

Edward Alexander, *Irving Howe — Socialist, Critic, Jew* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1998).

**“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds ...” —Emerson**

It is interesting to speculate on how Irving Howe, student of Emerson, would have responded to this non-biographic, not-quite-intellectual-historical survey of his career. For it is a study that keeps demanding an impossible consistency from a life ever responding to changing intellectual currents. And the responses come from first a very young, then a middle-aged, and eventually an older, concededly wiser writer. Alexander's title promises four themes, but develops only three. We have socialist, critic, Jew; we don't have the man, Irving Howe. In place of a thesis, Alexander offers strong opinions: praise of Howe for letting the critic in him eventually moderate the socialism and the secular Jewishness, but scorn for his remaining a socialist and for never becoming, albeit Jewish, a practicing Jew. If Howe could have responded at all, it would, of course, have been in a dissent. Yet he might have smiled at Alexander's attempts to come to terms with one infuriating consistency: Howe's passion for whatever he thought and whatever he did, even when he was veering 180 degrees from a previous passion.

Mostly, the book is a seriatim treatment of Howe's writings, from his fiery youthful Trotskyite pieces to his late conservative attacks on joyless literary theorists. Alexander summarizes each essay or book in order of appearance, compares its stance to that of its predecessors or successors, and judges them against an implicit set of unchanging values of his own, roughly identifiable to a reader as the later political and religious positions of *Commentary* magazine. Alexander knew Howe personally (though one is not persuaded that they were close) and desires to honor his memory. He manages admiration for Howe's mind, his literary style, even his idealism; but something gnaws at that desire, a sense of threat in Howe's godlessness, that returns Alexander relentlessly to questionings of Howe's character — unanswerable without a portrait of the man behind the character. Alexander can but barely honour a memory that he continually withholds — though he attempts to make his final summing up a homage. Yet without a sense of the man as friend, colleague, kin — the smaller but deeper arenas of human commitment — the reader is unmoved by alleged betrayals, or championings, of humane causes. They become mostly data.

Alexander's book does provide a review of certain historical and intellectual currents in the period of Howe's life, 1920-1993. For one who knows the history, it reprises fierce divisions on the left: contending Marxist sects (where the

absolute dividing wall was Stalinism), old socialist opposition even to the supposedly righteous war against the Nazis (an opposition that saw World War II as but a continuation of the capitalist imperialism of World War I), absorption of American socialism into liberalism (always to Alexander a well-meaning but intellectually fuzzy purgatory before the true leap into conservative heaven), and — less political but, to Alexander, more insidious — later leftist subversions of culture and education — in the sixties by the New Left and in the eighties and nineties by the multiculturalists. This history may provide a backdrop for Howe's restless quest for his and America's best self, but it leaves his fountain lights to be guessed at. Why the quest and whence the restlessness? Were there letters to friends or wives, conversations with intimates that might illuminate the source and direction of his energies — were there even intimates? Not until the final chapter of the book does Alexander allude to correspondence carried on outside of periodicals. But Howe was alive to so much going on about him that sequential summaries of his books and articles, even helped by reminiscences about them from his later memoirs, makes Alexander's survey seem to lurch through, rather than develop, its themes. By surrendering control of the book to a sequence of events, rather than organizing it around an internal thesis, Alexander allows his jibes at Howe's inconsistency to emerge — perhaps unintentionally — as the emphasis.

In the darkest days of the Great Depression, the adolescent Irving Horenstein “stumbled into socialism” at De Witt Clinton High School, joined the Young People's Socialist League, and soon was writing pieces for the Trotskyite *Labour Action*. Why? Was it family influence, a mesmerizing teacher, a need to belong? Alexander accepts Howe's later denial that it was “the pull of the group” and even his somewhat contradictory assertion that Howe felt an unflinching “sense of destiny” in being of that “tiny despised minority.” He had already been a *bar mitzvah*, could speak the Yiddish of his parents' table conversation, but felt his greater sense of peoplehood with the workers of the world, whose student comrades he excluded from his family's dinner table out of embarrassment over conflicting roles. He was a writer of polemics before he even entered, at sixteen, the City College of New York, before he became absorbed in the political give and take of its famous cafeteria alcoves, before he discovered literature. And he was using pseudonyms — including “Irving Howe” — for publishing of various political shades. So did other young passionate ideologues: Daniel (Bolotsky) Bell, Albert (Glutzer) Gates, Emanuel (Geltman) Garret, who thought they could be more influential if more Anglican. Alexander reads all this as latent anti-Semitism. He never tells us how far back in history his own classic Greek name goes [for the record, this reviewer's Anglo

name traces to 1881], but he is unremitting in accusing Howe of being a turncoat Jew who saw little value in his heritage (certainly not the value of “Horenstein”) until the 1960s, when he started work on what was to become *The World of Our Fathers*. For Alexander, the great irony is that in a life spent espousing causes that he considers inimical to Judaism, Howe’s everlasting fame and only financial success should rest on that book. Throughout his study of Howe, Alexander’s sharpest judgments are upon his subject’s unwillingness to embrace his religion.

But Howe’s problem with Judaism was that of modernism in general. For one of Howe’s temperament, it would be hypocritical to pray to a God one does not believe exists, or to join a congregation dedicated to such worship. For modern Jews, as Alexander acknowledges in passing, a number of substitute Jewish allegiances have served to keep at bay close focus on the question of God (whose nature, in Judaism at any rate, is more general than particular). Zionism, Jewish Socialism, the flowering of Yiddish literature (which Howe saw as, and Alexander acknowledges to have been, a rear guard action celebrating an already dying culture), preservation of the Yiddish language and the spread of Hebrew from the prayer book to the vital daily business of a revived country, the JNF and the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, Jewish studies in the universities — all these served to obscure the fact that Judaism itself, though not highly theological, is sustained by allegiance and echoes that gloss over conflict with science and universal brotherhood. The natural response of this former president of the CCNY Philosophy Club was to reject what he saw as fallacy; the natural belligerence of this future founder of *Dissent* was to choose his own “tiny despised minority.” Modernism allowed for the replacement of old absolutes with new. “The people” was more provable — and more malleable of definition — than God.

When Howe finally did turn to the question of modern Israel, he embraced Peace Now, for Alexander, an untenable position. Alexander defends Likud’s intransigence on grounds both biblical and historical; but the biblical authority is of dubious value to one who reads the Bible as man-authored, and the historical argument contradicts the logic Alexander uses against Howe’s unremitting socialism. For if history has eroded the socialist premise, as Alexander repeatedly reminds his reader, it has also eroded the Likud premise. Despite Jewish purchase and cultivation of the land apportioned to Israel in the armistice of 1948, and despite artificial Arab confinement of Palestinians in camps — whatever the reason, that is, for Palestinian proliferation — the fact is that what Alexander calls “Judea” and “Samaria” holds a majority population self-defined as “Palestinian.” That historical fact is the basis for Howe’s and

Peace Now's accommodation to their national aspirations. Today, with the newly covenanted withdrawals of Israel from parts of the West Bank, it would seem that the majority of Israelis agree with Howe's position.

Howe's interests ranged widely. He could involve himself in the conflict between Richard Wright's revolutionary and Ralph Ellison's moderate, Emersonian approaches to amelioration of the Black condition. He could consider Faulkner and the literature of the south, the Yiddish writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and ultimately Philip Roth and Saul Bellow of the 1980s and '90s as chroniclers of passing social traditions. In contemporary political and literary controversies he looked for the consequences, the effects on the way people lived. He tried to distinguish real innovation from last gasps, and often changed his mind. But the constant tug between progressive and conservative movements created a force that drew him into its field. His founding *Dissent* in 1954, and his dedication to working on and at the magazine a few days each week, sometimes when the issues he joined there were foreign to the ones he was reaching for in other venues, bespoke dedication to an idea of socialism as a corrective force amidst the sometimes extreme currents of the age. It would have been well to see Howe at work, sleeves rolled up, dissenting among the dissenters he invited to *Dissent*. We might have better known the extent to which ego or personal animus was in conflict with idealism, to which turns toward the right — his writing for *Commentary* is an example — were thoughts or opportunities. Whatever his personal rages or joys, Alexander is convinced that literature changed his life.

Howe began to read literature seriously in the army, when he was stationed safely in Alaska amidst a war he intellectually rejected as another capitalist contrivance. Alexander scores him roundly for not seeing it as a war against the Jews, or of subordinating that perception if he did. But in 1946 Howe returned to New York to study toward a master's degree at Brooklyn College, and a year later was working as an assistant editor to Hannah Arendt at Schocken Books and to Dwight Macdonald at *Politics*, for which he wrote under the pseudonym of Theodore Dryden. By 1948, drawn by his second wife's job to live near Princeton, he became acquainted with R.P. Blackmur, Delmore Schwartz, Saul Bellow, and John Berryman, and his now proven editing skills got him the assignment to edit Leo Baeck's *Essence of Judaism*. Within three years of the end of World War II he had moved into criticism and into paid contact with Jewish roots.

The critical faculty exacts a price. One may admire on aesthetic grounds a work one abhors on ideological grounds. Howe would have to come to terms with the anomalies that made writers more real than sloganeers: with Ezra

Pound's rantings, T.S. Eliot's anti-Semitism, D.H. Lawrence's proto-facism, Brecht's Stalinism, even as he admired their sublimity or their intuitive force. To a socialist convinced that the twentieth century was a wasteland, Eliot was too important to be dismissed just because he espoused a restrictive Christianity. The literary imagination, Howe discovered, exceeded the sum of its raw materials, and made worlds live beyond political theory. But this perception also troubled him and would send him ever back for ways to square the two realms of consciousness. From the New Critics of the forties he learned to admire the form, and with it the implicit life, of art. By the eighties and nineties, he would be able, on sure grounds of pleasure in literature, to take on those in the academy who had so narrowed criticism into sectarian mantras that they no longer loved books, only critical apparatus. The graduate school emphasis on Freudian, Marxist, feminist, new-historicist, structuralist, deconstructionist theory had emptied of its inhabitants the house of good-reading and had left them perched on its scaffoldings like so many birds of prey. Political correctness in literary criticism, Howe averred, was not a true left position, for the left had always striven to make the traditional culture available to the masses. Marxists had respected "the classical heritage of mankind." Terms like "elitist" (applied to "dead white males") or "relevant" not only proceeded "from an impoverished view of political life" [Alexander] but, in Howe's words, were "ephemeral in [their] excitements and transient in [their] impact." Who, by the nineties, still read Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* or could consider it more relevant to contemporary America than Mill's *On Liberty*? American society, Howe said, suffers from "the provincialism of the contemporary."

It is a provincialism that Howe himself was rescued from, Alexander believes, by cultivating the critical faculty in the spirit of Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, George Orwell, and Edmund Wilson, all of whom had faith in the "common reader." Most people read for pleasure or instruction "uncontaminated," in Johnson's words, "by literary prejudices" and "the dogmatism of learning." As Alexander traces Howe's responses to the currents of his life, it is literary criticism, especially his appreciation of the novel, that Alexander sees wearing away the dogmatism of Howe's youth, leaving his leftism a sentiment rather than a program. Were Alexander himself of a more critical spirit, accepting youth as youth and the sub-currents of the left in the thirties and forties as other than mere blindness; if he were willing to look at contemporary history as itself in flux among the unresolved claims of liberty, equality and fraternity; if he were, in short, less scolding of Howe for inconsistencies and more appreciative of his capacity for self-correction, he would have written a better book. As it is, he has written a useful one, especially for readers who can profit

from journeying again past political and cultural milestones of a century  
approaching its end.

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