

# The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time

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IN HIS HILARIOUS SHORT STORY "Conversion of the Jews," Philip Roth gives us one of the most endearing unimportant characters in our national literature: Yakov Blotnik, an old janitor at a Jewish Yeshiva who, upon seeing that a yeshiva student was standing on a ledge threatening to kill himself, goes off mumbling to himself that such goings-on are "no-good-for-the-Jews." "For Yakov Blotnik," Roth tells us in an aside, "life fractionated itself simply: things were either good-for-the-Jews or no-good-for-the-Jews."<sup>1</sup> This basic binary opposition, which I have named the "Blotnik dichotomy" in honor of its distinguished inventor, has, with minor variations and revisions, begun to assert itself prominently in a number of recent discussions of Mormon literature. The taxonomies that have come from these discussions tend to dichotomize Mormon letters into separate camps—such as "mantic" versus "sophic," "faithful realism" versus "faithless fiction," or "home literature" versus "the Lost Generation."<sup>2</sup> Each of these pairings suggests that at the heart of the Mormon literary consciousness lies a conception that Mormon literature can be

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1. Philip Roth, *Goodbye Columbus* (New York: Bantam, 1963), 108.

2. Most of these terms have been in wide use by scholars of Mormon literature for some time. The "mantic-sophic" dichotomy was introduced by Richard Cracroft in his presidential address at the Association for Mormon Letters in 1992, which was later published as "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 51-57. For representative uses of the other terms, see the same author's entry "Literature, Mormon Writer's of—Novels" in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992); Eugene England's "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years," *Brigham Young University Studies* 22 (Spring 1982): 131-60; and Ed Geary's "Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940's," *Brigham Young University Studies* 18 (Fall 1977): 89-98.

divided into two essential Blotnik types: books that are orthodox, faithful, inspiring, and testimony-building—good-for-the-Mormons; and books that are apostate, faithless, demeaning, and testimony-destroying—bad-for-the-Mormons.

While I am as concerned as anyone with what is good for the Mormons, I am not convinced, given the present state of Mormon literature and scholarship, that the Blotnik dichotomy in any of its variations provides Mormon scholars with enough useful information to justify the taxonomical importance that our recent debates have given it. This is not because I favor one end of the dichotomy over the other, or because I want to make the argument that books that might initially appear “bad-for-the-Mormons” are really, upon further scholarly consideration, “good-for-the-Mormons,” or vice versa. Rather, I believe that the conception of Mormon literature that has emerged from these discussions is too narrow to be useful to scholars of Mormonism and literature. Implicitly or explicitly, conceptions of “Mormon literature” based on these dualities force us to limit our definition of the term primarily to those books written by Mormons for Mormons dealing with Mormon themes. Such narrowing of our focus, I argue, detracts from the overall effectiveness of the Mormon scholar in the larger academic community.

In a recent *Sunstone* article based on his farewell speech as the president of the Association for Mormon Letters, Richard Cracroft, a professor of English at BYU, makes the following observation about the place of literary criticism in the LDS community:

If we who are Mormon writers, critics, and publishers wish to speak to the Saints, we must speak to them through LDS metaphors. We cannot dismiss or belittle or patronize them merely because we have supplanted their metaphors or because they refuse to set their familiar metaphors aside. This people deserves a literature grounded in Mormon metaphors, exuding their essences, mirroring their dualistic world, establishing their vision of themselves as pilgrims wandering by themselves across a twilight stage.<sup>3</sup>

When I read Professor Cracroft's words, I find myself alternately accepting and disputing his vision of Mormon literature and Mormon literary criticism. I agree that faithful Latter-day Saints deserve a literature that will confirm their world view and justify their faith. I object to the negativism and faithlessness that pervades some of the more intellectual discussions of Mormon literature, and I reject the notion that a work of literature must be faithless or negative in order to be good. I am the last person who would ever feel compelled to cram intellectual doubt and academic angst down the throat of someone who is living a happy, produc-

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3. Cracroft, “Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice,” 53.

tive life without them.

However, I disagree with Professor Cracroft on one major premise: that it is the duty of Mormon scholars and critics to "speak to the Saints," or to work within Mormon culture to foster, encourage, or critique either "mantic" or "sophic" Mormon books. Certainly the majority of Mormon readers want faith-promoting books, and as long as they are willing to spend millions of dollars a year at LDS bookstores, they will get them. However, decisions about what to write stem from the imaginations and motivations of individual writers, who are much less affected by critical discourse than we literary critics care to admit. Great writers have always produced great works, and mediocre writers have always pandered to the popular prejudices, no matter what scholars and intellectuals have written in academic journals. Good intentions aside, literary critics have rarely been an important *direct* factor in the production or consumption of any type of literature.

However, literary critics have always been an important *indirect* factor in the production and consumption of literature. Such indirect influence comes, not as critics and theorists attempt to encourage or proscribe different kinds of literary production, but, instead, as they have used literature as a starting point for commenting on, critiquing, and helping to construct the cultures that produce and consume books. In the past twenty years or so literary scholars of all stripes have used the tools of literary criticism to build platforms from which to argue that certain groups, subcultures, classes, or peoples should have more representation in, and more recognition by, the larger national or international cultures to which they belong. These critical discourses have joined with larger political movements to create curricular and publishing environments that have helped to move traditionally underrepresented groups to the center of the academic stage.

The question at the heart of my essay, then, is: Why not the Mormons? Literary scholars and critics now rally around the cries of "tolerate difference" and "celebrate diversity," and we, as Mormons, have plenty of difference and diversity to offer. However, I would guess that there are only a handful of non-Mormon scholars outside of the Rocky Mountain West who even know that there is such a thing as "Mormon literature." Most academics view Mormonism negatively, as merely a particularly curious fringe of the unpopular religious right, and not as a unique culture with its own art, music, folklore, and literature. The persistence of these perceptions affects us all, and we should spend a substantial part of our energy addressing and correcting them. In suggesting a course for Mormon literary criticism, then, I would like to propose and build on the following three propositions: (1) the story and theology of Mormonism form a unique, compelling, and largely misrepresented part of the larger

narrative of the American experience; (2) current conventions of literary theory and criticism are well suited for those wishing to tell unique, compelling, and largely misrepresented stories; and (3) the most important thing that Mormon literary critics can do in this environment is to use the tools of our profession to construct a space, within the larger cultural context of literary studies, for honest discussion of Mormon literature and the values that construct and stem from it.

In even beginning to answer the question, "What is Mormon literature?" we must concede that Mormonism is something more than a religion as the term is usually understood. One seldom hears talk of, say, Methodist fiction or Presbyterian poetry—at least not in the mainstream press. And those religions that do tend to be associated with a literature of their own—such as Catholicism and Judaism—are generally perceived as religions whose cultural ties are at least as strong as their religious ones. So imbedded in the assertion that there is such a thing as "Mormon literature" is the claim that we, as Mormons, and particularly as American Mormons, represent a cultural entity whose traditions, heritage, and experience deserve to be considered a vital part of the American mosaic. We are claiming, not just that we are Mormons, but that we are "Mormo-Americans," that "Mormo-American literature" should be considered an important part of American literary studies, and that anyone who doesn't think we deserve our own place in the canon is a "Mormophobe" whose position should not be taken seriously by an academy that values tolerance, difference, and diversity.

As Mormo-Americans who are also practicing academics at secular universities, we should also be arguing a further point: Mormon students and Mormon professors should be able to use university time and resources to study, write, and teach about our own culture and our own literature. We must, in short, insist that our employers and our colleagues accede to the force of their own rhetoric and accord us the same legitimacy now enjoyed by other subcultures within American society—not because we have been victimized or oppressed, but because our diverse culture and history have something valuable to offer the field of literary inquiry. Such requests will most likely be resisted; academia has always resisted attempts by any outside group to gain a foothold in its well-protected ivy-covered walls. The institutes of higher learning did not approach African-American scholars or feminist critics without any preface, "You may tell us your stories now, we are finally ready to listen." Scholars in these fields have spent years fighting for the right to include their values and perceptions in their academic work, and I believe that our profession is the better for their efforts.

So again I ask, Why not the Mormons? Academia in general has become large and diverse enough to accommodate our diversity; however,

any successful movement towards Mormon literary studies in the American academy requires a substantial number of Mormon scholars who are both good Mormons and good literary critics—and who can be both at the same time. I cannot overstate the importance of this latter area. Literary criticism, like any other academic discipline, speaks a language of its own—replete with unintelligible jargon and identifying code words. A number of other academics have been able to initiate meaningful discussions of their faith within an academic context—but only after they have mastered the language and the conventions of their respective disciplines. In literary theory scholars such as Edward Said (Muslim), Rene Girard (Catholic), and even Jacques Derrida (Jewish) have changed the critical landscape by taking their respective religious traditions and combining them, intelligently and unapologetically, with the assumptions and methodologies of contemporary philosophy and literary theory.<sup>4</sup> The work of these and other scholars is accepted and admired in the academy first and foremost because it is excellent, innovative, professional scholarship. Any scholarship of this caliber—even if it comes from an unregenerate Mormo-American—can have a tremendous impact on academic discourse.

It is in the first area, though, that I frankly perceive the biggest stumbling block to the type of theoretical movement I envision. In order for there to be great Mormon scholarship, Mormon scholars must not only be great, they must also be Mormon—and not just occasionally, incidentally, culturally, or secretly Mormon, but visibly Mormon, enthusiastically Mormon, and, most of all, unapologetically Mormon. It is, unfortunately, easy for faithful Mormons in academia to “pass” as normal, cynical, liberal academics. We look like normal people, we talk like normal people, and we can pick up and use jargon as quickly as our peers; if we don’t make a big deal about our religion, nobody need know the secrets that we keep hidden in the closet: that we belong to a religious community and culture that has shaped our lives more than most people imagine, and that we owe more allegiance to this community than we can ever, in rational academic terms, explain. As long as we can deflect the occasional

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4. The religious affiliations of these three major critics vary to some extent. Girard, probably the most religious of the three, published, after converting to Christianity, his monumental *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Mattheer (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987). Girard also speaks directly to the difference between biblical and mythical approaches to scapegoating in “The Bible is Not a Myth” in *Literature and Belief* 4 (1984): 7-15. Said, though not a practicing Muslim, writes about his Islamic heritage and culture extensively in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), and in *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). Derrida, without a doubt, is the most difficult to pin down, but he has dealt with his Judaism in a number of works, the most notable perhaps being “Edmund Jabes and the Question of the Book” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

inquiry about polygamy, racism, or the status of feminists and homosexuals in our church, we can go about our scholarly business without ever having to admit to our colleague—or even to ourselves—that we really are pretty weird. Like Gulliver in *Houyhnhnmland*, we learn how to walk like horses and talk like horses until we convince ourselves that horses are superior to people and that horse sense is the only kind of sense worth pursuing.

However, this approach will no longer do. Mormonism has become an important phenomenon in American culture, and it will occupy an important place in academic discussions of the future—with or without the participation of faithful Mormon critics. Unless we act decisively to place Mormonism and Mormon literature in the larger critical context, others will offer the definitions for us, and we will be increasingly stuck with the professional consequences of belonging to a version of “Mormonism” that we had no part in constructing. As with most critical projects, the success of Mormon literary criticism rises or falls with our definitions—and, in particular, our definition of “Mormon literature.” It is to our advantage to define this term as broadly as possible. We lose nothing by such inclusion; defining something as “Mormon literature” does not mean that we think it is good Mormonism, or even that we think it is good literature. Including something in the Mormon canon does not mean that we endorse it; it just means that we consider it part of the group of texts that we, as critics, can use to raise certain kinds of questions about Mormonism in academic forums.

On the other hand, Mormon scholars stand to lose a great deal by defining our terms too narrowly. Every text that we eliminate from our canon is a text that we can no longer use as part of our critical discussions. If our definition of “Mormon” is so narrow that it includes only writers and works that publish to the mainstream Mormon audience, then we will find it difficult to find places where our interests intersect with those of our colleagues. If, on the other hand, our definition of “literature” is so narrow that it includes only a few genres like novels, plays, poems, and stories, then we risk losing some of the most remarkable texts that our culture has produced. In either case, we risk confining Mormon literature to the academic ghettos where nobody but Mormons will ever hear of it. Thus Mormon literary critics gain much, while losing nothing, by casting as wide a net as possible and laying claim to as many texts as we can possibly use in the service of our academic cause.

To illustrate the kind of inclusion that I am speaking of, I would like to propose the following five categories as different areas of Mormon literature that should be studied as such. I acknowledge the inherent limitations of such arbitrary classifications, and I realize that the borders between many of my categories are subjective and permeable. I do not intend, however, for the lines to be exclusionary. My purpose in proposing

these categories is to foster inclusion by suggesting how different kinds of literary texts can work into the ongoing project of defining the boundaries of a Mormon literary criticism.

### 1. *Books by Mormons Written to Primarily Mormon Audiences*

It has now been one hundred years since Susa Young Gates, Brigham Young's most accomplished child, began serializing *John Stevens' Courtship* in a periodical that she also edited. Three years later, in 1898, Nephi Anderson published the classic Mormon novel *Added Upon*, which has never gone out of print.<sup>5</sup> In the hundred years that followed, the Mormon literary marketplace has expanded exponentially, adding hundreds, if not thousands, of novels and other works of fiction and poetry to the ranks of literature by Mormons, to Mormons, and about the joys, challenges, rewards, and struggles of being Mormon. Currently, this category includes a wide variety of purposes and philosophical viewpoints, from the faithful, testimony-building novels of Jack Weyland, Gerald Lund, and Blaine Yorgason, to the occasionally challenging, but decidedly Mormon fiction of Levi Peterson and Linda Sillitoe.

In this category I also include a wealth of literary material from genres that are often not considered "literary": journals, diaries, travel narratives, autobiographies, sermons, theological pamphlets, and religious journalism, to name only a few. These texts have played an important part in the Mormon experience, and they must also be included in our literature.<sup>6</sup> The oral and written folklore of Mormonism and of the Mountain West have played a vital role in our culture and have been profitably studied in both Mormon and non-Mormon publications by such literary scholars as William A. Wilson, Jill Terry, and George Schoemaker.<sup>7</sup>

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5. *John Stevens' Courtship: A Story of the Echo Canyon War* was serialized in *The Contributor* 17 (1895-96). It was later published by the Deseret News Press in 1909. The first edition of *Added Upon* was also published by the Deseret News Press. The most recent (1992) edition is published by Bookcraft.

6. I certainly don't claim to be breaking new ground here. The first published anthology of Mormon literature, Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert's *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), includes a generous selection of literature from most of these important genres.

7. See William A. Wilson, "On Being Human: the Folklore of Mormon Missionaries," *New York Folklore* 8 (Winter 1982): 5-27; "Trickster Tales and the Location of Cultural Boundaries: A Mormon Example," *Journal of Folklore Research* 20 (May 1983): 55-65; "Mormon Folklore," in Richard M. Dorson et al., *Handbook of American Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 155-61; "Dealing with Organizational Stress: Lessons from the Folklore of Mormon Missionaries," in Michael Owen Jones et al., *Inside Organizations: Understanding the Human Dimension* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), 271-79. Also see Jill Terry, "Exploring Belief: The Study of Mormon Folklore," *Utah Folklife Newsletter* 23 (Winter 1989): 2-5; and George Schoemaker, "Made in Heaven: Marriage Confirmation Narratives among Mormons," *Northwest Folklore* 7 (Spring 1989): 38-53.

Mormon sacred texts have claimed a key position in the literature of our people, but the literary value of the Book of Mormon has yet to be understood and appreciated by the scholarly community as a whole. This project alone could occupy many lifetimes.

All of the works in this category play a vital role in our Mormon culture and heritage. They speak to us, hold a mirror to our spiritual experience, and help us construct definitions of what it means to belong to the Mormon community and have a testimony of the gospel. In saying this, I draw no important distinction between writers who try to build testimonies and writers who try to ask difficult questions. Both, I believe, provide essentially the same rhetorical function, since, for many of us, the process of building a testimony is inseparable from the process of asking difficult questions. And because these texts constitute a primary mechanism for the transmission and reproduction of Mormon culture, Mormon literary critics have naturally expended a great deal of their energies reading, classifying, interpreting, and evaluating them. This is certainly a worthy project, and one that I have no wish to disparage. But we cannot stop here. One of my assertions in this essay is that any definition of "Mormon literature" that limits itself to the works in this category cannot adequately meet the demands that currently face the Mormon literary critic. The books that we write to ourselves represent only one of many worthwhile projects that demand our attention.

## 2. *Books by Mormons Written to Non-Mormon Audiences (about Mormons)*

Mormons have always been a people driven by the need to tell their stories to others. In the institutional church this drive takes the form of missionary work; in the literary world it manifests itself in the desire to use the values and collective memories of our culture as the basis for great writing. While Mormon authors have produced nothing like the works of the great Jewish writers of the century, we do have our literary heroes—a fact which usually astounds non-Mormons who have never heard of Vardis Fisher, Maureen Whipple, Virginia Sorensen, or Sam Taylor. Yet Fisher's *Children of God* (1939), Whipple's *Giant Joshua* (1942), Taylor's *Heaven Knows Why* (1948), and Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning* (1949) remain four of the greatest novels to come out of the Mormon tradition—and four texts well worth the attention of any serious scholar of the literature of the American West.

These four novels represent only the cream of the crop. During the 1940s and 1950s dozens of novels by Mormons were published in mainstream presses—some to considerable critical and commercial success.<sup>8</sup>

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8. For a partial bibliography, see Geary's "Mormondom's Lost Generation," 131-60.



In the past ten years Mormon literature seems to have experienced a second wave of such successful fiction. Highly acclaimed fiction and personal narratives by Terry Tempest Williams, Phyllis Barber, Pauline Mortensen, Judith Freeman, Walter Kirn have gone a long way towards making the Mormon experience once again part of the experience of the general American reading public,<sup>9</sup> and the success Orson Scott Card has had with employing Mormon characters in the science fiction and historical fiction markets has brought a sympathetic portrayal of the Mormon world view to hundreds of thousands of readers worldwide.

The works in this category provide a valuable on-ramp for Mormon scholars who want to discuss their faith in academic forums. Non-Mormons who read these books invariably have questions about Mormonism—questions that deserve serious scholarly treatment by literary critics familiar with Mormon theology, culture, and heritage. As I said before, if we do not step forward and answer their questions, somebody else will, and chances are good that we won't like their answers. But taking these books as the basis for serious discussions of Mormon literature allows Mormon scholars to use an expertise that we already possess in writing scholarship that, if done well, will be both useful to and well received by our colleagues in the academic community.

### 3. *Books by Mormons Written to Non-Mormon Audiences (not about Mormons)*

Any book by any Mormon writer should be considered fair game for Mormon literary critics—even if nothing conspicuously Mormon appears in it. I say this for two reasons. First, all writers include, in some way or another, their personal values in everything they write; hence, any book by someone who has been significantly influenced by Mormonism will relate, reflect, react, or in some way respond to Mormon values and perceptions. Second, and even more important, works of literature by writers known to be Mormon form a large and demonstrable part of Mormonism's contribution to our culture. Feminist writers have not limited their definition of "Women's Literature" to those texts which have an obvious feminist bent or which deal with women's issues in remarkable ways. Anything written by a woman qualifies for inclusion (though not necessarily praise) by those scholars who have dedicated their lives to discussing gender and literature. This inclusive strategy has given feminist writers a huge canvas upon which to raise and discuss questions of gender in the academic marketplace of ideas.

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9. For an analysis of some of these writers, see Lavina Fielding Anderson's "Masks and Music: Recent Fiction by Mormon Women Writers," *Weber Studies* 10 (Fall 1993): 71-80.

Similarly, our definition of "Mormon literature" should include such things as the wide-ranging philosophical novels of Vardis Fisher, the award-winning children's fiction of Virginia Sorensen, the innovative and critically acclaimed contemporary fiction of Brian Evenson, and the well-respected work of those twentieth-century authors that Bruce W. Jorgensen has referred to as the Mormon "expatriates": Ray B. West, Jr., Jarvis Thurston, Wayne Carver, Richard Young Thurman, May Swenson, and David L. Wright.<sup>10</sup> As with the previous categories, it does no use to ask, "But are they good Mormons?" This question immediately narrows our audience to the LDS community, for whom such questions matter a great deal. To the academic audience—an audience that has no problem accepting Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, and Jerzy Kosinski as "Jewish writers"—questions of meeting attendance, payment of tithes, and observance of dietary laws play a less important role than they do in our internal discussions.

#### 4. Books by Mainstream non-Mormon Authors (about Mormons)

Mormonism has always been an interesting story, one that popular writers have found irresistible. Occasionally, these portrayals are sympathetic or positive, and some of the most important writers on two continents have had occasion to praise or defend Mormons. Charles Dickens, for example, once described the industrious, orderly nature of the Mormon emigrants he encountered on a ship leaving England.<sup>11</sup> John Stuart Mill used the Mormon practice of polygamy as a test case for his assertion that a government has no right to interfere in the private lives of its people.<sup>12</sup> And George Bernard Shaw carried the argument even further and argued that Mormon polygamy was not only justifiable but socially beneficial.<sup>13</sup> More recently, Wallace Stegner has written sympathetically of Mormons in *Gathering to Zion*, and Harold Bloom, one of the most important figures in contemporary literary criticism, has extolled Mormonism as the quintessential American Religion and Joseph Smith as "an

10. Bruce W. Jorgensen, "Digging the Foundation: Making and Reading Mormon Literature," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9 (Winter 1974): 51.

11. Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, vol. 6 of *The Works of Charles Dickens*, 10 vols. (New York: n.p., n.d.), 635-38, quoted in Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 132.

12. In *On Liberty* (New York: Norton, 1975), 85-86.

13. In the appendix to *Man and Superman* (New York: Bantam, 1967), Shaw includes the following maxim: "Polygamy, when tried under modern democratic conditions, as by the Mormons, is wrecked by the revolt of the mass of inferior men who are condemned to celibacy by it; for the maternal instinct leads a woman to prefer a tenth share in a first rate man to the exclusive possession of a third rate one" (218).

authentic religious genius, unique in our national history."<sup>14</sup>

More often than not, however, the portrayal of Mormons in American literature has been negative. In the years between the migration to Utah and the end of the nineteenth century, the Mormon frontier served as the background (and often the foreground) for literally dozens of pulp novels, westerns, and adventure stories.<sup>15</sup> The majority of these texts portrayed the Mormons as a harsh, theocratic, and conspiratorial frontier community and as a sinister secret society bent on tracking down and destroying its enemies wherever in the world they tried to hide. This conception of Mormonism became so pervasive that it filtered into the writings of some of the most important writers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jack London, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Zane Grey.<sup>16</sup> Cable TV mogul Ted Turner even used it for one last ride in the made-for-TV movie *Avenging Angel* early in 1995.

Turner's movie aside, though, the popular perceptions of Mormonism have shifted almost 180 degrees in the past 100 years. Whereas Mormons were once used to represent lawlessness, chaos, and sexual promiscuity, we have now become standard stock for writers—from Tom Clancy to Tony Kushner—who want to portray a character as hyperobedient, patriotic, conservative, and, in all probability, sexually repressed. Ironically, though, while the popular image of Mormonism in American culture has changed drastically, our relative position in that culture has remained remarkably constant. In the nineteenth century, Mormons in lit-

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14. *The American Religion* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 82. Though Bloom's book is somewhat quirky in its approach to Mormonism as a gnostic/Kaballastic sect, the author does manifest a sincere respect for Joseph Smith and historical Mormonism. And he also pays a compliment to Apostle Thomas Monson, whom he sees as the next great prophet of the Mormon church: "What dreams he dreams one cannot know, but a considerable part of our national future is incarnated in him" (122).

15. See Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt, "Intolerable Zion: The Image of Mormonism in Nineteenth Century American Literature," *Western Humanities Review* 22 (Summer 1968): 243-60. See also Arrington's "Perpetuation of a Myth: Mormon Danites in Five Western Novels, 1840-90," *Brigham Young University Studies* 23 (Spring 1983): 147-65, and his "The Missouri and Illinois Mormons in Anti-Bellum Fiction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 5 (Spring 1970): 37-50.

16. Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, chaps. 12-16 (Chicago, 1872), while satiric (and funny) is generally considered good-natured treatment. However Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (London, 1877) and Stevenson's "The Destroying Angel" (in *The Dynamiters*, New York, 1985) accept, uncritically, the presentation of Mormons found in American pulp fiction. Jack London's *The Star Rover* (New York: Macmillan, 1915) deals specifically with the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and four novels by Zane Grey present, to one degree or another, a typical nineteenth-century view of the Mormon frontier: *The Heritage of the Desert* (New York: Harper, 1910), *Riders of the Purple Sage* (New York: Harper, 1912), *Wild Horse Mesa* (New York: Harper, 1912), and *The Maverick Queen* (New York: Harper, 1950).

erature were portrayed as promiscuous misfits in a Victorian society. In the 1990s the typical Mormon character has become a Victorian misfit in a promiscuous society. In both cases Mormons represent something other than the norm—a peculiar people whose inclusion in a literary text usually indicates the desire of an author to establish a foil for the values supported in the text.

Whether pro-Mormon, anti-Mormon, or somewhere in-between, important non-Mormon writers who write about Mormonism give us a tremendous opportunity to make our faith part of our scholarship. Everything that Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, and Robert Louis Stevenson say about Mormonism interests scholars because everything that these authors say about *anything* interests them. And, while being marginalized and misunderstood is generally not pleasant, it happens to be something of an advantage in contemporary literary circles. Almost all of the prominent schools teaching literary theory during the past twenty years—including deconstruction, feminism, post-colonialism, ethnic criticism, cultural materialism, and new historicism—have attempted to rewrite, in some way or another, literary history and give utterance to voices that have been suppressed. As Mormons we should be grateful for this trend. Once we arm ourselves with the most up-to-date tools of literary analysis, we will find numerous opportunities to question and problematize the negative images and stereotypes of Mormonism that American and English culture have always constructed in its literature.

##### 5. *Books by Mainstream Authors (not about Mormons)*

With everything else that it is, Mormonism is a philosophical system, a way of looking at the world. In the past ten years several Mormon literary critics have realized this and expanded their focus outside of anything that has previously been considered "Mormon." By thus expanding their focus, they have written compelling analyses of such varied topics as the Mormon connection to William Wordsworth's idea of the pre-existence in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," the relationship between John Milton and the Mormon defense of polygamy, and Milton's engagement with Mormon theology in Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*.<sup>17</sup> Scholarly projects such as these hint at the rich possibility for reading traditional literature that our Mormon perspective offers us. A work need not have a Mormon author or a superficially Mormon theme to lend itself to a Mor-

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17. These articles, respectively, are Rob Paxman's "The Poet as Prophet: The Genesis of Wordsworth's Pre-existence," *Insight* 5 (Winter 1990): 7-11; John S. Tanner's "Milton and the Early Mormon Defense of Polygamy," *Milton Quarterly* 21 (May 1987): 41-46; and Cecilia Konchar Farr's "The Philosopher and the Brass Plate: Melville's Quarrel with Mormonism in *The Confidence Man*," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 3 (1989): 354-61.

mon interpretation.

By this point, it should be obvious that my definition of "Mormon literature" has become synonymous with the definition of "literature" itself. This is precisely the case that I am making. At its best, literary theory is not merely a way to analyze literature, but a way to use literature to analyze the world. And since Mormonism—like Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, or existentialism—contains its own philosophical assumptions and values, it does not matter what we ultimately write *about* but who we write *as*. Marxist and feminist literary critics are Marxists and feminists, not because of the kinds of literature that they read, but because of the kinds of criticism that they write. A Mormon literary critic, then, is nothing more or less than a Mormon who does literary criticism—and does so as a Mormon, raising and answering questions about her faith in the process.

So what, finally, is "Mormon literature?" A number of contemporary literary critics, daunted by the task of defining "literature," have determined that it is "whatever literary critics criticize." Similarly, I would say that "Mormon literature" can best be defined as "whatever Mormon literary critics use as a platform for discussing our religious experience in an academic context." I do not believe that a Mormon literary criticism should be concerned with situating "Mormon literature" along any sort of Blotnik dichotomy. The tools of our profession provide us with ample opportunity to turn any relevant text—from the most mantic sacrament-meeting poem to the most sophic anti-Mormon invective—into a useful platform from which to tell our story and construct our religious faith academically. We do not need certain kinds of literature to accomplish our goals, just certain kinds of literary critics—critics willing to become experts in the conventions of contemporary literary theory while, at the same time, retaining their Mormon faith, values, and perspectives.

Students of Mormon literature have always been energized by Orson F. Whitney's prophecy that "we will yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own."<sup>18</sup> I believe that we will, but I reject the notion that we must conjure them up by the power of critical inquiry. Mormonism's Miltons and Shakespeares will probably pay little attention to the scattered essays on literary criticism that we publish. They will, like the Miltons and Shakespeares who went before them, have to find their own way in the world. Our job is not to manufacture great writers but simply to recognize them when they come along. And our failure—if we fail—will not be that we never produced literary messiahs with our criticism, but that, ob-

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18. Orson F. Whitney, "Home Literature" reprinted in Cracroft and Lambert, *A Believing People*, 132.

sessed with our own private mythologies of deliverance, we crucified them unawares.

Before concluding, I would like to address three specific things that I am *not* saying in this essay. First, I am not saying that Mormon literary critics should be missionaries or uncritical apologists for all things Mormon. Like all spiritual systems of values, Mormonism depends on subjective spiritual experiences, and such experiences can never be reproduced by academic discourse or scientific discovery. The most that we can prove through scholarly means is that Mormonism is interesting, that it has been misrepresented in the past, and that it should form a part of our common literary canon. Second, I am not arguing that Mormons should join the already-inflated marketplace of victim-status seekers. I do not believe that Mormons do, or should, qualify as an oppressed minority, that we should receive preferential treatment, or that every descendent of a Haun's Mill victim deserves forty acres and a mule. Such arguments would appeal to the worst element of the multicultural movement; my argument is directed at the best; if diversity truly constitutes an independent good, and if different cultures and values really do make us stronger, then academia cannot, while being true to its own premises, deny a voice to the Mormons. Finally, I do not intend to suggest that only faithful Mormons can or should criticize Mormon literature. If, as I have argued, Mormon literature forms a vital part of the American cultural landscape, then it must be considered fair game for all kinds of literary scholarship.

What I am saying, though, is that only faithful Mormons can criticize Mormon literature *as faithful Mormons*. We do not have the only critical perspective on Mormon literature. Perhaps we do not even have the best. But we do have access to a unique viewpoint, and no academic discussion of Mormon literature can be considered complete without hearing what we have to say. We know Mormon culture from the inside. We know that, like any other large group of people, Mormons can be ignorant, blind, and wicked; but we also know that they can be insightful, inspired, and magnificent. And we know that all of these attributes together constitute the story of Mormonism that the rest of the world needs to hear. As practicing literary critics, we are in a profession that gives us all of the tools that we need to tell this story. If enough of us do this, and do it well, Mormonism and Mormon literature stand to become increasingly legitimate areas of inquiry in our profession. This will allow many of us to work towards a greater reconciliation of our spiritual selves and our scholarly selves, and it will promote an understanding of Mormonism that has always been lacking in our disciplines. And this, I believe, will be good for the Mormons.