Poetry Matters in Mormon Culture

Robert Hughes

> *C. FRANK STEELE, editor of the Lethbridge Herald, has rounded up some of his verses which have appeared in his column, "Lights and Shadows," and has issued them in the form of a small, paper-bound brochure, a copy of which he has sent in to the office of* The Improvement Era. . . . *We commend Mr. Steele's activity in the field of verse. Many people might well follow his example.*

WHEN THE ABOVE NOTICE APPEARED in the *Improvement Era* in September 1933, it did not seem out of place in a publication intended for the general church membership. In the same issue of the *Improvement Era,* Theodore E. Curtis posted a notice for another collection of poetry. Its announcement included endorsements from notable leaders of the church:

> I have recognized in your work much talent for expressing great thoughts in a beautiful and expressive manner.—*Dr. John A. Widtsoe.* Your book is very popular.—*David O. McKay.* Your poems are very beautiful. You are a true poet.—*Orson F. Whitney.* Every reader of your inspired lines is better for having read.—*Dr. James E. Talmage.* The book is a gem. The sentiments expressed in your verses are beautiful and the arrangement very artistic.—*President Anthony W. Ivins.* You write many splendid poems.—*President Heber J. Grant.*[1]

The next year the *Improvement Era* published over 180 poems submitted from its readership, including brief epigrams submitted by young homemakers, sonnets written by experienced matriarchs, even an acrostic. During the same year the *Relief Society Magazine* published over one

1. *The Improvement Era* 36, no.11 (September 1933): 680.

hundred poems, the *Children's Friend* published nearly a hundred, and the *Instructor*, *Liahona*, and *Church News* each published several dozen poems. Poetry was composed and read by most literate people; even church leaders took the reading and writing of poetry seriously. Poetry was at its peak in Mormon culture, both among the highly educated and among the common membership.

Outside of Mormon culture, poetry also thrived. Robert Frost's new book of poetry, *A Further Range*, sold over 50,000 copies and appeared as the Book-of-the-Month Club selection. W. H. Auden was composing some of his best works, as were Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and others. Most homes had a poetry anthology gracing their bookshelves. In my own case, a dog-eared copy of the classic anthology, *One Hundred and One Favorite Poems*, with a publication date of 1929 was passed to me from an aunt and became my personal introduction to the joys of poetry. My grandparents, raising their children in the 1930s, memorized and would later recite poetry by heart to their grandchildren.

On a recent visit to the main Deseret Bookstore in Salt Lake City, a survey of the poetry section revealed a few shelves of books, numbering about a dozen titles. Most were anthologies of poems written decades earlier. Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson garnered multiple titles and were positioned next to a recent collection by Paul McCartney. Only one book was by an LDS poet—a collection of poems by Carol Lynn Pearson. Further investigation of LDS publications revealed that the *Ensign* had long since discontinued its practice of carrying poetry in each issue; none of the other official church publications carried new poetry. Unofficial publications intended for an LDS readership, such as the now dormant *This People*, have eschewed verse altogether. Contemporary poetry appears regularly only in editions of the scholarly or intellectual journals, including *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *BYU Studies*, and *Sunstone*. A poetry journal, *Zarahemla Quarterly*, ceased publication after a few issues; other literary journals carrying poetry came and went. A journal with limited distribution, *Irreantum*, the official publication of the Association of Mormon Letters (AML), carries about a half-dozen poems in each quarterly edition. However, the editor of *Irreantum*, in an e-mail discussion group sponsored by AML, stated, "Humor is definitely one of the areas *Irreantum* is interested in, and I personally enjoy it more than poetry."[2]

From its zenith in the 1930s to its nadir entering the new millennium, poetry as a cultural force in Mormon society has nearly disappeared. The

2. Chris Bigelow, AML-List, 25 January 2002; http://www.aml-online.org/.

fortunes of poetry have fallen from the height of church leadership endorsements to a state in which the editor of a literary association which "promotes the production and study of Mormon literature and its enjoyment by all" announces that for him poetry ranks below humor in the world of Mormon letters. The near disappearance of verse in Mormon literature has been bewildering to those who love and observe the art. How could such an important and enjoyable part of our literary tradition become irrelevant in the current cultural landscape? Why is poetry nearly non-existent in the main LDS bookstore in Salt Lake City?

This is a conundrum because poetry in general is thriving. Most major metropolitan areas have a freely distributed art and events newspaper available, and listed therein are scheduled poetry slams, occasional poetry readings, and meetings. At the same time, the internet has spawned new forums for the sharing of poetry, including e-mail discussion groups and web-rings which bounce the internet surfer from web-site to web-site to sample various individuals' works of poetry. In traditional print forms, more poetry is being published today than at any time in history. Les Dulton of Dustbooks, which publishes the biannual *Directory of Poetry Publishers*, receives books from 300 new small presses and 300 new magazines each month.[3] Most do not last long, but more than 1,400 magazines and 800 small presses survive long enough to make it into his directory. Each annual edition of the *Poet's Market*, another directory of publications which feature poetry, can be several hundred pages thick.[4] The field of Cowboy Poetry boasts annual gatherings around the country with regular participation of poets, singers, and an enthusiastic audience.

Yet, upon closer examination, it seems that poetry is thriving in a vacuum. Each poetry group develops independently of others; at any of the poetry events or activities occurring on a regular basis that I have attended, no mention was ever made of competing or complementary events and activities. Readings at universities or arts centers announce only poetry events under their direct departmental jurisdiction; at poetry readings held at city libraries, announcements or acknowledgements of university events seldom occur. Poetry slams are more about performance than poetry, more about angst than art. Cowboy poetry seldom, if ever, garners any mention from other poetry groups. With rare exceptions, the participants at one type of poetry event do not attend other events.

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3. Les Dulton, *Directory of Poetry Publishers* (Paradise, Calif.: Dustbooks, 2002).

4. Nancy Breen and Vanessa Lyman, eds., *2003 Poets Market* (New York: Writer's Digest Books, 2003).

What seems to be missing is poetry for the masses and poetry for the intellectual segments of society. Well-read individuals, who in a prior generation would have been familiar with the works of contemporary poets, no longer care. While they may make efforts to be familiar with critically acclaimed novelists of our time, whether Pulitzer Prize or Booker Prize winners, they no longer feel the same about leading poets of our day. Joseph Epstein lamented, "The crowds in London once stood on their toes to see Tennyson pass; today a figure like Tennyson probably would not write poetry and might not even read it."[5] Even regular patrons of the arts—those who frequent the symphony, opera, or jazz performances—will tolerate but not embrace the art of language. Readers of *Dialogue, Sunstone,* or similar publications which highlight literature in a Mormon context have apparently lost interest to the point that major publishers of LDS books seldom carry poetry titles any more. They simply do not sell.

The demise of poetry in Mormon culture has mirrored trends in a broader American culture. Much discussion about the reasons for this trend has taken place in various forums. Delmore Schwartz has blamed the obscurity of modern poetry on its difficulty. Randall Jarrell, in a lecture at Harvard called "The Obscurity of the Poet," blames the national culture.[6] Yvor Winters points to the ultimate results of Romantism[7] while Christopher Clausen highlights the increasing focus on scientific and technical advancements in society.[8] Philip Larkin blames the modern subsidizing of poets, which, he says, cuts them off from their audience; [9] Wendell Berry has identified the disintegration of language in general.[10] Alternative forms of entertainment are an obvious factor. Although no definitive conclusions have been reached, and the discussion continues, some factors consistently receive more attention and resonate with the non-specialist reader of poetry.[11]

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5. Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" *Commentary* 86, no. 2 (August 1988): 15.

6. Randall Jarrell, "The Obscurity of the Poet," in *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 3-25.

7. Yvor Winters, *Primitivism and Decadence: A Study of American Experimental Poetry,* in *In Defense of Reason* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1960), 1-152.

8. Christopher Clausen, "Rhyme or Reason," in *The Place of Poetry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), 1-27.

9. Philip Larkin, "Subsidizing Poetry," in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, c1983), 87-92.

10. Wendell Berry, "Standing by Words," in *Standing by Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 24-63.

11. Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" 16.

Traditional Poetry vs. Free Verse

When people are asked why they do not enjoy contemporary poetry, the response is typically "I don't understand it," followed quickly by, "It doesn't sound like poetry." All standard definitions of poetry include some reference to intense or condensed meaning coupled with poetic sound. Understanding the messages and meaning in poetry is a lifelong endeavor, but what does it mean to say that something sounds "poetic"?

Poetry comes from a strong oral and aural tradition throughout all languages and cultures. Traditionally, listeners could easily distinguish between song and poetry, and between poetry and prose. Song was distinct from poetry in that lyrics were accompanied by music, the art of tone.[12] Instrumentation was not required; the human voice could produce music. Poetry was distinct from prose in that poetry utilized the sound of words and sentences to distinguish it from prose. In *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* reference is made to a number of research findings in which listeners were asked to distinguish between "speech mode" and "non-speech mode." The brain processes the two differently. In poetry, both sides of the brain listen and process the sounds and meaning simultaneously, but of course, differently.[13] These distinctions were clear enough over time that a blind man could tell the difference between song and poetry, between poetry and prose. When prose was well written, it might receive the compliment that it sounded poetic.

In English, the sounds of poetry were typically identified by meter and rhyme, which were not usually present in prose. More recently (meaning the past century), syntactical and lexical experimentations on the part of poets have been used to signal that the words and sentences are non-speech mode, but meter has been the most important distinguishing sound in traditional poetry. As the modern English language evolved, the concept of stress or accent became a distinguishing characteristic of the language. With individual words, accent is a fundamental part of the word: We say MORmon, or SUNstone, emphasizing the first syllable, not morMON, or sunSTONE, emphasizing the second. The combining of stressed and unstressed syllables formed so-called "verse feet" with the verse feet set in various fixed patterns; the patterns became a staple ingredient of the poetic line. An oft-quoted comment from Robert Frost is that he would as soon write free verse as play tennis with

12. Susan Stewart, "Letter on Sound," in *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word,* ed. Charles Bernstein (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29.

13. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1174.

the net down. The reasons Frost gave for not writing free verse had to do with meter:

> I do not write free verse; I write blank verse. I must have the pulse beat of rhythm; I like to hear it beating under the things I write. That doesn't mean I do not like to read a bit of free verse occasionally. I do. It sometimes succeeds in painting a picture that is very clear and startling. It's good as something created momentarily for its sudden startling effect. It hasn't the qualities, however, of something lastingly beautiful.[14]

There may be something more to meter than Robert Frost simply hearing it beneath the things he wrote. Maybe he unconsciously felt it, too. William Packard, founder of *The New York Quarterly*, commented that language continues "to maintain its mysterious relationship with the pure intuitive rhythms of the earth. Sexual rhythms, the woman's monthly fertility cycle, a man's hormonal cycle, and the complex metabolism of all human and animal phases of growth from infancy through puberty and menopause—night and day, sun and moon, winter and spring and summer and autumn—all these mysterious rhythms [find] expression in language and poetry."[15]

The world of opera also gives us a further clue to rhythm and poetry. One of the reasons for the existence of vibrato is because it resonates with natural human rhythms: "We have natural tremors in our body," said Ingo Titze, director of the National Center for Voice and Speech. "We are gigantic oscillating machines. Everything is going back and forth—chemical, mechanical, physiological. It's very difficult for us to remain still."[16]

The standard line of traditional English poetry has been the heroic line of five beats—iambic pentameter. It is probably not coincidental that the heart beats on average five times for each breath we take; thus, the heroic line of Shakespeare's and Milton's poetry resonates deep within us. One poet and highly regarded scholar, Timothy Steele, has argued that the fight against meter by some poets is not a recent phenomenon, but rather dates to ancient Greece. The ascendancy of non-metrical poetry over the past century is merely the latest attempt to fight meter, and it will not last. Unfortunately, none of us will live long enough to see if Steele is correct.[17]

Obviously, this discussion of meter focuses on the English language, which developed stress and accent out of its Germanic roots, but not all

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14. Rose C. Feld, "Robert Frost Relieves His Mind," *New York Times Book Review*, 21 October 1923, 2, 23; cited in *On Frost: The Best From American Literature*, eds. Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 6.

15. William Packard, *The Art of Poetry Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), xiii.

16. Alan Edward, "Viva Vibrato!" *Deseret News*, 27 October 2002, E1.

17. Timothy Steele, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* (Fayetteville and London: The University of Arkansas Press, 1990).

languages have stress in syllables as a distinguishing characteristic. Many languages utilize rhyme in poetry, the repetition of sound being a form of echo that creates a rhythm and helps the listener or reader distinguish speech mode from non-speech mode. While rhyme may be dismissed as simple or childish by some, a more rigorous study of rhyme in poetry shows how rich it can be. We often consider strict rhyme (vowel and final) at the end of a line as the only type of rhyme used by traditionalists. Yet to masters of the craft—Shakespeare and Pope in an earlier age, Frost and Auden more recently—the language tools of alliteration, assonance, and other types of rhyme were not to be overlooked.[18]

With meter and rhyme firmly established as the specific means to identify poetic sounds in language, a formal poet could then use a stanza form as the logical next step in structuring a poem. Lewis Turco, in *The Book of Forms*, identifies hundreds of poetic forms in use in the English language.[19] Such forms have evolved through hundreds of years of experimentation and cross-fertilization with other language traditions. Not all forms are effective; time has shown which are useful for structuring certain poetic messages. For example, the Shakespearean sonnet form follows a logical sequence: The first quatrain establishes an argument, the second quatrain extends the argument, the third quatrain turns toward a resolution, and the final couplet closes the argument. Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 reads as follows,

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,
And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,
Nor shall death brag thou wandrest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest,
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

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18. There are seven basic types of rhyme, each of which repeats an initial sound of a syllable, a vowel sound, a final sound, or various combinations. If I=initial, V=vowel, F=final, the rhymes are IVF (alliteration, as in Bob, base); IVF (assonance, as in Bob, Mom); IVF (consonance, as in Bob, tab); IVF (strict rhyme, as in Bob, slob); IVF (reverse rhyme, as in Bob, bog); IVF (pararhyme. as in Bob, bib); IVF (rich rhyme, as in Bob, bob). See Preminger and Brogan, *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*, 1054.

19. Lewis Turco, *The New Book of Forms* (Hanover and London: New England University Press, 1986).

Edmund Spenser tried to improve upon the form by adding a rhyme between the first and second quatrain, and then again between the second and third quatrain. Following is a sequence from *Amoretti* (Sonnet 75) with a similar sentiment to the Shakespeare poem, i.e., the poet's lover will live forever in the poem:

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washèd it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his pray.
Vain man, said she, that dost in vain assay
A mortal thing so to immortalize!
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eek my name be wipèd out likewise.
Not so (quod I) let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your virtues rare shall enternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name;
Where, when as death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew.

The Spenserian sonnet would seem to be a superior form since it includes additional rhymes. But not so—we hardly even notice the additional rhymes because our mind is processing the message in the optimal mix of rhyme and reason. The sonnet from *Amoretti* achieves its objective, but not more so than Shakespeare's sonnet. As Paul Fussell more eloquently explains:

> We see from the opposition between form and matter in this sonnet of Spenser's the more general critical principal which underlies all stanzaic form: the principal of expressive form, or accommodation. That is, the sense and the form should adapt to each other: if a couplet follows a series of quatrains, the matter of the couplet should differ from the matter of the quatrains for the rhyme scheme to justify itself aesthetically and take its place as a fully expressive, organic element in the poem. Given the universal psychological appeal of the sonnet structure of complication followed by resolution—an archetype of the common act of problem-solving, or deciding, or even rationalizing—numerous variations are inevitable, although few have won the sanction of custom.[20]

Some Mormon poets in the past generation have used form effectively, but the use of tried and true forms is now the exception rather

20. Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 124.

than the rule. Clinton Larson composed in a wide variety of forms; Arthur Henry King used everything from a *Venus and Adonis* stanza to the Japanese tanka; Sally Taylor used multiple forms in writing a series of Mormon Pioneer poems; Marden Clark experimented with sonnet forms. A younger poet, Karen Marguerite Moloney, has used form on occasion to enhance her poetry. Here is a representative example, a modified villanelle titled "Snowfall at Glenflesk":

> The hush that sheathes the road is sure and slow.
> My lights suspend a galaxy of flakes:
> The silence is as haunted as the snow.
>
> I conjure kindred names I would not know
> Had no one told me how your welcome wakes
> The hush around your turf-fire, sure and slow;
>
> Had Conor and his liegemen long ago
> Been late to flock the glen beyond the lakes,
> Their sanctum still as haunted as the snow;
>
> Or had you never dusted off to show
> The pedigrees you walked these hills to make.
> The hush that sheaths the farm is sure and slow,
>
> And still you jigsaw all the leads I know,
> Till, dancing down the fields of my mistakes,
> The sentence comes as swiftly as the snow:
>
> "Curreal! Your Julia's from Curreal. And so
> It seems you're kin to half the valley's folks."
> The hush that sheathes the glen is sure and slow,
> Our sanctum still as haunted as the snow.[21]

This poem works not only because it carries a message of interest to Mormons and the emotional content seems sincere, but also because the poet has used her craft to raise the poem to the level of art. While there is a steady metrical beat throughout, it provides a lilt rather than a singsong rhythm. In several lines the poet's choice of words could have been different, but she chose to employ assonance, consonance, and alliteration with an ideal balance, and the exact rhymes do not sound trite;

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21. Karen Marguerite Moloney, "Snowfall at Glenflesk," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 86.

the chosen form builds on the concept of repetition, yet the slight modifications add rather than detract from the form. The listener or reader knows this is good poetry.[22]

But what of free verse? Does unabashed enthusiasm for traditional poetic form mean that free verse cannot be appreciated? As Robert Frost indicated, some free verse poems are effective. Consider Carl Sandburg's free verse poem, titled "Grass":

> Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo,
> Shovel them under and let me work—
> I am the grass; I cover all.
>
> And pile them high at Gettysburg,
> And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
> Shovel them under and let me work.
> Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
> What place is this?
> Where are we now?
>
> I am the grass.
> Let me work.

Sandburg's poem creates a moving and memorable picture with deep meaning. He also made countless choices based on sound which the reader likely does not consciously notice. A brief portion of Frances Stillman's analysis highlights some of the technical expertise hidden in Sandburg's poem:

> In the first stanza, which has three lines, the first line begins with an assonantal group of words (words with parallel or similar vowel sounds), "Pile the bodies high," and so does the second, "Shovel them under.". . .The third line of the first stanza introduces another piece of assonance, "I am the grass," with the "I" sound echoing the assonance of the first line; it then goes

22. Philip Dacey and David Jauss (eds., *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms* [New York: HarperCollins, 1986] 7-14) have pointed out nine common ways in which poets try to hide form to avoid criticism of writing in archaic methods, including: disguising forms, grafting free verse into traditional forms, alternating between formal and free verse, shifting stanzaic patterns, creating hybrid forms, inverting forms, truncating forms, extending forms, and inventing nonce forms. All these methods are evident in Mormon poetry of the past generation. However, Moloney does not necessarily hide form in her poem; rather, her departures and returns to the form capitalize on its inherent strengths.

> on to return to the assonance of the previous line in "cover," which is actually a half-rhyme with "Shovel.". . .In addition, "Austerlitz" (with the first syllable pronounced in the anglicized fashion in which we say "Austria") and "Waterloo" have great parallelism of sound. "Au" is the same sound as in "Wa(ter)," "ter" occurs in both words, and the final syllable in both cases begins with the letter "l.". . .Even in the seventh line, when the poet writes "Two years, ten years," his logic is musical, rather than substantive; "One year, ten years," or "Three years, ten years," would not have had the inevitability of sound (furnished by alliteration) that makes the phrase memorable. It is not the exact number of years, but the sound of the number, which is important here.[23]

To the blind man, there can be no question that "Grass" is poetry. It would not matter how it looked on the page, it would still be poetic in both sound and meaning. Contrast Sandburg's poem with one by Sharon Olds, who is a highly regarded and award-winning poet. Michael Ondaatje wrote of her book, *The Unswept Room*: "Sharon Olds's poems are pure fire in the hands—risky, on the verge of falling, and in the end leaping up. I love the roughness and humor and brag and tenderness and completion in her work as she carries the reader through rooms of passion and loss."[24] The book was a 2002 National Book Award Finalist for Poetry. Olds provides some background for one of her poems in the book, titled "Virginal Orgy":

> In our sophomore year, Solomon Wheat, a senior, captain of the high school team, carried us to the Tournament of Champions, and we won. I left the game with my friend the hourglass beauty, and her friend the President of the Sophomore class. He put an arm around each of us, as if there were two of him, one for her one for me, and I felt, through him, linked to her long, tilted eyes and Scythian-bow lips and cinched waist and the large globes of her breasts. It was almost as if I could look into a mirror held by Mike and see myself as Liz, the way we had seen ourselves as Solomon Wheat. I felt that Mike was hugging me partly so he could hug Liz, as if I were a moderate price he was paying for embracing her glory. . . ."[25]

But of course that *was* the poem. Sharon Olds found the return key on her keyboard, and the final result looks like this:

> In our sophomore year, Solomon Wheat,
> a senior, captain of the high school team,

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23. Frances Stillman, *The Poet's Manual and Rhyming Dictionary* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 86-87.

24. Cover blurb for Sharon Olds, *The Unswept Room* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2002).

25. Ibid., 27.

carried us to the Tournament of Champions,
and we won. I left the game with my friend
the hourglass beauty, and her friend the President
of the Sophomore class. He put an arm
around each of us, as if there were two of him,
one for her one for me, and I felt,
through him, linked to her long, tilted
eyes and Scythian-bow lips
and cinched waist and the large globes of her
breasts. It was almost as if I could look
into a mirror held by Mike
and see myself as Liz, the way we had
seen ourselves as Solomon Wheat . . .[26]

This is the type of highly praised free verse poem which confuses the general, non-specialist reader. Without the line breaks, nothing would distinguish it as poetry. When the distinction between poetry and prose becomes unclear, the typical reader will simply opt for well written prose instead, and poetry loses its audience. Just as formal verse can be poorly written, with trite rhymes and tortured meter, so, too can free verse be poorly written. Fussell comments:

> A lot of people take the term free verse literally, with the result that there is more bad free verse written today than one can easily shake a stick at. Most of it hopes to recommend itself by deploying vaguely surrealistic images in unmetered colloquial idiom to urge acceptable opinions: that sex is a fine thing, that accurate perception is better than dull, that youth is probably a nicer condition than age, that there is more to things than their appearances; as well as that Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were war criminals, that the CIA is a menace, that corporations are corrupt, that contemporary history seems "entropic," and that women get a dirty deal. All very true and welcome. Yet what is lamentably missing is the art that makes poems rereadable once we have fathomed what they "say."[27]

Many defenders of free verse point to a poem such as Sandburg's "Grass" to highlight how a poem can find its own "organic form." I do not dispute this notion, but it should be pointed out that the challenge is rarely met with success. A generation ago, A. R. Ammons described a coastline in his now-classic poetic manifesto, "Corson's Inlet," and praised the beauty of jagged natural shapes; so he, too, would let his own verse take a random course. He did not see straight lines or boxes in the natural world, and therefore he would not confine his poetry to the

26. Ibid.
27. Fussell, *Poetic Meter*, 88.

artificial forms traditionally used in poetry[28]. However, we have learned a lot in the last generation about nature and its randomness. Chaos theory, fractal geometry, the Fibonacci sequence, and other advances have taught us that nature is not so random after all. Nature has form and structure, and in an ironic postscript to Ammons's comment about the coastline, moviemakers now model coastlines on their computers using fractal geometry to save the cost of filming actual coastlines. Just as nature has form and structure, so have hundreds of years of experimentation shown that various traditional poetic forms, such as the sonnet, are the optimal organic forms which are often the best vessels for creating certain works of poetry.[29]

Free verse was discredited by some a century ago when experimentations with the new style were still underway. Today, however, free verse has long since become the accepted norm and formal verse has been discredited. Meanwhile formal poets and readers of formal poetry simply desire more balance in the publishing and teaching of traditional styles. Traditional poetry is often ignored by poets, poetry editors, and reviewers alike, despite the fact that readers enjoy it.[30] And in the schools, formal poetry is not taught with the same attention as free forms. Bruce Bawer commented on the teaching of traditional forms:

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28. A. R. Ammons, *Corson's Inlet: A Book of Poems* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965).

29. Denise Levertov defined organic form as "a method of apperception, i.e., of recognizing what we perceive, and is based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man's creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories. Such a poetry is exploratory." See Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form" found in *Poetry* 106, no. 6 (Sept 1965): 420; reprinted in Levertov, *Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1973), 7. Richard Wilbur, a traditionalist, explains organic form from his perspective: ". . .my practice is absolutely the reverse of saying, well let's write a sestina now, let's see if I can write a roundeau. I've never, never found myself doing that kind of thing. It's always a matter of sensing that something wants to be said, something of which, as yet, I have a very imperfect knowledge, and letting it start to talk, and finding what rhythm it wants to come out in, what phrasing seems natural to it. When I've discovered those things for a couple of lines, I begin to have the stanza of my poem, if I'm going to have a stanzaic poem. In any case, the line lengths declare themselves organically as they do, I suppose, for a free verse poet. The difference between me and a free verse poet is simply that I commit myself to the metrical precedents which my first lines set." For more in-depth discussions of organic form, recent developments in understanding natural order, and Ammons and Wilbur, see Paul Lake, "Orders: Free Verse, Chaos, and the Tradition," *Southern Review* 34, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 780-803.

30. In a 1995 poll of its listeners, the BBC compiled Britain's one hundred favorite poems. With the exception of a half-dozen free verse poems, nearly all were written with traditional meters, rhymes, and stanzas, see *The Nation's Favorite Poems* (London: BBC Books, 1996). In Mormon arts, one letter to the editor of *Sunstone* lamented that none of the poems in the publication ever made use of rhyme; "Reader's Forum," *Sunstone* 15, no. 4 (October 1991): 6.

> Formal poetry? Forget it. If traditional form and meter are covered at all. . . they tend to be treated at best as exotic options, at worst as quaint historical curiosities—things that a contemporary poet should know about in the same way that scientists should know about alchemy or Lamarck's theory of acquired characteristics. Even teachers who harbor an affection for form and meter are likely to place little emphasis on these matters in class, partly because they know that formal poetry (despite somewhat greater acceptance in recent years) is still not smiled upon by most American poetry editors.[31]

However, this type of discussion is truly academic, in the third meaning of the word. "Pushkin could count on railway workers to know his poems," John Berryman told Eileen Simpson, his first wife. If the only way to know whether a poem sounds beautiful and moving is to ask someone trained in the academy, then the audience has already been lost and will remain a fraction of what it could be.[32]

Academia and Poetry

The eight-volume *Critical Survey of Poetry* chronicles the lives and works of over 300 poets who have written poetry in English. Those born prior to 1900 came from diverse backgrounds and engaged in varied occupations. The earliest poets were often monks or courtiers, but the list also includes dramatists, diplomats, artists, librarians, etc. Robert Burns was a tax collector, William Cullen Bryant was a lawyer then a journalist, Stevie Smith was a secretary, and Carl Rakoski was a family therapist. Anne Bradstreet was the wife of a governor. The diversity continued into the early part of the twentieth century: T. S. Eliot was a banker, who later turned to publishing; Wallace Stevens was a corporate insurance lawyer; William Carlos Williams was a pediatrician. Others, such as Ezra Pound, E. E. Cummings, and Marianne Moore, were artists living a bohemian

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31. Bruce Bawer, *Poets & Professors: Essays on the Lives and Works of Modern Poets* (Brownsville: Story Line Press, 1995), 341. Mary Oliver, a Pulitzer Prize winning poet, commented, "Students and other readers of Milton, of Shakespeare, of Wordsworth, of Wilfred Owen, even of Frost, come to the poems, frankly, with tin ears. They cannot scan. They don't know an iamb from an anapest. They read for comprehension and hear little if anything of the interwoven pleasures of the sound and the pattern of the poem, which are also deeply instructive concerning the statement of the poem, along with the meanings of the words themselves. Not knowing how to listen, they do not hear it sing, or slide, or slow down, or crush with the heel of sound, or leap off the line, or hurry, or sob, or refuse to move from the self-pride of the calm pentameter no matter what fire is rustling through it . . . Five hundred years and more of such labor, such choice thought within choice expression, lies within the realm of metrical poetry. Without it, one is uneducated, and one is mentally poor." See Mary Oliver, *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), viii-ix.

32. Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" 16.

existence. Several, such as Archibald MacLeish and Randall Jarrell, worked for national magazines as writers and editors.[33]

Of the poets born after 1940 who are listed in the *Critical Survey of Poetry*, nearly all work in academia as professors. Some commentators have argued that this phenomenon has played a role in the decline of poetry in the intellectual community and in the broader American culture. They point out that fifty years ago there was only one creative writing program in the country—an experimental one at the University of Iowa. As of 1998 there were at least 290 graduate-level creative writing programs in universities spread around the country, and more than one thousand undergraduate programs. Due to public and private funding increases over the past generation, a career track in creative writing has evolved. The inevitable demands of a career, coupled with university organizational dynamics, have resulted in what some call behaviors indicative of an elitist poetry subculture.

This criticism has received renewed attention with the appointment of Dana Gioia as the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Gioia is best known as the author of a controversial essay first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, titled "Can Poetry Matter?" The essay is still available on the *Atlantic Monthly* web-site more than a decade after its initial publication.[34] Yet Gioia was not the first to raise the issue. The first detailed discussion of the phenomenon was by Joseph Epstein, whose critique in *Commentary*, titled "Who Killed Poetry?" received much attention.[35] Other articles in publications with a broader readership have echoed the points raised by Gioia and Epstein. A leader for an article in *The Economist* stated, "To be a versifier was once a great thing. Now it is faintly ridiculous."[36]

The key points in these articles and essays are as follows: First, the countless publications listed in directories such as *The Poet's Market* are completely unknown by society at large, read only by a small minority of the academic community. The intended audience for these directories is the subculture of poets who are found on university campuses: poets looking for publishers. Critic Bruce Bawer explains:

> A poem is, after all, a fragile thing, and its intrinsic worth, or lack thereof, is a frighteningly subjective consideration; but fellowships, grants, degrees,

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33. Frank N. Magill, ed., *Critical Survey of Poetry* (Pasadena and Englewood Cliffs: Salem Press, 1992).

34. Dana Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?" *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1991, reprinted in Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (Saint Paul: Gray Wolf Press, 1992), http://www.theatlantic.com/.

35. Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" 13-20.

36. "Poetic Injustice," *The Economist*, 20 December 1997, 133.

> appointments, and publication credits are objective facts. They are quantifiable, they can be listed on a résumé.[37]

The so-called "publish or perish" dictum has resulted in countless poems published for the poets themselves. Gioia comments:

> Like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producer and not the consumers. And in the process the integrity of the art has been betrayed.[38]

A second point raised in these essays is that editors of poetry anthologies are increasingly affiliated with academic programs. In the past a poetry anthology was an important means to introduce poetry to a broader audience, an audience which could not purchase the works of each poet. Some argue that, unlike anthologies earlier in this century, more recent anthologies appear to be assembled with marginal attention to the quality of the material. Publishers recognize that the best way to get an anthology assigned in a university program is to include the potential instructor's works in the anthology. The resultant anthologies are not so much a collection of the finest poetry being written as, rather, a kind of professional directory. *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets*[39] includes 104 poets, virtually all of whom teach in creative writing programs. It even includes photos of the poets. As Gioia points out, "one suspects that perhaps the book was never truly meant to be read, only assigned."[40] Hence, the broader community is not purchasing anthologies as often as in the past, and poetry is exiting from their lives.

Underlying this shift in our cultural relationship to poetry is the notion that advanced academic training is necessary to write decent poetry and, conversely, that poetry cannot be worthwhile unless the poet has an academic credential. Unfortunately, good poems and good poets get caught in the crossfire. When California's first Poet Laureate, Quincy Troupe, was forced to resign in 2002, the reason was a fabricated academic credential. The fabrication, he said, "went on my résumé about seven years into my academic career. . .Somebody told me I would never get on the tenure line unless I changed my resumé. Since then," he said, he has made his living by writing and publishing books and teaching.[41] In later interviews, he expressed great disappointment in the entire inci-

37. Bawer, Poets and Professors, 284.

38. Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?* 10.

39. Dave Smith and David Bottoms, eds., *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets* (New York: Quill, 1985).

40. Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?* 9.

dent: "This country has to learn to evaluate people on what they can do well instead of whether they are credentialed. . .Whether you have a degree has nothing to do with whether you can be a poet."[42] What was lost in the entire incident was the focus on his poetry, which was well liked across the board. He should not have needed the academic credential to write poetry.

The academic community rejects most such criticisms. Several poets responded to Epstein's article. Donald Hall wrote two responses, pointing out that Epstein's attacks used every possible cliché against poets and contemporary poetry.[43] Many of Hall's protestations had merit, but few poets have acknowledged any of the complaints against them. David Fenza, the director of Associated Writing Programs, speaks of "smarmy little putzes that are blinded by their own presumptions. . .The spread of writing programs represents the democratization of the arts. Creative writing is so attractive to students because it is one way of exercising the efficacy of the human will."[44]

Yet critics such as Gioia and Bawer are unrepentant about their comments. Gioia receives countless letters from people in all walks of life: housewives, ranchers, even a Hollywood producer, and a U.N. Ambassador, who all say he didn't go far enough in his criticism. "These people felt deprived of something important."[45]

These critics all agree that teaching is an honorable profession, and teaching in the humanities is doubly difficult in a society that highly values superior investment returns and advances in technology. Gioia's criticisms were not targeted toward individuals and the contributions they make to our educational system; Gioia himself received advanced training under the tutelage of poets Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Fitzgerald and occasionally teaches at the university level, in addition to having a successful career in business. Gioia's comments would have had the same validity if poets' occupations all gravitated toward pediatrics or tax collecting. The main criticism is the lack of diversity and its attendant problems, among those who control much of what the public reads of or about poetry. In an interview several years after his article appeared,

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41. Tim Rutten, "Poetry May Outlast these Laureates Woes," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 October 2002, E1.

42. Fahizah Alim, "Poet: On to Life's Next Verse," *Sacramento Bee*, 15 January 2003.

43. Donald Hall, *Death to the Death of Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 18-26.

44. Quoted in "Poetic Injustice," 130.

45. Dana Gioia, "Hearing from Poetry's Audience," *Poetry Review*, Spring 1992. See also Gioia's updated introduction to the Gray Wolf Press's Tenth Anniversary Edition of *Can Poetry Matter?*

Gioia stated:

> I am mostly a *persona non grata* on campus. The university is an institution, and one thing institutions hate—be they academic, military, or industrial—is criticism from the outside. I have been amused by how wildly rancorous and passionately loony some of the professorial attacks on me have been. . . .I have, of course, also found many eloquent defenders on campus. The university is not a monolith. There are still many independent-minded teachers and writers who keenly understand how troubled both Creative Writing and the academic study of literature has become. They appreciated that "Can Poetry Matter?" is not an anti-university tirade. It is a book that critiques some specific problems in current academic literary study, especially in Creative Writing programs, anthologies, and poetry reviewing, and then suggests—rather tentatively, in fact—some basic reforms.[46]

In the Mormon intellectual community, poet affiliation with academia mirrors that of the broader culture. With a few exceptions, most Mormon poets are quick to claim academic affiliation. In Eugene England and Dennis Clark's anthology, titled *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*,[47] the brief biographies of each poet summarize the situation. More than half indicated they taught at the university level. More than a third indicated a literary prize they had received. Over half claimed an advanced university degree. Only five of the nearly sixty biographies did not mention academic affiliation or credentials. Poets' biographies published in *Dialogue* and *BYU Studies* follow the same pattern. *Sunstone* does not give background on its poets, but the poets are seldom different from those found in *Dialogue* and *BYU Studies*. In the 1930s it was unusual to find an academic poet (e.g. Alfred Osmond) writing for Mormon publications; today it is the norm.

When Richard Cracroft reviewed *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poetry*, he lamented the fact that many of the younger poets represented in the volume, those born after 1939, wrote poems which "are testimonials to how the educated modern Mormon poet has assimilated the secular culture and modes of poetry, repressing and replacing soaring spirituality with earth-bound humanism."[48] The tone, style, structure, and vocabulary of the later poems in the anthology are similar to those found in the various academic journals devoted to contemporary poetry. Given that

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46. Gloria Brame, "Paradigms Lost," *ELF: Eclectic Literary Forum*, Spring 1995. Although Gioia is best known for his poetic roles, some Utahans may find his business career more interesting—as a vice-president at General Foods, he was responsible for the Jell-O brand of products.

47. Eugene England and Dennis Clark, eds., *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989).

48. Richard H. Cracroft, *BYU Studies* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 119-123.

the creative output of the younger poets will likely be scrutinized by peers outside of Mormon culture—i.e., other academic professionals who may have an impact on their careers—Cracroft's comments should not be too surprising.

Tension between academic and popular poetry surfaced a few years ago in a community bordering BYU. A proposal was made to name a popular poet as Orem's Poet Laureate. The proposed poet, a Mormon bishop, had written a great deal of traditional metrical and light verse and had the endorsement of some well-known citizens. However, those in the academic community were appalled at the proposal simply because BYU's Distinguished Poet-in-Residence, Leslie Norris, was also a citizen within the community's boundaries. The Utah State Poet Laureate, a recently retired professor at Southern Utah University, stated, "I'm stunned. Nothing against [the popular choice], but that's like overlooking the Kentucky Derby winner and choosing a plow horse as Horse of the Year. . . .I applaud Orem's initiative, but I wonder about their choice." Agreed Guy Lebeda, literature coordinator for the Utah Arts Council: "It's always good to recognize poets, but this would certainly raise eyebrows in the literature community. . . .They have a living treasure in their midst. That should pretty much end the discussion." Ironically, BYU's Norris rose above the fray and supported the popular choice. "Whatever encourages poetry, I'm in favor of. . . .[I]t sounds like they have the ideal man."[49]

The current situation in Mormon arts has not gone unnoticed. Elbert Peck pointed this out in a *Sunstone* editorial about Cowboy Poetry several years ago. He asked, "Is it possible to make poetry—folk poetry—a popular art again? Or is poetry destined to be the purview of a small elite of LDS literati?"[50] To answer Peck, I would paraphrase Dana Gioia's subtitle from his classic essay: If Mormon poets venture outside their confined world, they can work to make poetry essential once more.

The Search for Honest Critics

When the literary critic William Logan was asked what he thought of the present state of poetry, of its current health as an art, he replied, "I distrust the motives of the question."[51] No doubt his opinion was sought because he is one of the most respected poetry critics writing today, and it would bolster arguments on one side or the other if he weighed in with

49. Phil Miller, "Orem Laureate?" *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 5 May 1998, A1.

50. Elbert Peck, "Cowboy Poetry and Boots," *Sunstone* 15 no. 6, (December 1991), 12.

51. Garrick Davis, "William Logan and the Role of the Poet-Critic: An Interview," *Contemporary Poetry Review*, internet version, http://www.cprw.com/.

his opinion. But he refused to take sides in the debate and felt the discussion had been too divisive. Instead, his focus has been on analyzing and reviewing individual works of art, trying to determine which are good and which are not. Furthermore, as a poetry critic, his analyses and recommendations are always enlightening, whether the review is positive or negative.

Surprisingly, not all critics and poetry reviewers share Logan's critical approach. Consequently, some commentators point the finger at poetry reviewers—the poet/critic—as one more factor in the decline of poetry as a serious art form in American culture. As an anthologist can gather the best poetry together for a general audience, so too can a reviewer point the general reader toward works of distinction and away from mediocrity. Yet in the last half-century most poetry works which have been reviewed have received only praise, not critical analysis. When Fred Chappell, the North Carolina Poet Laureate, gathered several reviews of poetry that he had written for the *Georgia Review* into book form, his collection was subsequently reviewed by Adam Kirsch, a critic for *The New Republic*, who made these comments:

> Chappell is a good representative of the poetry boosterism common today, so happy that any poetry is being written and publicized that its quality is a matter of indifference. Indeed, criticizing its quality is seen as offering aid and comfort to the Philistine enemy. The very proliferation of poetry books and writers, at a time when readers seem to be vanishing, is a good thing, according to Chappell: [Chappell writes] "Literate citizens should be expressing their thoughts and feelings on paper; their emotional lives are so furiously busy that they really don't have time for the secondhand emotions of others." Notice the insidious use of the word citizens, as though writing awful poetry were somehow conducive to civic merit; notice, too, the automatic equation of poetry with "emotional lives," the reduction of art to therapy and gossip. When this is an accepted view of poetry, it is no use worrying about the Philistines: they are already within the gates.[52]

In an earlier age, poetry critics pulled no punches. Randall Jarrell's review of one of Archibald MacLeish's poems included the comment that "it might have been devised by a YMCA secretary at a home for the mentally deficient."[53] Likewise, his comment about a book by Oscar Williams: "[It] gave the impression of being written on a typewriter by a

52. Adam Kirsch, "Booster Shots," *The Boston Phoenix*, 20 April 1998, internet version, http://www.weeklywire.com/.

53. Quoted by Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?" h, When People Paid Attention from Randall Jarrell, "Poetry in a Dry Season," *The Partisan Review*, 1940.

typewriter."[54] Jarrell was excluded from Williams's anthologies for his comments, but his critical integrity was maintained. Jarrell thought his reviews had cost him a Pulitzer Prize, and maybe they did, but as Logan comments: "Reviewing is not a dangerous trade if the worst that can happen, even to a poet as good as Jarrell, is to be deprived of a few honors."[55] Yet most reviewers are also poets who prefer to practice professional courtesy. As Logan explains,

> Editors often complain that poets hate to review their contemporaries because they're afraid of making enemies. Perhaps this is cowardice at its most genial. When poets lather their reviews with nothing but diplomatic flattery (or criticism so mild it wouldn't kill a fly), criticism has failed its readers.[56]

Praise of mediocre poetry confuses readers, who end up doubting their own critical perceptions.

Poetry reviews in Mormon arts follow a similar pattern. One example is indicative: A poet named Dave Smith taught at the University of Utah. Some of his published poetry, both a book titled *Goshawk Antelope* and one titled *Dream Flights*, were reviewed in an issue of *Sunstone Review* by Bruce Jorgenson and Dennis Clark. Jorgenson writes:

> Dave Smith may be the fastest moving poet on the ground these days, a man whose totemic beast should not be goshawk nor antelope, but roadrunner. He was teaching at the University of Utah in 1979 when Illinois published *Goshawk, Antelope*. Now at Florida, he has published two more books of poems, *Dream Flights* and *Homage to Edgar Allan Poe*, and a novel, *Omliness*. Who could hope to keep up with that output?. . .No less a critic than Helen Vendler has nearly canonized Smith as a writer of "Faulknerian power," a "poet of plenty" whose "brilliant sense of reality lights up even his densest work" and whose "steady advance in art promises more powerful work to come". . . .Faced with the sheer plenitude of the poems and the verbal energy, one could hardly demur. . . .No cautious minimalist at all, but like the major romantics and their modern scions, in whose line he seems to belong, Smith interprets the world as a blankly enticing suggestive other, and wonders about that act itself, the mind in its knowing. . . .[57]

Glowing terms abound throughout Jorgenson's review. He concedes that some of Dave Smith's poetry might raise concerns, but glosses over the problem: "The occasional obscurity arises, I think, because Smith's

54. Ibid., as quoted by Gioia from Randall Jarrell, "Verse Chronicle," *The Nation*, 25 May 1946.

55. Davis, "William Logan," 3.

56. Ibid.

57. Bruce Jorgenson, "Poetry as Narrative," *Sunstone Review* 2, no. 8 (August 1982): 28.

poems, whether narrative or statically perceptual, almost always work from bewilderment toward some tolerable comprehension by 're-enact[ing] the irrational logic of flesh.'"[58]

Dennis Clark has been the most thorough and critical of poetry reviewers in Mormon arts. Consequently, his review of Dave Smith is more analytical about what message is being conveyed, and he does highlight some concerns. The review points out what Clark feels are some of the strengths of the book: "The poems are so carefully structured, possessed of so clear a narrative line, and gathered into a sequence so clearly moving toward a thematic climax, that I can't believe them autobiographical or confessional." Clark invokes other poet-critics, in this case Robert Penn Warren, to support his view that Dave Smith's poetry is worth reading. Yet one cannot escape the fact that the poetry of Dave Smith is lacking something, and Clark is aware of the problem. Of one poem Clark comments, "[T]hat point is unclear to me, as many of these poems are in places, usually in the seams." In fact, Clark drops several hints that might lead one to seriously question this collection of poetry, but rather than following through, he closes with this comment: "Read the poems with patience, going back where you find them opaque or oblique, and you will find them becoming public property, becoming your own experience, your own hope. What better gift can a poet offer?"[59]

Contrast these reviews with one by Bruce Bawer, a literary critic who was a director of the National Book Critics Circle. His poetry reviews have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post Book Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The American Scholar*, *The Nation*, *The Hudson Review*, and other publications. Bawer does point out and praise well-written poetry when he finds it, but of Dave Smith's *oeuvre*, Bawer writes:

> Dave Smith might be described, indeed, as a model academic poet. He is prolific: in sixteen years he has published two books of fiction and twelve volumes of poetry. . .a body of work that is perhaps second to none in its ability to reflect the perverseness of the artistic criteria and professional priorities which constitutes the "creative writing" sensibility. Smith's poetry, written invariably in free verse. . .typically consists of a gloomy, nebulous. . . description, heavy with abstruse allegorical intent and often permeated by violence. . . .Sometimes the natural description is accompanied by a spotty memory from the poet's childhood or an anecdote about his own children; more often than not it yields some sort of murky epiphany or vague metaphysical speculation about passion, fear, reality and illusion, the passage of

58. Dennis Clark, "Poetry as Fiction," *Sunstone Review* 2, no. 8 (August 1982), 29.
59. Ibid.

> time, the triumph of death, the endurance of life. Whereas in another poet this nexus between the natural, the personal, and the cosmic might give the impression of being emotionally valid, in a typical Smith poem the connections between these elements appear to be arbitrary. The average Smith poem, indeed, seems held together not by the force of his love or distress or wonderment but by an act of will.[60]

Bawer provides some clear examples of the form and content of Smith's poetry. The examples support his arguments, and his analysis of the flaws in the poetry is straightforward:

> Imagery, in his hands, is often an academic exercise, his personification tending toward such cliches as "the sullen sun," "the shocking gray face of the sea," "the wind softly licking the wave." His most characteristic metaphors and similes are equally mechanical; parodic of sincere emotion, they run the gamut from the confusing to the ridiculous, their main purpose clearly being not to conjure up a vivid, emotionally authentic image but to weave exotic verbal tapestries. . . .Even more exasperating are those similes in which he pointlessly compares physical objects to abstractions, the effect of which is to turn potentially sharp images into cryptic ones: an old tool shed is "eternal as guilt," a plunging hawk "as lethal as love," an arroyo "empty as memory." One feels as if one could play mix-and-match without doing any real harm—why not, for instance, a hawk "as lethal as memory," a tool shed "as empty as love"?[61]

Bawer's review, though largely negative in tone, is one that the general reader will take seriously. Not only is it clear what the poet is trying to achieve, but why the poet fails in that endeavor. The reviewer is straightforward in his analysis and recommendations. Although Clark's review comes closer to this kind of critical analysis needed by general readers, Jorgenson's review is simply enthusiastic.

Over the past forty years *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, and *Sunstone* have reviewed a couple dozen poetry books. Of those reviews, most were very positive and none could be considered negative. Some, like Clark's review mentioned above, highlight valid concerns, and as indicated above, Richard Cracroft's review of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poetry* actually expressed disappointment that the Mormon poems in the collection do not seem very Mormon. Yet no poetry reviews in Mormon periodicals have criticized a poetry work in a manner similar to Bawer. During the same time period, however, reviews of other types of books on Mormon topics have been more balanced, in that the reader of the reviews has the

60. Bawer, *Poets and Professors*, 285-86.
61. Ibid.

confidence to make decisions regarding purchase and reading based on the recommendations in the periodicals. As with reviews of other genres, a review essay looking at all the books of poetry in a given time period should give a reviewer ample opportunity to compare, contrast, and recommend superior works of poetry. Reviews of a single work of poetry by multiple reviewers with differing perspectives would likewise give the general reader a better indication of quality poetry books, as has been done with books on history, doctrine, or social analysis.[62]

The Romantic Era poet Percy Bysshe Shelley composed the poem *Adonais* as an elegy to John Keats. Although Keats actually died of tuberculosis, Shelley attributed Keats's death to the cruel and biting reviews of his work, reviews which were more an attack on Keats's social status than on his poetry. Time has been kinder to Keats than were his initial reviewers. Commentators on the current state of poetry criticism do not advocate a return to personal attacks on poets, but they do advocate integrity in poetry reviews. Honest critical reviews of Mormon poetry, preferably by general readers, instead of other poets who may have a vested interest, could help bring discouraged readers back to the art.

Conclusion

In 1653 Isaak Walton published *The Compleat Angler*, an eclectic combination of personal essay, fishing advice, and the occasional poem. The subtitle of the work captures the imagination: "The Contemplative Man's Recreation." The fact that poetry played such a prominent role in the book indicates the high regard held for the art of language. This regard ran through civil society for hundreds of years; three centuries later President Spencer W. Kimball was recording his thoughts and feelings in poetry.[63] In the spring of 2003, the 23rd Annual Conference of the National Association for Poetry Therapy was held in Miami, Florida. Sessions at the conference covered varied topics, including strategies for ensuring the continued government funding of creative arts therapies positions.[64] From mainstream art and enjoyment, to a debatable, publicly funded position on the fringe of society, poetry has traversed a tortured path.

It would be naive to think that a return to poetry which rhymes and

62. See David J. Whittaker, "Review Essay," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 100, for the rationale behind a review essay; also David J. Whittaker, "The Hoffmann Maze," *BYU Studies* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 67-124 as an example of an effective review essay based on this rationale.

63. Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and Poetry," *BYU Studies* 25, no. 4 (Fall 1985), 161.

64. http://www.poetrytherapy.org/main.htm.

carries a rhythm would restore it to the place it once held in society. A superior poem must also create an "immortal wound" as Frost says; it must touch the heart and capture the essence of the human condition. Technique is only one aspect of a superior poem. Although student-poets leaving academia refer to their varied destinations as "the real world," none would wish them to cease from composing after passing from the ivory towers. Nor would anyone desire their instructors to stop writing their own poetry (all of the Mormon poets praised in this essay come from the ranks of professional teaching). Rather, one hopes they view their art as an important part of society to which they contribute, not as an academic exercise or as career strategy. Mormon poets from all walks of life can compose and read what Cracroft calls literature "woven out of the stuff of Mormonism and spun across a Mormon world view interlaced with Mormon essences, those often ethereal but real, ineffable but inevitable spiritual analogues and correspondences that convey Mormon realities."[65]

Poets in earlier ages wrote works which appealed to both scholars and the general public. For example, Blake's poetry is suitable for children, yet also challenges scholars to this day; his "Tyger, Tyger" is a perennial favorite of English schoolboys and theologians alike. In the past century, Robert Frost could compose a poem like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which appeals to the general reader with its clear, concise images, yet still garners scholarly discussion of its countless aspects. Tennyson could write "Ulysses" with its allusions to Homer's *Odyssey* and specific references to Dante's *Inferno*; yet he could also stir the soul of the man in the street:

> . . .Come, my friends.
> 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
> Push off, and sitting well in order smite
> The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
> To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
> Of all the western stars, until I die.
> It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
> It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
> And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
> Though much is taken, much abides; and though
> We are not now that strength which in old days
> Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are:

65. Richard Cracroft, "Attuning the Authentic Mormon Voice: Stemming the Sophic Tide in LDS Literature," *Sunstone* 16, no. 5 (July 1993): 51.

One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

While we cannot return to the poetic environment of the past, we can try to return poetry to an honorable place in Mormon culture.