Poetry, the Other, and BYU

Tolerance and Diversity within Our Campus Community

Natalie Quinn

I am an English major with a guilty confession to make: until the latter part of high school, I hated poetry. I had always liked reading and writing, but for some reason I struggled to appreciate poetic expression with its subtler meaning and nuanced interpretations. I found poetry altogether frustrating and hard to decipher. I could not understand it, so I avoided it.

During my junior year of high school, the subject of my honors English class was American literature, and my teacher was Mr. Ben Gordon. Our course of study was chronological, so we began by reading the works of early explorers, colonists, and religious leaders and moved forward from that point on through the decades and centuries. Mr. Gordon delighted in challenging what we students thought we knew or understood about literature; he liked to make us think. Consequently, his class was both engaging and frustrating. When we arrived at the mid- to late-nineteenth century, he assigned us to read Walt Whitman's poetry. Given my longtime dislike of poetry, I was unenthusiastic about the assignment, and my apathy increased as I struggled to grasp what Whitman was trying to say with his long, convoluted lines of free verse that lacked recognizable metric patterns or a rhyme scheme.

I remember one particular night when I was up late trying to wade through some sections of "Song of Myself." My mother was staying up with me. She had been an English major and loved poetry, so she took it upon herself to help me love poetry, too. She sat by my side at the kitchen counter and lovingly read with me the sections I had been assigned, helping me pick apart the meaning of the lines—the imagery, the diction, the power of Whitman's thoughts. She became quite emotional as she pointed out to me these features of the poem, and before long I found that my eyes were also

filling with tears: I was so touched by the beauty of this poem—a beauty I had not previously seen or appreciated. Suddenly, I found myself opening my mind and my heart to these ideas that I had previously refused to acknowledge or value because they were foreign or hard to understand. Suddenly, I found myself loving poetry.

Fast forward a few years to my time as a college student. I had chosen English as my major and was enrolled in a class on literary theory. It was in this class that I first learned about Emmanuel Levinas and his philosophical ideas relating to the Other. Levinas teaches that we can transcend ourselves and our limited knowledge or understanding only by acknowledging and validating the existence of the Other. His philosophies promote a sense of responsibility and obligation that invites individuals to step outside themselves.

Levinas's ideas about the Other provide a perfect basis on which to build a community that is tolerant and diverse. To people outside of our campus community, BYU does not seem very diverse; rather, because most members of the BYU community are LDS, BYU seems homogeneous. However, this is not the case. BYU students, faculty, and employees come from all over the country and even from all over the world, and there is an incredible diversity of backgrounds, interests, and experiences among these community members. These individuals have had experiences and developed diversity through their participation in missions, study abroad programs, on-campus service initiatives, and other worthwhile organizations and programs. Their lives and endeavors exemplify Walt Whitman's exclamation in his poem "Give Me the Splendid, Silent Sun": "O such for me! O an intense life! O full to repletion, and varied!"[1]

If there is any homogeneity at BYU, it is a homogeneity that we believe extends well beyond the bounds of the university's campus to include and encompass the whole world. We believe that we are all children of God, that we have the same Heavenly Father and therefore have an obligation to treat one another with love and respect, or with charity, which is the Christian theological version of Levinas's philosophical concept of acknowledging the Other. As we charitably and respectfully acknowledge the Other, we can promote tolerance and diversity within our campus community. I learned as a junior in high school that being willing to open one's heart and one's mind to that which is unfamiliar or unknown—to the Other—can be incredibly enriching and rewarding. As we embrace the possibilities of our responsibility to the Other, we have the opportunity to learn and grow. Unsurprisingly, I think some lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem "Aurora Leigh" express my feelings most effectively:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
And only he who sees, takes off his shoes.[2]

We too can learn to see the heavenly beauty crammed into our world and into the people around us; we too can learn to appreciate the unique fire that burns in every object and individual with whom we come in contact; all we have to do is take off our shoes.

Natalie Quinn is originally from New Canaan, Connecticut, and was a senior at BYU (English major, Spanish and editing minors) when she presented this paper. Although she loves her Connecticut home, a part of her heart actually lives in Japan, where she served her mission. She is the second of six children, five of whom have been or currently are BYU students. She loves BYU and, as an undergraduate, delighted in participating in the Honors Program, traveling to London and Spain with study abroad programs, presenting at regional and national conferences, learning at the feet of exemplary professors and professionals, working as a Writing Fellow and TA, playing intramural flag football, and forming lasting, meaningful relationships with peers and mentors. She is currently a graduate student in the English MA program at BYU.

1. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1990), 264.

2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh,* ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: Norton, 1996), 238.