

Uncle Irving

Samuel Hux

"...so much of his work was that of the conservateur: He was an eloquent and always reliable defender of the Western cultural heritage throughout his busy career, especially against the counter-cultural idiocy of the 1960s and more recently against 'political correctness' and 'multicultural' tribalism. . . ."

"UNCLE IRVING"...Or so my colleague Elaine Hoffman Baruch and I referred to Irving Howe—a private joke whose origins I have forgotten. Once at a *Dissent* editorial meeting which I attended as a frequent contributor, a female member of the board objected to an essay by Baruch that Howe thought extraordinary (it failed some rad-fem test, as I recall): "I don't want to see anything else by that person in this magazine!" Howe cast me a quick apologetic glance, then said "Now, Cynthia...no more of that." I suppose that might sound somewhat avuncular—but I think he was "Uncle" Irving because ordinarily he was not anyone's idea of mother's brother. Not that I endorse one popular image of Howe as insensitive and abrasive, wearing that "iron smile" Robert Lowell pasted on him in the poem "The New York Intellectual." Those who found him abrasive (at least in the years I knew him) knew only the public, polemical Howe, in which role he could be devastating. In fact, Irving could be quite *courtly*, although I think he would have bristled at the suggestion.

For a while I was a neighbor of the Malcolm Cowleys, then in their eighties; Irving asked that I pass on his best regards. I saw Mrs. Cowley at the market and did just that. "Oh he's *such* a gentleman," she said. "Do you know that the last time I saw Irving he told me my dress

was the most beautiful he'd ever seen." Well I suppose it's not too difficult to charm an elderly woman who, incidentally, once was a fashion critic. But I found it fascinating to observe Irving's demeanor toward another octogenarian lady one evening, the widow of one of his close friends: gentle, solicitous, and *protective*, fearing over-zealous attention to a distinguished and brave woman (an American courier for the anti-Nazi Austrian underground). I was fascinated because the first time I met Irving Howe he struck me as incredibly awkward.

In 1972 I mailed *Dissent* an essay on some higher-education matter. He phoned: not for us, but would you like to meet at a delicatessen and discuss another possibility? I was on time and found Howe already there, pacing back and forth on the sidewalk. He was pleasant enough as long as we were discussing the subject at hand, but when that was settled before the spartan repast was finished I felt he couldn't wait to be gone: my questions or comments on whatever else was on my mind received the briefest of answers or responses, a sort of metaphorical drumming of fingers on the table, and in a few minutes I was as eager to escape as he was. Many years later when I saw him at the ballet one evening (a very regular occurrence), we talked about the program until he'd said what he had to

say and saw that I had too and then, seeing his wife beckoning, walked away without a by-your-leave. (A couple of weeks later he was profusely apologetic.) But by this time I knew him well enough to take no offense. He was the busiest man I have ever known. One of his associates remarked in eulogy that "often he managed to slight a friend without knowing it." Rudeness? Perhaps. But a surprising and deep innocence, I judge.

Irving's was a formidable intellect, he was more than a little frightening, he could make one nervous—and I think he was sometimes nervous in response to the nervousness he didn't know he generated. Sometime in the late 1970s he read a paper on George Eliot at a conference at the CUNY Graduate Center sponsored by my college and organized by Elaine Baruch. His paper presented, he sat on the stage while the other speaker, a beautiful young scholar, read hers. He paid absolute attention, but hunched forward in his chair, twirling his glasses. The young woman grew more and more nervous, repeated sentences, stumbled verbally—a painfully embarrassing performance. At lunch afterwards Irving wondered what was wrong with her since she had a worthy essay. I answered, "Irving, you scared her to death." He clearly did not believe me.

I imagine that by now the reader may be thinking: All well and good, but why, might I ask, a testimonial to a socialist in a conservative journal? Well, the answer to that question is the sub-text of this essay. But to make that answer clear I'm going to have to be a little rude myself (not innocently so) and violate the ethics of the encomiast by talking about myself as well as about my subject. After all, it is only by virtue of his impact upon me that he becomes my subject. That is, I have to take myself as seriously as I take Irving Howe, or as seriously as he took me...or rather almost. He once called me "brilliant" (behind my back). With no

false modesty, I know that's undeserved; I know the difference between smart and brilliant. But I'll be pleased until the day I die that he thought highly enough of me to bother to exaggerate. He occasionally praised what he called (to my face, or rather in correspondence) my "Huxian insights." But he occasionally was critical of my "Huxian voice," which always frustrated me, for I thought (something I never told him) that my polemical style was a reflection of his; in any case I early on before I met him chose him as a model. And after I met him I would often find when writing an essay that I was imagining it a conversation with Irving: he was my "designated reader" so to speak. And often when reading something of his I thought, "I know exactly where you are going." This was partly because of his lucidity, but partly, I thought, because our modes of thinking were akin (which of course is a different matter from same ideas). So I was stunned when he wrote me once that "People often praise conversational prose, but really conversational prose is hard to read."

I don't want to exaggerate my closeness to Irving. Only with qualification can I say "He was my friend." I knew him well. He did not know me anywhere near so well. That's only as it should be. I am scarcely an egalitarian demanding reciprocity. We lunched together perhaps three times, and there were maybe as many parties. We ran into each other at cultural events and conferences. But the relationship was primarily professional, intellectual: editorial correspondence and phone calls, *Dissent* meetings. Nonetheless, his impact on me was profound, and I will regret as long as I live that we were not closer than we were.

I knew of Irving Howe, of course, long before that delicatessen conference in 1972. Sometime in the late 1950s I drove from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where I was a student, to Durham on some forgotten errand and ended up in a

tobacconist's shop which also stocked newspapers, pornographic magazines, and...*Dissent* (nothing else, no other journals at all). Intrigued, I bought it, and thus first encountered Irving Howe. The first book of his I read was not *Politics and the Novel*, which introduced him to so many people, but probably his least known work, *The U.A.W. and Walter Reuther* (with B.J. Widick); the second was *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (with Lewis Coser). Howe was for me, that is, a social critic and historian who, incidentally, also wrote literary criticism, which I caught up with later in graduate school and as a young faculty member: *Politics and the Novel*, *William Faulkner*, etc., and the essays which would be collected in *A World More Attractive*, *Steady Work*, *Decline of the New*, and others. Even today when thinking of Howe I'm as likely to recall his political scholarship like *Leon Trotsky* and *Socialism in America* as I am to reflect upon the literary; and I'm certain that his greatest work was social history, *World of Our Fathers*, and that his second greatest was of the same genre, for *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* is the portrait of a distinctive world as much as it is memoir.

I took a degree in literature only because I thought I'd be better at it than at the history I was more interested in or the philosophy I loved more. I imagined a career of teaching what I thought I'd teach best and writing on whatever interested me or engaged my affection, and as a writer I wished to be an essayist rather than a specialist writing for others in his field. But I was terribly innocent about the specialist demands that would be made in the profession, and when I discovered them I began to admire Howe even more as a man who refused to specialize and even made a success of that refusal. I also refused. But unless one is blessed with Howe's enormous energy and his genius for time-management, then

churning out essays in literary criticism followed by political polemics followed by philosophical reflections followed by historical speculations and so on while never carving out a recognizable niche is no prescription for academic stardom. I could then call Howe's example, which few are capable of emulating, a negative impact upon me; but I don't regret it for a moment.

I should add to the penultimate sentence above: Unless one is blessed with Howe's talent. I'm not sure he was a great critic, but he was an excellent, *strong* critic, and his strength lay partly in his avoidance of all critical fashions and schools. If he had a method it was the challenge recommended by T.S. Eliot: be very intelligent and sensitive. And I would recommend to today's obsessive "methodists," the deconstructionists and post-whatnots with their immense and unearned philosophic pretensions, a reading of Howe's posthumous *A Critic's Notebook*, where one finds a man with no such pretensions at all (he once told me he thought he was philosophically tone-deaf—which he wasn't) examining the inner nature of fiction with an extraordinary phenomenological care. There is a logic to Howe's last work being a series of *pensées* on fiction (or *shtiklakh* as he called them—"morsels"), for his literary criticism was overwhelmingly devoted to novels, both in periodical essays and reviews and in books (Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner, Thomas Hardy). But I thought his rare efforts in the criticism of poetry, a genre he's hardly associated with, were the equal of his fiction criticisms; and what characterized one characterized the other: a respect for the aesthetic, but with a loyalty to the historical, a conviction that criticism is a moral discipline, and an allergy to cant.

Howe was of course a political partisan, but his literary criticism was never a vehicle for special pleading. Nor was his criticism of historical texts and memoirs:

he drew a firm line between his polemical pieces and his reviews of politically charged books for which he had scant sympathy. He did not disguise where he stood, but what he demanded from the subject were matters of tone, honesty, and coherence. And happily for reader and often for subject, he failed to draw a firm line between his critical approach to creative literature and to the non-fictional. That is, for a man who knew so well the difference between history and literature, his non-literary criticism is very literary. "Toward the end, Whittaker Chambers seems to have gone a little mad. It is not hard to understand why, and if one brings to life a fraction of the imaginativeness we all so devoutly accord to literature, it is even possible to sympathize with his condition." A man deserves, surely the same attention we'd give a text (especially since: "That Whittaker Chambers told the truth and Alger Hiss did not, seems to be highly probable"). I could discuss Howe on other historical subjects: his "T.E. Lawrence: The Problem of Heroism" for instance is the best introduction to that figure I know of. I have tactically alluded to Whittaker Chambers instead as a kind of ironic transition to all that now follows. For it was Chambers who explained to William Buckley, "I am not a conservative....I am a man of the Right."

I want to make a proposal about which I am serious only within strict limits, by which I am being intentionally provocative (which habit is one of Howe's legacies), and for which Irving would probably curse me: Irving Howe as conservative. I don't mean the kind of charge that always irritated Irving made by New Leftists, Marxist ideologues, and the occasional *marxisant* pisher, that he was "moving to the Right," was a "mere" social democrat unlike the more courageous Big Thinkers of the Left. I mean...well, we'll see what I mean.

The first essay I wrote for *Dissent*, a

direct consequence of that 1972 delicatessen conference was entitled "Liberal Education and Radical Values" (Fall 1972), whose argument was Irving's as much as mine: that the with-it Left's whoring after "relevance" and disregard for the cultural tradition of the West not only made for a poor education but was a condescending insult to the minority and working-class students the radicalized professors professed to be so concerned about. As I re-read it I find really very little that would have made it inappropriate for submission to a journal like *Modern Age* had I known at the time what my political philosophy really was. I knew there were conservatives I admired, and there were more I grew to admire during the 1970s: Michael Oakeshott, for instance, whom I was inspired to read by an appreciative essay by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin in (ironically) *Dissent*. But there were conservatives my mentor Uncle Irving admired, and he *knew* what his political philosophy really was. Howe's kindly feelings toward *traditionalist* conservatives is documented (see *A Margin of Hope*, 225-27): Clinton Rossiter, Russell Kirk, and especially Peter Viereck. Although he could be impatient with them as well: in a letter to me he referred to Kirk's thought and disposition dismissively as "georgics." (To be fair, this was probably in part a function of Irving's incorrigible urbanism: another time he wrote me "the city is in my blood, like a poison.")

I submitted nothing else to *Dissent* for a few years (although I read everything of Howe's that came out); I was having some difficulty judging my professed socialism in the light of my growing conservative urges. One result of a kind of dialogue with myself was an essay in *Moment* in 1978, "Confessions of a Socialist Conservative," in which I argued that a *temperamental* conservatism was perfectly consistent with a profession of social democracy and confided that "it

doesn't seem to me that mainline political conservatism [I really meant the Republican Party] is very temperamentally conservative." Irving saw that essay and invited another contribution to *Dissent*, and there began a fairly intense relationship with that journal which lasted for seven or eight years until it more or less petered out in the late 1980s, by which time I was beginning to *feel* in my soul what I already knew intellectually, that a profound distrust of capitalism did not necessitate one's being a socialist.

In Irving's "invitation" he remarked, "if you had a sense of the left a little richer than you seem to, you'd know that the tradition from which people like myself come, though it was disastrously mistaken and worse on many counts, nevertheless did share with serious conservatives a feeling for the past, a respect for inherited culture...." I was a little miffed by the first clause because I thought my early contribution to *Dissent* showed just that rich sense and because the continuation of the sentence quoted above was in fact one theme of that 1972 piece: "we said that we wanted that tradition to be made accessible to everyone, not just the rich." In any case my temperamental conservatism was acceptable in a contributor. "It's OK with me if you come out in behalf of conservative values as long as you attack" (in a symposium "Against the Neoconservatives") "what are now called conservative politics."

Now, of course, Irving's acceptance of my temperamental or cultural conservatism and his resistant admiration of some more thorough-going types do not make him a "conservative." Rather, it was his *own* cultural conservatism that inspires me to risk that identification.

There was the matter of his taste and inclinations: For all his writing on "modernism" and "post-modernism" those tastes were admirably "retrograde"—his preference for nineteenth-century novels (or twentieth-century ones that leaned

in that direction) and admiration for old and out-of-fashion poets like Edwin Arlington Robinson.

There was the fact that so much of his work was that of the *conservateur*. He was an eloquent and always reliable defender of the Western cultural heritage throughout his busy career, especially against the counter-cultural idiocy of the 1960s and more recently against "political correctness" and "multicultural" tribalism (for instance "The Value of the Canon," collected in Paul Berman's *Debating P.C.*). Even when he wrote about, or for, "progressive" causes like socialism he fell naturally into a kind of unprogressive mode, always testing his own views against the classical works and history of that tradition (as it was to him), about which he was immensely learned, and which he was intent upon protecting from the more ignorant looters of the Left. As editor and translator for three and a half decades and four collections he tried to insure that Yiddish literature not vanish with the language; as historian he tried to insure that "the world of his father" survived in memory.

And there was the matter of small gestures, habits, personal style which could be evoked only through an anthology of anecdotes and which I will sum up as moral and intellectual good manners.

Now, really, I understand that none of this makes Howe a conservative in any popularly understood sense. And knowing that Irving would not like this identification at all I'll now drop it—but only to ask a question.

Before getting to that question however it may be of interest to consider why Irving would not like this identification, aside from the obvious fact that "socialist" was good enough for him, for I think there's something beyond the obvious. He found a *National Review* caricature of him as a nineteenth-century figure out of touch with the modern, to which I alerted

him, "a great comedy"—but I'm certain he wouldn't find my remarks amusing. While *conservative* could be a term of respect for Irving when he was referring to men like Rossiter, Kirk, and Viereck, whom he called "civilized and moderate men," the courtesy was not extended to the more capitalistically oriented conservatives whom he judged ascendant and more populous. Then again the putative conservatives he knew best, I mean from personal experience, were his ex-colleagues, the "neoconservatives" whom he considered "frantic ideologues with their own version of P.C., the classics as safeguard for the status quo"—and he worried about *their* ascendancy. So out of respect for Irving's sensibilities I'll modify my identification of him with this compromise: He had his strong traditionalist side.

Now...suppose we were talking about someone who shared Howe's cultural values and disposition, who was not however a famous old soldier of the Left, yet who held economic views similar to his. What were those views? Once he shed the orthodox Marxism of his Trotskyist youth and passed through the somewhat vaguely defined socialist values of his middle age, he began to identify with the "market socialism" of the Glasgow economist Alec Nove (*The Economics of Feasible Socialism*), whose "feasible socialism" is not greatly different in spirit and nuance from, and is substantially akin in desired outcome to, my beloved Chesterton's distributism (which proposition could be a subject for an essay itself). Would you be comfortable calling that someone a conservative? I would. I'd have far less difficulty than in so honoring that foreigner to "the politics of prudence," Newt Gingrich, who may be a man of the Right, but who is a conservative I don't know how, unless someone has invented the category of "cybercon," and who must be the sort of "conservative" that leads that Hungarian-American

Tory John Lukacs (in *Confessions of an Original Sinner*) to distance himself as a "reactionary." And I have much less trouble with my imaginary figure than I have with our friends the libertarians / right-wing anarchists / anarcho-capitalists, who in their profound distrust of government seem willing to accept the highly *unconservative* dys-culture that an unpoliced capitalism would be likely to engender.

In October 1987 I took part in a written "Symposium on Humane Socialism and Traditional Conservatism" in *New Oxford Review* along with fourteen others including John Lukacs and Russell Kirk. Kirk referred to the anarcho-capitalists—as was his wont—as "ideologues of solipsism." Lukacs wrote that "All of the important conservative thinkers of the last 200 years have been anti-materialist and therefore, by definition, anti-capitalist." But we all know, don't we, that most Americans, not to say most conservatives, identify conservatism with enthusiasm for capitalism. And we all know, or ought to, that conservatives have often facilitated that misidentification, although as David Frum has written recently of Russell Kirk: "As long as he lived, by word and example he cautioned conservatives against over-indulging their fascination with economics." Then Frum concludes, "He taught that conservatism was above all a *moral* cause: one devoted to the preservation of the priceless heritage of Western civilization." Which is what Irving Howe was about.

That NOR symposium was an invitation to the kind of dialogue—people left and right who fear the cultural and social consequences of corporate giantism—that is implicit in Eugene Genovese's recent *The Southern Tradition*. I sent a copy to Irving—and that was the only correspondence from me he never acknowledged. I don't *know* why, but I suspect why. So again I'm not really going to try to induct Irving posthumously.

Nonetheless, he helped me find my way to my own conservatism. A more direct route, the Southern way Genovese writes about, was blocked for me by the racial politics which obscured those virtues Genovese is now excavating; and in the Chapel Hill of my youth I don't recall any professor ever talking about the Agrarians, whose ideas ("rural distributism" as it were) make more and more sense to me every year.

To say Irving helped me find my way involves two questions: *how* he helped me and *what* I found. The *how*: That's largely implicit in all I've said so far, and I hope that the narrative speaks as well as some belabored explanation would. But it is partly that, as I've confessed already, when I wrote I found that often I was imagining a dialogue with Irving, he was my "designated reader," although I should have said "designated contestant," for my imaginary dialogues were more often than not arguments. The *what*: I am a conservative, but I would be quite uncomfortable calling myself a man of the Right: there seem to be so many unconservative people there, just as there are so many illiberal people on the Left.

I read and hear much about a "Culture War" going on in this nation, but because of the example of Irving Howe I cannot buy the notion that the warriors fall neatly to the left and right. This is important to me because I think that (for all the obvious interdependence) culture is ultimately vastly more important than economics. And because I knew Irving no one will ever convince me that a "cybercon" lecturing about "revolution" (without the sense of tradition to say "counter-") and his followers, self-designated "bomb throwers," are my friends while some people I used to be associated with are not.

One last matter. Some years ago a Burkean friend asked me if I were still a socialist. "I'm too conservative to change," I replied. Well, I wasn't *that* conservative, but Irving was. Of course there's one change we all must face, and I sorely miss Irving's presence on this earth. When he died two years ago I somehow misheard the location of his memorial service, showed up at the wrong place, and never got to say goodbye. I have been wanting to pay my respects ever since.