

Mapping Futures: A Dialogue on Mormon Literary Studies

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John Bennion: Some writers hate their reviewers and critics. For example, Thomas Hardy famously argued with his critics and became so frustrated by their reception of his work that he stopped writing novels. However, most writers and readers see the value of good criticism. A good critic makes a record of their reading, not as the only possible or primary reading, but as a means of generating new readings. Roland Barthes suggests that one role of the reader is to perform a “writerly” reading of a writerly text, meaning that most good texts are not designed to produce a narrowly predictable response, as if a piece of literature is an industrial or commercial process (4). Since the Romantic period writers have enjoyed thinking about themselves as lonely geniuses, but the reality is that readers, writers, and critics are in a social environment and need each other; writers need critical readers as much as critics need writers. Neither could exist without the other. But before we dive in, perhaps some definitions are in order. What name do we choose for our subject?

Michael Austin: I like the original term “Mormon literature,” which has the advantage of being already established in the existing scholarship (as modest as it is) as well as more descriptive than other

terms. The recent emphasis of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the correct use of its name has actually been a good thing for Mormon studies generally and Mormon literature specifically. It has allowed for the word “Mormon” to evolve a more general meaning that creates a useful distinction. A “Latter-day Saint” is a member of a specific institution with an address, a web site, a tax status, and so on. A “Mormon” is part of a much larger faith tradition that includes several Restoration denominations, a history, a heritage, a culture, and a literature. Most of the people who write Mormon literature—however we choose to define it—have at least a complicated relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Many of them don’t consider themselves members of any Church or organization, but they do claim a Mormon culture, or spirituality, or aesthetic that sets them apart from other cultures, spiritualities, or aesthetics. Now that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has given up nearly all uses of the term “Mormon,” it is there to be picked up and used in ways that do not denote a formal association with the Church.

JB: A good distinction. To represent the symbiotic relationship between critic as reader and writer as a different kind of reader, I propose the double helix as a model. The two strands work together and have numerous connections for cross communication. The image of a double helix also brings to mind a genetic blueprint for generation of a viable organism, in this case the creation of literature. We want to focus this conversation on the infrastructure that currently supports Mormon literary writing—primarily poetry, essays, fiction. We hope to offer a blueprint for possible futures that would result in an even stronger infrastructure.

MA: The question of “infrastructure” is very important. Literature has to have institutions behind it in order to exist. For Sophocles and Euripides to write great plays, there had to be a theatre complex in Athens and a religious festival—the Dionysia—that created a reason to write plays and brought an audience to see them. The great novels of the eighteenth century required several new physical industries—

printers, binders, booksellers—to create the physical books that people could read. But they also required an intellectual industry to circulate ideas through the culture that they could appropriate, extend on, and contribute to. The broad work of criticism, I think, is the creation of institutions that make literature possible by creating spaces in which it can appear and audiences who can appreciate it. “Institutions” can mean many different things, but includes journals, presses, libraries, courses, websites, blogs, anthologies, scholarly organizations, foundations, prizes—anything that helps to make literature a part of the culture. This is well beyond what most people understand by the word “criticism,” but if we spend enough time with literary history, we see how often the people we call “critics” are also the ones who created the institutions that connected writers to an audience. This certainly holds true with Mormon literature. Eugene England, perhaps our most important literary critic, played an important role in creating both *Dialogue* and the *Association for Mormon Letters*, two institutions that have had an incalculable effect on the production of Mormon literature. And he created the first courses in Mormon literature in the BYU English Department. Literature simply cannot exist without some kind of institutional support, broadly defined.

JB: In your 2015 article, “The Brief History and Perpetually Exciting Future of Mormon Literary Studies,” you compared Mormon literary studies to the disciplines of Mormon history and Mormon folklore:

Despite its prominent start and considerable activity, the critical study of Mormon literature has not kept pace with its cousins, Mormon history and Mormon folklore, in either the quality or the quantity of its scholarly production. Unlike these other two disciplines, Mormon literary studies has had a difficult time breaking free from the largely internal audience for Mormon intellectual discourse, as represented by journals such as *Dialogue* and *BYU Studies* and by specialist and academic presses along the Wasatch Front. (50)

This prompts me to ask what scholars in Mormon folklore and history did to achieve wider prominence. I emailed two scholars, Jill Rudy, folklorist in the English Department at BYU, and Brian Cannon, historian at BYU and former president of the Mormon Historical Association, about the history of the growth of their disciplines.

Rudy wrote that Mormon folklore studies (dubbed “Latter-day lore” by Eric Eliason and Tom Mould) has been influenced by “a fascinating combination of insider and outsider interest.” She names the 1940s study of Three Nephite stories by Hector Lee, Austin Fife, and Wayland Hand, which they published in “the main folklore journals in the US.” In the 1950s, Richard Dorson, a nationally recognized folklorist with an interest in history and regional studies, included chapters on Mormon folklore in two books about American folklore. Rudy says, “that placed Mormons and their lore as an important folk group to consider.” During this same time, Austin and Alta Fife published *Saints of Sage and Saddle*, a book that “kept Mormon folklore viable.” Then Bert Wilson met Richard Dorson at Indiana University, intending to study Finnish language and literature, but Dorson helped him see the value in publishing on Mormon folklore. Rudy ends her email with the following:

So, the big difference it seems in Mormon folklore, different from literary studies as Austin observes, is an ongoing relationship with scholarly peers and being part of academic conversations at the national level because of insiders and outsiders becoming fascinated with and researching LDS topics. Also, being able to maintain this work over generations of insiders and outsiders has been crucial and vital.

Her analysis describes a process of remarkable individual work grafting Mormon folklore into the trunk of American folklore. Cannon wrote that the success of Mormon history was due to strong historians whose reputation spread nationally (especially Leonard Arrington), the production of dissertations and later articles by those in the field (including non-Mormon scholars such as Larry Foster and Jan Shipps), private money that established chairs in Mormon history

or Mormon studies at several universities, and presses that published Mormon history (namely the University of Illinois Press and Oxford University Press). Cannon observes that “interest in Mormon history is driven partly by finances in an era when university presses have a hard time staying afloat; general LDS readers buy LDS history.” Of Arrington, he writes: “My sense is that Leonard Arrington’s role was pivotal. He was a superb networker with a keen mind, and he acquired a strong reputation in Western American history and American economic history that served the public image of Mormon history well when he became Church Historian. Arrington and his associates engaged emerging trends in historiography such as women’s history and social history and applied them to Mormonism, which attracted professional interest and favorable attention.” Again significant individual work was grafted into or adopted by the general field of American history.

MA: There are some larger structural issues at play here that have nothing to do with Mormon studies per se. Literary criticism about anything is harder to get published than either history or folklore. I have had three different academic presses in the last few years—all of whom regularly publish titles in Mormon history and Mormon studies generally—tell me that they would be very hesitant to take on a book of literary criticism. It just doesn’t sell very well, and academic libraries that used to buy copies of anything that came from university presses are now so strapped for cash that they have to be more selective. This is becoming a crisis in English departments across the country that require books for tenure and promotion. The traditional academic publishers are not accepting enough literary criticism titles to meet the demand of the tenure industry. The underlying reason for this, I think, is that literary criticism is secondary in a way that both history and folklore are not. People who like history tend to buy and read history books, and people who are interested in folklore buy and read books about folklore. But people who like literature buy and read literature. They can go directly to the source without the academic or critical filter. So the market for books *about* literature is inherently smaller than it is for other subjects.

It is also true that both history and folklore are things that everybody expects Mormons to have. We don't have to prove that Mormons have history and that Mormon history is important to American history. Any historian who works in the 19th century knows this. And most people see Mormons as exactly the sort of weird, insular subculture that should have an interesting and abundant folklore. Mormon scholars in those areas don't have to persuade their disciplinary peers that the thing they want to write about exists. Mormon literature, on the other hand, is not a given. Most people who study literature don't know that anything of the sort exists, and the few people who have written about Mormon literature over the past fifty years or so have not really gotten past the stage of trying to define it. These factors have made it difficult for the academic study of Mormon literature to get off the ground. There is no scholarly infrastructure in place, and the barriers to creating that infrastructure, while not insuperable, are formidable. But there are several strong potential avenues for Mormon literary critics to pursue. For example, I have seen a lot of scholarly interest in literary readings of *The Book of Mormon* and other Latter-day Saint sacred texts. The recent collection *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon* (2019), edited by Jared Hickman and Elizabeth Fenton, is really groundbreaking here. Literary history and biography are also promising areas for research and publication. The University of Illinois Press has recently launched a brief biography series called "Mormon Lives," and two of the first volumes in the series are about Vardis Fisher and Eugene England. So some paths are opening up for those who want to pursue them.

JB: Reviews generally state that *Americanist Approaches* is both readable and pertinent to the study of Nineteenth-century American literature. In a review for *Reading Religion*, a publication of the American Academy of Religion, Spencer Wells writes that the volume is a "welcome (and never sleep-inducing) addition to what is shaping up to be a minor renaissance of scholarship concerning the record that the self-proclaimed prophet Joseph Smith brought to light in 19th-century New York." He praises the editors for analyzing

the book as a “historical document that both sheds light upon and was influenced by the milieu of its era.” Thus they sidestep the thrust of most previous scholarship—to “validate or invalidate the book’s supposed ‘antiquity.’” This editorial stance allows *The Book of Mormon* to be “fruitfully placed into conversation with the trends of its age.” Benjamin Park adds that the volume was made possible by American literature scholars focusing on “marginalized or overlooked voices” rather than restricting themselves to the traditional canon.

Michael, your own review of this collection points out that it helps fill a void that has existed in general American literary studies concerning *The Book of Mormon*, which, you say, “remains a mystery to all but the most specialized, or the most Mormon, Americanist scholars” (150). I’m interested in your statement that the sacredness of the text for fifteen million people has made it difficult for both insider and outsider critics to decide whether to address the book as a nineteenth-century document or as revelation of an ancient text, but I’m also interested in the method the editors and writers used to structure both the volume itself and the critical arguments inside. You describe what I’ll call bridge-building methodology. First the volume contains articles by writers from both traditional Mormon literary studies and general American studies. You also write that “[e]very selection in the volume opens or creates a set of potential connections between *The Book of Mormon* and the vast scholarly enterprise called ‘American Studies’—and it delivers these connections to the rest of us in the Mormon Studies community with the not insignificant imprimatur of the Oxford University Press” (155). Both Rudy and Cannon said that making connections between local Mormon studies scholars and national scholars was one way pioneering folklorists and historians increased the breadth of their disciplines. I’ve pointed out in a couple of essays that Mormon critics have a history of lamenting the divide between insider and outsider views, so building bridges seems instrumental to the future of Mormon literary studies.

MA: I think that the two issues you mention—the difficulty of writing about texts that millions of people consider sacred, and the im-

portance of building bridges between Mormon and non-Mormon — are different sides of the same issue. Scholarship requires a level of detachment that is very difficult to maintain when the subject of that scholarship is also a belief system that structures people's lives. When scholars debate questions like “was there really a Trojan War?” or “Did Shakespeare really write the plays of Shakespeare?” they may have to face professional consequences for their opinions, but they won't have to face personal consequences. They won't be ostracized from their religious community or beset with complaints that they are being insensitive to someone else's religion. That sort of analysis can be contained to the relatively inconsequential world of academia, where the battles may be fierce, but the stakes are low. But if someone sets out to write about The Book of Mormon, then even the most basic questions of textual analysis can have profound consequences. Who wrote it? When was it written? Who was the original audience? Is it a translation or was it written originally in English? It is almost unthinkable that someone could do a close reading of a text without saying anything about these questions, yet this is what almost every scholarly treatment of The Book of Mormon has to do. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a definite position on these questions. Latter-day Saint scholars who answer them differently risk their standing in the Church, and non-Mormon scholars risk appearing to be insensitive to a religious minority—which can also have serious professional consequences. At a different time, these considerations applied to scientists who studied evolution. Charles Darwin himself waited twenty years to publish *On the Origin of Species* because he understood that, once it was published, it would be devastating to the religious beliefs of his community.

With Mormon literature generally, the issues are similar. Most of the writers worth studying are going to be on the margins of Mormon culture, either just barely on the inside or all the way out. You can't always stick to the official version of Mormon history, culture, and practice and still write things that are beautiful and true. Latter-day Saint scholars who want to build bridges with non-Mormon literature scholars are going to have to focus on the marginal figures: Vardis Fisher, Maurine Whipple, and Virginia Sorensen in the 20th

century; Terry Tempest Williams, Brian Evanson, and Neal LaBute in our own day. Good scholarship about these figures can build bridges to the world of secular literary study, but these bridges will often come at the cost of alienating the more traditional Latter-day Saints at the center of the culture. Anyone who wants Mormon literary scholarship to succeed has to figure out, not only how to build bridges to non-Mormon scholars, but also how to build bridges from the margins of Mormonism back to the center.

JB: It might be useful to look at what has already been published to see what bridges have been at least partially constructed. I did a quick search of the MLA International Bibliography, using the terms “Mormon” and “literature.” I found 118 sources, with 29 of those being about folklore and several being about history. Of the 88 remaining works most were tagged as American literature, with five being British and five being French. The distribution through time is one citation each in the 60s and 70s, 19 in the 80s, 17 in the 90s, 20 in the aughts, and 26 in the teens. I was surprised to discover that only 18 were in regional Mormon journals and presses. “Book of Mormon” was in the titles of 26 studies. The second most popular subject was in the literary construction of Mormon identity as an aspect of national or regional (Western US) identity (14 studies). Gender studies was mentioned in nine articles, theater and film six, Mormonism and Judaism (representing the Holocaust) five. An obscure French novel *Le Parasite Mormon* was referenced four times. Other subjects mentioned were environment, gender, indigeneity, utopian movements, Mormonism and Milton, and childrens’ literature. The Mormon writers mentioned were Phyllis Barber, Doug Thayer, Parley P. Pratt, Faun Brodie, Stephenie Meyer, Neil LaBute, Brian Evanson, Levi Peterson, Bernard DeVoto, and Vardis Fisher. What strategic work might we do we do to build on this small national tradition of Mormon literary studies?

MA: If we look at the way that other regional/subcultural literatures have developed—with writers and critics working in tandem to convince the rest of the world to pay attention to them—we can find a

lot of models for the kinds of things that Latter-day Saint scholars should be doing to develop a richer tradition of Mormon literature and literary criticism. There are a lot of these kinds of specialized literary movements. I worked a lot with Appalachian literature when I was teaching in West Virginia. And I got a good dose of Jewish literature at BYU, when I worked as an assistant to Gloria Cronin on the *Saul Bellow Journal*. We can look at African-American literature, Chicano literature, LGBTQ+ literature, Catholic literature, and so on. The idea of a Mormon literature is not at all strange in the world of cultural studies. Just about everybody out there has a “literature of our own.”

The first stage in creating a literary tradition is usually some kind of manifesto in which writers and critics boldly declare that X literature exists and deserves a place at the grown-ups’ table. Perhaps the best example of this sort of thing is the 1930 book, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, in which twelve prominent Southern writers demanded their place in the canons of American literature. These were serious people—Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren among them. When they demanded that Southern literature and culture be taken seriously, people paid attention. Mormons are really good at writing manifestos about Mormon literature. We have produced dozens of them in the last fifty years or so. I wrote one myself when I was in graduate school (“The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time”). But at some point, we have to consider that the possibility of Mormon literature has been sufficiently manifestoed. We need to move on.

The next stage is usually canon building. Often, this is a work of reclamation, of going back into the past and discovering works of literature and cultural production that provide a tradition that critics can talk about and writers can build on. As Cole Porter says, “if you want a future, you’ve got to get a past.” The canon-building stage of Mormon literature was in full swing in the 1960s and 1970s. That is when folks like Gene England, Richard Cracroft, Ed Geary, and Neal Lambert searched the archive for early Mormon literature and read through most of the important novels by and about Mormonism from the 1930s on. This is when Vardis Fisher was held up as a potentially important Mormon writer, and when the early

novels of Virginia Sorensen became important again. And it is when Gene England pulled Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* out of obscurity and darkness to be republished in a new edition and taught in Mormon literature seminars.

But that work came to a screeching halt when the first generation of critics retired, and it is just now starting back up. But there is much more work to do here. We really don't have a recognized body of past work that has been accepted widely enough to constitute a tradition. That is a tremendous liability for writers who want and need a tradition to build from.

The third stage in the process is the creation of institutions—journals, presses, endowed chairs, contests, grants, graduate seminars, and so on. These institutions are important for both critics and writers. We live in an era when a vanishingly small number of writers and poets can make a living with their craft, so institutional support is more critical than ever. Once again, the institution-building for Mormon literature happened in the 60s and 70s. That is when *Dialogue* and *Sunstone* were founded and when they published the bulk of the non-official Mormon fiction and poetry. It's when the Association for Mormon Letters was founded and when BYU started teaching Mormon literature courses and published the first anthology of Mormon literature. Those institutions have been vital, but they are now fifty years old and struggling to remain relevant in a world transformed by technology.

As for who is doing the heavy lifting now, I think that Scott Hales, James Goldberg, and Eric Jeppson have done tremendous work in pioneering new spaces for Mormon literature to exist: the Motley Vision Web Site, the Mormon Lit Blitz, and the Peculiar Pages imprint. These are the new institutions that will take Mormon literature into the future. Terryl Givens, too, has been important for the larger project of Mormon cultural studies, and I expect both his and Kristine Haglund's recently released biographies of Eugene England to become important sources for students of the first generation of Mormon literary critics.

There are some people who have been working in the background for a long time to create and prop up the institutions that

make Mormon literature possible. Christopher Bigelow, the founder of Zarahemla Books, has produced a steady stream of Mormon fiction, drama, poetry, and nonfiction that has made some outstanding work available. Andrew Hall has done a log of very important background work that most people don't see. Andrew is the fiction review editor for *Dialogue* and the manager of the AML Website, "Dawning of a Brighter Day." He works in the background every year to coordinate the AML Awards, which have become an important yardstick for success in Mormon literature and criticism. He was also one of the editors of the recent volume of Maurine Whipple's lost writings published by BCC Press.

Another person who does a lot of crucial work in the background that very few people see is Ardis Parshall, who is simply the best archival researcher I have ever met. About five years ago, Ardis, who knew that I was working on Vardis Fisher and other "Lost Generation" writers, contacted me out of the blue and sent me a huge cache of letters between John D. Widstoe and Paul Bailey, a contemporary of Fisher's who wrote *For This My Glory*, *The Gay Saint*, and *For Time and All Eternity*. We ended up publishing an article about these letters in the *Journal of Mormon History*. Since then, Ardis has sent me hundreds of pages of correspondence involving 20th-century Mormon writers and their dealings with Church administration. I now know that many, many other people working on projects having to do with Mormon literature have received similar bounties from Ardis. This kind of largely unseen background work by people like Andrew and Ardis has kept the project of Mormon literature alive by propping up the institutions at times when they would have otherwise collapsed.

JB: I might add that Gideon Burton pioneered the Mormon Literature and Creative Arts Database, now adopted by the Lee Library at BYU. It's interesting that all of the pioneering critics you mentioned (England, Geary, Cracroft, Lambert) worked at BYU, publishing through regional journals and presses, but none of the new tribe—you, Hales, Goldberg, Jeppson, Bigelow, Hall, Parshall—are connected to the main university sponsored by the Church. In a couple

of ways this is a good thing: no successful literary movement could be based on a single institution and it may be that the bridge-building between fringe writers and critics and those fully in the Church is not feasible at BYU. Still, it could help to describe possible reasons that the blossoming of criticism and critical institutions from the 60s and 70s came to a “screeching halt.”

During the 90s the English department at BYU experienced an intense version of the national culture wars that English departments across the country passed through. The English department history, written by Doug Thayer, states that many progressive faculty embraced “gender studies, new historicism, multi-cultural studies, and post-colonial studies,” and other “isms,” but some traditional “faculty were less enthusiastic about them, arguing that criticism had become more important than literature, the literature useful only as a means to discuss criticism.” Not long after I came to the department in 1989, faculty meetings became battlefields. Thayer writes,

A political polarity between liberals and conservatives had developed, focusing on feminism, abortion vs. pro-life, and cultural studies. The national press and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) had become involved in airing departmental problems. Even BYU’s accrediting associations began to raise questions about department issues. Through correspondence, General Authorities told [department chair] Lambert to solve the department’s glaring problems.

In the English department, two young feminist scholars, Gale Houston and Cecelia Koncher Farr, and one fiction writer, Brian Evanson, did not receive promotion to continuing status (BYU’s version of tenure). The same thing happened to Tim Slover of the Theater and Media Arts department. A few others also left, including Eugene England, who was encouraged to retire, and Darrell Spencer, a winner of the Flannery O’Connor award in short fiction, who felt his position was no longer secure. These faculty members were replaced by young scholars who might gain national reputations and wouldn’t focus on Mormon literary studies. Thayer writes

that Lambert “worked to emphasize scholarship by hiring only the most promising new faculty, particularly women at equal salaries with men.” C. Jay Fox, who became chair after Lambert, continued the drive to hire new faculty who had already published in significant journals as doctoral students and who had a trajectory toward building a career through nationally significant scholarship. Thayer writes, “[m]oving toward more scholarly specialization during the previous twenty years, most faculty had begun routinely presenting papers at scholarly conferences, publishing articles and creative works in journals, and authoring an increasing number of books published by scholarly presses.” Today faculty publish in major university presses and first-tier journals, but few publish critical articles in Mormon literary studies.

I recently reread Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s 2018 address to the Maxwell Institute, in which he considered an evaluation made by external reviewers a couple of years earlier. Elder Holland once served as president of BYU and is now an Apostle in the Church. In the address he said that the Institute, which published your 2015 essay on the future of Mormon literary studies, needed to appeal to two different audiences and write “solid, reputable scholarship intended as much for everyday, garden-variety Latter-day Saints who want their faith bolstered, at least as much as it might be intended for disinterested academic colleagues across the country whose stated purpose will never be to ‘prove or disprove the truth claims of the Church’” (14). He further suggested that the Institute revise their idea of “Mormon studies,” primarily because the national definition of a cultural studies program required bracketing of faith:

[O]ver time I have come to see merit in a Latter-day Saint studies effort at BYU if you are willing to make it significantly different from the present national pattern. If you are willing to be truly unique, I can certainly endorse the idea that BYU should have a hand on any academic tiller dealing with the Church, becoming a place to which other such programs and chairs and lectureships might look for leadership. . . . But that leadership role cannot be successfully played in a traditional Mormon stud-

ies framework. I say this because Mormon studies programs on other campuses are designed to be primarily academic ventures, not spiritual ones, which is perfectly understandable. Some of our member students enroll in those programs, and it may be a faith-promoting experience, but in great measure those endeavors are oriented toward an audience not of our faith and not for faith-building purposes. (15)

The Maxwell Institute is not all of BYU, but at the beginning of the essay, Elder Holland said similar principles might apply more broadly at BYU.

I find myself encouraged by his speech, because he articulates BYU's unique position very clearly—to produce work that doesn't exclude spirituality. I think of my own novels, stories, and essays and excluding spirituality would completely transform them. In "Like the Lilies" I describe how the continued esteem of my students helped me work through depression to where I could feel the effects of the atonement. In *Ezekiel's Third Wife*, Rachel prays and has a kind of vision of her husband as he tries to escape a posse led by her father. In an unpublished novel a desert woman feels the presence of the hundreds of people—Goshutes, Basque and Mexican herders, Mormon ranchers—who have lived in or migrated across the arid lands where she lives. I think the fictional genres of fantasy and magical realism, popular with Mormon writers, are an attempt to include spirituality in literature, which our secular American literary culture largely excludes from serious consideration. I include doubt and sexuality in my work which might mark my novels as being outside the kind of work Elder Holland advocates, but possibly not. I don't find any evidence in his address that he wants writers not to explore all of their experience, but he does suggest being wise about what writers include in any single work. Toward the end of the address, he says,

By speaking to two audiences, I'm not suggesting you be two-faced. This is not a call to hypocrisy but precisely the opposite. When you're writing for the household of faith, you should

never write anything that would give your doctoral adviser just cause to accuse you of dishonesty. Likewise, when you are writing for an academic journal, you should never write anything that would give your ministering companion just cause to accuse you of disloyalty. Your soul must be one—integrated, intact, and whole—even as your voice may speak in different languages to different audiences. (18)

I've written several essays that fit generally under the umbrella of criticism by attempting to address the dilemma for writers in the Church—how to write simultaneously for the two audiences described by Elder Holland. This is the division critics of Mormon literature have talked about since the beginning. In these essays I pushed the thesis that the problem lies in the reader—that most readers who are members of the Church want a certain kind of literature, one that never asks difficult questions. Richard Cracroft defended this kind of reader in his 1992 Address as president of the AML. I have been of the opinion that readers needed to be the kind described in Bruce Jorgensen's presidential address of the previous year. While that still seems true, I've more recently decided that there may not be that much writers can do directly to change the nature of readers. However, we could create literature and criticism, at least some of the time, that doesn't automatically exclude this kind of faithful reader. I've also claimed that the best writing by members of the Church is for national audiences, and this kind of writing does little to offend faithful insiders. Shakespeare wrote for several audiences and kept his career and his head, so maybe that's what writers who are employed by the Church need to do.

MA: I am genuinely surprised to hear that the BYU English department has so few people publishing about Mormon literature. This seems to me to be an outlier even for BYU. Off hand, I can think of maybe a dozen subfields of Mormon studies in which BYU faculty members are publishing regularly with the top presses and journals. History and folklore, of course, but also music, political science, sociology, anthropology, geography, theatre, family science, and religious

studies. I can understand why the English department might not want their faculty publishing in regional forums. But I can't imagine that any English department chair in the country would have a problem with a book published by Oxford or Johns Hopkins University Press, even if it were about something as disreputable as Mormon literature.

But it is not just BYU. Other than those doing literary approaches to *The Book of Mormon*, which I have already mentioned, there are not people working on Mormon literature in literature departments anywhere. For all of us, it is a side hustle. Andrew Hall probably comes closest, but he comes out of a history department. I am a full-time administrator, which gives me an institutional affiliation and access to a library, but anything I write about Mormon literature (or anything else) has to come on nights and weekends. It is not part of my job. This is a precarious position for a discipline to be in. Nobody has to produce Mormon literary scholarship to get tenure or keep a job. We can do it as long as nothing more pressing comes along, but more pressing things do come along. Even one or two positions devoted to Mormon literature at universities somewhere in the world would do wonders for the development of the discipline.

JB: Such chairs might be housed in one of the many Mormon Studies centers that have sprung up across the nation, most of which consider literary studies as part of their purview. They could be similar to the Comparative Mormon Studies program at Utah Valley University, which sponsors the Eugene England Lecture Series, or the Mormon Studies program at the University of Virginia, which houses the Richard Lyman Bushman Chair.

You mention the Southern writers who “demanded their place in the canons of American literature.” You also say that we have “manifestoed enough.” But most of those manifestoes by William Mulder, Eugene England, you, Gideon Burton, and others were for insiders, not for the nation. If we as Mormon critics would take our own stand, what defenses, what specific bridges, would we construct that would persuade scholars of American literary studies that work by Mormon writers, other than *The Book of Mormon*, has an important place in the general tradition?

MA: I want to go back to the Southern regionalists who wrote *I'll Take My Stand*. I think that they remain the group that most successfully did what you and I think that Mormon writers and critics ought to do. They had a lot of things going for them. In the first place, several of them had already established themselves—or soon would establish themselves—as major writers and/or critics. I am thinking especially of Robert Penn Warren, who won three Pulitzer Prizes, and John Crowe Ransom, who was one of the founders of the New Criticism in the 1920s. People cared what they had to say about anything, so when they talked about Southern literature, people paid attention.

The other thing that they had going for them was a widespread movement in the United States that celebrated the different regions of the country. This was right when the expansion phase ended and the “Lower 48” states were all in place. The country was finished creating itself, so it was time for it to define its parts. Along with the older regions like New England and the South, there were new regions like the Mountain West and the Pacific Northwest, who were just starting to define themselves as distinctive cultures. The idea of a Southern region mapped nicely onto this movement, and it became the most successful of the regional literatures.

This is also the time that people started talking about a “Mormon Culture Region” in Utah and parts of Idaho, Arizona, Nevada, and California. Vardis Fisher’s first six novels—all written between 1928 and 1935—were marketed as examples of the same movement in regional literature, and, between 1930 and 1950, about a hundred novels were published, mostly by Eastern presses, from writers in this region—figures like Maurine Whipple, Virginia Sorenson, Jonreed Lauritzen, Richard Scowcroft, Jean Woodman, and on and on. Most of these novels dealt somehow with Mormons or Mormonism. But as Mormonism spread out, and was no longer primarily associated with a culture region, it became harder to determine what constituted “Mormon literature.” This has made it harder to fit into the existing models.

But along with the dispersion of the Mormon people, there has been a dispersion of literature into multiple genres and categories.

Not long ago, I was in our local Barnes & Noble and noticed an entire genre category called “Teen Paranormal Romance”—a category of literature, by the way, that was made hugely popular by a Mormon author, Stephanie Meyer. Another Mormon author, Brandon Sanderson, has become equally prominent in fantasy, and Mormon writers like Anne Perry and Mette Ivie Harrison have achieved success in the mystery genre.

But it is hard to gather all of these genre threads in one argument about Mormonism, especially because, of the writer’s I’ve named, only Harrison actually writes about Mormon characters living Mormon lives. Even if it is possible (as I’ve heard that it is) to tease out Mormon themes and arguments in Stephanie Meyer’s work, critical articles on teenage vampire romance novels are not especially promising avenues for career advancement if one is an English professor. That said, a solid collection that looked at Mormon themes in hundreds of works of genre fiction by Latter-day Saint authors could probably find a publication outlet in the Mormon studies world.

And it would help if we had a breakthrough novel or two in something other than genre fiction. We don’t need “Miltons and Shakespeares of our own,” as Orson F. Whitney famously said (18). But we could use a few Saul Bellows and Flannery O’Connors of our own. Or an *All the King’s Men* or *Tobacco Road* of our own. I think that it would be very possible for the raw material of Mormonism to support literature of this caliber, but it would not be popular with Latter-day Saints. There was a reason that Thomas Wolfe could not go home again, and I suspect that this is why some of our most talented writers have not yet attempted the kind of book that would break through to the larger literary world.

JB: I think it’s true that most of the best Mormon writing is published in national venues, rather than Mormon or regional venues. While they might not be viewed by some as distinctly Mormon in their writing identity, similar to what you said of Mormon literary critics, this national recognition may be a step toward national recognition as a significant literary movement. I’m not sure we can

claim a breakthrough of the caliber of the novels you mention, but I think there has been significant national attention to writing by writers with Mormon heritage—especially in the areas of poetry, creative nonfiction, literary fiction, and some significant literary work in areas generally considered genre fiction—science fiction, fantasy, and young-adult fiction.

I surveyed my colleagues at BYU concerning Mormon writers currently publishing in their genres, then I looked at the publication records for the names that came up often, watching for nationally recognized academic or commercial presses, top-tier literary journals, and significant awards.

In poetry, I found three who clearly match the criteria. Lance Larsen has published five collections of poetry with solid academic presses; Kimberly Johnson, with four collections of her own poetry; and Timothy Liu, with eleven collections of poetry. These three have published in first-tier journals, including *New York Review of Books*, *London Times Literary Supplement*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Southern Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Georgia Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Paris Review*, *New Republic*, *American Poetry Review* (Larsen); *New Yorker*, *Slate*, *Yale Review*, *Kenyon Review* (Johnson); *Triquarterly*, *Tin House*, and *Columbia Poetry Review* (Liu). Larson has won a Pushcart Prize and a fellowship from the National Foundation for the Arts, and Johnson has won awards from the Mellon Foundation, Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Foundation for the Arts. She also has a poem in *Best American Poetry 2020*. Larsen's poetry explores some themes common in Mormon literature: often focusing on what it means to have a body, which fact he celebrates as he observes how we move from one muddled, startled, joyous state to the next. Johnson explores connections between aesthetics, form, and religion, mostly in the context of lyric poetry. In addition to her own work, she explores the devotional lyric in an anthology and a critical analysis: *Before the Door of God: An Anthology of the Devotional Lyric* (Yale University Press, 2013), which is co-authored with Jay Hopler, and *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). Poetry Foundation writes that "Liu's poetry explores identity, violence, sexuality, and the power of witness."

Concerning fiction, three Mormon writers have won the Flannery O'Connor award, Darrell Spencer, Mary Clyde, and Paul Rawlings. Spencer has published five books, including a novel and four collections of short fiction, and has won the Drew Heinz Literature Prize. He often uses Mormon material in his stories, often doing through the eyes of a protagonist who is startled or bewildered by the encounter. Brian Evenson has published a dozen books of fiction which straddle the boundary between literary and genre fiction, as reflected by the various awards he has received, including the Shirley Jackson Award, the Bram Stoker Award, two awards from the American Library Association, an Edgar Award, two International Horror Guild Awards, three O. Henry Prizes, and an NEA fellowship. A linguistic wizard, his stories are boiled down Gothic, like a skeleton stripped of flesh, animated by something beyond flesh. Brady Udall has published a short story collection and two novels, both with Norton. His novel, *The Lonely Polygamist*, was a New York Times bestseller. He has published short work in *The Paris Review* and *Esquire*. His fiction is set in the arid West and overtly includes Mormon materials, viewing the culture with an ironic eye. Phyllis Barber has published nine books—two novels, two short story collections, three memoirs, and two books for young readers. Her novels, while also set in the West (both she and Spencer are members of the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame) are historical, exploring questions of obedience and will in the settlements along the Mormon corridor. Her memoirs are feminist and focus on feminine spirituality. Her work has been included in the *Best American Essays* and *Best American Travel Writing*. A handful of other novelists bear mention in terms of nationally published literary fiction: Tim Wirkus, with two novels that play along the edge between the fantastic and the spiritual; Ryan McIlvain, whose two novels scan Mormonism from a critical perspective; and Todd Peterson, who just had a book published with Counterpoint.

Patrick Madden is the author of three collections of personal essays and co-editor of a volume of essays which reflect or play against specific essays written by Montaigne—*After Montaigne: Contemporary Essayists Cover the Essays*. He has published in *Portland Magazine* (which Brian Doyle built into a home for spiritual autobiography),

Fourth Genre, *The Normal School*, *The Iowa Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2007*. He has received a Howard Foundation Fellowship and two Fulbright Fellowships, and is co-editor of the 21st Century Essays series at The Ohio State University Press, co-editor of the literary journal *Fourth Genre*, and vice president of the NonfictionNOW Conference. His writing is a marriage of Montaigne in his endless curiosity and ability to make the mundane significant through reflection, Hazlitt and Chesterton in his capriciousness and humor, and Francis Bacon in his logical approach to matters of science and human culture. Up and coming are Joey Franklin—two collections, *Best American Essays* notable essays, publications in *Poets and Writers*, *Gettysburg Review*, *The Norton Reader*, co-editor with Madden of *Fourth Genre*—and Lina Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas—two collections of essays, co-editor of the forthcoming anthology *The Great American Essay*, and publications in *The Bellingham Review*, *The Chicago Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Brevity*, *Poets & Writers* and the *Sunday Rumpus*. In addition, Tara Westover's memoir was on several national bestseller lists, and Joanna Brooks' work has had broad distribution, including a memoir, *Book of Mormon Girl*; a monograph, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence*; and a co-edited anthology—*Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*—the latter two both published by Oxford University Press. The final writer I'll mention in this short list, Walter Kirn, a member of the Church for a short time, has published a Best American Essay on his experience among the Mormons, and a collection of linked autobiographical short fiction, that gives his account of his teenage years after his family's conversion to the faith.

The best known writing by members of the Church is by science fiction and fantasy writers, many of whom write upmarket fiction (fiction which is a crossover for literary fiction), including Orson Scott Card and David Farland/Wolverton. Many young adult writers also use literary techniques in their fiction including fantasy writers Shannon Hale (Newbery Honor award), Rosalyn Eaves, and others who write contemporary young adult fiction—Martine Leavitt (Canadian Governor's Prize), Carol Lynch Williams (40 books and

numerous awards), Ann Dee Ellis, A.E. Cannon, and Matt Kirby. They generally follow the model created by Jane Austen, showing young women who must learn to use their heads; they often show their protagonists working their way through difficult circumstances that Austen might have imagined or observed.

However, as I said above, most of these writers write what may be classified as American literature, but more rarely as Mormon literature. They may be generally known to be members of the Church, but with some exceptions, they aren't known for Mormon materials in their work.

Several of them are no longer in the Church and have made conscious efforts to distance themselves from their religious roots. Still, all these writers could be the subjects of Mormon literary studies. For literary writers who overtly use Mormon materials we need to consider the Signature, By Common Consent, and Zarahemla publishers. Just counting those with several books we have Jack Harrell, Robert Hogdson Van Wagoner, Paul M. Edwards, Doug Thayer, Levi Peterson, Margaret Young, Steven Peck, Susan Elizabeth Howe, Alex Caldiero, Mette Ivie Harrison (who has four Mormon novels published with BCC Press as well as many with national publishers). I count myself among this group. Also notable are poets Carol Lynn Pearson, who has published with Cedar Fort Press, and Lisa Bickmore, who has significant national publications.

I believe I just have one more question, which came up earlier: What are Mormon narratives or themes that cut across publishing boundaries (Mormon market, national market, and literary press) that might be studied by American literature scholars? I'll take a stab at my own question first. Perhaps the most common theme is literature that engages with the concepts of frontier and wilderness. Vardis Fisher's *Children of God* charts the growth and westward pioneering movement of the Saints. Fisher also wrote about other frontier subjects—Lewis and Clark, the Hudson Bay Company, and the Donner Party expedition. Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* explores the tensions in the settlement of St. George, Utah, including their wrestle with both polygamy and the harsh environment. More modern writers have written either about pioneers or the wild

environment—including fiction writers such as Phyllis Barber (*The Desert Between Us*) and Dean Hughes (*Come to Zion* series, *Muddy*, and *River*), and creative nonfiction writers such as Terry Tempest Williams (*Refuge*, *Red*, *Erosion*, and many others) and George Handley (*Home Waters* and *The Hope of Nature*).

Another powerful subject through which Mormon writers connect to American literary themes is tension over cultural diversity. While Virginia Sorensen's books explore multiple subjects, her adult and children's fiction mainly focus on relationships between people of different cultural backgrounds; she explores this in *Where Nothing Is Long Ago*, *Kingdom Come*, *The Neighbors*, and *Plain Girl*. Books such as *The Morning and the Evening* and others consider tensions between mainstream and fringe members of the Church. Margaret Young, in her *Standing on the Promises* series, writes about race and religion. Gender relations, especially the status of women, is also a common Mormon literary theme with broader connections to American literature; these writers would include essayists, memoirists, and poets such as Lula Green Richards, Emmeline B. Wells, Lucinda Lee Dalton, Eliza R. Snow, Joanna Brooks, and Terry Tempest Williams. I'll mention one more category, a broad one: works that might be classified as gothic, magical realism, and fantasy, which for many writers who have ties to the Church is a means for exploring the limits of perception, the fuzzy lines between rationality, sensation, and spirituality. This diverse grouping might include such writers as Brian Evanson, Tim Wiskus, Steven Peck, Orson Scott Card, Brandon Sanderson, David Wolverton, and many, many others. Obviously, some essential works speak about spirituality in realistic as opposed to metaphorical terms.

MA: It's interesting that almost everyone I know has at least one favorite writer who is some kind of Mormon, whether they know it or not. For mystery fans, it is usually Anne Perry. But for the younger people, it is either Brandon Sanderson or Stephanie Meyer. And for the more academically inclined, it is Terry Tempest Williams, Brian Evanson, or Neil LaBute. And, until recently, it was often Orson Scott Card. All of these writers have in fact incorporated some elements of

their Mormon background into their writings in both obvious and subtle ways. But at a certain point, just identifying Mormons who write stuff isn't going to get us all the way to the Promised Land. This very loose collection of different kinds of writers who happen to be Mormon is going to have to coalesce into a body of texts that have dealt tangibly with aspects of Mormon cultural or religious themes. There is a world of difference between, say, Flannery O'Connor and Tony Hillerman. Though both identified as Catholic, O'Connor wrote about essentially Catholic things—not just the fact of being Catholic or going to Church, but about original sin, grace, conversion, and redemption. The heavy stuff.

Where do we see this in Mormon literature? Orson Scott Card has done a lot with some of the most identifiable Mormon doctrines: temple work in *Speaker for the Dead*, for example, or modern revelation in the Alvin Maker saga. I think that there is much more to do there. And some of his work (I'm thinking of some of the early stuff like *Songmaster*) does a nice job of exploring the dual nature of community, which can be both nurturing and suffocating, often at the same time. My son tells me that Brandon Sanderson (with whom I am only glancingly familiar) often explores the ideas of apostasy and restoration in his novels.

In the more literary narratives, Terry Tempest Williams did a marvelous job in *Refuge* of exploring the religious nature of wilderness and of multi-generational families, both of which are important Mormon concepts. And she also looks a lot at ideas of agency and consequences in *Leap* and some of her later work. And I think that the end of *The Giant Joshua* is the best thing we have on the idea of Zion. And a lot of very good recent poetry takes up the Mormon idea of Heavenly Mother/Divine Feminine—Rachel Hunt Steenblich and Kathryn Knight Sontag are two that come to mind right away.

At the end of the day, great literature is going to have something to do with compelling ideas, and Mormonism has as many of these as any other belief system. We can point to some isolated works that do this very well, but we don't really have a coherent literary tradition. We can draw a pretty straight line from Augustine to Dante to G.K. Chesterton to Flannery O'Connor that encompasses a thousand

years of Catholic writers grappling with the same issues. In eight hundred years, I hope that the same will be said of Mormon literature.

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