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 marketplace.” 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.”

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The Wisdom of Mad


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
were portrayed as a national menace, a cause of juvenile delinquency and other social ills. Congressional hearings were held. To ward off government regulation, Mad’s publisher, William Gaines, set up the Comics Code Authority to ensure that every comic book was certifiably “wholesome.” He had no intention of making Mad meet that criterion, so in 1955 it became a “magazine” instead. Mad later took its revenge with an article that blamed juvenile delinquency on baseball.

Mad sent up its rival publications (by turning innocent teens Archie and Jughead into chain-smoking juvenile delinquents, for instance), along with movie stars, television shows, pop singers, politicians, and advertisers. After the magazine satirically exposed the ads for various consumer products hidden in TV shows and movies, the Federal Communications Commission and Congress pressured the TV networks to cut back on the practice. Mad itself ran spoof ads for bogus products such as “Ded Ryder Cowboy Carbine” rifles. Rooted in pop culture, the magazine anticipated pop art.

Though Gaines always insisted that Mad had no political agenda, it took on politicians such as Senator Joseph McCarthy (in 1954), and “was not afraid to critique either side in the Cold War struggle,” writes Abrams, who teaches modern U.S. history at the University of Southampton, England. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (who had a bald pate like the “Mr. Clean” of liquid cleaner fame) became “Mr. Mean: All-Commie Brainwasher” in a Mad parody of an ad that had asked, in all seriousness, “Is Your Bathroom Breeding Bolsheviks?”

Mad refused “to affirm or support” anyone or anything, says Abrams. It treated student radicalism of the 1960s with the same irreverence it did everything else. But it made enough of an impact that Marshall McLuhan and many other intellectuals of the day felt compelled to take its measure. Mad, since absorbed by a media conglomerate, survives in body, if not in spirit, says Abrams. The familiar face of Alfred E. Newman still continues to stare out from Mad’s front page, his “toothy grin a reminder of [the magazine’s] mordant history.”

Mad continues to skewer American culture, though it may lack some of the bite of its original creators.

No More Mozart!


If less classical music seems to be coming from your local public radio station, it’s not just your imagination. Even though the number of public stations has grown to more than 800 across America—boasting a listenership of 29 million—the number of those stations identifying themselves as “classical” has been cut in half since 1993. The stations still playing classical music increasingly fill their designated music hours (mostly at night) with a syndicated service called Classical 24 rather than local programming. Jazz, folk, blues, and bluegrass