

Renegotiating Scylla and Charybdis: Reading and the Distance between New York and Utah

John Bennion

READERS UNPACKED BRIAN EVENSON'S NATIONALLY-PUBLISHED collection of controversial short stories, *Altmann's Tongue*, in diverse (perverse) ways.

Jerry Johnston, a columnist for the Mormon church-owned *Deseret News*, observed, "The word 'macabre' comes to mind. He is a literary version of Stephen King, trading more on psychology and character than gore. Like Poe. Like Raymond Carver writing up the Addams family."¹

In the same article Leslie Norris, one of Evenson's colleagues in BYU's English department, said, "Brian has created a whole world. ... It is a world where people work very hard, yet everything is purposeless. His great gift is the calmness he puts at the center of that world. I see him as a moral writer. He seems to be saying, 'This is what the world would be like if we didn't know right from wrong.'"²

BYU president Rex Lee (now deceased), interviewed for BYU's student newspaper, warned: "If his future work follows the same pattern of extreme sadism, brutality and gross degradation of women characteristic of 'Altmann's Tongue,' such a publication would, in our view, not further his cause as a candidate for continuing faculty status."³

Bruce W. Jorgensen, another of Evenson's associates at BYU, wrote, "Here is an alternative formulation. Perhaps the book poses such a ques-

1. Jerry Johnston, "Brother Grimm," *Deseret News*, 25 Sept. 1994, E1.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Shea Nuttall, "'Altmann's Tongue' author to leave," *Daily Universe*, 11 July 1995, 1.

tion as this to us: ... Can you love a serial killer? If you were God, could you, would you try to save him?"⁴

Susan Howe, a third of Evenson's colleagues, feared: "[A] text is a cultural artifact as well as an aesthetic construct. As a text enters a culture, it may be appropriated by naive readers who share some of the assumptions of the brutal characters and use the text to justify their own brutality."⁵ Later she added, "Violence is redundant. To create violence in literature, when there is so much of it in our lives, is not a stretch of imagination. It is a very easy choice, not worthy of the best Mormon Minds writing in the last days of the twentieth century."⁶

Gary Browning, a former BYU dean, wrote, "Evenson is a most effective teacher of the difficulties in judging rightly and righteously."⁷

Finally, the student writer of an anonymous letter complaining to church and university officials about Evenson's work that ultimately precipitated Evenson's departure from BYU felt "like someone who has eaten something poisonous and is in desperate need to get rid of it."⁸

In an interview Brian Evenson said: "When I published *Altmann's Tongue*, I didn't expect anybody in the Mormon culture to read it. ... I guess what happened was an audience was created for the book that I didn't expect. Suddenly, I was confronted with people reading the book in a much different way than I would ever have thought to read it. I would see it as a misreading I guess, but maybe it's valid in its own way or own terms."⁹

I am both a member of BYU's much-beleaguered English department and a writer, and I have little interest in being sucked into the whirlpool of the *Altmann* fray, proclaiming yet another reading which would argue with or reconcile all these others. Instead the question I would like to explore is this: What are the conditions under which a reader closes a text (literally and figuratively), refuses to suspend the narrative any longer in imagination, says, "Enough!" and, naming the book, is finished with further negotiation? The question is important partly because the act of clos-

4. Bruce Jorgensen, "Swallowing *Altmann's Tongue*: Misreading and the Conduct of Mormon Criticism," 30 Mar. 1995, Brigham Young University Literature and Belief Colloquium, 7, typescript dated 6 Apr. 1995, privately circulated.

5. Susan Howe, "The Moral Imagination," in *Annual of the Association for Mormon Letters*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Provo, UT: Association for Mormon Letters, 1996), 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 4.

7. Gary Browning, "The Moral/Religious Imagination in Brian Evenson's 'The Father, Unblinking,'" 30 Mar. 1995, Brigham Young University Literature and Belief Colloquium, 6, privately circulated.

8. Quoted in Jorgensen, 2.

9. Brian Evenson, interview by author, 28 July 1995.

ing a text is occasionally linked to the political act of suppressing the author.

Evenson's important book fits in a certain class of Mormon literature—books which attempt to steer between the Scylla of Mormon readers and the Charybdis of New York publishing houses (or is it the other way around?). Evenson and writers such as Maurine Whipple, Richard Scowcroft, Vardis Fisher, Virginia Sorensen, and Orson Scott Card have succeeded with their intended national audience but have been chastised—sometimes devoured—by their Mormon audience, an audience which feels either cheated or violated by the text. I propose that answers, if not reconciliation, between Mormon readers and nationally-oriented Mormon writers can be won by respecting (and disrespecting) both perspectives—a paradoxical double vision.

Like readers of Evenson's work, readers of Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* responded diversely, with significant implications for the author. Part of the discussion was and still is the book's sexual content, which provided dissonance for many varieties of Mormon readers. One early critic, Mormon apostle John A. Widstoe, wrote that Whipple's "evident straining for the lurid obscures the true spirit of Mormonism, and misleads the reader."¹⁰ This single review, according to Whipple scholar Katherine Ashton, "probably contributed most to the non-acceptance of the book by the Mormon audience."¹¹ Widstoe's reading conditioned and bound the readings of others, who apparently thought of his review as a proclamation. Whipple was awarded a Houghton-Mifflin Fellowship to write the book, but in a letter to a close friend she refers to "the anguish and disillusionment that *Joshua* has brought me."¹² Widstoe's review referred not only to "lurid" sexuality but to the "true spirit of Mormonism." He implied that the text was inconsistent with the reality of Mormon experience generally.

Yawning before us is the watery pit that swallowed *The Giant Joshua* and other books—that brand of reading and criticism which measures literature by one method only: first, by defining the nearly indefinable—general Mormon experience—and then by judging how well a text correlates to that standard. Some readers judge literature by no other standard, as if their own vision is absolute. Others, many of them careful readers, see dissonance as evidence that the writer doesn't understand Mormonism well. I want both to question and take seriously criticism by disso-

10. Quoted in Katherine Ashton, "Whatever Happened to Maurine Whipple?" *Sunstone* 14 (1990): 36.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

nance; mine is certainly a schizophrenic position.¹³

One example of a passage which many readers find inconsistent with the true spirit of Mormonism lies at the end of *The Giant Joshua*. The heroine, Clory, is dying. She thinks,

And now there is no more time. Already the radiance is trembling on the horizon, the flushed light leans down from the west, the Great Smile beckons, and suddenly, with the shock of a thousand exploding light-balls, she recognizes the Great Smile at last. That which she had searched for all her life had been right there in her heart all the time. She, Clorinda MacIntyre, had a testimony!¹⁴

How does a reader signify the problematic phrase "the Great Smile"? Is it testimony, God, or the Holy Ghost leading Clory to recognize what is in her heart? It is certainly not the phrase mainstream Mormons would use to describe any motion of the spirit. As Laurel Ulrich writes, "Whenever things get too bad for her, she turns to a kind of kindergarten mysticism, dwelling on thoughts of 'The unopened Door' and 'The Great Smile' (which has a way of turning into Charlie Brown's 'Great Pumpkin' once the spell of the book is broken)."¹⁵ Another critic, Eugene England, suggests that Whipple's abstractions of spirituality arise out of a novice misreading of Emerson's Oversoul or Transparent Eyeball.¹⁶ He says Whipple uses "resounding abstractions" and "vague and unsatisfactory mental solutions"¹⁷; that she is guilty of a "destructive confusion"¹⁸ and a "corrupted view of sex and of character."¹⁹ He writes, "On the one hand she creates a marvelously-realized emotional sense of their gritty faith and genuine religious experience, and on the other she indulges in imagining for them humanistic and pantheistic perceptions that are closest to

13. In his 1991 Association for Mormon Letters presidential address, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," Richard Cracroft suggests that many Mormon authors miss the mark of their mostly faithful audience by constantly writing about Mormons on the outer fringes of orthodoxy. Mormon literature should be mantic, consciously orienting itself toward the divine (see *Sunstone* 16 [July 1993]: 51-57). The next year in the same forum Bruce Jorgensen argued that the Christian reader should be eclectic, welcoming and embracing many kinds of literatures, authors, and characters ("To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," *Sunstone* 16 [July 1993]: 40-50). Positions were defined and a healthy debate began.

14. Maurine Whipple, *The Giant Joshua* (Salt Lake City: Western Epics, Inc., 1976), 633.

15. Laurel Ulrich, "Fictional Sisters," in *Mormon Sisters*, ed. Claudia L. Bushman (Cambridge, MA: Emmeline Press, Ltd., 1976), 254.

16. Eugene England, "Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*: A Literary History of Mormonism's Best Historical Fiction," in *Readings for Mormon Literature* (Provo, UT: the author, 1991), 19.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 23.

her own. She tries to have it both ways."²⁰ He suggests that the maudlin and melodramatic in Whipple's writing are evidence of personal anger at Mormonism and lack of testimony. Accordingly, Whipple is without "solid underpinnings in a secure knowledge—in an informed testimony—of Mormon thought."²¹

Whipple's critics may be "right" from some universal perspective (whose might that be?), but I am more interested here in the pattern of their felt dissonance. Ulrich and England both sense that Whipple is not always true to a generalized Mormon self. The problem is important because certainly neither England nor Ulrich is a naive reader who would not give Whipple a fair read.

The problem of dissonance could be resolved for a naive reader by replacing "The Great Smile" with stereotypical Mormon descriptions of testimony such as "a warm feeling," "burning in the bosom," or anything which follows the words "I know ... " when delivered in the context of standing and declaring. But are these formulations any less vague? Testimony—that personal, inner communication between God and each person, facilitated by the Holy Ghost—may be indescribable to someone who has not focussed on the experience; although, as a writer I have faith that words are just as unreliable for describing matters of the spirit as they are for matters of the mind or body. Any worn Mormon phrase will be shorthand for testimony, clear in speech among Mormons, even more jarring to the gentile ear than the phrase, "the Great Smile," which is defined and explored earlier in Whipple's novel.

The problem Whipple faced was how to signify the Mormon conception of testimony for an audience unfamiliar with traditional Mormon labels. Should she ground her images in ideas borrowed from philosophy or other religions to create a bridge for non-Mormon readers? But any such bridge causes dissonance for even well-educated Mormon readers, who sense her rendering of testimony as vagueness, words which miss the mark.

I see another whirling pit in our watery pathway. Many Mormon writers, myself included, yearn for the perfect line, perhaps in the Adamic language, which is so complete that the sign hangs in the air like a ripe, white fruit—so full of meaning that all readers can signify it as testimony, the tail-end of one of God's fleeting thoughts. Such a word would explode all boundaries, establish a new order in language, break trail for a Mormon literature as great as Milton's or Shakespeare's. But of course present language is earth-bound, provisional, and conditional. As Moroni wrote concerning the difference between speech and writing: "when we

20. *Ibid.*, 19.

21. *Ibid.*

write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words" (Ether 12:25).

The problem is this: Most Mormons want their Mormonism straight and familiar, unadulterated with secular philosophy, and historically they have mistrusted writing adapted to a national audience. The literary conventions such writers use to succeed, I believe, are often precisely what Mormon readers find foreign, vague, and offensive. So what conventions do they use, these Mormon writers aspiring for a gentile audience?

During May 1995 on the Association for Mormon Letters (AML) e-mail list, one participant commented: "What I'd really like to see writers on this list address is the question of audience, particularly how to write about Mormon experience for a secular, mainstream literary audience."²² I want to read responses to that question backwards, for evidence of what may offend *Mormon* readers. In a 17 May message, Pauline Mortensen, herself a writer of nationally-oriented fiction,²³ describes what turns non-Mormon readers off:

If one writes with a tacit understanding of truth that excludes most of what the non-Mormon audience views as reality, I think the writer will have problems. In other words, it is the silent spaces in a text which speak the loudest, the assumptions that one writer or another believes to be true which need not be spoken, but yet determine the outcome of the plot. These can be most annoying even within a culture.²⁴

All writers rely on shared assumptions, conventions which vary from genre to genre and audience to audience. Mormon writers, in order to succeed with a national literary audience, must abandon certain Mormon conventions, especially the assumption of universal truth. Mortensen continues: "In the end, I guess what I am talking about is narrative technique and closure. While your characters may come to certain conclusions, your text should be more careful about drawing small circles of enclosure in a big world. What matters most is the writer's politics and agenda rather than the setting."²⁵

Even within a culture, Mortensen suggests, the assumption is offensive that a writer is privy to all the secrets. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your position, this "insider" feeling is exactly what many if not most Mormon readers want. Related to this expunging of arrogance,

22. Holly Welker, Association for Mormon Letters List, May 1995.

23. See Pauline Mortensen, *Back Before the World Turned Nasty* (University of Missouri Press, 1989).

24. Pauline Mortensen, Association for Mormon Letters List, 17 May 1995.

25. *Ibid.*

the national writer of literary fiction must resist a yearning for textual closure, the same textual closure Mormon readers often swaddle themselves in. I'm not opposed to occasional swaddling, reveling in unambiguous truth and reassuring myself that I am privy to at least a share of the secrets, but if I read only texts which comfort, which end with the universe in good order or assume that all truth is already packaged, I risk stasis, stagnation, loss of growth.²⁶

Later readers of the AML list considered Walter Kim's "Whole Other Bodies," another text which succeeds with a national audience but which has been problematic for various Mormon readers—in part because the story's irony is invisible when it is read according to Mormon conventions. On 30 May Mortensen discussed the text's ambiguity:

The narrator describes his religious conversion as a joyous experiment that failed. I am both convinced by the joyousness of the conversion and the emptiness that follows. And I hover forever between the sincerity and the irony of that joyousness. It is the perfect story because it has no answers. It will keep playing over and over in my head and attempt to resolve itself every time but never will. And people will keep anthologizing it and commenting on it for that same reason.²⁷

This text refuses to close, remains continually animated in Mortensen's mind; such openness relies on the nature of the text and her affinity for a text that resists naming. But the convention of many Mormon texts is resistance to ambiguity. Some readers and writers want conversion with only temporary failure, joyousness without emptiness, sincerity without irony. Texts which provide deep religious ambiguity may frustrate such readers. What happens to readers of Kim's story?

The opening sentence is, "I remember the time of my family's conversion, that couple of months before He saved our souls forever."²⁸ The language is familiar to any Mormon reader, straightforward; it has been told again and again in Mormon publications. However, through examination of context and close reading, Mortensen discovers irony and ambiguity:

For me, the first context that gave me clues as to how to read the text was

26. In "Faithful and Ambiguous Fiction: Can Weyland and Whipple Dance Together in the House of Fiction?" *Association for Mormon Letters Annual*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Provo, UT: Association for Mormon Letters, 1995), 269-83, I argue that both comfort and risk might be necessary even in fiction for psychological growth—both building faith and tearing down the walls which limit it.

27. Pauline Mortensen, *Association for Mormon Letters List*, 30 May 1995.

28. Walter Kim, "Whole Other Bodies," in *My Hard Bargain* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 53.

from the other stories themselves. Kirn teaches us how to read his stuff, as does any author. He uses sophisticated literary devices, non-traditional Mormon-like devices. For instance, in "Whole Other Bodies" he begins with the ending. And in fact he begins with the cliché ending as in "happily ever after" only he says "that couple of months before He changed our souls forever." By beginning with the cliché ending, he calls it into question. It is the question or conflict of the story. Will it be forever? And I say look, this story was not published as essay (if it were, I would read it straight without irony), and it was not published by Signature [Books] or Deseret Book or Bookcraft, so what might be going on here outside of my own Mormon reading ... ? The word "forever" from an outsider's view has got to be a major joke. And in fact, from my experience, forever means a lot of different things. I will be your friend forever. I will love you forever. And so forth. The word "soul" has likewise fallen out of literary and philosophic circles and has only re-emerged recently in the New Age stuff (although in religious literature it has remained current). Kirn's story occurs in this outside context where these words have varied connotations and I take all of these contexts seriously when I read his story.²⁹

Mortensen, and assumably Kirn, take a stock line—"He saved our souls forever"—and render it ambiguous. Mortensen says, in her electronic posting, that even factual dissonance is part of the strategy. Kirn uses "poetic/fictional license" on realistic detail to

cross over to the outsider point of view in order to comment on the Mormon text. In other words, he shares assumptions with the non-Mormon audiences. These are ironic generalizing moments that teach me how to read. If Kirn says Testimony Sunday and Baptize the Dead [phrases which Mike Austin said on the list mark the story as written by an outsider], I sense that he sacrifices detail for the broader generalizing commentary. Such details teach me to read the word "forever" in an ambiguous way.³⁰

Again the factors which open the text for her, its complexity, its adaptation and distortion of mainstream Mormon materials and fictional techniques, especially its ambiguity, are exactly what may cause dissonance for even sophisticated Mormon readers, who sense that Kirn has the Mormon universe wrong.³¹

So far I have only considered snippets of text. I would now like to turn to a more extended reading of a story by Darrell Spencer, another

29. Pauline Mortensen, Association for Mormon Letters List, 5 June 1995.

30. Ibid.

31. What, one might ask, are mainstream Mormon materials and conventions? They are a fluid, ever-transmutating body of techniques borrowed from church talks, our brief Mormon literary tradition, but mostly national popular forms—an amoeba which is not easily identifiable.

Mormon writer and BYU English professor who angles his material toward a national audience. Like Evenson and Kirn, he uses narrative devices to open his text. He accepts dissonance in language, distortion between signified and signifier, as given, as a premise of his fiction. For example, one story in *Our Secret's Out* is entitled "The Glue that Binds Us."³² By substituting the word "glue" for "ties," Spencer makes the phrase ambiguous. While some ties sustain us, others bind and imprison. The title questions something which readers may have taken for granted. What is the nature of the glue that binds?

The story involves an apparent love triangle. The non-Mormon narrator, Colfisch, is returning to Utah for a visit. He worries that Gloria, his wife and a marginal Mormon, is leaving him for their host, Benjamin Gust, identified in the story as "a priesthood holder."³³ Another character, a friend of Gust's, is Zinnia Smith, also Mormon. Readers of conventional Mormon literature are familiar with stories containing love triangles and people who are estranged from the church; however, in those stories guilt and righteousness are more clearly attributed. Perhaps the non-Mormon other, not the priesthood holder, would be the one endangering the couple.

Colfisch possesses physical anxiety that the glue binding him to Gloria is disintegrating. "We're in our fifties, and we've left billing and cooing behind. Love isn't the question. What matters is liking. Liking counts. Love can't save you. What goes wrong is wives come to dislike husbands, and husbands come to dislike wives."³⁴ Love and like may not bind. Bodies no longer bind. "No one's arguing I'm pretty at fifty-five."³⁵ Colfisch reverses love and like in terms of what conventional wisdom would say is most important. In addition, he does not consider sin and redemption as causal forces; and Spencer refuses to illuminate the church principles which could prevent disintegration of a marriage. A Mormon reader used to those elements might feel that the text is ephemeral, that Colfisch and his creator both misunderstand the most important causes of unhappiness. The narrator's voice and attitudes permeate the story, creating dissonance for readers trained only in reading conventional Mormon texts.

Colfisch blames his disintegrating body for the loss of like and love, but he also blames the gods. "In a fit, some spoilsport goaty god has come down hard on me."³⁶ The conventional Mormon text (is there really

32. Darrell Spencer, *Our Secret's Out* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 134-51.

33. *Ibid.*, 150.

34. *Ibid.*, 135.

35. *Ibid.*, 138.

36. *Ibid.*, 134.

such a text?) generally marks clearly as a sinner anyone who blames God for his condition.

The following anecdote, early in the story, demonstrates how Spencer further undercuts conventional readings by blaming the gods for the unreliability of language. He uses a traditional verbal signal to mark the beginning of an anecdote—"So a few days ago ..."³⁷ He frames the story inside his story with references to the gods, who like the Navaho trickster coyote, are in the mood to interfere. The anecdote was told first to Colfisch by his wife, and then by Colfisch to the reader, explaining why he thinks some "god has come down hard on" him. The anecdote contains two familiar acts: (1) being accosted by someone on the street, and (2) giving facts to a journalist, who gets them wrong. Spencer writes,

Yahweh, overfed and world-weary, grows testy, calls in a few minor gods so his words will be heard, and says, "Let's break the rules, like pots."

So, a few days ago, on a Monday, a man comes up to Gloria on a downtown Salt Lake City street and hands her eleven one-hundred-dollar bills. The story makes the *Tribune*, only the reporter bungles the facts. He says one thousand dollars. It was *eleven* hundred, *eleven* one-hundred-dollar bills. The man did not say, as the paper says he did, "God wants you to have this." He said, "Greetings from your Heavenly Father and your Heavenly Mother, who want you to have this money in order that you shall never want again." If you'd heard him, Gloria claims, you would not have forgotten the exact words.

When she sat me down to tell me what happened, she said, "The young man said, 'Greetings.' Greetings, like he was from another planet." He said Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, not god. "How did they get it wrong?" she said, and she studied me like I had something up my sleeve. Her look was hard enough to make me wonder if I was part of some plot.

Like I say, the gods interfere. Sure, we invite them. We wear hair shirts, smudge ash across our foreheads. We cry, *For pity! For pity!* and sing, *De Profundus*. We file our grievances.³⁸

The passage violates two premises central to Mormonism: God is a discrete figure, unambiguous, and truth is the same, yesterday, today, and forever, also unambiguous. Spencer refers to god variously—first as "some spoilsport goaty god," "Yahweh," and "Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother," and as "the gods." Spencer's audience is primarily non-Mormon (*Our Secret's Out* was published by the University of Missouri Press), an audience that can take this mild ambiguity in stride. But because he does not refer to the Mormon god as a Mormon would, his references would discomfit Mormons who believe that there exists one

37. *Ibid.*, 135.

38. *Ibid.*, 135-36.

signification for God, and they know it.

The anecdote also shows that messages fall apart; truth is ambiguous. The journalist mixes up or reinvents most of what happened to Gloria. Like the parlor game “gossip,” the message is transformed in the telling. But was there ever a time when accident or hoax did not enter into the event? Is Gloria’s account, or Colfisch’s, or Spencer’s, for that matter, any more reliable? “True” accounts are drawn into question. The idea that truth itself could be doubted would cause tremendous dissonance for my imagined reader of conventional Mormon texts.

The act of being accosted on the street is also rendered ambiguous. Instead of asking for charity, or some political or religious influence, this man *gives* charity. He proclaims himself as a messenger from Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother, but he says “Greetings” as if he is a visitor from another planet. Was Gloria visited by one of the Three Nephites? Again the sign is ambiguous. Messages go awry and signification is unreliable.

Colfisch attributes this unreliability not only to the gods, as if deity has intervened between signifier and signified, but also to the location, as if only in Salt Lake City would a man accost a rich woman and give her money, a gift from Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother. So how do we interpret the anecdote? Who is playing a hoax—Colfisch or Gloria? The man on the street? Spencer? The Gods? Some readers will shut this text because of its many ambiguities.

I am going to skip to the end of the story, where Gloria describes an experience using common and conventional acts—parking in a car, praying together, sleeping together, and lightening up. The scene is made ambiguous partly because Gloria shifts between Gust’s Mormon and Colfisch’s non-Mormon perspectives³⁹:

Gloria says, “Last night, when Gust brought me home, he asked me to sit in the car for a minute.” [Act of ambiguous intimacy] She sips a Coke I got her.

I think, *Necking?* [Act of sexual intimacy]

She says, “He asked me to pray with him.” [Act of religious intimacy]

“To pray with him?”

“He and Zinnia are sleeping together,” she says. [Act of casual sexual intimacy]

I can see Zinnia’s bronze hair on a pillow and her fingers putting quote marks around *sleeping together*. Her husband is a Mormon bishop. [Act of marking serious significance]

39. In marking culturally significant acts, I am borrowing from Roland Barthes, who in *S/Z*, an analysis of Balzac’s story “Sarrasine,” breaks the text into lexemes and uses free association to identify possible connotative elements. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

I say, "He wanted to pray about screwing around?" [Act of ambiguous intimacy]

"Well," she says, "it's bad. I tried to lighten it up. I said, 'I don't pray. I wring my hands.'" [Act of releasing seriousness]

"How?" I say. "On your knees?"

"Just sitting in the car."

"Did you?"

"He did."

"He prayed in front of you?" [Act of pretentious religious intimacy]

"It was no big thing," she says. [Act of releasing seriousness]⁴⁰

This short conversation renders conventional signals ambiguous. Colfisch and Spencer's intended readers have trouble with the mixture of sexual and religious intimacy. He is perplexed by Gust's acts. What are Gust's motives as he arranges a prayerful *tête à tête* to confess his sexual malfeasance? Then Colfisch imagines Zinnia putting quote marks around *sleeping together*, marking a casual act with complex cultural significance. The two men mark the experience with variant and opposing forms of moral seriousness. Gloria gives them both a way of dealing with ambiguity—distance and humor. Many Mormon writers would write the ambiguity out of this scene. A priesthood holder, while dating one man's wife, wants to pray with her about his adultery with another woman, wife to a bishop. In that story sin would be clearly marked. Readers and writers of traditional Mormon fiction probably read Spencer's play and humor as dissonance. To such writers and their readers the story is polluted by non-Mormon laxness toward sin. Despite the fact that this kind of moral ambiguity happens daily all across Utah, Mormon readers often feel that writers must make judgments, delineate sin clearly. Attempting to render all signifiers in a unitary manner would transform this into a text which would hardly disturb. It is not merely sexual content but ambiguous signification which offends, and it is not just Mormons who are offended by ambiguity. The situation makes a twisted sense to Gloria, Zinnia, and Gust, but it simply bewilders Colfisch. One's perspective determines the extent and the nature of the ambiguity.

Toward the end of the story Colfisch is anxious to leave the confusion he names Utah:

By five we're headed west, Gloria driving, me letting Salt Lake City leak from my bones. Gloria wrote Gust a note and stuck it to the front door. It said, Eleven hundred dollars burning a hole in my purse. Wendover calling us. See you next time and think about coming to San Diego.

She says to me, "Zinnia's a mess."

I say, "What'd you tell her?"

40. Spencer, *Our Secret's Out*, 148-49.

"To run off with Gust."

"Will she?"

Gloria looks at me in the dark car and says, "You don't know what it is to be a Mormon."

"Do you?"

She says, "You don't think you can be a god."

"And you do?"

"Mormons do."

"Mormons can be God."

"A god. And Gust thinks so. He's a priesthood holder."⁴¹

Colfisch does not understand Zinnia's dilemma. If she loves Gust and that relationship is stronger than the one with her husband the bishop, she might run off with Gust. Gloria explains that both believe they can become gods; Colfisch is only further confused, further determined to escape. He shuts the story down because it contains an intolerable level of ambiguity. Like Colfisch, would students at BYU feel an overload of a different nature of moral ambiguity and decide that this sacrilegious story does not represent the Mormon perspective accurately? They might reduce the story to the literal denotation on the page, missing the play with language.

The final scene is the one which I believe would most disturb the traditional Mormon reader:

We're past the lake, and the Salt Flats stretch out in the grey morning light like a linen table cloth. One more nudge from one more malcontented god and I can see myself hotfooting it across the flats to the blue mountains at the edge of the earth. Up ahead, the monument the sculptor built, the one Gust told us about, rises out of the whiteness. The morning sun has turned it pink, and no matter how delicate you want to be you have to admit it looks like a giant's dick poking into the earth. It's got balls.

Wendover is less than twenty miles away, and we're flying when we pass the monument. Now I count seven huge balls on top. They're numbered and striped.

Gloria says, "Somebody ought to lasso that and pull it down."

There is probably twice as much of it in the ground as there is showing.

Just before we top a small rise, I turn around and see the Salt Flats spread out endlessly. I see the sculptor in his hometown in Finland or Sweden, wherever it is. He's drinking old-world beer from an ornate stein and resting his elbows on a wooden table, telling anyone who will listen how he went to the U S of A and put the entire state of Utah on.⁴²

Colfisch's way of dealing with the confusion is to imagine an insult,

41. *Ibid.*, 150.

42. *Ibid.*, 150-51.

as clear as an upraised finger, directed toward Utah. Even though Colfisch is finished with Utah, Spencer continues the play with language and conventions of reading. Like the entire state of Utah, the reader has been put on. The ending does not tie up meaning nicely, the ending is in some ways an escape from meaning. The ambiguity, the play with meaning, and the irreverent, even obscene, sexual content would cause a reader of conventional Mormon texts to feel uneasy. However, I think it is a mistake to think the character's ambivalence and Spencer's are one and the same. This symbol, the obscene joke, at the end of the story orders meaning for Colfisch. "This is what the state of Utah deserves for putting me on," he might think. He shuts down response to the multivarious story he has just experienced. He identifies Utah, names it and its odd inhabitants. Colfisch moves from a complex response to his experience to a simple one.

For similar motives to Colfisch's, I believe, my imagined traditional Mormon reader disconnects from some nationally-oriented texts because of unfamiliar conventions, disorienting ambiguity, and ideological differences. Such a reader, like Colfisch, leaves off playing and wrestling with the narrative.

In *S/Z* Roland Barthes, one of the godfathers of Mortensen's method of reading texts, discusses two kinds of relationships between reader and text, the readerly and the writerly. Colfisch and readers of print narratives respond differently when embroiled in the story than they do when conditions keep them from enlivening the story or when they remove themselves from further anguished or pleasurable play. In such a relation the text is simply received—a lifeless consumption of text by reader. Barthes writes, "Our evaluation [of a text] can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is that of writing. ... [What] is within the practice of the writer and what has left it: which texts would I consent to write (to re-write), to desire, to put forth as a force in this world of mine?"⁴³ He describes a kind of reading where the text is reimagined, remains animated, open, interactive—as if the reader is writing. Barthes continues, "Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader."⁴⁴ I suggest that not only the divorce between author and reader forces a text to become readerly; the conventional apparatus and ideology are also involved. In the readerly relation to the text, the reader

43. Barthes, *S/Z*, 4.

44. *Ibid.*

is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*. Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly.⁴⁵

So what might make a text readerly? Ambiguity might for some readers. Presence of excessive sexuality, irreverence, the grotesque, violence, inaccurate doctrine, incompatible politics might cause a reader to feel excessive dissonance with the known Mormon universe, causing him or her to disengage with text. Authority might, faith in what someone else has said about a text as happened with Whipple and apparently Evenson. In these cases the language of the text binds the reader with seriousness, renders him or her incapable of creative and flexible play with the text.

Barthes clarifies the conditions under which a reader disengages from a text or never engages playfully with it in the first place. The writerly text is:

a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be super-imposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.⁴⁶

The moment of the closing of a text involves a writerly text becoming readerly in the presence of a unitary system; the reader is bound by the words and rendered unable to achieve distance or play. I imagine myself as the student writer of the anonymous letter, who said that Evenson's stories made her feel as if she had ingested poison. As I grapple with Evenson's stories, I am bombarded by violent acts, so many that I can no longer read the sentences as satire, metaphor, or other literary device, but only as repetitive, repulsive violence—the poisonous spew of a depraved writer. Worse, this writer is not some foreigner who knows nothing about goodness—he is Mormon. As this reader, I judge Evenson's words against the standard of Mormonism. Or I am Widstoe reading Whipple's text. The characters are trapped and bound by sexuality, doubt, conflict. "These are not the good people I know, not my good ancestors." I can no longer imagine Clory and the others as alive, deserving of interest and

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, 5.

compassion. Once again they become the page-bound devices of a writer; and the reader is trapped in the literal. The play of the text is dead to me. As Ulrich put it, the spell is broken.⁴⁷

Perched on the mast, I feel the hot breath of Scylla (or is it vertigo?). Have I blundered into the final and most hazardous assumption that Mormonism is a monolithic system which prompts readers to close down? Is the Gospel of Christ unitary and singular?

Before embarking on this essay, before being buried in the swells and diverted by the currents of the material, I knew clearly what I wanted to say. I believed that readers used to what Pauline Mortensen calls “traditional Mormon-like” conventions simply miss Evenson’s, Kirn’s, or Spencer’s irony—apparent to what I thought was an elite group of sophisticated readers. I assumed that such readers, trained to see writing as literal truth and with an antipathy for anything postmodern, were incapable of the writerly relation. Simply pointing out the wonderful irony and ambiguity to naive readers would cause them to appreciate complex literature, I thought. I assumed that a text is inherently readerly or writerly, and not, as Barthes clearly says, that it has something to do with the relation between reader and text. Very clear. Unfortunately I find myself culpable. Just as Barthes privileges a certain kind of relation to a text, I have privileged a certain kind of ambiguous, secular text. Reading traditional Mormon literature, I find myself rejecting the text for any number of reasons—singularity, conservative politics, lack of the kind of ambiguity I relish, lack of sexuality. How is my response qualitatively different from the reader I set out to teach? Both of us shut down the text. As my friend and colleague Daniel Muhlestein wrote in the margin of an early draft of this paper, any binary is open to reversal.

Writing this essay, I have realized that the boundaries between what is readerly and writerly are fuzzy. When a Jack Weyland or Shirley Sealy text comes alive to a reader used to that convention, who can say that the only relation is the readerly one? Such a reader may believe, because of lack of training in communication theory, that all texts are simply received, but in practice, when a text comes alive, it is acted upon, becoming writerly. When I sat in my dorm room as a freshman, and the language of the Book of Mormon suddenly became luminous, was that an open or a closed reading? I would have thought that revelation should be pure denotation, but during that experience and others like it, the word was amplified. Occasionally I feel that same luminosity reading the *Ensign* and reading Walter Kirn, Darrell Spencer, Levi Peterson, Maurine Whipple, and Virginia Sorensen.

47. Ulrich, “Fictional Sisters,” 254.

Also, lack of training is not the only cause of a readerly relation to a text. Many careful Mormon readers, some who have spent their lives reading the scriptures and other books closely, are disturbed by nationally-oriented, ambiguous fiction, not just because they miss the point. Their method of reading is not qualitatively different from Mortensen's or mine. The reader who weeps at the faithful and true stories in the *Ensign* (I confess I am one of those readers) decodes context and convention, certainly different conventions from those found in stories by Mortensen, Kirn, and Spencer. Are such readers really incapable of enlivening a text, suspending it in imagination in a writerly manner? Is my own reading always writerly? Should it be? What are the relations between the readerly and writerly when I read a commandment in the scripture or make a covenant in the temple? To what extent do I play with the meaning in those words? The neat distinctions with which I began this project are not so tidy.

None of this would matter much if the question were merely one of picking up a book or laying it aside or of academic quibbling (so bitter, as Henry Kissinger once said, precisely because so little is at stake). However, many readers, whatever their conventional orientation, feel that the issue is deeper than the level of technique. The nature of language, God, and the universe is on the line. Or, in the case of Brian Evenson and others, the future of their careers at BYU.

In my soul I feel our dilemma to be a false one. The gospel of Christ is *both* restrictive meaning and infinite play. "In the beginning was the word," writes St. John. As Mormons we have tremendous faith in the potency of the word of God. Christ embodies his gospel but bodies it forth in the scripture, the literal word of God. We believe this and we are inclined to read scripture as referendum, unitary truth. In all writing which is pure enough to be moderated by the Holy Ghost, we assume, signifier and signified are miraculously one. The authority of the text is unarguable. This belief, as I have described it, is at once our only salvation and the greatest hazard of all. There must needs be opposition even in the Word—the opposition between authority and agency, the central opposition of our religion. No matter how much we may reside in the presence of the Holy Ghost, even if the scriptures could be a perfect readerly text, we still come to them conditionally, with incomplete faith and divided mind. Neither can they become completely a writerly text, where commandments, covenants, and moral truth are merely shifting sand. Relating to the scriptures as either kind of extreme text actually impedes our growth, keeps us from progressing grace to grace. We cannot afford to allow the scriptures to become merely received, easily named, but neither can we allow them to become only writerly, forever open, only play,

never the true message of God. Certainly the gospel can become dead to anyone, merely received, a unitary system. But as suggested above, any system can become monolithic, even the ideology of postmodernism.

In reading scriptural and secular texts, we may legitimately use both readerly and writerly impulses, both denotative intent, the building of meaning as described in Alma 32, and connotative play, which Barthes's defines as follows: "Connotation is the way into the polysemy of the classic text, to that limited plural of the text. ... Definitionally, it is a determination, a relation, an anaphora, a feature which has the power to relate itself to anterior, ulterior, or exterior mentions, to other sites of the text (or of another text): we must in no way restrain this relating."⁴⁸ Connotation releases the double meaning, "corrupts the purity of communication," "is a deliberate 'static,'" "a counter communication."⁴⁹ But the readerly, denotative, singular, and unambiguous meaning may also be necessary. In fact, neither an absolutely readerly nor an absolutely writerly reading is possible—each contains and defines itself by contrast to the other.

Continuing revelation requires a flexible relationship, sometimes open, sometimes narrowly restricted, to at least the text of God's mind, and perhaps to earthly texts as well. For these reasons I will read every text, especially the scriptures, by wavering between the readerly and writerly, between knowledge and faith, between reverence for authority and reliance on agency and autonomy.

So what is the model? My friend and colleague, Jesse Crisler, gave me one as he read an early draft of this paper. He described in the margin the gospel doctrine and priesthood classes he has attended where "the ambiguities, the double, triple, and more meanings of a word or passage, the historical and modern contexts ... have been thoroughly explored, but not definitely delimited." He goes on to say, "I've also seen truth in the scriptures, but that commandment also implies an understanding that the truths we find are more likely to be personal than unitary—'for in them ye *think* ye have eternal life'—I don't think Mormons have become South African Calvinists" (emphasis Crisler's). I imagine such a class where testimony is borne but discussion is unfinished—both the readerly and the writerly, the closed and the open are possible. Those who follow an ideology so closely that they insist on a certain way of reading or a certain kind of text may be prone to shutting down, excusing themselves from the carnival of words.

So after all this I am left, not with any orderly logical structure, but with the belief that any system may become monolithic for any individual, the gospel or the most elaborate academic theory included. Even ex-

48. Barthes, *S/Z*, 8.

49. *Ibid.*, 9.

cellent readers may shut down play with a text of experimental literary fiction, the scriptures, or popular Mormon fiction. We might read texts and judge each other after the manner of Sleary in Dickens's *Hard Times*—he sees with both the fixed eye of philosophy and the roving eye of fancy.

This might make us a people reluctant to prematurely close any kind of text and condemn the writer. As Gary Browning said in the review I quoted earlier,

I believe the most important message to be drawn from "The Father, Unblinking" is, given the sparse and contradictory knowledge we have of anyone but ourselves, and, perhaps, even of ourselves, and the ambiguities in so much of what we experience, rendering judgment, especially of another, is most perilous. Too much is imperfectly known: motivations, intentions, desires of the heart, generic predispositions, environment, experience, culture, and much more.⁵⁰

Quick to listen and slow to condemn, we might become as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.

50. Browning, "The Moral/Religious Imagination," 6.