

AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE SIXTIES: A CONVERSATION WITH MORRIS DICKSTEIN

Jonah Raskin

Morris Dickstein's neighborhood on the Upper West Side of Manhattan has seen far worse days. "I was held up once on the street," he said in April 2015, not long after his 75th birthday. He added, "That was hairy. The neighborhood is in much better shape now than it was then." Dickstein and his wife have shared the same apartment since the 1960s. Their children grew up there, on a street between Broadway and Amsterdam, where legions of students have nestled, studied, caroused, and recited poetry until late at night.

English majors at Columbia in the early 1960s, Dickstein and I took many of the same classes with the same professors, though we never met at that time. He was two years ahead of me and already on his way toward a long teaching career and an illustrious vocation as a literary critic, social historian and author of *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* and *Why Not Say What Happened*, a refreshingly candid memoir about his own education.

"Those were the days when we were undergraduates," he says. "Columbia had fewer students than any other school in the Ivy League and classes were small. Moreover, teachers didn't have to publish to get tenure, though that ethos soon changed. I was told that if I didn't publish my thesis on Keats I probably wouldn't get tenure. I did publish it and I still didn't get tenure at Columbia."

Just a week before we spoke, *The New York Times* ran an obituary for M. H. Abrams, the revered historian of ideas and editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, who died at the age of 102. "I was once on a panel with Abrams," Dickstein remembered. "Before it began he told me, 'Our job is to be pleasantly entertaining.' I said to myself, 'This guy will live forever.' I envied him."

In a way, I suppose you could say that I envy or at least admire Morris Dickstein, not because he's old and venerable, but because he seems so young and vibrant. I hope this interview reflects that admiration. Many of my questions focus on the Sixties, a pivotal time for both of us. Moreover, Dickstein's 1977 book, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*, has just been reissued in a new handsome edition in paperback. It's my hope that this interview might

inspire readers to read or reread *Gates of Eden* and perhaps to consider teaching some of the literature of the era that Dickstein knows as well if not better than anyone else writing about the Sixties today.

Raskin: I know that literary criticism still exists and that there are still literary critics, but the field doesn't seem to have the mystique it had in the early 1960s when I wanted to grow up and be a literary critic. What happened?

Dickstein: We could round up the usual suspects: the turn toward theory, jargon, professionalization; the decline of the centrality of literature among the arts, followed by the decline of book culture itself; the separation of academics from the wider world of general readers; the collapse of literary journalism, especially the general magazines like *Newsweek*, that once had excellent house critics, and the loss of free standing book review sections that most major newspapers once had. The Internet has changed the whole game, offering worldwide distribution but substituting the gripes and hosannas of ordinary readers for the authority of trained and experienced critics.

Raskin: If you want to read groundbreaking contemporary literary criticism where do you turn, and who do you admire?

Dickstein: I'm not sure about "groundbreaking" but I most admire critics, older and younger, who write for a broad general audience, yet do so from a well of intelligent, well-informed reading and thinking. Harold Bloom's new book on American writers, *The Daemon Knows*, is the work of an omnivorous reader whose style is passionate and personal. Younger general critics like Adam Kirsch, David Mikics, Christine Smallwood, and Thomas Meaney are willing to eschew specialization and take on a vast array of challenging subjects. Luckily, there are still journals hospitable to this kind of writing: the *TLS*, the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *Nation*, the *Bookforum*, the online *Tablet Magazine* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

Raskin: How did studying, reading and writing about John Keats prepare you to write about the culture of the Sixties?

Dickstein: I fastened on Keats—fell in love with him, really—at a moment when interest in the Romantic poets was reviving. They had not fared well under the reign of T. S. Eliot and the New Critics, when Donne and the Metaphysical poets were all the rage, when the Romantics were seen as loose and undisciplined in their language, their morals, their urgent strength of feeling, and when some

questioned whether Whitman was actually a poet.

So Keats and Blake and, later, Whitman prepared me for Ginsberg, where my book about the Sixties actually begins. This was a Romantic turn in postwar culture compared to the one in the 1790s, both of them revolutionary times of political crisis. The elements were similar: utopianism, strong emotional expression, a politics of personal protest and moral witness, new explorations of the dark and irrational, and a democratization of art and knowledge.

Raskin: Of all the many valuable insights of Keats, there's none as insightful from my perspective as his comment about negative capability – the state of mind "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." How has that concept aided you in your work?

Dickstein: I was influenced by the many brilliant intellectuals who wrote for journals like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*, all of whom had gotten burned by the association with Communism in the 1930s. Later, some of them turned conservative, which repelled me, but those I identified with had traded in ideology for complexity and ambivalence, and this suited my own temperament quite well.

This is part of what Keats had in mind—he associated it with Shakespeare but also with art in general. It's the kind of complexity of motive and meaning that Bloom describes as "the invention of the human" in Shakespeare, a fathomless depth of human complexity. It's also what Eliot meant when he said of Henry James that, "he had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it." It's a good corrective to political simplification.

Raskin: I've heard it said that one can't really write about an author until the author is dead. You didn't do that in *Gates of Eden*. Do you think the fact that, say, Allen Ginsberg was still alive and writing when you wrote *Gates*, limited you?

Dickstein: I was young and knew very few writers personally, so I wrote about them as if they were already dead, perhaps even established classics. On the other hand I had already begun to do a great deal of reviewing, so I was used to evaluating fresh and current work by living authors. I certainly didn't expect them to respond, or even to notice me, *pish* that I was. When my chapter on Ginsberg first came out in *Commentary* in 1970s I didn't hear from him but got a nice note from his father, Louis Ginsberg, who was a minor poet. Later, when the book came out, Ginsberg himself buttonholed me at a

PEN party to complain about some of what I'd written about him. Since I'd been so complimentary, it amused me no end that he should fasten on my one or two small reservations.

Raskin: As the Sixties have receded and as many if not most of the major writers who helped to shape that era have died, have you made adjustments or shifted your point of view?

Dickstein: My overall view of the Sixties hasn't changed much, though some of the wilder antics, the dress code, the acres of hair, the laid-back, spaced-out language now seems quite comical. I remain fond of its innocence and absurdities. But I never forget that serious issues were at stake—in politics, in the arts, in the changing shape and meaning of our personal lives. It was a turning point, for me personally but also for America at large. The key thing is that we were all so young then; I hope we profited from our mistakes. In my own case, I never really went overboard—pot but no LSD, protest but no “days of rage”—so that I had very little to regret, except the conservative backlash, which still influences our politics today.

Raskin: Looking back at the Sixties who would you say are the towering literary figures of American literature?

Dickstein: As far as the writers, the ones I like most like Mailer and Ginsberg have held up well. Some of the writers like Malamud, Baldwin, and Vonnegut went downhill steeply in their later years. Others like Bellow and Roth kept renewing themselves and continued to do great work for several decades. Some of the poets hold up as well or better than the novelists: Lowell, Plath, Berryman, Bishop, Galway Kinnell, James Wright, Mark Strand. The writers who've most faded for me are the social and cultural critics like Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse, whose work I haven't revisited in years. Paul Goodman is the exception: his critical writing on cities, on education, on young people seems perpetually relevant.

Raskin: What books if any from that period would you describe as American classics?

Dickstein: I frequently revisit Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, but I think several of his other books of that period hold up well: *Advertisements For Myself*, some of *The Presidential Papers* (on Kennedy, on boxing), *An American Dream*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, none of them exactly classics, like *Armies*, Lowell's *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead*, Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* seems just as funny and as much on-target on every new reading, though his best books came later;

Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*, Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Bellow's *Herzog*, Vonnegut's *Mother Night*, Updike's *Of The Farm*, a small novella with a large emotional reach; Plath's posthumous *Ariel*, Berryman's *77 Dream Songs*, Kinnell's *Body Rags*, Donald Barthelme's *City Life*. I could go on but you get the point. This was a strong literary period.

Raskin: Would you be willing to look at the literature of the Sixties from the point of view of, say, Walt Whitman and Gertrude Stein and imagine how they'd view it?

Dickstein: Whitman would love the shift from formal poetry to free verse, ecstatic, impassioned, often prophetic or passionately political; he might well have approved of the strong poetry protesting the Vietnam war. Stein, well, Stein rarely had a good word for any writing other than her own.

Raskin: What do you think were the most pernicious influences on U.S. culture by the whole Cold War mind set?

Dickstein: The worst effect of the Cold War was the constrained, constipated political environment, which limited all policy options and pushed artists toward abstractions—good for the painters, bad for the writers. Much has been written about the retreat to the private life, to suburbia, but much was also argued then. The Cold War was a great stimulus to social criticism, to books like *The Lonely Crowd*, *The Organization Man*, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, *The Power Elite*, and *The Hidden Persuaders*—all of them critiques of conformity, timidity, and competitive hierarchy, taking the measure of a world focused on getting and spending (not so different from our own). But it's important not to overestimate the influence of the Cold War on culture, since it also stimulated a lively counterculture—that was the other side of the 1950s, especially the late Fifties. This was part of my argument in *Leopards in the Temple*, against any sweeping Cold War determinism, which ignores other influences and counter-currents.

Raskin: I'm told that the sixties are still a flashpoint and that American politicians on the right are still making hay of that era and using it to beat liberals, leftists and the notion that government has a responsibility to help its least fortunate citizens. Have you found that to be the case?

Dickstein: For many on the right, the Sixties remain the source of all modern social evil—laxity, permissiveness, political correctness and egalitarian leveling. On the libertarian side, the Sixties succeeded

culturally even as it failed politically. The meteoric yet enduring rise of conservatism has been a lasting impact of the 1960s.

Raskin: In *Gates* you say, "we're all modernists today." I know I was in the 1960s, though by the late 1970s I think I had adopted post-modernism. Do you think that post-modernism has replaced or superseded modernism?

Dickstein: For a long time I resisted the whole notion of postmodernism. What I saw in the 1960s was the second coming of modernism, especially in the wave of metafiction in writers like Coover, Pynchon, Barthelme, Gass, Barth, and others, as well the surreal elements in poets like Ashbery, Koch, Ginsberg, Kinnell, O'Hara, and Bly. Some of this was strongly influenced by Latin American poets like Neruda, whom Bly translated, who was in turn influenced by Whitman. All this represented a kind of vernacular modernism different from the more mandarin modernism earlier in the century, which by and large was anti-democratic and anti-popular. Postmodernism was a different phenomenon that began to roll in during the 1970s, but that's another matter. It turned away from the titanic reach for significance that was crucial to modernism. It also eroded the distinctions between art and other forms of cultural expression.

Raskin: My friend Marty Jezer wrote a book about the Fifties called *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960*. I remember taking umbrage at the title and the concept. After all the Fifties saw the birth of the modern civil rights movement, the ban the bomb movement, the Beats, movies like *Rebel Without a Cause*, the publication in English for the first time of some of Karl Marx's seminal work, and much more. If you were to focus on the Fifties, culturally speaking, how would you define and describe that era? Was it a dark age?

Dickstein: The Fifties certainly had its dark side, as I said earlier, but it also gave birth to its own overcoming—in its social criticism, its best movies, and much of its writing. In many ways, 1955 was more of a turning point than 1960s, since this was when many of the countercultural influences really began to take off. Film noir, in countering the sunny optimism of the postwar years, was an example of the subterranean currents of the 1950s. I would describe the Fifties essentially as a decade of transition. Most of the seeds of the Sixties were sown then.

Raskin: Fifty-years after I was a student at Columbia, taking Trilling's class on contemporary literature, I still remember him and comments he made. I studied with Frank Kermode but have far fewer precise