

The stress in the Utah church (LDS) upon prophetic authority has choked off avenues of formal dissent and slowed the pace of change, keeping the Church in a more traditional track. The stress in the Prairie church (RLDS) on the authority of the body of believers has legitimized formal dissent, but made the church more open to change that follows societal agendas, to a softening and liberalizing of the church.

DISSENT AND AUTHORITY IN TWO LATTER-DAY SAINT TRADITIONS

By Dean L. May

THE EARLY LATTER-DAY SAINTS HAD A CLEAR agenda as they set out to transform the world—to announce that the heavens are not sealed and that God still speaks to humankind upon the earth; to build an enclave of order—a refuge from the increasingly diverse and individualistic world that modern liberalism and capitalism had spawned;¹ and in so doing to reject the claims of traditional Christianity to divine authority. Joseph Smith's most mature and complete account of his epiphany expressed clearly the pain he felt at seeing "no small stir and division," the "great confusion and bad feeling," and "strife of words and . . . contest about opinions" in his society and even within his own family. The injunction to harmony, unity, and order became central to his message and had great appeal both to Americans tormented by the excesses of democracy and to the English subjects dislocated by industrialization.

Joseph Smith's instruments for building unity and order were his claim to speak authoritatively for God, and his insistence that no other tradition did. The Savior himself had told the young man to join none of the existing churches because they "teach for doctrines the commandments of men," and after further visitations and instructions Smith proceeded to organize what he called, in the official preface to his canon of revelations, "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth."² The language is clear, unequivocal, and almost calculated to goad persons of other faiths.

Thus one could hardly become a Mormon without being a dissenter. In consequence most in the Latter-day Saint tradition are dissenters—or dissenters from dissenters. In other words, the Restoration arose as a dissent from mainstream Christianity, and most of the Restoration churches arose as a further dissent from that movement as understood by Brigham

Young, James J. Strang, William Smith, or others. A faith that at its outset so boldly rejects the claims of other traditions must insist upon the right of its converts to dissent from those traditions. And such a faith is almost certain at some point to find its adherents insisting upon that same right. How can dissenters in good conscience suppress dissent?

This dilemma, common in sects of most world faiths, is further complicated for the Saints by their belief that the heavens are open—that not only do prophets speak for God to humankind, but, in addition, all believers are entitled to personal revelation to help them in life's struggles. The young lad Joseph burned into the Latter-day Saint consciousness the promise of James that God "giveth to all men liberally." Yet, the early Saints' affirmation of the right of dissent and of personal revelation would seem a prescription for fragmentation and chaos, exactly the opposite of what the Restoration was supposed to achieve for its adherents. If all the worthy can receive revelation, what is to prevent the movement from spinning off into a solipsistic chaos of personal faiths? The agenda of Mormonism is internally inconsistent: the rejection of other faiths affirming a right to dissent; the urge to unity, harmony, and order suppressing that right for the faithful. The history of religious dissent in the Mormon tradition thus has taken place against this backdrop of contradictory impulses within the movement itself.

The centrifugal tendency of personal revelation precipitated a crisis as early as the summer of 1830, when Hiram Page began receiving revelations for the Church through his own seer stone.³ The prophet's initial intent was to wait for the matter to be resolved in an upcoming conference; but upon hearing that Cowdery and some of the Whitmers were persuaded by Page's revelations, he responded with his own September 1830 revelation to Cowdery: "No one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses." The revelation went on to enjoin

DEAN MAY is a professor of history at the University of Utah. An early draft of this paper was presented at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the Mormon History Association in Lamoni, Iowa.

obedience, to affirm that one might be led by the Spirit to *speak or teach* by way of commandment to the Church, but not to *write* by way of commandment, thus acknowledging the superior place of the written canon over other inspired teachings. Cowdery's own inspired writings could be considered "wisdom" but not commandment, and, in any case, he was told in no uncertain terms *not* to "command him who is at thy head, and at the head of the church; For I have given him the keys of the mysteries and the revelations which are sealed until I shall appoint unto them another in his stead." The rest of the document points out errors in Page's revelations and commands Cowdery to speak to Page about the matter and tell him that the revelations were not of God. The parting shot affirmed that Page had usurped properly appointed authority and that "all things must be done in order, and by common consent in the church, by the prayer of faith." (D&C 28:13.)

The revelation, in responding to the crisis, asserted three principles: it insisted upon the paramount and unique role of the prophet in receiving revelation that could become a part of the canon; it nonetheless left space for personal revelation to be received and taught as "wisdom"; and it affirmed that all things, including even the revelations of the prophet, should be accepted by common consent of the Church, apparently by discussion and voting in Church conferences. In other words, only the prophet's revelations could become canon, but not necessarily all of them would. Even *his* revelations could be rejected by the Church in conference assemblies. The document defined personal revelation as of less importance to the Church generally, and it limited and contained the form and setting of dissent to what amounts to a community veto of prophetic initiatives.

The principles, thus defined, were a major asset to Joseph Smith and to subsequent prophets of Restoration churches in countering claims to their ultimate authority and in maintaining a rather remarkable core of order and harmony among the Saints, given the enormous inherent potential for fragmentation. They have nonetheless worked out rather differently in the two major surviving bodies of Saints.

Several founders of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and especially Joseph Smith III, who accepted leadership of the church in 1860, had deeply resented the authority claimed and exercised by Brigham Young and the apostles between 1844 and 1846. The searing experience of the loss of the Prophet, the promulgation of plural marriage, contention over settlement of the Smith family estate and Church properties, and a period of "wandering" from claimant to claimant of the Prophet's mantle, all left them distrustful of any assertion of strong ecclesiastical authority.

The very process of reorganizing the Church illustrated clearly the attitudes thus gained during the period of wandering. Initial momentum was given to the reorganization through a revelation of 18 November 1851 to Jason Briggs, pastor of a local congregation, who had never claimed to be a prophet. He nonetheless wrote the revelation down, and after getting support from men in his own congregation, distributed it widely among the Saints of the Midwest, which resulted in a

revelation to another ordinary member, Zenos Gurley, affirming that of Briggs and designating Joseph Smith III to be the new prophet.

These revelations led to a conference being convened in Beloit, Wisconsin, on 12 June 1852, which, in the words of Roger Launius, had "no acknowledged head, no organization for which to transact business, no authority to act, and no business to transact."⁴ Those taking the initiative remained reluctant to assume authority and move toward reorganization. They were prodded in that direction by a revelation to Henry Deam, another church member with no particular office and calling. And it was two of their number, Samuel H. Gurley and Edmund C. Briggs, who in 1856 asked Joseph Smith III to lead the new movement. When in 1860, he finally accepted the calling, Smith, now president and prophet, averred that he would likely make mistakes, and asked the conference that when seeing his errors "they would seek to correct them, with understanding" (quite a different approach from the "when our leaders speak, the thinking has been done," model).⁵

The entire experience opened the Prairie-based Saints to a more tentative, fluid, and tolerant structure of authority and with it greater openness to dissent as challenge to church leaders. In essence they have been most comfortable with those portions of Joseph Smith's 1830 revelation to Oliver Cowdery that stressed the authority of Church conferences in debating and deciding important issues, and especially in sustaining prophetic revelations.⁶

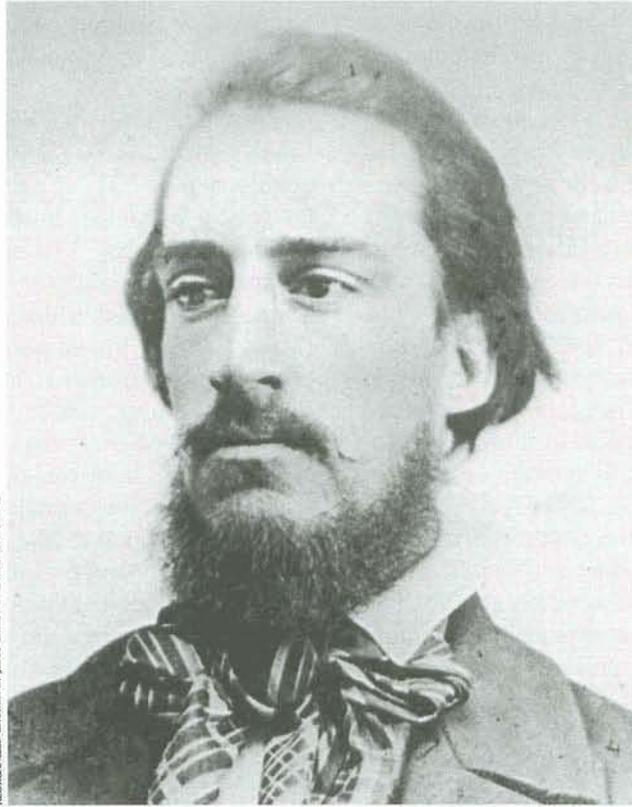
The Rocky Mountain-based Saints had a very different experience. The succession crisis was itself a war over who was chief authority among several brilliant and charismatic leaders. Much of Brigham Young's energy between 1844 and 1846 was devoted to disarming the various claimants to authority and fortifying his own.⁷ The exigencies of the exodus to the Far West and the effort to maintain ecclesiastical, civic, and social order in such a setting led the Rocky Mountain group to affirm rather more strongly than in the RLDS tradition the ultimate power and authority of the Twelve, the First Presidency, and by extension, that of other high Church officials whom they, very significantly, call "general authorities."⁸ (The term suggests that they have authority over the *Church* generally, but is understood by some to mean that they have authority over *things* generally, leading them on occasion to tell ward choir leaders which music is appropriately inspirational or which politicians or political causes have divine blessing.) Whereas the historical experience of the Prairie Saints led to a more decentralized polity in which the body of Saints assembled in conference had considerable power, that of the Rocky Mountain Saints led to a more enhanced central authority. The Mountain Saints elevated those portions of the Prophet Joseph's 1830 revelation that stressed the paramount authority of the prophet to receive revelation for the Church. To them the idea of vetoing a prophetic revelation would be tantamount to vetoing God himself.

Nonetheless, and here I speak more of the Rocky Mountain tradition, which I know best, it would be greatly misleading to see these Saints as unquestioningly swallowing all that flows

from Church headquarters. There has been among them considerable latitude in the realm of "wisdom" and "personal revelation and belief." There is a canon, but it, like all scripture, is subject to interpretation, and there is no Talmud or tradition of authoritative textual interpretation, nor a formal creed, beyond the very abstract Articles of Faith. The result has been to allow flexibility in official Church teachings, and, at the grass roots level, something not far from that "solipsistic chaos of personal faiths" I referred to earlier. The Rocky Mountain Saints are united in social habit, and in respect for their authorities, but not nearly so much so in doctrine. Historically they have been free to embrace a wide range of doctrinal positions, so long as they affirm the divine nature of Christ and the authority of the prophets, past and present, to receive revelation for the Church generally. The ritual core of testimony bearing is that they believe Jesus is the Christ, and that Joseph Smith and Ezra Taft Benson are prophets.

This latter affirmation, of the validity of prophetic callings, is the stickler, and it touches heavily on the matter of religious dissent. Religious dissent in the Mountain Latter-day Saint tradition has been defined rarely as heresy, in the sense of teaching doctrines contrary to those of the Church. Saints can and do espouse a considerable diversity of beliefs in the home, Relief Society, priesthood meeting, or even from the pulpit in sacrament meeting, and will, at the most, incur a frown from the visiting high councilor, or perhaps a talk with a bishop, *except when that view challenges the authority or integrity of the general leaders*. "Evil speaking of the Lord's anointed," or, as some general authorities understand the phrase, challenging Church authority, has been the mortal sin for the Rocky Mountain Saints.⁹

Now, I may have overstated the point, but I suspect a review of incidents where Church disciplinary action has been brought against dissenters would in most instances find them in the hottest water when they challenge the authority of the prophet or other high Church leaders. And discipline against those with dissenting doctrines is most commonly brought when a member speaks out in a highly public way on matters about which Church authorities have made special pro-



REORGANIZED CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS

When he finally accepted the calling of president and prophet, Joseph Smith III averred that he would likely make mistakes, and asked the conference that when seeing his errors "they would seek to correct them, with understanding."

nouncements. Church authorities have long demonstrated extreme concern about issues related to women's rights, manifested most recently in their revoking an invitation to mild-mannered but tough-minded Pulitzer Prize-winning Laurel Thatcher Ulrich to speak at BYU. They have pursued policies to define orthodoxy in academic endeavor at BYU. They have encouraged local leaders to reprimand persons who have spoken publicly on sensitive issues.

Such acts may indicate a growing preoccupation with doctrinal correctness and the possibility of more aggressive action against ideas considered heretical than has been the case in the past. But I suspect even in these instances the crucial concern is authority more than doctrine. In the Rocky Mountain tradition a public breach, through challenging authority, of the order, harmony, and consensus central to the agenda of the Restoration, is a most egregious act. It can bring a swift and unequivocal response. Part of that response usually takes

the form of resistance, hardening, and delay of prayerful inquiry by those in authority into the issue at hand.

A recent brouhaha in the Rocky Mountains has had to do with a central Church policy of maintaining files on members and making those files available to local leaders in suggesting a reprimand is necessary. The policy goes squarely against the belief I have grown up with that local bishops and stake presidents know their members most intimately and that no person removed from them has ecclesiastical rights to make judgments as to worthiness. Certainly busybodies whose hearsay reports may or may not reflect the spiritual well-being of individuals do not have those rights. I personally find the policy of gathering potentially misunderstood or garbled files on Church members and sending the information to local leaders utterly inconsistent with gospel principles of stewardship and Christ-like love. But I am not optimistic that the path of direct and public confrontation, for all the historical reasons I suggest above, will correct the situation; indeed it well may push us toward a lose-lose situation. Dissent, in the Rocky Mountain tradition, will more likely succeed if it avoids direct, confrontational challenges to authority.

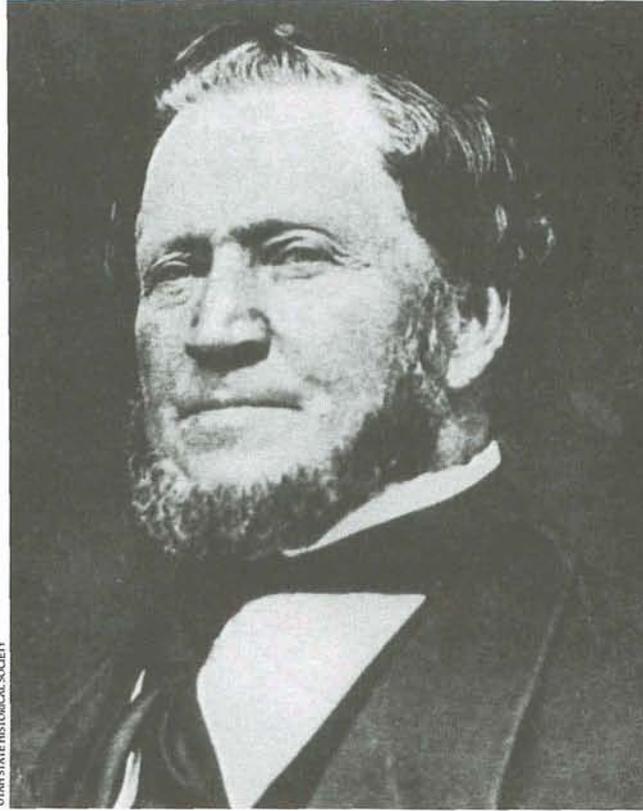
This sounds pessimistic, for dissenters outside of official

channels are clearly between a rock and, at least, a very rigid place. But not all the news is bad. For if institutionalized dissent is stonewalled in Salt Lake City, the more pervasive tradition of folk dissent has and does chip away slowly, and sometimes effectively, at those walls. If modification of policy is our goal, and surely it must be in this instance, the quiet letter, affirming faith but expressing concern, will do far more to bring change than a phone call to the religion editors of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Denver Post*, or the *Los Angeles Times*. Folk dissent is widespread and powerful in the Latter-day Saint tradition. My own experience, participating nearly a half-century in wards and branches in Wyoming, Idaho, BYU, Boston, France, Germany, and in the heart of Zion, is that local Saints adopt and adapt pronouncements coming from headquarters that resonate with their situations. As Art Garfunkel and Paul Simon sang, "A man he hears what he wants to hear /

And disregards the rest." If a gospel doctrine lesson is larded with sentiment or silliness, Latter-day Saints pass it by. If a policy inhibits accomplishing a legitimate and necessary goal, they work around it. The old saw that it is easier to get forgiveness than permission is a real principle of governance in the Rocky Mountain tradition. Their veto is less public and more quiet than in the RLDS Auditorium, but it is a veto nonetheless.

The downside of this necessity of learning to work around authoritative pronouncements without disrupting at least a surface harmony is a tendency toward evasiveness, inconsistency, and deviousness that, alas, influences much that is done in Mountain-LDS parts of the world in the same way bribery influences much that is done in parts of Asia. The upside is that in avoiding public debate and firm community resolution of issues that may arise, they also avoid precise definitions of orthodoxy in creed, doctrine, and even conduct, leaving a rather extensive sphere in which local and personal revelation can be manifested. The entire system avoids the brittleness that public dissent and decision making often engender, leaving a powerful residue of flexibility and variety beneath the outward veneer of uniformity. In most cases the small tremors seem to dissipate the stress, preempting the Big Trembler that all fear one day may come.

It would appear that the Prairie Saints are not without their



In contrast, in the Rocky Mountain tradition a public breach of the order, harmony, and consensus through challenging authority, is a most egregious act.

own problems related to their particular approach to dissent. An ongoing debate has, for several years, pitted those who hold to a more traditional view of the distinctive character of the Restoration, a male priesthood, the validity and role of the Book of Mormon, the New Translation, and the Doctrine and Covenants, against those who prefer to see the Church go more in the direction of inclusive, liberal Protestantism. Neither the authority of the prophet nor the openness of conference debates has been able to resolve this issue, and in the mid-1980s a number of RLDS members became convinced that the church was in apostasy and in need again of reorganization. Upon finding that their views would not prevail in church conferences, they began to secede. Indeed, their more or less spontaneous coalescing of local pastors and church members echoed the process that led in the 1850s to the initial Reorganization. In the early 1990s some proceeded to orga-

nize the Restoration Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Feeling inspired by God, they designated a set of apostles and filled other leading priesthood quorums. Recently their council of patriarchs chose a prophet and president to head their movement, in fact a Lamanite, not descended from the Prophet Joseph.¹⁰

Interestingly, the Utah church has been more prone to disaffection or apostasy than schism. Even fundamentalist dissenters have generally not created a duplicate structure at the highest level, and indeed the great majority concede a certain legitimacy to the mainline church in spite of its having gotten "out of order" on the question of plural marriage.¹¹ It may be that the stress upon the authority of the conference with its more public and democratic decision-making process, over that of the prophet, has for some desanctified the revelatory process and contributed to a hardening over controversial issues that diminish flexibility and foster brittleness.

The stress in the Utah church upon prophetic authority has choked off avenues of formal dissent, slowed the pace of change, keeping the Church in a more traditional track and leading Saints, if they would hope to effect change, to quiet, subtle, and personal resistance. The stress in the Prairie church on the authority of the body of believers has legitimized formal dissent, but made the church more open to change that fol-

lows societal agendas, to a softening and liberalizing of the church, and, when crucial issues cannot be resolved through legitimate means, to faction and even schism.

Finally, we are left with the strange irony of the Restoration: the conservatives of the mid-nineteenth century, who shrank back from the radical teachings embraced by Brigham Young and the Rocky Mountain Saints, now are led by a hierarchy that is theologically liberal, indeed more so than a good many of the members. Major currents of dissent in this tradition tend to pull back toward the views of early Saints. The radicals of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, find themselves led by a highly conservative hierarchy. Dissent among them tends to push toward current social agendas. We might all be better off if somehow Joseph Smith could put us into that proverbial bag and shake us up together, as he in a sense did with the issues raised by Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery in 1830. In the interim, we will no doubt continue to labor along our curious paths, loving and sustaining our faiths, though not without a bit of grouching here and there, bearing willingly, and for most of us, even unknowingly, the burdens and the blessings of our respective pasts. ☞

NOTES

1. See especially Marvin S. Hill, *Quest for Refuge: The Mormon Flight from American Pluralism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989).

2. Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith 2:5–10. Doctrine and Covenants 1:30. Though Joseph Smith's concerns were expressed primarily about religious divisiveness, it seems clear, in light of his subsequent work, that the increasingly chaotic character of liberal society in general weighed heavily upon him.

3. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 1: 218–19.

4. Roger D. Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 79–139, esp. 88, 118.

5. The statement comes originally from a 1945 ward teachers' message in the *Improvement Era* (June 1945), 354. It was shortly thereafter repudiated by President George Albert Smith, but remains a common part of Latter-day Saint hortatory discourse. See *Dialogue* 19(Spring 1986): 35–39.

6. It remains possible in the RLDS faith for a conference of the church to reject a prophetic revelation. While there has never been an outright rejection, in 1968 a revelation of President W. Wallace Smith was sent by the conference back to the Prophet for clarification. He then presented a second revelation, removing the unacceptable ambiguities, and the revelation, with the clarification, was approved. It would seem such a scenario would not be possible in the Mountain Saint tradition.

7. Richard E. Bennet, *Mormons at the Missouri, 1846–1852: "And Should We Die..."* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

8. Eugene E. Campbell, *Establishing Zion: The Mormon Church in the American West, 1847–1869* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988).

9. It would be possible to write another paper on the possible meanings of the term. My own sense is that "evil speaking of the Lord's anointed" should not appropriately include the assertion that general authorities might be wrong on some issues as they apply to particular situations and persons. If the Saints believe as I do that they can and should seek a confirming witness of the Spirit on all counsel and callings that are given from higher authority, then it must be possible in some instances for such counsel and callings to be rejected by the Spirit as inappropriate to the specific case. This might happen in those instances when Church authorities do not seek spiritual counsel and/or confuse personal belief and ideology with spiritual direction, thus giving directives that are not inspired. The revelation chosen by the Prophet Joseph as the preface to his compendium of revelations opened that possibility in suggesting that God's commandments "were given unto my servants in their weakness, . . . and inasmuch they erred it might be made known." (D&C 1:24–28.) "Evil speaking of the Lord's anointed" would seem rather more like libel or slander, that is, open defamation of character, which is

quite a different matter from saying a pronouncement or decision might not be applicable in all situations. Of course public statements questioning the integrity of general Church leaders diminish the authority of those leaders, and thus it is, I am arguing, authority that is the core of their concerns.

I might point out that this paper was prepared and delivered in the spring of 1993, well before the several highly-publicized Church disciplinary councils in Salt Lake City. My reading of these events is that they were played out in a manner consistent with the basic thesis in this paper.

10. William Dean Russell explained the recent discontents within the RLDS faith in "Defenders of the Faith: Varieties of RLDS Dissent," *SUNSTONE* 14(June 1990): 14–19.

11. D. Michael Quinn makes this point in "Plural Marriage and Mormon Fundamentalism," chapter 10 of *Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 240–93.



GORDON

I always followed public rules that said
I must blend in—deny myself myself,
until I read a newspaper account
of how another man was left to die.
It took the medical examiner two hours
to tell the court about his many wounds.
She used a model of a human skull
to illustrate just where the crowbar struck.
The injuries, the witness said, "are like
what happens when one's head is smashed beneath
the wheels of a car or truck. Beneath these blows
were crushing fractures, like an eggshell cracked
The victim . . . suffered wounds consistent with
the jabs that wire cutters make . . . an arm
was broken . . . injuries to genitals . . .
an x-shaped slash was carved into his throat . . .
and bruises from his shoulders to his knees,"
she said. The doctor also told the court:
"The victims liver had been punctured when
he was sexually assaulted with a lug wrench."
And after, Wood and Archuleta said:
"We didn't start out to kill," which is the same
excuse I heard a ten-year-old once say
while blindly stuffing firecrackers into
a stray cat's ass. The questioned killers said
he never begged or pleaded for his life.
I see the innocence of Gordon's eyes
in raging visions now, then turn and fight
to break the rules—an unchained, baited dog;
for friends too scared, or sick and weak, or dead.

—MARK JENSEN