

# Sacrament of Terror: Violence in the Poetry of Clinton F. Larsen

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Dr. Clinton F. Larson has been acclaimed as a Mormon poet, even as the first Mormon poet. In his review of *The Lord of Experience* Professor John B. Harris seems to have represented many of the Mormon intelligentsia in celebrating Larson's contribution to the Mormon Church. "For the first time," he wrote, "Latter-day Saints can point to a volume of verse and say to the literary world, 'We too have a poet, an artist of skill, knowledge, power, and depth.'"<sup>1</sup> Karl Keller, reviewing the same volume, spoke of it as providing the starting point for a Mormon literature. "It is not only refreshing to read Mormon poetry of such quality as Larson's," he observed, "it is about time we had some to read."<sup>2</sup> And Marden Clark, introducing his own explication of Larson's "The Conversions of God," rejoiced in the fact that a Mormon poem actually required explication, and explained that the "poem must be understood first as a Mormon poem, i.e., a poem growing out of the Mormon tradition and theology and defining Mormon concepts from the Mormon standpoint."<sup>3</sup>

Larson himself has acknowledged the recognition and has assumed the unofficial position of poet laureate of Mormonism. Although there are some who would consider the title rather dubious, all seem to agree that Larson deserves whatever glory such a title brings.

In their excitement over the reality of a Mormon who is also a fine writer, however, Mormon critics have exaggerated the significance of Larson's religious background and have done a disservice both to Larson and to the much needed criticism of his work. For Clinton F. Larson is not simply a Mormon with a poet's voice. Like the God of his poems, he is a "creator of titanic opposites," a man whose orthodox optimism conflicts with his private pessimism. His poetry reflects the tension between the reassurance guaranteed by religious precept and the uncertainty inherent in human percept.

The orthodox Mormon believes that "Man is that he might have joy," and a self-conscious joy seems to glow from Larson's religious poetic structure. How-

ever, the foundation of this fictive house to the Lord is weak and unstable because of the poet's

prescience, the prescience of death  
That dresses the tongue with lye and felt  
Or stalks along the parapets and towers,  
Invisible and lithe, astride the world;  
The instant scream, the black and gaping circle  
Sinking through the marrow of the spine.<sup>4</sup>

For Larson death is not the mother of beauty but of horror, a horror which forces him from the terrible present of meaningless violence into the soothing heroic past and into the paradisiacal future. The abandoned present, however, rejects the poet's gilded structure of glorified past and hopeful future, and intrudes into his religious orientation as an "instant scream" that mocks religious assurance. This intrusive vision of the present, with its authentic and immediate glimpses of unbearable violence, may well constitute Larson's finest poetic statement, not simply in the record of genuine despair, but in the record of the forces which both generate and erode religious faith.

There is a strain of formal optimism throughout Larson's plays and religious poetry. His prophets and heroes seem to be filled with a calculated religious assurance. There is a convincing sense of humble gratitude in Larson's address to the divine father in "The Conversions of God":

Yahweh, you are bound by me, for I, naive  
And in your image, am he whom you made.

You invest the air above me, yet would range abroad  
And spoil heaven for my joy. . . . (LE, 127)

Larson, for whom happiness is one with assurance, finds his joy in the concept of eternity: "You are the resurrection whose craft is power, Whose reason is love, the recessional wonder" (LE, 127). This optimism springs from hope and the hope is pitted against the terror of present experience. Present life is enriched by means of the future. One of Larson's favorite images is that of a man (e.g., *Coriantumr*, *Moroni*) taking refuge in the future while his present world is collapsing.

Where Larson turns to the future for hope, he turns to the past for examples of spirituality. Although Larson has attempted to make poetic use of his Mormon experience, he has never written a contemporary play, or celebrated in verse a living church or a living prophet. He has dramatized the life of Joseph Smith in *The Prophet*; and has, in *The Mantle of the Prophet*, presented a dramatized account of the first major crisis in Church history, the succession to leadership following the assassination of Joseph Smith. These events, occurring between 1830 and 1844, are the most recent events he treats in Mormon history. Usually he has turned his attention further back, to the prophets and heroic stalwarts of antiquity. The titles of his plays suggest his interests: *Saul of Tarsus*, *Mary of Nazareth*, *The Brother of Jared*, *Nephi*, *Coriantumr*, and *Moroni*.

In a conversation with this author, Dr. Larson indicated that his reluctance to

write a Mormon contemporary play arises from his love of grandeur, of the heroic and of eloquence. He suggested that it would be ludicrous to have a contemporary Mormon speaking poetically. "The poet has to guard himself," he observed, "against being caught up in these prosaic times." Trying to make something of the present, he suggested would be like "pitting oneself against a mammoth."

To find models for eternity, Larson, the poet of religious precept, often moves away from the mammoth of the present, the "sordid real," into the idealized past of scripture. Yet Larson, the poet of human percept, just as often condemns that very tendency to avoid the reality of present experience:

It has never been the spirit of prophets and poets to deny the existence of the world that we know, with its beauty and ugliness, its good and evil. They have never been so cynical as to imply that man cannot get along in it and cannot be saved in it, but, on the contrary, they have stipulated that withdrawal from it merely indicates psychological sickness, at worst belle indifference.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless in his religious poems Larson has so vigorously spurned the commonplace, ordinary world of today that this statement is consistently violated.

When Larson discusses spirituality in the present, there is a persistent sensation of loss. His emphasis on these diminished times reflects his inability to relate his sense of religious grandeur to present reality. Present holiness, for Larson, is explained in terms of hypocrisy, as in "Concordance for Poets," where

The man of holiness  
Privy with God, touches of doctrine here and there  
Like the flecks of stone under grime, the gild  
Of which sparkles with an ancient devotion:  
He is awry as piety shoring faith, the whited  
Ash spending itself in flames of discourse before  
A rationale or the blue conservatrix of time  
Who stills in her sorrow. Tears against the time.<sup>6</sup>

Here Larson's humor leans into rancor with the play on *privy*. The man of holiness is not only related in private (as he sees it) to God, but meets God in the privy, dealing in the irrelevant, focusing on religious excrement. The man of holiness also lacks an integral sense of religion, that which would give his beliefs coherence and unity. His religious ideas are as flecks scattered randomly. The damning attribute of the man of holiness, however, is his piety. Because his piety presumes to bolster faith, his faith is kept docile, impotent. His disingenuous piety grieves the elemental goodness of nature, "the blue conservatrix of time/ Who stills in her sorrow."

*The Lord of Experience* (1968) contains two short poems, "The Professional Christian" and "Total Sunday," dealing with contemporary Christian types: the professional Christian, echoing the Zoramites on their Rameumptom, who drones, "Behold how Jesus fills my soul" and the Christian who maintains "the refuge total Sunday / In lieu of total consecration" (*LE*, 42, 40). For Larson the present has been stripped of all but these counterfeits of spirituality.

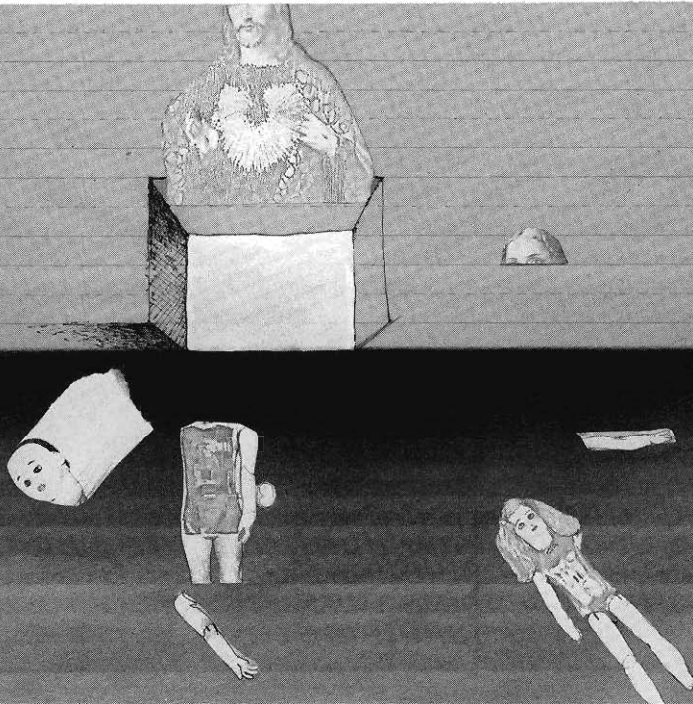
Such spiritual sterility is also indicated in "As if The Lord were Speaking," in which Larson assumes the divine voice and speaks to the children of the present:

My children, have you come to me for rest?  
 You have swept the firmament with your hair,  
 You have garnered garbage with soft hands,  
 You have wept in nurseries for a talisman,  
 You have hawked matches for a holy ghost,  
 And you have acquired the messiahs  
 Of gilt art and intellection  
 To your stages, doors, and podia. (*LE*, 55)

Referring to his people as children, the Lord chides them for their adolescence, and for their "emulation of creative elves," and asks, "Why should my spirit rest in you?" Modern man is too paltry to contain the spirit of the Lord.

To heighten the image of diminished religious vitality in modern man Larson often refers to man as a toy (the plaything of the Lord) which has been abandoned by its creator. This is most dramatically suggested in "The Visit," in which the narrator returns to the earth after a long absence. He has returned to discover the disintegration of Athens and Israel, "the kingdoms of purple and gold" representing man's intellectual and spiritual tradition:

I sit among the toys  
 Of the departed young:  
 I listen to the voice of light in the window,  
 But it drones in the marrow of dolls strewn and unsewn.  
 Hooks and eyes, drums, bolts and sticks,  
 Wheels, knots, cloth, and string  
 Tumble in my hands,  
 And the wastes they came to  
 Shrink the image of man to what they are.  
 The statuary God prevails,  
 But all his toys are broken. (*LE*, 6)



This sense of loss in the present, not unique to Larson, was central to Eliot and has been a frequent component in twentieth century religious poetry. But what is relatively unique in Larson's poetry is the overwhelming sense of man's vulnerability, the awareness of impending violence, which haunts Larson's world of present experience. Violence and persecution in Larson's historical religious plays leads to the spiritual growth of the hero. As Marden Clark has suggested of the two plays, *Coriantumr* and *Moroni*, the emphasis is not on the "undeserved suffering and evil in the universe," but on the "regenerative effects of suffering."<sup>7</sup>

Even when the violence is not regenerative, it allows the prophet of former days the chance to seal his testimony in blood. But, as Larson perceives, the days of such sealings are over. Violence in his poetry of present experience is casual and without regenerative effects. Today the Mormon general authority, stake president, or bishop is a successful businessman respected by the community. The Church itself is deliberately unobtrusive. Persecution and death, the supreme tests, are no longer feasible. The modern saint who walks with community leaders and corporate executives can no longer say, with Rachel in *Saul of Tarsus* as she holds up her chains, "This is the mark of my covenant."<sup>8</sup> Violence, no longer an assumed factor in the growth of the individual, and no longer the supreme test of faith, is reduced to a mockery of faith. It occurs willy-nilly, striking without reason, without motive, serving no other purpose than the crippling of the individual psyche. Larson traces such psychic damage in two of his most disturbing poems, "Homestead in Idaho" and "Arab Insurrection: A Memoir."

In "Homestead in Idaho" Larson focuses on the basic tension between man's lofty values and his frangible bonds with life, between his religious premises and present reality. Solomon and Geneva have decided to homestead in Idaho. Because they do not have the money to plant in the spring, Geneva persuades her husband to go back to Tamarack to work for the winter while she stays to care for the children and hold their claim to the land. She has ample provisions but Solomon is reluctant to go. Geneva assures him:

Go back, Solomon. By spring, we'll have a start,  
Then a barn by those trees, cows grazing there,  
And a house like we've wanted, beside a stream. (*LE*, 70)

Solomon acquiesces to the power of her imploring eyes and leaves for Tamarack. He works throughout autumn and winter and in the spring returns with provisions and an array of shoes and ribbons, small gifts of affection, symbols of the absurd dreams with which man faces the present. There is no smoke from the chimney as he nears the cabin. When he enters, he finds the lifeless bodies of his wife and children.

The poem is narrated by a man who has himself thought of homesteading in Idaho and who meets Solomon in a bar where Solomon is sitting alone, folding and unfolding a newspaper clipping, presumably an account of the death of his wife and children. The second section begins with an expansive statement concerning Solomon and Geneva's aspirations for their new land. Then the details of the tragedy are pieced together. Geneva had gone to the shed, where she had been struck by a rattlesnake. In attempting to bleed the poison out, she hurriedly

gashed the knife too far into the wound and then was unable to stop the bleeding. Crying that her babies must not starve and pleading for forgiveness, she shot her two daughters who were sleeping together in the crib.

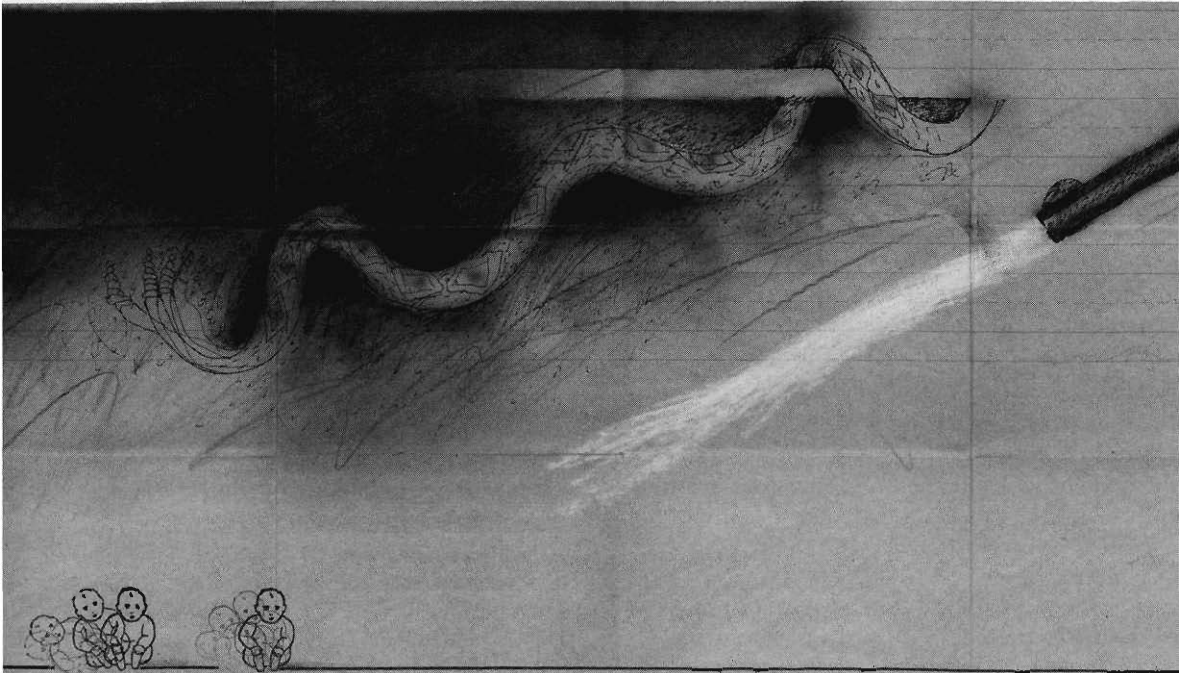
The poem is cruelly ironic, with the absurd undercutting of aspiration by casual violence forcefully dramatized. Human aspiration and resolve are no match for the impersonal powers which confront them.

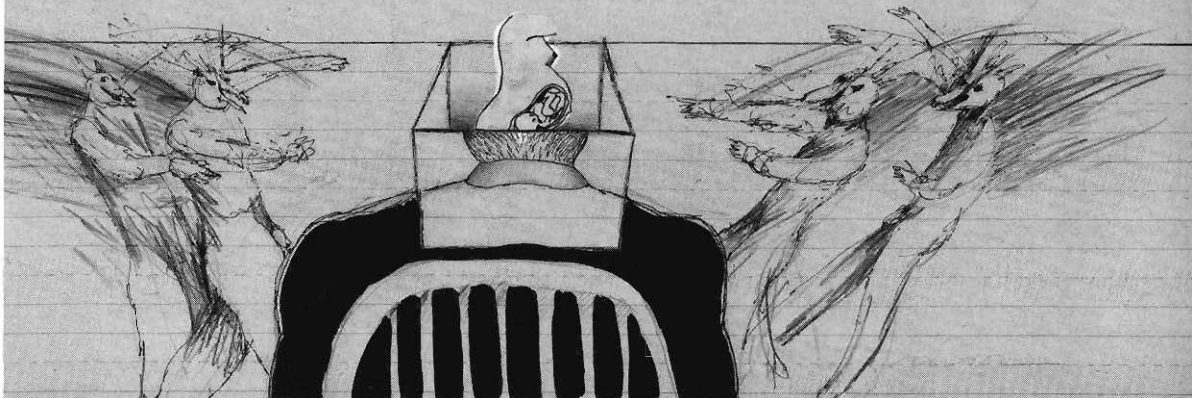
The future  
Declined from that day and would not rest,  
But as a bole of pain grew into that tower  
Of resolve and broke it easily, sacred  
As a sacrifice. (*LE*, 72)

Psychically damaged, Solomon is reduced to the tropistic action of folding and unfolding the newspaper clipping, as his pain seeks release in the nervous motion of fingers.

"Arab Insurrection: A Memoir," another poem which reflects Larson's vision of contemporary violence leading to psychic destruction, was based on an experience related to Dr. Larson in the spring of 1971.<sup>9</sup> According to the story Mormon missionaries had been introducing an elderly French couple to Mormonism. The couple lived in a boarding house which presented a large porch to the street. As the missionaries entered the house they noticed a young man on the porch sitting in a rocking chair. After several visits they asked the couple about the man and were informed that he was their son, who had been living in Algiers during the Arab uprising. During one of the attacks, the Arabs caught his pregnant wife, butchered her in the street, took out her unborn child and filled her with stones. And, according to the old couple, their son had never spoken since.

Shortly after hearing this grim narration, Larson wrote the poem. The brutality of the present is horrifyingly reflected in the image of the unborn child replaced in the womb by stones. Once more the violence is measured by its own meaninglessness. Larson is careful to preserve the senselessness of the murder.





Like a brown wind, they sweep against her, dismembering  
Her fingers before him, spurt of blood tempering  
Their steel. In a flourish of will, they stare  
At him, but turn to her to split and pare  
Her like a gourd, the foetus bloody and fair  
In their hands, slowly appearing. In a luminescence  
Of day, he rocks stonily, seeing, his sense  
Failing, gathering and picking, in a prescience  
Of death, pictures in the air. They fill  
Her with the stones they threw and kneel to kill  
Her veins that pulse in dust

There is no hint of ideological purpose or racial hatred as a motivation for the killing. The poet leaves the young man, reliving that moment of psychic destruction.

... as they will  
Him as he is, rocking in a chair, their whim  
Always before him, endlessly wavering and dim.  
(*Counterpoint*, 77)

Larson's poem, "Seven Tenths of a Second," concerning an automobile accident, likewise displays an absence of social criticism. There is no suggestion in the poem that the driver was speeding, or negligent, or that the car was unsafe. No information at all is given as to the cause of the accident. The facts are presented by a seemingly neutral narrator who limits himself to the split second breakdown of the violent event. The only logic is that of the concatenation of violent moments. There is no moralizing about what should be done. Whatever the poem may be, it is not a cry for safer roads and drivers, but once more an observation of man's puniness in a universe of titanic powers.

The poem presents the disaster matter-of-factly, in a world where things happen casually, consistent with the corresponding insignificance of life. The poet imagines the driver noting the "casual limit of an illusion," and later seeing the trunk

come up "as a casual mantle sloping in." Then, addressing the driver, the poet observes that "the structures near you Break you easily." Death is never a close battle, for man has only his fragility to resist the forces which assail him. At the moment of impact the driver is pressed forward by an illusion of speed; then his knees snap, his legs are sheared at the groin, and his trunk, now described as a crate, is impaled on the steering column.

Casual violence is also evident in "Murder," set in Ogden Canyon, Utah; the account of a man being tortured and finally flung from a cliff to his death. Once more there is no mention of motive. The torturers show no emotion other than that which accompanies their laughter. The incident is translated into its psychic impact, this time on the poet himself, who has read of the killing in the newspaper and now flees from the memory:

What memory is this I cannot touch  
Lying etched in newsprint, sudden print  
The stacked lingual cordage, pyre and such  
Combustible as fear in the heavy print  
Of meaning. (*LE*, 49)

For Larson, this life, unromanticized by the past or future, is always "combustible as fear." In the violent poetry of the present Larson abandons the Mormon concept of the efficacy of prayer and offers a vision of a deaf heaven, a heaven no longer responsive to man's cries. The image of a man "wailing God unto the cliff" as he falls to his death, reflects the extent to which Larson's awful perceptions have eroded his religious confidence.

In *Third Nephi* Larson demonstrates what he sees as the historical resolution to violence. Lacey, in despair at the violence and chaos of life, shouts:

Is there anyone out there who cares at all  
About us? O God, O God, what is the end  
Of this slow and casual sacrament of terror? (*Mantle*, 272)

These words are followed by the appearance of Jesus Christ, who stands in the air above the people and explains to Lacey in words more sonorous than persuasive, why He, Christ, had to die on the cross. This resolution, provided by a literal *deus ex machina*, is conspicuously absent from Larson's violent poetry of the present. In "Arab Insurrection: A Memoir," there is no God or angel who comes from the sky to restore the lives of a wife and her unborn child, or to explain to the husband how this experience can and will lead to spiritual growth. The only vision for the husband is the constant image of mutilated dreams.

Nor is there a remedy in "Homestead in Idaho," but only the pathetic folding and unfolding of the newspaper clipping. Nor is there resolution in "Murder" except for death, the cessation of agony, and in "Crematorium," Larson's poem of the Nazi extermination camps where death provides release from "the riot of hunger" (*LE*, 43).

Such poems testify (if at all) to a God who refuses to help, a God who chooses to ignore the sacrament of terror. This impotent and indifferent God is at odds with the traditional Mormon God, the loving father who is so concerned with



his creations that he sees the fall of the sparrow and often interferes in the affairs of men in order to save his preferred children.

Occasionally Larson's religious ambivalence is so severe that the indifferent god turns into a malevolent god. In the poem, "Execution" (*LE*, 88-89), an account of a pheasant hunt, the hunter stalks his prey:

The bluish glint, deistic hollow charm  
Transfixing prey before their sudden flight  
Into the gulf of death.

He shoots a pheasant, but is angered by one of his dogs who is not quite fast enough, and he levels the barrel of the gun at her:

Not quick to run  
Not quite alert to game, nor to a whim,  
But chosen she, the muscular and slim,  
Whose life had piqued the nostrils of a god.

The second dog watches the first dog dying, and

Fathoms the intent of him before  
Thought merciful, but now suspect, malign.

The idea of a god, thought gentle, turning to rage, is a frequent ingredient of Larson's apocalyptic poetry. In the poem "Advent" (*LE*, 5), "The table is set for the gentle god," and the guests wait for Him "who comes like the breath on a veil." But instead

Out of the East the breath is fire!  
Who comes with temblor, sound of hurricane?  
Who rages on the portico?  
Who claps his vengeful steel on stone?

In "The Machine Press," Larson's poem about a press operator who slips on oil and has his thumbs and index fingers pressed "paper thin," the poet describes the descending forge of the press as being "careful as God with the impress of pain" (*LE*, 56).

Larson's voice, though strong and significant, is, thus, far from being the collective voice of Mormonism. As long as he is pressured (both internally and externally) into being the spokesman for literate Mormons, he will be straining against the vision within, continually trying to sound as if the Lord were speaking rather than Clinton F. Larson. Even Robert Pack Browning, a non-Mormon reviewing *The Lord of Experience*, measures Larson's achievement by the yardstick of Mormon theology. He complains that

though Larson offers an inordinate number of poems on funerals, mortuaries, graveyards, the dying, and the dead (on a quick count I find 28), there are none surprisingly that could be firmly characterized as treating death in terms of the unique eschatological doctrines that are so central a feature of Mormon life and belief.<sup>10</sup>

Arguing that Larson has been intimidated by his mentors, mainly T. S. Eliot, Browning invites Larson to forget them and "begin to write the poems of Clinton F. Larson, twentieth century Mormon of Provo, Utah."

What Browning and his Mormon counterparts do not see, and what should be clear after an examination of Larson's poetry of violence, is that Larson's human voice is incapable of treating death in the way in which Mormon theology demands. The positive religious precepts celebrated in Larson's poetry do not reflect his deepest channels of feeling and insight, do not illuminate his most desperate questions and fears. On the contrary, Larson's feelings and questions are reflected in those disturbing poems of violence which reveal a human vision.

When Larson writes as a Mormon poet, his own voice is camouflaged. And yet that intrusive human voice will keep Larson from being popular with his own people, or from being the true poet laureate of Mormonism. In reality the widely read Carol Lynn Pearson is closer to being the Church poet than Larson. This is not because she is a better poet. She is not. But she reflects, better than Larson, the surface values of Mormonism. She reflects the dominant tendencies of the group—an unquestioned optimism, a pragmatism which spurns Larson's baroque language in favor of the simple and direct, and a capacity to be thrilled by over-simplified solutions, by moral dilemmas resolved in rhymed couplets.

If Larson could turn his attention away from those literate Mormons who are concerned about the establishment of a Mormon literary tradition and have conjured up a vision of Larson ushering in a renaissance of orthodox Mormon art, if he could turn from these and from the dogmas of precept and raise his own now muted voice, the voice of percept, he could produce a more significant poetry than he has thus far. It would not be the poetry of a god, nor of a church, but the genuine poetry of a single man engaged in the process of making sense out of his own human experience.

<sup>1</sup>John B. Harris, "New Edition of Larson Poetry Delights Critic With Quality," *Provo Herald*, Feb. 10, 1969, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Keller, "A Pilgrimage of Awe," *Dialogue*, 3 (Spring 1968), 112.

<sup>3</sup>Marden J. Clark, "Internal Theology," *Utah Academy Proceedings*, 41 (1964), 188.

<sup>4</sup>Clinton F. Larson, *The Lord of Experience* (Salt Lake City: Promised Land Pub., 1968), p. 90. Hereafter, *LE*.

<sup>5</sup>Clinton F. Larson, "The Commitment To Analogical Truth" (paper distributed privately), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Clinton F. Larson, *Counterpoint: A Book of Poems* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1973), p. 72. Hereafter, *Counterpoint*.

<sup>7</sup>Clinton F. Larson, *Coriantumr and Moroni* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1961), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>Clinton F. Larson, *The Mantle of the Prophet and Other Plays* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1966), p. 324. Hereafter, *Mantle*.

<sup>9</sup>I feel a justifiable proprietary interest in this poem as I am responsible for bringing the original account to the attention of Dr. Larson. In the spring of 1971 Dr. Larson asked me to talk to his contemporary literature class about existentialist philosophy. While trying to portray the impact of war on the European mind, I told this story which had been related to me by the missionary in the story.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Pack Browning [Review of *The Lord of Experience*], *Western American Literature*, 4 (Summer 1969), 143.