

Digging the Foundation: Making and Reading Mormon Literature

Bruce W. Jorgensen

The worst tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.

—N. SCOTT MOMADAY

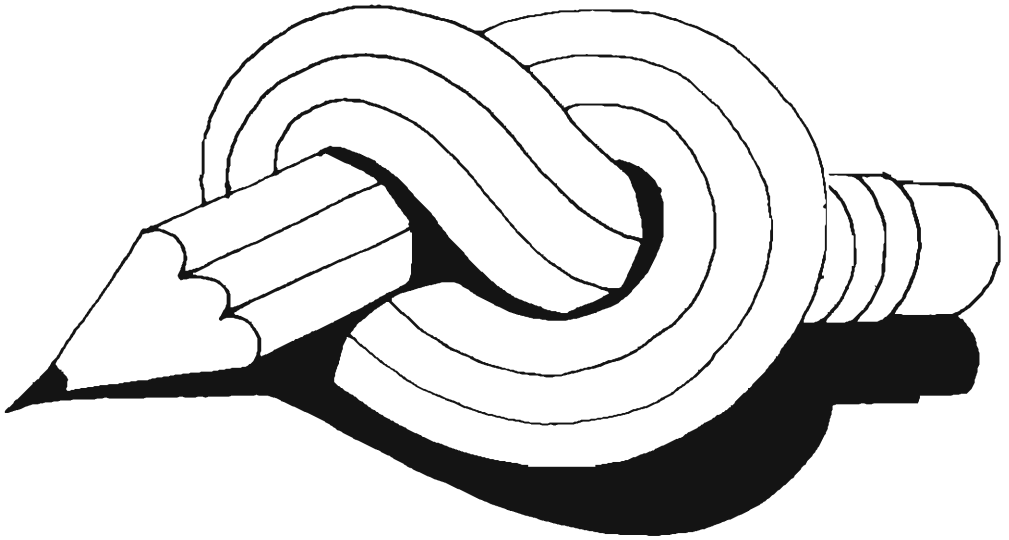
Their inner intellectual and spiritual problems cannot easily be shared with others.

—SYDNEY AHLSTROM

As an epigraph to their anthology *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints*, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert quote Orson F. Whitney's 1888 *Contributor* essay, "Home Literature":

We shall yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own. God's ammunition is not yet exhausted. His highest spirits are held in reserve for the latter times. In God's name and by his help we will build up a literature whose top shall touch heaven, though its foundation may now be low on earth.¹

While their anthology does not show us any Miltons or Shakespeares of our own, Professors Cracroft and Lambert have excavated a foundation long buried away from the sight of most Mormon readers, and they have shown us where some of the small-arms ammunition has been stored. If *A Believing People* reveals a foundation still "low in earth" (rather like the "hopeful houses" begun in so many small Utah towns in the 30s and 40s—three feet of concrete roofed with clay), if its genre-by-genre tour distracts and fragments our view of vertical continuity from past to



present—still it does show us what is there, what Mormon readers have to explore, enjoy, and learn from, what Mormon writers have to beat on their own ground.

The editors' admission that their anthology is "tentative and growing and open to change and improvement" (p. 5) gives me leave to make some modest proposals. First, simply a more careful job of proofreading to tidy up errata both gross and minuscule—from the twenty footnotes in Leonard Arrington's article (corrected on an errata sheet) to "noisesome" (p. 27) in Thomas L. Kane's lecture, to the incorrect title of Marden Clark's essay, "Art, Religion, and the Marketplace" (p. 289n). Such blemishes plague nearly all anthologists, of course.

Second, some suggestions on content. The editors note that we are "a world church" (p. 5), yet their selections implicitly define Mormon literature as a subspecies of American literature. Granted, perhaps most Mormon literature still is American in some sense; granted, as an American literature specialist, I, too, would feel less than competent to select works written in (or translated from) German or French, not to mention Japanese or Tagalog; still, since Mormon literature must cut across cultural and linguistic barriers, it would profit us to have an anthology that reflected this. Perhaps we may hope for an expanded, multi-ethnic edition, or for a companion volume.

Even on the home ground of American literature, though, the anthology suffers from the omission of significant work by "expatriates" like Ray B. West, Jr., Jarvis Thurston, Wayne Carver, Richard Young Thurman, and Lewis B. Horne. The inclusion of work by a few such writers (May Swenson, David L. Wright) implies a definition of "Mormon literature" open enough to include more of these writers, and surely by reason of literary quality they deserve to be here.

I found myself disappointed by some other inclusions and omissions. If Paul Cracroft, Helen Walker Jones, Charis Southwell, and Ann Doty (the last two published posthumously), why not Iris Corry, Sherwin Howard, Karl Keller? (I would not necessarily exclude the former, just include the latter.) Why not David L. Wright's *Still the Mountain Wind* or Ronald Dalley's *Only There Were Two* instead of Martin L. Kelley's *And They Shall Be Gathered*? Or why not one of Wright's published stories instead of the chunk from "River Saints"? I could go on, of course, and to little purpose; and I do know the editors wished to include much that I have mentioned, but could not because of limited space and other hindrances. Again, we might look forward to a revised edition, or to companion volumes.

But by far the biggest quarrel I have with *A Believing People* concerns its organization by genre rather than by historical sequence. I recognize the problems inherent in the latter approach: do we organize by authors' birth dates or by the dates of their first publications or (in the case of biography and history) by the dates of the events treated? I do not know how I might resolve such questions, but I do believe that while any organization must be somewhat arbitrary, an historical scheme might be less so than a generic one. Mormon literature is old enough that its history should have a discernible shape, while the histories of genres within that literature may not be clearly traceable in the limited samplings an anthology can afford. In *A Believing People* the genres don't seem all that distinct; for instance, the editors admit that Mormon "biography and autobiography are akin to Mormon history" and that "all three become, in a sense, forms of spiritual autobiography" (p. 47)—or hagiography, one might put it. Lines between fiction and poetry seem easy enough to discern, though Thomas Asplund's "The Heart of My Father," here located under Poetry, first appeared in a *Dialogue* Table of Contents (IV, 4) labeled Fiction; lines between Journal and Autobiography blur somewhat; the "Essay" by Orson F. Whitney reads very much like an oratorical "Discourse."

All this is technical quibbling, though, and fussy and foggy at that. I would really rest my proposal for an historical organization on some such rhetorical question as this: Wouldn't it be better, for instance, to have all the selections by Joseph Smith in one place, so that we could get a stronger sense of his as *one* Mormon imagination—the Mormon imagination, in fact, where it all begins? Think of the implications for a Mormon poetics of such a phrase as "chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory" (p. 169). Ponder the challenge to the Mormon imagination confronted by Mormon experience that is implied in the Prophets famous declaration (usually not read from this angle), "You never knew my heart; no man knows my history; I cannot tell it; I shall never undertake it. If I had not experienced what I have, I should not have believed it myself" (p. 172). The Prophet's calling was not a poet's or a novelist's, but he told us how hard it was, and was going to be, to imagine Mormon experience. The history of Mormon literature is a sequence of moments in which Mormon imaginations wrestle with that chaotic matter, striving for forms that will shape it into symbols and disclose its indwelling glory. This anthology should have helped us to see those moments and their sequence more clearly.

* * *

When I try to envision that sequence, I see something like this. Those nineteenth century Mormon writings that seem most consciously "literary" are the ones that, for me, just won't wash. Contrast the urbane polish of Thomas L. Kane with the

rough plainness of Priddy Meeks. Kane, describing Nauvoo and escalating into abstract polysyllabic vagueness:

Half encircled by a bend of the river, a beautiful city lay glittering in the fresh morning sun; its bright new dwellings, set in cool green gardens, ranging up around a stately dome-shaped hill, which was crowned by a noble marble edifice, whose high tapering spire was radiant with white and gold. The city appeared to cover several miles, and beyond it, in the background, there rolled off a fair country, checkered by the careful lines of fruitful husbandry. The unmistakable marks of industry, enterprise, and educated wealth, everywhere, made the scene one of singular and most striking beauty. (p. 26)

Meeks (as quoted by Arrington), describing the first winter in the Salt Lake Valley:

I went sometimes a mile up Jordan to a patch of wild roses to get the berries to eat which I would eat as rapidly as a hog, stems and all. I shot hawks and crows and they ate well. I would go and search the mire holes and find cattle dead and fleece off what meat I could and eat it. We used wolf meat, which I thought was good. . . .

We had to exert ourselves to get something to eat. I would take a grubbing-hoe and a sack and start by sunrise in the morning and go, I thought, six miles before coming to where the thistle roots grew, and in time to get home I would have a bushel and sometimes more thistle roots. And we would eat them raw. I would dig until I grew weak and faint and sit down and eat a root, and then begin again. (p. 38)

Given its occasion and audience, Kane's piece is quite good within certain limits; Meeks's journal gives us some sense of what those limits are, as does the almost Biblical compression of style in Mary Goble Pay's diary: "My brother James ate a hearty supper was as well as he ever was when he went to bed. In the morning he was dead" (p. 144). Even with the more tranquil reality it tries to represent, Kane's style seems out of touch; it is what Emerson meant by a "rotten diction," full of precut phrases. By contrast, Meeks and Pay pierce that, and "fasten words to things."

By thus opposing conscious "literary" style to primitive eloquence, I do not mean to argue that Mormon writers should have tried to work without literary sophistication. Quite the contrary: what was needed was more literary awareness, not less; but of the kind that led Mark Twain to recognize the power of vernacular speech, or Emily Dickinson to wrest the standard measures of hymnody to her own stylistic purposes. If Bernard DeVoto should stand glowing at my bedpost some night and ask me what "merely mortal storyteller" I would have to turn Mormon experience into literature, I'll answer, "Give me back Priddy Meeks. Or better yet, somebody who has read Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and the rest of the great ones, and who also understands the voice of Priddy Meeks." Bless us now, un-Saint Bernard.

Perhaps the closest we came to that kind of storyteller—and still a far piece off—in the nineteenth century would be Parley Pratt, with his wild mix of personae and styles. At times cloyingly sentimental-formal in the worst nineteenth-century manner, Pratt elsewhere breaks through into vernacular tale-telling that, had he been able to sustain it, might make him a good candidate, as in the story of the "love cracked" Luman Gibbs and his shrewish wife Phila (pp. 51-52). Pratt tells this story as an instance of the sordid that "served to enhance the misery of imprisonment, and to render our sufferings complete" (p. 52), but the manner of telling relishes the tale itself. In the portions of Pratt's *Autobiography* I have read, the partial literary sophistication and the vernacular power never quite get together (almost, by way of irony, in the rattlesnake incident on p. 71): Pratt maybe had the

makings of a good mortal storyteller, but most of the time he was about other business, and the makings stayed in his possible sack. Bless us now, Saint Parley.

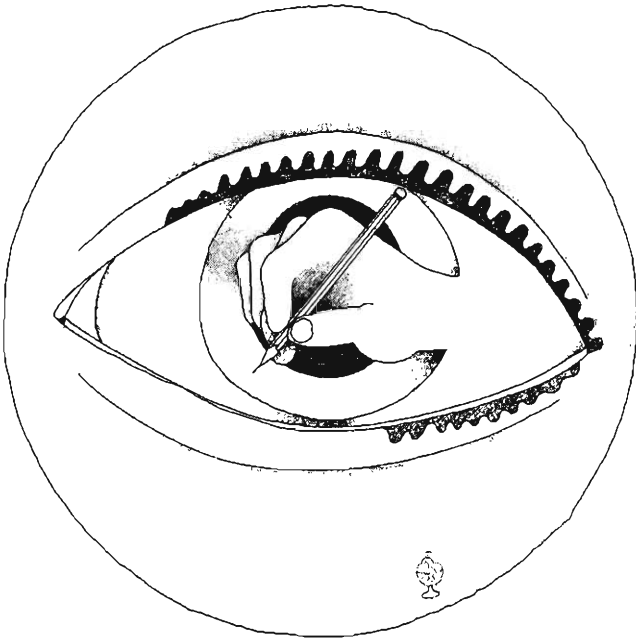
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The trouble with literature is that it is always literary: woodnotes wild are just woodnotes wild, and Shakespeare didn't just warble, he imitated; as every maker learns to make by following the gestures of the best makers he can find to teach him until those gestures that fuse experience in language become so habitual that the apprentice discovers a private inscape in the common syntax. Petrarch's sonnet becomes Sydney's, Spenser's, Shakespeare's, Donne's—and in each master's hand the form, imitated over and over, modified here and there, stays alive, original, never entrapping, always liberating. Literary imitation that succeeds goes deeper than the surfaces of form or diction, goes deep by unremitting discipline, holds the angel hard until he blesses, names, and wounds. No nineteenth-century Mormon writers represented in *A Believing People* seem to me to have wrestled that hard: they have settled for a seeming-sublime manner, for a sentimental manner, for a homiletic manner, rather than trying to see the vision and submit to the discipline of those writers whose manners they too lightly borrowed.

So I would take issue with Orson Whitney's insistence that "Above all things we must be original" (p. 206). Probably Mormon literature ought to be "for God's glory, not man's" (p. 205); maybe "The Holy Ghost is the genius of 'Mormon' literature" (p. 206); but I doubt this entails the radical "originality" Whitney exhorts us to, because I doubt that kind of originality happens very often. The first instances of new literary forms usually descend by intelligible steps of reaction or mutation or combination from older forms, and those first instances are not always the best of their kind. God seems to have been willing enough to pour the new wine of the restoration into the old bottles of the English language; I can't imagine why the Holy Ghost should scorn the sonnet or the short story. And (*tu quoque*, Orson) Whitney himself can hardly be said to have invented any new literary forms, but rather badly to have imitated old ones (for example, using ballad stanzas for his epic *Elias*). I wish he and others had been a little less chauvinistic and a little more humble, teachable, and willing to learn from the masters they aspired to equal or excel, more devoted to the calling and discipline of makers with words.

Almost everywhere in nineteenth-century Mormon writing, imitation looks slack and slavish, not strenuous enough. I don't know a Mormon hymn that quite stands up, poetically, to the best of Watts. The "Vision" (pp. 258-266), attributed to Joseph Smith but likely written by W. W. Phelps, is not as tough as its popular Puritan analogue, Wigglesworth's "Day of Doom," and it falls far short of the quality of Edward Taylor's "God's Determinations." Most of the poems of Augusta Joyce Crocheron (pp. 276-77) might have been written by Emmeline Grangerford ("And hast thou shut and locked thy heart/Against me? Nay, not so"), except that their subjects are not all deaths; though perhaps under the surface of stock diction in "Estranged" lies a certain toughness we could respect, were it not so far surpassed in Emily Dickinson:

I could not sing in heaven, if there
A loved face turned away,
Unreconciled; 'twould chill my joy,
E'en in that perfect day.



Mrs. Crocheron's *Wild Flowers of Deseret* also raises for us the question as to how you tell a Mormon poem from a non-Mormon poem. In "Estranged," perhaps the only thing that would suggest a specifically Mormon consciousness, even to a Mormon reader, would be the phrase "Life's holy mission here." Content, then? A little drop of doctrine, whether preached or, as here, absorbed into the stream of the speaker's emotion? Mormon literature may always suffer from identity problems that won't be made to go away by striving after originality or by invoking the Holy Ghost.

Another approach to the making of "Mormon" literature has been to employ, manipulate, or elaborate established Mormon symbols, such as the iron rod of Lehi's dream which Joseph L. Townsend used in "To Nephi, Seer of Olden Time" (p. 278). But given the hymn's heavily homiletic intention, such versified moralization might be said only to diminish into banality the symbol's original potency.

If, as the editors are probably right to say, the sermon is "the predominant form of literary expression in the Mormon church" (p. 165), the predominance of a homiletic intention in so much Mormon poetry and fiction from the nineteenth century to the present in the official and semi-official press of the Church should come as no surprise. From Orson Whitney's stricture that Mormon literature "must be made subservient to the building up of Zion" (p. 205), it is all too short a jump to the "flood of moralistic stories" (p. 331) which the editors represent with pieces by Josephine Spencer and Nephi Anderson. "'God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.' This was certainly exemplified in the history of Lester Amsden's love," begins Anderson's tale; and it goes on, "Although the cynic and the scoffer may scorn the thought that God has anything to do with the loves and hates of man, the careful student understands that our Heavenly Father takes cognizance of our every act and overrules it for our good. Lester Amsden understands this now" (p. 349). The homiletic story-writer has no particular interest in

his characters, except as they might serve him to point up such a moral for his dear readers.

The assumption that literature, in order to build up Zion, must preach, teach, expound, exhort, rather than represent, illuminate, celebrate, and judge human experience, has probably done more harm to the Mormon imagination than its lack of literary sophistication or its proneness to cheap imitation. The choice was not simply between didacticism and the untenable dogma of art for art's sake: literature is for some human sake, all right; it teaches; but its proper power differs from the power of a sermon; there is such a thing as "narrative knowledge," as Wayne Booth has called it,² and narrative knowledge is not the same as a homiletic storyteller's truism exemplified in narrative. On the side of art's sake and God's glory, the devout Catholic novelist and short story writer Flannery O'Connor cites Thomas Aquinas to the effect that "art . . . is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made," and she proposes that an art work that is "good in itself glorifies God because it reflects God."³

Homiletic Mormon writers seem to have excused themselves from the severest demands of artistic discipline on the grounds that they possessed the truth and were obligated to promulgate it and to strengthen their readers' faith in it. Thus an easy polarization of didactic and fine art, followed by an unexceptionable choice of didactic, has led to a cheap way out of disciplined art and into the cheapest sort of pious subliterature. Why have Mormon writers degraded their own values by using them as a cop-out?

The artistic complacency of nineteenth-century Mormon writers probably reflects the general intellectual complacency of the Church, if Hugh Nibley's "Educating the Saints—A Brigham Young Mosaic" accurately reflects what one prophet thought the Mormon mind needed. And Brigham Young's call for "strenuous, critical, liberal, mind-stretching" education (as Nibley characterizes it, p. 234) still accuses all of us. Our forebears' and our own failure to come up to that standard has led to the "supine readership" and the "uneducated literacy" decried by William Mulder (p. 210) and to the "terrifying intellectual vacuum" Nibley himself excoriates. That failure, together with other factors, might account for the apparent dearth of reprintable Mormon literature between roughly 1900 and 1940, an interval within which the editors of *A Believing People* present us with no examples of fiction or poetry. Assuming they sought and did not find, how do we explain the Great Gap? Perhaps the literary developments of the 1880s, the 1890s, and especially the 1920s could not be assimilated by Mormon writers still committed to didacticism and to waning literary fashions.

* * *

Somewhere this side of the Gap, things begin to change. It is as if the call in William Mulder's 1954 essay, "Mormonism and Literature," for "a smaller canvas, a surer perspective," for "stories that provide the feeling of living experience, . . . of very particular situations," for "authentic voices" (pp. 210-211) had begun to be answered. The causes must be many and complex, but Mulder's suggestion that "Mormonism is perfectly capable of its own *Christian Century* and *Commentary*" has of course literally been answered—by *Dialogue*, by a reinvigorated *BYU Studies*, most recently by *Exponent II* and by the inception of *Sunstone*. (A glance at the Acknowledgements in *A Believing People* may suggest, at least quantitatively, how much *Dialogue* alone has contributed to the growth of contemporary Mormon writing.) Mormon writers have begun to acquire and exercise a modicum of the critical intelligence and imagination called for by Brigham Young, and the

literary results deserve the attention of more than just historical or documentary interest.

"Imagination applied to the whole world," said Wallace Stevens in *Adagia*, "is vapid in comparison to imagination applied to a detail." Where an epic attempt might fail, a lyric vision of the "movement of history" (as in Edward Hart's "To Utah") can succeed because of prosodic skill and sharply focused images. When contemporary Mormon writers have looked back to Mormonism's usable past from the perspective of several generations' distance, the results have been criticism of popular Mormon symbols, as in Vesta Crawford's "The Fable of the Rose" (p. 285), or of our very understanding of and relation to some moment in our history, as in R. A. Christmas's tightly disciplined "At Mountain Meadows: For Juanita Brooks" (p. 316). The poem fairly cries out for the inclusion in the anthology of a chapter from Brooks's historical work. Again, in Clinton Larson's "A Letter from Israel Whiton, 1851" (pp. 292-294), in his "Homestead in Idaho" (not anthologized here), and in Clifton Jolley's "Heritage" (pp. 319-321), the thrust of the contemporary poet's critical intelligence aims at our own attitudes: a moment of history (here private rather than public) is imagined and set before us as a symbol of experience that tests complacent faith, challenges easy security within the Plan, by reminding us how often the tragic implications of our theology are borne out in mortality. Some readers have seen in Larson's work a tendency toward "meaningless violence";⁴ but those who question, on this ground, whether Larson's poems are "Mormon" might do well to reread Sterling McMurrin and Truman Madsen.⁵ Behind the oft-noted baroque splendors of Larson's style works a severe dynamic of Mormon theological ideas.

Contemporary Mormon writers have begun to work well with the smaller canvas of particular situations, too: witness lyric poems like Emma Lou W. Thayne's "First Loss" (pp. 300-301), with its poignant image for the experience of a twelve-year-old girl's aggrieved faith at her grandmother's death:

Now, lying on my back, I ran my longest arms
From hip to head, slow arcs on icy sheets,
And whispered childhood's chant to the breathless room:
"Angel, Angel, snowy Angel,
"Spread your wings and fly."

Or consider Dennis Clark's small triptych on the expectation and birth of his daughter (pp. 321-322), in which the last poem, "A Name and a Blessing," fuses private experience and ritual occasion to create a multivalent symbol; or Linda Sil-litoe's "Trip toward Prayer" (pp. 323-325), which works through a welter of quotidian opposition to finally open its cry to the Father. Behind both of these there may reverberate Eliza Snow's "Invocation" ("O My Father," p. 269), but the older poem is generalized in voice and theological imagery (being a hymn, it should be), where the present ones are personal and experientially particular.

We may hear authentic voices in contemporary Mormon prose as well—in the fiction of Douglas Thayer, Eileen Kump, and Donald Marshall, in the theological and critical essays of Truman Madsen and Marden Clark, and more recently in a personal essay like Edward Geary's "Goodbye to Poplarhaven" (pp. 242-247). In the last, there sounds for me the voice of a contemporary Mormon partly urbanized and partly expatriated by university and graduate education and nostalgic for a past that seems (perhaps was) more simply and securely Mormon. And the essay finds or makes symbols for the way many of us must feel about being half-uprooted from small intermountain Mormon towns and from a kind of community that might

have been, once, but clearly is not now. Note how Decoration Day comes to stand for that tenuous, half-gone community in its "massive reunion and homecoming" that involves "not only those living in the community but also the larger number who had moved away and the still larger contingent of the dead" (p. 245). That symbolic image of our common annual experience sank so far into my own buried sense of small town Mormon life that I awoke early one July morning in Ithaca to set down in my journal a similar description as an original note for a story, not to realize for eight months that the idea was not wholly mine.

In the stories of Don Marshall, here represented by "The Week-End" (pp. 372-380), the small voices of Mormon villagers speak from the dust of the dry places some call "Zion." What a shock of recognition when I first opened *The Rummage Sale!* I did not need to be told Marshall came from Panguitch to guess just about where his ear for dialogue had been tuned. Marshall's small but significant achievement is dual—first to have seen the stories in the uneventful lives of his Mormon villagers, and second to have begun to make their idiom work as a literary language. In effect, he has uncovered a "submerged population group," which to Frank O'Connor was the proper subject for short stories, a source of characters who, instead of representing "the reader in some aspects of his conception of himself," rather move on the fringes of their society, incongruent with its dominant self-images, small, lonely, inarticulate.⁶ Deriving from such a literary tradition, Marshall's stories will not be thought "uplifting" by some parts of the Mormon audience, for they tell of lives endured more than enjoyed. But as O'Connor points out, even though we do not "identify with" characters in this kind of story, yet in their words and gestures, however trivial or pathetic, we may hear a voice saying, "I am your brother." It can be edifying to be reminded, as in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, how "many people must live and die alone," even in Zion.

But historically the most important thing about contemporary Mormon literature, I believe, is that writing as a vocation within the Church not only has come to seem possible, but also has come to pass. It was not always so: Mormon literature may be said to have its lost or half-lost generation; and some who have not expatriated themselves have suffered mistrust and even brutal ostracism. It will not always be so in individual cases: witness the instance of David L. Wright, a one-man revolt from the Mormon village, yearning back like Anderson to "Winesburg"; perhaps enormously gifted, certainly passionately devoted to his craft, yet unable fully to reach and hold the discipline he needed. The reasons why some of those named above have been able to pursue the vocation of writing within the Church may be as many and as singular as the writers themselves. Surely the editors and readers of contemporary Mormon publications have helped; as has the creative writing program at BYU; nor could one discount the examples of scholars and writers like Hugh Nibley, Juanita Brooks, and Clinton Larson. But finally what may count most is the dedication and patience of the writers themselves.

Perhaps the patience above all. I think especially of Douglas Thayer and Eileen Kump, who I believe have published the best recent Mormon short stories. Thayer may revise enough times to lose count of the drafts before a story satisfies his exacting fictional and stylistic standards; for some stories this painstaking process has required as much as five years. Mrs. Kump began, at least as early as 1964, her cycle of historical stories about Amy Taylor Gordon; as teacher, graduate student's wife, and mother of four children she has carried on her work through a decade and several changes of residence, so far publishing four of eight projected stories.

The fruit of dedicated and patient craft is quality: these two writers have made

Mormon stories that will not easily be dislodged. Often deliberately flattened in tone, yet written in a style whose very syntax registers the rhythms of each central consciousness, Douglas Thayer's meditative stories show him to be our most incisive anatomist of the personal tensions of contemporary Mormons stressed between private needs and the social patterns of the Church. Thayer's work is well represented by "Under the Cottonwoods" (pp. 365-372), framed in a moment of quiet crisis when an innocently joyous boyhood self, sacrificed or disowned, rises to confront its protagonist.

Mrs. Kump's "The Willows" (pp. 360-365) I regard as her best story so far, and the best Mormon historical story I know. Nostalgia (as Karl Keller has remarked in conversation and in the following essay) has generated a great deal of Mormon historical fiction; but Mrs. Kump's stories seem to me to belong not to the nostalgic tradition of history-as-fiction, the genre of the costume novel, but rather to the tradition of fiction-as-history, best represented in American literature by Hawthorne's Puritan tales and by the work of modern Southern writers like Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Andrew Lytle: fiction as a mode of historical understanding, the imaginative apprehension of consciousness in another time.⁷

What makes "The Willows" work is first of all the credible child's consciousness of eight-year-old Amy, struggling between her father's charitably inclusive tolerance and the hateful polarization of Saints and Gentiles, us and them, that the Edmunds Act so exacerbated. And there is the story's indelible central image, almost too true to have been invented, of the hunted polygamous wives hiding among the willows, mourning alone or consoling one another, constrained even to drive away their own children. This image and the story's title may refract our vision back beyond the imagined historical moment to a Biblical analogue for the story's emotional logic in Psalm 137: the lament for Zion—

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept,
when we remembered Zion.
We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

—and the violent delight in the image of revenge on Babylon—

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones
against the stones.

The pattern is latent in the child Amy Taylor's confused feelings, but the shadow of a scriptural archetype is part of what makes "The Willows" a moving verbal symbol of Mormon experience, and a fine example of how Mormon literature can be made.

With works like these, that literature is here—with us and for us. The desert has begun to sprout if not to blossom, and Cracroft and Lambert's anthology gathers some of the greenest leaves.

* * *

I needed this anthology: I need Mormon literature. Sydney Ahlstrom's mild, almost offhand comment about contemporary Mormons, "Their inner intellectual and spiritual problems cannot easily be shared with others," cuts deep: for me, his "others" include other Mormons. And, in my need of the imaginative—the poetic, dramatic, fictive—sharing of Mormon experience, I don't think I'm alone. Some years ago Douglas Thayer remarked in a letter, "I wish that all my friends were

splendid artists who could create forms to tell me what they feel. . . . I see more and more how lonely people (especially Mormons) are and how art can help us to experience what others feel"; and in another letter, "It's almost as if no Mormon really understands himself or that he can be understood by another person." For me, imaginative literature has become the richest, most sensitizing mode of such sharing and understanding, a mode and a mediator of self-knowledge and other-knowledge.

I know—we know, some of us—exactly how deep N. Scott Momaday cuts when he says, "The worst tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined." Maybe not the "worst" (my Mormon mind holds back from that slight inflation of language, an unavoidable temptation for BYU Forum speakers), but a tragedy all right: to go unimagined (and unimagining) is to go deprived of those modes of knowledge that may most closely and fully reflect the shape, color, odor, sound, mass, texture, rhythm of our mortal experience. I believe I came here for that experience; I believe I am embodied for it; I do not believe it is dross, an orange peel to be thrown away when I have sucked the sweetly acrid juice of its implicated meanings; I needed to know *it*, as well as whatever I could conclude from it. Imaginative literature, like the other fine arts, helps me to know my experience, which includes, must include, that of my brothers and sisters.

We hear too much careless quotation of the prophets' phrase, "vain imagination." Like any other human capacity, imagination *per se* is neither vain nor otherwise; it becomes vain (empty and vaunting), in both artists and audience, unless it is strictly, rightly, and finely disciplined and used. There may well be more "vain imagination" of the undisciplined kind sloshing around in the Church than there is of the prideful kind, though the two go together like the Tweedle Twins (contrariwise). Verbal imagination (my main concern here) becomes vain when either writers or readers will not pay the hard price, the hours and energy of spirit, demanded by the discipline of the genres they wish to practice or enjoy. Its vanity is confirmed whenever the editors of a Church publication settle for less than excellence of artistic discipline in the name of "message" or "uplift" (Flannery O'Connor calls the results of such compromise by a harsh but just name, "pious trash"⁸), whenever they implicitly advocate non-excellent, undisciplined imagination by rewarding it with publication and prizes. Its vanity may be further augmented when the editors of the first major anthology of Mormon literature succumb even slightly to the temptation to inflate the language in which they judge that literature and the culture that produced it: "outstanding" (p. 47); "very good poems" (p. 251); "a rich heritage, a firm foundation for the literary tradition of the Saints," "a people whose individuality and commitment . . . have seldom been equaled" (p.4). I have augmented its vanity if I have overrated any writer whom I have praised in this review.

What is non-vain imagination good for, aside from the possibly selfish joy of imaginative knowledge? I believe John A. Widtsoe's teaching that "our feelings with respect to our fellow men should be cultivated. We must learn to sympathize with them in their joys, and pity them in their sins."⁹ The non-vain imagination matters here because, as C. S. Lewis wrote, "In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person's place, thus transcending our own competitive particularity."¹⁰ Such acts presuppose that we imagine (thus in a sense "know") each other person as what George Eliot in *Middlemarch* (end of Ch. 21) calls "an equivalent centre of self."

By the verbal imagination even at the pitch of its discipline, as by any human mode of knowledge, "we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13.12). And we would

see as we are seen, know as we are known by God. But that, Paul reminds us, will be "then"; and here we are "now." For now, I need the dim mirror of the verbal imagination, need it polished to the highest clarity a human writer can attain—aided by God if God will. I need Mormon literature because I need to understand and share Mormon experience, need to imagine it as a way to understand, in pain and joy, myself, my brothers and sisters, my Brother, my Father. It reflects some discredit on myself and my Church that it took James Agee's *A Death in the Family* to help me feel family life and sense one personal dimension of the image of Christ crucified; Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to help me feel the depths of the miracles in birth and death, the perplexity of conversion; Reynolds Price's meditations on some works of Rembrandt¹¹ to lead me to some imaginative understanding of Abraham's experience on Moriah; the last cantos of Dante's *Purgatorio*, so moving I trembled and wept, to give me a faint hint of what God's forgiveness may feel like. (I trust it was better for me to tremble with Dante than for Augustine to weep for Dido.) These are things I came here to know. It reflects some discredit But praise God it happened at all.

A Believing People belongs in the hands of every Latter-day Saint (or half-Saint) seeking to understand and possess his heritage and his cultural identity. Whatever its failings, it shows us the contour of the foundations of Mormon literature, the literature many of us need. If it shows us also how little distance we have come since Orson Whitney spoke, how far short of his high expectation, how low in earth still lie the foundations—yet it shows us the foundations *are there*. And from there we may hope to build more, to make it and read it well.

¹Quoted on p. 1 of the anthology. The text of Whitney's essay (p. 206) differs: "will" for "shall" in the first sentence; "brightest" for "highest"; "foundations" for "foundation"; "in" for "on" in the last phrase. All subsequent citations of *A Believing People* will be given parenthetically by page number.

²In *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago, 1974), p. 186.

³*Mystery and Manners* (New York, 1970), p. 171.

⁴Edward Geary in "On the Precipice: Three Mormon Poets," *Dialogue*, 9, 1 (Spring 1974), 88; and Thomas Schwartz in "Sacrament of Terror: Violence in the Poetry of Clinton F. Larson," *Dialogue*, 9 (Fall 1974).

⁵For once in agreement, more or less. See McMurrin, "On Evil and Mormon Finitism" in *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City, 1965), esp. pp. 96, 104-105; and Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City, 1966), pp. 18-19 and Ch. V. P. A. Christensen's "Tragedy as Religious Paradox" in *Of a Number of Things* (Salt Lake City, 1962), pp. 86-101, would be worth a glance, too; despite its apparent "humanism" I would have included it in *A Believing People*.

⁶*The Lonely Voice* (New York: Bantam, 1968), pp. xi-xiii.

⁷See Tate's "Foreword" to Lytle's *The Hero with the Private Parts* (Baton Rouge, 1966), pp. xiii-xiv, and in that book Lytle's own essays, "The Image as Guide to Meaning in the Historical Novel" and "Caroline Gordon and the Historic Image." On the more complicated instance of Faulkner, one might start with the chapter on *Absalom, Absalom!* in David Levin's *In Defense of Historical Literature* (New York, 1967), which also deals with Hawthorne. For a more extensive and intensive treatment of Hawthorne's fiction as moral history, see Michael J. Colacurcio's essays on *The Scarlet Letter* (*ELH*, 39 [Sept. 1972]) and "Young Goodman Brown" (*EIHC*, 110 [Oct. 1974]).

⁸*Mystery and Manners*, p. 180. If anyone thinks I'm being tough on my Church and its writers and readers (myself included), he should see this tough Catholic tear into hers, in "The Church and the Fiction Writer," "Novelist and Believer," and "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers," all in the collection cited here.

⁹*A Rational Theology*, 7th ed. (Salt Lake City, 1966), p. 175.

¹⁰*An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, 1961, 1965), p. 138.

¹¹In *Things Themselves* (New York, 1973), pp. 260-269.