

# Ambiguity and the Language of Authority

Nicolas Shumway

IN WHAT IS CLEARLY the most original and provocative of the essays in the BYU published collection *Arts and Inspiration*, Karen Lynn argues that two fundamental factors undermine the arts, particularly literature, in Mormondom. The first is scriptural completeness which renders any human-made text ultimately superfluous. She writes that "the sacred texts of Mormonism — the standard works — are held by Mormons to be complete and immutable. . . . Because the texts are complete, it is a sacrilege to ornament them; and because the Brethren are divinely called as stewards over the modern relevance of the text, it is a sacrilege for anyone else to expound upon them." She points out that writers cannot add to a complete canon, nor can they assume the role of interpreters without intruding on the specific stewardship of the Brethren.<sup>1</sup> In her second major point, Lynn argues that Mormonism excludes perplexity or ambiguity, and in so doing refuses space to most great art.

[Among Mormons] bleakness and confusion [in art] are not acceptable; if a complete set of answers and instructions is available, then a confused person must assume all responsibility for his own unhappy state. . . . We insist on success stories and refuse to accommodate stories of defeat, or even stories of righteous struggle unless these stories end by affirming a highly predictable and rather simple role for deity. . . . To a sensitive writer of fiction, tension and irresolution are not preliminary nor secondary; they are inherent in the human condition, as real and everlasting as any other part of life, and they must be reflected and reconciled in any work that seeks to deal with life in a meaningful way. The Mormon artist finds himself a member of a community that

---

NICOLAS SHUMWAY teaches Spanish-American literature at Yale University where he is also in charge of the undergraduate program in Latin American Studies. He has published and lectured extensively in his field and has authored a textbook soon to be published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. This paper was originally presented at the East Coast Symposium of the Association for Mormon Letters in Boston, Massachusetts, in June 1982.

<sup>1</sup> Karen Lynn, "The Mormon Sacred and the Mormon Profane: An Aesthetic Dilemma," in *Arts and Inspiration*, ed. Steven P. Sondrup (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), pp. 47-48.

tolerates none but the most simplistic treatments of unhappiness, depression, confusion, and frustration. If the artist describes trials, these must be the trials of a wicked, faithless, or unwise person, one who deserves whatever suffering he meets.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose is not to refute Lynn's observations, but rather to extend them, and finally to suggest that perplexity is perhaps not the problem but the solution. I will discuss her points in reverse order. If, as Lynn suggests, Mormonism is a religion whose aim is unambiguous truth, there is little question but that art and Mormonism are irreconcilable, at least according to one of Modernism's best spokesmen, Jorge Luis Borges.

In his short story "Deutches Requiem" the protagonist writes, "Formerly I was interested in theology, but from this fantastic discipline (and from the Christian faith) I was led away by Schopenhauer, with his direct arguments; and by Shakespeare and Brahms, with the infinite variety of their worlds."<sup>3</sup> In other words, in the variety of artistic representation, Borges finds little that resembles the simplistic dualisms of good and evil, spirit and flesh, right and wrong. The same theme reappears in a poem condemning human arrogance that thinks our actions deserve either heaven or hell.<sup>4</sup> In another passage, Borges remarks that great, lasting art "is always capable of an infinite and plastic ambiguity; it is everything for everyone, like the Apostle; it is a mirror that proclaims the features of the reader and it is also a map of the world."<sup>5</sup> In other words, definitive statements and absolute truths are never really present in art. Or, as today's textualist critics might say, texts are infinitely open to infinite readings; texts can neither be determined by authorial intention nor be determinate of a reader's experience. Art fathers ambiguity, irony, variety, and perplexity, not rock-solid truth. Finally, in a conversation I had with Borges several years ago, he remarked that the greatest catastrophe that could befall art would be the discovery of absolute truth, for at that point all discussion would end. Art is searching. It is the anticipation of an epiphany that never comes. Absolute truth in Borges's view is the end of searching, the end of anticipation. The end of art.

Borges's apprehension of finding absolute truth is an interesting contrast to the horror of ambiguity found in some religious people. It is not an exclusively Mormon problem, but I would suggest that Mormons have a particularly difficult time with ambiguity because of the peculiarly unambiguous nature of distinctively Mormon scripture. A former bishop of mine once remarked that the thing he most loved about the Book of Mormon was that one always knew who was good and who was bad. Moreover, if they were good, they prospered, and if they prospered they got proud, and if they got proud they got wicked, and if they got wicked they were cursed, and if they repented the curse

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-50.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Deutches Requiem," tr. Julian Falley, *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James F. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 142.

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Fragmentos de un evangelio apócrifo" *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974), p. 1011. Unless indicated otherwise, the translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> Borges, "El Primer Wells," *Obras completas*, p. 698.

was lifted. Similarly, if a person in the Book of Mormon is good, he either started that way, or he repented. And if someone is bad, he either started bad or got that way through sin. There is no middle ground where ordinary people strive to be good but don't always succeed.<sup>6</sup> This almost case-study clarity of the Book of Mormon undeniably leaves its mark on LDS consciousness in the type of stories we feel most comfortable with: the unambiguous, morally simplistic, didactic tales Lynn describes.

Mormons, however, accept other scripture that is not so unambiguous. The Bible's historical books often indicate a wonderful lack of interest in portraying biblical characters as paragons of anything, much less virtue. For example, no person in ancient history is described with greater clarity than David. Details concerning his life, his ambitions, his loves, and his actions are described vividly, from his homoerotic relationship with Jonathan to his adultery-inspired murder of Uriah.

Even more striking are Jesus' teachings in the New Testament which often seem designed to upset the certainty lovers of clarity yearn for. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the most interesting part of the story may have been the part that was not recorded: the reaction of Jesus's audience. It is reasonable to assume that Jesus chose a Samaritan to be the hero of his story because of the way that Samaritans were then viewed by the Jews. Not only were they political enemies, they were products of forbidden marriages and practiced an apostate religion. They were evil in sex, politics, and religion — a rather comprehensive list. On the other hand, the priest and the Levite, who shun the wounded man, are worthies in their society. Clearly, Jesus's intention was to upset perceived truth and to introduce in the minds of his listeners the kind of ambiguity that begets searching rather than instant knowing. One wonders who would be the good Samaritan if Jesus retold the parable with characters corresponding to today's prejudices. A benign communist perhaps? A noble lesbian?

The parable of the prodigal son is also ambiguous in its intention. Are we to admire the father for accepting back a profligate and ungrateful son? Are we to condemn the older brother who begrudges his father's charity? Are we to admire the prodigal who by all appearances had his cake and ate it too? Are we to condemn the father for being soft on sin? Are we to follow President

---

<sup>6</sup> There is a simple explanation for the peculiarly unidimensional portrayal of characters in the Book of Mormon — an unidimensionality not present in doctrinal passages and one that is plausible within the terms of the Book of Mormon itself. Unlike the Bible, most of the Book of Mormon passed through the filter of a single compiler and editor whose purposes were quite clearly more didactic than biographical. Moreover, Mormon, as he repeatedly tells us, was writing the record of his people specifically for us, the Saints of the restoration. I know of no other case where a writer from the distant past directed his writings to the concerns of readers who would live many centuries later. Biblical writers show little if any awareness of future audiences. Indeed, a central concern of contemporary biblical scholarship and criticism deals with reinterpreting scripture in light of its historical and cultural context. Book of Mormon scholarship, on the other hand, seems to go in the opposite direction: focussing on the idea that despite its accessibility to modern readers, the Book of Mormon is in fact ancient scripture.

Kimball's lead in *The Miracle of Forgiveness* and recognize that the true hero is the older son who stayed home and didn't fornicate?<sup>7</sup>

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard raises similar questions: how is it just for the master to pay the same wage both to those who worked only a few hours and to those who worked all day? Are we to understand from this that there is no danger in putting off repentance until the last minute? Or does the parable merely suggest that God and Milton Friedman practice different kinds of economics? That these questions can be asked at all illustrates the plastic ambiguity that Borges finds in great art. It also points out that Mormons who disallow perplexity must ignore questions raised by their own scriptures.

Lynn's first point, that only the Brethren can interpret scripture, becomes a stumbling block only if we assume that official statements from Salt Lake City, unlike other forms of discourse, do not allow for further enlightenment. Mormon doctrine, however, asserts that the individual has a right to inspiration on any subject. We are taught that only through personal revelation can the truth be ascertained; in other words, only God, as the highest authority, identifies and labels truth. One may search for truth through study and reason, but ultimately only God can validate a conclusion as true. In this sense, every person is his or her own prophet, and the god we follow is the god heard from within.

But Mormonism, like other religions, has also the authority of a god without, a god of visible leaders and official interpretations of scripture, a god beyond the individual experience of the divine. Ideally, one's private experience of truth should coincide with official interpretations of scripture. But on a practical plane, this is often not the case. A perusal of Christian history clearly shows that Bible study by the light of the god within can be a subversive activity — a fact demonstrated by Martin Luther in 1517 and in our own time by the continuing Protestant Reformation, the Second Vatican Council, and Liberation Theology. Mormonism avoids some of the subversive influence of such biblical study by questioning the completeness and reliability of the translations, but even at that I occasionally hear Latter-day Saints wonder if Paul really belonged to the same Church we do.

A more difficult problem than differing scriptural interpretations arises when personal revelation, the god within, fails to confirm official Church positions — a fact witnessed by the not uncommon phenomenon of fundamentalist apostasy. Theoretically, one can dissent from official positions on the basis of personal spiritual witness, but it is best to make sure the god within and the god without agree. My mission president, with folksy lucidity, explained this by saying, "Of course you have a right to ask the Lord if Church leaders speak the truth. Just make sure you stay on your knees until he says yes."

Although one might argue that truth is the central preoccupation of Western religion, I suspect that, in practical terms at least, the real issue is authority, or — better said — how and by whom is truth determined. Mormonism, by

---

<sup>7</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), pp. 307–11.

giving us two sources for truth, sometimes appears contradictory. The basic problem, however, is not the conflict between the truth of the god within and the truth of the god without, but rather the underlying assumption that one or the other is speaking unambiguous truth at all.

Why can we not put the same questions to statements by General Authorities and to our own interpretations of scripture and experiences of the divine that we ask of a literary text? For example: What is the historical and personal context of a statement? How many possible meanings do the words carry? How are words intended? What unexamined assumptions underlie a particular statement? Who is the audience? Who does the speaker think the audience is? How do our culture, our history, our language, our desires, and our personal experiences interject themselves into our understanding and expression of the divine? In short, our search for truth must not discount subjectivity — be it our own, that of scriptural authors, or that of Church leaders. Such a test will quickly prove the fraudulence of attempts to eliminate perplexity. Ambiguity and perplexity are constants in every aspect of our existence, including the way we experience religion, each other, and ourselves.

Interestingly, ambiguity is nowhere more visible than in the statement most often used to affirm certainty and silence doubters: “I know the Church is true.” Who, for example, is *I*? Can anyone describe the speaker without equivocation, even the speaker himself? Is there any reason to take *I* seriously? Why is *I* making such a statement? What does *know* mean? How do we know? How do we know we know? What is “the Church”? Is it the scriptures, the Brethren, the community, the Building Committee? And what is meant by *true*? Truth of correspondence? Truth of coherence? Truth for me and not for someone else? “I know the Church is true” may be a moving and heartfelt affirmation of commitment and faith, but — instructions to missionaries notwithstanding — it certainly does not end a discussion. Indeed, I can think of no better way to start one.

There is no doubt a type of believer among us — and certainly in each of us — who longs for undefiled, crystal-clear, granite-solid truth. Literature and art with their unresolved tension, perplexity, and ambiguity unsettle such belief. But there is also the type of believer who rejoices in the ambiguity of the parables, who believes religion to be searching and most security to be false. When Lynn claims that the Mormon community copes poorly with perplexity, she is probably right. Many of us cling to the unidimensional nature of Book of Mormon characters and to absolute pronouncements from the Brethren. Yet life is full of ambiguity which we must all face at one time or another. And perhaps for that very reason, what is most needed now are questions for gospel answers, new readings of Mormon scriptures that seek out perplexity not resolution, unending quests to intertwine our subjectivity with the subjectivity of others. We should seek out ambiguity, multiple meanings, ironic interpretations, openness. Perhaps then we will know, ambiguously of course, the truth that sets us free from truth itself — from codified, stagnant, repressive truth — and opens to us a world of eternal discovery.