The Thirteenth Article of Faith as a Standard for Literature

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In 1842, Joseph Smith wrote a letter to John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, outlining "the rise, progress, persecution, and faith of the Latter-day Saints."[1] That letter concluded with thirteen "Articles of Faith" that were later published in the Nauvoo *Times and Seasons*. In a general conference of the Church in Salt Lake City in 1880, these articles of faith were canonized as scripture for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Written in words drawn from Philippians 4:8, the last sentence of the thirteenth article of faith reads, "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things."[2] For Latter-day Saints, the question of what to read and what not to read is very important. We live in a world that is flooded with information. It comes to us as text messages, blogs, magazine and journal articles, email, internet posts, and books of all kinds. Navigating this flood is difficult given its volume alone. To this issue of quantity, adding questions of quality—what we should or should not read for our own best health—makes matters ever more difficult. When it comes to judging the literature we read—novels, stories, poems, and so forth—I propose that the thirteenth article of faith is the best standard available to us, a standard that can readily anchor principles of literary quality in reason, scripture, and doctrine.

David J. Whittaker, writing in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, addresses the thirteenth article of faith: "The final declaration provides a broad perspective for life and an invitation to the LDS approach to life."[3] I would like to state in the same spirit, one of a "broad perspective." The analysis that follows relies on straightforward dictionary definitions of significant terms, mostly taken

from Webster's first edition dictionary of 1828 (*American Dictionary of the English Language*) with some definitions augmented by the third edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. The thirteenth article of faith, when applied to the judgment of literature, may just surprise us with its liberality if we strip away our cultural amplifications and simply look at what the words themselves say. In fact, I believe that the thirteenth article of faith may be a most valuable aid in helping us avoid the Book of Mormon sin of "looking beyond the mark" (Jacob 4:14).

The last sentence of the thirteenth article of faith begins: "If there is anything virtuous . . ." The primary definition of *virtue* in Webster's 1828 dictionary is *strength*.[4] Thus, to be *virtuous* is to be *strong*. Other connotations include "bravery," "moral goodness," "excellence," "efficacy," and "chastity." The English word *virtue* comes from a Latin word meaning *manliness* or *excellence*, from *vir*, meaning *man*. The word *virtuous* also means *good* or *excellent*, as in the related words *virtuosity* and *virtuoso*. The work of a *virtuoso* exhibits "masterly ability, technique, or personal style."[5] What kind of literary work would be considered strong or brave? A work that exerts persuasive force, that is tough, courageous, and uncompromising in its argument. Such a work would not be a milquetoast effort to reaffirm a reader's worldview. Such a work wouldn't comfort the reader with the familiar. Think about the works you've read that were bold or challenging, that moved you to considering new perspectives. Such works are *virtuous*.

What about a *morally excellent* work of literature? A primary definition of *moral* includes the statement: "Concerned with the judgment of the goodness or badness of human action and character."[6] Think of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Edith Wharton, Arthur Miller, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Sherman Alexie. Think of Levi Peterson or Eric Samuelson. A novel that examines "the goodness or badness of human action and character" has to depict both. If that novel is morally excellent, it has to depict both very well. By contrast, a novel cleaned up and dressed in its church clothes, prepared for success in the commercial Mormon bookstore, closes its eyes to the "badness of human action or

character." That novel is impotent and therefore incapable of tackling significant questions of moral excellence.

What makes a work of literature *good*? That's a very big question. For the sake of this discussion, I'll say that at the very least, good literature is truthful about the nature of existence and the complexities of human relationships; good literature requires skillful and artistic uses of language, beyond the mere utilitarian; and good literature involves conflict, tension, evidence of the push and pull between individuals and human entities. By contrast, propaganda—material that advocates a particular doctrine or cause—is one-sided and, therefore, lacks the necessary conflict inherent in good literature.

What about *chastity* as an element of the *virtuous*? Too often Latter-day Saints reduce the meaning of *virtue* to *chastity* alone, missing the implications of *virtue* discussed above. Even worse, some Latter-day Saints equate *chastity* with *abstinence* in that they require a literature stripped of all evidence of human sexuality. But the teachings of Mormonism don't call for the annihilation of sex; Mormonism imbues human sexuality with divine and eternal significance. Yes, the LDS "law of chastity" calls for sexual abstinence before marriage, but it also calls for fidelity (and, therefore, sexual activity) after marriage.[7] I argue, then, by analogy, that just as a married couple can be sexually active *and* chaste, literature for adults can address matters of sexuality. This can occur if the portrayal of sex leaves the reader with a deeper awareness of the complex needs of others, if the work avoids degrading the reader and the subject matter, if the work enriches the reader with a greater understanding of the human condition.

What of sexual misconduct? Can a book that portrays adultery be considered chaste—a book other than the Bible, that is? Let me answer that by referring to the LDS Church publication *For the Strength of Youth*, which was written to help young people "with the important choices [they] are making now and will yet make in the future."[8] The revised version of this pamphlet issued in 2011 discusses entertainment and media: "Do not participate in anything that presents immorality and violence as acceptable."[9] The church encourages members to read the Bible and the Book

of Mormon, two texts that present immorality and violence, but these texts do not present immorality and violence as acceptable. This is the key distinction. Isaiah counsels against those who "call evil good, and good evil" (Isa. 5:20). It is not the portrayal of evil that Isaiah forbids, but the portrayal of evil as good.

Generally speaking, "literary" works uphold this standard. As the Oscar Wilde character Miss Prism puts it, "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means."[10] Yes, literature is ripe with characters who are liars, cheats, thieves, adulterers, and murderers. But such characters are typically the antagonists of their stories. Even when readers are led to sympathize with these characters, such characters are rarely portrayed as ultimately healthy, heroic, or admirable. Consistently, literature shows sexual recklessness as a preamble to lies and broken relationships. I'll concede that today's literature does not insist upon marriage or heterosexuality. But when two people are in a regular romantic/sexual relationship, infidelity by either partner is consistently portrayed as hurtful and wrong. The standard of sexual fidelity to one's partner is a basic assumption in almost everything we read. In literature, when people break that standard, they suffer negative consequences.

Allowing sexual content in literature is not the same as allowing the pornographic. In fact, a number of distinctions separate pornography from literature. One of them is pornography's lack of conflict. Pornography takes the conflict out of human relationships. The characters simply "go for it" unchecked—they want something and get it. Not all depictions of sexuality are pornographic, however. In 1973, the Supreme Court defined *obscenity* as that which, "taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." The Supreme Court also labels as *obscene* any expression that "appeals to the prurient"; in other words, that shows an inordinate emphasis on sex.[11] A medical textbook on sexuality, for example, has scientific value, and therefore is not "obscene." Similarly, a novel may have artistic value even if it portrays sexuality. Of course, determining literary and artistic value is no easy task. The topic deserves more discussion than I'm giving it here. But I hope it's enough to assert that not all

depictions of sex are pornographic—that a work can be *virtuous* even if it deals with sex.

When discussing appropriate reading materials, Mormons are often concerned about crude (unrefined) or vulgar (common) language. Interestingly, the discussion of language in the 2011 *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet gives equal condemnation to "swearing, mocking, gossiping, or speaking in anger to others."[12] If we poured through the novels in a commercial Mormon bookstore, we would surely find a paucity of swear words. Would we also find an absence of depictions of "mocking, gossiping, or speaking in anger to others"? I doubt it. I'm glad the Church equally condemns these behaviors in personal expression. But I believe that the portrayal of characters in literature is a different matter. If I portray a shoplifter in my writing, or if I read about one in a novel, that doesn't mean I'm a shoplifter or that I advocate the practice. The same goes for characters in literature who use crude language or speak in anger to others.

Does crude language have an influence on literary quality? Surely, the *presence* of crude language isn't a necessary element of good literature. A work of literature doesn't need vulgar language to be virtuous—to be strong, challenging, or skillfully rendered. But the same goes for the *absence* of crude language. Neither the presence nor the absence of such language ensures literary quality. But wait! Don't *words* matter? Yes, they do! In good literature, every word matters. Any word can be the wrong word in the context of a particular writer, audience, or text. The issue is not the vulgar word, but *the right word*. Of course, some readers are sensitive to vulgar language; they notice it and, at times, take issue with it. Certainly, such readers should stand by their preferences. But they should remember that the use of certain words neither determines nor precludes literary quality. Sensitive readers should develop the maturity necessary to distinguish between personal taste and literary quality.

A *virtuous* work of literature, then, is brave, strong, and compelling; concerned with matters of good and bad character; and unafraid of conflicts that include sexuality, violence, or crude language. Virtuous literature employs skillful and artistic uses of

language, showing a writer's virtuosity through effective, well-chosen words. Good literature is prized for its artistic value, not simply its informative or didactic content. When we look for virtuous literature, then, what do we find in a Mormon bookstore? Sadly, a predominance of works that are simplistic, propagandistic, and ordinary in quality. In short, the works there are *polite*, but not virtuous. They primarily seek *to not offend.* Lacking complexity and censored in content, they sell like hotcakes mostly because they are *safe*. If safety is one's goal, a Mormon bookstore is the place to be. But those seeking *virtuous* literature have to take the risk of shopping elsewhere.

The thirteenth article of faith also includes, "If there is anything . . . lovely." The 1828 Webster edition defines *lovely* as "amiable; that which may excite love; possessing qualities that may invite affection."[13] The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *lovely* as "enjoyable; delightful," with synonyms such as *beautiful*.[14] Let me ask you, have you ever *loved* a book? If you have, then you've found that book *lovely*. More particularly, have you ever read a book, a poem, a story, or seen a play that imbued you with a greater sense of compassion toward others, a heightened sense of our mutual needs, a greater appreciation for the human condition? If so, you've experienced literature that is *lovely*. Ironically, this may be true even when considering literature that portrays ugliness, since one can read about an ugly but sympathetic character and come away feeling compassion for that character and, thus, for other human beings.

"If there is anything . . . of good report." The word *report* comes from a Latin word that means "to carry." A *report* is "an official account or statement," especially "given in reply or inquiry, or by a person authorized." The word also means "to tell or relate from one to another."[15] In one sense, then, a report is a *review*, such as a book review. But a report can also involve the things you hear about a work and share among friends and acquaintances. If a book is praised by reviewers or if people you trust say good things about the book, the book is then "of good report." Of course, "of good report" also implies that the report itself is reliable. Imagine that someone tells you a particular novel

is "awful," but let's imagine that this person knows next to nothing about literature. Let's further imagine that this person can't tell the difference between a book's qualities and his own subjective likes and dislikes. Is this a good report? No. One might as well ask a Mormon who has never tasted alcohol to give a report on the quality of this year's California wines. A work of literature that is "of good report," then, is a work that has been praised by people who are qualified to speak on literary matters—people who know what they are talking about.

"If there is anything . . . praiseworthy." *Praiseworthy* means "deserving of praise or applause; commendable."[16] It comes from a late Latin word meaning "to prize," related to the Latin for "price." We might prize or praise a work of literature for its fine language, its well-drawn characters, its complex plot, its philosophical heft. Interestingly, the 1828 Webster definition clarifies that *praise* "differs from fame, renown, and celebrity, which are the expressions of the approbations of numbers."[17] By that definition, then, a bestseller cannot be called praiseworthy merely on the basis of the numbers of copies sold.

After listing the qualities of virtuous, lovely, of good report, and praiseworthy, the thirteenth article of faith states, "we seek after these things." I'd like to ask, *Do we really?* As Latter-day Saints, do we seek after that which is "virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy"? I'll leave you to answer that question for yourself.

In outlining these qualities, Joseph Smith wrote, "Indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul." Joseph was referring to the apostle Paul's epistle to the Philippians in 4:8, in the King James Version: "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." The New International Version adds "noble" and "admirable." The New Living Bible says, "Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise." The Revised Standard Version adds, "whatever is gracious"; the New Revised Standard Version adds "whatever is

commendable." I like the admonition to "think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise."

Earlier, I mentioned my concern that in Mormon culture we can be guilty of "looking beyond the mark." There exists in cultures and individuals a constant tension between liberal and conservative drives. Both are equally valuable, though "looking beyond the mark" can happen in either direction. I'm not talking about liberal and conservative politics. I'm talking about the liberal drive to open up, reach out, and explore new horizons versus the conservative drive to gather in, maintain, and treasure the known. Today's American Mormon rarely runs the risk of being too liberal. The greater risk is the tendency to be too conservative—to close ranks, narrow the vision, and become overly cautious. The conservative tends toward the traditional, the status quo. The conservative seeks to preserve and conserve, to resist change, to restrain, to insist on moderation. This tendency often aligns with careful business practices. If I'm in the publishing business, I don't want to take serious risks with my money. Wanting to keep my investments safe, I'd rather invest in another vampire rip-off of *Twilight*. Of course, many things are well-tested and safe and are also excellent and worthy of praise. But art can't sit still for very long. It can't survive in the status quo. Art has to look forward; it has to take risks. Any kind of risk causes anxiety for the conservative drive. Perhaps my argument is simple, then. Addressing Mormon culture, and Mormons generally, my plea is for a step toward the liberal. When it comes to literature and the thirteenth article of faith, I plead for the following:

> "Praiseworthy"—Literature should be prized not based on numbers sold but based on literary quality. Praise should be given to literature that challenges us rather than merely reaffirming and comforting us in our views.
>
> "Of good report"—The report should be good, and the person making the report should be knowledgeable and qualified to make literary judgments.

"Lovely"—When someone loves a book, that counts for something, even if the book is simple by educated standards.

"Virtuous"—Some good literature has been tried and tested and satisfies a conservative force; other literature takes risks in strong, compelling ways, sometimes through challenging portrayals of sexuality, violence, or crude language. The latter can be equally as virtuous as the former.

As the membership of the Church grows more diverse, I believe the commercial force that rules a Mormon bookstore will have to change. Its conservative bent is understandable, but that virtue is just one kind of virtue. Fortunately, we have the thirteenth article of faith. If we will read it closely, as we should read all scripture, and take it seriously, we'll find a standard that aligns with the best literary judgments, supporting the best principles of reason and the gospel.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, "The Wentworth Letter," in *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 437.

2. Articles of Faith 1:13.

3. David J. Whittaker, "Articles of Faith" in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 68.

4. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1st ed., s.v. "virtue."

5. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "virtuoso."

6. Ibid., s.v. "moral."

7. "Chastity" in *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 29–33.

8. *For the Strength of Youth* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), ii.

9. Ibid., 11.

10. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Project Gutenberg, August 2006, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm (accessed August 18, 2015).

11. *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973).
12. *For the Strength of Youth*, 21.
13. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1st ed., s.v. "lovely."
14. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "lovely."
15. Ibid., 3rd ed., s.v. "report."
16. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1st ed., s.v. "praiseworthy."
17. Ibid.