

Maverick Fiction

The Canyons of Grace by Levi S. Peterson. Illinois Short Fiction Series. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 135 pp., \$11.95 hardbound; \$4.95 paperbound.

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FOR ONCE THE LANGUAGE of bookhype might ring true: the publication of Levi Peterson's *Canyons of Grace* as one of the four volumes this year in the Illinois Short Fiction Series can be called "a literary event." Maybe not in the larger context of American writing and publishing, but at least in Mormondom. For one thing, *Canyons of Grace* is the first collection of stories by a Mormon writer to be published outside the Mormon circuit in a long time — if memory serves, since Virginia Sorensen's nostalgic *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* in the early sixties. For another, and more significantly, Levi Peterson's stories may be the first Mormon fiction in this generation to respond to Karl Keller's urging in his essay on "The Example of Flannery O'Connor" (DIALOGUE 9 [Winter 1974]: 62-71), that Mormon writers seriously grapple with Mormon theology in their fiction.

Before saying what I mean by that, a caveat or two. None of these six stories is exactly *Ensign* material (all but one has previously been published, either inside or outside the Mormon circuit, in DIALOGUE and *Sunstone*, in *Denver Quarterly* and *Ascent*), and some of their language and subject matter (fornication, homosexual guilt, abortion, blood atonement) will offend some Mormon readers.

Levi Peterson is a maverick. This shows obviously in the language of all but one of the stories' titles: "The Confessions of Augustine," "Trinity," "Road to Damascus," "The Shriveprice," "The Christianizing of Coburn Heights," "The Canyons of Grace." Such references beyond Mormonism to a larger Christian context may signify that the writer chooses, in Juanita Brooks's phrase, to "ride the edge of the herd," and perhaps this authorial positioning shows nowhere more trenchantly than in Peterson's use of Mormon ideas, Mormon theology. The idea that centrally engages his fictive imagination is one promulgated in the "King Follett Sermon" — that both matter and each human intelligence are as "self-existent" as God and hence qualify or limit God's omnipotence.

Fremont Dunham, the narrator-protagonist of "The Confessions of Augustine," puts it this way: "It is inchoate matter that troubles me. It is coeval with God. It does not owe its being to Him. It has an obduracy, an impulse of its own, a will to be other than what God wills." (p. 9) To orthodox Christianity, a profoundly heretical idea, and hardly less troubling to some states of mind in Mormondom. But to Fremont Dunham (and to the writer behind him) a sort of agonizing desideratum: "How do I otherwise account for myself at eighteen?" (p. 9) (I should say here that, to me, one of Levi Peterson's main achievements in the collection, and particularly in this story, is the creation of a narrative voice that can carry such discursive material without making it sound like the intrusive "explainery" that so often has marred Mormon fiction. Here, because Fremont Dunham *needs* such ideas

to account for himself, the ideas become not footnotes but part of the story's action.)

For one summer, logging in the Arizona mountains and loving a rancher's daughter, Fremont Dunham tries to ally himself with the benign wilderness of an earth that "seemed immense and absolutely free" (p. 14). But the accidental death of a coworker brings God down on Fremont with crushing force: "I perceived the mountains were not wild and vacant; I knew God was everywhere. I . . . stood paralyzed with surging terror" (p. 15). So even before he begins to make love with Annie, his wilderness has been invaded by divine judgment, and "for many weeks I existed in . . . a harrowing cycle of penance and fornication" (p. 20).

Finally, when he has decided to marry Annie he knows, "without warning or premonition," that he does not love her (p. 21). We can read this "revelation" several ways at once: unconscious self-serving rationalization (he doesn't want to marry an "impure" girl), curiously upside-down "return of the repressed" (not the inchoate id but the tyrannically ordered superego coming back with a clobbering vengeance), or the actual severe operation of grace. (That Fremont takes it the third way will seem to some readers to argue that the second reading is true; we seem caught in a circle here.) In any case, for Fremont, God has hung him "on a trellis of His own choosing" to "prune away that part" of him that loves Annie (p. 26). That this language hints castration perhaps suggests how violent the image of God may be in some corners of the Mormon psyche. That Fremont Dunham is telling his story twenty-four years after the fact and still finds comfort in knowing that "somewhere on the face of this broad earth" Annie and the son he made with her "are still alive," (p. 26) may imply how obdurate is the wilderness God rules.

All the stories in *Canyons of Grace* might be read as playing variations on either that tension between wildness and divine order (Jacob 5 also employs it in

the Book of Mormon) or that religious psychology. "The Shriveprice" begins abruptly: "Darrow's faith had returned to him without warning or solicitation" (p. 57) (another of Peterson's narrative virtues is in the clarity and sureness with which he establishes a story's central conflict) and goes on to show how Darrow Sevey, past seventy, finds his way, through conflicting and inconclusive evidences from his family's history, to the chilling solace of a conviction of his own need for blood atonement: "This very body, this rich hoard of pain, was his shriveprice, a sufficient collateral to buy off wrath, to unbond him from damnation. There was but a single technicality: his self-destruction must be a rite, a ceremony. It would have to proceed with propriety and order." (p. 78)

A similar, if less overtly violent, motion of the soul informs "Road to Damascus," in which Paul, a farmer married to a pious Mormon woman, Regina, goes to visit an old prospecting partner, Sam, after another partner, Christopher, has been lost and presumed dead in a deep fissure. Regina wants Paul to join the Church and packs her Book of Mormon with his provision; Sam wants Paul to go to Alaska because a farm has you "tied and throwed and ready for the branding iron and castrating knife" (p. 48). Paul keeps having visions of his dead mother that merge with Regina; and alone and deep in the mine where Christopher was lost he encounters either God or Death: "You have always known me, haven't you, Paul? . . . No one escapes me, do they, Paul? . . . It will not be long and I will come for you." (p. 51) To me the story seems too "managed" in its allusive references and symbols (it has a baptism and a dove, too), but this may simply reflect my preference for stories that are realistic rather than allegorical.

"Trinity" dissatisfies me in similar ways and probably for the same reason: it seems static and allegorical, rather like those tableaux or processions Hawthorne composed when he could not find a credible action to incorporate in his insights. The

story poses Mormon missionaries, Jamie Bolander and Laura Greenalgh, the first agonizing over his homosexual impulses, the second stark mad after aborting a fetus that she believes was the son of God, before a painting entitled *Trinity* which represents the Father holding "the limp, dangling body of the crucified Son" while "over them hovered the Dove" (p. 30).

In some ways, Jamie and Laura seem very real, but the setting of their encounter, their unrealistically stylized dialogue, and especially Laura's calling herself Mary and him Joseph, turn our attention away from them toward what they signify. The mode here seems clearly didactic rather than mimetic. Still, what the story offers to teach is a departure, a breakthrough from the implicit theology of the other stories I've mentioned so far, from that wrathful, punishing God to something more concordant with another side of Mormon theology:

On the face of the Father there was no rancor, no threat, no vengeance. A colossal grief, galaxies wide, was wrung out upon the brow and cheeks of the very Father, the Sovereign of Infinity, the Everlasting. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost. God the Sufferer. An unfamiliar comfort formed in Jamie's heart. In the root of things, the suffering of the innocent was demanded, but at least they wept together, the three of them: Joseph, Mary, and the Father. (p. 34)

One of the most successful stories in the book, "The Christianizing of Coburn Heights," once again pits a sort of wilderness against a sort of order and its mode shifts toward satiric comedy. Here it's Stake President Sherman Colligan and Bishop Arthur Bosen, two good-hearted low-level church managers, versus Rendella Kranpitz, a deformed, retarded, fanatical, possibly mad heiress from the wilds of Southern Utah who owns a house in a prosperous east bench Salt Lake stake. To Sherman, Rendella will declare things like, "Some of the sermons that get preached in the fifth ward would puke a turkey" (p. 81). You can sort of guess from that how

things might go as Sherman valiantly strives, "by a bold application of Gospel principles," "firmness and love," to handle this administrative problem (pp. 90-91). This is easily the best comic Mormon short story I've ever read, and I know one bishop who says the same. Let's hope Levi Peterson works this vein farther.

Another of the strongest stories in the collection is its title piece, "The Canyons of Grace," which reprises the themes of "The Confessions of Augustine" in a different key and with a different resolution. Like Fremont Dunham, Arabella Gurney begins suspended between "God's will" as she has been taught it by parents and church, and her own "unrelenting, desperate compulsion to persist in her freedom—to the point of perdition, if necessary" (p. 109). Two characters who help her work out the dialectic of this tension are Franklin, her colleague in a University of Utah archeological dig, and Reuben Millring, the prophet of God's "authentic order" (p. 128), whose splinter group hides in one of the canyons; but the main force in the story is wilderness itself. It is after "the holy wild told her she was free . . . completely, . . . inviolably herself" that she makes love with Franklin, "not doubt[ing] her damnation" but choosing for the moment "to exult in her courage, to relish the taste of her daring" (p. 120).

Arabella has few illusions about wilderness: "if wilderness is the ultimate reality I will die forever" (p. 118). For her that possibility is a "horror," so "there has to be a God. No one else can save me, though the price He asks is my integrity" (p. 119). If she's right about her integrity, knows what it actually is (and one can't help recalling Flannery O'Connor's note that the integrity of Hazel Motes, the Christian *malgre lui* of her novel *Wise Blood*, lies precisely in his being unable finally to escape the God who pursues him), Arabella has put the dilemma of salvation about as acutely as it can be.

When Reuben's henchmen abduct Arabella, the story takes another turn. She