

Part 3
Mormon Poetry Now!

POEMS FOR THE NATURAL
AND SOCIAL WORLDS

by D.M. Clark

THE POEMS DISCUSSED IN THESE ARTICLES use various modes of discourse, such as analysis, description and interpretation, among others. But the overwhelming element in these poems is fiction.

The long narrative poem, like Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, is returning to American letters (especially in the fantasy genre). The subject may be "unpoetic;" that we think it possible shows how far divorced we are from poetry. But to succeed, any poem must be fiction. It must be made new for the reader. The poem's fiction should represent the stories of our lives, compressed, polished, sculpted for the tongue. That's what I hope for as a reader of poetry. And, much more so than in a novel, I expect the language of each story to delight me, however much the subject might appall.

The subject matter doesn't matter. And the only criterion of less value than subject matter in determining the quality of a poem is message. If the writer wanted to push a message, he would write an essay or buy an ad. A poem is the product of a poet's need to speak and the audience's need to hear, not the need to speak or hear something. I don't mean that what the poem says is of no importance; what the poem says is second only to how it is said. But what is said is so conditioned by how that a poet who slights the how will find it almost impossible to write well. If we had no other evidence of the irrelevance of message, the popularity of rock lyrics would do.

Nor is the poetry always an escape into beauty. Poets have as much trouble facing the surrealities of the "real world" as anyone. That shows in this group of poems, which are concerned more with the "real" world than with the world of soul, the home, the

chapel, the faith. Few of the poems I read in SUNSTONE are as concerned with politics, economics, warfare, commerce, science, technology or social injustice; those which are usually approach their subjects indirectly.

"The last speaker will give the interpretation of tongues" approaches this unexplored world by looking into the mind of one whose only world is the "real" world. "The last speaker . . ." is also the last of a sequence of six poems, *Requiem for a Town*, about the death of a small town in Utah.* The sequence takes the form of the transcript of a funeral service for the town. "The last speaker. . ." is itself a requiem for one townsman, Howell Tuttle. Howell's father, Arthur, insists on opening the casket to see his son's red hair; the speaker opens Howell's brain and, like an archaeologist with the Dead Sea Scrolls, or papyri from Egyptian tombs, unfolds his innermost thoughts.

There is no dignity in Howell's life, no great thought, no great love. In the holy of holies there is no vision of God, no dance of the flaming tongue of testimony, no greatness. But there is also none of the mundane life Howell led: visions of pies, of "deer standing among cedar trees," of "the bull mounting the cow"—not even women. There are glyphs, but not hieroglyphs, no hidden meanings (compare this poem with Mark Solomon's "Two Poems in Hieroglyphs" in the last article). Just the picture of "water and willows / shade of trees . . . clouds drifting / doing nothing,

* Three of the others have been published. The five (with publication notes) are: I, "announcements;" II, "The Opening Hymn will be Praise to the Man," (published in SUNSTONE, vol. 3, no. 3, March/April 1978, pp. 18-23); III, "The First Speaker will Justify the Ways of God to Man" (published as "The Rabbit Drive" in *Dialogue*, vol. XV, no. 1, Spring 1982, pp. 164-168); IV, "The Next Speaker Will Treat The Subject Of The Godhead;" V, "The Next Speaker Will Expound the Scripture" (published as Scripture Lesson" in *Dialogue*, vol. VI, nos. 3 and 4, Autumn-Winter 1971).

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nothing at all". The speaker fills out the picture, with Howell as one of the chips off of the final stanza "carried away from willows . . . far, far, far to the sea," having no more premonition than a wood chip of the flash-flood of history that carries him off to die in Belgium. He seems a nonentity, a man without a personality. Yet Sandberg, in anatomizing him, comes up against the mystery of the soul: "who can read your brain, Howell Tuttle, to speak your words?" His environment has imprinted itself most deeply in Howell's mind; its meaning to him remains a mystery.

In that sense, you could call "The last speaker . . ." a religious poem. But Sandberg places his religious imagery firmly in the natural world (anyone who has harvested grain will recognize the accuracy of "barley beards on the neck and grain dust in the nose and . . . the taste of the black spittle when there is smut in the grain"). That final vision is bucolic, pastoral—what one might expect to find in the mind of a sheep. It reminds us, who have moved so far from the animal warmth of the farm, so far into civilization, of what Christ means when he calls us his sheep—of the peace and safety he offers.

Sandberg preaches no gospel, but the details of the poem speak. A line like "The BARs barked stark god-damns" does more than report (BAR is an acronym for Browning Automatic Rifle, made by a company founded by the first Mormon gunsmith of any repute). The likening of this funeral to those of ancient Egypt, and of this interpretation of tongues to archeological study, place the town firmly in the world it should have left. It died in a natural world, one red in fang and claw.

The next two poems are about that world. The fangs are in Sybil Johnston's "The Nest," the story of a woman water-skiing into a nest of snakes: cottonmouths, or copperheads. By the time she is pulled out, the snakes have made her into a parody of a Medusa. The story is told without one unnecessary word, leaving to the imagination only that the snakes are venomous (implied in the immediacy of her "bleeding the water black"). The title give the poem a sinister twist: it becomes one of those infant snakes, angling its fangs in the mind, memorable because it is concise, horrifying because it is so matter-of-fact. That memorability is one sign of a good poem. (Also of good advertising, much of which nowadays is as carefully built as a good poem.)

Nature shows its claws in "The Coyote," a poem no more merciful than Johnston's, less formal than "The Nest," yet shaped in its own way. Its shape reminds me of one of the cliff-tops that coyotes inhabit in the cartoons, the top pillar of wind-carved sandstone, a steep slope of capstone undercut at the edge to a sheer drop.

But this coyote is not as cute as a cartoon coyote. Nor as remote. It gluts on kittens, "lair[s] in canyons / Overlooked by houses," (That use of "lair" as a verb is a right surprise in this poem, a successful innovation.) And it insinuates its wildness into these manicured yards as "seducer of pedigreed bitches." The houses' "wide windows yearn / For far meadows of lights," where, presumably, sheep may safely graze—but overlook the coyote slinking "among the tams and marigolds." In its details, no world could be closer to ours.

There is the same kind of sinister view of the world in "By the River," but in Sillitoe's poem the sinister element is more definitely human. The title calls to mind the 137th Psalm:

1. By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
2. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
3. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

The rivers of Babylon have become more numerous to us, now, than the Tigris and Euphrates of this psalm. This particular river seems, from the white water and the pines of the first two stanzas, to be in the mountains. The last stanza, with its geese and pale sky, sets the time as one of transition, autumn or possibly early spring. These three stanzas record private moments, meaning what the images mean to the reader more than what any shared experience would mean.

The other stanzas draw heavily on shared experience, what you know, what you have done, what you have read, from the New Testament to Nixon's memoirs; on knowing the stories told in books: Lazarus raised from the tomb, Nixon thrust down to defeat, Joan of Arc burned at the stake. These references to history prepare the way for the analogy of stanza 6, the heart of the poem—a comparison of the life of plural wives to that of zeks in the gulag. The source of the comparison, which includes Hitler's extermination camps and the bombing of a black church in Birmingham, appears to be literary: apparently the "outraged prose" of one of the women of "Brigham's Lion House." The comparison is not flattering to Brigham, despite the fact that his prisoners can "shut the doors of an upper room and plot for hours over cooling soup." (And if the upper room and soup suggest the Last Supper to you, the poem works.) The stanza ends with a plea for, as it were, ignorance: "My traditions are as brittle as chalk" is offered as the reason for not hearing again some detail of the comparison.

You may find that comparison extreme—but it is the intensity of the emotion that carries the poem, not the rationality of its rhetoric. It testifies to feelings so intense that they have burned images into the speaker's memory in the heightened detail one associates with hallucination: "your hand turning as you speak, cells flaking from it like dust." Yet Sillitoe has the poem firmly under control. Beyond its picture of bodily decay (with "cells" once again suggesting prisons), this image connects with others of hands: in the third stanza, Jesus grasping Lazarus and hauling him out of the grave; in the second stanza, the hand of the same "you" in a gesture of love, and in the fifth, Joan's hand in a similar gesture, comforting a dying soldier.

It is Joan's memory of that scene which breaks her resistance to pain, her stoic refusal to hear the mob. For the speaker, the memory of this other hand in "that narrow triangle of window light" acts, in a like manner, as a catalyst of rage, threatening to break those brittle traditions. But the poem goes on into another tradition, into the healing power of the natural world where the

gliding shadows of migrating geese “dust my hands, my hair.” The poem returns to the river, to the earth. It is the song required of the captive, the lament offered to “they that wasted us.” “By the River” sings of the human factor in history, in life, in faith, finding that it corrupts what should be pure.

This world corrupted by its people is also the world of Bela Petsco’s poem. He presents it in terms of relations between men and women. The poem asserts that the apothegm with which it ends, “women love, men lie,” is a universal of human experience. At first, the four stanzas which locate the saying in history seem arbitrary. That’s one of the points of the poem: look anywhere in history and you find this truth. The poem is structured by a series of progressions. Look at two of them: The first is the historical, moving from the oldest represented civilization (Egyptian) to the newest (American). The second sequence is a sequence of immediacy, moving from the fine privacy of an inscription in a tomb to the crude immediacy of graffiti “lipsticked on a toilet wall.” The poem’s message is hardly new. The poem, however, lives not by its message but by the care with which Petsco writes, in the history he constructs for this maxim, and the detail by which he vivifies its avatars.

The topic of relations between men and women carries into John Schouten’s “Coming Home in the Evening.” To be sure, nature figures strongly in the poem as “an uneasy breeze” hissing away through the grass, as lightning “stealing the light from the trees.” But it is lightning without thunder, wind without a howl, a brew without a storm. Nature is one part of the world of this poem, and the entire world is sinister.

The speaker never gets home. The poem is on his coming home, and sparked by the lit drapes and dark car he imagines the arrival, his wife comfortable and domestic, himself agitated and protective. Protective, for into the disquieting natural world outside the house the man-made world intrudes, as if the train of his thought had materialized far down the valley. The effect is almost supernatural: the train becomes a sound of its boxcars, rumbling away like dreams, the dreams of a dreamer stirred by alarm and slowly surfacing; fades as the warning of the horn fades. The outbound train is usually a symbol for new possibilities, and its departure a melancholy sign of stasis, as if nothing will change. In this poem, it is as if the possibilities are not hopeful: the speaker will hear their “fading for both of us,” accepting this intrusion into sleep, protecting his wife. In this world, rather than fitting into nature, man intrudes. The result, for the speaker, is that our civilization has soured nature.

Such pseudo-sociological analysis as I have suggested for the last three poems does not work with all poems. Of course not. Nor does any other reading for message. It is often the fate of the message in poetry to be trite, when it’s there at all. I find no discernable message in “Sparta Butte Lookout,” for example. The idea that a work of literature “would carry a message” is moralistic. The expectation arises from our guilt at loving to read (and write) such useless trash as poetry. What message does the toothpaste in a tube of Crest carry? (Yeah, yeah, some message about our culture’s stress on appearance. The medium is the

message.) Poetry has its uses, as does toothpaste.

We expect poems to carry a message because their medium is composite: sounds made by the human mouth, paired with the meaning those sounds carry. It is the association of meaning with sound in human speech that leads us, as readers, to expect messages. You might go to hear a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth symphony because you wanted to hear the sweet sentiments of Schiller’s “Ode to Joy.” There’s not much chance you’d go to hear Varese’s “Density 21.5” because you expected it to tell you something about platinum, or that the work was commissioned by flautist Georges Barrere for his new platinum flute. But when you read a poem, you expect it to mean something. And usually, because the poet is using words, you are not disappointed.

“Sparta Butte Lookout” has the texture of a private joke. What, for example, are the four gods? Are they air, earth, fire, and water, as exemplified in the poem by wind, earth, lightning and creeks? The poem is not written to answer that question. More to the point, it is not written to ask it. Man is virtually absent from the poem. There is just an observer, one with a fine view of the natural world to go with his sense of humor, set as he is in a lookout across from an afternoon storm.

But because the number twelve has religious significance for me, I can’t help finding in this small joke a note of irony: lightning splits the four gods of the world into “twelve Oxen who thunder away,” as if, spooked, they had bolted from the font balanced on their backs. If it seems that I am reaching a little in associating the twelve oxen with those of our temple fonts, I can only plead “nolo contendere.” Poetry is the art of association, of impression. If I project myself into the Sparta Butte Lookout, observing the scene of the poem and interpreting what is seen in light of my own beliefs, *that* tells me the poem works. It draws me in, like a well-made puzzle. Even if I begin to read the poem for a message that I know rationally is not there, I can recognize that the poem is there.

That we receive a new world, patterned after the one we used to live in, is the gift of fiction. Like any other activity in the real world, reading changes that world. A well read poem becomes a part of the decor of our lives, a part of our speech. The decorum with which the poet creates and sustains the world of the poem invites us to enter it, to take it into us, to give ourselves to it, to make it ours. The logical extension of this process is fantasy, the creation of a world radically different from ours (but similar in the branches and foliage). That is also the logical next step for this discussion.

The final article in this series is one such poem (with a brief introduction), Orson Scott Card’s *Prentice Alvin and the No-Good Plow*. Since any fantasy is the product of private musing, it shares some of the characteristics of the poems in the first of these articles; as an allegory (though not a “hideous and intolerable allegory”) it has affinities with the poems in the second; as a narrative, it shares the concerns of the poems in this article. But as a fantasy, its primary concern is to present a world for your habitations, a new world. Come back for it.

*The last speaker will give the interpretation of
tongues*

-by Karl Sandberg

When they brought you back

Howell Tuttle

From Bastogne

Where you fell

(your hands were cold

the BAR's barked stark god-damns

the gray wind of winter

that Belgium day

ran aslant the earth)

Arthur would not let them bury you

Until he had opened the sealed casket.

By the red hair he knew it was you, he said

At the funeral in the meetinghouse

before they buried you in the cemetery beneath the pines

did they speak your words?

brain and the withered papyrii with

the glyphs

to inscribe the Book of the Dead

for the soul's journey

The depository of the carnal belly

legs, eyes, tongue

and the fleshy nose

the brain?

For nothing that a man will ever do

is lost but is registered in some

extension of the brain

in

glyphs of

pies

in the fall, when the Tutttles

butchered a pig

every day was pie until

the lard was gone, and

Deer standing among the cedar trees

What do they mean?

Deer with their noses in the air, ready to run

Cattle, the bull mounting the cow

What fine tweezers I must have

to unroll the crumbling scrolls,

and here are

Threshing machines and chaff blowing away

a picture for barley beards

on the neck and grain dust in

the nose and for the taste of

the black spittle

when there is smut in the grain,

A man on horseback

the smell of the horse sweat

on the saddle blanket

the smell recorded

in my brain

beside the glyph for woman

(you were married five days

before you left, though your

wife went with others after

you were gone)

What carried you to Bastogne?

Nothing in any scroll of Ethiopia

the name of Mussolini,

the Okies and Arkies

Nothing of the Reichstag fire or the Sudetenland,

of Nanking,

The gathering flood.

And here in the place reserved for the

mysterium tremendum

Where in Pascal was inscribed

the ethereal fire of God

And in Lucretius the vision of the atoms' dance.

Here nothing but a simple glyph:

water and willows

shade of trees

water and willows

grass in afternoon sun

the bank of the river

where the waters run still

clouds drifting

doing nothing, nothing at all.

Who can read your brain, Howell Tuttle,
to speak your words?
The spring knows nothing of the stream
nor the stream of the river
Chips eddy around the willows
where the waters run still
Chips caught by the tug of the river
And carried away from willows and cottonwood trees,
through rapids and tributaries
Far, far, far to the sea.

The Nest

-by Sibyl Johnston

The infant snakes angled fangs in her flesh,
like thick writhing hair,
when we pulled her, skis clattering, from the nest
bleeding the water black.

The Coyote

-by Penny Allen

Enemy of sheep
Who would believe
You lair in canyons
Overlooked by houses
Whose wide windows yearn
For far meadows of lights?
You slink among the tams and marigolds
Glutting on garbage and stray kittens
Seducer of pedigreed bitches.

By the River

-by Linda Sillitoe

i.
A few reeds across white rippled water
and mirror a few reeds in white rippling water.

ii.
Is it a river or the wind in the pines?
Your hand lifts the back of my head
and my fingers knot the shoulder of your

flannel shirt. What is that noise now
the wind or a river?

iii.

From the window of a speeding train
red sky and low flat limbs crossing
each other's trunks. And Jesus
reaches deep into the river to drag
up Lazarus, drowned friend,
his feet in Charon's boat.

iv.

Nixon tracked through the printed page
asterisks and all, what made you
worth my sore throat screaming back
at the lying black and white screen?
Watching you squirm in and out of it
like a worm in my throat, a shady uncle.

v.

Joan felt the flames snatch at her hem
as her toes raged to their bones.
But she held her eyes to the green tops
of trees and was silent. See how the
trees burn, burn leaf and bone with a noise
like the forest battle. See how they burn
and the noise and taunts battle her ears.
The mob with pebble eyes and fishy mouths
can't make her yell. But in her mind's
clearing she bends across a soldier,
hand supporting his neck. His lips twist
a three days' beard. His hand flat on her
face in his last second gives her
to the trees and she screams as she burns.

vi.

I have been here before, zeks,
whose snowed-on dark lines sigh
through my dreams in cadence
with your author's outraged prose.
Here in Bergen-Belsen and Birmingham
come home to Brigham's Lion House
where women shut the doors of an upper
room and plot for hours over cooling soup.

I remember that narrow triangle
of window light and your hand
turning as you speak, cells flaking
from it like dust, like days.
Don't tell me again, not again;
my traditions are as brittle as chalk.

vii.

A line of geese with outflung wings soars a pale sky.
Their shadows glide the river. My feet print the earth
by the river. Their shadows dust my hair, my hands.

-by Bela Petsco

Carved in the soft-stone of a tomb
belonging to one Sen-mut, the Scribe
in the old necropolis
near Karnak;

painted on a small, blue vase
brought from the floor of the sea
from a ship which sank
sometime during the dynasty of Sung;

written with tall, thin letters
in a Puritan diary
carried across the ocean;

written in lipstick on a toilet wall
in the IRT Subway station
at 59th Street, Lexington Avenue—
downtown side:

women love,
men lie.

as an afterthought.
An uneasy breeze dusts
over the road, hisses
away through the grass and then . . .
the house, the light
behind the drapes, the car
dark in the drive.
You'll be on the couch,
feet curled beneath you,
a book in your lap or some
piece of handiwork. . .
a train on the outbound track,
there'll be others in the night.
You'll sleep through them
but I'll hear for both of us:
horns fading, boxcars rumbling away
like dreams.

Sparta Butte Lookout

-by Rob Hollis Miller

lightning divides
this afternoon
divides the sky
as Wind divides
Earth from Sky
as Expanse
divides
Creeks from Thunderheads
as lightning
splits four Gods
into twelve Oxen
who thunder away

Coming Home in the Evening

-by John W. Schouten

Lightning rings the valley
lighting empty haylofts, stealing
the light from the trees,
and after each flash I listen
for thunder.
It doesn't come, except