

Excavating Myself

HERBERT HARKER

SOMEWHERE A BOOK IS WAITING to be written—somewhere, deepburied in the Mormon unconscious, and all we Mormon writers are hard at work digging up the back yards of our past trying to find it.

It isn't easy.

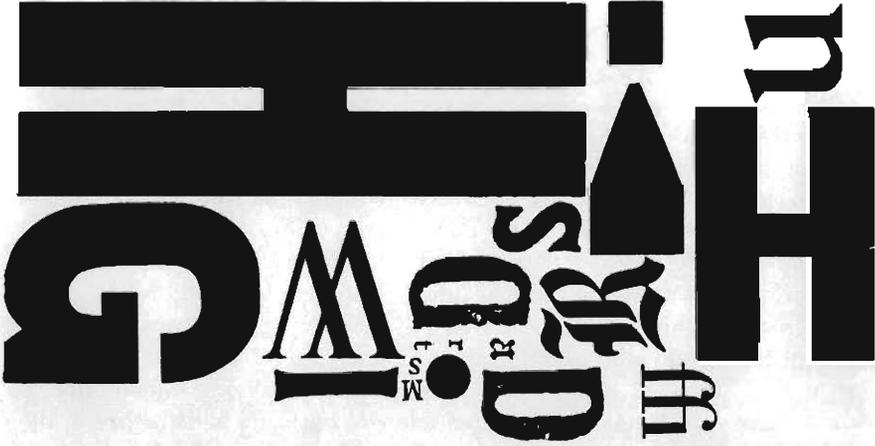
But that's all right, because when it comes to writing, difficulties are at the root of the work. Ross Macdonald told me once that when he has an impossible problem in his story, he sits and gloats for two days. Problems do not impede the story; rather, it is in their resolution that the story is made.

The nature of the problem itself is not always obvious. For example, we may feel that the selection of story material is only a matter of choice, but this is not usually the case for the fiction writer. His material is already inside him, like ore in a mountain. His work is to find, excavate and refine it. Some have said that among Mormons the job of prospecting for literary gold is especially difficult. I'm sure it is never easy, but I do agree that a "peculiar people" writer does have peculiar problems.

One such difficulty arises from a confusion of loyalties between spiritual obligations and artistic yearnings. I am thinking, for example, of the Mormon precept that my goal is to become a god. It is an awesome thought, truly sublime, yet a thought that strikes more terror to my heart than joy. I have little stomach for power. I confess to a hidden wish that somewhere on the backroads of the cosmos there may be a sunny meadow where gods create

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not new worlds but works of fancy to amuse their fellows. You know the kind of people I mean—minstrels, jesters, story-tellers—so they won't have to send down to the terrestrial kingdom for someone to entertain at the Pioneer Day picnic. I do not mean to be irreverent. I hope it is not blasphemous to think that there may be a heaven for Whitman as well as for Caesar, and that some level of such a heaven may hold a place even for me. (Considering my progress to date, eternity won't be a moment too long to perfect my writing skills, along with the rest of me.)



There are three things, among others, that can be helpful to a writer: a sense of place, a community of which he feels a part and a tradition, for out of a long past there develops a consensus on the forces that have shaped us.

A Mormon writer should have no trouble with a sense of place. It was bred in him—at his mother's knee he listened to the stories of Zion. As he grew older he struggled with the same land his father did—a land strong, primitive, variable, yet redolent of life-sustaining wealth. And though later he may have moved away, that sense of place is preserved for him in letters from home, family reunions, histories, the speeches he hears and even the songs he sings—"Oh, ye mountains high . . ."

When I was a child in Canada, I spent long days in the fields with my father's sheep. The wind that blew on me then still blows—I feel it every time I go back, and hear its moan, like a voice out of my past. It whispers half-forgotten tales of empty plains, and people grown hard and tough as the land itself.

And the power of this land is doubled for us by the manner in which it came to be ours—given us by the Lord, a New Caanan, a land of promise.

In a brief essay on the writer's sense of place, Ross Macdonald concludes,

We writers never leave the places where our first lasting memories begin and have names put to them. Together with our culture and our genes, both of which are in some sense the outgrowth of place, these places seem to constitute our fate. Our whole lives move along their ancient trails; but even when we are standing neck-deep in the open graves of our past we scan the horizon for new places, new possibilities. And as the final shovelfull plops down in our faces we taste in the dirt that chokes our mouths the spores of another promised land. . . .¹



The Mormon writer's community turns out to be both a blessing and a curse. Like an indulgent mother, it showers him with dramatic possibilities at the same time that it forbids him to use them as he wishes. He is expected to write stories about *good* people. The truth is that the wholly good person engages our admiration, but rarely our understanding.

An aura of mystery colors the typical Mormon world. A boy raised on the streets learns early the harsh realities of life. He has no illusions about angels rescuing him—he knows his fate is in his own hands. But it is different for a child who grows up faithfully saying his prayers. "Will God save me this time, or won't he?" The possibility of divine intervention is always there, and if help comes often enough, on terms satisfactory to the supplicator, then he continues to pray. But he can never be fully certain if his prayer has influenced events. To an adult, it can become an agonizing dilemma.

It is easier to write about such a dilemma if your reader has beliefs similar to your own. He accepts your faith as genuine, and he understands your doubt. But any fiction writer worth his salt craves an audience wider than his own community. If his voice cannot carry across cultural lines or attitudinal borders, he is no more than a pamphleteer, a bugle boy waking his own troops to battle.

What then is the writer's task?

You recall Salinger's little parable near the beginning of "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters"? Po Lo was getting old, and Duke Mu of Chin needed a new man to send for horses. Po Lo assured him that his friend, Chui-fang Kao, the vegetable man, was an excellent judge of horseflesh.

But when Chui-fang Kao returned from his first buying trip with the news that he had bought a dun-colored mare, and the horse turned out to be a coal-black stallion, Duke Mu lost confidence. Po Lo, however, was delighted. "Has he really got as far as that?" he cried. "In making sure of the essential, he forgets the homely details." We are told the horse turned out to be a superlative animal.

One responsibility of the artist is, like Chui-fang Kao, to draw attention to that which is important—to observe the heart, and not the skin only. He must trust or train his eyes to see things beyond their normal range of vision, his senses to detect tremblings before the earth begins to shake. For in a way he may be seen as both a historian and a prophet, recording past events and warning of the future.

Deep in his own heart, since it is the only heart fully open to him, he

must search for the truth. Truth is the artist's principal stock in trade—his vision of truth, sometimes the hidden, dark, repressed truth that we, his audience, have been unwilling, or unable to face. He is the spiritual astronaut who gives us a picture of our dark side, which like the dark side of the moon had never been seen before.

It is in his tradition that the Mormon writer is most crippled, not because his past lacks richness, but because it is so brief. His canvas is flat. He must work in two dimensions, as it were. The present, before it can have any depth, must echo resonances from the past. And until these resonances become widely familiar, they are ineffectual; they do not create a response in the reader. If anyone is to produce a significant work that is uniquely Mormon, then it must sound uniquely Mormon echoes that are nevertheless intelligible to the ear of anyone.

More than the conviction of the words and the thought expressed, the real power in writing is the vision which it evokes in the mind of the reader. If to him the words have no more than their surface meaning, their effect will be slight however lofty their thought. But the crudest words, should they summon images of the reader's own, may work a miracle in him—may even drive him to go out and buy your next book.

As William Butler Yeats says,

All sounds, all colors, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies, or because of long association, evoke indefinable, and yet precise emotions . . . The more various the elements that have flowed into [a work of art's] perfection, the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us. . . .

Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.²

The artist attempts to identify the things that move us, and give them expression, not in an overt way—scarcely more directly than does nature herself; gradually bringing us closer to an understanding of our time, our place, our people.

Meaningful symbols are not turned out to order, like kewpie dolls. They're no use, really, until they've been properly aged, like eggs that are such a delicacy in China after they've lain in the ground for a hundred years. A hundred years seems a long time to wait for an egg, but in moulding human awareness it is no time at all.

D. H. Lawrence says,

Many ages of accumulated experience still throb in a symbol. And we throb in response. It takes centuries to create a really significant symbol: even the symbol of the Cross, or of the horseshoe, or the horns. No man can invent symbols. He can invent an emblem, made up of images . . . but not symbols. Some images, in the course of many generations of men, become symbols, embedded in the soul and ready to start alive when touched, carried on in the human consciousness for centuries.³

The symbol of the cross, which Lawrence refers to, has been two thousand

years in development, yet we have rejected it because to us it signifies Christ's despair, not his triumph. But if we reject the cross, what shall we put in its place? Where is our Mormon star of David?

William Carlos Williams suggests, and he is surely not alone, that Edgar Allan Poe was the earliest writer with an original American voice.

He [speaking of Poe] was the first to realize that the hard, sardonic, truculent mass of the New World, hot, angry—was, in fact, not a thing to paint over, to smear, to destroy—for it would not be destroyed, it was too powerful. . . .

Poe conceived the possibility, the sullen, volcanic inevitability of the *place*. He was willing to go down and wrestle with its conditions, using every tool France, England, Greece could give him—but to use them to original purpose. . . .

His greatness is in that he turned his back and faced inland, to originality, with the identical gesture of a Boone. . . .⁴

As Williams makes clear, Poe's method, and indeed his genius, was in stripping his work of the ornaments of the New World, and plunging straight to its heart. There are no Indians in Poe, no mountains, forests, rivers that we recognize. And when he stripped those away, what was left? Terror, isolation and strange, inhuman forces.

But we cannot rest with Poe's vision. We Mormon writers must continue seeking for the original Mormon voice, working with images born, or reborn to human consciousness only a hundred and forty years ago. Oh, for a different milieu—some ancient, frothing confusion of a heritage. . . . If only I had been born a Jew I could write novels like Saul Bellow.

Apart from the youth of our images is the problem of their weight. God and angels make heavy freight for the fiction writer.

Eudora Welty reminds us that

. . . symbols are failing in their purpose when they don't keep to proportion in the story. However alive they are, they should never call for an emphasis greater than the emotional reality they serve, in their moment, to illuminate. One way of looking at *Moby Dick* is that his task as a symbol was so big and strenuous that he *had* to be a whale.⁵

How can we produce a work scaled to the proportion of these symbols which we have inherited? God and the devil; divine flesh and blood in a crumb of bread and a cup of wine; baptism by water and by fire; the power alive in men today, by which the worlds are and were created?

Of course the writer will not think of these things consciously as he works. But he is aware of the force they exert, and must strive to give that force purpose and direction. Consciously, he sets his characters in motion—the bishop, the primary teacher, the maverick, the apostate—and then as Matthew records, “. . . out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh, a good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things; and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.”

When I first thought about it, it seemed to me that the reason a person writes is to explain—to explain, for example what it was like to be the

grandson of a polygamist, living on a farm in Canada during the depression. I know now that my impulse rises from a deeper source; I write not so much to explain as to understand:

—to understand Joseph; how would it feel for a boy to look up and find himself face to face with the Lord?

—to understand what it was like for Hyrum to kiss his little boy goodbye, and ride away with his brother, knowing he'd never see his son again;

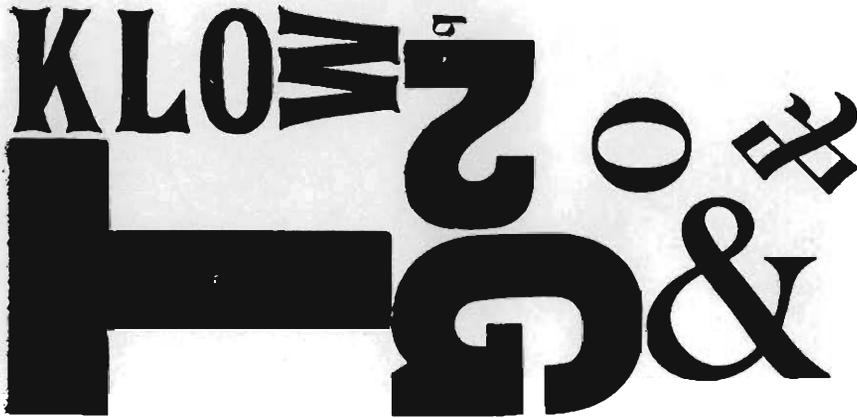
—to understand how men like John D. Lee could become embroiled in the horror at Mountain Meadows;

—to understand my father, aged five, taken from his mother in Salt Lake City to live with "Aunt Lizzie" and the rest of his father's family in Canada;

—and yes, even to understand what it was like to be the grandson of a polygamist, living on a farm in Canada during the depression.

My story is secret, in large measure even from myself. I must discover it and reveal it all together through the point of my pen, a line at a time. And though the enterprise isn't easy, we have no choice but to go forward, with whatever forces of intellect and talent we command, to make our lives, and by extension the lives of our people, real.

Yeats went on to say that "... an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression, in color or in sound or in form, or in all of these."⁶



In a way, then, we have power, if not to create, at least to more fully realize our world, by giving it expression. We can make our symbols and our language more explicit representations of our thought. It is time for us to get rid of our fear, to forget this inwardness, covering, hiding—to throw our coats open to the wind, unmindful of scars or psychic wounds. If we can do it honestly, the world will not laugh at us. It is not pain that makes people laugh, but sham.

Somewhere, a book is waiting to be written. It is important that it be written, for the promises of the scriptures notwithstanding, our survival as a people may well depend on it. What would we know about the Mulekites, were it not for the Nephite record? or the ancient Greeks, were it not for Homer? And it isn't enough to put characters on paper, or even engrave them on gold plates—the words we write must have power in themselves to endure.

We have all seen ferny imprints of leaves etched in solid rock which tell a story millions of years old. At his core the writer, or musician, or painter or sculptor longs to match the significance of that prehistoric mudbank—to become indeed what he is sometimes accused of being; an old fossil. As artists, we must try to be sensitive enough to take the imprint of our time, yet strong in the capacity of our work to endure, able to preserve the shape of that imprint long after the world it represents has washed away.

NOTES

¹ "The Writer's Sense of Place," *South Dakota Review* 13 (Autumn, 1975): 83-84.

² *Literary Symbolism*, ed. Maurice Beebe (San Francisco: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1960), pp. 26-29. From "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900), in *Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 188-202.

³ *Literary Symbolism*, p. 32. From "The Dragon of the Apocalypse," *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Anthony Beal (London: William Heineman, 1955).

⁴ *In the American Grain* (New Directions, 1956), pp. 225-26.

⁵ From a talk delivered at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference, June, 1976.

⁶ Yeats, in *Literary Symbolism*, p. 27.

