

Book Review

Levi S. Peterson, *The Canyons of Grace*

By Eugene England

Review of Levi S. Peterson, *The Canyons of Grace* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 135 pp., \$11.95 hardbound; \$4.95 paperback.

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GOOD LITERATURE IS informed and energized by conflict. Levi Peterson finds ways to give fictional voice, in believable and revealing actions, to the deep religious conflict some Mormons experience—obedience to the ordering of divine grace versus integrity to the independence of human grace. In doing so he makes the nature and power of his characters’ various versions of Mormon theology—its stern demands and compelling visions—clearer to others, as well as to Mormons themselves. But in the main his protagonists are attractive human beings *in spite of* their being Mormon, not because of it. We still must wait for a writer to capture consistently the deep ravishment of sincere Mormon faith, the comprehensible joy as well as utterable anxiety God’s presence can bring. Peterson’s book breaks extremely valuable ground and may well be the best collection of Mormon stories yet, but we can anticipate better, from him and others.

In the first story, “The Confessions of Augustine,” the narrator experiences the ancient conflict of flesh and spirit in his own Mormon terms:

Joseph Smith said that, in the beginning, there was inchoate matter and there were intelligences. One of these intelligences was superior, and He became God. He organized matter and made stars, suns, and worlds. He gave spiritual bodies to other intelligences, and they became His children in the pre-existence. Then, to give them a perfect being like His own, He prepared a mortal existence for them to test who would obey Him and who would not.

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. How do I otherwise account for myself at eighteen? (P. 9)

In what becomes the pattern for all the stories, Fremont Dunham revels for a time (like Augustine) in his ‘wild heart’ and in the literal wilderness that are parts of the universe still for him untamed by God. But divine grace intrudes on that illusion: When a companion is killed by a falling tree, Fremont has an ‘illumination’ that “the mountains were not wild and vacant” that “God was everywhere” (p. 15). This is confirmed even more devastatingly when, after deciding to marry a non-Mormon

girl he has been sleeping with, he suddenly feels a change inside (“a light had gone out,” p. 21) and no longer loves her—yet marries her and tries but ends up in a divorce, then a new marriage in the faith, and life as an “orthodox” Mormon. But a slight touch of irony reveals the cost of such abject surrender to the narrator’s version of divine grace:

The love of God is obedience. Like Augustine, I know that God will not be scorned. If it suits Him, He will feed me tragedy on the instant. He will shatter me. ... I will be put into the fiery furnace and whatever is base and impure in me will be burned away and I will be the pure metal that God desires me to be. (P. 25)

“Saved” (at least changed) by grace in a moral universe is the pattern. It is the pattern we know from Franz Kafka and Flannery O’Connor, but without Kafka’s absurd dreamlike rationality and also without O’Connor’s joy in the irrational intrusion of grace. Peterson’s world is sensual, ordered, lovely, with only occasional grotesques, with both the inchoate universe and God’s awful grace largely hidden. He can give us this world in a few lines, here the description of a saw, its terror just under the surface of ordered beauty:

Balanced on its arbor, it was as high as a man. A hundred filed, offset teeth gleamed on its circumference. When the muffled diesel behind it worked and the broad rubber belt whirred on pulleys, the great blade sang with an almost imperceptible timbre, like crystal that has been lightly struck. In motion, the teeth blurred into the iridescence of hummingbird wings. At the elevation of the sawyer’s finger, the carriage man ratcheted a log into position, and suddenly it hurtled into the saw. The teeth shrieked, the sawdust spurted, and irresistibly a plank fell away. (P. 10)

Peterson can also give us, in a few lines, what seems to his protagonists clearly a more attractive though not necessarily more true alternative to divine grace, the beauty of human grace. Paul, in “Road to Damascus,” is, like Christ’s apostle, converted by a vision, but this Paul *grieves* over the iron necessity of yielding. Before his vision he reflects on his Mormon wife’s disappointment that he has not accepted baptism, despite his faithfulness to human responsibilities:

Wasn’t he a good enough father? “Hold me,” little Amy would say, and he would heft her into the air, saying, “Will do so, sparrow,” and then he would squeeze her little bare feet and put her onto the wagon to go with him wherever it was he had to go. (P. 39)

And Paul is given Peterson’s own love of wilderness and regret at its loss: “There’s nothing like the mountains under a summer sun” he says as he relinquishes those mountains after his vision (p. 56). But Peterson’s maturity as an artist is revealed in his capture of Paul’s *longing* for God, as moving as his bitter grief at finally succumbing:

Sometimes Regina caressed his neck, kissed his forehead, and looked upon him with her bright face, her brows lifted musingly, her glance a caress of health and peace. Her soft hands and tranquil eyes tempted him, quickened his longing, roused him to believe, if only for an in-

stant, that somewhere was an everlasting home. It was far away, but surely somewhere, beyond the western mountains and then again beyond those mysterious purple peaks so far beyond them, was a golden kingdom. Bright with unending sunshine and filled with utter joy, it was the place where God was. (P. 40)

It is easy to overrate one story, “The Christianizing of Coburn Heights,” because it is the first piece of serious humor to appear in Mormondom in a long time. And as a new bishop I find it a marvelous antidote to the sentimental do-goodism and moral arrogance that can afflict anyone called to ecclesiastical authority; every priesthood leader, minister, and rabbi should read it for caution and instruction. Peterson here focuses on that dimension of his theme that has to do with the unpredictability of divine grace, both its resistance to the demands of moral imperialism and yet its ultimate helplessness before human agency,

Rendella Kranpitz, a compound of Sherwood Anderson rural grotesque and New York baglady, arrives in an affluent east bench Salt Lake Mormon ward by an act of grace (inheriting a house). She commits various assaults on the sensibilities of ward members (“When that choir sang last time, you could have laid me out square for being on a goat farm” p. 80), and her bishop threatens to excommunicate her for “contentiousness.” But the stake president, Sherman Colligan, takes her on as a special project, a supreme test of his leadership and the power of the gospel, an opportunity for his wealthy members to prove themselves worthy of their inheritances:

He had risen to a vice-presidency in a savings and loan company in the city. He took courses in motivation and management. He had a lust for challenge, resistance, and obstacles. His thick chest and broad shoulders suggested solidity, drive, the ability to move and to make move. Yet his fine face beamed with kindness and good sense. The man of arms within him was tamed to Christian purposes; he was tuned entirely to the pastoral services of his calling. He forgave the sinful, comforted the bereaved, sustained the wavering. He prayed for himself and his people a proper testing, a sufficient trial to keep them alert, spiritually fecund, resistant to the softening which comes with abundance and blessings. (P. 84)

However, some of that “inchoate matter” is there in Rendella, and she foils the president at every turn, with Peterson taking opportunity to satirize hilariously everyone from the “high-ranking” Mormon liberals scandalized by Rendella’s aggressive fundamentalist politics to the prototypical Mormon right-wing third party candidate she supports.

Rendella finally seems cowed by the president’s persistence. But then she defies and defiles him in an act of transcendent offensiveness and an assertion of intractable agency. And he remains, though deeply shaken (“It seemed as if nothing in the world was very important”), unhumiliated, still uneducated about the ontological weight of his opposition, the danger of presuming too much about God’s purposes, and the extent of his own limitations:

He reminded himself that Sherman Colligan never quit. There was

no reason why he should lose his nerve because of a frail, demented little woman. There was a godly purpose for the affliction which had come to him and his stake—there had to be. His testimony, his sanity depended upon it. Rendella Kranpitz was obviously not a run-of-the-mill test, an ordinary, everyday trial. She was an epic probe, an examination of heroic proportions. (P. 101)

Yes, it is tempting to overrate that story. (And on second thought perhaps it would be a mistake for new bishops and ministers to read it: They need a certain impervious optimism even to survive!) The last sentence of the story undercuts the climax with a weak joke, and there are technical flaws elsewhere. Peterson (remember, this is his first book) has not yet attained the leanness, the disciplined exclusions of O'Connor, and there are occasional seams in the fabric of illusional reality it is the task of fiction to create. On the other hand, he is mastering his craft steadily. A close study of his revisions of "Road to Damascus" (which first appeared in *Dialogue*, Winter 1978) is a fine lesson in rewriting. The new version is much less harsh, more subtle in its use of the central metaphor of the stunted pine, balanced in its evocation of Paul's central conflict and of the attractions of Regina and her God.

The final story, "Canyons of Grace," is Peterson's most challenging. The protagonist, Arabella Gurney, thirty and single, uses a summer excavating an Anasazi site in Utah's canyon country to find courage both to act out her rebellion and finally to be "saved" by "grace." She decides to accept the invitation to move into the tent of Franklin, a member of the anthropology team, "an unquestioning believer in science . . . [with] a kind of secular innocence, an enviable ability to suppose that whatever he did was good" (p. 104). But Arabella—inescapably though reluctantly Mormon—finds she does not have that ability to escape guilt. After being accosted in a nearby town by Reuben Milking, a self-proclaimed "prophet" who ordains her to be his plural wife and implies he knows of her intended sin, she smells damnation on herself and recognizes her "immeasurable, despicable cowardice" (p. 115). On a long hike with Franklin out to a remote canyon full of petroglyphs, she tells him of her decision not to sleep with him ("I really do believe in God . . . and I'm afraid," p. 117); but in the canyon itself, after he proposes, she reverses herself. And, after giving herself to Franklin, "she did not doubt her damnation. But for the moment, pushing aside her anxiety, she chose to exult in her courage, to relish the taste of her daring" (p. 120).

Arabella lives with Franklin with a sense of foreboding and, when she is kidnapped by a disciple of Reuben Milking, acquiesces for a time to Milking's demands ("One of your babies is going to be the prophet of this church some day," p. 128). Peterson captures the full horror of the LeBaron type of ruthless schismatic, a horror which finally moves Arabella, despite her guilty need for self-degradation, to escape to the canyons and a purely human rebirth. We last see her, having killed her vengeful God in Reuben, left only with her mortality:

The wilderness bore her no grudge, was still willing to bless her. She was alive, and the universe was holy. She would mourn for Reuben, who was dead, and for all the others who could not bear to know of their ultimate extinction. As for herself, she had decided to be coura-

geous. . . . An ephemeral predator upon a minor planet, she went forward free and filled with grace. (P. 135)

That last line—balancing all that Arabella has lost against what she has gained—is poignantly ironic. We have moved, in the course of the book, from a life bound up in absolute surrender to an unusual view of divine grace—to a life bound up in absolute surrender to the limits of human grace. And for many readers, Arabella’s choice will seem far from the real essence of “freedom” or “courage.”

But lest anyone suppose Peterson approves of sin or identifies with Arabella in her purely human grace, I recommend, as a gloss on this story, his marvelous personal essay, “A Mormon and Wilderness” (*Sunstone*, December 1979). There he explores his feeling and convictions about *both* the divine grace expressed in the faith and lives of his ancestors and the human grace contained in his love of wilderness. His chief exhibit is his mother, who “converses daily with God,” lives the commandments, and lets her compassion for the sinful override her moral indignation. In Peterson’s description of her genealogical work, her need to unite the human family, to disown time and space, search out dead parents and lost descendants, turn hearts to fathers and to children, he provides the most tender and intelligent evocation of the Spirit of Elijah I have read. About his mother he writes, “She has no words, no fine distinctions, no recognition of possible disparities between her heavenly faith and her love for this earth” (p. 72). *The Canyons of Grace* suggests its author has not yet found in his work such an integration of divine and human grace—but yearns for it.

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