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Review of "What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society" by Nina Baym

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What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society. Leslie Fiedler. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982. Pp. 258.

In *What Was Literature?*, Leslie Fiedler collects and connects some nineteen lecture-essays that he has long been delivering around the country (I heard one of them at least a decade ago). They are arranged in two parts: the first, entitled "Subverting the Standards," proclaims the death of literary study as we have practiced it in American colleges and universities; the second, "Opening Up the Canon," purports to sketch a new approach that may revive it. The essays in the first part have such coy titles as "Who Was Leslie A. Fiedler?" "What Was the Novel?" (a matter that is dispatched in four printed pages) "Why Was Criticism?" They are often repetitious, and just as often they contradict one another. The second part outlines a history of a new American epic—or rather, a newly discovered American epic—which Fiedler constructs from a choice of popular novels.

There is, however, little novelty in the book—and novelty, alas, is what this *sh tik* (to borrow his borrowed word) is all about. Over the years Fiedler has made his notions familiar to us all; and it turns out that in printed form, where they are available for scrutiny and reflection beyond the momentary impact of a dynamic lecture presentation—the "show biz" on which he thrives—they disclose only cosmetic changes from the thesis of *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Fiedler's persona, notwithstanding his apologia for comic books and TV cop shows, is still an *arriviste* trying to embarrass the New England literary establishment, still an elitist terrified and suspicious of what he simplistically totalizes as "the popular mind," still a misogynist, still an advocate of literary violence and rape, still a puritanical (or rabbinical) celebrant of the Dionysian: that is, one who celebrates dionysic impulses if and only if they are acknowledged as evil and shameful. The pop culture that he describes as "ours" is the long since defunct college-student dropout commune culture of the late 1960s, which even in its heyday was a minority (and perhaps elitist) concern. Despite a great deal of huffery and puffery in these essays about his growth and development, I find little change, no expansion, and above all no self-scrutiny or self-correc-

tion, in his work over the last twenty years. Boastfully claiming not to read or acknowledge any "criticism" (a word that usually appears within quotation marks) on the matters he writes about, he is still always ready to attack what he alleges critics to have said or not said (though how he found out is a mystery) about the works he discusses and the academic and cultural trends he describes—a move that guarantees him an outsider status not because he is provocative (as he likes to believe), or ungenerous (literary criticism is not notable for generosity), but because he is talking at people rather than with them.

In fact the true and only subject of Fiedler's book is himself, this particular critic as hero. It is *he*, all by himself, who is "subverting the standards" and "opening up the canon." (Never mind, among others, feminist critics, who have called attention to dozens of excellent neglected women writers; or the deconstructionists who have reversed the ways in which literature is read and thus in the most literal way "subverted" standards even if retaining the canon.) "But on this subject, too, critics were once again silent, except, of course, for me" (p. 44); "I announced boldly (as I announce every new insight boldly)" (p. 73). Me, me: "what I yearned for was to be published . . . to open communication with an audience, to exist for others" (p. 23). The yearning to exist *for* others seems simply to have overridden the existence *of* those others for the Fiedler persona, who is still at the mirror stage, seeing his own image in all that he gazes on so that his work seems finally of minimal value as either account or critique. The "cryptoanalytic" critic—one adjective which Fiedler uses to describe his work—must be sensitive to the potential otherness of the text if he is to decipher its codes, as must the "contextual" critic—another of his adjectives—to the cultural and historical scene. But Fiedler is sensitive only to his own mental processes, and to his own reception.

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, as readers will recall (for we certainly all did read that book, and it had an exhilarating effect in a context of stuffy moralistic criticism), Fiedler argued that our best literature conveyed a myth of America which featured and idealized a sublimated interracial male homoerotic bonding in the wilderness, denigrated the male-female relationships of settled society, and presented the crudest male adolescent stereotypes as excuses for female characterization. The thesis was notable for having its cake and eating it too: while attacking our best writers for their immaturity, it never queried their status as the best. It participated, none too subtly, in the ferocious

misogyny which it uncovered (I think in many cases accurately) in these books, and thus made a mockery of its apparent claim to mark a new stage in the maturing of the America (male) psyche. The book did not ask whether its chosen works really were “the best” and if so, why, let alone whether “the best” could ever be more than an opinion. Fiedler assumed, like Parrington, Trilling, and a host of others, that literary value in American books was a function of what they told “us” about our nation. He knew as well as other critics what being American was really all about. He posited a collective but historical unconscious (one which, despite his claim to a residual Marxism, is neither economic or ideological in nature) which expressed, repeatedly, the same national psyche in its best literature—and if a book lacked the myth, then it wasn’t among the best.

In brief, from a theoretical standpoint, *Love and Death in the American Novel* was vulnerable in the extreme. Luckily, theory was not so well developed back then and this weakness passed largely, though not entirely, unnoticed. But Fiedler’s view of the critic as a provocateur also demanded that he not consider the ways in which his argument might be strengthened or weakened by such empirical and logical matters as the laws of evidence, documentation, or argument. He simply asserted that things were as he said they were, with little attention to what he now slightly calls “‘rigor’ of exposition and accuracy of citation” (p. 109—the single quotes enclosing the word ‘rigor’ are his). Thus he could not compensate for theoretical defects with a strong or sophisticated historical empiricism. In fact the book was full of errors (as is *What Was Literature?*) significant enough to put into question the issue of whether or not Fiedler knew what he was talking about. (In *What Was Literature?* [p. 148] he asserts that in the earlier book he returned to Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* “over and over again” but in fact there is a total of two passing references to the novel, one of which gets the heroine’s name wrong, and a third to the author—leading me to suspect that Fiedler hadn’t then, and hasn’t still, read the novel.) But the book’s tremendous success as evidenced in citations, responses, and dissertation-production, constituted, for a while incontrovertible evidence of his expertise.

In *What Was Literature?* Fiedler simultaneously restates and reaffirms the thesis of *Love and Death in the American Novel*, and attempts to correct—more accurately, to conceal—its deficiencies by broadening its scope to include pop American literature. A great deal of rhetorical

obfuscation notwithstanding, his view of the canon, of “our” best works, has not changed an iota: Brockden Brown, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville are paraded before us once more as the only true flowers of our literature. Only, now, some few popular books are also allowed to march along—at the back of the procession, to be sure—not because they have literary excellence as such but because they disclose the very same myth as the elite works did, in a form more suited to “the popular mind.” The study of popular literature, that is to say, only confirms the myth that Fiedler discovered in elite literature. And since what Fiedler has always been looking for is that myth—the American version of sex and violence—he can proclaim himself a lover of popular literature without feeling that he thereby damages his claim to be our leading literary critic. The cake is still eaten and had.

Just as Fiedler’s vision of “our best literature” remains highly selective—no Howells, no Cather, and so on—his vision of popular literature is similarly partial. One innovation in approach, perhaps the only one, is that where *Love and Death* accepted a canon already in existence, *What Was Literature?* creates one—thereby intensifying the incipient solipsism of *Love and Death* rather than escaping from it. In one essay he selects what he describes as the “four forms which have most troubled elitist critics even as they have most pleased the mass audience:” sentimental literature, horror literature, hard core pornography (including Sade and Pauline Reage), and low comedy (Lenny Bruce and others) [p. 133]. He would probably consider it overly ‘rigorous’ in the reviewer to point out that the Marquis de Sade, while never a great favorite of “the mass audience,” has certainly been the topic of a great deal of serious, “elitist” literary criticism. Or that Lenny Bruce never had a tremendous following. Or to suggest that a definition of popular literature which includes, a priori, dismissal by elitist critics (whoever they are) begs the demonstration that a split between “low” and “high” is the essence of the literary scene today. Or to note that what Fiedler defines as popular literature is what *he* likes, and that since he is not a member of “the mass audience” this *cannot* be an acceptable criterion.

In the series of essays which constitute Part II of *What Was Literature?*, Fiedler outlines “a hitherto unperceived ‘epic,’ embodying a myth of our history unequalled in scope and resonance by any work of High Art” (p. 154). This work of the collective unconscious includes *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Clansman*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *Roots*, all of which are read as the darker brother of the elite books, dipping frankly into the matters

of miscegenation and rape that the elite books avoided, though everywhere implied, through their sublimated homoeroticism. This is what "the American imagination" is all about, Fiedler claims, and the virtue of the popular book is that it makes it ever so much clearer than the more clever elite one. This is because the writer to a mass audience is, either really or affectedly, much more naive than the elite writer—a self-serving and elitist assumption if ever there was one. In fact, if the book at hand does *not* reveal that myth, then—no matter how many have claimed to read it or love it—it is not "*echt* popular literature" (p. 122). And if readers are on record as experiencing the book in a different fashion from that which Fiedler attributes to them—well, they're a mass audience, which can't be expected to know why it likes what it likes.

It is, of course, illogical to object to the use of a normative definition for "good" literature, although one can certainly quarrel with one or another particular criterion for asserting that a given book is "really" good. All talk about "good" literature must be evaluative, seeking to persuade others to accept its criteria as well as the specific judgments those criteria imply. Similarly, arguments that academics and serious critics "should" pay more attention to popular literature, or anything else they have overlooked, are necessarily grounded in value judgments. But the field of study itself, that to which attention should be paid, it seems to me, needs to be established by invoking external, "objective" criteria. Neither the field of popular literature, nor—for that matter—the field of the "American," are properly constituted by a list of the critic's favorite works. To produce analyses of popular literature, or American literature, which have at the outset distinguished between the popular and the *echt* popular, or that which is merely written in America as opposed to that which is "really" American or "most American" is, in the crassest way, to be inventing rather than studying one's subject. That a field to some degree is always constituted by the questions we ask of it, that the status of the objective is problematical, does not cancel this obligation so much as make it a more difficult and subtle one to satisfy. The problem is not easy to set up, or the answers to come by; both question and answers remain subject to constant scrutiny and modification—oops, rigor again. Fiedler's lack of rigor, and his flaunting of inaccuracies, amounts to a form of coarse rhetorical bullying designed not merely to cow us into accepting his interpretations of the subject, but the constitution of the subject as well. In this procedure, however, and despite his claims to uniqueness, he is only one among many

Americanists, for whom tendentious definitions of the real thing have long been standard practice.

One could pursue Fiedler's commentary at length to uncover its fixation on the middle and late 1960s; or to disclose its obsessive misogyny even in—especially in—an argument which claims to be setting out to “redeem the feminine popular tradition” (p. 157). Thanks. But since Fiedler has attempted to unify his various essays through a contrast between “compulsory” literature read for work (in the classroom, under the aegis of elitist professors) and “optional” literature read for pleasure, it is perhaps more important to concentrate on his notion of the pleasures of artworks, whether high or low. “They provide the shameful pleasure we all feel . . . in contemplating images of terror and pain, with or without erotic overtones—indulging, vicariously, in the dangerous and the forbidden” he writes (p. 49).

I will not play the critical prude (what Fiedler would call the critical virgin or spinster) and insist that shameful pleasures are *never* derived from reading novels or watching TV violence. But to make them the whole story is, it seems to me, both an impoverishment and a brutalizing of the range of pleasures that literature is capable of providing. Apparently Fiedler believes that *all* pleasure is shameful, that no one really enjoys anything that is permitted, and that all claims to the contrary are so much hypocrisy. He is entitled to this vision of human nature, but it is a very specialized one, and profoundly moralistic. Indeed, Fiedler's suggestion of a way of reading literature that he calls “ecstatics” involves asserting that “we must”—note that ‘must’—“also serve God with the evil impulse” (p. 139), and hence integrates every aspect of human experience within a moral vision whose ideological basis, local, historical origins, and hegemonizing intentions he does not seem to see.

Besides being, ultimately, the expression of a totalizing morality which makes him more like than unlike most of the critical and cultural phenomena he attacks, Fiedler's approach is also, as he asserts, cryptographic, reading for the exposure of secrets. (Cryptography and patriarchal moralism may well go together.) This approach is impatient with surface form, and dismisses reports submitted by real people about their reading pleasures. Yet if, as Fiedler also asserts, fiction is fantasy; and if, as we all know, life is full of loneliness, pain, and terror, why should literature not on occasion provide fantasies of community, security, and simple bliss? Why should they—we—not enjoy the cheerful and comforting as well as the terrible and frightening, the permitted as well as

the forbidden? If violent rape is a commonplace, and rapists seldom punished, why not a literature where it is always averted and the attempt always avenged? If women are oppressed and dominated, why not a literature where we control things? If life is mean, why not a literature where life is magnanimous?

Another defect of the cryptographic approach as Fiedler practices it is an inability to distinguish between a real and a literary experience, or at least to allow the reader such ability. Enjoyment of literature may depend crucially on the constant awareness that it is not real. "Real" violence is terribly unsafe; literary violence doesn't leave a scratch on a person. It stands to reason that this difference is not trivial. The shame, terror, and guilt a person might "really" feel as an attacked or attacker may be exactly what reading or viewing is free of; and of course it is free of all real-life consequences. Dr. Johnson scoffed at the unities because, as he pointed out, nobody ever for a moment imagined the play to be taking place anywhere but in a theater. Fiedler's view assumes that we mistake books for real life, and thus projects a false naïveté on readers and viewers who often turn to books and spectacles because they've had enough of life already. Thus, despite his claim to correct the Victorian seriousness of academic criticism, to make (p. 34) "our country and our culture seem more interesting and amusing than most academic accounts would lead us to believe," his is a profoundly oppressive criticism.