

lization to a past one's glory, or to its decline and fall. They can serve as war monuments that evoke an enemy's barbarity, or as picturesque garden ornaments that hint at ancient lineages. "Ruins do not speak," Woodward observes. "We speak for them."

The author is especially eloquent as he charts classical Rome's rapid transformation from Eternal City to nearly abandoned wasteland, with the Forum collapsing into cow pasture and the Colosseum converted to a quarry. "If such a colossus as Rome can crumble—its ruins ask—why not London or New York?" That's a disconcerting question, with Ground Zero still fresh in memory. Although Woodward completed his book before the September 11 attacks, what happened afterward only reinforces his point about the potency of ruins. Lest the shattered World Trade Center stand as a portent of empire lost, it was quickly transmogrified into what looks like any other neat-edged construction site.

Some may quibble with Woodward's tendency to jump from one thing to the next, and it's true that his transitions often seem arbitrary. But this merely signals his enthusiasm. Like a giddy dinner-party companion, he can't stop sharing his eccentric obsession in a breathless rush of conversation, skipping from history to travel to memoir (he recounts his boyhood fascination with a decaying manor amid "bright new Lego-like houses"). You just have to sit back and enjoy the ride.

—REBECCA A. CLAY

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**IRVING HOWE:**

***A Life of Passionate Dissent.***

By Gerald Sorin. New York Univ. Press. 386 pp. \$32.95

Even after *World of Our Fathers* (1976), a popular elegy to Jewish immigrant culture, made him rich, Irving Howe (1920–93) never abandoned his radical ideals. The cofounder of *Dissent* devoted much of his life to bril-

liant commentary on the meaning of socialism in America. His range and power of discrimination as a critic, essayist, and autobiographer won respect from opponents and reverence from allies. Among the latter is Gerald Sorin, whose biography shines with admiration even as it records the personal flaws that shadowed Howe's "passionate dissent."

According to Sorin, a history professor at



**A Preacher in the Ancient Ruins (c. 1750), by Giovanni Pannini**

the State University of New York at New Paltz, loneliness drew 14-year-old Howe to the Young People's Socialist League in 1934. Principle kept him there. Socialism, Howe found, reflected the "ethic of solidarity" pervading the Yiddish neighborhoods of his East Bronx boyhood. At the City College of New York in the late 1930s, he led Trotskyists against Stalinists and distinguished himself by "overblown rhetoric, heavy-handed sarcasm, and a seemingly unbreakable attachment to intellectual agility rather than reflection, to dialectic rather than investigation and analysis." The proletarian revolution allowed no room for nuance.

As revolution passed America by, Howe's hot-blooded socialism cooled. He stopped talking of class analysis and began calling himself a humanist rather than a Marxist. By the end of the 1950s, he was counseling radicals to vote for liberal Democrats. Lacking manifest political content, his socialism became what he termed "the name of our desire." And so it remained, unsatisfied, until his death in 1993.

Socialism might not mean utopia, but it could mean a better tomorrow, and Howe did as much as any American of his generation to identify the political legacy of socialism with democracy, civil liberties, human decency, and intellectual integrity. Yet if he was a “hero of sorts,” as Sorin concludes, his was the heroism of the believer, not of the actor. For all his knowledge of international radical politics, Howe sent barely a ripple through the realm of political action. He opposed World War II as a clash between imperialists, then recovered so much faith in American policy that he failed to see the illiberal character of the Vietnam War until 1968. By that time, the antiwar movement had grown up in spite of him, followed by the counterculture and second-wave feminism. Howe treated these with the same withering condescension he had once dispensed to enemies at City College. The “ethic of solidarity” always looks better in theory than in practice.

If Howe’s temperamental excesses weakened his political leadership, they also reflected his honest attempt to confront the dilemmas of 20th-century radicalism. He was too smart to retreat into dogmatism, too faithful to betray his beliefs. At his best, he lived by social hope. This might not have amounted to heroism. But it was no mean achievement in troubled times.

—JOHN H. SUMMERS

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**COMING OF AGE AS A POET:  
*Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath.***

By Helen Vendler. Harvard Univ. Press.  
174 pp. \$22.95

Literary critics don’t come much more eminent and established than Helen Vendler. A beloved teacher of poetry and a principal architect of the reputations of countless contemporary poets, notably 1995 Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, she holds not only a select University Professorship at Harvard but a poetry reviewing slot at *The New Yorker*. From these twin platforms Vendler disseminates a fairly traditional vision of poetry, one that stresses the poet’s private aesthetics and the quest for a personal language to reflect inner experience. Those who complain that postmodern and “political” approaches have taken over the study of literature would be hard pressed to

name any postmodernist whose cultural authority rivals Vendler’s.

This latest book returns to familiar territory. Of the four poets it treats—John Milton, John Keats, T. S. Eliot, and Sylvia Plath—Vendler already has written copiously about Plath and Eliot and has published a book-length study of Keats’s odes. Her concern in these essays, originally delivered as lectures at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, is to pinpoint what the four poets had to accomplish at the outset, the problems of form and diction each had to solve before writing that initial “perfect” poem, the first one to last down the years and embody the poet’s mature style. If we can understand this, she writes, “then we can begin to appreciate all that any young poet has to master in order to write a poem that will endure.”

Though this sounds like a tight focus, in practice Vendler treats her topic loosely. The poems she picks as “perfect” are, not surprisingly, very well known—Milton’s “L’Allegro” (1631), Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816), Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1911), and Plath’s “The Colossus” (1959). She uses them to discuss such disparate matters as Milton’s capacity for extending a poem in space and time, Keats’s many variations on the sonnet form over the course of his career, Eliot’s repressed upbringing, and the unfairness of criticism that questions Plath’s status as a major poet. Throughout, Vendler tracks her poets’ struggles toward adulthood, because, “for a writer, achieving emotional maturity is inseparable from achieving linguistic maturity.”

The result is a collection of pleasing if not especially striking insights into canonical poems and poets. Vendler is particularly good on how her favorite poets play with structure and how they wrestle with a poetic form—the Petrarchan sonnet, say—until it becomes theirs. Some of the close readings scintillate more than others; a few of the analyses (notably of “Chapman’s Homer”) feel a trifle shopworn, as if they have been used for years as classroom examples.

Indeed, the volume’s only real weakness is a certain wobble in its sense of the intended audience. Parts read like an introduction, for a nonreader of poetry, to some of the underlying