Reading literature is risky, but it may help us to be more critical —and more merciful—"readers" of the culture we live in.

TO TELL AND HEAR STORIES: LET THE STRANGER SAY

By Bruce W. Jorgensen
With Ancillary and Humble Annotations
by N. Oman Claythorpe

THE OCCASION TEMPTS ME WITH DEFINITIVENESS, the seduction of the summa, the lust of the Last Word. But I mean to speak as a scribe, not as one having authority. There is a huge liberty in that: the freedom to say what I think as generously as I can. I expect also to mingle the philosophies of men with scripture, but I will not teach that mingling for doctrine, and in fact I hope to show how poorly at least one "philosophy of men" mingles. It consoles me to think that, not pretending to teach doctrine, I may freely and without reproach do what we all always do anyhow.

Last semester in a course I teach, a student raised his hand and, acknowledging he might be the only person in the room who felt this way, said he didn't think we ought to read or discuss, in a class at BYU, Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog" because it "glamorized immorality." It's the story of a habitual womanizer who begins a casual affair with a much younger married woman and finds himself seriously in love "for the first time in his life." As often happens, I wasn't ready, but I gave the obvious pedagogical rationale: this is a short story course, Chekhov is a great master of the genre, and this is generally recognized as one of his great (and genre-changing) stories. I offered an analogy of a kind I don't trust very far: is sulfuric acid dangerous? if so, why are BYU students instructed to titrate it in chemistry labs?[1] And I said the question seemed central.

I said that partly because at the same time I'd been re-reading and preparing to discuss Socrates' "quarrel with the poets" in Books 2, 3, and 10 of Plato's *Republic*, which poses the question in an acute and highly general form. Socrates says in essence that it's bad for both the poet and the audience to "imitate" a bad man, or even a "mixed" man, since what we must do is cultivate virtue, and to imitate badness or mixedness is to make our souls rehearse badness. "The listener," he says, "must be ever careful, must fear unceasingly for the city within himself"; "great is the struggle, great indeed, not what men think it, between good and evil, to be a good man or a bad man" (Plato, 408). If Socrates means what he says and is right, we're all, all of us TV watchers and novel readers, rather steadily contaminating ourselves with mixedness if not badness.

Yet Plato's dialogues themselves "imitate" both "mixed" characters like Phaedrus and the interlocutors here, Plato's half-brothers Glaucon and Adeimantos, and pretty decidedly "bad" ones like Meno and Alcibiades. So we might suspect some subtle, midwifing form of Socratic (or Platonic) irony at play in the famous quarrel. Socrates may be trying to provoke his interlocutors to question the notion that Homer and Hesiod "educate" by offering models for "imitation"; or to question the more general notion of "imitation" as an adequate account of how fictions work, how they're made, how they're received.

I notice that no matter how generally Socrates poses the question, he also rather insistently returns to specific, even singular instances—Achilles, Priam, Odysseus, Zeus, and so on. Is he inviting Glaucon and Adeimantos to consider such narrative singulars so closely as to "deconstruct" the general "theory" he seems to be giving them? My own experiences with the question, too, are always provoked by literary singulars, though the would-be censors (in my class or in myself) nearly always appeal to some general or even "universal" principle. I'd venture to state Socrates' supposed position this way: Poetic works educate us by offering us models to "imitate" in our actual political and ethical lives. But to do so they "imitate" the political and ethical badness of mixed or bad persons. Thus while offering to "educate" us they actually infect us with badness. Therefore, from any city that would be a good city, we

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1. Are they? We suspect the Speaker hasn't troubled to check this allegation.

must ban poetical "imitation." A close criticism of either the first or second proposition, in the light of our experience of any of the singular instances Socrates alludes to or quotes, might undermine either proposition and thus the whole argument. But I can't settle the famous quarrel here or now—it's one for readers of Greek who know far more about fifth-century Athens, especially its notions of education, than I'm likely ever to learn.

For Mormon readers and writers, versions of the quarrel keep coming up as we write, read, review, and commend or condemn works of putative "Mormon poetry" or "Mormon fiction," etc. A few days after that one came up in my class, another came up in Gene England's Mormon Literature class, when I guest-lectured, in the form of troubled reactions to Dennis Clark's story in *Greening Wheat*, "Answer to Prayer": was this pun-riddled story about a troubled Mormon husband who masturbates in the john at work, invents fantastic/domestic bedtime tales for his children, and prays with shocking fervor and honesty "really Mormon" fiction? And was it "good" or "harmful" to read it?

Yet another version came up not long ago in Richard Cracroft's *BYU Studies* review of England's and Clark's poetry anthology, *Harvest*, which found many poems in the latter half of the book, apparently, lacking a "whole and absolute . . . vision of the universe" (Cracroft, 120) and thus failing to express "the innateness and immediacy of the divine" (121). These, wrote the Reviewer (I'll call him "Reviewer" to avoid simplistic identification with our friend Richard Cracroft, who is a much broader man),[2] were poems turned up by an editor "rooting in the humus of recondite and not-very-fertile Structuralism" (122).[3] In these poems the Reviewer found "only occasionally . . . that distinctively Latter-day Saint voice, the sensibility of the believing poet," but rather more often the spoor of "a faltering spiritual vision" or even the "repressi[on] and replace[ment of] soaring spirituality with earth-bound humanism." These were "decidedly non-LDS poems" (122).

It was at best a mixed relief, amid all this, to find a couple of my own poems let into the fold. But distressing, overall, to read so much xenophobia, so much of "Surely thou also art one of *them*; for thy speech bewrayeth thee" (Matthew 26:73);[4] to read that so many poems by so many younger Mormon writers are fungoid—truffles or perhaps deadly amanita.[5] I pondered in my weary heart whether I lived—or wanted to live—in a "whole and absolute" universe; and if I did, how any "divine" might manage to be "innate" or "immediate" in it. I wondered aloud a tired, head-in-hands question: Is there a Mormon criticism?

BUT it's risky to quarrel with the king that shall be.[6] I'd rather take on Socrates first after all, and then try to sneak up on this Reviewer later with the help of some Jewish radicals.[7] Socrates first disposes of the "matter" of poetry—the kinds of stories about gods, heroes, and men that should and should not be told in educating the "guardians" in a well-ordered city; stories like the one Hesiod tells about Kronos castrating his cruel father Ouranos (Plato, 175), or the one Homer tells about kingly old Priam "rolling on the dungheap / and calling loudly on the name of each" of his dead sons (185).[8] Then Socrates says to Adeimantos, "We must make up our minds whether we will let the poets imitate when they make their narratives, or imitate in parts and narrate in parts . . . or whether we will allow no imitation at all." It's one of the few places in the dialogue (in the Rouse translation, anyhow) where Adeimantos pulls up sharp: " 'O my prophetic soul!' he said. 'Your question is whether we shall admit tragedy and comedy into our city, or not.' " And Socrates allows, " 'Perhaps . . . and perhaps I mean something more than that.' " He says he doesn't know yet himself, but " 'wherever the enquiry shall blow us like a breeze, there we must go' " (192).

By "imitation," Socrates means that kind of composition in which the poet takes on the "voice" or "manner" of his character (191), that is, using direct dialogue or first-person narration—or, in modern fiction, interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness. The enquiry eventually blows us toward implications like these—call them reefs or shoals or safe harbors, according to your own literary-ethical disposition:

> If [the young guardians-to-be] do imitate, they should imitate from childhood . . . men who are brave and temperate, pious, free, all things of that sort; but things not for the free they should neither do nor be clever at imitating, and nothing else that is ugly, that the imitation may never give them a taste of the real thing. Have you perceived that imitations settle into habits, and become nature if they are continued from early youth, in body and voice and mind? . . .
> Then any we care for, and think they should become good men, we will not allow to imitate a woman, being men themselves, either a young or older woman, nagging at a husband or quarrelling with

2. Indeed! And his literary-appreciative girth is shown by his high praise of that renegade Vardis Fisher's rendition of Joseph Smith's first vision, and by his recent adoption (note the word) of that West Coast expatriate Judith Freeman's novel, *The Chinchilla Farm*, for *his* Mormon Literature class at BYU, Winter 1991.

3. Cry foul! Here the Speaker, unable to resist his own penchant for puns and quasi-scatological jokes, wrenches the Reviewer's remark *radically* out of context: the phrase applies to editor Clark's *theory*, not his selections; and "rooting" is obviously used neither in its porcine nor its mycological, but in its *dendrological* sense.

4. Obviously the Speaker's emphasis. And isn't he playing fast-and-loose with the sacred text here? This is what the bystanders in the high priest's courtyard say to Peter, the President-elect of the Church, who is denying he knows Jesus in order to shelter the seedling Church. The Speaker so wildly misapplies this scripture here that we wonder if he is truly Mormon.

5. Once again the Speaker is seduced by his own devious wit: he might not know an amanita if it bit him, though he seems to know that its common name is "death cup," thus offering an odd allusive link to the execution of Socrates. The Reviewer neither said nor implied anything of the sort!

6. Really too pedantic! Rex quondam Rexque futurus indeed. But does the Speaker expect us to believe he has read Malory or Geoffrey of Monmouth, much less that he really knows any Latin?

7. Surely here he tips his incarnadine hand.

8. These unedifying stories may be in the classical texts, but must the Speaker rub our noses in them? What's his insidious game? We suspect he might be one of those "true believers" in "history with warts," too.

gods and boasting, thinking herself happy; or one held in misfortune with mourning and dirge, much less one in sickness or in love or in labour of child. . . . Nor must they imitate slaves whether men or women, doing what slaves do. . . .

Nor wicked men, as it seems, cowards, those who [are] . . . scolding, mocking and speaking vilely of each other, whether drunk or sober, and imitating what such men say and do to each other or to themselves with offence. And I think they must not get the habit of making themselves like madmen in word or act. They must know about madmen, of course, and about bad men and women, but they must do nothing of all this nor imitate this. . . .

. . . the decent man in his narrative . . . will not be ashamed . . . especially to imitate the good man acting firmly and sensibly, but less willingly and less often a good man shaken by disease or passions, or again by drunkenness or some other misfortune. But when he comes to one unworthy of himself, he will not wish to make himself really like a worse man, except now and then if the man does something good; he will be ashamed. He is unpractised, you see, in imitating such persons; and at the same time he resents modelling and fitting himself into the shapes of the worse. He disdains it in mind, unless it be just a bit of fun. (193, 194.)

Socrates does urge Adeimantos—baiting him to resist the argument?—to admit that "the mixed style [combining 'simple narrative' in the poet's own voice with 'imitation' of the characters' voices] is delightful; and much the most delightful to children and tutors alike" (195). But it's not long before we blow a goodbye kiss to the imitative poet and let him "go in peace to another city" (196).

In the last book of the dialogue, Socrates looks back[9] on the "city . . . in words" he and his interlocutors have "arranged . . . most admirably in general," and says he finds it "especially" so in regard to poetry (393), by their having decided "not to let in the imitative part of it" because "all such things are the ruin of the hearers' minds, unless they possess the antidote, knowledge of what . . . things really are" (394). Notice the implied "poison" or "contamination" metaphor, to which I shall return.[10] Here, Socrates must review and expand his critique of "imitation," as Glaucon and Adeimantos seem to have forgotten it. Are they dunderheads? Is this another cue that *we ought* to resist Socrates' argument because they don't?[11]

Imitation works "at three removes from truth" by imitating only appearances of things (399), which are themselves imitations of the Forms. "Then the imitator will neither know nor have right opinion about what he imitates, as regards fineness or badness"; and "his imitation is a kind of play, not earnest" (402). Worse still, it "joins hands and makes bosom friends with that part in us which is far away from wisdom, for no healthy and true end," and is thus "an inferior uniting with an inferior and breeding inferior offspring" (403)—terribly uneugenic. That is, since all imitation is of "men in action" and "feeling either grief or joy" in their action and its results (405), and since "the wise and calm character, being nearly always the same and self-composed, is not easy to imitate, and when imitated is not readily understood, especially by a festival assembly of all sorts and conditions of men gathered in a theatre; for the condition of mind is . . . alien to them"; then "the imitative poet is clearly not naturally suited to imitate this part of the soul, and his skill is not set upon adapting itself to it, if he is to be popular with the multitude, but rather to imitate the resentful and complex character, because that can be imitated well" (405). Doing what he does best—this poor business of imitating inferior appearances for the inferior part of the soul—the imitative poet "arouses and fosters and strengthens this [inferior, divisive] part of the soul, and destroys the rational part"; "he establishes an evil constitution in his soul; he gratifies the unthinking part of it . . . by imaging images very far away indeed from the truth" (405-06). The imitative poet does himself ill; he is self-corruptive.

And that, says Socrates, is not "yet the strongest accusation against imitation. For it is surely monstrous that it is able to corrupt even the decent people, with very few exceptions" (406), by enticing[12] them to "yield" themselves, with "delight" and "sympathy" no less, to "womanly" states of soul in imagined characters of which they would be ashamed in themselves. This is true, Socrates maintains, of "pity," of jesting at "the ridiculous,"

And the same with love-making and anger and all the desires and griefs and pleasures in the soul which we say go along with our every action—poetical imitation produces all such things in us. For it nourishes them by watering what it ought to dry up, and makes them rulers in us, when they ought to be ruled that we may become better and happier instead of worse and more miserable. (407.)

Glaucon "cannot deny it"; and so, farewell Homer and all the comic and tragic poets, including the aged and still astonishingly brilliant Sophocles, of whom the equally aged Cephalos reported this at the beginning of the dialogue: "I was with him once when somebody asked him, 'What about love now, Sophocles? Are you still able to serve a woman?' 'Hush, man,' he said, 'I've escaped from all that, thank goodness. I feel as if I had escaped from a mad, cruel slave driver.' " (127.)[13]

9. A dark, perverse hint here of Lot's wife looking back on Sodom? (Genesis 19:26.) Or a suggestion that the Speaker suspects Socrates himself would not be a citizen of the city he has created? Unthinkable.

10. Here the Speaker seems to fancy himself a hero in the mold of General MacArthur—a man worthy of imitation (but not by such as this).

11. Rhetorical question. Does he really suppose Socrates and Plato don't mean what they say? That they did not always strive to speak and write in such a way as not only to be understood but also never to be *mis*understood?

12. The word does not occur in Plato's text, and we suspect an allusion to its scriptural occurrences in 2 Ne. 2:16: "man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other"; or Mosiah 3:19: "the natural man is an enemy to God . . . unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit."

13. Why must the Speaker—why indeed must Plato—leave in this unedifying bit of trivia? We might excuse a pagan—but this Speaker!

Farewell to poesy, then, unless she "can give some reason why she ought to be in a well-ordered city," for though we must admit we are "enchanted" by her, "especially when [we] see her through Homer," we must "do as people who once were in love with somebody, if they believe their love to be no good to them: they don't want to give it up, but they must" (408). So the intellectual male "founders" of a (mental and verbal) city reject the works and the presence of imitative imagination, personified as female.[14]

WAS that what my student wanted, what those students of Gene England wanted, what the Reviewer of *Harvest* wanted? that well-ordered city, uncontaminated by the "alien" poison of the "imitation" of "bad" or even "mixed" men and women? that well-guarded citadel of the (male, mailed) mind,[15] that castle in the air, that cloud-cuckoo land?[16] Poor Chekhov will condemn himself to exile from that city of words by the words of his own hand, in a letter written on April Fool's Day 1890 to his millionaire conservative editor-friend Alexei Suvorin, who had scolded him for his "objectivity, calling it indifference to good and evil":

> You would have me say, when depicting horse-thieves, that stealing horses is an evil. . . . stealing horses is not simply stealing but a passion. Of course, it would be gratifying to couple art with sermonizing, but, personally, I find this exceedingly difficult and, because of conditions imposed by technique, all but impossible. Why, in order to depict horse thieves in seven hundred lines I must constantly speak and think as they do and feel in keeping with their spirit. . . .(Chekhov, 133.)[17]

As an artist—indeed the great poet of that form we call the short story—Chekhov, grandson of a serf and son of a father who beat him; Chekhov, who later said he had "squeeze[d] the slave out of himself, drop by drop" (107), consciously chooses to do just what Socrates warns against, to "speak and think . . . in keeping with [the] spirit" of men and women shaken by passions, sometimes of women "in sickness or in love or in labour of child"; he consciously embraces the risk of what Socrates felt was a form of slavery, and in that embrace he finds one form of the liberty he prizes most highly: "to be a free artist and nothing more," free "from force and falsehood, no matter how [they] manifest themselves" (81). And I am saying I think that in so doing he is true—as a great many other modern and contemporary writers are true—in a very deep way to the central passion of Judaeo-Christian story: the passion of the Other. I'll try to explain.

I'll take a flying leap,[18] is what I'll do, and say that I think the central question of all story—and thus possibly of every form of human culture—is just this: How shall we greet the Other? Shall we devour, or annihilate, or welcome? Polyphemos the wheel-eyed or single-eyed[19] has his answer: eatemup! (*Odyssey* 9.273-93). And for those who like their answers short and scriptural, I'll offer two or three before going on somewhat longer. From the Apostle Paul, once Saul of Tarsus, once "consenting unto [the] death" of Stephen, once making "havock of the church," once a persecutor "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,"[20] once stopped and questioned by a Stranger on the Road: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2). (I'm making the traditional assumption that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews: God forbid the writer should be somebody else, some stranger, some unknown other!) Paul may have in mind the way Abraham rushes out of his tent to welcome strangers in the plains of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-2), or even the way his brother Lot welcomes two strangers (the same? others?) at the gate of Sodom, the polluted city. But I digress. Here's another one, which the author of the Epistle may have had by heart: "But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:34).[21] The scriptorially minded could also read Deuteronomy 10:16-19 before commending themselves as suppliants to the Lord's care tonight:

> Circumcise therefore the foreskin[22] of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked. For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great god, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and the widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

I MEAN to take the ancient and widely understood habit of hospitality as metaphor and ground for Christian (and Mormon) imagination and criticism. On the way, and to substantiate "widely understood," I remind you of how that habit operates in the *Odyssey* (by Homer or somebody else or maybe even, Zeus forbid,[23] a woman). When Telemakhos, seeking news of his absent father, reaches Pylos, the city of Nestor breaker of horses, a sacrifice to Poseidon is in progress; but the

14. Here, dare we suspect a "feminist" agenda?

15. O my prophetic soul, indeed.

16. Sheer name-calling!

17. This smacks of the unseemly petulance of the recipient of literary patronage. Moscow rumor about this time had it that " 'Chekhov is Suvorin's kept woman' " (Troyat, 134).

18. Not content with recklessly *trying* to leap over tall buildings in a single bound, the Speaker must make it his theme!

19. We note the Speaker's irreverent allusion to Matthew 6:22: "if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light." There is simply no room in the Kingdom for his kind of foolish binocular vision: "if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out. . ." (Matthew 5:29).

20. These unedifying details might have gone charitably unmentioned.

21. This chapter of Leviticus, in current LDS copies, bears the following heading: "Israel commanded: Be holy, live righteously, love thy neighbor, and keep the commandments—The Lord reveals and reaffirms sundry laws and commandments—Enchantments, wizardry, prostitution, and all evil practices forbidden"; the recommendation regarding strangers is but one among "sundry" rules and other more important principles by which Israel is to keep itself holy.

22. Once again it suits the Speaker not to cut the gross—and grotesquely incorrect—anatomical detail.

23. An unwitting clue that the Speaker is at heart a pagan?

stranger is welcomed and feasted on wine and the flesh of the sacrificial bulls before Nestor speaks: "Now is a better time to interrogate our guests and ask / them who they are, now they have had the pleasure of eating. / Strangers, who are you? From where do you come sailing. . . ?" (*Odyssey*, 3.69-71.)

I remind you that in Greek one word, *xenos*, means both "stranger" and "guest"; and in the world Homer (or whoever) imagined, the stranger/guest is always—if the means are available—washed, sometimes fully bathed and clothed in clean garments, and fed to repletion—all this before being asked his name and story. Sometimes the story is asked before the name, I suspect because the story will tell us, better than a name could, who the stranger is among us. Much the same thing happens to Telemakhos when he reaches Lakedaimon and stands in the forecourt of the house of Menelaos, who is "deeply vexed" that his "henchman" should wonder whether to unharness the strangers' horses "or send them on to somebody else": "Unharness," the king says, "and bring the men here to be feasted" (4.1-36). The searching son isn't even asked his name in this case; Helen guesses who he is by his resemblance to "great-hearted Odysseus," and Peisistratos son of Nestor confirms the guess (4.140-57).

And the lost father Odysseus himself, when he makes his way, already bathed and wearing garments laundered at the inlet by Nausikaa, into the hall of the Phaiakian king and queen on the island of Scheria, spends a night and most of the next day, first given the seat of the king's best-loved son (7.170-71), then feasting, telling the last leg of his journey, sleeping, hearing bardic singing (including the story of "the love of Ares and sweet-garlanded Aphrodite" [8.267], another Socratic no-no),[24] feasting, sporting in the agora, watching "a dance on the generous earth" (8.378), before anyone bothers to ask who he is. By then, the ship is ready for his departure, he's loaded with guest-gifts, and he's weeping like a woman (8.521-32) over Demodokos' song of the Trojan horse. Only then does Alkinoös say, "Tell me the name by which your mother and father called you" (8.550). And he wants to know the story, too; so we and the Phaiakians, to whom "always the feast is dear. . . , and the lyre and dances / and changes of clothing and our hot baths and beds" (8.248-9), we get to hear the Great Wanderings, which take up the next four books of the poem, with all of the listeners "stricken to silence, / held in thrall by the story all through the shadowy chambers" (13.1-2). Last, I remind you that one way to translate the opening words of the *Odyssey* (as both Butler and Lattimore do) is simply "Tell me, muse"—as if the muse were a feminine guest with a tale the poet welcomes. Do all stories come from the Other? Are they all breathed into us by the visiting stranger?

The rule at any rate seems clear: welcome the stranger, bathe and clothe and feed, maybe even hear the story, then ask who. By then the stranger is among us, our guest, entertained like one born here and come home from long wandering. Back there on the plains of Mamre, before a certain stranger leaves he has promised you the son you've almost given up hope of having, laughed at your old wife for her laughter, knowing he'll have the last laugh and you—you'll name your son for that: Isaac, "he laughs." Strangers, hosts, guests, old wives, newborn babes—we all say the laugh's on us.

From Abraham and Homer at least down to the much-travelled Saul of Tarsus, then, there flows a perennial comprehension of hospitality as that gesture in which the wayfaring stranger becomes our guest-friend. We may watch it flood to the surface of Orson Scott Card's science-fiction novel *Ender's Game*, in the "xenocide" Ender Wiggin's version of what the "Bugger" Hive Queen would say to the destroyers of her alien species: "But still we welcome you now as guestfriends. Come into our home, daughters of Earth. . . " (Card, 355). In the Book of Mormon, too, as a couple of my students pointed out to me, Amulek understands this when he welcomes Alma: "[G]o with me into my house and I will impart unto thee of my food; and I know that thou wilt be a blessing unto me and my house" (Alma 8:20).[25] As readers, perhaps especially as readers in the formal role of critics, I suggest, we often too quickly judge the stranger by her language—her speech bewrayeth her as "not one of us" (what else?)—before we hear her story. Perhaps especially male guardians or priests, charged as we feel we are with the purity of the city, sniff the odor of contamination so quickly as to reject the gift the stranger may bring, or withhold the gift the stranger may need of us.

There's a holy urgency, we may tell ourselves, because we suppose on good authority that the end is nigh and the city must be every whit holy, pure as a bride arrayed for the bridal. "Heah come de judge! heah come de judge!" we chant to ourselves; but the judge ain't come yet. And in the meantime, in-betweentine,[26] ain't we got fun?[27] Well, no, not if our puritanical side, what Nietzsche called the "ascetic priest" in us, has anything to say about it. In the meantime, we'll have mean time, niggardly, narrow, miserly time; not time as the "Old Shepherd" in Act 3 Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* grasps it when he and his "Clown" son take up the abandoned Perdita, lost daughter of Leontes and Hermione: " 'Tis a lucky day, boy, and we'll do good deeds on't" (3.3.136). We'll have mean time; not time as a merciful means[28] to something else,[29] something or somebody other than we already are; not time to mean all we can to one another while the judge graciously defers his arrival, giving us all this meantime.

24. Rightly so.

25. Careful readers will have noticed that Amulek has been instructed by "an angel" to "receive" Alma; thus there is little evidence of a "habit" or "rule" among the Nephites.

26. A typo, or one of his deliberate puns? But what fork would he have in mind here?

27. This clowning is beneath comment.

28. A covert allusion to that raucous drunk Dylan Thomas and the demi-pagan nostalgia of "Fern Hill"?

In the sun that is young once only,
Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means (12-14)

The Poems of Dylan Thomas, ed. David Jones (New York: New Directions, 1971), 196-96.

29. Possibly an allusion to a little-known book by Jonathan Bishop, *Something Else*, which the Speaker is known to have read and marked with some care. Bishop's even less-known book, *Who Is Who?*, may also lurk beneath the surface here.

THE one we expect as judge and bridegroom, who may appear a stranger to us, and we strangers to him, lived, while he was here, in the comprehension of hospitality I've been sketching out. This is noteworthy, considering that his sojourning mother and father found "no room . . . at the inn" (Luke 2:7) and his birth was hosted by beasts, sheepherders, and a cheering-section of angels.[30] In fact, he himself said he'd had "no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58). Yet, invited once to eat at the house of a Pharisee named Simon, as he lay at lunch,[31] a woman came and began to bathe his feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair, the means available to her for welcoming this stranger as a guest. And Simon said in his wary heart, "If this man really were a prophet, he'd know what kind of woman he's allowing to touch him." Simon could sniff out contamination, whether in the itinerant rabbi or the woman come in off the streets so hungry to meet the rabbi that she'll crash a private party. But the young rabbi, catching a whiff himself, says, "Simon, I've got something to tell you"; then tells a parable and goes on matter-of-factly to upbraid Simon for failing in his ordinary duties as a host: "You didn't wash me, you didn't kiss me; but this woman here, since I came in she hasn't stopped kissing my feet and washing them with her tears and wiping them with her hair. She loves much, so her many sins are forgiven." (Luke 7:36-50.)

Another time, the young rabbi took off to the borders, tired perhaps from walking and teaching, and lodged in a house in the city of Tyre (Mark 7:24-30). I imagine him again lying at lunch or supper, and I like to think the people of the house have a bitch there, with a just-weaned litter of pups sprawling and foraging on a packed-dirt floor, begging for table scraps. Again a woman comes in with her trouble; a Greek, a Syrophoenician if we like precision, and her daughter is sick, contaminated, possessed of another kind of stranger, a demon.[32] She's heard of the rabbi, about whom news always seems to travel fast, and she breaks in on his supper to beg him to come heal her little girl. It's the only time I can think of in Mark's Good News[33] that the rabbi even temporarily draws a line to keep somebody out; he's notorious, as every Pharisee knows, for crossing all *their* lines. He tells her, "You don't feed the dogs before the children have eaten." Maybe he just wants to finish his meal before it cools. But this woman, full of love for her daughter and hope for the rabbi's good gift, comes right back at him with wit that the Pharisees seldom show, and even the disciples too infrequently: she says, "But sir, the pups under the table eat the crumbs the children scatter." Welcoming, loving her wit and the passions that drive it, changing his mind, perhaps even laughing, he says, "For that saying, go your way, your daughter is whole."

It's good news indeed, telling good stories about this guest, so I'll go on for another. Once in the last days of his work here, in Jerusalem now and not out on the borders, he's constantly harassed by Pharisees trying to snare him in a word, trying to make his speech bewray him so they can hand him over to the law. One day (Mark 12:28-34), a scribe after listening to some of this asks him, "Rabbi, what's the greatest commandment?" Well, that's easy, and Jesus quotes him straight: "Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord. . . ." Then for good measure he adds, "And the second is like, namely this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The scribe likes this answer (scribes always like accurate quotes, plus extras, in oral exams), so he echoes it back and adds another line for good measure himself: This "is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Well, the rabbi likes that, so he says, with what I take to be a generous smile of welcome, "You're not far from the reign of God." Then Mark tersely says that nobody dared to ask him any more questions. Nervous, I suspect, about finding themselves invited *in* where they were busy trying to keep somebody else *out*.

THAT may serve to sweep the dooryard for what I want now to enter upon: the yoked questions of what might be called "Christian imagination" and "Christian criticism"—of which I hope anything we might call "Mormon imagination" and "Mormon criticism" would be an instance. To guess how "Christian imagination" might act, I'll tell another story (John 8:2-11) that may let itself be read as suggesting what the imagination of Jesus was like. Once a gang of scribes and Pharisees, all men we must suppose, priestly guardians of communal purity, seeking one more time to trap Jesus, drag before him in the temple "a woman taken in adultery," caught "in the very act," to which these gentlemen have somehow made themselves witnesses. The old law says stone her; what does the young rabbi say? (We may wonder where her partner is, who presumably also was caught in the act, but the crimestoppers aren't saying.) Jesus buys a little time by scratching in the dirt, thinking is my guess, but more than that, imagining, taking in the story. And that would mean all of it: first, yes, the woman's desire, her pleasure, her fear and shame and guilt, her agony at being hauled into open daylight (half-naked? the text doesn't say, thus allowing our moral and sensual imagination to take part also, with results differing according to gender); but the men, too, their conniving, their so-conscious righteousness, their prurience, their pleasure in cruelty, maybe mixed with shame and pity, whatever passions shake them. I must suppose that, being who and what he is, this constantly tested stranger dives to the bottom of whatever they all feel, each one, descending "below all things" (D&C 88:6; cf. 122:8) to become enough to answer their need more than their bad-faith legalistic question.

The imagination of Jesus, I'm suggesting, which is the

30. Called, chosen, and carefully coached, we may be sure.

31. Here and throughout his retelling of New Testament stories, the Speaker paraphrases freely, though not enough to be charged with egregious travesty. At some points his renderings resemble the versions of Reynolds Price in *A Palpable God* (New York: Atheneum, 1978; San Francisco: North Point, 1985).

32. Only here does the Speaker even slightly acknowledge what should be obvious to anyone who lives in a house with a front door: not all strangers are nice guys; the stranger could be anybody, the Avon Lady or Prince Paris or Ted Bundy as well as the Prophet Elijah.

33. No: see Mark 4:12, which is thoroughly germane to the issue here: "That seeing they may see, and not perceive; . . . lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them."

originary Christian and Mormon imagination, will take precisely the risk Socrates warns against as the ruin of the soul:[34] to understand an other, whoever the other is, however bad or mixed. Something like this, I am persuaded, must lie behind the response Jesus makes, which most of us, sinners and accusers in need of justice and mercy, have by heart and can quote verbatim. I'm saying that Christian imagination chooses to be the antithesis of Socratic imagination: where the Greek will ascend, will fly every possible contamination in order to keep the city of pure soul well-governed and sterile, the radical Jew dives to the bottom to seize the root[35] of our cruelty and sorrow, to search out the venom that festers our wounds and thus begin to heal us. To do that, Christian imagination risks hearing our voices, the voices of all the others; "alternate voices" if you like,[36] voices speaking by turns. (To hear or to echo or to quote may not be to "imitate" in Socrates' sense; I have no answer to that question.)

THE risk of listening to other voices brings me, then, to what I propose—have been proposing all along—as the first gesture of a "Mormon reading," a "Mormon" way of judging the works of the imagination. Here I can rely on two quite explicit statements in Mormon scripture. This was the partial answer I took back to my class a week or so later, with the question of Chekhov's story still hanging over us. First the voice of the sojourner known as Jesus: "And whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do good is of me; for good cometh of none save it be of me. I am the same that leadeth men to all good. . . " (Ether 4:12). Then the voice of Mormon, chronicler of a culture wrecked by fraternal estrangement, his words handed on to us by his son Moroni, a visitor who showed up shining in a boy's bedroom: "I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God" (Moroni 7:16).

I'd want to underscore certain words here: "gift," of course; "inviteth," whose Latin affiliations and affinities are obscure, but which we normally associate with welcome; and "persuade," which at its root touches sweetness and is closely allied with *suavio*, to kiss.[37] But my immediate question is how to apply such a rule of judgment to literature, or rather, to specific stories. Clearly, these voices urge all of us who meet a stranger or a story to consider what it "invites" or "persuades" us to do. It's the burden of every censor: if I would censor, I first must say what "it" invites *me* to do. My student challenging Chekhov may not have considered this; at least he did not *say* he felt invited to do evil or to persuade not to believe in Christ; ostensibly, he seemed to want to persuade me and the rest of the class to be better Christians. But I'm already ahead of myself. First of all, what "thing" are we talking about? The story? Or any one experience of it? I suspect it's the latter, since not all of us are persuaded alike by the same story, and each of us may find different persuasions or invitations in the same story upon different readings. Probably, too, it is wrong, or at least rash, for us to take a *part* of the thing—the subject of the story, or a scene or detail or word in it—for the "thing." And so also with a moment of our experience of a thing, whether it's a scriptural narrative or anything else.

Concerning whether it's "right" or "wrong" to read a story like "The Lady with the Dog" in a BYU class, then, how would we judge? Does it "persuade" or "invite" to do good or to do evil? I can only say what it persuades or invites me to do (and perhaps I am deceived, and in some dark pocket of my psyche something else is afoot).[38] To put this too simply and generally, Chekhov's story invites me to believe that love is better than sexual predation; and to understand something of the hearts and minds of two casual adulterers (the "he and she" of it) who painfully and problematically (and however imperfectly) come to love one another, and face at last the question of what now to do. Is it always "wrong" to divorce? Has marriage always and everywhere persuaded or invited to do good? (A friend told me he once heard a man say, "I never could understand how anyone could commit adultery until I got married.") Reading literature is risky, as living in Western culture, in America, in Provo, at BYU in the 1990s is risky. So we read and discuss literature in class, which is also risky, but which *may* help us to be more critical—and more merciful—"readers" of the culture we live in. Chekhov, I find so far, helps me that way.

SOMETHING like that was my belated partial answer to a hard question that still has not gone away; I trust rather that it has begun to be listened to, has become part of the conversation in the household. I want to turn now at last back to questions of "Mormon literature," questions the AML has long assembled to ask and converse about. Implicitly, perhaps, to questions like "Is there a Mormon criticism?" or the one Dennis Clark asked in *Harvest*, which I hope you now hear as highly pertinent: "Is there a Mormon audience for poetry?" Explicitly, to questions about fiction, about short stories and novels. And for responses, I want to listen awhile to the voices of some others: novelists and story-writers like Chekhov, Henry James, Rainer Maria Rilke, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Reynolds Price, Milan Kundera.

About being a Mormon audience, about Mormon reading, including the formal, institutional kinds of reading we call literature classes and criticism, then, I answer first that it

34. Is the Speaker wresting the scriptures again? "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matthew 10:39, cf. 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33). By some devious means he seems to have learned that "life" in the Authorized Version translates the Greek *psyche*.

35. We confess ourselves astonished, even in the sometimes lubricious purlieus of this Address, to suspect here a lurking and (to be charitable) possibly unconscious (and to us incomprehensible) allusion to Eudora Welty's *Losing Battles* (362). Another, perhaps more likely antecedent is an episode in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Tablet XI, lines 266-91).

36. Elder Dallin H. Oaks offered the definitive apostolic counsel on this.

37. How very interesting—how sweet! Lips that touch Nietzsche shall never touch mine.

38. Gigantic understatement.

would be generous, hospitable;[39] it would listen, then take its turn and converse, as the AML for fifteen years now has feasted and conversed. Yet we've also had a continuing "tradition" of sometimes adverse or even acerbic dissent from the decisions of our preferably anonymous awards judges: this or that novel or batch of poems or stories is "not really Mormon"; and ironically enough, one such plaintiff had been the defendant in an earlier complaint. But we're not a court, not even a "court of love." We're more of a wayside inn, and these complaining and dissenting voices, too, should be entertained in our conversation. *Diversa non adversa*, Peter Abelard wrote to his stern opponent Bernard of Clairvaux: we—our minds, our voices—differ but are not against one another.[40]

Maybe the idea of "criticism" itself, of a crisis in which we have to decide, is the problem; we are to "receive"[41] and "hear" before we judge. Hospitable reading would be slow to shut out. It would be slow to decide whether a literary visitor is "Mormon" or not, especially slow to gauge this by some presumed "doctrinal" criterion or some elusive metaphysical or "essential" notion of "spirituality." After all, we are instructed by the visiting resurrected Christ in 3 Nephi 11:28-40 that *his* "doctrine" is repentance, faith, and baptism, "and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against them. And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock" (3 Nephi 11:39-40).[42] If that and only that is "doctrine," then it offers a test no poem or story can either pass or fail, since only personal agents can offer to meet such a test, and they do so in action. Maybe Mormonism itself has no "essence" but only a story,[43] which comprises all the stories of all the agents who come upon those invitations to action and offer to take them up.

I suspect it's a striving after wind[44] to pursue the "essence" of Mormon literature. When the Reviewer of *Harvest* says that "the more pertinent question" is "*What* is a Mormon poem?" he's asking emphatically a question framed by Western ontology, which has always asked, "What is it?"—always sought essences uncontaminated by time, space, matter, or the stories of existents. Stories always tell *how it goes*.[45] "Essentialism" is the problem in that review,[46] and it's why the Reviewer's judgments and descriptions of the poems he shuts out don't attend closely enough to the poems to notice traits that might "pass" even his criteria. Margaret Rampton Munk's suite of poems on dying (as a Mormon) with cancer "are certainly not a *Mormon* response to life and death" (Cracroft, 122), he says, apparently overlooking, for instance, the likely Mormon overtones of "solemn ceremony" and "sisterhood" in poem IV, "The Nurses" (England and Clark, 141), or what I take for a pervading "Mormon" attitude toward the body.

Next, of Kathy Evans he writes, "Neither is [her] beautiful revery, 'Midnight Reassembled,' rooted in the Mormon ethos in any way that I can discern" (Cracroft, 122), and offers in evidence these lines from the middle of the poem:

Somewhere, out there
in the immensity of night
a swan glides across
the surface of its own image,
wings touching wings on the water.
We touch the world this way.
(England and Clark, 172.)

Perhaps he glimpsed "the self-fascination of much contemporary poetry" (Cracroft, 122) in the mirror-image here, and that made him miss the pun in "a swan glides across" and forget that in the immense night Cygnus is the Northern Cross and that the swan has served as one of the many figures of Christ from at least the twelfth-century *Speckled Book* down to the contemporary Galway Kinnell's "To Christ Our Lord."[47] Yet it should have been harder not to hear in these lines the echo of "the Spirit of God mov[ing] [or brooding] upon the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2).

I notice, too, that all but one of the specifically named shut *out* poems are by women, while all but two of the specifically shut *in* are by men;[48] both of those are Linda Sillitoe's, and one, to be sure, is her "Song of Creation," which the Reviewer calls "lovely, feminist lines about the Mother and Father sharing in the creation of the world" (Cracroft, 122-23). Have I stepped in still-fresh irony here?[49] Mother and Father make a world together, but their daughters' voices sound a little too strange to this guardian of the city.

The one poem by a male writer specifically shut out of the

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39. This word signals what we suspect is a pervasively dissolved influence in the Address, from Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity, which announces in its Preface the book's project "to present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality"* (27).

40. The Speaker seems to have learned this remark from Friedrich Heer (116). But he conveniently passes over the rest of the story: Abelard, a premature feminist and dangerous intellectual notorious for his scandalous affair with Heloise, was condemned as a heretic and banished to the monastery of Cluny; his adherents were excommunicated and his books were burned, Pope Innocent II himself (whose name speaks volumes) lighting the bonfire at St. Peter's. That Abelard's faith-eroding *Sic et Non* should forerun the scholasticism of Peter Lombard and ultimately Thomas Aquinas, and that his elevation of Mary Magdalene above the militant saints should intitate a cult, are typical aberrations of apostate Christian history.

41. Has the Speaker the temerity here to allude to Moroni 10:4: "And when ye shall receive these things . . . "?

42. No comment. This "deconstructive" use of a sacred text speaks amply for—and against—itself.

43. The Speaker seems to have imbibed this notion from Richard Rorty's paper, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" (69). His fancy word "essentialism" below occurs in the same source, though he claims to have made it up for himself and been using it for years. Likewise, his earlier allusion to "what Nietzsche called the 'ascetic priest' " seems to have been lifted from this paper, though we have seen one or more worn volumes of that self-styled "anti-Christ" Nietzsche on his own shelves.

44. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher" (Ecclesiastes 1:2); "and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit [Hebrew: striving after wind]" (1:14).

45. Could this, perchance, be an "essentialistic" remark?

46. We've also overheard the Speaker say, promiscuously mixing metaphors, that "Reviewers always shoot from the hip, and often miss; they're plagued by premature ejaculation. And they often suffer from chronic contraceptive imagination." Out of the word of his own mouth. . . .

47. Did he make up *Speckled Book*? At any rate, these references are to the aberrant tradition of Celtic Christianity.

48. Such niggling tabulations are unworthy of the Spirit of True Criticism. And we are certain that the Reviewer's feminist credentials will be found impeccable.

49. Barnyard rhetorical question! Moo! Moo!

fold is Lance Larsen's "Passing the Sacrament at Eastgate Nursing Home," which the Reviewer describes as "a portrayal of routine and sterile Aaronic priesthood service in which the sacred ritual never rises beyond the 'bikini splendor, of the Hunsaker twins' or 'the lady in 243 who wore her breasts at her waist' " (Cracroft, 123). Deflected here, perhaps, by the attention the youthful persona does pay to female flesh, young and old, the Reviewer's censorious El Marko felt-tip must have spread its swath too wide and blotted out the boy's clear awareness that "we gave them / bread of another world." Those Hunsaker twins may now be "sex objects," as is "the wrinkled / Miss July behind the door" of the janitor's closet where they prepare the sacrament; but this boy is coming to know they will one day be women like the fallen lady in 243. He can add two plus two, even if the Reviewer can't. At the end of the poem he's thinking not of the twins' "bikini splendor" but of that lady and of how he "with clean and careful hands / laid the bread on her tongue." This is one of the tongues we must learn to hear, as this boy may now begin to try. The one female tongue that speaks in the poem calls him "Jesus"—this priesthood holder headed for the Order of the Son of God. And his priestly service is not "sterile"; his hands are "clean and careful." Would those be enough "hint[s] of transcendence and greening spirituality"? By my own argument I should not trouble to seek them out. I don't offer my readings as "definitive" (I don't believe in definitive readings, though I do believe in worse and better, smaller and larger), or as deciding whether these poems are "Mormon" or not; but I would say my readings seem to receive and respond more fully to the poems' available language. And above all I want to suggest what perils we are cast among[50] when we play the metaphysical quiz-game of essences.

Mormon reading would be patient, longsuffering, kind; its truest guides might be First Corinthians 13 and the thirteenth article of faith.[51] "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal": I suggest Paul says that if I don't graciously welcome and hear the tongues of others, I "thing" my own tongue, I become a noisemaker, a nonperson, incapable of true saying. Wouldn't a Mormon criticism conduct itself "ethically" in some manner rather close to what our friend and neighbor Wayne Booth recommends and exemplifies in *The Company We Keep*? Might it not ask what "kind of friendship" (Booth, 207) an implied author offers us in the gift of a text? what "kind of desirer" (201) the text invites us to be? whether it beckons us into a "pattern of life . . . that friends might well pursue together" (222)?[52]

A Mormon criticism will surely not judge very quickly by superficial elements such as the presence of the always-ready-to-hand clichés of pop Mormon "spirituality" or "virtue," or, negatively, by the presence of topics we disapprove or words we must not say, in honor of which I've begun to compose a ditty:

> We must not say the a-word,
> no, never say the b,
> not any of the three—
> or is it four or five or more,
> or upwards of a score?
> At any rate, not even contemplate
> the words that start with c;
> and d avoid lest ding or dong
> accompany our little song.
> And e-words—they excite,
> though polysyllabically long,
> so saying them cannot be right;
> and then we find and founder on
> the letter coming all along . . .

Well, it might go on, and I've had flashes of the whole alphabet becoming interdicted, right down to Z, for—of course! Thank you, Pat Aikins—*zucchini*, which one dictionary defines as "a summer squash of bushy growth with smooth, slender, cylindrical, dark-green fruit."[53]

Mormon reading, I dare to hope, would be slow to shut out a poem or story merely because it takes up the matter of sex—"the great relation between men and women, the constant world-renewal," as Henry James called it, noting its "immense omission in our fiction" in his 1899 essay "The Future of the Novel" (39). That may have been only part of what Chekhov had in mind when he advised his aspiring-writer brother Alexander, "Don't have too many characters. The center of gravity should be two: he and she" (Chekhov, 37). I can take Chekhov generally here, supposing "he and she"—or "him and her" as other translations have it—epitomize the play of difference, of necessary complementary opposites, Same and Other, which might beget all stories. Still, there are "The Lady with the Dog" and a great many others in which Chekhov tries out the "him and her" or "he and she" of it—the how and show of it, the who and shoe of it, the hem and sheer of it, the hire and share, the hope and shape of it, the here and home, the harm and charm, the hump and slump, the chime and shine, the heat and shade, the hide and hair, the high and shy of it, the hum and whirr, and the hymn and howl of it.

E. M. Forster said that "Human beings have their great chance in the novel."[54] And D. H. Lawrence wrote that the novel was "the highest form of human expression so far attained. . . . Because it is so incapable of the absolute"(Lawrence 1985, 179). Flannery O'Connor wrote that

50. Yet another covert allusion, this time to John Crowe Ransom's "Captain Carpenter":

> To any adversary it is fame
> If he risk to be wounded by my tongue
> Or burnt in two beneath my red heart's flame
> Such are the perils he is cast among. (33-36)

But to what intent?

51. Unlucky numbers! Yet the Speaker plunges on.

52. Brother Booth seems much more cautious than the Speaker about whom he allows into his living room.

53. The dictionary supposedly quoted here has not been found, and we suspect an oblique thrust at Sister Elouise Bell's well-beloved celebration of that great green blessing of the Mormon garden, now gathered into her collection *Only When I Laugh*.

54. Where? Just tell us where.

Fiction is the most impure and the most modest and the most human of the arts. It is closest to man in his sin and his suffering and his hope, and it is often rejected by Catholics [Mormons too, as we know] for the very reasons that make it what it is. It escapes any orthodoxy we might set up for it, because its dignity is an imitation of our own, based like our own on free will, a free will that operates even in the teeth of divine displeasure. (192.)

I think they all had in mind the same conception of the novel that Milan Kundera has in mind when he says, "The novel is the imaginary paradise of individuals. It is the territory where no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin, but where everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin" (Kundera, 159). The world of a novel is not that of some absolute, "essentialist" either/or, these voices say, but a world of both/and, all together. Novels are polyglot and heteroglot: many-tongued, other-tongued.

For Kundera, the European novel thus understood is "the depreciated legacy of Cervantes" (3-20). But I think he hasn't traced its genealogy back far enough. I think the fiction that is "incapable of the absolute" and in which "everyone has the right to be understood" descends lineally from Mark and Luke, from the stories they tell about that wayfaring stranger Jesus and his doings on dusty roads and streets; and behind them, I think, it goes back to some of the stories the stranger himself told. The stories I've already retold may suggest where I'd start looking; but to see this genealogical line start to trace itself, read Luke 15 and notice there how different Jesus' last parable, the one we call The Prodigal Son, is from his first two; how it gives everyone, even the grudging Pharisees, their chance to be heard and understood, and then doesn't shut the story down with the "absolute" of a "doctrinal" message. Then notice how the good-news writer Luke doesn't shut his story down either, doesn't tell us how this particular bunch of Pharisees took that tale.[55] I suspect that a lot more fiction-writers than are dreamt of in our theory or history have learned from these storytellers. We shame ourselves by not taking instruction from them, too. Kundera comes closer to this genealogy when he calls the novel "The art inspired by God's laughter" (160).[56]

D. H. Lawrence seems to have had such open, generous storytelling partly in mind when he wrote that "only in the novel are *all* things given full play; or at least, they may be given full play . . . ." For him, "out of the full play of all things emerges the only thing that is anything, the wholeness of a man, the wholeness of a woman, man alive, and live woman" (Lawrence 1985, 198). More and more, I find, I want that wholeness in the fiction I read—and, because I've tasted it richly there, in the life I live. For D. H. Lawrence, in a letter written 2 June 1914 (thirty years before my own birth),

the only re-sourcing of art, re-vivifying it, is to make it more the joint work of man and woman. I think *the* one thing to do, is for men to have the courage to draw nearer to women, expose themselves to them, and be altered by them: and for women to accept and admit men. That is the start—by bringing themselves together, men and women—revealing themselves each to the other, gaining great blind knowledge and suffering and joy. . . .(1932, 198.)[57]

In the next breath, Lawrence refers to this as "a sermon on a stool" (199).

Like Henry James, Rainer Maria Rilke writes of "the great renewal of the world" in the fourth of his *Letters to a Young Poet*; and rather like Lawrence he suggests that it "will perhaps consist in one phenomenon: that man and woman, freed from all mistaken feelings and aversions, will seek each other not as opposites but as brother and sister, as neighbors, and will unite as *human beings*, in order to bear in common, simply, earnestly, and patiently, the heavy sex that has been laid upon them"(1984, 41). And in his *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, in a section that recalls the seventh of the *Letters to a Young Poet*, his narrator writes:

But now that so much is changing, isn't it time for us to change? Couldn't we try to gradually develop and slowly take upon ourselves, little by little, our part in the great task of love? We have been spared all its trouble. . . . We have been spoiled by superficial pleasures like all dilletantes, and are looked upon as masters. But what if we despised our successes? What if we started from the very outset to learn the task of love, which has always been done for us? What if we went ahead and became beginners, now that much is changing? (1983, 135.)

More and more I'm persuaded that to undertake the great task of love—all of its works—I must listen to the voice of the Other, let the stranger say. I'm urged this way by some of the voices, female and male, that I've listened to longest and most attentively.

Eudora Welty wrote in her essay, "Looking Back at the First Story," "Imagining yourself inside the skin, body, heart, and mind of any other person is the primary feat, but also the absolute necessity" (755): the absolute necessity for making fiction. Reynolds Price's richest early story, "A Chain of Love," in which he imagined himself into a country girl named Rosacoke Mustian, was helped by his reading of Welty's fiction in the year he wrote that story. Recently, Price has urged more

55. The Speaker has been promulgating this eccentric interpretation of Luke 15 for almost five years now, and its lack of popular acceptance is but one sign of its essential erroneousness. For a near-canonical reading of the prodigal son parable, see Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (307-11), which also quotes extensively from the earlier apostolic interpretation given by James E. Talmage in *Jesus the Christ* (460-61).

56. The Speaker conveniently omits to note that Kundera also says, "I like to imagine that Francois Rabelais heard God's laughter one day, and thus was born the idea of the first great European novel . . . as the echo of God's laughter" (158). This discovery exposes his insidious agenda: this whole long performance has been a clandestine effort to stage an assignation between the Spirit of Rabelaisian laughter and the Spirit of Gospel Truth. But the lady won't show up.

57. It's like this nasty man to advocate exhibitionism and "joint work." And what's this about being "altered" by women? The fool under the trenchcoat deserves it!

specifically:

> Men should excavate and explore, however painfully, their memories of early intimacy with women, and attempt again to produce novels as whole as those of their mammoth and healing predecessors [such as Tolstoy]. More women should step through a door that is now wide ajar—a backward step, also painful but short, into the room of their oldest knowledge: total human sympathy. (Price 1987, 375.)

I welcome both these voices, and I pass their word on to my students. I'm urged on and encouraged by the examples of several among us: Douglas Thayer and Levi Peterson (1991), who in recent essays have begun to write movingly about their mothers; Bert Wilson, who listened so well to his mother's stories that one of her sentences helped guide him "through the dark"(23). My own first step out of my hard male skull and into a voice and experience much like my mother's, in a story called "Two Years Sunday" (*Wasatch Review*, 1.1 [1992]: 25-36), still seems one of the genuinely liberating things I've done in my slow effort to learn to write stories; other equally nourishing steps farther into that "common room" have followed, and I mean to take more.

But the step I take here and now is "down" or "aside"—from inconspicuous figurehead to something near a voice whispering low out of the dust. My valediction as outgoing president is simply this: Welcome to our common room; tell us your story so our hearing and telling can go on. That would be faring well.

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SILENCE

I haven't a heart of darkness
where blackness converges neverness
or the brights circularize drabness,
where suns surrender light to final
coldness, stars die,
voices murmur, sometimes roar
into the abyss of fear.

Silence is the final alert moment
before birth and reckoning.
In everywhere, everything, woman:
Women hold half the sky—
the vast, busy, silent spaces
where light travels fastest.

And peace, when found,
sounds like church bells stirred
by morning flocks of pigeons;
peace, when found, stands firm
like rain-greased torsos of storm-torn
sycamores,
creases the gnarled hands of old men sleeping,
overwhelms
the brisé flash and foul, acrid
prelude of war.

—SEAN BRENDAN BROWN