

# The Poetics of Provincialism: Mormon Regional Fiction

EDWARD A. GEARY

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS have been a source of sensationalistic subject matter for popular novelists almost since the beginning of the Church. But the Mormon novel as a treatment of Mormon materials from a Mormon point of view has come from two main wellsprings. The first was the "home literature" movement of the 1880s, the goal of which, according to Orson F. Whitney, was to produce a "pure and powerful literature" as an instrument for spreading the gospel, a literature which, "like all else with which we have to do, must be made subservient to the building up of Zion."<sup>1</sup> Even though its early practitioners are little read today—Nephi Anderson is the chief exception—the influence of home literature remains strong. It provides the guiding principles by which fiction and poetry are selected for the official church magazines, and it is also reflected in such popular works in Mormondom as *Saturday's Warrior* and *Beyond This Moment*. However, home literature has not had the impact on the world that Brother Whitney hoped for. It has not led to the development of "Miltons and Shakespeares of our own."<sup>2</sup> Good fiction is seldom written to ideological specifications. It is one thing to ask the artist to put his religious duties before his literary vocation or to write from his deepest convictions. It is quite another to insist that he create from a base in dogma rather than a base in experience. Good fiction, as Virginia Sorensen has said, is "one person's honest report upon life,"<sup>3</sup> and in home literature the report usually fails to ring true. It is not a powerful literature artistically, nor is it pure. In most cases its distinctive Mormon characteristics are only skin deep, masking an underlying vision which is as foreign to the gospel as it is to real life. The early home literature borrowed the techniques of popular sentimental fiction and the values of the genteel tradition with a superficial adaptation to Mormon themes, and this practice continues only slightly modified.

The second major movement in Mormon fiction rose from different motives and it employed different models. The second quarter of this century, and especially the 1940s, saw the emergence of a group of Mormon

---

EDWARD A. GEARY is associate professor of English at Brigham Young University and one of *Dialogue's* founders.

regionalists whose goal was not to create an altogether new literature or an art subservient to the building up of Zion but to capture in their fiction the life of their region as the New England and Midwestern regional writers had done and as the Southern writers were beginning to do. The Mormon regionalists produced a few good novels and many undistinguished ones. Their achievement is less significant than that of those other regional literatures, but they nevertheless deserve more attention than they have received, not only for their intrinsic merit but also because both their successes and their failures can tell us something about the possibilities of a Mormon fiction.

### The Epic Strain

When the term epic is applied to a novel it is usually used somewhat loosely to indicate a certain breadth of scope rather than a strict imitation of epic conventions. Such is the case with Vardis Fisher's *Children of God: An American Epic* (1939), which is the best known of several novels that attempt to treat the whole sweep of the Mormon story. Several months before Fisher's novel was published, Bernard DeVoto had warned of the perils in trying to deal with Mormons in fiction. DeVoto outlined an epic story, beginning with Joseph Smith, "that man gone mad on deity," and continuing through persecutions and migrations until at last "Israel . . . joins hands with the destiny of the America which it hates, which has tried to exterminate it, and walks into the sunset for America's future."<sup>4</sup> It was, he declared, "a good book, by far the best book I am never going to write."<sup>5</sup> DeVoto's point is that the story is too big and the reality too severely strains credibility for it to be workable material for the novelist. "God, the best story-teller, has made a better story out of Joseph Smith and the Mormon wandering than fiction will ever equal."<sup>6</sup>

Fisher's novel bears out DeVoto's views. For Fisher, as for DeVoto, the Mormon epic ends with Brigham Young, but even so it is too big to be dealt with in a single novel. Fisher has a wide-ranging mind and considerable skill as a writer, but both his imagination and his technical resources are inadequate to his scheme in *Children of God*. He attempts to give his novel both an epic stature—by focusing on Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, Mormonism's two great culture heroes—and a panoramic sweep—by viewing major events through the eyes of a number of different characters. As a result, the novel suffers a serious break in continuity when Joseph Smith is killed and one central character is replaced by another. Moreover, in choosing to treat historical figures from inside, Fisher is forced to attribute motives, to tell us what they thought as well as what they said and did. This poses special problems in the case of Joseph Smith, as I will point out later, and it also leads to some trouble with Brigham Young.

Brigham is heroic, for Fisher, mainly because he is a man of strong common sense and decisive action. Yet with his Freudian insights, Fisher shows Brigham as inwardly more self-doubting and unsure of his direction than he appears outwardly. Consequently there are two Brigham Youngs in the novel, and they are never satisfactorily reconciled. Fisher's panoramic technique is also unsatisfactory, leading to serious fragmentation. The reader is frustrated again and again as a character whose insights he has come to depend on drops out of sight for no apparent reason or comes to be viewed

only from outside. On the other hand, because the McBrides are to become the central characters in the last part of the novel, Fisher must periodically take them out of their box and parade them before the reader in the earlier sections, even though most of their appearances are gratuitous. This sketchiness in the handling of point of view is a constant problem in *Children of God*, one forced upon Fisher by his epic scheme.

Fisher's failure is not simply of narrative technique, however. *Children of God* also shows an uncertain imaginative grasp of materials. Fisher cannot quite make up his mind about the story he is telling. With the exception of Brigham Young he is unsympathetic toward his characters. Joseph Smith is portrayed as a creative mystic whose dreamy idealism and inaptitude for practical affairs would surely have destroyed the Church had he lived much longer than he did. The early converts are emotionally unstable zealots or cynical opportunists or, strangely, both. The pioneers are weaklings who succumb to panic whenever Brigham Young is not there to take care of them. The church leaders who succeed Brigham are at one and the same time impotent weaklings and clever, self-serving schemers. The men are repeatedly given "cruel mouths" and "crafty eyes." The women are stupid, slatternly or shrewish. Seldom indeed has such a collection of hard-bitten, unappealing characters been gathered into a single volume. And yet at the conclusion we are apparently supposed to feel that a heroic era has come to an end. Fisher has neglected to establish the values he expects the reader to appreciate.

Fisher's main problem, then, is his inability to resolve his own ambivalence toward Mormonism or to achieve an aesthetic detachment from it. However, it would be a mistake to think that a more positive *Children of God* would be the great Mormon novel. DeVoto was right. Attempts at a Mormon epic will always be "mere vulgarizations of a great story."<sup>7</sup> It takes a Tolstoy to get the Napoleonic Wars into a novel, and even he did not try to put the reader inside Napoleon's mind to any significant extent.

Of course it is possible to avoid some of the problems Fisher encounters by treating the Mormon epic more modestly. George Snell's *Root, Hog, and Die* (1936) covers almost the same time span as *Children of God* but achieves greater unity by rendering the story through the experiences of three generations in a single family. Paul Bailey, in *For This My Glory* (1940), follows a single character from the 1830s to the 1880s. Samuel Taylor, in *Nightfall at Nauvoo* (1971), restricts the time span, developing a panoramic picture of the rise and fall of Nauvoo. Yet these books also suffer from their epic pretensions. None of them evokes Mormon history as poignantly as does, for example, Virginia Sorensen's *A Little Lower Than the Angels* (1942). Though Sorensen's first novel is by no means her best, lacking the toughness of *The Evening and the Morning*, it nonetheless succeeds in rendering a part of the Mormon epic by not trying to be "epic" at all but by simply showing a single, rather ordinary family trying to live a normal life at Nauvoo while a great human upheaval is taking place around them. Sorensen's example reminds us that the novel as a form is not well suited to epic themes. The novel's great tradition is in its treatment of the private life. Since it is in the private life that religious experience takes place, the Mormon novel ought to turn this way instead of outward to big public events.

### Peculiar People, Peculiar Institutions

Mormons, as we love to point out, are different. And although we may not be quite as different as we like to think, we are different enough to pose some special problems for the writer of fiction. The problem begins with Joseph Smith, who made some rather definite claims which must be either true or false. If they are true, he was a prophet of God and the Church is the only valid instrument of divine purpose on earth. If his claims are false, then he was either a self-deluded fanatic or a deliberate fraud, a confidence man on a large scale. Whichever position a writer takes, he encounters difficulties. At best Mormons who hold that Joseph Smith was a true prophet have a difficult time making themselves understood by non-Mormon readers and at worst, descend into cheap hagiolatry when they write about Joseph Smith. The Mormon writer's task might be easier if Joseph himself had been a confessional or devotional writer, but most of his writings have a "public" character and reveal little of his inner life. We have only imperfect notions of just what a prophet is and how his mind works. Nevertheless, only as a true prophet can Joseph Smith be an authentic hero. Joseph Smith as a fraud must be an anti-hero, a rogue adventurer. And Joseph Smith as a deluded fanatic can only be pathetic.

It is possible to take yet another position regarding Joseph Smith, the position that it is impossible to be certain whether or not he was "for real." This position can be maintained as long as a writer treats him only from outside, but any inside view must proceed from an interpretation of his character which will necessarily incline toward one or another of the alternatives I have mentioned. Because Samuel Taylor in *Nightfall at Nauvoo* limits us to viewing Joseph through the eyes of others he comes as close as anyone has to an objective presentation. Yet many Mormon readers are dissatisfied with Taylor's treatment.<sup>8</sup> George Snell also presents Joseph Smith through the eyes of others, but near the end of his novel he introduces a spokesman for what seem to be the author's views, that Joseph was "a special kind of enthusiast with tremendous imagination" but "something a little wrong with his mind. . . . Those 'visions' he had must have been results of epilepsy, for I understand there was a strain of it in the family."<sup>9</sup>

Clearly it is difficult to write about Joseph Smith without taking a stand. Vardis Fisher attempts the impossible when he tries to go inside Joseph's mind without directly facing the validity of his claims. *Children of God* begins with the Joseph Smith story as all Mormons know it but with just a few crucial changes. Young Joseph is perplexed by the clashing creeds of the Burnt-over District and is searching for some sure path to truth, but for Fisher he is further moved by the guilt of masturbation—a foreshadowing of the sexual appetite which, for Fisher, eventually leads him into polygamy.

When Joseph goes to the grove, he does not try to pray immediately, but he loses himself for an hour in daydreams during which he keeps repeating the verse from James. The suggestion is that perhaps a kind of self-hypnosis takes place. When he prays it is with a sense of detachment from himself: "He was obscurely aware of his trembling body and the strange deep passion of his voice; but his prayer, filled with biblical phrases and archaic terms, seemed not to be his at all. He listened as if to another voice and was moved to deep astonishment."<sup>10</sup> The sense of an oppressive, destroying power

which Joseph Smith referred to in his own official story is suggestively imaged in *Children of God* as the onset of some kind of seizure, though Fisher carefully keeps it only a suggestion. After the vision, Joseph "came to his senses."<sup>11</sup> Fisher seems to be deliberately ambiguous here. He holds closely enough to the standard account that it is possible to interpret the scene in those terms, but for the reader disinclined to see Joseph Smith's experience as authentic the scene can suggest a particularly vivid daydream, or some kind of self-induced hallucination, or even perhaps an epileptic seizure. However, it is difficult to maintain so wide a range of interpretive options for very long, and when he is compelled to choose, Fisher tends to choose the naturalistic explanations. For example, when Joseph tells his family about finding the golden plates Hyrum asks whether he had seen them "With your mortal eyes," and Fisher takes an explicit interpretive position:

Joseph hesitated. The incredulity in his brother's voice impelled him to make one of the gravest mistakes of his life. He knew well that he had seen the plates only in a vision, but he felt nobody would believe that. If he had said he saw them in a vision and if he had added that he would translate them while the power of God was upon him, but without ever actually seeing them or holding them in his mortal hands, he would have avoided what was to become his most serious problem. But he did not in this moment foresee the difficulties. The only thought in his mind was this, that nobody would believe in golden plates if they were not tangible objects that could be measured and weighed. . . .

"With your own eyes?" Hyrum asked again.

"Yes."<sup>12</sup>

This is Fisher's approach throughout. He nowhere rules out the possibility that Joseph Smith's claims could have some valid basis, but he suggests repeatedly that Joseph's visions are simply projections of his own desires. For the most part Joseph seems to be taken in by his own dreams, but occasionally, as in the passage given above, there is a suggestion of fraud. Fisher is disingenuous in his treatment of Joseph Smith because he pretends to leave the basic question open when in fact he is stacking the evidence against the prophet. He also fails to confront the full implication of his position. He admires Brigham Young in large part because "there was none of the mystic" in him.<sup>13</sup> His hero is not Brigham the prophet but Brigham the colonizer. Is it really possible to choose one or the other? Can Brigham Young be worthy of the respect Fisher gives him if he was the devoted follower of a deluded fanatic or a fraud? Can an author treat Mormon characters honestly and sympathetically if he finds their beliefs absurd?

It is easiest to approach "the peculiar people" in fiction by way of ordinary Mormons, whose personal struggles of faith and doubt do not so insistently raise historical questions. Maurine Whipple points the way when she says in the Preface to *The Giant Joshua*, "These people of whom I write are my people and I love them, but I believe that what they did becomes even greater when we face the fact that they were human beings by birth and only saints by adoption."<sup>14</sup> Even so, the problem cannot be altogether avoided. It makes a significant difference, when Clory MacIntyre dies from the hardships of the Dixie Mission, whether she gave up her life for a humbug. The author's inability to make up her mind on that question is one

source of the weakness at the end of *The Giant Joshua*.

Whoever writes about the Mormons must deal not only with their religious claims but also with their distinctive social institutions, most obviously polygamy and the United Order. Polygamy is a topic of perennial interest, but the United Order seems to have received the most attention in the novels written in the 1930s or shortly thereafter. Especially in George Snell and Vardis Fisher, the economic and political ideas of the 1930s are imposed upon the earlier period in which their novels are set. Explicitly in Snell and implicitly in Fisher, the Church's attempts to establish a communal society are interpreted in terms of a struggle between socialism and capitalism.

Snell's *Root, Hog, and Die* begins with Jim Brent, a poor, illiterate boy who is literally sitting in a pigsty when a Mormon missionary finds him. The Church gives direction to his life, stimulating an enterprise which eventually makes him rich. His son Zeke had certain idealistic longings in his youth but is drawn into the family wealth and becomes an instrument of it as he grows up. Zeke's son Mark, however, has a 1930s social consciousness (even though the book is set in the 1890s) and attempts to revise the economic order to make it more just. He is killed while trying to end a strike at the family's mine. At several points in the novel, Snell presents his economic ideas explicitly. Although Jim Brent knows that agriculture is "the root and foundation of all prosperity," he, like other prominent men in the Church, realizes that industrialism is the way to wealth: "Farming was fine in an isolated community that had no need or desire for class distinction, but where a factory or a machine could be harnessed by a man, that man had his hands on potential power that lifted him economically many stages above his neighbor."<sup>15</sup> Using a young Jewish intellectual as his spokesman, Snell declares that the one really admirable thing about the Church was its early communitarianism. That was "one facet of a fine idealism, apart from every religious dogma that we may deplore now." Then he goes on:

But has it lasted? I'm afraid not. Look at your family, Mark. You're wealthy, and at the expense of the hundreds who work for you. I'll bet there are dozens of miners, millworkers, factory-hands, beet-diggers, and growers, who make starvation wages in your family's enterprises, and yet I suppose most of them, probably all of them, are just as "good" Mormons as your grandfather or your father. . . . That's what's become of your idealism. The Church itself is the worst offender because it's the biggest capitalist in the Territory . . . . Your people started with true economic ideals, and these have degenerated; your people started with false religious ideals but these will vanish in some later day, and I don't know what will be left.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly for Fisher, Joseph Smith's most admirable characteristic was his social idealism: "Nothing was closer to the prophet's heart than his dream of a society without avarice, poverty or wealth, distinctions of caste and position, meanness and bigotry and greed."<sup>17</sup> Brigham Young cannot believe fully in Joseph's utopian ideal, but he too embraces the principle of the United Order, hoping by means of it to "weld his people into one invulnerable unit."<sup>18</sup> In Brigham's mind,

There could never be a utopia in this world. But there could be united effort, with every person serving in the common plan; and there could be an abundance of goods for all. The selfish and the greedy, vain for

power, hungry for more than they needed, would have to be restrained; and the timid and inefficient would have to be encouraged.<sup>19</sup>

For Fisher, as for Snell, the modern Church has betrayed that dream. At the end of *Children of God* the fiery Nephi McBride predicts that in the future (after 1890)

This church that was to establish a new gospel of brotherhood on earth will have bigger banks and factories, its millionaires and beggars. Some will own factories—and some will own nothing but their self-respect. There will be the same wealth and poverty, luxury and starvation, snobbery and humility that are found all over the world. And our church, the one that began in a cabin in Palmyra and was driven across a continent, will be no different from churches everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

Relevance is a double-edged sword. What probably seemed to be the most timely aspect of Snell's and Fisher's novels when they were published now seems rather dated. A novel that wears better is Lorene Pearson's *The Harvest Waits*, published in 1940 and written, no doubt, by one who was just as aware of contemporary social issues as Snell or Fisher. But Pearson treats the United Order on something more like its own terms. It is a finely balanced view. She shows not only the idealism but also the zeal and injustice that can accompany the communitarian experiment, and she generates sympathy for those who are unwilling to consecrate their possessions to the Order. Throughout her novel she shows the experiment as doomed and yet as achieving something of real value. Though she says less about the idealism involved, the reader can get a better feeling for the true idealism from *The Harvest Waits* than from Fisher or Snell, who cannot resist the temptation at times to turn fiction into political tract.

In the minds of many, polygamy is the most peculiar of Mormonism's peculiar institutions. It is an inescapable fact of Mormon history and theology, and virtually everyone who has written fiction about the Mormons has treated it in one way or another. Outside writers have usually exploited the sensationalism of the topic, conjuring up visions of exotic harems and maidens seduced by goatish Mormon elders. Within Mormondom polygamy is a divisive fact. Fundamentalist groups hold ardently to "the principle" as a symbol of the fullness of the gospel. Modern church leaders seem embarrassed by polygamy, preferring that it not be mentioned. For the serious Mormon novelist, especially if he chooses to treat historical themes, it is a topic which must be dealt with, but he is caught between three forces: the sensationalistic expectations of the outside audience; the resistance within the Church to open discussion; and the strangeness of the practice itself which makes it difficult to understand even for those whose grandparents were engaged in it. Considering these difficulties, the Mormon regional novelists have been remarkably balanced and sensitive in their treatment of polygamy, although not uniformly successful.

The most difficult aspect of polygamy to treat is its origin. As with Joseph Smith himself, so with the doctrines he propounded, the writer is usually compelled to take some position as to their divine or human origin. Usually, in those novels which deal with the beginnings of polygamy, it is seen as originating in Joseph Smith's sexual appetites. This pattern is worked out

most fully in Fisher where even as a youth Joseph is portrayed as having a strong sex drive. Then when Emma turns out to be frigid and shrewish, as Fisher portrays her, Joseph's appetites must find some other outlet. Snell also adopts this view, and so, with a little more sympathy, does Virginia Sorensen in *A Little Lower Than the Angels*. Samuel Taylor is somewhat ambivalent, but his Joseph Smith clearly has an eye for the ladies. Such a view is damaging to Mormon religious claims, of course, but is workable in fiction if maintained consistently. However, both Fisher and Snell are inconsistent. They depict the beginning of polygamy as an aberration and its practice as a burden and a failure. Yet to give the practice up, they suggest, was somehow even worse, a betrayal of the central tradition of the Church. One can hardly have it both ways.

Polygamy is treated most successfully in those novels which do not concern themselves directly with its origins but simply explore the human effects of an established practice. The best treatment is probably Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* (1941), whose protagonist is a third wife. John A. Widtsoe complained that Whipple's book was "unfair" because she portrayed "a life defeated because of polygamy" while in fact "Proportionately, there were fewer unhappy marriages under 'Mormon' polygamy than under monogamy."<sup>21</sup> Elder Widtsoe gives no evidence for his interesting claim about the relative success of polygamous marriages, and I suspect that solid statistical evidence would be difficult to find. In the personal accounts which have come down to us there are some suggesting that polygamous marriages could be happy but also some indicating that the problems Whipple explores—unequal matches, jealousy, favoritism, irresponsibility—were by no means unknown. In any case, the validity of a work of fiction does not depend on its adherence to a statistically accurate representation of reality but on its conveying a genuine sense of human possibilities and on the coherence and comprehensiveness of the created fictional world. *The Giant Joshua* despite its faults has that validity and is a powerful and moving novel which is accessible to both Mormons and non-Mormons.

This is a crucial point, for if the peculiarity of Mormon traditions and institutions is such as to cut off access to a wider audience then the possibilities of Mormon literature are limited indeed. Virginia Sorensen has stated the problem in these terms:

Whenever you write about a "peculiar people" you will find yourself under the necessity of holding up the action of your stories, in a way most frowned-upon by the technicians, while you explain how your characters feel about heaven and hell, and why; how they are married and to how many different people and how this happened to happen; how they feel about food and drink; how many of their relationships are complicated, or sometimes enhanced, by the notion that they go on and on forever.<sup>22</sup>

Sorensen also points to the answer to this problem when she goes on to say, "I have always felt that a novel is seldom an explanation, but rather an exploration." There is no good reason why Mormons should be harder to present to a wide audience than, for example, I. B. Singer's *Polish Jews*, and Singer rarely interrupts his stories to explain the folkways. Sorensen's own novel *Many Heavens* (1954) is a fascinating treatment of the polygamy theme presented with considerable technical skill. She treats polygamy in psychological rather than doctrinal or historical terms and makes a unique



application of the peculiar principle to one of the commonest themes of popular fiction: Polygamy solves a love triangle. Not even Elder Widtsoe would have claimed that for it!

### Enlightenment

The Mormon regional novel was mainly the product of a single generation, the first generation formed by the twentieth century. Its members grew up when regional isolation was breaking down and rural Mormondom was experiencing widespread depopulation. Consequently it is not surprising that many of them saw the Church as failing, the Mormon experiment as essentially concluded. They were or saw themselves as being the first really educated generation of Mormons. As a result many of them convey a rather self-conscious sophistication. Knowing the real intellectual currents of the modern world as they do, they can look with some amusement upon the naivete of Mormon thought. They have been liberated from both a narrow and provincial society and an incredible dogma, though they retain a nostalgic attachment for a vanishing way of life. Because of these general attitudes, it is virtually impossible to find a Mormon regional novel that does not to some degree patronize its subject. At the same time, the novels themselves invite patronizing because their sophistication is both naive and tardy. It took the Mormon regionalists until the 1930s and 1940s to discover what Joyce had known in 1916 or Sinclair Lewis in 1920.

In some novels the sense of superiority is so strong as to reduce the story to caricature. Jean Woodman's *Glory Spent* (1940) is perhaps the most adolescent, but Richard Scowcroft's *Children of the Covenant* (1945) and Blanche Cannon's *Nothing Ever Happens Sunday Morning* (1948) are written in the same spirit, though with greater skill. Maurine Whipple and Virginia Sorensen treat their heritage much more sympathetically, but they too patronize their subjects. *The Giant Joshua* is filled with the sense that real life is elsewhere: in Salt Lake or in Philadelphia or beyond the Joshua tree forests in California, not in the hard pioneering of Utah's Dixie. And when Whipple does try to justify the struggle of pioneering, it is not really in Mormon terms but rather in a fuzzy combination of humanism and Transcendentalism (shown most obviously in her tendency to capitalize such words as "Dream," "Idea," and, for God, the "Great Smile"). The patronizing tone grows stronger in Whipple's second book, *This Is the Place: Utah* (1945).

Almost all of Virginia Sorensen's sympathetic characters are those who have freed themselves from the credulity of their neighbors, who are, like their author, "'in the middle'—incapable of severe orthodoxies"<sup>23</sup>. Mercy Baker, in *A Little Lower Than the Angels*, whose kind and skeptical father has made her proof against the enthusiasm which fires her husband and the other residents of Nauvoo; Erik Eriksen, in *On This Star* (1946), emotionally tied to Sanpete Valley but intellectually liberated by his years of semi-bohemian life in New York and Europe; Kate Alexander, in *The Evening and the Morning* (1949), a free-thinking feminist and social worker; Niels Nielsen, in *Many Heavens*, Vienna-trained in the best medical knowledge but drawn home to Cache Valley by his love for the people whose faith he has left behind.

There is a pervasive view in these writers that Mormonism is something

to be outgrown. Most of them have a three-generation view of Mormon history. The first generation were the zealots, strange, driven men and women with absurd ideas yet a dedication and fervor that gives them a kind of heroism. The second generation are the provincials, formed in the mold of Mormonism but lacking the true spark, having neither the burning faith of their fathers nor the enlightenment of their children. The third generation (with which the authors identify themselves) is enlightened and liberated and able to put the whole picture of Mormonism into the correct perspective. There is little sign, in these novels, that there will be a fourth generation. From the viewpoint of the present, expansionist period in Mormon history, the dead-end vision of thirty or forty years ago seems rather quaint, but it remains as a warning. Perhaps each generation has its own provinciality. The views of the writers of the 1940s now seem as naive to us as those of their parents seemed to them. And there is little reason to think that it is we who have finally arrived at a true and definitive vision. Therefore, though we may regret the persistent note of condescension and wish for a Mormon Eudora Welty who would never make her characters the victims of her opinions, we should not judge these novelists too harshly. The best work of the Mormon regionalists is still impressive: the fine artistry of Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning*; the imaginative power of Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*. These are novels to compare with better known works in the mainstream tradition of American literature. In any case, they are the best Mormon novels we have, and we are not likely to get better ones until we learn what they have to teach.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Orson F. Whitney, "Home Literature," first published in the *Contributor*, July 1888; reprinted in Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), pp. 204, 205.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Sorensen, "Is It True?—The Novelist and His Materials," *Western Humanities Review* 7 (1953): 283.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard DeVoto, "Vacation," *Harper's* 177 (1938): 560.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 559.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Neal Lambert complains that Taylor's Joseph Smith is "less a wonder or even an enigma than he is a conglomeration of stereotypes." Review in *Brigham Young University Studies* 12 (1972): 334.

<sup>9</sup> George Dixon Snell, *Root, Hog, and Die* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1936), p. 380.

<sup>10</sup> Vardis Fisher, *Children of God: An American Epic* (New York and London: Harper, 1939), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> Maurine Whipple, *The Giant Joshua* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. xi.

<sup>15</sup> Snell, p. 265.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 381-382.

<sup>17</sup> Fisher, p. 152.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 555.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 556.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 764.

<sup>21</sup> John A. Widtsoe, "On the Bookshelf," *Improvement Era* 44 (1941): 93.

<sup>22</sup> Sorensen, "Is It True?" pp. 290-291.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.