

the literary criticism of the new york intellectuals

a defense and appreciation

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In the flurry of commentary these past few years on the New York Intellectuals, much of what has been written suggests that while they engaged in criticism of literature, their political concerns essentially subsumed their other interests, that criticism for them was an outlet for extraliterary impulses. Even a book favorable to the group's early critical work, Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals*, finds its ultimate worth residing in their courageously left-wing yet Anti-Stalinist attitudes of the late thirties. However, such responses tend to obscure what was perhaps the most significant intellectual contribution of the New York Intellectuals: their exploration of the emotional resonances brought about through the social and historical dimensions of literature. In this process, they have over most of the last fifty years refused to compromise the integrity of works of literature for political purposes.

This essay, then, will argue that the New York Intellectuals' later critical work was largely nonpolitical. It will attempt to demonstrate as well that 1) the dialectical nature of their work helped to illuminate much of the literature of the last two centuries; 2) to a large extent their dialectic grew out of the Jewish immigrant experience, strengthening rather than narrowing their work; 3) they followed in a tradition of American cultural criticism stemming from Van Wyck

Brooks and Edmund Wilson; and 4) their emphasis on the historical, cultural and moral elements of literature served a humanizing function in American critical practice. This paper will also, in making its argument, respond to a number of articles and books which address the New York Intellectuals' literary criticism.

The term, "New York Intellectuals" essentially refers to a group of largely Jewish writers and intellectuals who initially clustered around *Partisan Review*. Somewhat later a number of them wrote for *Commentary*, a journal of Jewish thought and opinion. What primarily distinguished them in their early period was an effort to link left-wing politics with the literary avant-garde. Furthermore, their Marxism of the late thirties and early forties involved an independent radical position from which they launched attacks on Stalinist positions. This attitude eventually hardened into an anti-Communism ranging from liberal to neo-conservative. On the other hand, they were distinguished as well by a genuine commitment to literature as a form of aesthetic and humanistic endeavor, evidenced by their advocacy of modernist literature during the same period. They became known for their work in a number of intellectual areas, in particular for their literary criticism and commentaries.

The most significant literary critics of this group were Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe. The two most prominent art critics were Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Irving Howe identified representatives in other fields as follows: "The main political theorist was [Sidney] Hook. Writers of poetry and fiction related to the New York milieu were Delmore Schwartz, Saul Bellow, Paul Goodman, and Isaac Rosenfeld. And the recognized scholar, and also inspiring moral force, was Meyer Schapiro."¹ In addition others considered members of the group were William Phillips, Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, Dwight MacDonal, William Barrett, Mary McCarthy and, in his early period, Leslie Fiedler. While a number of these people engaged in literary criticism, this paper will concern itself primarily with the four literary critics mentioned above, who were most representative of the group.

The basic critique of New York Intellectual criticism was stated in a February 1984 article by Nathan Glazer in the *New York Times Book Review*. Glazer referred to an earlier paper on the New York Intellectuals delivered at Columbia University by Denis Donoghue:

The American intellectual, Mr. Donoghue argued, is much more involved in thinking and writing and fighting about politics, much less involved in the examination and ordering of private relations and the private life. . . . The politics are intensely felt, more intensely than literary or artistic judgments.

Of William Phillips' memoir of life in New York Intellectual circles, Glazer wrote, "Mr. Phillips subtitles his interesting memoir, 'Five Decades of the Literary Life,' and indeed there is a good deal about writers and novelists and critics and poets in it. But politics dominates."²

Donoghue, himself a noted critic and writer, had elaborated on his perception of the New York Intellectuals as essentially political critics of literature as early as 1979. In a review of Irving Howe's *Celebrations and Attacks* he raised

serious objections to the critical outlook of Howe specifically and the group by implication. Donoghue wrote of Howe:

He is concerned only with the problems we have, not with those we could find if we went to look for them. The real problems must be handled politically.

. . . The great merit of Howe's style, as of his mind, is that it is serious, and that it shows that literature is serious. The limitation of his style is that it does not show that literature is also and simultaneously playful, seriously playful, involving the work and play of mind, experiment, possibilities carried to the end of their line free from the obligations of translating themselves into a political program.³

There is merit to the claim that the New York Intellectuals at times slighted consideration of the aesthetic and experimental aspects of literature; furthermore, philosophical questions have often seemed of little interest to them. However, this paper will attempt to show that the concerns of their criticism were in essence far broader and deeper than politics alone.

A major question in dealing with this group relates to the influence of their early political radicalism upon their critical outlook. To the extent that Marxism functioned as an element in their work, it was applied, not in a doctrinaire and mechanical fashion, but as a sophisticated and flexible instrument. In fact, one of the keys to the significance of the New York Intellectuals from the late thirties on was that they were able to utilize techniques of cultural inquiry learned from Marxism without being tied to its dogma. As Irving Howe commented: "Marxism in decomposition offered a spur to improvising, to the release of personality, to moving *a little beyond*. . . . In such circumstances the critic is freed but not wholly freed; no longer a captive but not yet a wanderer."⁴ Thus, the New York Intellectuals were able to detach the insights of Marxism from its ideology.

One of the foremost examples of this phenomenon was their dialectical approach to literature. (Dialectics, of course, have roots in Hegelian philosophy, and thus need not be an exclusively political or economic interpretation of the world.) Frequently they saw literature as an expression of forces in opposition, particularly of the creative writer's alien, and sometimes adversary, relationship to his culture.

Probably the classic expression of this dialectic came in Trilling's "Preface" to *The Opposing Self*, in which he wrote of Hegel's account in the *Philosophy of History* of

the strange, bitter, dramatic relation between the modern self and the modern culture. . . . It was he who first spoke of the 'alienation' which the modern self contrives as a means for the fulfillment of its destiny, and of the pain which the self incurs because of this device of self-realization.

Trilling later referred to Matthew Arnold's application of this concept to literature: that poetry offers us "surprise and elevation" and "that our culture is hostile to surprise and elevation, and to the freedom of the self which they imply."⁵ (Trilling's attitude toward the self and culture was actually considerably more problematic than this preface suggests.) This dialectic, frequently stressed by the New York Intellectuals, had clear relevance to the relationship of writers to their culture from the Romantic through the modern periods. It is particularly salient for modernists such as Joyce, Eliot, Kafka, Hemingway. Although this analysis was not original with the New York Intellectuals, the group was in the forefront in this country of those suggesting the dialectic of self and society in the literary process.

One of the best critical illustrations of their dialectic appeared in Philip Rahv's related essays, "Paleface and Redskin" and "The Cult of Experience in American Writing," published in 1939 and 1940. Although Rahv developed Van Wyck Brooks' ideas of "highbrow and lowbrow" in American culture, he refined them considerably. Rahv saw the "paleface" sensibility of the nineteenth century as a reflection of the Puritan ethos with all its inhibitions. Yet Walt Whitman and Henry James were "both involved in the radical enterprise of subverting the Puritan code of stark utility and releasing the springs of experience. Thus they are the true initiators of the American line of modernity."⁶ In Rahv's view, however, their efforts led in the twentieth century to a "dissociation of mind from experience." The writers who most represented this dissociation were in his view Dreiser, Anderson, Lewis and Mencken.⁷ Here Rahv astutely indicated how the American writer's alienation from his culture, rather than influence from abroad, had brought about the schools of realism and naturalism in this country. His interpretation also helped to explain why American naturalism, unlike its European counterpart, had no developed theoretical underpinning.

Rahv saw in most of twentieth century American literature an "indifference to ideas generally, to theories of value." Thus even in the sophisticated fiction of Hemingway, "to safeguard himself against the counterfeit, he consistently avoids drawing on the abstract resources of the mind."⁸ Finally then Rahv delineated the literary consequences, both fortunate and unfortunate, of our writers' adversary relationship to their culture.

One interpretation of New York Intellectual criticism considers it narrowed and weakened by their dialectic. Grant Webster in his book on postwar American criticism, *The Republic of Letters*, finds their work basically dependent upon "a dialectic or tension between social reality and avant-garde tastes." Like Glazer and Donoghue, he feels that the group's criticism was essentially an expression of political impulses: the result of the collapse of American Marxism in the thirties was

the displacement of what was originally a political radicalism onto literature, which can be seen clearly in the change that takes place in the *Partisan Review* from 1936 to 1937. All the revolutionary expectations of the Intellectuals' early years are sublimated into a defense of 'mod-

ernist' literature, and their geographical Utopia becomes Bohemia, not Russia.⁹

This assessment of the New York Intellectuals' early allegiance to modernism does not sufficiently account for the coexistence in the *Partisan* group of an intense interest in literature as high art, particularly modernism, and the radical impulse almost from the beginning. Even in its initial phase as an organ of the John Reed clubs, *Partisan Review* had been founded in reaction to the "narrow minded sectarian theories and practices" of *New Masses*¹⁰ in the belief that the Communist literary movement needed a magazine of high quality. Although the new journal's critical stance was often highly politicized in these early years, as early as 1934 and 1935 it deemed the technical contributions of the modernists superior to those of the radical writers. Furthermore Rahv and his co-editor Phillips were, even in this original Communist embodiment of *Partisan Review*, highly sceptical about the possibility of literature expressing in a valid artistic way the content of a revolutionary movement. Thus the avant-garde impulse had been developing in the *Partisan Review* group almost simultaneously with its radical sentiments.

A far more favorable analysis of the New York Intellectuals' dialectic is provided by Mark Krupnick in his recent book, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism*. Trilling's own dialectical concern he sees, as "the relation of culture and personality."¹¹ Krupnick finds that the opposing terms of "will and idea, history and art, life and death [are] never resolved in his writing." For explanation of this chronic irresolution, Krupnick looks to

the social history of the New York Intellectuals of Trilling's generation.

As outsiders to American culture these intellectuals of the thirties and forties were committed to a left-wing politics founded on optimism of the will. Their political aim was a more just society. . . .

It had become clear by the mid-forties that there was a conflict within the first generation of New York Intellectuals between their political hope for a socialist society and their commitment to the American ethos of acculturation and success. That conflict between old European ideals and American actualities, between tradition and modernity, between politics and art—account in part for the extraordinary achievements of figures in Trilling's generation like Meyer Schapiro, Harold Rosenberg, Philip Rahv, Clement Greenberg, and Saul Bellow.¹²

It is salutary to find Krupnick crediting the tremendous dynamism of the New York group as well as the value of their dualistic approach to culture.

Both Krupnick's and Webster's analyses above have validity primarily as sociological explanations of the origins of the groups' dialectic. However, they do not exhaust answers to the question with which this paper is concerned: to what extent New York Intellectual criticism illuminated both the literary work and the writer's relationship to his culture.

The most thorough and meticulously researched study of the New York Intellectuals to date, Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and*

Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s again regards this group, as its title indicates, in essentially political terms. Wald may well be accurate in considering the original binding element of the New York Intellectuals to have been their Anti-Stalinist Leftism. However, to discuss the achievements of the New York Intellectuals primarily in terms of their late thirties Anti-Stalinism and their shifting attitudes toward Marxism is to render a skewed perception of this group, since much of their work, particularly from the forties onward, was not concerned either explicitly or implicitly with these issues.

Wald approaches his subject from a Trotskyist perspective. Thus he considers their early political and literary writing of worth, since they expressed the values of Anti-Stalinist Marxism; by the same token, he is critical of their later work as it departed from those values. Wald, for instance, favorably regards their early partisanship for modernism, which he sees "as an avant-garde cultural rebellion against the whole of bourgeois society."¹³ Although he discusses the artistic influence of writers like Joyce, Proust and particularly Eliot on the *Partisan Review* group, he essentially regards such considerations as secondary to the assault on bourgeois values. Like Webster, then, he downgrades the genuine importance of aesthetic and technical criteria for critics like Rahv and Phillips.

Wald argues that the New York Intellectuals' opposition in the forties of the "experiential" nature of literature to the alleged abstraction of ideology derived from philosophic pragmatism, and was in his view a reaction to their former Marxist involvements leading to the deradicalization of this group. He properly indicates that their theory of ideology ignored unconscious cultural and class allegiances which affect all writers.¹⁴ However, Wald forces their criticism into too narrow a frame of reference; for another way to regard their critical views of this period is as an evolution toward an increased valuation of those functions of literature (emotional, psychological, aesthetic, etc.) which are not bound up primarily with class interests. The New York Intellectuals in their critical practice did reflect an awareness of the impact of ideology on literature; however, they wished to show that literature is not exclusively, and typically not essentially, ideological. As their careers developed, they devoted less attention to overtly political novelists like Malraux, Silone, Koestler and Orwell and became increasingly engaged with largely nonideological authors such as James, Melville, Faulkner and Hardy.

To illustrate his contention, Wald cites Rahv's two essays previously discussed here as reflections of his "basic pragmatist differentiation between ideology and experience."¹⁵ It was true that Rahv in these essays tended to equate Puritan dogma with ideology as an inflexible and abstract system of belief, which, as Wald indicates, overlooked an author's unconscious manipulation of materials. However, Wald's emphasis on the primacy of experience in the literary perspective of the New York Intellectuals disregards the major role of ideas in this groups' criticism. Rahv insisted throughout his career that speculation was indispensable to literature. In "The Cult of Experience in American Writing," he wrote that "experience is the substructure of literature above which rises the superstructure of values, ideas and judgements."¹⁶ As we have seen,

he faulted twentieth century American literature for its paucity of intellectual content.

Wald agrees with Kazin's characterization of Trilling as a leader of deradicalization among the New York Intellectuals. Wald then amply demonstrates this point in considering the political implications of much of Trilling's fiction.¹⁷ Furthermore, Trilling himself wrote that the essays which made up *The Liberal Imagination* were written in response to the optimistic simplifications of the liberal mind that had led it into alliances with Stalinism.¹⁸ Yet to see *The Liberal Imagination* only in this light would be to miss much of its significance; for Trilling's famous assertion that "literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty"¹⁹ struck a chord in New York Intellectual criticism. It was to lead to a growing sensitivity among the critics of this group to the subtlety and emotional nuances of literature in contrast to the sometimes rigid conceptualizations of their highly ideological early years, as well as to an increasing awareness of the complexity and complication inherent in the Freudian view of human nature (on which Trilling expanded considerably in the essays, "Freud and Literature" and "Art and Neurosis.")

Wald contends that Kazin is essentially unrepresentative of the New York Intellectuals because he was "never sympathetic to Trotskyism" and since "he was less inclined than almost all the other New York intellectuals to mobilize literary criticism as an adjunct in a broader political struggle."²⁰ Again Wald is narrowing the context of New York Intellectual thought to the realm of politics. He does, however, correctly indicate the importance to Kazin of religion, an involvement which led in part to his attraction to writers of the Romantic era. These differences do in a sense set Kazin apart from the New York Intellectuals. Nonetheless, the social-historical component of his criticism reflects considerable correspondences to others of the group. Furthermore, with the passage of time, there was in the critical work of Trilling, Rahv and Howe an increasing exploration of social-historical themes and subjects (some of which are discussed in this essay) which cannot properly be called political or ideological.

The New York Intellectuals' dialectic was not merely an accretion from the Marxist thirties but to a large degree an organic development from their roots in the Jewish immigrant community. It is in this area of the problematic nature of Jewish identification among those New York Intellectuals who were involved with the *Menorah Journal* in the twenties that Wald's book is strongest. He demonstrates how the experience of exclusion from American culture, particularly American academia, contributed to the attempt by Jewish intellectuals like Trilling and Eliot Cohen, later to become the first editor of *Commentary*, to balance ties to Jewish culture with a cosmopolitan ideal. Wald is particularly good in dealing with Trilling's ambivalence about both his Jewish identity and Jewish feelings of alienation: in a fictional piece published in the *Menorah Journal* entitled "Notes on a Departure," Trilling implicitly criticized those Jews who embraced the solitude of exclusion from American life.²¹

By the thirties Trilling was pulling away from his Jewish antecedents, turning increasingly toward a cosmopolitan outlook. Rahv also rarely discussed his Jewish origins. On the other hand, Kazin and Howe have explored in essays, memoirs and cultural history their debt to the Jewish immigrant experience. All four critics, due to their initial alien relationship to Anglo-American culture, tended to gravitate to writers who expressed alienation from their own cultures; however, this tendency seemed to have a particularly marked relationship to Howe's and Kazin's roots among immigrant Jewry. In some respects their literary criticism paralleled Howe's *World of Our Fathers* and Kazin's *Walker in the City* and *New York Jew*; for frequently their dialectic involved not only the alienation of a writer from his culture but of a declining cultural group from a dominant culture. Both critics have manifested a keen insight into and intense empathy for literature dealing with the emotional dislocations caused by the clash of modern industrial culture with provincial or regional cultures.

One might conclude hastily that the criticism of writers of immigrant background like the New York Intellectuals would be restricted and narrowed by their early experience. Yet a fiction writer of similar origins, Saul Bellow, has had the universality of his work recognized with a Nobel Prize. Like Bellow, the New York Intellectuals gained perspective from having in a sense one foot in the world of Eastern European Jewry and another in modern America; for their emergence from a culture largely outside the mainstream of modern life helped them shed light not only on the dispossession of others of similar background, but also on the more prevalent unsettling effects of accelerating social change in the contemporary world. Their universality lay in charting the disorientation and anomie that many of the finest writers in European and American literature expressed in response to periods of cultural upheaval.

In Kazin's book on American literature of the nineteenth century, *An American Procession*, he devoted a good deal of attention to Henry Adams, whose Brahmin background differed markedly from Kazin's. Yet it was primarily the Adams who looked back to a unified preindustrial America that interested Kazin; thus, he functioned in *An American Procession* as an archetype of the writer-intellectual who reacted intensely and poignantly to the disintegration of a stable society before the "multiplicity" of industrialism. The greatness of Theodore Dreiser, long a favorite of Kazin's, was seen to lie in his ability to evoke

the physical discovery of a city . . . with so much feeling brought up from the depths of the old small-town experience . . . Dreiser's images of the city have a lasting hold because he described the most familiar objects in a great city as if they were foreign to him.²²

Kazin also had once seen a similar pathos in Willa Cather's depiction of the collision of modern American society with a regional pioneer culture. Kazin found moving this "struggle between grandeur and meanness"²³ and traced Cather's sense of loss at the materialistic culture engulfing her world. That this

world represented a European immigrant tradition must have made her work particularly poignant for Kazin.

Irving Howe has written book-length studies of Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner and Thomas Hardy. A sentence in his book on the latter provides a key to his interest in these subjects:

Most of the major fictional series of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, certainly those of Balzac, Hardy and Faulkner, require some image of a better or at least simpler past as a stimulus for their criticism of the dominant culture.²⁴

On the other hand, Howe would have found the work of these writers of provincial background "tiresome" had they not, like himself, chosen or been forced to encounter a more cosmopolitan world in order to make their work universal. For example, Hardy's writing achieves intensity, Howe contended, through a nostalgic relationship with a homeland and life-style in dissolution "which he then sets off against the ruthlessness of historical change. His possession of a slowly fading world, remembered with pathos and unrivaled knowledge, . . . makes for tension, memory and a brief monopoly of legend."²⁵

Howe's book on Faulkner, one of the early studies of this major American writer, revealed a similar interest. Faulkner, as Howe saw him, incarnated in his fiction a society at the crossroads, holding tenaciously to a fabled past yet moving inexorably into the modern world. Howe seemed to regard Faulkner's torment over moral values in his fiction as a barometer of the South's painful transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. These opposing social orders seem to have crystallized as Howe saw it "in the clash of antithetical forces of freedom and necessity in the Yoknapatawpha world." Howe regarded the greatness of Faulkner as arising from the author's "lifelong struggle with the Southern myth,"²⁶ a conflict to which Faulkner offers no definitive resolution. Thus the expression of the poignance involved in cultural transition is perhaps the most important consideration in Howe's and Kazin's critical work.

The foregoing comments are not intended to present Howe and Kazin as critics speaking with one voice. They simply indicate the ways in which the Jewish immigrant experience has affected their critical work similarly. Yet this element in their criticism hardly sums up their achievements. Howe's critical career, for instance, has been characterized by an increasing flexibility, with such unlikely influences as the work of Perry Miller, the Federalist Papers, and even the New Critics, whose emphasis on the integrity of works of literature has greatly impressed Irving Howe. Alfred Kazin also must have surprised many of those who see him as primarily a social critic advocating realist fictions by devoting at least a third of *An American Procession* to the transcendental and metaphysical writers: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Hawthorne. Yet Kazin revealed this side of himself years ago in passionate essays on William Blake and Herman Melville, in his keeping personal journals in the manner of Emerson and Thoreau, and by his comments on the importance to him of personal religion.

The New York Intellectuals' dialectic, as well as their many other social and cultural concerns, has sometimes been seen as expressive of an essentially European consciousness, largely ideological and alien to the indigenous traditions of American culture. However, to a great extent they are in the direct line of culture criticism developed by two thoroughly American critics, Van Wyck Brooks and Edmund Wilson.

Brooks' dualistic analysis of American culture was highly influential in the development of the New York Intellectuals' dialectic. As noted earlier, Brooks' insights in *America's Coming of Age* served as a basis for two of Rahv's most important essays. Furthermore, Kazin's view in *On Native Grounds* that modern American prose fiction emerged largely in reaction to America's rampant commercialism, drew considerably upon Brooks' outlook as well. Kazin wrote of him that

more than any historian of American literature, Brooks has seen . . . that literature does not reflect the life of a particular milieu so much as it is embedded in it—a point . . . Brooks is brilliantly, often movingly able to prove, to place, to affirm.²⁷

The New York Intellectuals then learned much from Brooks, especially from his theory of the dichotomy of American life between highbrow and lowbrow, spiritual and material, abstract and pragmatically concrete.

With Edmund Wilson, one finds the critic most admired by the New York Intellectuals. For Kazin and Howe in particular, Wilson was the critical model on whom they hoped to base their own careers. Both read *Axel's Castle*, Wilson's book on modernism, in their teens and were greatly affected by it. Wilson appealed to the New York Intellectuals as a man of letters, a renaissance man with a tremendous range of interests, whose commitment was nonetheless primarily to literature. His conception of literary criticism brought within its scope the significance of historical and social developments as well as the contributions of philosophy, psychology, music and art. There was in his work a sense of an easy, conversant relationship with the heritage of Western civilization. A curiosity about the phenomena of modern civilization, and a desire to bring to bear all possible evidence in order to understand the impact of these phenomena on the sensibilities of our writers were qualities of Edmund Wilson emulated by the New York Intellectuals.

Kazin's assessment of Wilson in *On Native Grounds*, published in 1942, showed most clearly what the New York Intellectuals valued in his work. Kazin felt that Wilson's criticism was

in the best tradition of *causerie*, the open mind luminously at work everywhere; a criticism that sought not to be esthetic or social criticism per se (the fatal either/or in modern criticism), but a felicitous blending of the two in the interest of the fullest possible understanding of the work as a fact in civilization, a repository rather than a symbol.²⁸

Years later Kazin indicated as well the essentially literary nature of Wilson's influence upon them:

He was . . . an extraordinary literary artist who wove his essays out of the most intense involvement with his materials . . . He had exposed himself to literature as the maximum experience of his life; I felt that he lived *in* literature as he did not anywhere else.²⁹

To the New York Intellectuals Wilson was always a great illuminator of the literary process.

Thus, while lines of influence with European culture existed for them, the New York Intellectuals were part of a clearly defined tradition in American letters as well.

The dialectical reading of literature may appear to sum up the critical achievements of the New York Intellectuals. However, this seems to be the case only if one overlooks that literature as a creative and humanizing force in life has been an abiding interest of this group. Perhaps the most all-encompassing phrase to express their approach to literature is: the connection between literature and life. They have seen literature involved in a fruitful and evolving interchange with its environment. In the forties and fifties, when the New Critics dominated the critical scene with their emphasis on the autonomous text, the New York Intellectuals countered by extending the boundaries of criticism and asserting the continuity of literature with other types of experience. As Kazin wrote, "Literature grows out of a sense of abundant relationships with the world."³⁰

In this regard they took their critical cue not, as some have contended, from Marx, but from Matthew Arnold. Arnold, Trilling reminded us, "said of literature that it was a criticism of life."³¹ It is little noted to what extent not only Trilling but Rahv, Kazin and Howe as well followed on trails blazed by Arnold. Rahv urged upon his readers the conception of criticism which "Arnold gave classic definition to." A vital part of this conception, as Rahv stated it, was that "the critic above all needs to recover the role of participant in the literary event."³²

The New York Intellectuals have represented the tradition of the antispecialist, as essentially the last group of American critics who pushed for connections between literature and the historical, cultural and moral dimensions of experience. To Kazin literary criticism was "part of the general criticism of established values which must go on in every age." This type of criticism is "concerned explicitly, fightingly, with an ideal of man, with a conception of what man is seeking to become."³³ Howe expressed very similar sentiments: "At its best modern criticism has always been an 'engaged' criticism. It has found itself caught up in a desperate struggle over the nature and quality of our culture."³⁴ Therefore, in discussing works of literature, the New York Intellectuals typically did not stop at explication or analysis alone but pushed beyond

to an evaluation of the underlying moral or cultural position of the author.

Perhaps the key element in the New York Intellectuals' critical stance was the historical dimension of literature, an interest clearly derived in part from their early involvement with Marxism. Yet their concern was not with the reduction of imaginative writing to a set of social and cultural circumstances but with the complex interplay of creative minds and historical forces.

The fullest explication of their views on this subject came about through their disputes with the New Critics. To give a somewhat simplified summary of the New Critical position, it emphasized a literary tradition apart from the social or cultural tradition, as well as the value of technical exegesis of literary works as a means of apprehending a writer's sensibility. One of the most important responses to this approach was Lionel Trilling's essay, "The Sense of the Past," collected in *The Liberal Imagination*. Trilling here focussed on what he saw as the central flaw in New Criticism: "It is that in their reaction from the historical method they forget that the literary work is ineluctably a historical fact and, what is more important, that its historicity is a fact in our aesthetic experience." Pressing his point further, Trilling agreed with Nietzsche's definition of the historical sense as a "sixth sense" of the mind which for Trilling was "to be understood as the critical sense, as the sense which life uses to test itself."³⁵

For Rahv history was almost an obsession. In a number of essays, he also attacked the New Critics for their disregard of history. For instance, in referring to their criticism, he wrote, "there is a dialectical relation between text and context, which, if ignored in principle, must eventually lead to the impoverishment of the critical faculty and a devitalized sense of literary art." As stated previously, primary to Rahv's conception of criticism as well were ideas "which alone enable us to assimilate literature to the historical world at large." Rahv contended that New Criticism "systematically eliminates ideas from criticism." For Rahv, like Trilling, Nietzsche's sixth sense was the most significant for the full understanding of literature: "The historical sense is at once an analytic instrument and a tonic resource of the modern sensibility."³⁶

Irving Howe as well joined in the critique of New Criticism. He took exception to the New Critical view that "literature was to be regarded as an autonomous mode of utterance, an independent category of experience."³⁷ His great service was in demonstrating that the most rigorous New Critic could not free himself from his moral and cultural predilections in the practice of criticism; in fact, that the implications of New Critical works were often quite conservative. Yet the political aspect of his critique is less important than the recognition by the New York Intellectuals that criticism as well as imaginative writing emerges from a particular cultural moment from which influence no critic or writer is immune. Thus the historical context of literary and critical works cannot be meaningfully transcended.

The New York Intellectuals' concern with the moral and cultural ramifications of literature led the group eventually to question as well the premises of much modernist writing. Once strong advocates of the literary avant-garde and still appreciative of much in modernism, by the late fifties they were at odds with what they saw as its encouragement of an unfortunate dichotomy between

literature and life. The ultimate example of this tendency, Howe indicated, was Symbolist poetry. "Symbolism proposes to make the poem not merely autonomous but hermetic, and not merely hermetic but impenetrable."³⁸ Kazin also criticized the Symbolist influence on many modern poets who often regarded "the language in modern poetry as . . . 'ultimate' and irreducible in its truth."³⁹ Kazin believed that consciousness alone and without reference to the external world cannot yield meaning.

Howe further faulted the modernist movement's attitude toward history. As a basically rationalist writer, Howe was disturbed by the subjectivity of the modernist sensibility which "posits a blockage, if not an end, of history: an apocalyptic cul-de-sac in which both teleological ends and secular progress are called into question, perhaps become obsolete." Howe found a number of regressive results of this outlook, including "a bitter impatience with the whole apparatus of cognition and the limiting assumptions of rationality."⁴⁰

Although there was a political dimension to Howe's and Kazin's questioning of modernism, it was only one aspect of a larger critique. Howe, for instance, found an essentially anti-democratic and elitist emphasis in modernism. Yet even this political aspect involved large questions of man and society. Thus, the New York Intellectuals' arguments with modernism were essentially moral and cultural in nature, as was most of this group's mature criticism.

A good illustration of this mature work is Howe's essay, "The Quest for Moral Style." Here Howe credited the creative moral tension developed by modernism's concern with "the crisis of traditional values." He wrote of the reflection of this tension in America's three most significant novelists of this century, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner. In Hemingway's work Howe found the perception of a disintegrating Christian heritage. Yet Howe contended that he and the other lost-generation writers "were in search of . . . a moral style," which Howe defined as "a series of tentative embodiments in conduct of a moral outlook they could not bring to full statement." In Hemingway's earlier work Howe believed the author sought to make assertions of value. His early stories "are actually incitements to personal resistance and renewal."

Fitzgerald as well, Howe saw as "driven by a vision of earthly beatitude." Howe found in him the vestiges of a distinctively American "vision of human possibility." The breakup of traditional values, Howe asserted, is what made this so tenuous a vision. Yet ultimately he felt that Fitzgerald was engaged in a search "for some token of grace in a world where grace could no longer be provided by anyone but man himself."

Howe considered Faulkner also afflicted with a spiritual malaise endemic to modern life. Faulkner's difference from Hemingway and Fitzgerald lay in his ability to turn to certain representative figures who in the South of the twenties and thirties still embodied for him a closeness to the earth and a natural purity. Yet as the Yoknapatawpha story unfolded, Howe found a gradual realization in Faulkner of the moral ineffectuality of these figures in the modern world. Finally, Howe felt that Faulkner arrived in his later work at an impasse of values. Thus, "he must now try to 'make do' . . . ; and not very skillfully, learn to improvise a moral style."⁴¹

In this evaluation Howe brought into focus the impingement of historical forces on the moral consciousness of three major American novelists as well as the nostalgic or poignant consequences of this impingement. It is of particular interest that an atheistic critic of Jewish background would relate their moral dilemma to residual Christian sentiments.

In the early years of their critical careers in the nineteen-thirties, the New York Intellectuals often stressed the politics of literary works above other considerations of merit. However, as their work evolved, the focus of their criticism shifted to the cultural, historical and moral dimensions of literature. These concerns were demonstrated in part through a dynamic and flexible dialectic, which particularly illuminated the alien relationship of the modern writer to his culture. The Jewish immigrant experience in this country, highlighting the effects of rapid social change in modern life, lay the foundation for this dialectical view of literature. In the development of their critical outlook, they were influenced primarily by Matthew Arnold among European critics, and the cultural criticism of Van Wyck Brooks and Edmund Wilson in America.

Ultimately, the criticism of the New York Intellectuals can be characterized as historical humanist in nature. They have called attention to an important aspect of literature, its interaction with our moral values in a social context. They were interested not only in the impact of literature on our cultural evaluations, but also in the role of our historical condition in the moral concerns and commitments of our literature.

Brooklyn, New York

notes

1. Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," in *Decline of the New* (New York, 1970), 228.
2. Nathan Glazer, "The New York Intellectuals—Up From Revolution," *New York Times Book Review* (26 February, 1984), 1, 34.
3. Denis Donoghue, "Irving Howe's Steady Work," *New York Times Book Review* (11 March, 1979), 9, 19.
4. Irving Howe, "The State of Criticism: Theory and Practice," *Partisan Review* 2 48, no. 2 (1981), 180-81.
5. Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York, 1955), xi, xii-xiii.
6. Philip Rahv, "The Cult of Experience in American Writing," in Philip Rahv, *Literature and the Sixth Sense* (Boston, 1969), 27-28.
7. Philip Rahv, "Paleface and Redskin," in *Literature and the Sixth Sense*, 1-4.
8. "The Cult of Experience," 24.
9. Grant Webster, *The Republic of Letters: A History of Postwar American Literary Opinion* (Baltimore, 1979), 212.
10. "Editorial Statement," *Partisan Review* 1, no. 1 (February-March, 1934), 2.
11. Mark Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism* (Evanston, Illinois, 1986), 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 188-189.
13. Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1987), 226.
14. *Ibid.*, 228-230.
15. *Ibid.*, 230.
16. "The Cult of Experience," 33.
17. *The New York Intellectuals*, 231-239, 243-246.
18. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, 1950), vii-viii.

19. *Ibid.*, xv.
20. *The New York Intellectuals*, 11, 361.
21. *Ibid.*, 27-37.
22. Alfred Kazin, *An American Procession* (New York, 1984), 237.
23. Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*, (New York, 1970), 250-251.
24. Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (New York, 1967), 45.
25. *Ibid.*, 2.
26. Irving Howe, *William Faulkner: A Critical Study* (Chicago, 1975), 150, 32.
27. Alfred Kazin, "Mr. Brooks's New England," *Partisan Review* 7, no. 5 (September-October 1940), 402.
28. Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, 450.
29. Alfred Kazin, *New York Jew*, (New York, 1978), 65.
30. Alfred Kazin, "The Language of Pundits," in *Contemporaries* (Boston, 1962), 392.
31. *The Opposing Self*, xii.
32. Philip Rahv, "Criticism and the Imagination of Alternatives," in *Literature and the Sixth Sense*, 254-255.
33. Alfred Kazin, "The Function of Criticism Today," in *Contemporaries*, 496, 498.
34. Irving Howe, "Modern Criticism: Privileges and Perils," *Modern Literary Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. Irving Howe (Boston, 1958), 4-5.
35. Lionel Trilling, "The Sense of the Past," *The Liberal Imagination*, 184-186.
36. Philip Rahv, "Art and the Historical Imagination," *Literature and the Sixth Sense*, 360.
37. Howe, "Modern Criticism: Privileges and Perils" *Modern Literary Criticism*, 28-29.
38. Irving Howe, "The Culture of Modernism," 18-19.
39. Alfred Kazin, "The Backgrounds of Modern Literature," *Contemporaries*, 3.
40. "The Culture of Modernism," 5-7.
41. Irving Howe, "The Quest for Moral Style" in Irving Howe, *Decline of the New*, 153-165.