

The Role of the Novel in Post-Utopian Mormonism

In his book *The Mormon People*, Matthew Bowman cites 1890 as a “convenient turning point” in the Mormon narrative. In that year, Church President Wilford Woodruff officially ended the Church’s sanction on plural marriage, a practice that had come to define Mormon identity since the early 1850s. This change signaled, in some ways, the beginning of a decades-long transitional period for the church that “drained from [it] the apocalyptic utopianism of the dusty Great Basin frontier and made of it a church more American, but also no less Mormon” (152, 154). What eased and enabled this shift, this paper argues, has much to do with how Mormons gradually freed Zion, their core utopian principle, from the gravitational pull of Jackson County, Missouri, and granted it an elasticity of signification that helped to preserve its utopian ideals in a post-utopian condition. This paper also argues that the Mormon novel is a product of this post-utopian condition, and grew out of the Mormons’ paradoxical desire to assimilate into American middle-class culture and continue to affirm a distinctive Mormon identity. Turn-of-the-century Mormons, after all, saw in the novel a popular genre that had the potential to appeal to the rising Mormon generation and instruct them on how to perform new Mormon identities and construct a post-utopian Zion. The Mormon novel, therefore, which I understand to be about Mormons by Mormon authors, offers valuable insight into the negotiations involved in making the transition from a utopian to post-utopian condition. A study of it also reveals how it continues to act as a site of post-utopian Mormonism’s ongoing efforts to achieve Zion within the context of American pluralism. Through it, we can identify and better understand how minority communities negotiate difference and maintain boundaries while participating in and contributing to an increasingly diverse and polyglot society.

The Post-Utopian Condition

In general, the term “utopia” connotes an ideal condition or society, or more broadly, ubiquitous efforts toward social betterment and the creation of the ideal. On a basic level, then, the term *post-utopian* implies a condition that follows the demise or failure of the utopian. If this is the case, it would seem altogether inaccurate to suggest that Mormons have moved beyond utopianism when they continue to list the decidedly utopians goals of perfecting the individual and “caring for the poor and needy” among the purposes of the Church (88, *Handbook* 9). Critic Fredric Jameson’s contributions to the admittedly broad field of utopian studies, however, allow us to think of the “utopian form” as a “representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality” (*Archaeologies* xii). In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Jameson suggests that a utopian space exists as “an imaginary enclave within real social space.” Society, in other words, tends to compartmentalize itself both spatially and socially through an infinite number of boundaries that it constructs in order to differentiate and organize how we live, think, and interact with others. Within the spaces formed by these boundaries, Jameson suggests, we create alternative Utopian spaces that challenge the boundaries of the existing social space. These spaces are “a kind of eddy or self-contained backwater” that disrupt the normal momentum of differentiation. They are an “aberrant by-product” that forms a “pocket of stasis” that fosters “Utopian fantasy.” In other words, these utopian spaces explore the present “agitation” occurring within the ever-changing real social space, and distance themselves from the “practical politics” of real social space by proposing a radically different space as an alternative to the present (15). These Utopian enclaves, Jameson suggests, “offer a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on” (16).

With Jameson in mind, can we understand nineteenth-century Mormonism as an experiment to echolocate the boundaries between the American Self and Other? Throughout the nineteenth-century, Mormons were not unique in attempting to build alternative communities where they could practice their beliefs without outside interference. Nor were their ethnic and cultural backgrounds radically different from the Anglo-Protestants with whom they frequently came in conflict (Givens 6, 123). Mormons, therefore, were forced to construct their Otherness by creating a discourse of radical difference, and supplementing it with the performance of radically different practices like polygamy and economic and social communalism (see Shipp, *Sojourner* 318). In a sense, they established Zion as a “representational meditation on radical difference” that sought to expose the boundaries of American democratic pluralism and use those boundaries as an indictment against the mainstream culture.

Nineteenth-century Mormons were utopian, therefore, not only because they endeavored to build a “better” society than the one they already had, but also because they actively maintained the stance that their “better” society was radically different from—and a corrective to—the status quo. This stance was in effect essentially from the time Joseph Smith first dreamed of a holy city beyond the Mississippi until the Saints struck a compromise with the federal government to cast their utopian dreams far into the future, subdue radical practices, and focus more on the here and now. In her book *The Politics of American Religious Identity*, Kathleen Flake characterizes this compromise as one of form. In essence, the Mormons substituted their notion of Zion as a literal Kingdom of God, defined most overtly by performative gestures like theocracy and polygamy, for something more abstract, monogamous, and politically benign. They also replaced their theocracy with the form of the traditional Protestant denomination, thus lessening their otherness in the eyes of a wary nation. In exchange, Mormons were given a

reprieve from the federal opposition that had nearly crushed them out of existence in the 1880s, thus granting them the privilege of participating politically and religiously on the national stage (8). This allowed the Mormons to continue as a people, although without the public trappings of radical difference. In doing so, they created means whereby they could preserve the energies of their utopian values of community building and social betterment without seeming to occupy a radical stance.

Thomas G. Alexander argues that this turn-of-the-century transition forced Mormons to “grop[e] for a new paradigm that would [...] allow them to live in peace with other Americans” (18). The new paradigm that emerged, I suggest, was a post-utopian condition, which allowed Mormons to preserve their essential utopian ideas beneath a stance of subdued difference and assimilation. Contemporary Mormonism, therefore, occupies a post-utopian position not because it has abandoned its commitment to the betterment of society, or even the Zion of its utopian millennialism, but because it has projected these goals far into the future and retreated from its stance as Anglo-Protestant America’s foil. Indeed, it is not altogether surprising that the early years of Mormonism’s post-utopian condition were characterized by public relations efforts that downplayed their differences and sought to “be understood, [if] not necessarily joined, by outsiders” (Nielsen 47).

It is within this context that we ought to understand the rise and development of the Mormon novel, for the novel offered Mormons a normative venue through which they could construct a post-polygamy identity without threatening outsiders with isolationism and radically different social practices. As we will see, the novel also allowed them to preserve Mormonism’s utopian impulse toward social betterment in a way that constituted an abstract, rather than a literal Zion.

Mormons and Novel-Reading

In many ways, 1889 was a watershed year for Mormon fiction. One year earlier, Orson F. Whitney had delivered a sermon entitled “Home Literature” in which he challenged Mormon writers to create “a literature of power and purity” through which they could better share the Latter-day Saint message (298). Eight months later, B. H. Roberts, using the pseudonym “Horatio,” published an essay entitled “Legitimate Fiction” in the February issue of *The Contributor*. In the essay, Roberts writes favorably about fiction that has been “employed in fighting social and political abuses,” drawing specific attention to fiction’s capacity for being “the most effectual means of attracting the attention of the general public and instructing them.” In his mind, novelists were rapidly taking the place of essayists because of their ability to make “[t]he dry facts of a theory respecting social reform [...] live in persons and work out the results desired.” Therefore, he “recognize[d] [in the novel] an effective and pleasing method of teaching doctrine, illustrating principle, exhibiting various phases of character, and making the facts of history at once well known, and giving them an application to human conduct” (133-136).

In the subsequent decades, an influx of fiction and serialized novels appeared in Mormon periodicals like *The Young Woman’s Journal*, *The Juvenile Instructor*, and *The Improvement Era*, which served as core venues for Mormon home literature into the first decades of the twentieth century. Writers like Nephi Anderson and Julia Macdonald also continued to justify their fiction by emphasizing two important qualities: its popularity and its purpose, or functional-didactic quality. In a sense, they portrayed the novel as a popular medium, formerly associated solely with Babylon and sin, which could be used to instill the utopian values of Zion into the rising generation of Latter-day Saints. Significantly, this change in attitude came at a time when Mormons could no longer rely on former markers of utopian difference, like polygamy and

communalism, to serve as entrenching vehicles for these values. Novel reading, therefore, offered Mormons a socially acceptable middle-class practice that could, in a deeply subversive way, preserve and promote the Mormon morals and teachings that they still believed defined them as a peculiar people, everlastingly separate from Babylon.

The Mormon Novel as Post-Utopian Expression

To better understand how the Mormon novel accomplished these aims—and continues to accomplish them—to constitute post-utopian expression, I identify three features of the Mormon novel that are more or less characteristic of the genre: 1) the borrowing of established forms, 2) the privileging of function over aesthetics, and 3) the textual negotiation of community boundaries.

Borrowing Established Forms. Following the assimilative trend of post-Utopian Mormonism, Mormon novels have favored established generic forms and conventions rather than radically innovative forms and stylistic eccentricities. Susa Young Gates' *John Stevens' Courtship* (1909), for example, relies on the stable conventions of historical fiction and popular woman's fiction. Nephi Anderson's *Added Upon* (1898) contains elements of utopian fiction, which was enjoying its peak popularity when the book was published, while the rest of the book reads like the sentimental romances from earlier in the century. The same is true for more contemporary Mormon novels. The works of Douglas Thayer and Levi Peterson published in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, look back to Ernest Hemingway and Flannery O'Connor. Twenty-first century Mormon writers like Steven Peck, Theric Jepson, and Brady Udall are writing novels that take their cues from the conventions of post-modern fiction.

Of course, this preference for established forms and styles over innovation should not suggest that Mormon writers lack creativity or originality. Rather, I suggest that Mormon writers

choose established generic forms and conventions as a way to subvert the post-utopian compromise that forces them to abandon radical difference in exchange for a continued place in the broader cultural dialogue. In a sense, they follow the same path as other ethnic or minority writers in drawing from traditions of the dominant culture to find a voice through which they can justify their experience and subvert the boundary constructs imposed by mainstream traditions. Mormon novels, therefore, borrow existing forms as a way to showcase their post-utopian sameness, justify their place in the literary tradition, and ultimately subvert it.

Privileging Function over Aesthetics. The next distinctive feature of post-utopian expression is the privileging of function over aesthetics. In many ways, this is the principal literary carry-over of Mormonism's largely utopian nineteenth-century literature, as it seeks to continue the work of promoting social betterment and community cohesion. At the same time, however, it is also the aspect of the Mormon novel that has drawn the most criticism from its observers—and perhaps kept it from receiving more critical attention. Indeed, considering home literature's plea for “artistic preaching” in novels, it is not altogether surprising that Mormon literary critics have largely overlooked the influence of Mormonism's transition to the post-utopian condition—and the didactic literature it provoked—on the development of the Mormon novel. The first contemporary literary critics to study Mormon literature, after all, were trained in New Critical methods that emphasized a text's aesthetic value and formal technique over its functional use, which severely tipped the scales against didactic novels. Trained to look at the aesthetic qualities of texts, they had little interest in—and even some contempt for—“inartistic” texts that seemed calibrated to perform a useful cultural function. Such works appeared anomalous to their notions of art and authorship, and even smacked of Church propaganda. In her groundbreaking 1985 book *Sensational Designs*, however, literary critic Jane Tompkins

suggests that even texts that are “suspect from a modernist point of view” help us to understand the way “a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” (xi). For Tompkins, texts are not passive objects of beauty and form, but “agents of cultural formation” because of the cultural work they perform (xvii).

Until recently, critics have largely ignored the cultural work of Mormon novels. Attention to cultural work, however, allows us to look at these works from the cultural context of turn-of-the-century Mormonism and see how the sentimental conventions of Home Literature fiction, say, become less a poor stylistic choice, and more a deliberate strategy for preserving Mormonism’s deeply-rooted commitment to future utopianism and radical difference. It also helps us to see how the functional remains a central aspect of Mormon fiction today, even though contemporary Mormon novelists generally balk at accusations of didacticism—or what Nephi Anderson called “purpose”—in their work out of fear, perhaps, that such attention would distract and detract from the technical and aesthetic quality of their work. The extent to which such purpose continues as an elemental part in the Mormon novel today is apparent in Eugene England’s suggestion that “[Mormon writers] tell us not only what it feels like to be chosen”—that is, both set apart and sent forth—“but what [Mormon] culture looks like when [it] fail[s] to live like chosen people and how the whole world might look if [Latter-day Saints] accepted the call to bless all nations of the earth with [their] righteousness” (89). Indeed, for England, the task of the Mormon writer is to “show us the attractions and easiness of misuse of power—man over woman, white over black, wealth over poverty—and then hold out persuasive hints of alternatives, of the redemptive power of grace, even of worldly foolishness, of sacrificial love, of yielding to each other” (80). I suggest further that one aim of the critic of the Mormon novel is to tease out these tendencies and uncover “purpose” in Mormon literature.

Negotiating Boundaries. Closely related to the functional quality of the Mormon novel is its interest in boundary negotiations. Interestingly, one of the great dilemmas of Mormonism's shift from a utopian to a post-utopian community was the loss of a sense of concrete boundaries. As Stephen C. Taysom notes, "[n]ineteenth-century Mormons understood that a line existed between the righteous and the wicked," and that line informed much of their activity inside and outside of the boundaries they constructed to enforce that line (51). Early Mormons believed that these boundaries would take a concrete form in the City of Zion they hoped to build in Jackson County, Missouri. After these physical boundaries failed to materialize, however, Mormons adapted their view of Zion to encompass something more abstract. This especially was the case at the end of the nineteenth century, when Mormons abandoned their stance of radical difference for a post-utopian position that wore away at many of the community's immediately recognizable boundaries, like polygamy, theocracy, and communal economics. By the twentieth century, Zion was well on its way to becoming a looser, relatively decentralized concept in Mormon theology.

Understanding the concept loosely in this manner, however, has allowed Mormons—and their novelists—to open it up to a kind of free play of signification that they can shape as they seek to promote and explore—sometimes pragmatically, sometimes not—the malleable boundaries that constitute contemporary Mormonism. Importantly, however, the malleability of the Zion concept in Mormonism's post-utopian condition does not preclude it from still behaving like a utopia. Jameson's notion of utopian space, after all, involves creating an alternative, experimental space of difference to act as a critique of the existing status quo, which Mormonism continues to do in sublimated and paradoxical ways. Consequently, despite the non-radical stance it takes towards the rest of the world, Mormonism continues nevertheless to identify with

the mainstream while insisting upon its own peculiarity (see Givens, *People* xvi). In this insistence, Mormonism continues to establish, in less overt ways, boundaries and enclaves, which are of no small interest to Jameson's understanding of utopia. As he argues elsewhere, utopias are "totalities" that symbolize "a world transformed" that erect "limits, boundaries between the utopian and the non-utopian." Significantly, though, while these boundaries seek to establish a difference between the spaces they separate, they also serve as their own critique of the utopian space ("Utopia" 25). Hence, he clarifies his definition of utopia to suggest that it is not simply a "representational meditation" on difference, but "an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining change in our own society and the world" (23). Utopia, in a sense, shows us the limits of our ability to imagine difference, and makes us aware of what we can and cannot conceive as an alternative to the present. By imagining a better world, that is, we become more cognizant of the ethical shortcomings of our own imaginations. Mormonism's amorphous approach to its own utopian vision, therefore, makes it possible to imagine many boundaries and many alternatives to those boundaries, which in turn helps Mormonism adapt itself in its post-utopian condition. In a sense, every new interpretation of Zion, the "pure in heart," creates new enclaves and new critiques, which in turn reflect back on and critique Mormonism's ability to define difference and imagine alternatives to the present.

This organic nature of Zion, and its effect on how Mormons constitute and critique themselves, has not gone overlooked by Mormon literary critics. In his essay "Toward a Mormon Criticism: Should We Ask 'Is this Mormon Literature,'" Gideon Burton suggests that Mormon literature is part of Joseph Smith's larger project of restoring Zion to the earth. Indeed, Burton claims that literature "is what [Mormon writers] *do* on the way to a still distant, spiritual-cultural

destiny called Zion” (36, 38). More specifically, he suggests “that the role of Mormon literature and criticism will not be to establish what [Mormon] culture currently conceives of as Zion [...]; rather, Mormon criticism and literature will help to discover and define Zion—to *achieve* this aspiration, not just reflect it” (41).

For Burton, Mormon literature needs to remain constantly on the move, constantly adapting itself to better explore its capacity to conceive Zion, rather than “mimetically represent or advertise Mormon experience or religion” (41). In pursuing this aim, perhaps, Burton is too teleological in seeming to suggest that Mormon literature’s efforts “to discover and define Zion” will eventually bring about a single and apparently changeless “spiritual-cultural destiny called Zion.” Even so, his notion of Mormon literature as the pursuit of Zion accords well with my claim that the Mormon novel is a site of perpetual free play where writers and readers can discover and rediscover, define and redefine, investigate and reinvestigate the boundaries of Zion. Indeed, since the concept of Zion is a contestable post-utopian space, a malleable, polymorphous ideal that never arrives at a teleological end because it is always being stretched, rearticulated, challenged, and supplanted, the Mormon novel is deeply interested in, to borrow Burton’s words, “establish[ing] what [Mormon] culture currently conceives of as Zion” as well as exploring the potentials of the Zion concept and advocating for efforts or changes that will more readily bring them about. While the Mormon novel may never succeed in achieving a teleological Zion, it nevertheless functions as a meditative site where utopian and post-utopian boundaries can be proposed and proved, investigated and interrogated.

In a sense, then, all Mormon novels are failures in their efforts to bring about better communities. No matter what new boundaries they propose, no matter how they seek to define and redefine the circumference of Zion, they will only reveal, to borrow from Jameson, “more

about [their] own limits and weaknesses than they do about perfect societies” (“Comments” 74). Even so, this should not prevent Mormon novelists from writing nor impede critics from reading the boundaries in these texts. Jameson is quick to remind us, after all, that the fact that “Utopias have something to do with failure” should not justify the pessimism or paralysis we risk acquiring in the pursuit of “Utopian visions.” He suggest, in fact, that “we use the Utopian visions we are capable of projecting today in order to explore the structural limits of [utopian] imaginings in order to get a better sense of what it is about the future that we are unwilling or unable to imagine” (“Comments” 76). In a sense, these visions can provide Mormon novelists with a utopian impulse that helps them discern Zion in “a variety of unexpected and disguised, concealed, distorted ways,” leading them to conduct a kind of “detective work” of “decipher[ing] and reading utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real” (“Utopia” 25-26). Moreover, by making the Mormon community aware of their “anxiety about utopia”—that aspect of Zion they are “unwilling or unable to imagine”—these novelists better prepare the community for and offer new insights on how to change when change becomes desirable or necessary (“Comments” 76).

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