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"WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE"

DURING A RECENT editorial meeting, I was asked to summarize what have been, during my tenure as Executive Editor of the *Massachusetts Review,* the major pleasures and challenges of the job. Not an easy task, given how varied, context-dependent, and subjective any thoughts on such matters must necessarily be. Yet I did spend fifteen years in this position, so it doesn't seem entirely impossible that some sort of marker, summary, or survey may somehow be of some use to someone—at least as a suggestion of what to avoid. For example: letting the door hit you on your way out.

I'll start with the challenges. Most, if not all, stem from a single source, one that is the strength of any publication like ours but also a wellspring of adversity. To put it succinctly: by definition, any literary magazine worth its salt will be created by a collective of editors, staff, and contributors who are brilliant, committed, and visionary; this combination of qualities also makes them, by definition, passionate about adhering to their vision. This is, as I've said, a source of strength, and when—as very often happens—those visions synergistically combine, it is a source of joy, perhaps the only real reason for doing this work at all. As Spinoza tells us, in a definition as tight and precise as any I've ever heard, love itself is simply joy with an external cause.

The challenge, of course, comes when this conglomeration of brilliant, committed, and visionary voices doesn't coalesce and instead competes. In such moments, and there will be such moments (if there weren't, could anything of import really be at stake?), it is the Executive Editor's responsibility to address the challenge. The very root of the term—from the Latin "sequi," follow, and "ex," out, but also through—suggests that the position should have this responsibility. At our magazine, however, this role has always been administrative, not sovereign.

What this decision and title have meant for me is that, in times of dissensus, the ear only of the Executive Editor is needed. The Executive Editor's voice should, in such moments, be largely silent. The reasons for this are principally two. First, none of the editors, staff, or contributors

will continue to dedicate their time, energy, and love to your pages if they don't believe that their voices will be heard. Second, the ultimate responsibility of any Executive Editor is to the magazine itself, to what sustains and strengthens that magazine as an institution, what allows it to continue to do the work it was founded to do—a legacy that has been honored, reinterpreted, and continued by every new incarnation of the *Massachusetts Review* collective. Obviously, decisions must eventually be made, and the Executive Editor must, I believe, be the final arbiter. The ideal result of such difficult conversations would be consensus, where everyone is equally happy; just as clearly, when the outcome of our discussions is less than ideal, unhappiness should also be distributed equally. Either way, the decision must be one that makes the magazine stronger, not the opposite.

Back in the spring of 2009, shortly after the *Mass Review*'s previous editor, David Lenson, anointed or conned me into taking his job, I happened to go to Washington D.C. for a conference. While I was there, I met with a Bosnian writer, Semezdin Mehmedinović. We didn't know each other well: we'd met in person only once before, in 2007, when the Smith Poetry Center, on my suggestion, had invited him to read his work. On that trip, I'd asked Sem about a wonderful, haunting war story he'd written; I'd read it, in very approximate English, in a limited-edition collection of war prose, published during the '92–95 siege of Sarajevo. He later sent me a copy of the original text, which I used, along with the earlier translation, to retranslate it for the pages of the *Mass Review*—my first contribution to the magazine. In D.C., I wanted to meet with Sem to recruit him—given his stature as poet, essayist, editor, and filmmaker—as an advisory editor for the magazine. He generously agreed and subsequently helped bring other major writers from the former Yugoslavia to our pages.

That day, Sem made a comment during our conversation that surprised me and, frankly, took me years to appreciate. I had just confessed to him that—given my complete lack of training, experience, and knowledge—I had serious reservations about taking on the job. Without hesitation, he responded, "You'll be a great editor! You have no ego at all, so you're perfect!" As I said, Sem and I had hardly met, so I'm not sure what that assessment was based on, and I also wonder if there has ever been a person with no ego. Over the years, or perhaps only when I read another *MR* advisory editor, Ruth Ozeki, on the three marks of existence according to Zen teachings, did I begin to get a sense of what

his comment might have meant. As Ruth reminds us, "no-self" is the second mark of existence. The first is "impermanence" and the third is "suffering," and each, in Zen philosophy, is a consequence of the others. All three, I suspect, are necessary lessons for an editor and perhaps the best description of the basic challenges of the job.

HAVING SPOKEN, in general, of the difficulties that an Executive Editor is likely to encounter, I'll now be more specific about two particularly difficult moments during my tenure, along with the actions taken in response.

Quickly, then, some ancient history. When I came on board, there was a brief honeymoon period, during which I announced two goals for the magazine: first, to get back the political energy and social relevance that the magazine had during its first couple of decades, and second, to do so, at least in part, by internationalizing in every way possible, and especially by publishing much more in translation. Both initiatives were warmly received by the old guard, at least at first.

Like most honeymoons, though, mine was short. At this point, there's no need to go into details, but I will say that the tension that emerged did seem consistently to fall along the lines of old guard vs. newbies. Given how long some of our editors had been working at the magazine and given the dynamics of any magazine (as described above), such difficulties were not hard to understand; they were probably unavoidable, and were, in many cases, though difficult, ultimately productive. But I also remember, when I was asked about how things were going, resorting repeatedly to the same metaphor. "We're sailing in the right direction," I'd say, "though it would be nice if we could raise the anchor."

I don't remember the proximal cause or causes, but by 2015 the sea had gotten quite rough—by that time, one veteran plus a relatively new editor had resigned, largely in frustration, and the head of our prose team too wouldn't last much longer. In response to these difficulties, I proposed that we call in a mediator so that we could discuss our process and explore how we might work together more productively, with less friction. The session we had, in July of that year, did help, and, at least for a time, things did seem to go more smoothly. The reason I mention it here is that I believe, in the history of labor relations, it is rare for a boss to call for mediation. Strictly speaking, the *Mass Review* has no boss, and one hopes it never will. What we do have is a tradition of valuing labor, including our own, and that is a legacy all magazines ought to honor.

The second moment of controversy, indeed crisis, is more recent, and other editors will no doubt have their own perspectives on that period. The summer of 2020 was the occasion of the greatest challenge faced by the magazine during my years of service. I'm sure I don't have to remind anyone of the confluence of world-historical events during that time. In midsummer of 2020, I proposed to the editors that we announce, on July 4 we would begin accepting submissions from BIPOC writers year-round, including during our summer reading period, when regular submissions were closed. During my first year as editor, we had instituted a similar policy for work in translation, for similar reasons: we wanted to increase the number of submissions in that category as well as make explicit the priority we place on getting such work into our pages. As should be expected, our editorial collective took this idea and ran with it, agreeing first to expand and diversify our masthead.

TIME TO DESCRIBE what I enjoy about this job. The first thing I should say is the first thing I always say: with a quarterly, every three months a bunch of boxes arrive at the office; you open them and find this wonderful gift inside, a new thing under the sun. And you think to yourself, "Wow, that's really something"—plus you know you helped make it happen. Not saving the world, of course, but it is good, and permanent, an addition to the archive. I doubt I've done anything more important, or that I ever will. So, yes, Christmas, four times a year.

My next analogy may not make sense to everyone, but for me the work of editing is most similar to something I did nearly a lifetime ago, during the '80s, when I worked as a lighting designer for an experimental theater company in Boston. For me, lighting for stage productions should be the equivalent of attention in the mind's eye. We're hardwired to look at what is brightest, or what is moving; the job of a lighting designer is to focus and gather the audience so that they attend to what matters most on stage at every given moment.

I see the work of an editor as similar in many ways. Like a lighting designer, the task of an editor is to take work that is there and make it clearer, cleaner—to reveal it more fully, on its own terms. This is done in editing individual pieces, but it also happens in putting together an issue, or in promoting one. Also like a lighting designer, I believe, the work of an editor should be invisible; if someone sees something you've done, generally it's a mistake. Pay no attention to that person behind the curtain!

Nearly anonymous work, performed in service to the vision of another, may not be everyone's piece of cake, but I have treasured it. Still, the larger, more immediate, and more visible aspects of making the magazine also have their pleasures. In this digital age, we now have the capacity to provide a nearly instant forum for voices we value on the issues we care about; no one can tell us what to do next, and there's no reason we have to keep repeating what we've already done. Literature is not journalism, so we don't respond directly to headlines; we sound out tidal currents, track continental drift. After the 2016 elections in the US, we began a blog series called "Our America"; together with our special issue on climate, we started another we've called "After Us." Our performance editors have used the website to examine the impact of social justice movements on the classical repertoire of ballet. We've published work in support of Syria, Hong Kong, Ukraine, and Palestine while continuing to fight for social justice and against authoritarianism at home. Our most recent special issue—*The View from Gaza*, guest edited by Michel Moushabeck and Mona Kareem—is a perfect example of what it possible. It is a privilege to have this platform for political expression and to share it with others whose voices and views we value.

Like all our editors, I've also had the pleasure of bringing work connected to my own training, interests, and community into our pages. First (and most notably), this was true of our *Casualty* special issue, published a decade after 9/11 and focused on the legacy of war, but it also can be seen in the many Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian writers we've published. I'm equally happy, though, about the work our magazine has done in publishing Black Italian writers, including Gabriella Ghermandi, Gabriella Kuruvilla, Igiaba Scego, and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah. Publishing work in translation can and should change the literature, even the language, of the receiving culture. Publishing writers who are themselves engaged in similar work in their home countries has made the *Massachusetts Review* part of a global literary activist culture—where the common goal is to change the status quo, both at home and abroad.

Of course, any single editor's sphere of knowledge and variety of networks is limited, only a tiny piece of the vast Borgesian library of literature; no one editor's perspective ever can or should represent a magazine like *MR*. This obvious truth is what makes me lean forward and hold my breath, hardly able to wait and see what our editors will do in the years to come. Financially, we're on more solid footing than we've ever been, and our masthead is likely now larger and more diverse than

it's ever been. A magazine, by definition, is a miscellany, a storehouse, and, when wielded correctly, a powder house of ideas. We certainly still have more to do, but no one today could look at what our editors now represent and not be impressed, even envious. Our incoming Executive Editor, Britt Rusert, will have more support and a broader range of expertise to draw on than we could have imagined fifteen years ago.

These days it has become conventional, at least in right-minded communities, to state expressly one's preferred pronouns. I generally add to my boring, traditional, and oppressive "he/him" a nod to multilingualism, substituting the French and Italian "lui" for him. I also include the editorial "we," and I don't do so simply in jest. For me, "we/ours" are absolutely my preferred pronouns. The collective work of this magazine has been, for me, the concrete emblem of this aspiration—imagining a form of identity that is other than individual. In the end, that is surely the best way to sum up the pleasures of my job: that they aren't mine at all, but ours.