Somehow, it never came off. Success eluded her, the novels did not get stronger, the promised career died aborning. Powell's spirit, however, proved as tough and enduring as that of the city she loved. Life was hard—her only child was autistic, she and her husband drank too much, the money evaporated, and one day she was old and poor, with no more parties to go to. But, inevitably, there would come a moment when she would see the unexpected humor or poignancy or treachery of some situation or other, and the next thing you knew she was writing another novel. When she died in 1965, her books long out of print and she herself a largely forgotten figure, she was still writing.

In 1987 Gore Vidal, who had known her when he was young, wrote a celebratory piece about Powell, and soon she was being rediscovered. Tim Page, a music critic at the *Washington Post*, became a one-man "Save Dawn Powell" operation, working relentlessly to have her novels reprinted and her diaries published. Now he has written her biography.

When we assess this renewed literary presence in our midst, it is the diaries that seem to compel. The fiction feels painfully dated now—the satire thin, the writing brittle, the characters without intrinsic interest—but in the diaries we have the live spirit of the woman for whom writing and New York were so marvelously one. Here, Powell is literate and hilarious, wise and heartbreaking, and endlessly self-renewing. In 1950, in a moment of exhaustion, she writes in her diary: "The reason friends in late middle-age appear inadequate is that one expects them to give back one's youth—everything one once had with them—and one charges them with the lack that is in oneself, for even if they could give, your container is now a sieve and can hold no gifts for long." Six years later, she's writing: "Just thought why I don't sell stories to popular magazines. All have subtitles—'Last time Gary saw Cindy she was a gawky child; now she was a beautiful woman. . . .' I can't help writing, 'Last time Fatso saw Myrt she was a desirable woman; now she was an old bag.'" The insight of the first entry juxtaposed against the irrepressibility of the second is Dawn Powell at her most characteristic—vital, gallant, urban—and that characteristic self is more consistently there in the diaries than in the novels.

Page's biography is what is known as serviceable. The perspective is devoted, the take uncritical, the prose pedestrian. Yet it captures admirably the rough-and-tumble spirit of a writer who deserves a place at the American table.

—*Vivian Gornick*

### *IRVING HOWE: Socialist, Critic, Jew.*

By Edward Alexander. Indiana Univ. Press. 284 pp. $35

"For more than 50 years, from the 1940s to the 1990s, Irving Howe was a kind of miracle." So begins Alexander's estimable study of one of the century's more formidable literary and cultural critics. Irving Howe was a key member of the New York intellectual circle, that "herd of independent minds" (as critic Harold Rosenberg once quipped) that helped shape postwar American politics and culture. Howe, who died in 1993, was indeed something of a miracle.

The circumstances of Howe's youth were inauspicious: he was born in 1920 into the humble, Yiddish-speaking, East Bronx home of David Horenstein (a failed grocer) and his wife, Nettie. He attended City College of New York, became involved in sectarian, anti-Stalinist politics, and as late as 1947 was still railing at the "imperialist" antagonists of World War II—Allied and Axis alike—in the pages of the Trotskyist *Labor Action* and *New International*. Even after he gained a broader audience by publishing essays and reviews in *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *Politics*, the *New Republic*, and *Time*, Howe remained a critic who embraced lost causes: socialism, the idea of which he never abandoned; Yiddishkeit, the disappearing secular culture of Eastern European immigrant Jews; and literary humanism, the scourge of contemporary poststructuralist critics.

To what, then, do we attribute his continued hold on us? What qualities still draw us to his remarkably diverse oeuvre, which includes studies of Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Thomas Hardy, Leon Trotsky, American communism and socialism, Walter Reuther, Ralph Waldo Emerson, American Jews, and Yiddish literature—not to mention *Dissent* magazine, America's finest journal of left political and cultural analysis, which Howe founded in 1954 and edited until his death?

According to Alexander, Howe "wrote

about politics and literature and Jews with the productivity of a major industry; and yet his scores of books and hundreds of essays not only met the demanding scholarly standards of the academy but were written with an analytical sharpness, polemical bite, and lethal irony that raised them above the level of what was (and is) generally found in journals of literary and cultural opinion."

An additional strength of Howe's criticism, astutely explored by Alexander, is his extraordinary ability to hold opposing ideas in creative tension—a kind of negative capability produced by years of dialectical thinking—which resulted in richly fertile discussions of aesthetics and politics, Judaism and "Jewishness," and socialism and tradition.

Short of reading Howe himself, especially his moving autobiography *A Margin of Hope* (1982), those (likely younger) readers in need of an introduction would do well to begin with Alexander's biography. Perhaps the book's greatest virtue is the extent to which it amplifies Howe's distinctive voice through generous quotation. Such solicitude is all the more admirable given that Alexander is a conservative. (Howe once referred to him as "my favorite reactionary.") Unlike so many contemporary biographies and works of literary criticism, this one does not suffocate its subject in a miasma of theory or specious psychoanalytical diagnosis.

Not that Alexander fails to criticize Howe. He censures his subject for misguided views of World War II and his (and the New York intellectuals') abject neglect of the Holocaust and his own Jewish identity. Only occasionally do Alexander's opinions become obtrusive, as when he repeatedly rebukes Howe for his views on Zionism, Israel, and the Palestinians. Anyone interested in Howe's varied career, and the historical context that has given it its particular shape—American radicalism, the Cold War and anticommunism, the New Left, literary modernism, Jewish life—will profit handsomely from reading Alexander's respectful book.

*—Harvey Teres*

***THE FACE OF RUSSIA: Anguish, Aspiration, and Achievement in Russian Culture.***
By James H. Billington. TV Books. 269 pp. $29.95

"Now we have hope," a Moscow woman quietly commented in August 1991 as it became clear that the Communist coup attempt against the fledgling Russian democracy had failed. Today, economic and institutional collapse continues to threaten the young democracy, yet Russian artists and intellectuals remain free to create without fear of political repression. Never before, in fact, have Russians been so free to explore human experience through artistic expression. Their persistent belief in an art that seeks to transform rather than merely to entertain may offer the greatest hope for preserving their democracy.

In *The Face of Russia*, Billington, the Librarian of Congress, seeks to tell "the story of the Russian people as seen through their art." Conceived as a companion volume to a PBS series, the book identifies three fundamental forces in the development of the Russian arts: Russian Orthodox spirituality, closeness to nature, and the habit of borrowing from the West—the "recurrent tendency to take over, lift up, and then cast down new forms of creativity," from icon painting to constitutional democracy. The author traces this pattern in the religious culture of the 15th to 17th centuries, represented by wooden churches and the icon painting of Andrei Rublev; the aristocratic culture of the 18th and early 19th centuries, represented by the imperial palaces of Bartolomeo Rastrelli and the literary legacy of Nikolai Gogol; and the mass culture of the later 19th and 20th centuries, represented by the music of Modest Mussorgsky and the films of Sergei Eisenstein. Through each of these art forms, Russians transformed foreign models into radically innovative original works in what Billington describes as "a culture of explosive revolution rather than gradual evolution."

While not purporting to be a comprehensive guide to the Russian artistic experience, this is an informative and highly readable essay. By avoiding some of the more obvious choices of artists and art forms, Billington has produced a personal book, conversational in tone and enlivened by his reminiscences. Few would argue with the author's belief that, in order to understand the Russian people, their history, and their future, it is both important and infinitely rewarding to study their art.

*—Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter*