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| Irving Howe (1920-1993) |
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| Irving Howe is an American literary and social critic. Howe was a central figure in the circles of American democratic socialism as well as a prominent voice in postwar American literary criticism. Though he addressed a great number of literary topics and periods in his writing, Howe wrote important reflections on international literary modernism in what Howe perceived as its last stages. Howe helped facilitate the rise of modernism in the cultural mainstream during the postwar period while remaining critical of the ways in which contemporary ideologies could appropriate the strategies of the literary avant-garde for exploitative and destructive purposes. Howe was particularly active in promoting modern Yiddish literature, initiating the translation and circulation of Yiddish writers who had previously been unknown to English-speaking audiences. Seeking to conserve a disappearing culture, Howe viewed Yiddish modernism as a compelling expression of the tension in modernity between tradition and cultural innovation. |
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Seeking to conserve a disappearing culture, Howe viewed Yiddish modernism as a compelling expression of the tension in modernity between tradition and cultural innovation.  Born Irving Horenstein to Eastern Europe Jewish immigrants to New York from Bukovina, Howe was educated at City College among other like-minded children of immigrants, a group that would later be known as The New York Intellectuals. During the turbulent interwar period of the depression, Howe along with his colleagues were drawn both to forms of democratic (and anti-Stalinist) socialism and to international literary modernism. After serving in the army during WWII, Howe returned to New York to continue participating in this growing literary community, contributing essays and reviews to such publications as *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *Politics*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Review of Books*. Frustrated with an atmosphere of conformism that he felt pervaded political and cultural life in America, Howe went on to found his own magazine, *Dissent*, which sought out new forums for cultural activism and socialist engagement. Howe would later explain his decision to create a journal in lieu of direct political action by joking that ‘when intellectuals can do nothing else they start a magazine’ (Howe, 1979: xv).  During the postwar, even as he remained devoted to his political commitments and the importance of socialist critique, Howe increasingly focused his attention, in numerous articles and several essay collections and books, on analyzing the accomplishments and failures of modern literature. Though he wrote extensively about many phases of world literature – from examinations of 19th century Russian novelists like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to a reconsideration of 19th century British fiction, from an analysis of early 20th century American naturalism to the promotion of contemporary Jewish American writing – Howe was also particularly interested in what he perceived were the last stages of international literary modernism. Viewing modernism from its end point, a moment Howe refers to as ‘the decline of the new,’ Howe takes on the task of trying to understand the cultural achievements of modernism while also explaining its more dangerous and ethically contentious manifestations. Howe views modernism as a dramatic break with the past and its traditions, presenting the work of literary art as a response to an irresolvable state of conflict between the old and the new. Howe claims that in literary modernism, the writer, with his ability to concentrate on language itself, offers an ever-renewing act of aesthetic compensation in the face of perpetual crisis. The modernist writer, disdaining religious and political institutions, often focuses on the possibility of individual expression and personal authenticity. Howe sees modernism as possessing a hunger for ‘a form of absolute personal speech,’ thereby creating ‘a literature deprived of ceremony and stripped to revelation’ (Howe, 1967: 16). With such statements Howe contributed to the institutionalization and canonization of modernism in the postwar period, but Howe also remained wary of the potential dangers of modernist poetics. In Howe’s estimation, the romanticization of the writer’s absolute autonomy from politics and history had indeed led to an essential critique of the bourgeois order but had also contributed to a lawlessness that releases a ‘force of darkness and brutality’ (19). Howe observes in modernism a tendency to align itself with authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies, betraying what he feels are essential ethical commitments. Howe also points out how postwar capitalist society appropriates the strategies of the literary avant-garde for its own commercial ends.  In tracing the legacy of modern literature and modernism, Howe increasingly wrote about contemporary literature, penning essays on such diverse writers as George Orwell, Richard Wright, Delmore Schwartz, Ignazio Silone, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Phillip Roth, and even an important reflection on The New York Intellectuals themselves. Howe continued to provocatively challenge such writers and critics morally and politically, combining probing and incisive readings with in-depth historical context. With muscular prose that strove for precision and clarity, Howe searched for a kind of literature that could flourish even in decline and resist the pitfalls of conformity and material gain.  Howe contended that Jewish writing, and Yiddish Literature in particular, was a compelling instance of this late flowering. Figures like Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Chaim Grade, and Jacob Glatstein could potentially avoid such destructive tendencies within modernism due to their connection to a traditional past and to the material conditions of everyday life. For Howe, the emergence of Yiddish literature out of Eastern European life, with its rich treasuries of cultural and religious tradition, required of its practitioners the constant negotiation between the inherited ‘world of our fathers’ and the encroaching demands of modernity. Always conscious of a history of persecution and the challenges of material poverty, Yiddish writers could not completely abandon the past or their fellow Jews for a personal salvation or for new exploitative ideologies. For Howe, Yiddish modernism sought a balance between conserving a disappearing world and simultaneously exploring the innovations of international modernism. Himself the child of Jewish immigrants, Howe saw great value in the combination of cultural rebellion and literary innovation with a sense of indebtedness to history, language, and tradition. Sensing the dramatic decline of Yiddish in the postwar period, Howe spearheaded ambitious translation projects, editing and publishing numerous anthologies of Yiddish literature, writing critical evaluations of important Yiddish authors, and introducing generations of American readers to a nearly forgotten literature. He also produced his most well-known work, *The World of Our Fathers*, a social and cultural history of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe to the United States. Here too Howe mourns a disappearing cultural legacy, attempting to restore to American culture ‘an eager restlessness, a moral anxiety, an openness to novelty, a hunger for dialectic, a refusal of contentment, an ironic criticism of all fixed opinions’ (Howe, 1976: 646) that he felt characterized the encounter between Jewish culture and modernity. List of Works: *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1954)  *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts* (1967)  *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (1969)  *The Decline of the New* (1970)  *Voices from the Yiddish: Essays, Memoirs, Diaries* (1972)  *Yiddish Stories, Old and New* (1974)  *World of Our Fathers* (1976)  *Jewish-American Stories* (1977)  *Ashes Out of Hope: Fiction by Soviet-Yiddish Writers*  (1977)  *The Best of Sholem Aleichem*  (1979)  *Twenty-Five Years of Dissent* (1979)  *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (1982)  *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*  (1987)  *Selected Writings: 1950-1990* (1992)  *A Critic’s Notebook* (1994)  *Politics and the Intellectual: Conversations with Irving Howe* (2010) |
| Further reading:  (Rodden)  (Sorin) |