

REVIEWS

Three Generations of Mormon Poetry

A zipper of haze by Timothy Liu, 32 pp.; *Tinder* by Dennis Marden Clark, 31 pp.; and *Christmas voices* by Marden J. Clark, 31 pp. (United Order Books, 137 East 1st North, Orem, Utah, 84057, 1988), \$4.95 ea.

Reviewed by R. A. Christmas, a poet living in Hesperia, California.

DENNIS CLARK loves poetry and poets, and he also loves to write poetry. I don't think this can be said of everybody in the poetry business. These three chapbooks are evidence of Dennis's development as an artist, his concern for his fellow LDS poets, and his commitment to bring LDS poetry to a wider audience.

Without Dennis's encouragement, my own work would have probably all but disappeared in the eighties, so I might as well confess right off that I feel I owe him a little puffery. Fortunately, with only a few exceptions, he deserves it.

I hope that United Order Books is more than a spasm on the poetic horizon, a few artists frantically waving their arms before sinking back, safely, into the sea of inattention. As Dennis puts it in a letter to *Dialogue*, "We are beginning publication of a series of chapbooks of Mormon poetry. These books represent the work of three generations of Mormon poets. We intend to continue publishing at least one chapbook a year from each of these generations of poets, Lord willing."

This "three generation" concept, while

no guarantee of excellence, at least counters the tendency to publish and promote only one's contemporaries; and it acknowledges that age and experience have a lot to do with the kind of poetry we write. We can forgive Dennis for choosing first off to publish himself and his father, Marden Clark; after years as poetry editor for *Sunstone*, he has put others first long enough.

Each chapbook is attractively bound, illustrated, and printed on high-quality paper. Those of us who are the beneficiaries of Dennis's determination, and anyone interested in furthering the cause of Mormon poetry, should write checks for \$14.85 and send them to United Order Books forthwith.

Now for the poems. BYU senior Timothy Liu's *A zipper of haze* is by turns hip and sentimental, personal and political. In "Convertible" Liu describes a Sunday drive in a girlfriend's Jag, during which they happen to pass a church.

As we watched cars pull in
And out between services
Mocking the Country Squire
Stuffed with greasy kids,
She recited some catechisms.
Behind my Vauxhalls, I
Saw the chapel shrink
In a rearview mirror
Reminding me that objects can
Appear closer than they are.

The title and the word play in the last

line particularly suggest a susceptibility to worldliness that is one of the major themes of the book, although I wonder if the inversion (“appear closer than they are,” rather than “may be closer than they appear”) is intentional, or as fitting—but perhaps I have spent too many years on the freeways.

For the most part, Liu’s short-lined, colloquial style is well-suited to the ironies he finds in his subjects. There are times, however, when his observations seem just a little too slick. For example, in “So Cal,” describing his friend’s camera pointed at downtown L.A., the phallicism seems forced.

You say it gives you focus
zooming in, your 100 mm

angled at the exhausted
crotch of civilization,
skyscrapers peeping out
of the zipper of haze.

Much better is his poem “In the Closet,” where homosexuality, AIDS, and Mormonism are dramatized with subtle symbolism and deep feeling. Most of Liu’s best poems are in Part II, where he considers his Chinese/American heritage from several viewpoints. In poems like “Nanking,” “Rita Considers Banana Fritters,” “Paper Flowers,” and “The Lord’s Table,” Liu finds a voice that transcends generational concerns.

Dennis Clark’s poems are exuberant and unashamedly sentimental. Dennis celebrates his subjects, particularly his parents, wife, daughter, and relatives, in a wide variety of forms and styles—all borrowed, really, but what does it matter? The poems in *Tinder* are not “Dry Poems” (the subtitle) except as fuel for the strong emotional/intellectual responses Dennis

hopes to ignite in us.

At his best, in a poem like “Rock Canyon,” Dennis creates powerful images through effective word choice and traditional accentual prosody. In the final line, sound is virtually wedded to sense.

See where the mountain gapes like a shattered bone.

The trail looks like the trees have shed pebbles for years.

Over your head stone walls unweathered jut—
set to clap shut in the next quake.

In “Early Good Friday,” Dennis reflects on the funeral of his uncle Harlan, who as a child miraculously survived a sled ride under a moving Model T. The last lines have a masterful off-hand quality, created by effective enjambment (thoughts spilling over from one line to the next), subtle variations of the caesuras (the pauses within the lines), and conversational diction.

I pray a winter resurrection
for you: Harlan, that lid would make
a dandy sled, and let you scare
some hearse’s driver half to death.

Good stuff—and there’s more: “On the Stranding of Great Whales”; “Stealing Roses”; “Knifing a Piggy Bank.” Dennis gives us sonnets, terza rima, free verse, accentual verse—a *tour-de-force*, really, except for his colloquial blank verse (derived from Frost, I believe), which sometimes flattens out into mere rumination, as in “Corn Grows in Rows”:

We always watched the corn to see it grow
two feet apart, we always planted more—
until it wouldn’t ripen if we did.

Nevertheless, there are rewards in virtually every poem for those who will take the time to read Dennis as attentively as he reads the rest of us.

The poems in Marden Clark's *Christmas voices* are all devotional, and except for the last ("*In Proprio Voce*") all are dramatic monologues. Each of the major figures in the Christian drama is represented, from Joseph to Judas, including God the Father, in poems written "over the past ten years as Christmas greetings and testimony" (author's note).

I'd better confess right off that most devotional poetry—outside of the LDS Hymnbook—leaves me cool, mainly because the style of such poetry seldom measures up to its subject. I mean, how could it? Our confused tongues are of the earth, earthy; his thoughts are not our thoughts, etc. Even Milton clings for dear life to this precipitous terrain, and at the moment I can think of only a couple of short devotional poems that strike me as wholly successful—Ben Jonson's "To Heaven," and Rilke's "The Raising of Lazarus"—and neither is a dramatic monologue.

So I have mixed feelings about *Christmas voices*. On one hand, I can't help but admire Brother Clark's pluck and his unflagging "testimony," which shine through in every line. On the other hand, I am uneasy about the poems as poems. For example, in the following lines from "The Father," Clark attempts to represent God's feelings as he witnesses the crucifixion of his Son:

One eyelash twitch—and all
Would change, the pain evaporate in
floods of light,
That soldier with the spear forevermore
Transfixed. How can my eyelash stand
the strain?

But no. That they be free my eye stays
bare.

All this about God's eyelash so trivializes the theme of the poem (the withdrawal of the Father's spirit from the Son during the crucifixion) that I am simply put off. This is the risk we run when we speak of heavenly things in earthly terms.

As might be expected, "Iscariot" is one of Clark's more successful efforts. The style is plain, the rhetoric restrained. The last stanza is stark and effective.

I followed Him, and cannot follow.
Yet even here I knew the tree,
The tomb, the stone rolled clear; I know
The empty tomb. I am the empty tomb.

This is powerful. So is the final stanza of "Simon/Peter":

I go with the others to Galilee
Back to my fishing, forward to His.
For I have known the tide lifting,
Pulling up toward Pentecost
The living water inside this rock.

In his own voice, Clark writes:

Giving words to them
Has made them living words for me . . .

Exactly. These seem very personal poems, and I wonder how much life they can have outside of the poet and his immediate friends and family.

But Marden and I covered this same ground over twenty years ago, and we are still as far apart as ever. I should be thankful that I have lived long enough to have my own work treated so generously by Marden's son. And I wish United Order Books good luck and bon voyage.