Bayard Taylor's the Prophet: Mormonism as Literary Taboo; Calaveras County Comes of Age; the Erosion of Belief in the Poetry of Clinton F. Larson

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BAYARD TAYLOR'S THE PROPHET: MORMONISM AS LITERARY TABOO
CALAVERAS COUNTY COMES OF AGE
THE EROSION OF BELIEF IN THE POETRY OF CLINTON F. LARSON

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of English
Brigham Young University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Thomas D. Schwartz
August 1972
This thesis, by Thomas D. Schwartz, is accepted in its present form by the Department of English of Brigham Young University as satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Richard H. Cracroft, Committee Chairman

David L. Evans, Committee Member

Aug. 2, 1972

Date

Marshall R. Craig, Department Chairman
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INTRODUCTION

The three papers included in this thesis reflect my development as a graduate student during the course of my master's program at Brigham Young University. I came to Brigham Young University interested in creative writing and developed a love for research and criticism. My work in nineteenth century American literature led to the first two papers. Both deal with literary history, the first narrow in scope, devoted to a study of the significance of a single play, the second broad in scope, devoted to a study of the unifying thread of anti-sentimentalism in the writings of the major American realists. These papers reflect both my research in and commitment to American literary criticism.

My third paper is a study of the significance of violence in the poetry of Clinton F. Larson. I have attempted to be objective and honest in my assessment of Dr. Larson's poetry. My thesis on his poetry is entirely my own. To my knowledge this is a first: a first study of Dr. Larson's poetry, and a first paper on his work ever included in a master's thesis. I am happy to have the privilege of opening up this area of investigation. It is my hope that this study will stimulate further discussion of his work.
Although the ideas presented in these three papers reflect my own work, there are a number of individuals, both faculty member and fellow graduate students, whose help has been invaluable and whom I wish to thank collectively. There is one individual, however, whose help has been so complete that I wish to express public gratitude.

Dr. Richard H. Cracroft has been my friend and literary mentor for the last eight years, through Freshman English in 1964, through four years of friendship in Madison, Wisconsin, and through the last two years of my graduate work at Brigham Young University. It was Dr. Cracroft who convinced me to do graduate work in English while I was a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Wisconsin. As my advisor and teacher, Dr. Cracroft has provided a constant example of thoroughness, critical acumen, and self-discipline. He brought to my assistance a background of scholarship, the practical experience of writing and research which I needed. More significantly, Dr. Cracroft took valuable time from his classroom preparation and research to shape my formless ideas and teach me those myriad details which are indispensable to the novice. Dr. Cracroft has provided a model for my own commitment to literature.

I also wish to thank my wife, Charlotte, and my two daughters, Charlaan and Adriana, for the inexpressible.
BAYARD TAYLOR'S *THE PROPHET*: MORMONISM AS LITERARY TABOO
In recent years scholars have been piecing together the story of Mormonism's bizarre image in American literature. The discovery, as Arrington and Haupt have argued, is that the Mormons, "ignored by literary masters," finally "fell into the hands of hack writers who denied them a grandeur they rightfully deserved." Consequently, the hack writer's image of Mormons has triumphed and the Mormons entered nineteenth century American literature either as "wily insincere leaders," or as "ignorant, fanatical followers." Lambert and Cracroft have similarly presented the nineteenth century fictional Mormon as either a "murderer or a seducer," and scholars seem in agreement that the Mormon in fiction settled quickly and firmly into the "stereotype of the popular villain."4

No one has yet attempted to explain why the theme of Mormonism was ignored by America's foremost writers. Neal


Lambert has suggested that the Mormon's popular image did not lend itself to great literature. "Polygamy, secret rites, blood atonement, priestly orders . . . have made the Mormon slip easily into a stereotype for slick fiction and gross comedy." This, of course, better explains the interest of hack writers than it does the silence of literary greats, a silence which more and more demands explanation. A partial explanation of this general silence can be provided through a discussion of Bayard Taylor's poetry drama, The Prophet: A Tragedy (1874), the only significant break in that silence. The play, which has hitherto escaped the notice of Mormon scholars, is itself an indispensable addition to the literary history of Mormonism; and the play's reception by the critics, the denunciation of Taylor's attempt to write of Mormonism from no less a "literary master" than Henry James, clearly suggests that Mormonism was not simply ignored by America's greatest writers of the period, but rather, was scrupulously avoided.

During the 1870's and 1880's Bayard Taylor was a highly regarded man of letters. He included among his

friends such illuminati as Twain (who described Taylor as "a genial, lovable, simple hearted soul"), Howells, Longfellow, Holmes, Whittier, and Bryant. A man of no small ego or ambition, Taylor aspired to greatness as a poet and produced a considerable quantity of lyrical verse characterized by technical proficiency and the sort of liberal ideas which were considered safe in the New England of his time. Today most critics agree with Richard Henry Stoddard's assessment that Taylor was a versemaker and not a poet, and he is remembered chiefly for his 1871 translation of Goethe's Faust, which even now is considered by many the most accurate English translation of the great German epic. Taylor has often been given the dubious title of poet laureate of the Gilded Age, for he reflected in his work the homely sentiments, the common goals, and the self-satisfaction of his readers. Like the age, his aspirations were high but his talents limited.

Early in his career, Taylor felt that a religious theme would tap his deepest powers. After immersing himself in nature worship, Taylor abandoned altogether the idea of an institutionalized religion for the possibility of inner communion with the divine force, and became zealously concerned with what he saw as the heresy of orthodoxy. Christians, he felt, were paying too close attention to the scriptures, refusing to accept what scripture did not guarantee.
Taylor, needing a dramatic vehicle for his ideas about an excessive adherence to scripture and the dangers of fanaticism, saw a rich potential in the phenomenon of Mormonism. At this time the Utah Mormons were coming under increasing attack from the American press because of polygamy. Seeing the tragic possibilities in the ongoing Mormon drama, Taylor began as early as 1862 to think of Mormon history as the perfect vehicle for his project. By the mid-sixties he had already committed himself so firmly to a drama about Mormonism that when Thomas Bailey Aldrich told Taylor that he was working on a piece entitled Seven Mormon Wives, a stunned Taylor immediately felt that his own piece had been purloined and later feared that Aldrich would accuse him of having stolen the Mormon theme. It was not until 1873, however, that he wrote the play. The conception of writing a Mormon play, he wrote in 1873, "struck me at first as so important that I kept it so many years in order to grow up to it."6

Taylor's letters from Gotha, Weimar, and Leipzig between August and November of 1873, during the writing of The Prophet, reflect intense satisfaction with his work. Supposedly vacationing after the nervous exhaustion which followed his translation of Faust in 1871, Taylor felt

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himself at the peak of his poetic powers and believed that he had found a theme worthy of his best.

Writing to J. R. Osgood and T. B. Aldrich, he predicted accurately that "the poem will certainly attract a great deal of attention—possibly of controversy. I assure you in advance of its originality and of its power, as contrasted with my former works" (Letters, 636). Several days later he wrote Aldrich, "The poem is by far the best thing I have ever written" (Letters, 638).

That the play is based on the early history of the Mormon Church is made clear both by the play and Taylor's letters. In November, 1873, he wrote, "The history of the Mormons is a background to the poem. Nauvoo is suggested; but the conception of the prophet's nature is quite independent" (Letters, 635). Much of the plot material, he suggested, is taken from early Mormon history. "It is full of passion and intrigue; among the scenes are: a camp-meeting; miracles in a mountain valley; camps on the prairies; the Temple of the New Zion; secret councils of the Twelve; and at last battle and death" (Letters, 635). In December, 1873, he informed Aldrich that the play was to be:

whole American in scene, character, and plot; in fact the story could not happen in any other part of the world. The rise of the Mormons under Joe Smith, the building of the Temple at Nauvoo, and the death of Joe Smith there, form a sufficient historical background. (Letters, 638)
Taylor's letters also make clear his intention to write something more than an expose on Mormonism. "The poem is a two-edged sword," he wrote in November, "cutting the fossilized orthodox to the heart no less than the Mormons" (Letters, 635). Taylor insisted that he was not writing about religious aberrations but about human passion. In February, 1874, he wrote:

I make the origin of the Mormon sect and the Joe Smith tragedy the historical background of my poem; but my plot has the universal human element. It stirs up more than one question which disturbs the undercurrents of the world just now; for it is pervaded with that sort of logic which lay behind the Greek idea of fate. (Letters, 647)

In another letter he spoke of the hero as having "a Hamlet-nature" (Letters, 636). Taylor clearly felt that in the theme of Mormonism he had found a framework for a dramatic presentation of issues which he considered central to American society.

David Starr, who dominates The Prophet as Taylor's fictional Joseph Smith, is introduced as a spiritually intense young man living in a period of religious unrest. David's father interprets his dissatisfaction as a product of adolescence and suggests to David's mother that what the youth needs is a wife. This confusion of David's spiritual unease for sexual restlessness provides early tension for the theme of polygamy which is central to the later development of the play. At a camp meeting, David finds in the
preacher's words evidence of a loss in power in contemporary Christianity. In Mormon terms, he senses apostasy. The preacher calls on David to confess. David answers:

The heart within me aches from stress of faith: I have no need to pray, except for power, which is the seal and covenant for them whom he has chosen.?

David seeks the restoration of the power of Christ's church: the miracles of faith, the gifts of tongues, healings, and spiritual manifestations. While not rejecting prayer and confession, he finds these preoccupations indicative of a loss of power. He shouts:

Have you the privilege To darken counsel with your cloud of words? To teach the lesser part, reject the whole, And mutilate His glory unto men? (Taylor, 13)

David also has graver doubts augmented by the impotence of modern Christianity. Momentarily tempted by atheism, he doubts if Christianity was ever more than it now is, and he cries:

O my God! There is no faith, no power, Nor miracle; and never can have been. But this is madness! This makes truth a lie, Makes life an emptiness far worse than death. (Taylor, 14)

Encouraged by his wife, Rhoda, and his servant, Peter, David determines to become a preacher. He stirs up some controversy and wins the admiration of Nimrod Kraft, Taylor's fictional Brigham Young. Kraft compares the vigor and personal strength of David to the enervated Christianity he has known, and says of David:

He claims his birthright, will possess,
And may restore to others, bringing back
The old, forgotten forces of the Church,
Whose right hand is Authority, whose left
Obedience. But, however, he may build,
My coarser strength must hew and set the stones.
If but my purpose can be squared with his. (Taylor, 27)

From his first appearance in the play, Nimrod Kraft is depicted as a self-seeking Iago, a man of demonic determination, who manipulates David Starr into providing a framework for his own glory and dominion. Throughout the play Taylor describes the two leaders in fire imagery, David being the pure flame (spiritual, intuitive, a man of faith), Nimrod being the fuel (practical, sensible, a man of action.)

Nimrod asks David to lay his hands upon his head and bestow upon him understanding and "the power to serve," but David falters, realizing that without the power he can not assume the office. However, David feels that Nimrod's desire obligates his exertion of faith, so he blesses
Nimrod with whatever power he may possess.

Musing later, David convinces himself that authority is a consequence of faith. Here as elsewhere Taylor blends Protestant ideas into the fabric of his Mormon drama, omitting the Mormon claim to direct restoration of the power through heavenly messengers.

David assembles a crowd and speaks of his religious fears:

I tried to understand
The many promises that rust unused;
And all I asked, was, Are they granted yet? (Taylor, 37)

If faith were sufficient, he explains, the power of God would be restored. He ponders:

Who knowest whether I deserve or no
The signs of power, -- who, should I point, as now
And say, "Be Thou removed." (Taylor, 37)

At these words a large part of the rock which he is standing upon falls with a great noise. The people cry out, recognizing David as a prophet.

This miracle, borrowed from the life of the prophet Matthias, seems irritatingly pale next to the events which began the ministry of Joseph Smith. In attempting to strengthen the credibility of the miracle, Taylor weakens the credibility of David's impact on his followers. It is
one thing to follow a man who claims to have seen God and spoken directly with his son, and with angels, and to have translated from golden plates the prophetic history of an ancient people, and it is quite another thing to follow a man who happens to have been standing on a rock speaking of faith, when the rock broke with a loud noise.

In Taylor's attempt to make the Mormon prophet appealing by reducing the supernatural aspects of his ministry, he strips the prophet of that which in the case of Joseph Smith made him a powerful leader. However interesting David Starr may be as a character, he is not a leader; and however credible he may be as an individual, he is conspicuously incredible as the dictator which his dramatic role demands. The reader scours the play in vain for some property of a leader in David Starr, for self-confidence, charisma, determination, and finally must content himself with having ferreted out Starr's capacity for exuding a faint spiritual effervescence. Even David realizes before long that his miracle was slight, that the rock could have split by coincidence, and he comes to doubt his own prophetic calling.

With his newly gathered followers, David builds a city, which, though unnamed, is clearly Nauvoo. He sets the members to work on the Temple, establishes a Council of Twelve Apostles, the law of tithing, the principle of
revelation, and a priesthood heirarchy.

As Nauvoo is being built, Livia, whom Nimrod describes as possessing "knowledge of the world," and "influence with her sex," approaches the camp and asks David for the gift of tongues. He blesses her and she speaks in Dutch, French, and Cherokee. The people naively take it as a wondrous miracle and David feels that he has met his equal in faith. When David praises Livia for her faith, she replies:

I was the harp-string, mute until you touched;  
If to your ear the sound be melody,  
Strike out of me the strong, full-handed chords  
To your exaltment! (Taylor, 63)

More a seducer than a prophetess, Livia makes her purpose clear:

There is no woman lives but in her soul  
Demands a bridegroom; failing one of flesh,  
Then one of spirit. Learn to promise this  
In secret visitations, mystic signs,  
Make truth seem love, and knowledge ecstasy,  
And you will lead our sex. (Taylor, 69)

One afternoon David's servant, Peter, talks to Nimrod about his marital predicament. He loves both Jane and Mary Ann and doesn't know which to marry. Nimrod asks why he should not marry both. "You've read your Bible," he explains; "What the Lord himself established for the fathers of the world, is justified to us" (Taylor, 79).
Whereas in Mormon history polygamy was introduced by revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith, here it comes to Nimrod Kraft (Brigham Young), the man whom the gentile world had identified with polygamy. Also it should be noted that although David speaks about revelation throughout the play, the ultimate authority rests with scripture, and as Taylor does not introduce the Mormon's claim to additional scriptures, this means that authority rests in the Bible. But again it should be remembered that Taylor is using Mormonism as a vehicle for his argument with Christianity.

Nimrod convinces the other members of the Twelve that polygamy is desirable and calls in David to hear their proposal:

We would restore that patriarchal home
The Lord preferred, -- its fair, obedient wives,
Its heritage of Children; as He gave,
So giving now, that none be left alone
Or fruitless. (Taylor, 82-83)

David's belief in the need for a restoration of the primitive church predisposes him to the suggestion that polygamy reflects the power which has been lost. He also realizes that this would evoke the anger of the gentiles and make "a chasm impassable between us and the world" (Taylor, 83). Nevertheless, the desperate plan answers his need for a supreme test. "There is faith that loves a
trial" (Taylor, 83), he says, affirming the plan. When he tells his wife, Rhoda, she pleads with him to change his mind. "Put me aside," she cries:

But think of innocent wives, whose joy of life,
So satisfied with trust in one man's truth,
Sustains them in long weariness and fear,
That ends in pangs, and endless, narrowing cares:
No, no: you will not rob them! (Taylor, 86)

David goes to the temple and as he prays, Livia enters and plays the organ. Lying, she tells David that it was his faith which enabled her to play. She proclaims her love for David in words of spiritual union. They embrace and David finds a personal commitment to the new law. Meanwhile, Rhoda, at home, realizes that Livia's ingenuity has destroyed her marriage:

My tongue deceives my heart,
I speak but foolishness, and vix him more.
But hers makes beautiful a darkened thought,
Makes purity a secret selfishness,
And holy love an evil. (Taylor, 97)

She vainly goes through the Bible trying to find a verse which denounces polygamy. Taylor's purpose again is to show that a close adherence to the Bible can lead one into moral turpitude or downright villainy.

Rhoda is not the only wife who is appalled by the new law. Because of their wives' indignation at plural marriage, two members of the Council of Twelve, Jones and
Hugh, conspire against the prophet. They visit Colonel Hyde, the leader of the gentile forces, and guarantee him evidence that plural marriages are being performed in the Temple.

Following David's secret marriage to Livia, word comes that Colonel Hyde plans to suppress polygamy. Nimrod responds with indignation at the law's harrassment, and he fulminates:

What have we done that should alarm the law? 
Low! Strife and murder in this border land
It scarcely chides, is patient of free lust,
Yet makes a culprit of the sanctioned love
That broadens home. (Taylor, 115)

Taylor denounces polygamy, not as illegal but as unnatural. The play becomes a poignant statement against polygamy, focusing not only on the spiritual development of David, but on the love and sorrow of Rhoda, and Taylor is at his best when he allows Rhoda to articulate her grief:

There's something in a woman's heart,
I think, so delicate, so soft a force,
That it will cling like steel, nor feel a bruise;
Yet loose one fibre, it may bleed to death. (Taylor, 124)

But she also knows now that David's life is endangered. Like the mother in the story of Solomon, who would rather give her baby to another woman than have it killed, Rhoda, worried about David's safety, goes to Livia for help.
She knows that Livia has a quicker mind and will be more useful in saving David. But Livia, like the errant mother who cared little for life, is reluctant to help because she is thrilled by the glory of the trial that awaits David. It is not life but dramatic effects which she values.

When the soldiers come for David, he commissions Nimrod to take care of the Saints. As David turns to meet the soldiers, Nimrod tells the people not to lament. Nimrod prophesies that they will cross the river and "found another Eshcol in the West." Then David reappears, mortally wounded, supported by Rhoda and Livia. David asks the people to listen to his last revelation. Then he falls, exclaiming, "I see no more--but, yes! one blessed face;/ Tis yours! --You're with me, Rhoda! you, my/ love!" (Taylor, 164). With David dying in her arms, Rhoda sends Livia away: "Leave us! You have no more a part in him./ He is all mine at last" (Taylor, 164).

David Starr had not been driven into polygamy through sensual desire--the usual fictional approach to the Mormon prophet. He genuinely saw himself as an instrument of the Lord in bringing about the restoration of all things. Nimrod Kraft had convinced Starr that polygamy was a necessary part of the old order of things. Starr's dying realization, that he had been duped by his strict adherence to the scriptures and that he had struck out against the
wisdom of the heart, forced him to see his second marriage as adulterous. The reconciliation between Rhoda and David thus became a scene of repentence and forgiveness for an act of infidelity. The play ends with affirmation, as David Starr, fully aware of the mistakes of his past and the pain they have caused Rhoda, reestablishes in his dying moments the joy of monogamous love.

Despite Taylor's enthusiasm for his play, and the popularity which his translation of Faust had engendered, The Prophet did not receive critical acclaim. It was criticized both on points of poetry (its language was too common place, too realistic) and on the subject (the critics were not really interested in a poetized history of Mormonism). In November, 1874, Taylor responded to the criticism in a letter to Paul H. Hayne: "The critics are mistaken," he wrote "in supposing that my design was to represent a phase of Mormon history. The original conception was totally unconnected with any actual events; the features which suggest the Mormons were added long afterwards" (Letters, 664).

For Taylor, such a response was natural, even predictable, concerned as he was about his reputation and standing with the critics. His defense of the play from this point on becomes a denial of its Mormon elements and a
reversal of his original ideas.

The most substantial attack on the play was a seven-page discussion in the prestigious *North American Review* by Henry James, already a significant voice in American letters and the man whom T. S. Eliot later credited with having the finest mind of his generation. To James the historical source was too glaring to be lightly disposed of. He writes:

*Taylor* has written the tragedy of Mormonism, and taken Joe Smith and Brigham Young for his heroes. His experiment has not, to our taste, been remarkably successful, but it is creditable to his intellectual pluck.\(^8\)

Throughout the review James wavers between a revulsion against the subject of Mormonism and a respect for Bayard Taylor's literary reputation. However, his discussion centers on the subject of Mormonism and his insights show his inability to accept that subject:

It disturbs our faith a little to learn that the prophet is Mr. Joe Smith, and the denouement is to be the founding of Salt Lake City by Mr. Brigham Young; we reflect that there is a magic in associations, and we are afraid we scent vulgarity in these. But we are anxious to see what the author makes of them, and we grant that the presumption is in favor of his audacity. Mormonism we know to be a humbug and a rather nasty one. It needs at this time of

day no "showing up," and Mr. Taylor has not wasted his time in making a poetical exposure. He assumes that the creed was founded in tolerable good faith, and he limits his view to its early stages, which already, at Western rates of progression, have faded into the twilight of tradition. His design has been to show how a religion springs into being, and how an honest man may be beguiled into thinking himself a prophet. (James, 231)

James commends Taylor on the subtlety with which he makes his prophet a mysterious mixture of "fierce monomania" and "clever charlatan," and also compliments Taylor on not spending too much time on the doings of Brigham Young whom he refers to as the "theocratic millionaire of Salt Lake City" (James, 233). But overshadowing such petty compliments is the insurmountable criticism that Taylor went beyond the limits of propriety. James insists that:

If his book has no atmosphere, the fault is not only Mr. Taylor's but his subject's. It is very well to wish to poetize common things, but here as much as ever, more than ever, one must choose. There are things inherently vulgar, things to which no varnish will give a gloss, and on which the fancy contents only grudgingly to rest her eyes. Mormonism is one of these; an attempt to import Joseph Smith into romance, even very much diluted and arranged, must in the nature of things fall flat. (James, 236)

Here is a "literary master" dismissing Mormonism as being too "inherently vulgar" for consideration by serious writers. To writers of the 70's and 80's "vulgarity" was not a light charge. This was a time of literary taboos, and one need only recall the press' vicious attack of
Harriet Beecher Stowe for her airing of the incest theme in the Byron controversy to realize that the serious writer had reason to take such taboos seriously.

Following James' review, Taylor decided on a public statement denying the Mormon emphasis in the drama. In early spring of 1875, the New York Staatszeitung reviewed The Prophet as a history of the early Mormon Church, and Taylor had his chance. In a letter to the editor of the New York Staatszeitung, published on May 3rd, 1875, he wrote, surprisingly, "The Prophet does not represent the early history of the Mormons, and David Starr is as far as possible from being Joe Smith. The man who most nearly stands for his prototype in real life was the Rev. Edward Irving" (Letters, 664). Irving had been a Scottish religious reformer who emphasized spiritual gifts and faith.

Luckily for Taylor his letters which had made clear that the plot, characters, and themes were distinctively American and Mormon, were private and could not be used to disprove his new stance. According to Taylor, "The immigration to the West and the manner of David's death are the only features that coincide with the story of the Mormons" (Letters, 665). Taylor conveniently ignores David's calling to the ministry, the building of the Temple in New Zion, the meetings of the Council of Twelve,
the Danite-inspired conspiracy in Act Five in which Jonas is apparently killed by Nimrod's men, the institution of tithing, revelation, and the priesthood hierarchy, the commissioning of Nimrod to lead the members across the river to the West, and of course, the central theme of polygamy.

The anti-Mormon sentiment was so pervasive that even Taylor's biographer, Albert H. Smyth, familiar with many of Taylor's letters, felt it important to carry the argument in Taylor's behalf. Smyth wrote that "in David Starr . . . there is no attribute of the Mormon leader. Starr is a fine idealist, not a vulgar sensualist," and Smyth underlined the assertion that the play bore only slight resemblance to Mormonism and that the real prototype was the Rev. Edward Irving.

What Taylor had earlier called the finest thing he had written, now became an embarrassment. By November, 1874, he was feigning indifference. "The Prophet now belongs to my past," he wrote, "and will not trouble my thoughts any more" (Letters, 664). Dissembling his irritation, he told his friends that he was relieved to get to work on other projects, more important projects, and The Prophet was effectively forgotten by author and critics alike.
In this manner America's most able critics succeeded in silencing this pioneer study of Mormonism, and in silencing Taylor they possibly silenced other writers who may have been interested in the theme of Mormonism. Had the critics sounded a different note, a note of interest and appreciation, Taylor's effort might have encouraged other serious writers to continue the dramatic study of Mormonism. Eager as American writers of the period were to find American material, a usable past, such encouragement might have led to a significant literary interest in this uniquely American religion.
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CALAVERAS COUNTY COMES OF AGE
In 1865, Henry Clapp's *Saturday Press* printed Mark Twain's story, "Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog." The story of the celebrated jumping frog that was grounded with quail shot typifies the spirit of the age, and in a few unpretentious pages captures and conveys the nineteenth century tension between romanticism and realism—a tension which the twentieth century perspective now recognizes as central to the age of realism, to the voluminous outpourings of sentimentality and the vehement outpourings of indignation against it.

Such a tension is a familiar strain in American history, as evidenced by the recurring American dream of success and romantic idealization on the one hand and a gut-level practicality on the other. The American mind, however, not only seems most comfortable when its root-hog-or-die pragmatism is glossed over with the blush of romanticism; there are times when it so insists upon a heavy-handed lacquer of idealism that the romantic glow is more apparent than real. Such a glow existed between 1865 and 1900. The Civil War had shaken the American sense of life, and the American dream dwindled into a jumbled incoherence. Kazin clarifies this incoherence when he points out:

The new America that was cradled in the Civil War, baptized by the Bessemer process and married too early in life to the Republican party, the new America that came in rudely
through Gettysburg and the Wilderness, stamping across a hundred thousand corpses, blaring its tariffs, sniggering its corruption, crying "Nothing is lost but honor"—that America was so shocking and new that its impact on the first postbellum generations still reverberates in the American mind.¹

Following this observation Kazin argues that the first realists of the period were almost devastated by the impact of the war.

Years before Frederick Jackson Turner announced the closing of the frontiers, eastern farmers demonstrated their awareness of the fact by moving to the cities instead of trying for western farm land. In the cities, however, the retired farmers faced competition not only with the urban population but also with thousands of immigrants seeking their fortune in the land of boundless opportunity. With the hope of new frontiers initially stilled and then replaced by the eruption of industrialism, the dignity of labor declined. Workers faced low wages, long hours, and dangerous working conditions. By the 1880's many textile workers were toiling from twelve to fourteen hours a day at looms and spindles. Between 1870 and 1899 over 11,000,000 men, women, and children had immigrated to America, and this together with automation, left many

men unemployed. Along with technological unemployment came layoffs attributable to the business cycle, so that in the late 1880's, unemployment approached twenty percent. Meanwhile, three percent of all those fortunate enough to find work were killed or injured as a result of industrial accidents. The development of the railroad made possible a new competition in the fields of textiles and manufacturing, and such competition led to a struggle for jobs. Wages spiraled downwards in the attempts to compete with produce coming from the underpaid South.

It is no wonder that the nation's population turned from reality to a world of sentimental distortion. The nation craved rags-to-riches stories and demanded writings in which virtue was rewarded and crime punished. People preferred myths of the American industrialist as a man who made it to the top by reason of his honesty and hard work. The glorification of success attended a glorification of sacrifice and contentment, built upon the obvious attempts of American writers to restore meaning to a lost coherence.

Writers such as Sidney Lanier and Joel Chandler Harris exploited a myth of the ante-bellum South—the myth that life before the war had been meaningful. The South yearned along with Uncle Remus to "go back to der ole deys." In New England Sarah Orne Jewett wrote quaint stories in which she
praised childhood and a life which was structured and peaceful. She presented old ladies living in quaint houses, surrounded by orderly fences. Writers everywhere were turning from the difficult and disappointing present. Many people found meaning in the dream of the West, in the pretense of the new frontiers yet to be conquered. Even Bret Harte, while capturing some of the irony of life in the West, did his part in shaping this myth.

This is not to suggest that all of the voices in American fiction were devoted to training frogs for fantastic leaps. There were a few who stood ready to ground the pretenses of a sick age. With their record of aggression and immorality in the old South, John DeForest and George Washington Cable cut into the myth of the good old days, the myth of the halcyon plantation. In the west Ambrose Bierce presented a west not of adventure and limitless freedom, but a land of violence and treachery. But it was with the rise of the American Realists, Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Dean Howells, that American literature presented a sustained attack on sentimentalism.

The first of these realists, Mark Twain, indicted the gilded age by attacking the literature of sentimentality which accounted for so much of the stupidity of the age. In *The Gilded Age*, Laura Hawkins enters a bookstore to buy Taine's *Notes on England* or Holmes' *Autocrat of the*
Breakfast Table. After the clerk tells her that they really do not carry too many cookbooks, he shows her one of his best, "The Pirate's Doom" or "The Last of the Buccaneers." Then he tries to cap his persuasive pitch with the following words:

It's full of love troubles and mysteries and all sorts of such things. The heroine strangles her own mother. Just glance at the title, please, "Gorderal the Vampire," or "The Dance Of Death."²

In Huckleberry Finn, Twain introduces and establishes an obvious contrast between Huck and Tom Sawyer. Less obvious but no less deliberate is the fact of contrast between Huck, the realist, and Tom, the incorrigible sentimentalist. Tom sees life through the "verities" of the printed word. The novel begins when he organizes his pirate band, lays out the rules according to the authorities, and remains persuasive until he outlines the necessity of ransoming prisoners. One of the boys asks him what ransoming means. "I don't know," he replies, "but that's what they do. I've seen it in books, and so, of course, that's what we've got to do."³


When asked how they can do it if they don't know what it is, Tom replies: "Why, blame it all, we've got to do it. Don't I tell you it's in the books? Don't you want to go to doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?" (H. F., 13)

At the end of the novel, Tom and Huck try to free Nigger Jim. Huck has a plan for this, but Tom's is more persuasive because it follows the "authorities" more closely. When Huck hears Tom's plan, he says, "I see in a minute it was worth fifteen of mine for style, and would make Jim just as free a man as mine would, and maybe get us all killed besides" (H. F., 182). In the process of tunneling Jim (who is already a free man) out of his cabin prison, Tom throws in messages in blood, loads of paraphernalia, and the necessary prison pets, spiders and smakes.

The major obstacle to success occurs in the matter of case-knives. Tom insists, "I've read all the books that gives any information about these things. They always dig out with a case-knife" (H. F., 190). Tom, who is distressed because traditional escapes take months and years, decides to dig Jim out with the case-knives, but let on later that the escape took thirty-seven years. The boys make no headway with the case-knives, so Tom decides to use the picks but to call them case-knives. Finally, the realist, the anti-sentimentalist, Huck Finn, has had his fill:
Picks is the thing, moral or no moral; and as for me, I don't care shucks for the morality of it, no how. When I start in to steal a nigger or a watermelon or a Sunday-school book, I aim't no ways particular how it's done so it's done. What I want is my nigger, or what I want is my watermelon, or what I want is my Sunday-school book; and if a pick's the handiest thing, that's the thing I'm a going to dig that nigger or that watermelon or that Sunday-school book out with, and I don't give a dead rat what the authorities thinks about it nuther (H. F., 191-192)

That Jim finally gets away in spite of Tom's plan is Twain's whole point. Progress comes despite the damaging impact of tradition, of outdated authority, of the wisdom of the ages. Like John DeForest and George Washington Cable, Twain seemed to feel that the decades following the Civil War were plagued with the romanticized vision of the ante-bellum South. Thus, in Huckleberry Finn, the wreck which Huck and Jim see coming down the river is named the Walter Scott. In Life on the Mississippi, Twain wrote that Scott came on the scene at a time when progress was being made following the French Revolution, and he says of the man:

Along comes Sir Walter Scott with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back; sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion, with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the silliness and emptiness, sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long vanished society.4

4Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1897), p.290.
Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* renews the attack on sentimentality by showing that the people in Arthur's kingdom were trying to touch their lives with chivalric legend. They went to battle in suits of armor, for instance, not because it was safer that way, but because armor was part of the ritual of going to war. The first half of the novel is devoted to attacking, through the emphasis upon Hank Morgan's Yankee know-how, the insanity of a devotion to tradition in the face of facts. Since tradition is perpetuated in books, the attack takes the form of satire on the reading matter of the age.

As Jay Martin points out, *A Connecticut Yankee* cuts both ways: against the age of chivalry, but also against the machine society of the eighties:

His technology is devoted to war, death, and destruction; thus his triumph is his inevitable defeat. Surrounded by the bodies of electrocuted knights, he is trapped by his own victory. Proclaiming his doctrine of mechanical energy without correspondingly increasing consciousness—as Adams would put it—Hank initiates not civilization but inertia. It is Hank himself, then, symbol of the nineteenth-century, who brings about the decline of history. The final victor is therefore Merlin, symbol of the most primitive superstition, who casts a thirteen-century spell over the sleeping Hank.\(^5\)

Like Twain, Henry James, too, felt compelled to stuff some of the jumping frogs of his age. Though more sensitive

to the processes of consciousness than any other novelist of his time, he recognized that readily disseminated ideas, those coming from popular fiction, the theater, and the language of tradition, were vitally important in a study of mental activity. Thus, often in his writings characters are shaped by what they read.

In his early novel, *The American*, we find the unlettered Christopher Newman charging through Europe veiled in Adamic ignorance and naiveté. While his ignorance does not correspond with bliss, it does become morally superior to the tradition of the Bellegardes, those guardians of the good, who accept him as a suitor because of his money and because he may be able to retrieve Claire de Cintre from her seclusion following her disastrous first marriage. Then when Lord Deepmore comes along with his pedigree, Newman is dropped as a contender. Claire rushes off to a convent, and Newman finally faces the bare outer walls of the convent and realizes that he will never be a part of this world of tradition, this world of vile condescension. Moreover, while he can no longer be what he was before coming to Europe, he, likewise, cannot make the transition to the old world. Newman is a new man, standing like Hank Morgan out of the present, but, unlike Hank, barred from the past.

The novel is clearly associated with the devotion to sentimentality and tradition which is found in the
Bellegardes. Just as it is carefully stated that Newman has never read a novel, so is it established that the cultivated Bellegardes have read. Valentin, who early calls himself an idealist, speaks of his relationship to Claire in terms of Orestes and Electra. When he tells Newman about Claire's first marriage, he begins by calling it a "chapter for a novel" and restates in another way the importance of literary undertaking when he points out that his "clever" brother is writing a history of *The Princesses of France Who Never Married*.

At a party given by the Bellegardes for the coming marriage of Claire to Newman, Claire finishes a story to her little niece in the following words:

But in the end the young prince married the beautiful Florabella and carried her off to live with him in the land of the pink sky. There she was so happy that she forgot all her troubles, and went to drive every day of her life in an ivory coach drawn by five hundred white mice.⁶

Newman asks if she is fond of children and she replies that she likes to talk to them because it is possible to be more serious with them than with grownups and then points out: "That is a great nonsense that I have been telling Blanche, but it is a great deal more serious than most of what we say in society" (*American*, 148).

When Newman then asks if she had been happy at the ball, she replies "Ecstatically." "Now," says Newman, "you are talking the nonsense that we talk in society" (American, 148). And Claire answers him with the masochistic grace which is later apparent in Penelope Lapham when she says: "It was my own fault if I was not happy" (American, 149).

The novel ends with Valentin's melodramatic death by dueling and Claire's entrance into the Carmelite convent. The convent and the duel represent the highpoints of sentimentality. Those critics who criticize James for the melodramatic devices of the duel and convent overlook the central point of the story: melodrama in life is the price paid for tolerance of melodrama in literature. Valentin and Claire de Cintre became what they had read.

Christopher Newman finishes the experience with a lesson learned from trying to relate to those who can only relate to the past. The Duchess Had told him that his real triumph would be in pleasing the countes, a woman "as difficult as a princess in a fairy tale" (American, 213). Newman, however, was incapable of making any kind of transition into the world of mawkish fiction.

In abandoning Newman outside the walls of the convent, James locks himself outside the fortress of easy emotions and fairy tale virtues. He expresses indirectly and symbolically the message of his friend Santayana who said
that it is more fruitful to live one's life in accordance with the truth than to bolster one's life with an illusion.

The difference between the unlettered Christopher Newman and his female counterpart, Isabel Archer, should now be considered. Unlike Newman, Isabel is well read in popular fiction. Despite her sense of being above the conventional, she is, as James puts it, ground up in the conventional. More than any character in the corpus of Howells' works, Isabel Archer reflects the damage done to an individual by sentimentalism.

Her initial response to Warburton provides an insight into her romantic orientation: "Oh I hoped there would be a Lord, it's just like a novel." As a child Isabel refused to look out one door, lest it interfere "with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side . . . a region of delight or of terror" (Portrait, 20). She has grown up pouring her life into the mold of the literature she read. After all her "reputation of reading a great deal hung about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic" (Portrait, 29).

Isabel is immediately smitten by the romance of the Touchett house, and though Ralph tells her that it's a prosaic old house with only the romance she brings to it,

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she "reassures" him with the words, "I've brought a great deal" (Portrait, 41).

As a romantic, Isabel is chiefly concerned with appearances, with the artifice of life and feeling. The narrator states that her chief dread was appearing narrow-minded and that "what she feared next afterwards was that she should really be so" (Portrait, 54). Having no sense of responsibility for her theories, she responds to Warburton's revolutionary ideas by saying: "Oh I do hope they'll make a revolution. I should delight in seeing a revolution" (Portrait, 65).

Warburton's radicalism is, of course, as much a ruse as Isabel's love of freedom and her openness to experience. That Warburton typifies the English, who, the narrator says, are the most romantic people in the world, is apparent in his proposal to Isabel: "I fell in love with you then. It was at first sight, as the novels say; I know now that's not a fancy-phrase, and I shall think better of novels for evermore" (Portrait, 95).

While Warburton qualifies as a sentimental romantic, it is Isabel who must face the consequences of extreme sentimentalism. She must soon wonder:

if she ever had been or ever could be, intimate with any one. She had an ideal of friendship as well as several other sentiments, which it failed to seem to her in this case--it
had not seemed to her in the other cases—that the actual completely expressed. But she often reminded herself that there were essential reasons why one's ideal could never become concrete. It was a thing to believe in, not to see—a matter of faith, not of experience. (Portrait, 173)

When she finally meets Gilbert Osmond, she is perplexed by the difficulty of living her own life, of being responsible for her own decisions. Osmond proposes marriage in the style of the successful gothic hero as outlined in popular fiction. He demonstrates both confidence and a refusal to beg and further tells her to travel, to see more of the world, so that when she comes back she will not feel as though she had been kept from some meaningful experience.

Whereas Isabel had liked Warburton too much to marry him, her marriage to Osmond satisfies the strong emotional needs caused by her sentimentalism. First, it provides an outlet for her sense of sacrifice, that feminine need to give her life stoically for a cause—in this case, Pansy. Second, it allows her to continue an inner life because Osmond remains so far from her ideal that she is able to keep pure her ideal and preserve the reality of her dream. She exemplifies, in fact, the human being victimized by that which Madame Merle called the "cluster of appurtenances," the one whose self for other people "is one's expression of one's self" (Portrait, 187).
Not only is the case for frogs and quail shot established in the writings of Twain and James; it is amplified in the work of William Dean Howells. By the time Howells had become the editor of The Atlantic Monthly in 1871, he had already built a reputation as an anti-sentimentalist. As editor of The Atlantic and Commentary and as a writer of novels and short stories, he was to make this attack the central theme of his work. He translated frog stuffing into a literary theory.

His theory of realism as a necessary attack on the emotional excesses of popular fiction is, of course, found in Criticism and Fiction, which calls for literature marked by "fidelity to experience" and "probability of motive."

His demonstration of his theory is early found in "A Romance of Real Life," a story whose title reveals the dramatic irony so characteristic of the period. The Contributor answers the knock of a mariner who claims to have been at sea for years and who wishes to find his family and be reunited with them. The Contributor feels himself part of a real romance until the fact that romance cannot be real is firmly established when he locates the daughter, only to learn that the father has been in prison, not upon the sea, and that the daughter does not wish any reunion with a father who can only make her life miserable. Lest Howells'
attack upon popular fiction be missed, he has the Contributor exclaim that he has read *Two Years Before the Mast*, "a book which had possibly cast its glamour upon the adventure."⁸

Later, in the short story "Editha," Howells places part of the blame for the Spanish American war upon the popular idea that war is noble. Editha delights in George's going to war, because it will allow her to marry a hero. "Our country right or wrong," she quotes. Her ideas are not new, of course, but borrowed from the current tides of patriotic literature, as is her romantic notion penned to her fiancé:

"I could not love thee, dear so much, Loved I not honor more."⁹

After George's death, Editha visits his mother, thinking to share a common grief. Mrs. Grearson, however, is not a sentimentalist and is, therefore, not at all interested in discussing the nobility of war or the great sacrifice which they have made for their country by giving George to the cause. Instead, she says: "When you sent him


you didn't expect he would get killed."

At Editha's murmur, she continues:

No, girls don't; women don't, when they give their men up to their country. They think they'll come marching back, somehow, just as gay as they went, or if it's an empty sleeve, or even an empty pantaloon, it's all the more glory, and they're so much the prouder of them, poor things. . . . You just expected him to kill someone else, some of those foreigners. . . . conscripts, or whatever they call 'em. You thought it would be all right for my George, your George, to kill the sons of those miserable mothers and the husbands of those girls you would never see the faces of. . . . I thank my God they killed him first, and that he ain't living with their blood on his hands.  

She angrily tells Editha to take off her black dress before she rips it from the girl. Editha can neither part with clothes nor with sentiments, and so she simply concludes that Mrs. Grearson's mind has been damaged by the news of her son's death, and thus the "vulgar" words. Editha then comfortably settles in her world of dreams and lies. The story is not subtle and if by sentimentality we simply mean emotional excess, as Cady suggests, it must be said that Howells falls into one kind of sentimentalism while attacking another kind. But sentimentality to Howells and the realists was something very specific—a common impulse, a desire to satirize false views of life and the literature which encouraged them.

10Ibid., p. 228.

11Ibid.
Howells reveals a specious concern for theme which completely dominates his treatment of either character or situations. It was precisely because he lacked the genius of either Twain or James that he was able to take a theme which Twain and James had woven into the fabric of their creative achievements, and make it not a part but the salient center of his own.

Such a "center" is apparent in his major statement of anti-sentimentalism in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The novel concerns the Lapham and the Corey families and the marriage of young Corey to Penelope Lapham. The Laphams are members of the nouveau riche and, with the exception of Penelope, are not well read; on the other hand, the Coreys are members of the aristocracy and, as such, know fiction. In fact, the youngest Corey, Nanny, "had read a great many novels with a keen sense of their inaccuracy as representatives of life, and had seen a great deal of life with a sad regret for its difference from fiction."\(^{12}\)

By some improbable mistake the Laphams and the Coreys have been assuming that young Corey is after the hand of the beautiful Lapham daughter, Irene. Actually Corey is in love with the serious sister, Penelope. The Laphams have been aiding Irene, who is in love with Corey. This much of the

plot is similar to a piece of popular fiction, *Tears Idle Tears* which everyone was reading. In the latter book, when the sister found that the young man was in love with her rather than with her sister, she felt that she must sacrifice him because she could not be happy if her sister was miserable. Penelope read the book and told Corey that "It'd be wicked for any one to do what that girl did. Why don't they let people have a chance to behave reasonably in stories?" (Lapham, 306) Still, when Corey announced that he was in love with her rather than with Irene, she found herself acting just like the heroine of *Tears Idle Tears*.

Earlier in the novel Howells had his mouthpiece, Sewell, declare that "The novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious" (Lapham, 278).

Sewell goes on to call *Tears Idle Tears* psychic suicide and talks of love as it is presented in novels as being the affair of very young people whose saccharine view of romance makes their young lives ridiculous. Therefore, when Howells demands in *Criticism and Literature* that we turn to life rather than to literature and imitate life rather than literature, he is not just talking about the
role of the novelist but is issuing a warning to the possible victims of popular fiction.

As Carter points out, there were for Howells three levels of immorality in novels. The least immoral are those novels which appeal to our prejudices or lull our judgment. These are "not so fatal, but they are innutritious and clog the soul with unwholesome vapors" (Carter, 163). More immoral is the novelist who flatters our passions, exalting them above principles. This kind of novel injures even if it does not kill. But the mortal crime is committed by the novelist who imagines "a world where the sins of sense are unvisited by the penalties following, swift or slow, but inexorably sure, in the real world..." (Carter, 163). He produces novels which are "deadly poison; these do kill" (Carter, 163). Carter interprets these sins of the senses to mean "any usurpation of human reason by human unreason or passion—by the passion of pride as well as love, the passion of possessiveness and acquisition as well as the passions of an unreasoned devotion to an abstract duty" (Carter, 163). For Howells, the moral novel would mimic a world in which the supremacy of such passions was penalized by human unhappiness.

However, at this point Howells' theory breaks down. As his own stories demonstrate, unhappiness is not so much the penalty for these sins of the senses as it is a concomitant of an unreasoned devotion to duty and chivalry.
In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Penelope's unhappiness is not a penalty but rather an integral part of her sentimental pose. In "Editha" it is Mrs. Grearson who seems truly unhappy whereas Editha is shielded from unhappiness by her sin of sense. In this case it is precisely her sin which saves her from the retribution of sorrow. Not even in Howells' fictive world, therefore, are sinners regularly visited with unhappiness.

The idea of moral retribution for sins of sense proved inadequate as did the basic drive of realism itself. The times were changing and already the naturalists were facing more substantial issues than sentimentalism. While Penelope Lapham was sacrificing young Corey, Howells' countrymen were being caught in the pull of appressive forces. Thousands of workers were being crushed by industry, workingmen were turning against immigrants in acts of mass violence, epidemics and starvation were becoming part of the life of the cities.

American intellectual thought was turned upside down by Marx, Darwin, and Freud. Howells was himself becoming more and more concerned with the cause of socialism during the 1880s, so that even his friend, Hamlin Garland, could say that Howells was more radical than he. Howells' growing socialism was solidified by the Haymarket Affair of May 4, 1886. The state's retributive executions incensed Howells as they did many Americans. Howells
referred to the act as "civil murder."

Howells himself saw that life's problems went beyond sentimentalist fiction. When he wrote *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, he faced the social situation, the implications and complications of predatory capitalism, with a larger vision than he had shown in earlier novels. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the attack on sentimentality had ceased to be a major theme, and the man who had marshalled the attack on sentimentalist fiction had moved beyond this attack.

The Realists were replaced by Naturalists with their greater daring, their greater indignation, their passion for the underside of life. The twentieth century has turned Mark Twain into the father of modern style, remembered for his technical advances. James is still worshipped because of his contributions to the craft of fiction. His novels themselves have become curious, period pieces which are possibly a bit precious (as Norris complained), possessing all the passion of a "broken teacup." And Howells, who formulated realist theory, is remembered as an editor, a secondary novelist, and a man who established a method rather than a metaphysic.

Most modern writers do not share the Realist assumption that social insanity can be rectified by getting rid of sentimentalist fiction. To an age which has produced
the novel of the absurd and the novel of the grotesque, it is not fiction that is insane, it is life itself. The post-existential vision of man as "fever in matter" has possibly precluded an appreciation of the Realist's metaphysic. There is little time or inclination to worry about the impact of *Tears Idle Tears* when, as Faulkner suggested, man has only one question left: "When will I be blown up?"

But even the zaniest of the modern absurd novels of America, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse Five* or *The Children's Crusade*, return to the spirit of Realism in suggesting that part of our present dilemma is due to the insane ideas which have been perpetrated through literature.

Today, bestselling novels and television shows portray the same adolescent romance which Howells fought. And today thousands of young marrieds are seeking divorce because of the disparity between what they had expected and what they found in marriage. With no emphasis placed on preparation for the realities of marriage and with all the emphasis upon courtship and wooing, preening has become the national preoccupation.

Along with divorce, adultery has become a constant theme of popular fiction and television. What was once a reflection of moral turpitude is now a reflection of sensitivity and openness to experience. With such
a premium set on adolescent courtship and a glorification of adultery, the family as a basic unit of society is under constant fire.

Possibly more important, however, is the place of violence in popular fiction and television. Many responsible critics have warned that the violence in television and fiction may be responsible for some of the violence in society.

Perhaps it is time for some of these contemporary jumping frogs to be grounded. It may be that D. H. Lawrence was correct in asserting that the essential function of literature is moral. At any rate, the Realists were trying to assert this ineluctable bond between morality and literature. The attack on sentimentalism was motivated by moral indignation; this attack was not the whole of Realism, but it was the initial force and possibly the most pivotal element in the Realist movement. To document and analyze the method of realism ignores the specific genius of the age of Realism, that genius of circumstance in which America's best writers rallied to the cause of grounding the pretenses of an age which had strapped itself to Jim Smiley's jumping frog.
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THE EROSION OF BELIEF IN THE POETRY OF CLINTON F. LARSON
Dr. Clinton F. Larson has been acclaimed as a Mormon poet, even as the first Mormon poet. Indeed, in his review of The Lord of Experience Professor John B. Harris seems to have represented many of the Mormon intelligensia 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.'"¹ 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."² 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."³


³Marden J. Clark, "Internal Theology," Utah Academy Proceedings, XXXXI (1964), 188.
Larson himself has taken the equation seriously and has assumed the unofficial position of poet laureate of Mormonism. Although there are some who would consider the title rather dubious, no one would deny Larson whatever glory such a title brings.

In their excitement over the reality of a Mormon who is also a fine writer, however, 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. However, the foundation of this fictive house to the Lord is dark and vacuous 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.4

For Larson death is not the mother of beauty but of horror, and forces him from the terrible present of meaningless violence into the soothing heroic past and into the paradisiacal future. The abandoned present rejects the poet's gilded structure of glorified past and hopeful future, and intrudes into his religious orientation as an "instant scream" that provides a mocking commentary on life and 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 motivate 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 the joy of righteousness, the calculated calm of religious assurance. There is a convincing sense of humble gratitude in his 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.

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

Larson clearly finds his joy in the concept of eternity.
Happiness is one with assurance.

You are the resurrection whose craft is power,
Whose reason is love, the recessional wonder.
(L. E., 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 (i.e. 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 the 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 Dr. Larson he 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." He further suggested that trying to make something of the present would be like "pitting oneself against a mammoth."

To find models for eternity, Larson moves away from the mammoth of the present, the "sordid real," into the idealized past of scripture. This is in direct contradiction to his written credo:

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.5

5Clinton F. Larson, "The Commitment To Analogical Truth" (paper distributed privately), p. 3.
Yet, in his writing, Larson has so vigorously spurned the commonplace, ordinary world of today, that this credo is frankly contradictory.

When Larson discusses spirituality in the present, there is a Miniver-Cheevy-like sensation of loss. His emphasis on these diminished times reflects his inability to relate his sense of religious grandeur to present reality. Present holiness is for Larson essentially a matter 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 whitened
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.6

Here Larson's humor leans into rancor with the play on privy. The man of holiness is not only under contract (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 ideas are as flecks scattered randomly. The damning attribute of the man of holiness, however, is his piety.

He is awry "as piety shoring faith." His piety contains faith and is the enemy of faith. His piety is a corral in which his faith is kept docile, impotent, by being isolated. 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 of Rameumptom, who drones, "Behold how Jesus fills my soul;" (L. E., 42) and the Christian who maintains "the refuge total Sunday/ In lieu of total consecration" (L. E., 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 intellect
To your stages, doors, and podia. (L. E., 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 virility 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 speaker 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. (L. E., 6)

This sense of loss in the present, not unique to Larson, was central to Eliot and has been a constant component in twentieth century religious poetry. But nowhere in Eliot or in the mainstream of contemporary poetry has there been the sense of man's vulnerability, the awareness of impending violence, which haunts Larson's world of present experience.
There is a meaninglessness in the violence of the present which is vainly sought for in his historical plays. The violence and persecution found in the historical plays were part of the spiritual growth of the religious 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."\(^7\)

And even when the violence was not regenerative, it allowed the prophet of former days the chance to seal his testimony in blood. But, as Larson perceives, the days of such sealings are over. Today the Mormon General Authority, Stake President, or Bishop, is a successful businessman respected by the community. The Church itself is conspicuously 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 Rachael in Saul of Tarsus as she holds up her chains, "This is the mark of my covenant."\(^8\) Violence, no longer an essential part of the growth of the individual,

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and no longer the supreme test of faith, is reduced to a mockery of all values and all faith. It occurs willy-nilly, like a will-o-the-wisp, striking without reason, without motive, and without regenerative effects. Violence serves 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, on the tension between his religious promises and present reality. Solomon and Geneva have decided to homestead in Idaho. Because they do not have the money for 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. (L. E., 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 as he nears the cabin. When he enters, he sees the dusty crib and Geneva still against it, over the blood-stained floor.

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 into the wound and twisted, but too deep, and she was unable to stop the bleeding. Then, 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 may not be intentionally ironic, but the absurd undercutting of aspiration by casual violence is 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. (L. E., 72)
Larson attempts to camouflage the maudlin tragedy by means of an inflated vocabulary and an austere progression of images. The vocabulary provides a needed distance between the reader and the subject. Larson localizes the horror of loss in the action of Solomon's folding and unfolding of the newspaper clipping, as the pain seeks release in the nervous motion of fingers. The action reduces human behavior to a series of tropisms.

"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. 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 rocking back and forth in a rocking chair. After several visits they asked the couple about the man and were informed that he was their son. He had been living in Algiers

9I feel a justifiable proprietory 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 who had been my roommate during my freshman year at Brigham Young University in 1964.
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 rocks. And, according to the old couple, their son had never spoken since.

Shortly after hearing this grim narration, Larson wrote the as yet unpublished poem:

**Arab Insurrection: A Memoir**

White as stone, he sits agape in a chair,  
Tassels of willows beyond, sweeping the air.  
Daylight, a thinness of luminescence, fair

As gauze, intervenes. He sits, tipping  
Into it, to see: Algiers—the sipping  
Of wine in a portico, swallows nipping

At cherries in the dry wind, the aeration  
Of sight, straws and shadows in an adumbration  
Of belief, his wife at the gate to hear elation

In the streets. Allah, in shadows, comes  
Turbaned and flowing in robes, his thumbs  
Dismaying her. Great with child, she drums

The light with horror as a scimitar, against a gate,  
Cleaves its grain. The latch falls charily, late  
As a golden minaret to seize the sun. I wait

To see him see, white of stone, remembering:  
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 as they will
Him as he is, rocking in a chair, their whim
Always before him, endlessly wavering and dim.

The brutality of the present is horrifyingly reflected
in the image of the unborn child replaced in the womb by rocks. Once more the violence is subordinated to its own meaninglessness. Larson is careful to preserve the senselessness of the murder. There is no hint of ideological purpose or racial hatred as a motivation for the killing. The poet leaves the young man, living the greater tragedy

As he is, rocking in a chair, their whim
Always before him, endlessly wavering and dim.

Larson's poem, "Seven Tenths of a Second," concerning an automobile accident, provides a more glaring absence of social criticism:

Seven Tenths of a Second

There's the tree, shaded and stolid as death,
And you, in the impress of speed, a mile a minute
On a register, weigh forward with your last breath
To note in a curious gravity the casual limit

Of an illusion pressing you to settle still
Forward at three thousand, two hundred pounds.
In the compression the bumper flows into the grill,
And its bits of steal slip into the tree with sounds
Of puncturing; the hood rises and waves into the shield
In front of you as the drive of wheels lifts and hovers,
Twisting openly; the grill spills its flakes, annealed
Into colors of light, as the body steel covers

The trunk as if a casual mantle sloping in
And corresponding; and the rear enfolds and splays
The doors that move like tongues floating in
A discourse of the day. Your body plays

Against its speed as the structures near you
Break you easily: your legs reach straight,
Snap at the knees, leaping short, and shear you
At the groin; off the seat, your torso like a crate

Settles into the dashboard as your chest and arm
Curve the steering wheel; you crest into the visor,
Though you cannot see the pitching motor block harm
The chipping trunk, for you keep speed, wiser

Than before without knowing; the steering column
Bends vertical, and you, driven and impaled,
Fail inwardly, pulsing blood into your solemn
Lungs. Your head is mantled and assailed

With glass. The car reclines into the ground,
Conforming noisily as hinges rip, doors pry
And rail the air, and seats rise, puff, and bound
Forward to press and pin you where you die.
(Presences, 80-81)

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 simply, the split
second breakdown of violence followed by violence. 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 a cosmic protest
against man's puniness in a universe of titanic powers.
The poem presents the disaster matter-of-factly, where things happen casually, consistent with the corresponding insignificance of life. The driver notes the "casual limit of an illusion," and later sees the trunk come up "as a casual mantle sloping in." Then, with echoes of "Homestead in Idaho,"

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. The lack of causality is amplified by the unreality of the situation. There is no impression of speed, although there is "a mile a minute/ On a register." 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.

This lack of causality is again evident in "Murder," set in Ogden Camyon, Utah; the account of a man being tortured and finally flung from a cliff to his death. Once more there is no suggestion 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, pure and such  
Combustible as fear in the heavy sprint  
Of meaning. (L. E., 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 belief.

In Third Nephi Larson demonstrates what he sees as the historical resolution to violence. Laceus, 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? (M. P., 272)

These words are followed by the appearance of Jesus Christ, who stands in the air above the people and explains to Laceus 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 the whim of the assailants.

Nor is there a remedy in "Homestead in Idaho" other than the pathetic folding and unfolding of the newspaper clipping. Nor is there resolution in "Murder" except for death, the cessation of agony. Death does become a good, when like the tortured, one "begs for what is next." Death is also the resolution in "Seven Tenths of a Second," and in "Crematorium," Larson's poem of the Nazi extermination camps where death provides release from "the riot of hunger" (L. E., 43).

Such poems testify (if at all) to a God who refused to help, a God who chose to ignore the sacrament of terror. This willy-nilly deism is at odds with the traditional concept of God as a 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. For Larson, present agony posits neither help nor concern.

The erosion of religious belief is so extensive that the deistic god often turns into a malevolent god. In the poem, "Execution," 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. (*L. E.*, 98)

He shoots a pheasant, but is angered by one of his
dogs, 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.
(*L. E.*, 98-99)

The second dog, watches the first dog dying and:

Fathoms the intent of him before
Thought merciful, but now suspect, malign.
(*L. E.*, 99)

The idea of a god, thought gentle, turning to rage, is
a frequent ingredient of Larson's apocalyptic poetry. In
the poem "Advent:"

The table is set for the gentle god. (*L. E.*, 5)

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?
(*L. E.*, 5)
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" (L. E., 56).

In such poems God resembles Larson's own father, a man of arbitrary moods, alternating between kindness and violence. As a boy Larson lived against the borders of his father's explosive will. He has a scar over his right eye caused by a knife wound from his father. He claims he cannot recall what prompted his father's anger, but the scar remains.

The causes of religious erosion are many but the poetry indicates that such an erosion exists. Larson's religious belief, his refuge from the empirical present, is itself colored by that present.

Larson's voice though strong and significant, is not the collective voice of Mormonism. As long as he is pressured (both internally and externally) into being the one-eyed poet in the land of Mormon myopia, he will be straining against the vision within, continually trying to sound as if the Lord were speaking rather than Clinton F. Larson.

The pressure to be a Mormon poet is great. 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.10

Arguing that Larson has been intimidated by his mentors, mainly T. S. Eliot, Browning invites Larson to forget his mentors and "begin to write the poems of Clinton F. Larson, twentieth century Mormon of Provo, Utah" (Browning, 144).

The advice is correct, if one excludes the word, Mormon, for 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 humanistic voice is incapable of treating death in the way in which Mormon theology demands. The 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 humanistic vision.

Because Larson writes as a Mormon poet, his own voice is camouflaged. And yet that intrusive humanistic voice will keep Larson from being popular with his own people, or

10Robert Pack Browning, Review of The Lord of Experience, Western American Literature, IV (Summer 1969), 143.
from being the 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 is closer to the heart of Mormonism. She reflects the dominant tendencies of the group—an unquestioned optimism, a pragmatism which spurns Larson's literary language in favor of the simple and direct, and a capacity to be thrilled by quick solutions, by a moral dilemma resolved in a rhymed couplet.

If Larson could turn from those literate Mormons who are so embarrassed by the lack of a literary tradition in Mormonism that they feel an inner need to be able to point to a profound Mormon poet, if he could turn from these and from the dogmas of precept, and raise his own now muted human 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.
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ABSTRACT

Bayard Taylor's poetry drama, The Prophet, a fictionalized account of the ministry of Joseph Smith, is a little known but highly significant contribution to the literary history of Mormonism. The story of Taylor's writing of the play, the angry reaction of critics, particularly of the young Henry James, who felt the theme of Mormonism was too vulgar for dramatic treatment, provides insight into the image of Mormonism in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Mark Twain's image of the leaping frog, stuffed with quail shot, provides an apt metaphor for the prevailing tension of the age of realism, between the forces of sentimentalism and the anti-sentimentalist reaction of the greatest writers of the period, Twain, James, and Howells.

Clinton F. Larson is a Mormon poet, but his poetry reveals a tension between religious optimism and personal pessimism. A close reading of his poetry of violence reveals that it is his personal voice of fright which is the most authentic and most significant.

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