

“Moonbeams from a Larger Lunacy”: Poetry in the Reorganization

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IT WAS STEFAN KANFER, I BELIEVE, who suggested that “inside every man there is a poet who died young.” Many in the Restoration have felt this urge to express an emotion, to describe a scene, or to acknowledge a love and have done so in verse. Some perhaps even in poetry. Within the Mormon movement the attempt to express one’s feelings has produced hundreds of pieces of poetry. Even when limiting our view to the Reorganization, there has been a significant amount of work done, though this has not necessarily produced any significant poetry.

This study addresses poetry within the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and defines an RLDS poet as someone who belongs to the RLDS church and who has published poetry in some form or other. While these may appear to be large parameters, they include a rather select — if not necessarily superior — group of persons. In defining poetry I shall revert to the words of an old first sergeant: “It is what they say it is!” Thus, if something has been published as poetry I have not chosen to argue. These definitions are both too inclusive and too exclusive, but the simple fact of determining that there is an RLDS literary tradition of some kind makes any other definition awesome.¹

While any generalization I might make about style would be unfair to some authors and too kind to others, a major difficulty with most RLDS poetry is that it is poor poetry. The critic, as most of you know, is like the eunuchs in a harem; they know how it is done, they’ve seen it done every day, but they are unable to do it themselves. While feeling this impotence, I nevertheless re-

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¹ It should be noted that I have not considered the rather large body of unpublished materials that I personally know exists among some RLDS authors.

member John Ciardi's definition of a bad poem as one that "either misplaces its human sympathies" or has such gross "technical incompetencies" as to be unacceptable. Herein lies the problem. Some of our poetry is technically well done, or is at least experimentally interesting. Some makes a significant effort to deal with the human empathy. But in the main, it has failed to do either.

Most is written in traditional verse forms, often in syllabic rhyme with emphasis on visual rather than assonantal schemes, as this poem by Joseph Dewsnap, Sr., shows:

Help my rejoicing soul to reach
 The bliss of her supreme desire
 To know and tell thy wonderous love
 'Tis human hearts with joy shall move.

I feel myself unworthy, Lord
 Of thy dear love and sacred trust;
 Yet, as thy holy breath and word
 called man immortal from the dust.²

RLDS authors, like the majority of English-speaking authors, have formalized the two-ascent foot and produced what is often an adulterated iambic octameter, pentameter, tetrameter, or trimeter — often in the same poem. David Smith, one of the more formal and technically correct of the RLDS poets wrote primarily in iambic octameter as did his son and fellow poet, Elbert A. Smith. Briefly in the 1940s unmetaphoric forays into Imagism were popular. Most post-1960 poetry is in iambic octameter, pentameter, or blank verse even though there have been some experiments in haiku, li, and other specialized forms. What is often identified as blank verse by authors and editors is usually free verse having no meter whatsoever.

False rhyme schemes are quite common and have little of the musical quality that I would prefer. There was (and is) a great respect in the later years for short pithy poems with very uncomplicated subjects; longer and more complicated attempts, when found, lack the thematic structure one finds in much great poetry. There are few attempts at more classical forms; and only occasional use of blank verse with little experimental work of the "word jazz" variety.

The primary exception to these comments appeared during the 1960s in *Stride*, a magazine for youth, where some excellent beginning poetry was published. This medium ceased publication in the 1970s, cutting off an important outlet.

On the other hand, RLDS poetry does not generally identify with Ciardi's human sympathies. This may be a case of the blackness of the kettle irritating the pot. Yet, I feel words — so often chosen for the sake of the implicit mes-

² Jasper Dewsnap, Sr., "Prayer," *Autumn Leaves* 1 (Jan. 1888) : 68.

sage — are without muscle or history and as such stand stark, embarrassed by their simplicity. Note this 1954 poem from *Saints' Herald*:

There was no chancel for the white-robed choir,
No cushioned pews nor windows of stained glass;
But angels sang an anthem from the skies
To wondering shepherds seated on the grass.

There was no bassinet with bows of blue,
No silken pillow for his small dark head;
But Mary wrapped a king in swaddling clothes
And laid him gently in a manger bed.³

Words are used both rhetorically, in order to avoid passion; and reflectively, in order to create relationships between the fact and the image. We limit the ability of the language to speak when the overtones of association fail to be developed by the factual, rather than the intuitional, nature of their use.

Symbols in RLDS poetry rarely get beyond their own static presentation to achieve a new emphasis, particularly when they are measured to fit into lines or to accomplish a rhyme, and are full of weak adverbs and adjectives or, as is often the case, completed with accents designed to create instant dialect for the sake of meter. They reflect the tendency to perform in poetry rather than to relate through it.

Most of us use metaphor fairly routinely to define and express our feelings. Such use creates a bridge between two unlike, yet related, aspects of the metaphor itself. This is the essence of what is often called Platonic love. The tension created allows us to inject something new into what was understood separately before, and in doing so, to acknowledge something which was not before. More than this, the metaphor is a statement about our understanding of our existing world, our immediate environment. It is, as well, the mark of our willingness to venture away from the ultimate, the concrete, for (as Ann-Janini Morey-Gaines states in her beautiful review of *Gyn/Ecology*) “metaphor is the language of invention and process, not finality and ultimate destination. We rehearse our alternatives in story and myth, and our stories are our conversations about our choices, not only what we desire but also what we fear; the things before and the things behind. Without our stories, metaphors are the critical continuities with which we explore experience.”⁴

For what is apparent in this attempt to expand on understanding, to go more than one way at a time in our thinking, is that the point from which we speak metaphorically is over-defined. There is no reaching out in the sense that

³ Berde Rooney, “Royalty,” *Saints Herald* 101 (20 Dec. 1954): 16.

⁴ Ann-Janini Morey-Gaines, review of Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Matathesis of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), in *Soundings* 65 (1982): 340–51. For the reader interested in the use of metaphor as cultural tool this is a very significant article. This should not overshadow, however, the impact of Mary Daly’s work on the nature of feminism.

Morey-Gaines has suggested; the vast majority of our metaphoric usage is limited to comparison. There is no new comprehension for either the reader or for the poet, no point at which we can read back into the metaphor a new understanding of the place from which we left. Often what we write is superior verse; but lacking this metaphoric sense, it is not good poetry.

I suspect there are many excellent and practicing poets who will serve as living proof of the limitations of my comments. But I accept Paul Valery's assumption that one line of a poem is given to the poet by God, or by nature, or even by experience, but the rest he/she has to discover alone. Most RLDS poetry in publication reads as if the authors wanted to write a poem, not that they had a poem — or a line — to be written. They do not acknowledge the image before the thought, failing to recognize that in the writing we must live our “way through the imaged experience of all these ideas.”⁵ Such an experience in writing poetry requires an abstraction, an imagination. But more than that, it requires a life-time of watching, of waiting, of seeing normally unseen things and hearing in the silence of one's wondering the words that not only recall but regenerate the experience. It requires that the poet be the kind of person who sees and feels simultaneously so that he/she might think with his/her body and feel with his/her mind.

Much of the poetry of the RLDS does not reflect this sort of poet. Much of the problem can be attributed to the amateur nature of both poets and editors. Every poetic effort appears to be accepted as a valid one. Certainly a poet must practice, but I am leery of the tendency to publish every exercise. These practice efforts are often clever, sometimes amusing, and once in awhile edifying and true. But they leave nothing for the limitless world of consideration. The vast majority of published authors within the RLDS tradition have had fewer than five works published, with the largest percentage having only one. Thus, many of the published works are first poems — often only poems — without the selectivity that is brought about by experience, critics, competition, and a literary tradition.

One reason for this, I believe, is the “presentational nature” of what is written. I refer to the emotional shorthand used to describe an event, recapture a mood, or celebrate an occasion. Note this response to the opening of a new church building.

A church is more than wood and brick,
block and mortar, steel and stone . . .
they are the shell but not the soul
a church is more than these alone.

Mute walls cannot respond to prayers
of dedication; neither can
they take the good news to the world
of God's enduring love for man.

⁵ Paul Valery, *The Art of Poetry* (New York: Vintage Book, 1916), p. 41.

So let this dedication be
of mind and sinew, heart and nerve
of all who enter — that each one
may come to worship . . . leave to serve.⁶

This “light verse turned sober” tends to be very limited in scope, it has as a theme something pragmatic rather than abstract, it has few if any timeless or enduring qualities, and more than not it is limited to the existence of an emotion, not a response to the emotion. Often it is simply what Emma Lou Thayne has called “metered moralizing.”⁷

Writing prose is often more testimonial, of the prayer meeting variety, composed of an outpouring of the warm consideration of the grace of God and the love of the Saints. But writing poetry is more than testimonial, it involves a great deal of hard work, and it hinges on the author’s willingness to risk self-exposure in an effort to expose the reader. It is hard to read poetry, and I would venture that most poetry printed by the RLDS is not read, primarily because it says nothing new and its rewards are not worth the effort of understanding.

The other side of this, of course, is that poets are not used. Many promising poets whose work appeared at one time in *Stride* have failed to continue writing, or at least to submit work for publication.⁸ Some have gone on to become accomplished poets but few either write about, or for, the Reorganization. This is true in part because neither the reader nor the editors have been able to grow with the poet’s professionalism.

Thus there are few RLDS markets for insightful and demanding poetry. In the first place there are not enough knowledgeable readers to create a demand. In the second place the market has been greatly restricted by both editorial and official reaction as to what poetry should be.⁹ It has not been used by committed and concerned people, by leaders or dissenters, for inquiry, for dissent, or for a means to push on the frontiers of our beings. Once again we seem to present poetry to fill empty spaces, not empty hearts and minds.

II

The majority of RLDS poetry, particularly since 1900, does not relate to the Reorganization, the Restoration, or to the institutional church. Certainly

⁶ Naomi Lou Russell, *Discovery: A Collection of Poetry* (Independence: Russell, 1976), p. 73.

⁷ Emma Lou Thayne, “The Chiaroscuro of Poetry” in Thomas Alexander, ed., *The Mormon People: Their Character and Tradition*, Charles Redd Monographs in Western History #10 (Provo: BYU Press, 1980), p. 34.

⁸ There were a dozen or so showing great promise: Twyla Jones, Gary Wick, Elaine Cook, Gaye West, Beth Higdon, Vere Jamison (Evan Shute), Pam Lents, Rosemary Yankers, Barbara Hiles, Billi Jo Maples, and Bruce Koehler, to name but a few.

⁹ William Russell in his response to this paper in its original form provided an excellent illustration to this point when he reported that an RLDS poet had sent a poem to the *Herald* only to be told by the then-managing editor that it was a good poem, but “can’t you write it in prose?”

it does not characterize the unique nature of the movement or any of its peculiar beliefs. For a quick quantitative look at this point I surveyed four major works in the RLDS tradition and issues of *Stride* from 1957 to 1969.

*Poetic Voices of the Restoration*¹⁰ published 244 poems by RLDS authors covering over ninety years and yet only twenty-one of these dealt with distinctively RLDS topics. In *Hesperis*, written by the theologically minded David H. Smith and Elbert A. Smith,¹¹ fewer than twenty of the approximately fifty poems dealt with the church, its history, or theology. *Discovery*, a small work by Naomi Russell, produced only two RLDS verses of the forty-eight. In *That Ye Love*,¹² a collection of works by Evelyn Maples, deals with distinctive RLDS concepts in only eight or so of her ninety-four poems. In *Stride*, which during the editorship of William D. Russell published a large amount of poetry written by youth, fewer than thirty of the more than 150 pieces had anything to do with the special nature of the movement.

I imagine there are many reasons for this, the most obvious being that there is very little about the RLDS movement distinctly unique, and what there is, is more historical and scriptural and does not seem to inspire poetic commentary. This is not to suggest that the Church does not have a significant heritage and message, but only to point out that it is not being stated in published poetry. A second reason is the “autobiographical and confessional” nature of our literature.¹³ This might be illustrated by the fairly common topic and style shown in the following poem published in the *Herald* in 1945.

I chanced to meet a friend one day
As I was going on my way.
In our exchange of thoughts and views
I had a chance to speak the news
Of gospel truth brought back to earth
To give to men the soul's rebirth,
To tell him how God speaks once more
Just as he did in days of yore;
But no — I just forgot to say
The words I should have said that day.¹⁴

The Mormon movement as a whole is prone to such poetic lapses since the nature of our story is told in the lives of those who have sensed the message and

¹⁰ Frances Hartman, *Poetic Voices of the Restoration* (Independence: Herald House, 1960).

¹¹ David H. Smith and Elbert A. Smith, *Hesperis or Poems by Father and Son* (Lamoni, Ia.: Herald Publishing House, 1911).

¹² Evelyn Maples, *In That Ye Love* (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1971).

¹³ Suggested by Eugene England in his review of Richard Cracraft and Neal Lambert, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974) in *BYU Studies* 15, no. 3 (1975).

¹⁴ Melvin Knussmann, “Last Opportunity,” *Saints Herald* 92 (1 Dec. 1945): 2.

lived the life. It is easier — perhaps for our purposes better — to explain the nature of the life so affected than it is to try and capture the effect.

One of the more enlightening works on Mormon literature is Eugene England's essay, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day."¹⁵ In it he states that most literature has missed the Mormon view of the search for self. While I think the pragmatic nature of this search is far less significant for the RLDS than the LDS, I would agree with him that the search is most often an individual one, often associated with God but rarely with the institutional church. This may or may not be a significant factor, but it does explain a good deal about the lack of passion that is found for exemplifying the Church through poetry.

In identifying what this means about our people, however, wisdom suggests that I be guided by the words of David H. Smith, early RLDS leader, who wrote of his craft in "The Poet's Story":

And do not think that he has passed
through every scene he pictures forth
think of the poet least and last
and take his song for what 'tis worth.¹⁶

It is my contention that so far the singer is more expressive than the song.

In a second comment made by England, this time in his review of Cracroft and Lambert's *A Believing People*, he states that America's great literature "has almost invariably grown out of the religious failure of a group" Thus, he suggests, we ought perhaps to be "pleased to have been spared such greatness."¹⁷ Surely he writes in jest. There is always a chance that the LDS may have missed such problems; but in the RLDS, failure is not unknown, we are not pleased by our inability to find expression in poetry, nor — as he suggests for the LDS — have we "been too busy doing more important things."¹⁸ If he is even reasonably serious, then I feel he has miscalculated the significance of poetry in the religious expressions of a people. I would think this would be even more true within the LDS tradition because of its uniqueness, while the RLDS find some of their literary expression in the larger and less unique field of Christian and Protestant literature.

Whatever the reason, however, it is observable that RLDS poetry — either officially or privately published — has, as a rule, not reflected the doctrine, theology, or history of the movement.

III

At the risk of sounding overly dramatic let me suggest that the poetry of the RLDS tradition is too free from discomfort and/or joy. I am reluctant to

¹⁵ Eugene England, "The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 years," *BYU Studies* 22 (Spring 1982): 131.

¹⁶ David H. Smith, *Hesperis*, p. 99.

¹⁷ England, *A Believing People*, p. 365.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

use the word tragedy, as some suggest, and I do not want to argue that poetry is only born out of the pain of human existence. There is a point at which a people, however, have been blessed (or damned) with an abundance of mediocrity. We have not had the advantage of harassment, for relatively small attacks have befallen the Reorganization; we have not had the advantage of wilderness, for it is our effort which has placed us in the mainstream of Christianity; we have suffered neither isolation nor persecution as did our forefathers in the Restoration. We have not even had the advantages that our Utah friends had of exile, for we rarely separate ourselves physically or psychologically from midlands America that is our home. And few great periods of joy, limited mountain-top experiences, or contemporary miracles are around to inspire.

Lack of institutional awareness of either the joy or pain of humankind leaves us unrepresentative of the people to whom we speak. Not that we have not ourselves suffered our own personal difficulties or that in the framework of the church we do not feel broken and alone, but there is no continuing institutional assumption of the essential nature of human suffering. More and more as we reach out to other countries, as we become aware of the pain and suffering of the less fortunate, when we are willing to die our deaths on the crosses of other persons' needs, we may begin the understanding of institutional expression.

In the meantime we have not really learned ourselves. We have not paid the price of knowing where our hearts are. We have not dealt with the existential loneliness we feel, or feel we should feel, as a peculiar people. While I believe that many of our people have become existentially sound as persons, they still have not been willing to view the dark side of religious experience. While they revel in the conversion they do not understand the loss that each conversion recalls. Religious poetry suggests aid in the lonely struggle (or undertakes to explain the death of loneliness through God), the togetherness of our human struggle, or the details of our partnership with God. We are reluctant to express the dark side of the church — as David Smith did the dark side of his soul¹⁹ — and in so doing identify only the progression and the power. But as such we have provided nothing equal to a “Hound of Heaven.”

I need to state a bias here, for I feel there is something within the nature of the movement which makes poetic expression difficult, if not nearly impossible. I start by affirming that our poetry is, to quote Gabriel Marcel, “not in tune with the deepest notes of our personal experience.”²⁰ He suggests an “onto-

¹⁹ David H. Smith wrote the following in the midst of his early troubles with mental illness:

I turn unto my task with weary hands,
Grieving with sadness, knowing not the cause;
Before my face a desert path expands,
I will not falter in the toil, nor pause;
Only, my spirit somehow understands
This mournful truth — I am not what I was.

Hesperis, p. 102–3.

²⁰ Gabriel Marcel, quoted in Ralph Harper, *Nostalgia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1965), p. 31.

logical hunger” which reflects on our ability to express ourselves about our experience. Karl Keller touched on it when he suggested that we have denied ourselves a literature because “we have learned to love the Word of God but not the words of Joseph Smith.”²¹ This is unlike the Jews for whom the words of the prophets produced a love of the words themselves, and thus a lively literary tradition.

But it goes deeper than this. The RLDS tradition, as well as its theological implications, give rise to a literature — at least a poetry — of narration rather than expression. This is a public rather than a private response. The paradox of the sacred and profane worlds has been well stated by others and needs no comment here. But the implications of this conflict within the RLDS community can be seen in the restrictive nature of a poetry that is public rather than private.

The immediate experience of sacred power in the life of a person is vastly different from the commitment of one who finds dedication in a religious community through the process of socialization. Often our most definitive character is formed in the social process of our religious understanding. But that is not where the power of our conversion lies. The assumption that our religious expression is the narration of this social process is a key to explaining the lack of animation in RLDS poetry. It lacks the power expressed by one who, making a sacred and personal decision, has literally been trapped in the meaningfulness of this pivotal communication with the divine.

As a generalization I believe that RLDS poetry lacks evidence of phenomenological reverberations from experience. To produce religious poetry — or any poetry for that matter — one must go beyond the sentimental vibrations that one feels. These repercussions must be allowed to spread out, mingling immediate experience with universal experience to create reverberations. The human capacity for reflection is the ability to transform information into knowledge, to alter understanding from “the sphere of being” into the “sphere of coming into being.”²² In the vibrations our literary efforts mimic experience. But in the reverberations such experience becomes our own. RLDS poetry often appears to have bounced off the authors, but the work never seems to have possessed the authors.

Readers, even less involved and looking for the warm verification of previous convictions, will have found the collected works perhaps more easily identifiable but no more rewarding.

IV

Finally, I would suggest that our poetry has generally provided neither “an escape from dullness” nor “freedom from the known.” The first term, borrowed from Ezra Pound, suggests that poetry must begin with the call to experi-

²¹ Karl Keller, “On Words and the Word of God: The Delusions of Mormon Literature,” *DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT* 4 (Autumn 1969): 13.

²² These terms are not mine but result from a source read so long ago that I cannot identify it. To the author I express my gratitude.

ence, but that such a call must create unaccustomed understanding, must uncover the non-discovered, must live with the spontaneity of a new affection. The partial power of poetry is that it calls us to see again that which has grown old with recognition, to find in metaphor a resemblance that is new, in allegory a new tale from an old story, in simile a new identification for a familiar form, in imagery a total sensory suggestion, and in symbolism a look in several directions at once. Can anyone avoid the freshness aroused in Wadsworth's description of a painting:

I held unconscious intercourse with beauty
Old as creation . . .²³

or wonder at the motivation of another poet who observes the obvious:

We see the wintertime draw near
The harvest fields are white.²⁴

I have gone to Krishnamurti for my comment about "freedom from the known."²⁵ In reading RLDS poetry I call to mind the failure to remove it from the restriction of old emotions. There is a point, I believe, when the dictates of our search as persons, as well as our presentation of our thoughts about persons, call us to ask questions and to stand silently awaiting answers. These answers come not in observation but in the maturation of persons confronting their world. I have always called this frame of mind philosophical; others call it poetic. Both recognize that life is often lived in a manner which does not include that thing which makes it significant. It is that thing we search for, both in cognition and in expression. We call it God and love and peace. But we do not know enough of what it is to speak about it, or to it, other than in the language of our intellects. Those that know me know that I am not speaking against reason, or scholarship, or even logic, but against the assumption that all that is to be known is cognitive. Our poetry is evidence of our limited ability to share what we seek, and what we feel about what we have found.

Is it possible to find what we seek, or is it like the breeze that we crave on a hot summer evening? We cannot provide it, but we can open the window of our lives for it to enter. Such "waiting," if that is what it is, is not passive, it is passionate, passionate in the sense of urgency and intensity. It is also frightening. Such passion will lead us to places that we have not been before. If we are to seek what has not been found, then we must discover how to leave what we have. This is what we seek though we do not know it or like it. This freedom from the known then is the passion, not of knowledge, but of rejection, of moving away, of cutting off the limitations of yesterday's sensations. It is the open-

²³ Ernest de Selincourt, ed., *The Prelude* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 1:562.

²⁴ Minnie McBain, "The Gospel's Autumn," *Poetic Voices of the Restoration*, p. 126.

²⁵ J. Krishnamurti, *Freedom from the Known* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1969).

ness to new sounds that makes us listen, like the love of love makes us loving. We seek to be silent and to love, yet if we achieve both we are not aware of being either.

To suggest that the poetry of the RLDS movement lacks passion, then, is to suggest that it is too conscious of what it is. It is not risk, it is not the leap from that which is known to accept without recognition that which is unknown. The idea of losing one's life in order to have life has been pronounced theologically, religiously and philosophically, with little avail to most of us. But it is the nature of poetry in its most meaningful form. It is the point at which poetry and religion become as one. The weakness of our poetry is the weakness of our poets. They feel passionate about what they have learned but have yet to learn to be passionate about their awesomeness. The concern is there, the love is there, the interest in expression and perhaps the gnawing desire to express is there, but we have not yet been good enough listeners.