"A Song for One Still Voice": Hymn of Affirmation

Susan H. Miller

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE, FROM PAUL'S INJUNCTION, "Mortify the deeds of the body" (Rom. 8:13), to King Benjamin's declarative, "The natural man is an enemy to God" (Mosiah 3:19), teaches the death of the natural man, the birth of the spiritual. But the paradox is that our physical bodies, created by God and, according to Mormon doctrine, fashioned after his own of flesh and bone, are endowed with sensory awareness and perception, with needs and desires — indeed with the capacity to find joy or damnation through the senses. Often in the intense desire, the yearning to learn spiritually, we feel the pull of polar extremities: to find God through denial of the senses or to find him through surfeit of the senses. We desire the dramatic. Dealing implicitly with this paradox, Bruce Jorgensen's "A Song for One Still Voice" (1983) quietly, but insistently, reveals another way to God — through performance of simple duties and appreciation of sensuous detail: affirmation of body and spirit.

Superficially simple, this short story details not more than an hour or two in the life of a married man who rises early one morning while it is still dark to take his water turn. This explicitly simple act, however, takes on deep implicit significance as surface action works rhythmically with meditative flashbacks. Contact with his family and nature prompts Carl's introspective, lyric reflections. The detail builds gradually through an intricate synthesizing of imagery, recollections, and sensuous awareness of nature and human relationships.

Equally important is the point of view from which the story is told, because it forces us, at least with a second or third reading, to *notice* the narrator's voice. After the first reading, I questioned why this exposure of a man's actions and thoughts was not given the immediacy of first person. The story is Carl's alone, and there is no need for a narrator to move to other characters. Yet a

---

SUSAN H. MILLER is the mother of six children and a graduate student in English at Brigham Young University.

heightened awareness of the third person narrator compels the reader to evaluate this voice as it links outside action with inside view. The lack of artificiality in the narrator makes him a trustworthy guide to Carl's innner self.

Although paralleling the simple action of Carl's taking a water turn, the journey centers on reflexive spiritual perception and thought. The luminosity of the story is achieved through the narrator's selective interior monologue. As readers, we become aware of a privileged status with narrator-as-guide reflecting Carl's genuineness. But the narrator's voice maintains a crucial distance, preserving the sanctity of the individual, while at the same time allowing entrance into Carl's mind and heart. Ultimately, the narrator discloses the quiet dignity and integrity of Carl's acts and thoughts.

The initial imagery shifts cyclically from warmth to cold as Carl gets out of bed in the early morning and leaves the house, returning later to the warmth and intimacy of his wife and children. The juxtaposition of warmth and cold not only emphasizes the coldness of the room and out-of-doors, but it also provokes a mental observation on experiences that have taught him "his first terror of the simple elemental world." He remembers the difficulty of thawing a frozen water line and thinks of his grandparents "lasting out the winter" and of his own responsibility to provide his family's needs: "shelter, heat, food, clothes" (p. 2). The recursive movement is again to warmth as he touches the floor and is "thankful for the carpet" (p. 2).

Paralleling this simple thought is a meditation on the beauties of nature: The hawthorn in the front yard is about to bloom and he remembers seeing it last fall as he came "into the room one afternoon . . . to a moment's stunned joy at the pear-yellow light flooding through the drawn blind" (p. 2). This pattern of concrete incident prompting reflection intensifies Carl's everyday experiences; he realizes and accepts the duality of nature: terror and rapture. The pattern, then, establishes a refrain that continues throughout the story, taking on the melodic rhythm of song.

The dominant quality of this short, sweet "song" is stillness, while the cumulative force of the details leading to Carl's moment of grace resonates with intensity. Subtle intertwining of present events evokes memories, sublime in their lyrical quality. Sensuous detail that elicits delight in the simple pleasures of human relationships and nature informs the texture of his reflections. Putting on "stiff shoes" and taking "hat and gloves from the hooks" invokes this lyrical remembrance:

> He remembers coming home early one afternoon last week, quiet to surprise them, walking through the house, then opening the door to the porch and seeing them blurred and pastelled through waterspotted glass and screen: sitting under the blossoming apple trees, petals strewn thick around them on the grass, the little girls calling to make it rain again, and she shaking a low branch to shower more on them. He stood and watched, drowned in delight that he could find no words for, hardly daring to go on out because his coming might be less to them than what they already had (p. 3).

Another meditative flashback occurs when he thinks of the newly planted garden: "peas, carrots, lettuce, thin grasslike spears of onion sets." This

prompts the recollection of "onion-stuffed nylons" (p. 4). As he hung them on the porch the previous fall, he noticed the cat "claw down" a hummingbird:

> He himself pounced on the cat to rescue the bird, got it in his hand, felt the shock of its unimaginably intense life, saw at its throat what he first thought was blood, then realized was the ruby, glowing in the dusk as if the bird bore the summer's whole harvest of light (p. 4).

Demonstrating the intricate connections between mind and world, this passage, likewise, testifies poignantly of the beauty and pain, the glory and danger of nature. Nature's dangerous, even predatory aspects must be felt, experienced — acknowledged.

Gentle irony is at work here reminding us that roses and lilies are nice, but even onions will suffice to evoke religious meditation. We cannot escape the commonplace. By accepting reality, with both its positive and negative qualities, we can penetrate the mysteries of existence, find the universal through the particular. Thus Carl senses how the intensity of the bird's movement and its ruby throat, which he mistakes for blood, becomes a metaphor for the sum total of existence: "the summer's whole harvest of light" (p. 4).

The "light" imagery is intricately interwoven into a background of darkness, creating a subtle chiaroscuro. Each element, in significant religious ways, reveals and defines the other. The obvious movement in the story is from darkness to light: Carl rises in the dark to take his water turn; and at the story's end the light, which invests and penetrates his surroundings, symbolizes a spiritual communion with God and his creations. But paradoxically, it is revelatory light from the moon, not the sun — the symbol generally associated with God's power. Mythically, the moon represents intuitive, creative powers; and as one of God's creations, it possesses also the powers of illumination and transformation. The moonlight resting on tangible, sensory objects discloses the holiness of their very essence. Doctrine and Covenants 88, with its elucidation (among other things) of what the light of Christ is, confirms the puissance Carl feels in and through and from God's creations, particularly the moonlight:

> As also he is the moon, and is the light of the moon, and the power thereof by which it was made; And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings; Which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space —
>
> The light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God (D&C 88:8, 10–13).

Scriptural elements of water and light continue to penetrate and connect throughout the story. "Silver" imagery also intermingles with the "light" and "water" imagery. As Carl opens the headgate, the water flows like "silver flickerings" until it becomes "a still, blade-pricked sheet of dusky silver." And the light from the moon on apple branches is also "like silvery weightless snow" (p. 5). Perhaps I am straining at a gnat to compare Jacob's Well with Carl's headgate. But similarities do exist. Literally, both are ordinary sources of

water for humans and nature; spiritually, they both transmute to "a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14). The water and light elements create a recurrent beat, crescendoing in Carl's moment of epiphany. Together they are catalysts, illuminating the ordinariness of Carl's surroundings — the bare clay, the weeds, the apple branches — and effecting spiritual transport — the weightless free fall, the world's tidal bulge, the yearning beyond prayer.

Still, the dangers implicit in the imagery of darkness exist and are given voice. An action as simple as Carl's brushing the *light*string makes him think of spiders: *black* widow spiders, so dangerous he has taught his children to kill them (p. 2; my emphasis). Carl also fears stumbling in the dark hallway; he does stumble and almost falls over a tree stump in the yard, wishing he had a flashlight. But when he gets to the street, the artificiality of the "hard glare of mercury-vapor lamps" which he dislikes because of the "livid cast they give to the skin, the tarry-looking shadows they throw around even pebbles" is subtly juxtaposed to the naturalness of the night sky, where "out of the glare, he can look up at the stars, thick, clear, shining, a steady, warm light" (p. 4). The dark sky makes visible the beauty and order of the heavens. Contrasting the artificial against the natural light, Carl meditates on the constellations and the sun:

> It felt good to know the sky, and he'd wonder what it was like to know it as God does, galaxies and even clusters of galaxies flung like seeds to the far fences of the universe. He'd read that a planet within the great Hercules cluster would be seared in the light of a thousand suns, and supposed that to be like the place where God dwells (p. 4).

This passage exposes the meditative movement of the mind and its ontological link with the world — from the actual event of stumbling in the dark, through a comparison of artificial light to natural light, to reverential awe at the grandeur of the heavens and God's power and knowledge as symbolized in the sun.

Interspersed with his meditations on nature are Carl's delight in the simple pleasures of his family and his daily activities. He feels "a sort of stewardship" (p. 2) for his rented home, yard, and garden. To eat something grown by his own labor "feels good" (p. 5). We find no deification of nature, only delight in as ordinary an act as planting and watering a garden—but acknowledgement that "he still doesn't like weeding" (p. 5).

Carl notices concrete particulars. And their quiet but strategic accumulation gives us a man who prizes sensuous detail: the flowering hawthorn, the blossoming apple tree, his daughters' play, a neighbor's shared garden surplus, a friendly dog, shining stars, the throb of a hummingbird, a breath of fresh mint, even the "faint odor" of vinegar in his wife's hair. Carl's experiences teach us that valuing the tangible world is an expression of love for God's handiwork, an acknowledgment that the earth and they that dwell therein belong to him — a touchstone to the secrets of the universe.

The framing image of the story, however, is not nature, but Carl's family — his wife and children. During the story he moves from the warmth of a shared

bed and thoughts of his children back to his wife and daughters at the story's conclusion. His tender regard for his wife parallels his responsiveness to nature: "He senses with his whole body" her need of sleep, even though "he half-wishes to wake her" (p. 1). After he returns, he kneels by the bed, kisses "her warm, pulsing temple" and again wants to wake her (p. 5).

Because the story has been built so carefully on physical and spiritual communion, I find his unresponsive wife the one disquieting feature of the story. Even given his tender regard for his wife (and her sleepiness), I almost wish that she had been physically responsive to him. The complaint is minor, perhaps not justifiable, except that the steady advance to an ultimate communion with the Spirit has included responsiveness to and response from other things, including a dog. A part of this might have included a loving union of husband and wife. Why? Because much fiction depicts our inability to synthesize spirituality and sexuality. Jorgensen himself believes that sexual intimacy between husband and wife is a vital link to the sacred. In an essay of Virginia Sorensen, he states:

> If, in Mormon belief, love is a thing "most joyous to the soul" and if only "spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fullness of joy," then the sexual love, the erotic personal union, of husband and wife may well be the richest earthly symbol and foretaste of celestial beatitude, and men and women both rightly may and ought to seek and find it in marriage (1980, 55).

This story might have shown that physical intimacy can be sacred, not sensational. Nevertheless, Carl's private inference: "There is no loneliness like the body, nor any delight" (p. 5), is a haunting affirmation that our physical self is a means to the spiritual.

Significantly, the episode prior to his moment of grace brings Carl back into his home and in contact with his family. Just before the harmonizing of the light with the delight and fear he knows exists in sensory experiences, Carl diapers his baby daughter and turns "her warm, tumblesome body end for end so she lies as she should" (p. 5). Although this simple act emphasizes the pervasive stillness, even gentleness, in the story, an intenseness informs the texture — much like the piercing, penetrating quality of the still small voice that came to Elijah. When Elijah tried to reconvert the wayward Israelites with a show of force, God humored him by sending fire to consume the sacrifice, even to "lick[ing] up the water that was in the trench" (1 Kings 18:38). Only momentarily were the people persuaded. The Lord's lesson was that fireworks are only a flash in the pan — good for a hurrah but not a hosanna. Discouraged, Elijah went to the mountains to hide, but

> behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake:
>
> And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice (1 Kings 19:11–12).

Then God met Elijah's grievance that "I, even I only, am left" (1 Kings 19:14) with the assurance that he was not alone; others remained who also were faithful. The still voice exposes the ambiguity of the aloof self with the collective group, thus displaying the potency of human connectedness.

Carl's experiences confirm the Lord's lesson to Elijah: simplicity has staying power that theatrics do not. Carl too knows the value of human relationships, especially in their innocent form of nurturing rather than coercing. After touching his wife, diapering his baby, and checking on an older daughter, Carl looks to "the east window" and sees "unbelievably, snow," which is actually "some surprise of the light," illuminating weeds, water, trees.

> Looking at it, he is weightless, in free fall as if the earth has dropped from under him, or as if he is drawn up with the world's tidal bulge and loosed in the gravity of light, yearning farther out and from deeper within than in any prayer he has ever spoken (p. 5).

We come to feel in our bones, as did Carl, the veracity of his moment of grace.

Studied, the journey to this moment of grace is as significant as the epiphany itself, because it details not a harrowing journey into a secret heart of darkness, nor a sublime transport of the soul through consummation with idealized nature, but rather the harmonized existence of a man content in his stewardship in the ordinary world. The power of "A Song for One Still Voice" for those who, like me, are drawn to the glorious excesses of terror and rapture; who, in fact, become addicted to the painful ecstasy of richocheting between heaven and hell, is its affirmation, indeed its healthy reminder, that another way — perhaps a more sure way — to God is not through dramatic confrontation of wind, earthquake, and fire, but through the light: sweet . . . simple . . . still.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jorgensen, Bruce W. "A Song for One Still Voice." In *Greening Wheat*, edited by Levi S. Peterson, 1–5. Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1983.

————. "Herself Moving Beside Herself, Out There Alone": The Shape of Mormon Belief in Virginia Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning*." DIALOGUE 13 (Fall 1980): 43–60.