

## Being Joseph Smith

*The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Dissociated Mind*, by William D. Morain (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998), 246 pp., \$31.95  
*Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*, by Robert D. Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 263 pp., \$19.95

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NEW YORK TIMES REVIEWER Christopher Lasch, reviewing Erik Erikson's psychobiography of Mahatma Gandhi in 1969, wrote: "Erikson understands that to reduce illustrious men to their symptoms explains everything except the one thing that most needs to be explained—their greatness itself" (*New York Times*, 14 September 1969). The standard that Erikson set in *Gandhi's Truth* has been difficult for others to match, due in part to Erikson's groundbreaking re-inventions and applications of psychodynamic theory.

Few pianists can play like Liszt, yet playing Liszt's music is a worthy endeavor for pianists, if sometimes a frustrating exercise. Similarly, few psychological theorists can achieve insights parallel to those of masters such as Erikson; the question, then, is whether others should try the same endeavor. Is engaging in Erikson-like life analysis a benign task, analogous to an amateur pianist attempting Liszt? Or

is it dangerous, like an amateur attempting brain surgery?

Two authors recently have applied psychohistorical techniques to Joseph Smith. Though both authors use similar tools, they take differing approaches, and the books vary in tone and in conclusion. Both attempt to crawl inside Joseph Smith's psyche to explain Joseph's behaviors and beliefs. Everything from Joseph's sexual behaviors to the manifest content of scriptures and spiritual events he recorded are fair game in the hands of authors William D. Morain (*The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Dissociated Mind*) and Robert D. Anderson (*Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*).

For Morain, being inside Joseph Smith involves analyzing a traumatic incident from Joseph's childhood and applying it to the remainder of his life. Morain focuses on the familiar account of young Joseph's leg surgery, followed by a period in which he was sent away to recover in the care of relatives before returning home. Morain dissects the particulars of the events and seeks evidence of repetition of those elements throughout Joseph's life. For example, the surgeon's knife morphs throughout Joseph's life into the sword of Laban.

The inner world of the Joseph that Morain describes is dark and driven, with the one traumatic childhood event pervading all other meaningful activities and purposes in Joseph's life.

In Morain's analysis, the childhood trauma tossed and tumbled Joseph's psyche like a leaf in a hurricane; Joseph is seen as having few inner resources. The assumptions that Joseph was emotionally fragile and was emotionally wounded form the core of Morain's argument, which is equivalent to describing Joseph as the sum of his failings. In Morain's view, Joseph existed to endlessly relive his childhood trauma.

It is hard to see how this depiction of Joseph matches the image of the man who attracted thousands to a new religion. Joseph was, by many accounts, charismatic and attractive. Morain's description leaves Joseph as what Jung would call Shadow, not as a man merely striving and struggling with conflicts. Morain sees no positive life force within Joseph. He assumes from the outset that this event was "tragic" and that Joseph exhibited "psychopathological patterns" and "bizarre behavior" (xxiv). Morain considers Joseph's adult behaviors as "adult symptoms arising out of his personal horrors" (xxiv). He claims that Joseph was "driven by powerful inner forces that neither he nor those around him could understand or control" (2). He asserts: "No subsequent event could have engendered even a small fraction of the impact on his behavior and character that was induced by those events occurring prior to his departure from New England" (7). Morain then follows those assumptions to their conclusions.

In Morain's view, Joseph's life thus was an endless acting out, replay after replay, of the early trauma. The Joseph whom Morain describes virtually becomes the embodiment of the trauma. It is as if Joseph were trapped in some *Star Trek*-like time warp, endlessly repeating his own history but

with no chance to work through it or get it right in the succeeding relivings. If Joseph's life were the movie *Groundhog Day*, Joseph would never leave Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

This is the stuff of serial killers, perhaps, or of bad plot lines in mediocre murder mysteries. But it is not the stuff of the reportedly cheerful man who organized a church and became a beloved, if controversial, leader. It is not the stuff of real life.

Psychologically, the retelling that Morain attributes to Joseph is a psychological hell, a place of unredeemable misery, of unquenchable thirsts. In reality, few people live out their lives in a twisted replaying of the wrong ending to a bad drama. A more affirming view of life would have us see this replaying as a process or movement toward health.

The author stretches the point imaginatively but unbelievably in his dozens of descriptions of life events that he purports emanated from Joseph's childhood surgery. Among the more far-fetched reasoning is Morain's assertion that Joseph "seems to have developed a genius for getting himself attacked by all-male mobs in reenactments of the original trauma" (38). While the Doctrine & Covenants makes it clear that Joseph did appear to bring a certain amount of grief upon himself, claims such as this seem a distant stretch.

Anderson's explanation of Joseph's mind and behavior makes fewer assumptions and presents them with less rashness. Nonetheless, Anderson is not reluctant to reach conclusions and make judgments. For instance, Anderson writes of the accounts surrounding Joseph's surgery: "As a psychiatrist, I find something troubling in this description. . . . The father, overwhelmed with anxiety, burst into

tears and 'sobbed like a child.' This was not a helpful response at a time of crisis. What the child needed at this moment was not childlike instability in his father, but stability and effectiveness" (26).

Obviously, the extraordinary circumstances triggered an unusual response in Joseph Sr., which may be why it was recorded. Perhaps Joseph Sr.'s empathy with his son's pain was in some way comforting to a young boy who may have felt alone in his pain—we cannot know, nor can we judge.

Anderson's desire to elucidate the unexplainable and wring knowledge from the unknown mars an otherwise unique approach. He examines the Book of Mormon through the lens of Joseph's early experiences and struggles, postulating how Joseph's life colored his explanations of events in the Book of Mormon. Anderson concedes: "I am profoundly aware of how offensive this interpretation may be to devout Mormons." He adds: "This very dark view of Joseph Smith's early infancy and childhood is admittedly extreme speculation, and there is no historical documentation of such emotional deprivation from his mother's history that would justify such furious hatred in the [Mulekite] story" (212).

This reading back is the hallmark of Anderson's approach. He extrapolates from the Book of Mormon to explain what he then assumes must have happened in Joseph's early life. He justifies his approach through the rationale that interpolating elements of the Book of Mormon into Joseph's history may provide the most accurate view possible of Joseph's psyche.

Or not. It could be equally interesting—and perhaps more intellectually challenging—to explain Joseph's inner life without a summary dis-

missal of all of his claims of divine and revelatory events.

Where Anderson treads on firmer ground is his explanation of projective identification as a framework for understanding the relationship between Joseph and his followers. True, Anderson does explain away supernatural phenomena as having an unconscious basis, but at least he describes a transpersonal process that can explain deep loyalty and connection.

The question remains whether these psychohistories represent benign exercises. Studying the life of Joseph Smith through various lenses is an interesting exercise, but it may not present a rich picture. Psychological theory is still developing and maturing, and the field of psychology remains far from being explained by a grand, unifying theory. Nor has psychology done an adequate job of explaining things that poets and writers explain so much better—love, wisdom, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, growth, and epiphany, to name a few. The most respected psychological theorists' explanations of growth and development seem shallow and hollow when matched with Millay's "Renaissance" or Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. But that is understandable; literature is a far older discipline than psychology.

Perhaps the greatest risk in Morain's and Anderson's works is that they make the process of psychological understanding seem too easy. I am reminded of a giant puzzle that my husband assembled this year while recovering from a January malaise. Its border was all black, several pieces deep, consisting of almost identical shapes. As I helped him assemble the border, pieces in the outer layer often seemed to fit together readily; it was only when we attempted to fit in the

second and third rows of black pieces that we realized that the seemingly identical puzzle pieces differed just enough so that the wrong piece kept the inner layers from fitting. Sometimes, the only way to judge whether the correct piece was in place was to see whether the puzzle bulged or remained flat.

Those seeking to understand Joseph through the lens of psychology must remember that, like the surgeon's knife, psychology's power to heal is also its power to destroy. The healing and insightful power of psychology often resides in the practitioner's ability to manage ambiguity, discern subtlety, educate his or her intuition, and excise his or her own arrogance. This is as true of the literary practice of psychology as it is of its practice in the therapy room. C. S. Lewis wrote "the kind of explanation which explains

things away may give us something, though at a heavy cost. But you cannot go on 'explaining away' forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. . . . If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see."<sup>1</sup> Morain and Anderson present new insight into some of Joseph's more puzzling behaviors. Nonetheless, the presentations are at times disconcerting in their confidence. When they reach the inner layers, does the puzzle bulge? And, more tellingly, do we see Joseph more clearly, or do we merely think that we see through him? And, seeing through him, do we fail to actually see him?

## The Life of a Controversial Biographer

*Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer's Life*, by Newell G. Bringhurst (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 350 pp., \$29.95.

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WINNER OF THE 1999 "Best Biography Award" from the Mormon History Association, *Fawn McKay Brodie* measures up to the honor. A biographer commonly finds varied reasons for selecting his or her subject. Newell Bringhurst candidly discusses his motivations for researching and writing about Fawn McKay Brodie. "She was

born of stalwart Mormon pioneer stock," he notes, "her ancestors having migrated to Utah during the mid-nineteenth century" (xiv). This background is quite similar to Bringhurst's own.

After questioning childhood beliefs during their adolescence, both Brodie and her biographer began drifting away from the faith while attending the University of Utah. Each experienced a sense of despair over what they saw as the seeming "contradictions" of Mormonism. For Brodie, doubt came from years of "meticulous research" into the career of Joseph Smith, which led her to conclude he was a "conscientious imposter"—in

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: MacMillan, 1975), 91.