

IMPERCEPTIVE HANDS: SOME RECENT MORMON VERSE

B. W. Jorgensen

Bruce Jorgensen is a prize-winning poet who teaches English at Southern Utah State College at Cedar City.

Dialogue: What would you say is the future of poetry in the church?
Larson: All is not well in Zion.

Thus Clinton Larson in an interview published in *Dialogue* for Autumn 1969. Dr. Larson, whom Karl Keller has described as the first "Mormon poet," also affirmed a hope that "If . . . literary artists . . . take their work as seriously as they should, and by 'seriously' I mean that they become professionally responsible, then a significant and coherent literary movement can begin." Whether a "literary movement" in the church is possible, or even desirable, I wish to leave aside. Good poems, however, should be possible and certainly are desirable; they are, as Larson suggests, "part of the spiritual record" of this people. The recent books of three young writers, who might be thought of as second-generation L.D.S. poets, exhibit the grounds for both the hope and the negation in Larson's remarks.

The Search (Provo: Trilogy Arts, 1970) is Carol Lynn Pearson's second book. Her first, *Beginnings*, is widely known and sold, and some see its popularity as a healthy sign.¹ It may not be, but the reasons for the wide accep-

¹Two significantly divergent reviews, by Dale Fletcher (*Dialogue*, II [Winter 1967], 123-126) and Edward L. Hart (*B.Y.U. Studies*, VIII [Spring 1968], 346-350), suggests the literary problem its publication raises. The former lauds its vision, its use of "the key of knowledge"; the latter disparages its artistry.

tance of Mrs. Pearson's work by the Mormon audience are not hard to guess. For the most part, her poems resemble the invocations in our Sacrament Meetings: they seek to utter for a congregation the attitudes institutionally appropriate to the occasion.² Thus their themes are usually general, simple, and consistent with our received notions of gospel truth; their tone "uplifting" and reassuring if not self-satisfied; and their language plain, even commonplace. The question is not whether they speak for us, but whether they do it as well as poems should.

While not the best poem in *The Search*, "Unfed" (p. 8) is fairly representative, and it exhibits the characteristic virtues and defects of Mrs. Pearson's manner:

We feed one another
 In rations,
 Serve affection
 Measured to
 The minimum daily
 Requirement,
 The very acceptable
 Least—

While love
 Bursts the walls
 Of our larder,
 Wondering,
 Amazed,
 Why we are afraid
 To feast.

The poem delivers what we have come to expect of Mrs. Pearson, possibly what she has come to expect of herself: a small but significant moral perception clinched with a witty, sometimes surprising rime. The question is whether, in meeting these expectations, she has failed to be "professionally responsible" to the craft of poetry, and particularly to this poem. The syntactic inversion that sets up the "least / feast" rime is mildly disturbing, but here, unlike such inversions in some of her other poems, it functions as well to remind us that the least of love may be all too acceptable to us, that we casually constrict our spiritual lives. Even the cliché from the cereal ads does double duty, suggesting some of the habits of thought that induce our self-constriction. And of course the rime itself carries the poem's central anti-thesis, as it should if it is to be given such prominence. All well and good. But:

Consider the metaphor in the second stanza. Love is some kind of swelling foodstuff, like an enormous mass of rising bread. But it also has attributes of consciousness: wonder and amazement. I am uncomfortably reminded of an amorphous, sentient, protoplasmic invader I saw once in a

²Thus they may belong to a variety of poetry Allen Tate described in "Tension in Poetry" in his *Collected Essays* (Denver, 1959): "a generalized personal poetry for the sake of the reassurance and safety of numbers"; "the anonymous lyricism in which the common personality exhibits its commonness" (p. 76).

drive-in movie.³ Perhaps I strain the ridicule, but this botched metaphor does represent a kind of poetic irresponsibility that I believe is characteristic of most of Mrs. Pearson's work. The first lines of "Mother to Child" (p. 23), for another example, contain a simile with some of the density and suggestive power of a good haiku (though I would cut "Look," "little," and "Like," and put a colon after "mine"):

Look—
Your little fist
Fits mine
Like the pit
In a plum.

Sixteen lines of pious truisms follow this, narrowing and confusing its rich implications. Why not leave well enough alone? Even Jesus didn't always bother to explain his parables — "who hath ears to hear, let him" — but Mrs. Pearson, solicitous of her audience's edification, buries good metaphor with middling message.

Her other main defect, unevenly disciplined language, she commonly displays in diction and prosody. In "New Child" (p. 19), for instance, the denotation of "desperately" (literally, "hopelessly") jars heavily against the content and tone of the poem. Similarly, to return to "Unfed," the syllables "the walls" in line 10 add little to imagery or meaning, since a larder must be some kind of enclosed space. Also, coming after the tripping anapests of lines 5-8, these syllables tend to make me hear lines 9-11 as "While love / Bursts the walls / Of our larder," draining the force of "bursts." Even with "the walls" deleted, though, the rhythm still dribbles. Sound does not support sense, here and in far too many other poems in the book; the meters and rhythms seem to be whatever came easiest to hand.

In my judgment, *The Search* shows little or no growth in craft or perception beyond what Mrs. Pearson displayed in *Beginnings*. The manner — particularly the clever rime — may in fact be hardening into a formula. Besides the careless treatment of metaphor and prosody, this second book displays some of the other defects Edward Hart found in the first. The offensively smug persona,⁴ for instance, appears in "To an Atheist" (sic, p. 34), where the sneering tone is, to say the least, uncharitable; again, in "Standing Before the Great Pyramid" (p. 52), the persona seems so certain of a good seat on judgment day that we might wonder why a writer so sure of eternity doesn't spare a little time to make better poems.

But a reviewer need not labor his own wit to make the point. Mrs. Pearson's own poem "The Pruning" (p. 17; it could stand a little itself)

³The film does not need naming, but it might be instructive to consult a 17th century treatment of a theme similar to that of "Unfed" — George Herbert's "Love (III)." Herbert employs the metaphor of eating, but he treats Love (another name for Christ in his tradition) as a gracious host unwilling to let us decline his invitation.

⁴John Ciardi has argued in "The Sympathetic Contract," Chapter Five of *How Does a Poem Mean?* (Boston, 1959), that a persona or "total complex of tone and attitude" that a reader cannot accept is sufficient reason for judging a poem bad.

makes a sufficiently apt comment on her work. She recalls herself as a child, ignoring her father's advice about pruning the apricot buds, and leaving "one branch / All full of flowers." She harvests, of course, "many, many / Tiny apricots." Read the last four lines (the first three a single chopped-up pentameter; the last, despite the rime, gratuitous):

When it was dark
I fed them
To the cow.

I prune now.

Amen and amen.

One small apricot in this book is worth saving from the cow, though, in spite of a poor title and apparently casual line-breaks. In this one, metaphor, wit, and surprise rime all cohere; it is one of the best she has given us:

THE USES OF PRAYER

Heaven
Holds out a blessing
Like a bright
Ripe fruit,
Only waiting
For us to ask for it:
Our words
Weave the basket.

* * * * *

Judging Marilyn McMeen Miller's *Rainflowers* (Provo: Art Publishers, 1969) presents an immediate difficulty: written to appeal primarily to youth, taking as its main subject romantic love, the book is heavily sentimental, often tritely cloying (see "Daybreak," p. 19). A few poems, granted the general subject, do have a sort of charm, like "Afterthought" (p. 14):

I should not have kissed you—
That is plain;
Yet were I given half a chance
I would again.

The book has as well an interesting organization, a kind of narrative progression I would describe as moving through four phases, tracing the growth of one love, then its dissolution, then the growth of another love to fruition, and ending with themes of nature, time, and eternity.

While I believe Mrs. Miller capable of writing better poems than Mrs. Pearson (she has perhaps more feeling for language, more sensitivity to sound and the sensory qualities of imagery), *Rainflowers* now seems to me no more successful than *The Search*, and it shares with Mrs. Pearson's work the problems of diction and prosody. Mrs. Miller often seems to choose her words more for sound or connotation than for denotation ("deckles," "paramour"), others for their exotic or "poetic" associations ("linnet," "wattles," "moor," "heather"); some phrases are redundant ("sluggish turtling drives"),

others merely trite ("sun-kissed grass," "warmed my heart," "fruited plains").

Prosodically, like Mrs. Pearson, Marilyn Miller frequently *appears* to be writing free verse; at least many of the poems look random. But even rudimentary scansion shows them often to be irregularly broken iambs. The first five lines of "Star Bright" (p. 11), for instance —

When I was almost out of stars
You came.
The sun-kissed grass
And leaves
Were not the same

— are actually a pentameter couplet, and the emphasis presumably secured by the line-breaks does not justify them. The same broken pentameters occur again in the last three lines of "Forever Moon" (p. 43), in the third stanza of "This Is a Good Love" (p. 45), and elsewhere, prompting the observation that if so many lines are iambic or near-iambic, they should be more carefully wrought, or if free verse is the aim, they should scrupulously be kept from falling into such frequent iambic patterns.

Here and there we encounter well-modulated iambic lines preceded, followed, or interrupted by clumsy ones or by awkward trisyllabic feet. Note, in the following, the second line, a trimeter with an effective spondee:

And it has been so many days since I have seen
That moon's dark half defined
By some light still mirrored from the sun. (p. 43)

Or, in these lines, the nicely counterpointed third:

Into the streaming edge
Forsaken by dappling sunshine —
Facing rivers of clouds and rains. (p. 53)

This sort of thing suggests a willfully slack prosodic discipline, for if Mrs. Miller can write good lines, why doesn't she make all of them that way?

One poem in *Rainflowers* I find prosodically interesting is "Dusk Song" (p. 52), for some of its lines suggest what Mrs. Miller may be able to do with rhythm:

The throb of the cricket
Etches eternal evenings — its long
Constant saw of strings:
Legs like strings scraping night —
All warping, woofing to this one
Ancient song, long — meaning warm
Summer dusk, tall grass, woods, a walk
In dim parks, the cool odor of Queen's Lace.
This tune is the sum of sighs.
The breathing out and in that begin
To calm.
And in evening's breath
The rocker etches in duet
Its mellowing psalm.

Note how the frequent sprung stresses in lines 6-8 relax in subsequent lines to reach the appropriately regular iambic movement of line 13. One wishes this pattern of rhythmic tension and relaxation had been more consistently developed through the entire poem. The use of assonance and consonance here also deserves notice, though unfortunately this and other positive values in the poem are counterbalanced by some obtrusive defects (e.g., the dissonant onomatopoeia of "woofing" and the misnomer "Queen's Lace").

In general, that is what I find in *Rainflowers*: fragments of poems, lines, perceptions that suggest definite poetic talent, but few poems wholly successful even in small ways. Clinton Larson's comment again applies: Mrs. Miller is fully "responsible" neither to the craft of poetry nor to the poem she has in hand. Perhaps, in her choice of subject and dominant tone for *Rainflowers*, she has also failed to be responsible to her own sharpest insights. For, ironically in a book devoted to love, most of her better lines deal not with falling-in or being-in but with falling-out. Consider the acid levity of "A Gift" (p. 28):

My other gifts are much too much —
I sense they seem to fright you.
So now I'll give my absence, love,
A gift that should delight you.

Or the abrupt dismissal in the last lines of "Don't Talk to Me of Love" (p. 29):

I have seen your loves grow dim
And stop and start.
If you must talk of love,
Make it short.

Once, in a simile in "The Miracle of Touch" (p. 48; and why not just "Touch"?), Mrs. Miller gets close to the feeling of being-in-love, when the eyes of the beloved

like the crested peaks from jewels
Strew the skin with points of light.

This image, in its synaesthetic force, outdoes everything else in the poem, perhaps outdoes any other image for such a feeling in the entire book. And once, in the last lines of "This Is a Good Love" (p. 45), she reaches an insight into being-in-love that surpasses any other in the book. Almost buried by the rest of the poem, these two lines of shrewd understatement evaporate the other thirty-nine. They might profit from revision (at least cut "I" from the second; perhaps combine the two into a single pentameter), but we may take them as they are:

They are simple, and they are truthful.

I believe I love you
And I rest in my belief.

In contrast to the rather generalized piety and sentiment of *The Search* and *Rainflowers*, the poems of Dennis Smith's *Star-Counter* (Provo: Trilogy Arts, 1970; the spine reads "*Star-Counters*") are rooted in particular experiences. That may be both strength and weakness, for when the use of personal experience degenerates into sentimental indulgence in all the prosaic detail of childhood memory, we get the maunderings of "Late Night Reflections of [at?] a Traveling Carnival" (pp. 56-62). Even in poems less prolix, the core of meaning may be cocooned in unselected and merely circumstantial detail, detail uninformed by metaphorical significance.⁵ The result is (if we permit it the name) poetry of low imaginative pressure.⁶

A second problem is the approach Smith takes toward experience in too many of the poems, his means of developing significance, which usually is to moralize an anecdote. In "Triple Treehouse" (pp. 9-11) three boys appropriate boards owned by the speaker's father and, unable to agree on plans for one treehouse, build three separate ones, connected by catwalks. The father, returning home, first chastises the boys for the risks they have taken as well as for the lumber, then relents:

He knew, I guess, that trees
were made for climbing in.
And so he didn't scold so rough
that we would never dare
go up the trunk again.

And were the world a tree —
the men are more important
than the boards
to God, I think.

And so,
despite the boards and height,
Dad let us keep
our houses in the tree.

The method here, I believe, might be called anagogical: the mundane becomes the emblem of the divine. Like God, the speaker implies, his father understood that human growth requires a kind of freedom that often entails risks. That this is a significant theme — not just Mormon but universal — and that it is pertinent to childhood experiences, no one could deny. What troubles me is that the poem's structure — anecdote leading to explicit theme — is just too simplistic, the method of countless Sunday-school talks. It narrows rather than widens implications in the poem by too ob-

⁵Yvor Winters, on an album produced for the Yale Series of Recorded Poets (Decca DL 9136), remarked that "narrative details do not lend themselves to poetic treatment very well" because they often lack "intensity" or simply "importance," the result being either dullness or overstatement. Winters was speaking of long narrative poems, but short narrative poems run the same risk.

⁶I am aware of two senses of the "pressure" metaphor, those of T. S. Eliot (in "Tradition and the Individual Talent") and Wallace Stevens (in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" from *The Necessary Angel*). Both senses apply to Smith's work.

viously spelling things out. And thus it needlessly narrows its audience, for the reader able to derive the anagoge for himself will be slightly put off having it thrust at him, and the reader not particularly concerned with how boyish experience reveals God's ways to man may be simply offended by a pious truism.

Another objection to the anagogical method is that it makes a good share of the poem's details gratuitous and inefficient. Why, for instance other than for narrative probability, does the father learn about the treehouses from the mother? Why, except for completeness in anecdote, does the poem include the details of selecting sites and connecting treehouses with a catwalk? These details may not be meaningless, but are their implications consonant with the explicit anagoge at the end? Or, supposing the anecdote and its details to be worth poetic development, is the "truth" at the end adequate to their implications?

The method of moralized anecdote may be partly justified by the book's dual perspective, the man remembering the boy. Unfortunately, when the boy's perspective dominates we sometimes get unpardonably puerile conclusions. In "Higher Up" (pp. 12-14) the boy watching his neighbors from a tree wonders

if there isn't someone
higher up than I am
in a taller poplar
looking down at me

and in "It All Began" (pp. 18-19), having learned in grade school "what an atom was," he lies on a hill behind the barn, looks into the sky, and wonders

if the globe
that swirled with me
weren't in someone else's basement
just a speck of floating dust.

In at least two instances, though, the dual perspective works well enough, the language of the boy and of the man blending appropriately to render the way each understands the experience. "My Cousin's Swing" (pp. 29-31) ends with the boy frightened by the swing, promising himself not to try it again, then giving in to the excitement of his sense of peril:

But I took back my vows
on other, later Sundays
when the chance came up again
to dare the world to shake me loose.

Unfortunately, an excess of circumstantial detail mars the whole poem. This is less true of "Boy Diving Through Moss" (p. 45; also published in *Dialogue*, Vol. IV, No. 4, p. 75), where another dare becomes the emblem of the Mormon view of man's existence:

Oh, sweetest grin!
To know the leap from life
through death
and into life again.

Smith handles the resources of language as casually and simplistically as he does the resources of experience. He is apparently trying to employ a colloquial idiom suited to reminiscence, as the beginning of "Triple Treehouse" — "I didn't ever tell / about our treehouse, / did I?" — suggests. Within that idiom, though, he allows himself far too much looseness and imprecision, including our endemic pulpit formula "that which" (in "Boy Diving Through Moss") and this phrase, incomprehensibly absurd in its context: "my two-year old brother" (in "Triple Treehouse"; the brother is apparently two years older than the speaker). No freshman English teacher, I hope, would let those pass by. Finally, the idiom is simply and flatly prosaic; worse, it is monotonously iambic, as scansion of any passage I have quoted, line-breaks ignored, will show. Smith's ear seems deaf not only to the integrity of a poetic line but to meter and rhythmic variation as well.

These defects in approach to experience and in poetic discipline result in a volume not of poems but mostly of raw material, some of it trivial, some of it significant and potentially poetic. There is, for instance, a moderately good poem hidden in "Dare" (p. 15):

I'll hide beside
the railroad track,
I thought.
And so I did —
as close as I could get
and not be seen
lying in the brush
beside the track.

There in the dusk
I lay,
and all the while
the light came closer,
and my senses jumped
to know that it was coming.

And then the horn,
the horn
which jumbled up my eardrums, blew,
and in a screaming
earth-erupting flash,
no further than a body length away,
the engine passed,
and all those rolling tons
shook flying by
while I lay petrified
between the shouting
clicks and clacks
to think
that it was jumping off the track
to kill the world.

Then suddenly
the trembling earth stood still—
and I could breathe again.

One of the poems in the book without an explicit moral, "Dare" does make fairly vivid a boy's experience, though the meaning of the experience is not clear. The writer does not see his subject clearly, and the failure of vision is largely a failure of poetic discipline.

An old joke about sculpture suggests how the poem might be disclosed: "How do you carve an elephant?" "Just take a big rock and chisel away everything that doesn't look like an elephant." Even so with a poem: cut away everything that doesn't look like a poem — inert detail, slack or repetitive or imprecise language, cliches, insensitive rhythms, and whatever an intelligent reader would not need to be told — and you may have a poem. Begin by lopping off the first four lines, since we can infer from the next six that the boy thought he would do what he is doing. Those next lines might run as follows:

As close as I could get and not be seen
In brush beside the track I lay in dusk

and so on, ending the poem with "The shaken earth stood, and I breathed again." Those first two pentameters are perhaps too regular, but they would establish a norm against which substitutions and variations, as in the last, could be played to convey the speaker's emotions. In the present lines,

and my senses jumped
to know that it was coming.

substitution or sprung rhythm might evoke the tremor of the boy's mind and body, the inward counterpart of the train's thudding approach.

Above all in these lines, I would cut the noun clause "that it was coming," for it limits the lines to mean that the boy's senses jumped either *in response to* the train's coming, or *in order to perceive* it. Left to itself, the verb could mean those things and one thing more: "know" is the key to the poem, for the boy wants to *know* the heightened sense of life induced by proximity to a destructive force. Given a wider application, the desire to *know* may be one of the deepest motives of our existence. Our understanding of the Fall suggests this, as does the Mormon doctrine that we risked mortality partly in order to know by experience. The one word, given freedom for its full work in the poem, could communicate this to a reasonably intelligent reader; the poem would still need no appended "moral" or "truth."

But this is presumptuous. After all, it is not my poem, and only those who share my implicit criteria for good poems would agree that my revisions improve this one. Granted. I can justify this critical tactic only by saying that if any reader can demonstrate to his own satisfaction that a poem could be better than it is, he has grounds for calling it unskilled or bad, judged by his criteria. It is a tactic Mormons interested in Mormon poetry should soon begin to employ, though it will yield us little good unless we arrive at some consensus on literary standards. Reviews and essays devoted to literature in *Dialogue* and in *B.Y.U. Studies* may help us do that.

Robert K. Thomas once remarked in conversation on a familiar Mormon literary topic that we might not ever see the "great Mormon novel," but we might hope for "a good novel by a great Mormon." What I believe we see in *The Search*, *Rainflowers*, and *Star-Counter* are a few small, moderately good poems and a great many mediocre and bad poems by good Mormons. The reasons, as I see them, should be obvious: overemphasis on "message" or on pleasant indulgence of sentiment; unexamined assumptions about the nature and function of a poem; most of all, failure to take pains with the resources of language in making poems.

In objecting to "message" or "uplift" in poems, I do not advocate the dogma of the poem for the poem's sake.⁷ Despite MacLeish's famous dictum (in "Ars Poetica") that "A poem should not mean / But be," poems do mean, because language is conceptual, as Yvor Winters argued. Our Mormon trouble is that we usually want a poem to mean too obviously, want it to preach, teach, expound, or exhort rather than to represent a human intelligence responding to experience.

That is the first assumption to examine: not whether a poem should mean, but whether it must mean only in certain ways. We may still desire a poetry of moral perception, but we need to widen our awareness of the means available to render such perception. Part of the work has already been done for us. Yvor Winters worked out a "moralistic" (as contrasted with "didactic," "hedonistic," or "romantic") theory of poetry, which conceived of the poem as potentially the most complete judgment of a human experience, synthesizing the rational, the emotional, and the moral.⁸ I cannot see that such a theory would conflict with the perspective on experience afforded by the restored gospel. It deals directly with the technical problems of making moral perception pervade the poem, with the problem of integrating vision and artistry.

Which is just the problem these three books epitomize. The writers — and other Mormon writers as well — have been too often content to presume the vision justifies the poem, and let artistry go. By insisting that writers take pains with their craft, I do not propose they give their first loyalty to it.⁹ That loyalty, for the Mormon writer, should belong to God; under the law of consecration the writer serves not his craft, but God with

⁷Poe, in "The Poetic Principle," put it in those terms. Robert Thomas usually counters by asking how a poem can have a "sake." A poem might be said to have a "sake" insofar as it "deserves" to be as well-made as possible, but we are still left with the question, "What is this well-made thing for?" Obviously for some human use, though not necessarily a narrow one. But poems have been put to all sorts of uses, so perhaps we should ask what is the best use of the poem. Differing answers to this question usually imply metaphysical or theological differences.

⁸See at least "A Foreword" and "The Morality of Poetry" in *In Defense of Reason* (Denver, 1947) and the "Introduction" to *Forms of Discovery* (Chicago, 1967). Winters' theory informs all his critical work that I have read.

⁹Walter Sullivan, "Southern Writers in the Modern World: Death by Melancholy," *Southern Review*, N.S., VI (Autumn 1970), 907-919, suggests that modern art has become increasingly empty because the artist has "turned his fidelity and his piety away from God and lavished it on his craft" (911).

his craft. But we also preach the perfecting of talents: the writer who does not become a better craftsman with each poem, the writer who prostitutes the integrity of his craft to his audience's supposed expectations, must be judged a slothful servant. How can we accept the least of poetry, any more than the least of love, or of righteousness? Though poetry is, for better or worse, a secular art with secular standards, that art can embody a religious vision. And though the vision come first, the technical discipline, as my comments on Dennis Smith's "Dare" should suggest, can give it fuller precision and clarity. The problem is really *to achieve vision through artistry*, as we fulfill our innate godhood through the discipline of experience. The techniques of poetry are, as Winters insisted, "forms of discovery," and technical discipline is the means to finer perception, to the achieved vision, the poem:

A poem is what stands
When imperceptive hands,
Feeling, have gone astray.
It is what one should say.¹⁰

¹⁰Yvor Winters, "On Teaching the Young," *Collected Poems* (Chicago, 1960), p. 90.

