

Facing Pages

I

WHEN KIM MERKER, letter pressman extraordinaire and former managing editor of this magazine, asked me more than a dozen years ago whether I might like to edit *The Iowa Review*, maybe someone should have asked, “Hey, shouldn’t he have a license?” But no one did, and here I still am, stepping with the *Review* into our twentieth year. Surely it is one of the more amiable aspects of small and smaller magazines that most are produced by the unlicensed. Thousands of people scattered all over the country work on this and similar magazines, producing, if you will, a national magazine of many chapters from many odd corners. However much similarity and overlapping one finds, one also finds difference, there being many disparate doorways through which writers emerge into our national literature. Overseeing part of that work here, with the help, over time, of many others, most of them graduate students, has become my continuous, floating seminar, the longevity of which gives me after all some sort of license. So to assume that leverage and to take further advantage of it, I intend to introduce the three issues of this twentieth anniversary year with brief commentaries on the practice, worry, and romance of editing as I have known it. Each essay will be short and, if you prefer, you can turn a few pages and begin directly with our first story.

If that story can wait, let’s consider matters of format and form, the semi-otics of a magazine. You hold one in your hands: nine by six inches, perfect bound, with matte paper, Bembo, a classic typeface, and a glossy cover with a full-color image. This is either an archetypal magazine format or a very quiet parody of it. Inside, as in the last issue and the next, you will find four or five stories, thirty to forty pages of poems, several essays and reviews, and an occasional interview. Each of these writings has been chosen with care. With too much care? With too little? With care applied from an imperfect aesthetic, political, or theoretical posture? No doubt we falter in each of those particulars, but let that be the subject of our next essay. For now let’s stick with form.

Within an issue a kind of landscape emerges through the arrangement of our contents. We tend to begin with prose, often with a story or pair of

stories. We divide the poems into two or three groups, balancing length and tone and narrowness or breadth of line within those groups, and setting them against contrasting clusters of prose—two or three stories, or a pair of essays, or an essay bracketed by stories, and so on. We try to provide a sense of varying pace and contour within an issue and to avoid clustering too many male or female voices too tightly together. Other kinds of variety will also be apparent and sometimes played upon. Different kinds of poems and stories may contrast with each other, or stories with essays that are also narrative. If the assemblage of all this becomes a landscape, I suppose it is usually a midwestern landscape, with a sudden storm now and then but, on the whole, with few moments of violent transition.

Any number of details reveal our desire for consistency within a flexible sense of form. Our covers, for example, have been the same glossy white for the last seventeen issues, with a cover image an increasingly prominent feature. Guided by an earlier, reasonable observation—“Some essays read like stories, and some stories like essays; then there are prose poems”—we avoid making generic distinctions in our table of contents; but we do make those distinctions on some of our title lines and in the index that comes at the end of each year. Throughout every issue we worry about consistency with compound words and hyphens, eliminating some, introducing others, and restoring still others even as we go to print. We fuss similarly with the varieties of ways authors signal internal divisions—using white space, and numbers, or letters, or Roman numerals, large or small. In these as in other details, we wish neither to straitjacket an author into a house style nor to let usage seem freeform or random. Overall, I suppose, we feel a constant pressure from the side of the tidy to urge what’s less than tidy to shape up, as if the section lines of an idealized midwestern landscape might justify the pages of a perfect issue; but we hope, at the same time, not to overdo it.

Magazine : journal : periodical—we answer to each of these terms. The first implies a sheltered load of explosives; the second, something of the day—a ship’s log, a writer’s journal, the daily paper; and the third, the periodicity of a regular curve. This predictability of pattern, both of physical and timely appearance, and in a form that seeks to endure beyond tomorrow, seems a root expectation of a magazine. Thus a magazine stands midway between a newspaper and a book. Ours is less likely than *American Poetry Review* to be found wrapping fish. But a book is more likely to

remain on its purchaser's shelves year after year. Our magazine, bookish in format, seems to beg to be taken as a book, almost, and allowed to linger on the bedside table longer than the *Sunday Times Book Review*, or than any other magazine, be it *The Threepenny Review* or *The New Yorker*, that's folded like a pamphlet and, perhaps, stapled.

At the same time a magazine is unlike a book in that it remains a fragmented collection. The issues of a magazine have a centrifugal and fugitive quality: they tend toward being dispersed. Even within an issue, each of the items included aspires to become part of its own book, shed of the writers who had surrounded it first. From a writer's point of view, that essential fragmentation might seem an ethical principle of magazine form. Every compromise of it appropriates a writer's work for a lesser purpose. Yet almost every impulse an editor has in gathering and arranging an issue, in seeking works that resonate with each other, in ordering contents to reflect themes planned or serendipitously discovered, is to find a whole greater than its parts and so to undermine authorial separateness.

These are hardly new issues. T. S. Eliot once distinguished between a "review" and a "miscellany" by noting that "a magazine which makes up its contents merely of what the editor considers 'good stuff' will obviously have the character of a miscellany" and be the "feeble reflection . . . of a feeble editor." Eliot believed that a review should demonstrate "critical value" and that

The bound volumes of a decade should represent the development of the keenest sensibility and the clearest thought of ten years. Even a single number should attempt to illustrate, within its limits, the time and the tendencies of the time. It should have a value over and above the aggregate value of the individual contributions. Its contents should exhibit heterogeneity which the intelligent reader can resolve into order. (*The New Criterion*, January, 1926)

For my own part, I've come to see things differently. My favorite idea of *The Iowa Review* is as neither a miscellany nor as bound volumes, destined for the library, but as a kind of conversation. Perhaps now we have a continuum, with Eliot's terms the extremes and "conversation" at a mid-point, nearly; but if so, I'll tie a string to my term and pull it ahead, as an apex, or leading edge of what is possible. And from "conversation," we can step nimbly at times to "forum" — a quick displacement from the word with

which we began—and seize upon a pleasant though false etymology.

“Forum” and “form” have no serious connection at all: “form” goes back to the Greek, *morphé*, “forum,” to words for “door” and being out of doors. The second is a more open notion than the first. My ideal would be a trading place of artistic gestures, cultural stances, and ideas, and so an issue full of voices playing off, taking up, and contrasting with each other. Even when the participants don’t seem fully to meet on these pages, when they diverge from rather than connect with each other, I’d like to think the reader would take part—that’s where the “u” in “forum” would come in—sometimes bridging the gap, sometimes noting and commenting on differences. On the best occasions, the writers themselves, despite their natural tug toward seeing everything in an issue in which they appear as background to themselves, would become immersed as readers and continue the conversation in which they have already played a part. For, though I have no wish to resolve everything into order, nor to hinder writers from striking out on their own, the notion of a forum remains a shadowy template behind these gatherings of writers in print, and our landscape a peopled landscape on which there is some tendency for individuals to cluster.

In closing, then, I would like to announce a SUBSCRIBERS’ AWARD, a new annual feature that should extend the conversation of our magazine. Individual subscribers will soon receive a form asking for their favorite work in each of the three genres we regularly publish: Essay, Poem, and Story. Nominate one work in any or all of these categories and return the form to us. Your nominations should come only from issues of Volume Nineteen, dated 1989. In our next issue we will announce the winners, honor them as SUBSCRIBERS’ AWARD WINNERS for 1989, and award each writer \$100. Since contributors receive a year’s subscription, they will be among the voters. We will consider it inelegant for writers to vote for themselves, and we can infer a great deal from postmarks. Then, finally, after the last issue of this year, we will send out a new form for Volume Twenty (all writing by staff members is ineligible). We would like to recognize what our readers find most worthy from year to year and include your voices in our conversation. We also promise to solicit new work from the winners.

D.H.