

Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple. The Transformation of American Fiction 1945-1970*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002; xii + 242 pages; ISBN: 0-674-00604-6; £10.95, paper.

In his highly influential and enjoyably written study of American culture and literature in the 1960s, *Gates of Eden* (1976), Morris Dickstein successfully combined the role of the historian with the role of the literary critic, explaining the premises on which he operated in that particular study by stating that:

the culture of the arts can illuminate the texture of feeling and opinion in the culture as a whole. This is hardly new, but historians rarely do it in more than a perfunctory way. Historians neglect mutations of form in the arts, which tell us everything about the artists' unconscious assumptions, while critics busily sort out the forms as if no assumptions were involved, merely the proliferation of artifacts, the more the merrier (*Gates of Eden*, x).

Now, more than 25 years later, Morris Dickstein has produced another hybrid of cultural history and criticism, aptly titled *Leopards in the Temple. The Transformation of American Fiction 1945-1970*. The premises are the same as in *Gates of Eden*; once again Dickstein in various intriguing ways takes into account both mutations of form and unconscious assumptions. The title of his lucid and exhilarating study refers to Franz Kafka ('Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers') and it offers a number of detailed and comprehensive readings of works from the postwar literary canon. *Leopards in the Temple* is structured chronologically: Dickstein begins his survey with interpretations of war novels by Norman Mailer (*The Naked and the Dead* (1948)) and James Jones (*From Here to Eternity* (1951) – 'still the best of all the novels about the Second World War' (29)) and concludes with an excellent presentation of Philip Roth, some of the best 20 pages ever written about this prodigal son of the Jews. Dickstein manages to cover almost the entire career of Roth, from *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) to *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), the latter intriguingly interpreted as 'the last novel of the 1960s' (228).

Throughout the entire volume, Dickstein focuses on the fictional characters of the novels, short stories and movies in question, and interprets them as projections of their authors. Among the ravenous leopards breaking into the temple of American literature in the postwar years we find characters such as the Invisible Man (Ralph Ellison), the eccentric Misfit (Flannery O'Connor), the White Negro (Norman Mailer), Rabbit Angstrom (John Updike), Holden Caulfield (J. D. Salinger), a number of loopy intellectuals (Saul Bellow), various schlemiel figures (Bernard Malamud), as well as old-world decadents (Vladimir Nabokov), all outsider figures and 'sharp-clawed primitives' (4) who, in Dickstein's view, define the character of postwar American writing.

Some of the many writers in question continue to publish new works of fiction regularly (Mailer, Updike, Bellow, Roth, Gore Vidal). Others have died, among them Nabokov, Jones, Malamud, O'Connor, Ellison, Jack Kerouac, and James Baldwin.

But they all belong – despite differences in thematics and formal aspects – to Dickstein's *Greatest Generation* of American writers. In other words, they all belong to the contradictory, self-critical and radical decade of the 1950s.

Contradictory? Self-critical? Radical? The *1950s*? Indeed, Dickstein *is* thinking of this particular decade, even though the conventional view of the 1950s stresses innocence and tranquillity, political and sexual repression, social conformity, and racial segregation. Dickstein's aim is to draw a much more complicated picture of the 1950s, and he succeeds brilliantly in revising the conventional view. He reminds us that the role of women changed dramatically in the postwar years and that 'the cradle of the civil rights movement was the postwar years, not the 1960s, when it began to splinter' (9). The decade also saw the emergence of youth culture, mirrored in various movies as well as in first person picaresque narratives of adventure and flight, including *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *Invisible Man* (1952), *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), and *On the Road* (1957), the latter being compared to John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom*-tetralogy. Drawing on his detailed knowledge of works of social criticism from the period, Dickstein also convincingly concludes that 'relentless self-criticism, not complacency' (146) is characteristic of the 1950s.

From a Scandinavian point of view it is indeed interesting to compare the arguments put forth in *Leopards in the Temple* with similar attempts to revise the conventional understanding of Danish postwar literature. Various scholars have recently argued that Danish prose fiction during the Cold War period is much more experimental than often acknowledged, and that a specific and very narrow definition of *modernism* successfully succeeded in excluding a number of talented writers from entry into the literary canon.<sup>9</sup>

The five chapters of *Leopards in the Temple*, all elegantly written, are titled 'Culture, Counterculture, and Postwar America,' 'War and the Novel: From World War II to Vietnam,' 'The New Fiction: From the Home Front to the 1950s,' 'On and Off the Road: The Outsider as Young Rebel,' and 'Apocalypse Now: A Literature of Extremes,' and can easily be read separately. The last chapter is by far the longest, but each chapter presents convincing arguments for Dickstein's overall thesis: that the most profound changes in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American literature did not take place between the 1950s and the 1960s, but rather between the prewar- and the postwar generation of American writers. In a characteristic example of the author's ability to point to differences and similarities between generations of writers he argues that

[n]ot all thirties writers were naturalists or Marxists, but nearly all of them, even those who were modernists influenced by James Joyce and Marcel Proust (including John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Henry Roth), saw the texture of society, of city life, or of America as a

9. See for instance Søren Schou, et. al., *Dansk fiktionsprosa fra 1945-1960* (Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag 2001), as well as various essays devoted to this particular discussion in the Danish periodical *KRITIK*, 158 (2002).

whole as their inescapable subject. For them, the marginal characters who mattered to their fiction were social misfits [...] The writers who followed in the forties and fifties, however, were influenced more by *Heart of Darkness*, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and *Civilization and Its Discontents* than by the *Communist Manifesto* and *Das Capital*. They were concerned more with Oedipal struggle than class struggle, concerned about the limits of civilization rather than the conflicts within civilization. Their premises were more Freudian than Marxist (84).

Morris Dickstein has written an acute and intelligible social and literary history of postwar America. Once again the author shows, as he did in *Gates of Eden*, how appealingly history can illuminate fiction, and vice versa. *Leopards in the Temple* is especially recommendable to university students of both 20<sup>th</sup> Century American fiction and social history in that it most definitely will challenge their previous conception of the American Fifties.

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David Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and American Cinema*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000; x + 230 pages; ISBN: 0-85989-608-0 ; £35.00, cloth.

In response to poststructuralism's attempts to attenuate or even sever the connection between the world of things and the world of words, the last decade has seen the emergence of a new mode of critical thinking that proposes to read culture under the sign of nature. For practitioners of 'ecocriticism,' the point of literary criticism is not to debunk but rigorously to defend literature's capacity to evoke a natural reality, and thus use the text to call attention to the complex but necessary reciprocal interplay of mind and world, the human and the non-human. Defined by Lawrence Buell as 'the study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis,' ecocriticism moves from '*différance*' to '*référance*' without forgetting the linguistic, psychological and ideological complexities identified by postmodern schools of criticism, and without simply recuperating traditional tropes stipulating a romantic, prelapsarian relationship between man and nature.

The scope and ambitiousness of first-wave American ecocriticism in the 1990s, however, were perhaps limited by the relatively narrow canon of 'nature writers' – typically Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Robert Frost, Mary Austin, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Robinson Jeffers, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard and Gary Snyder – whom ecocritics deemed worthy of close scrutiny. It cannot escape notice that all these writers are white, that most are men, and that many have long held secure places in college anthologies like the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. While pledged to questioning humanity's ownership of the earth, early ecocritics also appeared institutionally conservative, committed to defending the privileged status of literary high culture within the academic curriculum. This implicit contradiction vexes even American ecocriticism's one undisputed masterpiece, Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*.