REVIEWS

Almost But Not Quite

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Turn Again Home. By Herbert Harker. New York: Random House, 1977. 245 pp., $8.95.

"A novel," Randall Jarrell once wrote, "is a prose narrative of some length that has something wrong with it." There is a notion abroad in Mormondom (one I doubt Herbert Harker subscribes to) that there are two kinds of criticism, constructive and destructive, and that constructive criticism means fulsome praise while destructive criticism means fault-finding motivated by envy, spite, and malice. I know of only one kind of criticism, which R. P. Blackmur called "the formal discourse of an amateur": an attempt to get clear sight of a work in its defects as well as its virtues, to diagnose the defects (if any) because the virtues are worth saving. Since I care about what Harker has tried to do, I am going to try to locate the fault, the "something wrong," in *Turn Again Home*. But as Californians and Wasatch Fronters can both testify, it matters to know just where a fault runs.

Some readers and reviewers have already complained that it's hard to get through the first half of *Turn Again Home*. I concur. Of some thirteen substantial flashbacks in the book, eleven occur before its midpoint and eight of these in part one, ranging in length from one to sixteen pages and accounting for roughly sixty pages of the first ninety. The arithmetic is trivial, but the proportion may hint at why readers find the first half slow going. For with so much space given to the past, the present action—Jared Roseman's search for his father, who has mysteriously disappeared on his seventy-seventh birthday—is repeatedly interrupted and seems hardly to move at all.

Not that there is anything wrong with flashback itself as a technique. Virginia Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning* (my own nominee for finest Mormon novel) also interweaves past and present as its heroine, Kate Alexander, comes to terms with her whole rebellious and passionate life in the troubled present of her daughter and granddaughter—and without disrupting continuity of interest. Continuity may be the key: the past action is continuous both in itself and with the present action, and flashbacks or time-shifts (as Conrad and Ford, masters of the technique, called them) always bear dramatically or thematically on present action.

That, I think, is what *Turn Again Home* lacks. Its flashbacks suggest a good deal about Alma Roseman's complex and enigmatic character and about the relations of children in polygamous families, but we get little sense of continuity among the chunks of past time, pieces of a puzzle Jared tries to assemble in his mind. And in most instances the flashbacks seem arbitrarily wedged in: the author isolates Jared in some place that calls up memories, and we're off.

At the end of chapter five of part one, for instance, Jared, with "no idea where to begin" looking for his father, stops in an empty stackyard:

> He tied his horse to the stackyard fence, walked inside, and sat on a hump of the hay. Its dust rose around him, hot and stifling, bringing a tang like ginger to his nostrils.
>
> He thought that here he would be able to think, but his mind seemed encircled by the fence—he could not get beyond it. His thoughts turned back to themselves. (p. 29)

Chapter 6 begins: "The first time he visited this spot had been that November when he was seven, just a couple of months after his father brought him from Utah to Canada, to what had been the family home in Cardston. The cold then had been as dry and palpable as was the heat today." The rather slow, expository transition dulls the ginger tang of the dusty stackyard, and the eight-page episode that follows deals with the Roseman children sledding near the stackyard, Lyman's cruelty, and Jared's discovery that the gentle Grace is his full sister. This flashback does follow chronologically from an earlier one (pp. 9–12) relating Jared's first night at Aunt Bessie's, his first encounters with Lyman and Grace, his first awareness of how Alma estranges himself from his family by spending long intervals at "the lease," "a great stretch of land where they say he runs his sheep" (p. 12). These two episodes are parts of a continuous action, then, but their continuity has been disrupted by another flashback (pp. 17-26) relating the episode, six years later, of Alma's burning Hickory Jack Hagedorn's dance hall; the continuity is something a reader has to work out rather than feel immediately and strongly in the narrative.

Though the sledding episode (pp. 29–37) occurs during Alma's prolonged absence at the lease, which foreshadows his birthday disappearance, we tend to forget this in our concern with the children's relationships, as does Jared, who falls asleep in his reminiscing and awakens in the chill of evening: "Then in the darkness beyond the stackyard fence his horse pawed impatiently, and like a stone falling in Jared's stomach, the recollection of his father's disappearance hit him" (p. 37). What should hit the reader (but didn't hit this one except in much thinking after two readings and some notetaking) is that Alma has been an absent father all along, that his absence betokens something eating at him, that it at least partly accounts for the fragmentation of his family.

Not all the book's flashbacks pose problems as acute as this one and its neighbors (the one that occurs as Jared reaches his mother's home in Smithfield and recalls Alma taking him away, in fact, works fine, the present fully impacted by the past); yet discontinuous flashbacks may well be a surface sign of a much deeper fissure in the book. For as I see it, *Turn Again Home* has two subjects, incompletely integrated: first, the Mormon family under the stress of polygamy after the Manifesto, when fairly often fathers emigrated to Mexico or Canada with one wife and children, leaving another (or others) behind in Utah to fend for themselves; and second, bloodguilt for the atrocity at Mountain Meadows. Somehow, a reader supposes, Alma Roseman's failure as a father must connect with his guilt as a murderer—and almost tragically so, since both in begetting and in destroying life Alma has believed he was following God's will, yet guilt estranges Alma from his children, makes him a mystery to them long before he disappears bodily. In turn, Alma's division of and from his family must connect with the bitter fraternal conflict of Lyman and Jared, and with Jared's own seven-year retreat into the isolation and partial apostasy of Arrowhead Ranch, the home of Mormon-hating Hickory Jack Hagedorn. I can reason out these connections better than read them, feel them, in the novel, where they seem insufficiently dramatized and narrated, parts almost but not quite composed into a whole.

Turn Again Home is ambitious (not to say audacious) in its choice of subjects from the Mormon past, yet seems less evenly made, less whole, than Harker's first novel, *Goldenrod*. Stylistically, for instance, this passage works against itself:

> As Alma continued to talk, his words came out in bundles, with pauses in between, as though he had to wrap and tie them. "My hired man taught old Nack a trick once." Pause. "That was years ago, though." Pause. "Maybe he can remember." (49–50)

The metaphor (thoroughly appropriate to Alma's life as a sheepman) and the short sentences alone could do the job; the intrusions of "Pause" simply waste their own and the metaphor's energy, as if the writer had fully trusted neither his image nor his reader's auditory imagination. Occasionally Harker's prose sidles toward metaphoric concision, but mostly stops short at similes: "Darkness rose from the earth like smoke" (86); "Her eyes were like knobs on a cupboard door" (127). Usually it is workmanlike, unobtrusive, as prose in realistic fiction likely should be, though it lacks the austere, tense economy of the prose of Ross Macdonald, Harker's mentor (acknowledged in the novel's dedication by his real name, Kenneth Millar).

His historical subject has led Harker to use documents (actual and fictitious) with uneven effects on narrative unity and economy. For instance, the chunk of Bancroft paraphrased and quoted in part two, chapter five, is something Jared can credibly discover when he visits Gladys Wells, a bitter survivor of the massacre living in Cedar City; yet still it seems an intrusive explanation, a piece of incompletely assimilated research, and much less moving than the fragmentary clues Jared gathers from Alma's letters and journal. Harker might have done better simply to trust his reader's general knowledge, since to the novel the facts of the atrocity matter less than its effects on Alma Roseman and his wives and children. Indeed, in rendering Jared's recovery of his father's buried past, Harker succeeds better in evoking these effects through stock fictional devices such as Jared's mother's haunted sleepwalking:

> She uttered a gentle cry and placed her hand over her face, her fingers spread so she could look between them. "Ohhh," she sobbed. "Look what you have done. Look at the little babies. How could you?" She shrank away. "Don't touch me. I don't want you ever to touch me again." (p. 115)

The device may be as old as *Macbeth* to most of us, but it is still eerily compelling.

Equally stock, yet also engaging, is Harker's portrayal of Hickory Jack Hagedorn as a colorful cussing cowboy. Even if we have heard its like before, Hick's speech smells strongly of tackrooms and horseturds:

> "He is the meanest-lookin' beast I ever see—blind in one eye, so no matter which way he stands, his head's cocked lookin' off toward Fisher's. He's got a sway back, shad belly, long legs and hooves like a set of plough shares. You'd swear his nose come off a bull moose. His head is bald as a suitcase, with little carrot ears stickin' ever which way on top of it. They ain't enough mane left on his neck to braid a watch fob . . . . They's more scars on his hide than hentracks in a Shanghai Bible." (p. 173)

> "Number one, tie down your spurs. Number two, get on her if you can. Number three, take a fistful of mane, dig in your heels, and say your prayers. After that only God can help you, and He might prefer standin' clear." Hickory Jack laughed. "Number four, where do you want to be buried?" (p. 182)

Hick's voice seems in fact vital and poetic enough to have sustained the whole novel, though it might have been impractical if not impossible to use him as a narrator. (Andrew Lytle's intermittent use of Jack Cropleigh in *The Velvet Horn* might suggest a strategy.) Had that been possible, *Turn Again Home* might have come nearer to unity—at least to some unity of tone or voice. But as it is, the book finally looks like several kinds of novel imperfectly fused: mystery, cowboy romance, pastoral eclogue or elegy for the author's boyhood Alberta (its title may allude to Tennyson's elegaic "Crossing the Bar"), historical novel, and even mythic novel of guilt, retribution, atonement, and forgiveness. While these might have been made one, I feel they have not been. Ultimately, wholeness in an historical novel may depend, as Andrew Lytle has urged, on the author's having discovered, through long meditation on his subject and deep sustained immersion in his craft, a "central" or "controlling image," a symbol or archetypal pattern endowed with the shape and dynamics of the one action that is the whole narrative. In his elaborately twined plot involving a Missouri Wildcat's marked pistol, sons seeking to find or avenge fathers, and fathers turned to seek sons, Herbert Harker seems to have reached for but not quite grasped such a unifying image of the whole.

Thus, while *Turn Again Home* is intermittently engaging, interesting, moving, it is finally unsatisfying. Still *Turn Again Home* deserves our attentive reading because as a Mormon novel it pleads neither for nor against its Mormon characters and its share of a usable Mormon past. Rather, it accepts these as given and tries to envision a fictive world shaped by but not insisting upon Mormon ethos and mythos.