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Minds, Bodies, and Objects

Samuel Morris Brown

AS I WANDER EVER MORE DEEPLY INTO THE SEMANTIC LABYRINTHS of early Mormon translation, I find myself confronting ubiquitous objects that matter for more than their mere physicality. Seer stones, interpreters, gold plates, Egyptian papyri, locks of hair, underclothing, and scores more. Mormonism is saturated with such objects, pregnant with what some scholars call “abundance” or “real presence.” Mormons don’t call them “relics,” afraid to conjure (that fraught word!) Catholic altars, corpses, and catacombs. Mormons are no idolaters, so there must be no relics. But we who think academically about Mormons may do well to acknowledge the deep kinship Mormons have with others who have cherished manifestations of the divine in time and space.

These distressingly powerful objects—some of what William James called the “wild facts” of the cosmos, media that won’t easily reduce into digestible bits via traditional scientific methods—have presented interpretive problems for observers for a long time. We twenty-first-century folk—whether academics, practitioners, or both—struggle to make sense of such objects, which early Mormons deployed in multiple applications. We students of Mormons and media seem to adopt one of two equally obtuse approaches. To steal metaphors from my main line of work in biomedicine, these objects are seen as either potent medicines or placebos. Neither explanation is adequate; both are dependent on

cultural changes of the last several centuries. These recent changes have obscured our scholarly vision of powerful objects.

In general, Catholic historians know these stories better than Mormons do. Robert Orsi has written influentially on the problems of real presence for scholars hoping to understand Catholics,¹ and he joins a chorus of Catholic scholars wincing at the mess, as they see it, that Protestants have made of the modern intellectual world.² These criticisms aren't always fair, but they are sometimes insightful. In a similar vein mined in the anthropology of African Christianities, Birgit Meyer resists Protestant assumptions about the nature of media and religion and the ostensible antagonism between the two. She argues against the dominant model, insisting instead that media can serve as instruments of real presence in the modern world.³

Working from philosophical history, Charles Taylor's smart, sprawling work on the nature of modernity helps frame an approach to abundance and its critics.⁴ Orsi steered clear of Taylor's highbrow philosophical work, but they share a sensibility beyond their Catholic background. Taylor argues, following Max Weber in a neo-Hegelian sort of way, that secular modernity restricted itself to an immanent frame. In

1. Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), which extends his work from *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

2. In history, see, for example, Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012). In political philosophy, see the aggressive and controversial treatment of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

3. Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies, and the Question of the Medium," *Social Anthropology* 19/1 (2011): 23–39.

4. I find Taylor's writings, despite their disheveled casualness, among the most illuminating philosophy ever published. The key works relevant here are *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), *Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), *Language Animal* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), *A Catholic Modernity?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and his essay in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

other words, an influential part of Western society (most memorably, its governments) rejected the possibility of something beyond physical nature. There were no more ghosts, wizards, or demons. But there was also no God, no human soul, no power infusing or ordering all of nature. The heuristic device of mechanistic materialism—one mustn't invoke unquantifiable forces to explain observed phenomena, a tactic central to applied science—became the linchpin of an emaciated metaphysics. In Erazim Kohák's apt phrase, "Good physics ma[de] bad metaphysics."⁵ The constriction of existence to this immanent frame occurred not only as a metaphor from applied science, it also reflected ethical positions based in new ideas about equal human dignity, the nature of pluralism, the politics of modern governance (this, another instance of heuristics baptized as metaphysics), and the importance of resisting the authority of others, as Taylor describes at length.⁶ Anti-Catholic sensibilities infiltrated many of these developments, including ardent rejection of the status of abundant objects of real divine presence.⁷

Fast forward a century or three, and we espy a treasure-seeking frontiersman who, as most of his neighbors, drinks too much and is suspicious of churches. His namesake son is a bright, autodidact farmhand with second sight. This boy will found a new church to replace all churches, founded on a bible that unseats and transforms all Bibles. This special son's early career is embedded in webs of charged objects. Some objects were treasure-questing paraphernalia: seer stones, daggers, sigils, lamens, and the like.⁸ Others were perhaps more religious

5. Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 17.

6. This is one of the core arguments of *A Secular Age*, that secular rationality is an ethical rather than logical stance.

7. The classic history texts describing this process for early modern England include Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991). Orsi is responding to these Reformers and their historians.

8. Whatever its interpretive limitations, D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987) provides a helpful catalogue of charged objects familiar to Smith and his intimates.

(acknowledging the semantic wobble in that adjective): ancient interpreters, gold plates, and Egyptian funeral papyri. Some were in the intermediate zones associated with yearning for good health and postponed death. These might include Joseph Smith's red handkerchief (famously used to heal malarial Saints in Nauvoo), the canes made from his and his brother's coffins, olive oil, scented whiskey, and many other physical objects that contained or disseminated healing power.⁹

Disciples have tended to use the mechanistic, medicinal metaphor in their devotional stories about these objects. When it comes to translation, there is Google Translate (the computer technician's xenoglossia) on a special thumb drive (the seer stone interpreters). The gold plates were an ancient record legible to any reader of reformed Egyptian glyphs, and the interpreters were linguistic machines that spat out the English text corresponding to each individual glyph. For health, one touched a body with sanctified olive oil, and its cells realigned as needed. These objects brim with mechanistic power for many believers.

That these odd machines did not obey science's requirements for external reproducibility exposed them to criticisms within the immanent frame, even as they didn't fit well on the axes of immanence and transcendence. The major response to mechanistic accounts is to see the objects as "inspirational" in the flat sense of the post-Romantic West. They are, in other words, placebos. Our creative juices start flowing when we see a sunrise in the mountains or hear a gorgeous opera. An embalmed rabbit foot creates the right mindset to win a footrace. We humans think more clearly when our minds are focused by belief in the efficacy of a neutral object.

9. Jonathan Stapley and Kris Wright, together and independently, have written well on these topics. See, for example, Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, "The Forms and the Power: The Development of Mormon Ritual Healing to 1847," *Journal of Mormon History* 35/3 (Summer 2009): 42–87; "Pouring in Oil: The Development of the Modern Mormon Healing Ritual," in *By Our Rites of Worship: Latter-day Saint Views on Ritual in Scripture, History, and Practice*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, 2013); and Jonathan Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

The “catalyst” theory for the Egyptian project is a placebo wrapped in a modernist story. The objects (gold plates, seer stones, Egyptian papyri) catalyzed Smith’s revelatory output.¹⁰ Some describe these translation placebos as analogous to “Dumbo’s feather.” In *Dumbo* (1941), a forlorn elephant with comically enormous ears learns to fly. But first he must look beyond his insecurities to a marvelous potential as the first flying elephant. A cadre of crows plucks a feather and tells Dumbo that the feather is magical. After the young elephant learns to fly, compliments of the magical feather, he discovers that he had the power of flight all along; he just had to believe in himself. He had to find a placebo.

When it comes to health, placebos are in their element. If people can be healed by believing in a sugar pill, surely they can be healed by belief in sacred oil and the laying on of hands.

Moderns love placebos. They’re the cornerstone of our contemporary biomedical scientific enterprise. They help us control what we don’t understand about mind and body. When we scholars say “placebo,” we don’t want to invoke mind-body interaction, though, just the unconscious bias introduced by patients and physicians when they want a treatment to succeed.

The two possibilities of direct treatment and placebo don’t consider the possibility that students of media and religion have misframed the problem entirely when it comes to Joseph Smith and his objects. We may be struggling, willy-nilly, with an encounter with real presence that the translator attempts to reduce to language. We also may not have language to acknowledge that placebo is itself a metaphor representing a basically secular account of phenomena beyond the explanatory reach of secularist models.

I’m aware of an easy criticism, that I haven’t provided a mechanistic account of these objects, probably because I have explicitly excluded

10. On the catalyst theory, see, for example, Karl Sandberg, “Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator,” *Dialogue* 22/4 (Winter 1989): 17–37; and Charles M. Larson, *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus: A New Look at the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 1992), 136–37.

such an account. I could be coy and say that this quest for mechanistic clarity is itself stamped by secular modernity. That may be true, but it's not terribly useful. I could instead admit that I'm interested in the possibility that there are mechanistic traces of a broader experience and a reality that we do not exhaust with our observations.

These aren't just academic questions. I will never wholly know my beloved wife, but I will anxiously and earnestly learn everything I can. She is an electrified mass of calcium, carbohydrates, amino acids, and water. Fine. So am I. But we are vastly more than that. We would do well to remember that is true not just of humans but of the things they see, encounter, handle, and believe in.¹¹ Strict materialism as a worldview is spectacularly obtuse and ultimately unfeasible, as we see when we train its blinkered eyes on the relationships that matter most to us.

Still, we moderns—observers and observed alike—are all cross-pressured. Mormons are sacramentalists who can't entirely shake Protestant antisacramentalism, and their double-mindedness shows in their rejection of divine presence in the emblems of the Lord's Supper, served on a "sacrament table" rather than an "altar," on the one hand, and the belief that in the temple the bodies of the dead are sufficiently present *in our bodies*, that they are baptized through us. Mormons look straightforwardly Protestant in their churches and beyond Catholic in their temples, where—perhaps uniquely among current American Christian communities—human bodies become ritual relics of abundant presence. Without attempting to suggest any specific genetic association, one sees resonances with the "medium" of séance spiritualism, whose body becomes a vessel for abundant presence. Mormonism and its Mormons are brimming with objects full of power, not just for practitioners, but for scholars working to understand the multifarious intersections of media and religion.

I think there's gorgeous and saving mystery in actual presence. That word *mystery* is part of what has driven anti-Catholic secularizing

11. I find myself recurring often to Erazim Kohák's notion of the "moral sense of nature" in *The Embers and the Stars* as I consider these topics.

reform. One can hide a lot of craven stupidity in mystery, I agree. If we're honest, though, mystery remains under modernist reductionist accounts; it just becomes the insipid mystery of sampling errors, confounding variables, and residuals. Our models are never wholly adequate to the phenomenon we're describing. But what is missing may not be a nuisance we wish we could forget; it may rather be the very sinew of meaning. Allowing media to speak on their own terms can dramatically enrich the scholarly terms of engagement with traditions for whom objects can still whisper from the mortal dust.

Let these objects, these consummate media, incarnate great power. They do not need to be placebo feathers plucked from crows. Let them be vessels of actual divine presence. Let them escape the relentless reductionism of modernity. Let them *be*.

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