Clinton Larson's "the Witness": the Quest for a Mormon Mythic Consciousness

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CLINTON LARSON'S "THE WITNESS": THE QUEST FOR A
MORMON MYTHIC CONSCIOUSNESS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of English
Brigham Young University

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

by
Dennis R. Perry
August 1981
This Thesis, by Dennis R. Perry, 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.

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16 July 1981

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my appreciation and wonder at the speed and accuracy of Richard Cracroft's last minute help and his willingness to jump head first into a half-written mass of split infinitives, to Charles Tate for his careful scrutiny and helpful suggestions, to Eugene England for his insightful and often revelatory comments, and to my wife Mary Lyn for her patient typing and editing.
PREFACE

It is surprising that with all of the richness and complexity of form and matter in Clinton Larson's hundreds of published poems, and with a culture that cries out for "Mormon" literature, there are, to date, only two full, focused articles on his poetry, along with a few book reviews, prefaces, and an occasional passing comment. This even though his first book was published over sixteen years ago.

The "why" of this paradox is hard to answer. It is not that his poetry has not been able to arouse a variety of responses. Everything from "nearly perfect" and "cloudy language" to "anti-intellectual" and "meaningless violence" has been mentioned. Probably the major controversy about Larson's poetry has been the question of its identity as "Mormon" literature. In his review of Lord of Experience, Karl Keller notes that although there is nothing explicitly Mormon in Lord, yet certain characteristics of the poetry—lack of metaphysical tensions, few unresolved ambiguities and light without dark contrasts—reveal them as definitely Mormon.¹ While Keller finds the poems' lack of

¹ Karl Keller, "A Pilgrimage of Awe," Dialogue, 3 (Spring 1968), 111-118.
doctrinal Mormonisms an effective escape from didactic sermonizing, Robert Pack Browning considers Larson's "silence" on Mormon themes a literary self-consciousness that stifles many of the poems and obscures others.  

The Mormon nature of Larson's poetry is again called into question by Edward Geary who takes both sides of the issue in his review of Counterpoint. He suggests that the "meaningless violence" in many of the poems belies Larson's promise that they dramatize God's offer to the world of eternal life despite the presence of sin. Geary cites "Stringing Wire" as one of those poems that offers little reassurance of "the eternal life of the Spirit." By Counterpoint, however, Larson had become less shy about dealing with explicit Mormon subjects, at least in "A Letter From Israel Whiton, 1851," which Geary cites as "a Mormon poem and a very fine one."  

Thomas Schwartz again calls Larson's Mormonism into question by attempting to show that Larson's tendency to violence reveals a "private pessimism" that conflicts with his "orthodox optimism." Schwartz carries this so-called conflict to the point that he

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2 Robert Pack Browning, "Review of The Lord of Experience," Western American Literature, 4 (Summer 1969), 143.


4 Geary, p. 90.

considers Larson's poetry a testifier to a God who ignores and refuses help to his terror-stricken children, a very un-Mormon poetry indeed. For Schwartz, however, the lack of "Mormonism" is a virtue in the poetry. As a counter-example to Schwartz's and others' conclusions that "meaningless" violence is un-Mormon, Bruce Jorgensen cites Sterling McMurrin and Truman Madsen in support of his assertion that evil is a necessary balancing force in the universe for Mormon theology and that it provides the cosmos with meaning. To him, this tension between good and evil creates a "severe dynamic" behind the "baroque splendors of Larson's style."  

Larson also finds a defender of his poetic Mormonism in Clifton Jolley, who sees no incongruity in the existence of both joy and terror in the lives of the faithful; for him, both are a necessary part of a growing experience.

Besides the poems' "Mormonism," their obscurity of style has also been discussed often among critics. Browning refers to an "infrequent opacity" and to "cloudy language." He also accuses Larson of a "studiously heavyweight vocabulary; ludicrous contortions and distentions of syntax which read like parodies of 'difficult' poetry." 8 John B. Harris also refers to


8 Browning, p. 144.

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Larson's often over-extended vocabulary that sometimes borders on the ridiculous. Marden Clark mentions that parts of the "Skills of the Spirit" are obscure, and as a polite way of criticism, states that he is not "sure" how or if it all works. (The implication is that if he knew what Larson said, he would know if it worked in the poem or not.) Though Keller seems to contradict these arguments that Larson is obscure by labeling him as "not at all difficult," he later admits that Larson sometimes uses obscurity to cover up a thin idea. Keller, like Browning, also refers to Larson's use of "awkwardly collapsed syntax"—inevitably a deterrent to understanding. Finally, Bruce Clark, in his preface to Centennial Portraits, warns the readers that Larson's poems require concentrated effort to understand.

Another issue that has been mentioned by Larson's critics is his sheer mass of poems. Larson himself has listed his output at over 2,500 poems. Browning, referring to Lord of Experience, would like to see one quarter the number of poems in

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11 Keller, p. 117.

the volume. He accuses Larson of an inability to control himself.\textsuperscript{13} Keller, too, calls \textit{Lord} crowded.\textsuperscript{14} And although Eugene England, in his 1980 Redd Lecture, cites the unequalled quantity of respectable work by Larson as one criterion for his position at the top of Mormon letters, he adds that only "a part of his work is first-rate"—but he also notes that Dickinson and Whitman could claim no better.\textsuperscript{15}

These issues of the Mormonism, obscurity, and bulk of Larson's poetry are by no means yet resolved. However, whether the reasons for the lack of further recent Larson critics are political (most of Larson's potential critics are also his colleagues at BYU) or aesthetic, my purpose is not so much to explore in depth the 'old territory' as it is to stake out some new. My contention is that Larson's poetry is worth energetic criticism, and I hope that this examination of "The Witness" will make a contribution to the now small body of analysis of the writer many have called "the first real Mormon poet."

"The Witness," which was one of the poems added in a special edition of \textit{Lord of Experience} (1968), is, I submit, a landmark poem for Larson in at least two ways: first, it

\textsuperscript{13} Browning, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{14} Keller, p. 118.

summarizes the result of years of writing, and second, it clearly points the way to what he has done since then. It is a manifesto of his purpose and aspirations as a poet. This thesis will concern itself with how "The Witness" functions as such a manifesto.
Chapter One
POETRY AND MYTH

I.

By no means an easy poem, "The Witness" can be studied from a variety of perspectives. Its 359 lines divided into twelve unequal sections (or poems) are a mass of dense imagery in baroque style, religious and natural symbols and images, and layers of structural movements and counter-movements, all tied together by an intensely personal, sacred, and mythic vision. In fact, "The Witness" is a combination of mythic visions, and it is upon this concept that I will focus the major portion of this study. However, because this is the first study of the poem, it is necessary to look at how its formal qualities function and then how it stands up to the critical evaluations given of Larson's other poetry. After a brief examination of these elements, I will be able to suggest in the remainder of the thesis how the heretofore little-mentioned mythic element is central to Larson's poetry.

When examining Larson's poetry, one is reminded immediately of the poetry of T. S. Eliot. In his review of Lord of Experience, Browning notes that Larson needs to finish his apprenticeship to T. S. Eliot and begin writing Clinton
Larson. 16 The influence of Eliot on Larson is unmistakable in "The Witness"; among several examples that Browning did not suggest, I note the following: 1) the central image of the wasteland; 2) the blank verse with occasional and striking variations; 3) the symbolistic and impressionistic style; 4) the numbered sectioning of the poem; 5) the idea of the subjectivity of time, as in "Four Quartets"; and 6) the presence of myth as a central unifying quality. To compare "The Witness" and "The Wasteland" specifically, however, one notes that Larson replaces what we might interpret as Eliot's five-sectioned "tragic" structure that produces despair and fear in the reader, with a twelve-sectioned "epic-comic" structure that produces rather pity and joy. Besides looking at his influence from Eliot, in order to come to an assessment of Larson's unique accomplishment in "The Witness," I will examine its hypothetical purpose (what he tries to do), its form (how he tries to do it), and its diction.

Unlike Eliot's quest through a vision of hopeless waste, Larson's purpose in his poem is to imitate a man who, upon finding himself in the chaotic, spiritual wasteland of a contemporary Los Angeles freeway, seeks to discover and fulfill his religious being and thus escape the effects of that wasteland. The poem consists of twelve sections that emotionally move the

16 Browning, p. 144.
reader from an initial pity at the sorrows of Christ's sacrifice for an unaffected mankind, to the final joy symbolic of those who are able to appreciate and partake of the benefits of that sacrifice. In the poem, Larson himself finally arrives at a state of imagined oneness with the creator and becomes poetically a Christ figure—a mediating light of the world.

In order to induce the emotions of pity and joy in the reader, Larson needed to create a mimetic persona with whom the reader could identify and sympathize—a type of "everyman" on his and our journey to salvation. It is here that Larson both succeeds and fails. As an everyman, Larson projects too much austerity. His persona's vocabulary is so scholastic that it drains off much of the poem's emotional force. Examples such as loquitur, noesis, sapience, vellum, Veronica, recondite, cordillera, sentient, quantum, revetments, and contrails support many of the diction criticisms cited in the preface. Considering the needed humility such a quest calls for, this "heavyweight vocabulary" gives the persona, as spiritual seeker, an air of unbelievable sophistication which alienates him from his everyman audience. At times this austerity works effectively to reflect the quester's dependence on reason as a symbol of his yet immature spirituality, but when that dependence is supposedly overcome by the persona, Larson's charged diction remains.

As an everyman, Larson fails again by his Mormonization of Whitman's transcendentalism. As a result of his quest,
Larson's persona is able to claim that he can "speak of" and "for" God: "his voice my vision / Of light."\(^{17}\) Besides the fact that cosmic all-seeing-eye-bell poetry has been done effectively already (perhaps Browning should have added Larson's need to end his Whitman apprenticeship, also), it is difficult for the reader to identify with so archaic a person as the poet-prophet who has come down from the mountain to justify God's ways to us mortals. Perhaps a bit of subtle metaphor could have accomplished emotionally in the reader what Larson didactically fails to do with his blatant propheting. So much for the weaknesses of this pose. These problems are only a tonal problem for the "modern" reader (and this is not the audience I perceive that Larson is aiming at).

Larson finds poetic strength from his everyman pose as well. For example, he is able to reflect his immature early steps toward the spiritual integrity of mythic consciousness by over-zealously tring to reason with modern poets in Section III:

Their disciples
Of anathema repine in the dregs of God, wishing
For better, doctrine or catechism, something
Against the boxed pabulum of this, our everyday.

   · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·
   My irony, live in the heat
Of the sun: It is pure! Seek its excellence!
And those intone the litanies of this, our
World devise the beetles of the past languishing
Torpidly in nooks: naturalisme, realisme,
Existentialisme, edema, q. v.

\(^{17}\) Clinton Larson, "The Witness," *The Lord of Experience* (Salt Lake City: Promise Land Publications, 1966), pp. 135-143. All references to the poem are to this edition. The poem's lines are not numbered here.
Larson's attacks, the equivalent to the just-converted destructionist warnings of the street-corner prophet, are the repinings of his "loquitur"—a third person symbol of his presently dis-integrated self. As a result of these displays of his own spiritual immaturity, Larson attempts to induce pity and joy in the reader and thus fulfill one of the ambitious purposes of the poem, to find a poetic voice through which to proclaim light and truth. The poet's success or failure to do this can be found in an examination of the poem's form as it succeeds or fails at structuring these emotions.

In the symbolist tradition of Eliot, Larson images his spiritual progress by making an "objective correlative" for it in the passion and resurrection of Jesus. As Christ moves closer to his crucifixion, portrayed in several sections of the poem, Larson accordingly becomes aware of the direction for his "search for being." The poem is, therefore, existentially structured as the convergence of God and man resulting from Christ's atoning sacrifice. Following this movement of the poem, Larson's emotions range from his pity at the increasing sorrow of Christ's passion and his own spiritual confusion (Sections I-IX), to his joy at Christ's resurrection and, therefore, his own spiritual fulfillment. In addition, the movement from pity to joy is microcosmically suggested in every section in the poem but Section VII, where Christ is crucified and only sorrow can appropriately exist. Each of the other sections, as we will
soon see, ends in optimism and expectant mythic-spiritual insight.

Structurally, Larson has at least two reasons for dividing the poem into twelve sections. First, Christ had twelve apostles, or special witnesses, to his passion and resurrection. As seen in Section XI, Larson attempts to become a metaphorical poetic apostle of Christ. While reflecting on his new powerful relationship with Christ, Larson equates himself with Peter: "And he found my question, examining my witness / As He might beside the waters of Canaan." Later in Section XII, if we read the section as Larson's voice (even though at times that is ambiguous), he is equating himself with John, the beloved: "I am the beloved. / I am the witness of Your eyes." Note that on both occasions of identifying himself with the apostles, he mentions his function as a witness. The use of twelve sections seems to reflect that apostolic significance as each section is a micro witness supporting the macro witness of the collective poem. Just as each apostle was a witness of Christ, so the combined efforts of the twelve were also a witness.

Second, that there are twelve books in an epic is important also to Larson's use of twelve sections. From Larson's point of view, the grand sweep of his poet's version of salvation of man demands an epic hue (note Section IX, particularly), and the twelve sections help provide that. However, it is in the poem's epic nature that we find the most basic of the poem's problems.
The scope of the human drama he encompasses seems to demand a larger canvas to be painted on; to use another metaphor, "The Witness" too often seems like the dashed-off headlines of an articulate but brief and hurried reporter. Though the poem is suggestive of Eliot's "Wasteland," it lacks the epic vision Eliot achieves through his compactness of allusion and his random narrative. "The Witness" is not filled enough with the depth of a variety of images or length of narrative worthy of its subject.

In relation to the poem's purpose and form, there are finally two aspects of the poem's diction that must be examined: 1) charged language and 2) natural imagery. First, I noted earlier that each section is a micro version of the poem in its movement from pity to joy. For example, the emptiness of hope in Section I ends with a freshening of "the revetments / Of feeling." Section IV ends a passage fraught with images of Christ's suffering with this ecstatic revelation: "I cannot / Know the bearing wind, the touch of spume, except / Forever as I turn toward the sun." These repeated epiphanies unfortunately wear out the reader's capacity for climax. Instead of holding something back for the final jubilant outburst, Larson dissipates the reader's emotions through his too frequent use of charged climactic section endings.

Second, to create a metaphor for spiritual experience, Larson relies heavily on natural imagery. Rather than use the extensive allusions of an Eliot, Larson usually uses nature to
objectify what he cannot say. Often this is a subtle effect:
"I moisten my eyes with sorrow, or is it the fall / Of the wind
from the ocean that freshens the revetments / Of feeling?" As a
metaphor for feeling the influence of the divine Spirit issuing
from eternity, this is an effective metaphor. Or, as a metaphor
for the bloody death of Christ and the judgment of the dark ages
on the world, the following sunset image works well: "the velvet
memory gives me the banner / INRI in the red sheen waking to
evening."

However, too often the natural images become as Browning
mentions in another connection, "convention—often cliche—
habits of thought, feeling, expression." Sometimes Larson
overuses such images as "light" and "wind" so often (light
appears thirty-six times in this 359 line poem), that the reader
can almost predict when it will next appear. The common natural
images of light, wind, clouds, water, trees, air, etc. are
repeatedly used and give the effect of saying nothing very beauti-
fully. Given their place in this densely impressionistic poem,
these images are often used too predictably. For example, the
Triumvir "peals the radiant sun" instead of sentencing Christ to
die; "the sun spurs the flame that dips / As if reaching,"
instead of Christ's reaching out to the spiritually barren man-
kind. On one level of the poem, there is no detectable reason

18 Browning, p. 144.
for coming in and out of metaphorical language. However, as we examine the mythic elements that Larson incorporates into "The Witness," we will find that he structures the poem tightly on the mythic and not on the literal level.

Though the poem has the weaknesses I have indicated, it is still worth careful scrutiny. On the level of myth, where I feel it is most significant as a statement from the Mormon perspective, many of these problems become secondary and Larson's style becomes artistically viable. As a result of his use of myth, Larson is able to forge metaphorically his own religious vision.

II.

The most obvious mythic element in the poem is its underlying "quest" structure. As a "quest" poem "The Witness" works simultaneously on several levels of meaning: the poet's quest for images from the divine source; the poet's quest for a poetic calling; the poet's quest to restore the "divine" purpose of poet as prophet; man's quest for God, truth, happiness, and understanding; and man's quest for beginnings from which to find understanding. These several quests are at once spatial, temporal, and existential. If we wish to get a clearer view of the quest archetype at work in the poem, we can immediately see many
of these elements by looking at one aspect of Joseph Campbell's myth compilation in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.19

Larson's poetic quest clearly parallels the archetype of Campbell's quest pattern. Campbell's version of the quest begins with the hero leaving his common hut and surroundings after being somehow lured away; in Sections I and II of "The Witness," the poet begins in modern Los Angeles, where he feels a call from the ocean (symbolic of his eternal longings) that immediately takes him to a primordial paradise of bliss. Campbell's version of the quest continues as the lure takes the hero to the threshold of adventure where he must battle the blocking agent to get through. In "The Witness," the poet chooses to battle three blocking agents: the mayors of Southern California, who by their representative positions are, for the sensitive poet, blocking his creativity; the modern poets of classical, faithless sentiments blocking his audience's response to the poetry; and his own reason blocking his faith and intuition. After passing the threshold, Campbell's hero wanders through "a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him [tests], some of which give magical aid [helpers]; the poet/quester in "The Witness" during his journey toward God, at whatever level of meaning, is confused and naive throughout his ordeal and is thus threatened with reliance on reason that should

19 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New Jersey: Princeton U. Press, 1973), pp. 245-246. All subsequent references will be from pp. 245-246 and will not be noted.
demand his rejection of mythic faith. However, he is able to receive help from an animistic and talkative nature by his transhuman connection with it. Campbell continues to characterize the quester thus: "When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward"; in Larson's poem the poet ends up at the crucifixion, the nadir or meridian of time, where his faith is "tested" by reason and despair and where the result of his success is a knowledge of god, a poetic gift, understanding, etc. From here, Campbell's hero's reward is given as marriage, apotheosis or recognition of father-creator (father of the atonement); Larson metaphorically becomes one with the Gods, and as his gift, recognizes the atonement for what it is—a means to eternal life. Campbell's hero now must return to the real world and again overcome an obstacle; Larson, on the other hand, is back in civilization and must resist reason once again. For Campbell, the quest ends "at the return threshold . . . [where] the hero re-emerges [with] . . . the boon that . . . restores the world [elixir]." Larson returns with the power to bring man and God together.

Apart from the possible interpretations of "The Witness" as quest, which I mentioned at the first of this section, it is interesting to view the poet's search for his spiritual origins where mythic understanding can be found. In the poem this search is couched in images and allusions to what Mercia Eliade calls the search for "sacred space," and the search for "sacred
time.\textsuperscript{20} This is religious man's escape from the profane chaos of the world to the sacred cosmos of the mythic, eternal present—the times in which the gods created everything. Larson's persona in "The Witness" implicitly seeks for a "mythic consciousness" in this quest in space and time in order to find a spontaneous voice for his poetry and become a poet-prophet. I will show in Chapter Four how these mythic elements are a metaphorical structure by which to voice parallel Mormon concepts in a congenial poetic language. But first, I must discuss what "mythic consciousness" is and how it is distinguished from myth.

It is hard to discover a consensus among experts as to what myth is. It has been characterized as diseased language, ancient social norms, religious rites, visions of the "collective unconscious," binary oppositions in society, psychological warfare, and as customs expressing a people's belief. The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics covers two of the most persistent ideas as two extremes of a mythic continuum. On one end we have myth as story that is not true, and, on the other end, myth is a kind of perspective of consciousness that is finally objectified in what we now call mythology. It is in this latter vision that this study is primarily interested. A

brief history of the study of mythic consciousness will help clarify the poet's quest in "The Witness."

Although we often associate the beginning of modern literary interest in myth with the publication of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), the first serious assessment of mythic thought in primitive peoples was attempted by the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico in *Scienza Nuova* (1725). He postulates that those cast out of the Garden of Eden forgot God, language, and civilization, and became absolute primitives. In such an extremely naive frame of mind, when a thunderstorm came, they perceived it to be a great and terrifying animated body, a god.21 In seeking to imitate the sounds they heard, the primitives developed a mimetic language, and thus religion and language were born simultaneously. It was a language born in animism, the belief that all natural phenomena are meaningful signs. Because many of these "signs" were awesome to the primitive, such as thunder and lightning, they worshipped these things. For them, these natural "signs" later became the language of Jove by which he issued his commands. In summary, myth for Vico becomes a kind of poetry of fantasy, adorned with Gods and heroes inspired by natural phenomena, in a language from which it would be impossible to distinguish the central truth from

its fantastic, linguistic form. An idea implicit in Vico's theories of myth is the oneness of man with nature, a philosophy which runs counter to more popular theory that myth is pure fiction most likely dreamed up by creative ancients. For Vico, there was no conscious mythmaking, only the imitation of forms through the medium of language.

Vico was virtually ignored in his time, and similar ideas about myth do not begin to appear again until late in the nineteenth century with Max Müller's *Comparative Mythology* (1856), in which he also points out that the names of the Gods originated from natural phenomena, but that a "disease" in language has obscured much of the revealing etymology that should be found based on a theory such as Vico's. Andrew Lang, a contemporary of Müller, held a similar view to Vico and he succeeded in making explicit the oneness of mythic man with his environment that was only implicit in *Scienza Nuova*.

The Savage, at all events when myth-making, draws no hard and fast line between himself and the things in the world. He regards himself as literally akin to animals and plants and heavenly bodies.


Vico, Müller, and Lang set the tone and the stage for our contemporary theories of myth.

Contemporary thought on mythic consciousness, for the most part, has accepted the mimetic theory of the primitives' thinking process, but has provided much more philosophical and anthropological evidence. Among the other things, modern thought has developed the connection between language and mythic consciousness. Ernst Cassirer, in his work, Language and Myth (1946), explains how the "word" in primitive minds is more than a mere referent:

> For in this realm nothing has any significance or being save what is given in tangible reality. Here is no "reference" and "meaning"; every content of consciousness to which the mind is directed is immediately translated into terms of action, presence and effectiveness. Here thought does not confront its data in an attitude of free contemplation, seeking to understand its structure and their systematic connections... but is simply captivated by a total impression."25

Because the word in the mythic consciousness is mimetic of a certain divine and powerful reality, such as creation, Cassirer explains that the word itself also becomes endowed with power:

> The original bond between the linguistic and mythico-religious consciousness is primarily expressed in the fact that all verbal structures appear as also

mythical entities, endowed with certain mythical powers, that the word, in fact, becomes a sort of primary force, in which all being and doing originate. In all mythical cosmogonies, as far back as they can be traced, this supreme position of the word is found. 26

Mircea Eliade, in *Myth and Reality* (1963), also reveals, in a wealth of examples from modern and ancient primitives, powerful evidence for this "indissolvable unity" of word and object for the mythic mind and the "magic" power of the word. 27 Because of the mythic belief in the power of the word, primitives developed rituals in which the power of the word, through the re-enactment of myth, is manifest as a primal force to recreate and sustain the community. This is possible because the myth or word, and the original event of creation that it stands for, are not separated. In a primitive society it is not uncommon, usually once a year, to re-enact myths of origin and cosmogony in order to heal individuals, to initiate them ("create" them), or to re-create the tribe's world. Even the enthroning of kings can be a re-creation. For example, in Fiji, when the King is enthroned, it is called a creation of the world, and in his position as *axis mundi*, when the King holds up his arms, the cosmos is actually regenerated. 28 The re-enactment of the myth

26 Cassirer, p. 45.


of creation was a restoring of the present world, or a restoration of health to an individual. 29

This short history and summary of mythic thought and some of its implications will provide a bare framework, a vocabulary, from which to discuss the mythic elements in the poetry of Clinton F. Larson. These elements are so obvious in Larson's poetry that they are actually unavoidable. Professor Edward Geary, for example, points to Larson's characteristic animism:

"The fugitive doctrine that everything—even inanimate objects—possess a spirit of its own finds its fullest expression in the poetry of Clinton Larson." 30 From Larson's own statement we discover first-hand his concern with myth:

I intend that the baroque style, in its complexity and verbal richness, should eventually reveal the sinew of intellectual accuracy and proportion, besides spiritual elevation. This insight is, of course, gained through analysis and, finally, in the text attaining the status of a kind of mythic idiom, as occurred, for example, with Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven" and with much of Dylan Thomas' poetry. I hope this happens . . . . 31

(italics mine)

In Modern Poetry of Western America, Larson cites Keith Wilson's and A. Wilber Stevens' suggestions that the Western landscape (the outward subject of much of Larson's poetry) gains "the sense

29 Myth and Reality, p. 25.
30 Geary, p. 89.
31 Keller, p. 116.
of an ambient myth, a reality which imposes disciplined habits of mind and sharpens the sense to animal-like alertness. Like myth, it seems to elude scientific inquiry . . . ." Larson goes on to note that the Western landscape "offers perspective through beauty and a primitivistic insight." 32

This kind of spontaneous insight gained from a oneness with the land is not strange to the romantic poetic. The aeolian harp of Coleridge and Shelley is one of numerous examples of symbolic references to similar ideas expressed by the nineteenth century romantics. Larson has given it in an aura of twentieth century anthropological and philosophical myth speculation. However, Larson's belief in this kind of intuitive knowing is by no means purely metaphorical. It is his real belief, however, that makes his use of these mythic elements a viable and powerful expression of his own religious values and not an empty exercise in rhetoric. Clifton Jolley provides an anecdote that illustrates what I feel is Larson's own "mythic" or romantic faith in spontaneous insight:

Late one evening several months ago he phones me. I had been in bed for fifteen or twenty minutes and was nearly asleep.

"Did you know that the Brother of Jared is living on Arcturus?" he asked.

"What's that you say?"

"Go to the window and look out, low above the horizon. It's a feeling I've had, an impression." His voice was thin and curious. As always, I did as he commanded.\(^{33}\)

Like a mythic primitive, Larson lives by his hunches and reads meaning in an animistic cosmos.

In this thesis I will focus on "The Witness" as Clinton F. Larson's poetic search for mythic consciousness through space and time as a means of ritually returning to the sacred and powerful center of existence. This mythic return results in the gaining of poetic power because of the proximity to the gods, thus making Larson a "witness" of divine nature and reality. To demonstrate how Larson uses myth in the poem, I will rely heavily throughout the thesis on Eliade's definitions and explanations of mythic thought as found in *Myth and Reality* and *The Sacred and the Profane*. In Chapter Two, I will examine Larson's search for a mythic space from which to revitalize poetic language with divine imagery. In Chapter Three, I will examine Larson's search for mythic time—time which brings him near enough to God to gain the power of witness. In Chapter Four, I will examine the implications of Larson's approach as the basis for a Mormon poetic, examine the poem as a manifesto of Clinton F. Larson, and look at the similar strains in his subsequent work.

\(^{33}\) Jolley, p. 15.
Chapter Two

MYTHIC SPACE: THE SEARCH

Modern anthropological studies have suggested that primitive mythic societies, when staking a territory, considered themselves to be creating a world. Eliade cites the primitive viewpoint that "a territory can be made ours only by creating it anew." Such "creation" involved a variety of ritual, depending on the tribe, but was almost always a repetition of the original creation and had the effect of creating a cosmos (organized, sacred space) and consecrating it. As Eliade points out, this was part of the primitive's religious belief, and for most of these groups, this involved, first, finding (creating) the center of the world (axis mundi), and then extending outward to the four horizons (imago mundi). As a result of this ritual, cosmos is created from chaos, and their world, only then, becomes habitable. Whether this ritual is symbolically or literally true for them, it creates their only world, and the axis mundi is their vital link with the divine.

To us, it seems an inescapable conclusion that the religious man sought to live as near as possible to the Center of the World. He knew that his country lay

34 Sacred and Profane, p. 32.
35 Sacred and Profane, p. 45.
at the midpoint of the earth; he knew too that his city constituted the navel of the universe, and, above all, that the temple or the palace were veritally Centers of the World.\textsuperscript{36}

Cases are recorded of a people, after their \textit{axis mundi} (their pole or tree) is destroyed, wandering aimlessly without purpose or hope or meaning in life until a new center can be established. In this chapter I will explicate "The Witness" in terms of how Larson\textsuperscript{37} metaphorically creates mythic space by creating a Center of the World in which he can find mythic consciousness, and thus power, through nearness to the gods.

In the first of the poem's twelve sections, Larson paints a dismal picture of the southern California freeway system as a symbol of the "civilized" world in which he finds himself; his reactions to the symbols signal his need to create mythic space: "The bleak pastiche of signs defines the flowing / Vision of worlds of turnpikes turning under my wheel." The poet sees in this scene a hectic monotony that he expresses poetically in several ways: 1) the lack of punctuation that hurries us through the lines, 2) the rhymed iambic word pairs that produce a monotonous rolling effect—"bleak pastiche," "signs define," "turnpike turning," and 3) the repeated "of" that strings the images together. In this world Larson is not in control; this

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Sacred and Profane}, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{37} I will refer to the poem's persona as Larson throughout; it is clear, however, that I mean his persona.
is indicated by his comment that the freeway is "turning under my wheel." He is not actually steering. And not only does he realize he is not in control, he also finds his world hard to comprehend; it is a "bleak pastiche" that defines this "vision of worlds"—a world that is consequently fast-paced and blurred. From these opening lines, we soon sense Larson's discontent with his environment.

The next four lines indicate how this chaotic and unsavory creation took place, for what purpose, and more of its effects on the poet:

The jet stream of my seeing, with contrails of memory, 
Avails the imperial mayors that devised the continuum San Bernardino, Covina, Alhambra, Los Angeles as streaks 
Of radiance verifying the limits of my fantasy.

The first of these lines again indicates the hectic pace he feels on the freeway as a metaphor for modern life, and its blurring of his vision (again using the freeway trip as a metaphor—this time of his blurred thinking). The "contrails of memory" indicate the hopelessness of his quest to understand his situation; like the contrails following a jet, even his flashes of understanding evaporate as quickly as they appear. This inability to understand "avails" the creators of this environment by limiting Larson's "fantasy" or intuition. From Larson's point of view, the "imperial mayors" use conformity to keep order in society, a society in which creativity is stifled and reason is worshipped
at the expense of imagination. Even the towns all look alike to Larson and become a "continuum." The entire image of the freeway, which is maintained throughout these lines, reinforces the orderliness of a society where life is defined by pre-constructed paths that are lined with a "bleak pastiche" of signs that direct the individual's destiny. This society requires little thinking and less fantasy. Thus, men, as well as concrete cities, become a continuum.

This unsavory characterization of civilization is a paradoxical twist of traditional mythic thought in that usually the unprepared wilderness, not the city, is the chaos; for Larson, the city is chaos and not the cosmos it was designed to be. In another sense, however, it is fitting that there is no cosmos in the city since there has been no mythic ritual creation and, therefore, no center. As Larson's imagery continually suggests, it is not a world but a machine.

The need for a primitive, mythic space born out of the poet's frustration with the chaotic machinery of modern society is more explicitly suggested in the final lines of this section: "I moisten my eyes with sorrow, or is it the fall / Of the wind from the ocean that freshens the revetments / Of feeling?"

Larson creates a contrast here between the previous lines that illustrate the rigid order of civilized life built on reason, and the unordered (by man) natural world that can elicit "feeling."

These last lines indicate an indecision in the speaker: has he
felt sorrow because of his own reaction to the previous scene? or is it the influence of the sea winds? or perhaps both. The earlier lines suggest his unhappiness with the hectic order of modern life, but the wind and the ocean have symbolic significance that will introduce us to the next section of the poem. The wind as a symbol for the spirit, and the ocean as microcosmic nature in all of its vastness and variety create a "spot in time" for Larson's romantic persona which lifts him out of the first section's cosmic vision. The use of contrast between reason and intuition is often exemplified in the poem, as it is here, by abrupt shifts from poetic discourse to disconnected bursts of sublimity within a section. This does two things: 1) it links the poet epistemologically with other romantic poets who believe their "overflow" comes unexpectedly and spontaneously, and 2) it objectifies the poet's struggle towards a mythic language based on feeling and not reason—a basic tension in the poem that we will see more of in the next section.

In Section I the beginnings of the quest myth, as delineated by Campbell, take shape. Larson's reaction to his common surroundings interrupted by the "revetments of feeling" that he experiences, is equivalent to a call to adventure or, in Larson's case, a call to seek a new consciousness in which fantasy is unlimited. The last lines of Section I show the poet asserting himself, trying to emerge as an individual from the continuum society in which he finds himself.
In contrast with most of Section I, Section II continues the feeling of a need for sacred space. Whereas Section I illustrated the speaker's inability to cope with a world that is a paradoxical juxtaposition of chaos within so-called order, Section II presents a world, or cosmos, where understanding and peace come not from reason, but from feeling. The call that ends Section I is solidified in Section II which opens with an indication that the speaker once inhabited a cosmos:

In the beginning I chose the mist, the azure
Of sewn pearls in gossamer; I chose the light
That hangs like dawn from the embers of morning.

To contrast with the indicative and concrete images in the first section, these impressionistic descriptions are rationally indistinct but clear in terms of the feeling they project; the sounds and rhythms of the words, and not their definitions, carry the bulk of the meaning. The softness and peace of this scene is underscored by the sound imagery with its preponderance of short vowels in such words as mist, azure, pearls, gossamer, dawn, and embers. The drowsy /z/ sound in the following words also contributes to the peaceful mood: chose, azure, pearls, gossamer, hangs, and embers. The fact that he chooses the light from the "embers of morning" (or stars), rather than from the direct sun, visually softens the scene further.

The fact that the author makes choices in this cosmic environment contrasts it with Section I's modern setting and
further demonstrates the poet's aversion to reason, which he equates with an alienating bondage. In the following lines note that the speaker does not here speed by a blurring pastiche of worlds, but conversely, this world was "about me, moving in the hush / Of my devotion."

In the beginning I chose the mist, the azure Of sewn pearls in gossamer; I chose the light That hangs like dawn from the embers of morning.

In this "beginning" world the speaker feels no alienation from his environment, but he is one with it; he and it move together in the "hush of [his] devotion." Larson further adds a poetic sense of unity to the scene by the parallelism developed in the repeated "I chose" and the three consecutively stressed words / / "hangs like dawn," that exemplify the meaning of the line by suspending it. Time here is suspended eternally. The rolling and monotonously unpunctuated iambics of Section I are gone and are replaced by a mixed variety of rhythms from iambics to anapests and spondees that indicate the lack of modern so-called order.

The religious imagery in the final lines of Section II adds a new dimension to our understanding of Larson's quest for mythic consciousness. It becomes a metaphor for the Christian experience:

so to touch the falls of God
Is to know the high valleys of heaven where
In the silence of angels, the cycles of time
Repose as strands to be spun as from ravelling
Or as wisps of glory.
These lines, in referring to the "falls of God," recall to us the end of Section I in which the "fall / Of the wind" touched the poet's feelings. This experience, Larson tells us, is equivalent to a kind of Christian revelation of eternity which, as this section shows, mythically transforms the chaos into cosmos. These lines also help prepare us for what is to happen throughout the rest of the poem in its use of imagery and diction. This is not a typical romanticism, wherein the poet appeals to a pantheistic god for intuition. This is a romanticism rewritten by the Christian (Mormon), and, as I will note in detail as I examine the rest of the poem, Larson uses Emersonian transcendentalism and Wordsworthian pantheism as a metaphorical system in his search for a mythic consciousness, or, in religious terms, a spontaneous and purely faithful Christian identity.

Finally, these lines complete a set of contrasts with Section I, contrasts that have been developing throughout Section II: the ability to choose vs. predetermined choices, stillness vs. hectic movement, calm vs. anxiety, cosmos vs. chaos, eternity vs. time, nature vs. civilization, and mimetic vs. indicative. Together Sections I and II show the need Larson feels to find mythic space by first showing his frustrations in the profane modern world, then contrasting it with his revelatory experience of an indistinct but sacred cosmos. With Section II's vision instilled in him, Larson is prepared to undertake the quest—a mythic return to sacred space. In Section III there is an
explicit expression of the poet's desire for that mythic space and his detailed rationale for it (which indicates that he has not yet arrived at mythic consciousness in Section II, but remembering a time when he had).

Before explicating further, I must put Section III (and the rest of the poem, consequently) into context. From this section on, the poem's imagery is clearly Western American. Such images as cactus, valley of death, condor, Phoenix and salt in "The Witness" as well as from other sources since the poem's publication, have helped to identify Larson's imagery as Western and to clarify its mythic implications for the poetry. In the preface to Modern Poetry of Western America (1979), Larson puts the Western landscape specifically in a mythic context: "Like myth it seems to elude scientific inquiry and is richest when perceived in metaphysical communion."38 He continues to link the West with mythic consciousness by stating that analogical truth derived from the Western landscape "offers perspective through beauty and primitivistic insight."39

From another source the boundaries of Larson's West are made clear and become a key to his linking of mythic consciousness with the West. These boundaries are described in Modern Poetry of Western America as an "oval that might be drawn on a map from

38 Modern Poetry of Western America, p. xxi.
39 Modern Poetry of Western America, p. xxi.
Vancouver to Snoqualmie Pass, Coeur D'Alene, Jackson, North Platte, Denver, Tucson, San Diego, San Francisco, Coos Bay, and back to Vancouver." An actual drawing of the oval (which is quite amorphous, in reality) places Salt Lake City at very nearly its central point. As I have pointed out, the "Center of the World" or axis mundi, for the primitive mythic, is what gives the rest of the world its meaning. It is clear throughout the poem that although Larson has more than one center existentially and geographically, like the primitive mythics he too finds a center, which for him as a Mormon, becomes the seat of the Church and its axis mundi (the temple). From that Center, the rest of the West, as described in his oval, becomes a cosmos—a place near to the gods. This is an important linkage of mythic consciousness with the poet's faith and makes a specific distinction, contrary to the claims of some of the critics cited in Chapter One, from Christian generally to specifically Mormon; this mythic Mormonism also illustrates the purpose of the use of mythic consciousness in the poem—as a metaphor for the poet's faith. And the West becomes the poet's source of symbols and the language to express them—hence the need to create mythic space is imperative to give the poet his language. In Section III, then, Larson creates the West metaphorically as a key to obtaining his mythic vision.

40 Modern Poetry of Western America, p. xxi.
Section III brings Larson, metaphorically, to Campbell's threshold of adventure. Here he must fight a war of words to establish and enter his "Center of the World." The section opens with an interesting complaint that is a response to modern poetry and the poet's announcement of his own quest:

But then my loquitur repining: "Our ontology
Is the valley of death and the cactus flower,
The fern of the highlands and the condor winging.
We must get beyond the sleight and decorum
Of repartee, and among the evanescent shades
Exhume the variety of insight that devised
Belief that extends into the valley of death,
Where the sun spurs the flame that dips
As if reaching, where the deep lakes fail
In the platinum light that lies over the salt
And rock, searing the day,—beyond Phoenix,
Where in the east the mountains round like a condor
Brooding.

Larson begins by linking himself with the land: "Our ontology /
Is the valley of death," which is a major step for the poet
toward obtaining a mythic consciousness. I again quote from his preface to illustrate this relationship between man and nature:

"Like myth, it [nature] seems to elude scientific inquiry and is richest when perceived in metaphysical communion. It functions as an extension of man's Being."41 Eliade explains this relationship in the primitive between mythic consciousness and the world:

Clearly, his [the primitive's] life has an additional dimension; it is not merely human, it is at the same

41 Modern Poetry of Western America, p. xxi.
time cosmic, since it has a transhuman structure. It could be termed an open existence, for it is not strictly confined to man's mode of being . . . . The existence of *homo religiosus*, especially of the primitive, is open to the world, in living, religious man is never alone, part of the world lives in him.  

Eliade goes on to explain the benefits of this openness for the mythic mind:

Openness to the world enables religious man to know himself in knowing the world—and this knowledge is precious to him because it is religious, because it pertains to being.  

With this mythic unity of man and world established, Larson has created a path to religious knowledge and, perhaps more importantly as an artist, a metaphorical system by which to express that knowledge through his relationship to God. Later, the poem is an example of this mythic unity as the poet, upon seeing the Savior, metaphorically becomes the sky in which the sun (Son) appears: "He is there, / The gold of light in the height of my azure."

Note, too, in reference to this unity, the use of the plural pronoun "Our." Speaking for and to all modern poets, Larson expresses the need for this mythic unity of man and world in order to write significantly: "We must get beyond the sleight and decorum / Of repartee . . . ." This becomes a call for poets

42 Sacred and Profane, p. 166.
43 Sacred and Profane, p. 167.
to eschew mere cleverness, which for Larson is a sleight-of-hand kind of poetry that, in the end, has little substance. The jux-
apositioning of "sleight" and "decorum" is telling here for Larson's philosophy: decorum, the classical poetic ideal, becomes a sleight hand, or a sleight of word; it is creating poetry like a magician produces rabbits out of his hat. Larson proposes a poetry through intuition and not the classic concern with rational craft. For Larson the romantic, this classical approach is shadow with substance, fancy without imagination, craftsmanship without inspiration. This is his condemnation of the modern poets who he would claim have not found mythic consciousness and are trapped by the form without seeing the reality. As the section unfolds, it is clear that what is significant in poetry for Larson is usually also religious: "We must get . . . among the evanescent shades / Exhume the variety of insight that devised / Belief that extends into the valley of death." In the West, where shadows of mountains and cacti move, Larson sees the hand of God, the source of true insight, faith. "Valley of death," to which belief extends, is a double entendre meaning 1) the deserts of the West and 2) the next world after death. Thus, that "belief that extends into the valley of death" is faith in a next world. With Larson's insistence on inspiration over craftsmanship, a return to romanticism (reality) over classicism (decorum) becomes a necessary part of the search for mythic consciousness.
In the above sequence in Section III the word *shades* has special significance because it is later repeated several times throughout this section. It is referred to as evanescence from which a variety of insight is "exhumed." Later the shades are referred to as rising and shimmering, out of which the poet asks, "Can we know them?" Still later the shades flush out human defecion or disease—they purify. And finally, they maintain the image of fire and light. In these contexts, the shades seem to be the mysteries of nature that change and evolve, disappear, are rich and lush, hold and shape light, and purify man in his mythic relationship with nature. The shades are that aspect of mythic space that Larson perceives becoming the rich vein for poets and the source of the knowledge of God. They are the ambiguities that keep nature alive with poetic possibilities; perhaps they are the Oversoul. Larson alludes to this revelatory quality of nature in his preface to *Modern Poetry of Western America*, where he discusses Western poetry "in which images of the landscape appear [conveying] an aura of revelation."\(^{44}\) This revelation often takes the form of a metaphorical pantheism in "The Witness" as the following lines from Section III demonstrate.

In describing the West, the poet paints the sun spurting the flame "that dips / As if reaching"; an obvious double meaning

\(^{44}\) *Modern Poetry of Western America*, p. xxi.
here, evoking the sun, literally, and Son, metaphorically. Larson also describes the mountains that round "like a condor brooding."

This metaphorical pantheism soon becomes even more specific:

"... Those who have seen / The viable sky know the fierce hand
of God / That must sear our estimates of good for our final /
Day." For Larson, the West alone, as rationally perceived, is
not the revelation; that revelation comes through a mythic con-
sciousness only that can ascribe nature's every move and nuance
to divine intervention. As the poet imaginatively becomes part
of the land (in "transhuman" fashion), he is metaphysically able
to then understand God's workings through it. This knowledge is
only obtained by revelation: "Can we / Know them? Only as they
are, revealed." He describes the form of this natural revelation
in pantheistic images:

The licking
Flame of the sun in the valley of death smelts
them /our estimates of good/
Purer still as they breathe dogma like the furnace
Of light when our day began.

The dogma breathed by divine nature is that to which poets must
turn for truth, but since most do not do so, Larson becomes
increasingly sarcastic in his attack on those he views as
strictly rational: poets and scientists who rely on reason alone
to understand and explain the world. This attack becomes Camp-
bell's "brother battle" (poet brothers) through which the
quester must pass to enter the threshold of adventure leading to
a new world—the "Center of the World."

Speaking of the richness and ambiguities of nature and the
fact that only revelation brings us to an understanding of them,
larson taunts the rationalist and his resorting to theories such
as evolution to posit nature and God:

And when, in the censures of mind, can we
Teach them /natural occurrences/ sequences of behavior
to make them
Rational and easy for our convenience?

After explaining that the "style" of nature is baroque and there-
fore not easily posited, larson sarcastically asks from a
rational point of view how we can understand natural phenomena:
"And what, / We may say, can be done for them, these hardly /
Practical and livid with virtue?" He implies, of course, that
to a rational mind, nature is meaningless in its own state. The
rationalist must remove the ambiguities by theorizing and posit-
ing them. He also faults religionists and philosophers as well
as poets and scientists for the same propensity:

Their disciples
Of anathema repine in the dregs of God, wishing
For better, doctrine or catechism, something
Against the boxed pabulum of this, our every day.

Larson goes on to champion nature's ambiguity, or irony: "My
irony, live in the heat / Of the sun: It is pure! Seek its
excellence!" Those who cannot live with this mythic "negative capability" must rely on worldly philosophic answers:

And those intone the litanies of this, our World, devise the beetles of our past languishing Torpidly in nooks: naturalisme, realisme, Existentialisme, edema, q. v. These our food. These, our summary.

To contrast with these, the world's traditional answers to the mysteries of life, Larson next describes what can be found in nature for the mythic poet:

But our image, the shades Maintain, is fire, the spectacle of diamond light Under the hammers of tungsten carbide flaking From its violence. All this, and more.

The poet can find bright blasts of light and inspiration in nature from the divine forge of creation. Finally, sarcastically, Larson lauds the accomplishments of the rational, classical poets:

We have To admire such persistence too, amid disciples, In lieu of accuracy, and somewhat neo-Platonistic, Blue. Oh, such eclectic good! Enough to dazzle us With pain!

In short, Larson admits they have form, enough to dazzle, but no truth. Rather than revealing nature's ambiguities "as they are," these poets only express the platonic ideal (of a sky, in this case) that has been handed down by poetic tradition.
To end Section III, Larson describes the rationalist poet's attempt and failure at poetry and then states his hope for a redemption of the art by divine intervention:

And now the law of God, awkward in
Their singing Rubaiyat, invests us like a seminar
And pleads a case of love, enduring to the end,
The primum mobile, a folksong wheezing like
The bagpipes of our minds. They keep the ivory
And gold, the goldleaf, by our ears, the whitest Light, and try, try as they will, God's will, now.

Here Larson is saying that though the poets have put God's laws into their poetry, directly or indirectly, those laws are uncomfortable in that platonic and distorted traditionalism, but through it all, the truth can be found in life. And though it be seemingly old and wheezing, with the upsurge of Western, mythic poetry, God's will, the primum mobile, can again be known. Section III, then, is an existential echo of Section I; poetry has been corrupted by the same forces that have corrupted civilization and has become a chaos and not a cosmos. The culprit? Scientific rationalism that posits and explains all away for expediency's sake. Flashy form and clever "repartee" avail the mayors of Covina, L. A., and Alhambra by limiting the poet's "fantasy"; both maintain the status quo and are easy to live with. Hence the need for mythic space, as articulated in Section III, is the need for a new cosmos in which to find openness to divine being within a state of mythic consciousness. But though Larson states the need for mythic consciousness in Section III, it is
clearly not yet his. As the poem continues, I will note where his quest for it leads.

Now beyond the "threshold of adventure," Larson enters what Campbell describes as a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces. In Section IV, the poet, in his mythic, "transhuman" state of being, or openness, searches for mythic consciousness in a mythic space in which he now finds the images to express himself. Though Larson has tried to cast off rationalism in Section III, he now has the confusing problem of finding meaning in other ways:

So again I have been asked the way for searching,
And as far as the hawthorn shines in the darkness
I walk, and I ask, "Is this the way?" And, as
The answer defines my meaning, the evening closes,
Borne on the light in the variety of clouds in the
stellar Air.

In his imaginative oneness with the Western landscape, Larson is able to ask for answers from his pantheistic world and expect response. He gets the answer in the response of the coming dawn. However, Larson is not yet prepared for this kind of answer and still clings to his own deep-seated rationalism: "I mourn my finite care, and I ask for the swirl / Of meaning sown in noesis alone." The mythic completeness of the answer of the dawn baffles Larson who still must rely on simple human answers that he had just censured in Section III. He then questions what noesis might mean in mythic terms:
Or is it noesis
As I find the harbors of evening, in the romance
Of sheds in the arbors, light-taken and rimming
The darkness, grey as the arc as it flickers, dimming?

He decides here that mythic reason is couched in a new language—a metaphorical language that does not depend on human rationalism for meaning. In other words, God's communication to man is metaphorically translated by the occurrences in nature. By describing nature, Larson tries to appeal to the reader's emotion over his reason, to poetically communicate to the reader what God literally or imaginatively communicated to him.

With this new but not yet fully understood mythic consciousness, Larson partially finds a sacred space:

Violence is my sudden day: there in the billowing Shadows, I follow the way to the down of Calvary, Softly, and the velvet memory gives me the banner INRI in the red sheen waking to evening: cruciforms Light as balsam.

The instant transition from night to "sudden day" indicates the poet's newly gained insight; that is, in linking mythic consciousness with Christianity, Larson attempts to relocate the Gospel in a Western setting and couch its meaning in pantheistic metaphors. The crucifixion becomes a setting of the sun wherein the concept INRI is the color of the sunset that awakens in the consciousness of mankind. From this image Larson begins to learn how to understand the entire Christian experience: "but
there, against the meaning / Of falling from the ring of knowing,  
the ring / Of mire against the air." The way down to Calvary,  
to understanding of the Gospel message, is falling from the ring  
of knowing, rationalistic knowing—a "mire against the air."  
Here again Larson points out his increasing conviction that one  
can only know things "as they really are" and not as they are  
processed through our distorted perceptual models such as  
rationalism. Mythic consciousness is thus the only key to cer-  
tain kinds of knowledge.  
Here his mythic consciousness and oneness with the land  
becomes a variation of Whitman's all-knowing posture, as he is  
even able to relive the crucifixion and feel the Savior's  
experience with him:

I shun the Triumvir  
Who speaks to me at the edge of seeming, who in  
The swirl peals the radiant sun. Now in the bed  
Of the shade there is Calvary and the finite red  
Where the crown tips with agony.  

He sees now what the Savior sees and even feels the pain of the  
crown of thorns. Larson, in the midst of this transcendental  
experience, seems to switch roles and becomes an onlooker of the  
scene, and thus begins to "think" again:

My sudden wish,  
And when His breath touches the air I bow in the  
wisdom  
Of the torch epithet, word, or circlet of radiance,  
There, springing light from the aspect of death,  
Grey as my sapience.
From the context, the "wish" is perhaps that the Savior would not die, showing a lapse of faith or understanding in the resurrection like that of the ancient witnesses, but he soon realizes the impossibility of such a desire because of the "torch epithet" or "word," which refers back to Christ's identity—INRI. Realizing his error, Larson chastises himself: "... And I was in darkness, leaning / Into light, where I forgot the day in the memory / Of meaning."

Larson continues by explaining how he received his mythic consciousness, with a reference to the Christian paradox that one must lose oneself to find oneself: "I found him / In the hush of light, in a vacancy of being." The "vacancy of being" surely means a vacancy of self-conscious being and an openness to integrated, creative being. Only as he does not try to reason an understanding of the Gospel, does some understanding finally come. In his preface to Modern Poetry of Western America Larson explains the need for openness over reason for understanding:

We cannot see the stars until it gets dark enough to see them, but we can watch them flicker on and then form the constellations. We must be willing to wait upon them, hoping that the atmosphere is clear enough for patterns to appear.45

For Larson, it is chiefly revelation through his mythic openness that brings him understanding: "I cannot / Know the bearing

45 Modern Poetry of Western America, p. xxii.
wind, the touch of spume, except / Forever as I turn toward the sun."

Section IV ends in a poetic ecstasy that describes in pan-
theistic imagery what he has learned that links his faith to
mythic consciousness:

then in degrees
Of latitude above the solstice corona the sign
Of the wind! And in the sea of light the meridian
God defines the height of the sun in the clouds of
time.

Again, as noted in the end of Section I, Larson uses contrast
in language intensity to show his shift into mythic insight.
Here also Larson even more specifically defines how he makes the
link between mythic consciousness and faith: through the Holy
Ghost, metaphorically referred to as "the sign / Of the wind."
Only through that medium can religious understanding beyond
human reason alone be obtained in the mind of modern man. As
the poem continues to unfold, the inter-dependence of the vital
relationships between faith and mythic consciousness, and between
mythic consciousness and mythic space, become apparent.

In Section VI (I will examine Section V in Chapter Three
in connection with mythic time), the scenes of Christ's passion
are again relocated in the West and Larson completes that part of
the search for mythic space. He accomplishes this by using
images of a Western tree and lake to surround the scene wherein
Christ is ascending Calvary: "I saw the hill in the shadows of
dreams, cottonwoods / On the slope of the timbral wind . . . .
the wings of a swift / In the cottonwoods above the stream and
the lake."

Watching the Savior, who is comforting Mary as He goes
toward His sacrificial death, Larson still depends on reason and
manifests it in his lack of belief. Though the Savior has been
resurrected, as is indicated by his "Whom seekest thou?"
question to Mary, Mary and Larson (who is watching the scene)
cry because they still do not understand or believe the resur-
rection, and that unbelief nullifies it and causes the Savior
figuratively to die again. Larson's still rationalist tendencies
crop up as he expresses his reason for being at the scene: "I
have asked / To come, urgent as knowing." As a result of his
rationalism, Larson cannot understand or believe in the resur-
rection, a symbol of Christ's entire mission, and has not yet
found the mythic vision he seeks. Frustrated by this, he calls
for help as Section VI ends:

Master, Master, I call, and about me
The streets awakened into noon, and there, in the wisp
Of sky, I see a gleam, and in a sudden dream
Of my boyhood I see glory, the wavering wings of a
swift
In the cottonwoods above the stream and lake.

As he relies on outside help for understanding instead of on his
own reason, he is transported to a new natural scene which gives
us again a contrast in language intensity that serves as an
indication of the poet's mythic state and as a transition to Section VII.

Section VII finds Larson again in a "transhuman" mode of being—in a state of openness in which he waits for a revelation of being in the movement of divine nature:

I wonder why you stand so quietly, waiting, waiting
For the grey fronds to stir over water,
For the curving height of God to yield
... ...................................
I am here, waiting
For the least word of becoming, and the waters
Awaken from your being and stir against the wind
And the wavering sky rippling them, as if wings Were near.

In this "transhuman" structure of being, as both nature and man, the poet is able to carry on a dialogue with nature, who seems to articulate his questions and provide the mimetic answers by a ripple of water or a stir of the wind. As he waits in openness for the divine hand to move through the forces of nature, it is clear how it is possible that some of the revelations come to him:

I have judged the flowers by the path
And find them thorned with light, masterfully
The declension of meaning, but mauve and topaz
With the fire of history.

Metaphorically, light here is the medium that retains and trans- fers truth (history). Earlier in Section V Larson presents this same concept in a different way. Speaking of the Savior, Larson shows how Christ established truth: "But he ranged in the
patents / Of power to write the Word into the stone of light."
And even earlier, in Section III, we learn that the "shades" or mystery truths of nature are imaged in light. The "fire of history," or its meaning, as we equate light with truth, is in the truth established by Christ. Larson images nature as a container of all of history in its absorption of light. He wants this knowledge transferred to him metaphysically in order that he may understand the meaning of being. That he uses nature as a metaphor for the way to truth is clear when towards the end of Section VII he finds an analogy to studying nature in studying the scriptures. In both, the truth is found in light: "Marvels of doctrine lie on the page / Touched with gold, the vellum love of verse and line." The sacred space he seeks in the West is identified here with the scriptures. Both can and must be understood mimetically. With these lines Larson also justifies his poetry because through words "of verse and line" truth is established, or in other words, a sacred space forms just as in nature, where the reader learns truth. So as the poet seeks mythic consciousness, and records his experience, he is simultaneously blazing a trail for the reader to find it also. What is only hinted at here becomes evident in the final section where I will again refer to this poet's important relationship to his audience.
In this transcendental state, the poet receives another transitional vision that leads into the next very important section of the poem in terms of finding mythic space:

But the danger of listening becomes the falls of air
Before me. I ring in the air, and turn: He is there,
The god of light in the height of my azure!

His listening, or openness, brings the Holy Ghost, which in turn leads to the climactic vision in the poem. In Sections VIII and IX Larson will mythically enter the nadir of sacred space and there attempt to take his boon. In these sections he centers on the image and significance of the cross in the final establishment of mythic space. The opening of Section VIII paints a grim picture of the Savior on the cross: the cross becomes "the grave of the air, the tomb / And the loss of eternity." Eternity is presumably lost to those who do not repent but remain fallen. Also implicit in the statement is Larson's echo of the despair the disciples felt when their Master seemingly died forever. As the poet, seeking mythic consciousness and faith, Larson, by identifying himself with the disciples, illustrates his process of gaining faith and shows that he has not yet reached the perfection of it. He still feels a glimmer of despair before the reality of the cross. The cross, with Christ's dying, becomes an image of the grave of unsaved mankind because of their disbelief: "The etched hill / Is the mound of man, that he could live and strive / For the measure of dying." Here Larson implies
the need for a kind of mythic consciousness in all men. Those who figuratively strive forward in life only on a meaningless rational freeway in L. A. are striving for death and not eternal life offered by Christ: a life only to be understood mythically or intuitively. As Eliade points out, among primitive societies, "the real sacrilege is to forget the divine act. 'Wrong,' 'Sin,' 'Sacrilege' is 'not remembering' that the present form of human existence is the result of a divine act." As a poet-prophet, Larson seeks to bring men, including himself, back to remembrance.

Sections IX and X suggest the cross as an axis mundi by virtue of the central role Christ's atonement has in establishing the meaning of the Christian's life. I mentioned earlier how the axis mundi marks the center of the world for the mythic primitive and from it the world is geometrically and existentially created. For Larson, the cross as a symbol of the atonement is the marker of the center of the world in two ways: 1) Christ's atonement occurred in the meridian of time, making it figuratively the center of this world's existence and 2) In view of the Christian's idea of life's purpose, Christ is that alone which gives life meaning. From the fall until now, the Christian man's hope of eternal bliss rests with the sacrifice of God in the meridian of time.

Section IX reinforces Christ's central role in creating the earth as sacred space (relocated by Larson to the West) and by showing men that they do not recognize Christ's role and its importance:

The sign is the Veronica of the fame of man:
He struggled here from the tablets of Sinai.
And now names the Messiah INRI in the irony
Of his testament. Who hangs there? But it is
The evening of life radiant in shadows.

Larson indicates here that though Christ declared himself to be King of Kings, the irony of his testament is the INRI sign nailed to the cross. Man from Sinai to the present has been and remains in a spiritual wilderness; though it was in the wilderness that God placed his children so that they could learn His ways, yet they have been unable to do so. Even though Christ died "in remembrance / Of being," yet for the mass of chaotic civilization, his sacrifice on the cross only "holds the stiff / Meaning for the fascination of history." The meaning is "stiff" because of the wooden cross and the dead Christ, and "stiff" also because it yields for most only rational fascination without meaning.

However, as the rest of the section illustrates, the full meaning of Christ's death does not end at the cross:

I assign the images of His ascension to the air,
And there He reigns in the fusion of wisps
Of rolling light.
In his metaphorical language Larson defines Christ's resurrection in terms of the light that permeates and fuses the heavens. Then, to sum up the sorrows of the cross turned to joy in the resurrection, the poet likens the change to stellar activity: "the fire in the caverns of conscience / Repines, then bursts as far novac across the spectrum / Of meaning, in the van of awe." The guilt of sin in the "caverns of conscience" dissipates as Christ's atonement re-establishes meaning in life for the sinner.

The final confirmation of the cross as the **axis mundi** comes with Section X, as the poet expresses the results for himself of the revelation: "This is my loss of night." This is also his Campbellian "boon"—mythic knowledge and faith. No longer in the darkness of rationalism, the poet, now centered in the universe (his new world), becomes a part of everything as he partakes of the reconciliation of Christ. Here is the birth of the Mormon transcendentalist poet. For Larson, then, the road to mythic consciousness lies in overcoming the fall (chaos) and replacing it with salvation, the ultimate cosmos:

For in the west Venus hangs, the diadem of the sun. The love of the stars is near as my hand against Their radiance, flowers starring the blending violet Of eternity.

Mythically, the repeated references to the stellar fields are an indication of the **imaggeo mundi**—the horizons of the **axis mundi**. In this case they are limitless in time and space. The **axis mundi** also gives Larson a place from which to speak.
He becomes a poet by virtue of the place where he is, the world divinely created:

The sound is in me that can speak of God
If my lips but yield the forms of the wheel of light,
Its subtleties my syllables that ring the colors
Of being from sound into light.

He is now able, through his full mythic union with the divine, as metaphorically explained in natural imagery, to bring meaning, or truth, into language. But again, this ability is not the product of reason, but "of our aura / Of feeling that lift me, not of this world, there / In the hush of forever and the veil of my knowing." The hush for Larson is "feeling," knowledge spontaneously intuited; his knowing is in a veil because it cannot be understood rationally. In the end of Section X and in the beginning of Section XI the poet is once again in the civilized chaos and is fearing his mythic welfare in this confrontation with blatant reality. Mythically, his quest has brought him to the point of re-entry into the normal world. But this flight must be successful if the quest is not to be all for nothing. He must enter the real world with his boon intact if he is to save the world from modern "classicism." In his desperation and fear of the world, he compares his own witness of Christ to Peter's, who, after denying the Lord, is questioned about his loving Christ more than fishing—or in other words, his old
ways. Larson, after fearing his own denial, experiences an interview similar to Peter's: 47 "And He found my question, examining my witness / As He might beside the waters of Canaan."

Following this interview, Larson, now speaking for Christ, confirms the relocation of the Gospel to the Western landscape:

this is not
The road where I once appeared, He said. Emmaus
Is the fall of another time, the surety of willows
In the hushed will of the crypts and sands of Asia,
I am the sign of Samarkand and the Colorado
From the rim of the canyon.

The Lord also now reconfirms His mode of communication through a metaphoric pantheism:

I touch your arm
And guide you as you listen to my quietness,
The remote voice of fire, arriving in the gesture
Of giving. Listen!

The "remote voice of fire" is obviously the reoccurring light which illuminates and binds all things in Larson's poetry. 48

With the end of Section XI, we have the poet's manifesto—his acceptance of the call implied in the comparison of himself to Peter. Proclaiming the Lord as his inspiration, Larson commits himself to "listen!":

And I shall, as if forever,
When He speaks through the veils of evanescence

47 John 21: 15-16.
48 Marden J. Clark, pp. xi-xviii.
And over the tiers of God as they range in the briefs
Of creation, in the clarity of cordillera.
And in his robe He turned, rustling into darkness,
Beholding me and my questions, His voice my vision
Of light.

Thus, through his arrival in mythic space, Larson attains mythic
consciousness, and with it, his call to be a poet. This calling
he equates implicitly with a discipleship as opposed to the
secular poet-prophet of the transcendental mode.

Mythically, the poet occupies in our culture the place of
the medicine man in primitive cultures. As a man with superior
knowledge and spiritual insight, the medicine man could recreate
the origins of an object and thus call it into being. Knowing
the origin of things, as Eliade suggests, is "equivalent to
acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be con-
trolled, multiplied, or reproduced at will."⁴⁹ Only after
imaginatively witnessing the major scenes of the passion, which
is the origin of the religious man's world, can Larson now claim
the power to bring "sound into light." His calling, or poetic
power, comes by virtue of this witness. With Larson's knowledge,
he is able magically (because to mythic man, words are magic)
to recreate the origin of the world or cosmos.

The result of the quest for mythic consciousness culminates
in Section XII, in which Larson has reached such an imaginative

⁴⁹ Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 15.
oneness with the divine that he speaks as if he were the Lord. His calling as poet is the Campbellian elixir that metaphorically can restore the world to a relationship with God. Significantly, the poem's metrical structure abruptly changes at this point from the previous blank verse to interchanging anapestic and iambic three and four foot lines. This produces a faster line in which images are compounded for greater density and compactness. There is no unnecessary elaboration. This concision fittingly reminds us of the plain style of the scriptures. It also provides a new voice for the new poet, one that deals in images more than reason. For the first time in the poem, Larson, like Eliot before him, has liberated himself from some of the more conventional constraints of reasoning with the reader—at least to a point. As the poet begins, he refers to himself as the "beloved," a title given one of Christ's disciples—also a "witness" for the Lord:

I am the beloved.  
I am the witness of your eyes.  
But can you see the prize  
That sends the gull against the skies  
To cry for the light that lives in me?

Although he identifies himself again with the disciples, the poet also identifies himself with the Lord by the repetitious "I am." Here he carries Whitman one step further: Larson cannot only identify and experience all human things, but he can also identify with the divine. His question to the readers
suggests their need for mythic consciousness to understand the light found in his witness—the poetry. Though he gives them eyes figuratively, they must see for themselves. The poet portrays himself here as a source of divine light.

Larson next identifies himself not only with God, but with all aspects of the reader's life: from "the skein of your desire" to the "immeasurable fire / Of your duress." He knows the "white caress / Of your attention / And the sentient intention / Of your will." Thus his "transhuman" posture is now extended to all people. This echoes the sympathy Christ has as a result of his having descended below all things. Here Larson seems to imply that he has done the same thing during his quest for mythic consciousness.

In a brief reference to the "chaos" of civilization that he has already experienced and wants to use as proof of his common experience with all men, we hear echoes of the first section. Speaking of the will:

Then, suddenly, it breaks
In the steeples of cities, flakes
Of shadows falling there, strewn
Over the lines and dreams of afternoon.

The poet knows from experience the dangers of chaos for the mythic consciousness or spiritual identity; the will to maintain mythic consciousness is stifled in the trappings of modern society where the heat of the afternoon sun has the power to
dissipate the will. The sun as divine here indicates the divine
dissipation of willful sinners. These lines, by reconjuring the
chaos, succinctly remind us again of the need for the creation
of mythic space, which becomes, in effect, the purpose for the
poet. He creates a place for the reader to gain mythic conscious-
ness. The poet draws together the elements of divine nature and
represents them metaphorically in a way which enables the
reader also to glimpse the divine vision. This is typical
Romantic Platonism; Larson, following Sidney's dictum, creates
a "second nature" but captures it as sacred space:

I am the beloved,
I am the wonder of distances
Across the casual instances
Of your belief.

For the reader, not only is the poet (and poem) mythic
space, but he is also a direct inlet to God:

I am the beloved,
Shadowless at noon,
Pillar of your sun,
For I have won
The towers of your light,
And I am there
In the pure air
Admissible to you,
As God might be.

Here again Larson implicitly compares himself to the Lord who,
by virtue of the experience and knowledge he gained by his
quest, becomes a type of intermediary. Larson becomes such an
intermediary between the reader and deity. The following stanza partially explains by what right he can make such a claim:

I am the beloved,
Who will not flee
Or use the key
Of avenue
To break the light:
The stars that billow in their dying,
The lucent red or blue defying
Quantum time or segments of a dial
Or the sacrament you know in every vial
Of wonder that you hold
In a lesser fold
Than God's.

He can make the claim to speak for God because he pretends only, as he says in Section III, to reveal things "as they are." He is a pure conduit. The above lines repudiate poets or prophets who attempt to explain God and the wonders of the universe by using "the key / Of avenues" or proven scientific methods, to make things "rational and easy for our convenience" (see Section III). They belong to the "lesser fold / Than God's." By his later claims, that he is "the vale of sky that darkens with the depths / Of indigo," he indicates the subtle ambiguities he is able to reveal, unlike the limited, though clear and easy answers. Rather than explain what God is, the poet reveals His essence metaphorically: "And the time / Vibrating the concentric lays / That convey the ambience of God."

Larson concludes the poem with the reaffirmation of what he does as the "Witness" and how he does it:
I am the fire of your light,
The sound of words
That tremble into being out of light,
Your prescience of Him.

As the "fire of your light" he is a source of his readers' illumination. According to his own witness he is the poet that gives language meaning by his foreknowledge of God and His ways. Not only does "prescience" indicate foreknowledge, or prophecy, but also implies that all of this knowledge is revealed prescientifically—or mythically.

In this chapter I have described the poet's search for mythic consciousness in mythic space, how he finds the need for it by the contrast of chaos (Section I) and cosmos (Section II); I have shown that in the Western landscape Larson identifies that sacred space where he can relocate the Gospel for his personal vision and which becomes the "Center of the World" by virtue of his endowment of meaning onto the cross; and finally, that as the poet witnesses the "passion" in a "transhuman" structure of being, he learns the language by which to express his mythic space by translating nature's metaphorical pantheism into his witness of the divine vision. In the next chapter I will focus on the use of mythic time to reach mythic consciousness.
Chapter Three

MYTHIC TIME: THE RECOVERY

Eliade notes that finding sacred space is only the starting point in attaining mythic consciousness or participating in true "being":

So it is clear to what a degree the discovery—that is, the revelation—of a sacred space possesses existential value for religious man; for nothing can begin, nothing can be done, without a previous orientation—and any orientation implies acquiring a fixed point.50

Primitive man, once he has established the "world" in space, must then go systematically and ritually back toward the original or primordial time in order to find fully regenerative meaning and power. Eliade explains:

As the exemplary model for all "creation" the cosmogonic myth can help the patient to make a "new beginning of his life. The return to origins gives the hope of rebirth.51

50 Myth and Reality, p. 192.
51 Myth and Reality, p. 30.
In other words, the cosmos can only finally be created when taken back metaphorically to the primordial time when all things were originally created.

Eliade explains that mythic time can be characterized as a "primordial time, not to be found in the historical past, an original time, in the sense that it came into existence all at once, that it was not preceded by another time, because no time could exist before the appearance of the reality narrated in the myth." 52 This recovery of sacred time is usually accomplished by imitating the gods ritually (verbally and/or physically) and thereby recreating the sacred past. Mythic man lives in a "circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present that is periodically reintegrated." 53 We will see that Larson reverts systematically to the atonement of Christ as the sacred time that presently gives most meaning to life for religious man. In the poem, Larson attempts this by imitating the "gods" as the primitives did. In this case, Larson imitates Christ and goes back further in each section toward the eternal now. Larson conveys ritual through literature, which, as Eliade states, is a means itself of recovering mythic time:

More strongly than any of the other arts, we feel in literature a revolt against historical time, the

52 Sacred and Profane, p. 22.
53 Sacred and Profane, p. 70.
desire to attain to other temporal rhythms than that in which we are condemned to live and work.\textsuperscript{54}

"The Witness" is Larson's equivalent to acting out the cosmogonic myth; for Larson, the myth of creation is Christ's establishment of salvation through his atonement. The result of the ritual return to sacred time is a rebirth in Larson. It is around this aspect of the quest motif that "The Witness" is structured. As part of the Christian pattern of rebirth, the poem's return structure provides a period of repentance. This is emphasized by the constant sense of sorrow and confusion in the persona.

It is important to note that the poem's twelve sections reflect the months of the modern calendar year, and it is by their own calendar years that the primitive mythics organized their festivals which became sacred times: "Religious participation in a festival implies emerging from ordinary temporal duration and reintegration of the mythic time reactualized by the festival itself."\textsuperscript{55} Larson's twelve section structure is his link between the mythic and present time. Primitive yearly festivals reflected the mythic life:

This cosmic life was imagined in the form of a circular course; it was identified with the year. The

\textsuperscript{54} Sacred and Profane, p. 72.

\textsuperscript{55} Sacred and Profane, p. 69.
year was a closed circle; it had a beginning and an end, but it also had the peculiarity that it could be rebORN in the form of a new year. With each New Year, a time was "new," "pure," "holy"—because not yet worn—came into existence.  

The year is also conceived of "as a journey" through the universe—this is significant for the journey-like structure of return through repentance and rebirth. As it becomes necessary in this chapter, I will restress explicational material from Chapter Two, but in this case with a temporal perspective.  

Sections I and II are the poet's first cyclical return and rebirth. Section I reveals the poet's dilemma in the historic present, or profane time. In contrast to the "eternal" present of mythic time, the historical present moves relentlessly forward: "The bleak pastiche of signs defines the flowing / Vision of worlds of turnpike turning under my wheel." The historical present is blurred and flowing, the wheel moves under his hand without his being able to control it. Time is out of control. Further, Larson's seeing is a "jet stream" that allows only "contrails of memory." Unlike the mythic world vision of the ancients that put stress on the past, the modern world only looks forward and lets the past fade behind. This realization of modern time causes Larson to feel "sorrow" for his stranded state in this profane time and creates the desire to return to mythic

56 Sacred and Profane, p. 76.
57 Sacred and Profane, pp. 73-74.
time. The realization of a higher need is objectified in Larson's image of the "wind from the ocean that freshens the revetments / Of feeling." Section I shows Larson's discomfort (as religious man) in the profane world, which provides him with motivation to embark on the return journey to the mythic present throughout the rest of the poem.

Also, Section I introduces circle imagery which is a device Larson uses throughout the poem to suggest the structure of his journey. The circle imagery does not here indicate the cyclical nature of the mythic calendar year; it is used ironically in this hectic, modern-world scene to depict the meaninglessness of the profane pursuits that lead men in circles, as if on a "turnpike." Throughout the poem there are no fewer than thirty-one references to or images of circles. Such words as turning, cycles, ravelling, round, spiral, arc, ring, swirl, circlet, turn, corona, degrees, curving, wheel, rolling, dial, wound, and concentric all work together to suggest the poem's cyclical "return" movement. I will periodically note Larson's use of these images throughout the poem.

Section II's quiet world contrasts sharply with the hectic world of Section I by objectifying what Eliade terms "the nostaligia for the perfection of beginnings that chiefly explains the periodical return in illo tempore." 58 "In the beginning,"

58 Sacred and Profane, p. 92.
as this section begins, Larson reflects on a state of time in which the elements "were about me, moving in the hush / Of my devotion." Time for Larson moved mythically in unison with the sacred; "hush" suggests a standstill in time. The sacredness of time is created by the presence of God: "... so to touch the falls of God / Is to know the high valleys of heaven." God's presence is part of the perfect world and "corresponds to the nostalgia for a paradisal situation."\textsuperscript{59}

The cycle imagery is reiterated twice in this section: first, the "embers of morning" (stars) move about the poet, naturally, in their circular orbits; second, the last three lines of the section bring out the relationship between the cycle and mythic time: "the cycles of time / Repose as strands to be spun as from ravelling / Or as wisps of glory." Time is, to the mythic poet, cyclical and recoverable as it is "spun" in the "hush / Of [his] devotion." These images of spinning (spun, ravelling), representing the cycles of mythic time, work well to depict mythic time's eternal presence that the poet is here experiencing—it is unravelled, and then ravelled again, as if in the cyclical pattern of festivals around the New Year. Time is thus, as Eliade points out, "equal to itself; it neither changes nor is exhausted."\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} 
\textit{Sacred and Profane}, p. 92.

\textsuperscript{60} 
\textit{Sacred and Profane}, p. 69.
In combination, Larson's discomfort in the historical time of Section I and his return to mythic time in Section II, constitute the poet's first rebirth in the poem. The nostalgia for "perfection of beginnings" that he achieves in Section II provides him impetus to imaginatively journey back to the mythic time of the gods where he can be close to them.

Section III, in which we have already pointed out the poet's search for mythic space, brings the poet closer to the gods by bringing the poet "near to a Center of the World" which is equivalent to "living as close as possible to the gods." And it is in Sections III and IV that Larson continues his return journey to mythic time, in the Western landscape, which as I noted in Chapter Two, is the spatial "Center of the World."

Section III, which is essentially a digressional diatribe aimed at modern, decorous, city poets, focuses also on the search for mythic space. But in that space, the cycle images reappear and thus indicate the mythic time potentially present in the West. The images are: 1) a "condor winging," which suggests the bird's circular flight pattern; and 2) the mountains, that "round like a condor." With the bird images as emblems of cyclical time, Larson seems to be indicating the aloofness and transitory nature of mythic time and foreshadows his own arduous journey back to a full realization of sacred time.

61 Sacred and Profane, p. 91.
Section IV, which I have noted previously as Larson's move from reason to faith, culminates as a second rebirth for the poet and moves him closer to his quest for mythic time. I noted in Chapter Two that the moment Larson relies on faith, he is transported to sacred space. Simultaneously, he is also in the vicinity of mythic time and thus able to be where certain events surrounding the "beginnings" occurred—specifically, the crucifixion. He now knows at what point the origin of the world lies: "And in the sea of light the meridian / God defines the height of the sun in the clouds of time." For Larson, the meridian of time becomes the temporal "Center of the World."

This knowledge is another rebirth for the poet as he continues his return journey; time now identifies him: "vision of darkness / My years are my name and the region of my fame."

Again time is equated with space and becomes a "region" of fame, or identity. However, for Larson, the journey is not yet finished; just as he identifies his insight, he feels that the "darkness touches my arm / As if the velvet of shame, and the theology becomes / My index and sire of shade." He has as yet sorrow to experience before his fulfillment.

Cycle imagery continues to mount in Section IV with nine images: arc, ring (twice), swirl (twice), cirrolet, turn, degrees, and corona. One particular image, that of the poet turning "toward the sun," is particularly effective in summing up the mythic process of return; viewing the sun as a symbol for Christ,
the need for religious man to worship his god ritually, through cyclical festivals, in order to return to mythic time, becomes clear. Just as the sun defines the course of the year, and thus outlines the journey, so the Son, by virtue of his atonement, defines man's return to God. The opening of this section also provides an interesting and different sense of the cyclical journey:

I walk, and I ask, "Is this the way?" And, as The answer defines my meaning, the evening closes, Born on light in the variety of clouds in the stellar Air.

A circular pattern of knowledge is created in this image of Larson's asking questions and feeling answers that define his questions. This existential circular movement is imagistically reinforced by the image of the clouds and stars orbiting overhead. Again this echoes the birth and rebirth cycle repeated so often in each section of the poem. The fifth and sixth sections continue the poet's understanding of his relationship with time, and he begins to see inklings of the fulfillment foreshadowed in Section IV.

Section V begins with Larson's reflection on his position in time:

the obscure year, graven in stone, was full Of the umbra of edges, in a wisdom I could define As I might a calendar of years.
Here Larson identifies the cyclical nature of time with knowledge. Two images of cyclical time, the circular stone calendars of antiquity and the "calendar of years," are felt by Larson to impart a type of wisdom to him. As a result of his encounter with cyclical time, Larson returns again in time:

I knew, as
I stood before it, that I should feel the glance
Over my shoulder in a device of years before me.
But, as it was, I touched my presence there
For an instant, and I was gone.

As he goes back toward mythic time, he is again at Golgotha, and through his vision he gains an impression of the eternal nature of things:

and I was gone, and play began,
For in a sleight of memory I hold it now,
The skein of forever ravelling in light:
When I saw the crown of thorns amid the upright
Spears of fences, roses there, I started,
As if the fear of scripture had led me again
To the shuddering light of Golgotha brazen
With sacrifice.

It seems clear in this section that Larson, until he finally reaches the end of his journey, is in a confused state that lends a dreamlike, impressionistic quality to all of his experience. I would note in this connection that later in the section Larson remarks that "all had drifted into the rift of meaning, what / Seems as it widens into history or dreams." Larson is struggling
to capture his impressions, the articulation of which forms part of his return as "poet" on the level of journey to artistic fulfillment.

With this startling vision, Larson reverts to a childish wisdom. The noesis that yet is engrained in him, that he tried to overcome in Section IV, lingers still:

but a round of days and years
In my boyhood lent me the appraisals of youth,
As if I could be kept long at the threshold
Of light, and not beyond.

His youthful ideals of right and wrong and the need for reason and "justice" again color Larson's vision of faith. Just as he stumbled over noesis before, he now demands reasonable explanations to understand the events surrounding Christ's death:

I asked for Pilate,
And he came lazily judicious and wondering why
In the flicker of his eyes and the tilt of his head,
As if he could not be concerned about the event
Of Christ, or even about his own disclaimer.
All had drifted into the rift of meaning, what
Seems as it widens into history or dreams.

In his youthful exuberance, the poet/child harangues Pilate for letting Christ die and the Sanhedrin for putting him up to it:

Sire, why do you stand, impotent of censure
For anyone? If you had seen Him on the mount
Of God, you would have lived or died to keep Him
There. But in a thrust of power you armed impertinence
Before the stalks of hands tipping in the day,
The vote of censure of death before the myth
Of God. Sanhedrin, this is Rome! Cleric Rome
Reporting its accounts, Douai and Saint Jerome!
In all of his excited passion, the poet/youth has forgotten the necessity of Christ's death; his surface reason has dulled his higher wisdom. Larson's journey back to mythic time is a hard one. In the poet's progressive regression in movement, we have another significant cyclical structure that provides the need for recurring rebirths. This rebirth-through-insight seems to come again at the section's end; Larson compares the accomplishments of the monk-scribes with Christ's, and comes to insight about their difference in relation to time:

He ranged in the patents
Of power to write the Word into the stone of light.
Morning and evening are the shadows of sun,
And the sun is the spiral of zenith as they vanish
In the turning day.

Larson senses that, like the sun, the Lord and his revered truths will rise again from the shadows of evening (death). However, those who put him to death, or perpetuate falsehood, "vanish /
In the turning day."

In Section VI, Larson is still in the vicinity of mythic time, as he was at the end of Section V; however, he still seems unaware of historical circumstances surrounding the crucifixion:

I saw the hill in the shadows of dreams, cottonwoods
On the slope of the timbrel wind. I have asked
To come, urgent as knowing, knowing the judgment
In the hollowing streets. Master, is it You crowned
And walking in the issue of sacrifice, as if again
To the sepulchre?
For Larson, his return journey to mythic time necessarily seems to entail a naiveté about the events of the passion—as if he were an actual resident of that time with only the limited knowledge of the apostles. With this device, the poet becomes an "everyman." In order for him to imitate the creative acts of the gods, in primitive-mythic fashion, Larson must go through that creation process step by step with an openness to being that will not allow for certain pre-conceived assumptions. In relation to the recovery of mythic time, note this passage's employment of the "transhuman" structure of being that was discussed in Chapter Two which opened Larson up to the meanings of divine language signals from nature. To imaginatively comprehend the events of the passion, as they occurred in sacred time, Larson must be open as well.

With the weeping woman, Larson ignorantly cries in his darkness about the resurrection, and thus experiences the reality of the return to mythic time. From his darkness he is seemingly renewed or reborn once again. After calling for the "Master," Larson records a "natural" epiphic vision:

And there, in the wisp Of sky, I see a gleam, and in a sudden dream Of my boyhood I see glory, the wavering wings of a swift In the cottonwoods above the stream and the lake.

However, his rebirth here is illusory. It seems that each section's epiphanous ending transports Larson to the next inner
circle in his journey toward mythic time. But each new cycle poses new challenges to his understanding and faith and requires a new leap of faith. As Section VII begins, again with Larson in his "boyhood," he is still lost in "reasoned" sorrow for the loss of Christ.

Section VII finds Larson surrounded by a quiet natural state:

The willows dip and trail in silence, in the surface
Where the modulation is the sky in its clarity
Or tumbling azure on the surface of clouds.

This description of nature emphasizes "surfaces" and points to the still hazy perceptions of Larson. A question is interjected next:

Did you come here for the psalm of God? You stand
In the vale of trees, as if in the sorrow for the testament
Of life.

In his continued ignorance of the reality of Christ's resurrection, or its meaning, Larson mourns. Next a voice seems to answer his sorrow:

I have judged the flowers by the path
And find them thorned with light, masterfully
The declension of meaning, but mauve and topaz
With the fire of history.

The answer is that the flowers on the path die and return annually, and by analogy then, so can Christ. This "declension of meaning" that explains how the flowers as witness compared
"with the fire of history" of Christ are but "mauve and topaz,"
is the divine language of nature. Again a question is asked:

Is there reason that
I wonder why you stand so quietly, waiting, waiting
For the grey fronds to stir over water,
For the curving heights of God to yield?

To nature, who seems to be asking the questions at this point,
the poet/child's sorrow is "unreasonable," in the mythic sense
of reason. But though this is a necessary part of Larson's jour-
ney, he must be careful not to be overcome by his sorrow before
he comes to a fuller understanding:

so quietly,
It is as if I could not speak, or call, if you moved
Away and were lost in the shadows of time as they list
In the pall of distances.

The next few lines help us realize that the persona in this
section is not only nature, or Larson, but a combination—
achieved in Larson's imaginative "transhuman" structure. The
same openness, consequently, that permits his ignorance, also
proves his salvation: "I am here, waiting / For the least word
of becoming, and the waters / Awaken from Your being and stir
against the wind." This openness causes a rebirth of knowledge,
and divine nature speaks to him metaphorically in such a way as
to prepare him to receive the ultimate rebirth he experiences
soon in the sequence of Sections VIII through XI:
But the danger of listening becomes the falls of air
Before me. I ring in the air and turn: He is there,
The gold of light in the height of my azure!

As noted in Chapter Two, Section VIII is a gloomy, hopeless
picture of the crucifixion, wherein the cross becomes the marker
for humanity's grave. Finally, in terms of Larson's journey
back to the origins of the world, he is at the threshold. Prior
to this, we have seen the poet always on the outskirts of the
passion activities. But in Sections VIII through XI he actually
witnesses the crucifixion itself and is finally reborn spiritually
and mythically.

However, in Section VIII, though Larson witnesses the cruci-
fixion, its significance at first does not dawn upon him. He
even questions his own understanding of the crucifixion through
the medium of mythic time: "Can I see the slight stirring / Of
agony in the vision of distances?" Here his own lack of vision
is perhaps an echo of the Jews' disinterested gaze—now and
then:

the cruciforms bend
In the vacuums of passion and quiescence that veil
The declining armor of Rome and beckon Jerusalem
To the memory of death.

Larson next realizes that the Jews' disinterestedness toward
Christ's atonement (and man's disinterest in general), is what
makes the cross "the grave of the air."
In Section IX the poet understands the meaning of the atonement that lifts him beyond his mere sorrow. The crucifixion becomes not only potential death for man, but "the Veronica of the fame of man"—his potential salvation as well. To this moment mankind "struggled here from the tablets of Sinai." And however ironic it is that those very struggling Jews killed their God, yet His death is done in the "remembrance / Of being"; man can yet be saved despite Christ's death.

There is an interesting double movement of time going on simultaneously in this section: the Jews moving up to the time of Christ, while Larson and all partakers of the atonement must move back and recapture the event in mythic time. And because Christ died in remembrance of being, the going back to origins, to mythic time becomes a creation of being. One must return to where the glory is to find "the furnace of being."

At this point in the section, as the results of the crucifixion are finally being understood, Larson realizes the limitations of temporal time for understanding the origins of salvation: "the sky holds the stiff / Meaning for the fascination of history." As history, the crucifixion is meaningless. Only as one goes back to the mythic time of the event itself does he realize its significance. In history alone, meaning is "recondite / Before the sepulchre."

As this section ends we see the fuller meaning and purpose of Larson's return to origins that we intimated earlier—
repentance. He must be purified to return to the mythic time. Throughout the section, the sin and hell references—guilt, heat, burning, and furnace—image the purification that can come with realization of and faith in Christ's resurrection:

I assign the images of His ascension to the air, And there He reigns in the fusion of wisps Of rolling light. The fire in the caverns of conscience Repines, then bursts as far novac across the spectrum Of meaning, in the van of awe.

The reader now realizes that the sorrow experienced so often by the poet through his journey back is, on the Christian level, his own sin set against the reality of Christ and His dying for Larson and all other men. This implies regeneration. For primitive, pagan man Eliade notes that the return to the time of origins is also regenerative: "But, above all, the ritual recitation of the cosmogonic myth plays an important role in healing, when what is sought is the regeneration of the human being." 62

As a result of Larson's return to origins, he is now regenerated in Section X: "This is my loss of night." He has escaped historical time and dwells now in "the blending violet / Of eternity." Larson now comes to the fore as Poet:

The sound is in me that can speak of God If my lips but yield the forms of the wheel of light

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62 *Sacred and Profane*, p. 82.
Its subtleties my syllables that ring the colors
Of being from sound into light.

By reaching the time of origins, Larson is now able to "participate in being"\textsuperscript{63} and imitate the gods by creating—in the poet's case, recreating. For the primitive poet recreates the activities and myths of the gods by embellishments that result from their "ecstatic experiences" in mythic time:

But these researches have brought out the role of creative individuals in the elaboration and transmission of myths. In all probability this role was even greater in the past, when what is today called "poetic creativity" was bound up with and dependent upon an ecstatic experience. . . . It is the specialists in ecstasy, the familiars of fantastic universe, who nourish, increase, and elaborate the traditional mythological motifs.\textsuperscript{64}

As the section ends, Larson is back in modern civilization with its "stores, the yards / For play, the trolleys, the alleys, the schools" and its historical and profane time juxtaposed against the poet's place "in the hush of forever and the veil of my knowing," but he is now reborn as the "poet."

It is the final section of the poem in which Larson acts in his newly found role as the "called" poet. For Larson, the Mormon poet, this call is one in which he places in a Mormon context the literary power of imposing his imagination on the standard mythic structures as explained by Eliade:

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Sacred and Profane}, p. 106.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Myth and Reality}, p. 146.
The relations between the traditional schemas and the new individual revaluations are not rigid: under the impact of a strong religious personality the traditional pattern finally yields to change. All this is as much as to say that privileged religious experiences, when they are communicated through a sufficiently impressive and fanciful scenario, succeed in imposing models or sources of inspiration on the whole community. In the last analysis, in the archaic societies as everywhere else, culture arises and is renewed through the creative experiences of a few individuals. But since archaic culture gravitates around myths, and these are constantly being studied and given new, more profound interpretations by the specialists in the sacred, it follows that the society as a whole is led toward the values and meanings discovered and conveyed by these few individuals. It is this way that myth helps man to transcend his own limitations and conditions and stimulates him to rise to "where the greatest are."^65^  

By imitating the gods, Larson tries to create a poetry that can bring all men to "mythic consciousness," or in other words, religious awareness. His imitation of the gods is signalled in the poem by his speaking as if he is God in the first person: "I am the beloved."

In Section XII, as poet to the people, Larson establishes how he brings mythic awareness to the reader by being able to recreate all things through the poetic ritual. With his "inspired" words in poems—

I am the fire of your light  
The sound of words  
That tremble into being out of light—

^65^ Myth and Reality, pp. 146-47.
Larson is confident that he is able to "convey the ambience of God" to the reader. The poet's power to do this, which I have been examining, is derived from his being in the mythic, eternal present—where all things are imaginatively before him. The poet repeatedly alludes to his place in mythic time in Section XII: "The wonder of distances," "all coordinates of the sun," "defying / quantum time or segments of a dial," "Before the shore of distant time," and "who nods / In the sidereal valleys of the mind / But I?" As the Lord's poet, he sees himself "admissible to you, / As God might be." The culmination of the poet's journey back to mythic time is simultaneously finding God, learning to imitate him, and being called as the poet who re-reveals and elaborates the cosmogonic myths. Also, as foreshadowed in Section III, Larson has restored the poet to his "rightful" office.

I have shown in this chapter, then, how Larson must imaginatively travel back to the time of origins, the mythic time or eternal present, in order to get to where God is and have an "ecstatic experience" by which he deserves the creative "light" to show others the way to God by recreating the myth. The time of origins, in this Christian poem, is the atonement, and the return journey to recreate that myth is one of sorrow for sin that results finally in the poet's purification (rebirth) and call as poet. In the final chapter I will look at the poem's place in
Larson's poetry as a kind of manifesto for the "poet laureate of Mormondom," and the implications of his mythic structures for religious poetry.
Chapter Four

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I examine Clinton F. Larson's poem, "The Witness." In the Preface I look at three of the issues regarding Larson's poetry in general: 1) its Mormonism, or lack of it, 2) its obscurity of diction and syntax, and 3) its mass. Examining these issues enables me to put Larson and "The Witness" into a critical perspective and prepare a foundation for my own criticism.

In Chapter One I examine some of the formal aspects of "The Witness." The examination reveals some of the weaknesses that other critics have noted in Larson's poetry—obscurdication, austere tone, and imagery problems. However, I point out that Larson compensates for many of these weaknesses in the richness of suggestion found in the poem's mythic-quest superstructure. I also note that within that superstructure (Campbell's design), which Larson uses as a metaphor for spiritual experience, Larson seeks a mythic consciousness—an avenue to a spiritual oneness with God. In this connection I give a brief review of the history of thought on mythic consciousness to help explain what Larson
is attempting to achieve in his poem. I particularly note Eliade's studies, which I use extensively throughout the thesis.

In Chapter Two I explicate the poem as a quest to create mythic space; this is a crucial experience for Larson, one by which he imaginatively attempts to gain a mythic consciousness, I demonstrate that he found a "Center of the World" in the Western American landscape where he begins a dialectic with nature based on metaphorical animism. This becomes his vehicle by which to communicate with God.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I explicate the poem as the quest for mythic time. Here I show the poet's desire to return to the time of origins—the sacred, powerful time—to be near the gods and to parallel their creative power. I show that both this process and the quest for mythic space become a quest for the poetic calling. This calling is, to Larson, as divine and sacred as a call to be a prophet. It is this aspect of Larson and "The Witness" that is of key importance to his contribution to Mormon Art.

"The Witness" is the poetic manifestor for Larson that points the way to his subsequent writings. This is particularly evident in his next book, Counterpoint. Such poems as "Sun Worshiper" and "Tetragramation" reveal his increasing reliance on animism as a metaphor for spiritual experience. In these poems he seems to be carrying on from the center place of insight to which "The Witness" has brought him. Western World is even
more pronounced in this "natural" tradition. In "Rain Shadow," "Forest," and several other poems, Larson seeks to utilize natural imagery as a metaphor and language for spiritual understanding. As he says in "The Witness": "The voice is in me that can turn sound into light." That voice is the translation of the natural images Larson sees that God uses to communicate his will to man. In "The Witness" Larson receives that calling to communicate or reflect God's will, and Larson's later works continue as the fulfillment of that poetic charge.

It is, finally, this "imaginative" position as poet-prophet in "The Witness" and later poems that is Larson's unique contribution to Mormon poetry. I have shown that Larson's greatness is not his technical polish or formal purity. I show that though these problems do exist, much remains in the poem's mythic structures to reward the patient reader. And myth is Larson's metaphor for Mormon experience. For him, obviously, myth can be valuable for powerfully expressing the everlasting plight of man—the search for meaning and the definition of the self.

Beyond these important contributions to literature, there is a Mormon form to Larson's quest poetry that shapes the whole of his poetry in a way similar to how the Catholic vision shapes O'Connor's fiction. Just as so many of her stories hinge on the moment of revelatory epiphany—the central insight to which the story moves and which eventually leads to solving the central conflict—so Larson's "The Witness," and his poetry collectively,
has a Mormon "restoration" form. I sense that something lost is being revealed anew. As Joseph Smith restored God's word to a spiritual wasteland, so Larson poetically attempts to restore the calling of poet-prophet and restore living water to what he conceives as the world's parched aesthetic spirits.

In the Joseph Smith account of the First Vision, a clear quest pattern emerges: he feels the call in his searching in the churches for truth and in his reading of the scriptures; he enters the woods, or threshold of adventure, where he must fight the devil or blocking agent in order to enter the new world of God's presence and gain the elixir or knowledge by which to restore the world. So Larson, in "The Witness," follows a similar quest form in order to bring God's word to a world that lacks it artistically. This pattern is most explicit in "The Witness" and implicit, therefore, in his other poems that carry out the work "The Witness" started. For this reason I find "The Witness" is a poetic manifesto, or in mythic terms, the center of the poetic world of Clinton F. Larson and the center around which his vision revolves.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


THE WITNESS

I

The bleak pastiche of signs defines the flowing
Vision of worlds of turnpike turning under my wheel:
The jet stream of my seeing, with contrails of memory,
Avails the imperial mayors that devised the continuum
San Bernardino, Covina, Alhambra, Los Angeles as streaks
of radiance verifying the limits of my fantasy.
I moisten my eyes with sorrow, or is it the fall
Of the wind from the ocean that freshens the revetments
Of feeling?

II

In the beginning I chose the mist, the azure
Of sewn pearls in gossamer; I chose the light
That hangs like dawn from the embers of morning.
And they were about me, moving in the hush
Of my devotion: so to touch the falls of God
Is to know the high valleys of heaven where,
In the silence of angels, the cycles of time
Repose as strands to be spun as from ravelling
Or as wisps of glory.

III

But then my loquitur repining: “Our ontology
Is the valley of death and the cactus flower,
The fern of the highlands and the condor winging.
We must get beyond the sleight and decorum
Of repartee, and among the evanescent shades
Exhume the variety of insight that devised
Belief that extends into the valley of death,
Where the sun spurts the flame that dips
As if reaching, where the deep lakes fail
In the platinum light that lies over the salt
And rock, searing the day,...beyond Phoenix,
Where in the east the mountains round like a condor
Brooding. Out of these we have seen the shades
Rising, green as the fern or shimmering thin
As the coloratura flame of a flower. Can we
Know them? Only as they are, revealed, husking
The orders of tedium. Those who have seen
The viable sky know the fierce hand of God
That must sear our estimates of good for our final
day. And when, in the censures of mind, can we
Teach them sequences of behavior to make them
Rational and easy for our convenience? The licking
Flame of the sun in the valley of death smelts them:
Purer still as they breathe dogma like the furnace
Of light when our day began. They write in the purity
Of light so hungering for sapience that they deny
The world of our variety to defend their style:
Incipient baroque, Heaven's reality, if you will.
They polarize their being with light: Messier 81,
The Pleiades, the Spiral Galaxy. And what,
We may say, can be done for them, these hardly
Practical and livid with virtue? Their disciples
Of anathema repine in the dregs of God, wishing
For better, doctrine or catechism, something
Against the boxed pablum of this, our everyday.
And they do not get it, except in forays of lyrical
Hate. So what can be kept but our ritual patience?
Nothing, for the shades invest the convolutions
Of human defection to flush them of disease,
Withal as if to please. My irony, live in the heat
Of the sun: It is pure! Seek its excellence!
And those intone the litanies of this, our
World, devise the beetles of our past languishing
Torpidly in nooks: naturalisme, realisme,
Existentialisme, edema, q. v. These, our food.
These, our summary. But our image, the shades
Maintain, is fire, the spectacle of diamond light
Under the hammers of tungsten carbide flaking
From its violence. All this, and more. We have
To admire such persistence too, amid disciples,
In lieu of accuracy, and somewhat neo-Platonistic,
Blue. Oh, such eclectic good! Enough to dazzle us
With pain! And now the law of God, awkward in
Their singing Rubaiyat, invests us like a seminar
And pleads a case of love, enduring to the end,
The primum mobile, a folksong wheezing like
The bagpipes of our minds. They keep the ivory
And gold, the goldleaf, by our ears, the whitest
Light, and try, try as they will, God's will, now."

IV

So again I have been asked the way for searching,
And as far as the hawthorn shines in the darkness
I walk, and I ask, "Is this the way?" And, as
The answer defines my meaning, the evening closes,
Borne on light in the variety of clouds in the stellar
Air: I mourn my finite care, and I ask for the swirl
Of meaning sown in noesis alone. Or is it noesis
As I find the harbors of evening, in the romance
Of sheds in the arbors, light-taken and rimming
The darkness, grey as the arc as it flickers, dimming?
 Violence is my sudden day: there in the billowing
Shadows, I follow the way to the down of Calvary,
Softly, and the velvet memory gives me the banner
INRI in the red sheen waking to evening: cruciforms
Light as balsam, but there, against the meaning
Of falling from the ring of knowing, the ring
Of mire against the air. I shun the Triumvir
Who speaks to me at the edge of seeming, who in
The swirl peals the radiant sun. Now in the bed
Of the shade there is Calvary and the finite red
Where the crown tips with agony. My sudden wish,
And when His breath touches the air I bow in the wisdom
Of the torch epithet, word, or circle of radiance,
There, springing light from the aspect of death,
Grey as my sapience. And I was in darkness, leaning
Into light, where I forgot the day in the memory
Of meaning. In the loss of seeing, the sire of glory
Awakens from the light to find the vellum story,
There resting in my search for being. I found him
In the hush of light, in a vacancy of being, as if
He could move in the gusts of my vision. I cannot
Know the bearing wind, the touch of spume, except
Forever as I turn toward the sun. Then in degrees
Of latitude above the solstice corona the sign
Of the wind! And in the sea of light the meridian
God defines the height of sun in the clouds of time.
The distances fade, and the darkness touches my arm
As if the velvet of shame, and the theology becomes
My index and sire of shade. Vision of distances,
My years are my name and the region of my fame.

V

The obscure year, graven in stone, was full
Of the umbra of edges, in a wisdom I could define
As I might a calendar of years, and I knew, as
I stood before it, that I should feel the glance
Over my shoulder in a device of years before me.
But, as it was, I touched my presence there
For an instant, and I was gone, and play began,
For in a sleight of memory I hold it now,
The skein of forever ravelling in light:
When I saw the crown of thorns amid the upright
Spears of fences, roses there, I started,
As if the fear of scripture had led me again
To the shuddering light of Golgotha brazen
With sacrifice. But a round of days and years
In my boyhood lent me the appraisals of youth,
As if I could be kept long at the threshold
Of light, and not beyond. I asked for Pilate,
And he came lazily judicious and wondering why
In the flicker of his eyes and the tilt of his head,
As if he could not be concerned about the event
Of Christ, or even about his own disclaimer.
All had drifted into the rift of meaning, what
Seems as it widens into history or dreams.
Sire, why do you so stand, impotent of censure
For anyone? If you had seen Him on the mount
Of God, you would have lived or died to keep Him
There. But in a thrust of power you armed impertinence
Before the stalks of hands tipping in the day,
The vote of the censure of death before the myth
Of God. Sanhedrin, this is Rome! Cleric Rome
Reporting its accounts, Douai and Saint Jerome!
And in the cloisters of your retirement you search
For light in the shading or illumination of pens
On parchment, white. But He ranged in the patents
Of power to write the Word into the stone of light.
Morning and evening are the shadows of sun,
And the sun is the spiral of zenith as they vanish
In the turning day.

VI

I saw the hill in the shadows of dreams, cottonwoods
On the slope of the timbrel wind. I have asked
To come, urgent as knowing, knowing the judgment
In the holloing streets. Master, is it You crowned
And walking in the issue of sacrifice, as if again
To the sepulchre? And You nod to the woman at your side,
"Whom seekest thou?" or some rendering of faith
For her that she might believe the virtue of light.
In a rush, as if of wings in the azure of wings,
He spoke again, forgiveness, forgiveness for giving.
And she wept, and I, for seeing Him laboring there
Into death, heavy with Pilate or Antipas or some
Figure of official sanction, as heavy as earth
In the variant clouds streaming the mauve wisps
Of God at evening. Evening, and still she weeps.
He vanishes in the streets, the crowds following Him
For wonder, their souls hovering against the decision
Of time. Master, Master, I call, and about me
The streets awaken into noon, and there, in the wisp
Of sky, I see a gleam, and in a sudden dream
Of my boyhood I see glory, the wavering wings of a swift
In the cottonwoods above the stream and the lake.

VII

The willows dip and trail in silence, in the surface
Where the modulation is the sky in its clarity
Or tumbling, azure or the surface of clouds.
Did you come here for the psalm of God? You stand
In the vale of trees, as if in sorrow for the testament
Of life. I have judged the flowers by the path
And find them thorned with light, masterfully
The declension of meaning, but mauve and topaz
With the fire of history. Is there reason that
I wonder why you stand so quietly, waiting, waiting
For the grey fronds to stir over water,
For the curving heights of God to yield? So quietly,
It is as if I could not speak, or call, if you moved
Away and were lost in the shadows of time as they list
In the pall of distances. I am here, waiting
For the least word of becoming, and the waters
Awaken from your being and stir against the wind
And the wavering sky rippling them, as if wings
Were near, as they rush to the shore from the swirl
Of your being. I am the boyhood of wonder as I can
Barely sense the cathedral God whispering in the peace
Of feeling. Marvels of doctrine lie on the pages
Touched with gold, the vellum love of verse and line,
But the danger of listening becomes the falls of air
Before me. I ring in the air, and turn: He is there,
The gold of light in the height of my azure!
VIII

But there, on the hill, the grave of the air, the tomb
And the loss of eternity! Can I see the slight stirring
Of agony in the vision of distances? The etched hill
Is the mound of man, that he could live and strive
For the measure of dying. The white blood swirls
Into the silhouette, and the cruciforms bend
In the vacuums of passion and quiescence that veil
The declining armor of Rome and beckon Jerusalem
To the memory of death. Who is the arch captain
Of the Sanhedrin who died in the prayers of my rabboni?

IX

The sign is the veronica of the fame of man:
He struggled here from the tablets of Sinai
And now names the Messiah INRI in the irony
Of his testament. Who hangs there? But it is
The evening of life radiant in shadows. Does God
See the fire of guilt raising the epithets of vision?
I see the hill burning in the darkness, in the passion
Of its restriction, in the heat of the held god
And the love of His dying, what He does in remembrance
Of being, the full cloth over the sight of heaven,
Alone, where compassion defines my rhetoric:
Rabboni, rabboni! and the sky holds the stiff
Meaning for the fascination of history, for pilgrims
Of significance, ranging footless in prayer,
Where glory is the furnace of being, recondite
Before the sepulchre. Is this the garden of the virgin
Weeping? She touches the palms of morning that lean
Into silence, and the fire illumines the robe,
That lies forsaken of wearing, and the supper of manna.
I assign the images of His ascension to the air,
And there He reigns in the fusion of wisps
Of rolling light. The fire in the caverns of conscience
Repines, then bursts as far novae across the spectrum
Of meaning, in the van of awe.

X

This is my loss of night: to find it soft as heaven,
For in the west Venus hangs, the diadem of the sun.
The lore of the stars is near as my hand against
Their radiance, flowers starring the blending violet
Of eternity. The sound is in me that can speak of God
If my lips but yield the forms of the wheel of light,
Its subtleties my syllables that ring the colors
Of being from sound into light. But I stop at the corner
Of the street, under the electric arc that shudders
The pale ghosts of the earth, the stores, the yards
For play, the trolleys, the alleys, the schools
For our corporate life, and the symphonies of our aura
Of feeling that lift me, not of this world, there
In the hush of forever and the veil of my knowing.

XI

Now, as I walk home, the ghosts appear in the relief
Of shadows in the imperative light, and they coast
In my vision, disappearing as I look away into darkness.
I thought the nearness of my other world upon me,
But in the measure of my recognition He touched my arm,
And I turned to His eyes, full of the sense of immediacy,
And He found my question, examining my witness
As He might beside the waters of Canaan. This is not
The road where I once appeared, He said. Emmaus
Is the fall of another time, the surety of willows
In the hushed will of the crypts and sands of Asia.
I am the sign of Samarkand and the Colorado
From the rim of the canyon: I touch your arm
And guide you as you listen to my quietness,
The remote voice of fire, arriving in the gesture
Of giving. Listen!

And I shall, as if forever,
When He speaks through the veils of evanescence
And over the tiers of God as they range in the briefs
Of creation, in the clarity of the cordillera.
And in his robe He turned, rustling into darkness,
Beholding me and my questions, His voice my vision
Of light.

XII

I am the beloved.
I am the witness of your eyes.
But can you see the prize
That sends the gull against the skies
To cry for the light that lives in me?
I am the beloved.
I am the aegis of the gleam
Of the gull in the invisible stream
Of air in the measure of light
That falls to us,
The skein of your desire,
The immeasurable fire
Of your duress:
  I know the white caress
  Of your attention
  And the sentient intention
  Of your will.
Then, suddenly, it breaks
In the steepleys of cities, flakes
Of shadows falling there, strewn
Over the lines and dreams of afternoon.
  I am the beloved.
  I am the wonder of distances
  Across the casual instances
  Of your belief.
I am the reef
Before the shore of distant time
In the clime
Of all coordinates of sun.
  What in you defeats
  My name,
  The flame of your sun?
I am the sere light of the eternal bar
Near or far
In the hour of your seclusion,
Or the diffusion
Of talk in the porticos,
Or the imagery of cameos
Against a guess of conscience,
Or the happy diffidence
Of noon.
  I am the beloved,
  Shadowless at noon,
  Pillar of your sun,
  For I have won
  The towers of your light,
  And I am there
  In the pure air
Admissible to you,
As God might be.
I am the beloved,  
Who will not flee  
Or use the key  
Of avenues  
To break the light:  
The stars that billow in their dying,  
The lucent red or blue defying  
Quantum time or segments of a dial  
Or the sacrament you know in every vial  
Of wonder that you hold  
In a lesser fold  
Than God’s.  
Who nods  
In the sidereal valleys of the mind  
But I?  
I am the tenor of eternal time  
As consonant as a timbrel rime  
That holds the touch of sound  
Against the galaxies wound  
With light or love  
And then from the dome of fire the dove  
That soars across the silver lakes  
That iridesce their blue. Who slakes  
The thirst of one who holds the sheaves  
Until I come like gusting leaves?  
I am the beloved.  
The vale of sky that darkens with the depths  
Of indigo is mine  
And the tine  
Vibrating the concentric lays  
That convey the ambience of God.  
I am the fire of your light,  
The sound of words  
That tremble into being out of light,  
Your prescience of Him.
CLINTON LARSON'S "THE WITNESS": THE QUEST FOR A MORMON MYTHIC CONSCIOUSNESS

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ABSTRACT

"The Witness" can be viewed as Clinton F. Larson's poetic manifesto that points the direction for much of his subsequent work. Although his poetic "Mormonism" has been questioned by several of his critics, this thesis shows that Larson definitely expresses his Mormon faith in "The Witness" as a metaphorical quest for mythic consciousness. While searching in the poem for sacred space and time, Larson seeks to become closer to the divine and powerful center of being, creating at once a metaphor for his quest to understand and assimilate Christ's atonement and a poetic voice from which he can speak for and of God.

It is from this imagined pinnacle as poet-prophet that Larson seeks to establish a Mormon poetic that boasts a Mormon "restoration" structure analogous to the Catholic "epiphanous" structure characteristic of much of Joyce's and O'Conner's work.

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