

Death to the Death of Poetry! The Art Is Alive and Kicking in Mormon Circles—and in Mainstream American Culture

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When I read Robert Hughes's essay, "Poetry Matters in Mormon Culture," published in a recent *Dialogue*,¹ I didn't feel an overwhelming need to respond. But like a sliver that goes at first unnoticed and later itches for immediate extraction, his essay got under my skin and eventually demanded (it seemed to me) this response. As a Mormon lover of poetry, I'm gratified that Hughes cares about the craft and its future. I share his dismay that the role of poetry in the Church has diminished. I share his regret that the memorization and recitation of poetry in the public classroom is a thing of the past; and I concur that the general population—not only those with academic degrees—should feel empowered to write poetry.

Nevertheless, I found Hughes's essay puzzling in a number of ways. He admits that the judgment of poetry is a "frighteningly subjective consideration" yet insists on a narrow definition of good poetry. He quotes

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1. Robert Hughes, "Poetry Matters in Mormon Culture," *Dialogue* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 1-27.

with nostalgia effusive reviews of C. Frank Steele's poetry but finds positive reviews of Dave Smith's poetry reprehensible. He says that the general public should read and write poetry (presumably whether they're good at it or not) yet vigorously decries "mediocre" poetry. He claims that people know instinctively what kind of poetry they like (the rhyming kind), yet are "confused" by praise of the aforesaid mediocrity.

Much as I hate to contend with a fellow defender of poetry, I found myself mentally resisting many of his conclusions. Or maybe it was the combative tone of Hughes's essay that set my teeth on edge. In any case, I'd like to rebut several of his conclusions, according to my own lights.

Conclusion 1: Formal poetry is inherently superior to free verse. Hughes cites Carl Sandburg's "Grass" as the exception to the rule, implying that its artistry is unusual. The truth is that most poems, whether free verse or metered, are and always have been, pretty average. Poems of genius are rare. Otherwise they would not be remembered. When poetry was, as Hughes claims, "at its peak" in the 1930s (2), many a published page was filled with forgettable rhyming doggerel, while today the scales have tipped in favor of forgettable prose-like meditations. Nevertheless, Czeslaw Milosz, the Lithuanian poet who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1980, has little patience with Frost's statement (quoted by Hughes, 5-6) that writing free verse is like "playing tennis with the net down," especially coming from a poet who was known for "mercilessly condemn[ing] his rivals." Declares Milosz, "I . . . am absolutely on Walt Whitman's side."² So is Danielle Dubrasky who, in her response to Hughes's article, did an excellent job of using specific examples from contemporary Mormon poets to show that free verse requires just as many artistic decisions and methods as its formal counterpart.³

Conclusion 2: Formal poetry has been consigned to the literary junk pile. Sure, free verse is strongly in favor right now, but many great poets are still writing formal poems—and being read. Not only that, they're being awarded the highest literary prizes. Derek Walcott received the Nobel Prize for literature a few years ago. His book-length epic *Omeros* is written

2. Czeslaw Milosz, "Robert Frost," in *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays*, edited by Bogdana Carpenter and Madeline G. Levine (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 401, 402.

3. Danielle Beazer Dubrasky, "Alive in Mormon Poetry," *Dialogue* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 27-29.

in twelve-syllable rhyming tercets. And what of Seamus Heaney's recent critically acclaimed translation of *Beowulf*? A review in *AudioFile* magazine noted that "his versification is truly marvelous."⁴ I could give many more examples.

Conclusion 3: Much of Mormon poetry is not Mormon enough. Hughes concurs with Richard Cracroft's lament that younger Mormon poets have "assimilated the secular culture and modes of poetry" (9). Hughes praises one poem "because it carries a message of interest to Mormons" (9). What might that message be? Must Mormon poets confine themselves to certain themes or attitudes? Who determines what constitutes "Mormon writing"? As I've stated in these pages before, I believe Mormon literature includes anything that arises from a Mormon heart and mind. A poem may not be appropriate for quotation in a Gospel Doctrine class but still be a very Mormon poem.

Conclusion 4: University writing programs are ruining poetry. I strenuously dispute the notion that the study and composition of poetry at the university level are somehow killing public interest in the art. If all graduate writing programs were to disappear from the face of the earth, would the public suddenly and enthusiastically embrace poetry? Would poetry return as a driving force in our elementary schools? Would the average (as Hughes puts it) "housewife" take up a pen and start jotting? No. The demise of poetry as a public practice is primarily due to societal developments to which Hughes devotes only one sentence in his long essay: "Alternative forms of entertainment are an obvious factor" (4). I would argue that television, Blockbuster, video games, and the internet are the *primary* reason that poetry has lost much of its popular appeal, along with other time-honored traditions such as the family dinner hour, scripture reading, and letter writing. We're all too darn busy (and spiritually numbed) watching *Die Hard X* to memorize a poem, let alone write one. If anything, the growth of graduate-level writing programs should be a beacon of hope in a society that looks to *The Matrix* as a source of metaphysical inspiration and is impervious (if one judges by network news and political campaigns) to any information that can't be delivered in a twenty-second sound bite.

4. *AudioFile: The Listener's Guide to AudioBooks* (Portland, Maine, 2001) as quoted in Editorial Reviews of Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* (audiocassette edition: Highbridge Audio, June 15, 2000) retrieved [in September 2003] <http://www.amazon.com>.

Conclusion 5: Poets employed in academia are bleeding the life out of poetry. I guess we could go back to the days of royal patronage. Unfortunately, that's not possible, although it continues to be the case that writing takes time and concentration. Writing also thrives on conversation, on camaraderie with others who care about the art. I know from experience that the workaday business world can suck the poetic spirit dry. I've been working in high-tech marketing and public relations for nearly a decade; and during all that time, I've never heard a client or colleague quote a poem or say the word *poetry*. I have, however, experienced plenty of ear-jangling techno-jargon, crack-of-dawn "networking" breakfasts, late-night association meetings, overwhelming deadlines, and sheer exhaustion. From my point of view, it's only natural that poets and writers should gravitate into a career that affirms their life's work and which allows them the emotional space to pursue it.

Conclusion 6: Positive criticism is "dishonest." I find it odd that Hughes apparently accepts Quincy Troupe's excuses for lying about his lack of academic credentials (which was the issue behind his firing, not the belief that good writing requires credentials) (17) yet vehemently decries "dishonest" criticism, which he seems to equate with enthusiastic reviews (23). The most disappointing element of Hughes's essay is his decision to castigate Bruce Jorgensen for a positive review he wrote years ago on a poet whose work Jorgensen happened to enjoy. To suggest that his review was somehow "dishonest" (19) because it did not correspond to Bruce Bawer's opinion is, I believe, even more wrong. (By the way, why does Hughes spend a paragraph listing all of Bawer's credentials and publications [22] yet insist that credentials and publications in no way reflect the expertise of poets? [24])

Hughes implies he does "not advocate a return to personal attacks" (24), but I'm afraid that he committed a couple in his own right. What greater personal injury can be inflicted on a poet than to paint his entire body of work, with a single brush, as "mediocre"? Hughes wants the general public—and the Mormon public—to write poetry and to get that poetry into publications read by their peers. But the average person would never publish again if subjected to such verbal tar and feathers for their efforts. To complicate matters, in Hughes's view, there is no appropriate way to distinguish the presumably tough-skinned professional poet from the everyman popular poet (especially since, in his view, academic credentials are irrelevant). It would seem, then, that he would subscribe to Thoreau's

view that "the finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling."⁵ This is not, however, the case, either in Hughes's scathing assessment of other critics and poets or in his nostalgia for an earlier age when "poetry critics pulled no punches" (20). He lauds Randall Jarrell's statement that a certain poem, "might have been devised by a YMCA secretary at a home for the mentally deficient" (20). I thought Hughes was on the side of scribbling housewives and, one would suppose, secretaries. And I'm sure that in any other context, he wouldn't condone the ridicule of the mentally deficient. Reviews, even negative reviews, can and should be honest without being cruel.

As for Hughes's lament that cronyism spawns "dishonest" enthusiasm for contemporaries' work: Any human pursuit—from figure skating to stock brokerage—is subject to politics. Unfortunately, poetry is no exception. Nevertheless, it would seem that the greater temptation is toward overly *negative* assessments of competitors. I must return to Milosz, whose poem "Report" baldly asserts that the poet

cannot bear another poet nearby, if he suspects him of
being better than himself and envies him every scrap of praise.

Ready not only to kill him but smash him and obliterate him
from the surface of the earth.

So that he remains alone, magnanimous and kind toward his
subjects, who chase after their small self-delusions.

Despite this shocking assessment, Milosz continues:

How does it happen that such low beginnings lead to the splendor
of the word?

I gathered books of poets from various countries, now I sit
reading them and am astonished.

It is sweet to think that I was a companion in an expedition that

5. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, edited by William Howarth (New York: Modern Library, 1981), 6.

never ceases, though centuries pass away.

An expedition not in search of the golden fleece of a perfect form
but as necessary as love.

Under the compulsion of the desire for the essence of the oak, of
the mountain peak, of the wasp and the flower of nasturtium.

So that they last, and confirm our hymnic song against death.

. . . Fraternally, we help each other, forgetting our grievances,
translating each other into other tongues, members, indeed of a
wandering crew.⁶

To my mind, Milosz does not describe or inculcate either of two faults denounced by Hughes: poets' participation, on the one hand, in "an elitist poetry subculture" (20) or, on the other hand, their demonstration of "cowardice at its most genial" via the "diplomatic flattery" (21) of their peers.

Conclusion 7: Poetry is currently at an all-time nadir in American and Mormon society. Yes, it's discouraging that poetry is no longer a focal point of public discourse. It's sad that fewer people keep poetry on their shelves. It's disheartening that the Church has followed this societal trend and has generally removed poetry from its publications for adults (but not, thank heavens, from *The Friend* or from conference talks!). Nevertheless, artistically, poetry is as strong and vibrant as ever, both in and out of the Church.

And perhaps both Hughes and I are too pessimistic about the role poetry plays in people's everyday lives. Does it matter that aficionados of cowboy poetry don't go in for Blake? What of rap, which is nothing if not raw meter? What of the poems that filled electronic chat rooms and bulletin boards in the wake of 9/11? (But then, Hughes scoffs at the notion of poetry's therapeutic value [24].)

According to Robert Pinsky, poetry in today's America has a "fluctuating, sometimes invisible yet vigorous life that some have mis-

6. Czeslaw Milosz, "Report," *Facing the River*, translated by the author and Robert Hass (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco Press, 1995), 13, 14.

taken for neglect. In one stereotype, Americans are too pragmatic, or too undereducated, or too distracted by mass culture, to cherish this ancient art. The vigorous response to the Favorite Poem Project contradicts that conventional notion.⁷ This project called for anyone and everyone to submit their favorite poem, along with an explanation of their selection. Recently, I've been reading the resulting anthology, *America's Favorite Poems*, which is crammed with works by poets from Shakespeare to Pham Tien Duat to Sandra Cisneros. I find it immensely moving that people from all walks of life—from the ichthyologist in New Jersey to the administrative assistant in Missouri—keep special poems tucked in their hearts; and that these poems are as unique and various as the people who love them. It's enough to warm the heart of the deepest skeptic.

People still need poetry. They love poetry—when they get the chance. For several years I've taught poetry workshops in my children's elementary schools, and I'm always amazed at the children's natural metaphoric vision and at their delight in word play. Perhaps what's missing most in our competitive, over-scheduled, media-saturated lives is the *opportunity* to develop a love of poetry. I submit that those of us who value the art have a responsibility to share that love with others. Within the Church community, we have many forums to do so, including sacrament meeting talks, Relief Society Enrichment lessons, Cub Scout activities, ward talent nights, and family home evenings. We might ask ourselves, "What have I done lately for poetry?" (As Hughes aptly points out, just buying a few books goes a long way [4].)

It also behooves us to treat our fellow writers with warm regard and cordiality. We Mormon lovers of the word should stand together against the trends inside and outside the Church that would deny poetry's relevance and relegate it to the past.

7. Robert Pinsky, Introduction, in *Americans' Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology*, edited by Robert Pinsky and Maggie Dietz (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 3.

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During 2005 and 2006, *Dialogue* expects to publish a series of articles on the Mormon experience and identity outside the usual Anglo-American cultural realm.

Guest edited by Ethan Yorgason, this series will feature articles on a variety of topics from the perspective of various scholarly disciplines, including history, literature, and the social sciences. Each paper may focus in depth upon a particular cultural setting or offer cross-cultural comparisons among two or more settings.

As the Church continues to grow, cultural-geographic distinctions promise to assume greater significance in both doctrine and practice. We would therefore welcome papers that examine the following questions.

What are some of these possible distinctions?

How might the Church respond to an impetus toward varieties of Mormonism?

How do these distinctive varieties of Mormonism contribute to the relationship of Mormonism to the host society/culture?

We are also interested in the interpretations given Mormon history by both members and nonmembers within cultures beyond the Anglo-American sphere. Articles could also treat the level of historical "literacy" among Church members, the aspects of Church history that are best and least well known, the purposes to which historical knowledge is put, and the relationship between Mormon history and Mormon identity.

Submissions

Manuscripts for this series must be received no later than June 1, 2005. In formatting and documentation, submissions should follow the *Chicago Manual of Style* (15th ed.). Electronic submissions are preferred and should be sent as attachments in MS Word or WordPerfect to yorgasoe@byuh.edu. Please provide mailing address and phone number. Paper copies, if unavoidable, may be sent in triplicate to Ethan Yorgason, BYU-Hawaii, Box 1970, Laie, HI 96762. Manuscripts should be sent as soon as possible up to the deadline. Address queries to Yorgason at (808) 293-3617; fax: (808) 293-3888. For *Dialogue's* publication policy, please see <http://www.dialoguejournal.com/>.

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To initiate this proposal, *Dialogue* sponsored two sessions on the disabled at the Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium of 2004. An essay from one of these sessions, treating the faith of a young woman severely disabled by cerebral palsy, will appear in our summer issue. We will publish other accepted submissions in later issues.

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- What different problems face the physically disabled and the mentally impaired?
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- What programs and social services for persons with disabilities does the Church provide? Which seem successful and which less so? What is missing?
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