SPIRITUAL PROBLEMS IN THE TEACHING OF MODERN LITERATURE

Stephen L. Tanner

In this essay, the author, a professor of English at the University of Idaho, pursues a number of questions raised in the last issue (on "Mormonism and Literature"), particularly the difficulties and opportunities that confront readers and teachers of a modern literature which seems increasingly alien to their deepest values and standards.

There are certain problems which a Mormon must cope with in teaching any secular literature. What does he do, for example, with a literary work which expresses ideas and attitudes in opposition to his theology? What does he do with the work which treats, perhaps very graphically, behavior that is contrary to his standards of taste and conduct or which embodies a moral thesis he considers insidious? Is it possible for him to be objective in such cases? Is it *desirable* for him to be objective in such cases? These questions arise, of course, in regard to literature of nearly any era, but perhaps nowhere is their difficulty more acute and bewildering than when they are posed in connection with modern literature. My primary purpose in this essay is to clarify as far as possible, within the context of modern literature, the problems implied by these questions. My initial assumption is that these problems and their consequences are frequently not examined as carefully as they should be; and until they are, satisfactory solutions cannot reasonably be expected.

There will be no discussion of specific works in this essay. Since opinion varies so widely, and often heatedly, on the quality of individual works produced in recent times, I am afraid that such discussion would only open up a Pandora's box of disagreement and unmanageable issues. I will focus rather

on theory. A good deal of what I say will be abstract, but this is commensurate with my second aim, which is to suggest a general method, or at least some fundamental assumptions and premises that might go into formulating a general method, for approaching modern literature.

In general, I will be using the term "modern literature" to refer to a particular movement or school of writing rather than to literature generally which happens to have been produced recently. In other words, I have in mind a type of literature and not simply a period. Literary modernism, as a movement, is varied and complex and resists simple definition. It is hard to say whether a given writer, or an aspect of a writer's work, falls under the rubric of modernism; but there is value and convenience in generalizations as long as they are not inflexibly applied. An intelligent and flexible attempt at defining modernism can be found in Irving Howe's introduction to *Literary Modernization,*[1] and for the purpose of the essay I will accept his definition.

Howe, after acknowledging the elusive and protean nature of the term, discusses the literary and philosophical attributes of modernism under the following nine headings:

1. The rise of the avant-garde as a special caste
2. The problem of belief becomes exacerbated, sometimes to the point of dismissal
3. A central direction in modernist literature is toward the self-sufficiency of the work
4. The idea of aesthetic order is abandoned or radically modified
5. Nature ceases to be a central subject and setting for literature
6. Perversity—which is to say: surprise, excitement, shock, terror, affront —becomes a dominant motif
7. Primitivism becomes a major terminus of modern writing
8. In the novel there appears a whole new sense of character, structure and the role of the protagonist or hero
9. Nihilism becomes the central preoccupation, the inner demon, at the heart of modern literature.

According to Howe, the modern writer finds it a condition of being a writer that he rebel:

> A modernist culture soon learns to respect, even to cherish, signs of its division. It sees doubt as a form of health. It hunts for ethical norms through underground journeys, experiments with sensation, and a mocking suspension of accredited values. Upon the passport of the Wisdom of the Ages, it stamps in bold red letters: *Not Transferable*. It cultivates, in Thomas Mann's phrase, "a sympathy for the abyss." It strips man of his systems of belief and his ideal claims, and then proposes the uniquely modern style of salvation: a salvation by, of, and for the self.

It is difficult to imagine any set of attitudes more contrary and antagonistic to Mormon theology. The Mormon culture seeks unity rather than

[1](Greenwich, Conn., 1967).

division. It recognizes the value of honest doubt, but sees it not as an end in itself, but rather as a step toward a healthy and legitimate certainty regarding the fundamental questions of life. It turns to revealed religion for ethical norms and not to "underground journeys, experiments with sensation, and a mocking suspension of accredited values." The Mormon is appalled at the notion that the "Wisdom of the Ages" is "Not Transferable." Indeed, his guide for conduct and belief *is* the Wisdom of the Ages, which he believes is contained in the Scriptures. His handbooks for living in the present—his Standard Works—were, for the most part, composed centuries ago, but he has faith that they embody principles of truth which are eternally valid. The Mormon culture has no "sympathy for the abyss"; its attention is always directed upward, out of the dark abyss toward the light. And as for "a salvation by, of, and for the self," Mormon theology asserts that salvation comes only by subjecting and disciplining the self to a specific system of belief—there is only one name given by which man must be saved.

The conclusion seems inescapable that literary modernism is incompatible with Mormon theology—with Christian theology in general, for that matter. How is the Mormon teacher to cope with this contradiction between his religious faith and the dominant literature of his age?

It is easy for some to condemn modern literature *en bloc* as unclean, ungodly, and unartistic, and simply reject it out of hand. It is equally easy for others to praise it lustily for its frankness and penetrating questioning, its formal excellence, and other qualities which most critics find in it so abundantly. The first attitude, in its extreme form, is illustrated by the good brother who said to me when he learned I had written a master's thesis on Ernest Hemingway: "Hemingway's novels are really just a bunch of filth, aren't they?" (I spared him the anxiety of knowing that any unclean elements in Hemingway are obsolete in view of the depths of scatology reached by more recent authors.) The second attitude is demonstrated by the more "enlightened" brother who bends my ear with his enthusiastic response to a recent best-seller which he has absorbed apparently without the slightest inkling that its fundamental premises are directly in opposition to the gospel he expounds so enthusiastically on Sunday. I cannot admire the uninformed, closed mind of the first man; nor can I admire the mind of the second man, whose intellectual fiber is so flabby that it can accommodate conflicting ideas with no apparent discomfort.

Neither the closed mind nor the mind so open that a constant breeze prevents things from being properly sorted out will do for the Latter-day Saint approaching modern literature.

On the basis of Howe's list of characteristics, there is, perhaps, a third approach which might have merit. Notice that most of the items on that list which do not run directly against the grain of Mormon theology are the ones having to do with form and technique—in other words, aesthetic considerations. Is it possible for a Mormon teacher to focus on aesthetic concerns to the exclusion of discomforting religious and philosophical attitudes? I cannot see this as a very satisfying solution, because the Mormon, who

sees all aspects of his experience as having some bearing on his spiritual life, must ultimately make a connection between life and art, between ethics and aesthetics. This is not to say that ethics and aesthetics are the same thing. It is perfectly possible, and may be valuable, to study a work of art, or a movement of art, from a purely aesthetic point of view. But, in my opinion, a Mormon scholar will recognize that such a study is abstracting for a special purpose what in practice cannot exist separately. Therefore, the attempt to come to terms with modern literature by an exclusively aesthetic approach will finally prove abortive.

If we avoid the extreme paths of blind intolerance and equally blind acceptance, as well as the strictly formalistic route, then where is the proper avenue of approach? Obviously, it is located in some kind of mediatorial position; but discovering that position is no easy task. It is a task we frequently botch because we fail to perceive adequately the extent and difficulty of the challenge entailed in the Christian ideal of being in the world but not of the world. We find it too easy to be both. We are deceiving ourselves, of course; especially nowadays when, by the very nature of our mass-media–mass-man society, it is so extremely difficult to keep those "in" and "of" prepositions sorted out. Perhaps this is our basic challenge in the Church today: The temptation is not to break under persecution, but to conform under acceptance—to be absorbed into an ungodly world.

One cannot logically partake fully *of* the world during the week and then expect not to be *in* it on Sunday. But it is characteristic of human nature to be able to live comfortably with logical inconsistency. Look about us. On every hand one can see people and movements that are blissfully unaware of the rational contradictions between their ideals and their actions, their ends and their means. Perhaps for the sake of our psychological stability in this chaotic world we should be thankful for our capacity to eliminate the friction of logical inconsistency. But a teacher has a high calling. He must be a discriminator, a fearless maker of distinctions. He must have the intellectual training to perceive contradictions and the spiritual courage to confront them. The Mormon teacher of modern literature must understand the full implications of the fundamental incompatibility of literary modernism and his theology; and then, without distorting the literature or compromising his theological beliefs, he should be able to abstract from the literature, through a process of sifting and winnowing, what is beautiful, enlightening, true, and significant or enriching to human experience. For despite the basic conflict between our religion and modern literature, the latter still possesses such qualities, sometimes to a rather remarkable degree.

What I am advocating, and what I believe is possible, although not easy, is a kind of middle way between uninformed intolerance and uncritical tolerance—a special combination of informed intolerance and critical tolerance. It may appear that I am merely playing with words here, but I have in mind a definite position which, in a meager way, is analogous to that of God himself, who cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance and yet who loves the most miserable sinner.

The aim of a Mormon teacher should not be to insinuate any partisan or parochial strictures upon the artist. He should remember that generally the modern creative artist works without benefit of theological support. As Irving Howe points out, he is frequently a rebel against systems of belief. His work, therefore, is often a negative disclosure of the nature of human need, bearing witness to the absence rather than the presence of God, and must be taken on its own terms to be justly understood. And understanding should be a primary objective for the Mormon teacher, the same as it should be for all members of the Church. The central program of the Restoration, after all, is to proselytize, to spread the gospel message and convert souls; and effective missionary work requires an understanding of those being taught.

Jesus went among the publicans and sinners because it was the sick who most needed the healer. It is probable that he knew he must go among them in order to understand them—their thoughts, values, hopes, fears, and aspirations. He had to understand them, and perhaps demonstrate that he was open to and aware of their position, before he could convert them. His remarkable ability to fit his teachings to his audience is well recognized; only by knowing that audience well could he do this. We cannot expect to achieve much efficiency in converting the world unless we profit from his example.

I am suggesting that one justification for a Mormon's studying modern literature is that such a study produces understanding, which, in turn, produces the power to influence for good. To ignore or reject modern literature because of regrettably frequent instances of nihilism, atheism, and obscenity is to lose the benefit of the largest body of revealing confessional literature since the Renaissance, a literature which quite accurately reflects the dominant attitudes and values of the people of our world. To open oneself to this writing is admittedly dangerous: herein lies the real challenge of the Mormon stance of being in the world but not of it and trying all the while to convert it. In confronting this danger, we can again look to Christ's example. Regardless of the extent to which he fraternized with the sinners, his purpose and achievement was always in the end to observe rather than espouse. This is not an easy undertaking, and I fear that some of the teachers and students of modern literature within the Church have failed in it. They suppose themselves to be fighting a gallant rear-guard action, when, in truth, they are already chopping wood and hauling water for the enemy.

What I intend is that modern literature can teach us a good deal about man, but rather little about God. In other words, modern literature is very revealing of how men are thinking, behaving, and acting, and we need to know this; but it is not a very reliable source for learning the nature of God and how men are to please him. We can go to it to learn much about human nature and experience, but for the fundamental principles of our theology and moral system we rely on revealed religion, though admittedly there are plenty of modern writers writing within a more or less Christian framework who can teach us a good deal about our relationship to God and our moral obligations to our fellow men.

One of the major problems confronting us in our desire to understand modern literature and the world of attitudes and values it expresses is the need to determine the sincerity of a particular writer. It does us little good to give thoughtful and serious consideration to a work which did not receive the same kind of consideration from its author. Because of the very medium he employs, the modern novelist must be sensitive to commercial considerations. This makes him susceptible to the suggestions of publishers and the implied suggestions of a mass reading public. Sometimes such suggestions can lead him to compromise the sincerity of his expression and the integrity of his artistic vision. Such a compromise is sometimes manifest in an author's use of sexual episodes, explicitly described, which have no genuine organic relation to his main artistic purpose. They are a sort of sop to conciliate the real or imagined taste of the public which generates best-seller lists. In selecting his texts, therefore, the Mormon teacher should be discriminating.

One concern which can cause confusion in that process of discrimination is the search for "relevance." This word is currently much batted about within the academic community. Students are demanding more relevance in their course work and teachers are scrambling to satisfy their demands. Unfortunately, the kind of relevance commonly involved in this process is often of a rather superficial variety; it is a relevance of subject matter rather than treatment, title rather than content, appearance rather than substance. For some it is no more than relevance in time. In a course in late-nineteenth-century American literature last semester, several students in their final exams dismissed Mark Twain, Henry James, William D. Howells, and even Stephen Crane and Frank Norris as completely "irrelevant" to our present society. At the heart of their arguments for such a conclusion was simply the contention that writers who wrote seventy or eighty years ago by this fact alone cannot be relevant. They are outdated. Their ideas are old and must therefore be obsolete.

I am entirely in favor of relevance in the study of literature. I would not be making the study of literature my profession if I did not find it relevant. But the term must be carefully defined. I think a meaningful relevance must transcend a mere relation in time or subject matter. I am concerned with the relevance a particular work of literature has to the fundamental issues of human experience. These remain, as far as I can see, largely unchanged throughout the ages. When one thinks of relevance in these terms, he can allow that the writings of Homer, Shakespeare, and Emerson or Isaiah, Paul, and Alma can be, and indeed are, very relevant to the problems of American society in the 1970's. On the other hand, there are many current books on drugstore shelves whose titles proclaim that they are up-to-the-minute in the subject matter they treat (in fact, there is a trend in paperback books now to race for publication after a noteworthy event; e.g., new books on Robert Kennedy appeared on the bookstands only a matter of days after his assassination; and novels dealing with the subject of heart transplants were begun as soon as Dr. Barnard performed the first success-

ful heart transplant operation); but though these books appear relevant—that is, their subject matter is currently in the news—their relevance is really only marginal because the treatment is superficial, unoriginal, too inflexibly partisan, or inaccurate.

In order to be relevant, a work of literature should not simply be related in some way, but that relation should center on a significant valid insight of some kind. Relevance for a Mormon teacher, it seems to me, should be a matter of the relatedness of a particular work to the recognition and understanding of fundamental values, problems, and behavior in human experience. For him a piece of literature is relevant if it enlarges to some degree his appreciation of the complexity of the human predicament and aids him to some extent in answering important questions and in formulating enlightened attitudes and opinions. This puts into the background criteria based solely upon time or topic.

Closely associated with the question of relevance in choosing course material is the question of the experimental or avant-garde. To what extent should the desire to keep up to date with literary experimentation determine the selection of texts? Should one select a novel or play or collection of poetry solely because it is categorized as avant-garde? Should one reject the novel, play, or poetry for the same reason? Again, balanced judgment is needed. Obviously, some of the classics of tomorrow are being written today. But one ought not to let his fear of failing to recognize lasting literature at its birth cause him to embrace indiscriminately everything which appears strikingly novel or original. There is a danger in going so far as believing that an avant-garde work is good per se. While experimentation and change are the *source* of growth and progress, they cannot be equated with growth and progress. A great deal of experimentation fails, after all, and change can be for the worse just as well as for the better. For every James Joyce in the twenties there were dozens of experimenters in symbolism, dadaism, surrealism (and heaven only knows what else) who have disappeared into the obscurity of literary trivia. I do not mean to imply in any way that the Mormon teacher ought to avoid the avant-garde; this, of course, would lead to stagnation. He need have no fear of change and experimentation. As Emerson said, "The thoughts are few, the forms many," and the writer is free to create the "large vocabulary or many-colored coat" of an indigenous unity. The teacher should exercise some caution, of course, with experimentation and change in moral law (taking this term in its broadest sense). He should not be blindly reactionary to a work which in a new way examines, for instance, the theme of modern sexuality. But at the same time he should be unimpressed with its "avant-gardism" sufficiently enough to be able to make a sound judgment on its intrinsic merit. In short, there is nothing sacred about the avant-garde: the badge of experimentation of itself merits no reverence.

After the teacher selects his texts, he is still faced with the problem of determining his point of view or tone regarding that material. In my own teaching, I have placed a premium on objectivity. Perhaps this is why I was

made a little uncomfortable recently on reading a statement by Randall Stewart, a noted teacher and scholar of American literature. Professor Stewart confesses to a "growing impatience with the traditional academic adoration of the objective, disinterested, neutral approach to all questions." He notes an "uncomfortably close kinship" between neutrality and sterility. *Neutral,* he remarks in an aside, is related etymologically to neuter. He then goes on to say that

> Professors of literature have been more neutral than most, especially where moral and religious questions have been concerned. The reasons for this have been at least three: (1) professors of literature, being congenitally polite, have not wanted to step on anybody's toes; (2) they have striven (mistakenly, I think) to be as objective and disinterested as their scientific brethren; and (3) they have prided themselves (again mistakenly, I think) on their agnosticism in religious matters, agnosticism being, or having been in the past, almost universally regarded in academic circles as more scholarly, more intelligent, and more sophisticated than "belief."[2]

Allowing, on the one hand, that there are dangers in partisanship in the classroom, and, on the other hand, that certain pedagogical ends can be achieved by playing the devil's advocate, the Mormon teacher might well give Professor Stewart's statement thoughtful consideration. To be sure, a teacher is obliged to allow his students to formulate their own conclusions regarding any particular piece of literature; but is he not obliged also, as a fellow human being and spiritual brother, to share with them, at least to some extent, his personal solutions to the anxieties often generated in the encounter with literary modernism? This does not have to involve preaching doctrine, but it could involve hints and suggestions which would let a little light into the student's soul and open up affirmative alternates for him to weigh along with the more obvious negative ones.

Probably the most important concern for a Mormon teacher of literature is the sorting out of his own opinions, attitudes, and beliefs. He ought to identify or establish points of demarcation in his moral and religious views. How far can he go, for example, in accepting a particular moral attitude, stated or implied? Where is the point beyond which he cannot go and remain consistent with his religious faith, his world view? This, of course, is not easy and is never fully accomplished, because no one's world view remains static from one day to the next—at least not if his intellect is the least bit active. But the effort and the approximation are what count. The Mormon teacher who is honest with himself will never be able to feel smug and comfortable in the bewildering world of modern literature. There will necessarily be a constant tension between his theology and his subject matter. But there is no spiritual growth without tension. This is what makes religious faith in the modern world such an adventure, such a challenge.

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[2]*American Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Baton Rouge, 1958), p. viii.