Reviewing the Reviews
by Albert R. Vogeler

What is a review? It is an essay, short or long, summarizing and analyzing a book and discussing its importance in some category of literature. The word also denotes a periodical that prints such essays—a review journal. For almost all scholarly interests, and many vocational interests, specialized review journals devoted to the relevant new literature are at hand. Many distinguished periodicals—the Partisan Review, the Kenyon Review, the Hudson Review, the Paris Review, the Sewanee Review—have inherited the name from the nineteenth century but are devoted less to book reviewing than to essays, short stories, and poetry. And popular upscale magazines like Harper’s, the Atlantic, and the New Yorker carry a limited number of reviews.

But despite the abundance of such specialized journals and literary magazines, it is clear that book reviewing for the general reader has greatly diminished during the last decade. The relentless decline of major newspapers, attributable in part to the growth of the internet, has forced cost-cutting reductions in content and staff. Stand-alone weekly book review sections, reluctantly deemed dispensable, have disappeared from the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the San Diego Union-Tribune, the San Francisco Chronicle, Newsday, and the Los Angeles Times. Their relatively few book reviews are carried by other sections of the paper along with entertainment and the arts.

Only The New York Times stands firm with a diminished, but still robust, Sunday book review of about 30 pages and a staff of a dozen. But of the seven hundred to one thousand new books it receives every week it can review only about twenty per issue. Even counting its single daily book reviews, some written by the formidable Michiko Kakutani, it covers only a handful of mainstream titles and for others offers only short squibs. It can “make” a book with a front-page review. And for half a century the Times Best Seller lists have been the measure of a book’s popularity, if not of its quality.

Can the “common reader” hope to find a periodical more comprehensive than The New York Times Book Review? The answer is unequivocally Yes. There are three, the New York Review of Books, the London Review of Books, and the Times Literary Supplement. Their styles and agendas differ, but all are cultural powerhouses.

When The New York Times ceased publication early in 1963 due to a printing strike, several publishers, journalists, and critics decided to replace its rather stodgy book section with an independent and vigorous review, published twice a month, embodying their own literary and political values. They featured the extended essay as the defining characteristic of the New York Review, an essay centered on an important new book but also exploring larger relevant issues. (This of course was a revival of the long topical essays in great Victorian periodicals such as the Edinburgh Review, Westminster Review, and Fortnightly Review.) With length comes the need for a compelling style to hold the reader’s attention. For forty-five years the New York Review has attracted and cultivated some of the most fluent writers, as well as significant thinkers, of their time. And the editors found in David Levine a portrait cartoonist who provided thousands of distinctive images of these writers.

The names Saul Bellow, W.H. Auden, Alfred Kazin, Harold Bloom, John Updike, Norman Mailer, Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, William Styron, Gore Vidal, Joan Didion, and Truman Capote suggest the range of literary talent deployed in the NYRB over the years. Indeed, so many authors were regularly discussing other authors that critics spoke of the “New York Review of Our Books.” But the political dimension of culture has always been co-equal and deeply involved with the literary. Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, Noam Chomsky, Garry Wills, Ronald Dworkin, Vaclav Havel, Andrei Sakharov, Isaiah Berlin, and Tony Judt represent some of the voices that gave the
NYRB a strongly left-liberal stance, solidarity with dissidents, and a moral, philosophical, and historical depth.

The New York Review's vigorous stands against the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon, the Iraq War, and George W. Bush, together with a preoccupation with nuclear weapons, civil rights, and foreign policy, have made it a major political organ in America. But, according to its critics, it has thereby exceeded its proper role as a book review, and they have also derided it as an inbred New York, or East Coast, or Ivy League elitist coterie. But the excellence of its writing and research, its serious analytical manner, and the qualifications of its writers are all undeniable. It has been called “one of the great institutions of intellectual life here or elsewhere.”

Across the Atlantic, the London Review's beginnings resembled those of the NYRB: it emerged from a strike that suspended The Times of London in 1980. Its aim was similar: to offer substantial authoritative essays on the wider significance of important new books. And it engaged a comparable array of distinguished writers and critics, mostly British. Though it reviews many books with political themes, it is not strenuously committed to a political viewpoint, nor does it consistently pursue current controversial issues, as does the NYRB. Its book advertising, like that of its New York counterpart, provides a valuable overview of the best academic and commercial publishing. The London Review offers Londoners something more than twenty-six issues a year: a cozy well-stocked bookshop welcoming browsers, with an adjacent bakery, near the British Museum.

The Times Literary Supplement (now called TLS) is the godfather of existing book reviews, having been founded in 1902 as a supplement to The Times of London and becoming an independent weekly in 1914. While its reputation as a source of responsible and quotable judgments on books grew, so did the frustration of readers with its policy of anonymity for its reviewers—“Who said that about my book?” Finally, in 1974, one its most creative editors, John Gross, allowed the reviewers bylines. The TLS has since identified them more fully at the back of each issue, and also lists all twenty-seven of its editors by their subject specialties. It is an impressive and heavily academic roster, reminding us of the immense range of topics under review. The TLS has recently tried to erase any vestige of its reputation for dull staid sobriety by means of allusive and often punning titles. The Nobel Prize winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa has called it “the most serious, authoritative, witty, diverse and stimulating cultural publication in all the five languages I speak.”

These three iconic periodicals generally favor nonfiction over fiction. They celebrate and articulate not only the 500-year old transatlantic literary culture of the English language but also a Western literary culture 2,500 years old. All three have consistently made a point of honoring the achievements of the ancient world through the books they review and the scholars they employ. Similarly, all three offer essays inspired by new books on the life, literature and culture of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. Victorians, Modernists, and our own contemporaries are ever-present in their pages. Politics and philosophy, history and anthropology, religion and science, technology and psychology, art and music are inevitably encompassed in their essays. They represent the observations of some of the most articulate observers of our time. The NYRB, LRB, and TLS are, in effect, journals of ideas. This is more than can be said of mere “book reviews.”

The ultimate value of these three periodicals lies in something more than their currency, quality, and comprehensiveness. Though the internet can be seen as the enemy of book reviewing (in the case of newspapers), it is also provides a new dimension to the value of reviews by means of archiving. Periodicals live, accreting, through time. So to have the complete contents of these three book reviews instantaneously available and searchable on the internet, which can now be done, is a great gift to scholarship.