
A Sad and Maladroit Fiesta

Morris Dickstein: *The Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*;

Basic Books; New York, 1977.

by Christopher Manion

When I told a friend who raised her children during the sixties that this book was a cultural history of that period, she replied: "It must be pretty short." And she would have been right, had the author written just that. Instead, Morris Dickstein, who was there, wants to tell us "what it felt like" to grow up in the sixties, which he entered as an undergraduate at Columbia, fresh from an orthodox Jewish background, to become a graduate student at Yale and a teacher at Columbia as the period wound down. It would appear that he never got over a hundred miles away from New York, and it shows.

The Education of Morris Dickstein might be the title of the real book which is neither cultural history nor mere criticism; rather than combine the two approaches, an admittedly challenging task, the author presents us with considerations of literature surrounded by—and orbiting around—politics. Much of the critical material seems to be previously published work from *The New York Times Book Review* and *Partisan Review*. But at the center and around the edges, it is possessed of one simple message: the fifties, which nurtured everything bad — repression, McCarthyism, the Rosenbergs, grey flannel suits and the Cold War—were fol-

lowed by everything Dickstein had learned to love: liberation in literature, in sexual norms, in politics and the imagination. Allen Ginsberg, one of Dickstein's favorites, called it "magic politics"—"poetry and theatre sublime enough to change the national will and open up consciousness in the populace." Dickstein points out that this may be found wanting in practical possibilities, but "preserves its appeal as a vision."

Magic, of course, implies the forcing of a spirit—good or evil—to break the natural order of events when it is cornered by the right formula. The notion is not new to history. Hegel, for whom Dickstein expresses a certain affinity, dabbles in magic when "solving" the "riddle of history." And Friedrich Schiller, in his inaugural lecture as a historian at the University of Jena just prior to the French Revolution, calls on his listeners to create "artificial links" to connect otherwise meaningless events of the past, links forged by the writer's imagination and inspired by the demands of present-day events. Then, he goes on, we can make the reader believe what we want him to believe (and what he would otherwise reject) by means of an "optical illusion" which will make him feel better. Dickstein's modern sages call it relevance.

This does not imply that Dickstein and Ginsberg, would actively attempt to deceive, only that visions such as theirs, however acquired, often collide with reality so forcefully that they can be preserved only by "magic"—willful alteration of perceived reality by the invocation of slogans, ideological diatribes, or repression of conflicting evidence; such

visions are then accepted as "second realities" which replace the real thing so effectively that further repression becomes either unconscious or unnecessary. The painstaking process of investigation is dominated by, or replaced by, an unabashed embracing of the vision. It is the light of his own vision, then, that Dickstein wants to shed on developments which have left "some people feeling puzzled or confused."

Dickstein's illumination amounts to a two-toned appeal to the good old "black-and-white" which even his favorite writers would eschew as "too simplistic for the complex problems of today." He envisions the fifties much as a contemporary civilized being might imagine the Neanderthal period. For all its critical trappings, this is a fundamentally political book, and Dickstein hails the political turn which all religion and literature took in the sixties. The evil fifties mentality gives way to the bountiful sixties mentality which overcomes the repression like D.H. Lawrence's "new shoots of life springing up and slowly bursting the foundations." And one must realize that the sixties is just a state of mind, that this process can happen any time, anywhere. If you went to Columbia in the late fifties, you were already there. If you agree with Dickstein's political views, you're *still* there. It's kind of a private *Magical Mystery Tour*. Once you are able to wake up and assess the reality with fairness of mind and heart, you may find a lot of rubbish and dirt. But that's another story.

But there is good news: For those who want an insight into the handful of rock musicians and the few dozen writers

Christopher Manion, a graduate of Notre Dame and an officer of the Rockford College Institute, is a guitarist who witnessed firsthand the rise and fall of the Woodstock generation.

which Dickstein considers as the whole of the culture he is commentating (“rock *was* the culture of the sixties in a unique and special way”), his treatment reflects a labor of love and many well-worn volumes (and records) on his shelves. He is at home here, and chides those close to him—and not so close: Mailer “groped” through three novels to find himself, Malamud is “flawed,” Sontag is “marred.” He selects a narrow corner of the writing of the period and does a good job with it (but beware if you oppose his thesis: Tom Wolfe, another Yale Ph.D., is simplistic and misreads the sixties—so there!)

Dickstein’s chosen subjects in the musical arena—Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones—are treated knowledgeably, somewhat roughly, but nonetheless sympathetically. The sexual character of rock is a foregone conclusion, and Dickstein himself discovered that he had entered the sixties so sexually

repressed that he didn’t even realize it. Country music, however, and blues—not the reprocessed city varieties but the real thing that found its way from authentic ethnic sources to merge with pop music in the sixties until it was impossible to tell which was folk-rock or country blues or vice-versa—this musical melting pot receives no attention. Why? Because its antecedents are consistent far into the fifties, forties, even beyond, and collide with Dickstein’s vision. But these forms never penetrated New York until they were suitably commercialized (and the TV show “Hee-Haw” shows what New York really thinks of the rest of the country). These songs were everywhere else, though, treating real-life problems with persuasive, uncluttered directness, while Paul Goodman, a favorite poet of the protest crowd, was not interested in graduate-student Dickstein’s “clever and brilliant” observations at a conference somewhere because Dickstein didn’t

“turn him on.” Goodman, you see, had a “passion for the young which was fueled by his sexual need,” “driven and debased by sexual hungers and humiliations.” *Those* were the sixties.

What we have here, then, is one very private, very personal, and very belabored sixties’ life, bearing and reflecting the imprint of the New York intellectual community during those years which allegedly constitute the “watershed of our recent cultural history.” In the song from which the book’s title is taken, Bob Dylan does not tell us whether the Gates of Eden are approaching or receding: for Dickstein, they are always there but just out of reach. This is a period piece, and as a cultural history it is short indeed. It can best be summed up in the words of the Paul Simon song from the end of the era: “A man hears what he wants to hear, and disregards the rest.” ■

The Establishment’s Preference

“There was something about the sweet reason of Dickstein’s tone that I found attractive . . . The theoretical limitations of the book were offset . . . by its propaganda potential . . .” — *Village Voice*.

“Here is a stimulating overview of the painful birth of a new sensibility among a new generation which, he feels, will yet ‘have its say’ in a new way . . .” — *Publishers Weekly*.

“I still find excessive Dickstein’s estimate of the period’s cultural achievements, but I can see that his book makes the unqualified opposition of such critics as Philip Rahv, Saul Bellow and Daniel Bell seem flat and uninformative by comparison. Those writers, notwithstanding the validity of many of their judgments, simply refused to take the period seriously. Dickstein has shown, conclusively, the inadequacy of this position. He makes it clear that we learn more about the period by taking it seriously than by writing it off as the triumph of the ‘trendy’ . . .” — Christopher Lasch, *The New York Times Book Review*.

“What *Gates of Eden* is willing to essay it essays with humanity and intelligence . . .” — *New Times*.

— COMMENDABLES —

An Arsenal Stockpiled with Arguments

Paul Johnson: *Enemies of Society*;
Atheneum; New York, 1977.

By Robert Nisbet

Society, for Paul Johnson, is capitalist, middle class society, the only possible society, he emphasizes, that can, in our era, make possible political freedom and a genuinely civilized culture. This society came into being roughly in the sixteenth century, and, with only occasional setbacks, prospered, developed, and spread until the twentieth century. Despite the fact that capitalism has, on the record, given freedom and security to more people than any economic system in all history, and despite the fact that in our century wherever capitalism has broken down or been destroyed, despotism and poverty have followed, this economic system has nevertheless been under attack for well over a century.

Johnson's chosen "Enemies of Society" do him and our middle class society honor. They include ecological fanatics and doom-sayers, philosophers whose logic-chopping has virtually destroyed a once great tradition, social scientists whose left-wing ideologies are masked in pseudo-science, professors who have abandoned true scholarship in favor of class room political militancy, teachers in the schools who have substituted pap

*Dr. Nisbet is Albert Schweitzer Professor
of Humanities at Columbia.*

for curriculum, indulgence for discipline, and artists and writers whose hatred of capitalism has taken the forms of adulation of everything evil from schizophrenia to permanent terror. All in all, this is a powerful and necessary book even though I find occasional lapses of critical judgment or interpretation and signs of haste (such as misspellings of proper names) in the book's preparation. ■

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"Mr. Johnson is immensely entertaining, but the reader may not share his sense of urgency—his feeling that Western culture may be doomed by these trends"—*The New Yorker*.

Berger's Good Sense

Peter L. Berger: *Facing Up to Modernity*; Basic Books; New York, 1977.

Peter Berger takes on the widespread myths of the technological age. He argues that by tearing down our old belief structures and replacing them with overdoses of "freedom" and "liberation," we breed bogus relationships, loneliness and self-doubt. He goes on to give horrifying examples of what happens when the current value-neutral attitude is taken to its logical conclusion. He analyzes modern culture's aberrant search for a new basis of values. He concludes that the authority of traditional religion still remains the supreme source of insights and explanations. He'll be hated by liberal pundits and thanked by anyone who has still preserved a modicum of good sense. ■

Trilling's Appeal

Diana Trilling: *We Must March My Darlings: A Critical Decade*;
Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich; New York, 1977.

A collection of lucid, thoughtful essays written in beautiful English prose, a delight difficult to find amidst the contemporary racket and shrillness of the reviewers—pushy journalists feigning to be critics. Mrs. Trilling's concern is criticism. She expresses a worry:

"We are accustomed, of course, to the reluctance of our critics to submit to rigorous examination any political or social idea which is presented to them under the aspect of enlightened dissidence."

This is not an easy book to read for those unaccustomed to the form of the literary essay. However, in its finely chiseled phrases and elaborate reasoning there is a multitude of clean-cut, accessible-to-anyone explanations and conclusions. Anyone who has given a thought to what has happened to the ideas which once successfully governed our daily lives, will find in this book his own thoughts, feelings, anxieties and pre-sentiments formulated in a way that makes them clearly understandable in spite of the refined language. ■