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THE BOOK OF MORMON
AS AUTOMATIC WRITING:
BEWARE THE *VIRTUS DORMITIVA*

Richard N. Williams

Review of Scott C. Dunn. "Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon." In *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, pp. 17–46. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002. \$21.95.

In scene 23 of *The Imaginary Invalid*, Molière satirizes learned explanation and pretension. His satire is acute, as good satire should be; it has a sharp point that is then driven home. In this scene, the learned professor deals with the question of just how it is that opium is able to produce sleep. His explanation is that it is because of its *virtus dormitiva*—that is, its “sleep-producing power.” The term *virtus dormitiva* has been adopted to refer to any empty explanation—to any attempt to explain through simple redefinition. A definition does not explain, even when it is offered in Latin. An explanation that is a *virtus dormitiva* leaves every bit as much to be explained after its adoption (as an explanation) as before it was offered (as an explanation). The central thesis of Scott C. Dunn’s essay “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon” turns out to be a classic example of explanation by *virtus dormitiva*. It is this very fact that makes a review of this essay so difficult.

Because Dunn offers nothing more than a *virtus dormitiva*, the difficulty faced by a reviewer centers around two conclusions toward which an astute reader is drawn: (1) If Dunn is right and the Book of Mormon is the product of automatic writing, the reader of the Book of

Mormon is left to decide whether the source of the book is God or some other source, and whether the content of the book is true (doctrinally and historically). (2) If Dunn is wrong and the Book of Mormon is not the product of automatic writing, the reader of the Book of Mormon is left to decide whether the source of the book is God or some other source, and whether the content of the book is true (doctrinally and historically). Careful analysis shows that if the central thesis of Dunn's essay is taken seriously and on its own terms, it is, in a profound sense, irrelevant. The only other reading that can make sense of the essay is that it is meant to be a weak refutation of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon based on a sort of "guilt by association" strategy by linking the book with "spiritualism." In our days, the linking of religion to spiritualism is common, even as it was earlier. Some see this as a positive thing. But to most, including Dunn, I expect, it is a negative thing. It provides grounds for some to dismiss religion as occult nonsense or for others to diminish traditional religion by absorbing it into a much grander and ineffable cosmos. Both of these tactics are dismissive of the restoration of the gospel and inimical to the claims of Mormonism.

That Dunn's thesis—that the Book of Mormon resulted from automatic writing—is a bona fide *virtus dormitiva* is easy to demonstrate. Definitions of "automatic writing" abound even on the Internet as well as in other sources. Common elements of these definitions include the following: The written material comes from communication from an unknown source outside the writer's own explicit consciousness. Automatic writing is often attributed to persons now dead. Automatic writing often results in the "medium's" writing (or dictating) faster than normal so that the written project is finished faster than might be expected from a human author writing his or her own material. (This description is in keeping with the definition offered by Dunn, pp. 37–38 n. 5.) Any person seriously investigating the Book of Mormon to know whether it is true surely seeks to know such things as: What is the source of the book? Is it from God, or is it simply human imagination? Did it come from prophets who are now dead? How could Joseph Smith have written the book in so short a time? How could he dictate

for such long periods and never need anything read back? What was the role of the interpreters or seer stone? If the answer to these questions is that the Book of Mormon resulted from “automatic writing,” one may be impressed for a time—until it becomes blindingly clear that “automatic writing” is purely a descriptive term that offers a new name for the process that produced the book, but is not an explanation at all because it leaves each of the original questions unanswered.

For the foregoing reasons, Dunn’s central thesis is difficult to take seriously. And because of this, Dunn’s purpose in writing the essay is unclear. At best it might be concluded that he is interested in the occult and is simply pointing out interesting parallels between the Book of Mormon and incidents of “automatic writing.” This sort of stuff hardly threatens the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, nor should it weaken anyone’s testimony of it any more than referring to prophecy or spiritual discernment as “extrasensory perception,” or faith moving mountains as “psychokinesis.” Dunn might be accused of trying to weaken individuals’ faith in the Book of Mormon by a strategy of “guilt by association” with the occult. As much as one who really believes the Book of Mormon to be what it claims to be might resent this strategy, one should not be fearful of it, chiefly because, as demonstrated above, its central thesis is nothing more than a contemporary avatar of the pretentious *virtus dormitiva* and thus is irrelevant. At the end of the day, it may not matter very much whether we call it “automatic writing” or “translation.” The proof of just what the book is lies in the power of its doctrines and in the confirmation of the Holy Ghost as to its truthfulness and, ultimately—whether revealed to all of us in this world or the next—whether there actually were gold plates, a being named Moroni, and a colony of Israelites in America before the Europeans arrived. In light of these issues, both Nephi’s and Moroni’s farewells are intriguing (see 2 Nephi 33:11 and Moroni 10:27).

In the last few pages of his essay, however, Dunn seems to reveal his motives as he ends his seemingly innocent and merely interesting thesis of the connection between automatic writing as a paranormal phenomenon and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. He does this by bringing into his argument some of the old and tired

contentions against the authenticity of that book. Examples include the use of New Testament language and expressions that surely could not have come from ancient American plates and, therefore, must have come from Joseph Smith or his unconscious mind. This ignores the fact, however, that, strictly speaking, Joseph's work was not a translation in the sense we use the term today. He was obviously not reading the plates since the language of the plates was, by its own admission, a dead language. The Book of Mormon describes the "translation" process used by Joseph. In this passage the Lord, speaking to the man who would bring forth the Book of Mormon to the world, says: "thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee" (2 Nephi 27:20). Thus the translation of the plates is really the Lord's own, not Joseph's. One might expect the Lord to use revelatory language in one hemisphere and epic consistent with the revelatory language used or to be used in other hemispheres and epics to teach the same gospel. One might also expect him to use language in his translation that mirrors as much as possible the language of his other books of scripture, the language that religious seekers of truth will already know, love, and recognize by the power of the Holy Ghost. Dunn's conclusion that his automaticity thesis "clarif[ies] the translation process" is false (p. 33). It does nothing of the sort. Attribution to an unknown, broadly spiritualist source clarifies nothing. Rather, as a *virtus dormitiva*, it requires explanation of a more difficult and arcane sort than that already offered by Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon itself.

Dunn raises other issues that have traditionally been used to cast doubt on the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. I will not respond to them. They do suggest, however, that Dunn intends his thesis about automatic writing to be a refutation of the Book of Mormon.¹ For this reason I will demonstrate why, aside from its being irrelevant, his thesis should be rejected on other conceptual grounds.

First, the Book of Mormon appeared more than two decades before the rise of modern spiritualism in America. Many histories of what is

1. For a look at automatic writing, which some critics have offered as a possible explanation for the Book of Mormon, see Robert A. Rees, "The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 4-17.

sometimes referred to as “Modern Spiritualism”² trace its beginnings to the experience of the Fox sisters in New York in 1848. Thus, at least, it should be noted that the coming forth of the Book of Mormon does not fit into a well-established spiritualist movement of the day. All the examples of supposed automatic writing that Dunn cites postdate the Book of Mormon, most by quite some time. This timing issue affords the automaticity hypothesis little face validity. The Book of Mormon cannot be shown to have resulted from the spiritualist movement, nor is it claimed by the movement as a harbinger.

Second, Joseph Smith never invoked traditional spiritualist experiences or explanations, unlike spiritualists of the nineteenth century. When I was first contemplating writing this essay, I contacted a professional colleague of mine whose expertise is in the psychology of religion and who is well qualified in matters of spirituality and spiritualism in the history of religion. His initial response to the automaticity hypothesis was that it seemed odd since Joseph Smith, unlike mediums and spiritualists of the nineteenth century, never invoked spiritualism as a source or influence. For most spiritualists, the channeling or mediumship is the crucial issue, but Joseph never made such claims. Rather, he consistently reported that the source of the message was the metal plates and that his own translation occurred by the gift and power of God; he was able to show the plates to several credible witnesses who testified of their existence.

A third reason to reject Dunn’s thesis is that explanation in terms of the unconscious mind begs the question. To suggest, as Dunn does, that the automatic writing that supposedly produced the Book of Mormon drew upon Joseph Smith’s own unconscious mind invokes very tenuous assumptions about the unconscious mind (pp. 24–26). The examples Dunn cites are very mundane compared to the scope of the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, they simply presuppose that prior inputs come out later from the unconscious mind. The content of the Book of Mormon is such that it seems quite unlikely that Joseph could have been exposed to inputs sufficient to produce the text of the Book of Mormon. For me, the most difficult issue involves the

2. See, for example, www.s-upton.com (accessed 16 November 2006).

sophisticated doctrines clarified in the Book of Mormon. From where could the extensive and comprehensible doctrines about the fall, the atonement, and the covenant of Abraham have come? For something to come out of Joseph's unconscious mind, it must necessarily have first been stored there. I am aware of no theory of the unconscious mind that would support the possibility that the unconscious mind is capable of innately possessing or manufacturing such complex things as the Book of Mormon. Nor am I aware of any context in which the explanation of a phenomenon in terms of the unconscious mind has been taken as a genuine clarification. The unconscious mind is, and always will be, a type of *virtus dormitiva* so long as the answer to the question "What is the difference between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind?" is necessarily that "the unconscious mind is unconscious."

My fourth objection toward the thesis that the Book of Mormon arose from automatic writing is that it violates the principle of parsimony. Religion and religious phenomena have been the subject of critical analysis over centuries. Skeptics have attempted to substitute nonreligious, or at least nonsupernatural, explanations for religious and supernatural ones. The strategy is always the same because it follows a rational line of analysis. The analysis goes like this: Some phenomenon X (the Book of Mormon as translated scripture) is *really just* Y (automatic writing). However, this critique only works—that is, it is only compelling—if Y, the proposed new explanation, can be seen as more logical, rational, empirically demonstrable, or more parsimonious than the original phenomenon X. For example, according to some interpretations in the discipline of psychology, all seeming acts of agentic choice are taken to be *really just* the result of meat and chemicals in the body. Although this explanation in reality fails, it illustrates the tactic in that meat and chemicals, at least, can be examined empirically and that they are associated with some other types of responses, such as digestion and reflexes. So if some people are inclined to reduce more ephemeral things like agentic acts to more material things like the presence of meat and chemicals, the explana-

tion might be persuasive. This explanatory tactic, I believe, has always been at the heart of the conflict between science and religion.

However, in the case of Dunn's automaticity hypothesis, it must be remembered that it would be one thing to suggest that the Book of Mormon is the product of some well-documented, scientifically verifiable phenomenon (one known through replication to be responsible for related phenomena). It is quite another thing to suggest that the Book of Mormon is the product of a suspect and innately unverifiable phenomenon associated with the occult. As such, Dunn's criticism of the Book of Mormon (and his article *is* a criticism in the sense that it claims the book is not what it portrays itself to be) has the *form* of reductive arguments bolstered by parsimony, but it violates that very parsimony in offering an explanation of the Book or Mormon that is more suspect, less verifiable (remember the witnesses to the plates and the translation process), and more mystical than the phenomenon it seeks to replace. Parsimony is very much on the side of Joseph having been given the translation of the words on the plates by the Spirit of God.

Traditional skeptics often ask believers to give up a belief in a miracle in the face of a simpler and more reliable explanation. Dunn asks us to give up a belief, verified for millions by the confirmation of the Holy Spirit, in favor of an explanation that is less empirical, more occult, and more arcane than the belief itself. This is a classic example of *virtus dormitiva* and a very bad bargain.