

## **A Tribute: Brian Abel Ragen**

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For many years Brian Abel Ragen entertained dining companions with stories about D.C. Collier Junior High. It was evidently not the sort of institution that one might have expected a man who seemed happiest in a blazer and spoke in Johnsonian periods enlivened by occasional descents into the demotic. Instead, it was a public school near the beach, which in the era Ragen recalls meant that a good portion of the student body had but three goals in life: to surf every day, to woo the bong every night, and to lay a beating on anyone who let down the side by answering a question in history class. “My mother thought all boys should go to public schools, because they should learn about the sort of men they would manage. (Being spared by her sex from the burdens of life as an executive, she had herself attended the Bishop’s School for Girls.) My brother and I learned that there were sorts of people it was best to avoid at all costs and went into professions where we hoped never to see them. I had rosy ideas about college teaching in those days.” The stories of Ragen’s attempts to get through the day with as few injuries and as little humiliation as possible were quite amusing, though we doubt he would appreciate our putting them in print.

One thing he laughed about for years was the school’s mission to give all students a “salable skill,” so all boys took metalwork, woodwork, and graphic arts. The woodwork came in handy, now and then, but there never seems to be much need to cast a hacksaw handle from molten aluminum. But what Ragen laughed about most was graphic arts: “They wanted me to have a salable skill, so they taught me to set moveable type just when even the linotype was becoming obsolete.” As the years have passed, he has admitted again and again that carrying fonts, setting lines so that they were justified by adding slugs, and adjusting vertical spacing on a

page by adding thin strips of lead had been the best preparation for one of the most interesting parts of his career. “Aside from reading the backwards letters, everything I learned in that cramped, inky classroom helped me better understand how page layout, even using a computer, works. The metaphors on which layout are based are dead ones for most people: they are very much alive for me.” He also suggested that browsing through an ancient edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, one that reminded authors who added any text in proof to delete an equal number of characters from the same page, was a formative experience.

And why would a literary critic need to know the minutiae of the printer’s trade? First because the English Department at SIUE wanted a professional-looking newsletter and couldn’t afford a professional. That was a minor job. In 1991 a major job presented itself. *Papers on Language & Literature* had lost its long-time editor, Alvin Sullivan, who died after a long illness. It then lost half of its funding, and Sullivan’s successor was unwilling to take the steps necessary to deal with the crisis. Many at the university were willing to let a scholarly journal that it had hosted more than two decades die. *PLL* then was just the sort of operation that any editor of a first-class journal would ask for: the editor received two units of reassigned time from a three course load, he worked with an essentially full-time secretary and a graduate assistant, and he had all layout and artwork handled by an outside printer. Those days were clearly at an end. Ragen and Professor Jack Voller created a system that allowed the journal to go on. Voller proved a financial wizard and made some hard choices, such as raising subscription rates and ending the gracious but expensive practice of sharing copies of each issue with many other journals or the libraries that supported them. Ragen brought all the page-layout in-house, creating a body of styles that gave the journal a consistent look and a group of procedures and checklists that made processing accepted manuscripts a clear and efficient process. Jean Vassier, who had handled accounts and correspondence, became a true managing editor who soon was

handling PageMaker with ease and discussing fonts and file formats with the printer as if they were common knowledge. She received no increased compensation for her extra work, and the editors did without the graduate assistant and one unit of reassigned time each term. PLL, however, survived, and despite a few glitches every now and then, it carried on with its quality unimpaired.

For several years, Ragen and Voller took the editorial duties term by term, with Ragen always fielding questions on page layout and Voller keeping the finances in order. In 1997, Voller left PLL and has since published several books on the Gothic and made himself a master of web technology.

Ragen then carried on as sole editor. He has often said that life as an editor is an endless round of “begging, thanking, and snubbing.” The editor is constantly begging busy scholars to evaluate manuscripts, he is constantly thanking those referees—and even the occasional donor—and since most manuscripts have to be rejected out of hand or after the expert reader has reported on them, he is constantly snubbing someone. Sending out the rare acceptance letter, sadly, does not make up for all the gloom the editor spreads, since it will often turn the humble supplicant who has submitted a manuscript into a prima donna whose every comma is sacrosanct and who refuses to bend the knee even before that never-to-be-questioned power, the House Style.

Ragen and the editorial staff recall some essays that should not have gotten through, but fortunately not very many. There have also been submissions that in their transcendent lunacy gave the editors—and, frankly, everyone passing by the door of our basement offices—the sort of glee and, indeed, awe at the heights of human folly that most of us lose after the first couple years of teaching freshman English. Sadly, the seal of the brown, self-addressed envelope prevents us from giving examples.

What Ragen remembers more, however, are the essays that were a joy to read. Even some good articles contribute to knowledge but are not that much fun. But who can resist an essay on the language of science that begins, “A little known fact about Charles Darwin is that he spent a good part of his old age investigating whether plants could hear bassoons” (William J. Mistichelli citing Janet Browne, *PLL* 34, 1998)? Many essays were not just contributions to scholarship but good pieces of writing. Those were the ones Ragen was proudest of publishing.

Through it all—and the years might be counted with the versions of PageMaker and InDesign—the challenge of making authors look good in print absorbed Ragen. It took years for the various styles to reach their final form. (How shall we make sure every multi-paragraph block quotation within a footnote look like every other? How much space between epigraphs when the author insists on more than one? Where shall we put acknowledgements of support from foundations?) And then there have been the quotations from foreign languages, and the attempts to make carons (haceks) appear in the right place without giving up the New Baskerville font we had used for years. In a recent issue, we published a facing page edition and translation of an Old French Romance. For days and days Ragen was absorbed in getting the two texts to march together, with all the line numbers in place. When Melanie Ethridge took over as managing editor in 2000, Ragen seemed to be speaking a foreign language half the time. Part of the process of preparing a manuscript was “inserting the appropriate ligatures.” What is this, surgery? Who noticed that in a good book “**f i**” and “**f l**” became “f” and “fl”? And the first essays on Old and Middle English brought forth a flood of “ashes,” “eths,” “thorns,” and “youghs.” It was like introductory linguistics again—except they never even mentioned “youghs!”

Ethridge soon enough learned the whole business of running the journal and—since good work always brings more tasks—of managing the accounts for the three other journals the English Department at SIUE published. And thanks to the imaginative and skillful work of the

then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences—Sharon Hahs, now president of Northeastern Illinois University—*PLL*'s financial future is secure. In addition, *PLL* has generated more of its own revenue in recent years. Thanks to desktop publishing, all the recent articles are now available on-line, and the regular stream of royalty checks from electronic publishers has helped the journal remain healthy even as print subscriptions have declined slightly.

The flood of manuscripts is unceasing, but it tosses up treasures often enough. Some arrive in almost perfect condition; some need a good deal of cleaning, a cleansing of the jargon that has grown like invasive barnacles over so much American literary criticism. Brian Abel Ragen has sifted through the flotsam and polished the tarnished doubloons. Ragen, who has published books on Flannery O'Connor and Tom Wolfe, will now devote more time to writing. We intend to keep calling him for advice on computers and page-layout.

When Ragen is asked what he is proudest of after 15 years as editor, he always gives that same answer: "That I am not the last editor of *PLL*."

The staff of *Papers on Language and Literature* would like to thank Professor Ragen for his dedication to the journal and wish him well in his retirement. We would also like to welcome Professor Jack Voller back to the journal as its editor.

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