

Alive in Mormon Poetry

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THE SUMMER 2002 EDITION of *Irreanteum: Exploring Mormon Literature* is devoted to the theme of environmental writing in LDS theology and culture. It features poems solicited by guest editor Todd Petersen by several contemporary LDS poets, including Susan Elizabeth Howe, Bruce Jorgensen, Patricia Gunter Karamesines, Leon Chidester, and me. At the risk of seeming narcissistic, I call attention to this issue as an appropriate place from which to respond to Robert Hughes's essay, "Poetry Matters in Mormon Culture," as this essay lacks an in-depth discussion of those who would be considered contemporary Mormon poets. In addition to that of the poets mentioned above, the poetry of Lance Larson, Kimberly Jones, and Emma Lou Thayne has found appreciative audiences both within and without LDS circles. I was curious that Hughes limited his discussion of contemporary Mormon poetry to only one poet—David Smith. Furthermore, the inclusion of Smith seemed to serve as part of a critique on the integrity of poetry reviews rather than a discussion of Smith's poetry in the LDS culture. The lack of reference to other LDS poets seems an odd omission considering the essay's title.

To counteract that omission, I will refer to some of the poets published in *Irreanteum* to expand Hughes's definition of poetry. He limits poetry to formalist poetry, in which the form of the poem is shaped by a pattern of rhythm and rhyme. By insisting on such a narrow definition, he ignores a larger and equally important aspect of poetry—its metaphorical nature. Poetry is a shape shifter. The most effective poems, whether written in free verse or in traditional forms, are those in which language transforms and is transformed, like a figure in one of Ovid's myths. Part of the pleasure of reading poetry comes from the shifts in imagery and metaphors, which can be as startling as the water nymph Daphne hardening into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's pursuit. A pattern is created as the image or metaphor turns.

This poetry of shifting metaphors can be found in Bruce Jorgensen's poem "Getting Home from Ithaca, 1968." The poem begins with the

intensity of youthful desire, emphasized by the pattern created in the repetition of the word "owned." "I was twenty-four then/and could love a place enough to die in it./Mine: not one I owned/and the one that owned me;/and it took two years in a place I'd never own,/would never own me,/ to give me to it" (23). An internal rhyme in a later stanza—"swam, when the falls/flowed again, *naked*/to stream-smooth rock and *shaken* shadow (23 my emphasis)"—underscores the eroticism of the experience. This memory of fluidity and potency is made more poignant by the turn in the last three stanzas toward an arid and petrified image of "pocked basalt, dry/mottled with pinyon" (23), anticipating a loss of that youthful sexual intensity.

In her poem "Utah: Five Sacred Lessons," Susan Elizabeth Howe uses a long narrative form to create a lyric sequence which develops a relationship between the land and the poet. Her poem forms a pattern by personifying the land as a teacher. She also uses a technique of contrasting philosophical statements with sharp imagery, as in the following lines: "The mountains are great ships/ floating above us, setting their course/by the stars. / But to know the mountains/there are other ways. / Watch the hummingbird,/ whose nest is the size/of your two folded fingers/your pinkies./She is both quick/and still" (36). This contrast creates a pattern by alternating the focus of the poem between broad and detailed observations. Leon Chidester's poems are terse narratives, whittled down to essential syntax and imagery to reflect desolation and the hardship of living off the land. In all of the above poems, there is an inherent relationship between the poem's form and its content. The form is not random but creates a pattern that develops out of that relationship.

Another of Hughes's concerns is that poetry has become less prominent in LDS publications and bookstores. He states that "[t]he demise of poetry in Mormon culture has mirrored trends in a broader American culture." Poetry has lost a larger national audience because "[e]ach poetry group develops independently of others. . . .With rare exceptions, the participants at one type of poetry event do not attend other poetry events." Hughes points out, validly, that despite the increasing publications available for LDS poets, these poets are not known by a mainstream LDS audience. However, keeping in mind the metaphorical nature of poetry, I suggest that there may be another reason for poetry's demise in the LDS culture. The LDS religion presents a challenging paradox—its theology is mysterious, supernatural, and metaphysical. It is based on an amazing metaphor—that mortals are capable of being transformed into deities. Yet, the programs developed by the church encourage primarily a pragmatic existence and a literal interpretation of sacred texts. Does the pragmatic emphasis sometimes undermine the religion's metaphorical nature? In other words, is contemporary poetry ignored because it does not fit into the goal-oriented outlook of today's church programs?

Ironically, the LDS religion is very poetic. The dichotomy of having a divine nature within a mortal shell has been expressed over the centuries by a variety of poets. The LDS religion expands on that idea through very eloquent and poignant beliefs, in particular the concept that we have passed through a veil of forgetfulness away from a place we sense only through the most intangible sensations. Perhaps if more individuals within the LDS religion would explore this less certain but very rich side of Mormon theology and depend less on didactic stories or slick, idealized "Mormon Ads," there would be not only a broader audience for poetry but more poets.