

Book Review: *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent*, by Gerald Sorin. New York: New York University Press, 2002. 386 pp.

Reviewed by Richard D. Chessick, M.D., Ph.D.

This is not a disinterested review because I have a profound ambivalence about Irving Howe. On the one hand, his philosophical and political views are the closest to mine, and I approve of them. On the other hand, his behavior towards other people, in my opinion, was consistently reprehensible. The book under review covers his entire life and thought quite well, and the only complaint one might make about it is the flaw of name dropping which becomes tedious after a while. Perhaps some of that could have been placed in footnotes.

I will not outline the personality characteristics of this nasty, aggressive, impatient individual in any detail; suffice it to say that in intellectual debate he was a gut-fighter and had no patience or tolerance with disagreement and especially with stupidity. He often reduced his students to tears. He had four marriages and many sexual affairs and his behavior and attitude toward women in general was to use them as selfobjects without much respect for their particular needs or personalities.

He had a brilliant mind with a large variety of interests, some

of which, like Yiddish literature, I am not familiar with. I would like to list those areas of his thought that are, in my opinion, contemporary and must be considered by all thinking persons. It is odd that a person as grating and unpleasant as Howe was would have a serious lifetime commitment to the attempt to build a less competitive and more fraternal society. At first he seemed to think that communism would produce this society, but he became disillusioned and, much to his credit, advocated the importance of the democratic process in any society regardless of its economic principles. In that sense he was a committed democratic socialist, and he founded a well-known journal, *Dissent*, that was dedicated to these principles.

Democratic socialism was based on the Federalist Papers, with careful attention to checks and balances in order to prevent any individual from an excess of tyrannical power. Howe was thus very aware of the need for a balance of powers in any society. He repeatedly emphasized intellectual tolerance and freedom although in his dealings with others he was markedly intolerant.

He was against mass culture, the culture that dominates our country today, because he felt it encouraged and permitted barbarism over reason and was conducive to violence. Howe insisted that the classics were of contemporary importance as an illustration of human experience.

A generosity of spirit, a sense of empathy , an openness of

mind, a shaking up of embedded assumptions, a modification and enlargement of the self, all of these were the goals of literature, according to Howe. And all were possible, even with writers whose views were fundamentally different from one's own. (p. 163)

Howe was an advocate of the existence of what I have called "archaic sadism" (*Psychoanalytic Clinical Practice*, Free Association Books, London, 2000). He questioned whether there could ever be a progressive transformation of humanity. In his early years he thought that human nature was an "experiment," but after the Holocaust he came to the tentative conclusion that there was something intrinsically recalcitrant in human nature.

It could operate as positive force, refusing, ultimately, to be transformed by ideology and terror, as the Hungarian rebels appeared to prove. Still, because of the ruthlessness of the totalitarians bent on holding power simply for the sake of power, Howe had to pay attention again, as he had with the Nazis, to the actuality of 'radical evil', a deeply rooted, intrinsically recalcitrant and incorrigible evil that was 'part of the nature of things' and not fully explainable through social analysis. (pp. 166-167)

Howe developed at one point what must be classified as a serious clinical depression. To the end of his life he advocated the

idea of the city. At the same time he was in despair over the deterioration of his home city, New York. He was

constantly struck by the "sheer moral ugliness" of the scene - the drug dealers, the homeless beggars, the porn shops. He remembered Trotsky's expectation at the end of his book, *Literature and Revolution*, that humankind would someday rise to the levels of Goethe and Beethoven. But he asked himself how that expectation could be reconciled with "seeing what one sees" on the streets: the utter "waste and distortion ... of human capacity?" (p. 269)

He felt that the city offered the widest facilities for significant and intelligent conversation even though he was dejected about the cultural and material degradation not only of New York but of American cities generally. "Yet he wanted to stay in New York, the city which molded him, and where he could still hear a Haydn concert or a reading of Collette or watch in awe the choreography of George Balanchine at Lincoln Center" (p. 270). He blamed the powerful American right wing "with its mean spirited attack on the cities and on the welfare state (a hidden form of racism and anti-Semitism), for much of the problem" (p.270).

So of course he opposed the dismantling of social programs and supported the extension of the welfare state. He recognized the

problems inherent in trying to determine to what extent the government needs to be involved in all this. He realized there has to be a balance between individual personal liberty and the egalitarianism which is produced by an increased social welfare system. For Howe, this was a vision to be striven for, a goal and an ideal which he adhered to increasingly as his life approached an end.

One of the most valuable aspects of Howe's thought emerged in his arguments with the New Critics of literature. He opposed their insistence on sticking only to the text of a given poem, for example, and emphasized that we could not neglect the biographical and historical circumstances of anyone whose creative work we attempt to study. As a literary critic he bitterly opposed the postmodernist movement in literary study and fought for an intelligible and humane literary criticism free of the cumbersome jargon that today makes such criticism unreadable to any but other professors in English departments.

Sorin offers us the information to trace the evolution of a brilliant man from a radical Trotskyite who came from the garment district in New York and great poverty to an intellectual maturity that brought him closer to an understanding of the direction necessary for society to evolve if there is to be a chance that the human species will not extinguish itself.

Dr. Chessick is Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences,
Northwestern University; Senior Attending Psychiatrist,
(Emeritus), Evanston Hospital; Fellow, American Academy of
Psychoanalysis, and Training; and Supervising Analyst, Center for
Psychoanalytic Study in Chicago

Correspondence to: 9400 Drake Ave., Evanston, IL. 60203-1106