

Reviews

Edited by Richard L. Bushman

While Mormons have been writing poetry since the founding of the Church, Karl Keller argues in the opening review that Clinton Larson is the first Mormon poet. By that Keller means that other poets have written on Mormon themes, but that Larson experiences all of life with Mormon sensibilities. The poems in the collection reviewed do not talk about baptism and the celestial kingdom as we have come to expect Mormon poets to do, but the whole of life, everything Larson sees and feels, is seen and felt in a Mormon spirit. In his poetry the Gospel is enlarged to include all of life, a notable poetic and spiritual achievement, to say the least.

Elsewhere the fusion may be less complete, but individual Mormons working in their own ways are attempting a similar integration of faith and experience. One of the works reviewed is an effort to elaborate on stage the human meaning of a Book of Mormon episode. Another tries to mediate rational and religious methods of inquiry. A survey of the articles in DIALOGUE over the past few years would further illustrate the many directions in which faith thrusts Mormons.

When we have boasted that ours is a seven-day-a-week religion, we have usually meant that we try to follow God's will in all of our personal relationships. Larson and others like him are trying to let faith penetrate their intellectual as well as their social lives, not simply to be good neighbors, but to sanctify their thinking, feeling, and speaking in every dimension of existence. The results when in print, while almost always controversial, are bound to enrich our cultural and ultimately our spiritual life.

A PILGRIMAGE OF AWE

Karl Keller

The Lord of Experience. By Clinton F. Larson. Provo, Utah: B.Y.U. Press, 1967. 129 pp., \$4.95. Karl Keller is an Assistant Professor of English at San Diego State College and a member of the Board of Editors of *Dialogue*. He has published articles on poetry, and his book, *The Stairway of Surprise: The Metaphysical Strain in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* will be published this year. He is currently at work on a book on the Puritan poet Edward Taylor and on an anthology of Mormon literature.

I think that at some far-distant point in time the history of Mormon poetry

may well have to be said to have begun with Clinton F. Larson and this first collection of his verse, *The Lord of Experience*. There is no tradition before him that shows any kind of a beginning and precious little besides his writings to suggest the existence of any kind of poetic movement now within the Church. It is not only refreshing to read Mormon poetry of such quality as Larson's, it is about time we had some to read. One was beginning to fear that since almost every bit of verse that emerges from the Church is mortally wounded by apologetics, proselytizing, sweetness and light, and childish form, the Church *couldn't* produce any significant poetry. But Clinton Larson's volume, a collection of poems he has written over the last seventeen years, is, along with his recent verse-plays,¹ a beginning. Not so much because much of the poetry is *good* poetry but because it is *real* poetry, a new phenomenon in the Church. *The Lord of Experience* is therefore in its own way a history-making book: it does not show art filling a religious purpose but shows (at last, after all the history of pursuing The Word in the Church) religion succeeding in an esthetic way.

Perhaps it is too delimiting to call Larson a *Mormon* poet. He is simply a poet. Though certainly not simply, but complexly. Not that he is at all a difficult poet, but that many of the complexities and delights of being catch his attention and stir him to the intense expression of his awe. A man's life is, as he puts it in one poem, a "pilgrimage of awe." This makes his poems, which bound at ideas with a refreshing energy, humanistic works that escape the conventional units of doctrine. As a result, his collection carries the burden of the Church's world-view with greater candor and color than any sermon can.

Oddly enough for a writer of evident orthodoxy and for one who evidently has a large vision of himself as the Church's poet, there is no mention of anything explicitly Mormon in the 175 poems of this collection—as if Larson is avoiding the specific pursuit of the history, the personalities, the social and theological issues, and the language of the Church. These are not even poems that can be used very comfortably in church talks. Larson simply does not discuss the Church in his poems. But he doesn't need to, for it is evidently so much a part of him that everything he thinks or does that has significance to him is automatically a part of *it*. Therefore, the exactness of his title, *The Lord of Experience*—which seems to me to be a unique kind of "testimony" that he is giving us. To Larson, all heightened experience falls under the province of the divine; the divine is implicit in all the heightened things of a day's life; and so these are not poems asking us, as almost all of our Mormon verse tritely does, to experience the Gospel, but asking us to see at last that all significant personal experience *is* the Gospel. It is therefore not merely awe or awareness or the apprehension of truth but the personal experiencing of the divine that becomes Larson's central theme ("in me" is a phrase recurring in poem after poem, emphasizing Larson's view of the spiritual nature of personal experience). So, while on the surface of things Larson may not appear to be a *Mormon* poet, in a much deeper sense he is a significant Mormon *poet*. The Kingdom of God to Larson is not in the institution or authority or ordinances, but, as he

¹I think it is a mistake to approach Larson's plays, as Gary Stewart does in his review of Larson's *The Mantle of the Prophet and Other Plays* (*Dialogue*, Summer, 1967, pp. 125-129), as anything but *poetry*. Stewart says that Larson's productions do not succeed as drama, but needs to sense their value as *poetry*.

says, "in the still center." Pointing with lush awe and intense devotion to that inscape therefore becomes his poetic mission:

I have seen in the still center of every man
The immutable mask of the central fire no one
Sees. No farther in must thought run,
No farther, for it to be.²

It is not so significant that he is a faithful churchman as that through devotion to words he has given his faith life. Through meditation on the means he has given the Gospel meaning.

The fact of Larson's poetry seems to me to put the esthetic vitality of Mormon theology to a test. And there is obvious success. Notice for example what Larson is able to do with the idea of the spirit of man:

It lies behind you, motionless as fear,
Like larvae sinking into sleep, rapt,
And dreaming rigidly of flight and flame;
It lies apart, aside, unseen, for what
Remains is husk, the stiffening cocoon;
It lies behind you, hidden in the sheath
Of anonymity, crisp, the laughing sum
That slips like light in air, around and in,
Flown and borne, of being winging full;
It lies behind you, motionless as fear,
Arranging in the forms its core of mind
That binds the seen unbreathing as a tomb.
(*"The Unseen World"*)

Or how he finds images for the idea of opposition in all things, here using moon and earth for contrasts:

You cannot
Put Him off. He hangs hell beyond our air
And shows Himself to us as creator of titanic opposites,
For us the filament of green bending lightly
In the shade or in the warmth of sun.
(*"The Twin Planets"*)

Or how at his hand the Mormon concept of the Holy Ghost becomes more comprehensible:

On this meniscus of iron
The firebird walks
Like a jay gabbling
On the bark of a tender limb.
Can one be at ease
Over the core of fire

²Larson's poems are reprinted here with permission from the author.

Except him, ruffling
Heaven in his wings?
The barque of the void
Copernicus hollowed
Shudders there
And coasts like the van
Eros near the moon,
In the darkness where
The planes of fire glare
In the still realms
Of isothermic clouds;
The great vales
Flare in the arc
That whitens the void of their sire.
The bird walks over sand
Like a litigant
Before the dissembled bar
Of the sea.

(“The Holy Ghost”)

Most admirable is Larson’s attempt to show the need of the Restoration of the Gospel with a series of richly suggestive metaphors, as in the poem, “The Visit.” (In the “evening” of the world, men are “Hungering for an aspect of being”):

I approach the door,
A visitor come home to what remains,
My desire like a void over the land.
The stone effluvia hold the beams and slanting floors;
The lace of vines covers the turrets;
The gardens bask in fumes of dusty rot
Where snags of wire curl, rusting.
Evening now, and the door’s hinge
Ushers drafts into the rooms:
There, the Lord’s casque is sundered
And the breastplate wrinkled from war;
The armor lies in state
Now that no defense is taken.
Only the few remain,
Shuffling and grovelling in their peril
Because their mewling safety demanded it.
Science, the meter of decimation, guesses
The fragile margin by which they are,
So I visit the laboratory of rooms,
Preening my hate for those peers in garlands of mail
Who devised the method for what I see.

The foyer leads

To a smaller room: O, the heavens rise
In the orbit of Andromeda, the buildings
Of my cities are there, but all are only desire,
Hungering for an aspect of being.

Suddenly with grief,
I sit among the toys
Of the departed young;
I listen to the voice of light in the window,
But it drones in the marrow of dolls strewn and unsewn.
Hooks and eyes, drums, bolts and sticks,
Wheels, knots, cloth, and string
Tumble in my hands,
And the wastes they came to
Shrink the image of man to what they are.

The statuary God prevails,
But all his toys are broken.
What pogrom lights my eyes across the vistas of broken tombs?
The gorge of what dragon spills these broken toys?

I close the door,
And they are gone in the surmise of time:
O Athens and Israel, the kingdoms of purple and gold,
They are gone from the little room.

Larson's poems are curious in still other ways that make them peculiarly Mormon. For one thing, they are intense but for the most part without metaphysical tension. There are few philosophical conflicts in his subject matter, few ambiguities of existence that go unresolved, few disparities in reality revealed. There is a great deal of light imagery but without the darkness for contrast, and there are a great many affirmations and heady transcendentalisms but without any real descent into gloom and doom as juxtaposition. To Larson, man's glory is not defined by contrast with his wretchedness but, as in the optimism of Mormon theology, by keeping one eye on the plenitude of man's world and the other on the possibilities of man in the cosmos. The excitement in reading Larson's verse comes, then, not from any tension created in the mind but from the calm intensity; that is, not from pondering the Inscrutable (Larson is in many ways anti-intellectual), but from scrutinizing with awe the lushness of creation and from personally experiencing the divinely compact multiplicity of observable forms, as with grace. The richness of imagery (often obscuring ideas with its color and sound) is itself a statement of faith in a miraculous world, and neatly refutes the claim that the strong strain of Puritanism in Mormonism makes sensuous expression impossible. Note the richness of the imagery in a poem like "Supplication":

The day is still. . . .
Across the fields the roofs glare angular
White and green, and the ambrosia of cause
Pools in the spirit of God.

The final beetle whirs in a ravine,
The insistence of failing wings
Deathless as a quattrocento martyrdom.

Like the sword of the apocalypse,
The day is still. . . .
The strain of death invades song,
And the choir of meaning is high and false
Across the fields;
Their singing is duty for God,
Crazed with overt belief.

Old machines rust and bake in the motionless day;
The day is for everyone,
The worn children of the mind
Heaped in the fields of their sacrifice.

They listen, as I, to the whirring of God in the ravine,
Who inspects with an Aristotelian air
The monuments to Him.

Hymen,
I think of the askance of men
Who see in themselves the glory of infinite song.

The day is still
As the fire
Nineveh and Tyre. . . .
O God,
An outraged dove leans against the wall of our being,
Laughing, mad,
And pecking at the causeways of our blood.

On the subject of the richness of his imagery, Larson has written:

I intend that the baroque style, in its complexity and verbal richness, should eventually reveal the sinew of intellectual accuracy and proportion, besides spiritual elevation. This insight is, of course, gained through analysis and, finally, in the text attaining the status of a kind of mythic idiom, as occurred, for example, with Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven" and with much of Dylan Thomas' poetry. I hope this happens, particularly, with such passages as this one, which refers to the Lord:

They hint the incalculable god
Wherever they stream
Whose voice is the whisper and ermine of sand.³

Larson's other Mormon eye is on man and his transcendent possibilities, so his choice of imagery is most often one that obtains primarily cosmically; that is, normal time-space relationships are contorted and descriptions are projected onto a cosmic screen. Most things are a little out of this world. This fusion of here and

³From a letter to me, January 7, 1968.

hereafter, senses and soul, man and divine (confused and fuzzy and a little too lofty and lordly as such remote and abstract imagery often is in the poems) is itself a statement of hope. This lushness and sublimity, along with Larson's view of God as an immanent personality that hovers watchfully over the perfect beauty and order of creation and the strivings of man, give his poems a significant Mormon tone.

But these poetic probings of one's faith are not always to Larson's credit. There are some serious failings in the test that Larson's poetry makes of the esthetic vitality of Mormon theology. To be sure, his poetry succeeds when it has "Meanings thriving each through each / To fuse their being" or when his images "Circle the mind with awareness," but it fails when it is merely ecstatic and didactic or merely rich and sublime. Thus a poem like "The Song of Light" is all electrical exclamation marks and a beautiful and cruel sacramental poem like "Crucifixion in Judea," a description of the nailing of Jesus to the cross, is marred by a sermon at the end: "Receive Him as He gave Himself and so remember Him."⁴

The sensuous fullness of imagery that is characteristic of Larson's style is all too often an excess of description that turns the reader into a mere consumer. A number of poems cannot be taken seriously; intense as they may show Larson's devotions to be, they are merely exercises in sound. God's plenty becomes clogged with noise. This lush, heavy, reduplicative imagery makes for obscurity, obscurity of the sort that a poet develops when he has a thin idea and thin feeling and needs to beef up his material with high sound and awkwardly collapsed syntax. Such poems are not so much complex as obscure, and so in his celebrations of light and plentitude, Larson's brilliant-seeming phrases often have attractive sound but little sense. They bog down from the sheer weighty love of words. Chastity of imagery is lacking.

The loftiness of point of view and sublimity of imagery characteristic of Larson's style often smack of remoteness, and the joy in intense human experience Larson professes is often undercut by the lordliness (one is almost tempted to say the austerity). There is something a little pretentious about all the spirituality in the poems—the dedication of the book to Jesus, super-earnest encomiums like "To the Creator" and "As If the Lord Were Speaking," the consistent affirmation of most "things of the spirit" without much discrimination, and especially Larson's longest work, the six-part debate poem "The Conversions of God," an overwrought attempt to define Deity.⁵ All the spiritualistic imagery tends to make Larson remote from the experiences of society and civilization, and the cosmic reaches leave little sense of time or place. There is sometimes a tone of scoffing superiority: T. S. Eliot "tinkers endlessly with shame" and needs to believe something beyond his "sterile

⁴Published in this issue of *Dialogue*. Because the didacticism and ecstasy are dissolved in the facts of a plot, much more successful are Larson's narrative poems: "The Incurable," the story of a condemned criminal who fails to save a drowning child; "The Funeral," the story of a highjumper defeated by his own ambition; and "Homestead in Idaho" (first published in *Dialogue*), the story of an isolated, dying pioneer woman who shoots her children rather than leaving them to starve. One would like to see Larson work more with narrative form.

⁵See Marden J. Clark, "Internal Theology," *Utah Academy Proceedings*, XLI (1964), 188-194; an excellent, enlightening, though I think excessively enthusiastic explication of "The Conversions of God" by Larson's best-informed apologist.

conversion”; Plato “missed the vital Discipline” of Christianity and was too “proud of little things that bear / Some semblance of the real”; and “the wastes [that Protestant reformers] came to / Shrink the image of man to what they are.” Oddly enough, Larson himself is seldom a persona in his poems, barely even any kind of a voice. The poems, beautifully worked but austere, as a result lack a personal tone, a personality, a warmth for subjects, a humane hand extended to the world. Larson is hidden somewhere behind the lush imagery and sublime sound, as if he is a little afraid of his readers, a little different, a little indifferent. Larson’s social satires are excellent—conventional churchgoers are those who “maintain the refuge [of] total Sunday — In lieu of total consecration”; the falsely pious are those who exclaim, “Behold how Jesus fills my soul”; the philosopher is “Nervous with preoccupation, — Staining all life with [his] preoccupation”; and the critics of Larson’s own poems are “olympic esthetes” who “explore . . . surfaces” merely and “toss on a trampoline — Like automats, sticks of trash, — My scholarship alive with racking heat”—yet his main interests are not the problems of society and civilization but man’s soul and beyond.

Are all these features of Larson’s poetry—an emphasis on personal spiritual experience but lack of individual personality, intense enjoyment of the plentiful creation but consuming awe that amounts to greed of The Word, imagistic forms that set man soaring on his eternal scale but remove him from worldly necessity—are these also perhaps characteristic of the esthetic side of the Church?

What Larson’s Christ says of himself in the poem “The Pyromaniac” is also true of the role Larson sees himself in as poet:

I raise the turrets of light that turn the earth
And make it pure: I am the sword flaming
In Eden forged against the milieu of man;
I am the son of morning, the keeper of flame,
The mime of the firegod before he comes.

One can be grateful for his effort and accomplishment in that role.

But as a final note, it must be mentioned that it almost seems unfortunate that the poems are published by B.Y.U. Press, for they will then not get the wide audience they need nor the objective critical attention they deserve. They deserve the best appearance as well, but here the poems are in no thematic or chronological order; they are crowded and the lines of type are dirty throughout.

Clinton Larson is a remarkable poet. I suspect that he has only begun his work. One can only hope that he has also begun to win over the hearts of his people.

PROBLEMS AND ANSWERS

John Sorenson

Answers to Book of Mormon Questions. By Sidney B. Sperry. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967. 261 pp., \$3.50. Dr. John Sorenson, an anthropologist by training, is head of the social science division of General Research Corporation in Santa Barbara.

Doctor Sidney Sperry has revised somewhat his 1964 book, *Problems of the Book*