

PROSPECTS FOR THE STUDY OF
THE BOOK OF MORMON
AS A WORK OF
AMERICAN LITERATURE

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I

No one will want to deny that the Book of Mormon has been a book of considerable impact and importance in America, insofar as it has affected the lives of many millions of citizens; yet it has never really been counted in the canon of American literature. Not even the enlightened developments of the past forty years or so that have broadened the base of literary studies to include, in addition to *belles-lettres*, virtually all written and even oral expression have altered this strange state of affairs, though they may well prove to have set the stage for such a change. No serious or sustained treatment of the Book of Mormon has appeared in any of our myriad literary histories, nor has any enterprising critic undertaken to explain an omission that, once it has been noticed and reflected upon, begins to look like a conspiracy. Such studies as have appeared, in undergraduate or graduate theses or in exclusively Mormon periodicals and books, have, perhaps inevitably, gained no wide currency, nor have they achieved any real standing in the scholarly world at large. Occasionally the Book of Mormon has been mentioned by a literary critic of consequence, as in the rare, almost isolated, case of

Van Wyck Brooks, who once made it the subject of an essay.¹ But the most striking thing about Brooks's essay on the Book of Mormon is that it soon becomes clear, alas, that he has not even bothered to read it. Indeed, the author of the most penetrating commentary we have had on the work as an "American document," Thomas F. O'Dea, has pointedly observed that "the *Book of Mormon* has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion on it."²

This is not to say, as the missionary often seems to assume, that scoffers who can be persuaded to read the book will remain to praise it. It is an admittedly difficult book to read, and we should be prepared to accept the fact that those qualities that made it attractive and even compelling to many of its early nineteenth-century readers will become increasingly hard for twentieth-century readers to recover. The pervasive literary judgment that it is for the most part ill-written is likely to stand. Champions of the book will do well to remember that neither Smith nor any of the early converts whose lives were transformed by reading it were concerned with the question of literary excellence. On the other hand, detractors who are accustomed to draw invidious comparisons between the Book of Mormon and the King James version of the Bible will do well to remember (or learn) that much of the Old Testament is equally ill-written and in the same ways, though more consistently Elizabethan in its grammar and accidentals. It is a common piece of piety to characterize the literary quality of the King James version by pointing to the lyricism of the Psalms or the Song of Songs or the dazzling brilliance of intermittent passages in St. Paul or the occasional magnificence of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets. But no one reads the Book of Numbers, let us say, for its aesthetic qualities, nor most of the Pentateuch, for that matter. Unfortunately, the Book of Mormon is much more like the Pentateuch than St. Paul, and it is this characteristically "Pentateuchal" quality of the Book of Mormon that prompted the Mark Twain quip, so often repeated by its critics, that the book was "chloroform in print."³

But even if the Book of Mormon is not remarkable in its literary qualities as we ordinarily speak of them, a substantial part of the reason for its neglect as a work of American literature must be attributed to the categories and critical conventions of literary study as it has been traditionally practiced. Literary study has been dominated, since even before it was taken over by the academy, by aesthetic considerations, and this is still largely true today. Works that do not measure up to the prevailing aesthetic standards are relegated to historians or anthropologists or to any interested practitioner of a social science, *unless*—and here is an interesting fact—they happen to be the products of

¹"The Book of Mormon," *Sketches in Criticism* (New York, 1932), pp. 253-256.

²*The Mormons* (Chicago, 1957), p. 26.

³*Roughing It*, Definitive Edition (New York, 1922), III, p. 110. Though Twain is thoroughly scornful of the Book of Mormon, he at least gives evidence that he has taken the trouble to read it and gives specific examples of what he objects to.

writers who have written other works that *do* measure up, in which case they are retained by the literary scholar and studied for the light they may throw upon the author's life or philosophical temperament or more important works. Thus a man like Jefferson, who made an inestimable contribution to American life and character by writing—as a *writer*, if you will, a man of *letters*—but who eschewed *belles-lettres*, is usually considered only a peripheral figure on the horizon of American literature. This kind of thing is usually justified with the argument that literary study concerns itself primarily with *imaginative* literature, but if Jefferson's writing is not in large part genuinely and truly imaginative, then the word is being sadly misused.

It is gratifying to note that our most significant and most widely acclaimed literary critics—men like Edmund Wilson and F. O. Matthiessen, for example—exercise a function far broader than merely making aesthetic judgments and willingly accept the role of “social scientist” or whatever the job entails. (Matthiessen preferred to call himself a “cultural anthropologist.”) The study of literature, we are finally coming to see, should not be limited to poems, plays, and stories but should be the study of human documents, of man's verbal representations of his experience, of his recorded visions of the world he inhabits or creates, whatever form they may take. Certainly the Book of Mormon, then, by dint of its decisive impact on the American scene, has a legitimate claim on our attention as literature above and beyond, as O'Dea puts it, the “superficial peculiarities and literary awkwardness” that commentators have heretofore made the “chief objects of their attention.”⁴

But the question of categories and conventions of literary study is not the end of the matter either. There have been important literary studies that have overlooked the Book of Mormon even as a species of sub-literature, which is to say, writing that doesn't measure up aesthetically or which lies somehow outside the conventional categories. A striking example is an excellent work, now virtually a classic, Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: A Study of the West as Symbol and Myth*. Those familiar with Smith's book, its scope and subject matter, will recognize that the topic is tailor-made for a consideration of the Book of Mormon. But Smith, a brilliant scholar who is exceedingly well-informed on the literature of the West, does not feel constrained to so much as mention the Book of Mormon. Bernard DeVoto, who wrote prodigiously on the literature and history of the West and who knew of Mormon culture at first hand, having been raised in Utah, could do no better than brutally dismiss the book as “yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless, and inconceivably absurd. . . .” Ironically enough, the only scholar of note not only to call DeVoto on his wrong-headedness but to put the Book of Mormon up for serious consideration as a work of American literature has been Fawn Brodie. More than twenty years ago she laid out the case for serious literary study of the Book of Mormon and

⁴O'Dea, *The Mormons*, p. 26.

countered DeVoto's charges with a defense that subsequent literary scrutiny is certain to confirm—that the book, while dull, is “not formless, aimless, or absurd,” and that “its structure shows elaborate design, its narrative is spun coherently, and it demonstrates throughout a unity of purpose.”⁵

One is finally led to the conclusion, for lack of a better one, that the literary neglect of the Book of Mormon is largely the result of both ignorance and diffidence. Most students of American literature and life would appear to be ignorant of the character and substance of the Book of Mormon and of its profound relevance, as I see it, to the pressing concerns of American life in the early nineteenth century. This is an ignorance that is perhaps shared by Mormon as well as non-Mormon scholars, though one must take into account that the basic assumptions of Mormon fundamentalists preclude consideration of the Book of Mormon as an “American” work, in the ordinary sense of the word, and least of all as a product of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the diffidence of Mormon scholars would appear to be somewhat different from that of their non-Mormon colleagues. This is an apparent reluctance to offer for publication anything that would have unfavorable repercussions in the Mormon community. The situation here is admittedly awkward and difficult, but the reluctance is nevertheless an unbecoming one in a scholar. The diffidence of non-Mormon scholars is typified, I fear, by an attitude even more reprehensible in a scholar, and that is the tendency to treat the subject with a knowing wink or smirk. This attitude is probably not the diffidence of “politeness” at all, in most instances, but rather a species of the first category, ignorance.

The upshot of all of this is that the Book of Mormon has been denied its due, whatever that may come to be, as a work of American literature. This is a lamentable state of affairs, not only for Mormons and others closely concerned with the book itself, but for anyone who has a serious interest in the American experience and the culture that has emerged from it. The only way to rectify the situation, obviously, is to make a start, and the question immediately arises, where does one begin? I should like here to offer a few suggestions, and I should like to begin with a consideration that has at least a logical priority—the text of the Book of Mormon.

II

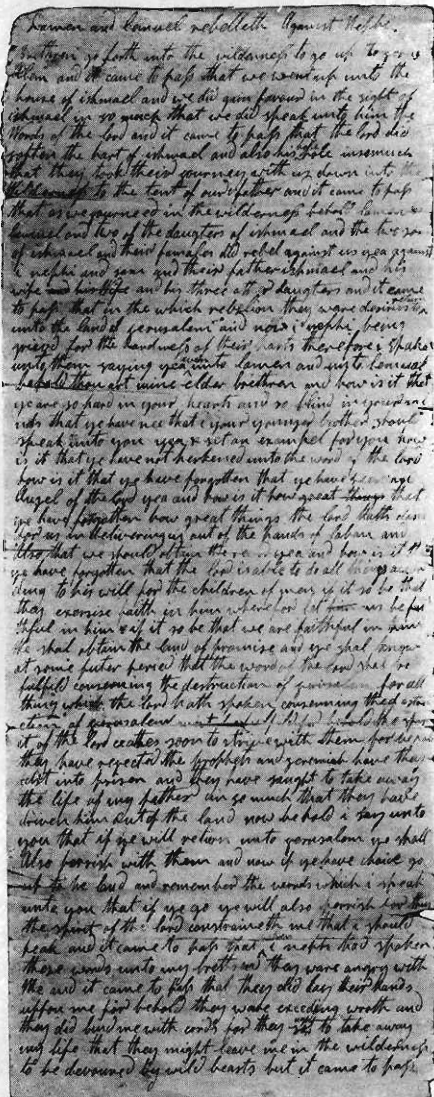
The first major task of the literary scholar is to establish the text. This is a task that appears simple to the layman but is often one of the

⁵DeVoto's charge and Mrs. Brodie's response appear in her monumental biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, (New York, 1945), pp. 68-69. While Mrs. Brodie's book contains some errors of fact (some of which have strangely persisted through seven printings) and, inevitably, some judgments which are questionable, it seems to have escaped most Mormons that her book is regarded by non-partisans as one of the finest examples of American biography, that it actually champions its subject as an extraordinary and fully human figure in American history, and that it is directly or indirectly responsible for arousing much of the sympathetic attention that has been paid to the early period of Mormon history by non-Mormon scholars over the past two decades.

most complex and difficult that the scholar has to face, as much subject to contention and controversy as the interpretation of the work itself. It is logically the *first* consideration because all others are necessarily tentative until the text has been established. The critic who would offer an interpretation of a work must be assured that the passages, phrases, and words that he cites as evidence in his arguments are authoritative, that they do not represent misprints or interpolations by another hand or the emendations of a capricious editor or a host of other corruptions that plague literary texts. Until the textual editor has done his job as thoroughly as possible, all readings and interpretations are tentative only and subject to revision.

Alerted to the dangers of the textual corruptions that attend reprints and editorial revisions, the layman may attempt to circumvent these pitfalls by seeking refuge in the first edition. But, unfortunately, this often brings him into contact with an even less desirable text than the modern editions he had hoped to escape. For, especially in older books, the authors themselves did not always arrange for or supervise or sometimes even consent to the initial publication of their works. The reader who acquired a first edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example, would not have a reliable text, as this happens to be what Shakespearian scholars call a "bad Quarto," a presumably pirated and imperfect version of the play. Even when an author has seen his own work through the press, he may overlook—and thus "authorize" typographical or substantive

errors which he may never catch or which he may silently correct in a subsequent printing. Or the author may make an outright revision of his work, which he has a perfect right to do, and thus rob the first edition of its authority. To come closer to home, the first edition of the Book of Mormon, while it continues to be of tremendous textual value, is not the edition that



A page of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon in Oliver Cowdery's handwriting.

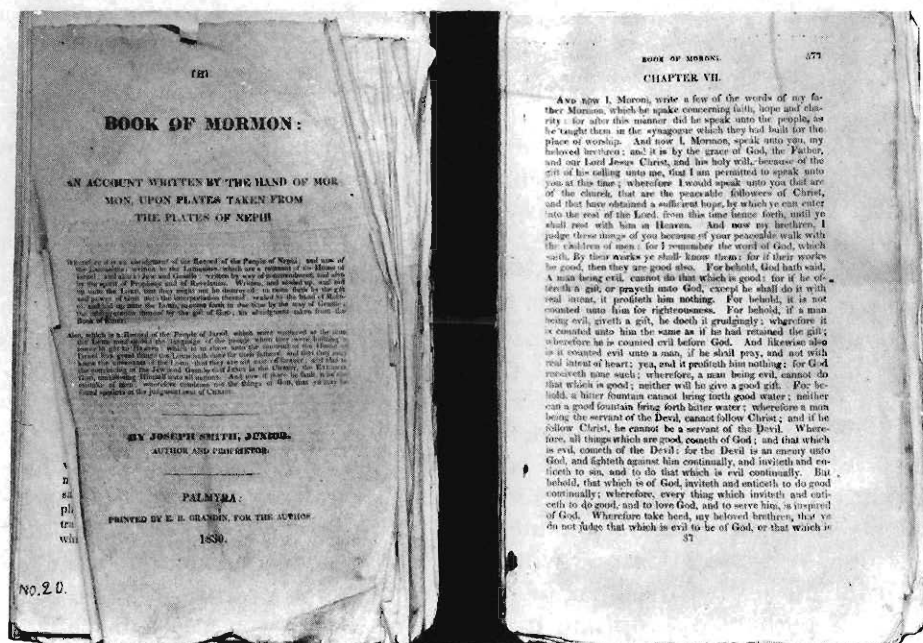
anyone familiar with the various other editions is likely to recommend to an interested reader.

It has been the great good fortune of the contemporary literary world to have witnessed the development of a school of bibliographical and textual analysis that has raised immeasurably the standards for the establishment of literary texts. Pioneered by Walter Gregg and R. B. McKerrow, two British scholars specializing in the English Renaissance, the movement has found its most energetic practitioner and spokesman in Professor Fredson Bowers of the University of Virginia. Like his predecessors, Professor Bowers is primarily concerned with the editing of texts from the English Renaissance, but he has demonstrated the value of his editorial procedures for American literature in an admirable edition of Whitman manuscripts and, more recently, in the superb Centenary Edition of Hawthorne, of which he is the textual editor, and which is certain to set the standard for future editions of the American classics. It is not possible to describe or summarize briefly the highly complex and exacting methods developed and employed by Professor Bowers and his colleagues, but they are characterized by the most rigorous attention, not only to the minutest details of whatever printed texts and manuscripts may be involved, but to the details of typesetting, layout, printing, proofing, and binding that went into the production of the printed texts.⁶ These procedures are the most painstaking ones imaginable, but they provide us, when carried through, with the most complete understanding of the nature of existing textual problems and the most reliable text that it is possible to have. In short, until this knowledge and these techniques have been applied to the establishment of the text of the Book of Mormon, we will continue to have something less than a text that we can confidently call definitive.

The textual criticism of the Book of Mormon along modern lines, so far as I am able to determine, has not yet begun, and I would not like to claim that I can begin it here, but I would like to indicate some of the problems that will have to be confronted. One of the initial problems will be to identify all the documents and sources that are pertinent and to make available those sources that are now virtually inaccessible. There exists, for example, a reportedly complete manuscript copy of the Book of Mormon and some fragments of another. The complete copy is the one that was retained by Oliver Cowdery when he left the Church and is now in the possession of the Reorganized Church at Independence. Although it has been photostated (white on black), the strict procedures which have been laid down by the Church officials to insure the maximum security and safety of the manuscript itself have had the effect of making it unavailable for scholarly examination. If the custodians of this unique manuscript could find means, consistent with its safety and

⁶A good general introduction to these methods, of a non-technical sort, is a lecture by Prof. Bowers, published by the University of Kansas Libraries as a pamphlet: *The Bibliographical Way* (Lawrence, 1959). A much more technical article is "Established Texts and Definitive Editions," *Philological Quarterly*, XLI (1962), 1-17.

security, of housing it in their own rare book facilities, rather than the Kansas City bank vault where it now reposes, then ways could almost certainly be found for qualified scholars to examine it without risks. Once a reliable transcript had been made, which could be checked against good quality microfilm copies, there would be little need to subject the manuscript itself to a great deal of handling. When these things are done, it will be possible to begin to discover answers to the crucial questions that the manuscript raises, such as: whether the manuscript is the original draft or the copy Oliver Cowdery is said to have made; whether this is the copy that was used by the printer; how it is punctuated and paragraphed; in precisely how many hands it is written and whose hands they are; what is indicated about the nature of the composition and dictation; and so forth.



Title page and sample page from the first edition (1830) of the *Book of Mormon*.

Most important of all, of course, is the question of how the manuscript relates to the first edition and to subsequent changes in the text.⁷ A committee authorized by the Reorganized Church undertook such a comparison shortly after the manuscript was acquired and presumably did a careful and conscientious job. The published report of the committee, however, indicates that the end product it was attempting to

⁷The temptation to regard the many changes that have been made in the text since the first edition as trivial and of no real consequence should be resisted. Prof. Bowers and others have demonstrated often and persuasively that the cumulative effect of a large number of minor changes is one of real significance. A glance at one of the many useful, if amateurish, volumes produced by Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *3,913 Changes in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, n.d.), will indicate the general nature and magnitude of the differences between the first edition and the current edition of the Utah Church.

achieve is something quite different from what literary scholars would call a definitive edition.⁸ This, together with the fact that the rigorous and exacting procedures of modern textual analysis were simply not available to the committee at this time, is why the edition that the committee produced falls short of the standards of contemporary scholarship. Nonetheless, because it is based on a comparison of the earlier editions with one of the original manuscripts, and because it adheres more closely than other modern editions to the format of the book that prevailed in Joseph Smith's lifetime, this is the edition that is to be preferred, from the point of view of literary scholarship, above all other current editions.

Closely related to the problem of establishing the text, and an equally good point at which to begin to bring serious literary scholarship to bear on the Book of Mormon, is the problem of descriptive bibliography.⁹ Here again, Professor Bowers and his associates have put what was previously a rather casual affair on a very sound and rigorous basis and have thus made possible finer and more useful discriminations.¹⁰ They have, for example, greatly improved our ability, not only to discriminate between editions or printings which are virtually identical, but to detect and establish the priority of varying states within a single printing. One of Professor Bowers's associates, Dr. Charlton Hinman, has perfected a collating machine which vastly extends the scope and accuracy of textual comparison. It is now possible to compare, by means of the Hinman collating machine, many copies of a single edition or printing of a volume in a reasonable length of time and detect even the slightest variation, such as a broken type face.¹¹

The job of providing a definitive descriptive bibliography of the Book of Mormon is one that can and should be undertaken at once. These researches, for which literary scholarship can now provide completely satisfactory means and methods, will supply a tremendous amount of valuable information and will lay a solid foundation for the establishment of the text of the Book of Mormon.

It is perhaps appropriate to say at this point that the full-scale re-editing of the Book of Mormon employing the modern procedures and standards being outlined here is *not* proposed on the assumption that anything terribly dramatic or startling will emerge in the form of a drastic textual revision. There is no reason, as a matter of fact, for

⁸"Preface," *The Book of Mormon* (Independence, 1953), [vi]-viii. The most recent edition of *The Book of Mormon* published under the auspices of the Reorganized Church, issued in 1966, has been edited with an eye toward making it more readable and thus, while it may be fairly successful in terms of its aims, is not well suited for scholarly use.

⁹See Fredson Bowers, *Bibliography and Textual Criticism* (Oxford, 1964).

¹⁰The most exhaustive treatise on this subject is Prof. Bowers's *Principles of Bibliographical Description* (Princeton, 1949).

¹¹Abundant evidence of what the Hinman collating machine is capable of uncovering in the supposedly well-searched area of Shakespearian texts is Prof. Hinman's two-volume work, *Printing and Proof-reading in the First Folio of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1963). Prof. Bowers's own textual introductions to the three volumes of the Centenary Hawthorne published thus far are fascinating examples of what can be done with the basic data supplied by the machine.

thinking anything of the kind. (It is, of course, true that the only way to be certain that doing an up-to-date job of editing would change nothing of any consequence in the text is to do it. This is precisely the reason that the newly created National Humanities Foundation set aside a very large amount, in its initial appropriation, for the definitive editing of the standard American classics.) Rather, the proposal rests on the assumption that an important document deserves the best editing possible and that the people who study the document and treat it seriously can take no comfort in anything less.

There is good reason for thinking that literary scholarship is in a position, in performing these tasks, to render a valuable service to Mormonism. As a discipline, it has no theological or sectarian ax to grind and, because of its impartial position, can command the respect and confidence of all elements within the Mormon community and without. Furthermore, the approach to and presentation of the text by literary scholarship would be such as to make the textual variants and other evidence involved in problematic passages available for scrutiny so that alternative readings could be independently considered and arrived at. This kind of scholarly interest and activity would also have the effect of broadening the base of readership for the Book of Mormon, something that would surely be welcomed by all Mormons.

III

But if establishing the text is logically the first task of the literary scholar, it is in practice, of course, one that is not undertaken until a considerable amount of other interest has been expressed in a work. Readers who are attracted to the Book of Mormon because of its potential significance as literature are not likely to await a definitive edition of the text before offering their judgments and interpretations. I should like to offer some suggestions at this point as to what we might expect from a literary, as opposed to a religious, approach to the Book of Mormon.

The literary study and analysis of the Book of Mormon, when it is seriously undertaken in our time, will of necessity have a decidedly mythic orientation. I think we may confidently predict as much for two reasons: one is the contemporary importance and pervasiveness of myth criticism in literary analysis; the other is the special character of the narrative of the Book of Mormon itself.

It might not be too much to claim that the mythic approach to literature, as it has emerged in our time, while revolutionizing our understanding of contemporary and traditional writings, has substantially altered our estimates of important writers. The reputation of William Blake is perhaps the most striking example. Regarded as a madman by his contemporaries, he is now generally ranked as a major poet. The sole reason for this radical shift is clearly the seriousness with which it is possible for modern readers to take Blake's religious vision through the instrumentality of myth. It is no accident that one of the first studies to penetrate Blake's depths and reveal his poetic themes, Mark

Schorer's *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*, should contain what has come to be regarded as a classic statement on myth. Noting that any definition of myth must not be too stringent, he emphasizes that for literary purposes "even a loose definition does not include . . . the current journalistic sense of falsehood, nor does it imply anti-intellectualism or any other such pejorative. The term denotes, in fact, neither the negation nor the contrary of ideas, but their basis and their structure, the element by which they are activated." He then undertakes an illuminating discussion of myth, from which I quote only the first few sentences:

Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience. A mythology is a more or less articulated body of such images, a pantheon. Without such images, experience is chaotic, fragmentary and merely phenomenal.¹²

It is worth emphasizing at this point that Schorer deliberately rules out any possibility that "myth," as he and other literary critics use it, may imply falsehood or fraud. Hence, a mythic approach to the Book of Mormon would be concerned with the character and significance of its dramatic configurations and structure, not with its historical validity.

Interestingly enough, the development of the mythic mode of interpretation has not been exclusively literary but has, in fact, been closely related to the understanding of traditional religious texts. Once the classical Greek myths, under the aegis of the emerging discipline of classical anthropology as exemplified in Frazer's *Golden Bough*, began to be understood not as mere superstitions but as profoundly significant and expressive forms, the discovery of archetypes and the reexamination in this light of virtually all dramatic narratives, particularly those of religious import, was inevitable. In our own day, the possibility that serious literary commentators, in examining such a narrative as the Book of Mormon, will be particularly attracted and sensitive to its mythic dimension is a foregone conclusion.

This represents a consideration that will understandably give pause to a Mormon world accustomed to thinking of the book in merely literal terms. Mormon intellectuals who have already expressed concern over whether interested non-Mormons are really capable of "taking Mormonism seriously" will perhaps regard the mythic approach as merely another in a series of simplistic and superficial dabbings in the phenomena of Mormon culture.¹³ This would constitute a serious mistake—

¹²(New York, 1946), p. 27.

¹³One may cite, as a recent and telling example, Mr. Richard L. Bushman's contribution to a roundtable in a recent issue of *Dialogue*. Writing of the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price, he states: "Their claim to be ancient writings can be readily tested by established canons of proof. Unfortunately, non-Mormons have started at the wrong end again by showing similarities

serious, not only because it would widen the breach between Mormon and non-Mormon students of the Book of Mormon, but also because the valuable insights that such an approach might yield for Mormonism itself would be thereby lost or obscured in the haze of controversy. For the mythic approach to the Book of Mormon would not constitute, as some might fear, an attempt or intention to profane the sacred, but rather to apprehend it in a way that is meaningful and consistent with what is known about the way man sees and understands and projects the world and the life he lives in it. The actual effect of the development of myth criticism has been to force students to take the writings of prophets, seers, and revelators *more* seriously than they had previously. The tendency to write such works off as so much superstitious malarkey has actually been reversed. This means that the problems traditionally posed by a literalistic scrutiny of sacred texts—as, for example, the whole question of how pre-Columbian archeology squares with the Book of Mormon—need not prove insurmountable barriers to serious inquiry. Indeed, once the mythic mode of interpretation is adopted, such matters do not appear as barriers at all.¹⁴

It was over sixty years ago that George Santayana crystalized a developing trend in nineteenth-century thinking—a trend that occupied such disparate figures as Emerson and Matthew Arnold—with his famous formulation that identified poetry and religion. His *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900) offered as its central idea “that religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry.” Santayana’s intention here was not to demean religion; on the contrary, his whole purpose was to dignify it and, in the context of a shooting war then raging between science and religion, to affirm its profound significance and importance for human values and human experience. He felt that religion had been defended on the wrong grounds and wished, by identifying it with poetry (whose

with nineteenth century beliefs. . . . The only way to prove the Book of Mormon and the writings of Abraham false is to find contradictions with the milieu of the ancient world from which they claim to have arisen. No non-Mormon historians have undertaken this task, however, and all we hear is that the Gadianton bands were disguised versions of the Masons. Meanwhile, Mormon historians have gotten the jump on their antagonists and brought to light a multitude of similarities and harmonies which go far toward proving the Book of Mormon authentic ancient history” (*Dialogue*, I, Summer 1966, 82). Mr. Bushman is perfectly aware, as an historian, that the burden of proof is on those who advance or support a claim—any claim—and that other historians, whose scepticism is after all not partisan but professional, are under no obligation either to accept the claim or to demonstrate its falsity. In this light, the rhetorical strategy of the passage just cited, in which the “negative” efforts of non-Mormon historians, represented as misguided slackers and “antagonists,” are compared invidiously with the “positive” efforts of Mormon historians (which, incidentally, do not appear to have convinced or impressed anyone outside the faith), does not constitute a very inviting intellectual basis upon which to “take Mormonism seriously.”

¹⁴A recent collection of essays may be recommended as virtually an ideal treatment and coverage of the subject of myth and literature: *Myth and Literature*, ed. John B. Vickery (Lincoln, 1966).

proper concern, he thought, was to express the ideal), to rescue it from the ignominy of a false science.

For the dignity of religion [he wrote], like that of poetry and of every moral ideal, lies precisely in its ideal adequacy, in its fit rendering of the meanings and values of life, in its anticipation of perfection; so that the excellence of religion is due to an idealisation of experience which, while making religion noble if treated as poetry, makes it necessarily false if treated as science. Its function is rather to draw from reality materials for an image of that ideal to which reality ought to conform, and to make us citizens, by anticipation, in the world we crave.¹⁵

To regard religious doctrines and scriptures in this way, as Santayana was perfectly aware, is to regard them as myth. This is the direction that has predominated in the twentieth century and is one of the reasons that the study of literature and the study of religion have been drawn much more closely together. Nor has this development been without significant consequences. One of the leading protestant theologians of our time, Rudolph Bultmann, has made the mythic approach to scripture one of the keystones of his theology. In this connection, Bultmann, who is by training a New Testament scholar, has had a wide influence. To treat the scriptures literally, he would insist, is to treat them in a way that distorts their meaning, to treat them often in a way in which they were never intended to be treated, and to confuse the message (what he calls the Kerygma) with its expressive medium, namely myth.

Within the past year, there have been indications of a movement in this direction even within the Roman Catholic Church. According to a recent report, a group of Roman Catholic scholars and theologians convened last summer by the Pope to "summarize contemporary concepts of original sin" reported unanimously that "'Adam and Eve' was a literary device used by the Hebrew editor of the Book of Genesis to symbolize the first human being or beings," that the question of where and how man first appeared "is up to scientists to discover, not theologians," and that "The concept of original sin refers to man's revolt against his own conscience, and therefore against God."¹⁶ In short, the panel of Catholic scholars advocated a mythic approach to the Book of Genesis, which they felt got at the deeper significance of the literal text.

In view of all of this, there is little doubt that the mythic approach to the Book of Mormon is not only inevitable but that it holds out potent possibilities for the enrichment of our understanding. For there is widespread agreement that Joseph Smith was a brilliant and sensitive young man, living in the religious confusions of the burned-over district of upstate New York, in answer to whose quest for certainty there came,

¹⁵*The Works of George Santayana* (New York, 1936), II, 3-4. This last sentence would seem to have a special significance when applied to the early teachings of Joseph Smith.

¹⁶*Newsweek*, August 22, 1966, 93. The quoted material represents the language of the magazine account rather than that of the report itself.

from whatever source, the series of dramatic images that comprise a truly arresting and remarkable book. The problems posed by a literal approach to the narrative increasingly block the path to the book for many contemporary readers who should know something about it; the mythic approach, as in the case of the book of Genesis, opens the way. "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life."

The study of the Book of Mormon as a work of American literature, once it is seriously undertaken, will prove immeasurably more diverse than my discussion here of two basic problems can suggest. It will be characterized, no doubt, by a good deal of wrangling, profitable and otherwise, and will naturally run the risk of splitting into two hostile camps. This can be avoided if the spirit of scholarship, rather than partisanship, can be made to prevail. The participation of non-Mormons will go far to insure that the endeavor transcends parochialism and apologetics. The continuing interest of Mormons will serve to maintain the proper magnitude of the religious dimensions and their historical importance. I believe that the convergence of these two into a fruitful working relationship might well make possible the most exciting new vista to be discovered in American literary studies in recent years.