

## The Old Mormon Poetry

*A Widening View* by Carol Lynn Pearson, illustrated by Trevor Southey (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, c1983), 64 pp., \$4.95 (cloth).

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THE OLD MORMON POETRY is still alive and kicking, as this volume by Pearson shows. Some of the kicks and jinks are interesting, but some are too familiar to hold my interest — and some are just tired. A people's taste in poetry reveals its values as fully as does its taste in music or painting. What the popularity of Pearson's books<sup>1</sup> tells me about their primarily Mormon audience is that it exists, it wants poetry, and it has an undeveloped taste. Her work is good enough to find an audience interested in poetry, but not good enough to help that taste develop.

And I believe that she is to blame for that: she consistently writes down to the reader. I know that she writes down rather than just across because she does not do it with a *foolish* consistency. As evidence here is her two-stanza "Prophet's Feast":

He led us to the banquet  
He blessed the food, and then  
Gladly he raised his fork  
And the Prophet's feast began.

We watched in awe, and still  
We stand with empty plate,  
Sincere and hungry, testify  
That the Prophet truly ate.

Understatement makes that poem work. Pearson does not prod you with her elbow and say "We fools! Instead of getting personal revelations, we just stand up hungry and testify; how we deprive ourselves." The intelligence shows not so much in her

<sup>1</sup> The dust-jacket calls *Beginnings*, *The search*, and *The growing season* "best-sellers," without even adding the qualifying epithet "regional." Since *Beginnings* was reprinted by Doubleday, that may be true.

choice of a feast as metaphor for the gifts of the Holy Ghost as in the use she makes of it. By linking it with our practice of standing and testifying while fasting, and implicitly with the emblems of the sacrament, Pearson requires more of us than just "yeah!" The poem shows true wit.

"Getting Ready" (p. 60) shows less wit than irony. Rather than the bemused wonder of "The Prophet's Feast," Pearson observes with mild sarcasm this man of meetings:

He's always getting ready,  
But never quite goes.  
He's always taking notes,  
But never quite knows.

He's touched by all the starving  
But doesn't touch his wife.  
His life is spent at meetings,  
But he never meets life.

The wordplay in the poem, such as the rhyming of "notes" with "knows" which asserts a genetic connection between the two, shows intelligence. The use of the gerund *meeting* to oppose the meaning of its verbal form *meets*, uses intelligence wittily. And in both poems, Pearson heightens the effect of her wit by relying on formal verse, with regular meter and rhyme.

These poems are, however, the exception in *A widening view*. Pearson more often uses a free verse that relies on the free play of cleverness to carry the poem. That leads her to write down, as in "Unpinned," which begins:

I hope that humans  
Never pin down  
Love or God.

Things pinned down  
(Like butterflies)  
Lose something  
(Like life).

The parenthetical comments, arch and obvious, show that Pearson places no trust in

her readers to follow her metaphor. Their cleverness ruins the witty and subtle braiding of the literal into the metaphorical meaning "to pin down." As a reader of poetry, I dislike being told how to interpret a metaphor; I'd much rather have a poet trust my intelligence to help the meaning emerge. The poet gives me a perfect egg; I hatch it.

I am not always comfortable with Pearson's occasional didacticism. However, when I read her poem "The Grade" (p. 58) carefully, I have a feeling that didacticism is not its worst feature. It opens:

God does not grade  
on the curve,  
I'm sure of it.

After describing our classroom competition for grades, it ends:

And God, I think,  
Sits at the front of the class,  
Holding A's enough for all,  
Watching us  
Work out our salvation  
In fear and competition.

I like the thought, especially when I think back to the savagery of competition for grades in my high school classes. But Pearson fails to develop the metaphor fully enough to hold my interest. The poem deals strictly with the meanness of the feelings of class members for each other. She gives no idea of what the assignments in such a class would be, of what one would do between meetings of the class, of what the homework would be, of how the class would be run. And yet the metaphor would not only permit such development, it cries out for it.

Such poverty of development underscores one of the greatest faults of the book: Pearson relies too much on stock emotion and cliché to carry her poems. Two of the best poems in the book, "The Touch" and "Laura and the Empty Tray," are flawed by sentimentality: they rely on emotions which the author assumes are sufficient in themselves. Rather than evoking fresh response, Pearson nearly spoils

"The Touch" by letting currently fashionable sentiments about touching carry the narrative. Robert, at the stricken father's bedside to touch him, reviews their life together:

Do you remember that I would  
never go out  
To a real barber, Dad?  
Do you know why?  
Because once a month, when  
you gave me  
A haircut in the kitchen —  
you touched me.  
And it felt so good.

The detail here is convincing, but their relationship is not believably developed in the rest of the poem, partly because Robert is so self-absorbed. His desire for affection is natural and understandable, as is his need to give affection. But the tone of his voice is a whine that grates on the ear, rather than ingratiates. The poem would read well as a dramatic monologue, but it lacks the emotional honesty of great poetry.

Pearson's dramatic training along with an air of self-amused detachment, makes "Real Tears" (p. 46), on the other hand, a far better poem than "The Touch." The same qualities also guide "Laura and the Empty Tray" far more successfully through the jungle of sentiment Pearson invokes. Largely because of the wealth of detail, I sense more real life behind the poem than with "The Touch." Laura is a too-busy Mormon mother:

There had been two cans of paint  
Beside the tub for months,  
White eyes staring accusingly  
At the walls that were slowly  
peeling  
And at Laura; who was running  
in and out  
Trying not to think  
About the paint and the tube  
of calking  
For the sink.

Her husband asks what she'd do if she had a whole extra day in the week. "The downstairs bathroom," she says. He forces her