

Writing: The Most Hazardous Craft

Writing: The Most Hazardous Craft

Edward L. Hart

I greet you today as practitioners of the most hazardous craft known to man—that of writing: and I salute your intrepidity. Any kind of writing is dangerous enough, but to be a Mormon writer is to face double jeopardy. I have to confess, first of all, though, that I am not sure what a Mormon writer is. It may be a Mormon who writes, or it may be a writer who happens to be Mormon. (You will notice in the preceding sentence how skillfully I avoided sexist language by referring to the writer as *it* instead of *he*, while at the same time avoiding the tediousness of *he* or *she*. This is one of the lesser hazards of the craft.) I suspect that it makes a difference whether a person is a Mormon who writes or a writer who is a Mormon. I imagine, further, that both kinds may be present; and for fear of offending one kind or the other (another hazard) by any definition I might come up with, I bequeath the task of defining to my successor, John Tanner, along with all the other equally valuable perquisites of office.

I speak in all seriousness when I say that writing, if it is done seriously, is dangerous. Any time the imaginative forces of the mind are released and given free rein (and they have to be given free rein or they do not work) there is a danger, because the imagination leads into the exploration of new worlds. Ariel had to be released by Prospero in order that the creative imagination could function unhampered by the dull pall through which the conscious mind sees everything. But the question of what may lie ahead if the imagination is freed is as puzzling to the would-be writer as was the prospect of the next world to Hamlet. We simply don't know what lies beyond. To explore the beyond is compared to the exploring of the dark side of the moon by my friend Radcliffe Squires, a Utah poet though he teaches at the University of Michigan. His essay is called, appropriately, "The Dark Side of the Moon." He delivered it originally at a function honoring our former teacher Brewster Ghiselin on his retirement, and the essay is now, at least in part, in the fourth edition of *The Norton Reader*. I want to summarize some of his ideas.

When the imagination is turned loose, says Squires, "We neither can keep an unconscious solution to a problem from arising nor can we force it to arise."¹ There is, in short, no guarantee as to what will happen when we begin to write imaginatively. We may not like at all the solution that arises. Squires continues:

The act of creation in the arts . . . involves really *two* processes or aspects that are at war with each other but which must nevertheless be made one. One of these aspects concerns the release of an anarchistic, quite feral voice, and it quarrels with the other aspect, a voice that is formal, debonair, and legal. The formal and legal side is so terrified of the feral that it seeks to cover it, to hide it away.²

As the process of composition continues, says Squires, the rational mind tires in its censorship, and then “the wilder faculty makes some kind of composition and in so doing gives point to reason and depth and beauty to formality.”³ But what if that accommodation to each other is not made? “When, for reasons that are always obscure, the cooperation fails and the task is not performed, then the artist is in Hell. He may in fact by such stoppages be driven mad.”⁴ I recommend the reading in its entirety of Squires’s essay.

Yes, writing *is* hazardous to your health and probably should bear a warning label from the Surgeon General. Those who fear the imagination and who would therefore banish creativity perceive correctly that it is a potential threat to the established order. But to follow their advice and give up creativity leads us into another danger, worse than the perils opened upon us by creativity; and, of course, that new danger comes from being uncreative. Lack of creativity leads to another Hell—the Hell of stagnation. According to Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” And surely, falling back for a moment into Radcliffe Squires’s language, a creative act that “gives point to reason and depth and beauty to formality” is one form of vision.

The would-be writer who has followed me to this point faces Hamlet’s dilemma: to be or not to be creative. Logically, the choice of not to be leads to a certain death, the Hell of stagnation, whereas the other choice, the option to be creative, though potentially open to failure, as every course in life is, offers an equal hope for success. No oddsmaker could fail to recommend the way that at least has a chance of winning.

Assuming, then, that we have made the choice to be creative writers, we have nothing to lose and a great deal to gain by facing the hazards squarely. Let us assume that a young Mormon has decided to try to write and wants to project in written words a unique experience. I suppose almost the first thing any writer discovers is that it is impossible to transform any living experience directly into words. The reason is that words have a life of their own, and once they have been called into play they lead the mind that brought them forth into avenues and nuances of thought and feeling that didn’t exist before the writing started. T. S. Eliot talked about “finding an ‘objective correlative’” that should serve as a “formula” for a particular emotion,⁵ but Eliseo Vivas pointed out the fallacy in the assumption that there can be any A=B correspondence between the words of a finished work and the original emotion that prompted the writing of

it. Vivas uses the example of Garcia Lorca writing about the death of a bull-fighter in the ring. Says Vivas, “The emotion originally felt by Garcia Lorca . . . was transmuted into something quite different as he began to produce the poem,” and he concludes that Garcia Lorca had to discover the precise meaning of the poem through the act of composition.⁶

The would-be writer has thus discovered the impossibility of simply taking an experience out of the mind and putting that precise same experience onto paper. But let us not be discouraged by this state of affairs. There is hope in it if we look closely. Though we cannot, in effect, take a picture of an experience and hold it up for examination, we can do something better: we can transform the experience through the creative imagination and in the process, if we are lucky, discover its meaning—which almost surely we didn’t know before we started to write. I said “if we are lucky,” because there is always the chance that our effort won’t succeed. There is always the chance, also, that the meaning we discover may be disturbing—since when we took that walk into the unknown there was no guarantee of what we’d run into.

What I have just said applies to all writers, of course: not just to Mormon writers. I also said, near the beginning, that the Mormon writer faces double jeopardy—a second hazard in addition to those that face every creative writer. That second hazard is the risk of being misunderstood. The writer’s attempt to express a new perception may be mistaken for rejection or rebellion. Chaucer is still mistakenly thought by some beginning students to be attacking the whole Catholic church when they read about the Pardoner and his relics, failing to see that in the whole context, including the treatment of the Parish Priest, Chaucer was motivated by love of the institution he was attempting to cleanse. Similarly, Jonathan Swift was a devout believer in the Church of England, though he was misunderstood even by Queen Anne, whose influence kept him from becoming a bishop.

Those insights produced by the most devoted Mormon creative writer may not be immediately appreciated by other people in the Church—or even by members of the family. In this connection, I refer to a letter sent to me as president of the Association for Mormon Letters by Virginia Sorensen Waugh, who praised the association for providing the kind of support for writers that they are not likely to receive from family and friends. The letter happened to come just as I had arrived at this point in the preparation of this paper, and it fits so well that I’m going to read a relevant section:

During my years of trying to say what I felt about my childhood—and I still *try*, though age and infirmities limit the product sadly—I felt deeply the lack of sympathy “out home” and perhaps rather more deeply, the booing. Even the family—only “Can’t you let Grandma lie in peace?” When I hoped to give her a kind of eternal life!⁷

I do not say what I have been saying to frighten anyone away from the attempt to be creative. I can think of no legitimate grounds for doing that. President Kimball called upon Church members to become new Miltos or Shakespeares. I heartily concur with that aspiration. But at the same time I have to say what I have said: that creative expression may be misunderstood and that that misunderstanding may lead to an alienation of the kind that was the last thing the writer wanted upon embarking on a career.

What, then, if anything, can be promised the beginning writer who wants to be creative and who, at the same time, wants to keep a faith intact. For one thing, such a writer cannot be promised immunity from the perils that universally beset all mankind. No one can promise that regarding any pursuit. I think I can promise this, however: that the kind of thing one discovers in the process of creation will depend a great deal on what was deep inside to begin with. A person has, after all, the control over the process to insist that it does not stop at the first level but goes deeper and deeper to the point where one recognizes one's truest self.

In the full light of all the possibilities and problems, I still conclude that creative writing is a way of expression not to be withheld from even the most devout Mormon. If the faith is real and based on genuine conversion to principle, and if one survives the hazards and delves to the richest and deepest sources of being, there will be no loss, but rather an enhancement—in the discovery of that deeper self in the context of the deeper truth.

Edward L. Hart is a professor emeritus of English at Brigham Young University. This article was originally presented as the 1986 presidential address to the Association for Mormon Letters.

1. Radcliffe Squires, "The Dark Side of the Moon," *Sewanee Review* 82 (Summer 1974): 512.

2. Ibid., 516.

3. Ibid., 517.

4. Ibid.

5. T.S. Elliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in *Critiques and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R. W. Stallman (New York: Ronald, 1949), 396.

6. Eliseo Vivas, "The Objective Correlative of T. S. Eliot," in *Critiques and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R. W. Stallman (New York: Ronald, 1949), 396.

7. Virginia Sorensen Waugh to Edward L. Hart, 10 January 1986.