



LITERATURE, MORMON WRITERS, AND THE POWERS THAT BE

Wayne Carver

The true business of literature, as of all intellect, critical or creative, is to remind the powers that be, simple and corrupt as they are, of the turbulence they have to control. There is a disorder vital to the individual which is fatal to society. And the other way round is also true.

R. P. Blackmur, "The Politics of Human Power"

I — A DIGRESSION

For the better part of a month, I was with a group of young Mormons bent on giving the Church a vigorous expression in all the arts. We were not very clear as to just what we would do. We would do something. We felt the Church deserved this. It was such a fine Church, everything considered. And it deserved us. Not in its (then) present state, maybe; but we had faith that it could puff up to us. There was the son of an official sculptor, a yearning scientist from Alberta, two or three others who do not congeal into identities in the twenty-three-year-old mist I am looking into; and there was me, an ink-stained veteran of a year of writing C to C-plus freshman themes at Weber College. We all met near the end of our term at Biarritz American University in the south of France, the winter after one of the wars had ended.

We talked a lot, especially the sculptor's son and I. We decided to take our discharges when they came along, even though we had seen Paris, and go forth seeking anything virtuous, lovely, and of good report, and thus give the Church some high culture to put alongside the Tabernacle Choir, the Singing Mothers, and trombone solos of "Abide with Me" at missionary farewells. So we all went home again (we had never heard of the heresy that you can't go), but though some of us saw each other at BYU, we were never very close; and somehow what seemed so important along the rocky, storm-sprayed coast of Biarritz didn't make much difference in the autumnal softness of the foothills of Provo.

All in all, I think it is just as well. There have been plenty of other things to do, like keeping alive; and whatever the conditions are that create fine works of art — and that's what we really were talking about, you might as well know — to be fully alive is the fundamental one. Not the only one, of course. Programs by groups of even angry young men are tacit admission that the young men think they may already be three parts iced over and are

thinking of blasting out. The problem right after the war was not to make a high culture, but to find for the life that the war both threatened and made precious a channel to flow in.

At any rate, after that brief romance with the idea of promoting a literature (those C-pluses made me the literary one of the cabal), I never paid much attention to whether there is, ought to be, or will be a Mormon literature that is any good. It was adventure enough in the late 40's and early 50's (and still is) to try to learn something about literature and writing besides how to juice up a talk for sacrament meeting with quotations from the best books and out of context. But something of that brief time at Biarritz stayed with me, clinging to my bones the way my Mormonism does, barely letting me know it is there but inseparable from whatever it is that props me up each morning and lays me down to sleep each night. For better or worse, I have *Dialogue* to thank for reminding me of this.

Like a lot of boys around Ogden, I imagine, I had, even before the war, been personally flattered to learn that one like us — well, not *quite* like us — had attacked Ogden and the Church in national magazines, and had first learned to lisp “paranoia” from his essays on the Prophet. But DeVoto was the only writer I knew of then who had written that way, or in any other way about us. Later, in the company day room at Fort Jackson, I found a copy of Stegner's *Mormon Country* and devoured it whole, out of total homesickness, the same way and for the same reason that I bought James Whitcomb Riley's *Songs of Summer*: to escape (while building timber trestle bridges in Gill Creek) to the scenes of Mutual evenings, priesthood outings, Saturday baseball games, cottonwood trees along canal banks, the sound of water lapping over a headgate and through a gap in the ditch, and the deep smell of cut hay, clover blossoms, and wilting burdock — to be knee-deep in June and Utah instead of up to my waist in clay-colored water with a slung M-1 and a hammer I never did learn how to use.

Much later, I think at Biarritz, I learned that Stegner had written a novel that was set for part of the time in Salt Lake City, that *another* Ogden boy had publically committed *Children of the Covenant*, and that a mere slip of a girl from Huntsville who had actually taught at Weber had dropped at least two degrees of glory by marrying a Jew and writing *No Man Knows My History* in that order. Toward the end of the two months at Biarritz, I gave my writing teacher (a very good one from Dartmouth) an essay entitled “Literature and the Mormons,” a hysterically unequivocal shriek of protest about the quality of literature about the Church, an ejaculation that received its force from my definitive ignorance of what I was talking about.

When I came back to the States, I took my discharge at Fort Dix, went into New York, and at a Doubleday bookstore bought *Children of the Covenant* and *No Man Knows My History*. By the time my train reached Ogden, I had read them both. When I reached Plain City, I gave Mrs. Brodie's book to a maiden aunt who claimed she always voted for Norman Thomas. I never saw it again. A few years later, I gave Richard Scowcroft's book to a friend whose politics I have forgotten. But I lost the book. Not long after I came

home, I bought Hugh Nibley's *No Ma'am, That's Not History* from another friend who was unruffledly working his way through a Ph.D. in science by selling Church books. I read it, yawned, and put out of my mind the whole matter of Mormon literature and the way the Church responds to what is written about it and its people. Then a couple years ago I read in *Dialogue* Samuel W. Taylor's "Peculiar People, Positive Thinkers, and the Prospects of Mormon Literature" (Vol. II, No. 2, Summer, 1967). My first reaction was to hunt up my old essay from Biarritz. To find it required considerable archaeological digging in my files, and when I found it, it helped not at all.* I just put all the blame on the Church, or so I think I did. The piece is a mere diffusion of rhetoric, a mist so obscure that it really lacks even the virtue of error. But at the bottom of the last sheet, the Professor's usual chill had condensed the high humidity of the essay: "You, your Church, and its writers are just provincial," he wrote, in the only clear statement on the page. And, I think he had — and has — something there.

*Because it is unlikely that I shall ever want to devote a separate work to the subject of the relationship of research to professional and personal growth, I want to relate here that in my two months' search for this yellowing paper, I discovered additional evidence that research is necessary and that every teacher should be required to post a bibliography of his publications on his office door next to his office hours. In the course of searching for this old essay in storage files, drawers, bookshelves, under the cushions of sofas, in abandoned canisters, discarded briefcases, and my wife's handbag, I found five books I had accepted for review, the earliest marked 1956; two stacks of unread students' papers from the spring term of 1958, which, because of the lilacs, was a particularly bad one for me, I remember; a pair of keys belonging to Tithonus, a *struldbrugian* Pontiac we retired to brood in 1961; the note cards for a speech I gave at an Ogden ward in 1943 on "Was Joseph Smith the Greatest American?"; my file of notes, with bibliography, on the Morrisite War; and the recipe for Uncle John's Salve, a black magical unguent of universal healing properties concocted from olive oil, red lead, and camphor gum by the Aunt who assimilated the Brodie book. She also made hand lotion out of glycerine and quinces. By insisting that teachers publish, do research, we not only help them reclaim the past, but they tidy up the house and office, as well. I even noticed that part of my basement wall, over in a far corner, is crumbling in. Some of my files are down there, now that we have a de-humidifier.

II — A HUMBLE REMONSTRANCE

. . . she impressed on me that for the last ten years she had wanted to do something artistic, something as to which she was prepared not to care a rap whether or no it should sell. . . . She yearned to be . . . but of course only once, an exquisite failure.

James, "The Next Time"

I was going to talk some about provincialness and sophistication, but I've changed my mind while I was finding more paper. I'll just assert the truism that sophistication is not necessarily a virtue and provincialism not necessarily a vice. But I do think Mr. Taylor is provincial to the point of darkness, in the sense that a provincial seeks easy explanations outside himself for complex personal responses, when he puts the blame for the lack of "a great Mormon literature" on the repressiveness of the Church. He contends that the Church represses writers in the Church, and outside it if they write on Mormon subjects, by insisting (and by having the means to enforce

the insistence) that this "peculiar people" be depicted as "positive thinkers"; by maintaining a controlled press, and by controlling the publication — or in the instance of drama, the production — of other works when it can; and by eliminating the market for such works within the Church when it cannot.

The tales he tells in support of his contentions are indeed sad to read. But they are irrelevant to the question of why there is no great Mormon literature. (Actually, I think there are some very good novels — no poems or plays that I know of — by and about Mormons; but a few good books do not make a literature. Nor do a lot of bad ones.)

The fact is that Mr. Taylor seems to be two different men who, somehow, have not managed to get to know each other very well. There is Sam Taylor, an accomplished commercial writer, who has to sell his writing to live. He knows his market and writes for it. Sometimes he writes about his Church, and his family within the Church. He is a pleasant man of considerable talent; but he is Good Neighbor Sam, too. Good churchman Sam. He "deeply deplores" what the Church is doing to prettify Joseph Smith, but he is "not foolish enough to invite the wrath that would follow an honest attempt to correct it." He believes the function of literature is "promotion of the faith; [he] simply think[s] it is possible to do it a good deal better." He is "serene in the belief" that the Church "is led by Divine revelation." In a letter replying to his critics (*Dialogue*, Winter, 1967) he is sympathetic with writers within the Church who are pressed into "happy conformity" and "deliberate distortion." ". . . They are simply meeting their market, as every writer must. If a managed press requires distorted myths, they must either conform or quit writing. But certainly my critics would find it enlightening to sit in on shop-talk among Mormon writers, as I have, while they frankly discussed the truths which they never would dream of putting into their works."

This Sam Taylor is cut from the same goods as J. P. Marquand's disenchanted characters who whore all day in the advertising cribs and renew their virginity every afternoon with martinis before catching the train to Scarsdale.

But there is a Samuel W. Taylor, a "creative writer . . . ridden and driven by a consuming passion that has been called the divine discontent, . . . an interpreter; he is eternally a crusader; he is a non-conformist and a dissenter who cries out the faults of his world in an attempt to make a better one. . . . His drive compels him to present the essence of things as they are and were and not as positive-thinking apologists have decided they should be. . . . Most good and great creative writing is basically the literature of protest."

Samuel W. Taylor, the "creative writer," is a meld of Zola and Shelley. And despite the rather grand rhetoric, it is impossible not to like and respect him, and to wish him well. But what has he to do with Sam, the conforming friend of deliberate liars? One wonders if it is the Church or Sam that holds Samuel W. in bondage. And can "divine discontent" make no headway against either?

The impression I have of Mr. Taylor as he faces the outrages he complains of is of a nebbish-like character, frail, kind of tired, slumping down on

a chair and ruefully eyeing a great towering dowager in ostentatious silks and pearls: "I'm ridden and driven by the divine discontent," he says, "and if you wouldn't always get so mad, I'd protest against something."

Just what he would protest, in the happy event that what bothers him went away, is not clear. But though his language is a little too transcendental for my taste, I agree with him that great writers and great literature have the power deeply to disturb the complacent, myopic, arrogant certainties of men and the world men create. But these certainties, these men, and this world are not abstractions; their form and substance does not have to be incanted out of the deep abyss before they work in the world and before we can deal with them. They are in our families, our professional organizations, our churches, our state. They are in the hearts of every man and in the stuff of everything man creates. If Mr. Taylor finds them in his Church, why doesn't he use that formidable array of powers that he says writers possess to help root them out? His attempt, successful or not, might create the very literature he says is lacking. But, instead, he simply drops a signed complaint in the suggestion box.

Because he does seem to be two writers, neither one uncomfortable enough with the other to want to be free of him, Mr. Taylor wants too many things that do not, I'm afraid, come together. He wants to tell the truth, to write for a commercial market, to promote his faith, to be a mover and shaker of the status quo, and all the time to remain in the bosom of the Church. In wanting all this (and merely complaining that the Church won't give it to him), he avoids the excruciating necessity of choosing exactly what he will do, of working his own line, and then living with the consequences of his choice. If he wants to sound like Shelley — "the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire" — and to identify the source of writing as a "divine discontent," he must go all the way and say that the result of such writing is to be misunderstood and lonely.

One must choose. Which is the more "divine," one's discontent with folly and repression or one's understandable desire to conform to a Church based on "Divine revelation" that is, apparently, foolishly repressive?

One must choose, but it is an agonizing choice. Some have made it. In the classroom, we call this kind of dilemma a "tragic choice." One must choose, but the occasion is one of sorrow, not anger. One must choose, but either way, the cost is very great.

III — A MODEST PROPOSAL

*... I have only to endure. I am here to be worked upon. ...
Are any or all of the institutions so valuable as to be lied for?*

Emerson

My only point that bears in any way upon Mr. Taylor's personal circumstances is this: his dilemma is the very stuff that great literature is made of, not the reason it is not made. Serious imaginative writers, if they do not inherit such dilemmas, have to go around finding or inventing them. Mr. Taylor's eloquent appeals for the Church to — in effect — stop persecuting

him and other writers within the Church deserves the strongest support we can give them. But his appeals have nothing to do with literature, unless he will make literature out of them. Otherwise, they refer to matters of ecclesiastical polity, quasi-doctrinal dogmatics, cultural lag, and to an agonizing personal situation.

I do not want to give the impression that the dilemma so starkly posed by Mr. Taylor is an easy one to avoid (and despite its potential for literature, only a fool would welcome such difficulties because he could then write about them) or, having not avoided it, to resolve. It is, in fact, as I have suggested earlier, not amenable to resolution at all in the terms he proposes. According to Mr. Taylor and the subjects of his anecdotes, they want to write the truth about their experience as members of the Church; but, unfortunately, one of the truths about the Church is that it will not let its members write truly. And there, as James' characters would say, we are!

The creative writer is the one that suffers from this situation. It is not so with the composer, whose non-representational sounds protect him; nor the sculptor, whose marble, bronze, burlap, and twisted tin is probably doctrinally and ecclesiastically mute; nor the historian, if he doesn't go in for vivid writing; nor the anthologist, if he tends to his prefaces; nor the political scientist, who can always say "behavioral studies" and let his passions and other testimonies speak through charts, graphs, and tables; not even the folklorist, if he just collects and avoids newfangledness; and certainly not the writer of dissertations, who by definition avoids everything.

These intellectual workers may or may not be believers, though they may or may not go to church. But unless they go out of their way, to see that their work betrays them, it is not likely to. But a fiction writer, putting down and publishing to the world an honest and recognizable account of some of the anxieties faced by a returning missionary, would he not in 1969 still be greeted as John A. Widtsoe greeted Richard Scowcroft in 1945?

Scowcroft will win fame in the boggy field of literature if he will view life as a whole and not confine himself, as here done, to hospital wards. And there are healthy, red-blooded episodes within "Mormonism" to fill many a coming book. . . . Readers are heartily tired of books that caricature and malign the good people who wrested civilization from the western deserts. Especially is there a revulsion of feeling when this is done by descendants of the pioneers.

I prefaced this quotation with what I intended as a rhetorical question, in the Van Wyck Brooks manner, but maybe it is not. Mr. Taylor himself says that if some of the books that caused a stir in the Church — and in me in that day room, at Biarritz, and on that homeward-bound train — were published now, "they might find themselves upon the shelves at Deseret Book," a sure sign that the Church is willing to let the authors be heard — or browsed among.

I have my doubts that imaginative writing about Mormonism and Mormondom is about to escape from the Deseret News Press and Bookcraft and enter literature. The hired hands will continue to write what and as they

are told, and the free lancers will continue to show their freedom by meeting the "demands of their market." I suppose from time to time someone — neither hired, sold out, nor buying in — will write a true and good fiction; and if he is a faithful member of the Church, the day he does may be the saddest day of his life. I think it probably will be.

For there remains, I think, that awful, threatening power of mimetic writing to disturb the complacency of *The Powers That Be*, even as that writing is most fully realizing its social function of reminding those powers "of the turbulence they have to control." There is a covert disorder in powerful images, just as there is an overt order. It is not, ostensibly at least, the madness or the "fine frenzy" of writers that our official custodians are afraid of. They can handle madness. Where everything outside the sanctioned institutions is thought to be an asylum filled with recalcitrant sociopaths, dealing with madness is simply a matter of defining terms, attaching labels, and marking the exits. And against frenzy, fine or gross, the Grandgrinds and other Guardians can marshal all the "arts of measuring and numbering and weighing," checking enthusiasm with quantifications in the name of understanding. Rather, what scares *The Powers That Be* is the taut plasticity of the images in a work — or the image of a work — the possibility, terrible and blasphemous, that when emotion is both concentrated and released in images of high intensity, the resulting sense of life may overflow the social forms consecrated to domesticating it. Every icon in literature is potentially Caesar's mantle.

"Art is an envisagement of feeling, . . ." says Susanne K. Langer, formulated and expressed in what she calls a symbol and I am here calling an image. But I think few people who have been strongly moved by works of art would deny that the visage of the work creates, also, the feelings therein envisaged. That is why James was right to insist to H. G. Wells that "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, . . ." and it is precisely this sense of life, interest, and importance in their constituencies that ecclesiastical, governmental, educational, and familial Powers That Be are afraid of — and rightly so. Picasso refused to join Stuart Davis and Jacques Lipchitz in protesting the "serious wave of animosity towards free expression in painting and sculpture mounting in American Press and museums . . ." and pointed out that which Mr. Taylor and all *The Powers That Be* must never forget: that "art is something subversive. . . . If it is ever given the keys to the city, it will be because it is . . . watered down . . . impotent. . . ."

The Powers That Be have much greater regard for the latent power in artistic images than have writers like the other part of Mr. Taylor, who are asking to be rendered even more domestic and safe than they are.

But perhaps just as an experiment to test a cultural condition we could find out whether the Church is ready to, if not bless, at least endure with a sigh, some truthful work of literature about it and its people. Mr. Taylor says, "I cheer the approaching dawn [though] I have no illusions about it bursting upon us in full glory and right away."

I'm sure it won't. I have even said that I don't think it matters. But if the coming of the "full glory" means the coming of a great literature — and

not the Church's giving its consent for one to be created — I think that glory will never dawn if the unsticking of the sun depends upon "a play about Polygamy on Broadway, . . . a musical." Mr. Taylor says such a play of his (" . . . in costume and with good music, it could be charming") was prevented by the Church from being performed. Even Davy Crockett needed rendered-out bear grease to get the sun unfrozen, not a pink and white confection from the pastry shop. A word from Salt Lake City to New York stopped that play, says Mr. Taylor. But one bad review might have stopped it in a week. And what is a musical, a period piece in costume and with charming music, going to say about polygamy, the Church, human problems, the fates, anyway? But there is this about a book. Once it is published, it is there. And even if it is very good, it will find some readers. It can be sent through the mails. It can be reviewed all over the country, not by just three daily papers and *Time*. If it is troublesome to The Powers That Be, the Powers can let the fact be known. If it moves and shakes someone, he knows it and talks about it. Such a book would accurately test the present receptivity of the Church to truthful writing about it.

I have not been a careful student of the literature written about the Church, as I tried to say. And I probably have missed some recent books. But while I see histories and studies rolling off the presses, I haven't seen any novels for quite a while; and I don't know of anybody who is writing one. Mr. Taylor, who ought to be, is confecting period pieces. The intellectuals in the universities are collecting folklore, editing source books, worrying about the Papyrus manuscripts, and trying to force a marriage of group therapy to fireside meetings. The most talented writer with a Church background whom I know, or know of, writes books of extraordinary beauty and strength about the court of Louis XIV.

So where is all the literature that is struggling to be born? Or where, even, is there a poor little repressed novel, scratching with twitching hands its humped and hairy back? We cannot measure the extent our Church and its culture has moved away from the narrow, puckering fears of its pioneering period if nothing of considerable power does not come along to challenge it to a response.

I propose that before we all begin to keen about the repressions of the Church, somebody write a novel about the Mormons, create a genuine work of literature that is true to himself and its subject and without a thought of what the response of the Church authorities will be. In other words, write out of the only attitude that can create "a literature," if that's what we really want, as opposed to just a bunch of books, which is the attitude that James' narrator in "The Figure in the Carpet" intimated when he said that "literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life."

Or, without worrying about divine discontent and non-conformity or how ridden or driven you might be, would somebody out there please put down with great care and love and regard for the truth of your feelings, the story that everyone growing up in the Church has within him? It needs to be

done, though the risks may be great, just as the skill to do it must be bitterly learned. That's my proposal. No more laments.

In 1945 Bernard DeVoto let Ray B. West, Jr. publish in the autumn issue of *The Rocky Mountain Review* a letter he had written to a friend in Ogden. *The Improvement Era* reprinted a tenderly abridged version of it in March, 1946, without saying it was changed. Even that long ago, DeVoto agreed in part with Mr. Taylor that the positive thinking in Utah (DeVoto called it "The booster state of mind") was diminishing. But, he went on,

. . . it is true . . . that Utah, and especially the Mormon culture, is extremely sensitive and intolerant to criticism and even to difference of opinion in which there is no criticism whatever. . . . It is lugubriously true that the orthodox Mormon mind cannot tolerate any objective treatment of Mormon history whatever. All treatment of the Mormons must completely accept the Mormon doctrinal, metaphysical and supernatural assumptions. . . . All Mormon actions have always been pure and sanitary, all criticism of them has always been evil and mendacious. . . . Yet it is perfectly possible for any writer to handle any other religion in America objectively and to be answered objectively in turn. It is not possible of the Mormons, and that is further evidence of their cultural lag.

In the first part of the letter, DeVoto admits that his two early articles on Utah "were absolutely in the [*American*] *Mercury* mood of illegitimate and dishonest attack." They were, indeed, and that's probably why, at eighteen, I liked them. But having said that, he insists that his *Year of Decision: 1846* "contains the most sympathetic treatment of the Mormons ever published by a gentile." Yet he continued to receive nothing but abuse from his home state. He concludes:

When one is young and idiotic there may be some ambition to be known as a final authority, an important writer, a man of distinction and publicity or even fame. It doesn't last: one matures. One comes to understand that what counts is the honesty and thoroughness of the work. I should find it hard to state exactly what my ambition as a mature man is. It would run something like this: to do good work, to do work in which I may take some satisfaction and my friends some pleasure, at the utmost, as Frost once said of Robinson, to put something on the record that will not easily be dislodged.

Where are the writers, saturated in Mormon life but not in fief to it, who will put true pictures of that life on the record? A Mormon literature of enduring sensitivity and vigor, one that will not be stopped by a few phone calls, is possible if men of talent will "be generous," very courageous, "and pursue the prize." But they will have to assume the risks of telling what they know to be true. Nobody has ever said that that is a snap. But somewhere, sometime, along the line, you have to choose.