

Freak Love

Leslie Fiedler rises to the defense of 'difference.'

TYRANNY OF THE NORMAL

Essays on Bioethics, Theology & Myth.

By Leslie Fiedler.

155 pp. Boston:

David R. Godine. \$22.95.

By Richard A. Shweder

HOW should you react to an overweight, elderly Jewish poet who assures you that he "would infinitely prefer to be described as a 'fat old kike' than as 'a portly senior citizen of the Hebrew persuasion' "? How should you react to a professor of literature who proposes that "deep in the undermind of all of us there persists a desire to murder the disabled," and opines that the guilt we experience over our unconfessed feelings toward "cripples" and "gimps" cannot be allayed by the "linguistic censorship" imposed on us by "enlightened" do-gooders who would deprive us of our primal dispositions and essential human ambivalences, as revealed by Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Mary Shelley and Robert Louis Stevenson? How should you react to a cultured author with impeccable literary credentials who suggests that the birth of a child inevitably generates not only love but also hate and resentment in parents and that, for the sake of our mental health, we really ought to "reinstitute some form of permitted and ritualized 'abuse' of the young"?

Some readers will be entertained by such lubrications and welcome them as the bombillations of a quick-witted iconoclast writing in a dreary age of political correctness. Others will take umbrage at such fulgurations and dismiss them as the convulsions of a critic who is a bit too eager to be extravagant and outrageous. Both types of readers will miss the point.

The poet, professor and author is, of course, Leslie Fiedler, who is widely known and acclaimed for "Love and Death in the American Novel." His new book, "Tyranny of the Normal," is a roundup of nine of his essays, written over 25 years. The book includes disquisitions and ruminations with titles like "Child Abuse: An Amateur Approach," "Why Organ Transplant Programs Do Not Succeed," "Pity and Fear: Images of the Disabled in Literature and the Popular Arts" and "Eros and Thanatos: Or, The Mythic Aetiology of the Dirty Old Man." Primary ambivalence is the first principle of Fiedlerism, and Mr. Fiedler is conflicted about almost everything: doctors, nurses, hospitals, cities, organ transplants, rock festivals, the maimed, the newborn, even the sexual desires of portly senior citizens of the Hebrew persuasion. Yet the most basic ambivalence that motivates our author is his uncertainty about the age of reason and secular society itself, where damnation has "become a metaphor," sex is "no longer regarded as sinful," and "earthly science" has begun "to inspire the faith formerly reserved for God."

To say of this essayist that he is a seriocomic literary critic writing about his wariness of doctors ("iatrophobic" is one of his favorite words) is to make him sound bland. In the title essay, Mr.

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Fiedler observes that all social groups, including our own, arrange for "the ritual slaughter of Freaks" and suggests that "in all probability more 'abnormal' babies were being allowed to die (in effect, being killed) in modern hospitals than had been in the Bad Old Days when they were exposed and left to perish by their fathers."

Whatever the shock value of that observation, his aim there as everywhere in this book is not to offend or disparage. His real point is to note that "fear of difference" is an inherent feature of the human condition, that we only make things worse when we pretend it does not exist, and that there is reason to be afraid for your life when the definition of "normality" is moved out of the family into the misguided hands of well-intentioned medical professionals, bureaucrats and politicians. No other writer has guts ironical enough to make that point better. No other writer is a more courageous defender of "difference" in an age that has yet to realize that you do not have to be the same to be equal and that justice is not served by treating different cases alike.

Mr. Fiedler likes to talk about dark things that he thinks we all feel but can't easily express, and don't necessarily want to hear. With the help of Freud, Sophocles and Bram Stoker, he gives mythic archetypal character to double binds and no-win situations and tries to elevate his personal ambivalences to the status of a theory of interpretation and a universal doctrine. He evinces a nostalgia for archaic rites and sensibilities, such as circumcison and the cathartic effects of corporal punishment. He plays the part of a neo-antiquarian jester in the Court of Science exposing the unspoken doubts, fears and hostilities of the "enlightened." He just loves to make counter-intuitive observations. Being born a "Freak" is not necessarily a hideous fate, he avers, and even "the most grotesque among them have managed to live lives neither notably worse nor better than that of most humans." He may be right.

In the contemporary marketplace for anti-P.C. literature, Mr. Fiedler, a writer with an imagination from out of the pale, is publicized as "cantankerous," "infuriating," "provocative" and "controversial." This is unfortunate, perhaps even a little embarrassing, for such labels on a literary package make it easy to type the author and thereby neutralize his passionate voice. To say that he is "infuriating," or, alternatively, to say that he is a near-perfect antidote to sentimentalism, shallow humanism and the "thought police" in an age of political correctness, is to domesticate him by casting him into an all too conventional and already standardized role. It is the tyranny of the normal all over again. □