

The New Partisans

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One must have been in exile and in the wilds to appreciate a new periodical," said Alexander Herzen, the 19th-century Russian writer, editor and revolutionary. It's a sentiment quoted in the editorial statement of N+1, and the appearance of the little-known, idiosyncratic, yet wildly ambitious intellectual says a good deal about this journal of culture, literature and politics launched last month.

Years from now, the inaugural issue of the twice-yearly N+1 — the title is a mathematical reference suggesting the possibility for additional and ever-refined viewpoints — may come to look like a remarkably prescient commentary of our times; an age when anyone speaking longer than a sound bite is a "flip-flopper," when only the crudest forms of agitprop cut through the noise. It gives us Michael Moore on the left, Bill O'Reilly on the right, and Mel Gibson on the screen.

Or as the New York-based N+1 crew puts it: "We live in a time when serious writing about culture has become the exclusive province of bullies, reactionaries, and Englishmen" — a sly reference to book critic par excellence James Wood — "a time when a magazine like *Lingua Franca* can't publish, but *Zagat* prospers."

While I've found *Zagat* pretty useful at times, it's easy to see what troubles the quartet of talented editors. There's little that expresses

the current troubled state of intellectual expression in this country than the recent demise of several notable magazines and journals. In addition to *Lingua Franca*, which beat back the mystifying thickets of intellectual trends and university culture with wit and flair, last year saw the shuttering of the once mighty *Partisan Review*. Just this spring came news that major budget cuts had effectively forced the resignation of the editor of the award-winning *The American Scholar*, Anne Fadiman, after a transformative seven-year stint. Even the death and retirement (respectively) of the guiding lights behind *The Paris Review* and *National Review* makes one wonder whether we're coming to the end of the era of the serious "little magazine."

Yet a quick glance at history suggests that it's precisely at times when general level of discourse appears to be at its crudest, when the intellectual options appear most limited, that some of our finest journals are born. Take the example of *Partisan Review*, the zeyde of all American journals. Launched in the midst of the Depression by immigrant children with bad job prospects but a good perch from which to critique the world around them, the magazine defined American high culture in the years immediately before and after World War II.

Though its circulation hit only 15,000 at its height, *Partisan Review* (or P.R.) helped to launch the careers of Lionel Trilling, Mary McCarthy, Irving Howe and Norman Mailer, among others. And it helped define not only the leading intellectual movements but also the literary landmarks of its day. Stories by Delmore Schwartz and Bernard Malamud, not to mention Saul Bellow's landmark translation of I.B. Singer's "Gimpel the Fool" — Singer's first appearance in the English language — were first published in its pages.

But P.R.'s lasting contribution was as much a matter of its approach and style as its substance. As literary critic Morris Dickstein noted in *The New York Times* shortly after the journal's demise, its freewheeling style, copied since by so many other journals, helped establish the broad appeal of the New York (i.e., Jewish) intellectual. P.R.'s style was "exactly critical yet jokey and colloquial, rooted in sources as wildly varied as Yiddish humor, Talmudic debate [and] sectarian Marxist polemics."

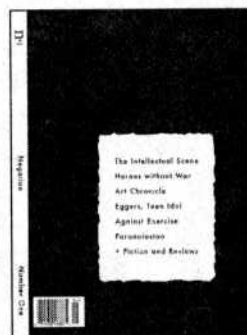
It's precisely this mixture of the exactly critical yet jaunty style, at once impressively smart and yet appealingly unpretentious, which marks many of the articles and reviews in N+1. Yet unlike P.R., the magazine's best writing doesn't shy away from popular

culture and the truly avant-garde. Thus the editors cheerfully take on other journals such as *The New Republic* ("a Major League culture magazine supporting a farm team political bureau") and *McSweeney's* (examining Dave Eggers' "regressive avant-garde" hijinx while teasing out the implications of his Peter Pan-like obsession with childhood). Even when its articles fall short — a lightweight satire about making Palestine into the 51st state sidesteps the sort of problems the magazine takes on elsewhere — there is a seriousness of intent that is always refreshing.

When *Partisan Review* folded, not long after the death of its co-founding editor William Phillips and years since it had ceased to really matter, critics rushed to declare "the age of the quarterly" over. "It is no longer at the center of American high culture, but neither is any quarterly," Morris Dickstein told a reporter. Maybe so. Yet by applying a nuanced perspective to cultural matters of the moment, a fearless takedown of not a few sacred cows, and its decent sense of fair play, at least one new journal suggests not so much the passing of an era as the potential for its rebirth. ■



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The premiere issue of N+1.