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# A Poetics of the Restoration

*George B. Handley*

Starting first with the proposition that the humanities and the Restoration both share an interest in the preservation of threatened knowledge and in the recovery of lost knowledge, I would like to suggest further how these two forms of restoration can enjoin the same labor. Brigham Young dispensed with the notion of a strict distinction between sacred and secular forms of knowledge when he insisted that all truth belongs to Mormonism, that “every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment in mathematics, music, and in all sciences and art belong to the saints.”<sup>1</sup> However, this would seem to contradict the notion articulated in the Doctrine and Covenants that the two chief obstacles to our understanding of revealed truth are “disobedience” and “the traditions of [the] fathers” (D&C 93:39). Or, as Paul put it, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8). If these traditions are nothing but fallen discourses, honest but erroneous attempts to express the truth as reflected in contexts that have not enjoyed the fullest light of revelation, perhaps culture deserves, at best, only our cautious and distant respect. But Brigham Young’s audacious claim is a call for charity, “to lay hold upon every good thing” (Moro. 7:19). Charity is a Christ-centered viewpoint that requires the faith and desire to glean truths from secular sources in all cultures. In this way, secular learning of culture becomes integral to the kingdom’s healthy and ongoing unfolding of the restoration of all things. As the first section of Doctrine and Covenants makes clear, God defines his commandments as divine mandates (they “are of me,” he declares) even though they are also transmitted in the language of local

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I first conceptualized this essay after I arrived at BYU in 1998 and participated in a Literature and Belief conference. This was the first of several opportunities the BYU community has provided me to think seriously and formally about the meaning and value of my work as a scholar within the broader context of my LDS faith. This idea lay dormant in me for some time until a group of us in the College of Humanities began to convene and discuss the need for an organization that would facilitate collegiality and collaboration worldwide among LDS scholars in the humanities and to begin exploring the religious basis of our scholarship. The result was the creation of a new organization, Mormon Scholars in the Humanities (MSH), founded in 2006. As its first president, I gave a condensed version of this essay at the inaugural MSH meeting in 2007.



I have found the organization to be a unique opportunity to explore the intersection between my devotion to my profession and to my faith in dialogue with many of the finest minds and most devoted disciples I have had the good fortune to be around. I had pursued all of my schooling in California (Stanford and UC Berkeley), so I had grown accustomed to having my scholarship somewhat independent from my thinking as a believer. This independence is not a bad thing. I believe important benefits come from patient and faithful tolerance of apparent contradictions in ideas. Indeed, it can be unproductive to prematurely force what might turn out to be an unhappy marriage between secular ideas and gospel principles. At the same time, it would be a mistake to shy away from the opportunity and responsibility to articulate the spiritual foundations of a believing scholar's work, and this kind of exploration is precisely the special opportunity afforded by MSH and by *BYU Studies*. I have been consistently inspired by what I have learned from comparative and postcolonial studies, and this essay is, indeed, an *essay*, an experiment or attempt to explore common ground with the Restoration. I never tire of the fascination that comes when ideas reveal their insights unexpectedly after the patient and long process of consecrated scholarship.

understanding: they “were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language” (D&C 1:24). So while culture might be the obstacle or weakness that blinds us, it must also become the means or language by which we “might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24). The key to this process is an uncompromised dedication to understanding God’s will that links a lifelong passion for learning both from the word of God—from revelation—and the word of men and women—from the world’s cultures.

The humanities—literature, philosophy, history, and the arts—are born of a striving to bear witness to human experience in all of its varieties, usually under conditions in which the particularities of experience are threatened by oblivion. Whether it is against the grain of a dictatorial political regime or of the dehumanizing forces of a consumption-obsessed economy like ours, expression in the humanities offers itself as a kind of counter-memory, one individual experience at a time, to the oblivious tendencies of power, to the passage of time, and to the persistent patterns of sin. Human expressions are rarely without sin or error, of course, but because they always demand attention to the particulars of individual lives and distinct cultures, they can provide a valuable check against our tendency to rush to quick and glib generalizations about what we deem to be the universals of human experience. If, as it has often been said, it is hard not to love someone whose story you know, it is also easy to hate or ignore someone whose story you can generalize.

The humanities also help us to see how our own particulars of cultural context have shaped our views, including our views of God. Revealed religion, of course, is by definition an expression of truth that transcends human particulars, but, if we are serious in our devotion to revealed truths, it is imperative that we are mindful of how our own culture informs and shapes our understandings. Only by comparative and promiscuous reading about individual lives embedded in other cultures can we become more aware of our embeddedness in our own. Perhaps the “traditions of men” that are most dangerous are those ideologies and discourses that willfully ignore the sanctity of God’s children and impetuously and impatiently bypass the responsibility of having to approach humanity one story at a time. Religious cultures are by no means inoculated against such traditions. When we speak of seeing someone’s true “humanity,” we mean that we can see their identity as it has been shaped by time and circumstance, that we have caught a glimpse of the complexity and mystery of their inner life, and that we feel an elemental compassion for their story. It is equally important, of course, to see our own humanity, lest we fail to understand how we might see the world differently had we lived a different life. When the faithful

disciple engages deeply with the particulars of a culture and emerges with a changed, reoriented, and enlarged vision of human experience, the humanities prove integral to the ongoing restoration of all things. In that the humanities ask us to engage in imagining the world, or in world making, as the word *poetics* implies, consecrated learning becomes a poetics of the Restoration.

Even if the essential ordinances and doctrines of the gospel have already been restored, the extension and application of the saving power of its doctrines depend in part on this expansion of our understanding of the broad varieties of the human condition. Because the passion, or suffering, of Christ is *compassion*—a suffering *with* all of humanity—cultivating the mind of Christ means developing an increasingly profound understanding of how the gospel relates to the diversity, range, and levels of human experience. It means learning Christ's atoning sorrow, which is an expression of understanding or feeling for the particulars of human circumstances. Thus, although "the traditions of men" are always a potential roadblock to understanding gospel truths, passion for the humanities founded on devotion to the Lord helps the believer to use the humanities' portrayal of those very particulars to consecrated ends. It is curious that Alma would describe a process of testing the word of God that echoes how we gain aesthetic experience. In Alma 32, especially verse 27, we find a description of the importance of a suspension of disbelief: "If you will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you." In verse 28, Alma describes a physical reaction, an enlarging of the "soul" and enlightening of "understanding" and a "delicious" sensation, as long as "ye do not cast it out by your unbelief." Like art, suspension of disbelief toward the word of God yields fruit, a swelling "within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—it must needs be that this is a good seed."

Both secular and spiritual knowledge require a patient forbearance, a willingness to allow truth to surface only after earnest experimentations upon the word. This kind of patient and deepened vision will not come from a superficial assessment and least of all from a cold dismissal of cultural difference. Preparatory to anyone gaining greater light and understanding is the cultivation of an awareness of others that keeps the soul open to mystery and wonder in the world around us and a humble acceptance of the limits of our understanding. It is no secret to lifelong scholars that such awareness of limits only grows with time and effort. Seeking out the "best books" for anyone is a step in the direction to be able to say, like Nephi,

“I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Ne. 11:17). Belief in Christ, in other words, requires vigilant awareness of what we do not know and cannot be separated from a vital interest in the world, in the affairs of men and women, and in the many cultural expressions that shed light on the human experience.

Much of what I have said thus far is not exactly news in Mormon belief, even if we don’t always live up to Brigham Young’s challenge, but I wish to focus on why and how secular learning further enables the Restoration. It is our human condition to inherit culture, so the traditions of men are going to shape and compromise the way we understand the gospel, one way or another. This is one reason why we are wise to overturn the soils of culture from time to time, lest the truths that we think we hold dear become reified, heretical, or false. Mormon explains that the intellectual purpose of charity is to “search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ” (Moro. 7:19). Further, in *Doctrine and Covenants* 98:11, it states: “I give unto you a commandment, that ye shall forsake all evil and cleave unto all good, that ye shall live by every word which proceedeth forth out of the mouth of God.” Discipleship, in other words, is incomplete if we are merely content to forsake evil by holding on to what we already have.

The comfort and reassurance of religion sometimes appeals to the fearful, incurious, and the uncharitable mind because religion can provide an excuse to avoid the risks of learning and growing. On the other hand, discipleship is also incomplete if, in our attempt to identify and cleave unto the good in the lives of men and women, we do not maintain, as a keel and rudder on an otherwise perpetually drifting ship, an orthodox devotion to what has already been revealed. This is perhaps the fate of no small number of aspiring scholars who, willing to take notes in lecture halls and to study long hours into the night, remain unwilling to give the scriptures or the teachings of the prophets more than a cursory glance.<sup>2</sup> As James reminds us, culture blinds all of us when we refuse to allow God’s word to penetrate our character or when we prefer the life of ideas or convictions to a life of committed moral action (see James 1:22–23). We must resist, in other words, the temptation of assuming that it matters more to be right or think right than to do good.

This is not to suggest that a disciple should be unconcerned about false ideas; this is an ongoing and real concern for any learner. But it is interesting to note what happens to ideas when they are patiently contextualized and pondered by someone living a consecrated life. Falsehood

is most threatening to the mind that fears falsehood above all, especially more than it loves the good. One might think of a false idea as a common stone that some might dismiss out of hand but in which others who are more patient might find flecks of gold. Moreover, perhaps the pursuit of ideas is less immediately about truth and error and more, at least initially, about an opportunity to contemplate the various forms of life and thus reflect on and even transform the nature of what we believe. Besides, there is something indecent about an uncompromising pursuit of only gold in a world bedecked by stones of infinite form and color! Consecration, in other words, has a tendency to unveil the world itself as the sought-after precious stone. So the effects of consecration will not be reflected so much in the content of study—which authors or artists, which period of history, culture, values, or philosophies to study—but in the amplified vision of possibility one obtains. This sacralization of knowledge means that secular knowledge gradually acquires a character that, like a window, opens the relevance of Mormon belief to wider varieties of human experience and that, like a mirror, allows us to reflect on our latter-day Mormon condition.

I have only occasionally tried to write overtly about Mormon topics, but I have been surprised how my scholarship on topics seemingly unrelated to sacred things has broadened and benefited my understanding of the restored gospel. My first book was an attempt to restore hidden knowledge of the story of slavery's transnational impact in literatures of the Americas. I had been struck by how novelists portrayed the genealogical search into slavery's history as a kind of recovery of lost or hidden knowledge regarding the complex, cross-cultural origins of the Americas and how crucial testimonial language was to this process. Testimony and genealogy. Without intending to, I had written a book with a rather Mormon accent, after all. My discovery, then, was that listening carefully to other voices and other cultures doesn't have to involve sacrificing our values, since ultimately there is no avoiding writing ourselves into what we learn as scholars.

This is not to say that, as readers, we shouldn't worry about the danger of trying to make what we read mean what we want it to mean, of reading ourselves narcissistically into everything we study. There is a different and superior quality to self-understanding when it comes unexpectedly and is not the result of an overzealous search for anticipated confirmation. Presumably we don't attend church merely to receive repeated confirmations of what we already know about our place in the world but to see ourselves anew so that repentance and growth are possible. This happens when we are willing to put ourselves aside and to see the world through the eyes of others. The Spirit seems to reward us with deeper self-understanding in

these efforts. The same principle holds in secular learning. For this reason, as we seek to translate other ideas and other cultures, it is vital to show forbearance and patience, to seek anonymity, to listen, and to discover the “Mormon” or eternal and sacred dimensions of knowledge serendipitously, as revelation and not as self-projection. If we wish to understand our Mormonness, in other words, it is best to do so after we have carefully developed familiarity with the ideas and cultures we encounter.

There is, of course, a great deal of debate in the history of literary criticism about what guides and explains how we read, and what *should* guide how and what we read. There is a tendency, on one hand, to argue that interpretations merely and always reflect the assumptions, prevailing attitudes, and milieu of their time and, on the other, to argue that texts are the primary force in determining meaning.<sup>3</sup> Both concerns are valid. The latter emphasis on the text’s authority and priority has been especially emphasized in religious cultures because the very idea of holy writ implies the inherent and primary importance of the text itself as determinant of its meaning and truthfulness. Attitudes that tend to emphasize the radically distinct nature of sacred truth over and against secular understanding tend to want to see the truth of the word of God as self-contained and in no need of any reader’s agency, historicity, or prejudice, since to commingle the contingencies of a reader’s culture and moment in history with the will and the mind of God would appear to contaminate and divert, perhaps even pervert, the ways of God in the minds of men. Peter, who teaches that “no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Pet. 1:20), nevertheless acknowledges the challenge scriptures’ sacred nature presents to us. In Paul’s letters, for example, we find, as Peter says, “some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness” (2 Pet. 3:16–17).

The special status of sacred writ often inspires such strong warnings, but we must also consider Nephi’s rather liberal mandate to “liken” the scriptures to our own circumstances. It is tempting, but ultimately erroneous, to assume that Peter means that human agency, imagination, and experience play no role whatsoever in the generation of divine meaning. This is because such a dismissal of human culture essentially renders reading a completely amoral exercise in its attempt to protect and keep unambiguously clear the boundaries between the human and the divine, the secular and the sacred. From such a position, one cannot explain satisfactorily why two people can read the same text and come away with



separate interpretations, nor, curiously, can one argue from such a position why one reading is correct and another false. Usually the only arguments offered are tautological: the reading is right or wrong because it conforms or diverges from what is preestablished as the truth, even though it is rarely acknowledged that this truth is likely preestablished, of course, by tradition, by human habit.

In effect, overzealous and fundamentalist defenses of the special nature of holy writ lead to a crucial contradiction: in order to preserve the notion of the text's special status above and beyond human stains, defensive readers want to hold to the promise of an absolute and transcendently correct reading, that is, the promise of a perfect human mastery of the text. Alan Jacobs argues that this position, ironically, is more akin to the secularist distrust or suspicion of sacred texts. "Freedom from" and "mastery of," he reminds us, are related concepts, but not identical: "What is vital to note here is the elimination, in each case, of an ongoing dialogical encounter with the text, in which the reader and the text subject each other to scrutiny. . . . In neither case is there anything like real reverence, love, or friendship—in Bakhtin's term, *faithfulness* is lacking—and thus, in neither case is the readerly/critical experience productive of genuine knowledge (of the self or the other)."<sup>4</sup>

Whether one assumes dogmatic protection or dogmatic rejection of claims that sacred writ is unstained by humanity, the reader is never required to take what Jacobs calls the "enormous risks"<sup>5</sup> of using discernment. In the former case, the assumption of a radical textual determinism means it is merely and always the text that produces meaning, never the reader's agency, choices, or judgment. Ironically, a strictly fundamentalist reader cannot explain how she avoids worshipping a god after her own image. In the case of the secular reader who employs a categorical hermeneutics of suspicion toward the text, the determinism lies with the reader who produces all meaning and ends up answerable to no one. A categorically suspicious reader cannot explain how she avoids the false consciousness she set out to escape.

There is another possibility, one that seeks what the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr calls "mutuality."<sup>6</sup> Great knowledge comes at great risk—what Ricoeur calls the very "wager" at the heart of all interpretation—and one of the risks is to bet on one's interpretive capacity to discern the will of God; to read faithfully is to believe in the possibility that a mingling of human and divine understanding does not have to lead to contamination on one hand or absolute certainty on the other. Jacobs compares this mutuality to the dialogic imagination of Bakhtin, a kind of hope in a fruitful give and take between the reader and the text. He explains, "This hope involves

neither *demand* nor *expectation*; indeed, if it demanded or expected it would not be hope. An absolute suspicion—one that always and on principle refuses Ricoeur’s wager—is the natural outworking of despair.<sup>77</sup> What is equally hopeless is a “triumphalist confidence” or presumption that mere contact with the word of God, and no willful interpretation, is sufficient to produce right understanding.<sup>8</sup> The implication here is that good readings combine submission to the text, most often associated with reading sacred literature, with willfully seeking an understanding of ourselves in the text, most often associated with secular literature. In what follows, I hope to combine what we can learn about reading from Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with the Book of Mormon in order to then draw some important conclusions about how, as disciples, our relationship to the humanities is vital to our understanding of the gospel and to what I call a poetics of the Restoration.

### Reading as Translation, Reading as Revelation

Gabriel García Márquez represents a structure of reading in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that helps us see how the moment of revelation of lost truths simultaneously becomes a revelation of the self. A novel of almost Book of Mormon–like ambition to recount the lost story of the Americas, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* begins with the founding of a backland village in Colombia called Macondo, a town isolated from the rest of the world; consequently, Macondo’s story remains on the margins of the march of modern history, ignored in the larger world and largely unaware of its place in it. A gypsy, Melquiades, brings scientific and philosophical knowledge to José Arcadio Buendía, Macondo’s founder, and gives him an alchemist laboratory. The laboratory includes untranslated documents, a philosopher’s stone, and other paraphernalia. It becomes a place of secret knowledge, of potential omniscience, but is also a place where time stands still. The narrator tells us that José Arcadio “was the only one who had enough lucidity to sense the truth of the fact that time also stumbled and had accidents and could therefore splinter and leave an eternalized fragment in a room.”<sup>9</sup> More specifically, this laboratory is a repository of Macondo’s own history, unknown to its own people, splintered off from the world but, like the tale of the Nephite migration, restored from oblivion on timeless but as yet untranslated parchments that Melquiades has left behind. The parchments, then, represent for Gabriel García Márquez how literature restores to the imagination the individual sufferings and the family histories that political power seeks to conceal.

Whenever translation of the parchments is undertaken in order to help the family and the town recover knowledge of its own past, each translator finds himself in a race against time since the room becomes “vulnerable to dust, heat, termites, red ants, and moths, who would turn the wisdom of the parchments into sawdust.”<sup>10</sup> García Márquez is making a rich and important point here. He highlights the fact that our understandings of the truth are vulnerable to and always limited by our need to translate them into our particular moment in place and time. This is one way of suggesting the possibility that as long as we are stuck in our particular human condition, we will never be able to gain a perfect and objectively true perspective on it. Human self-understanding, in other words, will always be shaped by the very conditions we are trying to step beyond so as to understand them objectively. García Márquez suggests that human art is defined by an almost impossible desire to take the limitations of our human condition and attempt to imagine on what terms they might become the very means of our transcending those limitations.

The parchments beg for translation and from time to time attract several members of the family, typically in their prepubescent stage, when they do “not show the least desire to know the world that began at the street door of the house.”<sup>11</sup> But then the parchments are abandoned once these family members discover sexual and political desire. A dichotomy exists, then, as the critic Josefina Ludmer has demonstrated, between characters who are asexual, imaginative, withdrawn, and mindful of history and transgression and those who are driven by sexual desire, who are political, communal, and interested in future knowledge and change.<sup>12</sup> García Márquez represents these two poles in the competing images of Macondo as a city of houses of glass (where the domestic space is transparent and reflective of the outside world) and of houses of ice (where home is opaque and reflective of the domestic viewer). If retreating to intimate solitude brings self-reflection, insight, imagination, and memories of the past, communion with others brings knowledge of the world, experience, and the chance to affect the future. One form of activity comes at the cost of the other form of knowledge. So unless a character can combine these two poles, translation that would reveal true self-understanding will not occur.

As the novel advances, family lore erodes, memories fade, and genealogy is lost. Finally, the gift of translation comes to Aureliano Babilonia, last in a long line of genealogy. He enters the laboratory and decodes the signs, only to learn his genealogy and discover that he has unwittingly committed

incest with his aunt, Amaranta. The narration explains that at the commencement of the translation, he begins

to decipher the instant that he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror. Then he skipped again to anticipate the predictions and ascertain the date and circumstances of his death. Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city . . . would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments.<sup>13</sup>

His moment of reading himself simultaneously becomes ours since we too discover that the novel we have been reading is the parchment he has just translated.

The brilliance of this scene is that it demonstrates that reading always involves translating ourselves—seeing ourselves in the stories we read, discovering meaning that is produced by our history and our genealogy. It is as if to say that we cannot but liken stories to ourselves. The question is whether or not we do so self-consciously, whether this appropriation reveals new self-understanding or simply produces the same meaning incestuously. The incestuous story here bears an important relationship to the tragedy of Oedipus. Oedipus begins as hero for solving the riddle of the Sphinx and lifting a plague from the city of Thebes. He appears to be a gifted reader, but when as the king he learns that a great crime has brought the city under another plague, he stubbornly refuses to see himself in the story he gathers until he discovers that he is the very criminal he seeks. At this moment, interpretation results tragically in a discovery that his defiant actions have fulfilled the prophecy he tried to prevent from coming true. Reading and interpretation, the Greek myth implies, are never entirely innocent or divorced from self-interest and political power. The symbolic force of Aureliano Babilonia's incest and translation, for García Márquez, is that we are always incestuous readers of our own stories; just at the moment when we discover the secret knowledge of others, of things past or lost, we also discover that that secret history is the story of our own origins and therefore a prophecy of our own moment of reading. We read texts, and when we find meaning in them, it is as if they have awaited us for fulfillment.

Reading becomes a dialectic, then, between translation and revelation, something akin to the dialectic between human imagination and divine will, a structure that we find in the Book of Mormon. The similarity of

structure reminds us that human art and scripture share the same ambition: to gain self-understanding through—not despite—the particularities of the human condition. The New World scripture contains buried truths and performs an act of recovery of crucial genealogical and spiritual knowledge that, similar to the knowledge in Melquiades's parchments, has been ignored in official histories. Only, in this case, it is knowledge marginalized because it is of a spiritual nature and not simply because it emanates from the margins of history. Nephi explains that he writes this record to “preserve unto our children the language of our fathers; and also that we may preserve unto them the words which have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets which have been delivered unto them by the Spirit and power of God, since the world began, even down unto this present time” (1 Ne. 3:19–20). He also makes it clear that “the things which are pleasing unto the world I do not write, but the things which are pleasing unto God and unto those who are not of this world” (1 Ne. 6:5). So the text contains a sacred version of his own secular record and an alternative history to others that might be written by those of this world who despise the revelations of God.

One main reason the Book of Mormon contains knowledge that was ever lost in the first place and was therefore in need of restoration is because of the damaging effects of the scattering of Israel on language and memory and the difficulties this diaspora presented to the preservation of a coherent history that would link up the disparate branches of the family tree. It is for this reason that the lessons of literatures of diaspora and postcolonial struggles can be especially relevant to the Restoration. Like García Márquez's narrative, the Book of Mormon is a story of moments of forgetting and of then recovering the ever-tenuous knowledge of origins. The narrative begins with Nephi's precarious task of obtaining the plates in order to preserve the language of the Jews and the knowledge of the covenants. The recovery of our knowledge of things of God, however, also involves interpretations of dreams and visions, solving the riddles, as it were, of God's language. Nephi tells us, for example, that he becomes a special witness and mouthpiece of God's language when his father first tells him of his dream of the tree of life: “I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Ne. 10:17). He is then given a step-by-step interpretation of the vision of his father, translating and preserving each sign of the dream in a language of understanding for his people and for his reader. But the text suggests that if the reader doesn't follow the same process, meaning stops there. Nephi explains: “For [Lehi] truly spake many great things unto [Laman and

Lemuel], which were hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord; and they being hard in their hearts, therefore they did not look unto the Lord as they ought” (1 Ne. 15:3).

So reading translated scripture correctly requires additional translation, a continuation of the process of likening “all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Ne. 19:23). For Nephi, this is quite literally a process of adoption into the genealogy of the house of Israel, but what saves this from becoming simply a reaffirmation of a kind of familial or racial exclusivity is that it recurs with each independent reader and that the text, of course, is destined to be read by ever-increasing numbers and varieties of readers. Nephi refers specifically to Isaiah in order to demonstrate that revelations apply equally to the time of Isaiah, to the time of Nephi, *and* to our time. “Our” time, of course, is a loose description of each individual reading moment; whether it happens in early nineteenth-century New England or twenty-first-century New Zealand, the “time” of the reading is as varied as each reader. As in the novel, we see someone translating a prior text; Nephi translates or interprets Isaiah, reading himself in Isaiah’s words, and this translation simultaneously becomes prophecy because he and the reader both see themselves in the translation. In other words, we understand Isaiah in the last days because we have a text doubly translated from Isaiah through Nephi and Joseph Smith. In this sense, revelation is always a reading or translation of a divine text, but translation in Mormon experience is not a one-way transference of meaning but a two-way dialectic; that is, some application to our own historical moment, some interpretation, is also involved.

This gives a new understanding to the idea that the “glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36) since *intelligence* from the Latin literally means “to read and to understand” but also to “choose among, to grasp among certain possibilities.” That is, reading is seen as an active process of selection of meaning rather than a passive reception. We need only think of the example of Oliver Cowdery who, like the many characters in García Márquez’s novel, wanted to translate but failed; and the Lord explained why he failed: “You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, . . . you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you” (D&C 9:7–8). Given the fact that he was trying to translate an unknown alphabet and found himself staring at a blank stone, this is a stunning mandate for Cowdery to use the full force of his imagination. What was it he was supposed to study out in his own mind exactly, except perhaps what he could imagine might be possible?

This suggests that revelation results from a unique balance between our own historicity and the metahistorical position of God, between the place where past and future overlap, where God's time and human time meet, and where memory of the things of God is recovered in a mortal context. Like Aureliano Babilonia's experience, translation is possible only when one begins with a return to oneself, to one's origins, to one's human place. That this is a world-making poetic exercise is evident in the fact that we cannot be passive and inert and introspective alone; we must try to engage our human imagination actively so as to encounter the will and mind of God.

We see this structure at work when Joseph Smith translates himself from these words of Joseph of Egypt's prophecy:

But a seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins; and unto him will I give power to bring forth my word unto the seed of thy loins. . . . And out of weakness he shall be made strong, in that day . . . they that seek to destroy him shall be confounded. . . . And his name shall be called after me . . . yet I will not loose his tongue, that he shall speak much, for I will not make him mighty in speaking . . . and I will make a spokesman for him. (2 Ne. 3:11, 13, 14, 15, 17)

So for Joseph, the translation mirrors Aureliano Babilonia's experience since he prophesies himself in the act of deciphering the plates.

Although the 2 Nephi text is rather direct in its identification of its translator, we are all, its converted readers, implicated as translators, discovering our scripted role in the divinely directed historical drama of the Restoration. Indeed, it is as if we are looking over Joseph's shoulder, as we do over Aureliano's at the conclusion of *One Hundred Years*, reading him reading himself reading ourselves. Aureliano's text becomes ours, just as Joseph's does. The reading moment is saved from becoming a closure of history, as García Márquez's novel rhetorically suggests, because each new reader transforms the endpoint of the genealogical trajectory that extends from the obscure past into the present moment of reading. Restoration, in other words, implies a perpetually open-ended teleology of history, awaiting each and every human story, one at a time, to magnify its genealogical reach by means of adoption, the adoption papers being the reading experience itself. The redundancy of always reading oneself, of reading as genealogical discovery, is saved from a kind of implied incest by the fact that new readers are always adopted into the genealogy of meaning. The family tree of meaning keeps finding reasons for new forms of kinship. Ultimately, when any reader is converted by the Book of Mormon, the act of reading becomes a fulfillment of prophecy about reading itself, a kind of adoption or transformation from Gentile to member of the house of Israel. Nephi tells us, as just one example of many instances when we are invoked,

that “if the Gentiles shall hearken unto the Lamb of God in that day that he shall manifest himself unto them in word, and also in power, in very deed, unto the taking away of their stumbling blocks—and harden not their hearts against the Lamb of God, they shall be numbered among the seed of thy father; yea, they shall be numbered among the house of Israel; and they shall be a blessed people upon the promised land forever” (1 Ne. 14:1–2).

And of course key to the conversion or adoption of the human family into the transcendent covenant of Abraham is the Book of Mormon itself. Isaiah and Nephi both prophesy of the book and the conditions of its coming forth and of its reception. Indeed, one purpose of including Isaiah in the Book of Mormon is to teach us of Christ’s transcendence across the different dispensations of time even as it also shows his perpetual inextricability from the fabric of human history. We also come to recognize our own moment in time in this transcendent plan or pattern. These revelations gather the house of Israel, and all of humanity, back into the umbrella narrative that began with the Abrahamic covenant. Isaiah states, “And again: Hearken, O ye house of Israel, all ye that are broken off and are driven out because of the wickedness of the pastors of my people; yea, all ye that are broken off, that are scattered abroad, who are of my people, O house of Israel” (1 Ne. 21:1). The book contains that secret knowledge, broken off from a larger whole, like the fragments of time found in Melquiades’s laboratory, and hidden from the foundation of the world. This knowledge in fact recounts our adoptive genealogy and recovers our knowledge of our own origins in the narrative of human history that we discover we have written with God. We rescue this secret knowledge of God’s designs from the realm of myth or of mere rhetoric and bring it into actuality and history by the use of our agency; through repentance and conversion, we marry human time to a divine, eternal narrative of salvation.

This encounter with oneself in the act of translating what is revealed, however, can be prodigal rather than oedipal if it is a return to our origins that then opens us perpetually to the next reading and to the next reader. In other words, we must become aware of the contingent nature of our revelation, how it is enabled by our particular moment in culture and in time and how, therefore, it is subject to further understanding. In this way, the moment of prophesying oneself in the act of deciphering latter-day scripture is not a closure of knowledge or a collapse of history itself but the initiation of a *perpetual* process of recovery. In the Book of Mormon, the moment of each individual reading is prophesied as a time when things will *begin* to be restored, when the Abrahamic covenant will *begin* to be fulfilled (1 Ne. 15:13–18). The widening and deepening of the meaning of



the Abrahamic covenant is the responsibility and effect of individual readers from ever wider spheres of human experience who understand that conversion is a choice between searching perpetually for further light and knowledge or losing that which we have already been given (see Alma 12:9–11). For readers merely seeking affirmation of what they already knew, the text is only a mirror, never a window. But readers seeking to move beyond the redundancy of selfhood will be rewarded by a perpetual discovery of larger contexts within which to understand the fragments of truth they possess. What more will the Book of Mormon come to mean, for example, when it is read by millions of Chinese?

If revelation is nothing more than what we have imagined a god might say, then of course Freud was right to criticize religion as a self-deluding dream of our own deepest desires. It is natural, then, that defenders of revealed religion point to what is new and unanticipated about the will of the Lord. But it is important to recognize that to believe in a revealed God does not preclude the possibility that our own inventions and imaginings have been vital to enabling and framing the meaning of such revelations. We are accountable for the truths restored to us, either from revelation or from secular learning, because our active imagination has helped to amplify the meaning of what we discover. This is what I mean by a poetics of restoration: new truth is revealed at the same time that we begin to see the role our imagination has played in projecting a world that anticipates what *might be* revealed. Revelation is not the result of impatient or arrogant expectation, or a waiting for a particular revelation we are sure the leaders of the Church will eventually be smart enough to receive, but instead humble anticipation of new meaning, a rediscovery, redefinition, or realignment of what we thought we knew. Our devotion should be not only to what we know (what we have received), but also to what is yet to come. The Restoration calls for an open orthodoxy, a devotion to what the Lord has revealed *and* to what he will yet reveal, even if it means we must change our thinking about what we thought we knew. To begin the process of restoring truth *in* our weakness is to start with the premise that our cultural and temporal conditions are obstacles. Restoration is not a solipsism in which we invent what God might say and then nod in not-so-surprised affirmation of what we have been told. Rather it is the result of imaginative work that puts us in a position to receive correction. It is the Lord who anticipates the weaknesses and particularities of our imagination and then *broadens* the significance of our questions. The confrontation with the self becomes redemptive, rather than tragic as it is for Oedipus, once we accept our portion of responsibility for the kind of deity who has been revealed to us.

## Restoration and the Traditions of Men

Because learning about other cultures helps us to see our own culture in all its contingency and partiality, it is vital to keeping ourselves aware of the role our own culture has played, for better or for worse, in shaping our transcendent understandings of God and of ourselves. Consider the ways in which their place in a particular culture and at a particular moment in history blinded Peter and his fellow disciples from understanding on the eve of the Pentecost just how much more generously they needed to apply the gospel. Despite their ultimate inclusion of the Gentiles, Christ chastised the Old World disciples for their “stiffneckedness and unbelief” because they failed to understand how much more diverse and geographically distant the other sheep might be (3 Ne. 15:18). To have congratulated themselves merely for finally understanding that the Gentiles deserved the gospel fell short of understanding just how many “Gentiles” the world over in far away and even unknown lands qualified for the blessings of the gospel.

If it is “stiffneckedness” to have failed to imagine a people on a land mass previously unknown to the Old World, how much more unfaithful to the Lord is it for us to live in this age of unprecedented access to global information to willfully ignore the particular histories, experiences, languages, and cultures of all of God’s children. We rightly look forward to the prophesied day when Zion will be the envy of the world for its cultural accomplishments and secular knowledge, but we have too often imagined that this would involve an immersion in our own Mormon uniqueness and exceptionality and our claim to have the complete treasure house of knowledge. If the traditions of men are the stumbling block to our proper understanding of the gospel, we cannot hope to sort through the murky diversity of human experience in order to identify dangerous falsehoods if we are not equally committed to finding marvelous truths, that is, those portions of the word that he has told us have been revealed across the world, to men, women, and children, according to the “heed and diligence which they give unto him” (Alma 12:9).<sup>14</sup> No perpetuation of the Restoration is possible if we turn our back on the many rich and varied traditions of men and women, the cultural achievements of the so-called heathen. Zion’s greatness, I believe, will come because we will leave no stone unturned, because we have an insatiable curiosity about how others have generated ideas and lived values unique to their circumstances.

Of course, lest we lose our moorings in the process, individual devotion to the Lord’s oracles is the beginning and returning point for all learning. It is also useful to remember that no one person can obtain sufficient knowledge to fully grasp the extent of the Restoration of all things. In this

quest, there is no room for academic, political, or cultural chauvinism, or for anti-intellectualism or fears of honest and open discussion of opinions. We don't want to be like those in Milton's day who wished to burn or ban books because they preferred an orthodoxy based on hearsay or on authority alone and not on personal witness or investigation. Milton believed that secular learning could aid in "reforming the Reformation" because truth always needed further revision. "Opinion in good men," he wrote, "is but knowledge in the making."<sup>15</sup> For Milton, the earnest Christian's duty was to "hear . . . all manner of reason" and to commit to "books promiscuously read."<sup>16</sup>

In other words, Milton understood that truth had been scattered throughout the world and that its broken body must be searched for aggressively and reassembled in a gathering of insights from all books. Mormon suggests similarly that human judgment is flawed by two fundamental errors: judging "that which is evil to be of God, or that which is good and of God to be of the devil" (Moro. 7:14). Mistaking truth for error is as morally dangerous as mistaking error for truth. The countless truths that have been buried by such mistaken judgments historically have been ruinous and arguably the very reason why art and why a dispensation of restoration are necessary. As Milton notes, "Revolutions of ages do not oft recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole nations fare the worse."<sup>17</sup> The only way he could imagine that we could fight against these consequences was to adopt a spirit of anticipation: "The light which we have gained was given us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge."<sup>18</sup>

Our willingness to withhold premature judgment about how ideas fit into the great expanse of God's knowledge requires charity, Christ's power to "bear all things," which, among other benefits, strengthens us with patience to withstand the apparent contradictions of ideas, thus keeping us open to greater understanding. This openness gains direction gradually because it is framed by belief in an eventual restoration of all things, what the novelist Marilynne Robinson refers to as the "law of completion," that moment when "everything must finally be made comprehensible."<sup>19</sup> Without faith in this ultimate moment of circumscription of all truth to act as our compass, the partial knowledge we obtain against the great tide of chaos and forgetting that seems to be the sea we swim in would drain, instead of instill, hope. We can ill afford to be overly confident that we have arrived at a final state of understanding. Indeed, we might say that knowing an idea, feeling its truth, is a brief glimpse into a mind in which all things are known. It is as if we instinctively feel that our newfound comprehension

is evidence that ideas can never be lost, even if they are often lost to our memory or changed by new information. Trust in the Restoration means that we play at secular learning, experimenting on the word long enough to harvest what fruit an idea bears.

In his monumental essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot argues against culture's tendency to fetishize originality and uniqueness, what "least resembles anyone else," in a work of art.<sup>20</sup> The newness that we think we admire in a great work of art is really a function of the individual talent's ability to transmit tradition *as if* it were new. The poetics of reimagining and rearranging the past allows the individual talent to render all ages contemporaneous. Eliot notes that "not only the best, but the most individual parts of [an individual's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."<sup>21</sup> These voices of the dead are displaced and reorganized by the voice of the individual talent so that new understandings emerge that simultaneously feel like things we always or once knew. It is as if to say that creating a new work of art is really only a poetic reading, a restoration of what an earlier work of inspiration sought to express.

So one mistake we might make when we suggest that Mormons can achieve the level of accomplishment of the Bachs and Shakespeares of the world is to assume that there is a kind of radical originality in what must be accomplished. If we really believe in the Restoration, it is well to remember that as unique as we sometimes insist it is, Mormon belief is nothing new; it is the oldest understanding of the cosmos. So we could say that we already have our "Mormon" Bach: the J. S. Bach of the Brandenburg Concertos and the B-minor mass we have come to love. There are as many Mormon writers as there are Mormon readers. That is not to say that we shouldn't aspire to Bach-like or Melville-like accomplishments, but who would want a culture without Bach or Melville? Perhaps it sounds arrogant and egotistical to claim such heroes as our own, but I mean this as an expression of compassionate, not proprietary, affection. If we are serious about the endeavor of gathering the house of Israel and if all of world culture is up for grabs, Mormon culture stands to become something much more broad and inclusive, much more diverse, and much more sympathetic to the world than any of us has imagined. Indeed, it would seem that it has to if the work of Restoration is to go forward.

Mormon individual talent will achieve greatness when it exhibits what Eliot calls a "continual extinction of personality" because "the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, . . . in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways."<sup>22</sup> The goal of

Mormon art or Mormon learning should not be “a turning loose,” to use a phrase from Eliot, of Mormonness so that the whole world looks at us in envy to say that we have something special, unique, or original.<sup>23</sup> I suspect admiration will come when the culture of Mormonism is invested in the cultures of the world, when we are seen as a people actively engaged in empathetic, disciplined conversations with other traditions, beliefs, and cultures. Eliot is suggesting a paradox; the expression of Mormonism would be an escape from whatever we think “Mormonness” might mean. We need not fear. This is not a denial or denigration of who we think we are, for as Eliot notes, “Only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the individual talent is adopted into the family tree of cultural achievement without compromising originality. In the terms I have been discussing, this talent is a reading of the past that is simultaneously a transmission of the old and a creation, a poetics, of something new. This has important implications for a contemporary LDS religious culture that is still very much invested in our uniqueness, still predominantly shaped by American culture and history, and still emerging from its origins on the Wasatch Front.

Indeed, we seem as a culture to be at a crossroads. We are becoming increasingly international in membership, multilingual as a body and as individual members, and global in our reach. And yet we remain as closely identified as ever with a narrowly defined version of American nationalism, with a specific political party, ethnicity, and geography. This is most evident, perhaps, in the way that U.S. Americans who descend from British Island and Scandinavian stock tend to read their own story into the Book of Mormon to the exclusion of other Americas and other Americans. Indeed, it is not yet clear that in the Mormon emergence out of obscurity we are doing all that we can to demonstrate our commitment to listening to and gathering truth wherever it may be found. We will be like the stiffnecked disciples if we remain content with merely extending now dated and reified understandings of what we thought it meant to be Mormon.

Our Sunday School conversations about the Book of Mormon notwithstanding, the book is *not* exclusively about Anglo-American experience within the geopolitical borders of the United States. Rather, it describes a geography in the Americas of shifting political boundaries with a plurality of cultures of various races. Surely one of its most powerful messages is its warning against geopolitical chauvinism. Nephi asks us, “Know ye not that there are more nations than one?” (2 Ne. 29:7). The Book of Mormon offers a vision of unity for that plurality, to be sure, but like the New World’s greatest novels, it also issues stern warnings about the dangers of entrenched

claims to identity that use force or chauvinism to achieve unity. Most significantly, it points to additional books of equal value to come forth from other lands.

If America was the cradle of the Restoration, perhaps we would do well to consider rethinking what America means; it needn't be an ethnically narrow and geographically restricted America but rather a cross-cultural and transnational location where a dizzying variety of diasporic communities gather, commune, and influence and change each other, and thereby challenge singular ethnic or political claims on the meaning of any one nation. In other words, if it has been suggested that the Restoration took place in the United States because of its particular opportunities of religious and political freedoms, perhaps it is time to consider that American experience has also laid the groundwork for a New Jerusalem, a Zarahemla of sorts, that can become one of the great gathering places of the world's cultures: the Americas of Canada, the U.S., Central America, the Caribbean, and South America; the Americas of Native Americans from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic; of Asian immigrants from Canada to Argentina; of the vast African diaspora; the Americas of Latin American, Arab, European, and other peoples of international and intranational migration. These have all yet to play their transformative role in the Restoration.

In an important book that outlines a theory of culture for a diasporic and plural America, the Martinican author Édouard Glissant warns against the tendency for cultures to find identity in genealogical roots, especially when those roots are merely conceived as moving back through time to a sacrosanct origin that expels all others.<sup>25</sup> He warns, in other words, against totalitarian visions of unity that fail to establish relations with other cultures, other myths, and other lands across time and instead lay exclusive claim to territory. "The root," he insists, "is monolingual" whereas a culture of "errantry" understands itself in motion across land, through time, and as composite.<sup>26</sup> Sacred books such as the Bible, he argues, are much more cross-cultural than their readers often realize:

Within the collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim. When the very idea of territory becomes relative, nuances appear in the legitimacy of territorial possession. . . . These books are the beginning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they will be put).<sup>27</sup>

Glissant shares Eliot's suspicion that all cultures really are the result of a remaking of fragments of the past into new formulations that work for the present. For this reason, he insists that cultures come to understand

themselves as a contingent unity that is the result of an “aggregation of things that are scattered.”<sup>28</sup> This implies, of course, that cultural origins are not merely found in the past but are created in the imagination of the present, that there is a continual poetics of identity in the cultural work of any group. Repeatedly, Glissant takes aim at any conception of time that would place history along a chronological trajectory, what he calls “ancient filiation” and “conquering legitimacy.”<sup>29</sup> The reason for this critique is that often such conceptions fail to take interest in and include other peoples, times, and places. What is sacred for Glissant is not the fiction of a singular story of origins but the opportunity to self-consciously and poetically remake culture from the fragments that lie about us in the present; that is, the sacred is the work of imagining relations between competing origins and thereby forging new awareness and new possibilities for more inclusive communities.

In their habits of reading and learning, some Mormons feel hesitant to embrace the educational and scholarly objectives of our politically correct and multicultural times because of today’s increasing balkanization of identity and secularism. And Glissant’s theory might sound too facilely inclusive and indifferent to the transcendent claims of sacred literature regarding our spiritual identity and our relationship to eternal truth. But he is useful to remind us of the dangers of a too narrowly cultural or geographical claim on eternal truth because of the ways that it isolates and excludes. Surely it is not insignificant that the Book of Mormon tells the story of immigrants, portrays the brotherhood between races, and exposes in no uncertain terms the unfinished nature of God’s revelations to humankind. Indeed, the Book of Mormon implies a fundamental redefinition of the traditional Western and Hegelian conceptions of history. The book exposes the story of lost histories that are the result of sin, arrogance, and violence. It calls for greater humility and repentance in light of the ruptures and gaps in our linear understanding of the past that it portrays. Contrary to how virtually every national history is created, the structure of history, in the Restoration at least, does not evolve by means of linear unveilings of time progressively marching from one point of origin to another point of conclusion. The linear structure that culminates in the last days is compromised by a circular returning that is implied in a Restoration, a return again to that which has been hidden since the foundation of the world.

If the Restoration is a chiasmic response to the Apostasy, it would seem that the emerging knowledge of Christ throughout history spins forward but leaves behind in its wake a series of forgettings; history, in other words, results in simultaneous rupture and continuity. The Book of Mormon, for

example, portrays the arrival of the Gentiles in the New World, an event that results simultaneously in the perpetuation of God's covenants *and* a loss of truth. (The Gentiles were presumably not only our British but also our Hispanic forebears. I see no reason why the Book of Mormon's account of the discovery of the Americas is not also telling the story of Hispanic Catholic colonies who, arguably more assiduously than the English Protestants, devoted extraordinary efforts to bringing the word of God to millions of the native inhabitants of the Americas.) We are told that the Gentiles receive "the power of the Lord" to defeat their mother colonies and to exercise power over the Native Americans to establish territory for themselves "out of captivity" (1 Ne. 13:16, 13). They carry with them the word of God, which contains "the covenants of the Lord" but is also missing "many parts which are plain and most precious" (1 Ne. 13:23, 26).

The results are mixed: the Gentiles are simultaneously described as "lifted up by the power of God above all other nations," and yet the fragmented truths they possess "blind and harden the hearts of the children of men" and "an exceedingly great many do stumble, yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them," resulting in an "awful state of blindness" (1 Ne. 13:30, 27, 29, 32). It is not always easy to see founders as both great and flawed, but that is certainly the way honest histories tell it. It is often assumed that Nephi's vision sees Columbus in a state of divine inspiration that moves him across the waters. There is little doubt from the historical record that Columbus felt so inspired, but there is also little doubt that he was blinded by a great many false traditions and ideas that caused him to fail to understand accurately where he was geographically during his voyages in the New World. This failure and his arrival had no small consequences. It is hard to see why we should celebrate Columbus's arrival unambiguously or to focus exclusively on the white immigrant story of the Americas, when in the wake of Spanish and other European arrivals, thousands of Indians were enslaved, only to be replaced by millions of Africans; and millions of Indians died of disease, so many that over the course of the next century and a half, the indigenous population of the Americas, estimated to be at 54 million prior to 1492, fell by almost 90 percent by the 1600s.<sup>30</sup>

Columbus is secondary to my main point here, which is that the Book of Mormon portrays history in the Americas as a series of events through which righteous men and women simultaneously bring the plan of God forward and (either through the failings of those same men and women or the incomplete nature of those events) leave behind pieces of the truth that need to be restored. A restoration implies a perpetual glance back, a recognition of the always incomplete nature of human action and understanding,



and a desire to find the deeper reasons for humanity's secret kinship and belonging in the covenants of Abraham. Traditional Christianity does not always fully confront these forgettings or this constant fragmentation of the gospel's truths. Mormonism posits the need for continual revolutions, that is, for continual returns to the source, to imagine again the lost connections, the repressed relations that make history less determined by evolutionary stages of the past and more determined by our imaginative acts in the present. And, as García Márquez's novel argues, this poetics of restoration is the fundamental impulse of art and is reason therefore that art and culture deserve our serious attention.

Indeed, literary and historical production in the Americas, especially over the last fifty years, has shown profound interest in the early years of colonialism, the breadth and depth of over three centuries of African slavery throughout the Americas, and indigenous life. Moreover, the stories of immigrants and their family memories, the ethnic plurality of cities in the Americas, and the connections between the Americas and the rest of the world have figured more prominently in the literary and scholarly imagination of hundreds of writers and thinkers throughout the Americas than in any previous era of history.<sup>31</sup> The stories that have emerged remind us that the great meaning of the gathering of the house of Israel is not always blood descent but adoption. They suggest that the profound differences among a plurality of Americans and Americas should challenge us to imagine our kinship. This commitment to hearing scattered stories is a means of testing and potentially expanding the limits of community. It is how a poetics of restoration can avoid the pitfalls of what Glissant criticizes as an unhealthy and even violent obsession with a community's unique and sometimes hardened claims to sacred roots. We see these obsessions whenever there is undue pride about the exceptional nature of a particular culture's origins or unhealthy protectionism about the purity and singularity of those origins. It is not insignificant that such negative protectionism has so often yielded to violence. It certainly enriches our understanding of the past to acknowledge heroism and inspired acts and words, but it does not diminish America to acknowledge the violence, the pride, and the stumbling blocks that have also moved history forward. Such acknowledgement does not preclude the possibility that any nation's affairs have been providentially aided. Indeed, doing so helps us to see providence in human relief. If we were to take the Book of Mormon as our inspiration, we might see a recovery of such plural and sometimes contradictory histories as our sacred duty.

The sacred, for Glissant, is not the imagined origin itself in a state of static perfection but the act itself of imagining the deeper signification

of the root, something that sacred books teach: “The founding books have taught us that the sacred dimension consists always of going deeper into the mystery of the root, shaded with variations of errantry.”<sup>32</sup> Specifically, he suggests that something like the intolerant and violent treatment of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans, which characterize the arrogant trajectories of Western claims to exceptionalism and to territory, is movement that paradoxically “contained the embryo (no matter how deferred its realization might have seemed) that would transcend the duality that started it.”<sup>33</sup> The seeds were sown, in other words, in the crucible of New World experience for a cross-culturation imagination in which humanity could begin to discover the grounds for relation among all family trees. Here we see how the very human conditions that limit, even blind, us might indeed become the means of a redeemed and more penitent self-understanding.

Genealogy has always been effective in teaching diachronic heritage back through time but less effective in mapping the synchronic interrelatedness of communities across time. Family trees are deceptive in this regard because they stress parental links at the expense of the vast and virtually unmappable network of kinship every human being possesses across time with an innumerable family of lost cousins. The genealogical search is a discovery of kinship, but it can also be a discovery of the limits of our understanding of blood, the perpetual mystery of life stories that remain beyond our grasp, and the need to supplement the inevitable lack of sufficient documentation with imagination. If there was a time when those bitten by the bug of Elijah were able to boast of their monarchic ancestors in the Old World as far back as 1066, perhaps it is time we start using genealogy to help us see our responsibilities toward our present-day kin among the far-flung races and religions of the world we inhabit.<sup>34</sup> To express ourselves, to know ourselves, and to be truthful to our heritage all imply that we become answerable to and interested in other peoples, other cultures, other times and places.

Who and what we imagine our community to include is often more potent than what our bloodlines indicate about our identity, and this is why culture is so important to understanding ourselves and others. If our ultimate objective is the community of the Abrahamic covenant, a binding of all the families of the earth, it is an understatement to say that there remains a lot of work to do to prepare our hearts to welcome all of God’s children. Every conversion to the gospel, every consecration of one individual life, and every way of seeing the world within the framework of the great plan of happiness represents an adoption and an architectural retrofitting of

the house of Israel. The spirit of Elijah in its broadest sense represents the search for lost knowledges in the world and the attempt to convert transgression and errantry, individuality and particularity, bloodlines and geographies into the new substance of the story of all humankind. This spirit is operative in a disciple's secular learning because even if exposure to the particulars of another culture and identity might challenge the exceptional claims of the Mormon personality, a poetics of restoration that seeks to find the reasons for inclusion of all God's children rewards our leap of faith with a return to, not a dissipation of, the foundations of our Mormon selves, refreshed and restored in profoundly new ways. It is not a Tower of Babel of secular knowledge we need to build but rather the contingent scaffolding of an imagined totality that we hope the Lord will reveal beneath the stories we hear. We can never be sure we properly understand the relationships we imagine among cultures, but charity to bear all things, including, for the time being, what appear to be unassimilable differences, may allow us the opportunity to restore the meaning and shape of the community we hope to establish. In this sense, we are invoked as poetic creators in this ongoing restoration of all things. The aim is to remake our Mormonness, both individually and as a culture, so as to allow more and more of the world's hidden truths to resonate in what we claim to believe, a prospect that I think bodes well for performing the great labor of the gathering of Israel and the restoration of all things.

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1. Brigham Young, quoted in Spencer W. Kimball, "The Gospel Vision of the Arts," *Ensign* 3 (July 1977): 3.

2. There is a rich bibliography on the role of the disciple-scholar in the Mormon tradition. I like what Elder Neal A. Maxwell says: "We constantly need to distinguish between the truths which are useful and those which are crucial, and between truths which are important and those which are eternal. The restored gospel gives us this special sense of proportion." Neal A. Maxwell, "The Disciple-Scholar," in *Learning in the Light of Faith: The Compatibility of Scholarship and Discipleship*, ed. Henry B. Eyring (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 4. Elder Henry B. Eyring elaborates on the priority of our submission to Christ: "Start with the

prophecies about how the gospel of Jesus Christ will change you. From that you will see why faith in Jesus Christ and in the authority of His mortal servants will multiply your scholarly powers. Then, when you have acted on that, you will be able to see how the other predictions and sayings of prophets will expand, not contract, your understanding.” Henry B. Eyring, “Faith, Authority, and Scholarship,” in Eyring, *Learning in the Light of Faith*, 53.

3. This is a very brief gloss on a long and somewhat complicated history of literary theory, which has featured eras that have emphasized, among other aspects, the importance of the text’s formal qualities (formalism), the importance of the reader’s identity and/or context (reader response theory, feminist theory, and race theory), the influence of economic and political oppression (Marxism and postcolonial theory), and the inherent gap between signifier and signified (poststructuralism). Often contradictory and often enlightening, these theories enrich our understanding of the complex process of reading, interpreting, and making meaning.

4. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 2001), 70.

5. Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 88.

6. Cited in Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 89.

7. See Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 89.

8. See Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 89.

9. Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 322.

10. Márquez, *One Hundred Years*, 329.

11. Márquez, *One Hundred Years*, 321.

12. Josefina Ludmer, *Cien Años de Soledad: Una Interpretación*, 2d. ed. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1974).

13. Márquez, *One Hundred Years*, 383.

14. See also Alma 12:10–11; 32:23.

15. John Milton, “Areopagitica,” in Stephen Greenblatt, and others, eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 717.

16. Milton, “Areopagetica,” 713.

17. Milton, “Areopagetica,” 712.

18. Milton, “Areopagetica,” 716.

19. Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Picador, 2004), 92.

20. T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 37.

21. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 38.

22. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 40, 42.

23. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 43.

24. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 43.

25. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

26. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 15.

27. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 15–16.

28. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 55.

29. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 56.

30. Shawn William Miller, *An Environmental History of Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 56.

31. My first book, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), explores the theme of genealogy in novels from the Caribbean and from the U.S. and exposes the shared anxieties and histories across various American nations. It is an attempt to understand how the U.S. wrestled with the legacies of its own history of slavery and its striving for democracy in ways that were not entirely unique. My scholarship participates in an active and broad discussion among other scholars on the relationship between and among the various cultures of the Americas.

32. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 21.

33. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 56.

34. Between 75 and 90 percent of all African Americans, for example, have white ancestry, which would suggest there are a great number of whites who have yet to acknowledge black ancestors who may have passed as white or who owned slaves. See Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 15.