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A Second Look at Leslie Fiedler

Leslie Fiedler published hundreds of essays (captured in approximately twenty books of criticism), three novels, and as many collections of short stories and novellas. He was a prominent and outspoken figure in literary studies almost from his debut in 1948 through the 1980s. But, while he continued to write until his death in 2003, Fiedler has been largely forgotten by scholars and the public alike. Detractors suggest that he rode the waves of popular trends until his flimsy raft was shipwrecked on the shore. Recent trends in literary and cultural studies would instead suggest that Fiedler had found solid footing long before the crash.

Fiedler began his career with a conscious break from the New Critics who were dominant after World War II. Their formal writing and attention to close reading did not suit his psychoanalytic technique and conversational style. Fiedler was an early advocate for myth readings and discovered archetypes where none had bothered to look. Though much of his work focused on American novels, he, like earlier New York Intellectuals, published earnestly on American culture and politics as well, most notably on the Rosenberg trial. Unlike other academics, Fiedler seriously studied and wrote on popular culture ahead of his time. Ideas like those he had in 1952 on comic books have only recently received acknowledgment as literary scholarship.

As Fiedler's popularity peaked in the 1960s and 70s, the brash critic focused inward to reflect on the impossibility of playing both the worldly wild child and the institutional critic. Perhaps foreseeing his own decline in a 1964 essay, “The Death of Avant-Garde Literature,” Fiedler writes, “no writer can have the rewards of a book-club adoption and of alienation at the same time” (Collected II 455). In 1970 he turned the psychoanalytic reading he had given America’s classic literature on himself, with his reflective Being Busted, a social critique-cum-memoir written after being arrested for letting marijuana be smoked in his house. In the following year’s “Leslie Fiedler Reintroduces Himself,” Fiedler proposes three stages of his life: “first into radical dissent, then into radical disillusion and the fear of innocence, and finally into whatever it is that lies beyond both commitment and disaffection.” I will use those here.

I. Dissent
Leslie Fiedler broke onto the literary scene in _Partisan Review_ with his controversial and eventually famous “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” in June of 1948. Prior to it, Fiedler had published a review of four poetry collections and a short story in _Partisan Review_. Following it, he responded to symposium questions on “The State of American Writing” and wrote a second review of several poets’ collections. Fiedler’s works in _Partisan Review_ during that pivotal year reflect many of the characteristics by which he would later become recognized: an obsession with alienation and the “Other,” a critical eye and vitriolic tongue hidden beneath a veneer of informality, and a respect for the value of popular culture.

“Huck Honey” combined all of these traits but for a time went almost unnoticed. The essay is irreverent yet perceptive in its psychoanalytic reading of classic American novels. Fiedler reveals the frequent homoeroticism of tales about lost boys written for men too afraid of heterosexual relationships to truly grow up. And while Fiedler later claimed that he never intended to shock with the article, “something so sweetly simple, so seductively obvious” that he thought everyone would agree with his claims (Fiedler qtd. in DeMott), it was shocking enough that many people could not take the article seriously. According to reviewer John Leonard, Philip Rahv only published the piece because he thought it was a parody. And a _New York Times_ review of Fiedler’s first book, _An End to Innocence_, which includes a slightly modified version of the Huck essay as its centerpiece, fails to mention the shocking essay. Despite its initial neglect in these two sources, the essay has since been well-utilized and required little explanation in a _New York Times_ article as late as 1986 (O’Connor). As Fiedler explains in his introduction to the second edition of _An End to Innocence_, for a time people spoke of the homoerotic undertones of American male literature “as if everyone had always known what was really at issue between Huck and Jim on the raft” (Collected I xvii).

While _An End to Innocence_ was favorably reviewed when it first came out as the anticipated debut of “a brilliant young writer” known in the “little magazines” (Barrett), _Love and Death in the American Novel_ was the most significant of Fiedler’s early works. It extends the thesis of “Huck Honey” to all American novels and elaborates it, arguing that “the failure of the American fictionist to deal with adult heterosexual love and his consequent obsession with death…affect the lives we lead from day to day” (12). Though at first unpopular, his use of “depth psychology” on the American classics would eventually be taken up by others with gusto (Sheed). Fiedler’s approach was bold. In his introduction to _Love and Death_, he not only brushes aside the techniques of the New Critics as dull but
also argues that they were exercises in “higher remedial reading” (9).
Instead of focusing on particulars as the New Critics did, Fiedler
looked for a broader, more general understanding applicable to
society, the psyche, and culture. Fiedler sought to understand the
American condition through its literary classics.

Although now considered his greatest work, *Love and Death*
received mixed reviews upon publication. While some of his
reviewers appreciated his attempts to crack the shell of American
literature, others felt he was too unscholarly or that he ignored texts
that did not fit his schema (Hayman 263). Compared to the New
Critics, Fiedler was seen to excel at the nonacademic. He avoided
footnotes and embraced exclamation marks, each talent a source of
pride for him (*Love and Death* 7, 9). Fiedler even considered the
work to be a kind of gothic novel in the vein of America’s major
forms of literature (*Love and Death* 8). He would later explain that
*Love and Death in the American Novel* was the first of a trilogy that
would fully explore American culture. Along with subsequent radio
shows and book club deals, the book positioned Fiedler as a public
figure.

II. Disillusion
The same year that Fiedler published *Love and Death*, he came
out with the literary *No! in Thunder*, a collection of essays looking
at the whole of Western literature through myth analysis. In the
introduction to the second edition, Fiedler writes, “All my adult
life I have been pulled back and forth between a commitment
to literature and a concern with politics....It is for that reason, I
suppose, that [*End to Innocence*] dealt largely with politics....I had
resolved not to misrepresent myself once more....and it seems to me
now looking back on *No! in Thunder* that it is finally too
literary” (*Collected I* 213-214). Fiedler is most known for his chutzpah, but it
often overshadows the value of his scholarship. His “Dante: Green
Thoughts in a Green Shade,” examining just one of Dante’s sestinas,
was considered the work of a “formal scholar” (Lask), and his stand-
alone piece, “Introducing Cesare Pavese,” was recommended as a
better introduction to a Pavese collection than one provided by a
Pavese scholar (Simon).

In his efforts to examine both the academic and the popular,
Fiedler ultimately undermined himself. At a commercial symposium
he argued that “it is the duty of the artist to bite the hand that
feeds him” (Harris), a phrase and mentality that persist through his
history. The finale of his “too literary” collection focuses on theory
but condemns it. The final essays are, to Fiedler, “examples of the kind
of theorizing which threatens to leave literature and its appropriate
delights for the sake of amateur philosophizing....I reprint them at the end of this book to indicate that at best they are rationalizations, defenses of a practice which deliberately eschewed methodology and which existed long before their formulation” (Collected I 513). But his rocky relationship with institutional scholarship proved quite attractive in a certain light, and in the chaos of the 1960s Fiedler’s anti-establishment persona was finally accepted. Despite this phase of positive reception from a new wave of thinkers, Fiedler seemed unsatisfied. Within the academic realm, he protested police involvement at an MLA conference and participated in SUNY Buffalo’s eclectic strike of 1970. But Fielder continued to push the boundaries of the literary critic’s role. With other New York Intellectuals, he publicly protested the Vietnam War, the Leary trial, a German Passion play, and Soviet treatment of Jews through the early seventies and was a prominent voice at a festival honoring a draft card defacing clergyman who was on the run.

Despite growing popularity, with radio and television appearances to complement his writing, Fiedler’s critical work struggled to find intellectual footing. He followed Love and Death in the American Novel with Waiting for the End in 1964 and The Return of the Vanishing American in 1968, completing his American trilogy. Waiting for the End deals with more recent novels, tracing the purported death of American literature at a time when the novel as a medium was pronounced dead. By 1966 Fiedler himself considered novels dead, claiming that they had become too “respectable” and “predictable” (Aldridge). The Return was a shift toward future mass culture scholarship, examining the contemporary obsession with American Indian culture and the reintegration of Western myths into popular culture. Neither was well-received in book reviews, although Waiting for the End nevertheless made it onto the New York Times list of the top literary books of the 1964 season. Reviewers found his work to be more of the same, in a new but now stereotyped context. Waiting for the End was read as “nothing if not a middlebrow book” and one reviewer claimed that “as a piece of serious criticism it leaves much to be desired” (Crews). The Return was considered the work of a myth-reading “crank” who was part of an isolated group of intellectuals and who kept harping on stereotypes, such as WASP, to fit the most popular trend to his ongoing thesis (Rexroth).

Fiedler, whose strident voice had always generated praise alongside criticism, unsurprisingly gained both fans and foes with his fiction. His first novel, The Second Stone, was marketed as controversial, with advertisements using negative reviews (“what nerve he had to write this novel”) as well as positive (“brilliantly conceived”) (“Ad 223”). A few years later, between 1964’s Waiting
and the second edition of *Love and Death* in 1966, Fiedler published his second novel, *Back to China*, a somewhat autobiographical satire in the form of an adventure novel that was considered too vicious to its protagonist (Poore). The following year he put out a collection of three novellas entitled *The Last Jew in America*, which exemplified the alienation of three men with intertwined stories: a “Jew” in Montana, a “WASP” in New York, and a “spade” back in that same Montana town. The collection focuses on the Other in America, but like *Back to China* it draws heavily on autobiography as Fiedler began to explore his own Otherness. Whether writing fiction or scholarship, Fiedler’s provocative style demanded newness, but sometimes reviewers found him repetitive and aggravating (Maloff). The most consistently positive review of later writings in the sixties was for a collection of short stories entitled *Nude Croquet*, but even that fell short of expectations by being too staid (Leonard). By 1969, Fiedler had somehow become both predictably provocative and institutionally accepted.

III. Whatever Lies Beyond

At the end of the 1960s, Leslie Fiedler’s acceptability came into question when police arrested him and his family on drug charges. Although he eventually won his appeal, Fiedler set out on a new journey that would bring him back to old ideas. His autobiographical *Being Busted* is a sobered meditation on his drive for success. But even within his “confessional,” *Being Busted* appears as much a dissection of the Other in society as any of his literary works, and Fiedler was quick to fall back into his earlier stride. Leaving behind “respectable” fiction, Fiedler spent later years of his life swimming the depths of the popular culture he always loved. Rock music, film, genre fiction, and even pornography all had Others to explore, but it came to feel disingenuous. By this time, other scholars had also taken on the popular mantle and both reviewers and Fiedler himself seemed to “eulogize” the critic (Norman), as if he were not “youthful, assertive, gay, but dead, dying or so established as to become almost Official” (Sale).

Fiedler’s next project examined another lowbrow figure-become-Official, but 1972’s *The Stranger in Shakespeare* drew foul calls of repetition. The dissection of Shakespeare’s Jews, blacks, savages, and women appeared to be a carcass already well-picked. Despite his excellent psychoanalytic digging, the Other costume that Fiedler had long carried with him felt forced onto the skins of those Elizabethan characters (Lehmann-Haupt). And some reviewers, who in the early 1970s wanted to like his easy style and intriguing ideas, were forced to acknowledge that all of his digging was merely “bold”
and “resourceful,” not in any way useful for viewers of Shakespeare (Kermode). After a last attempt with literature, Fiedler had reached his saturation point. After 1972, he finally turned to developing large works on popular culture and mass media, media with which he had been intellectually interested for more than twenty years. As he wrote in 1971, “criticism at the moment can no longer condescend” to popular culture as even Fiedler once had (Collected II 404).

Fiedler spent much of the rest of his life engaged in this pursuit. Following his love of science fiction, he published the 1974 sci-fi novel *The Messengers Will Come No More*, which one reviewer snidely renamed “The Last Jew in the Cosmos” for its familiar tone (Alter). In public lectures, Fiedler gave talks on the analysis of television programs, violence in the media, and the role of technology in the future of cultural meaning making. And in 1978 he published *Freaks*, a critical look at the extreme Other as seen in our historical love for sideshow attractions like Siamese Twins, the Fat Lady, and the Skeleton Man. *Freaks* was the sort of edgy, beyond-the-pale book that audiences expected from Fiedler and, despite the work being “rushed” (Stade), it managed to provoke response the way that *Love and Death in the American Novel* once had, calling into question the role of Others “more marginal than the poorest sharecroppers or black convicts on the chain gang” (Fiedler qtd. in Stade). *Freaks* was used to explain everything from the fascination with Halloween costumes to the appeal of the carnivorous Alice Cooper, the seductive androgyny of Mick Jagger, and the sexual thrill of vampire movies.

Fiedler’s straying from literature culminated in what was to be his final critical work, 1982’s *What Was Literature?* The book was a final call to other intellectuals to move away from the novel and into media that could communicate with the masses in a way novels once had: films, television, comic books, and genre fiction. After the reception of his work, again controversial for its attack on the very institutions in which he had thrived, Fiedler continued to write regularly and give talks; he had not said all he wished to say and three more works would be forthcoming (Shulevitz). The first of these works was a collection of essays on Jewish identity published in 1991, *Fiedler on the Roof*, which was received as “a welcome shift into a minor key” for the once provocative writer (Dickstein). And the second book, the 1996 *Tyranny of the Normal*, which examined medical ethics and the “freaks” of our everyday experience, was understood as his attempt to “expose the unspoken doubts, fears and hostilities of the ‘enlightened’” (Shweder). Though new, both were explorations into our culture’s obsession with the alienated Other in American society, the myth that had entranced Fiedler all along.

A third book, reported by Shulevitz to be about popular
culture, never materialized before Fiedler’s death in 2003. His *New York Times* obituary describes the range of his successes in criticism and highlights broad life experiences that hardly come to the fore of his work, including work with the Navy as a Japanese translator (Leonard). But in the end Fiedler is boiled down to a “literary provocateur.” As such, our literary memory of him as one of the “most prestigious contemporary American intellectuals” in 1972 too often reduces 55 years of writing to applications of his 1948 “Huck Honey” (Leonard).

Works Cited


