialism—contains its own philosophical assumptions and values, it does not matter what we ultimately write *about* but who we write *as*. Marxist and feminist literary critics are Marxists and feminists, not because of the kinds of literature that they read, but because of the kinds of criticism that they write.”<sup>130</sup> The same holds true for a Mormon theoretical approach.

As I’ve imagined it, then, a Mormon literary theory would

- grow out of Mormon cosmology;
- draw upon and develop tenets of myth criticism, aligning with the Mormon notions of the mythical proportions of life;
- advance the building of culture and of Zion;
- value language and “the Word”;
- seek the redemptive power of art;

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129. Butler, *Postmodernism*, 68–69.

130. Michael Austin, “The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time,” *Dialogue* 28, no. 4 (1995): 143.

- accept the challenge of ethical criticism, assuming an inherently moral force in literature; and
- align with the movement of New Sincerity in literature and the arts.

This is only the beginning of a conversation, however. In his book *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan Culler says literary theories are speculative, “not easily confirmed or disproved.”<sup>131</sup> Other writers might value different characteristics in Mormonism and thus come to different conclusions. Such differences should be welcomed and explored.

I would assert that a Mormon literary theory does exist—all the ingredients are present. What I’ve described appears to be, from my experience, the way most literary Mormons read—and have read for a long time. But my own attempt to define this theory will not suffice. More work should be done. Perhaps the next step should be one of application, an analysis of one or more literary works, whether Mormon or not, based on the tenets I have delineated above. In his “Home Literature” address, Elder Orson F. Whitney said, “Let us onward, then, and upward, keeping the goal in view; living not in the dead past, nor for the dying present. The future is our field. Eternity is before us.”<sup>132</sup> My hope is that this essay will serve as a springboard, one from which others might expand or challenge the discussion of Mormonism and literature and criticism that has been ongoing now for more than 175 years.

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131. Culler, *Literary Theory*, 3.

132. Whitney, “Home Literature,” 206.