

ROBERT FOGARTY & GARY PERCESEPE

AN INTERVIEW WITH *ANTIOCH REVIEW*
EDITOR ROBERT FOGARTY

GP: This issue of *Mississippi Review* celebrates the centenary of the contemporary literary magazine marking its inception with the first issue of Ford Madox Ford's *The English Review* in 1908. I am aware that you place the origin of the contemporary literary magazine a few years later, with the first issue of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* in 1912. How did *Poetry* differ from what came before?

RF: Monroe's agenda, which she sets out in the first issue, is to make the magazine inclusive—it's not to be a coterie magazine, it's not to be limited to a particular set of poetic instructions. And that marked a rather significant shift and remains an important issue. How inclusive are magazines? Can they maintain that sense of having what Monroe called "an open door policy?" That's an important notion in a commercially driven culture.

GP: What is your own personal history with literary magazines? Do you recall how you first became interested in reading?

RF: I had little exposure to them in college. I became aware of them when I taught for the first time. I taught at Michigan State for four years, where there was a rather significant component of writing. And several faculty members, including myself, decided that we would try to start a literary magazine. It met with a very good reception. It was interesting. It also met with certain kinds of hostilities, particularly when the editor attacked the university, which was not the wisest and most astute thing to do. But he did

it. So, I had exposure to it in the sense of it being part of an adversarial culture.

GP: What led you to the position of editor at the *Antioch Review*?

RF: I had no particular ambitions. I'm somewhat unusual as an editor of a literary magazine in that my background is in American studies and I'm a social historian, so that I don't come out of a particular yearning to do it. When I came to Antioch College in 1968, the *Review* was in fairly good shape. And then, as the fortunes of the college went south, the then editor took out what he considered to be a blind ad in *The New York Review of Books* offering to lease/sell the magazine without the authorization of either the editorial board or of the college itself. He thought it was a blind ad, but it was quite evident that it was the *Antioch Review* and phone calls started to come in. And then he was summarily fired.

At that point, I was going on a sabbatical, but when I returned from the sabbatical, I became the editor of the magazine. The magazine had always had a rather mixed set of editors. One editor was the college librarian, a very good editor, Paul Bixler. And Paul saved the magazine. And so, when I came back, I started to do it.

Fortunately, there were still some members of the faculty who had had a long experience with the magazine, particularly Nolan Miller, who taught fiction and who was basically Mark Strand's mentor at the college.

GP: The *Antioch Review* was started in 1941. Has its mission changed?

RF: The *Review*, like many magazines, changed over time. Unless they do that, they're bound to sort of disappear, because you have to be responsive for both financial and also I think literary reasons.

The magazine, when it was first started, was seen as an alternative to Fascism and Communism. It was a political magazine in many ways. And so, the first four or five years one sees essays on a wide variety of subjects. Most of the writers were drawn from the social sciences.

However, beginning about 1945, the magazine began to be more inclusive and to begin to publish poetry and short fiction, although that did not dominate in any way. Also, the magazine was collectively edited for a very long period of time, until the late '60s, when a decision was made to bring in an editor who would be solely responsible for all of the content of the magazine. So, it went from being a kind of collective effort to being in some ways a stand-alone magazine.

We now publish more literary material than we do in the general area of the social sciences. However, we continue to publish essays, as we did recently, a very long piece on the twentieth anniversary of the Falkland's War, a rather long and quite wonderful piece that we published over two issues. And we still operate in some ways within the belle lettres tradition.

GP: The Internet is certainly a major topic of conversation in lit mag publishing, as well as in the larger publishing world. A recent issue of *Boulevard* devoted one of their symposiums to this subject. Writers and editors in the symposium seemed to agree that the Internet's effect on literary magazines was largely positive. Do you agree?

RF: I think it's a mixed bag. One doesn't want to be parochial. By parochial I mean limited to a particular audience or to a particular generation. One wants to try and reach as broad an audience as one can find, because that helps writers ultimately. The Internet is a generational phenomenon. I'm pre- Euclidian [laughter]. But we [the *Antioch Review*] have just recently undertaken an

e-commerce initiative. We're going to improve our website. We're going to be more user-friendly. We're going to make use of the Internet in order to generate some revenues. I don't see the *Antioch Review* at this moment going online. No one has been able to convince me that you can make any money. And money is an important element for any literary magazine. Without a subsidy or subvention of some kind, it's very difficult.

GP: Is everyone an artist and everyone an editor? Has the Internet democratized writing and publishing to the point where we have seen a decline in quality? Or is this a canard?

RF: I can't say, since I don't read online. I'm the least capable person to do that. Whenever I talk with other people, though, I find that they don't read much online either. Now, it may be that people below the age of forty, let's say, regularly do it. I suspect that people in writing programs make more use of it for a variety of reasons.

I still think that there is a two-tiered system in which online publication is one thing and then getting published in the hard copy is still the most desirable, for prestige purposes. I don't see that going away.

GP: What do literary magazines want and why do they want it? What are the impediments you face in getting what you want?

RF: The impediments are practical. The volume of submissions is really daunting. This is a major problem. We have ten volunteer readers who read the slush. They are being generous with their time. And they have other lives to lead. So, reading for the *Antioch Review* is done on the margins. That makes it difficult to be responsive in a significant way. It used to be that you could tell if something was Xeroxed; you can't tell anymore. So, multiple submissions become a major issue. I don't like them. We have a policy

of not using them. But there's nothing to be done about it. It's just a fact of life.

The big magazines, like *The New Yorker*, don't publish anybody who is not a known quantity. Occasionally, they will have an emerging artist's issue. *The Atlantic* publishes a single story with each issue. So the outlets for serious fiction and nonfiction and now memoirs are to be found in the literary magazines and the small magazines. These are the places where people can test out ideas.

It's always been that way, actually, and that's one of the great strengths. Commercial publishers simply won't look at a writer unless they have published in those magazines. And these are the places where all the hard reading is done by editors. Editors and agents are the ones who maintain our contemporary literary culture.

GP: Lit mags have tiny circulation and perhaps even smaller readership. Is there anything wrong with that, if the magazines still serve the purpose of a practice field for younger writers?

RF: I don't think there's anything wrong with it. I think that the economics of publishing a magazine have changed. Some magazines have very substantial subventions. Two that come to mind are *The Virginia Quarterly*, which has an enormous budget, and *The Kenyon Review*, which is well sustained. *McSweeney's* is privately bankrolled by one writer. Those magazines are able to do a lot of different things. They run conferences. They're able to do a lot of direct mail. They're able to support an increase in the readership by the standard routes. Direct mail is very expensive. It's very difficult to do. And you have to do it consistently and you have to put money into it on a regular basis.

The smaller magazines are quite often mom and pop operations. They start out; they find a niche audience of one kind or

another. One of my favorite quotes is from Emerson: “It looks well in July. We shall see them in December.”

Many magazines start; the real trick is to sustain it and to be able to serve different kinds of writers over a long period of time. Some are able to do that. *The Paris Review* has patrons. It has a circulation of about 6,000, using real numbers. Plimpton used fake numbers [laughter].

GP: Is there a trend towards self-promotion in independent literary publishing?

RF: Yes. We increasingly live in a celebrity-driven culture. One sees magazine editors becoming quasi-celebrities. But that’s not the function of an editor. The function of an editor is to serve two audiences—writers and readers. The idea of celebrity-ness is very, very strong in American culture at the moment. I don’t think it’s a good thing and you try to avoid it as best you can. That doesn’t mean that you don’t try to get publicity for the magazine or to try and give writers an appropriate audience.

I think that one of the difficulties is that there has been, as you know, a proliferation of not only writing programs, but publications. On one level that’s fine. But do the magazines serve literary or institutional ends? That’s a very important question. If they serve purely literary ends, then that’s one thing. If they merely serve as a vehicle for students at a college or a university getting some experience, that’s a different matter.

What is the magazine’s audience? Why does it exist? In the case of most magazines, these are really pretty small enterprises. And they exist, like your corner drugstore, your corner grocery store—to sell things.

Without substantial revenues it’s very hard to be competitive in a world in which there are lots of books that are published.

There are lots of ways in which people spend their time. There's more competition for cultural matters.

GP: Do you see the relationship between literary magazine design and content as having changed in recent years?

RF: Some magazines—and this is not just recent—are put together for the purpose of design. And the design overwhelms the text. And you don't want to do that. You want to have the design serve the text.

There's a magazine, which I found unreadable in the first couple of issues, published by the University of Illinois at Champaign. I found it impossible to read—the layout, the design, the overlays, the use of the contrasting colors. They're coffee table books. They're not books that ultimately get read. And I think that it mimics too much of the commercial culture.

We're very fortunate as a magazine in that we have had the same designer, David Battle, for thirty years. David resides in Yellow Springs. And I happen to think that the *Antioch Review* is very well-designed. It's accessible. It has rather striking covers. And the cover serves the purpose of drawing in a potential audience.

One of the things that magazines have to do is, first of all, get in somebody's hands. Secondly, you have to get them to open the page. And then the hard work begins for them. . . .

Many magazines are insipid. They stick a picture of a bird on a tree as the cover. They do sentimental covers. Others never change at all. I think the format of *The Sewanee Review* has been the same for as long as I can remember. It begins with book reviews. Well, it's not a bad idea. It's not the most exciting way to begin your read. But they have had a consistent pattern of design.

Ours is different. And I think one of the good things about literary magazines is that they should be different one from an-

other, both in terms of their content and also in terms of how they look and how they feel. The size of the book makes a difference. The heft of it. Is it big enough? Does it have enough to convince somebody to spend a total of ten dollars for it? All of those are key elements in a magazine and we pay attention to that as best we can. There is a commercial side to all of this.

GP: What literary magazines make essential reading for you? Which editors do you follow to track the direction they are taking their magazines?

RF: I glance at a large number of them. We do exchanges with about 140 magazines. I pay attention to the kind of changes that they make in the look of the magazine.

I think that *Tin House* is a good magazine. I admire Lee Montgomery, who is one of the editors there. She's a very good writer and they've been able to push themselves.

I think *Ploughshares* is a fine magazine. It rotates the editorship, which gives it a certain kind of freshness, I think. I think there's an advantage of doing that, actually.

The Kenyon Review is a very solid magazine. Quite often, with new magazines, you have to sort of wait a while, because you don't know whether or not they're a Potemkin village. Is it real? Will it last? Is it just façade?

I think *The Hudson Review*, which probably has a relatively small circulation, is a serious magazine. It's sort of old fashioned, and it publishes quite good critiques of contemporary music. It publishes works on the arts. It has a fair range to it.

TriQuarterly, under its recent editors—and Reg Gibbons was the editor for a long time—it's a very serious and sober magazine. It's not dull. It takes itself seriously. It places itself within this tradition of literary magazines whose job is not to mimic or ape the commercial world or to follow a trend. We're no different than

a lot of other cultures. We have trends. And it's like following the stock market. You know, you're not supposed to time the stock market; it's a cliché. And you shouldn't follow trends. They're there and there'll be another one.

Sometimes when I do special issues—I did one on jazz a couple of years ago that was quite successful. We then got a lot of submissions on jazz. But I had no interest in doing a second issue. So that particular trend lasted for one issue. It was a perfectly good issue. It had a lot of interesting stuff in it. It sold well.

Writers should look at a magazine and ask, "Do you want to be in the company of the writers that you're reading? Is that something that's important to you?" And I think that it is. You like to be in the company of good people.

One of the functions of an editor is taste. the *Antioch Review* is a reflection of my taste. I'm perfectly willing to acknowledge that. And I feel that editors show what their taste is by the kinds of material that they publish. And, you know, your taste may change over time. It may get more sophisticated. You don't want it to be merely following a trend. I think that's a dangerous thing to do.

GP: How do you view the literary magazine's place in the political sphere?

RF: Well, the *Antioch Review*, as I said earlier, was a political magazine in its early years. I think that universities have an obligation to pursue the truth and not to become partisan. And I think the same is true of literary magazines. If one uses the word political in a kind of conventional way, then it should not be a mouthpiece for X or Y. If one broadens the definition of political, it shouldn't become merely a coterie magazine. It ought to be open to different sorts of things, different kinds of writers.

GP: After all these years at the *Antioch Review*, how do you keep the magazine fresh?

RF: By not simply paying attention to brand new writers, but to writers whose work is appealing. I mean, we've had two recent occasions, where there was, I think, a 50-year gap between the publication of a story by a writer and the publication of a second story. It was quite amazing.

Bruce J. Friedman is a perfect example. We published Bruce in his early years when he was an up-and-coming young writer. Fifty years later, he sent us another story, which is wonderful. It's a terrific story. His writing is still as good as it was and it's as fresh.

So, I think that trying to keep the pages of the magazine fresh is really one of the key elements of a literary culture. But you don't want it to be merely limited to the new, new. You want it to be something which people want to read and feel affected.

The case of the memoir is a good example. Memoir is an honorable form. And we've published a fair number of them. But I don't want to be known as a magazine that just publishes memoirs. I'm probably going to cut back on the number of memoirs that we publish, even though the quality of them has improved rather dramatically in the last three to four years. They're very, very good. And they're quite wonderful in their own way. But there are other purposes a magazine should serve.

GP: It seems that within and without the academy there is a general lack of knowledge about literary magazine history. Writers frequently submit their work to magazines about which they know little or nothing. Are there some magazines that stand out to you today as important for young writers to know about? Is there a literary magazine canon, a chosen few that you might recommend to a young writer interested in literary magazine history?

RF: Yes, there are a couple of them. The Hoffman book is the standard. It's an old book. *TriQuarterly* did a special issue in which there were a large number of contributors. This was again somewhat dated. There's been no recent work that I'm aware of that tries to bring people up-to-date.

I think one place to begin is by looking at the volumes of the best of whatever it is—the best mysteries, for example, or the best short stories. Those are pretty decent barometers. Or the Pushcart Prizes, which are widely respected.

So, I would start with that. And then, from there, regularly read literary magazines of a fairly wide range. I think that one has to immerse oneself. It's like going to museums, ultimately. If you're interested in art history, you'd better go to museums. If you're an artist, what you do is you try to see all of the work that you can to become immersed in the literature.

GP: The *Antioch Review* continues to feature book reviews. Why is it important to you to include book reviews in your magazine?

RF: We recently added a column by John Taylor, who's an expert on French poetry, because I felt that poetry was getting short shrift with regard to reviews. But I also wanted him to cover a big range of things and particularly Continental. He has, over the last two years, published reviews on Dutch poetry from the 1950s, as well as translations from Palestinian poetry and Israeli poetry. The range is really quite remarkable. And I think that it opens up avenues for people. It suggests to them that there's more to the poetic world than just what they're reading in their classes and that maybe they ought to look at this.

Reviews are hard to come by, particularly with regard to poetry. You're lucky if you get four or five reviews. The major poets will, of course, all be reviewed. They'll be reviewed and, you know, Mark Strand and any number of people will have their work re-

viewed. But if you're published by a small publishing house, the chances of your getting a review are not great. So, I think that you're performing a service, both for the reader and for writers. And I think that's one of the functions of the magazine.

GP: Of course, some poets need those reviews for tenure [laughter].

RF: Yes. Yes, they do. I don't know whether or not online publications serve the same purpose—it's not clear to me. I can't speak with any authority about that.

And there's also the notion of peer review in the academic world, where you have to be in peer-reviewed journals. So, a review in the *Antioch Review* might help someone. But more importantly, it gives them a sense that they're being noticed. And getting noticed is important for a writer in a very competitive world. We tend not to run significantly negative reviews. I mean, we just don't. It's been our policy for a long time.

GP: What is needed to maintain a literary magazine in today's environment?

RF: A lot of hours [laughter]. It's not easy. You need to have a purpose. You need to have some sense about why you're doing it. So, that's important. It's important in anything.

You have to recognize that there is this commercial side to it and that, if you don't pay attention to that, your deficits will go up.

One of the major difficulties for any magazine is distribution. People take distribution for granted—how it gets into bookstores. One of the distributors just recently went bankrupt—it had the odd habit of not paying people. DeBoer was a major outlet. We are very lucky. We have Ingram. Ingram's a big, major distributor. We're in lots of bookstores.

I think that there are many different facets to publishing a magazine. And some of them are rather pedestrian. One has to pay attention, for example, to reprints. We have a big backlog and we are still getting reprint money from a very famous essay published by Daniel Bell, who's one of the most important sociologists in the world, actually. That was published in 1945. We're still getting royalties from that. The backlist is very important for any publication. And, in fact, with the electronic world now, we've seen a rather marked increase in the amount of money that we get from electronic rights.

So, there is this standard problem for any publishing house. How do you build the backlist? How do you sustain it? Can you live off it? Probably not. Can you manage not only the cash flow, but can you manage the sheer volume of works that will come in once you develop a reputation of some kind?

GP: What has been the darkest moment in the *Antioch Review's* history?

RF: Well, on more than one occasion there was a threat to withdraw the subsidy. Our subsidy is modest. This year, I know, we will run a deficit of \$26,000. Now, that's Starbucks' money, actually; it's chump change. But once you stop publishing a single issue, you're in trouble. Because one of the major audiences is someone who never ever reads the magazine and that's a periodical librarian. The periodical librarian wants that periodical to come when you say it's going to come, so they can send it off to the bindery. It's that simple. If you miss an issue, you're pretty much out of business, because there's no reason for a library to continue you. And once you're out of the sight of the buying public, you're going to be read only by, you know, aunts and uncles of writers.

And so, the *Review* has been under threat in at least two points in its history. And it was rescued by a grant from the State of Ohio,

actually, in the late, early '70s, that I wrote. And that's always at the back of one's mind—we're sponsored by Antioch University. We're under the university. We're no longer under the [Antioch] College. We haven't been under the College for about ten years. And so, the closing of Antioch College will not affect the *Review* in any significant way, as far as I know. But you never know.

GP: For our readers who may not be tuned in to this, what is the difference between Antioch College and Antioch University?

RF: Antioch University is basically a holding company. In the late '60s, Antioch College began to establish satellites and centers elsewhere. At one point there were as many as twenty-six. At the moment, they are freestanding institutions accredited by regional accrediting associations. And these serve mostly adult populations; they don't serve the traditional college population of the eighteen to twenty-two-year-old. And these universities are located in Seattle, Los Angeles, one in Yellow Springs—an adult campus—and in New England. There is a central administration.

Antioch College was founded in 1854 by Horace Mann, who was the first president, and the College has a long and very distinguished history, with not only famous graduates of some note, but a very interesting history which, regrettably, has now come to an end.

GP: There are some of us who still can't wrap our minds around the closure of Antioch College. One of the questions that I often hear is, "How could the College faculty and alumni and other interested parties have allowed a situation where Antioch College no longer had a Board of Trustees—a governing board? How did the governance get usurped by the university?"

RF: Well, a decision was made by the Board itself, actually. I'd say twenty years ago, I think it must have been at least twenty

years ago, when these entities were called “centers.” (They are now colleges, part of the university system.) The trustees made a conscious decision to develop what was then called a network. And it developed at the cost of the College in some ways. It took the historic endowment of the College and folded it into the University. The College’s administrators were forced to pay more attention to University affairs.

And then there were just, kindly put, missteps that occurred along the way by the College administration. As the College began to shrink—the College has never had a large endowment and the University doesn’t have a huge endowment. I think the endowment’s about \$30 million. That’s not much money in today’s world.

And so, there’s . . . to put it bluntly, there’s blood on a lot of hands. There is no single cause for why Antioch College disappeared. I think it became too inward-looking, actually. It shrunk the co-op program, which had been one of its distinctive features. It began to be more concerned about itself, rather than about the world. And by that I mean colleges have obligations which are beyond practical ones. They exist to enhance knowledge, to further it, to educate, in this case, young people, to make opportunities available for them to extend their capacities.

I think the “Antioch experience,” as it is called, is similar to the myth of perpetual return. It’s the great heroic myth. The myth of the person going out and seeking the treasures and then bringing the treasures back for consumption by the locals. Now, that’s a heroic notion, and it is, of course, one of the elements of the college. Colleges don’t always do things that are practical. There is an impractical side. You know, why do you study astronomy, one of the more impractical subjects available? Well, studying the skies is a wonderful thing. And there is an aesthetic.

And I think that's one of the things that magazines are concerned with also, not just with colleges and universities—they're there to sort of elevate in some ways, to almost to spiritualize the world. That's what words do. Words really make a difference. They're not merely words. These, when strung together in a wonderful sentence, they elevate the spirit in a significant way. And I think that that's an important function for a college and/or a university to maintain.

GP: The founders of the *Antioch Review* were all Antioch College faculty. You were a professor of history at the college for many years—a college that I suppose now no longer exists. Can one imagine the *Antioch Review* in any other place than Yellow Springs, Ohio?

RF: Oh, anything's possible. There is this historic association—if you go on the campus of the college there is a historical marker. And on that historical marker, among the various accomplishments it lists, is the *Antioch Review* was founded here in 1941. So, its historic association is very deep.

Half of the members of our advisory board—it's a national board—are graduates of the college. The other half of the advisory board are non-Antioch people. And they involve people like Richard Stern, a very fine writer. David St. John, who is a long standing poetry editor. Gordon Lish, who we will be featuring in the next issue, in the summer issue. Amy Hempel, who's one of America's finest short story writers. And Gerald Early, who's a first-rate social commentator, historian and critic, who we published very early in his career—it's not a pun. And Tom Boyle, the same thing. We published him quite early in his career.

And so, this mixture suggests in some ways local interests. But at the same time, it also has had a larger purchase in the world. And I think that's important, that magazines not become too pa-

rochial, focused only on a subset of the academic world, or even a subset of the commercial world.

It is the expansiveness of a magazine in some ways that can make it very appealing. One of our writers, Peter LaSalle, said that often the inclusion of nonfiction in a literary magazine draws people in. It makes them—they're easier to read, actually, than a really difficult story or a difficult poem. So that, if you have this mixture, people can pick and choose.

And you know, in an age of specialization where people buy things that are just germane to one area, if I have any editorial philosophy, it is that I really would like to surprise people.

GP: For this issue of *Mississippi Review*, we are asking our editor friends to give us the name of an emerging writer that you have published recently in your pages, whose future seems especially promising. We will then solicit work from that writer for this issue. Who comes to mind for you?

RF: The term “emerging writer” is often is a euphemism for young. I think people emerge at different points. My choice is someone who has actually written four novels. She teaches at Cornell. And she wrote a wonderful memoir piece for us. Her name is Maureen McCoy. I don't know how old she is. I've never met her. I like the work. I think it's interesting. I think it's honest. For instance, she writes of her father, who she didn't know very well.

When her father dies, condolence cards come to their home. And they're all from bars that he went to and drank in. It wasn't that he had a secret life; he had another life. And it's through this other life that she begins to understand certain things about her father, which she simply didn't know. This is not easy to write about. So, she's known somewhat as a novelist, but she's now emerging as, I think, a quite good memoir writer.

And I think that that kind of emergence, regardless of age, is really what's important. An old friend of mine, Cyrus Colter, wrote a wonderful book called *The Beach Umbrella*. He won the Iowa Short Fiction Award. I think it was the second one. He started writing when he was 50 years old.

He was an emerging writer in many ways. He was a distinguished lawyer. He was on the board of the Chicago Philharmonic. He was a rather remarkable man. But he emerged and he wrote a wonderful book, which is about the black middle class, not the "underclass," but the middle class. And it's a handsome book.

I know a writer who wrote a story called "Dog It." And it's got a gun. It's got a girl. It's got a dog. It's got problems of one kind or another. It happens to be a terrific story. It was included in the Pushcart Prize. This is written by a man who runs a large manufacturing company in DeKalb, Illinois. He's not—you know, he doesn't go to literary meetings. He doesn't go to literary conferences. He doesn't live in Brooklyn [laughter]. All of those things ought not to disqualify him, because he's just a very good writer. He hasn't sent me anything since then, but presumably he's working at it.

GP: Maybe he will . . .

RF: Maybe he will.