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Remembering Irving Howe

BY JOHN RODDEN

Irving Howe (1920-93) was a vocal radical humanist and the most influential American socialist of his generation. Howe was also, in my view, the last major American public intellectual, certainly the last of the Old Left. Not only was he prolific—he wrote 18 books, edited 25 more, penned hundreds of articles and reviews, and edited *Dissent* for forty years—but he was competent and more often brilliant in virtually every literary endeavor of his mature years. While some readers may find his work on “politics and the novel” to be most valuable, I believe that his contributions to the study of Yiddish literature and Jewish immigrant history are more likely to last.

Indeed, it is quite possible that Howe’s work will endure longer than that of the elder generation of New York intellectuals in whose shadow he sometimes found himself. Not only is much of his literary and political criticism still in print, but this essay is written as *Dissent*, which Howe faithfully edited for four decades, celebrates its fiftieth year of publication in 2004. Woody Allen’s joke two decades ago in *Annie Hall* that the magazine merge with the neoconservative journal *Commentary* and be renamed *Dysentery*, elicits today no more than a smile from serious readers. Allen’s movie has become a period piece, whereas *Dissent* continues to represent the distinctive voice of American social democracy and radical humanism.

* * *

Yes, Irving Howe had his admirers—and his detractors.

“Irving made a lot of enemies in his lifetime,” recalled Robert Boyers, an intellectual and friend on the Left. Indeed Howe was fond of the remark of William Dean Howells that anyone could *make* enemies but the real test was to keep them. By that criterion, he succeeded well. Though he occasionally reconciled after falling out (with a few writer-intellectuals, such as Lionel Trilling and Ralph Ellison, and a few New Leftists, such as Jack Newfield, Carl Oglesby, and Todd Gitlin), Howe made and kept an impressive number of enemies.

Howe’s chief enemies and most severe critics included onetime friends and colleagues in his New York circle who had moved to the right in the late 1960s and ’70s: Hilton Kramer, Norman Podhoretz, Saul Bellow, Midge Decter, Joseph Epstein, and Sidney Hook. But other harsh critics stayed on the political or cultural Left—or moved even further leftward, including Alexander Cockburn, Philip Rahv, and the majority of those New Left leaders whom Howe had excoriated in *Dissent*’s pages. Still other opponents, such as Richard Kostelanetz and Philip Roth, were literary or aesthetic rather than explicitly political adversaries.

For instance, Bellow dismissed Howe as “an old-fashioned lady.” Roth parodied him as Milton Appel, a “sententious bastard.... A head wasn’t enough for Appel; he tore you limb from limb.” During the late 1960s, when acrimonious differences over the Vietnam War and the counterculture split American intellectuals into rival camps, the poet Robert Lowell cast Irving Howe in the role of the archetypal “New York Intellectual.” Lambasting Howe as an elitist radical looking down on humankind, Lowell wrote in his sardonic poem, “The New York Intellectual” (1967):

Did Irving really want three hundred words?...
 How often one would choose the poorman’s provincial
 out of town West Side intellectual
 for the great brazen rhetorical serpent
 swimming the current with his iron smile!

In the early 1970s, Philip Nobile mocked Howe as “the Lou Gehrig of the Old Left,” “who is always there when you need him with a clutch position paper on the Cold War, Vietnam, Eugene McCarthy, confrontation or sexual politics.” Nobile added that Howe often assumed a gatekeeping or policeman’s role, “serv[ing] as the Left’s chief of protocol, correcting the manners of apocalypticians and calling for coalitions always and everywhere.”

To Lowell and Nobile, Howe was a critic-shark who patrolled New York’s cultural currents, an American commissar imbued with the joy of sects, an intellectual ironman whose pen never ran dry. Or, as Nobile once remarked of Howe’s circle: “They must be New York intellectuals. See how they loathe one another.”

Some of Howe’s neoconservative critics – such as his first biographer, Edward Alexander– value his literary criticism and his work on Yiddish literature; they confine their ire largely to his political writing. Alexander and other Jewish neoconservative critics have been especially hard on Howe for his positions on Israel. (Howe supported the Israeli Labor Party and Left-oriented organizations associated with the peace camp, such as American Friends for Peace Now.) The neoconservatives have also castigated Howe’s sectarian articles for the Trotskyist group to which he belonged in the early 1940s, pieces that Howe wrote in his early to mid-twenties and never reprinted—and for which he felt rather apologetic in later years.

But the celebrations – especially outside the neoconservative fold – vastly outnumber the attacks. Already by the mid-1960s, recalled Kenneth Libo, Howe’s graduate student at Hunter College and later his research assistant and collaborator on *World of Our Fathers*, Howe “had become a hero of sorts to many liberal-minded academics of my generation.” Upon publication of *World of Our Fathers* in 1976, notes one literary historian, Howe “was greeted as a cultural hero” within the American Jewish community. Reviewing *World of Our Fathers* that year, the Catholic priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley exclaimed that “us Irish, we should be so lucky to have an Irving Howe.” In 1977, the editors of *Moment* published a poll in which ten prominent American Jews listed the ten “most formative books of the Judaic world, representing all times, all places.” *World of Our Fathers* was the only book on American Jewish

history to make any of the lists – alongside the Bible, the Talmud, the Passover Haggadah, and the daily prayerbook.

Such praise drove Nathan Zuckerman (a.k.a. Philip Roth) to exclaim about “Milton Appel” in *The Anatomy Lesson*:

When literary Manhattan spoke of Appel, it seemed to Zuckerman that the name Milton was intoned with unusual warmth and respect. He couldn't turn up anyone who had it in for the bastard. He fished and found nothing. In Manhattan. Incredible.

If anything, the celebrations have only intensified since Howe's death. “A kind of moral hero,” Mitchell Cohen wrote in *Dissent*. “One of the steadiest minds in modern American life, and one of the most steadying... the splendid voice of social democracy,” eulogized *The New Republic*, alluding to Howe's essay collection of the mid-1960s, *Steady Work*. “A monument to a range and a depth almost impossible to imagine in one human being, combined with a quiet decency,” Robert Kuttner rhapsodized. Leon Wieseltier went, if anything, even further. “A great-souled man,” Wieseltier called Howe in *The New York Times Book Review*, “the man who, more than any American intellectual of his generation, by his work and by his example, conferred greatness upon the homeliest of qualities...the quality that mattered most to Orwell and Silone: the quality of decency.”

More recently, Richard Rorty lauded “Howe's incredible energy and his exceptional honesty,” making him virtually “a warrior-saint” who “came to play the role in many people's lives that Orwell did in his.” Libo hailed Howe for his “tough-minded realism and sustained hopefulness, as he strove... to improve the human condition by advancing Enlightenment goals of equality, fraternity, and progress.” “*World of Our Fathers* WAS my ethnic revival,” recalled Matthew Frye Jacobson. “There is no doubting that Howe was among the spiritual authors of my most deeply held scholarly and civic conviction...”

Indeed the kudos continue to the present. In 2003, Joseph Dorman called Howe “a true intellectual hero of the Left.” Even Ronald Radosh—a former adversary within the New Left who had moved far to Howe's right—pronounced him “undoubtedly one of our country's most eminent intellectuals, a man of passion and intelligence....”

Such paeans strike most neoconservatives as deplorable. (Alexander is a notable exception.) “Preparations are apparently under way to make [Howe] into the American Orwell,” lamented Joseph Epstein, who dismissed Howe’s radicalism as evidence of a politically immature and insecure thinker, indeed of a card-carrying lifetime member of “the Old People’s Socialist League.” Hilton Kramer pronounced all of Howe’s political writings, including his work on politics and the novel and other literary essays written from an explicit left-oriented perspective as “worthless.” Neoconservatives are not alone in refusing to canonize Howe as “St. Irving.” In a memorial column on Howe in *The Nation*, Alexander Cockburn derided Howe as “an assiduous foot soldier” in the campaign to “discredit vibrant political currents electrifying America and supporting liberation movements in the Third World,” a lapsed radical whose “prime function in the last thirty years of his life was that of policing the Left on behalf of the powers that be.”

However much Howe’s “enemies” may ridicule comparisons portraying him as “the American Orwell,” one cannot deny that the ongoing controversy about Howe’s heritage does indeed resemble the cultural politics surrounding Orwell’s reputation. Indeed, with the exception of Noam Chomsky, probably no American socialist thinker in the post- World War II era has provoked more disagreement within the Left and aroused more vitriol on the Right than Irving Howe. And I would argue further that Howe, like Orwell before him, became the “conscience” of his generation and ultimately even our nation’s intelligentsia. As a result, the stakes involved in disputes about Howe’s legacy are high. For to elevate or denigrate Howe—as has long been similarly the case with Orwell in Britain—is to affirm or assault nothing less than the recent history of the American liberal-Left, the status of the radical dissenting tradition, and the relevance of social democracy or democratic socialism to the American polity.

To understand how Irving Howe has come to occupy such a cultural role—and how he himself understood that role—let us recall the literary-political legacy that Howe embraced as his own. And let us do so by way of a quartet of intellectuals dear to Howe’s heart, persons who formed the intellectual-moral center of his critical outlook. For a leitmotif of this essay, which is quite evident in the critical responses already

quoted, is the (contested) perception of him as a literary-political hero. I believe that Howe aspired to a kind of intellectual heroism—very much like the writers with whom he identified, the figures who came to figure prominently in his imaginative and emotional life. Indeed, Howe’s choice of literary-political models furnishes insight into his much-disputed legacy as well as his impressive achievement.

Howe exalted four near-contemporary figures who inspired him from his youth onwards: Trotsky, Orwell, Ignazio Silone, and Edmund Wilson. Frequently Howe’s identifications with his subjects were so deep and intense that his writings on them amount to self-portraits.

Howe’s first great hero was Leon Trotsky, the man whose political orientation Howe embraced as a young teen when he entered the Trotskyist youth organization, the Young People’s Socialist League. Howe’s enduring fascination with Trotsky’s leadership skills—and indeed his high regard for Trotsky the man and writer as a “figure of heroic magnitude”—are well-known. Trotsky’s personal example and writings helped draw Howe into and sustain him in the Trotskyist movement. (Howe remained a committed Trotskyist for more than a dozen years, from the age of fourteen to his late twenties.) Even after officially withdrawing from his Trotskyist sect, the Shachtmanites (led by Max Shachtman), in October 1953 at the age of 33, Howe continued to include Trotsky among his culture heroes, his only explicitly political figure (except perhaps for Norman Thomas). Howe’s biographical study *Leon Trotsky* (1977) makes clear his youthful veneration of Trotsky:

How intransigent he remained in defeat! To have come even briefly under his influence during the 1930s was to learn a lesson in moral courage, was to learn the satisfaction of standing firm by one’s convictions, to realize that life offers far worse things than being in a minority.

On the final page of *Leon Trotsky*, Howe concluded:

A good portion of the writings of this extraordinary man is likely to survive and the example of his energy and heroism is likely to grip the imaginations of generations to come... Trotsky embodied

the modern historical crisis with an intensity of consciousness and a gift for heroic response which few of his contemporaries could match. Leon Trotsky in his power and his fall is one of the Titans of our century.

Indeed Howe retained a passionate, conflicted, yet lifelong identification with Trotsky for his “moral courage” and ability to stand alone. (Some critics have argued that Howe whitewashed Trotsky and downplayed his moral as well as political crimes.)

Howe’s great esteem for Orwell, whom he repeatedly acknowledged as his “intellectual hero,” is well known. And this time Howe chose well: Orwell’s skepticism toward ideology countered the influence of Trotsky’s allegiance to Marxist abstraction and will to the god of System. Moreover, Howe rightly intuited that he and Orwell shared significant literary affinities, above all a similar kind of rhetorical, inventive (rather than creative or purely literary) imagination. Like Orwell, who was the twentieth-century master craftsman of enduring catchwords and neologisms, Howe carved lapidary formulations in powerfully, and sometimes beautifully, chiseled prose, whereby he too added phrases to the cultural *Zeitgeist*. (Howe especially admired those passages in which an author wrote “chiseled” or “clenched” prose – a favorite Howe epithet – and Howe’s own best writing possessed a rigorous, taut dynamism.) Indeed, one could say that the prose gifts of both writers crossed from the rhetorical to the journalistic. Like Orwell’s catch phrases, Howe’s coinages were often polemical—and directed at explicitly political targets: “this age of conformity” (his swipe at the intelligentsia’s conservative turn in the 1950s), “socialism is the name of our desire” (adapted from Tolstoy’s famous assertion about God), “the New York intellectuals” (a phrase that he gave wide currency, if not invented, to characterize his *Partisan Review* circle), “guerrillas with tenure” (perhaps his sharpest cut at the New Left’s guru scholars), “a world more attractive” (a little-known phrase of Trotsky expressing love for art over politics), “confrontation politics” (what Howe characterized as the New Left’s negotiating style), and “craft elitism” (how arcane literary theory, exemplified by poststructuralism and postmodernism, exploits jargon to exclude the non-specialist reader), among other phrases.

Orwell did not hesitate to borrow words and phrases for his own purposes and to reinscribe them—and neither did Howe. This is apparent in Howe's book titles, such as his volume of literary criticism, *A World More Attractive*, which recalls Trotsky's phrase. But it is also evident in his edited volumes, such as *The Radical Imagination* and *The Radical Papers*, which allude to Trilling's celebrated *The Liberal Imagination* and to the Pentagon Papers, respectively.

Ignazio Silone was, for Howe, a literary-political hero much like Orwell, another writer and radical about whom Howe felt no ambivalence—and perhaps toward whom he felt a closer fraternal proximity, as if Silone were merely a slightly elder intellectual big brother. ("My favorite living writer," Howe once called Silone. It is also notable that Silone was the only member of Howe's pantheon who ever published in *Dissent*.)

In his essay on Silone, originally published in 1956, Howe acknowledged Silone as an exemplar of the conscientious, responsible, outspoken dissident intellectual who lived on "an intellectual margin." (I believe this phrase served as the germ for the title of Howe's autobiography, *A Margin of Hope*.) Indeed Howe came to see himself as a kind of Jewish-American Silone: "The man who will not conform," Howe wrote of Silone "is a dissenter." Howe elaborated in terms that suggest veiled autobiography:

His own attitude toward socialism was to retain the values, even if he could not retain the doctrine. Silone's demand, at once imperious and relaxed, was that others would share with him a belief in the recurrent possibility of goodness.

Howe calls Silone "a luminous example" of "a patient writer, one who has the most acute sense of the difference between what he is and what he wishes."³⁹ Howe proceeds in terms that suggest Silone's heroes—and their author himself—represent a level of heroic living that Howe yearns to reach in his moments of utopian yearning:

The hero of Silone's fiction feels that what is now needed is not programs, even the best Marxist programs, but examples, a

pilgrimage of good deeds. Men must be healed. They must be stirred to heroism rather than exhorted and converted. Unwilling to stake anything on the future, he insists that the only way to realize the good life, no matter what the circumstances, is to live it. The duality between the two heroes, between the necessity for action and the necessity for contemplation, between the urge to power and the urge to purity is reflected in Silone's own experience as novelist and political leader. In his own practices as an Italian socialist, he is forced to recognize that the vexatious problem of means and ends involves a constant tension between morality and expediency.

Furthermore, Howe agreed with Silone that heroism is "a condition of readiness, a talent for waiting, a gift for stubbornness." Howe admired Silone's resolution and steadfastness despite the fatiguing labor of striving for a more virtuous social order, what Howe called Silone's "heroism of tiredness." Ultimately Howe realized that patience, alertness, and waiting had to be his way, too, the way of all those who would hold fast to the ideals of socialism. And so, Orwell became for Howe a model of "the intellectual hero," Silone "the hero of tiredness."

Edmund Wilson was the only American member of Howe's heroic quartet. Yet young Howe prized Wilson partly for his mastery of the European literary and political traditions. For the aspiring cosmopolitan writer-critic just beginning his career at *Partisan Review*, the American outpost of European culture in the mid-1940s—indeed the premier cultural magazine of the American intellectual world from the 1930s through the 1950s—Wilson represented European intellectual sophistication on native ground. He stood before Howe as an *engagé* intellectual (like Orwell and Trotsky) who had never succumbed to the coarseness of ideology (unlike Trotsky—and indeed unlike the youthful Trotskyist Howe). Of course, Wilson was also the only member on this high stage of Howe's literary pantheon connected with Howe's intellectual orbit in New York, a fact that obviously rendered him a figure in even closer proximity (physically, if not fraternally or ideologically) to young Howe than Silone. Howe could (and did) get to know Wilson personally. Ultimately he granted Wilson too a measure of heroism—and Wilson's literary stamina,

indeed superhuman energy, matched Howe's own. Unlike Silone, Wilson was a hero of tirelessness:

Almost everyone looked up to him. Writers and critics looked up to him, both those for whom he served as a mentor and those ambitious enough to have him as a model. . . . His career took on a heroic shape, the curve of the writer who attains magisterial lucidity in middle age and then in the years of decline struggles ferociously to keep his powers. One doesn't customarily think of writers as heroes; nor are heroes always likeable. But in Wilson's determination to live out the idea of the man of letters, in his glowing eagerness before the literatures of mankind and in his stubborn insistence on speaking his own mind, there is a trace of the heroic.

These remarks of Howe on Edmund Wilson came to apply to Irving Howe himself. In *A Margin of Hope*, Howe cited Wilson as his chief literary model (along with Orwell). Here again, as with Howe's other literary heroes, one discerns a resemblance to Wilson in Howe's own "magisterial lucidity" and "stubborn insistence on speaking his own mind."

The animating idea of one of Wilson's critical studies, which Howe much admired, may well be applied to Howe himself. He was, in fact a "triple thinker," immersed in, and master of, at least three worlds—literary, political and Jewish. But we might also think of Howe in connection with Wilson's particular use of the term. "The artist should be triply (to the nth degree) a thinker," wrote Wilson in *The Triple Thinkers* (1938), which set forth Wilson's ideal of the writer's relationship to society and reflected his disillusion with Marxism as a way of reforming society or even adequately describing it. Wilson's triple thinkers (above all, Pushkin, James, Shaw and Flaubert, from whom Wilson borrowed the phrase) are unwilling to renounce responsibility either to themselves or to their society. They refuse either to dwell in a private garden of self-cultivation or to turn themselves into political hacks or social do-gooders. Instead, they seek meaning in the tensions between their inner and outer worlds. These tensions stimulate intellectual leaps, indeed imaginative triple jumps. The triple jumper of the mind soars dialectically to the triple

thought: art functions as an existential guide. (Aestheticism – art for art’s sake – is the single thought. Its antithesis, the double thought, arises from the realization that beauty does not exist as a transcendent, eternal abstraction but rather arises from social circumstances. This insight, if it loses dialectical fluidity and ossifies beyond conviction to dogma, becomes the doctrine that art must promote social reform.) The triple thought is the recognition that art is all this and much more, indeed that the work of art can enlarge our awareness, ennoble our inner lives, and enrich the human condition.

I regard Irving Howe as a Flaubertian – or Wilsonian – “triple thinker.” Although Wilson’s exemplary thinkers were nineteenth-century literary men *par excellence*, triple thinking is not associated with a particular epoch, form, genre, or style. It envisions new relationships, connects the real to the ideal, interweaves the social and artistic planes – and generates disturbance.

Irving Howe certainly was a thinker (“to the nth degree”) who generated a lot of disturbance. And I would argue that he moved far beyond the double thought (and sometimes doublethink) of his youthful Trotskyist dialectics to become one of our most sophisticated critics, possessed of a rare gift to appreciate art in the way of Orwell, Silone, and Wilson himself.

Indeed, as I have already suggested, Howe’s thinking was also “triple” in another sense: he was fluently trilingual in three domains. Howe lived concurrently in three overlapping, interacting worlds: American socialism, humanistic criticism, and Yiddish culture—and he commuted constantly among them. They were his three great loves—and he witnessed all of them grow pale and frail in his own lifetime.

* * *

Howe not only popularized the phrase “New York Intellectual” in his brilliant 1968 essay of that title, but also came to personify, as both his admirers and adversaries have recognized, some distinctive features of the species. The personal memoirs of friends and colleagues invariably address his complex personality and intellectual temperament, noting his intensity and his strenuous work ethic. Many also note his gradual

mellowing, his growing capacity to relax, his increasing ability to transcend partisanship. The mature Howe knew there was also a time for frivolity and lightness – and so he learned in later life to open himself to new pleasures, such as the ballet. As Daniel Bell put it in his memorial to Howe in *Dissent*: “Irving changed not only his opinions but the way he held them.”

“Looking back at my disillusionment with political ideology,” he wrote in 1982, “it would be more correct to say that my politics changed because I became, I like to think, more humane, tolerant, and broadminded. If I’m right in using those adjectives, then it became easier for me to acknowledge things that a rigid ideology would deny.”

But if Howe mellowed, he did not become lukewarm. He always ran hot on both justice and equality, the pole stars of his radical humanism; and he stayed cool—nay, cold—to neo-conservative celebrations of capitalism, far-Left diatribes against “Amerika,” and academic jargon of all kinds. He could be abrupt and flinty when confronted with what he regarded as stupidity, or intellectual complacency, especially if it came with academic credentials. (He was proud that he had become a chaired professor without ever bothering to get a Ph.D.) Of course, he lived through dramatic changes in the course of his lifetime, but responded to change and conflict like a man who refused to take comfort in the ideas that had shaped him.

As Leon Wieseltier observed in his memorial address on Howe: “He saw the end of socialism. He saw literature mauled by second-rate deconstructionists and third-rate socialists of race, class, and gender. And he saw the world of Yiddish disappear. But he never surrendered to nostalgia. He remained almost diabolically engaged with the politics and culture of his time.”

But Howe’s hunger for social justice could go beyond moral seriousness to an almost messianic longing. In *World of Our Fathers* he exalted *menschlichkeit*, or humaneness, calling it “that root sense of obligation which the mere fact of being human imposes upon us.” It is a “persuasion that human existence is a deeply serious matter for which all of us are finally accountable.... We cannot be our fathers, we cannot live like our mothers, but we may look to their experience for images of rectitude and purities of devotion.”

Howe, obviously, was comfortable with terms like “seriousness,” “rectitude” and “purity,” and didn’t at all mind referring to himself as a “radical humanist.” He was a man who lived with presentness and contradiction without abandoning his fidelity to what some would call “old-fashioned” or unfashionable virtues.

* * *

Nicholas Howe once remarked that the phrase “It’s like the crumb” became an endearing shorthand joke between Howe and his friends to describe a wonderful, gratuitous detail in a work of fiction—which, as detail evolved into story, assumed the form of an anecdote.

Especially at his memorial service and in the memorial issue of *Dissent* (Fall 1993), his family, friends and colleagues sprinkled delicious *shtiklakh* (morsels) about Irving Howe’s foibles and eccentricities. Everyone spoke about “Irving.”

These first-person reminiscences vividly evoked the man — at the baseball game reminiscing with beer-guzzling fans about having seen Babe Ruth play in Yankee Stadium, brusquely ending a phone conversation by hanging up the phone before a friend would say good-bye, leading a *Dissent* editorial meeting with a mixture of benevolence and argumentativeness. Some recollections consist of choice *shtiklakh*, while others are less edible or digestible to his friends. Nonetheless: the crumbs on his coat are there.

One crumb often passed around among his friends was the joke that Irving Howe was the last nineteenth-century Russian writer. Indeed, Howe does seem made in the image of the Russian intellectual of that era: a utopian, an idealist, a radical reformer, an impassioned advocate. Morris Dickstein once called him “a counter-puncher who tended to dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy of the moment, whether left or right, though he himself was certainly a man of the Left... whatever way the herd was going, he went in the opposite direction.” And these attributes were not confined to his political or cultural criticism. They manifested themselves in his prose style. As his son Nicholas observed, Irving Howe had “a utopian faith in the reader.”

Unsurprisingly, Howe also deeply identified—and ever more so as he grew older—with the greatest nineteenth-century Russian writer, utopian, and reformer/revolutionary: Leo Tolstoy.

I have already discussed Howe's four literary-political models from the generation immediately preceding his own. But Howe revered other writers from other generations too. Indeed, one of them was Tolstoy, who also induced him to hold the looking glass up to himself.

Howe's comments on Tolstoy are transparently self-reflexive: "I love the old magician in the way that Chekhov and Gorky loved him—for his relentlessness of mind, his unquestionable desires. Of course he succumbs to moral crankiness, to intemperate demands for temperance, but stubborn and even perverse, he remains faithful to the contradictions of his sensibility."

And there is more: "Tolstoy keeps groping for some stable position between the esthetic and the ethical. He never quite finds it, but he can write as if indeed he had found it." All this mirrors Howe – with his love of the ballet and polemic, his affinity for literary criticism and politics. As if to supplement Tolstoy's *Confessions* by voicing his own, Howe adds this (self-) criticism of his moral passion: "In a few instances, Tolstoy's ethical imperiousness does overwhelm his esthetic pattern."

Yes, Howe's own vulnerability to self-righteousness and godlike Final Judgment must also be conceded—and they never vanished completely. But Howe largely avoided the fate of another Russian author, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn: "What has happened to Solzhenitsyn?" Howe asked in 1989. "The answer is that his zealotry has brought about a hardening of spirit..." Solzhenitsyn lacked what Howe often referred to as "moral poise," which he defined as a sense of "ease in a world of excess." Instead Howe himself heeded the example of the Yiddish writers whom he cherished for their wondrous balance amidst adversity, above all Sholom Aleichem, the "dominant quality" of whose literary imagination is his sense of "moral poise."

Howe also aspired to such "moral poise"—and that is why Aleichem was also a literary (and political) model for him. As he knew, Howe himself could indeed be a stringent and severe man. That was the form that his tender sense of life sometimes assumed, the means whereby he maintained a poised balance amid all the demands of his triple loves.

The balance did indeed sometimes have something of the tenseness—the “intemperate temperance”—of the aged Tolstoy. That was the price that his friends—and above all Howe himself—paid his daimon for his extraordinary intensity, concentration, and passion.

One is reminded that Howe began his career with a study of another intemperately temperate man. In his first book, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (1949), co-authored with B.J. Widick, the twenty-nine-year-old Howe wrote that Reuther, a left-wing anti-Communist labor leader whom young Howe much admired, was “*an unfinished personality*” battling to reconcile the pursuit of power and the call to a nobler vision. Which would be stronger, mused Howe, the drivenness or the dream? Howe too remained an unfinished personality, a skeptical dreamer, chastened revolutionary, driven reformer, and anti-utopian animated by utopian longings. The oppositions animate just about everything he wrote as a mature literary-political intellectual, and are as readily identifiable in his essays as in his book-length studies of writers and thinkers. If any cultural critic of the second half of the twentieth century can still inspire our affection, it is surely Irving Howe.