

PERSONAL VOICES

Mormons and the Beast: In Defense of the Personal Essay

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*Now of that long pursuit
Comes on at hand the bruit*
—Francis Thompson
The Hound of Heaven

The horror! The horror!
—Joseph Conrad
Heart of Darkness

*But, as I drive at night between
high mountains
(their summits lost in looming
cloud)
or along the edge of a black-aviced
lake . . .
I feel the general terror.*
—Arthur Henry King
"I Will Make Thee a Terror
to Thyself (Jer. XX:4)"

SOME CIRCUMSTANCES IN LIFE lie outside the possibility of comfort. There may be philosophical arguments to support such a statement, but perhaps it will suffice to point out that the scriptures reveal a suffering God. As a matter of fact, sorrow appears to be the effect that we most frequently work on him. Indeed, our "Man of Constant Sorrows" has promised that his way of life is likely to bring a "sword" to *our* comfort, that his "peace" will be unlike any we might have imagined.

And so, the terror of the Christian life—the possibility (indeed, the probability) that while Matthew Arnold was wrong about life having "neither joy, nor love, nor light," he was right about it having neither "peace, nor help for pain." Ultimately, good men will always suffer at the knowledge of evil and the suffering it inflicts; and the more right-

eous we become, the less subject we are to the debilitating influences of evil, and, therefore, the more subject we are to the evil which influences others. Our lives appear to be a progressive substitution of one suffering for another—empathy for agony, as it were.

But what, then, is the gospel for? Were not men made for joy? While God has intended that we should live in harmony with a universal order, it seems that such a harmony has effects which may not so easily be understood in terms of "rewards," as we have often believed, and the "joy" which the scriptures promise must be understood in the context of Calvary and Carthage. Not from suffering are we set free, but from its terror.

And yet, I *am* afraid. I believe in God but am afraid to die, afraid to deliver into tentative hands the protection and control I effect in the lives of those I love; I believe in God but am afraid he may not be or be no more than what I believe; I believe in God, but I am afraid. And my fear works a constant, almost animate terror in my life, a terror comprised both of things that are and things that might be. Perhaps the point is that I do not believe well enough, or perhaps not long enough; or perhaps the terror is to some degree a product of my belief, my hoping. Were I able to resign myself to a meaningless existence bounded by birth and death, perhaps the possibilities of life would not work such anxiety in me. But my faith in Christ is strong enough to give me hope while not strong enough to resolve my fears.

Yet I do hope, I do believe. It is both what I choose to do—an act of will which distinguishes me from those who choose otherwise—and, in ways I do not understand, it is what I do not choose but *am*,

what I cannot choose against, I believe, and, to the degree that I am unable to measure or compare, God has blessed my belief with faith, a faith which in a confusing complex, nourishes, sustains, and terrorizes my life. God is my hope, and fear of failing him, or the irrational fear that he may fail me, is my terror.

It may be suggested that such terror is the more appropriate subject of therapy than of essay—that one should take the “positive” approach and ignore its existence, imitate the activities of those who are not afraid until one is no longer afraid oneself. Remembering Joseph Fielding Smith’s refusal to “pretend” to sign papers for photographers (“I will not be involved with any degree of dishonesty,” he had said with a slight irony), I have often wondered if moral subterfuge, regardless of its benefits, is justifiable. But even if it were, my life of fear is further complicated by the fear that those I might take for my models, those I might put my faith-to-be-healed in, are no more certain than I, but are merely involved in therapeutic activities based upon examples no more certain than themselves. And in the end, it may not even be good therapy.

Essay may be only another form of therapy, of course, but if honest at least it does not deny the reality of the problem—it does not take refuge in a therapy which may ultimately serve as the end rather than the means. Essay has a particular advantage over any other literary approach to the terror of life. While having neither the formal elegance of poetry nor the rich textual elements of fiction, it is more direct than either of them. Although indirection may be the soul of art and the means to a fuller experience than otherwise is achieved, it may also separate one from a sense of personal responsibility and involvement, like going to a psychologist to discuss the problems of a fictive “friend.” The personal essay is utterly responsible, its point of view is owned. In it, one may take neither comfort nor refuge in the satisfactions of pose or form; one must face the beast, naked and alone.

Occasionally this is done so well, the satisfactions are so keen, that the “beast” appears to be overcome, terror put away. This may be the gravest danger of the personal essay. Its very nature implies that it will often and intensely be involved with sentiment, with the broad

range of emotional experience which lies beyond empirical proofs. The line which separates the honestly moving from the sentimentally contrived has always been a fine one. We have avoided defining precisely where it lies, because it does not yield to absolute critical boundaries; like irony, sentiment is a function of relationships; it is a matter of context. Anyone with a marginal skill and sensitivity should be able to recognize the grosser examples of sentimentality from the more cautious achievements of honest sentiment. The examples nearer the line and on either side of it are what pose the problem. And because there is a problem, and because no one likes to play the fool, there is a good deal of legitimate personal essay that is too easily discounted as sentimental and the terror implicit in it ignored by an explicit society.

This problem of discerning sentimentality from honest sentiment may be the best indication we have of where the critical line should be drawn and for what reason. The sentimental ignores or denies the obvious terror of existence and, as Flannery O’Connor has pointed out, attempts to “skip” the sacrifice of Christ and arrive at a mock state of grace which is achieved without terror or pain. Sentiment, however indirectly, acknowledges the majestic terror of life and seeks to deal with it, to suffer for it, occasionally to transcend it.

From *Dialogue’s* inception, the journal has had a commitment to the essay which concerns itself not with things or even ideas, but with the impress of things and ideas, of personal forces upon the human soul. In Vol. 1, no. 1, Eugene England’s “The Possibility of Dialogue: A Personal View” spoke of “the risk of choice” and “complex possibilities” which confront and occasionally confound the modern Mormon; Victor B. Cline wrote about “The Faith of a Psychologist” (an essay which he sub-titled “A Personal Document”); and the “From the Pulpit” section was introduced to publish profounder examples of what is a generally (if not often deeply) personal Mormon sermon style.

But it was not until Vol. 6, no. 1, that the “Personal Voices” section was instituted and the personal essay given a continuing (although irregularly appearing) place of its own. Many fine personal essays appeared in “Articles and Essays”