Mormon Postmodernism: Worlds without End in Young's *Salvador* and Card's *Lost Boys*

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JOSEPH SMITH'S REVISION of the Pauline closing, "world without end" (Eph. 3:21) to become "worlds without end" (D&C 76:112), is a significant ontological move. Specifically, Smith's closing provides an opening for contemporary Mormon literature to explore the possibility and implications of multiple worlds and realities.

Brian McHale, a senior lecturer in poetics at Tel Aviv University, argues, in *Postmodernist Fiction*, that the shift from modernism to postmodernism is a shift in philosophical emphasis. In modernism, the principal concern was epistemological: What do we know? How do we know it? and How much can we trust our knowledge?[1] Modernism, for the most part, conflated the metaphysical world into the physical world and produced what is called, in Mormon literary circles, "sophic" literature. In the natural and psychological realism of modernism, even Mormon modernist literature, there was little room for the supernatural.

For example, Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* explores only the weak theological idea of togetherness; and its final, typically modernist, death bed scene portrays the protagonist Clory—after realizing that she does indeed have a testimony of the gospel—merely concerned that her fingernails be manicured as she enters into the beyond. The *Giant Joshua* and most other modernist texts failed to portray anything beyond the natural world, beyond death or what Jean-Paul Sartre metaphorically called "The Wall."

On the other hand, postmodernism has moved away from epistemological concerns to those of ontology. Ontological questions concern the

1. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, Inc., 1987), 6-11.

nature of reality and the possibility of multiple realities and plural worlds. The postmodernist shift in academics has resulted in the inclusion of multicultural literature and of genre fiction such as fantasy and science fiction. Ihab Hassan provides one possible definition of postmodernism as "a response, direct or oblique, to the Unimaginable which Modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments."[2] In other words, postmodern literature often creates worlds of wonder and of miracle and explores the supernatural.

The exploration of the supernatural and its often harsh juxtaposition with the natural world is a principal characteristic of much postmodern literature. Such writing makes a space for literature that is neither superficially faith-promoting, ignoring the difficulties of reality, nor convolutely skeptical and disillusioned, unable to see beyond this telestial world.

By traveling among worlds, crossing over into other cultures and other realities, Mormon postmodernism affirms the intrusion and influence of one world upon another. A modernist wall, a sense of epistemological limitation has come down, and in its place only a postmodern veil separates the human from the divine and this life from the afterlife. This veil is easily parted, allowing for revelation, manifestations of goodness and of evil, and glimpses into multiple realities.

The Mormon novel *Salvador* by Margaret Blair Young contains much crossing over, overlapping, and blurring of worlds and realities in the Magical Realism zone of Latin America.[3] *Salvador* is the first-person narrative of Julie (a recently divorced Mormon woman searching for her identity and her faith) who with her parents, Chuck (a disillusioned, excommunicated apostate) and Emmie (a selectively orthodox Mormon who spouts optimistic clichés), travels from the snow-tipped mountains of Orem to the oppressive heat of El Salvador.

Julie, Chuck, and Emmie leave behind capitalist America and mainstream Mormonism to enter into the quasi-religious zone of Zarahemla, a place forged out of history, myth, and the Central American topos. The reason for their journey is to visit Uncle Johnny, the salt-and-pepper-bearded, prophetic figure who lives in another reality of consecrated and polygynous jungle communities. Julie, Chuck, and Emmie fail to escape their reality completely, for capitalist America and the mainstream Mormon church are present in El Salvador, embodied in Piggott, the district president, who lives in a luxurious, servant-attended mansion.

Still, Julie and her parents experience in El Salvador the reality that "we Gringos see on the 6:00 news: that world of wars and quakes and

2. Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 53.

3. Margaret Young, *Salvador* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992).

starvation and little brown people with desperate eyes who were born to be part of Dan Rather's script."[4] The world that used to end "when *Wheel of Fortune* begins"[5] had now become Julie's world. Yet this country of poverty and suffering is also a place of romance, religious discovery, and danger, where ancient ruins have been overgrown by jungle and where jaguars prowl in the night.

Julie has escaped to El Salvador after filing for a divorce from an abusive husband, a divorce that Julie blames on her mother's idealized notions of marriage and the church. Like her father who served in Vietnam, Julie is disillusioned because of her exposure to excessive cruelty and evil, and she attempts to find hope and redemption by leaving her reality and traveling to a world of myth.

But besides natural danger, the mythical world in the jungle also abounds with human cruelty and evil. In his attempts to establish his dream of a religious Zion, her Uncle Johnny, though extremely charitable to the poor, domineers over his wife and tyrannically controls other women and his followers. Hints of murder and revenge pervade the narrative as Alberto, Johnny's illegitimate son and disciple, faces the Hamletesque dilemma of whether to heed the demands of his ghosts.

In the climactic scene of the novel, Alberto takes Julie to the temple ruins of Zarahemla where, Johnny claims, Christ preached to the Nephites. Alberto shows Julie pictographs on the wall that prove to him that this was the temple of Zarahemla; but Julie reads the signs, not as Lehi's vision of the tree of life, but rather as a human sacrificial ritual of the Mayans. A clash of interpretations and of realities follows, which results in Julie's return to the United States, in Alberto's disappearance into the landscape of myth, and in Johnny's denunciation as sinful.

Both Julie and Alberto profit from a clash of realities. Julie returns to the United States more mature and with an understanding of the miracles that her mother subtly works while seeming to be superficial and foolish. Alberto frees himself from Johnny's control and begins to develop his faith elsewhere. Johnny, on the other hand, though confronted and rebuked by the district president and others, still refuses to change his abusive nature.

Eugene England, in a blurb at the front of the novel, suggests that this work by Young is not yet the great Mormon novel, but that it shows the way. May I suggest that the great Mormon novel will be one in which the realities of Julie and Alberto do not just clash and break apart but instead come together—thesis and antithesis—in a new synthesis, in a new world of logos and of mythos, a world in which a ruin could be both sacred temple and sacrificial altar.

4. Ibid., 71.
5. Ibid.

A step beyond *Salvador*'s clashing realities is Orson Scott Card's *Lost Boys* in which evil and grace intrude into this world from other ontological levels.[6] Card creates a postmodern zone not in the jungles of Central America, but in the workings of a computer game. Mystically using a computer game as an extension of his consciousness, Stevie Fletcher—an eight-year-old, Christ-like boy—communicates with seven molested and murdered boys who are buried under the Fletchers' house.

In *Lost Boys*, a crossing over of realms or ontological levels occurs: from the natural realm with its greedy, perverse, but also good and charitable humans who are, at different times, kind, cruel, worn out, and even insane; from the realm of evil that is eternal and unexplainable; and from the realm of the divine from which come supernatural manifestations and communication.

Card's text reads like detective fiction as the reader is invited to identify and name various types and degrees of evil which beset the Fletcher family. The principal question in this text is: What are we to do when we are confronted with evil? The narrative itself proceeds to provide possible answers.

As a postmodern work, the concern of this narrative is more ontological than epistemological. The tension of the novel arises, not because of an unreliable or limited narrator, who delays the revelation of the cause of evil, but rather from the fact that the evil itself cannot be completely constrained because it exists on a supernatural level. The reader is introduced to the real evil of the novel in a disturbing prologue, but because the prologue is discontinuous from the rest of the text, the evil seems to exist prior to the world of the narrative, to be distant and incomprehensible, and to make itself manifest in this world from a different ontological level.

Two possible explanations are suggested for the existence of this evil: abuse of a child character and his having witnessed what Freud calls the primal scene. The evil takes upon itself the name of "Boy," the term used by the father in his abuse of the child. The child character takes that word "inside himself and it [becomes] the name for all his bad desires."[7] The evil grows within the character as it makes him play pranks, cheat on tests, even when cheating is unnecessary, and finally becomes too strong to be contained, bringing the character to molest and murder those who will be known as the lost boys.

But, as stated previously, though the abuse fosters the evil, the evil, like the prologue itself, already existed. Just as the prologue is a given, structurally preceding, independent of, and disconnected from the narrative, so the evil in this work is a given, an independent entity. As the

6. Orson Scott Card, *Lost Boys* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).
7. Ibid., 1.

connection between prologue and narrative is tenuous, so is any attempt to establish a direct or simplistic causal relationship between the abuse in the prologue and the manifest evil in the narrative itself.

After the prologue, the narrative begins with the Fletcher family moving from Vigor, Indiana, to Steuben, North Carolina. Moving away from the comfort zone of family and friends, the Fletchers gain a heightened awareness of the dangers and threats that abound, especially in a strange land. In response to these newly perceived threats, the three children—Stevie, Robbie, and Betsy—naturally turn to their parents—Step and DeAnne—for protection. Understandably, DeAnne attempts to calm the children's fears by teaching that though they may be on their own, Heavenly Father watches over and protects them.

Step, reacting to what he considers a simplistic explanation of the workings of the divine, interrupts DeAnne: "God doesn't work that way. . . . He doesn't stop evil people from committing their crimes." After DeAnne rephrases Stevie's question as asking whether they are safe, Step elaborates on his previous response: "Yes, Stevie, you're safe, as safe as anybody ever is who's alive in this world. But you were asking about what if somebody really terrible wanted to do something vicious to our whole family, and the truth is that if somebody is truly, deeply evil, then sometimes good people can't stop him until he's done a lot of bad things. That's just the way it happens sometimes." What then, Stevie begins to wonder, is the role of God in protecting his children? Step concedes that "only in the long run" does God seem to get those who commit evil.[8] This scene, which suggests the vulnerability of good to the attacks of evil, concludes with Step's partially comforting remark, "There aren't that many really evil people in the world."[9]

But the narrative forces the reader to question Step's concluding remark. The narrative abounds with evil people. At work, Step associates with the self-protecting, deceitful Dicky who tries to intimidate and manipulate Step, while making plans to steal Hacker Snack (Step's successful computer game) and with Gallowglass, a bright, young computer whiz who admits a sexual interest in children.

At church, the Fletchers are hounded by Dolores LeSueur, the prophetess in their ward, who claims to receive revelations for everyone. Most of the time, Dolores, as long as she gets her way, is harmless; but at times she intimidates others, as when she tells Stevie that his parents are unrighteous and are preventing him from accomplishing a great work. Even at school, Stevie is emotionally abused by a teacher who has allowed hatred to grow inside her like a disease.

8. Ibid., 14.
9. Ibid.

Step confronts, addresses, and attempts to remedy all these manifestations of evil. By getting a contract with Agamemnon, another software company, Step is able to leave the evil environment at work and the family learns to ignore Dolores LeSueur's revelations. In the case of Stevie's teacher, Step confronts the teacher and principal, resulting in the teacher's dismissal. In reporting his confrontation with the teacher to Stevie, Step summarizes how good people are to respond to evil: "I mean, that's what you do with bad people, when you can. You just name their sin to them. That's what the prophets always did," said Step. "Just name their sins, and if they have any spark of goodness in them at all, they repent."[10]

These attempts by Step to confront evil are part of the development of the principal theme in *Lost Boys*, which is that the most effective way to combat evil is to identify and name sin. As Step tells Stevie, "[People] can only do their evil when they think that nobody knows."[11]

Step believes that people with a spark of goodness in them will repent when their sins are named. Stevie, however, asks about people who are the exception, who seem to lack any element of goodness. The narrative contains a foreshadowing of the novel's conclusion as Step, using the example of the prophet Abinadi in the Book of Mormon, shows that sometimes evil people choose to kill the messenger, rather than repent. Speaking about the possible consequences of naming sin, Step says, "Son, I guess [Abinadi] knew and the Lord knew that death isn't the worst thing in the world. The worst thing in the world is knowing that something really bad is going on and then not doing anything about it because you're afraid."[12]

Although Step and DeAnne identify, confront, and eliminate many manifestations of evil, the real evil of the novel remains unknown to them. Stevie is the only character who recognizes the evil that was foreshadowed in the prologue, evil which is of a different kind than that which Step and DeAnne overcome. Eventually—like the prophet Abinadi and even the character's possible namesake, Stephen in the New Testament—Stevie will sacrifice his life in order to identify the greatest evil in the novel. His ultimate sacrifice leads to the containment of evil, but only after that evil has taken the lives of seven boys plus his own. Stevie is able to bring about a redemption and healing only after the evil has brought about much suffering. Though Step and DeAnne can confront and overcome one kind of evil in the novel, the uncreated evil is overcome only by Stevie's sacrifice.

With the computer used to extend his consciousness, Stevie's goodness

10. Ibid., 240.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.

and sensitivity lead him to an awareness of, and contact with, the seven boys who have been molested and murdered as a result of the evil described in the prologue. When Stevie's growing list of imaginary friends matches the names printed in the newspaper of the missing boys, Step and DeAnne call the detective in charge of the murder cases. After briefly meeting with Stevie, Douglas, the detective, comments to Step and DeAnne on the relationship between the good that he discerns in Stevie and the evil which has caused these boys to be lost:

> What's going on here in Steuben is so evil and he is so good and pure that he can't help but feel it. . . . The rest of us, we've got good and evil mixed up in us, and our own badness makes so much noise we can't hear the evil of the monster out there. . . . The evil that pushed those names into his mind, that is real.[13]

The detective recognizes within Stevie a purity which reacts to the real evil present in Steuben, a real evil that will be contained only by a sacrifice of goodness.

Card's work portrays the Mormon theological belief that evil really is real; it has an ontological status of its own; that is, evil does not merely exist in order to promote a higher good. As B. H. Roberts stated, evil "is not a created thing. It is one of the eternal existences, just as duration is and space. It is as old as law—old as Truth, old as the eternal universe."[14] This evil comes from another realm, another reality, at times making itself manifest in this world.

Sterling McMurrin in *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* explains that "the primary meaning of human existence is found in the struggle to overcome [evil]." Humanity can choose to either resist God or join with him in the endless struggle "to extend his dominion over the blind processes of the material world and to cultivate the uses of freedom for the achievement of moral ends."[15]

The members of the Fletcher family are—to quote the Apostle Paul—"laborers together with God" (1 Cor. 3:9) in the creation of the good and in the struggle against evil. They live through the severest of adversity and attempt to transmute some of the evil—whatever portion is possible—into good. For the most part, they are able to withstand the evil, but they do not stand unaffected.

Card's narrative suggests the importance of identifying and naming evil and taking action against it, even though the consequence may be death. While reading the novel, the reader brings about the narrative's

13. Ibid., 441.

14. Quoted in Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1965), 108.

15. Ibid., 97.

disclosure of evil and, therefore, participates vicariously in the struggle against it. Contrary to the belief that narrative often advocates or gives license to evil, this particular narrative identifies, struggles against, and, after much suffering and pain, binds evil.

Card's *Lost Boys* and Young's *Salvador* are postmodern texts that explore multiple realities and the intrusion of the supernatural into this world. Postmodernism encourages the juxtaposition of realities and worlds in a way that seems propitious for Mormon literature. Postmodernism allows for the combining of diverse elements—the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, the reality of one culture and that of another—in the same text in a way that didn't seem possible in modernism. However, as in modernism, many elements of postmodernism are obviously antithetical to Mormonism. The most disturbing characteristic is what has been called the "entropy of meaning,"[16] as narrators become impotent and as structure, the intelligible shape or form of what we call meaning, becomes "deconstructed."

But as these two works demonstrate, much meaning can be created out of the struggle between, and the synthesis of, realities and realms. Other works of Mormon literature could continue to explore the tension resulting from such a clash. The great Mormon novel might be the one that can bring these realities and realms together in visionary combinations, allowing us—like Joseph Smith—a glimpse at worlds without end.

16. Hassan, 55.