

# John Hicks

## Early Days

I AM ASKED FOR MY IMPRESSION of the first years at *The Massachusetts Review*: 1959-1965. What I recall most about that period is the strong sense of opportunity.

Opportunity meant the chance to build something worthwhile; perhaps memorable. We had the imagination and nerve to think so, and among us the talent and energy. The incentives were powerful.

Some of us had returned from the violence of World War II, we were hungry for more civilized arts, fine arts, and humane letters. We were eager to put experience, academic and otherwise, to constructive purpose. The *Review* became a means of doing so. Conceived as a “quarterly of literature, the arts, and public affairs,” it offered us broad scope and plenty to do. There was also glory enough for everyone. That raised the tempo of work and the quotient of fun.

*MR* rode on a tide of forces. We quickly became part of the radical transition of the former Massachusetts State Agricultural College into an expanding and aspiring University of Massachusetts created by post-war public demand. We became part of the ambitious recruitment of new faculty, part of the development of a Graduate School, part of the creation of new departments in new disciplines of research, and of new facilities to serve them. At the University, *MR* was an act of initiative and self-belief.

Concurrently, there was a growing reciprocity among the neighboring colleges in the Valley. Administrators discovered they could best pursue some objectives cooperatively. With greater efficiency, at less expense, with less duplication. Younger faculty at the colleges were by this time sharing intellectual interests anyway—having already shared World War II, and in many cases graduate school training. So inevitably began a four-college, later five-college, intellectual community.

Into this fertile setting, *MR* was born in 1959. Independently organized by UM professors and alumni, given office space by the University's department of English, it was first financed by a grant from the University Alumni Association, which also later provided larger editorial quarters in Memorial Hall. Doris Abramson, an early Board member, recalls one of *MR*'s earliest patrons. She had entertained Nina Curtis at dinner, and, perhaps partly because Ms. Curtis's brother, Lincoln Kirstein, was founding editor of *Hound and Horn*, talked about the *Review* and its financial problems. After her guest had left Doris found a check for one thousand dollars beside her plate. "Some tip!" Doris commented; Ms. Curtis remained an anonymous patron for several years. While having this imprimatur, and these University roots, the magazine reached out to draw upon the available intellectual resources of the whole community of valley colleges, and to a network nationwide, even international. It thus avoided being or becoming a local or coterie publication. Five college contributors competed equally with any others. But the fact of its community breadth, in editors and contributors, added quickly to its strength and reputation. This also later provided legitimate grounds for an appeal for five-college support.

By adopting its name *The Massachusetts Review*, by choosing its model and precedent Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* of 1847, and announcing this in the epigraph on the first page of its first number, the magazine from its beginning connected itself to a noble, historically recognized, regional tradition both social and aesthetic. It was like making a running start. It further defined our identity and direction. It was another source and lift of morale.

© No wonder we felt an empowering sense of opportunity. No wonder there was an eager partnership among editors; and pride among contributors.

Volume One, Number 1, it is worth recalling, included work by Robert Frost, e.e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, John Holmes, Maxine Kumin, Leonard Baskin, Robert Tucker, John Ciardi, Paul Gagnon, Leo Marx, Alvan Ryan, Sidney Monas, Armour Craig, William Havard, Arnold Kenseth, Jean Pedrick,

Allan Brick, Stanley Koehler, Leon Barron, and others. More good things were soon to come. And a larger company of editors.

The success d'estime of its early numbers identified *MR* as symbolic of new fresh possibilities at the University. This evoked strong and crucial support from University trustees. In particular, from trustees Frederick Troy, Louis Lyons, Robert Gordon, and Frank Boyden. Frederick Troy was especially influential. He was one of the company of founding editors, a former professor of English at UMass (now retired). As a University trustee, re-appointed by a succession of five state governors, he remained for many years in a position to define and defend, to changing administrators, *MR*'s value to the University and its place in the valley scene.

Everyone in the early years at the *Review* went to school, so to speak, to Sidney Kaplan. He was an editor of remarkable gifts intellectual and practical. To be sure, there were various kinds of expertise represented on the editorial board. Sidney was hardly alone. But he had a compelling vision of what this journal could become.

Not least, Sidney had rare skills for design and typography. He had grown up in proximity to the arts of printing; he was closely familiar with press work and details of production. He was managing editor for Leonard Baskin's Gehenna Press. At *MR*, his vision created a journal of visual beauty, style, and originality—not then common among little magazines. This further fueled ambition. If we could put out one elegant substantial volume, then we could do another, and yet another.

To early editors concerned about production—F.C. Ellert, Frederick Troy, Leon Barron, Jules Chametzky, myself, Robert Tucker, Frank Murphy, et al.—it was Sidney who explained how to put a number together. Then how to use page space attractively; how to present an author's work to best advantage; how to save costs; how to measure type and pages; how to do lay-outs. (We then taught others.)

With Esther Tane and Leonard Baskin, Sidney produced a remarkable series of art signatures that brought *MR* its early prestige.

There were monographs on such artists as Barlach, Callot, Posada, Lachaise, Bresdin, and others. Engravings were often printed directly from the block; plates were printed at the distinguished Meriden Gravure Co. "Portraits of Artists by Leonard Baskin" (1963) included eighteen reproductions and a wood engraving, with an essay by Sidney Kaplan.

In 1962 Stanley Koehler put together *MR's* first Special Number, "A Gathering for William Carlos Williams," for which the artist Ben Shahn let us reproduce from the huge originals, his striking portrait drawings of Dr. Williams. In the same year, Sidney and Jules urged me to do "A Centenary Gathering for Henry David Thoreau." Among its contents were reflections on Thoreau's philosophy of civil disobedience by Martin Buber, and by Martin Luther King. King's statement was dictated by phone from jail in Albany, Georgia. In 1964, "An Irish Gathering: Letters, Memoirs, Poems, Articles of Twentieth-Century Ireland" was edited by David Clark and Robin Skelton. So began *MR's* series of Special Numbers.

The magazine moved into the main stream of social turbulence in the mid-1960's. As a journal "of public affairs," it was inevitable that we would engage in the challenges of the then national struggle for civil rights, voting rights, desegregation, fair housing, social justice for minorities; then women's rights, and the controversy over the Vietnam War. Relative to civil disobedience, and to bringing new voices into our pages, I recall with Jules Chametzky visiting John Hope Franklin in New York one long Sunday afternoon; and our more than once going to Washington to speak with Sterling Brown at Howard University.

On heated issues, and our choice of ways to deal with them, or choice of voices to publish, there were sometimes strained and awkward differences among editors. (See Robert Tucker's poem "June Rain 1972.") For all of the tensions however, there was a sort of gallows humor and comedy too. I can still hear Stanley Koehler in the middle of one bruising editorial battle. "If there is a consensus, I would like to crawl into it."

In retrospect, for a journal aspiring to be relevant to profound needs of the time, we went a fair way toward holding a mirror

up to a decisive decade (1959–1969) in American culture: publishing writers white, black, and brown; in works drawn from fiction, poetry, reportage, book review, debate, document, and essays on literature, history, politics, society, music, and art.

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