Running the Editing Gauntlet

by Sven Birkerts

When at some sociable event, some sociable person asks me what it is I do, I try to answer in whatever way I feel would best satisfy my asker and move the conversation along. "I teach," I say. Or "I write." But every now and again, as if to convince myself, I’ll say "I edit a literary magazine." And if they then ask, as some do, what my job involves, I answer, blandly and truthfully, "Reading and reading and sifting and sorting." If the person still acts interested, I might go on to clarify: "I don’t do the real editing." Which is true. And if they ask still further, I tell them that the real editing gets done at various levels and by various people, though most centrally by AGNI’s senior editor, Bill Pierce, who works hands-on with nearly every poem, story, or essay we publish, but who also collaborates at various stages with our trusted staff editors -- Jen Drew, Sumita Chakraborty, Lynne Potts -- and also in a tutelary fashion, to the several interns who work in the office.
Editing, as I've come to understand, is far more complex and exacting than people -- even literary-minded people -- realize. The common view is that once a piece has been accepted for its merits, the journal's editors groom the language as needed, correcting mistakes of fact and style, clarifying obscurities, sharpening expression, eliminating redundancies, and so forth. I offer this capsule account not only because of what I hear others say and ask, but also because when I started at AGNI I thought as much myself.

My position, which has me serving as first reader, sifter, and sorter, brings me in contact with the big picture. I read to discover the intent and ambition of any submitted work and then to make the inescapably subjective judgment about whether it succeeds, and if it does, how well, and whether it works for us. I am like the impresario Serge Diaghilev, who, asked by the dancer Vaslav Nijinsky what it is he wants him to do, answers tersely: "Astonish me!" And really, that is the business in a nutshell, and I have written versions of this before.

But this work I do is not to be confused with editing. Reading and then accepting or rejecting work allows me to claim my title, but it has very little bearing on the processes that come next. Indeed, there is a significant gulf between, say, the story I have read and been moved to accept, and the story that is read by and then worked on by Bill and the other editors. At times it feels like they are different stories.

A certain kind of office scenario bears this out, and there are usually several such scenarios per issue. I will be sitting in one of the big chairs in our big "library" room, reading -- reading, but also paying attention, as one does, with maximally extended sensors, alert to the scrape of a chair or some variation in the regulated discharge of the printer, and, especially, to the sounds that signify various kinds of affective response. Working closely with people we learn to decode their sighs, snorts, finger taps, and more and less benign exhalations. But sometimes there is no need to de-code. I'll hear the deliberate sound of papers slapped down onto a desk, and then something like "I can't believe this!" or "You're kidding, right?"

And I'll know right away what this means. The genre editors and I have accepted an essay or story that is driving Bill crazy. Whatever I saw and was stirred by is clearly not what he is seeing. These are not the noises of a man stirred, or even intrigued enough to tolerate whatever problems he has found. No, I have failed, I have made an error in judgment; I have committed to something that simply does not pass muster. I am slipping. What now?

Maybe I exaggerate just a bit. But let me work up a metaphor to illustrate. I have let myself be charmed by a house, how it sits on the property and how the windows admit the afternoon light. I have impetuously put down money and signed the mortgage. I have trusted that my partner will agree, and I am wrong. For my partner, in this case my colleague, knows about plumbing and seepage; he understands materials; he looks at practical things like room layout and can see the various concealments the previous owners have attempted.
Very well, I exaggerate again. This editor and senior editor are usually in closer aesthetic accord than I have indicated. What I am trying to illustrate is the fact that though Bill's reading is every bit as responsive to the literary "big picture" as mine, his has a significant added dimension. The editor's dimension. Where I read a submission in the hopeful light of desire, in the subjunctive case, eager to be triggered, Bill is sometimes reading it as a fait accompli, something that has been accepted. He is looking at it, at least in part, in terms of the work that has to be done.

Which is to say he reads not only for impression -- of freshness, originality -- but also for structural integrity, consistency, qualities of syntax and voice. He asks: what will we have to do here to get this to be the essay or story that Sven thinks he saw? For he is good enough at second-guessing to spot my enthusiasms. After ten years of working together, he knows how I read. He also knows my weak spots, ways I get suckered, pitches that work on me that might not work on many others. But though he may sigh and slap down papers in the next room, he almost always discovers the solution, the prods and suggestions that can go to the author and bring the piece around.

My point is that editing is a good deal more than the various fusses and fidgets that many people believe it to be. In truth, it asks the deepest sort of immersion in what the New Critics called "the words on the page." Editing partakes of the patient-doctor kind of intimacy. It is close-reading in the extreme. It is also the call-response process that authors dream of, though they often don't know it until it happens.

But it does happen. And time after time I have been shocked by the reactions of writers to suggestions and criticisms that have seemed to me tough -- that are tough. I'm surprised by how seldom they are upset. Some seem almost happy. I have come to see that what compensates -- not always, but often -- is their gratitude for having been taken that seriously, for having been read.

You would think that after all my years now of doing this I would be accustomed to, if not made jaded by, the whole process -- no longer taken aback when I see the late-stage copy-edited page, the palimpsest of marks, corrections, and queries on what had passed my eyes originally as a clean piece of writing. You would think I would have been instructed by the look of my own introductions when they are passed back to me, and my gamut of