



fied by clinging to “the shopworn idea of a high-low split between artists and illustrators.”

N. C.’s work brought him little satisfaction. “Letters of praise,” Michaelis notes, “stung him like a lash.” The typically poor quality of reproductions grieved him. “I would work my heart out,” he wrote, “and then it all seemed small and fleeting when transferred to the magazine page.” He seldom went a season without an episode of black despair.

Fatherhood proved his greatest source of pleasure. He was the breakfast chef—pancakes—and would wake the household by playing thunderous chords on the piano. “My art vanishes into the merest speck when suffered comparison to the one Divine and tangible sensation bequeathed to us: parent to child, child to parent,” he wrote. Andrew Wyeth would later say that it was his father’s “great willingness . . . to give and give and give” that kept N. C. from becoming a great painter. N. C. taught all five children to draw and paint, and to feel—as did he and his mother—too much. “Nostalgia,” N. C. once wrote, “is a personal experience I hallow as another might a religion.” Separation and loss, as Michaelis observes, became central to the Wyeths’ sense of themselves—and to their artistic achievement.

N. C.’s relationship with his son Nat was close but complicated. The only child who didn’t become an artist, Nat nonetheless married one, Caroline Pyle. In proper Greek tragic fashion, Caroline and N. C. fell in love. N. C. refused to own up to the relationship when Nat confronted him. Not long after, on October 19, 1945, N. C. was taking Caroline’s three-year-old son, Newell, for a ride in his station wagon when the car stalled, or stopped, on some railroad tracks. An oncoming train instantly killed both grandfather and

grandson. Was it a suicide—had the boy been not Nat’s child, but N. C.’s? Family opinion divided. Michaelis doesn’t try to decide, observing only that “fathers who die violent deaths inhabit shallow graves.”

A beautiful stylist with long experience writing for magazines, Michaelis knows how to set up a story. That he didn’t do so here—there is no introduction—suggests that he wanted the intrinsic drama of his material to speak for itself. But given the author’s incisive analysis throughout, one can’t help wishing for some discussion of N. C. Wyeth’s place in the history of American art, and for some reflections on the mythic hold the Wyeth family exercised on the popular imagination. We don’t get anything of the kind until the final page, when Michaelis terms the Wyeths “a federal family” like the Roosevelts and the Kennedys. Surely more could have been said, without compromise or hype.

—A. J. Hewat

DAWN POWELL.

By Tim Page. Holt. 362 pp. \$30

In 1940, a week before the publication of her novel *Angels on Toast*, Dawn Powell wrote in her diary: “A new book coming out no longer rouses any hope. As the day approaches, I look at the book section and think with a sudden horror that this is the last Sunday I will be able to look at a book review without sick misgiving—no review, bad review, or patronizing review . . . and after that the nervous, weary effort to pick up and begin again after another disappointment.” Powell was in her forties at the time, and had been writing for 20 years. She knew whereof she spoke.

Coming to New York at 22 from a miserable Ohio childhood, armed only with courage and ambition, she became known as a good-time drinker and a prodigious wit. From the 1920s on, nearly everyone who met her thought her the funniest woman they had ever known, and many (among them John Dos Passos and Edmund Wilson) considered her a social satirist of the first order. A great future loomed. She began to write novels—*The Tenth Moon* (1932) and *Turn, Magic Wheel* (1936), among others. Half of them provided a dark view of the midwestern small-town life she had come from, but the other half were witty send-ups of social climbers in New York. It was the big-city novels that made sophisticated readers say Dawn Powell was going to do for New York what Balzac had done for Paris.

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 Internationalist*. 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