TRANSLATING WITHOUT A TEXT: THE CASE OF THE
BOOK OF MORMON

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ABSTRACT

Gideon Toury has usefully described the *Book of Mormon* (1830) as a pseudotranslation, but the identification only begs the question of why Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844) chose to present his work in this way, and why, having adopted the role of "translator," he used a strategy of overt translation. After considering the possibility of Smith's using talk of an "original text" as a false document frame, we conclude that Smith adopted the role of translator to claim for his work the authority of an external (and therefore clear-sighted) observation of his world and settled on a strategy of foreignization because his theory of language meant that "plainness" would be unachievable if one sought to express the ideas of such an original in another language. Although we might assume some general familiarity on his part with eighteenth-century translation theory, Smith's thinking was essentially his own.

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1. Introduction

In 1830, Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-44) published the *Book of Mormon*. It was, he claimed, a translation of a history written in Ancient America—a work inscribed on metal plates in a "reformed Egyptian" script, and dating to the fifth century CE (Smith 1908, Mormon 4:98-99). His words are hard to credit. There is no evidence that books in Ancient America—or elsewhere, for that matter—were written in the way Smith reported of his source. Though much depends on how one defines a book (as apologists have pointed out there *are* examples of short texts engraved on gold, or lead, or copper), there is as yet no evidence that long texts were ever engraved on metal plates in the ancient world. As for the script: it too fails the test of archeology. The name might been suggested by an early article on the Rosetta Stone, which reported that the letters of its demotic script had been "combined and diversified" (Young 1817, vol. 3, p. 2; "reformed," one might say), but nothing like demotic Egyptian has been found on Mesoamerican stele, and neither has anything like the sample of the characters that Smith claimed to have transcribed from the plates—characters which as it happens look more like an alchemist's sigils than anything known to Egyptology.

Such objections to the idea that there were plates do not, of course, affect Smith's claims to have learned of plates in a vision, and translated them by the "gift and power of the Holy Ghost." (Smith 1835, Section 2).[1] People have visions, and they speak under what they think of as inspiration; there is no reason to assume *a priori* that this was not the case for Smith. But given the sheer improbability of his story of an extended narrative inscribed on metal plates, we can only agree with Gideon Toury that the *Book of Mormon* is a pseudotranslation—a text presented as a translation "with no corresponding source in other languages ever having existed" (Toury 1995, p. 40; cf. Toury 2005, p. 6). Later we will need to modify the definition to "a translation of a text to which the translator never had access"—but Toury's basic point can stand. The work is not a

translation in any normal sense of the word.

Useful as it is, however, Toury's description leaves some questions unanswered. Why, for example, did Smith think that he was a translator in the first place? No doubt he was familiar with St. Paul's reference to the gift of the interpretation of tongues, and the way that conservative Biblical commentators thought it gave those who received it the ability "to render foreign languages readily and properly into their own" (Henry 1991 on 1 Cor. 12:10), but though Paul's words offered a plausible explanation for his experience, other explanations were possible. Smith could, after all, have claimed to have received his inspiration without any reference an original text and thereby avoided questions and ridicule.[2] He did not, and we might wonder why.

2. False Document Frame

One possibility is that Smith talked of plates (and therefore of translation) in order to provide his work with a false document frame. Writers of fiction often did. For example: in 1834, introducing his novel *Douglas D'Arcy; Some Passages in the Life of an Adventurer*, William Thomas Haley would move from ironic reflections on changing fashions in narrative, and the observation that it was "rather *passé* to find mouldering MSS. in ponderous oaken chests" and how "[e]ven a supernatural roll of parchment, solemnly presented by a mysterious figure, clad in dazzlingly white raiment, would scarcely be tolerated at present," to talk rather diffidently of his own manuscript found. He was introducing the life of D'Arcy as an editor not as an author, Haley explained. He had not invented the story that he was presenting to the world; he had found it in autobiographical papers left at his disposal by a former school fellow. "[T]he plain truth is my forte," Haley insisted: "of invention I have no notion" (Haley 1834, pp. [v]-vi, 328). It is of course unlikely that these readers would have believed these protestations or Haley's circumstantial account of how he came to publish *Douglas D'Arcy*. Nevertheless, they

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616

accepted his story of papers left to him by a friend. They believed in the frame story—or as Kendall L. Walton would put it, describing our relationship with literary works, "made-believe" in it—in order to enter into the work's fictional world (Walton 1990; cf. Miller 2012, p. 42; for the false document frame, see Mooij 1993, p. 72).Perhaps Smith had been counting on his readers doing the same when they read that the *Book of Mormon* had been translated from a text inscribed on plates which had "the appearance of gold"—indeed, almost anticipating Haley's complaint, from plates whose existence had been revealed to him by a messenger clothed in a robe of "most exquisite whiteness."[3]

Such an explanation seems reasonable. As many have noted, claims that a text is a translation can simply be a variation on the "standard story-telling device" that there was an "authentic source or original" for the work (Bassnett 1998, p. 30; Peter Markoe's *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* [1787] and Montesquieu's earlier *Lettres persanes* [1721] are notable examples), and we certainly seem close to a false document frame with Smith's own claim that a commentary on Jn. 21:20-24, dictated in April 1829, was a translation of the text of a parchment written and "hid up" in New Testament times (Smith 1835, Section 33). Nevertheless, we might still hesitate to assume a false document frame in the case of the *Book of Mormon*. Remembering David Davies' contention that "fictional narratives must be products of acts of 'fiction-making,' where the maker's intention is that we make-believe, rather than believe, the content of the story narrated" (Davies 2010, p. 52) we might find it significant that, in the accounts we have of its dictation to scribes (see Stott 1986), Smith expected belief, not make-belief, from those who read the work.

To note that Smith expected belief in his gift is not to take him at his word and think that he really found the plates (or, more cynically, to assume that he simply pretended to have found them); after all, what is more likely than an unprecedented discovery or a deliberate fraud is that he

found *something* that he took for a sign of their existence and then assumed that what came to him was their translation. The possibility of such a discovery was first suggested by Fawn M. Brodie,who noted that the area Smith had traveled when hiring out as a well-digger and treasure seer in the 1820s—broadly, the triangle with corners at Palmyra and Otego, New York, and Harmony, Pennsylvania—was one rich in Native American burial sites (Brodie 1945, p. 40). The suggestion is worth taking seriously because, if Smith *had* found metalwork, pottery, or beads it could well have triggered inspiration. "[G]iven a piece of ancient pottery or stone implement," we read in one textbook on clairvoyance, a psychometrist "is able to picture the time and peoples connected with the object in the past" (Atkinson 1997, p. 99), and as that seems to have been Smith's experience in later years[4]some *trouvaille* could presumably have precipitated Smith's work on the *Book of* Mormon.(For examples of what Smith might have found see Ritchie 1936.) If it did his talk of translation would not have been an attempt to create a false document frame, but an affirmation that the plates existed even if they had not been found—that, as we might say, the *Book of Mormon* was the *scriptio superior* of a palimpsest.

3. Pseudotranslation

Smith, it should go without saying, did not talk of palimpsests; we only introduce the idea to suggest how he could have trusted to his inspiration even though the plates remained undiscovered. As the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche noted in his discussion of the translation of the New Testament, a task in which the Hebrew and Aramaic anterior to the Greek text cannot be referenced but need to be allowed for, the underwriting haunts and structures the signifying chain, even though it does so as an absence—as a "sharp goad" transforming what we read (Laplanche 2002, p. 45); as an "enigmatic signifier," something which "s*ignifies to* [the reader] without *signifying of* anything" (Stack 2005, p. 66; Stack's italics). So it might have been with the *Book of Mormon*, with Smith

certain of the existence of his original (the plates) and haunted by the idea of their potential content, yet unaware of what it might be. It is in this sense, we suggest, that the work is a pseudotranslation.

However, be that as it may, the question of why Smith spoke of his work as a translation in the first place remains. Toury (2005) oversimplified the case by suggesting that, if the *Book of Mormon* was to be accepted as scripture, it had to be presented as a translation. Smith did not think that a work had to be a translation to be accorded Biblical authority. *Anything* spoken by inspiration was "the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation," he would explain the year after the publication of the *Book of Mormon* (Smith 1835, Section 22, a revelation of November 1831).

In part the Biblicalism of the *Book of Mormon* followed from Smith's conviction that he had a prophetic message to share, for, as Anthony Pym has noted, a pseudotranslation provides voices for ideas that cannot be expressed directly ("'Don't blame me,' says the subversive author expressing culpable thoughts, 'I'm only the translator'" – Pym 2004, p. 82)—voices that express their thoughts in language that the "translator" would not normally use. Bible study had convinced Smith that America was slipping away from the gospel, but the Bible alone was an insufficient resource for motivating reform. As he bitterly recognized, "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" (Roberts 1978, vol. 1, p.12). God's word could be exploited so differently by its interpreters that an appeal to scriptural authority was meaningless. What was needed was an authoritative source that could both challenge an increasing secularism (and be a resource for those who chose to reject the temper of the age) and warn of what was to come, and this could not be supplied from within his own culture. As Maurice Bloch noted some forty years ago (1977, p. 281), only an alien language—here, that of the Bible—canbe used to criticize one's own culture.

What is more, a Biblical style would—by its foreignness—give authority to his message. Though the language of the Authorized Version of the Bible was familiar in his day from private reading and public worship, and its cadences "informed the speech of common folk and educated alike," it was not the language of everyday American speech or its best thought. Even Smith, who would himself drop into "a sacred language" when telling of his own religious experience, did not usually speak in such lofty tones (Barlow 1991, pp. 5, 14). Hence its apologetic importance. If a man claimed to have received revelation, the Methodist theologian Richard Watson explained, "His belief has no authority to command *ours*. He may actually have received it but we have not the means of knowing it without *proof*," and he would therefore be expected to provide "some external authentication of his mission" (Watson 1850, p. 71; Watson's italics). Smith was certainly familiar with this line of thought and perhaps even knew Watson's text (it was the standard work of Methodist theology in early nineteenth-century America: for Smith's interest in Methodism, see Turner 1851, p. 214), and he would have assumed that the language of his overt translation—a language very different from his own—could be thought evidence for the authority of its words.

4. Overt translation

We need not be so cynical, however. Whether or not we think that Smith used the role of translator to claim authority, there seems little reason to doubt that he would have thought himself a translator simply because contemporary translation theory made doing so inevitable. In 1791 Alexander Tytler, Lord Woodhouselee, had described "a good translation" as one in which "the Translation should give a complete transcript of the ideas of the original work" (Tytler 1907, pp. 9-10), and it would have seemed logical to Smith to assume that the inspiration which yielded those ideas—or was thought to yield those ideas—as a translation.

We should not exaggerate Tytler's importance for Smith's thinking, for we cannot find a

rationale for foreignization in the *Essay on the Principles of Translation*. Tytler stressed the need for qualities of a work translated to be "as distinctly apprehended, and as strongly felt, by a native of the country to which [the target] language belongs, as it is by those who speak the language of the original work" (Tytler 1907, pp. 8-9, 63-64), and most most Anglophone translators in Smith's day would have agreed—preferring to manage things so that a reader unadvised of the fact would not even know that what they were reading *was* a translation. As Lawrence Venuti has noted, "invisibility" has always been dominant in Anglo-American translation practice(Venuti 1995, p. 65; cf. Kundera 1992, p. 322). Although Tytler offered a more complex account than most theorists, allowing that "A good translator must be able to discover at once the true character of his author's style," and insisting that "[i]f a translator fails in this discernment, . . he will present [his author] through a distorting medium, or exhibit him often in a garb that is unsuitable to his character," even he did not expect a translator to violate contemporary principles of L^2 decorum.Smith was following a path of his own when he adopted a Biblical English for his work, for all that he was following Tytler's logic in claiming a translator's role.

Smith's use of Biblical English had apologetic force, as we have seen, but there was more to it than apologetics. More even than a sense of fitness—a sense that it was right to present the history of the *Book of Mormon* peoples in the language conventionally used "for representing the specific 'other'" that authored the text (Bellos 2013, p. 37). Given the history it described,[5] the first readers of the work would certainly have found it natural for its language to echo that of the Bible. However, more can be said. By using the forms of seventeenth-century English—its "torrent of words, biblical imagery, loose or unstructured paratactic forms, violent changes of tone, and . . . intensity of manner" (Auski 1995, p. 305; for an introduction to the style of the Authorized Version, see Campbell 2011, pp. 79-82)—Smith revealed not only the foreignness of his source, she showedthe brokenness of

translation.

Smith's originality in taking this course should be noted. Though Friedrich Schleiermacher had argued that the former was a desirable quality in a translation some fifteen years before Smith set to work on the *Book of Mormon* (Lefevere 1992, p. 149), his argument would have been largely unknown in the New Nation (for Schleiermacher's contemporary reputation outside of Germany, see Bernofsky 2005, p. 25). So would Robert Southey's application to translation theory of a Romantic appreciation of the antique and the odd. Though it seemed natural to Southey to argue that "the language of Elizabeth's reign must needs accord better with the style of Cervantes than more modern English would do" (and to seek to use archaisms in his own translations), few contemporaries would have agreed (Southey 1849, vol. 3, pp. 104-105; cf. Curry 1975, p. 136). What Juliane House would categorize as overt translation (House 1997, p. 148) was not yet in fashion. However, Smith did not have to borrow from contemporary writers to arrive at the conclusions he did. His thinking on language was sufficient for him to formulate his ideas about translation. At Babel, he explained, *individuals* were "confounded" so that they could not understand each other (even family groups had to learn to speak amongst themselves)—and indeed could not even express the thoughts that came to them—until they had newly shaped language to the task (Smith 1908, Ether 1:8). As language and culture were intertwined, he explained, the link between meaning and word in one language could only be approximated in another, and in a worst-case scenario a written text divorced from a speech community could not be understood (Smith 1908, Ether 1:87, 89).[6]

5. Conclusion

Smith, we can conclude, expected a translation to show foreign qualities. Although he held to an ideal of stylistic plainness,[7] and thought that the way God spoke to men and women

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622

"according to their language" should be a model for ordinary speech (Smith 1908, 2 Nephi 13:3-5), he distinguished between the language of an original text (which would have accorded with the language and culture of its readers) and that of a translation (which, while it would be comprehensible, would betray signs of broken accord). Inspiration, or learning, could bridge cultures, he still expected the language of an original to seem foreign—even awkward—in translation. This is acknowledged within the *Book of Mormon* in the way that "the learning of the Jews" is written in "the language of the Egyptians" (Smith 1908, 1 Nephi 1:1; this was the "reformed Egyptian" discussed above),and the script chosen had proven inadequate to the task. "[I]f we could have written in the Hebrew," we read, there would have been "no imperfection in [the] record" (Smith 1908, Mormon 4:99; Egyptian was chosen because it took less space on the plates), but as it was the record was flawed.

Whether Smith thought that broken accord would be found in every translation might be debated, but he clearly thought it a necessary feature of the style of the *Book of Mormon.* Hebrew thoughts imperfectly described in reformed Egyptian was appropriately, that is brokenly, expressed in seventeenth-century English—a code that though familiar was imperfectly adapted to the needs of readers in 1830. Not surprisingly the archaisms we find in the work (some not even found in the Bible, and not listed in the *OED* from works published after the eighteenth century)[8]obstructed rather improved communication. This would have been deliberately done.

Some might argue here that Smith did not have sufficient control of his material for us to talk in this way. However, though there clearly are redundancies and unintended grammatical errors in Smith's text (Lamb 1886, p. 27),the presence of the "mistakes of men" does not necessarily mean that he had no control over what he dictated (Smith 1908, Title Page; some of these mistakes would be corrected in in the work's second edition, published in 1837). Neither should the idea of Smith's

deliberate adopting a certain style be thought to invalidate his claim to inspiration. After all, in a collaborative translation method, a bilingual informant [X] can dictate a translation to a monolingual writer [Y] who then shapes this input to create the final text (Hung 2006, pp. 147-48). In Smith's case we would have to allow for a double dictation, but could still see the process as essentially the same—words being "given" by the informant [X] (God or the subconscious) to the prophet [Y] who would use his knowledge of a literary code to shape the text, and then dictate it to a scribe [Z] (for Smith's verbal inspiration and use of scribes, see Stott 1986). But be that as it may, it would have seemed natural to Smith to adopt a broken code in translating a language known only to God. This was why he adopted a Biblical voice.

NOTES

[1]   As used in context the phrase refers to revelation yet to be received, but Smith's followers would apply it retrospectively to the *Book of Mormon.*

[2]   Twenty years before Smith dictated his translation, a farmer in upstate New York had reported plowing up a copper tablet (Turner 1851, pp. 688-89), and there were rumors that the Alabama Creek had preserved a record on brass and copper plates "given to them by . . . God" (Adair 1775, p. 179); however, few observers in 1830 found such recollections convincing evidence for Smith's claims.

[3]   Haley was probably not thinking of Smith, for the details given were conventional: see, for example, Morris 1795, pp. 72-73 ("a holy angel, clothed in shining raiment, surrounded with a blaze of light, descended into [the] room").

[4]   In 1834, when presented with a skeleton in an Indian mound, Smith was able to elaborate on *Book of Mormon* history and inform the party that the remains were those of a warrior named Zelph.

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624

In 1835, he felt that a papyrus that came into his hands contained the writings of Abraham, and began a translation which was published seven years later. In1843 six plates were brought to him, and he explained that they contained the story of "a descendant of Ham through the loins of Pharaoh king of Egypt." Smith would be assassinated before he could elaborate on this précis. See Roberts 1978, vol. 2, pp. 79-80; 235, 236, 348-51; vol. 5, pp. 372.

[5]   The *Book of Mormon* describes three migrations from the Old Word to the New: one from the Tower of Babel two from Jerusalem around 600 BCE.

[6]   When there *was* a speech community, individuals could be taught its language and learn to read its texts. In 1835 Smith would set himself the task of learning Hebrew from Joshua Seixas to improve his knowledge of the Bible (Zecker 1968); he only relied on inspiration for languages for which there was no informant.

[7]   For the idea of "plainness of speech" see 2 Cor. 3:12; though Paul had merely sought to justify his speaking without reserve, commentators (e.g. Henry 1991) had presumed that the phrase implied clarity as well as boldness; cf. Smith 1908, 2 Nephi 15:7.

[8]   Skousen 2005 notes the use of "require" to mean *request* (Smith 1908, Enos 1:28, cf. *OED*, def. 3), "counsel" to mean *counsel with* (Smith 1908, Alma 17:69 and 19:15, cf. *OED*, def. 4), "but if" to mean *unless* (Smith 1908, Mosiah 1:119-20, cf. *OED*, def. 10b), "depart" to mean *to divide* (Smith 1908, Helaman 3:44, cf. *OED*, defs. 3a-d), and "to become extinct" to mean *to die* (Alma 44:7, cf. *OED*, def. 3).

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625

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626

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628

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