



A CONVERSATION WITH CLINTON F. LARSON

Clinton Larson is a Mormon poet and playwright. His works include a collection of poems, THE LORD OF EXPERIENCE (second ed. 1969), and plays, THE MANTLE OF THE PROPHET AND OTHER PLAYS (1966). Because he is one of the most distinguished writers in the Church and because of his experience with young Mormon writers as director of the creative writing program at Brigham Young University, DIALOGUE invited him to comment upon the advantages and difficulties of the poet in the Mormon community. The interview was conducted by Edward Geary, a colleague on the English faculty at BYU and DIALOGUE's Book Review Editor.

Dialogue: Perhaps we could begin with some information about your own background. What do you feel has made you a poet?

Larson: My origins are clearly defined. Initially, I want to give credit to President Hugh B. Brown, who was my mission president. He gave me, certainly, a real interest in words, or he was able to convey to me impressions which made the Church and the love of language consonant. I regard President Brown as one of the great orators of this century. He loves words, and he uses them beautifully in his discussions of the gospel. Secondly, I give credit to Professor Brewster Ghiselin of the University of Utah, who is not a Mormon, but who has lived in Salt Lake Valley most of his life. He was a student of D. H. Lawrence, and because of that relationship and because of his own sensitivity and fine ear for verbal music, he conveyed to me a love of language from a literary craftsman's point of view. Taking classes from Brewster was a privilege; being a fine poet himself, he enlightened me about the possibilities of modern poetry.

In addition, I think that I look to some of the prophets for guidance in the problem of Mormon literary art. Take, for example, the great prophet-poet Nephi, who in Second Nephi indicates his great love of books. He claims that he is a poor writer, but to my mind he is a fine symbolist poet. He used the branch of the olive tree as a viable figure of speech. He had the same vision that his father Lehi had, a vision which involved profound metaphors and the affective interpretation of metaphors. Nephi's expression was, of course, for the benefit of Laman and Lemuel and the whole family. But Nephi repeats the metaphors again and again to convert Laman and Lemuel to the truth, which is the method of the artist. And I think it is marvelous how he ends Second Nephi. He says farewell; the

spirit of the Lord tells him to speak no more — no more will he be stirred to poetic expression. In his humility, he claims that what he has spoken is not poetic, but it is, with the substantive qualities of the best literature. Nephi's farewell is particularly poignant because his great desire to communicate spiritually through symbolic language has failed, and because of Laman's and Lemuel's intransigence regarding the Lord's will. What Nephi is trying to do is to cause his brothers to flex their minds and spirits so that they can accommodate greater and greater truths.

I think that as we look back to Joseph Smith, we see a man of tremendous capability, a great prophet and poet in every sense of the word. I am concerned that we do not lose that tradition of love of language and the great verbal ability, you see, that was invested in the early brethren of the Church. Not that this ability has been completely lost, but sometimes we adopt opinions that seem to negate its importance. We get doctrinaire rather than affective in our use of language. Mormons should cease sounding like medieval schoolmen, to whom religion became an abstract adjustment to religious theories; rather, we should leave most doctrinal matters to the latter-day oracles and then convey testimony and religion into the actualities of art and life.

Dialogue: You have identified poetry closely with visions and prophecy. Would you go so far as to say that poetry is the language of the spirit?

Larson: It seems to me that without question poetry is the principal language of the spirit. And I think this is generally agreed upon by the modern poets. There is plenty of precedent for this view: for example, the Apocalypse and Isaiah. In the Bible the tradition of poetry is a spiritual matter. In the Church we should be able to accommodate this perspective more easily than we do. The Church should not be completely devoted to functional prose. We must use, among others, the traditional poetic modes of literature of the Near East. One has merely to go to the Near East today to observe a culture which regards the poetic spirit as a means of spiritual communication.

Dialogue: Can you identify the moment when you first perceived the possibilities of poetry in relation to the gospel?

Larson: In 1936 I wrote a poem about the Crucifixion — about Golgotha, the Cross, and the nails — in which I gave these inanimate objects a responsive voice. My love of language, my interest in symbolic literature, I am sure, began then. When I came home from my mission, in 1941, I saw an inspiring scene. I had done a little writing for the Church publications — the *Liahona*, for example, and the New England missionary publication — but, really, my literary purpose with respect to the Church had not crystallized. But when I saw Salt Lake Valley from Parley's Canyon, I was deeply stirred. I realized what the pioneers felt when they saw the valley, and I remembered, of course, that Brigham Young had followed Joseph's inspiration that the people should move west. He said frequently that he loved Joseph, and this also stirred me. So I said to myself, "How can I best express this?" I knew that I could not use the language of Brigham Young; he was too succinct. What

I wanted to do was to interpret, in baroque style, what Brigham felt about Joseph. So I wrote *The Mantle of the Prophet*, my first poetry drama. In Act Two, Brigham Young addresses the casket of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo:

We are as straws together in a swirl of wind;
We pass over the land until the wind puts us down.

The style and tenor of this passage seemed appropriate and effective for me. The wind, of course, is the Holy Ghost, and it means simply that Brigham Young receives the influence of the Holy Ghost in his interpretation of his mission and Joseph's mission. Further:

Joseph, the Twelve remain, and the ache
Of your vision is with us and must be fulfilled.
I have stumbled in your presence, wondering
How to serve you and whom you served.
My hard hands have taken yours, inquiring.
How can I be of use? I have looked into your eyes
And have seen the far horizons of the West,
The wagons and the prairies white and golden
Under a summer day. I have seen the cleavage
Of land from the mountains. In the depths
Of my heart I wander there, where the gulls
Ride above a silver sea and the sky
Like a veil hangs over a great valley.
How can I know where this may be,
Except as I remember you in my stride
That brings me west? I have come from the East
To find you, and I have found you only here.
As you are carried in death, so I must find you
Beyond the river, along the trail
To Laramie, or if not there, westward still
Where the people may gather, where
The mountains decline with the sun.
I have seen the inland sea in the silence
Of your eyes.

We now understand, through research, that Brigham Young did have visits from Joseph Smith as he crossed the plains. It is my purpose in this play to show the close connection between heaven and earth. That is to say, the possibility of using a baroque style — the style that relates the realities of earth to the realities of heaven — is exciting to me because it seems allied with spiritual truth.

But I see the possibilities of a range of contrasting styles that can be used for expression of Mormon ideas. For example, S. Dilworth Young has a kind of sinewy, pioneer-like style; it is somewhat hard-bitten and stoical, and I think he does very well to capture this aspect of pioneer life, of Mormon life. But I think there are other avenues that can be explored stylistically, with the idea of creating a flexibility in the Mormon spirit as it is today. In other words, we should not be hide-bound by one prosaic or poetic style in the Church. We must have different voices, and these must be individual voices, it seems to me, particularly from among the writers of the Church.

For the artist, this individuality comprises the stewardship of his talent as it applies to the Law of Consecration.

Dialogue: It seems, then, that you find poetic resources in the L.D.S. faith — in the possibilities of language, in the spiritual significance of metaphor, and in the subject matter it provides.

Larson: This is one of the great advantages of having the Mormon tradition. There is a whole galaxy of new mythic subjects. You see, many contemporary writers are somewhat at a loss because they cannot find a significant tradition to which they can attach themselves.

Dialogue: And you feel that Mormonism provides you with a significant tradition?

Larson: Yes. The history of the Church, the Book of Mormon, and our milieu are magnificent material, substantive material, for literature.

Dialogue: Is there any tendency in the Church to try to restrict the acceptable modes of expression of our beliefs and traditions?

Larson: The restrictions which members of the Church impose on writers, I think, arise from the proprietary interest that these people have in the Church — and I think it's perfectly appropriate for them to have a proprietary interest in the Church — but, you see, our cultural values are really not protected too well, particularly in the area of literature, which is highly individualistic. Collectivistic culture is dominant. But reality is manifold and surprising, and will not be contained by social policies. Certain people want to repress writing in the Church, and I think do so quite effectively, because they simply don't understand that a variety of styles can be used to express the truth. Consider the many effective styles that can be found in literary history. These styles, you see, can be used — and should be used — to help Mormons understand other people. If we fail to accommodate different voices we are going to lose a lot of people.

The doctrinaire teaching characteristic of the Church is simply inappropriate for certain kinds of people; chief among these are the artists. Artists ordinarily do not respond to doctrinal discussions. They respond to spirituality when it is artistically conveyed. They are temperamental, antithetical people. You cannot expect them to alter their personalities so that they can accommodate the doctrinaire style exclusively. It is axiomatic that the Church reach out with compassion to all men, not simply to a single middle-class stratum.

Dialogue: Have you encountered other obstacles to getting your plays before a Mormon audience?

Larson: Yes, I should say. Many people in the Church don't understand that literature deals with the totality of life, and that in life there is "opposition in all things." It's an amazing thing that people in the Church do not accept this dictum in art as they do in experience. Often Mormons are distressed by the negative elements in my work. For example, in *The Mantle of the Prophet*, Sidney Rigdon challenges Brigham Young. But to portray opposition to the Quorum of the Twelve apparently causes concern in some quarters. Sidney Rigdon presented one of the most dangerous challenges to

authority that the Church has ever seen, and you have to portray him in this light. Again, there are negative elements in my play *Mary of Nazareth*. Mary is challenged by the elders in her neighborhood: "Who is the father of your child?" That dramatic situation has caused just a little concern. But we must recognize that anyone who questions the divinity of Jesus is questioning the virtue of Mary — drama or not. Through "opposition in all things" — even in drama — the beautiful spirituality of Mary and Elizabeth and Joseph are enhanced, made clear and valuable. The negative aspect is as necessary in literature as it is in life.

Dialogue: How can artists more effectively reach the membership of the Church?

Larson: For a number of reasons it is very difficult for the artist to reach the members of the Church. Of course we are all very interested in trying to make the Church function the way it ought to. But we have many problems. The chief one is that too much power is vested in committees. Committees are able to perform only in certain ways. Whenever a committee gets together and decides something, there is a compromising of creative intent in favor of democratic purpose. The committee by its very nature is antithetical to the nature of art, which has to do with the aristocracy of talent. And in the Church we have, as you know, a great many committees that decide on cultural matters. Everyone has his voice, and as a result the significance of the artistic work or performance is minimized or negated, along with individuality, artistic distinction, and style. The negative aspect is almost always minimized by a committee. They seem afraid of it, not realizing the value of the individual integrity of a work of art. Committees ought to extend a spirit of trust to artists and accept them as conveyors of individualistic truth. But the inclination of our people is to accept the artistic individuality of our artists only if they have first received distinction in the world.

Brigham Young University is or should be committed to liberality and professionalism in the arts. I think there is a real attempt at BYU to permit the individual artistic voice, to give it birth, to give it an audience. For example, Merrill Bradshaw's music is often dissonant and excitingly contemporary, and BYU provides an audience and an opportunity for him. As for me, particularly, BYU enables me to relate my creative activity to my teaching.

Dialogue: Would you advise the young Mormon artist to seek channels outside the official structure of the Church?

Larson: He should do what he can inside the Church, but he should not let the individuality of his talent be directed by a committee. The artistic work is *his* gift and witness; only the General Authorities have the power to speak for the whole Church. These positions should not be confused. If an artist's style is not acceptable in the Church, he should do what he can to achieve a proper audience elsewhere. My musical play *Snow White and the Mirror*, which is about the Spirit of the Lord, has been accepted more readily in the professional theater than in the Church. The fact that I've never been able to get any of my work published in the *Improvement Era* does not

dismay me. There are several fine literary magazines that publish my work — *Dialogue*, for example. *Dialogue* is concerned about a variety of opinions, about the need for spiritual flexibility. In many ways it “justifies” the culture of the Mormon people (and I use the more scientific meaning of the word *justifies*). Perhaps young writers can publish in *Dialogue* or *BYU Studies* if they can’t publish in the *Relief Society Magazine* or *The Instructor* or the *Improvement Era*. Each magazine has its particular function, you see, and certain personalities are consonant with particular functions.

Dialogue: Would you tell us something about how you work?

Larson: I mull over subjects and experiences. Art results from a psychological balance. You feel a certain thing, you get in a certain attitude, you feel a kind of push to create. It is an exciting process. *Musa* is the Spanish word for it — the moment of artistic creation, the drive or predisposition to create. I enjoy this feeling and work very rapidly. I can write a play in three or four days. I wrote *The Mantle of the Prophet* in three and a half days. I rearranged some of the dramatic effects, but substantially the play is as it was when I first wrote it. Generally I write very rapidly. However, some ideas or insights seem to be miscast from the beginning. And even though I write the poem or piece rapidly, sometimes I find myself going over and over it, trying to get the correct perspective, trying to find out what I wanted to do, because I didn’t have it quite right in the beginning. I have one poem in my portfolio that I have revised again and again and again. And I use snatches of it in various works, but it was wrong from the start. But most things come easily — “To a Dying Girl” and Part II of “Homestead in Idaho,” for instance.

Let me tell you about “Homestead in Idaho.” At first I thought that it was a short story, and I tried to write that story. I worked on it six weeks, and it wouldn’t come off. It was pretentious and dry. I didn’t know what to do. Then one day I noticed that some lines could be scanned. I cut out the parts that did not have the quality of poetry, and the first section of the poem came into being very quickly. Then I felt obliged to record the voice of the poet. And so I wrote the second part in twenty or twenty-five minutes, in its final form.

Dialogue: Does the Mormon artist face any other peculiar problems besides those you have mentioned?

Larson: One thing that stands against the development of art in the Church is populism. Populism is the idea that if a lot of people agree that the work is good then it must be good. It is the use of *consensus genitum* as a critical criterion. Only in the long historical view does this position have value. The thing that is popular in the football stadium, in other words, may not be the best work of art. On the other hand, I support the modernists whose work — it can be substantiated — is enduring and in the long run as popular as any fad. The *carpe diem* attitude does not fundamentally apply to works of art. A fine work of art comes into existence quietly and gathers reputation steadily.

I think that the idea of “enduring to the end” is consonant with the idea of modernism and antithetical to populism. Populism begins with sentimentalism, and sentimentalism is the backwash of the nineteenth century and should be abandoned. We should demand of any writer the soundest sensibility and education; it is not enough simply to render the thing sentimentally. And it would seem to me that particularly in the area of drama our society is lending itself to the defects of sentimentalism. Approval of sentimentality is like the doctrine of extreme unction. It is not enough to save, or even qualify, a work of art.

Dialogue: What would you say is the future of poetry in the Church?

Larson: All is not well in Zion. Part of the spiritual record that must be kept is the poetry of the people. In a sense, a people who do not have a body of significant and enduring poetry do not, in fact, exist. The dearth of poetry in the Church indicates, I think, a tendency for Mormons not to live their religion, but to live for it. This condition, however sentimentally commendable, is narrowing and spiritually erosive.

The future of poetry in the Church is in the hands of a small group of people — the General Authorities and the few people in the Church who can qualify as poets. If the General Authorities support art and poetry as expressions of individual testimonies or as prayerful activity — which, indeed, they are — and not as general statements of doctrine or the expression of oracles, then the Church will acquire the perspective that will cause art and poetry to flourish, even with the negative elements that characterize them. If the artists — literary artists, particularly, in this context — take their work as seriously as they should, and by “seriously” I mean that they become professionally responsible, then a significant and coherent literary movement can begin.

But there seem to be only a few serious literary artists. How they use their abilities is supremely important. Art is intrinsically powerful and audacious, and talent can be so easily misused. But the right people are beginning to appear. Eugene England, Karl Keller, and Robert Christmas are, for example, skillful and discriminating. If they insist in Mormon society that their writing is *what they are*, Mormon society can hardly reject them or refuse to take them seriously. The future of literary art in the Church, then, depends on how willing the writers are to believe in themselves, stand their ground, and work for their objectives. The Church will then learn to see them accurately. The Church is of course obliged to support sensibility, integrity, and good intentions. Specifically, the gift of the Holy Ghost in poets will enable them to achieve an authentic new voice and to aid the cause of the Church in richly significant ways. I deeply hope that the Church and its poets can seize upon and fulfill the literary promise of our believing people.