

THE *MODERN LANGUAGE REVIEW*:  
THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS

The *Modern Language Review*, or the *MLR* as it has come to be known, has survived a century in which the world has changed in a manner which was hardly conceivable when the journal was first published in 1905. It has become one of the best known modern-language journals in the world and has a reputation for scholarly distinction and critical excellence. Oddly, perhaps, for our purposes here and indeed for the purposes of the MHRA which was to come into existence later, modern languages included English; and this still applies since, contrary to what many people seem to believe, the critical methods, the subject matter, the very nature of our discourse are similar if not identical. We have changed with the times, of course. We publish articles on linguistics and we publish articles on cinema. We have expanded our definitions of the subject matter of our disciplines as the times have required it. The advent of the Internet and the easy access to online resources have radically altered the way in which research in our disciplines is carried out, especially, perhaps, for those working in the earlier periods, where access to primary sources was problematic for those not living within easy reach of a major research library. And yet, if we look at the journal as it appeared in 1905 and compare it with the issues that appear now, we will see obvious similarities.

The first volume has no introduction and is launched with an article by G. Gregory Smith: 'Some Notes on the Comparative Study of Literature'. It could be argued that there could be no better introduction to the essence of the journal and to the Association which produces it. The article is dated October 1905, which is a curious date to launch a journal—but it coincides, of course, with the university term. We should not forget that for many years, and still mostly today, the editorial work and the process of reading and judging were undertaken by busy academics for whom the *MLR* represented an additional burden, but one that was readily undertaken because of our love of and commitment to the subjects we teach and research. There was clearly a belief in those early days that our disciplines could benefit from studies which drew links and crossed boundaries. Gregory Smith writes:

the comparative method emphasises the *positive* side of criticism—the unity of literature rather than the differences, or, let us say, the unity in the differences. It searches for what is common (not necessarily by contact or infusion), and would help us to reach the fundamental ideas in the history of *motif* and form. (p. 5)

The first issue of the journal had this introductory article, an article on English translations of Dante, and then a series of 'Notes' on Shelley; there follows an article on the authorship of the songs in Lyly's plays, two pages of 'Shakespeareana', an article entitled 'A German Version of the Thief-Legend' (which does draw parallels with other versions in other languages), and then twelve pages of book reviews, ordered somewhat differently from the present-day review section, starting with German and followed by English and then Italian, concluding with a short section entitled 'Minor Notices', where French texts are represented for the first time. The issue is rounded off with a list

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of new publications which contains 'General' books, books on Romance Languages (including medieval Latin, Italian, Spanish, Romanian, Provençal, and French) and Germanic Languages, with, again, General works, followed by Scandinavian, English, and German. There is a total of just eighty-four pages.

The first issue tries to do a lot: to define the nature of its study in the first article and then offer some critical analyses which would not be out of place in today's journal. Here, surely, is one of the great qualities of the journal—its articles remain alive and can be read with pleasure and interest today. There is evidence of solid and serious scholarship, with intelligent minds asking probing questions and giving new answers. In those days it was edited by John G. Robertson and published in Cambridge at the University Press, and there was an advisory board of sixteen members. It was described as 'A quarterly journal devoted to the study of medieval and modern literature and philology'. A glance at the index for the first ten volumes suggests an emphasis on the canonical literature but also a willingness to publish work on linguistic issues, on translations, and on detailed textual analysis. And, of course, there are the book reviews. These were a feature of the very first volume and they have remained an invaluable element of the journal throughout its first hundred years. The style of the reviews seems to have changed very little: brief introduction, analysis of content, and a final paragraph in which the reviewer's real message is imparted. For example: 'In spite of these defects, X's book is a valuable *Vorarbeit* which students of English theatre in the eighteenth century cannot afford to ignore'; 'The chapter on the novelist's [Balzac] influence—in which the name of Zola is not even mentioned—is a meagre and disappointing close to an admirable book'; and 'A work of this kind cannot be too well supplied with indices'. How true—and how similar to the reviews we read with pleasure today: fairly critical, informative, and, if possible, helpful.

The first volume of the *MLR* also had a short section giving news of interest to its readers, the kind of information which today would be found in a bulletin or in an electronic announcement. So we read: 'A "Société des Textes français modernes" has been formed under the presidency of M. Gustave Lanson, with a view to publishing more or less inaccessible texts at a moderate price.' We have come full circle, as the MHRA is launching its own series of Critical Texts. The first volume also has a list of 'New Publications', something which would be impossible these days; given the constraints of space, this is a task which is much better carried out using the Internet.

The early volumes did not have the strict structure which is a feature of the journal today. Articles appeared in no obvious order, so that, for example, the first item in the April 1906 issue is on 'Dante in Relation to the Sports and Pastimes of his Age'. The opening lines read:

From the outset it must be confessed that Dante is an inadequate exponent of the sports and pastimes of his age. His references are so scanty that they may be considered barely worth collecting. Yet this very scarcity has an interest, because it sets his reader thinking how it was that Dante, who sings and writes of so many sides of Italian life, should almost pass by in silence those amusements which for the majority of his countrymen made life worth living. (p. 174)

This modest opening leads us into an article which is rich and full of suggestive comments, evidence of a most careful reading of the corpus. The author was Edward Armstrong. No institutional affiliation was given in the early volumes—people either knew or it did not matter.

The first reference to the Modern Humanities Research Association appears in Volume 17 of 1922. The 'prelims' followed the list of contents. We read: 'This Association was founded at Cambridge on June 1st, 1918, and numbers about 800 members. Its main object is the encouragement of advanced study in Modern Languages and Literatures by co-operation, through correspondence, personal intercourse, the interchange of information and counsel, and financial support for students engaged in research.' The aims and ambitions were noble and generous and to this day they remain much the same. The remit of the *MLR*, which at that time was the only publication of the MHRA, was given in this introductory piece:

(1) Original Articles, embodying the results of research or criticism; (2) Texts and Documents, hitherto unprinted; (3) Miscellaneous Notes and Discussions; (4) Reviews and Minor Notices of Books; (5) Notes on matters of literary and scientific interest, including a quarterly chronicle of the Association; (6) Classified Bibliography of New Publications.

The issue for April 1923 contained the Bulletin of the MHRA, including a notice that the annual meeting of the Association would be held at Columbia University, New York city, in the following June, and news that the *MLR* for January

appears in a greatly enlarged form, consisting of one hundred and thirty-two pages in addition to its supplement, the *Bulletin*. This is partly due to the assistance of the Tiarks fund for the publication of research work in German and partly to the fact that the *Review* is steadily increasing its circulation, and becoming, in fact as well as in name, the journal of the Modern Humanities Research Association. Nor is this surprising, for there are few societies which supply to their members journals of the quality and standing of the *Review* at the rate of fifteen shillings for a volume of some four hundred and fifty to five hundred pages. We urge all members to contribute to the further success of the *Review* by sending in their order at once.

The Bulletin for January of the following year, 1924, announced the publication of Volume 19. The news was not all good:

Two years ago when the Association took over the *Review*, the finances of the journal were in such a condition that it seemed unlikely it could continue. Last year there was a deficit on the year's working of £120. This year, by means of our great efforts, we have reduced this to £75. Our great hope during 1924 is to wipe out this deficit entirely and to that end, we make a special appeal to *all* members to send us their subscriptions; one hundred additional subscribers and our end will be attained. The 1923 volume contains 520 pages, and it would be difficult to find any review in Europe, of the same high and scholarly standard, which is larger and better at the price of *fifteen shillings*, postage (to any part of the world) included. Even to non-members, who pay twenty-five shillings, the *Review* can hardly be called unduly expensive.

The accounts for the MHRA are included in this Bulletin and they show a loss for the *MLR*. The Bulletin also includes lists of recent members, with an impressive number coming from the United States. These were difficult times

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for the journal and for the Association which owned and published it. One can see that the problems were overcome, since the *MLR* has continued to appear without interruption to the present day. A decision was clearly taken not to include the Bulletins as an integral part of the journal, since 1923 seems to be the last date of their inclusion. Much depended on the good housekeeping of the Hon. Treasurer and the Hon. Secretary, as subscribers needed to be reminded of their obligations and readers were regularly told what excellent value the journal represented. In this respect, very little has changed. The *MLR* today covers a wider range of languages than the early volumes and it has expanded its interests to cinema, as already mentioned, and to comparative studies which might include the fine arts. It is now of consistent length and the entire publication process has been changed, in keeping with the technology which is now available to us. What has not changed is the quality of the journal and the generous and committed attitude of its editors, who give their time freely in the defence and pursuit of the humanities in which they, and the Association which they serve, so profoundly believe. It was the ambition and belief of the early pioneers of the journal which established it as, perhaps, the foremost publication of its kind in the world. In one century the *MLR* has published some 3250 articles and nearly 20,000 book reviews. A representative selection, from across the century, of articles on general and comparative topics is republished here, together with three new contributions by distinguished scholars. The ambition which drove the first editors has not changed and it is a challenge which we take into the next hundred years as we continue their good work and seek to maintain the journal's eminence.

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