

REVIEWS

Edited by Edward Geary

*The western land is the precipice of experience, shelving
From the continent into the sea, where weather begins. . . .*
—CLINTON F. LARSON, "Crossing"

On the Precipice: Three Mormon Poets

Barbed Wire: Poetry and Photographs of the West. By John Sterling Harris; photographs by L. Douglas Hill. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974. 73 pp. \$5.95.

Counterpoint: A Book of Poems. By Clinton F. Larson. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1973. 111 pp. \$6.95.

Until Another Day for Butterflies. By Emma Lou Thayne. Salt Lake City: Parliament Publishers, 1973. 63 pp. \$3.50.

All three of these poets claim, explicitly or implicitly, to be "western," and it is unlikely that anyone will challenge the claim. Their poems reflect the western landscape, or, more specifically, the Great Basin landscape with its wide barren valleys and sudden precipitous mountains, its sagebrush and juniper and quaking aspen, its snowbanks and mountain thunderstorms and rushing streams. It is a dramatic and sometimes violent setting, and the human events in these poems are also often abrupt and elemental. The poets are Utah natives and lifelong members of the Church. If their poems are western, are they also Mormon? That is, do they possess distinctive qualities of subject matter or form which set them apart from the work of other mid-twentieth century poets of western America and identify them as the product of Mormon culture? This is a difficult question to answer. All three writers have some poems dealing with Mormon subjects. John S. Harris writes of a village society peopled by mischievous Jack Mormons, water-stealing high councilmen, and eccentric farmers who give their domestic animals a name and a blessing. Only a Mormon, I suppose, could feel the full force of the ironies in "Progress," about the demolition of a pioneer meetinghouse:

The officials point with pride
To the bright glass replacement up the street,
Praise the classrooms,
The long carpeted hallways
And the tall aluminum steeple
That has no bell;
They walk with relief over the old site
With its fearsome past all hauled away
And talk with the service station man
About his plans.

Mrs. Thayne also writes of a distinctive Mormon society, the east side of Salt Lake City a generation ago. There is little of Mormon society—or indeed any

human society—in the poems of Clinton Larson, but “A Letter from Israel Whiton, 1851” is one of the most powerful evocations of Mormon pioneer experience I have ever encountered, deserving to rank with Wallace Stegner’s account of the handcart companies.

However, the fact that one can mention Stegner and Larson together points up the difficulty in defining Mormon literature, for Stegner is not a Mormon writer though he has written about Mormon life. On the other hand, the poets under consideration here have many poems which do not explicitly treat Mormon experience. What then, if anything, makes them Mormon poets? If we are to answer this question, we must look, I think, for the center of each writer’s vision, for the fundamental assumptions, the outlook upon life, the tensions and resolutions that inform the poems.

For example, Emma Lou Thayne’s poems cover a wide range of topics and suggest a wide variety of moods, from ski-soaring to old age to “Faces Under the Dryer at Robert Steur’s College of Beauty”; from nostalgia for childhood experience to convalescent depression to the kinetic joy of “Hitting a Ball—Square.” However, there is not merely a range of attitudes; there is also a recurrent tension. On the one hand, life is “The Beautiful Complexity,” a rich and delightful *melange* of activity and sensation. Mrs. Thayne celebrates the rewards of life intensely lived, of boating and skiing and running barefoot in the rain. But she also gives us some memorable reminders of the reality of pain and loss, an unlovely complexity. There is the old woman in “Ninety-five” whose life is so completely a thing of the past that “No one knows my name”:

See my boxes full of boxes.
Open them enough
And here I am:
Too far away for anyone
To call me Katherine.

There are the lost classmates in “Reunion—Class of ‘41.” And there is the unsettling question at the end of “Lucy, Mummy: Pueblo, Female, Age 33”:

What pain so smashed itself
Across your mouth? Fright never stayed like that,
Nor even agony. What got you, grimaced
Ghost, that you can leave your sawed-off teeth in me?

Mrs. Thayne’s poems reflect a peculiarly Mormon tension between faith and skepticism and a personal tension between active and reflective modes of existence. Perhaps the most revealing poem is “Sunday School Picture,” a reminiscence of the old Highland Park Ward which once “housed/ the biggest Sunday School the Church has ever/ let exist.” Here a photograph becomes a symbol of the sense of inner division:

In the picture
that President Heber J. Grant had them take
that auspicious day (three shots overlapping)
I came out twice, being on the edge of two of them,

and Mother always said that would guarantee me
two chances at perfection, but I being seven
at the time figured so? and went on becoming
two people instead.

The poem proceeds to develop that image of a divided self which most reflective
Mormons must have felt at times, as exemplified in getting the giggles

when we sang
You-hoo unto Jesus and had to leave all the time
hunching up the searing aisle acting like
we had the nosebleed. . . .

or in reciting

a two-and-a-half minute ordeal
that my mother knew I knew on Why I Want
To Be Baptized,
which I didn't. . . .

But the poem also works its way through a sense of the conflict and loss and struggle
of existence to an authentic and satisfying resolution:

Sometimes I look
at that thousand-peopled picture when I'm sorting
things and marvel a lot, and even otherwise, I find
myself saying, Highland Park Ward, my roller skates
still rattle down your dented driveway, and
my absent waiting is sometimes done against
the brown bannisters below the Garden of Gethsemane
in your raised entry,
and mostly, your organ
churns under its outside loft across the filled
fields where our short-cuts are long buried
in old foundations,
and like the green-grained oak
of your chapel doors, it closes with gentle right
my separateness and gathers my wandering
double selves together.

Clinton Larson invites consideration as a Mormon poet when he declares in a Prologue that *Counterpoint* "presents the drama of a world that, despite the presence of sin, has the promise of receiving the glory of paradise; and it hopes to show that the world's inhabitants are in the hands of their creator, who offers them the eternal life of the spirit." However, the casual reader—perhaps even the attentive reader—may not find this claim altogether borne out in the poems. Actually, Larson's imagination runs strongly to meaningless violence. Examples of poems in *Counterpoint* which demonstrate this are "Seven-tenths of a Second" and "Arab Insurrection: A Memoir." So does "Stringing Wire," an excellent poem

and a good example of Larson's approach. The poem describes the process of stringing barbed wire on a fence with a precision which implies a universe of order and beauty. The barbs "sprinkle light in the laden air." The fence posts are "erect as virtue." There are only subtle hints of the menace existing beneath the calm surface of life: then a sudden eruption of terror:

Fed into the lever, the wire strings and tightens,
 Singing and tuning to a universal *ing*
 Rising in the register of purpose,
 To straighten in the air and brandish barbs
 Like threat in the eyes of frenzy.
 Smooth a crimp and cinch with a lever,
 Holding the wire in a reticent glove that must be firm.
 But as you absently note the sun over twilight time
 It loosens, the wire rustles and whips,
 Twisting in its surgery, bits of glove and flesh
 In a slight spray of terror and infirmity:
 Coiled before, and tight as a cobra yielding.

There is very little reassurance of "the eternal life of the spirit" in such a poem as this. But in one sense, at least, "Stringing Wire" is a spiritual poem. It is as though the wire had a spirit and will of its own. The fugitive doctrine that everything—even inanimate objects—possesses a spirit of its own finds its fullest expression in the poetry of Clinton Larson. He hears the thunder roaring *Tetragrammaton* and sees the divine radiance over Dead Horse Point or in the flames of a bonfire. An orchard, a stream, cactus, wildflowers: everything is spiritual to Larson. But equally everything is sensuous. So intense, indeed, is his response to sensory experience—especially to the visual and tactile senses—that he seems at times to have almost a religion of the senses. This sensuous spirituality, if I may call it that, is evident in such a poem as "Felled Tree":

A twinge up there, continuous and running
 Like a wire of light, and a hand turns
 Against what is not there, to feel bark sunning
 In blue! Where was the tree? Now it spurns
 The breeze, and the strange day of ferns

Suspends the spiraling light up there, candling
 Its glow like a firefly brightening
 And becoming a spectral God. Handling
 The shapes of light, the wavering and lightening
 Gossamer of limbs dies, a ghost whitening

Against the empyreal blue and black.
 Shifting, leaves like the passing of sea
 Waving shoreward or like sequins that tack,
 Strewn in light, it is the lyrical issue to free
 The soul of vision into the holiest see,
 A tree shaped for the swift call to thrive
 In the gloss and reaching, rounding: tree! tree!

This seems to me clearly a religious poem, but is it a Mormon poem, or pantheistic, or animistic?

One virtue of Larson's dramatic poems is that they do not leave us in this uncertainty. The human situation provides a firmer point of reference. That is why I consider "A Letter from Israel Whiton, 1851" (originally published in *Dialogue*) the most significant poem in this volume. The poem's meaning develops from an interesting counterpoint between the understated, ungrammatical, and inarticulate language of Whiton's letter to his mother and the richness of his unspoken perceptions:

*We took in Sister Snow and her little boy
To carry through to the valley for 75 dollars,
When we got about 300 miles she died
With the Cholery. Her husband was to the gold
Minds and was a coming to meet her to the vally
In the fall, but I heard from him; he has been sick
In the Sutters' gold minds and has not come yet.
By having Sister Snows things in my wagon
I had to by another yoke of oxen when I got
To Fort Carny where I got my cattle, because
She was foot sore and could not go, for 55 dollars.*

The oxen before me, I watch the rhythm of the wagons
Tipping and heaving, and the finite dust
Settles in our wake, paling the sage on either
Side, and after. I am the measure of that journey,
Never to return, and here where the soundless sky
Drifts from the still clouds, and where it goes
I see the quiet periods of stars and the sleek
Heaven of that other certainty . . .

*It was very bad for Eliza to have sickness
And death in her wagon on such a journey.*

The poem reaches its climax in the reader's discovery of what Israel Whiton cannot bring himself to write to his mother—or even admit to himself: that his wife Eliza is dead as a result of the hardships of the journey and he is alone in the Salt Lake Valley. Now his intended destination has become but another way station on a longer and more arduous journey.

But Eliza is still as I write, and I must only
Listen. I, Israel Whiton of the Salt Lake Valley,
Write this letter to you, Mother, from the canyons
And the butte above my land; it is a leaf
From the spring before we came, as both you and Eliza
Know, unanswerable except in the signs that come,
That I cannot seek. So I give it to the wind. . . .

This is a Mormon poem and a very fine one.

John S. Harris's first volume of poetry includes a wide variety of poems, from

the "Canticles" which are devotional exercises employing Old Testament imagery and the rhythms of the King James Bible, to "Notes on Infantry Weapons" which reflect the author's ambivalent enthusiasm for guns. At the core of his vision, however, he too seems to be hanging on the precipice, suspended between a faith in the ultimate rightness of things and an awareness of the multitude of wrongnesses in the world we inhabit. Again and again in these poems we find a man or woman alone, confronting something incomprehensible and menacing. Here, for example, is "Daddy Long Legs":

I cannot tolerate a spider—
 A black widow's sudden rush
 And the menacing gait
 Of the hairy tarantula
 Send chills through glass.

But the foolish daddy long legs
 Is a different kind of thing—
 With his silly little pill
 Of a body in common brown
 And ungainly, skinny legs,
 He slowly bumbles his way
 And I sympathize
 With his incompetence.

But once I opened the door
 Of a dark cellar and saw
 Daddy long legs covering a wall—
 A thousand tiny bodies
 And a maze of slender legs,

Each spider touching
 The legs of his neighbor
 And undulating
 Up and down in unison
 And steady dreadful rhythm
 Of courting or worship or
 Something man does not know—
 I chilled and closed the door.

The modulation of tone is effective here, from the light-hearted opening with its combination of self-deprecation and an appeal to common experience, through the comical picture of the daddy long legs and the bond of identification with the creature's incompetence (for isn't there a kind of incompetence, an inability to deal with life, in our aversion to creeping, crawling things?), to the appalling experience recounted at the end. The first half of this poem is the sort of thing that would delight a child, but as a whole it is no child's poem. It is an encounter with the otherness of nature, a challenge to the Romantic (and popular Mormon) notion that all things were made for man. The speaker saves himself by shutting the door on the inhuman vision and, I suspect, by telling the story. If Harris's poems deal

with the fact of human isolation, they also suggest the necessity of human fellowship, going so far as to speculate that God created man because

His universe was too lonely for his virtue
With only stars to receive his selflessness
And empty void to feel an overflowing love.

But fellowship is not achieved merely by human association. Typically in these poems the individual's isolation is not dispelled but strangely intensified by relationships with other people. Harris's characters have difficulty communicating with one another. At worst, as in "The Gate" and "The Unhobbled Mare," they cannot communicate at all, and conversation becomes a form of combat, a fencing with *double-entendre*. At best, as in the very moving "Fallow," there is a curious inarticulateness as the husband and wife assume self-conscious roles and discuss their infertility in roundabout terms. Communication, when it does succeed, takes place by gesture, and even speech becomes gesture as the characters use a highly metaphorical language. Perhaps the prototypical Harris character is the old sheepherder who climbs to the summit of a desert mountain:

He tried to say a profound word,
But there was no one there to listen,
Even if he could have said it.

And so he makes a symbolic gesture instead, building a cairn of rocks to which other solitary climbers, in later years, "Have climbed and stared and known and added stones." This is a parable of the human condition: fellowship exists but is dispersed. The voice in the poems is a voice reaching out to the reader for understanding, since there is seldom anyone in the world of the poem who understands.

The encounters in Harris's poems often have sexual elements, and this has led to some problems. "The Unhobbled Mare" (published in *Dialogue*, III, no. 4, Winter 1968) was omitted from this volume because some administrators at Brigham Young University found it distasteful, and "Fallow" narrowly escaped the same fate. Clinton Larson has been faced with similar problems on occasion. It is unfortunate that these narrow attitudes persist, for in other respects the BYU Press has become a highly professional operation, with editorial and design standards that are a far cry from the ones Karl Keller took to task in these pages in his 1968 review of Clinton Larson's *The Lord of Experience*. There is a good deal of loose talk at Brigham Young University about the emergence of "a great Mormon literature" and of Mormon writers to rival Goethe and Dante and Shakespeare. It is ironic that if a Mormon Dante or Shakespeare did happen to come along his works could not be published without bowdlerization by the BYU Press.

It is also ironic that Harris's most shocking poems escaped censorship, apparently because the censors did not understand them. For example, "First Spring Ride" tells of a lonely woman, filled with an inexplicable restlessness in early spring, who tempts her winter-wild horse into coming near enough that she can vault onto his back. She clings there for a ride which is described in increasingly obvious sexual terms:

He wheels and rears
 Then bolts across the field
 While I, with only mane to hold,
 Grip his withers with my thighs
 And gasp at wind
 In thrill and fright
 of power in his motion.

Four times around the field,
 Each time with two long
 Leaps across a broad canal,
 While I cling to the gather
 And release of his muscled back
 And feel his sweat
 Against my clasping thighs.

At ride's end both speaker and steed are "spent" and "wondering," and so is the reader who wonders if we now have a Mormon D. H. Lawrence.

These poems have much more to offer than mere titillation, however. "The Gate," which is also pervaded by sexual imagery, is an exploration of loneliness and possessiveness. It is about a jealous brother who refuses to allow his sister to move into town from their isolated ranch, claiming that he needs her to keep house for him and—more revealingly—that he wants to keep her safe from "all those men" in town. He seems to be in control of things, but he is perplexed because he keeps finding the barbed wire gate to the ranch open.

I'll have to lock it up, he said,
 Before our breeding stock
 Gets out and strays away.

Breeding stock indeed! And the girl's response:

Yes, she said, it's always easier
 To let the gate down
 Than close it up again. . . .

The reader has the ironic pleasure of seeing the possessive brother thwarted without his knowledge, but there is a deeper note in the poem too. The girl says,

This empty house and empty land
 Oppress me so
 I feel a prisoner here
 Inside your fences,
 And a woman can't live this way.

It is the note of desperate loneliness again. How many women—and men—in the West and elsewhere have echoed that cry? It is of course not a complaint peculiar to Mormons, but these poems, like most good poetry, are finally valuable chiefly for the insights they offer into our common experience as humans living in the world.