
Journal of a “Superfluous Man”

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BOOK REVIEWED:

Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography*.
New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

The title of this book will appear to many to contain a flagrant contradiction. A renaissance in the twelfth century! Do not the Middle Ages, that epoch of ignorance, stagnation, and gloom, stand in the sharpest contrast to the light and progress and freedom of the Italian Renaissance which followed? How could there be a renaissance in the Middle Ages . . . ? The answer is that the continuity of history rejects such sharp and violent contrasts between successive periods, and that modern research shows us the Middle Ages less dark and less static, the Renaissance less bright and less sudden, than was once supposed.

— Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927).

The title of Irving Howe's intellectual autobiography, *A Margin of Hope*, may sound disconcerting to those familiar with Howe's career and writings. Howe is a product of the 1950s. He has become far more famous as critic, historian, and politically engaged intellectual in the years since then, but it is as difficult to think of him without the 1950s as backdrop as it is to think of Norman Thomas without the 1930s. And "hope" in any measure is not a feeling we customarily associate with the 1950s.

Christopher Lasch once described with delicate irony the mood of American intellectuals in the 1950s as they discarded the left-wing enthusiasms of their youth: "Weary, sober, wise with the wisdom of disillusionment, the survivors woke from the long nightmare into homely reality, reassuring in its concreteness. The cold gray morning light of midcentury dissipated the last of the great abstractions."¹ Does this describe Howe's experience? It seems to. He begins his autobiography by describing his first meeting with the Italian novelist Ignazio

¹ Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 171.

Silone. The two men are amused to discover that they both became socialists at the age of fourteen. It is an inconsequential exchange and seems like an odd way to start the book, unless one knows that Silone was a moral hero to the small group of intellectuals who joined with Howe in starting the journal *Dissent* in 1954. Silone charted his personal disillusionment with communism in the novels *Bread and Wine* and *Fontamara*. He contributed an essay entitled "The Choice of Comrades" to *Dissent* in 1955 that effectively captured the "weary, sober" mood of Howe and his associates that year: "Our number," he wrote, "is an ever-swelling legion: the legion of refugees from the International."² Which International Silone had in mind is not clear, nor is it important: "refugees" is the key word in the passage. "Refugees," the huddled groups one saw in newsreel shots of European DP camps, were marginal men and women. They were victims. They were powerless. But they were also innocent, which was an attractive state of mind and being to those who had witnessed the great deceptions and grim massacres of the preceding two decades. "No other twentieth-century novelist has so fully conveyed the pathos behind the failure of socialism," Howe wrote of Silone in *Dissent* in 1956. "For Silone," he continued in a passage that is as much self-portrait as literary criticism, "heroism is a condition of readiness, a talent for waiting, a gift for stubbornness; his is the heroism of tiredness."³ *The heroism of tiredness*— if Howe was tired in the 1950s, then how much of a margin of hope can he summon up in the 1980s?

It is time to take another look at the 1950s. Just as the Dark Ages were not so uniformly dark as writers from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century assumed, so the 1950s do not now seem as conformist as they did when viewed from the cultural and political splendors of the mid-1960s. It would stretch the analogy past the breaking point to argue that there was a "renaissance" going on beneath the surface of the Age of Conformity—and yet, within a few isolated intellectual monasteries like *Dissent*, a devout order of left-handed scribes busied themselves with tasks that undermined the prevailing pieties.

"*Dissent*," Howe tells us in his autobiography, "arose out of the decomposition of American socialism." The early chapters of *A Margin of Hope* provide a vivid personal record of the process of decomposition. Howe joined the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) in 1935, a year in which it was still possible to believe that the Socialist Party had a fighting chance of regaining, perhaps even surpassing, the influence it had enjoyed under Eugene Debs before the First World War. Norman Thomas had received nearly a million votes in the 1932 presidential election, and hoped to do better in 1936. President Roosevelt was just beginning his "turn to the left," and the Communists were still disentangling

² *Dissent* 2 (Winter 1955): 18.

³ *Dissent* 3 (Winter 1956): 72, 74.

themselves from the ultra-revolutionary policies imposed upon them by Moscow in the early years of the Depression. In the East Bronx, where Howe grew up, links with earlier Russian and American socialist traditions were still strong: "Socialism, for many immigrant Jews, was not merely politics or an idea, it was an encompassing culture, a style of perceiving and judging through which to structure their lives." But the appeal of the New Deal, as it moved into the 1936 election campaign, proved broad enough to draw on those same values. Thomas's vote dropped dramatically. While older supporters of the Socialist Party voted for Roosevelt on the Democratic or American Labor Party ticket, younger Socialist Party members including Howe began to hear the siren call of the Leninist-style "vanguard party." Howe acquired an intimate knowledge (later to mature into lasting distaste) of the appeal and tactics of left-wing factionalism, as he moved from the radical wing of the Socialist Party, to the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, and then to an even more isolated outpost in the Workers Party led by Max Shachtman (Shachtman split with orthodox Trotskyism over the issue of whether the Soviet Union under Stalin remained a socialist state: Trotsky said it did; Shachtman disagreed).

Howe's description of the appeal of sectarianism is reminiscent of Doris Lessing's fictional portrait of a small group of African Communists in the "Children of Violence" novels: both Howe and Lessing understand how political isolation, far from discouraging the sectarian, only feeds a sense of personal fulfillment and mission. As Howe recalls:

To yield oneself to the movement . . . was to take on a new identity. Never before, and surely never since, have I lived at so high, so intense a pitch, or been so absorbed in ideas beyond the smallness of self. It began to seem as if the very shape of reality could be molded by our will, as if those really attuned to the inner rhythms of History might bend it to submission. . . . What could again be so exciting, what could rouse comparable visions of triumph and martyrdom? The movement gave me something I would never find again and have since come to regard with deep suspicion, almost as a sign of moral derangement: it gave my life a "complete meaning," a "whole purpose."

Distinguishing himself as an ideological combatant in the factional wars of the City College cafeteria, Howe was soon being groomed for leadership. By the time he turned twenty-one he was appointed editor of the Shachtmanite weekly newspaper:

Prolific and cocksure, brimming with energy and persuaded I had a key to understanding the world, I needed only the reams of yellow paper on which I typed and the *New York Times* from which to draw facts. (Blessed *New York Times*! What would radical journalism in America do without it?)

Howe might have gone on indefinitely enjoying what Daniel Bell once characterized as the “mimetic combat on the plains of destiny” of the sectarian left,⁴ but a more fateful conflict interrupted. In the spring of 1942 he received a letter from his draft board, and spent most of the rest of World War II literally and figuratively on ice—stationed in a remote army outpost in Alaska.

Sect life left little time for introspection; in the enforced isolation of military service Howe began to sort out a sense of personal identity and vocation that went beyond the honorific “professional revolutionary.” Howe had grown up as a bright, dreamy kid with a taste for high-brow literature, and a sense of isolation from real life. Over the past century left-wing movements have provided a temporary home for thousands of young people fitting that description, allowing them to entertain colorful fantasies of revolutionary apocalypse before they subside into self-congratulatory disillusionment after discovering that the Great Day has been postponed indefinitely. Howe escaped that fate and Alaska was part of the reason. He shed the “singleness of mind” of his late adolescence, discovered among his barracks-mates varieties of wisdom unrepresented in any of the alcoves in the City College lunchroom, and developed a capacity for patience and irony. At war’s end he went back to New York, less certain in his beliefs, tougher in his intellectual capabilities.

Howe returned dutifully to the Workers Party, to his typewriter and the reams of yellow paper. But try as he might, he could not summon up his former enthusiasm. Capitalism and Stalinism seemed more durable than ever. Reports of the Holocaust shook his belief in the ultimate perfectibility of the human race, and in the capacity of Marxism to account for such absolute and purposeless evil. Slowly he disengaged himself: “I would come to meetings only occasionally, I would write a piece once in awhile for the paper, I would send a check.” (As late as 1950, however, he was still enough of a sectarian to enjoy Earl Browder’s humiliation at Max Shachtman’s hands in their famous debate. Shachtman in his summation recited the names of the eastern European Communist leaders executed in the purge trials, then pointed to Browder, the disgraced former leader of the American Communist Party, and declared: “There but for an accident of geography sits a corpse!” Browder, to the delight of the partisan audience, turned ashen. On such pathetic victories the anti-Stalinist left nourished itself in the early 1950s.) While the ingrown world of the sectarian left grew less congenial, the world outside noticed Howe’s talents and beckoned to him. He began publishing in *Commentary* and *Partisan Review*, swallowed hard and took a job as book reviewer for *Time*, and eventually moved on to a teaching job in the Brandeis English department.

4 Daniel Bell, “The Background and Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States,” in Donald Drew Egbert and Stow Persons, eds., *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), vol. 1, fn. p. 222.

What happens to political movements in decline? How do people respond when their fundamental assumptions about the way the world works begin to crack? Howe has a sharp eye and a long memory, and recalls:

You feel as if you had been invaded by some mysterious sickness, a Hardy-esque fatality. Leaders lose their power to persuade; the bonds of fraternity crack; the very aroma of the movement—the air in the office, the mood at a meeting—turns bad. It's no longer a pleasure to go down to the party headquarters, to kibitz and gossip with comrades. At meetings everyone seems to be counting the house. . . . Two or three times now I have lived through this experience, and I've become, I suppose, an expert at spotting the symptoms. When I recognize them I feel ashamed, the way one does upon noticing that a friend has begun to show the pallor of disease. I want to flee.

But sometimes, when a movement hits bottom and has reached the point of deepest despair and disillusionment, it can reveal a capacity for reflection and change that never appeared in more optimistic moments. Portions of the American left discovered just such a capacity in the 1950s.

In his last years in the Shachtmanite organization (by that point bearing the less pretentious title of the Independent Socialist League) Howe tried to interest the old man in the idea of starting a quarterly journal of opinion—one that would take its stand on the anti-Stalinist left but remain open to writers of different persuasions within that general grouping. Shachtman, like Trotsky before him, was capable of daring revisions of orthodoxy, but suspicious of innovations he could not control. When Shachtman dismissed the idea Howe and a few like-minded comrades severed their remaining ties with the ISL, and in early 1954 brought out the first issue of *Dissent* on their own.

It was not an auspicious year for brave new beginnings on the left. *Dissent's* statement of purpose reaffirmed the editors' belief in socialism, but found it easier to define what the journal did not expect to accomplish than what it hoped to achieve:

Dissent is not and does not propose to become a political party or group. On the contrary, its existence is based on an awareness that in America today there is no significant socialist movement and that, in all likelihood, no such movement will appear in the immediate future.⁵

Dissent, Howe comments in *A Margin of Hope*, "did not brim over with high spirits" in its early years. The editors huddled over the prostrate body of the American left, shaking their heads, feeling in vain for any sign of pulse. Volume 1, number 2, included an article by Howe and Lewis Coser tracing the decline of

⁵ *Dissent* 1 (Winter 1954): 3.

the utopian vision in socialist thought. Two issues later Coser described the pathology of sectarian life. Volume 2, number 1, printed Silone's "Choice of Comrades." And Volume 3, number 2, carried this confession from Coser: "We who prided ourselves on our secret knowledge of the workings of history, suddenly became aware of our ignorance. We have thereby gained in humility and, perhaps, humanity, but we have lost in persuasiveness."⁶

For all the gloomy prognoses, there is a curious undertone of optimism in these early *Dissents*. If the doctors really believed the patient was past recovery why, after all, would they keep poking at him? George Rawick, writing in 1954 about student politics, traced the decline of campus radicalism since the end of World War II. But he noted, on some campuses, the appearance of a new generation of political activists who had "not been corrupted by a sense of guilt for being previously sympathetic to Stalinism. . . . If lacking in knowledge and sophistication, these students have nonetheless begun to question and find their own way."⁷ The Spring 1956 issue included three articles on the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott led by Martin Luther King, Jr., including one by Howe in which he speculated that "a few decades from now the Montgomery action may be looked upon as a political and social innovation of a magnitude approaching the first sit-down strikes in the Akron rubber plants during the mid-thirties."⁸ And Norman Mailer, in an apocalyptic manifesto "The White Negro" that made some *Dissent* editors uncomfortable, looked forward to "a time of violence, new hysteria, confusion and rebellion [which will] replace the time of conformity."⁹

Dissent did more than keep alive the idea that history had not come to a dead stop with Eisenhower's inauguration (in itself a contribution of some value). Contributors such as Erich Fromm, Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse, and Dwight MacDonald probed the psychological and cultural foundations of "mass society." Their conclusions were often pessimistic. William J. Newman wrote about the destruction of traditional working-class communities in Britain, and wondered if the "moral source of socialism" might disappear in the drab television-lit living rooms of the government housing projects of the new London.¹⁰ Harold Rosenberg described modern society as a "horror-Utopia of universal de-individualization" in which "members of every class yield themselves to artificially constructed mass egos." This was a bleak forecast, and yet the willingness to look unblinkingly at the unfavorable terrain for political resistance suggested, at least, a will to continue to seek ways to resist. "The weapon of criticism is undoubtedly inadequate,"

6 *Dissent* 3 (Spring 1956): 157.

7 *Dissent* 1 (Autumn 1954): 398.

8 *Dissent* 3 (Spring 1956): 121.

9 *Dissent* 4 (Summer 1957): 291.

10 *Dissent* 5 (Spring 1958): 161.

Rosenberg concluded. "Who on that account would choose to surrender it?"¹¹

Was there some new terrain on which the radical movement could be rebuilt? Coser, in the Spring 1956 *Dissent*, confronted the problems raised by the "mass society" critique for the left: "One can organize workers against exploitation, but how is one to organize those who are psychically exploited by the engineers of consent?" He had no program to offer, but speculated that future radicals would seek "to increase the area of personal and social control. . . . Responsible determination of one's personal life may perhaps be linked with responsible co-determination in public life."¹² It was not such a long road from these tentative questions to the New Left's insistence that "the personal is political."

The journal did not always speak with one voice, and *Dissent* did not abandon more traditional radical concerns. Howe, who displayed some impatience with the mass society theory, whittled away at the myth of the happy worker. *Dissent* printed some of the better labor journalism of the decade, including contributions by Harvey Swados, Frank Marquart, Dan Wakefield, Paul Jacobs, and B.J. Widick. The journal paid particularly close attention to events in the auto industry, probably reflecting *Dissent's* Shachtmanite heritage (the Workers Party had "colonized" the auto factories during World War II with its best organizers, and Walter Reuther, who displayed a special genius for coopting dissidents in the United Auto Workers, brought many of them on staff in the 1950s). Several writers warned prophetically of the danger posed to workers and their unions by automation. One unsigned piece in the spring of 1956 predicted that computer technology would someday wreak havoc on the communities that depended on the auto factories: "Displaced workers may become the unemployed inhabitants of economically gutted cities."¹³

D*issent* acquitted itself well in its re-examination of the left's ideological heritage: discarding what was outmoded, and retaining what was of value. It would be interesting to know what it was like to edit a radical journal in the 1950s. Unfortunately *A Margin of Hope* provides few clues. Some of the initial reviews of the book took Howe to task for revealing so little about his love-affairs, marriages, and divorces. Since he makes it clear from the start that this is an intellectual autobiography, he is well within his rights to keep his private life out of the story. What is more disappointing is that he chooses to reveal so little about his feelings about his later public role. We learn all about his buddies from the East Bronx and City College, his youthful self-image, the pleasures of comradeship, and the excitement of wrangling over political ideas that he experienced in his early years. Did political life become so routine and humdrum after 1954 that it

¹¹ *Dissent* 3 (Fall 1956): 375.

¹² *Dissent* 3 (Spring 1956): 162-163.

¹³ *Dissent* 3 (Spring 1956): 191.

was no longer worth reporting? Back issues of *Dissent* from the 1950s reveal, on careful reading, a zest for combat, a sense of purposeful engagement, and a belief in the power of criticism and analysis. Howe and his associates could not have carried on with the burden of publishing *Dissent* for nearly three decades simply as an existential gesture of "the heroism of tiredness." Howe's journal contributed significantly to the rebirth of the American left in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The fact that its contributions have gone mostly unnoticed and unacknowledged is due in part to the "weary, sober" tone in which it framed its insights.

Since its founding, *Dissent* has clung to a pose of beleaguered melancholy, as if to go on record with more than guarded optimism that life goes on would be a betrayal of intellectual and moral responsibility. Over the years *Dissent* has repeatedly indulged itself in a kind of preemptive disillusionment; the journal welcomed signs of new life on the left as they appeared in the late 1950s, then immediately began searching for evidence of apostasy. (In an ill-tempered exchange in the summer of 1959 with C. Wright Mills over Mills's pamphlet *The Causes of World War III*, Howe declared that he, for one, did not intend to become a "surfrider on the Wave of the Future."¹⁴ To avoid that fate he shot first and asked questions later whenever anyone associated with the New Left said anything vaguely reminiscent of Stalinist apologetics.) *Dissent's* political outlook originated in the repudiation of the illusions of the sectarian left; its tone and sensibility restricted its readership to those who had either gone through a similar process of disillusionment or could learn the appropriate cues. *Dissent* spoke an exotic language difficult for the uninitiated to understand: "Poznan" was freighted with political meaning for *Dissent's* vintage-1950s readers, while most New Leftists would not have been able to find it on a map. *Dissent* became a sectarian journal of non-sectarianism.

Howe devoted a chapter in his 1957 book *Politics and the Novel* to a study of the "superfluous man" in Turgenev's novels. Turgenev's radical heroes, like Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*, were doomed to defeat, trapped between their sweeping insights into what needed to be changed in the world and their inability to effect those changes. Turgenev "speaks to us for a politics of hesitation, a politics that will never save the world, but without which the world will never be worth saving. He speaks to us with the authority of failure."

Howe concludes the chapter with a description of Julius Martov, a leader of the Russian Menshevik Party, a man "caught between the two groups [the Bolsheviks and the right-wing of his own party], criticizing both and unable to accept the policies of either. . . . With Martov there went the last of Turgenev's heroes, the last of the superfluous men."¹⁵ Not quite the last. Martov became a Turgenev hero, a "superfluous man," by force of circumstance; Howe has become one by choice.

¹⁴ *Dissent* 6 (Summer 1959): 299.

¹⁵ Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Fawcett, 1967), pp. 140-141.