

## GOODBYE TO COLUMBIA: THE EDUCATION OF MORRIS DICKSTEIN

*Jonah Raskin*

Morris Dickstein's new memoir, *Why Not Say What Happened: A Sentimental Education*, reaches a crescendo in 1971 when the English Department at Columbia votes to deny him tenure and he takes a job at Queens College. Even for long-time academics, his narrative provides a behind-the-scenes look at the inner workings of Ivy League academia. For readers of twentieth-century Jewish fiction, Dickstein emerges as a character who might inhabit a Philip Roth novel entitled "Goodbye, Columbia." Comic and yet deadly serious, he's a representative figure of his generation and an inveterate New Yorker who moved from the Old Testament to rock 'n' roll and from the synagogue to the streets of protest, all the while that he confesses his own inner demons. Yes, this is a confessional memoir of the sort that might make his button-down professors uncomfortable.

Nearly a decade before his Columbia declined to make him a permanent member of the faculty, Dickstein graduated from the college magna cum laude. In 1963 he received an M.A. from Yale and in 1967 he received a Ph.D., also from Yale, where he worked with Harold Bloom and wrote a thesis entitled *The Divided Self: A Study of Keats's Poetic Development*, which became his first book. It's a story he tells with great gusto and with a sense of his own divided self.

Dickstein seemed destined to join the English Department at Columbia and to become a colleague of the teachers—Lionel Trilling, Steven Marcus and Andrew Chiappe—who had guided him through his undergraduate education. Dickstein and his alma mater seemed and indeed still seem indivisible. Retired now from Queens after a long and as they say illustrious teaching career, his education at Columbia still matters to him. About a third of the way through his memoir he explains, "It's strange that I should be writing about my undergraduate courses and teachers more than half a century later." Not so strange to those who attended Columbia. He adds, "the best of these were not simply courses but life altering experiences" (107). For decades, the English Department had that effect on students. Dickstein read voraciously, thought deeply and prepared himself for a career as a

university professor. Then, on the way to tenure, the Sixties swept across America and forever altered his life.

In the last chapter of his memoir, he explains, "The liberating changes in my own world were modest—after all, I was married, had children, had a job—but our lives unfolded in tune with the times: occasionally getting high, marching against the war, going to deafening rock concerts...and letting my hair grow and grow." He adds, "Some of my elders at Columbia never forgave my sympathy for the student movement" (296). If he had meant to sabotage his own journey toward tenure he couldn't have done a better job.

Still, all the while that he let his hair grow longer and longer, he also aimed to be the English department's fair-haired boy. He wrote and published in nearly all the right places, received fellowships, attended Cambridge for a year, revered nearly all his professors and walked as closely as he could in their pedagogical and intellectual footsteps. His teachers might have taken him for one of their own; after all he took his cues from them, from *Partisan Review*, their publication, and contributed to *Partisan Review*, too. But as his memoir makes abundantly clear, there was no way that Morris Dickstein could ever become another Lionel Trilling or a Steven Marcus and they must have known it.

He was too earnest and idealistic and perhaps all-too naïve about the academic world. Still, better naïve than cynical and better sentimental than sarcastic. Dickstein belongs to a generation that came of age after World War II and that never experienced the ideological fissure of the 1930s and 1940s that informed the opinions and the perspectives of his professors in the 1950s and 1960s. Of Trilling and Jacques Barzun he writes, "They were careful scholars but also freewheeling minds, seemingly interested in everything, following questions wherever they led" (107). What he doesn't apparently appreciate even at this late date is that Trilling and Barzun were cold warriors, that they were bitten by the virus of McCarthyism and that while they gave the impression that they were open minded and freewheeling they had long ago closed the door on a vast territory of literature and politics. There's a lot behind the phrase "seemingly interested in everything."

In the 1960s, Henry James was the great god of the English Department while Theodore Dreiser was in the dog house. Marx was out and Freud was in. Irony and ambiguity were enshrined, political and personal passions dismissed and discarded. For decades not a single woman author—not Sappho, Colette, Dickinson or Virginia Woolf—

was taught in the English Department and no authors of color, either. A Columbia education was rich and rewarding in some ways and woefully lacking and disappointing in others.

The Sixties and 1968 in particular confirmed Trilling's worst fears: that student protest would lead to anarchy and that questioning the power of the university itself would lead to anti-intellectualism. In *Why Not Say What Happened* Dickstein shows that throughout the 1960s, he didn't join political groups or organizations and that he never adopted Marxism, though he was curious about Marxist ideas. Moreover, he also shows that he embraced the notion that the Cold War hemmed-in American culture and that it was time for a thaw. In that regard, he betrayed the fundamental assumption with which Trilling, Barzun and their colleagues operated in the world. A thaw wasn't what they wanted. They wanted the status quo. Dickstein didn't and yet his memoir is a testament to the seductive power of the cold warriors. It also suggests that by 1971, they were still unwilling to open the door and allow someone like him to join their world and reluctant to expand the intellectual and cultural horizons at Columbia.

The author of the *Gates of Eden*, a romp through the Sixties, and *Dancing in the Dark*, a study of American life and culture in the Thirties, Dickstein has long had the enviable habit of looking at his subject matter from more than one perspective. Like the best of American critics, he enjoys a double consciousness. He sees writers, books and movements this way and then that way. In the last chapter of his memoir he looks at himself from inside and outside, with detachment and with passion, too. He examines Columbia's decision not to grant him tenure with a sense of hurt, anger and resignation.

After all these years he understands there's nothing he can do to change the past. All he can do is to put his own ghosts to rest. Dickstein's friends, George Stade and Leo Brady, informed him, he explains, of the English Department's meeting when his foes voted against him. "I had never experienced any serious rejection," he writes. "Now, it appeared, my life had unaccountably taken a dark turn. Somehow, I hadn't measured up. The very place where I had come of age, where my life had taken shape, was turning me out. For the first time I glimpsed what others described as depression; an affectless sense of sheer void" (292). He adds, "It took years for that blow to heal completely." Meanwhile, he still had a year on his contract. "I'll show those fuckers what I can do," he explains. It's one of the few times in his memoir that he uses an obscenity. He adds, "it was a

childish notion, an obscene gesture in the face of the whirlwind, but it was healthy" (293).

Not getting tenure at Columbia ended one chapter of Dickstein's academic life and opened another. Looking back from the present day it seems like a blessing in disguise: a deeply felt, much needed personal liberation. Dickstein went on writing and teaching. Columbia's loss was Queens College's gain and his own, too.

*Why Not Say What Happened* offers a bittersweet portrait of a young man who was raised as an orthodox Jew and as a "Yeshiva boy" who turned to literature as his chosen religion. Dickstein belongs to a tradition of New York Jewish intellectuals that includes Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin and Maxwell Geismar; none of whom taught at Columbia, all of whom wrote major works about American culture that changed the ways that Americans thought about themselves and the society to which they belonged. *Why Not Say What Happened* serves as a lyrical companion piece to Dickstein's *Gates of Eden* and *Dancing in the Dark*. It shows how very much he's still a product of Columbia and yet a renegade from Columbia, too. He might be the last of his kind and emblematic of an age that now seems provincial and parochial, but one that taught students to read closely and to connect individual works of literature to the big cultural picture. Those lessons, which Dickstein learned well, are well worth preserving today.

#### WORK CITED

*Why Not Say What Happened: A Sentimental Education* by Morris Dickstein. New York: Liveright, 2014. 304 pages. \$ 27.95. Print.

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