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Joseph Smith as a Writer

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Joseph Smith as a Writer

JOSEPH SMITH WAS born and bred in difficult and limited circumstances among people who made the best of their circumstances—as so many thousands and tens of thousands of Americans at that time did under the influence of the religious force that impelled them. To give you some better idea of those circumstances, I want to refer to two books I have recently been rereading: *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, both by Charles Dickens. *American Notes* is an account of Dickens's visit to the United States in 1842; it was also published in 1842. *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a novel with an American setting that was published shortly after *American Notes*. Both *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* give a drastic account of the America of those days; both contain vigorous and satirical criticism of the American society of the forties, the society that was persecuting the Church to the extreme. It is now over one hundred forty years since these books were published, and they are still worth our attention because they were written by perhaps the greatest reporter who ever lived (Dickens did years of reporting for newspapers and for Parliament) and because they provide us with an unexpected view of what America looked like to a European in the early 1840s.

Dickens came to America prepared to be impressed by its democratic institutions because America was far more democratic than Britain at the time. And he did actually find himself impressed by many American institutions—for example, by the New England factories, which were run in an admirable way, and by the hospitals and prisons, which he visited assiduously. He was impressed by the government in Washington. But there were other

things that are startling to read and that were startling to me when I first read them as a boy of nine—for example, the universal habit of spitting in public, the mostly unpaved streets in the great American cities, and the thousands of pigs roaming all over the cities and living out of the garbage. The frontier was evident very soon after one left the seaboard cities; people were living and pioneering in very rigorous, very severe and difficult and poverty-stricken surroundings. It was a very hard life, indeed. You owe your prosperity now to the hard way in which those people worked under conditions of disease and poverty.

What we can get more from *Martin Chuzzlewit* than from *American Notes* is an account of what life was like in the Mississippi Basin. There was the same poverty as there was elsewhere on the frontier. Malaria was prevalent, and its impact on Church members in the Mississippi Basin must have been considerable. We find reference to the types who were tarring and feathering Joseph Smith further up the river or killing at Haun's Mill. Barbarisms, like those committed by some of the Indians, were perpetrated by American citizens on other American citizens. The sense of lawlessness is brought home by what Dickens as an outside observer had to say about conditions in the Mississippi Basin at this time. We tend not to realize the grim circumstances in which the Church grew up. The stories of persecution, the stories of torturing and deaths, are not exaggerated. This church was born in blood and baptized in blood; indeed, it is from the blood of the martyrs that the success of the Church has sprung. Life then was so different from what it is now that I wonder if we can feel sufficiently grateful about the difference or, indeed, if we should feel grateful about the difference when we see testimony flourishing in adverse circumstances rather than in prosperous ones.

Let me turn now to Joseph Smith himself. Joseph Smith had practically no formal schooling, just a few weeks. The outstanding thing about him is what he did with what he got: he translated the Book of Mormon, wrote the Doctrine and Covenants under inspiration, and accomplished other tasks that show the extent of his genius. The fact that he was inspired by the Lord does not diminish his achievements, just as the fact that Paul and Peter were inspired does not diminish their achievements. We owe our thanks to the Lord in everything; nevertheless, there are supreme

geniuses among human beings. Some souls are far more equal than others.

We can see the contrast between Joseph Smith's limited education and the inspiration of his translation if we look at the 1830 facsimile edition of the Book of Mormon. It brings Joseph Smith home to us in a very different way from the verse-divided, modern-punctuated, spelling-corrected edition. Something comes out of that 1830 edition that affects us more than the post-1924 editions because we have from it the sense of the tremendous genius of Joseph Smith.

We must remember that those who founded our church were not greatly different from those early Christians in the meridian of time. They were plain, "uneducated" people. I think it is probable that Paul spelled correctly, but I doubt if Peter did. Nevertheless, Peter, like Joseph Smith, was a highly intelligent man. We have to remember that in those days the intelligent people of the lower classes remained at the social and economic level to which they were born; they were not promoted up through society as they are today. (I should say, "the *so-called* intelligent people." Intelligence tests reflect what society thinks, not what God thinks, and certainly not any kind of objective reality.)

Because Joseph Smith was a genius, he didn't need much formal instruction, any more than Shakespeare did. He absorbed knowledge about language and so was a fit tool through which the Lord revealed modern scripture with all the rhetorical richness of ancient scripture. Where did Joseph Smith absorb knowledge of language from? He had two major resources: one was the scriptures—and his principal education was from the scriptures—and the other was all the sermons he attended. We have no evidence of how much Joseph Smith read the scriptures in his youth, but he must have read a good deal because he must somewhere have gained the thorough knowledge of scripture which he demonstrated when he was in his twenties. We can see from his writing that the scriptures were a part of him as they were a part of many of his contemporaries, including his contemporaries in the Church. We know, of course, from his account, that he did go frequently to churches. And when he went around to those churches, he certainly did not hear men who spoke stumblingly. Their sermons would have been apostate sermons, that is true, but those were

men who had had rhetorical training, who had been taught how to build a sermon and how to use the various rhetorical devices, men who were in touch with the rhetorical tradition of the scriptures. That is the tradition in which Joseph Smith grew up.

Joseph Smith was brought up in a rhetorical situation that has ceased to exist. He spoke and he wrote as people had always written and spoken from the beginning until the tradition began to be upset in the seventeenth century. From the point of view of language, Joseph Smith is closer in sympathy, nearer in mentality and education, to Moses and Isaiah than we are to him. The great divide has come since, not before.

When I read the history of Joseph Smith (his own account in the Pearl of Great Price), the person I immediately think of is the poet and critic Coleridge, who was writing in England a little earlier. Joseph Smith's language reminds me very much of the language that Coleridge often used at his best in the *Biographia Literaria*. That is not saying a little. Coleridge was perhaps the best English prose writer of that time. So if we take Joseph Smith's story irrespective of the message that it contains, if we just look at the writing, we conclude that this is a highly educated man. The reason Joseph Smith sounds like Coleridge, of course, is because Coleridge and the pastors and masters of New England read the same philosophical and theological authors. Coleridge was older than Joseph Smith, but, allowing for delay across the Atlantic (in those days information flowed from Europe to the United States), they were writing under the influence of the same authors.

When I was first brought to read Joseph Smith's story, I was deeply impressed. I wasn't inclined to be impressed. As a stylistician, I have spent my life being disinclined to be impressed. So when I read his story, I thought to myself, this is an extraordinary thing. This is an astonishingly matter-of-fact and cool account. This man is not trying to persuade me of anything. He doesn't feel the need to. He is stating what happened to him, and he is stating it, not enthusiastically, but in quite a matter-of-fact way. He is not trying to make me cry or feel ecstatic. That struck me, and that began to build my testimony, for I could see that this man was telling the truth.

Joseph Smith begins his story in his matter-of-fact way, setting out carefully the reason that he is writing this history and the facts

about his birth and family. Then he moves from the matter-of-fact to the ironical, even the satirical, as he describes the state of religion at the time—the behavior of the New England clergy in trying to draw people into their congregations. He tells about reading the Epistle of James. He doesn't try to express his feelings. He gives a description of his feelings instead, which is a very different thing. Look at verse 12:

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. (JS-H 1:12)

I am not good enough to write a passage as good as that. That is beautiful, well-balanced prose. And it isn't the prose of someone who is trying to work it out and make it nice. It is the prose of someone who is trying to tell it like it is, who is bending all his faculties to expressing the truth and not thinking about anything else—and above all, though writing about Joseph Smith, not thinking about Joseph Smith, not thinking about the effect he is going to have on others, not posturing, not posing, but just being himself. The passage continues as follows:

At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. (JS-H 1:13)

Notice the coolness: “At length I came to the conclusion.”

I at length came to the determination to “ask of God,” concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture. (JS-H 1:13)

Notice the rationality of it, the humility of it, the perfectly good manners of it.

So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. (JS-H 1:14)

Just imagine what a TV commentator would make of this sort of thing.

It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had made such an attempt, for amidst all my anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally. (JS-H 1:14)

Do you see how the tone is kept down, how matter-of-fact it is? Notice the effect of a phrase like “to pray vocally.”

After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. (JS-H 1:15)

Plain, matter-of-fact, truthful, simple statements in well-mannered prose. This is no posture. We are not thinking of Joseph Smith; we are just waiting, waiting, waiting to hear. Do you see how beautifully this is built up, how the tension is built up by his being so modest, so well mannered?

I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. (JS-H 1:15)

He is telling us about something terrible. But he is not trying to make us feel HOW TERRIBLE THIS IS. He is telling us that it happened.

Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. (JS-H 1:15)

He felt he was going to be killed. But there is no excitement, no hysteria about this. He just tells us. Notice in particular the coolness of the phrase “for a time.”

But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction—not to any imaginary ruin, but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world, who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being—just at this moment of great alarm . . . (JS-H 1:16)

Notice the expression “of great alarm.” What would a posing sensationalist do with that? What kind of explosion would he devise, I wonder?

. . . I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.
(JS-H 1:16)

“A pillar of light *exactly* over my head,” “*above the brightness* of the sun,” “descended *gradually*”—note the modifiers, the exactness. What he is trying to do is tell us what happened. He goes on in the same tone. He doesn’t get ecstatic. He doesn’t run over. He just goes on telling us just what happened in this astonishingly cool, and at the same time reverential, way. This is a visit of God the Father and God the Son to a boy of fourteen. But he is not in undue awe. He doesn’t stare. He is not frightened. He was perhaps terrorized by what happened before, but he is not frightened of this. He doesn’t lose his self-confidence, and at the same time, he is modest.

And then the humor: he returns home, leans up against the fireplace, and his mother asks him what is wrong. He answers, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true” (JS-H 1:20). We have to remember that his mother had joined the Presbyterian Church shortly before this. How do you assess that as a conversation between a fourteen-year-old and his mother? All mothers know that sort of thing really happens to them with their teenagers.

The whole man is involved in this account, but the whole man isn’t posturing and appealing to you to believe it. He is merely stating it, stating it with the whole of himself. The conviction is behind it. The emotion is there in perfect control. It is in the rhythm, the superb rhythm of that piece, and we won’t get that unless we read it aloud. There is an extraordinary alternation of short and long sentences. Some of the sentences are long indeed—magnificent sentences—periods much better than Samuel Johnson could write. So there is this combination of a firm, convinced rhythm and a matter-of-fact statement drawing on all the resources of early nineteenth-century prose to produce a piece of prose better than anything Coleridge ever wrote.

Now there is no passage in mystical literature or in any other kind of literature concerned with visions that I know of which is

like this, and therefore I am not prepared to give credence to other “mystical” passages outside the scriptures—I know the difference. I am thinking about St. Bridget, who lived in Sweden in the fourteenth century, and whose life I have studied in some detail; she had her ecstatic visions. I am thinking about St. Teresa, that great Spanish saint who wasn't quite sure whether Christ was her Lord or her husband. They don't compare with Joseph Smith. They attitudinize; they get into postures, contortions of mind, in expressing themselves. Not so Joseph Smith.

Now if you want to see Joseph Smith's temperament in contrast to another totally different temperament, compare the account given by Joseph Smith of John the Baptist conferring the Aaronic Priesthood on him and Oliver Cowdery (JS—H 1:66–73) with the piece of flowery journalese that Oliver Cowdery produced, which is in the footnote on the same page, right at the end of the Joseph Smith story. Oliver Cowdery produced a fireworks display. His is rhetoric in the false sense. He endeavors to persuade us and himself of feelings that he did not have. Joseph Smith simply describes the feelings he did have. Oliver Cowdery was capable of writing cheap journalese, but Joseph Smith wrote as a philosopher and rhetorician capable of comparison with the highest. He was a prepared vessel, prepared by the Lord, who knew Joseph Smith's capacity and helped him make the utmost of it. I think it is significant that Oliver Cowdery's account is in a footnote. It is of supreme importance to realize (one must know enough about language to realize it) that there is nothing vulgar in the scriptures anywhere. That is part of the evidence that the scriptures are the word of God.

I am asked sometimes, “Why don't we have any great literature now?” And we don't, you know; we may kid ourselves or other people may try to kid us that we do, but we don't. There were Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe; and there it seems to have stopped. There seems to have been no supreme figure since then. But I tell you there was one: Joseph Smith.

I only wish that I could know more about that fourteen-year-old boy. We do know a certain amount about him. But what would it have been like to have met him—to have discovered the reserved, reflective person that he was, yet with an enormous reservoir of power, with so much sense of humor, with such pleasure in

physical contact with his fellow human beings. And who cares that he was a person with faults? There are plenty of odd things carried down by the purest stream that ever flowed. The faults are there and the condemnations are there—they are there in the Doctrine and Covenants. The Lord speaks to him and condemns him and Joseph Smith writes it all down for us. He doesn't pretend.

Think of Joseph Smith as a man who speaks to our time from eternity.