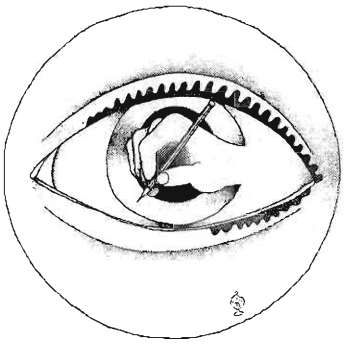

OUT OF THE BEST BOOKS

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The five volume series in world literature edited for the Relief Society by Professors Bruce B. Clark and Robert K. Thomas of Brigham Young University is a landmark production. Not only does *Out of the Best Books* represent the first literary text edited by Church members for a Church auxiliary, but it contains a serious approach to works of literature for Relief Society women; however, as I will attempt to show, it is one that might be more strictly literary than it is.

The authors group selections according to topics and ambitiously propose to study literature for its own merit rather than the lives of authors or historical background, as has too often been the custom in Relief Society lessons. Such a proposal leads one to expect an emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of literature; and that expectation is further raised by Dr. Thomas' introduction to the first volume in which he lays a fourfold critical basis for making valid judgments — Platonic morality, Aristotelian esthetics, Longinian authority, and Horatian durability. All of these give reason for discussing literary worth on grounds other than personal taste.

Unfortunately the editorial comments in the first volume, which are written entirely by Dr. Clark, for the most part avoid the critical issues in Thomas' introduction and illustrate instead a statement Clark later made in the June 1967 *Relief Society Magazine* (pp. 474–75) that "at its best, literature is concerned with building faith and championing spiritual values — and with exposing and opposing selfishness, materialism, shallowness, and all things harmful to human personality or destructive in human relationships." Such questions of character and morality are about all that his essays stress; and while such essays lead to lively discussions, by ignoring the creative process and structural values in individual works, they change the nature of the course from a study of literature to one of character with illustrative stories, poems and sermonettes.

When Dr. Clark does respond to Thomas' Introduction, he identifies his critical approach as primarily Platonic and Aristotelian but argues that to continually label his method would be "artificial" (I, 24). I heartily agree with his condemnation of labels and suspect that Thomas' main purpose in defining four approaches so simplistically is to break his readers loose from their prisons of personal taste and give them a foothold in

objective criticism. When Dr. Thomas writes commentaries in the second and subsequent volumes, he demonstrates that the study of poetry or prose as an organic whole (in which meaning is revealed through form and is not separate from it) proves more profitable than categorizing and dissecting. For instance, his description of Walt Whitman's developing maturity between an early version of "A Noiseless, Patient Spider" and the one published in *Leaves of Grass* provides a concrete demonstration of the tightening of thought that follows reshaping the same theme in different language.

Professor Clark seems to find difficulty synthesizing meaning and method. By examining the "form" of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality . . . ," he means describing its stanza pattern (I, 62). And by an "aesthetic response" he means listening to the musical flow of language in a poem read aloud. Yet in the very essay in which he separates "beauty of form" from "significance of content" he explicates Hopkins' "The Windhover: To Christ Our Lord" with profound sensitivity to the interweaving of images and word play and rhythm with the author's feeling for the glory of Christ (I, 98). In most of his essays, however, the need to select one viewpoint rather than give an extended analysis forces Professor Clark to concentrate on his "primary concern . . . [,] meaning rather than aesthetics" (I, 323), and this may well be what the Relief Society General Board desired him to do. Only in a section called "Appreciation of Beauty" in volume four, does he quote works like Keats' "Autumn" and Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" to "illustrate artistic excellence, the sheer beauty of language in the creative hands of one of the great word masters" (IV, 173) without pressing for a moral message.

Because of this emphasis on meaning, *Out of The Best Books* speaks for many Latter-day Saints who want a clear connection made between their reading and their concept of truth. Women have been responsive to this series because it invites discussion of human values — faith, serenity, patience, perseverance, courtesy, beauty, and so forth. The prefaces written by Dr. Clark stress that literature leads to insight into life's ideals, and many of his commentaries include questions so that women will become involved — not so much with literature itself as with the ideas it suggests.

As a survey, the series purports to represent world literature, yet the selections are strongly English and American, from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bias toward Victorian and Romantic writings perhaps occurs because writers in these periods most strongly reflect Mormon truths and moral standards. More than likely, however, these are works familiar to the editors from their own teaching experience, and they avoid the difficulties of unfamiliar language patterns that earlier classics present. At the same time, contemporary poetry and short stories and essays have also been slighted; their authors are notable, they focus upon the problems of our day, problems of nuclear warfare, fading idealism, race relations, youth-age gaps. It remains to be seen whether the new Volume Five (scheduled for fall publication) with an emphasis on community relations will carry updated selections. The first lesson comes as far as a Walter Lippmann essay and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

It is commendable that the editors have introduced translations from world literature, many of which may be unfamiliar to American readers. There are short stories by Scandinavians Selma Lagerlöf and Carl Ewald, by the modern Czechoslovakian Peter Balga, as well as by standard Russian writers Leo Tolstoi, Anton Chekhov, and Maxim Gorky, and by the Italian Luigi Pirandello.

Of interest to Latter-day Saints will be the championing of Mormon writers. Seven of Eliza R. Snow's lesser known poems are included, plus poems by contemporary Carol Lynn Pearson and an excerpt on Zion's Camp from *The Long Road* by S. Dilworth Young. Two Brigham Young University professors are represented by Edward L. Hart's perceptive poem "To Utah" and in excerpts from Clinton F. Larson's verse play *The Mantle of the Prophet*. There is a selection from Albert R. Lyman's novel of southern Utah, *Man to Man*, a fine short story by Eileen Gibbons Kump, "Bread and Milk," and another by Brian Kelly, "A Run of Grey." Such inclusions help correct the notion that Mormon literature must be either parochial or sentimental. Instead this writing is characterized by skillful techniques as well as sharp insight into character and felicitous descriptions of Mormon customs and country.

My objections to the series lie not in what is included but what is excluded — more purely literary interpretations and a wider range of authors and periods of time. If the commentaries sometimes read like supplements to the Family Home Evening Manual, one must remember that the program is called "cultural refinement" now instead of "literature." The General Board, too, is concerned with involvement and, if one oft-published Relief Society poetess is correct, with relating all literature to personal improvement.

As a consequence, in my experience the lessons have not been taught as well as the quality of the text makes one think they should. Really thoughtful discussions of literary worth have been rare. Instead, with our religious orientation leaning toward the practical and didactic, we tend to be satisfied when we have stated the theme of a poem or story and neglect to measure our reactions against the objective standards Dr. Thomas proposes from the history of literary criticism. We especially tend to forget the Aristotelian contention that literature has its own justification and aims. It does not need to be related to psychology or theology, to social theory or intellectual history, or to other arts in order to influence us. "Great art impels as well as illustrates. Great poetry persuades as well as informs," Thomas argues (IV, vii). With all its limitations, this program can hopefully "sharpen our sensitivity, enlarge our sympathy, and refine our perception" for literature as well as for life (*Relief Society Magazine*, June 1966, p. 469).