

*Lost Cause*

“Critical Condition” by Sven Birkerts, in *Bookforum* (Spring 2004), 350 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001, and “The Democratization of Cultural Criticism” by George Cotkin, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 2, 2004), 1255 23rd St., N.W., Ste. 700, Washington, D.C. 20037.

In its heyday in the 1930s and after, *Partisan Review*, fighting Stalinism and promoting modernism, was at the center of American intellectual life. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, the center shifted to *The New York Review of Books*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, and other venues for the New Journalism and opposition to the Vietnam War. Today, American intellectual life has no center, laments Birkerts, editor of *Agni*, a literary journal based at Boston University: “If our situation feels demoralized, dissipated, without urgent core, it is to some degree because we are without a larger rallying cause and without any stirring sense of possibility.”

Though rallying causes are available (e.g., opposition to the Bush administration’s “outrages”), “the rallying *will*” is lacking. “Our intellectual life is fragmented. It has, perhaps of economic necessity, migrated into the academy, where it can only conform to the dominant strictures of theory-suffused disciplines.”

It was theory’s ascendancy in the 1980s and 1990s that eventually made traditional literary criticism, rooted in humanism and practiced by generalists, seem hopelessly old-fashioned. Meanwhile, “corporate conglomeration” was transforming the publishing world, ushering in the era of the blockbuster bestseller and making “the merely literary . . . a harder sell in the trade market-

place.” By the mid-1990s, “the rules of the literary game” had changed, for reviewers as well as authors. There were fewer literary books being published by the major trade houses than in earlier decades, and fewer venues in which to review them. And instead of making straightforward literary judgments, reviewers took cover behind irony. When irony began to cloy, some turned to “snark”—vicious, apparently gratuitous negativity—as in the notorious pronouncement by bad-boy reviewer Dale Peck that “Rick Moody is the worst writer of his generation.” Such judgments, says Birkerts, are a cry of rage and desperation, born of “the terrible vacuum feeling of not mattering, not connecting, not being heard.”

Cotkin, a professor of history at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, doesn’t buy it. “Snark” did not begin with Peck, he says. Mary McCarthy, for instance, “outvenomed many of her compatriots” in the *Partisan Review* crowd.

Where Birkerts sees the loss of a “center,” Cotkin sees the “democratization of criticism.” The change, he admits, does pose problems. But rather than “nostalgia for a golden age that never was,” the solution, in his view, is “more democracy (against the corporatization of culture) . . . and a spirit of openness to what is new and invigorating in our culture.”

*The Wisdom of Mad*

“From Madness to Dysentery: *Mad*’s Other New York Intellectuals” by Nathan Abrams, in *Journal of American Studies* (Dec. 2003), Cambridge Univ. Press, Edinburgh Bldg., Shaftesbury Rd., Cambridge CB2 2RU, England.

During the decade that many intellectuals still regard as the Age of Conformity, one publication was willing to take on every sacred cow: *Mad Magazine*. Its joyous 1950s nihilism helped prepare the way for the adversary culture of the 1960s.

*Mad* began, in October 1952, as a comic book aimed at teenagers. Comic books, which first appeared in the mid-1930s, became a truly mass medium during and after World War II; by 1947, they were selling 60 million copies a month. In the 1950s, they