

# A Note on Gene England's Poetry

By *Leslie Norris*

This short reflection by Leslie Norris, a highly honored poet who was BYU's Poet-in-Residence until his death in 2006 comments on England's style and accomplishments as a poet. It appeared in the tribute issue *Sunstone* published shortly after his passing.

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THE CRITICISM WRITTEN by poets is often an observation of their own theory and practice, and Gene England was no different in this way. In “New Tradition,” an essay he contributed to *Harvest*, the anthology of Mormon poems he edited with Dennis Clark, Gene tells us what poetry is and what it should do. For him, “poetry has content as well as form” and “poetic forms can control the remarkable effects of rhythm on emotion and cognition with more subtlety and power than the prose writer.” So we should not be surprised when he praises those poems which achieve “an unusually healthy integration of skillful form with significant content.” Many poets would agree with Gene, as far as this. Perhaps not every one will go with him in believing that poetry “should continue the tradition of making rhythmic combinations of sounds to help readers discover a world that exists and can be defined by language, and to share insights into how to live better in that world.” Many writers believe that writing poetry is a moral activity, and this concern is passionately central to all Gene’s work including his poetry—a measure of how powerful and purposeful he felt the written word can be in our lives. His sturdy conviction is that “most American poetry increasingly neglects content—ideas and values are negated or simply missing.” Ideas and values are Gene’s stock-in-trade, so we must be aware of their importance in his own poems.

Tenacious in argument, convinced in belief, clear in discourse, his work, in whatever genre he chooses, seems all of a piece, and even a casual reading of his poetry suggests that these qualities are recognizable in the lamentably few pieces available to us. His poems are admirably direct and shapely, move firmly toward their intended last lines. They have a planned certainty about them, a confidence. His forms, and we have seen how essential form is to him, are varied and relevant. “Kinsman,” the fine poem about his relationship with his father, is written in simple, unrhymed quatrains, moving briskly through the narrative commonplaces of a day in a rural life and rising to a plain epiphany as achieved as it is unexpected:

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.

Most of Gene's poems are about the things of this world, weathers, seasons, animals, a handicapped child and its bruised parents. And behind them, unstated, a mute gratitude for the gift of life and the certainty of eternity, "what endures beyond the veil."

"Sunrise on Christmas" is a more lyrical poem than "Kinsman" and accepts a more complex form, one fitted to the context:

Looking up the glacial valley of the Weber  
 Into the high Uintas, past fading trails  
 Where Bannock and Shoshone summered into Colorado,  
 I see light grow out above the southeast ridge.  
 Ah, it is the day returning,  
 Pale upon my face;  
 It is the ancient figure of my hope.

Gene is completely aware of tradition, and when he needs to, he adapts an old form to his use, as in that stanza. He is perhaps not a singer, but his voice speaks well to us, its purpose is clear, its intent forceful.

Yet his verse does possess a singular quality not to be found in his prose—a kind of freedom with its usual formal shape and controlled content, something more personal. It does not have the driving, often didactic purpose of his essays, so it can be more exploratory and flexible. "Pilgrims," the poem in three sections which won the Crown Award in the 1989 BYU Eisteddfod Competition, celebrates the miraculous life of the natural world, using as exemplars the migrating Pacific salmon ("Honorable dead Chinook, tyee, King"), and the individual caribou ("that streams thousands a thousand miles"), and the minute hummingbird (whose "blood-gem throat leads across the gulf"). This is certainly a poem "about a world that exists and can be defined by language." It is in such work that Gene is most recognizably a poet. Here he teaches and exhorts, not openly, but through his delight in the living world. He is part of that life, his language exults, he is a maker. It seems as if some of his images and phrases astonished him even as he made them. There is no difference between form and content, and the poem is an act of discovery and unification.

One of Gene's projected studies was to be a critical biography of my poems and short stories, and we spent hours together while he recorded his questions and my hesitant answers. Somewhere there may be many tapes of our conversations. It was a delight to experience his sharp curiosity, the restlessness of his intellect. Again and again, he would return to the mystery at the heart of the poem. It was something I did not want to discuss, knowing it to be unreachable, but I would always speak of more recognizable aspects of the poet's task and the means the poet uses. For me, perhaps the essential gift a poet needs is simply a love of words, the wish to see how they fit in his ears, to toll them about his tongue. This intrigued Gene. Late in his life, in January of this year, he wrote "Anhedonia." The word means "an inability to feel pleasure" as Gene explains in a headnote. But when he read it, listened to it, and spoke its syllables, the word did not bring Gene a feeling of the deep depression which accompanies the condition. For Gene the word meant ". . . a flower / of Antarctica: / Purple and cobalt blue, / Glowing deep in ice caves. . .

Anhedonia.  
How can it mean no joy  
when the word is such a joy,  
A pleasure in the mouth  
And on the pulse and heart.

Gene England wrote verse all his life, almost up to the day of his death. It is to be hoped that there are examples remaining among his papers—I remember some lovely work in the *Sewanee Review* some years ago—and that they can be collected. I am grateful to Gene for many reasons, most of all for his friendship, which began on the day I became his colleague at BYU. That evening, he and Charlotte called at the house at which Kitty and I were staying and took us to the cinema. It was cold. Dirty snow lay on the pavements. The film was *On Golden Pond*. We knew we had found friends. I owe him greatly for his unstinting support of my work and cherish his gallant spirit.

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