

Marshall Berman

The hymns of praise that followed Irving's death overlooked one of his most special qualities: his capacity to change and grow, at a time of life—his fifties and sixties—when most people stagnate or shrink. But we can't appreciate his growth without facing some of his other qualities that needed to be outgrown. I want to focus on Irving in the late 1960s and early 1970s: before he grew, and after.

Before he outgrew, Irving acted out, and some of his most extravagant acting out was aimed at my generation. In 1965, he brought out an essay called "New Styles in Leftism," an assault on the New Left. Before and after it ran in *Dissent*, he went on tour and gave it at colleges around the country (I heard it at Harvard in the spring, and at the New School in the fall). This talk drew big crowds and strong responses; talk reached the shouting level within a couple of minutes, and stayed that way for hours; people screamed at and denounced old allies, felt betrayed, discovered that they couldn't work together after all. Irving claimed to be speaking on behalf of sober rationality, but in fact he was striking deep emotional chords and raising the temperature of political discourse to a frenzy. (Events soon drove the fever even higher, but he did more than his share to keep it up.) His essay is commonly and correctly listed as an opening salvo in the great American "Culture Wars" that still rage on today.

"New Styles in Leftism" says two things: (1) The New Left is wrong to be obsessed with style; (2) The New Left has THE WRONG STYLE. Thesis 1 was absolutely right. Obsession with *echt*-radical style often estranged us from our deepest values: people who were really kindred spirits tore each other to pieces over how they dressed and danced and what they smoked, and over who was really "truly radical," to the amusement of the *mamzers* who ran the world. But Irving seemed not only to lose touch with insight number one, but to become the sort of person he unmasked, a man obsessed with style. He seemed complacently happy in a world of thesis 2, where only people with THE RIGHT STYLE were allowed to play. For the next few years, *Dissent* seemed to care more about somebody flying a Vietcong flag at a mass antiwar demonstration than about what American guns and bombs were actually doing to Vietnam. This struck me as tragic, rather than just dumb, because Irving was so smart, and his own insight into thesis 1 should have skewered all the varieties of thesis 2, including the ones he

seemed to embrace. I kept up my student subscription, but *Dissent* was hard to read. I remember saying, bitterly, that it should be renamed *The Joy of Sects*.

But then Irving outgrew and overcame. In the October 1971 *Dissent*, he published an essay called "What's the Trouble? Social Crisis, Crisis of Civilization, Both?" A lunky title, a complex piece, not reducible to sound bites, never reprinted, but maybe the best thing he ever wrote. Here, instead of dissing the New Left and the counterculture, as he had done for years, Irving tried to locate us in modern history's long waves. The mood of "What's the Trouble?" is reflective rather than polemical. If there is any polemic in it, it is directed at unnamed people in Irving's own circle "who, in the name of plebeian solidity, minimize the significance of the new youth styles," and who think the late-sixties counterculture is "unique to disoriented or spoiled middle-class youth." Against them, Irving insists not only on the pervasiveness of youth rebellion—yes, even in the working class—but on its seriousness:

There are overwhelming cultural or pseudo-cultural experiences shared by the young of all classes, certainly more so than in any previous society. Movies, rock music, drugs . . . increasingly do create a generational consciousness that, to an undetermined extent, disintegrates class lines.

This idea—that mass media and drugs could shape consciousness and disintegrate class identities—would have been commonplace (indeed, would not even have been noticed) in a paper like the *Village Voice*. But when Irving said it in the very different context of *Dissent*, he was addressing a founders' generation then in its fifties and sixties, and pointing out "overwhelming experiences" that it was refusing to face. He was arguing very hard not only against his readers' grain, but (note that verbal emphasis, "increasingly *do* create . . .") against his own.

Back then, there were several older intellectuals out there who insisted on the primacy of mass media in contemporary life: Marshall McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler, Susan Sontag, Charles Reich, Herbert Marcuse. But their angle was that "the kids," the younger generation that had grown up on television,

Remembering Irving Howe

were uniquely whole, free human beings, liberated from the hangups of the literate (as in “The kids don’t need Shakespeare and Freud.” etc., etc.). Irving was as scornful of this *narishkeit* as he was of the hate campaigns against “the kids” whipped up by the Nixon White House.

He argued that the youthful extravagances of the 1960s showed, not that “the kids” were out of the civilized mainstream, but precisely that they were *in* the mainstream:

Some of the more spectacular symptoms of disaffection we are now witnessing ought to be taken not as historical novelties revealing the special virtue or wickedness of a new generation, but as tokens of that continuity of restlessness and trouble that comprises the history of Western consciousness since the late 18th century.

Irving then discusses the modern welfare state. A state like this is not only a triumph of state-building, but an achievement of “Western consciousness,” and a great leap forward in human history. But even at its best, he says—and the USA is a long way from its best—a welfare state inevitably undercuts itself. This is because it is

unstable enough to encourage the militant arousal of previously silent groups, the intensification of political discontents, and the reappearance, if in new and strange forms, of those tormenting “ultimate questions” with which modern man has beset himself for a century and a half. These “ultimate questions” as to man’s place in the universe, the meaning of his existence, the nature of his destiny—that they now come to us in modish or foolish ways is cause for impatience or polemic. But we would be dooming ourselves to a philistine narrowness if we denied that such questions do beset human beings, that they are significant questions, and that in our moment there are peculiarly urgent reasons for coming back to them.

Suddenly Irving had shifted and deepened the focus of political thought, to explore “those tormenting ultimate questions” about “the meaning of existence.” We all must face these questions, he says, and ask—in the words of the great 19th-century

Russian writers, and in Irving’s own italics—“*How shall we live?*” At the climax of this essay, Irving highlights Dostoevsky and his meditation on the idea of “The Golden Age”: it can never be realized in the world, yet without it, everyday life in the world can mean nothing at all. At the essay’s end, Irving insists that “the effort to force men into utopia leads to barbarism.” But then, at the *very* end, he affirms that “to live without the image of utopia is to risk the death of the imagination.”

This essay marked a creative breakthrough. Irving had spent years fighting the New Left, which was even more furious in its own fighting; but now that the New Left had eaten itself up, and clearly wasn’t coming back, Irving not only could see how valuable our movement had been, but could say what it ultimately *meant* in greater clarity and depth than any of us had ever been able to say it. The New Left came into being not to promote a lifestyle, but to confront the most urgent spiritual question, *How shall we live?* In the New Left’s early days, that was clear to many of us. (See the 1962 SDS Port Huron Statement.) But amid the war, the riots, the splits, the assassinations, “the tormenting ultimate questions” that brought our movement to life got buried in the mess our lives became. It wasn’t just that Irving was reminding us why *we* were out there; he was generous enough to admit that we had reminded him of why *he* was out there. True, he could only see the light after our star died; but it was impressive that he could see it and say it at all. As the New Left disintegrated, Irving grasped its deepest drive and reason for being, and he internalized that drive and that reason and made them his own. He overcame the spiritual complacency that drove his 1960s life as a hit man, and grew into a spiritual urgency that gave him new substance and depth.

“What’s the Trouble?” is not only a fusion of deep thinking and deep feeling, but a brilliant speech-act, a rich and complex work of communication. It helped transform *Dissent* from a sectarian base into an open political and cultural space, where democratic socialists who really meant it and survivors of the New Left—the Slightly Used Left, I used to call us then—could talk and listen and think and learn from each other, and have arguments without walking out, and imagine a golden age. It lifted Irving from a fighter to a leader.