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Esoteric Texts: A Lesson on the Conceit of Understanding, Interpretation, and Translation (To Say Nothing of Deconstruction), Independent of Culture, Time, Place and Context

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ESOTERIC TEXTS:
A LESSON ON THE CONCEIT OF UNDERSTANDING,
INTERPRETATION, AND TRANSLATION (TO SAY NOTHING OF DECONSTRUCTION),
INDEPENDENT OF CULTURE, TIME, PLACE AND CONTEXT

Gordon C. Thomasson
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All too often we assume that a given text, artifact, or other manifestation of a culture is open to anyone's own understanding as easily as we can turn the pages of a book. At the opposite extreme to this kind of pride is another self-deception, based upon an often profound personal experience of meaninglessness, that asserts that whatever human products we, whether as scriptorians, literary critics, philologists, archaeologists, moralists, or just plain persons attempt to "read" are in fact also really meaningless. In the very middle of this continuum is the even more irrational position that every or any text means and can mean only one thing, and that all we need do is let the text "speak for itself." This latter position is, ironically, as common to a style of secular scholarship that systematically ignores the last generation of thought in the philosophy of history, as it is to true biblical fundamentalists who really believe only in plenary inspiration and "infallible" texts (see APPENDIX I).

From outside this entire spectrum I assert that anything we can classify as a "text" so qualifies precisely because it has some intrinsic meaning (or even multiple possible intended meanings), but that for us as finite and temporal human readers and interpreters, no text is sufficient in itself. We must use every means at our disposal to understand both the matrix out of which a text comes as well as what

1A translator of L.D.S. materials faces problems similar to those that confront a person attempting to translate biblical parables which often carry multiple messages.
Frequently [L.D.S.] General Authorities will preach [for example] on repentance and employ words or short phrases (at times perhaps unconsciously) from the temple to make a point. These convey a straightforward message to all hearers, but to those who have received their endowment a second message is given, a reminder of higher and more serious responsibilities. How does a translator choose between the often multiple intended levels of meaning found in Gospel discourses? This is especially difficult due to the fact that translators cannot simply rely on the endowment ceremony... as a guideline. ... An L.D.S. translator must be made aware of the multiple levels of meaning in the original source, and must either have guidelines as to which level the translation should be addressed to (the world, Judeo-Christians, investigators, new converts, longtime members, endowed members or whoever), or sufficiently gloss the translation to insure that the various messages get through (Thomasson, 1973: 79, note 12).
we bring to it, if we hope to honestly engage in dialogue with it and the humans who conveyed it (intentionally or not) to us, or permit it to speak through us.² And it is precisely in the realm of the esoteric that we find the ideal setting for demonstrating the reality and complexity of the problem of discovering meaning when we encounter a text.

Living and working as an anthropologist among the Kpelle people of Liberia in West Africa sensitized me to the reality of the esoteric and the problems it poses even beyond the perspective that my own Mormon cultural background and anthropological and linguistic training had provided, as well as the technical and ethical dilemmas that any esoteric text should impose upon us. Consider especially the methodological and moral problems inherent in studying a culture/religion with a tradition of covenant secrecy (Thomasson, 1987:35-42; 1988).³ The Kpelle people share a sacred system of meaning, values and ritual which is not to be betrayed to outsiders. Respecting their high moral right to privacy, I avoided any investigation into those areas of their culture that they, rather obviously, feel are none of my or any other outsider's business. Previous generations of non-Kpelle, with the profound disrespect for human rights that is engendered by imperialism and colonialism (including academic imperialism, justified by an hypocritical rhetoric of academic freedom), have done their best to pry into and expose the Kpelle tradition for all to see. What they have produced is virtually worthless, as untrustworthy as the data from Nazi Death Camp "medical experimentation," for most of the same technical and ethical reasons (Alexander, 1949; Moe, 1984). And under cross-examination, this "National Enquirer" school of anthropology is as nonsensical, shallow and contradictory as the average expose of Mormonism. Even where one can record, film or seemingly re-enact a ritual, i.e., that which is essential: what those actions really mean to those persons faithfully performing them, cannot be so captured.

²A good discussion of some of the problems associated with the perspectives of a reader is to be found in Kira Pratt Davis, "What the Author Had in Mind: Text vs. Context in Mormon Scripture" (1986). It should be kept in mind, however, that

The polysemic, pluralistic nature of textual meaning is not a new discovery. It is implicitly perceived in the Talmudic modes of commentary as well as in the scholastic classification of literal, allegoric and anagogic levels of significance. The insight that the interpretation of a text is a process in temporal motion, that individual sensibility and the ideological-social context will alter accepted meanings, is familiar to scriptural exegesis and text criticism after Spinoza. Argued methodically by Schleiermacher, it will form the basis of what is called today (faintly portentously) Rezeptionstheorie or "theory of reception." (Steiner, 1981:5)

³It is disturbing that the most recent, major study of secrecy in religion proceeds almost without exception to ignore the ethical and human rights questions which the uninvited study of someone else's secrets should immediately raise (Bolle, 1987).
Even interviewing willing participants can extract (with years of effort), only shards of the worldview within which the actions are understood. And the supposedly willing informant, who, if he or she is not pulling the wool over your eyes and telling you that culture's equivalent of "stork," "tooth fairy," and "Santa Claus" stories, is usually so shallowly integrated and socialized into the culture (as evidenced by its betrayal), that no real credence can be given to the explanations. And there is no possible independent "control" upon which one can rely to gauge the accuracy of reported meanings.

What is freely admitted among the Kpelle is that within the context of their centuries-old system of universal public education, the Poro and Sande "bush schools," which are the occasion for initiation into the respective men's and women's secret societies, children learn an entire new set of meanings for the language which they have heard their elders use before their matriculation. There is an "inside" to the Kpelle language that the outsider and the child is not supposed to, and in fact cannot truly penetrate, without being initiated into the secrets and mysteries of that people, becoming, as it were, Kpelle. To pretend that such esoteric levels of meaning do not exist can only be done by denying both what they report and what one experiences as existential "fact." But to come to understand even the gap between ourselves and any text, let alone one that is esoteric, we must be willing both to admit our finite ignorance and expose ourselves to the potentially relativistic implications of taking another people's way seriously (compare Wendland, 1987). To elaborate, let us begin with a particularly fertile text.

Secular Esoteric Texts

As an illustration of the problem of understanding, I present the following scenario. Imagine some future post-nuclear holocaust archaeologist unearthing an oblong metal box with a strange assortment of implements, artifacts and a weathered piece of paper in it, bearing the inscription:

**Bad boys rape our young girls, but Violet gives willingly.**

Naive to the language of one caste within our long since vanished, to say nothing of by then technologically obsolete society, scholars looking back at us through the, in fact, esoteric remnants of the material culture of one minority group at a particular moment in its very rapid evolutionary (or perhaps more accurately, revolutionary)

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4It was this sort of would-be ethnographic data, from Australia, upon which Freud relied in his attempts to "understand" religion. For a better examination of what Freud was really doing, however, see the discussion by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1965:14-15).

5Unconsciously I may have hit on the foregoing framework, but not the following text, which dates from my Junior High School days, based upon the story of Brother Francis of Utah in Walter M. Miller, Jr's. apocalyptic science fiction novel *A Canticle for Liebowitz* (1964).
history (and a very narrow point at that, lasting less than a century), might, in the spirit of Freudian criticism, at best judge that we had a curious fixation on sex, if they had nothing more to go on than this text and the best dictionaries available from our time. But our text, like every text, is not necessarily what it appears to be at first glance.

"Bad boys rape our young girls, but Violet gives willingly" is not simply a text in itself. It is a mnemonic device, key to an esoteric tradition that will forever be invisible to those whose training and biases predispose them to studied ignorance. Historicists and positivists, for example, among other things, based on their own secular culture and consciousness, eliminate a priori the significance or reality of references to the supernatural from any text. Similarly and in turn, the modern deconstructionists, following the lead of Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and others, project their own guilt and angst filled existential experience of the meaningless of modern secular culture, onto all texts and cultures and conclude that nothing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BAD</td>
<td>BLACK</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOYS</td>
<td>BROWN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAPE</td>
<td>RED</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUR</td>
<td>ORANGE</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YOUNG</td>
<td>YELLOW</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIRLS</td>
<td>GREEN</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUT</td>
<td>BLUE</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIOLET</td>
<td>VIOLET</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIVES</td>
<td>GREY</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILLINGLY</td>
<td>WHITE</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILVER</td>
<td>10% TOLERANCE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOLD</td>
<td>5% TOLERANCE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

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6de Man's recently documented Nazism represented the epitome of at least a mid-twentieth century, morally meaningless, secular culture.
the latter contain means anything either (or, perhaps more accurately, that they contain nothing). But however opaque or meaningless it may seem to some readers, every text, in the broadest sense of the word, including everything from our example sentence to an entire library of written documents (the Meroitic corpus, for example), archaeological remains, and examples of the graphic, plastic and musical arts and beyond, does mean something to its creator, participant, or initiate in the culture of origin. That meaning can be approached (or approximated) by outsiders, in some degree, only if they enter into a relationship with their sources with profound humility and awareness of their outsider status and ignorance. 7

If we wish to understand "Bad boys rape our young girls, but Violet gives willingly," we must move far beyond the meaning we could ascribe to it through recourse to a dictionary. On the first level of abstraction, our sentence has two immediate layers of meaning that are obvious to those who have had contact with it in the context of the culture from which it originates.

Column I in Table 1 contains the words of our text, which are all too easily mis-interpreted on a so-called "common sense" level through recourse to one's mental dictionary, by letting the text "speak for itself." But the difficult to scramble, almost unforgettable and ambiguously risque words do not exist in combination for their own sake (or meaning). The sentence is an esoteric key to the twentieth century electrical "color code." Several generations of (mostly adolescent male) "priest-attendants" of our technology (did you ever try and fix your old television set?), learned to chant this mantram as one of the earliest stages of their initiation into the profession. Once they (I) had recited it several times (the whole class in my Electric Shop course said it in unison, and it became a kind of password for us), it stuck in our memory from that time on. 8 Another mnemonically tenacious example is the first word in Morse code that many World War II U.S. Navy code trainees were taught, just before lunchtime (an unintended positive reinforcement?), that was intended to overcome a psychological block and show the students they could remember the code. Specifically they were taught to repeat "three dits, four dits, two dits, dah." 8

7 Failure to do so on the part of supposedly educated Western experts in "development" is responsible for most of the failures and a good part of the starvation resulting from "assistance" programs to the third world. For an overview of this problem see Robert Chambers (1983, 1985). Chambers is, simply, the most profound development theoretician and practitioner in the world today.

8 We can recall here Mark Twain's short story "Punch, Brothers, Punch," (1935:1105-1108), about the demonically possessing chorus:
   Punch, brothers! punch with care!
   Punch in the presence of the passenjare!
which an individual could not stop saying to him or herself, short of starving to death or going insane, unless he exorcised himself by getting someone else to repeat it and thereby become possessed.
This sequence when converted to a word, due to its scatological meaning, was easily and firmly imbedded in their minds.

Column II is a non-random listing of colors, corresponding to the visible spectrum and the rainbow, where the first letter of each color name matches the first letter of the word occupying the same relative position in the original sentence. This second layer of our text, and the sequence (B B R O Y G B V G W) that is repeated or reinforced, is the link to the third level or correlated meaning, for the color names do not exist for their own sake, but to symbolize something beyond themselves.9

Column III is a list of numbers that is linked with remembering the otherwise unwieldy sequence of colors, which in turn can be recalled through the original sentence.

From these relatively simple abstract planes we can go through other levels of abstraction and layers of meaning to various intended "realities" that are symbolized or implied by our text. On a physical/material level of abstraction that correlates to the color names and numbers we can find painted stripes of color on electrical "resistors" (these were far more common prior to the days of microcircuitry and "chips"), and translate those colors into values of electrical resistance, enabling us to identify, test, match and replace a component, based either on a parts list or schematic diagram or by looking at the original part itself. On yet another plane of meaning, these electrical values symbolize the function of a particular part; what it may contribute to an electronic system as a working whole, either on the workbench or as represented in a circuit diagram or blueprint, which is yet another level of reality from that of the actual equipment in which the part is installed, be it a radio or whatever. In a circuit diagram, yet another symbolic representation of the same component may be found, a "wavy" line (\(-/\-/-/-/-\)), which may also be described next to the part schematically represented or in an accompanying "parts list" with numbers such as 120K, which again correlate with the colors on the "real life" part. The letter "K" is used to signify thousands when it is used (the last, usually the fourth color band on a part indicated the number of zeros to add to the number code). Sometimes the numbers and the "K" are followed by the Greek letter Omega (\(\Omega\)), which in turn symbolizes "Ohm" and is the name of the standard unit of measure for electrical resistance. Electrical

9 Silver and Gold, while part of the color code, were not part of the memory aid that is our text, not because no one could write some other easily remembered text that could include them, but for the reason that "everyone knows," so I was taught, that silver is less valuable than gold. These "metallic" colors represent a tolerance of error or precision performance rating, with the gold being most accurate, usually conforming to military specifications.
resistance is the impediment (properly, impedance) which any medium presents to the passage of an electrical current.\footnote{Not accidentally, a Greek letter Omega was used as the symbol of the "Resistance," the Vietnam War era movement to "stop the draft" and the war. This symbol held additional meanings for Christians involved in the anti-war movement for whom Christ was the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last.}

The Ohm, in its turn, is named after Georg Simon Ohm (1787-1854), the physicist who formulated "Ohm’s Law" (which is yet another set of embedded and related symbols: $E = IR$), that, among other things, is used to calculate electrical resistance. With Ohm’s Law we clearly permute through our original text into the complex worlds of meaning of applied and theoretical physics and mathematics. We have thus moved an incredible distance from the almost naughty text with which we began, in a progression that is coherent and meaningful to those who are part of the tradition.

In review, then, besides meaning sexual assault and/or kidnapping (remember the musical comedy "The Fantastics"), "rape" can also mean "red" that can stand for the real number "2" or for two zeros that follow some other number (-s), depending on where it is painted in a stripe around a small (as little as $\frac{1}{16}$ inch diameter and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch long) bakelite cylinder filled with carbon and having wires protruding from either end, thus contributing to the identification of the number of Ohms of resistance the part does or should provide. We can interpret the numbers to be sure the component is of the correct value, based on a circuit diagram, and use our understanding of physics to grasp its role within the functioning of a circuit as a whole.

In rehearsing the above, which is just a fraction of what I learned in Electric Shop classes, I have in part initiated you, the reader, into the group of people for whom our text, "Bad boys rape our young girls, but Violet gives willingly," has a more or less commonly shared and understood complex of meanings, even though those could never, worlds without end, be discovered through the normal dictionaries, schools of literary criticism, textual interpretation or hermeneutics that are our usual recourse when confronted with a text. As a result of this partial initiation, you have potential access to a universe of real and practical meanings that will be inaccessible to others who have not been exposed in one way or another to the culture of those trained in pre-1970s electronics.

It may be objected that our "esoteric" text is only an exaggerated exception to the general nature of language. On the one hand, it may be asserted that consistent interpretation and perhaps even complete computer translation of scientific and mathematical texts may be possible. If this is the case, it is due to the existence and use of internationally agreed upon or conventional meanings (or mathematical equivalents) for key words and symbols employed in these disciplines (e.g.: joule, dyne, m, etc.). But this argument is belied once we leave that ethereal world and turn to the seemingly simple, most
straightforward of everyday prose, let alone a scriptural text or what
George Steiner has called "the autonomous life-forms of the poem." It
is in the, in fact, almost logically impossible task of accurately
translating even non-technical plain everyday speech from one language
to another that the true nature of the problem becomes more apparent.
Let us examine one example of the absolute impossibility of complete
interpretation or understanding, independent of context and culture
even where only one language (our own) and no "translation" is involved.
To suggest that true meanings can be discovered independent of culture
and context is to argue that single meanings can be extracted from what
are in fact ambiguous symbols. I am not here simply repeating S. I.
Hayakawa's arguments about semantics. Beyond the infinitely different
sets or universes of meaning accumulated by each individual for any
word, such as the word "cow" (referring specifically to the female
quadruped ruminant bovine mammal), we find that a majority of words in
any language are in fact multivalent (or have many possible meanings)
and therefore are essentially (or by their very nature) untranslatable,
independent of the specific culture and context in which they occur.
Puns, in other words, are not exceptions but rather are reflections of
the very essence or nature of language. The following sentences
illustrate this point:

"I don't like the pitch."  "Don't pitch it like that."

These texts are classic examples of totally context-dependent language.
What does either sentence mean, read in isolation? What can they mean
read together? Let us ignore the other words and just concentrate on
the word pitch. In Table 2, below, I have listed a few of the possible
meanings for this word based on my own vocabulary for the majority of
meanings and recourse to three relatively small dictionaries for the
rest (not, by the way, either the Oxford English Dictionary or even the
current Webster's Unabridged).

11"Linguistics--so far as they bear on the autonomous life-forms
of the poem--will be, uneasily, Whorfian." (Steiner, 1978:163).

12As Werner Winter articulated the problem in his essay,
"Impossibilities of Translation."
While languages (or words) may be similar to each other, they are
never identical ... The system of form and meaning in language A
may be similar to that in language B, but it is never identical
with it. This statement [which Winter concedes is a tautology—if
the two were absolutely identical there would, in reality, only be
one!] has a very simple, yet very important corollary: There is no
completely exact translation ... There are only approximations,
and the degree of similarity possible between original and
translation depends on the degree of similarity between the
systems of form and meaning in the two languages involved. (1964:
### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thrown baseball</td>
<td>sales talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>angle of a roof</td>
<td>musical tone (Hz.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bite of propeller</td>
<td>stone road paving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weftwise # of warp ends in carpet</td>
<td>space between gear teeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overall size of typewriter's characters</td>
<td>horizontal space occupied by typed letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--horseshoes</td>
<td>--a tent or camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--dark</td>
<td>--hay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--pennies</td>
<td>--hopes (set high)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--shot (in golf)</td>
<td>--headlong (fall)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--of slope</td>
<td>--it (throw away)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--in (help, attack, contribute)</td>
<td>--(spades, etc.) or lead/set trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--of woodplane to a board</td>
<td>--of a cape or a headland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--one person versus another</td>
<td>--of fold in rock-strata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--woo (make love or court)</td>
<td>--a musical instrument (to voice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pitch) the place on a street where a street performer, bookmaker,</td>
<td>soccer field (in West Africa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beggar, streetwalker, or other individual habitually stations him-</td>
<td>array of troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or herself to do business.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(pitch) part of a field or mine set apart for a specific laborer to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have listed in Table 2 only a small fraction of the usages that a dedicated researcher could find for the word *pitch*. While it is true that most of these fall into one of several broad categories (to erect or set up, to place in the ground, a measure of height and/or angle, some sort of oscillation, to throw, etc.), such general ideas are, in and of themselves, insufficient to convey the full significance of a specific usage of the word *pitch* by a particular person or group in a given instance. To conclude from this that *pitch*, or any other word, lacks any intrinsic meaning is to miss the point completely, however, because what we see is that in every case of communication between finite humans, meaning is the creation of people communicating with each other in the context of their cultures and in response to the environment they are in and the events they are experiencing. And to say that the many uses of a word such as *pitch* are "jargon" completely begs the question. Two carpenters contemplating the roof of a house, two aeronautical engineers discussing a propeller, or any other persons or group succeed in using a word to communicate with each other.
precisely because they share a culture, despite the inherently ambiguous nature of their language per se. If even those same individuals use the "same" combination of sounds or word on another occasion or in other social settings or groups, the intended and understood meanings may change. Therefore we must rely upon data outside any text, whether it be a mere transcription of a conversation, a book or manuscript, engraved monument or metal plate, a daily newspaper, audio or video recording or whatever, if we are to discern its meaning with any degree of certainty. No text is completely self-contained—a "set that contains all sets"—for, to be so, it must contain itself, or the key to itself. "Interpreters" are necessary, along with any text, unless we prefer the self-delusion of circular logic. Either we admit the necessity of information external to the text itself, or else we must broaden our meaning of the word "text" to include the culture and context of the originator and intended recipient of the communication, as well as taking into account any differences between their background and any other language and culture into which we wish to transfer their words/meanings.

If anyone thinks our example pitch is unique, they should consider many other examples. "Let's forge it" may be a statement of a criminal, a blacksmith, or a trailblazer, among others. Where words have entered English from other languages but sound the same as already extant words, we find one source of such multiple meaning problems, but only one of many, since as human culture changes human language must adapt itself to those changes, and in the process old words are given new or additional meanings. But words are not like old wineskins containing new wine. Words can expand almost infinitely in their possible

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13For a text to contain itself, and be unrelated to the outside world is both impossible and undesirable. It would then be totally undecipherable! For study of the Book of Mormon, for example, to be confined to itself it would have to contain a glossary of terms used therein (a few words, such as "priestcrafts" [2 Nephi 27:29] are, in fact, defined within the text, but these are exceptions and far more are left undefined). But then we would need to have a glossary to define the words in the glossary, and so on in either an infinite regression or a path of circular logic. Some, who today would read the text based upon their own command of English and "common sense," ignore crucial details and vital truths. For example, numerous twentieth century commentators have read the word "esteem" (1 Nephi 17:35; Mosiah 27:4; D&C 38:24-25), giving it the "economic" meaning of "to set a high value upon," following contemporary dictionaries, and ignoring the fact that in Joseph Smith's day "esteem" was as or more likely to have meant "to reverence," which makes much better "sense." It is similarly crippling to our understanding and ability to grasp the truth to ignore, for example, Hebrew and the insights that can come from biblical studies and knowledge of the Ancient Near East, and goes completely contrary to the example set by Joseph Smith himself.
meanings. Beyond such problems, we also meet the paradoxes of language, where rules of grammar and syntax as well as lexical values are "correct" and yet a statement is uninterpretable, such as Bertrand Russell's classic example: "This sentence is false." 15

Interpreting Ancient Texts

Parsing

Once we move to the ancient world, even more problems arise. For example, whether due to the shortage and/or high price of writing materials, or perhaps because written texts were often created as aids for memory rather than substitutes for it, many ancient texts were written with all the words run together, without spaces between them. This represents no problem for those who already knew a text by heart, but for anyone else, including everyone now living, it is a substantial barrier to accurate reading and translation. As a result, many ancient texts must be parsed, or divided into significant units before anything else can be done with them.

Parsing is, at best, a subjective process, because in most cases the culture and context from which the document originates are vaguely known, if at all. To illustrate, first consider the following example of a text I created which typifies the problem:

"MYSELFISHEARTHISISOLATED"

From this we could parse a number of possible texts. For instance:

14Moreover, it is a dangerous conceit that our, or any human's commentary and glosses can completely exhaust the meaning of a text. George Steiner makes a point paralleling Werner Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy in physics.

The ardent insufficiency of good criticism, of good reading, is not an inadequacy of technique. The fact that even the most penetrative commentary does not equal or exhaust its text, will not be amended by some historical advance in semantics or the theory and practice of aesthetic interpretation. ... We fall short of total analytic explication, we lack the "decision procedures" in respect of the total complex of meanings and of values in a worthwhile text--one would almost say in any human pronouncement worth receiving ... . (Steiner, 1981:9)

15In an unpublished essay, "Notes Scribbled on 'The Wall,'" I have developed a critique of Sartre's short story titled "The Wall," which is set during the Spanish Civil War. The tale hinges upon the fact that the hero, despite his best efforts at telling an "untruth," an effort in which he wagers his life intending to lose, instead betrays another man. The truth or falsehood of the protagonist's statements depends upon more than his intentions, including in this case the free will of another person. The story also can be seen, in part, as an ironic existentialist commentary upon the curious fixation upon language as a mathematically intelligible phenomenon by philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century (including Lord Russell).
"My self is heart, his isolated."

"My selfish earth is isolated."

Or on the possible assumption that this is a cryptogram or an esoteric and/or mnemonic device, we might unscramble:

"My's elf-fish hear Isis. Sol ate Ted, Ed."

Another possibility, common when copying documents, is that two letters have been merged into one. Restoring a lost letter "h" might produce:

"My selfish hearth is isolated."

One need look no further than the available manuscripts for and legitimate translations of John 8:25 to see that this is not just a theoretical problem. It is a crucial aspect of biblical translation, in spite of our ignorance about the culture and context of the texts. Depending on how they are parsed, the words of countless biblical texts can be read in numerous ways (and we must not forget that many of these words, like the English word pitch, also have multiple meanings). Thus, Christ's response to the Pharisees' question:

"Who art thou?"

in John 8:25 can be rendered:

"Why do I speak to you at all?"*

(Readings marked by an asterisk [*] are from Metzger, 1971:223-224)

"Why am I even speaking to you at all?"

(Kingdom Interlinear Greek English New Testament, [Jehovah's Witnesses])

"Why should I speak to you at all"

(New English Bible)

"That I speak to you at all!"*

"[I am] from the beginning what I am telling you."*

"I am what I told you I was from the beginning"

(J.B. Phillips New Testament in Modern English)

"Primarily [I am] what I am telling you"*

"[I am] what I have told you from the beginning."*

"What I have told you from the very beginning"


"Even what I have told you from the beginning."

(Revised Standard Version)
Comparing the same passage from two Spanish translations we find that the differences are just as great as in the various English readings ("word for word" translations into English are my own):

"Yo soy el principio de todas las cosas, el mismo que os estoy hablando."  
"I am the beginning of all things, the same that [of whom] I am speaking [of]."

(Petisco [Roman Catholic] translation from the Vulgate, Madrid, 1960.)

"Lo que desde el principio os he dicho."  
"That which from the beginning ye I have told."

(Revision of De Reina/De Valera Protestant Bible, Sociedades Bíblicas en América Latina, 1960.)

Grammar provides no certain help here, and so, as in many other New Testament passages, theological bias inevitably comes to play as translators, let alone interpreters of the English text, attempt to jump behind or beyond what the documents can tell us, to divine what the writers of the text meant to say. But lacking revelation, this is a most secular and insecure leap, with the landing place predetermined, not by the text itself, but by the conceptual framework and intellectual or theological prejudice which is the only springboard an individual can use to get past the difficulties of the text. There is no single, indisputably correct reading for texts such as John 8:25 that can be established or determined by scholarship! People who expect easy or certain answers to such questions are only asking for translators to be dishonest with them.

The Prophetic and the Sacred Esoteric

Considering the aforementioned kinds of problems, it should be of little surprise that the epistle of 2 Peter would insist on the necessity of having the Spirit to understand the scriptures, reminding us we should proceed with our study:

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved upon by the Holy Ghost. 2 Peter 1:19-20

Even more to the point, we must remember that the Pauline epistles reflect at times a Roman citizen and participant in Greek culture concerned with gentile converts in Greek provinces, and at other times a "Pharisee, son of a Pharisee," student of the Rabbi Gamaliel involved with Christians of Jewish ancestry. We should be as sensitive to the kinds of misunderstandings that must necessarily arise when people uncritically read a document from another culture without taking into account the differences that exist, much as the early Christians were cautioned against private interpretations. It is this kind of problem that undoubtedly led to the Petrine admonition:
And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are 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. 2 Peter 3:15-16, emphasis added.

These problems are as significant to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as to any other group, and as relevant to 19th century A.D. historical texts as they are to 5,000 year old inscriptions and other texts.

A classic example of the problems inherent in translating a religious text that has been transmitted within a relatively inaccessible language and a closed (hence esoteric) priestly tradition (both of which the Book of Mormon writers represent themselves to be a part of, and for which there is substantial evidence), is to be found in Naxi culture of southern China.

The Naxis are a Tibeto-Burman people who live in the northwestern corner of Yunnan. They have a very rich ritual tradition and a treasure of scriptures that have been used in this rich ritual life. These scriptures are interesting in that they are one of the very few, and maybe the only, living pictographic, iconic, or hieroglyphic languages or scriptures in the world [Chinese is, by contrast, idiographic]. It's not just an interesting case of the evolution of the script, but you actually have people who can read this, so you know how it was meant to be. This is accordingly a living fossilized language. But time is running out, because this scripture makes considerable use of mnemonic devices, and it is not standardized, so one has to be a trained priest in order to read it. The moment these priests, or tombs, die out, it will join the other dead languages of the world. According to recent Chinese reports, the number of priests who are really well versed in this literary tradition have become "as rare as the morning star."

It so happens that about one-half of the total corpus of twenty thousand scriptures are in the West ... [collected] between the 1920s and the 1940s. ...

The problem is that the day the last capable priest dies, these big and fascinating collections here in the West are like deadwood, because although the pictographs themselves can be understood, you cannot know how the text was meant to be read. It is the things that are not there, that have not been written, that are decisive. (Bockman, 1986:11-12)

One would be hard pressed to give a better description of the problems facing translators of any Egyptian religious texts, whether of a hieroglyphic nature such as in the Book of Abraham, or in a reformed script such as either Meroitic (I examined a number of these texts in the Sudan in 1985) or the very similar Nephite characters found on the
Anthon transcript from the Book of Mormon. The same is true for the recently discovered 1,800 year-old inscription in an undeciphered and as yet unnamed language found south of Veracruz, that was announced at the 12th annual Maya Meeting at the University of Texas in 1988. Such texts are precisely "sealed books" because of the, to us, incomplete nature of the language they contain.

Many Latter-day Saints, when the remnants of the Joseph Smith Egyptian papyri were recovered in 1967, expected that a quick, and word-for-word "translation" would directly correlate with the already extant Pearl of Great Price text of the "Book of Abraham." The fraudulently credentialed and almost totally unskilled Dee Jay Nelson quickly came up with just such an out-of-the-dictionary reading, and it bore no obvious resemblance to the Joseph Smith text. The absurdity is that people expected anything else. People failed to realize that to communicate the meaning of any text, let alone an Egyptian religious document, translators must first educate their readers beyond the naive and false assumption that a "word-for-word 'translation''" is even possible, let alone meaningful. Missionaries rarely ever come to realize how little correspondence there is between the messages they intend to send with their much prided MTC abilities and the actual messages received by their hearers. Any serious student begins by learning that Egyptian culture and/or religion was esoteric. But the L.D.S. public demanded immediate meaning and understanding. What they got from the quick "translations" done in the years immediately


17 This is in part because members usually are too respectful to correct the missionaries' errors, and non-L.D.S. who criticize are too often dismissed as simply anti-Mormon. Mormons have no monopoly on such puzzles. Discussing difficulties in translating scriptures, E. E. Evans-Pritchard first notes simple problems: for example that "Feed my sheep" cannot easily be translated into an Eskimo language, as some have tried to do, by substituting, say, "seals" for sheep. Seals are hunted. They are never herded, fed, protected from predators or otherwise shepherded. Caribou are inappropriate for the same reasons, and even "sled dogs" leaves a great deal to be desired. Eskimos are a nomadic hunter-gatherer people, not pastoralists. Consequently, all the significant implications of Christ's pastoral symbolism are lost on them. Complicated examples, on the other hand, make "Feed my sheep" seem easy.

How do you translate into Hottentot 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not charity ...?' In the first place you have to determine what the passage meant to St. Paul's hearers; and, apart from the 'tongues of men and angels,' what exegetical learning has gone into the elucidation of eros, agape and caritas? Then you have to find equivalents in Hottentot, and, since there are none, you do the best you can. Or how do you render into an Amerindian language 'In the beginning was the word?' Even in its English form the meaning can be set forth only by a theological disquisition (Evans-Pritchard, 1965:14).
following the scrolls' appearance, to the disillusionment of some, was nothing more than the English equivalent of an Egyptian "Bad boys rape our young girls ...". Many now ex- and anti-Mormons alike thought that God or a scholar with a dictionary could give them knowledge from a text when they

took no thought save it was to ask ... But, behold ... you must study it out in your mind. (D&C 9:7-8)

They were disappointed in their requests precisely because of their irrational and uneducated assumptions about the nature of the task of translating any text, let alone one that is obviously both sacred and esoteric.

Since 1967, in countless magazine and journal articles, almost endless lectures, and two books, Hugh Nibley has set about the thankless task of remedially educating the Saints about the nature of texts and translations, and their responsibility to study them seriously (which takes years). He has been met by almost hostile reactions at times because he did not give people easy answers. The third chapter of his "Egyptian Endowment" book is a masterful exposition on the nature of translation, yet almost no one I know who claims to be upset about the issue has ever read it (Nibley, 1975:47-55). Some "philosophers" and other pseudo-scholars with an antipathy to working with original languages, formal logic, and the nature of culture are offended that the texts are not immediately open to their great minds. They then dismiss Joseph Smith's translations as false and trivial in blessed ignorance of any of the facts of the matter. The general public, following their lead, whines that "Nibley is too hard to read," and yet somehow expects that reading ancient Egyptian should be easier than reading Nibley's scholarship. In fact, once the honest student gets past the "Bad boys rape ..." level, the texts and the illustrations of the Joseph Smith papyri are quite clear, with substantial precedents. But the majority continue to wallow in their ignorance at the "Bad boys" level, and in a few cases, publish their studied ignorance to the world. Nibley knows that people cannot be force-fed knowledge, so he does his best to educate the people, but like Jerusalem of old, they "would not."

In spite of all that has transpired, people still continue to expect understanding to be easily obtained. If it is not forthcoming at the speed or with the ease they demand (neither slower nor more dense than television news or USA Today), they assume it is not to be had, and significant texts are dismissed as false (De Santillana, 1969; Frye, 1982). Perhaps the most often dismissed text is the Book of Mormon. And yet that book gives us an incredibly sophisticated articulation of the role that culture must play in grappling with the problem of meaning, understanding, interpretation and translation in any text, a lesson that is wholly unpredictable in terms of its originating in the context of upstate New York in the years prior to 1830 (let alone among
The first Nephi outlines this cultural perspective in his statements on Isaiah's writings that in reality is a good starting point for every honest student of any text:

NOW I NEPHI DO SPEAK SOMewhat
CONCERNING THE WORDS WHICH I HAVE WRITTEN
WHICH HAVE BEEN SPOKEN BY THE MOUTH OF ISAIAH
FOR BEHOLD ISAIAH SPAKE MANY THINGS
WHICH WERE HARD FOR MANY OF MY PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND
FOR THEY KNOW NOT
CONCERNING THE MANNER OF PROPHESYING AMONG THE JEWS
FOR I NEPHI HAVE NOT TAUGHT THEM MANY THINGS
CONCERNING THE MANNER OF THE JEWS
FOR THEIR WORKS WERE WORKS OF DARKNESS
AND THEIR DOINGS WERE DOINGS OF ABOMINATIONS
WHEREFORE I WRITE UNTO MY PEOPLE
UNTO ALL THEY THAT SHALL RECEIVE HEREAFTER
THESE THINGS WHICH I WRITE
THAT THEY MAY KNOW THE JUDGMENTS OF GOD
THAT THEY COME UPON ALL NATIONS
ACCORDING TO THE WORD WHICH HE HATH SPOKEN
WHEREFORE HEARKEN O MY PEOPLE
WHICH ARE OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL
AND GIVE EAR UNTO MY WORDS
FOR BECAUSE THAT THE WORDS OF ISAIAH
ARE NOT PLAIN UNTO YOU
NEVERTHELESS THEY ARE PLAIN UNTO ALL THEY
THAT ARE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF PROPHECY
BUT I GIVE UNTO YOU A PROPHECY
ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT WHICH IS IN ME
WHEREFORE I SHALL PROPHESY
ACCORDING TO THE PLAINNESS WHICH HATH BEEN WITH ME
FROM THE TIME THAT I CAME OUT FROM JERUSALEM
WITH MY FATHER
FOR BEHOLD
MY SOUL DELIGHTETH IN PLAINNESS UNTO MY PEOPLE
THAT THEY MAY LEARN
YEA AND MY SOUL DELIGHTETH IN THE WORDS OF ISAIAH
FOR I CAME OUT FROM JERUSALEM
AND MINE EYES HATH BEHELD THE THINGS OF THE JEWS
AND I KNOW THAT THE JEWS DO UNDERSTAND
THE THINGS OF THE PROPHETS
AND THERE IS NONE OTHER PEOPLE THAT UNDERSTAND

18I can here only note in passing my recent discovery, using WordCruncher software and the LDS scripture textfiles now available, of the absence of modern color names from the Book of Mormon. Only black, white, and red are (predictably) found, with "scarlets" being used to describe a type of cloth rather than color per se (see Thomasson, 1981; Witkowski and Brown, 1978; Bornstein, 1975).

THE THINGS WHICH WERE SPOKEN UNTO THE JEWS
LIKE UNTO THEM
SAVE IT BE THAT THEY ARE TAUGHT
AFTER THE MANNER OF THE THINGS OF THE JEWS
BUT BEHOLD I NEPHI HAVE NOT TAUGHT MY CHILDREN
AFTER THE MANNER OF THE JEWS
BUT BEHOLD I OF MYSELF HAVE DWELT AT JERUSALEM
WHEREFORE I KNOW CONCERNING THE REGIONS ROUND ABOUT
AND I HAVE MADE MENTION UNTO MY CHILDREN
CONCERNING THE JUDGMENTS OF GOD
WHICH HATH COME TO PASS AMONG THE JEWS
UNTO MY CHILDREN
ACCORDING TO ALL THAT WHICH ISAIAH HATH SPOKEN
AND I DO NOT WRITE THEM (2 Nephi 25:1-6, from F.A.R.M.S., 1986-

A Partial Conclusion

Whether we re-translate "manner," "works," "doings," or "things" as
culture or leave the text as it stands, except for those who both
humble themselves and acknowledge the almost insurmountable difficulty
of reading and understanding a text from another place, time, and
language, and who also seek honestly to be "filled with the spirit of
prophecy," Nephi's, and in fact every text will remain, at best,
obscure, giving us little more information than that "bad boys rape."
An honest attempt at understanding, at gaining meaning from another
human's effort to communicate, is an attempt to achieve a communion
with that other person, whether living or dead. Anything less than an
honest attempt at communion is cannibalism, a parasitic using of that
person for our selfish purposes. Finally, we must recognize that

20A typical example of the misinterpretations that come from not
understanding a culture is to be found in the convoluted
rationalizations and bowdlerizations that pious and victorian readers
impose on Hosea 2:2 where that prophet is commanded to
take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whoredoms: for
the land hath committed great whoredom, departing from the Lord.
Removing the sexual imagery may make the text more acceptable in a
Junior Sunday School, but does little to help us interpret the passage.
Understanding just a little of the "manner of the things of the Jews," such as the frequency with which they fell into Canaanite practices of
"worship" with ritual or temple prostitutes or hierodules, helps us to
see that Hosea's prophetic acts were, to Israelites of that time, a
very effective symbolic condemnation, precisely mirroring the way in
which many were in fact "departing from the Lord."

21Compare John Freccero's analysis of Inferno 32-33 to contrast
communion and cannibalism (1977). In George Steiner's view, the reader
Encounters the poetic fact ... with an informed, scrupulously
sensitized awareness both of the vital orders of responsibility, of
answerability in his response, and of the necessary shortcomings of
this response. He does not aim "to master" the text, except in the
purely technical, formal sense of the term. He aims to be mastered
texts have meaning, not independent of, but rather completely dependent upon 1) context, which is to say the culture the text comes from, and 2) the spiritual condition in which we receive it, which topic would require us to begin another lesson entirely.

by it. I have sought elsewhere to give some account of the processes of self-immersion in a text which accompany any full reading, any reading in depth. I have suggested that these processes, of which learning texts by heart is a decisive, representative aspect, can best be compared with the suspension of disbelief towards, with the testing acceptance of a "real presence" in the text (or work of art). What I mean by "real presence" is that substantiation of articulate form, of expressive representation into "being," as experienced in the presentness of an ikon or in the dynamics of symbolic immediacy in communion. Only some such analogy, be it on a severely secular plane, will, I think, begin to give any useful account of the perfectly literal experience every true reader has had when a poem, a scene from a play, an episode from a novel, have entered into him, have solicited or unbidden, taken root in the core of his consciousness ...

It is, I am persuaded, only some such analogy with the psychology of revelation, an analogy implicit, as it happens, in the descent of modern textual hermeneutics from scriptural exegetics, which can hope to throw light on such phenomena ...

Indicatively, the epiphany of the literary persona is a challenge, at once central and commonplace, about which structuralist-semiotic-deconstructive schools of reading find nothing to say. (Steiner, 1981:12-13, emphasis added.)
A prime example of the [disingenuous?] claim that they, as scholars, were just "letting the text speak for itself" are the defenses offered by Brigham D. Madsen and Sterling M. McMurrin of their Studies of the Book of Mormon (1985). Those authors' essays actually put B. H. Roberts' ideas and beliefs into a very particular context, a frame (pun intended) that does anything but allow Roberts or his text (which he intended should never be published, and this is a crucial, moral point) to supposedly speak independently. They indulge in a fallacy I learned to avoid from the very first book I read on the philosophy of history, some two decades ago, Hans Meyerhoff's The Philosophy of History in Our Time (1959). To make the explicit obvious, if I were to circulate a photograph of Professor McMurrin, for example, mounted on a white mat that had parallel red lines printed along each side of the photo, meeting at each corner with a circle that contained within it a black swastika, could I be justified in saying that the likeness speaks for itself? Of course not. The context in which I would have placed his photo, what I have included as much as what I have chosen to omit, biases our perception, just as do the editors' essays. There is simply nothing in Roberts' life that reflects anything but a good will to bear witness, and the editors seek to turn that attempt to bear testimony upon its head.

Taking the position that some texts are esoteric, or have an esoteric level of meaning that is not universally accessible, and that no text is complete and self-sufficient, also contradicts the basic assumptions of "fundamentalism." William D. Russell, in a naive, and (in terms of the Utah L.D.S. community) irrelevant article in which he urges us to go "Beyond Literalism" (1986), misunderstands both the essential nature of biblical fundamentalism and its relationship to the Mormon tradition. While (at the insistence of reviewers) he cites James Barr,

1My point is as much moral as it is scholarly. As George Steiner said,

I have touched on some of the social and political liabilities incurred by the present-day (black) arts of "un-reading." But the crux is moral. A just reading of a text is fully concordant with our understanding of speech as it is uttered to us by another human being. In both cases, the cardinal principle is that of "answerability," by which I mean that of a response that is adequate, reciprocal, complementary, informed by intelligibility and courtesy of heart. In short, it is "responsible" in the strong sense of the word. Faced with the finally mysterious activities of human(e) discourse, with the unelucidated experience of the radical depth and uniqueness of human linguistic exchanges, we seek to "respond responsibly." We seek to make our answer answerable to the autonomous presence before us, to the deployment, always vulnerable to misprision, to misappropriation, to trivialization, but always charged with creative, metaphoric, innovative energies towards us and the world, of being. (Steiner, 1981:7, emphasis in original)
the latter's analysis of fundamentalism is totally at variance with Russell's picture.

It would be well to keep Barr's cogent distinction between fundamentalism and "literalism" in mind with regard to our discussion of the nature of the esoteric in texts.

The 'plain man' ... will commonly say that a fundamentalist is a person who 'takes the Bible literally'. This, however, is far from being a correct or exact description. The point of conflict between fundamentalists and others is not over literality but over inerrancy. Even if fundamentalists sometimes say that they take the Bible literally, the facts of fundamentalist interpretation show that this is not so. What fundamentalists insist is not that the Bible must be taken literally but that it must be so interpreted as to avoid any admission that it contains any kind of error ... no error of any kind—not only theological error, but error in any sort of historical, geographical or scientific fact, is completely absent from the Bible. In order to expound the Bible as thus inerrant, the fundamentalist interpreter varies back and forth between literal and non-literal understandings, indeed he has to do so in order to obtain a Bible that is error-free. (Barr, 1978:40)

One need go no further than the eighth Article of Faith to see how unrelated the slur/labels of "fundamentalism" and "literalism" are to anyone, Joseph Smith especially, who takes Mormonism seriously. Mormons are not snake-handlers, strychnine drinkers, offending eye pluckers, hand cutters or anything else remotely resembling biblical "literalists," and are equally uncommitted to inerrancy. Like William Russell's diatribe, Martin Marty's almost obscenely funded current project on "fundamentalism" appears to be proceeding in total oblivion to this fact, polemically labelling contemporary Mormonism as a fundamentalist group in reckless disregard of the facts.
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