Quick Critics: Speeding Up the Publication of Reviews From Years to Months

By JENNIFER HOWARD

In metabolic terms, publishing in the humanities is more couch potato than sprinter. An idea can take years to move from light-bulb stage to manuscript to finished book. Add another year, or two or three, before an author can expect to see reviews of that book in academic journals. That slows down an already glutted system.

"It's just appalling that the average gap between publication and first review is more than two years," says James A.W. Heffernan, an emeritus professor of English at Dartmouth College. In Charles Dickens's day, he points out, "compositors were able to get whole novels out in a week or two." Why, in a wired world, should it take 24 months or more for a 1,500-word review to see the light of day?

Mr. Heffernan wants to rev up the scholarly review metabolism. This fall, he plans to start an online review of scholarly books, New Books on Literature 19, "to revolutionize academic reviewing" — at least to revolutionize it in his field, which happens to be 19th-century British and American literature. (Hence the 19 in the review's name.) He intends to do this by the simple act of publishing critiques of new books within 90 days of publication. Other Web-enabled touches: The site will invite responses from authors and comments from readers, and it will link key terms in each review to 19th-century literary resources such as the Victorian Web (http://www.victorianweb.org) and Nines (http://www.nines.org).

Mr. Heffernan was inspired, or provoked, by personal experience. In 2006, he asked the editors of European Romantic Review if he could write about a forthcoming book, the first critical edition and English-language translation of Vie de Lord Byron en Italy, a memoir by Lord Byron's mistress Teresa Guiccioli. They agreed. Mr. Heffernan turned in his piece. Then he waited. And waited. And waited — for more than a year.

He does not blame journal editors or reviewers for such delays. "It's a twofold problem," he says. First, reviewing "tends to be a rather thankless task," so it gets pushed to the bottom of a reviewer's agenda. Second, academic journals have constraints on how many reviews they can publish in any given issue and how long those reviews can be. Reviews languish for months or years before space opens up.

"I just looked at this in relation to the Internet and thought, the beauty of it is there isn't any delay at all," Mr. Heffernan says. "You do your editorial work, and once the piece is ready, you just post it." That won't necessarily light a fire under reviewers, but at least it minimizes the lag time on the publication end.

Could it be that easy? A few others have done it. Mr. Heffernan surveyed the online review landscape and came up with a couple of good models. There's H-Net Reviews (http://www.h-net.org/reviews), which posts assessments of recent scholarly books in history; in a prospectus that lays out the vision for his review, Mr. Heffernan praises H-Net Reviews' "promptness and range of coverage." And for a decade now, the College Art Association has run caa.reviews (http://www.caareviews.org), which serves up reviews of monographs on art and art history within a year of their publication. Mr. Heffernan calls that "lightning speed" in academic-reviewing terms.

The College Art Association site, though, requires a subscription. The new online 19th-century review will be free and open to all. That also makes it a "shoestring operation," Mr. Heffernan says. It will rely on volunteer editorial labor, along with a modest grant and Web hosting from Dartmouth. A Web-savvy graduate student (she's paid) is building the site. The Dartmouth College Library has pitched in with technical and moral support.

"That's the beauty of this operation," Mr. Heffernan jokes. "We can have 30-plus people working on content for no pay."

Those volunteers include Thomas H. Luxon, director of the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning, who is the new review's associate editor. Twenty-one scholars have agreed to serve on the editorial board, help recruit reviewers, and edit copy. Qualified graduate students will be considered for review assignments if they come well-recommended.

Graduate students are among the "prime consumers of new scholarship," Mr. Heffernan points out, so it makes sense to call on them "to help us come to terms with new books." He adds, "I love the idea, frankly, that we have people in all ranks, from graduate students on up through chaired emeriti, who will be contributing."
Last spring and summer, as the idea for the review took shape, Mr. Heffernan began contacting possible contributors. "A surprising number of people were willing to review on a 90-day turnaround," he says. Nearly a hundred 2009 titles have already been scheduled for review. Although only two reviews have been turned in so far — and one of those didn't work as a scholarly critique — the editor sounds confident that he will have three dozen or so reviews ready to go by the time the site makes its debut in early September.

"I just want to get it started and hand it off to someone else," Mr. Heffernan says, "to show it can be done."

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