

HUMAN CONFLICT AND THE MORMON WRITER

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Six days a week, I begin my day with an hour of writing, usually fiction writing, and I find the experience cathartic. Writing allows me to purge my emotions, express my frustrations and joys. Through writing I can give order to the general chaos of my experience. Whatever I'm happy or bothered about, whatever issues I'm brooding over—writing becomes an avenue toward understanding. It's great fun to see a vague notion develop into a story that works, that seems to have a life of its own. But writing also puts me, as a Mormon, in a peculiar dilemma. As a believing, participating Mormon, I know the gospel is literally the "good news." I believe in the words of Jesus when he taught, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9). I recognize the focus the Brethren have placed on God's "plan of happiness" (Alma 42:16). As a fiction writer, however, I know that conflict is essential to the nature of storytelling. A story with no antagonist is no story at all. A canon of stories with assured and familiar happy endings soon loses a reader's interest.

The dilemma deepens when we consider the sources of conflict for the Mormon writer. When I ask myself, "What are my current experiences regarding human conflict?" The answers are all close to home. I teach at a church-owned school, where my students, colleagues, and friends are all Mormon. Most of the people in my town are Mormon. They're good people, as people go. They aren't perfect, but neither am I. Since writers, and especially fiction writers, draw from their own experiences, and my current experiences are thoroughly Mormon, I regularly face conflicts, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies in myself and those around me. The conflicts I find in my little microcosm of Mormonism seriously frustrate me—every day, in fact. And these are the tensions that move me to seek catharsis through writing. But when there's conflict among my brothers and sisters in the Church, do I want to bring it to light, pour salt on the wounds, expose the Church and its members to criticism? Not really. In fact, while my fellow Mormons sometimes frustrate me, I also find in them remarkable examples of goodness, humility, reason, and humor. Shouldn't I, then, practice mercy and forgiveness rather than highlight conflict among the Saints?

If we look deeper, another layer of concern emerges. Faithful Latter-day Saints want to be good representatives of the Church. This isn't just a matter of shallow public relations. Latter-day Saints regularly affirm through the sacrament that they are "willing to take upon them the name of [Christ]" (Doctrine and Covenants 20:77), becoming representatives of the Savior and his church in all they do. Quite a responsibility! In my

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own case, as a convert and one of few active members in my family, I want to put a good face on the Church. Yes, I see mistakes in my fellow Mormons; I see faults in myself. I know of those who've been hurt and even abused by church members—even priesthood leaders—but I don't want to spitefully shout these things from the housetops. I don't want to be a Book of Mormon Korihor, to whom the deceiving angel said, "Go and reclaim this people, for they have all gone astray" (Alma 30:53). Thus I'm torn between an honest desire to address wrongs and a communal desire for the good of the Church, a church in which I find sanctuary every day. What is a writer to do?

There's a very good reason why much of the fiction written by faithful Latter-day Saints is essentially positive in its outlook. Theologically, Philip Barlow points out, "Mormonism is an optimistic and proselyting faith, which desires—appropriately—to convey its optimism to others."¹ Many have argued "that Christian tragedy is impossible, because in Christian belief *ultimate* justice is guaranteed by a benevolent God; and some have further argued that *Mormon* tragedy is unthinkable."² After all, in Mormon theology, even murderers will be resurrected and live forever in a kingdom of glory, entitled to the ministry of the Holy Ghost (Doctrine and Covenants 76:86). Perhaps Mormons could look at any conflict and glibly say, "God is merciful. Everything will work out fine." It is a positive worldview all right, but such a position can render any conflict impotent. And impotent conflicts make impotent stories. Bad news for Mormon writers.

Mormon optimism is further grounded in—and actually springs from, according to Terryl Givens³—an American context. Russian writer Valentin Tomberg, in a 1931 essay, commented on the American penchant for all things happy. Tomberg said, "Suffering is for the American something which has no right to exist. It should be eliminated from life." Tomberg calls the "willful pursuit of absolute 'positivity'" the "key to the secrets of America," adding that, for the American, "One should be ashamed of pain as one is ashamed of the necessary lower life processes of the body."⁴ What is true for Americans is true for American Mormons. We Mormons embrace technological advances, exude positivity, and celebrate the progressive vision of our forebears. We're a forward-looking people. (Perhaps we have to be, since our history is so relatively short.) In true American style, we celebrate our strengths, rarely reflecting on our mistakes. Art is often born of sorrow resulting from sin or misconduct.

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As a Mormon writer, then, I'm guilty on all charges. Culturally, I'm an American who wants a cessation of suffering—a sucker for a happy

ending. Theologically, I'm a Mormon optimist who believes in the ultimate justice of the universe. My daily life is thoroughly Mormon, and so are most of my friends. I naturally want to protect them and the church from undue criticism. How can such a person write fiction about Mormons, acknowledge their conflicts, weave their problems—even their sins—into an engrossing storyline, bringing characters to a dramatic point of no return? Isn't there a terrible risk that the writer might simply exploit weaknesses of the Saints for personal gain? The short answer is, Yes. The risk is real. All the more reason to tread carefully, even charitably.

Perhaps the most significant issue here is the ultimate optimism of Latter-day Saint theology. If Mormons believe the universe under God's direction will all work out fine, that Christ will win and Satan will lose, does that belief undercut the existence of genuine conflict? No, not if we remember that God's success is only part of the story. The success of God's plan of happiness doesn't guarantee the complete success of each individual agent involved. That was Satan's plan. In a profound paper entitled, "Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest," Eugene England asserts that "Mormon theology, revealed through Joseph Smith, claims that the universe is essentially, as well as existentially, paradoxical—and therefore is irreducibly tragic."⁵ The paradox England refers to is the gospel's simultaneous allegiance to individual agency *and* to the covenants and commitments made among individual agents. An essential ontological element of the Mormon cosmos can be summed up in the biblical phrase, "There was war in heaven" (Revelation 12:7). In that war, one army won, but many individuals were lost. Modern-day prophets proclaim that the same war continues on this earth⁶ and "rages today ever more fiercely."⁷ Thus, Mormonism posits an existence fraught with potential conflict for each individual, a conflict rooted in our eternal and undeniable moral agency. Perhaps this is why England concluded that, "Mormon tragedy will not be tragic...because of the *failure* of religion, but rather because of the success of religion."⁸ Ironically, the triumph of agency ensures that some will choose their own tragic self-destruction.

All of us, in fact, have used our agency in ways that severed us from God's favor, if only for a short time. Even Joseph Smith was told that he had "lost [his] privileges for a season" in consequence of the lost 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Lehi (Doctrine and Covenants 3:14). The Lord told Joseph that if he did not repent, he would "be delivered up and become as other men, and have no more gift" (Doctrine and Covenants 3:11). What a tragedy this would have been—our world without Joseph Smith as we know him. According to scripture, this was possible, through the triumph of agency.

And according to Benjamin Cummings, agency is possibly due to the very nature of the eternal, individual self. Writing in 1968, Cummings

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defined the self in Mormon existential terms: “Each being is a distinct identity, an eternally existing individual. He does not trace his origin back to some undifferentiated ‘mass’ of being, nor is he destined for ultimate absorption into any sort of undifferentiated state.”⁹ Cummings asserted that “the eternal Self cannot escape from existence nor can it escape from the awareness of its existence.”¹⁰ Most pertinent to our discussion here is what Cummings called “an inevitable sense of solitude that holds each person in its grip.” Cummings said this solitude “is inevitably recurrent because it is born of the very fact of individuality, which by definition means separateness, singleness, aloneness, being an eternally identical one or unit. The sense of this separateness has been called ‘cosmic loneliness.’”¹¹

Notwithstanding our eternal individuality, we come together in communities to seek what Cummings calls “affiliation.” Through the covenants of the church we seek eternal union in marriage and families, and the building of Zion. Cummings says, “One of the conditions of [the individual’s] progress is affiliation with others whose goal is the same as his own. . . . Through all eternity he remains an individual, but through eternity he will remain a social individual.”¹² As Eugene England says, “That condition of the universe, not only allows the individual to develop his fullest powers but in the process confronts him eternally with what seems a central tragic paradox in mortal experience: group values versus individual values.”¹³

We are, as Cummings asserts and England echoes, essentially and existentially alone in the universe. And from our aloneness arises our desire for communion. Perhaps this same tension drives the writer who spends hours and hours in the solitary practice of writing, working toward the goal of greater communion with others. When two individuals with moral agency come together, we have the possibility for synergistic growth as well as conflict—misunderstanding, unrighteous dominion, tragedy, violence. In a Latter-day Saint paradigm, community can take a form on a continuum anywhere between Babylon and Zion. Zion is that society in which individuality and agency are never abused, a community in which each individual retains the utmost agency to choose freely while never choosing to harm or dominate another. I believe the *oneness* spoken of in a Zion society is not *sameness*, as some imagine, as has been established in fledgling utopias (intended Zions) that turn dystopic, leading into physical and spiritual captivity rather than freedom. No, *sameness* is not the realm of Zion, but of Babylon.

In Babylon the initial quest appears to be toward freedom, diversity, transcendence, but the outcome is always the opposite. Intoxication, gambling, sexual excess, pornography, and finally addiction and bankruptcy—these states are not creative; they’re mind-numbing courses

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toward sameness. As Margaret Atwood's poem "Siren Song" puts it, "Alas / it is a boring song / but it works every time."¹⁴ This is why Flannery O'Connor says that in the context of fiction writing, "Sin is interesting but evil is not. Sin is the result of an individual's free choice, but evil is something else."¹⁵ In other words, sin involves conflict, or tension within a character; evil is a battle already lost. So the eternal individual, in need of communion, seeks a community that is truly and eternally pleasing for all individuals involved. It is a pragmatic ethic, this choice between Zion and Babylon. It should be easy to choose Zion. But it isn't, because making Zion isn't easy.

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In Mormon culture we find an ironic and peculiar kind of expurgated Babylonian sameness in our writing, a will toward conformity and conventionality. Why? Because sameness and repetition are easier than genuine creativity. This occurs when we fail to test our readers' comfortable and familiar beliefs, resorting instead to "secure absolutes, even at the cost of worshiping idols [that meet] complacent needs, grant special privileges, and maintain untroubled relationships."¹⁶ This isn't just a Mormon problem. Any writer can be tempted by stereotypes, cardboard conflicts, cheap resolutions, and propaganda—the promotion of specific doctrines or causes. A feminist writing about men, a gay writer writing about homophobia, a Marxist writing about American materialism, a former Mormon writing about hypocrisy in the Church, a faithful Latter-day Saint writing about the nobility of the priesthood—they all run the risk of writing in order to prove the validity of their cause, rather than writing to explore the conflicts that move real people with real, individual struggles. As John Gardner cautions, "The artist who begins with a doctrine to promulgate, instead of a rabble multitude of ideas and emotions, is beaten before he starts."¹⁷ Like all writers, Mormon writers must remember that real human beings are more complex, self-contradictory, and ultimately more interesting, loveable, and even admirable than the political or religious systems that seek to contain them. Good literature may use religious, social, and political categories as a setting, or it may use them to introduce conflict, but good literature ultimately transcends those systems.

One might ask, then: If Zion is a place of perfect harmony, and if meaningful literature relies on conflict, will there be any literature in Zion? In heaven, will we read great stories only to remember the way things used to be...back when we had problems? If we understand our own religion, I think we have to answer, No! In a Mormon cosmology, the potential for evil is as eternal as the potential for good. Remember, "There was war in heaven" (Revelation 12:7). And what about all those eternal offspring yet unborn, some of whom will go astray? Mormon writers—and readers—need to be capable of grasping the complexity

of their own teachings. But we writers are not there yet. Speaking of contemporary Mormon culture, Terryl L. Givens has said, “Mormonism’s obsession with certainty, with plenitude and prophets and gospel fullness, can be intensely sterile ground for the artistic endeavor.” Despite the depth and complexity of our theology, Givens says Mormons “do not wrestle much with metaphysical anguish. In spite of the possibilities suggested by both the unfathomable darkness of Gethsemane and the weeping God of Enoch, Mormonism has no patience with a tragic vision.”¹⁸ If so, I argue, we have little patience with our own theology.

William Faulkner, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, said that great fiction is about “the human heart in conflict with itself.”¹⁹ But what if I have not admitted conflict into my heart? What if I say that “all is well in Zion” or if I am “lulled away into carnal security” (2 Nephi 28:1)? Will I be able to write fiction that evolves from meaningful conflict? Why would I want to? But wait. If I acknowledge the conflict in my heart—and worse, if I write about it—won’t some of my fellow Mormons think me sinful, even faithless? Yes, especially if their faith is of the “all is well in Zion” brand. But if I understand my own religion, I will remember that I belong to a church that began with a question—a deeply significant question—asked in faith. Therefore, I propose three paradoxes that might be embraced in the heart of the Mormon writer, paradoxes that grow naturally from Mormon theology and align with principles writers have long known.

Mormonism’s understanding of the nature of the war in heaven should imbue every Mormon writer with a profound respect for agency as it plays out in the characters written of, even when those characters go wrong.

First is the paradox I’ve already discussed, the conflict of individual versus group values—the ever-present desire in the individual to honor his or her singularity while at the same time seeking what Cummings calls “affiliation.”²⁰ At the center of all stories of human conflict is an individual agent in the context of other agents. Mormonism’s understanding of the nature of the war in heaven should imbue every Mormon writer with a profound respect for agency as it plays out in the characters written of, even when those characters go wrong. Eugene England said it best in his essay, “Danger on the Right! Danger on the Left! The Ethics of Recent Mormon Fiction.” According to England, writers have to love their characters enough to let them fail as well as succeed: “When this happens, characters are created who are allowed—even encouraged—by their authors to take on a kind of independent existence.” The result is characters who:

make surprising, unprogrammed, ethical moves and discoveries. In turn, we as readers are open to consider and adopt new ethical perspectives for ourselves, because we too feel our agency is being respected, that we are not being manipulated. The characters thus take on such an appearance of reality that we love them and learn from them—like we do our friends, or even people we know well whom we think are wrong.²¹

Mormon writers who embrace the eternal paradox of the individual *and* the group in their theology will find genuine conflict a meaningful, ever-present element in their writing. Recognizing this paradox will be a remarkable prophylactic against agenda-driven stories, cardboard conflicts, and predictable plots and characters.

Second, as Mormon writers, I believe we need to be more honest about the sins and shortcomings among us. I am not proposing that we give up our ideals or teachings. It is essential to remember the admonition of the Savior to “Be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48). We deeply need the frequent teachings of the Brethren as we regularly teach each other to do what is right. But we could do more to humbly admit how far we have to go. I’ve long told my BYU–Idaho students that our neighbors watch us every day and they already know we’re not perfect. We’re not fooling anyone but ourselves. Every day Mormons lie, hurt people, break the law, commit infidelities. We shouldn’t, and we know we shouldn’t, but we do. Yet we are called a “peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9) because we come together in the Church and try to improve. When we do wrong, we try to repent instead of justifying ourselves, rationalizing, and making excuses. Perhaps the significant difference between sinners and saints is that saints realize their need for a Savior and sinners don’t. Honest portrayals of our shortcomings won’t scandalize our neighbors—since they already know. In fact, the results may be just the opposite. When we’re honest about ourselves, we gain our neighbors’ trust. We might even inspire them with our faith as we turn to God, in our weakness, seeking forgiveness and grace.

Acknowledging our shortcomings is only half the picture, though. A more meaningful understanding of the faults among us—and within us—must be balanced with a commensurate comprehension of our goodness. This brings us to a third paradox for the writer: the possibility that virtue may be more difficult to portray than vice. The word “villain,” from the Middle Latin *villanus*, meaning “farmhand,” originally meant a peasant, someone not chivalrous, someone of low status, education, and morals. A villain is a base character, an antagonist “capable of cruel and criminal actions,”²² while a hero is a “defender, protector.” Traditionally, the relationship of hero and villain is one of greater to lesser. The hero seeks the good of others and himself, by means reasonable and apprehensible to the audience. But the villain is selfish, corrupt, a destroyer who’s inexplicably driven, often to the point of self-destruction.

Traditional definitions may be less applicable in contemporary stories, since today’s antagonist isn’t necessarily a “bad guy,” but might be “merely an opponent and may be in the right.”²³ Notwithstanding, the contemporary protagonist-antagonist relationship posits the antagonist as secondary. In Greek drama, the protagonist is the first actor to engage

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the chorus in dialogue. The antagonist is one who “struggles against.” Earlier, I argued for Zion as a place of creativity, and Babylon as a will toward sameness. Similarly, I argue that goodness in fictional characters is deep, rich, and complex; while evil is shallow, paltry, and simple. Is this hierarchy reflected in Mormon fiction? In nature, weeds grow without cultivation, while beautiful flowers require skilled and careful gardeners. Are the good characters in Mormon fiction rich, deep, and complex? Or do Mormon writers rely on superficial markers to illustrate goodness—conventional habits, clean-shaven faces, modest dresses, the absence of Word of Wisdom violations? If goodness is complex and rich, if evil is superficial and deficient, it should be easy to present evil with a few shallow tags. But a good man is harder to find—or should be. When we use superficial tags to portray goodness, we insult our readers and we insult goodness itself.

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Rather than relying on stereotypes of goodness, we must do justice to the real adventure we’re engaged in, an adventure William James described in these words:

If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem.²⁴

The individual and the group, the righteous acknowledgment of sin, and the complexity of good characters—the tensions inherent in these paradoxes—have all the power necessary to generate meaningful cathartic experiences for writers and readers. Add to those paradoxes two more: Mormon optimism, which strikes a healthy balance against the potential tragedy of our existence, and the eternal singleness of the individual balanced against his or her desire for affiliation. The possibility of conflict abounds, good news for the Mormon writer. Yet the scripture says, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9). In order to make peace, one must begin with war—or the potential for war. To the fiction writer we might say, “Blessed are the resolution makers,” remembering that chaos is the elemental material out of which order is resolved. In a Mormon paradigm, conflict will always be potential among us, and so will resolution. If we honestly reveal our human conflicts, our neighbors—who know our faults already—will see our capacity for cooperating with Christ’s atonement, his healing of the human family. Thus we may represent him indeed.

It may be convenient for a writer to put people into facile categories—LDS, inactive, conservative, smoker, clean-shaven, multiple piercings, modest, tattooed—but easy categories make bad fiction. (They may

make bad religion, too.) As Mormon writers, we should be suspicious of our own stereotypes, our own snap judgments. Good writers seek to move their fiction beyond stereotypes, political and social agendas, and institutional constraints. Mormon theology is remarkably amenable to this complex view of art. Traditional Christianity posits a heaven that is finished, absolute, without conflict. But the gospel as restored through Joseph Smith is a gospel of eternal progression, one in which none of us is ever finished growing or reaching, one in which agency and the conflict between good and evil exist forever. Thus we might imagine a Zion/Babylon dichotomy in these terms:

Zion → Diversity → Tension/Conflict → Growth/Progress

Babylon → Sameness → Stasis/Stagnation → Damnation

With this perspective, Mormon writers have the capacity to imagine an art that is never finished. What an exciting universe for the artist! In this context, life and art become what William James calls “a real adventure.” James said:

Suppose that the world’s author put the case to you before creation, saying: “I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own ‘level best.’ I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?”²⁵

The task is the same for the Mormon writer, to create worlds “not certain to be saved,” fictional worlds that honor characters’ individual agency, worlds in which good and evil are equally potential. Will good always prevail? One might ask, is good really sufficient? Is evil, by its very nature, deficient? In order to go forward in such a context, the writer must have faith. As James says, “It is a real adventure.” ∞

NOTES

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- 2 Eugene England, “Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest” in *Dialogues with Myself* (Midvale UT: Signature, 1984), 2.
- 3 Terry L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.
- 4 Valentin Tomberg, “The East European Conception of Suffering,” *Gnosis* 31 (1994): 44.
- 5 England, Eugene, “Danger on the Right! Danger on the Left! The Ethics of Recent

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- Mormon Fiction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32.3 (1999), 16.
- 6 Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Times in Which We Live," *Liabona* (January 2002), 85.
- 7 James E. Faust, "The Enemy Within" *Liabona* (January 2001), 54.
- 8 England, "Danger," 16.
- 9 Benjamin F. Cummings, *The Eternal Individual Self* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1968), 61.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 70.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 121.
- 13 England, "Joseph," 6.
- 14 Margaret Atwood, "Siren Song." *Poetry Archive*. 20 January 2009, <<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=98>, 25-7.>
- 15 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Noonday Press-Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988), 199.
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- 17 John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 14.
- 18 Givens, 6.
- 19 William Faulkner, "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," 21 November 2002. <<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-acceptance.html>>.
- 20 Cummings, 121.
- 21 England, "Danger," 18.
- 22 M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace 1999), 225.
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- 24 William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 240.
- 25 William James, *Pragmatism. William James: Writings 1902-1910*, (New York: Library of America, 1987), 614.