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*"I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction."*

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

The flaws of Mormon fiction are many. But so are the possibilities.<sup>1</sup> Neither in the flux of Mormon activities nor in the canon of Mormon writings has fiction ever figured very significantly. But I believe it can be argued that that comes less from any prohibitions inherent in the theology than from the general irrelevance of our fiction to the doctrinal interests of the Church. More alarming than the paucity of qualified works of fiction in the Church is the lack of fictional exploration of the theology itself. Mormon fiction is by and large jack-fiction; it does not live by the principles of the Church. It is almost axiomatic, unfortunately, that with few exceptions the more removed a work of Mormon fiction is from orthodoxy, the better its art (*viz.*, *Children of God* by Vardis Fisher or *A Little Lower Than the Angels* by Virginia Sorensen), and the more narrowly orthodox its point of view, the poorer its art. What is needed is a new awareness of the imaginative possibilities for use of Mormon ideas in fiction. I would like to argue that possibility.

The usual complaint is that Mormon fiction tends to two extremes, the historical-regional and the didactic.<sup>2</sup> 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 very 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.

Unlike what one finds in the works of Jewish novelists like Bernard Malamud and Isaac Bashevis Singer or Catholic novelists like Walker Percy and Wilfrid

Sheed, it would therefore be virtually impossible to deduce a theology from works of Mormon fiction. For that reason, while they illustrate the imaginative capabilities of members of the Church, they by and large fail to reveal the imaginative potential of the theology itself. *Mormon fiction* at the present moment is a contradiction in terms: the two factors have not yet become one fact.

Like the manners of the Church, its art is not separate from but part of the larger environment of the West, where there has always been a difficulty representing ideologies artfully. Wallace Stegner has voiced this difficulty best: a writer of the Church, like any western writer, suffers from both "an inadequate artistic and intellectual tradition" and from "the coercive dominance of attitudes, beliefs, and intellectual fads and manners destructive of his own" coming from the world around him.<sup>3</sup> He therefore turns to that which he is sure of, his area and his past, even though to write about such at this point in time is more often than not sure suicide. Readers don't believe in going there anymore. Such a writer does not get past the celebration of the heroic and mythic frontier, however Church-dominated, to write about his beliefs as facts of his present earthly existence. He denies his gods for a mess of local color. Mormon historical-regional fiction suffers in precisely this way.

To be sure, some of the best fiction to come out of the Church has been of the local-color format—for example, Samuel Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why* (1948), Ardyth Kennelly's *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1949), and (best of all) Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* (1941). Yet this has been fiction that for the most part is the by-product of a history and a life-style that has *already* been created. It is parasitic. It reveals what lucidity about the history reveals. Whereas fiction with an ideology (or theology) at the heart of it is not based on the given but participates through language in the *creation* of that theology, historical-regional fiction lives off *lived* life; and too often that means living off stereotypes and patterns, off outmoded tribal qualities and virtues. The historical Mormon novel discredits with narrative that which it affirms by the choice of its subject. The native voice in Mormon literature has not always sounded very native, but twice removed from the life it loves and recreates. Its nostalgic, elegiac tone is a confession of yearning for a heroic, hard, dangerous life our authors have been cheated of. It has little ideological substance.

The didactic fiction suffers in another way, from obscurant sentimentality and folklorish inaccuracy. Nephi Anderson's *Added Upon*, for example, is a tract-like novel promoting hope in family life in the hereafter. But its lack of love of the worldly concrete and its sentimentalized guesswork make it vague and maudlin—and ultimately insulting to the mystery of the Resurrection. Similarly, a novel like O. F. Ursenbach's *The Quest* (1945) insults the mystery of personal salvation by relying on abstractions and conjectures. Such didactic Mormon fiction is escape fiction. It has no faith in the real and so will be incapable of stirring faith in the minds of real people. It does not begin where human perception begins, in the senses, and so its message cannot be believed. That is, it fails to be sufficiently *in* the world and *of* the world. It is concerned, to its own artistic disadvantage, with unleshed ideas and emotions. It tries to make that which is good without giving enough consideration to the good of that which is made.

The historical and the didactic purposes of such works of these two types ignore not only the present world but *especially* the philosophical foundations of the gospel. They may therefore be largely peripheral to one's most serious interests. It does seem odd that of all the things Mormon writers of fiction have had to offer the world, they have not yet offered it their beliefs, their theology, the gospel.

The attempts of Clinton Larson and Arthur H. King (in poetry) and Douglas Thayer (in fiction) to integrate art and Mormon theology are about the only ones where one may observe another type of writing being explored. Larson and King, through concrete baroque metaphor, have attempted to create means for realizing imaginatively such abstractions as the institution of the Church (a fun house), the saving Christ (a pyromaniac), conversion (hot weather in Tucson), and even God ("Ellipse, oval . . . O golden excrement"). Thayer, in several of the works in his "Mormon Stories" series being published in *Dialogue*, has likewise attempted the use of concrete, worldly symbols to represent factors of his faith: a wounded deer is the crucified Christ, a hawk is the Holy Ghost, a label inside a pair of jockey shorts is one's conscience, an uncompleted construction site is the fallen world, a gull is the Church devouring the entrails of the natural man. But these are only *beginnings* in the attempt to make the Mormon intellectual experience understandable and credible in imaginative literature.

The works of these writers demonstrate, if only tentatively, the possibilities of a Mormon literature which excitingly and convincingly *could* represent the theology in both form and content. In such works, the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense; his faith is not detached from the natural world. Yet it must be evident that Mormon writers have not yet been very successful in creating a fictional world in which their beliefs are shown to be *true*.

The possibilities for an artfully articulated theology can be demonstrated best, I think, with a reference to the theories of literature and the literary methods of the highly skilled Catholic writer of fiction Flannery O'Connor. In her techniques the Mormon writer has the best of possible examples. So remarkable is it to find a writer proclaiming Christian orthodoxy in these days ("I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy, . . ." she exclaimed in a lecture in 1960. "I shall have to remain well within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. I shall have to speak, without apology, of the Church, even when the Church is absent; of Christ, even when Christ is not recognized.")—so unusual is this attitude that special attention must be given to the ways in which she captures what she calls "the Mystery of religion" in her works.

Nathan A. Scott, Jr., the most orthodox Christian apologist among notable critics of modern literature, writes of Flannery O'Connor's art and faith:

Now it is as a part of this tradition [of offering a kind of attestation to the divine mystery that is part of the world] that we ought, I believe, to understand the legacy of that remarkably valiant and gifted young American, Flannery O'Connor. . . . In her two novels—*Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960)—and her two collections of stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converse* (1965),<sup>4</sup> she leaves a body of work which is to be counted amongst the finest fiction produced anywhere by her literary generation. And what makes it in part so notable are the radical kinds of moral judgment into the service of which she was so intent on putting her art. It was indeed always an art that very much wanted to wake the spirit's sleep, to break that somnolence into which we flee from the exactions of the moral life; and it consistently expresses a fierce kind of rage at the feckless, lack-lustre slum to which the human world is reduced when through indolence of spirit or failure of imagination, men have lost all sense of the pressure of glory upon the mundane realities of experience and have thus "fallen" into the profane. . . . She wanted not only to exhibit what is banal and trivializing in the desacralized world of modern unbelief but also to portray its vacuity in such a way as to stir the imagination into some fresh awareness of what has been lost—and thus to "baptize" it, to render it open and responsive once more to the dimension of the Sacred and the pressure of glory. . . . Hers is a body of fiction made rich and radiant by a Christian presence whose wit and brilliance and (notwithstanding all the Gothic furniture) whose cheerfulness we are only now at last beginning to discern.<sup>5</sup>

Similar amazement at the happy coincidence of Christian orthodoxy and fine art in her works has been expressed by Alfred Kazin:

The fascinations of Flannery O'Connor's work to me are many. She is one of the few Catholic writers of fiction in our day . . . who managed to fuse a thorough orthodoxy with the greatest possible independence or sophistication as an artist. . . . Her stories show that the Church—which as a physical character she used rarely in her work, and then in a mood of relaxed satire at her own expense—was so supreme in her mind as to be invisible.<sup>6</sup>

For these reasons, and for others that I will show, Flannery O'Connor is, better than anyone else in our time, the Christian fiction writer's mentor.

In technique as much as in subject matter, Flannery O'Connor is the supreme example of the writer with Christian convictions. That writer's true country, she believed, is not that which is past or that which is regional, not even that which is practiced and normal and desirable, but that which is eternal and absolute. Though a Southern writer with a deep regard for Southern tradition, O'Connor never succumbed to the self-defeating temptation of nostalgia, reminiscence, or memorializing that many Mormon writers have fallen under. She avoided the narcissistic sentimentality of much fiction written from the point of view of a region or an institution. She escaped it, she felt, by working in the light of an ultimate concern. Her answer to provincialism was simply to widen the province to include the acts of God in the lives of men in her stories. In addition, she was able to avoid the didactic by concentrating on the *worldly* manifestations of the supernatural. To Flannery O'Connor, it must also be pointed out in contrast to the Mormon writer, Catholic dogma was never a hindrance to a writer; instead, she found it a liberating force. It affects one's writing, she felt, by guaranteeing one's respect for the mystery of God's work in the world. This respect, she believed, separates the writer from the conventions of belief and the conventions of writing in the conventional world. The believer in the Mormon philosophy, from Flannery O'Connor's point of view, should find his field of vision of the concrete facts of man's life enlarged, not narrowed. Whenever she was told that because she was a Catholic she could not be an artist, Flannery O'Connor would reply that because she was a Catholic she could not afford to be *less* than an artist. She called religion "a dimension added" to her writing.

Though her stories are always concerned with ultimate and absolute religious matters ("My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil"), they do not *sell* a religious viewpoint. Since she believed that divine manifestations were always *concrete* manifestations, she transcended both didacticism and regionalism by insisting that her art be incarnational; that is, that it approach the infinite *indirectly* through the mediation of matter, that in fact it use the humblest materials of our lives to represent the relation of the human and divine. To her, fiction is about things human, and since we are made out of the earth, the writer of good fiction must be willing to be earthy:

If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased. To look at the worst will be for him no more than an act of trust in God.<sup>7</sup>

She has a story, "Greenleaf," in which the divine appears in the form of a bull ("like some patient god come down to woo") that troubles the herd of a self-satisfied woman, Mrs. May. She is a candidate for grace, but the divine must first

break through the great wall of her damning pride. The bull charges and gores Mrs. May; only then does she have "the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored." Flannery O'Connor thus renders her conviction about divine grace concrete and entertaining. Her dramatization makes any statement of dogma unnecessary: Mrs. May cannot deny either the reality of God in the end or His intolerable demands. Abstract beliefs have been made concrete, the divine working itself out imaginatively through the things of the world.

Flannery O'Connor felt that when it comes to the desire to write concretely about ultimate concerns, however, there is perhaps the temptation to write a sketch with an essay woven through it or an essay with a sketch woven through it or an editorial with a character in it or a case history with a moral or some other mongrel form of story-telling. To avoid such, she found it valuable to follow Aquinas' observation that "the artist is concerned with the good of that which is made." By that is meant that just as human experience has its meaning *in* that experience and not apart from it, so a work of fiction must speak *with* characters and actions from amid our mundane lives and not *about* characters and actions, not from any position above mankind and the world. It speaks from the earth to God, not the other way around. "The writer's moral sense," Flannery O'Connor wrote, "must coincide with his dramatic sense."<sup>8</sup> The good writer is interested in doing justice to the visible world because it suggests to him an invisible one.

None of this means that when one writes, he forgets or gives up any religious position that he holds. As the example of Flannery O'Connor shows, one's beliefs are the *light* by which one sees. But that is quite different from letting them be *what* one sees or letting them be a *substitute* for seeing. Religious and moral judgment is something that begins in the act of seeing; whenever it becomes separate from one's vision of the real world, then confusion results in both the mind and the story. The hardest lesson for the writer of convictions is that he must move from the concrete to the metaphysical and never the other way around. One story of O'Connor's, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," is about "a poor disabled friendless drifting man," Tom T. Shiftlet, who fixes up a woman's car for her and takes her idiot daughter off her hands for her, only to desert the girl at a roadside restaurant and drive on looking for hitchhikers to help. It is a story in which O'Connor is exploring the relation between a savior and the savable. "The life you save may be your own," says a sign along life's road, but as this Christ-figure finds out, there is no one who wants salvation anymore or is worthy of it, and all that is left to do is to call down apocalyptic destruction on the world:

Mr. Shiftlet felt that the rottenness of the world was about to engulf him. He raised his arm and let it fall again to his breast. "Oh Lord!" he prayed. "Break forth and wash the slime from this earth!"

The turnip [of a cloud] continued slowly to descend. After a few minutes there was a guffawing peal of thunder from behind and fantastic raindrops, like tin-can tops, crashed over the rear of Mr. Shiftlet's car. Very quickly he stepped on the gas and with his stump sticking out the window he raced the galloping shower into Mobile.

With such black humor O'Connor makes concrete her concern for an unbelieving world, a concern that is made believable in concrete fictional terms first so that one may believe the idea behind it when one deduces that.

Now, the orthodox Mormon writer is apt to be a reformer and apt to want to write because he is possessed by the bare bones of some abstract idea, conscious of problems but not always necessarily conscious of people, concerned with questions

and issues but not with the texture of existence, knowledgeable of case histories but not knowledgeable about all those concrete details of life that make actual the mystery of our position on earth. The analogical approach of a writer like Flannery O'Connor has to do with the divine life and our participation in it. She worked to make her descriptions of human action reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible. Both man and God are present in all that she wrote. She believed that two qualities make fiction—a sense of mystery and a sense of manners. Fiction must have human gestures through which one makes contact with Mystery. What Flannery O'Connor's stories teach is that what is needed in the writer is a sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of the divine in our lives. She asks one to define the divine concretely, to document any plan of salvation *at work*.

In her short novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, a call comes from God to a young country boy through his drunken, hysterical great-uncle to "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY." No matter how he tries to escape this divine election to be a prophet, he finds the divine at work in every contrary and evil thing he does, so that he is eventually driven to do the will of God he has tried violently to avoid. The divine intrudes in odd and surprising ways in his life to teach him to accept his call:

He felt his hunger no longer as a pain but as a tide. He felt it rising in himself through time and darkness, rising through the centuries, and he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth. He felt it building from the blood of Abel to his own, rising and engulfing him. It seemed in one instant to lift and turn him. He whirled toward the treeline. There, rising and spreading in the night, a red-gold tree of fire ascended as if it would consume the darkness in one tremendous burst of flame.

O'Connor is exceedingly skillful in finding concrete, "natural" ways in her stories to give the divine will expression in men's lives that normally exclude the divine: a pride-filled woman yells "Who do you think you *are*?" at the heavens and it turns into an echo; a displaced person comes from Poland to work a widow's farm and when he tries to teach her compassion and concern, she lets a tractor run over and "crucify" him; an escaped convict, "The Misfit," shoots all of a family stranded on a roadside in order to send them "to the father of souls." In such grotesque ways, she gives the divine an appearance.

Like any writer of special interests, it is easy for the Mormon writer to make himself a victim of parochial esthetics and cultural insularity, especially if he lets certain "official" doctrines keep him from seeing comprehensively or lets opinions and traditions keep him from seeing certain ways. It may also be easy for him to try to use fiction to prove the truth of the Church or the existence of the supernatural, even if he must fraudulently manipulate or smother certain facts and actions in his stories as he writes. But as the example of Flannery O'Connor shows, the writer of convictions does not necessarily have to move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. If he at any point separates the natural and the supernatural in what he writes, he will reduce his faith to pious clichés, and he will give himself over to a sentimentality that overemphasizes innocence and goodness. Both cliché and sentimentality ignore the hard work of experience and are therefore to the religious mind obscene.

The writer of faith, Flannery O'Connor contended, looks for the apt symbol to express his beliefs, one which will represent his theology believably:

Great fiction involves the whole range of human judgment; it is not simply an imitation of feeling. The good novelist not only finds a symbol for feeling, he finds a symbol and a way of lodging it which tells the intelligent reader whether this feeling is adequate or inadequate, whether it is moral or immoral, whether it is good or evil. And his theology, even in its most remote reaches, will have a direct bearing on this.

It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident. It makes a great difference to his novel whether he believes that we are created in God's image, or whether he believes we create God in our own. It makes a great difference whether he believes that our wills are free, or bound like those of the other animals.<sup>9</sup>

This means that the religious writer must try to penetrate the concrete world and seek to find in it the image of its true source, the image of some ultimate reality. Because writing fiction is by its very form the art of dealing with the concrete world, the writer must seek to find in the world of things the means for talking about his abstract beliefs, even the supernatural. If he does justice to the visible universe, to the world of experience, and makes that believable *first*, then he will be believed when he bears witness to the invisible world. He must not fall for the convention of portraying a reality that ends very close to the surface, if his belief indeed extends to an ultimate divine source. He must find a concrete way of showing the mysteries of life that make an objective world beyond the processes of consciousness. If he is a true artist, he will suggest, as O'Connor herself did in her stories, that image of ultimate reality as it can be seen in some aspect of the human condition. Then his art will perform the service of revelation.

In her story "The Enduring Chill" a young intellectual is dying to spite his mother and all that she represents. He is cured when a water stain on the ceiling of his bedroom takes the form of a hawk in his mind and descends upon him; it is the Holy Ghost forcing him to live in a world in which grace takes the form of the struggle to live:

The old life in him was exhausted. He awaited the coming of new. It was then that he felt the beginning of a chill, a chill so peculiar, so light, that it was like a warm ripple across a deeper sea of cold. His breath came short. The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion. Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend.

In this way O'Connor has the ultimate alive in the world's symbols. Her stories are redolent with such Mystery relayed through mere manners.

Such anagogy is the surest artistic method for a person to be both novelist *and* believer. This means that he will, as Flannery O'Connor herself did, locate the supernatural, the invisible, the mysterious *in* the world. Only in this way could she feel she was representing the central religious experience of a relationship with a supreme being recognized through faith. There is little of the anagogical in Mormon fiction, and therefore no God, little theology, and only a modicum of faith. The problem for the believing writer who wishes to write about man's encounter with God is how he can make the experience—which is *both* natural and supernatural—understandable and believable to readers. This has been a problem in every age, but in our own it is an almost insurmountable one.

The supreme example in Flannery O'Connor's fiction of the convergence of the natural and supernatural is her story "Good Country People." The main characters are a cynical, agnostic intellectual, Hulga Joy, and a tricky Bible-salesman, Manly Pointer; the main conflict is a contest of wills about who will seduce whom. They go to the hayloft of the barn where he tries to get her to tell him she loves him. But she does not know what love is. She has an artificial leg and he manages to get her to unhook it and give it to him. He runs away with it, leaving her humiliated and humbled. He has been the Christ trying to overcome her pride-filled intellectual coldness. When she cannot learn love, he leaves her in a condition that is without grace. The story is both humorous and rich in theology. What is important about the approach is the use of the natural to talk about the supernatural, the doubleness of language (puns, elaborate metaphors, black humor) as a representation of the world's doubleness (nature and supernature), and the use of the grotesque to show both the displacement of man and his need for redemption. By such means a writer becomes a revelator of the Mystery.

Even with the analogical approach there is the danger of a writer not seeing the truth while he writes but seeing only what he *believes*. Poor religious fiction results from the mistake of a writer thinking that his church or the scriptures have done his thinking for him and from the fact that he has not been willing to get himself dirty arranging reality into satisfying patterns on his own. "But the real novelist, . . ." Flannery O'Connor advised, "knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is. The more sacramental his theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that."<sup>10</sup> In the story "Everything that Rises Must Converge" the question of how mankind can learn love when he is by nature loveless is dramatized by the bitter conflict between a mother and her son. Only when a black woman knocks the mother down (she represents the artfully made darkness of this world through which the divine works to bring man to grace) does the son discover his need of, even his love of, his mother. The story presents the idea of the need of a third, outside force (the divine will) to bring mankind together.

The comparison here may be unfair since Catholic theology is considerably more definite than Mormon theology in constructing a reality that yields itself to such dramatization: the long line of theology-dramatizing works from Augustine's *City of God* to J. F. Powers' *Morte D'Urban* attests to that fact. The relative ease of salvation in Mormon thought may in some writers' minds prevent use of many of the features of great art—*anxiety, alienation, suffering, tragedy, the absurd, grotesque humor, and therefore (often!) depth.* In application it is a theology that tends to exclude divine *action* (either *prevenient* or *intervenient*); there is definitely the tendency to hold that man helping himself is the divine at work already. Mormon fiction may therefore tend to be man- rather than God-centered; that is, it is emphatic about the Mormon's manners and rather equivocal about any Mystery beyond. Herein may lie the cause of much of the superficiality. But such positions overlook the possibilities for exploring the ways in which language can be applied to aspects of the theology to make it reproduce itself esthetically. The use of writing to keep the universe sacramental should not continue to pass Mormon thought by.

A particularly good source for material for Mormon fiction after the O'Connor manner (*contre* Wallace Stegner's recommendation that one look under his nose for stories and characters) is, I believe, a work like Sterling M. McMurrin's *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*. Whatever its philosophical in-



tent, it is essentially an outline of the esthetic possibilities of Mormon articles of belief. As codified richly by McMurrin, the catechism becomes dramatic. Juxtapose the optimistic, confident "concept of man as uncreated and underived," for example, over against the gloomier, humbling "sense of dependence upon God for his present estate and for whatever salvation he may achieve" and you have a tension that should make a valuable story: our lives given conflict, duplicity, ambiguity, and tragic depth by the concurrent thoughtful pursuit of both being and nothingness. Look as well at the imaginative possibilities in McMurrin's description of the Mormon God:

God is described in non-absolutistic terms as a being who is conditioned by and related to the world of which he is a part and which, because it is not ultimately his creation, is not absolutely under his dominion. . . . God's environment is the physical universe, the minds and selves which exist but are not identified with him, the principles under which reality is structured, and perhaps even the value absolutes which govern the divine will. . . . This means that God is a being among beings rather than *being* as such or the ground of being. . . .<sup>11</sup>

This gives the writer license to clothe the divine in any earthly form—though ultimately grotesque, dependent, and infinitely varied. There could be scores of stories, too, in "the relation of reason to revelation" in all men's lives, or in the place of the divine in transmuting tragedy into moral good, or in the idea of evil as an absolute, or in the interplay of man's creativity and Christ's atonement. In any case, one would work as a writer to create a fictive world in which a belief is made true.

But our writers' decision to keep God out of the picture and ignore man's cosmic dilemma (as imposed on him by Mormon ideology) reduces much Mormon fiction to mere skill with ephemera. The example of Flannery O'Connor provides a relief: the willingness to narrate beliefs believably. The reason this is a valuable process is that as a writer turns his abstract convictions into fully earth-bound fiction he is demonstrating his faith that transcendent things matter in our lives, that, in fact, one's life can have both. To write about only transcendent matters (dogmatic fiction) or only earthly manners (historical/regional fiction) and to fail to embody the one in the other and make them one imaginatively is tantamount to denial. In this light, faith-promoting fiction is heresy and history-documenting fiction is untrue. An approach which affirms at one and the same time the means by which we live and the means by which we believe would make important fiction: the very bringing together of the two imaginatively and convincingly would be a demonstration of an act of faith.

If Mormons are the last believers—it is supposed to be what one is best at!—then it should not be so difficult to get those beliefs into imaginative forms. So far, no one has done it very thoroughly, very devotedly. Perhaps the problem lies in the fact that we have not yet learned that there is quite a difference between ethnic consciousness and esthetic belief. In the one the job is to come to terms with one's past, but that can yield an overweening self-consciousness and an obsession with the burden of history. The other is liberating, for it explores the possibility of using language to create a universe in which one's beliefs become true; one proceeds to create the truth. This does not mean that one's art thereby becomes a servant of (or subservient to) one's beliefs, but means instead that art is making it possible for one to believe by imaginatively creating a fictive world where what one holds to by faith becomes a reality. In her best short story, "The Artificial Nigger," Flannery O'Connor takes two characters, a pompous grandfather and a rebellious boy, into the hell of an inner city where they get lost, deny each other, and cannot get home. She

turns a plaster hitching-post into a pointer for them, a symbol of Christ showing the way to the train station and their home in the country—and therein salvation through the atonement of Christ in which she believes becomes a reality on the pages of her story:

The two of them stood there with their necks forward at almost the same angle and their shoulders curved in almost exactly the same way and their hands trembling identically in their pockets. Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man. They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy. Mr. Head had never known before what mercy felt like because he had been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew now. He looked at Nelson and understood that he must say something to the child to show that he was still wise and in the look the boy returned he saw a hungry need for that assurance. Nelson's eyes seemed to implore him to explain once and for all the mystery of existence.

To *make* a world where the factors of one's faith actually become realities has always been the opportunity of the fiction-writer. If salvation through Christ's atonement was one of her central concerns, Flannery O'Connor wrote about it in the most worldly of terms (man lost in hell in need of a signpost showing him the way home) so that she could believe it as really being true. For others this means simply finding a form for one's faith. Fiction-writing is not bearing witness to the truth so much as witnessing one's faith come alive in one's own hands.

Admittedly the imaginative handling of the Mormon past is a way to a delightful fiction; Fisher, Sorensen, Taylor, and Whipple have proved that amply. The imaginative handling of conflicts inherent in Mormon life is, too; Douglas Thayer and Robert Christmas make excellent reading: a built-in conflict of vision, together with the desire to resolve it, can make a writer. Yet both handlings leave a whole world unexplored—the abundant world of Mormon thought. That plane dies in the rhetoric of the theologian and survives only by sheer weight of authority until the thoughtful writer gives it a medium to live in. When someone becomes capable of creating imaginative worlds where Mormon theological principles are concretely true, then we will have a writer of the stature of Flannery O'Connor. *Because* she was a Catholic, she said, she could not afford to be less than a good artist.

1. See my "On Words and the Word of God: The Delusions of a Mormon Literature," *Dialogue*, 4 (Autumn 1969), 13-20.

2. Kenneth B. Hunsaker, "Mid-Century Mormon Novels," *Dialogue*, 4 (Autumn 1969), 123-128. I am ignoring another category of Mormon fiction that is just now beginning to emerge, the contemporary satire, the best representative of which is Robert Christmas' *The Beheading Game* (Chicago, 1971).

3. *The Sound of Mountain Water* (New York, 1969), p. 170.

4. All of which have been brought together as *The Collected Writings of Flannery O'Connor* (New York, 1971).

5. "Flannery O'Connor's Testimony: The Pressure of Glory," *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor*, eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson (New York, 1966), pp. 143-144, 155.

6. "Heroines," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 11, 1971, p. 30.

7. "The Church and the Fiction Writer," *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1970), p. 148.

8. "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," *Mystery and Manners*, p. 76.

9. "Novelist and Believer," *Mystery and Manners*, pp. 156-157.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

11. *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City, 1965), p. 29.