

Only a year ago Franklin Fisher stood at this very podium and reminded us: "Fewer people than we might think find it terribly important to take a stand on whether Joseph Smith really saw God or was visited by an angel. But a Mormon novel is by definition about people who do find it important" ("Three Essays: A Commentary," 11 [Summer 1978]: 55).

Mormon missionaries are such people. And their work is to persuade other people that such things are

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important. But what happens when a missionary doubts his own message? The missionary is a sinner partially redeemed, dealing in the cosmic drama of salvation, redemption, and—yes—damnation. Yet we seldom refer to this issue with such polysyllabic splendor. Instead, the missionary problem is more usually summed by a code question, "How's your testimony, Elder?" meaning, "Do you *know* you can deliver what you promise?"

All other questions pale by comparison with this one focusing on the missionary's own spiritual health, yet this question may well be the most important frequently asked question in missionary fiction. Only within the last three or four years have a handful of Mormon

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

The Identity Crisis in L.D.S. Missionary Fiction

By Lavina Fielding Anderson



writers—all but one of them beginning their craft—approached as an artistic problem the agonizing spiritual problem of a crisis of faith, a crisis of religious identity. These creative works are Douglas Thayer's "Elder Thatcher," from *Under the Cottonwoods and Other Mormon Stories*, (Provo: Frankson Books, 1977), Béla Petsco's "Numbers" and "God Still Demands a Sacrifice" from his 1977 BYU master's thesis, "Nothing Very Important and Other Stories," Christy Ackerson's novel, "Tales from a Tracting Book," also a 1977 BYU master's thesis, and Robert Elliot's three-act play, *Fires of the Mind*, performed at BYU and published in *Sunstone* (winter, 1975). (Future publication is planned by both Petsco and Ackerson.) I except Gladys Farmer's delightful collection *Elders and Sisters* since it seems to me to deal more with the sociology than the psycho-spirituality of missionary work.

In all four, the main characters experience an identity crisis brought on by the contrast between the futility and boredom of their missionary routine and the transcendent spiritual content it should enclose. In other words, all of the main characters *do* missionary work, but all come to the point where they ask, "Can I be a missionary?"

It's valid, at this point, to ask why this question, so frequently asked in real life, is so seldom asked in fiction. I think there are three reasons.

1. Where missionary work in general is concerned, nonfiction has traditionally communicated with more power. For instance, the *Ensign* has published forty-five short stories since 1971, only two of which deal with missionaries. But during the same time, it has published at least twenty-five first person missionary accounts and sixty-five articles on how-and-why missionary work should be done. Since 1971, the *New Era* has published ten missionary stories, but forty-six first person accounts, and fifty-two how-and-why articles. Missionary work is the Church's serious business and, after all, isn't there something a little—well, sacrilegious—about *making up* spiritual experiences?

2. Traditionally, missionary stories—like missionary homecomings—have trained prospective missionaries for their future roles as tractors, teachers, and testifiers. Three fine examples are Bruce D. Porter's article, originally submitted as fiction, "Dinner Invitation" (*Ensign*, June 1977, pp. 30-33)—two proud and squabbling elders are humbled by their contact with a shockingly fat but radiantly spiritual German sister; Mark J. Stoddard's short story, "Jensen and Ernstein," (*New Era*, February 1975, pp. 11-13)—featuring a trunky senior and a greenie with a powerful testimony; and Bill Adler's short story, "When White Shirts Turn Gray," (*New Era*, December 1977, pp. 13-15)—showing an arrogant greenie who is taught humility and love by his departing senior. These stories effectively reinforce correct missionary attitudes. Should the institution's own publications show the missionfield itself precipitating a crisis of faith? Should other believing members of the Church?

3. Our missionary model comes from 1830 missionaries like Parley P. Pratt: an adult convert; an identity crisis, were one to occur, would probably accompany conversion. His mission would be the vehicle by

which he demonstrated the profundity and power of his reorientation Christward. In contrast, a twentieth century typical missionary is a nineteen-year-old boy who may or may not have experienced that profound reorientation and whose role is described by dress standards, staying with his companion at all times, and memorizing discussions at least as much as it is by providential deliverances, confounding the opposition, and performing miracles. In other words, as the details of a missionary's role have become more conspicuous, it is more possible for a missionary to role-play, rather than probe the depths of his religious identity.

In our first example, Douglas Thayer shows us the relationship between role and identity. With his blunted, understated sentences, each one sitting four-square and factual in a paragraph that is a complex blend of narrative and memory, he traces Elder Thatcher's identity crisis and its resolution. The entire story takes place while David Thacher, six weeks back in Provo from his mission to Germany, waits to give two carefully outlined pages of inspiration for his homecoming talk.

But he has mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, he wants to tell the priests at the sacrament table what a mission is really like. "They shouldn't have to go on missions as dumb as he had been. They needed to know the good and the bad" (p. 103). On the other hand, he knows that the congregation "didn't want him to tell them about the everyday boredom, doubt and failure, and even despair a missionary faced" (p. 102). He remembers he had borne his testimony on leaving because "he had felt the whole ward needed him . . . to confirm their idea of what a newly ordained nineteen-year-old elder should be" (p. 78).

Why are there so few examples of a literary treatment of the missionaries crisis of faith?

But in the missionfield, he started needing to know what he himself thought and felt. At first, he simply wanted to go home. He hated Germany, was embarrassed at his new role, and racked by the feeling that "he would never be young and free again" (p. 91). But home, while it was "all the good things"—his family, his girlfriend, his ward—constituted precisely those elements that had also "trapped him on his mission" (p. 92). More importantly, he feels from his very core that he had "to be honest or he lost a place to start his life. . . . So he had decided that he could ask for a release and go home honest only if he did absolutely everything he was supposed to. Then he could stand up in testimony meeting and say, 'I made an honest mistake. I found out that I didn't know the gospel was true, but I still want to go to church and live here in the ward with you.'" (p. 93).

So he did everything he was supposed to, and the role became his means to finding his identity, even though "he didn't want it to be true then, already afraid perhaps of the obligation of knowing that, the intensity of life, the understanding" (p. 101). The change, when it

occurs, is something he can't describe or talk about because "it was too personal, the beginning of a new mind and a new heart, the feeling of beginning power, new happiness" (p. 102). These feelings are as real as the embarrassment, the fatigue, the homesickness. For the first time, seeing the suffering in Germany, he sees the necessity for a Savior; he also sees that "sex didn't have to be the ultimate experience of his life." Instead, in this new reality, "love and spiritual experience [became] as real as eating or drinking," and he senses, outside himself, an "infinite emotion," demanding of him a "final obligation" (p. 99). Role-playing the missionary has transformed him into the missionary; facing the comfortable complacent congregation, he puts the outline back into his pocket. That gesture is an affirmation of his new identity as a committed, converted Christian. He will not deny the reality of his spiritual experience.

In contrast, Béla Petsco's narrator, Mihály Agyar, a Hungarian convert from New York serving in Arizona and California, finds that the missionfield presents him with a choice between his identity as a committed Christian and his role as a missionary. In some ways, the most metaphysical of the four writers, Petsco reveals Agyar to us with an austere and remote style, watchful and withdrawn even in the depiction of pain. In the first story, "Numbers," Agyar is tossing in a waking nightmare of free-associated scriptures involving numbers and the missionary numbers game:

"So he numbered them in the wilderness of Sinai. . . . He numbers. She numbers. It numbers. They number. We. . . . No—not we. They number.

"Number now, and see who is gone from us. . . ."

The crisis begins as she looks at the tracks, "wickedly inviting," and thinks how easy it would be to step in front of the train.

"Now, if you come to know in your heart, Brother Brown, that the restoration of the gospel is true, would you desire to be baptized into the Church . . . and become number 1,857,663? . . ."

"Number of baptisms this week. Number of baptisms to date . . . Number of families being taught. Number of contacts this week. Number of hours spent teaching 1st Discussion—2nd Discussion—3rd Discussion—4th—5th—6th. Number of contacts committed to baptism. Number of copies of the Book of Mormon placed. Number of testimonies borne" (pp. 173-176). Against this flood is his own puny voice protesting, "No." For him, retaining a testimony depends on denying the "worship [of] all the golden numbers" (p. 179).

In the following story, "God Still Demands a Sacrifice," Agyar reaches the predictable impasse with his mission president and offers to go home: "I cannot any longer support a system which equates doing the Lord's work with baptizing alone" (p. 185). His mission president asks him to fast, pray, and talk with a visiting General Authority. Agyar does and the General Authority shatters him by saying, almost kindly, "'After all,

Elder, baptism is the name of the game' " (p. 186). Thus, the sacrifice Agyar has offered is not acceptable. As he leaves, he says to the General Authority: "God still demands a sacrifice."

"It was almost a question—at least the brother took it as one—and after a moment . . . said, 'Yes . . .'" (p. 187). The sacrifice Agyar is being asked to make is that of his personal integrity.

Petsco does not follow Agyar into the labyrinth of the decision he must make. He leaves the reader with the fresh shock and the pain; but in the following intercalary vignette we have a snippet from his homecoming talk: "'A mission is neither all good—nor is it all bad. . . . My mission taught me the importance of gaining a personal testimony'" (p. 188). Whatever Agyar means by "testimony," he has found the key to living with ambiguity, as Elder Thatcher now must in his materialistic home ward. Agyar and Elder Thatcher could keep both their identities and their roles; but for Agyar, unlike Elder Thatcher, the role was his burden, not his means of deliverance.

In Christy Ackerson's "Tales from a Tracting Book," also set in Germany, we see Sister Nancy Harper juggling her own explosive oranges of role-playing and identity. Ms. Ackerson's prose does not have the carefully layered solidity of Thayer's, the austere metaphysics of Petsco's. Instead, it is busy, buzzy, and domesticated, breathing a kind of homey reality that, in some ways, makes it easier to relate to. Sister Harper is introduced to us as thoroughly human, diligently tracting the morning away but wishing irritatedly that her companion wouldn't wear such garishly red lipstick and brooding with voluptuous greediness over German pastries. She lives inside her missionary routine with the same combination of comfort and frustration as a housewife and with as little thought for philosophical subtleties, usually.

When an enthusiastic new elder gives as a spiritual thought the example of Ether who "'did cry [repentance] from the morning, even until the going down of the sun'" she wonders cynically, "without counting hours?" yet still feels "vaguely guilty. If I were as spiritual as Ether, we might be having success. I'd know just what to say to Kreugers, and *how* to say it, and they'd feel the Spirit, and know it was true. Or maybe, if they really weren't ready yet, I'd know that, too, and we wouldn't be wasting our time on them" (pp. 98-99). This chain of simple sentences is like her perception of her role: cluttered but uncomplicated. What's bothering her is not profound questions about ultimate truth, but her inability to perform perfectly the missionary's role. When she *does* throw herself into the role, she, like Elder Thatcher, finds the results confirming. She and her companion fast for the Kreugers (a kind of ultimate sacrifice for this missionary who savors each taste of yoghurt with healthy sensuality) and it seems to work. She feels "so good. . . . The Gospel *was* true. . . . Clear sky, sunshine, fasting—it was neat, being a missionary." We notice a certain elemental simplicity in her distinctions. "We were in the right place at the perfect time. And Kreugers would make it. We'd go in there tonight with a spirit so strong they wouldn't be able to resist" (pp. 109-110).

But Kreugers do resist. And another investigator, her life briefly transformed by the gospel, backslides overnight. Then Sister Harper is transferred—her passage to a new identity.

The crisis begins as she looks at the tracks, "wickedly inviting," and thinks how easy it would be to step in front of the train. She leaves her companion, her investigators, and her city without feeling "a thing" (p. 223). She considers, then rejects the idea of asking golden questions on the train. And she toys with the idea of going on to Munich instead of transferring as she must in a few miles.

At the same time she is questioning her identity as a missionary, she is also questioning her identity as a woman, possibly paralleling Elder Thatcher's attempts to place sex in proper perspective in his changing life but in reverse. Behind her she leaves Elder Dunn, whose brown eyes and pointed allusions to their "future" has sent her mooning over housewares in a department store. But he is still corresponding with Francene, who writes provocatively sexy letters. Part of Sister Harper's anger boils over in that direction: "That fluff head! What did *she* know of missionary work? . . . She'd probably cry when the first hausfrau waved a mop in her face. And then Elder Dunn would comfort her with some meaningful promises about their future. Ha!" (p. 225).

But Sister Harper can't soothe her battered femininity by leaning on her missionary competence since she's also questioning *that*. "Missionaries were incredibly naive. . . . What *did* we do, really? . . . What had I done? . . . The Germans just didn't change. . . . We trudged up and down stairs, pushing doorbells, meeting goals, counting hours—all along vaguely suspecting that we weren't accomplishing much." She feels revulsion at the thought of starting "the whole missionary routine all over again" (pp. 226-27). Yet missionaries don't quit—except for those who can't learn the language. And she was "a super missionary who knew the discussions backwards and forwards, in English and German, and *could* do the work, but didn't see the point any longer."

She has to sort this out carefully: "It wasn't that I hadn't tried. I'd done as much as three or four elders put together, and I'd followed the program, and kept the rules. And it *still* hadn't paid off" (p. 228). It's a dizzying revelation for her. The cause-and-effect of the gospel that she had always taken for granted *doesn't* work. The gospel may still be "true," but now she has no way to prove it.

When the train pulls out for Munich, she climbs back on it.

At first her freedom exhilarates her. Then it panics her. She deliberately picks up a German student for the afternoon, but finds herself compulsively probing for the meaning in his life. He has little, and it makes her realize with a shock that she does. She explains the Atonement to him, so passionately that he finds her naive and accuses:

"You've never *done* anything really bad, have you?"

"I stared at him. . . . Just today, I could have said.

Right now. The stupidest thing I'd ever done, only I couldn't go back now.

" . . . because if you had," he was saying, 'you couldn't make it sound so easy. . . . People don't change. . . .'"

This repetition of her own earlier words stings her. "Yes, they do," I blurted out. "They *can*. I'm going to."

"He stared at me strangely.

"I've done something awful," I said, "I have—and I can't talk about it now. But I'm going to . . . do better."

"He narrowed his eyes.

"I'm going to repent," I said, standing up. "I'm going to have a clean record now."

"His lips pressed into a smile. He was *trying* to understand. I suddenly wanted to hug him. I wanted to hug the whole world. But I remembered mission rules.

"It's OK," I said, smiling. "Let's go."

"He got up slowly. 'You really know that,' he said, trying to smile himself. 'You really believe it.'"

"I do," I said. "I know it's true" (pp. 249-250).

This moment of realization, that affirmation, was more than conditioned reflex to a "teaching moment." It was a realization that her identity did not come from role-playing missionary for the promised reward of a baptism. Instead, it sprang from her need to change because of acknowledged wrongdoing, her right to change because of her eternal identity, and her power to change because of the Atonement of Christ. As a missionary on the loose in Munich, she was at odds with her role and had experienced a frightening loss of identity. "Nobody knew I was anything!" she had realized (p. 239). Her conversation with Otto makes her see the relationship between her permanent identity and her temporary role. She is not a complex character and she is not fascinated by the intellectual aspects of the problem; but a profound change has occurred.

Oddly enough, the rest of the novel is not anticlimactic. Her discovery becomes part of her life, not the high point of her life. No one knows she's been playing hookey because her companion's train was late too. It's raining the next day. Tracting is still dreary. She still loves pastry. She still thinks about Elder Dunn and her heart does flipflops when he is transferred in as zone leader. But she refuses to break an appointment with a contact when Elder Dunn invites the sisters to the circus; and when they meet a former SS officer who cannot cleanse his conscience of the innocent blood he has shed, she tells him with authority:

"You *can* be clean again, Herr Brandt. You *can* erase the past. It's not easy—I know from something I've done—you have to change your life and start keeping *all* the commandments. . . . It makes you worthy to really talk with Him, and *then* you can ask His forgiveness for what you've done."

"Herr Brandt gazed silently into the bottle of sprudel on the table.

"Like me," I said. "Nobody knows this, but . . . I even ran off to Munich by myself and broke all the rules." (Sister Nord choked on her fork.) "Now I'm trying to repent—I'm trying to be a better missionary so I can ask the Savior to forgive me. And then His Atonement—His sacrifice—will pay for the wrong I've done. Then I'll be clean again."

"Whew, I thought. It's that simple, But I never saw it that way until now.

"Herr Brandt looked across the table, his eyes gentle. 'That's why I need to stop smoking,' he said, 'So I'll be worthy. The others never explained it quite that way' " (pp. 304-5).

Part of the gentleness may be his mature recognition for the difference between deliberate murder and an afternoon in Munich, but part of it is also for a recognition that the atonement is infinite. Herr Brandt is ultimately baptized, though not easily; but the real convert is Sister Harper. She had first accepted unthinkingly, then rejected her role as a missionary. Now she accepts it as an expression of her identity—that of a committed Christian.

In the fourth example, Robert Elliot's *Fires of the Mind*, Elder Johnson ultimately rejects the missionary role and, in so doing, rejects the identity and testimony he had thought he wanted. The play involves five elders in Taipei, whimsically and somewhat irrelevantly named Matthews, Markham, Lucas, Johnson, and Poll. The dialogue is supple, slangy, laced with humor, and taut with the threat of violence. Elder Matthews, the zone leader, is hard-working, and rules-conscious, currently guilty of classifying his slide collection during study time. Elder Markham, Johnson's companion, is sincere, a little stupid, and frankly bucking for a promotion.

Elder Johnson knows the cliches too, but, as his departing companion, Elder Poll, had explained to Elder Markham: "He knows the Church rests basically on revelation and individual testimony, and he's not satisfied with what he's got. . . . He doesn't want a sign, but he figures the 'warm feelings' everybody talks about aren't enough to base your life on. He wants something more, and until he gets it, he has to reserve judgment. And he's honest, painfully honest. I mean he can't just accept the fact that he hasn't completely arrived, and work at it slowly. He's always thinking about it and tormenting himself" (p. 33).

For Elder Johnson, the trial of faith is faith itself.

Elder Lucas, the fourth elder, understands Elder Johnson and mediates between him and the two insensitive "system" missionaries. He had gone on his mission from "a little hick town in Alberta," determined that "no big city Heart of Zion boys were ever gonna show me up. . . . I went into the LTM red hot and I burned the place up. But it wasn't for the Lord. I worked really hard, but only to prove that I was the best" (p. 43). His mission has taught him that "reward-seekers and sign-seekers are both looking for proof that they're worthy. They're both insecure, and they want the Lord to compensate them for it. Sometimes He will, but sometimes He won't. I guess that's the trial of faith, or at least one of them" (p. 45).

For Elder Johnson, the trial of faith is faith itself. He had come on his mission as a "gambler," feeding coins of his time to the "one-armed bandit" Mormon god. "And I keep on losing," he cries. "A month, a year, now two years for this mission. And I always say I'll quit if I

don't get an answer. But, everyone says 'Try, just once more, try. You've tried so hard and so long. Don't quit now. Maybe it'll come this time.' And it never does. A taste, sometimes—a feeling, a thought—but it's only a tease. They never last. Never" (p. 55).

He will not accept the good feelings. "I could never say something's true because it makes me happy. For me, it's got to be the other way around. It makes me happy because it's true" (p. 55). Epistemology is as important as ontology. Because he does not understand the means by which his "good feelings" come, he refuses to recognize them as valid.

In a climactic scene where he contends against the models of Elder Markham's unthinking faith and Elder Lucas' sophisticated spirituality, he suddenly comes to the core issue—his real identity as a skeptic: "What if they're wrong? How could you live with yourself if they're wrong? Your life would be a joke. All your suffering a joke!" (p. 87). Despite his sincerity and his pain, he is not striving for a convert's identity; he is preserving the identity he has built out of negation and resistance. And he rejects the possibility of faith by rejecting the missionary's role. He slips out of the apartment with a girl, even while his companion is reading aloud a letter from a man they've taught, a man whose openness to spiritual experience has brought him the confirmation that Johnson has rejected for himself.

In summary, let's return to those three reasons why fiction may have traditionally avoided the missionary's crisis of faith as a subject. And I think we can see that the failure has been in the writer, up to this point, not in the subject. Are these creative works as convincing as nonfiction? All four are deeply affirmative of the reality of spiritual values. Even in *Fires of the Mind*, Johnson is rejecting something he could have—not something that does not exist. And Agyar's testimony survives almost total disillusionment with the missionfield. These stories bear, in our terminology, a powerful "testimony of testimony." Second, these stories are also effective as training literature for prospective missionaries. Granted, not every missionary suffers a crisis of faith, although I know few who do not feel crippling discouragement, at least for a time. But for those who do find themselves doubting and despairing, where are their models? And third, none of these stories denies the importance of the missionary's role; instead, all of them use the yardstick of conformity to role as a measure of the missionary's own spiritual maturation—positively for Elder Thatcher and Sister Harper, negatively—though in different ways—for Agyar and Johnson.

The question of a missionary's faith is thus not only legitimate for the Mormon writer to ask, but a vital and urgent question. Again at last year's meeting, Herbert Harker said, "When I first thought about it, it seemed to me that the reason a person writes is to explain—to explain, for example, what it was like to be the grandson of a polygamist, living on a farm in Canada during the depression. I know now that my impulse rises from a deeper source; I write not so much to explain as to understand" ("Excavating Myself," *Dialogue*, 11 [Summer 1978]: 60-61).

Thayer, Petsco, Ackerson, and Elliot have helped us understand.