An Interview with Irving Howe

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ALH: You have written extensively about American literature, yet I notice that you do not include any American writers, save for the somewhat complex case of T. S. Eliot, in your list of “writers who have meant the most to me” (A Margin of Hope 350). Which American writers have mattered most to you? Do you find that they speak to you with a different kind of authority, interest, and power than do writers such as Brecht, Orwell, and Kafka?

Howe: To really explain why, when I first became involved in literary life, the writers who seemed to matter most were European, would require the most difficult of all things—imagining historical circumstances different from the present. If you put yourself back into the period of the late 1940s, and into the somewhat special literary, political, and cultural milieu in which I then found myself, the milieu of the New York intellectuals, then perhaps you’ll see why it was European literature that gripped our imaginations most of all.

This wasn’t true for everyone. Alfred Kazin was much more of an “Americanist” even at that early point than, say, Philip Rahv or Lionel Trilling. But we—I use the term “we” quite loosely—then thought of ourselves as committed to literary modernism, and modernism meant, above all, European writing. We knew that there were American modernists; we thought of Hemingway and Faulkner as in some ways modernist. Stevens wasn’t yet an important figure for us, but we knew that Cummings, Williams, and other poets were modernist. But literary modernism meant primarily Joyce, Kafka, Eliot, Brecht, Pirandello.

So there was for us the idea of discovering and championing literary modernism, and it is important to remember that the great European writers were not yet fully accepted. They were honored, but within the literary world in America, there was still a great deal of struggle, of rearguard resistance against the acceptance of these writers. One of the things that gave the Partisan Review people energy was the notion of struggling on behalf of the modernists against middlebrows and academic
critics. In the academy, it wasn’t until a decade later that the fight was over and modernism accepted, and, as it came to seem, accepted all too much.

Another reason for the European orientation was that our politics was that of the anti-Stalinist left. Now today everyone is against Stalinism; everyone attacks and repudiates it. This common understanding of Stalinism was achieved, however, in a sense, at the cost of our lives. It took decades of struggle, intellectually and politically, for this view of Stalinism to become part of the political understanding of serious people. Because we were concerned to advance a leftist anti-Stalinist position, which we allied, skillfully or not, with modernist literature, we felt a strong kinship with certain other European writers. These writers probably do not figure much for a good many younger readers, though I hope that in time readers will come back to them. I mean writers such as Silone, Koestler, Malraux, Orwell, Victor Serge, and some others. There was a small, rather beleaguered community of gifted, if not great, anti-Stalinist writers. They were not of the same level or quality as the major modernists, but they were serious figures who merited respect. And we felt a kinship with them.

There’s another reason for the orientation toward European writers. Many of us were the children of Jewish immigrants who came from Eastern Europe, and the Jewish immigrants brought with them an enormous admiration for Russian literature. The great heroes of the more emancipated, secularized immigrant Jews were Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Turgenev—the masters of nineteenth-century Russia. For someone like Rahv—though he did write very well on James and Hawthorne—what really absorbed his imagination were the nineteenth-century Russian writers. For me, this was something that came, so to speak, from the very air around me. I drew it in almost unthinkingly.

Now I also remember along these lines that when I got out of the army, in 1946, I picked up a book by V. S. Pritchett, a critic I’ve always admired (even if he doesn’t have a system!). The book was The Living Novel. During the war, Pritchett had been the literary editor for the Tribune, a socialist weekly in England, and then, I think, he also worked for the New Statesman. There weren’t many new books during these years, so he decided to write about old books. He would do a piece every couple of weeks about a writer of the past he esteemed. In The Living Novel, he dealt with nineteenth-century Russian writers who were not quite of the very highest level, but still terrifically good—Goncharov and Lermontov, for example. I then went
If you were concerned with socialist ideas, if you felt that you were living in a moment of historical apocalypse—say, in 1939 or 1946—and were trying desperately to define what Stalinism was and what new kind of society had emerged that had traduced your socialist hopes, then Emerson's Concord could seem extremely thin, even genteel.

It was only in later years, more recently, when I went back and read Emerson again under the prompting of certain American critics, such as Harold Bloom, that I saw him differently. But a period of several decades elapsed between these two phases of my experience.

I should say, however, that even then, some thirty-five years ago, I and some of my friends did read Melville with intense interest. We also read Henry James avidly—Rahv played an important role in stimulating this taste, and Edmund Wilson's essay on James was also important for us. But what I now think of as the central tradition in American letters stemming from Emerson and Thoreau—that was something we were not terribly responsive to. And the scholarly work on American literature—Perry Miller's work on Puritanism, for example—I really didn't get to until later. That was a flaw, a deficiency.

ALH: Do you believe it is possible to speak of a distinctively “American” literature? I was struck by a sentence in World of Our Fathers: “Bored by the apparent parochialism of native American culture, the sons of the immigrant Jews helped break down the whole idea, no longer so enabling for our writers, that there was a peculiar grace or virtue in the ‘Americanness’ of American literature” (603). Could you elaborate upon this point,
and explain what it implies about efforts to locate something unique about American writers, books, and literary traditions?

Howe: I now do believe in a distinctive American literature, but back then I would have been much more skeptical. You must remember that our position was strongly international. Literary modernism, by its very nature, tended to break down national boundaries. Was Joyce an Irish writer or a European writer? Was Kafka a Czech writer or a Jewish writer? These questions came to seem meaningless. We felt that we had entered a period of international literature. Even Hemingway, while very American in many respects, in the 1930s was probably the most influential writer in the world. There were people imitating Hemingway's style in Buenos Aires, in Tokyo, in Constantinople—everywhere. We judged that both for political and literary/cultural reasons we needed to see literature from an internationalist perspective.

This was enabling but had its costs, primarily, as I have said, in a certain narrowness in relation to what we saw as American. There was, to be sure, a nativist, American parochialism, but our view of it was in turn parochial. Gradually we did correct this view. Of course there is an American literature! How can you read Huckleberry Finn, Cooper's novels, The Confidence-Man, or even a novel like The Europeans without feeling that a distinctive American aura and atmosphere pervades these books?

Yes, there has been a tendency on the part of some Americanists—who have developed a professional interest in it—to exaggerate the "Americanness" of American literature. Still, I think one can locate a distinctive American quality, a voice, a tone. Though I would then want to add that those critics also have an important point who have insisted upon seeing Twain, for example, in relation to English and European ancestors, and who wish to complicate the notion of a distinctive Americaness by showing the roots of American literature in English literature and European culture. If you'll forgive my using this phrase, you need a certain dialectical sense: there is a distinctiveness about American literature and also a similarity to English and European writing, and they coexist within the same "texts."

ALH: In American Newness, you keenly examine a number of central writers of the American Renaissance, yet you do not deal with Stowe or Douglass, both of whom suggest interesting (if very different) angles on Emersonian self-reliance and indi-
vidual freedom. This leads me to ask you to comment on the current scholarly, and often highly polemical, emphasis on “expanding the canon.” How would you respond to a reader who judges that your argument in *American Newness* should have taken account of black and women writers?

*Howe:* One answer is that *American Newness* is a very small book, really a few lectures where I was trying to stay with the main figures. Perhaps a more cogent criticism would be that in this little book the main figures are by no means adequately treated. Since I did not treat them fully, there would have been little point in diverging still further to other writers. I wasn’t attempting to write a history of American literature; I was trying to show certain lines of intellectual development and provide what I thought, rightly or wrongly, was a somewhat fresh view of what Emersonianism meant. The only other person I had ever encountered who had expressed a view similar to mine was the American historian George Frederickson, who had written on this period in his fine book, *The Inner Civil War*, and said some of the kinds of things that I wanted to get at.

As for the canon, I would say that there are certain expansions that seem perfectly legitimate. Some of Douglass’s writing has a particular American eloquence which is impressive. The first third of Du Bois’s *Autobiography*, showing his childhood and youth in western Massachusetts, is wonderful, and there is perhaps as much reason to read that book as Henry Adams’s autobiography. But my objection to some of the current trends is that the canon is being pushed too far and too willfully in behalf of ideological ends. I myself cannot see that it is essential for our students to read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at a time when they read so little and when we would be overjoyed if they managed to read *Moby-Dick*.

*ALH:* Could you also describe here your response to such important Afro-American writers of this century as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright? What did these writers mean to you? Do you regard them as “Afro-American” writers, part of a separate tradition, or does it seem more natural simply to term them “American” writers?

*Howe:* Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, as well as the other black American writers, are part of the American literary canon—they were born here, they have lived their lives here, they write about American life, they write in English. Where else could they be placed? I don’t know what, if any, meaning the phrase
“Afro-American” has, other than as a token of a certain kind of black politics; but from a literary point of view, these writers are as much American as Faulkner or Hemingway, Bellow or Malamud.

Wright was for a brief time, toward the end of his life, a friend or a friendly acquaintance. We met and got along very well. I admired the courage with which he broke into the American literary world, and I think of him as an important if limited writer. All the work of later black American writers was made possible by, even if written in opposition to, Wright. He was the first to release the full weight of black anger. And he was also interesting for his political experience, first as a Communist, then as one who had broken from Communism and for a brief time, though not uncritically, approached a sort of African nationalism. By the time I met him he was a skeptical yet still impassioned man.

With Ellison I had a once-famous literary quarrel, in the early 1960s, which almost everyone except me thought he won. (In America you have to “win” or “lose.”) We have since become friendly and agree upon many things. I admire his fiction enormously, and in fact reviewed Invisible Man favorably when it first came out. Baldwin I never knew. His fiction seemed very thin to me, but I think he was for a while one of the major American essayists.

ALH: Have feminist literary theory and criticism affected your critical work in important ways? I am wondering, for example, whether you might write about The Bostonians differently today from the way you did in Politics and the Novel. In rereading your essay, I noted your powerful, persuasive account of James’s “conservative skepticism” and suspicion of public life. But would you also want now—possibly spurred by feminist scholarship—to engage James’s mocking descriptions of feminism and women’s reform even more directly and severely?

Howe: First, I should say that for almost ten years, I was away from literary criticism and, indeed, from literary life—these were the years I was writing World of Our Fathers and doing other nonliterary things. You see, while I believe that literary criticism is very difficult and that very few people do it well, I also think that it is not enough by itself to absorb the energies of a serious person.

I am not saying that literary criticism doesn’t matter, is not valuable or interesting. But my impression is that almost all of the critics whom I admire, in the recent past and earlier,
did other things as well. For them, literary criticism was ancillary to writing fiction or poetry, to being engaged with ideas or politics or with religious interests. Very few critics that I know of, at least very few of the major critics, have been merely literary critics. At the same time, I do want to emphasize again that criticism is extraordinarily difficult to do well. You can perhaps train yourself to do it, but you cannot find a set of rules or a "method."

So for a period of time I was away from literary concerns—I am very much back with them now—and I fell behind. I didn't read a good deal of the material that younger academic people are concerned with. (I have the feeling that if I just hold out a little bit longer, I may not have to read all that much of it!) Some of the French stuff I just cannot read. Maybe it's my fault. Maybe I lack the kind of philosophical disposition needed to read it; that could be. I wrote somewhere that I am lamentably cool to metaphysics.

I have read some of the earlier women critics and respect them very much—Elizabeth Hardwick, Ellen Moers, Susan Sontag—but they are not the women critics who are usually meant when people speak about feminist criticism. The academic feminist critics I haven't read with any adequate attentiveness, and so I cannot comment on them.

As for The Bostonians, remember that I wrote that essay a long time ago, in the middle 1950s. It seems only natural that if I were to write the essay today I would treat the novel differently. At that point, feminism was not part of the prevailing consciousness. The question of conservatism was. Not being immune to the pressures of the zeitgeist, I wrote a bit more about the conservative aspect than the feminist aspect. But I did pay attention to Olive Chancellor's feminism and her lesbianism. I tried to suggest that James had a rather complex view; it would be a mistake to say simply that he was attacking the feminist and transcendentalist traditions. He is condescending toward Miss Birdseye, but he also admires her.

Clearly James is writing from a conservative point of view. But he is also extremely sardonic toward and critical of the conservative Basil Ransom. If Basil Ransom wins out in that book, it's mainly because James thinks that he has "biology" or "nature" on his side. But certainly James does not align himself ideologically with Basil Ransom; he makes fun of his ideology. James is trying to establish himself in the book at a certain distance from all of the dominant ideological figures of the day. The Bostonians is the coldest of James's novels, the
one book where he seems not to have any quavering affection for any of the characters.

ALH: In *A Margin of Hope*, you refer to the powerful appeal of literary criticism to post-World War II intellectuals. It seemed, you reflect, to offer a kind of intellectual freedom and range—an opportunity to examine the most “serious concerns” of the culture—that could be found nowhere else (147). Would you be inclined to use such lofty language about criticism today?

Howe: I certainly don’t think such language applies to the dominant trends in current academic criticism. Today, the whole idea of the common reader—whether an actual reader whom we might specify as part of a social group, or a projected desire of an ideal audience—has virtually been abandoned in the academic literary world. A tremendous and, I think, disastrous change.

You see, when you had people like Trilling, Orwell, Wilson, Empson, Auden, and William Troy, and also some of the New Critics such as Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Austin Warren, who were not just formalists but also powerful critics of culture, you had people who seemed to be speaking to the deepest concerns of a cultivated reader. This was especially true at a time when many serious intellectuals and readers were becoming somewhat disenchanted with politics. Such a disenchantment usually occurs in a conservative period and did occur in the 1950s. People read the literary critics not merely because they wanted illumination about various books and writers, but because these critics seemed to be making cogent observations about the nature of our life, at least the life of the educated public.

Now whatever the virtues may be of the main trends in academic literary criticism, I don’t think that anyone is likely to respond to it as readers did to the criticism of the 1950s. Was this conception of criticism specific to the historical moment of the postwar years? I don’t think so. The tradition had already been established in the work of the great English critics—Arnold, Hazlitt, Samuel Johnson, all of whom in part were journalists. While I don’t believe that journalism should ever become the dominant component, it should always be there as a possibility, as an avenue and occasion for criticism. All of these critics, as well as many lesser figures, found a way to pay attention to a particular text and also comment on the larger cultural context in which these texts had appeared.
**ALH:** Can you speak even more directly about the impact of the academy on literary and cultural life? Russell Jacoby, in his recent book, *The Last Intellectuals*, laments the disappearance of "nonacademic intellectuals" such as yourself, and objects to the manner in which narrow-minded professionalism and self-isolating specialization now rule the academy. The relation between the academic scholar/critic and the intellectual does seem an issue that has often concerned you. I think, for instance, of your complaint in *Celebrations and Attacks* about the "omnivorous" need for research topics among academics (156), and some of your affirmative remarks in *Margin of Hope* about "the intellectual as anti-specialist" (161). Is there any room in the academy for such an intellectual, one who seeks frequent contact with the common reader?

**Howe:** I've been both a professor and a free-lance intellectual writer. I taught for thirty-three years—took my work as a teacher seriously, did it as well as I could, and enjoyed a fair part of it. I was not, and am not, a scholar in a narrow sense, though by now I may know a few things. From my association with J. V. Cunningham at Brandeis—a poet-scholar I admired enormously and whom I look upon as a teacher—I learned that scholars need not be the musty, irrelevant sort of drones some of us had foolishly supposed them to be. I learned that scholarship can be as serious, indeed exalted, a calling as the intellectual life and that often enough the two could unite. (You have to learn *something* as you get older.) My complaint about a lot of what's going on today in the academy is that it is insulated, seemingly indifferent to the common reader who is still out there, lost in a tangle of categories and phrases, but not especially scholarly, and, so far as I can tell, not deeply engaged with literature.

**ALH:** This line of questioning leads me also to ask about your admiration for Edmund Wilson, whose exemplary critical activity you have described in *Margin of Hope* and elsewhere. Do you believe that Wilson can still serve today as a model?

**Howe:** I think Wilson was a first-rate critic of prose and a splendid writer. The generation of critics among whom he stood out tried to write with lucidity, force, and wit. People like Robert Penn Warren, Yvor Winters, Harold Rosenberg, William Empson, and others were not only lively critics, but were very good writers in different ways. So the question isn't Wilson himself, as an individual. The question is which kinds of predecessors
or contemporaries you wish to emulate. I think my choices are pretty clear.

**ALH:** In *Margin of Hope*, you state that the Partisan Review writers scorned "political contamination of critical judgment" (149). What in your view is the relation between political and aesthetic judgment? Isn’t there a danger in the position that the Partisan Review writers favored? Can such a position impel critics to slight or ignore the political meanings and implications of literary works? I’m thinking not only of an obviously disturbing case like Ezra Pound (whom you comment on in *Margin of Hope*), but also Eliot, Lawrence, and Hemingway. When we read The Waste Land, Women in Love, or For Whom the Bell Tolls, don’t we inevitably make aesthetic and political judgments at one and the same time?

**Howe:** This is, of course, a very complex matter and it would be foolish to try to respond to it in a few words. But what interests, and amuses, me about your question is the way you phrase it. For decades, the charge against the Partisan critics—and sometimes a warranted charge—was that their politics got in the way of, or alloyed, their literary responses. All through the years from, say, 1937 to 1967 no one thought the New York writers were slighting politics. Quite the contrary. Now, it seems they are to be cast in another way.

Clearly, our political views influence, sometimes sharpen, and sometimes debase our literary judgments. At times, as with Pound, it becomes all but impossible to keep them distinct. But with the great works you mention I for one find it not too difficult—am I using the phrase correctly?—to "Bracket" the politics and take pleasure in the poem or novel.

**ALH:** A final question about the postwar years. You, Dwight Macdonald, and others wrote very harshly in the 1940s and 1950s about the evils of Stalinism. Do you regret at all the fierce tone that you employed? How do you respond to critics who contend that your polemics against Stalinist sympathizers functioned to discredit the Left in general?

**Howe:** I don’t want to pretend that every review or polemic I or my friends wrote had exactly the right tone. Of course not. There were excesses, indulgences, outbursts, furies. But I strongly believe that the political and intellectual struggle against Stalinism was an essential, perhaps even the central, moral obligation of intellectuals during my earlier years. We were seeking
to rescue the idea or image of socialism from the horrors of the Gulag, from the lies of the Moscow trials, from the cultural barbarism of socialist realism. It was a bitter fight and there are still bruises. But it was something we had to do. If we hadn’t struggled, as a quite small minority, within the literary world, and an even smaller minority within the Left, to expose the brutality and foulness of Stalinism—and what we said you can now read in the Moscow press—it wouldn’t be possible for people of your generation to look back “dispassionately” and wonder about our tone. It was the Gulag that discredited the Left, not those of us who told the truth about it.

Works Cited


