Confessions of a Chameleon

Edward A. Geary

John Keats coined the term "negative capability" to describe a poet's ability to present his or her material objectively and impersonally. The poet with negative capability, Keats declared, "has no character" and takes "as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet."[1] Negative capability is probably an optional quality for poets, but it is almost essential for editors—except, of course, those few who deliberately make their publications a sounding board for their own opinions. For the most part, an editor's job is to make *other* people look good. To the extent that he or she succeeds, an editor's contributions are virtually invisible. Only failure is obvious.

As I look over the eight volumes and more than four thousand pages of *BYU Studies* for which I served as editor, I am struck both by how much and how little of myself I find in them. As an author, I made only three brief appearances, a two-page Editor's Column in my first issue and two book reviews. This follows from my conviction that as a general rule editors should not publish their own work. (I am writing the present self-serving essay not of my own volition but at the request of my successor.) The contents of the journal do of course reflect—for better or worse—my editorial judgments in selecting manuscripts for publication from among those submitted. But very few articles have appeared in *BYU Studies* merely because I wanted to see them there. I have tried to respect the process of peer review, and I have depended very heavily on the counsel of my associates, David J. Whittaker, Richard L. Anderson, Ronald W. Walker, and Paul H. Peterson—all of them much better qualified than I to judge work in most areas of Mormon studies. Several issues have had guest editors who assumed the primary responsibility for soliciting and selecting manuscripts.

Nevertheless, there is scarcely one among the thirty-plus issues that does not represent many, many hours of my own labor. I could point to several articles on which I firmly believe I invested more time and more

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creative and scholarly effort than the listed author. (Authors, of course, see these matters somewhat differently.) It is a common complaint among the editors of academic journals that their contributions are the least appreciated of all scholarly activities. If I had published four thousand pages of *my own* work over the last eight years, I would have a prodigious reputation. If I had edited eight separate volumes of scholarly work in my field, it would have impressed my colleagues and supervisors as a very substantial achievement. But because it was "only a journal"—and an unspecialized journal at that—my editorial labors count for little in my professional vita.

The life of a chameleon is not without its rewards. It is an interesting challenge not to impose your own conception of the subject on a work, but to adapt to the texture and coloration of the author's ideas and in a sense enable an article to become what it wanted to be but was not. There is also a certain satisfaction in wielding the editorial "hidden hand," knowing that you played a larger part in determining the final form and effect of an article than the reader—and perhaps even the author—will ever guess.

Being a chameleon can also be awkward on occasion. I have spent more time and emotional energy than I care to remember arguing for the publication of views with which I did not agree, but which I nevertheless believed should not be silenced. I have sat in meetings of BYU faculty and smiled blandly while a colleague declared that no genuine scholar would besmirch his or her reputation by appearing in the pages of *BYU Studies*. I have written conciliatory letters to narrow-minded readers whose opinions I secretly despised. And I endured—we all endured—the fiasco of a thick issue devoted to Mark Hofmann's "discoveries" that appeared just as those discoveries were being unmasked as a fraud.

Taken all in all, my tenure at *BYU Studies* has been an interesting experience. It is something I am happy to have done and happy now to leave to someone else. Before I disappear altogether, however, I would like to shed my protective coloration and express my real views on a few matters pertaining to the journal.

I believe scholarly journals in general are very important. They are among the few remaining bastions against the trivialization of thought in the two-column article and the twenty-second sound bite that dominate the popular media. And perhaps a non-specialized scholarly journal such as *BYU Studies* has a special role since it still tries to speak with some depth and thoroughness to serious, inquiring general readers. The journal suffers, however, under the burden of an unfortunate name. *Brigham Young University Studies* sounds like the title of a rather ponderous and dull monograph series. It certainly does not suggest anything very lively. And it is a misnomer. As the journal has evolved, it is by no means

a cross-sectional representation of the scholarship being done at Brigham Young University. It has become primarily a journal of Mormon history and religious studies, with occasional articles on other topics. That is how contributors think of the journal, as indicated in the manuscripts submitted, and it is what most of the readers expect.

BYU Studies is also an institutional journal, for better or for worse. It is all very well for us to print a disclaimer in each issue to the effect that contributors are expressing their own views and not necessarily those of the editors, the university, or the Church. Many readers persist nonetheless in assuming there is some kind of institutional endorsement of the materials published—and do not hesitate to protest when they encounter ideas that do not agree with their own views of what the Church and BYU should be promoting. Then, too, the editors cannot help but be influenced by knowing that a copy of every issue of *BYU Studies* goes to each member of the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, the Quorums of the Seventy, and the Presiding Bishopric. And at least some of those copies get read, as we have learned sometimes to our gratification and sometimes to our consternation.

The university leaders are also well aware of the tensions inherent in publishing a noncorrelated academic journal in a university sponsored by a highly correlated church. They must at times have held their collective breath, wondering whether something published in *BYU Studies* would create problems. To their credit, however, they have given the editors a rather free hand. In eight years, I can think of only three occasions when representatives of the university administration expressed concern about something we were thinking of publishing. The first such incident occurred early in my editorial tenure. We had commissioned a book review of several works of so-called "scientific creationism." The review was moderate in tone and well reasoned in its arguments, but because it contained the **E**-word (evolution), someone on the editorial staff suggested that we ought to pass it by the academic vice president's office. The official who read it recommended against stirring up the waters of controversy, and so we killed the review. If I had known then what I know now, I would simply have gone ahead and published the review without asking anybody's counsel.

Our second encounter with the administration came when a group of BYU faculty proposed a special issue of *BYU Studies* "in the interest of peace." The call for contributions issued by the guest editors apparently raised concerns in some quarters, and I was asked to meet with the academic vice president and his staff to consider whether peace was too political an issue to be examined in a journal published by Brigham Young University. I remember this as one of the strangest meetings I ever

attended. The upshot, however, was that the administration decided to leave the matter to the discretion of the editors. We left it pretty much to the discretion of the guest editors, and the result was one of our finest issues. The third incident also involved a guest-edited issue and brought a member of the board of trustees into the discussion in addition to the academic vice president. Once again, however, the officials eventually decided to trust the judgment of the editors.

The impression I gleaned from these encounters was that at least some members of the board and the administration genuinely wanted to see *BYU Studies* engage substantial issues rather than always trying to play it safe. I think it is important to affirm this impression even though I cannot substantiate it with any explicit license. The leaders of the Church, invested as they are with the heavy responsibility of advancing the Kingdom of God on the earth, are understandably sensitive to public image. They do not enjoy—any more than the rest of us would—being compelled to correct erroneous impressions, or deal with unnecessary controversy, or dodge the bullets of critical snipers from within their own ranks. At the same time, I believe that in general they hope the members of the Church will take responsibility for their own stewardships and carry out their assigned tasks with energy and imagination—even if that means making occasional mistakes. They want BYU to be a genuine university, and, if the university is to sponsor a scholarly journal, they want it to be an instrument of serious and substantive inquiry. In my view, those goals are not best realized when every decision is made in fear and trembling over what "the Brethren" might think of it.

I don't wish to leave the impression that I have worked alone. On the contrary, I have depended at every point on excellent and dedicated associates. I have mentioned those who have served as my associate editors. I already think back nostalgically to our freewheeling and stimulating editorial meetings. The professional staff have also made very important contributions. Linda Hunter Adams has been an example of unfailing devotion to *BYU Studies*, promoting the journal at every opportunity, always on the lookout for promising articles, and a fine copy editor. M. Shayne Bell played a vital role in putting the production of the journal on an efficient footing at a time when we were embarrassingly behind schedule, getting out six or seven issues a year on a budget designed for four. When Shayne left to pursue other opportunities, Doris Dant stepped in with her fine insights and tough-minded efficiency to keep production on track. Additional contributions have come from a series of student interns who provided invaluable help with copy editing and typesetting, checked articles for accuracy, and served the subscribers in a multitude of ways. I can think of no better way to sum up the pleasure

of working with these good people than by quoting William Butler Yeats's lines:

> Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
> And say my glory was I had such friends.[2]

NOTES

[1] John Keats, letters to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 1817, and to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818, reprinted in M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 2:862-63, 868.

[2] William Butler Yeats, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," in *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 318.