

Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the American Renaissance

Robert A. Rees

PREAMBLE

. . . a book I have made,
The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything,
A book separate, not link'd with the rest nor felt by the intellect,
But you ye untold latencies will thrill to every page.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

OVER THE COURSE OF A LIFETIME, I have read the Book of Mormon a number of times and have taught it in seminary, institute, and gospel doctrine classes. I have written about it and read extensively in both the literature that supports Joseph Smith's claims about its origins and the literature that postulates the Book of Mormon is a product of a nineteenth-century imagination. I am a literary critic who has spent a professional lifetime reading, teaching, and writing about literary texts. Much of my interest in and approach to the Book of Mormon lies with the text—though not just as a field for scholarly exploration. I'm drawn to its narrative sweep, complexity of plots, variety of stories, array of characters who inhabit this world, and the premise that the book is about ultimate matters—God's dealings with his children in the New World.

Even before the book's publication, controversy arose about its origins, and immediately after it was published, theories about its composition began to abound. Some claimed that Smith was the author, and others countered that he was too ignorant and provincial to have written the book. Since that time, there have been numerous theories about the authorship of the Book of Mormon. These range from its being a tale told by an idiot *devoid* of either sound or fury while signifying nothing to its

having been inspired directly by the Devil to (the latest claim) its having been authored by a genius who was, in fact, inspired by God.

Louis Midgley has summarized the various attempts to explain the book into four categories: 1) "Joseph Smith wrote the book as a conscious fraud"; 2) "Joseph Smith wrote the book under the influence of some sort of paranoia or demonic possession or disassociative illusion"; 3) "Joseph Smith had the help of someone like Sidney Rigdon in creating the book as a conscious fraud"; and 4) "Joseph Smith wrote the book while under some sort of religious inspiration."¹ Alternately, these explanations present Joseph Smith as a country bumpkin and a brilliant sophisticate, as a simple self-delusionist and a complicated conspirator, as an idiot and a genius, and as a Devil-inspired and God-inspired seer.

Assessments of the Book of Mormon itself are no less extreme. Early views of the book included seeing it as "the result of gross imposition, and a grosser superstition,"² the ramblings of a digger for treasure, a book inspired by Satan, and a compilation of "every error and almost every truth discussed in N[ew] York during the ten years before its publication."³ Some saw it as a clear work of plagiarism, contending that Smith took the basic plot and much of the substantive content of the book from Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* or a fictional narrative written by Solomon Spaulding. In his *Comprehensive History of the Church*, B. H. Roberts catalogues some of the early anti-Mormon assessments of the Book: Governor Ford of Illinois saw it as "the fumes of an enthusiastic and fanatical imagination"; for Lily Dougal it was "the work of a genuinely deluded. . .but undisciplined brain," and, according to I. Woodbridge Riley, it was the product of "subjective hallucination, induced by hypnotic suggestion."⁴ Mark Twain gave it the cleverest and briefest of sobriquets when he said the book was so boring it should be considered "chloroform in print."⁵

1. Louis Midgley, "Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Critics and Their Theories," in ed. Noel B. Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1997), 104. Hereafter *BMAR*. I would like to thank Eugene England and Richard Dilworth Rust, life-long friends and fellow scholars of both the Book of Mormon and the American Renaissance, for reading the original manuscript of this study and offering helpful insights and suggestions.

2. Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon*, Vol. 1 (Independence, Mo: Zion's Publishing, 1959), 149.

3. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon*. . . (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832), 13, as quoted in Richard Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1: 20.

4. B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Vol. 1 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 150-51.

5. Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, Harriet Elinor Smith and Edgar M. Branch, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 107. Twain wrote, "If Joseph Smith composed this

In the eighteenth century there was a controversy over the authenticity of a collection of prose poems called *The Poems of Ossian*, which James Macpherson had written but tried to pass off as the work of a third century blind epic poet named Ossian. The book was extremely popular in both America and Europe, and most people considered it authentic. However, the venerable Samuel Johnson, upon being asked whether he thought the work could have been written by a modern man, replied, "Yes, Sir, many men, many women, and many children."⁶ I get the impression that some critics have the same opinion of the Book of Mormon—that not only could many men, women, and possibly even children have written it, but that any fool could have and that one particular fool, Joseph Smith, did.

While nineteenth century estimates tended to dismiss the book as the product of a deluded or demonic mind, twentieth century evaluations have tended to be more sophisticated, if no more reasonable. Bernard DeVoto postulated that Smith wrote the book under the spell of epileptic seizures, producing "a yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless, and inconceivably absurd. . . ."⁷ After the advent of Freud, it was inevitable that someone would try to explain the Book of Mormon in strictly psychological terms. The first significant attempt was Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (1954, revised 1971), which argued that the book was nothing more than a playing out of Joseph Smith's fantasies and the Smith family's psychological history.⁸ Robert Anderson's *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith* (1999) is the latest attempt to provide a psychological explanation of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Unfortunately, because Anderson relies so slavishly on Freudian analysis and so heavily on Brodie's study, he is even less successful in finding a convincing explanation as to how Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon than was Brodie.

As a literary critic I am aware of the multiple ways of looking at a book. Sometimes when I teach a text, I encourage examination through

book, the act was a miracle—keeping awake while he did it was, at any rate. If he, according to tradition, merely translated it from certain ancient and mysteriously-engraved plates of copper, which he declares he found under a stone, in an out-of-the-way locality, the work of translation was equally a miracle, for the same reason"(107).

6. Quoted in: James Boswell, "From The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 4th Edition, ed., M.H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), Vol. 1, 2395.

7. Bernard DeVoto, "The Centennial of Mormonism," *American Mercury*, 19, no. 5 (Jan 1930), 5, as quoted in Louis Midgley, "Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon?" *BMAR*, 105.

8. Fawn McKay Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged (New York: Knopf, 1971), 43, 413-17.

various critical approaches—new critical, historical, biographical, Freudian, Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, reader response, etc. All of these may be legitimate approaches to the text as long as they don't become too extreme or doctrinaire, which they often do. Reading contemporary criticism of the Book of Mormon reminds one of Emerson's statement, "Tell me your sect, and I'll tell you your argument." Often, the authors' contentions proceed far more clearly from their critical ideologies than from evidence in the text.

Over the years as I have read the opinions, analyses, examinations, and theories of various Book of Mormon scholars. I have been intrigued by the chasm that divides believers and apologists (those who consider the Book of Mormon divine) from non-believers and naturalists (those who insist on more naturalistic explanations). One of the things that characterize the relationship between these opposing camps (I call it a relationship since I don't think "dialogue" accurately describes their discourse) is their tendency to dismiss and label one another. Since I have been labeled both an apologist and a naturalist critic, sometimes in pejorative terms, I have watched this exchange with interest.

Those who have challenged the traditional explanation of the Book of Mormon by exploring its nineteenth-century setting⁹ have often raised important issues, which apologists sometimes dismiss too easily. On the other hand, when devoted Mormon scholars have likewise raised crucial issues, deepening or broadening our perspective on the text and the purported connection to its ancient setting, naturalists often dismiss the findings of this group without giving them fair consideration.

It is fascinating that each group looks at the book and finds its own predictable set of parallels. The naturalists find parallels with the late decades of the eighteenth and early decades of the nineteenth centuries, and this convinces them that the book is a product of a modern American mind. Meanwhile the apologists find numerous parallels with the ancient world and conclude that the book could only have originated with ancient peoples. One often feels that the discourse concerning the Book of Mormon has been reduced to, "My parallel arguments are more sophisticated, more authentic and more persuasive than yours!"¹⁰ And, indeed, since everyone uses parallel arguments, since at least some of the parallels discovered by each camp appear genuinely persuasive, and

9. For example, the writers of the articles in Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1993), 1, 2; hereafter *New Approaches*.

10. For a discussion of the use of parallel arguments, see Douglas F. Salmon, "Paral-
lelomania and the Study of Latter-day Saint Scripture: Confirmation, Coincidence, or the
Collective Unconscious?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2000):
129-156.

since no parallel argument is likely to be conclusive, the questions we can ask are: "How legitimate is the parallel?"; "How many points of correspondence exist between the two things compared?"; and, finally, "Is the comparison unique or, at least, compelling?" The more general the parallel and the more widely it can be found in the culture, the less convincing it is likely to be.

Gordon C. Thomasson argues that parallels that can be found outside what he calls "the information environment" of Joseph Smith and the period of the Book of Mormon's publication have "a different apologetic weight than something which was known." "For example," he writes, "the Dead Sea Scrolls (including biblical variants) were not part of Joseph Smith's or any one else's information environment in 1830, whereas, for example, the writings of Ixtilxochitl were known or knowable."¹¹ If in the Book of Mormon we find striking parallels to content or style in the writings of Ixtilxochitl, which Joseph Smith might have encountered either directly or indirectly, that is interesting, but if we find such parallels to unique material in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which Joseph Smith could not possibly have encountered, then such evidence would weigh much more convincingly in the case argued by the apologists.

In the past decade a new group of scholars has staked out territory between the apologists and naturalists. These scholars consider Joseph Smith a prophet and the Book of Mormon inspired, but they do not consider the book to be an authentically ancient work. They argue that even though they are fictional characters, the speakers of the Book of Mormon have important things to say to our generation. For example, Anthony A. Hutchinson feels, "The Book of Mormon should be seen as authoritative scripture." He explains: "God remains the author of the Book of Mormon viewed as the word of God, but Joseph Smith, in this construct, would be the book's inspired human author rather than its inspired translator."¹²

Clearly, such a view provokes ultimate questions about the Book of Mormon and more. If Alma is a fictional rather than an historical character, and if the Jesus who speaks in 3 Nephi is really Joseph Smith's inspired *imagining* of what Jesus would have said had he, in fact, visited ancient America, and if the central purpose of the text is to guide 19th century behavior (moral or otherwise), then what does it mean to call the book a second testament of Jesus Christ? Clearly we have radically altered the meaning of the text. Such a reading tends to make irrelevant, or

11. Gordon C. Thomasson, "Personal Parallel Perspectives on Parallelomania," unpublished paper in my possession, 3, 4. Thomasson's paper provides a direct rejoinder to Salmon's arguments.

12. Anthony A. Hutchinson, "The Word of God is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture," *New Approaches*, 1-2.

at least unimportant, the matter of whether God moves through history or of whether Jesus was the literal son of God who atoned for the sins of all Adam's children.

A related approach is taken by Mark Thomas in his *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives*. Thomas, who hopes his book will provide "a foundation for a new tradition in Book of Mormon studies," states, "In the end, a book's authority lies less in its origin than in its messages." Although he tries diligently to keep a neutral position on the question of textual origin, I believe that Thomas reveals a bias against the apologist position. For example, he states, "We will never find the book's real value or message until we set aside the apologetic issues of authorship, at least temporarily. . . ." He points out that "Biblical scholarship has faced similar interpretive problems with apologetic interests interfering with interpretation."¹³ One could argue that a balanced position would be as demanding of naturalist issues of authorship and acknowledge that rationalist interests at times also interfere with interpretation.

Thus, while the text is paramount, questions about its origin are hardly irrelevant. I am willing to concede that some such discussion may be irrelevant and some certainly misguided. Were Moroni a fictional character in an historical novel written by Joseph Smith, I think I would still find his discourse on charity (Moroni 7:44-48) and his invitation to come unto Christ (10:32-33) inspiring, but they have far more meaning and a more profound impact when I consider that they are the words of an actual man who walked the earth and who struggled with his soul and its relation to his Savior just as I do. Thus, while the text is paramount, questions about its origin are hardly irrelevant, I do not believe these are Joseph Smith's thoughts or that these words came out of his specific experience, even though they are expressed in his language.

One primary reason to read scripture is that, in seeing how God acts in the lives of others, we feel emboldened to invite him to act in similar ways in ours. When we see him acting in history, we believe that the ultimate fate of the world is in his hands. When we believe that he truly sent his son to die for our sins, we are inspired to change our hearts, and, in the words of the Lamanite king, to give away our sins to know him (Alma 22:18). While fictional characters, especially if artfully drawn, can so inspire us, ultimately, we are distanced from them. We suspend our disbelief for a time, but it is still disbelief that we are suspending.

Hence, I find myself constrained to ask if it is reasonable to argue

13. Mark D. Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2000), 1. In conversation, Thomas stated that he did not intend his words to be taken as critical of the apologist position.

that Joseph Smith could have written rather than translated the Book of Mormon? Could he reasonably be considered its author, given his literary imagination and talent, his maturity as a writer when the book was published, the amount of time he had to produce the book, his education, his knowledge base, and the sophistication necessary to design and execute a complicated work with such a rich array of characters and literary forms and styles? In considering each of these questions, I will look at Joseph Smith in relation to his contemporary authors, those who make up the pantheon of American Literature from early to mid-nineteenth century.

The Book of Mormon came out of the richest creative period of American culture, a time the critic F. O. Matthiessen termed "The American Renaissance." In his book of the same title,¹⁴ Matthiessen chronicles what Van Wyck Brooks has called "the Flowering of New England."¹⁵ That flowering, which produced such masterworks as Poe's stories and poems (1827-1848), Emerson's *Essays* (1836-1850), Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), not to mention the astonishing poetry of Emily Dickinson and a host of minor masterpieces, took place in the same fertile ground out of which the Book of Mormon was published. Was the Book of Mormon a product of what David S. Reynolds has called "the subversive imagination in the age of Emerson and Melville" (the subtitle of his *Beneath the American Renaissance*),¹⁶ or was it what Joseph Smith claimed it to be—an ancient sacred text whispering out of the ground to modern readers?

LITERARY IMAGINATION AND TALENT

The highest species of reasoning upon divine subjects is. . .the fruit of a sort of moral imagination.

Emerson, Journal, 18 April 1824

Blessed are those who have no talent.

Emerson, Journal, February 1850

While many critics disagree about Joseph Smith's character, there is almost universal agreement that he had an unusually creative and energetic imagination. Fawn Brodie wrote that "the rare quality of his genius

14. F. O. Matthiessen, *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

15. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England* (New York: Dutton, 1952).

16. David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988). Hereafter *Beneath the Renaissance*.

was due not to his reason but to his imagination. He was a mythmaker of prodigious talent.”¹⁷ Harold Bloom, one of the preeminent humanistic scholars of our generation, has praised him as having an “extraordinary capacity for speculative development.”¹⁸ Yet, what we know of Joseph Smith at the time he produced the Book of Mormon reveals no proclivity for artistic expression. That he was imaginative there is no doubt, but that he had the ability write a five hundred-page fictional narrative there is substantial doubt. There is an enormous difference between being able to conceive of something imaginatively and being able to shape it into a unified, complex, and concrete artifact. Many of us may think of wonderful novels we would like to write or symphonies we would like to compose, but only those with true gifts are able to produce novels or symphonies.

Was Joseph Smith a gifted creative writer? Did he have narrative or fictional capabilities similar to those of contemporaries such as Cooper, Melville, or Hawthorne? Did he have any poetic ability like Emerson’s, Lowell’s, or Whitman’s? Was he a lesser literary light like John Neal or William Gilmore Simms? Or could he, in fact, be placed even in this latter category of writers?

Although Harold Bloom praises Joseph Smith’s charisma and imagination, he sees him as “an indifferent writer.”¹⁹ Smith achieves moments of eloquence and was beginning to develop a mature writing style by the time he was martyred, but none of his own writings indicate either the narrative style or poetic complexity found in the Book of Mormon. Richard Rust observes, “I have spent a good deal of time reading the journals and letters of Joseph Smith, and I consider his style to differ markedly from the style (really, the styles) I find in the Book of Mormon.”²⁰ The word-print studies by Hilton, Larson, Rencher, and Layton point to markedly different styles among Book of Mormon writers. Not everyone is convinced by their findings,²¹ but whether the word-print analysts are convincing or not, there is no disputing the fact that there are a number of strikingly different authorial voices in the Book of Mormon. To invent these would be an extremely challenging task, especially for a novice writer creating the entire narrative orally, as Joseph Smith’s scribes describe him as doing.

17. *No Man Knows My History*, ix.

18. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 80. Hereafter *American Religion*.

19. *American Religion*, 80.

20. Letter from Richard Rust to Robert A. Rees, 20 July 2000, in my possession.

21. See, for instance, Edward W. Ashment, “A Record in the Language of My Father’: Evidence of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew in the Book of Mormon,” *New Approaches*, 372-74.

Consider what this would have involved: to compose the various narratives within the Book of Mormon orally, Joseph Smith would have had to keep in mind the distinctive rhetorical style and vocabulary of each character. This would mean mentally cataloguing and tracking each writer or speaker's way of expressing himself. For example, since Alma the Younger has by far the largest vocabulary in the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith would have had to be aware that he was putting a number of words into Alma's mouth that he could not employ in the vocabulary of any other writer! Even had he had a photographic memory and been a brilliant novelist, I don't believe he could have kept this sorted out as he was *dictating* the book.

I contend that not only was the composition of the Book of Mormon far beyond Joseph Smith's capabilities, but that he was, in fact, unaware of the subtleties and complexities of the text. There is surely no evidence that he knew anything about writing intricate parallel literary structures or creating a wide range of characters, a complicated fictional plot, or a variety of styles. Again quoting from Harold Bloom, Joseph Smith's "life, personality, and visions far transcended his talents at the composition of divine texts."²²

MATURITY AS A WRITER

Until I was twenty five I had no development at all.
Melville

To produce a mature work of literature, a writer must be seasoned in the craft of literary invention and construction. No masterpiece springs full-blown from the writer's mind without prior experience in working out style and subject matter. Without exception, Joseph Smith's contemporary authors produced their major works when they were mature writers. Each writer's *magnum opus* was years in the preparing and writing. The works of each author show progressive development from early literary expressions to later master works. In most cases their early works reveal writers attempting to find their voice as well as their subject matter. For example, Emerson's *Nature*, as Matthiessen observes, "contains in embryo nearly all his cardinal assumptions,"²³ but the essay is philosophically opaque and stylistically difficult. Although Hawthorne's early style "shows remarkable finish,"²⁴ the contrast between his first novel, *Fanshaw* (1828), and *The Scarlet Letter* (1851) is dra-

22. *American Religion*, 81-82.

23. *American Renaissance*, 12.

24. *Ibid.*, 203.

matic. Whitman's early journalistic writing reveals only the vaguest promise of the powerful poetry that he would later produce. In fact, it wasn't until he read Emerson's comments on the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) that he seemed to fully realize his vocation as a poet. As he later said, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil."²⁵

By way of comparison, we have only two minor, extant examples of Joseph Smith's writings before 1830, the year the Book of Mormon was published—a letter to Oliver Cowdery and a one-paragraph introduction to the Anthon Transcript.²⁶ Neither shows promise of literary expression. There is no evidence before 1830 that Smith was developing as a writer or that he had any ambitions as an author. The material written in the years immediately following the publication of the Book of Mormon shows Joseph Smith as a writer with little literary style or polish. Certainly there is evidence of the beginnings of an eloquent voice, but that voice is tentative and immature. Nowhere in Joseph Smith's early writing does one find the kind of literary ability necessary to write a book which has since been translated into more languages and sold more copies than any book written by his illustrious contemporaries.

By comparison, we might point out that Nathaniel Hawthorne had been working on *The Scarlet Letter* for twenty-five years before it was actually published. That is, most of the themes, character types, and situations in his novel were developed to one extent or another in the notes, sketches, and stories Hawthorne wrote between 1825 and 1850. As to the actual time of the writing of the novel, Arlin Turner notes that by the end of August 1849, Hawthorne "was writing immensely, so his wife phrased it."²⁷ Typically, Hawthorne would put in nine hours a day at his desk. He wrote his friend Horatio Bridge that the book had been finished on 3 February 1850, making a total of more than five months' time for the novel's composition.

Critics speak of Melville's "try works," the works of fiction he wrote that prepared him to write *Moby Dick*. His previous novels of the sea, *Mardi*, *Omoo*, *Typee*, *Redburn*, and *White Jacket*, were all novels in which he was working out both his subject matter and his style. *Moby Dick*, which took him more than eighteen months to complete, reveals indebtedness

25. *Ibid.*, 523.

26. In his *Early Mormon Documents* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1996), Dan Vogel lists Smith's letter to Oliver Cowdery of 22 October 1829 as the only extant pre-Book of Mormon document written by Joseph Smith. Dean C. Jessee includes the introduction to the Anthon Transcript as possibly having been written in 1828 (*The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1984], Vol. 1, 223-24).

27. Arlin Turner, *Nathaniel Hawthorne, A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 187, 193.

to all of these earlier works. Melville, whose education, both formal and experiential, was far superior to Joseph Smith's, said, "My development has all been within a few years past. . . . Until I was twenty five I had no development at all."²⁸ In other words, at the same age at which Joseph Smith wrote a book as ambitious as *Moby Dick*, Melville—recognized as one of the literary masters of American literature—was just beginning to feel confident as a writer, and *Moby Dick* was still far in the future.

Henry David Thoreau spent nearly nine years writing *Walden*. Here again, Thoreau's early writing both prepared him for and contained many of the ideas and themes of his major opus. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote nothing as sustained as the Book of Mormon, but his essays, which represent his major contribution to the literary age that bears his name, were produced over a lifetime. Walt Whitman wrote and rewrote his great collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, over his entire adult life, seeing it through many permutations and numerous editions.

Thus, each of these authors was significantly older and more mature as a writer when he published his literary masterpiece than was Joseph Smith when he produced the Book of Mormon. Emerson was thirty-eight when his first volume of essays was published, Thoreau was thirty-seven when he published *Walden*, Hawthorne was thirty-six when *The Scarlet Letter* was published, and Melville thirty-two when *Moby Dick* appeared. Whitman was thirty-six when he sent an autographed first edition of *Leaves of Grass* to Emerson.

TIME

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.
Thoreau, *Walden*

Writers know that writing takes time. As Donald Hall, one of our most venerated contemporary poets says, "It's typical for me to spend three to five years on a poem, but not working on it every day but maybe every day for six months, then nothing for six months, then starting it again. At the beginning, every draft changes a lot, but toward the end I may spend a lot of time changing a word from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. . . . There are several poems I've worked on over twenty years."²⁹

In an article entitled "For Authors, Fragile Ideas Need Loving Every

28. Herschel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, vol. 1, 1819-1851 (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1996), 842.

29. Donald Hall, *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*, ed. James Haba (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 144. Hereafter, *Language of Life*.

Day," the novelist Walter Mosley speaks of the importance of a routinized, disciplined approach to writing. Arguing that writing is a quotidian endeavor, Mosley says that interruptions and distractions (which Joseph Smith experienced in abundance during the translation of the Book of Mormon) cause the life to drain out of one's writing: "The words have no art to them; you no longer remember the smell. The idea seems weak, it has dissipated like smoke." He adds, "Nothing we create is art at first. It's simply a collection of notions that may never be understood. Returning every day thickens the atmosphere. Images appear. Connections are made. But even these clearer notions will fade if you stay away more than a day. . . . The act of writing is a kind of guerrilla warfare; there is no vacation, no leave, no relief. In actuality there is very little chance of victory. You are. . . likely to be defeated by your fondest dreams."³⁰

Most writers recognize that good writing is seldom easy and rarely flows seamlessly from the writer's pen or keyboard—and certainly not in unprepared or unrehearsed dictation. The more complicated, complex and sophisticated the text, the more time it takes to compose. While some writers speak of writing mellifluously flowing lines as if under a spell, in reality, this seldom happens, and if it does, it doesn't last. When asked about the place of impulse or inspiration in writing poetry, Hall states, "It's twenty seconds of impulse and two years of attention."³¹

How much time did Joseph Smith have to write the Book of Mormon? This much is part of the historical record: After losing the first 116 pages of the book through Martin Harris's negligence, Joseph did not resume his work of translation until 22 September 1828, although he seems to have written little until Oliver Cowdrey became his scribe on 5 April 1829. Between that date and 11 June 1829 (the day Joseph applied for a copyright), a period of approximately sixty days, Joseph and Oliver completed the bulk of the translation. By any measure, this was an astonishing accomplishment. As a straight work of translation or inspired dictation, this would be a formidable task.

Scholars have pointed out that during the time he was translating the book, Joseph Smith was plagued with numerous mundane concerns—finding work, feeding his family, protecting the plates, burying a still-born child, etc. In other words, there were so many stresses and strains that, for the most part, sustained daily writing would have been out of the question.

The Book of Mormon is a complicated narrative with many twists, turns, returns, foreshadowings, and archetypes; numerous kinds of parallelism, including extensive and complicated chiasmi and complex

30. Walter Mosley, *New York Times*, 3 July 2000, B2.

31. *Language of Life*, 143, 146.

poetic forms; and many different styles. This is not the kind of book one dashes off in a few months as one might a romance novel. This kind of writing takes time and lots of it.

EDUCATION

Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings.

Emerson, "The American Scholar"

The authors of the American Renaissance had educations vastly superior to Joseph Smith's. Hawthorne graduated from Bowdoin and Emerson and Thoreau from Harvard. Melville attended Albany Academy, and Whitman, although having only about six years of formal education, was a school teacher and for many years engaged in various aspects of journalism, including reporting, writing, and editing. In addition, all were intimately involved in the cultural life of their communities, attending lyceums and concerts, lecturing, publishing and, with the exception of Thoreau (who said that he had traveled much in Concord), traveling far beyond their local environs. This is a stark contrast to the education and culture of Joseph Smith. His formal education was limited to only a few years of schooling, and that, most likely, involved sporadic attendance.³² In his earliest history (1832), Smith summarized his education: "We [the nine Smith children] were deprived of the bennifit of an education suffice it to say I was nearly instructid in reading and writing and the ground [rules] of arithmetic which constuted my whole literary acquirements"³³ (spelling and punctuation in the original).

For the writers of the American Renaissance, not only is there evidence of early composition that prepared and influenced their masterpieces, but there is ample evidence that they benefited from belonging to a literary culture, one full of cross-fertilization. Emerson's influence on Thoreau and Whitman is well documented, as is Hawthorne's on Melville, and vice versa. Although Emerson's shadow on the age is the longest, Emerson himself reveals and acknowledges indebtedness to a number of writers including Swedenborg, Carlyle, Coleridge, and Goethe.

Like Joseph Smith, all of the writers of the American Renaissance

32. Dan Vogel postulates that in addition to attending school in Royalton, Vermont between 1808 and 1813, Joseph may have attended school during other periods of his youth but that he "was probably not a regular attender" (*Early Mormon Documents*, Vol. 1, Note 3, 27).

33. *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 4.

were influenced by the King James Bible, and all of their works have allusions to that sacred text and reflect biblical style although none of their works reveals the depth and sophistication of biblical indebtedness that characterizes the Book of Mormon. However, Joseph Smith shows no influence at all from the writers, historical or contemporary, European or American, who served as models for the writers of the American Renaissance. There are no allusions in his writings or in the Book of Mormon to such important writers and thinkers of American culture as Cotton Mather, Edward Taylor, Jonathan Edwards, John Neal, James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, or even the more popular writers of the time who were, as David S. Reynolds says, "part of a heterogeneous culture which had strong elements of the criminal, the erotic, and the demonic."³⁴

The popular hunger for such sensational, sentimental literature seems not to have infiltrated Joseph Smith's creative imagination. Reynolds describes the "seamy fiction" written in "a succinctly American irrational style whose linguistic wildness and dislocations were also visible in the grotesque American humor that arose during this period."³⁵ It is curious that Reynolds makes no mention of the Book of Mormon, possibly the most subversive text (in the sense that it had the potential to overturn so many established ideas about religion and culture) written in nineteenth-century America.

In relation to the writers of the American Renaissance, Eugene England observed: "Joseph Smith thus strikes straight to the heart of the major epistemological and ontological dilemma the great Romantics struggled with. And his resolution was no mere compromise but can be understood as an integration of the great Romantic impulses and Classical realities."³⁶

Although non-Mormon literary critics have essentially ignored Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon—and it is scandalous that this is so—some recent critics have begun to pay attention. Harold Bloom has praised Joseph Smith in relation to his contemporary writers: "I myself can think of not another American, except for Emerson and Whitman, who so moves and alters my own imagination. . . . So self-educated was he that he transcends Emerson and Whitman in my imaginative response, and takes his place with the great figures of our fiction, since at moments he appears larger than life, in the mode of a Shakespearean character. So

34. *Beneath the Renaissance*, 169.

35. *Ibid.*, 170.

36. Eugene England, "How Joseph Smith Resolved the Dilemmas of American Romanticism," in ed. Bryan Waterman, *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1999), 178. Hereafter "American Romanticism."

rich and varied a personality, so vital a spark of divinity, is almost beyond the limits of the human, as we normal construe those limits."³⁷

And yet Bloom, a master at deciphering and delineating texts, seems to have missed much of the intricate complexity of the Book of Mormon. He saw it, along with other scriptures in the Latter-day Saint canon, as "stunted stepchildren of the Bible."³⁸ He summarized it thusly: "It has bravura, but beyond question it is wholly tendentious and frequently tedious. If one compares it closely to Smith's imaginings in the Pearl of Great Price and the Doctrine and Covenants, it seems like the work of some other writer." He is quick to add, "and I don't mean Mormon or Moroni."³⁹ Frankly, I don't believe Bloom gave the book his best critical effort.⁴⁰ This seems evident from his comment, "I cannot recommend that the book be read either fully or closely, because it scarcely sustains such reading."⁴¹ That a scholar of Bloom's reputation could conclude that the Book of Mormon was the result of "magical trance-states"⁴² and explain its astonishing Hebraic absorption (of "the archaic or original Jewish religion"⁴³) as the result of Joseph Smith's being "drowned in the Bible,"⁴⁴ only demonstrates, once again, that scholars who insist on a naturalistic explanation for everything (Bloom sees "all religion [as] a kind of spilled poetry"⁴⁵) have difficulty seriously considering any non-naturalist explanation of the book's origin.

KNOWLEDGE BASE: WHAT DID JOSEPH SMITH KNOW?

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own.

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, Stanza 5

How much of the information contained in the Book of Mormon would have been available to someone living in Joseph Smith's environs prior to the publication of the book? In the most serious study to date of this question, Gordon C. Thomasson contends that "empirical investigation of the information environment in Joseph Smith's time shows it to have been far richer than commonly has been assumed." Thomasson

37. *American Religion*, 127.

38. *Ibid.*, 81.

39. *Ibid.*, 85.

40. In conversation, one of Bloom's former students told me that Bloom confessed to him that he had not read the Book of Mormon.

41. *American Religion*, 86.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 87.

44. *Ibid.*, 86.

45. *Ibid.*, 80.

adds, "Critics of, and apologists for the Book of Mormon have at various times both under-, and over-estimated the extent of the information environment of early America, and especially the Burned-over district."⁴⁶ Of the information generally available, to just how much was Joseph Smith likely to have had access? And, beyond this, a still more critical question—to what extent was he capable of integrating such information into a composition of his own devising?

Equally significant to what was or might have been known to a writer in Joseph Smith's time is what was *not* known. As Thomasson argues, "Any attempt to deal with the Book of Mormon as a testable historic document must examine its contents in the light of at least two criteria. First: its assertions must be evaluated in terms of what is known today. Second: those same assertions should be considered in terms of what was known or 'knowable' in 1830. If the book supplies information which was otherwise unavailable at the time of its first publication (not part of the information environment) then its claim to historical validity is enhanced."⁴⁷

To write a history of ancient Hebrew people who immigrated to the New World, an uneducated person living on the edge of the American frontier would, among many, many other things, need to have known the English Bible (and the Hebrew culture it represents); its many kinds of stylistic parallelisms and poetic forms; its various cultures; its economic system; its characters, images, and symbols; its religious rites and customs; and its legal system.

How well did Joseph Smith know the Bible? In her memoirs, Lucy Mack Smith recalled that as a boy of eighteen (i.e., in 1823 or 1824) young

46. Gordon C. Thomasson "'Daddy, What's a Frontier?': Thoughts on the 'Information Environment' That Supposedly Produced the Book of Mormon," unpublished ms. in my possession, 18 (hereafter "Frontier"). Thomasson, who coined the phrase "information environment," provides the most detailed account yet as to what information might have been available to someone living in Eastern New York in the late 1820s. Thomasson says, "There are two types of critical tests which can be made on Book of Mormon data:

- 1) The first type involves subjects about which an information vacuum can be shown to have existed in 1830—and about which the Book of Mormon takes a position which can be compared to new data revealed by contemporary scholarship (textual comparison of the Book of Mormon with otherwise unparalleled Qumran and/or Nag Hammadi documents might fall in this category).
- 2) The second class of tests includes those cases in which the information environment of 1830 can be shown to have documented a particular position which the Book of Mormon took exception to—and these two conflicting ideas can be compared to current scholarly opinion. These are tests which the Book of Mormon can pass or fail—taking into consideration the open-ended dialogue which is true scholarship. These are tests to which it generally has not been subjected.

47. *Ibid.*, 16.

Joseph “had never read the Bible through in his life.” Moreover, she said, “he seemed much less inclined to the perusal of books than any of the rest of our children.”⁴⁸ Bloom’s contention that “Smith had drowned in the Bible, and came up from it in a state of near identification with the ancient Hebrews”⁴⁹ is speculative at best. In fact, it’s really quite incredible when one considers that absorbing the Bible is a far cry from replicating its forms, styles, and patterns in highly specific ways. And this must be seen in light of Lucy Mack Smith’s statement about her son’s acquaintance with the Bible and David Whitmer’s statement about Joseph during the time Joseph was translating the record of Lehi: “In translating the characters, Smith, who was illiterate and but little versed in biblical lore, was oftentimes compelled to spell the words out, not knowing the correct pronunciation.”⁵⁰

Given the hardscrabble nature of Joseph Smith’s life prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon, would he have had time to immerse himself so completely in the Hebrew scriptures as to have mastered its literary styles and cultural complexities? When Bloom states that Smith imaginatively recaptured “crucial elements in the archaic Jewish religion” (which had evaded both “normative Judaism and . . . [the Christian] Church after it”⁵¹), he leaves unexplained how someone of Joseph Smith’s naiveté and lack of exposure to such ancient and arcane material could have been capable of such a feat.

There are many other such examples. Joseph Smith would also have had to have a thorough knowledge of olive horticulture, the detailed information contained in Jacob’s parable of the olive tree (1 Ne. 10 & 15, Jacob 5). How likely does that seem? Someone raised on an American farm would have surely known about wheat and beans, but he wouldn’t have known beans about olives.⁵²

48. *Joseph Smith and His Progenitors* (Independence: Herald House, 1969), 92, as quoted in Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherahin,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 243.

49. *American Religion*, 86.

50. Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1991), 174, as quoted in Royal Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *BMAR*, 76.

51. *American Religion*, 99.

52. See Wilford M. Hess, “Botanical Comparisons in the Allegory of the Olive Tree,” *The Book of Mormon: Jacob through Words of Mormon*, Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1990), 87-102. Gordon C. Thomason cites Johannes Jahn’s *Biblical Archeology* (1823) as reporting that in Arabian culture “a subtle olive culture was practiced in which the branches of wild olives were grafted into barren orchard trees to cause them to become fertile” (“Frontier,” 36). This shard of information, however, could hardly account for the many specific particulars of olive horticulture found in the book of Jacob.

Joseph Smith would also have had to have knowledge of ancient travel routes taken by Lehi and his family. As Gene England has summarized, "For Joseph Smith to have so well succeeded in producing over twenty unique details in the description of an ancient travel route through one of the least-known areas of the world, all of which have been subsequently verified, requires extraordinary, unreasonable faith in his natural genius or his ability to guess right in direct opposition to the prevailing knowledge of his time."⁵³ In other words, the unlearned and untraveled American prophet would have had to know how to guide his characters through the Arabian Desert.

We now know that the use of Baal and El names was out of favor during Lehi's time but not during the time of the Jaradites.⁵⁴ I would guess that even if Joseph Smith understood the significance of such names, he'd have had no idea as to when it had and hadn't been appropriate to use them, again keeping in mind that he was dictating the book orally without text or notes.

And then there are matters of literary style. Chiasmus is an ancient poetic form and mnemonic device. It strains credulity that Joseph Smith could compose numerous examples, some of them extremely complex, by dictating them spontaneously. As John W. Welch points out, the Book of Mormon, "especially in its most literary portions, is replete with precise and extensive chiasmic compositions." After citing an example of chiasmus in Mosiah 5:10-12, Welch states, "Again, the repetition here is precise, extensive and meaningful. It simply strains reason to imagine that such structure in this oration occurred accidentally." Later he concludes, "The use of chiasmus is. . . a conscious creation of an imaginative and mature artist. . . . No one seriously contends that Joseph Smith or anyone associated with him knew or could have known of chiasmus or had the training to discover this principle for himself. The evidence is overwhelming against such a claim."⁵⁵ This is not external, but internal evidence. That is, the chiasms (at least some of those so identified) are clearly there; they are not the invention of modern readers. No naturalist critic of whom I am aware has seriously answered the question as to their origin.⁵⁶ And as Mark Thomas says in "A Rhetorical Approach to

53. Eugene England, "Through the Arabian Desert to a Bountiful Land: Could Joseph Smith Have Known the Way?" *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1982), 153.

54. Hugh Nibley, *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), vol. 8, 387-88.

55. John W. Welch, "What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove?" *BMAR*, 205, 207, 208. See also Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981).

56. In a paper presented at the August 2001 Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City entitled, "The Use and Abuse of Chiasmus in Book of Mormon Studies," Dan Vogel argues

the Book of Mormon," "Letting the text speak requires attention, sincerity, and integrity."⁵⁷

In an interview with her son, Joseph Smith III, Emma Smith, who knew Joseph more intimately than anyone, said her husband had limited knowledge of spelling and "could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well worded letter; let alone dictate a book like the Book of Mormon." She added, "I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this [translate the Book of Mormon], and for one as unlearned as he was it was simply impossible."⁵⁸

Hiram Page spoke of Joseph's inability to produce such a book on his own: "[It would be unreasonable] to say that a man of Joseph's ability, who at that time did not know how to pronounce the word Nephi, could write a book of six hundred pages, as correct as the Book of Mormon, without supernatural power. . . ."⁵⁹ This seems to be corroborated by two interviews David Whitmer gave toward the end of his life: in one he said, "In translating the characters Smith. . . was oftentimes compelled to spell the words out, not knowing the correct pronunciation," and "Sometimes Joseph could not pronounce the words correctly, having had but little education. . . ."⁶⁰

Early theories that Smith copied the book from another author or that it was written by someone else were based on the assumption by

"that there are fundamental problems with the whole theory of chiasmus" (p. 1, typescript in my possession). While Vogel is correct in postulating that some scholars have played fast and loose in finding chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, and while his challenging of some purported examples of chiasmus is persuasive, the fact remains that there is chiasmus in the Book of Mormon and that even non-chiastic parallel passages required either conscious composition or absorption of parallel structures so completely as to produce them unconsciously, which strains credibility. There is a difference between the simple parallel structures which Vogel finds in the writings of Joseph Smith and others and the sometimes lengthy and complex parallel forms one finds in the Book of Mormon as, for example, in Mosiah 5 and Alma 36. It is the presence of such examples that has yet to be explained as coming out of Joseph Smith's information environment or out of his inventive mind.

57. *New Approaches*, 55.

58. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald* 26 (1879), 290, as quoted in Richard Bushman, "The Recovery of the Book of Mormon," *BMAR*, 25.

59. Letter to William E. McLellan, 30 May 1847, *Ensign of Liberty*, 1 (January 1848): 63, as quoted in Richard L. Anderson, "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *BMAR*, 53.

60. James H. Hart interview, 1884, as quoted in Royal Skousen, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *BMAR*, 66.

those who knew him that Joseph Smith simply did not have the education or intelligence to write such a book. According to Louis Midgley, "The gossip about the presumed activities of the young Joseph Smith published in [E. D.] Howe's book yield a portrait of someone incapable of the intellectual effort necessary to produce a long, complicated history like the Book of Mormon."⁶¹ Richard Bushman says, "We must remember that he was only twenty-two, truly unlearned, with no worldly standing, living in an obscure rural backwater, and with only a few visionary glimpses of what lay ahead."⁶²

Those who assisted Joseph in the translation of the Book of Mormon testified that he dictated the narrative of the people of Lehi at times for hours on end, day after day, without any reference materials, and that he would pick up the dictation the following day at the very place where he left off, with no prompting to tell him where the narrative was to continue. Had he been "free-composing" his narrative, rather than translating as he claimed, he would have had to keep in his consciousness not only the various threads of his narration, but the structure and intricate pattern of the history he was inventing, the array of characters who peopled that history, the cultural and religious traditions that informed their actions, and the various forms of their literary style. Consider the magnitude of such a feat. In all of literary history there is not a single example to match such an accomplishment. The only thing to approach it is the theorized ancient oral spinning of epic tales, but that was done only by poets who had spent years memorizing vast "word hoards" of narrative formulas and images which they would then weave into constantly changing epic poems. If Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon out of his imagination and in the manner in which his scribes said he did (and we have no reason to disbelieve them), he is the only writer in human history to have accomplished such a feat. I contend that Joseph Smith's critics have never satisfactorily demonstrated how he could have done this.

SOPHISTICATION

I always feel like drinking that heroic drink [brandy] when we talk ontological heroics together.

Melville to Hawthorne, 29 June 1851

Joseph Smith was, according to contemporary accounts, a typical frontier figure. He had little education, culture, or polish. Jan Shipps calls him

61. "Who Really Wrote . . . ?" 110.

62. "The Recovery of the Book of Mormon," *BMAR*, 29.

"an unsophisticated farm boy."⁶³ In his mid-twenties he had little knowledge of history, languages, politics, or the arts and humanities. Except for a few passages in the Doctrine and Covenants and some of his sermons, all written after he expanded his education, there is nothing in Joseph Smith's writing to suggest a sophisticated literary style. In fact, like many of his American contemporaries, he wrote in a plain style significantly different from the style or styles we find in the Book of Mormon.

I first learned of the literary complexity of the Book of Mormon from Robert Thomas. Thomas, who had written his undergraduate thesis at Reed College on the Book of Mormon as Hebrew literature, was the first scholar to see the intricate biblical parallelism in the book.⁶⁴ Richard Dilworth Rust in his valuable study, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*,⁶⁵ gives a much more detailed and comprehensive analysis of the book's many literary forms and styles, opening the text in many new ways.

In his insightful new study of the Book of Mormon narratives, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives*, Mark Thomas describes the book as "complex," "subtle," "unique," and "artful." It has, he says, "enormous variety" and "great subtlety," and uses the Bible in "diverse and intricate ways." Then he adds, "It would be difficult to find a more original religious text."⁶⁶ Thomas speaks of its use of symbol systems, image patterns, shadows, figures, repetitive triads, and narrative linkings. His study illustrates what David S. Reynolds says of a text: "The distinguishing quality of the literary text is not radical subversiveness, but unique suggestiveness and great reconstructive power."⁶⁷

Another distinguishing mark of a sophisticated mind is the conscious use of irony. While this subject deserves a fuller treatment than can be given here,⁶⁸ it is sufficient to note that the Book of Mormon is replete with examples of verbal and dramatic irony. It includes many of the varieties of irony distinguished by classical rhetoricians and used by classical authors and the writers of the Hebrew scriptures, yet is devoid of the kind of irony that one might expect of someone living in Joseph Smith's nineteenth century environs—the deliberate overstatement or

63. Jan Shippy, "The Mormons: Looking Forward and Outward," in *Where the Spirit Leads: American Denominations Today*, ed. Martin E. Marty (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1980), 29-30, as quoted in Louis Midgley, *BMAR*, 103.

64. Robert Thomas, "A Literary Analysis of the Book of Mormon," A.B. thesis, Reed College, 1947.

65. Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: the Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).

66. *Digging in Cumorah*, 49.

67. *Beneath the Renaissance*, 10.

68. I addressed the use of irony in a paper given at the August 2001 Sunstone Symposium entitled, "Irony in the Book of Mormon."

exaggeration that is a characteristic of American Southwestern humor. Again, it is important to note that Joseph Smith's own early writing is devoid of any conscious use of irony, which is what one would expect in a naïve writer.

SOME ANALOGIES

Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when
you find a trout in milk.

Thoreau, *Journal*, 11 November 1850

To me Joseph Smith's inventing the Book of Mormon would be akin to a frontier craftsman, a maker of rag rugs, suddenly producing an oriental rug requiring a knowledge of ancient weaving traditions, dyes, and fabrics, and then weaving a rug of such complexity that only in the twentieth century would someone be able to discern and decipher its intricate figures and patterns. Or it would be as if a frontiersman able to pluck out a few bars of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" on a banjo were suddenly to compose and dictate an elaborate fugue or a symphony for full orchestra and chorus.

I still think Nibley has the best analogy: "To put it facetiously but not unfairly, the artist [who sets out to create such a work] must not only balance a bowl of goldfish and three lighted candles on the end of a broomstick while fighting off a swarm of gadflies, but he must at the same time be carving an immortal piece of statuary from a lump of solid diorite."⁶⁹

TWO CULTURES

The problem, as I see it, with Book of Mormon scholarship is that all sides in the argument seem to be talking past one another or, to use Paul's words, to be "speaking into the air" (1 Cor. 14:9). Thus, Edward Ashment contends, at the end of an essay on "evidence" in the Book of Mormon, "Unfortunately there is no direct evidence to support the historical claims of the Book of Mormon—nothing archeological, nothing philological. As a result, those for whom truth is the product of spiritual witness, not empirical inquiry, resort to developing analogies and parallels to defend the book's historic claims. That is the apologetic historical methodology."⁷⁰ It is interesting and ironic that this charge parallels the one leveled against the naturalist critics by apologists, who see them as

69. Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 159.

70. Edward W. Ashment, "'A Record in the Language of My Father': Evidence of Ancient Egyptian and Hebrew in the Book of Mormon," *Approaches*, 374.

ignoring compelling historical, textual, and philological evidence and developing analogies and parallels to attack the book's historicity.

Ashment's dismissal of the apologist methodology is no less disturbing than the tone of some of the fully fourteen apologist critics who reviewed *New Approaches* for FARMS. One of these critics dismisses Ashment (referred to as "a California insurance salesman who once studied Egyptology at the University of Chicago") as having a "faulty (and occasionally amusing) methodology." Another accuses him of outright dishonesty.⁷¹

Although I have lived most of my life in academia where this type of behavior is all too typical, I don't think there should be a place for nastiness or insults in scholarly discussion. We should all be humbled by our vast ignorance and respectful of those with opinions or interpretations contrary to our own. As John Stuart Mill says, "For while everyone well knows himself to be fallible, few think it necessary to take any precautions against their own fallibility, or admit the supposition that any opinion, of which they feel very certain, may be one of the examples of the error to which they acknowledge themselves to be liable." Mill says further, "It is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the . . . truth has any chance of being supplied."⁷²

There is, of course, reason for distrust and suspicion when each side has been so quick to dismiss the methods and observations of the other, to question the motives and scholarship of opponents, to rush to judgment about each other's discoveries. We need to recognize that, as extremes, each position is limited. Those who defend the Book of Mormon primarily with their testimonies tend to be closed to hard questions and real challenges the book presents in its claim to be a translation of an ancient text. They need to acknowledge that some questions are legitimate and that not everyone who challenges Joseph Smith's account is an enemy of the truth or the church. They also need to understand that merely invoking spiritual authority closes off dialogue.

On the other side, naturalists who refute the divine origin of the book dismiss the spiritual experience of believers as well as any evidence that suggests the book has an ancient primary source. They need to acknowledge the challenges that face their scholarship if they contend that

71. Daniel C. Peterson, "Editor's Introduction," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 6, no. 1 (1994), x; John Gee, "La Trahison des Clercs: On the Language and Translation of the Book of Mormon," 88 ff. Peterson's biographical sketches of other contributors to *New Approaches* seem designed to diminish their credentials and credibility, and the tone of some of the reviews is, unfortunately, as nasty and negative as some comments the naturalist critics make about the apologists.

72. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. David Spitz (New York: Norton, 1975), 54, 82.

Joseph Smith was the author of the book. The believer-apologists need to be less pious and the non-believer-naturalists need to be a little less enamored of their empiricism.

Until the Enlightenment, academics and religionists alike tended to see the world through two lenses—*logos* and *mythos*—and considered each essential in the process of seeking truth. As Karen Armstrong argues in *The Battle for God*, “The *mythos* of a society provided people with a context and made sense of their day-to-day lives; it directed their attention to the eternal and the universal. It was also rooted in what we call the unconscious mind.” She adds, “*Logos* was equally important. *Logos* was the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function well in the world. . . . In the pre-modern world, both *mythos* and *logos* were regarded as indispensable. Each would be impoverished without the other.”⁷³ Using both is what Lowell Bennion called “carrying water on both shoulders.”⁷⁴

I believe we need to recapture this older way of looking for truth, to recognize that *logos*, with its emphasis on empirical proof, is ultimately no more reliable nor no less essential than *mythos*, with its emphasis on ritual and mysticism. It is the dialogue between the two, the respect for what they both can teach us, which should inform our quest for both immediate and ultimate meaning.

A TENTATIVE THEORY

Words may be a thick and darksome veil of mystery between the soul and the truth which it seeks.

Nathaniel Hawthorne to Sophia Peabody, 19 May 1840

It appears that the naturalist critics and the apologists are caught in a hopeless standoff over the Book of Mormon. Each side has dug in for the long battle and each uses whichever weapons from its arsenal seem expedient to press its position. But what if neither side is entirely right—nor, for that matter, entirely wrong? What if there were a third option? I doubt that such an option would appear tenable to either camp because it would mean retreating from their strongly defended positions, but as I read the Book of Mormon and try objectively and fairly to consider the arguments on each side, and as I try to incorporate both my scholarly analytical skills and my spiritual experiences with the book, which have been consistent over a lifetime, I have come to the conclusion that the Book of Mormon may be genuinely *both* an ancient and a modern text. I

73. Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Random House, 2000), xv, xvi-xvii.

74. Lowell L. Bennion, “Carrying Water on Both Shoulders,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 110-12.

believe that there were real people named Nephi, Alma, Moroni, and Mormon who lived and wrote on the American continent. The records they kept were like the records kept by other ancient peoples, containing a chronicle of their cultural experience and religious history, expressed in the forms and styles of their literary tradition. But I also accept that what thoughts and feelings they hoped to pass on to future generations were in practice "translated" or expressed in Joseph Smith's language and through the experience of his nineteenth-century mind.⁷⁵ This would explain why one finds examples in the Book of Mormon of expressions and verbal coloring that most likely were not in the original source. For example, David Wright argues convincingly that in his expression of ideas found in Alma 12-13, Joseph Smith "transformed" Paul's letter to the Hebrews. This seems much more plausible than the proposition, advanced by some apologist critics, that there was an ancient prototype that served as a source for both Alma and Hebrews. But, while Wright's argument is persuasive, I do not agree with him when he states, "It goes almost without saying that this conclusion means further that the rest of the Book of Mormon was composed by" Joseph Smith.⁷⁶

The position I am arguing is similar to that which Blake Ostler articulates in his essay, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source." Ostler makes a convincing case for the possibility of both an ancient source and a modern transformation of that source so that the book presents "a modern world view and theological understanding superimposed on the Book of Mormon text from the plates."⁷⁷ Although somewhat parallel, my argument is more conservative than Ostler's. It seems to me that one has to do too many intellectual and spiritual gymnastics either to see the Book of Mormon as a perfectly literal translation of an ancient text source or to see it as entirely a product of a nineteenth-century mind. On the one hand, there are simply too many things in the book that neither Joseph Smith nor any of his contemporaries could possibly have known; too many complexities, subtleties, and intricacies in the text that were beyond his or any of his contemporaries' capabilities; too many examples of spiritual depth and profound expression that were certainly beyond his cognitive or expressive abilities when the Book of Mormon was produced. I believe that the integrity

75. The translation/compositional process by which Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon may have been similar to that which he employed in his revision of the Bible and in his production of the books of Moses and Abraham. In each instance, Joseph created new or revised texts through inspiration or revelation.

76. David Wright, "In Plain Terms that We May Understand: Joseph Smith's Transformation of Hebrews in Alma 12-13," *New Approaches*, 207.

77. Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no.1 (Spring 1987): 39, 66.

of the text requires us to look for the source of all of these things outside of Joseph Smith.

On the other hand, there are matters of composition, style, and subject matter that require us to have a more liberal, open concept of translation to include transformation, expansion, extrapolation and perhaps even invention. That is, it would not be surprising that as he was translating, Joseph Smith came to prophesies concerning our day in which he took the basic idea presented by an ancient author and through inspiration expanded on it or, as in the case of Alma 12-13, turned to a scripture with which he was familiar in order to find a fuller expression of the idea. In some instances, perhaps because of the difficulty of translation or simply for convenience sake, Smith apparently copied the King James text, even when that text was corrupt. This seems to be the case with the Sermon on the Mount. As Stan Larson argues, when one compares Christ's sermon in 3 Nephi 12 to the King James Version and the earliest extant Greek texts, "where the KJV mistranslates [a phrase]. . .the Book of Mormon simply follows this mistranslation."⁷⁸

The position I am presenting here is different from that of Mark Thomas who argues that the entirety of the Book of Mormon is a God-inspired nineteenth century creation.⁷⁹ The problem with Thomas's position, besides the fact that it requires us to make what for me is an impossible leap in seeing the unlettered Smith as the inspired author, is that it requires that we see either God, Joseph Smith, or both as deceptive. That is, if God has important things to say to his children living in the latter days, why would he need to pretend to put his words into the mouths of fictional characters who are presented as real historical figures, especially when he seems to have no problem putting them into the mouth of Joseph Smith and others in the Doctrine and Covenants? And, if it is Joseph Smith who is creating a fictional setting while presenting it as authentic history, then one has to ask why a writer whose essential purpose is to convince people that Jesus is the Christ must resort to fraud and subterfuge to do so. As C. S. Lewis observed about those who see Jesus as the world's greatest moral teacher but not as the Son of God he declared himself to be, one can't have it both ways.⁸⁰

78. Stan Larson, "The Historicity of the Matthean Sermon on the Mount," *New Approaches*, 113-63.

79. See especially Chapter 1 of *Digging in Cumorah*.

80. C. S. Lewis, *The Case for Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960). "I'm trying to prevent anyone from saying the really silly thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That's the one thing we mustn't say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he's a poached egg—or else he'd be the Devil of Hell. You must

HEARTS AND MINDS

I believe that the Book of Mormon is best approached through a combination of rational and spiritual methods. Those who are skeptical of cognitive approaches to the book's origin and meaning tend to forget, as Sir Thomas More says in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, that "God made the angels to show him splendor. . . . But Man he made to serve him wittily in the tangle of his mind,"⁸¹ or as an Episcopalian ad has it, "Christ came to take away our sins, not our minds." We are not simply to testify of the hope that is in us, but, as Paul said, to give reasons for it.

But if believers need to be *reminded*, so to speak, that God expects us to think, non-believers or skeptics need to remember that God gave us hearts as well as minds and that he expects us to use both in seeking truth. Increasingly, scientists are speaking of what they call "heart intelligence" or "emotional intelligence," ways of knowing that are different from but which complement cognitive intelligence.⁸² It is, thus, by thinking and feeling, by intuition and inspiration as well as by cognition that we may have the best chance of arriving at the truth, keeping in mind that neither heart nor mind nor the two in concert are infallible. Robert Frost speaks of poetry as a "thought-felt thing," which may also be a good way for us to think of the best critical evaluation. Eugene England argues that this is the only way to understand Joseph Smith himself: "If we are better to know him, better to know his history, which he said we would never know until the judgment day, we must know both his heart and his mind, much better than we have."⁸³

The danger of our age is that we have become too intoxicated with reason, too slavishly dependent on strictly empirical processes. In his important book, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*, John Ralston Saul chronicles the extent to which we have exaggerated the importance of reason since the Enlightenment. The price we have paid for this over-reliance on the mind is that we have become an increasingly scientific, technological, and mechanistic society. As Saul says, with the Enlightenment "[r]eason began, abruptly, to separate itself from

make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don't let us come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to" (45).

81. Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons: A Play in Two Acts* (New York: Random House, 1962), 126.

82. For a summary of this research see *Science of the Heart: Exploring the Role of the Heart in Human Performance* (Boulder Creek, CA: Institute of HeartMath, 2001).

83. "American Romanticism," 181.

and to outdistance the other more or less recognized human characteristics—spirit, appetite, faith and emotion, but also intuition, will and, most important, experience.”⁸⁴

In *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, Wendell Berry speaks of the current scientific reductionism that sees the world and everything in it as if they were mechanical and predictable. Like Saul, Berry deplores what he sees as “the preeminence of the mind,” and the “academic hubris” that thinks it can understand the world when it has “no ability to confront mystery (or even the unknown) as such, and therefore has learned none of the lessons that humans have always learned when they have confronted the mystery.” According to Berry, when we accept the non-rational or mysterious “as empirically or rationally solvable,” we never find them.⁸⁵

Over the years I have had a number of conversations with students, colleagues, and fellow writers about the Book of Mormon. When Kurt Vonnegut asked me how I could possibly believe the book, I replied that if I was intellectually honest with myself, I could not discount either my experience as a textual critic or as a reader who surrenders to the book’s spirit. I gave a similar response to Allen Ginsberg when we were sitting in a restaurant in Sujhou, China. When I told him about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, he asked incredulously, “This is believed?” I assured him that it was indeed believed, by me and by many others.

Mark Thomas says, “This visionary book speaks to us—children of the Enlightenment—of the non-rational, spiritual world.”⁸⁶ I believe this is so, but I also believe that it speaks to us of the rational world, of the analytical and discursive processes of the mind. We need both, in concert with one another, in approaching so challenging a text.

CONCLUSION

In this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches

Melville’s review of Hawthorne’s *Mosses*

I have tried to demonstrate that Joseph Smith did not possess the literary imagination or talent, the authorial maturity, the education, the knowl-

84. John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire’s Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 51.

85. Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 15, 27

86. *Digging in Cumorah*, 2.

edge base or the sophistication necessary to write the Book of Mormon; nor, had he possessed all of these things, was the time in which the book was produced sufficient to compose such a lengthy and elaborate narrative.

Could any of Joseph Smith's more illustrious contemporary authors have written the book? I don't believe that Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman, colossal writers that they were, *together* could have written the Book of Mormon. Further, I don't believe that, if all the scholars in the world in the mid-1820s had gathered in a large room with access to every extant book and manuscript and a decade to work on it, they could have written such a book. That is my considered, scholarly opinion. There is simply too much the book points to that no one in nineteenth century America knew or could have known.

This belief is both intellectual and spiritual. As a scholar I believe that the best and most inclusive objective evidence, the most persuasive empirical evidence leads to the conclusion that no one living in the world of the 1820s, let alone an untutored, inglorious farmer, could have produced the Book of Mormon. And yet it bears the unmistakable imprint of Joseph Smith's own nineteenth-century mind and heart.

The Book of Mormon speaks to *my* heart as well as *my* mind, and I have come to trust both experiences as real and valid. I am challenged by the book to be a better Christian. I find my understanding of God broadened and my understanding of Jesus Christ deepened by the words of this book. I have written before that the Book of Mormon "has opened my heart wider to experience [God's] love."⁸⁷ I rejoice in a book that has such an expression as Moroni's final invitation: "Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him. . . . And. . . if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, . . . then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot" (Moroni 10:32-33).

CODA

Not "Revelation" 'tis that waits,
But our unfurnished eyes.

Emily Dickinson, Letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1862-63

When he gave his "Address" to the Divinity School at Harvard in 1838, Emerson made a dramatic break with both traditional Christianity and with the long line of clergymen in his own family. He scandalized

87. Robert Rees, "It Has Opened My Heart Wider to Experience His Love," in Eugene England, ed., *Converted to Christ Through the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 192-98.

the faculty with his call for "perpetual revelation" ("It is my duty to say to you that the need was never greater of new revelation than now. . . .God is, not was; . . .He speaketh, not spake") and for personal revelation ("Intuition. . .cannot be received at second hand").⁸⁸ Emerson had come to the conclusion, to use the words spoken several decades earlier to the boy Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove, that the creeds of the churches "were an abomination" and their ministers "were all corrupt."⁸⁹ (Joseph Smith—History 19). He spoke words that Joseph himself might have said, "Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead."⁹⁰

Had Ralph Waldo Emerson met Joseph Smith, I believe he would have felt an immediate kinship with him, would have recognized the prophetic mantle of his visionary countryman. He might have recognized him as the prophet he himself imagined coming to the New World: "I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty which ravished the souls of those Eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also. . . .I look for the new Teacher that shall follow so far those shining laws that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy."⁹¹

The canon-making critic Harold Bloom places Joseph Smith in the same pantheon as Emerson and Whitman. "Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman were great writers. . . .Joseph Smith did not excel as a writer or as a theologian, . . .but he was an authentic religious genius, and surpassed all Americans, before or since, in the possession and expression of what could be called the religion-making imagination."⁹² The period of spiritual and imaginative expression that flowered in early to mid-nineteenth century America is called the Age of Emerson, but given the growing reputation of the Vermont farm boy who saw the Father and the Son in a woodland grove and of the book—more widely read than any other written in that productive time—which he miraculously brought forth, it is not inconceivable that sometime this century that renaissance may find itself renamed the Age of Joseph Smith.

88. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Address [to the Divinity School]," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), 79, 83.

89. Joseph Smith—History: Extracts from the History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, 19, *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979).

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*, 91-92.

92. *American Religion*, 96-97.