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David Hamilton: Jim the Wonder Dog

"If my mind could gain a firm footing," writes Montaigne in "Of Repentance," "I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always on apprenticeship and on trial" (611). So he continues to enlarge his essays and record changes in his thinking. I find similarly that each issue of *The Iowa Review* essays my discerning. If I could ever get one entirely right, I should retire.

"I'm sorry; we regret that we cannot use . . ." Thus the key phrase in the rejection slip I inherited and that we have come around to again. I felt embarrassed at first by its presumption, another subject of Montaigne's, as if some Deus applied his Machina to our unsolicited submissions, turned a crank and so separated, by universal law, those we could use from those we could not. Forces beyond my control made those determinations, and I was as subject to them as the writers. Feeling instead that our decisions, however flawed, or not, were choices we chose to make, neither bound nor threatened by forces beyond our control, I changed the wording over the years in a variety of ways to admit my responsibility for what we selected. But I have come around to that phrasing again because in a way it is so: to the extent that I aspire to make decisions, not just essays of choice, I owe it to myself, and to my sense of the magazine, to not use, to feel in fact that I simply cannot use, whatever fails to inform my sense of what getting it entirely right, just once, entails.

So the question of our panel is the only question. Writing I find I can use is my only excuse for a magazine and my belief that I have found it my only reason for continuing. Will we favor free-standing essays offered as art or are we seeking commentary? Do we want stories with beginnings, middles, and ends and a character making her or his way through crisis to a heightened discovery of being, or may they be metafictional, experimental, surrealistic, unrealistic, hyper-realistic, humorous, fantastic, or anything other than traditional? Then with poems, but calling upon terms that apply to the other genres equally, are we looking for the readerly in its

approach to us or for the writerly in its withdrawal? And are we then, to continue with Barthes' terminology, capable of bliss as we chase after a unique experience in reading if not in comprehension?

When I stumble over these questions, as I do daily, I often seek out Jim and ask his advice. Jim the Wonder Dog, a Llewellyn setter, lived from 1925-37, a touch before my time, and when he passed on, the people of my hometown, where he had become a leading personality, sought to place his remains in the cemetery. Authority, however, demurred. A plot just over the fence was the compromise, but the cemetery extended, and extended again, so now Jim lies just about dead center. His grave is the most visited site within it even though we could point out those of a Civil War governor and two generals, one from each side, both sons of the governor, and of a small flock of other distinguished persons. When I get a chance, I sit in the shade of elms that have volunteered around Jim and run over my questions. He always catches me up on something.

For instance, when I rehearse a heartfelt distinction between writer-driven and editor-driven magazines and seek to identify with the former and dismiss the latter as mere commercial ventures, when, that is, I would banner my altruistic leanings toward writers of loftier insight and more nuanced sensibility than I, Jim reminds me, idealisms notwithstanding, that the medium is also the message; the material means and circumstances of production inform art as much as individual creativity; the writer's intention, that frail vessel, is quite regularly swamped by readers' countervailing designs; in short, the writer is just another voter; some peoples' votes count more than others, and editors stuff the ballot boxes even when they protest they'll do no such thing.

Jim was a clever dog. Not only is his grave much visited but a small public park just off the square commemorates his Wonder. It features a highly realistic statue of Jim—if you accept bronze casting as realistic—and water features provided by the Garden Club. Jim belonged to the manager of the Ruff Hotel, which was once on that site. It stood two blocks uphill from the railroad station and was an easy hike for traveling salesmen. Long before TV and with little in the way of movies, Jim provided much evening entertainment. "Jim, who drove here in an out-of-state car?" his owner, a Mr. Van Arsdale, would ask, and Jim would go sit in front of the stranger. "Jim, who here has borrowed her sister's pink suit?" and Jim would take his place before that lady. "Jim, who here doesn't believe in you?" and off he would trot to stare down the offending guest.

Legend has it that these talents were discovered out hunting one summer afternoon. At first, anyway, Jim was little given to hunting and Mr. Van A. was frustrated. He had about given up on Jim, and was thinking of making a present of him to an unsuspecting neighbor, when he muttered, as much to himself as to Jim, "Geez, it's hot. Why don't you find us a shady walnut?" Jim trotted off and sat down beneath one. As you can imagine, that question led to others, and before long Jim was a celebrity. A might before my time as I said, but in all my years in that town I never found a doubter. My late uncle claimed to have watched him perform a number of times and so did my brother's first grade teacher. Both were persuaded, as were language professors at the state U, who couched their questions in a range

of languages that were all Greek to his owner. Greek was one of them, and Jim continued unerring. In fact one smart aleck wrote something in Greek on a slip of paper and set it before Jim; this time Jim sat still and did nothing and onlookers thought he had finally been caught out until his interrogator confessed he'd only written out the alphabet and had not asked him a question. By some reports he picked Kentucky Derby winners, seven in a row, and two presidential elections.

Well, when it comes to my first set of alternatives, we are good fence sitters, better for watching dogs in the field, and we manage a bit of both. That is, we favor essays as works of art but find commentary irresistible now and then. We tend to run commentary as review essays, which we would favor more if we got more good ones. We have been known, too, for both traditional and maverick fiction. I'd say there's really little better than a good, traditional story with characters that seem like people suffering or at least extending themselves through situations that touch both mind and heart; it's just that very few of them stick with you. Even if it affects me today, I find, if I can't remember it tomorrow, that I can afford to let it go; that I have in fact let it go and may as well admit as much, in which case high wire acts of all sorts fill out our pages admirably. As for poems, I'm capable of both ways of reading. I tend to believe that the greater risk lies in insightful simplicity and being all but fully understood, and possibly disliked for it; besides, I can only follow the path of bliss with one flirt at a time, whereas multitudes bid for our attention.

Or to take this a step further, I find the excuse of many that my lack of comprehension only betrays my incapacity for bliss and my unwillingness to work hard for it to be naive and sentimental in its self-valuing. The nearer truth is that those writers haven't anything like an idea they could possibly be clear about; they have little to offer but their rarified, cliquish, pretensions. It is always possible, of course, that I'll fail to respond to the exceptional case, and that possibility gives every pretender leverage. But genius, by definition, cannot possibly become group-think which is what every stray obscurantist offers—his or her own small way of being not found out in workshop. There's good reason why the very few Steins and Pounds who molded our era had to be published first, not by genius editors from afar who panned true ore from their slush, but by individuals near at hand upon whom they had exerted their considerable charisma, condescension, and charm. That at least is what I believe when most beleaguered. On my better days every would be writer is to be cherished for his or her endearing amalgam of daydream, industry, and self-sacrifice which once in a while I can reward, if only by a little.

But before you give up on me, as Mr. Van A. was about to do on Jim, let me add that Jim has one more clue to offer, and I'll leave you with it. It's a neat trick, I suppose, but rather tiresome to be a dog who identifies the pink dress, the out-of-state car, or the unbelieving observer and who can distinguish the alphabet from a question. It is a trick worthy of many a workshop afternoon to be so unerring. But enough is enough.

Let us suppose though that Jim and his owner go hunting again one hot summer day. Having used up their water and found no birds, they sweat. Mr. Van A. wipes his brow and turns to his Wonder Dog, "Jim, why don't you find us the shade of a fine, old walnut?" This time Jim flops down. Following through one more time is just beneath his dignity, which reaches at least to a walnut's lower branches. He'd

rather roll in the dust than perform again and he does. Mr. Van A. shakes his head, mutters something unsavory, and returns to his Model T. Jim tags along, head and tail down, and when the door opens, drags himself inside. “What’s wrong with you, Jim; you lazy or something?” Mr. Van A. admonishes. Jim just lies there and naps all the way back into town. At the hotel door though he perks up. He beats his master out of the car and with one glance back, trots inside. He crosses the lobby and sits down smiling in front of one handsome, antique, breakfront, walnut cabinet. “Bingo,” I hope I’ll always say, “you are accepted.”

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After over four decades of university teaching and three of editing *The Iowa Review*, David Hamilton looks, not quite idly, toward whatever comes next, with a few books and chapbooks to his credit (*Ossabaw*, *Deep River*, *The Least Hinge*, *Hard Choices*) and with hopes for a few more.

Lynne Nugent: The Death of the Issue?: New Challenges and Opportunities for the University-Affiliated Literary Magazine

In an October 2009 presentation to librarians, graduate students, and professors at the University of Iowa, librarian and copyright activist Molly Kleinman convincingly argued for the virtues of the Open Access (OA) model, a platform in which writing (mostly scholarly writing in her examples) is published directly to the Web and made freely available to readers. Concerned that traditional publishing models place too many walls around scholarship, Kleinman and other OA advocates envision journals that aren’t cordoned off from readers by the price of an individual subscription or, more likely in the age of online research, by the price a university library pays to a service that provides electronic access to content.

Rather than subscribe to a print journal or check one out from the library, scholars now are more apt to search online for a single article from within a journal. OA dispenses with the print artifact altogether and allows for single articles to be searched for and printed out at will. This new model does away with subscriber revenue, Kleinman conceded, but it saves on paper and glue and ultimately increases readership exponentially. These journals give up on the dream of being supported by their readers, usually requiring funding from a sponsoring institution instead, but they fulfill their mission of disseminating knowledge to a wider pool of readers while operating with a smaller price tag than ever.

“Does this mean the end of the print journal?” one slightly-anxious sounding audience member asked Kleinman during the Q & A period.

“Books are a useful technology,” she replied. “I don’t think the book is going to go away. You can read a book in the bathtub and not have to worry about being electrocuted. However, in the world of journals, there might not be so much need for the ‘issue.’ Print-on-demand may take its place.”

The slightly-anxious sounding audience member was me. I’m the managing editor