

EUGENE ENGLAND and DENNIS CLARK, eds. *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989. 316 pp. \$14.95, paperback.

Reviewed by Richard H. Cracroft, professor of English and chair of the American Studies program at Brigham Young University.

For the Latter-day Saint who keeps one eye peeled for the Millennium and the other fixed on the encroachments of Babylon, the publication of *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems* is both a satisfaction and a consternation: a satisfying confirmation that many (middle-aged) Latter-day Saint poets are beginning to harvest a literature commensurate with their vision of the Restoration and at least as good as the writing of their Gentile counterparts; and a consternation, a storm warning that at least some (younger) Mormon poets, while achieving significantly as artists, seem to have replaced their Urim and Thummims with self-reflecting spectacles that essentially make these artists no different from other contemporary poets. *Harvest* is nonetheless a significant gleaning and harbinger, the happy result of editorial collaboration of two accomplished LDS poets and scholars. A respectable but bifurcated, two-toned book, *Harvest* gleans the best from fifty-eight poets, including five respected Gentiles and ex-Mormons, "Friends and Relations," whose inclusion underscores the comparatively remarkable accomplishment of Latter-day Saint poets.

The poets included in the first half of the book speak deeply, often movingly, in a variety of voices and visions about life as experienced by men and women deeply rooted in Mormon soil: a *Mormon* (though not institutional) poetry. The other half of the book speaks, also movingly and with similar variety and poetic skill, about human life rooted in a universal soil. Many of these later poems could have been written anywhere in Western culture and raise the question, Why are they included in a collection of *Mormon poems* as opposed to a volume of poems by Mormons? The difference is significant for the future of Mormon literature and the future of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Eugene England, primarily responsible for the selection of poems written by poets born between 1901 and 1939 (called, collectively, the "New Tradition"), notes in his editor's comment that contemporary LDS poets

are generally university-trained, . . . and therefore interested in formal skill and experimentation. . . . Yet, like their Mormon predecessors, they care deeply about ideas and values, even some extremely specific ones that they claim to know through religious

experience, and they act with energy to communicate those ideas in confidence that they will be understood, at least by fellow Mormons (285).

England rightly asserts (at least about the poets born prior to 1939) that contemporary Mormon poets demonstrate “an unusually healthy integration of skillful form with significant content” (286) and praises Clinton F. Larson as the planter who cultivated a poetry “that was both Mormon and honestly reflective of personal feelings” (287). Thanks to Larson’s liberating influence, says England, Mormon poets have written and continue to write “in a diversity of voices, but all of them in their own way Mormon” (288).

England makes no attempt to replow Mormon literary history and begins his selection with three decidedly Mormon poems by Helen Candland Stark, including “Winds (World War II),” published in *The Improvement Era* in 1943. With the inclusion of Stark and Veneta Leatham Nielsen, the editors thus represent and omit such poets of the *Relief Society Magazine* school as Alice Morrey Bailey, Christie Lund Coles, Vesta Pierce Crawford, Zara Sabin, and Ezra T. Poulsen — poets who often wrote well, variously resisting their readers’ demands for more message than the post-T. S. Eliot literary world finds comfortable. Uncompromisingly New Critical (and blessedly non-Post Structural), England’s selections, like his vision of the universe, are whole and absolute — with beginnings, middles, and ends — though he avoids inclusion of any humorous poetry (such poems are admittedly sparse, but there are some good ones) or any of the late Elder S. Dilworth Young’s roughshod and decidedly non-New Tradition gems. Nor does he include even *one* section of *A Certain Testimony*, R. Paul Cracraft’s impressive contribution to Mormon letters via the epic — a form into which Elder Orson F. Whitney and Alfred Osmond had ventured earlier but with considerably less success. For these omissions the compilers will have to answer to a Higher Editor.

Nevertheless, the selection is rich and admirably inclusive. The best are there — from Arthur Henry King, Marden J. Clark, Edward L. Hart, Iris Parker Corry, and Clinton F. Larson to Emma Lou Thayne, John S. Harris, Donnell Hunter, Marilyn McMeen Brown, Vernice Wineera Pere, Carol Lynn Pearson, and Sally T. Taylor. The first half of the volume is replete with well-crafted and *Mormon* poems reflecting the vision of men and women who have, in various ways, looked intensely at the world through the eyes of the spirit and attempted, with consummate skill, to communicate the ineffable.

Typical of such efforts is the moving “My Kinsman,” by Eugene England (who apologizes needlessly for including his own

verse [and Clark's] in a harvest that his efforts as founding editor of *Dialogue* did so much to prosper), which describes a father, young son by his side, kneeling amidst his southern Idaho crop, and crying to the Lord,

"Thou art the Prince who holds my heart  
And gives my body power to make.  
The fruit is thine: this wheat, this boy;  
Protect the yield that we may live!"

And fear thrilled me on that hushed ground,  
So that I grew beyond the wheat  
And watched my father take his hold  
On what endures behind the veil.

(78-79)

Reflecting the faith of *a believing people*, then, most of the poems of the New Tradition center, as a Latter-day Saint artist's stewardship should, in a deep-felt awareness of mankind's indebtedness to the redemption freely proffered by Christ and of the power God has granted his children to sanctify themselves by overcoming the world. In such a reality Latter-day Saints live, move, and have their being; it is their meat and drink; and it is this covenant theology that has moved Saints, from 1830 to the present, to flee Babylon, sacrifice the world, and cross the spiritual plains to Zion, forging enroute an evolving latter-day mythos that becomes the soil — not merely a sprayed-on nutrient — for the Latter-day Saint poet.

In replowing the Mormon-Christian myth in the soil that nourished them, Mormon artists use poetry as what Brewster Ghiselin calls "an instrument of knowledge"<sup>1</sup> to confront and render the world. If they are honest, they cannot write otherwise. Aware of the charge to plumb microcosmic truths for macrocosmic Truths, the Mormon poet probes the symbolic in the startling language and images of poetry, creating disciplined, crafted poems that outdo the worldly poets while expressing the innateness and immediacy of the Divine. As Elouise Bell concludes in "This Do in Remembrance of Me," "Every symbol has two halves./ But to us falls the matching" (95).

A far different purpose seems to inform the selections of the second half of the volume, made primarily by Dennis Clark from the works of Mormon poets born after 1939, a selection he entitles "New Directions." In his editor's comment, Clark explains his theoretical differences with coeditor England, differences at least partially responsible for the clear-cut tonal bifurcation of the volume. Addressing the tired, head-in-sand question, "Is there a Mormon poetry?" (instead of the more pertinent question, "What is a Mormon poem?"), Clark poses another question, "Is there a

Mormon audience for poetry?" (289). Then he reveals his own rooting in the humus of recondite and not-very-fertile Structuralism (he evokes the neuroanatomical arguments of Frederick Turner and Ernst Pöppel and the work on syntactical subordination by Noam Chomsky), by claiming that "*the audience of a poem determines, to a greater extent than its author, what a poem means*" (291; Clark's italics). Most important to such audiences, he insists, is not the *irrelevant message* of the poem, but its *sounds*. Thus he insists, with more than a touch of dogmatism, "The only criterion of less value to me than subject matter in determining the quality of a poem is message, and the two are wed" (291). The result of Clark's standpoint is the confession — in a book subtitled *Contemporary Mormon Poems* — that "not all" of the poems he has selected are "related to Mormon experience" (290).

In fact, the poems Clark has selected as representative of New Directions in Mormon poetry (some of them, I would suspect, over England's raised eyebrows) seem to spring less from the spiritual and mythic roots of Mormonism than from the self-fascination of much contemporary poetry. Thus we read, deeply moved, Margaret Rampton Munk's universally appealing, well-honed lines as she unblinkingly charts her course toward death from cancer — but they are certainly not a *Mormon* response to life and death. Neither is Kathy Evans's beautiful reverie, "Midnight Reassembled," rooted in the Mormon ethos in any way that I can discern:

Somewhere, out there  
in the immensity of night  
a swan glides across  
the surface of its own image,  
wings touching wings on the water.  
We touch the world this way.

(172)

Indeed, we find only occasionally among the poets born after 1939 that distinctively Latter-day Saint voice, the sensibility of the believing poet. Whether it is because Clark has "privileged" the poems because of their sound or because they reflect a faltering spiritual vision among younger Mormon poets, these poems 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.

Fortunately, there are notable exceptions, making it possible to hope that Clark's criteria for selection may have distorted the representativeness of the poems selected. Linda Sillitoe, for example, is represented not only by several decidedly non-LDS poems, but also by "Song of Creation," lovely, feminist lines about

the Mother and the Father sharing in the creation of the world; and by "Letter to a four-year-old daughter," about a child's discovery of the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. And there is rich spiritual depth in Randall L. Hall's "Passover: A Mirrored Epiphany," in which the Christ, on the cross, suddenly realizes a truth that "Took his breath, / Stunned Him suddenly with knowledge" that "the blood / Once painted on the lintels and the door posts / Was his own" (183). We are similarly moved by Colin B. Douglas's sweet canticles, "Take, Eat," and his "Adoni: Cover Me with Thy Robe"; by the back-handed evocation of Mormonness in Karen Marguerite Moloney's refreshing, "The Truant Officer Recalls Sweet Maggie" (about an ex-wife whose Mormon perfections intimidate her puzzled Gentile husband); by Bruce W. Jorgensen's quatrain, "Weight of Glory," and his moving folk-ballad about Joseph Smith, "The Light Come Down." All of these speak humanly from spiritual roots. But more typical of these poets, when they begin to approach Mormon subjects, is Lance Larsen's "Passing the Sacrament at Eastgate Nursing Home," a portrayal of routine and sterile Aaronic Priesthood service in which the sacred ritual never rises beyond the "bikini splendor, of the Hunsaker twins" or "the lady in 243 who wore her breasts at her waist" (237). There is no hint of transcendence or greening spirituality; it is a competent, earth-bound (non-Mormon) poem.

Despite — or perhaps because of — the questions this volume raises about the nature of contemporary Mormon poetry as a spiritual thermometer of a people, *Harvest* should lie, dog-eared, on every reading Mormon's nightstand. Virtually all of the poems would compare favorably with anyone's selection of modern poems. Many of them go beyond — to reveal a balance of spiritual vision and painstaking craftsmanship that portrays an admirable present literary reality and the promise of a distinctive, distinguished, and *Mormon* art in which faithful stewards of the word achieve an artistry based in vision and "achieve vision through artistry," as Bruce W. Jorgensen has written, while "we fulfill our innate godhood through the discipline of experience."<sup>2</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Brewster Ghiselin, Foreword to *Modern Poetry of Western America*, eds. Clinton F. Larson and William Stafford (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), xvii.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce W. Jorgensen, "Imperceptive Hands: Some Recent Mormon Verse," *Dialogue* 5 (Winter 1970): 34. (Italics in original.)