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Special Feature: Arno Schmidt's "The Book of Mormon"

Arno Schmidt among Comic Commentators on the Book of Mormon

John Durham Peters

Introducing Schmidt

Arno Schmidt (1914–1979) was one of the most important, prolific, and original of postwar German authors. His magnum opus, *Zettels Traum* (1970), appeared in 1,360 large-font, signed typescript copies that each weighed 12 kilos and resembled another intimidating modernist text, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, in its experiments with genre, fascinating density, multilingual citations, jokey allusiveness, and mythic grandeur. Like Joyce, Schmidt pushed boundaries of all kinds and sometimes got

I'd like to thank Erhard Schüttpelz for first drawing my attention to Schmidt's essay and to him, Benjamin Peters, Joseph Spencer, and Kirk Wetters, for useful feedback on earlier drafts. I thank the Internationale Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie in Weimar, Germany, for offering hospitable conditions for writing this essay.

into hot water with those who found his writings sexually and religiously indecent. As an author, his work is hard to classify; he is sometimes called an “avant-garde traditionalist.” In personal belief, he was an atheist, though one who was curious about the many forms that belief can take; he opens his essay on the Book of Mormon, for instance, by confessing his soft spot for holy books. A fierce critic of both West and East Germany, he was politically neither a Marxist, nor a social democrat, nor a straight-up conservative, though his attacks on mass society and choice to live his last two decades in relative isolation in a remote hamlet in Lower Saxony have led some critics to detect conservative sympathies. But he was also a clear anti-Nazi and was disgusted at what his country had done. Perhaps by living in a remote spot with his wife, Alice, also a writer whose work was not appreciated until later, he simply wanted to maintain his artistic integrity and stay aloof from the cultural establishment. By any account, he was a lone wolf, anxious not to be pinned down.

Schmidt read deeply in American and British literature and, besides his many novels, stories, and essays, his great literary gifts also took form in the translation of various English works, including American authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and William Faulkner. Like many of his countrymen, Schmidt found the American West fascinating, especially Native Americans and their history, and he wrote a controversial psychoanalytic biography of Karl May (1842–1912), the still widely read author of western adventure novels who did so much to establish this fascination in German culture and elsewhere. As a holy book about the ancient history of the Americas that is also a one-of-a-kind genre-breaker uniquely ambitious in its claims regarding what a book can be, the Book of Mormon combines many of Schmidt’s interests.

Thomas O’Dea’s observation deserves quoting yet again: “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.”²¹ Harold Bloom, in one of his many brilliant but hard-to-verify generalizations,

1. Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

declares that the Book of Mormon “exists in more unread copies than any other book,” a statement partly verified by his own admission not to have read the whole thing.² To be fair, having opinions about books one has not read is a major part of intellectual life,³ but critics of the Book of Mormon sometimes flaunt their lack of reading to an unusual degree.

This is one reason Schmidt’s essay is remarkable. Here, we have a first-class mind and writer who read the book—twice. He does the book the honor of being taken seriously, and considered it part of the canon of American literature well before this approach was even somewhat normative for scholars of literature and history.⁴ It is difficult to think of another major non-Latter-day Saint author who has engaged the Book of Mormon with such patience. Schmidt read the Book of Mormon not as a dangerous or preposterous text to be contained or debunked, as many have from the beginning, nor as necessary homework for a larger travel narrative, as did Richard Burton or Mark Twain in their visits to Salt Lake City in the early 1860s, but rather as an exploration of the many ways human beings create worlds out of words. Schmidt clearly thinks the Book of Mormon is outlandish, but no more so than any other religious scripture, and he is funny and generous about it. (That human beings build outlandish worlds to live in is one anthropological generalization we can all agree on.) As far as I can tell, he stood completely alone in appreciating a book that had absolutely no advocates outside the Church and no public intellectual presence in postwar Germany. The open-mindedness of the essay reminds one of the liberal

2. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 127.

3. Pierre Bayard, *Comment parler des livres que l’on n’a pas lus?* (Paris: Minuit, 2007), translated as *How to Talk about Books You Haven’t Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007).

4. Douglas Wilson, “Prospects for the Study of the Book of Mormon as a Work of American Literature,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3/1 (1968): 29–41; Elizabeth Fenton, “Open Canons: Sacred History and Lay American History in The Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1 (2013): 339–61; Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature* 86/3 (2014): 429–61.

call of John Stuart Mill to learn from the most disparaged and neglected voices.⁵ In its droll dissidence, the essay rebukes the German public for its ignorance and seeks to correct a long-standing fog of misinformation surrounding a significant religious minority.

Apparently, Schmidt first planned the text as a radio talk in 1958—radio was a robust forum for intellectual life in West Germany, and Schmidt often wrote for the medium—but he had no takers, so he wrote it as a long-form magazine piece in May 1961. It was published first in March 1962 in *konkret*, a far-left tabloid that played an important role in Germany’s student movement and was one of the leading outlets for German postwar authors of many stripes. It was then published in a book collection of his short pieces, *Trommler beim Zaren* (1966), and again finally in the authoritative *Bargfelder Ausgabe* (Bargfeld Edition), which is the text we used for this translation.⁶ The magazine *konkret* had both a tough-minded political side and a playful experimental side, and Schmidt’s essay fit more with the latter. Judging from his detailed knowledge of the Latter-day Saint tradition, including the Tabernacle Choir, the hymnal, and *Der Stern*, the German-language publication from 1867 to 2000 (now renamed *Liahona*), one wonders if, buried in some postwar missionary journal somewhere, there might not be entries about lively discussions with a certain Herr und Frau Schmidt . . .

Schmidt’s take is at turns perceptive, spiky, funny, wise, and even affectionate. The essay is rather scattered in structure, and often jumps from point to point in one lightning flash after another without filling in the gaps. In four sentences, he can go from discussing the Book of Mormon’s thought-world, to its moral harmlessness, to the Tabernacle Choir, to an extended quote of a Utah-praising hymn from a

5. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; New York: Norton, 1975). See chap. 2: “The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it” (Mill, *On Liberty*, 11); on Latter-day Saints, see Mill, *On Liberty*, chap. 4.

6. Arno Schmidt, “Das Buch Mormon,” in *Essays und Aufsätze*, Vol. 2, ed. Bernd Rauschenbach (Bargfeld: Arno Schmidt Stiftung, 1995), 65–77. The few small textual variations between the Bargfeld edition and in *konkret* are detailed in Vol. 2, p. 472.

late nineteenth-century German hymnal. This rapid-fire juxtaposition keeps the reader hopping and also suggests Schmidt's sense of humor. Of all modes, humor is the hardest to translate, and Schmidt plays with different levels of style that are difficult to render in English. He can be faux-bureaucratic, mock-scholarly, prophetically portentous, and jokily insinuating, in addition to being lucidly descriptive. The accompanying translation, drafted by Hans-Wilhelm Kelling, revised by Joseph Spencer, and polished by me, tries to render Schmidt's sense clearly, and footnotes, all of them from the translators, explain some (not all) of the obscurities. Those interested in the nuances will have to learn German!

Schmidt claims not to take sides and presents himself as a mere reporter, but he clearly goes beyond that. There is something thrilling about reading over the shoulder of a first-rate mind reading a book that demands a special reader. He has clearly done his homework and, unlike most other arms-length commentators, makes relatively few and only minor goofs. Like many others in recent Book of Mormon criticism, Schmidt is less interested in the book's complicated origin story than in the text itself. His embrace of the theory that Joseph Smith was a writing medium might seem too easy, but it gets him off the hook of explaining the book's authorship. Like other literary commentators on the book, Schmidt is less interested in the black box of how it came to be than in reading the text for what it says. So many get stalled by the gold plates and angel Moroni that they fail to read the book at all; Schmidt's account of authorship fits his program of reading the text as a literary cosmos rather than as history or ultimate truth. He sees the book as an expansion—a Haggadah, he calls it—of the Bible, a notion suggested by such later towering critics such as Krister Stendahl and Harold Bloom as well as Latter-day Saint apologists such as Blake Ostler.⁷

7. Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaean-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 139–54; Bloom, *American Religion*, 81; Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20/1 (1987): 66–123.

Schmidt also notes the two items that any postwar European would know about the Church—polygamy and the Tabernacle Choir. As a missionary in the Netherlands in the late 1970s, I can attest that these were pretty much all the general Northern European public knew with regard to the Church, in addition to a rare smattering of knowledge of the Osmonds, the musical group. (Schmidt’s discussion of polygamy includes a bit of familiar quasi-feminist wit that many wives would ease the housework.)

Furthermore, he is well informed about the publishing history of the Book of Mormon (even if his passing nomination of Orson Pratt and Sidney Rigdon as the movement’s two chief “dogmatists” seems rather arbitrary) and of its history of translation into German, including some witty comments about the effect of “and it came to pass” on total word count. It is not clear how he determined that the Lehites landed in Peru or Chile, since no such specificity is authorized by the text, but he makes some prescient observations about the fraught project—one combining philology and detective work, as he puts it—of localizing Book of Mormon geography.⁸ He enjoys the book’s roll call of exotic names and figures of speech. The claim in 3 Nephi 8:21 that there could be no light because of the darkness, he savors for poetic possibilities instead of scoffing at it, and indeed his mode is to bring his best interpretive game; he practices a hermeneutics of charity, not one of suspicion here. He is not interested in drive-by shootings of the book’s apparent rhetorical infelicities that are so frequent among lesser critics. He understands well that the book’s narrative arc culminates in the appearance of the resurrected Christ to the Nephites in 3 Nephi. He concludes with a sure sign of strong reading: an appropriation from the text itself to authorize the mode of reading that he has employed. Texts teach you how to read them, and his concluding quotation from 3 Nephi 10:14 is an affectionate tribute to the power of the text, honoring both its medium and its message.

8. The widespread use of archaeological videos such as *Ancient America Speaks* (1972) in missionary work was yet years away, but it is possible that Schmidt had access to archaeological paratexts in *Der Stern* or oral lore.

Schmidt brings perhaps no single insight that is absolutely new to Book of Mormon studies, but the overall effect is to shine a light on the book that is unlike any other and to offer many observations that are acute and well expressed. We might once again repurpose the words of Luther about non-canonical writings: Schmidt may not be holy writ, but he is good and useful to read.

The Tradition of Comic Commentary

Here, I want to reflect on Schmidt's question about the literary productivity of the Book of Mormon. That is, I want to think about comedy.

Schmidt wonders about the "poetic usefulness" of the Book of Mormon, that is, its ability to inspire other texts. He notes the Bible's fertile literary offspring and some of the Qur'an's. Schmidt's basic idea anticipates Bloom's famous notion of the ways that strong texts make later texts indebted to them (the "anxiety of influence"⁹). Schmidt knew of no downstream literary effects from the Book of Mormon and missed its multi-media offshoots in literature, pageantry, cinema, painting, sculpture, and illustration.¹⁰ And since Schmidt's essay, there have been numerous Book of Mormon spin-offs within science fiction, such as Orson Scott Card's sci-fi *Homecoming* series or, in a more episodic way, the TV series *Battlestar Galactica*. But perhaps one of the clearest ways that the Book of Mormon has been poetically useful is the very tradition that Schmidt sits in but does not recognize: the comedic mining of the book. Is there any book so widely regarded as humorless that has inspired such funny spin-offs?

Presiding among comic commentators is Mark Twain's satirical burlesque of the Book of Mormon in *Roughing It*.¹¹ (Schmidt was an early

9. Harold Bloom (*The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973]) is the first in a long line of meditations by Bloom on the topic.

10. See Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

11. Mark Twain [pseud. Samuel Langhorne Clemens], *Roughing It* (New York: Harpers, 1871), 110–19.

and appreciative reader of Twain and alludes to *Roughing It* in a 1970s text, but there is no mark of direct influence from Twain on Schmidt's Book of Mormon essay.) The tradition of comic commentary on the Book of Mormon that Twain founded runs up through the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, which draws on, invents, parodies, amplifies, and distorts the potential for earnestness, clunkiness, cluelessness, cheeriness, high stakes and drama, profound spiritual direction, and hearty good feeling of the Book of Mormon without engaging the text directly at all. I defy anyone to read Twain's comments without laughing out loud, even if he is obviously unfair, a cherry picker, and fond of tall-tale exaggeration. Twain may have given Book of Mormon critics one immortal line—"chloroform in print"—but he also opened a lasting way of dealing with the book: humor. Twain, to be sure, had no less mercy on Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* and satirized the Qur'an and the Bible with equal vigor. His treatment of the Book of Mormon is part of a more general modus operandi of what the late BYU English professor Richard Cracroft called "gentle blasphemy."¹²

My vote for the most distinguished practitioner of Twainian religious criticism today would be Harold Bloom, whose *The American Religion* (1992) has many brilliant and witty things to say about Latter-day Saints, though he saves his funniest lines for New Age spirituality.¹³ Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk might come in second place, though his flowing pen has yet to touch the Latter-day Saint tradition.¹⁴ Twain, Schmidt, Bloom, and Sloterdijk are united in having no interest in the angry Enlightenment-style critique of religion that rails about "hellish deception" (Schmidt) and is mirrored in the Book of Mormon figures of Sherem and Korihor (see also Helaman 16); indeed, Sloterdijk's break-

12. Richard H. Cracroft, "The Gentle Blasphemer: Mark Twain, Holy Scripture, and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 11/2 (1971): 119–40.

13. Bloom, *American Religion*, 186–87.

14. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Gottes Eifer* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 101; translated as *God's Zeal*, trans. Wieland Hoban (New York: Polity, 2009), where he quotes Forest Whitaker's Oscar acceptance speech thanking God for always believing in him (Sloterdijk, *God's Zeal*, 68). See also Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

through book *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) shows why old-style unmasking or debunking had run out of steam. No, these Twainian figures do not denounce religion: they see it as one of the many crazy and charming things that human beings do. They personally may or may not believe, but they take religious experience as a primary anthropological fact, and humor as one of the many ways to understand it.

A full inventory of the Twainian tradition of reading the Book of Mormon deserves a more thorough study than I can do here, but let's take a few high points.¹⁵

Twain (1871): "And it came to pass, after a great deal of fighting, that Coriantumr, upon making calculation of his losses, found that 'there had been slain two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children'—say 5,000,000 or 6,000,000 in all—'and he began to sorry in his heart.' Unquestionably it was time."¹⁶

Volk (1900): "A Lamanite general is scalped after the most approved Indian fashion, though the plucky fellow refused to retire, and did his most effective fighting after, minus a scalp!"¹⁷

Brodie (1945): Smith "began the book with a first-class murder, added assassinations, and piled up battles by the score. There was plenty of bloodshed and slaughter to make up for the lack of gaiety and the stuff of humanity. . . . Ammon, an American counterpart of David, for want of a Goliath slew six sheep-rustlers with his sling."¹⁸

15. See also Richard H. Cracroft, "Had for Good and Evil": 19th-Century Literary Treatments of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (2003): 4–19.

16. Twain, *Roughing It*, 117. Cracroft ("Gentle Blasphemer," 134) rebuts Twain on this point.

17. Edgar Estes Volk, *The Mormon Monster* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1900), 182.

18. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (1945; New York: Knopf, 1971), 62–63.

Harrison (1954): “If the passage from the Book of Mormon above is really an abridgement, what did the unabridged record look like? Perhaps it gave the individual names and addresses of the two hundred and twenty thousand slain!”¹⁹

Schmidt (1962): “And I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing, and I saw many harlots.”²⁰ Ooh la la!”

Neal Chandler (1991): “The fact that not one of the amputees [by Ammon’s sword in Alma 17], except, of course, the one who loses his head, actually dies of his wound seems to underscore a certain kind of divine charity attendant on this violence or at least to indicate an advanced state of Lamanite emergency medicine hitherto unrecognized by Book of Mormon commentators.”²¹

Michael Hicks (2012): “Oh, one more thing: these plates I am engraving this on are the smaller of two sets. Always good to write in duplicate, I learned as a boy” (1 Nephi 9).²²

The question is, where does the funniness of the Book of Mormon come from? Is the book inherently funny or does its lack of humor compel the clever critic to provide it? Is the lack of humor itself funny? Philosopher Simon Critchley writes in an affectionate Twainian piece: “The very mention of the Book of Mormon invites smirks and giggles, which is why choosing it as the name for Broadway’s most hard-to-get-into show was a smart move.”²³ For another Twainian critic, historian Donald Harmon Akenson, “mostly one just chaffs under [The Book of Mormon’s] remorseless humorlessness. . . . If the Almighty in the Book of Mormon

19. G. T. Harrison, *Mormons Are Peculiar People* (New York: Vantage, 1954), 67–68.

20. 1 Nephi 13:7; Arno Schmidt, “Das Buch Mormon,” *konkret*, March 1962.

21. Neal Chandler, “Book of Mormon Stories That My Teachers Kept from Me,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24/4 (1991): 13–30, quote: 19n2.

22. Michael Hicks, *The Street-Legal Version of Mormon’s Book* (Independently published, 2012), 11.

23. Simon Critchley, “Why I Love Mormonism,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2012, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/why-i-love-mormonism>.

is given even a single chance to show that he understands that his creation and his creatures have some amusing foibles, I have missed finding it.”²⁴ Akenson writes wittily about the book’s lack of humor. Perhaps nature abhors a vacuum: the critic rushes in to fill the lack. You can see such strategies in the critics quoted. Twain jumps on loose temporal coordination. Schmidt treats a scene meant to be horrifying as alluring. Chandler uses strategic anachronism to explain a textual incongruity. Hicks renders Nephi’s momentous description of his records as banal wisdom. The Book of Mormon is a bit of a sitting duck for this kind of treatment. Perhaps earnestness always invites a take-down, especially if clumsily presented. Anyone who spent time as an overly serious child in a schoolyard (authorial confession alert!) understands this dynamic!

To devout members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, comic reading might seem to have missed the boat. Many would endorse the words of BYU literature professor Marilyn Arnold: “Of the many hundreds of texts I have read, none has touched me more profoundly than the Book of Mormon. Without question, it is the greatest book I have encountered.”²⁵ Opinions shatter on the nature of the book. It is an unusual book that can be so meaningful to some and so deadly dull to others. Indeed, the Book of Mormon always poses in the most extreme terms the question of what it means to read. It claims that you can possess and read holy books cluelessly (2 Nephi 29:3ff.); berates its readers for missing the point (2 Nephi 32:1–9); frankly admits its lack of literary prowess and polish (2 Nephi 33:1–2; Ether 12:23–28); and even questions whether reading it is necessarily the right thing for everyone (Moroni 10:3). The book sets the highest possible standards for its proper reading. One must recognize the book’s place within the divine plan of history. One must see it as critically continuous with the Bible as another installment of God’s word. One must tremble at the ultimate

24. Donald Harman Akenson, *Some Family: The Mormons and How Humanity Keeps Track of Itself* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007), 26.

25. Marilyn Arnold, “Unlocking the Sacred Text,” *The Columbia Sourcebook of Mormons in the United States*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Reid L. Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 378.

guarantee that the book's veracity will be confirmed at the final judgment (2 Nephi 33:11–15; Moroni 10:34). The Book of Mormon is not content to be a book among books, to be a work of imaginative genius, as Schmidt, Bloom, Critchley, or many others would read it. It repels the genre category of fiction, and it even elbows aside the Bible's claim to be the uniquely divine book. As a genre, fiction is too ontologically fickle—the Book of Mormon wants to grab hold of reality, including the reader. Above all, to read the Book of Mormon properly according to its own demanding logic is to come to Christ. Good reading requires a transformation of the reader, a change of heart, a conversion.

The Book of Mormon thus provides one account of why people fail to enjoy it: the price is too high. The aesthetic failing of the text is actually the spiritual failure of the reader. The book's apparent dullness is a secret test of the heart's receptivity.²⁶ "Unreadability is the reader's problem," as Jonathan Sudholt puts it in an innovative analysis of how the Book of Mormon's laments about communication breakdown comment on the dysfunctional public sphere in 1820s America.²⁷ Perhaps the communication breakdown is intentional: the Book of Mormon leaves it up to the reader to build the connection. It invites the reader to be a co-author, to bring the text to life. To this way of thinking, a comic response to the Book of Mormon would be at best a warped response to the book's invitation to fill in the gaps. Laughter would be a defense mechanism against its absolute demands, a way of fending off a book so relentlessly and unapologetically in-your-face. One of Schmidt's most astute observations is that the book is well armed against its accusers! It anticipates its critics and outfoxes them by putting the onus on them. Its plainness, it cunningly suggests, might well be a trap laid for the

26. Akenson, *Some Family*, 25, floats the hypothesis that the Book of Mormon is a failed three-volume novel in the nineteenth-century style. What readers after modernism and cinema fail to recognize is that dullness and duration are aesthetic experiences in their own right and were actively cultivated in long-form nineteenth-century literature. See Stefanie Markovits, *The Victorian Verse-Novel: Aspiring to Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

27. Jonathan Sudholt, "Unreadability Is the Reader's Problem: *The Book of Mormon's* Critique of the Antebellum US Public Sphere," *Radical Americas* 2/1 (2017): 1–33.

wise and the learned. This is the old Christian principle taught by St. Paul—that the folly and scandal of the Gospel are by design. Maybe the joke's on the scoffers.

That the book is a stumbling block on which its readers either shipwreck or build a sure foundation is one compelling account of how the Book of Mormon wants to be read. In accordance with this logic, I have no interest in adjudicating here which way it should be read: that is a job for every reader. The book tempts the idea that the sheep read for divine truth and the goats read for fun. There is a vengeful strain in the Book of Mormon that a good reader would be dense not to see. As a rule, readers have not sufficiently grappled—theologically, hermeneutically—with the violence of the text. Indeed, it may be that the general lack of rigorous close reading in Latter-day Saint culture functions well to avoid or ignore theological and ethical problems closer readings would bring out (see 3 Nephi 9, for instance). *The Book of Mormon* musical, though again taking little from the Book of Mormon except perhaps for the self-righteousness of the young Nephi in its figure of Elder Price, makes fun of the missionaries' oblivious optimism in the midst of appalling suffering and violence in "Africa."²⁸ In the same way, devout readers of the book can take edification and comfort from a text marked by remarkable scenes of violence and threats against the wicked.

But the Book of Mormon also has a generosity and good humor that richly deserves to be cultivated. The comic commentators recognize this. Perhaps Twain and his followers have something to teach. (Twain has been a topic of significant interest by devout Latter-day Saint scholars.)²⁹ As a rule, Latter-day Saints know how to take a joke, as evidenced by their generally good-natured response to the *Book of Mormon* musical. (They certainly have had plenty of practice.) The ulti-

28. I personally find the musical's depiction of Africans more troubling than its portrayal of Latter-day Saints.

29. Robert A. Rees, "Mark Twain and the Bible" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1966); Cracroft, "Gentle Blasphemer"; Jeffrey R. Holland, "Mark Twain's Religious Sense" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1973). In the conclusion to *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* ([New York: Oxford, 2010], 273), Grant Hardy uses Twain against Twain to defend the Book of Mormon's aesthetics.

mate division, in any case, is always within people, not between people. We are all ongoing projects, and, for that reason, I am grateful that the Book of Mormon provides for both entertainment and edification. As readers, as humans, we are always in the middle of the journey.

By way of conclusion, we can perhaps celebrate comedy, at least of a certain kind, as a genre with a particular affinity to Christianity. Certainly, the great literary critic Erich Auerbach thought so in his landmark book *Mimesis*.³⁰ Comedy is not for heroes and demi-gods; they enjoy the elevated styles of tragedy and epic. Comedy in its classical form explored low and vulgar characters and situations and was particularly well equipped to show the eruption of the banal and the ordinary amid any lofty aspiration. For Auerbach, the biblical story of Jesus, born in a manger, a friend to fishers and farmers, changed all the rules: it invented a new way of writing and thinking, the *sermo humilis* or humble discourse, that transfigured comedy's interest in everyday reality. In this mode, the humor of bathos is both inevitable (because we are mortal and embodied) and redeemable (because Christ was once both of those things). For Auerbach, the incarnation of Christ marked a new genre (e.g., in the Gospels) both sublime and humble, both freighted with the most intense meaning and housed in the most ordinary circumstances. Dante was Auerbach's chief example of a Christological and comedic imagination. Indeed, comedy, as Søren Kierkegaard wrote of irony, is about the absurd mismatches of existence. Laughter can be cruel, but so can many things. When combined with charity, comedy might be just what the doctor ordered. Jesus, let us not forget, was a ferocious ironist unafraid of absurdist figures of speech (a log in the eye? A camel passing through the eye of a needle?). And Harold Bloom called Joseph Smith a "robust American humorist."³¹ His followers might well take that label as high praise.

The genre of the Book of Mormon is an open question: chronicle, voice from the dust, biblical expansion, tragedy, family history, critique

30. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (1946; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).

31. Bloom, *American Religion*, 110.

of modernity, political rhapsody, racial allegory, civilizational analysis, holy writ, and many more. For now, we might follow Auerbach's reading of Dante and propose the genre of Divine Comedy.³² Dante's conception of comedy doesn't fit exactly, since we moderns find it hard to imagine the human condition as entertainment for the divine spectator, but the idea that that there might be something funny even in the most holy things is surely worth considering.

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32. Another scholar who suggests the relevance of comedy (by way of Kenneth Burke) for the Book of Mormon is David Charles Gore, *The Voice of the People: Political Rhetoric in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, forthcoming).