

Mormon Poetry Now! A Golden Age?

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I. Already to Harvest . . . Again

Twenty-five years ago, Dennis Marden Clark, then poetry editor for *Sunstone*, began a four-part series for the magazine, called “Mormon Poetry Now!” In his column published once a year over the next four years, he set out, according to his stated purpose, to survey “the state of the art of Mormon poetry,” to examine “the best of what Mormon poets [were] trying to publish.” I’m sure his survey of the field dovetailed nicely with the work he was doing alongside Eugene England to gather poems for the anthology they were editing together, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*. Taken together, these projects may well compose a unique moment in Mormon literary history—a conscious move to place Mormon poets center stage, if only for a moment; to “definitive[ly]” represent “the new Mormon tradition of poetry” that had developed over the preceding thirty years and that continues into the present. As England has it, those

working within this contemporary tradition tend toward “an unusually healthy integration of skillful form and significant content,” toward the marriage of formal poetic training and the moral “ideas and values . . . they claim to know through religious experience.” It’s a union, England concludes, that leads them to “act with energy to communicate those ideas in confidence that they will be understood” and accepted by both their peers within Mormonism and within the field of mainstream American poetry.

I’ve deliberately tied myself to those definitive efforts to represent the new Mormon poetry by making Clark’s title my own. My essaying here, however, is anything but an authoritative attempt to illustrate the expansive breadth of Mormon poetry as it has developed in the twenty-plus years since *Harvest* was published. That would require far more than the space of a single essay. My immediate project, rather, is to elaborate on Glen Nelson’s somewhat, in his

words, “over-the-top” claim made in passing during his recent *Mormon Artist* interview with Randy Astle: while discussing the Mormon Artist’s Group’s recent “Song/Cycles” project—a collaborative effort facilitated by MAG and several Mormon composers and poets to set the poets’ work to music—he mentions that it’s “commonly known that we’re experiencing something like a golden age of Mormon poets,” that Mormon culture has certain “name poets” who are finding some degree of acknowledgment and success in the national poetry market.

I asked Glen what he meant by this “golden age” and to whom this idea was “commonly known.” In response to the first question, he echoed England’s comments about poets who are, to his knowledge, believing Latter-day Saints and whose work is stellar enough to garner national attention on its own merits. For instance, he mentioned that he had a phone conversation with the poetry editor of the *New Yorker* a while ago. He said, “I was curious whether she was aware that such-and-such a poet in their magazine was Mormon. It made no difference to her. And I’m fine with that. It did, however, make a difference to me.” As it does to me, especially because there seems to be an increasing number of (as best I can tell) believing Mormon poets making names for themselves beyond the Mormon journals and publishing houses—those like the core group reviewed below and the many more I don’t have space to mention here. Taken together, these poets compose a concentrated dose of our literary kin who are making noticeable splashes in the American mainstream, such as may or may not be happening in the more visible genres (the novel, for instance).

I’m not certain whether this increasing movement of our poets into the national spotlight (a) warrants the “Golden Age” appellation or (b) is “commonly known” among a broader audience than the few devout followers of contemporary American poetry who happen to have an interest in those mainstream poets who are also Mormon (or is it those mainstream Mormons who are also successful poets?). However, I am certain the field of contemporary Mormon poetry is “already to harvest” (D&C 4:4)—again—and that this trend and these poets deserve more of our community’s attention.

II. A Brief, Necessarily Biased, Survey

The following survey of eight Mormon poets—many of whom are winners of national poetry awards and all of whom are accomplished writers—was framed around several criteria: (1) the poets had to have published a book (either a full-length collection or a chapbook) within the last five years—I’ve included at least one book from each year, though each poet only appears once, even if they’ve published multiple books; (2) they had to be—as best I could tell—believing Latter-day Saints; (3) they had to represent something of the diversities of the Mormon lyric voice (a difficult thing to represent with such a small sample size); and (4) their books had to be on my bookshelf. I include this last

criterion as a means to justify not broadening the survey’s scope and not including several recent volumes I want to read but haven’t yet because I’m on a young family/graduate student budget and haven’t the wherewithal to feed all my wants just yet.

So without further ado, I offer capsule reviews of books by eight contemporary Mormon poets, circa 2005–2010, listed by year of publication.

“A Delicious Lapping”: Lance Larsen, *In All Their Animal Brilliance* (Tampa, FL: University of Tampa Press), 2005. 84 pp. Winner, Tampa Review Prize for Poetry and 2005 Association for Mormon Letters Poetry Award. Larsen received a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2007. American poet Lola Haskins blurbed about Larsen’s second collection that “the book stands out” in the field of contemporary American poetry for at least two reasons: first, because “it travels—from a talisman in the first poem to a vineyard in the last, in which metaphors of growth and renewal are tied directly to the poet’s life opening outwards.” And second, Haskins continues, because “its honesty stuck with me when I went to bed at night.” These marks of Larsen’s poetry—its movement outward toward the apocalyptic moment when the self becomes expansive enough to embrace all that is Other (including “[t]he Father” of Jesus imagined in the book’s last poem, the Coke-drinking God who “wanders his overgrown / vineyard in an underfed body”) (“Vineyard,” lines 30–1), and its formal, emotional, and spiritual integrity—these characteristics make reading (and re-reading) Larsen’s work a delight. Like the best poetry, its content is substantive, structured on the lyric marriage of the transcendent and the everyday, making the experience both soul-affirming and soul-expanding. This tension between affirmation and expansion tempers the poet’s line, making it taut enough to resound with the rhythms, the wit, and the (ir)reverence—the “delicious lapping,” as he names it in one poem (“This World, Not the Next,” line 23)—of quotidian language laced with traces of an Infinite song.

“Not Satisfaction, but Its Proxies”: Javen Tanner, *Curses For Your Sake* (New York, NY: Mormon Artists Group), 2006. 44 pp. The title of Tanner’s chapbook frames well the experience captured in his lyric narrative poems. Extracted from the decree God directed towards Adam and Eve at the moment he expelled them from the Garden of Eden, the phrase “curses for your sake” (see Gen. 3:17) suggests that moral paradox and ambiguity form the developmental crux of mortality. In other words, the pain, suffering, and even, as Tanner calls them, the “proxies” of satisfaction (“Eden,” line 2) (objects or relationships that prepare us for the ultimate satisfaction of spiritual and physical salvation) work toward our advantage and enhancement as human beings and human communities. With evocative language and imagery informed, to some degree, by his Mormon religious experience

and self-consciously centered on the visceral rhythms and ambiguities of human experience, he thus takes up his poetic cross and wills us to follow as he forges a path through variations on these ambiguous realities to the end of preparing us for more lasting psychological and spiritual connections and consolations.

“An Economy of Grace”: (Scott) Warren Hatch, *Mapping the Bones of the World* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books), 2007. 96 pp. Winner, 2008 Association for Mormon Letters Poetry Award. Although it might seem contradictory to suggest that this collection (Hatch’s first) of long narrative poems is economical—as if the poet had composed from a frugal rhetorical budget, determined to compress experience into as tight a linguistic vessel as he could craft in order to get the most out of his poet’s mite—the true economy of Hatch’s poems resides not in poetic thrift. Indeed, the poet is very generous with his words, both in terms of rhetorical kindness—his narratives are accessible, marked with compassion for his subject matter and for his readers—and the measured sprawl of his line. Rather, Hatch’s poetic economy manifests in the way he explores the rich narrative resources of his past and of his place (rural, wild, even suburban Utah), meandering through language and experience as he follows wisps of grace from astrology mapped on a lover’s skin to the snap of Grandma’s bed sheets, along the vistas and salt valleys of memory.

“The Points at which My Loves Fell From Me”: Philip White, *The Clearing* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press), 2007. 77 pp. Winner, Walt McDonald First-Book Competition, 2007. In this book dedicated to his late father, mother, and wife, White invites us to feel our way around in the soul-space excavated by love and life, loss and death. Framed, then, as elegiac meditations on the loss of persons beloved, White lingers on these moments of departure—what the speaker in the final poem calls “the points at which my loves fell from me” (“Six O’Clock Flight To the Interment,” line 25). But this fall isn’t the end of love, though the poet neither finds nor offers easy consolations or platitudes to pacify the bereaved while making his way through grief to some measure of grace. Indeed, the fact that he leaves *The Clearing* with questions about how we represent and remember those we’ve lost suggests that coming home to love isn’t a simple matter of moving on with life after loss and thus of moving away from loss. Perhaps, instead, it involves learning to see our beloved dead as more than “mere scenery, props” on life’s stage meant to slide into the background, forgotten. Perhaps it means learning to see them as “a world” in themselves, as “a field,” “a struck stage, a slate / wiped clean, a cloud moraine above or below / or within which everything takes place,” including our lives, our love, our memories. Although, paradoxically, “we will never find ourselves in [these places] again” (lines 68–72), partly because in circling back to love through loss we find

ourselves and our surroundings—or rather our perception of our surroundings—changed. And we will never again know those earlier selves, those earlier loves, losses, and landscapes—for better or for worse—the way we once knew them.

“How We Are Saved”: Neil Aitken, *The Lost Country of Sight* (Tallahassee, FL: Anhinga Press), 2008. 76 pp. Winner, 2007 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry and 2008 Association for Mormon Letters Poetry Award. Aitken’s first collection begins with a poem—“In the Long Dream of Exile”—that marks the solitary nature of the poet’s vocation. Pointing to this call to wander rhetorical landscapes in pursuit of, among other things, what poet Adrienne Rich calls “the dream of a common language” (the shared signs and tokens through which we might make our way into deeper relationships with one another, with the earth, and with God), the poet shows how this work keeps those who choose it always “on the verge of love” (line 19). As a participant-observer who is both a compassionate part of and who stands apart from various communities (the latter as a function of the solitude necessary for the poet to assimilate and express his insights into human experience), he skirts this verge with longing and lyric precision. He traces rich veins of language and connection through relationships lost, forged, and remembered on his journey through the lost country of sight: the exilic, often neglected place wherein poetic imagination and memory offer new visions of personal and communal histories, presence, and potential.

“A Little Tomb, but Flashy While It Lasts”: Kimberly Johnson, *A Metaphorical God* (New York, NY: Persea Books), 2008. 69 pp. Johnson received a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2005. Johnson’s second collection continues the poet’s self-avowed probing at the limits of language as a means to human expression and knowledge. Testing the world as we experience and order it through words from the beginning, she picks up with a poem titled “Epilogue,” whose group of speakers flaunts their poetic acumen, as here:

Before the sackbut, before the virginal
struck perpendicular chords, our madrigals
were sublime, loosing harmonies

to unhinge the spheres. (Lines 1–4)

With this poem, she draws readers more deeply into the “little tomb” of poetic language from which she intends to raise us—or at least to make us more aware of—through the Lent-patterned movement of her poems. We follow her from her playing in an ash garden at the outset through a thirty-nine poem psaltery filled with physical and spiritual yearning to a voluptuous rise into the wor(l)d’s “profane loveliness” at the end (“Easter, Looking Westward,” line 10). In

this compressed space framed by the structures of metaphor and sound, Johnson presents us with images, words, and word sequences that flash across the mind and the tongue, that highlight language as a material system through which we act upon the world, and that compel us to lay to rest the easy language (cliches, etc.) through which we too often experience one another and the world.

“Braced against a Holy Staff”: Mark Bennion, *Psalm & Selah: A Poetic Journey through The Book of Mormon* (Woodsboro, MD: Parables), 2009. 109 pp. “However much I admire Nephi / I know it is with Sam / I hold the greater kinship” (“Tribute,” lines 1–3). With this declaration of affinity—a genealogy of likeness, Nephi connecting the poet with Sam, and through Sam, the Book of Mormon’s cast of secondary characters—Bennion begins his lyric journey into the heart of Christian theology. As modeled by Christ, it is the act of attending to the one; of extending a hand of compassion and fellowship to the marginalized, silenced Other (as the leprous, the blind, the lame); of assimilating the margins into an ever-expanding center. The poet honors this principle by noticing and giving voice to those characters “braced against a holy staff, / Adjusting their shoes, / Unnoticed” (lines 28–30)—those on the canon’s periphery to whom we don’t pay much, if any, heed: Sam, Lemuel, Zoram, the daughters of Ishmael, Chemish, Abish, Abish’s father, Lamoni’s wife, Lehonti, Gadianton, and more. This revisionary accounting for the Other, offered through Bennion’s layered, dynamic, and aesthetically rich lyric narratives, merits multiple deep readings.

“Blooms Flourish In Spite of Her”: Karen Kelsay, *In Spite of Her* (Cheyenne, WY: Flutter Press), 2010. 26 pp. In this latest chapbook of narrative poems, Kelsay explores the relationship between a middle-aged woman and a world that changes and moves on “in spite of her” (“In Spite of Her,” line 11). These poems become acts of mourning mixed with moments of acceptance of and resignation to those things we just can’t change, those losses we’ll never get back. Children grow up, leave an empty nest purred with memories and parental regrets; and no matter how much we want them not to, the seasons change. The world—and our mortality with it—continues its entropic cycle through space. As the title poem suggests, critical language hurled at us when young can shape our self-conceptions for a lifetime. And yet, hope also resides in these elegies: in spite—even because of—the critical words we may carry for a lifetime, we can master skills we once struggled at and become good people. A new generation of kin—whether blood-related or just neighbors looking for a more mature presence in their lives—can give us the chance to try again what we feel we failed at the first time around. We can find redemption from regret. And despite the inevitability of death, there is beauty here, witnessing that God is near, even if a bit “too near” at times for our own comfort (“Autumn Ambivalence,” line 18). ♣

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