

Romaunt of the Rose:

A Tapestry of Poems by Clinton F. Larson

These poems, written by Clinton Larson and read at the Medieval and Renaissance Conference at Brigham Young University, bespeak a spirit from a time gone by yet ever with us. They flow in rings of form and textured thought reminiscent of days of old when knighthood and the eternal feminine flamed across the sunlit land in art and song, in luxuriant poetry, soaring architecture, and violent statecraft rife with selfish purpose and often misspent religion. The poems reflect the times. They are opulent in imagery and reference, and strict in form and variance. They portray the past, the present, the future.

These poems by Clinton Larson are intellectually challenging. They are scholarly in that they speak in modes correct and typical of their times—the tercet, the sestina, the sonnet, the “sweet, new style,” and more. They speak in styles typical of the time’s feelings and attitudes—decorative isolation, fractional seeing, omnipresent evil and good, the wonderment of woman, the divine mystery of Mary, and chivalry, and prayer, and the beauty of nature in the awesomeness of space, and the ever-impending presence of God and irrevocable judgment.

But in our day, we do not much read poetry. Mostly, we do not choose to make the effort. Poetry demands too much of us; we are not willing to work for the reward. It is so easy to accept the dull monotony of the newspaper and radio, or the lethargic mediocrity of television. Poetry, at least real poetry, is seldom considered.

Poetry is vision condensed by words to form. It carries more power in less space than any other mode of expression. It is rich, orchestrated, powerful. It will not settle for a one-finger piano rendition when its vision is other-worldly symphonic. A poem is sometimes like a temple or a cathedral in which one loses oneself to find a greater knowledge of self or fellows. Visible objects may be seen as symbols, as comparatives, rich in connotation, working subliminally as intricate yet deep expressions of faith and insight, rather than as mere elements of description or location or narration. The poet is one who sees in every forest glade a Garden of Eden, in every man and woman an Adam and Eve. He is one who sees in the brilliance of temple candelabra the beauteous light of Christ, and in the blue of carpet, a walking in the skies.

A poem exists in order and form, and, often, a poet’s skill may be measured in his love of words and how he chooses and orders them to reach out toward those he loves. But the poet can only offer vision. The reader must come to him, willing to see. He must want to understand each allusion; he must desire to comprehend each comparative. He must put himself in position to perceive. And as he does this, his being will open, and he will see and know things he had never before realized.

—Richard G. Ellsworth

Romaunt de la Rose, A Tapestry



In its origin, near a column
From the invisible seed grace
In its emergence, flower of rose

White as marble, it came pastel
Against the Acropolis into the season
Of the salvor, then matte lucid

Into the invisible pretensions of Greece,
In the land of washed hills and vales
And the discipline of a new society.

Homer, tragic as classic theatre,
Dispatched it to the ruins of Rome
In his imagination, his iron personae

Providing tragi-comic play
Across the closed sea from Africa.
When in medieval lustre it became

The windrose in stone, pity of memory,
Soft centuries of translucence, chivalry
The mark and standard of the saint

Of Christ, it became florid as a ray
Softened as sunrise red, risen
To romance of the charity of love

That abounds in lanes of sacristy.
The knight of the cross of Ely
Fled across a glen and saw the rise

Of the petals of Agincourt and England
Holy against the cross of Lorraine.
Rose of the cross of Ephraim petalled

The air through which English yeomen
Followed Alan of Walsingham
To the lantern of the risen sacrament.

The transept and nave of his cathedral
Echo the petals of light in the aura
And effulgence of memory. The stallion

Of England in Bedford prances forward
Through the carrying weather of mist,
Among oaks that hold antiquity.

Henry II, the protorenaissance,
Edging into sense, whereupon
The zeal of England tips in and wavers

Like farewell. The seas become spume
In the empire of Virginia as Shakespeare
Wrests the image from a transparency

That washes down and away. Remote
In the venue of sky, the starcrest
Heavens brim the sequestering caves

Of divinest passion, palings of home,
Pavilions and mosaics of doctrine,
The absolute God, the helmsmen

Of light, Zion of our Paradise,
The temples of ice, the aurora
Of Greenland paling away into green,

And a world in which the indigence
Of spirit makes the windrose forever
Immortal. Oh, eternal rose,

You are a fantasy too rich
For atmosphere in lacustrine blue,
A puritan of that paradise of mind,

Flame of the immortal zeal petalling
Fire that consumes but never burns,
And then you are taken in a vase

To a window near Windsor to be enlightened,
Raised in a hand, and translated
In that eminence, following the daffodil

Into the bright amazement of wind,
Into the romance of the stanza of spirit,
And into bequest. Rose transformed, becoming,

Still into lustre, conscience or gleam,
Voice of light from the threshold,
And subtly open, vision of the immanence

Of dayspring in one's hand.

Eleanor of Aquitaine



With the absolute decorum of a medieval queen
She rules the dukes of her glittering entourage
With the height and angulation in her collage
Of images. Some invidious vassals lean
Their careless umbrage short of ire and inveigh
Against the unrest that diminishes the day
Of her hauteur. So consider the haunting scene
In which her gems are fixed in forest emeraldine
Far and far away, in legend and its samite array
Of shadowed myth. Swift and sudden light may come
To justify her being, but how? Fine antiquity
Must have its sway, but not in darkness. The sum
Of her accounts, in her surveillance, is no iniquity,
But a wink that trespassed into being in the calm
Of her honor, her lyric of myth, hushing into a psalm
That we remember.

Knight Errantry: Evening and Morning



tars of light alight on crests: all crests
Hallow Christ in our history from Excalibur
To the chalice bluing as it holds the sky.

Sunset gleams from the starburst around us
Like a cluster of thorns, attends critically
Bedimming lights, and fetches distant hallows
Consigned to glory as metaphors of general
Sun. It suns the air, though sun is gone,
Slopes of cloud arising like a spell of snow.
Staid in slowing trades, it remembers crests
Of tinning blue, suspending fields of snow
Over snowy murals in the sepulchral silence
Of dark loneliness: the hint and dint
Of His eloquence vanish in terms of His glory,
And fluencies of the ever-flowing shapes
Of air lift the aurora over sills of day.

Reading Spenser



Spenser, prince of the Renaissance, you kept
Your fealty like samite in strands of imagery
That fall from stanzas in the richest vagary
Of discipline. You are the prince yclept
Magnificence who holds the flower that slept
The ages of wonder in the spell, or perjury,
Of someone such as Colin or sylvan Margery.
Once again from their bower they have crept
To test the meadow for its dew, the song
Of nightingales, the flowering of vales
Of light. And if you should come, a throng
Like them behind you, following . . . What pales
Before me? Never my knowing that in your will
The Word shall live, that you are living still.

Cathedral



he subtlety of water is motion under a glasslight
Surface. Ah, sky, the motion over air, tinsel
Of light, arrives, wind of color, trees bluesilver,
Green, the causal cliffs in a stand of gravity,
The rush of topaz, fever of sun, in this canyon!
What compels that radiance, that turn of light,
In upon stone, the listless intimacy of brown
Nearby? A crag moves through a vision of blue
Like sharp polarity. The cathedral is the canyon
Far removed in temperate England, where canyons
Failed, except in the mind. The buttressed stand
Of wall, the arch high into grave premonition,
The clerestory of light of the ascension, blue,
The crypts of greystone, the river of sound
From a choir, Deus, Deus, gloria in excelsis
Deo, in a loft of stone, river of sound
Modulated into the voice of organ, echoing,
Vibrato, celeste. The interpretive soul of man
Walks the corridors of its analogies:
Here, Alan of Walsingham must be, and there
A chambered councillor of the King. The door
Of the cathedral offers the sky as if it were
Palette, the devising mists and clouds blending
Pastels of green and blue across lakefront
Willows. Motion under the round of air, elixir
Of lake: motion, the subtlety where once
Calm was sable will. Quasar in a galaxy
Is motion, far light years curving away
Into red and infrared, canyons of light
And cosmic shade, motion and origin, the sepulchre.

Milton's Blindness



ever have you seen him, but he remembers
The dark surface of your sleep that like a leaf
Lies still on a pavilion of water. In the grief
Of Gethsemane, he glances as if in a dream
Of centuries that break into surf as they teem
With morning: yellow gold, blue of azure, reef
Of sun, goldstone, crystal cave, windsor sheaf
Of amber, tourmaline, diamond, and starry stream.
More godly is communion's skiey censer wafting
Cloudy vales where the wind's winnowing is repose!
He can be seen in the far canebrake, on rafting
Light of the lake where the arc of day glows
Into silk, then at evening, but never so much
As in the hint of dawn at evening, his lightest touch.

La Vita Nuova



I have seen gravure of the Sistine Michelangelo,
Who offered the panoply of heaven in a lucent
Room, thin light brightly offering the hemisphere
Of sky: the empyrean blue, the overcast of blue,
The cloudy instruments of light, seraphim, circles
For apothegm, and then there! the sunswept visage
Of Omnipotence, as if the winds of His speed
Had drawn His hair to hover in the nearby air.
He reaches to archangel Adam with the vividness
Of immortality, and then, in the quick leap of being,
Adam rises from the very dust in the image
Of his origin. And so of another origin is Eve,
Becoming Adam, arising from the being of his sleep.
What a creation is she beside him! She looks to him,
As he reaches for the substance of Jehovah's wonder
In the tendencies of light and form, as he feels
Irresolution. Together, together, and what is
Memory but tinge of origin, the touch when all
Began, color and the prisms, the fielding sun,
And the paradigms of immortality in everything
They see? Together, they are seal and index
Of His certainty. It is she, hint of Eden, all
That can be given, substance of his origin arrayed
In waves of sun, diatoms of diamond, diapasons
Of waterlight, and suddenness of morning in lilacs
And wisteria, gardenias, lotus of some other world
So far from this! The touch, Nefertiti of the swan,
The features delicate as porcelain, the eyes emphatic
As lids of the near horizon, and in them azimuth
And atmospheres of light, or Rebecca of the desert
And the well in the draughts of limpid heaven drawn
From the deeps of the earth, the lustre of sallow
Gold and the song of her devotion. The touch
Is always near, at index finger's tip, as is she.

The Sweet New Style



rnavant, writing in the sweet new style,
Gave Dante reason to write in terms
Of the golden Triumvir to show
That they were easily the voice
Of One. Dante's Paradiso, so eventual
Among the stars, arose into the round

Of Light, the empyrean, to round
Into itself the aura of the style
That glows like the happy terms
Of lovers in vineyards who show
Spring the gentle Provence voice
Of light in their living, eventual

If one can see that form is eventual
Statement. One's worship in the round
Of litanies is as dear as the style
That graces others whose simple terms
Of living are like the infinitesimal show
Of stars and the spiritual voice

That is heard in a quietness as eventual
As one's conscience. The eternal round
Is kept as song in the easy style
Of Beatrice, who strolled in terms
Of her own gentle beauty to show
Diamond spring as it stirs the voice

To sing lyric poetry as eventual
As eternity among violets round
About a garden. A garland's style
Inspires charity in heaven's terms.
Who may know how God might show
The young to sing but by the voice

That wells in poetry? The eventual
Day is still the same, and the round
That is a diadem conveys the style
That He lives by, dwelling in terms
Of litany. The ever new will show
The oldest witness. Dante's voice

Murmurs, in the eventual style
Of prayer, God's terms as the voice
Of soul to show the round of our Eternity.

Herrick's Julia



So old at thirteen, she has her own room.
A change has come over her like a solemn hush
Over roses as spring becomes suddenly warm. The rush
Of color to her cheeks, signifying another loom
Of feeling that interests her, hardly invests
Our attention in petals that stray in the air
To alight at her feet, though they are certainly there.
And now, queenly, she notices our bequests
Of admiration that her eyes are skiey blue,
That she wears a trace of rouge, a natural gloss
On her lips, gems on her fingers that drew
Our attention at first, and diamonds that toss
Their glistening from the lobes of her ears.
She is more, even now, more than she appears,
Even to me.

Belle France



From Marseilles to Calais in the domain
Of diamond spring, belle France has lain
Like vineyards, in the incipience of rain,
Misty warm unto the Pyrenees and Spain.

What is it but wonder of fair Aquitaine
In the very air? Hedgerows now abloom,
A window open, singing from an inner room,
Porcelaine and lilacs, and radiant perfume.

The maze I wander in, like misting rain,
Is pastel and palest blue, as in Cezanne.
The subtle rift of morning is sun and span
Of light where the violet and jasmine fan.

Of white Versailles encumbers rain
And opens, hue on hue. Who has known
Belle France in her curvatures of stone
That grace the leewardings of monotone

Under spindrift noon? Songs of the air
And fair romance have come, in illusion
Everywhere until, in their suffusion,
I keep them, in their bright profusion,

As my inner fare, O fair and melody,
As if the horn of Roland sings afar
For the emperor Charlemagne.

—Clinton F. Larson

Clinton F. Larson, a professor in the English Department, is poet in residence at Brigham Young University. These poems were read at a special session of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association, 8 April 1983, at Brigham Young University.