

# **POLITICS AND THE NOVEL**

DISCUS / AVON / DS21 / \$1.65



**Irving Howe**

**The classic study of the impact  
of ideology on literature**



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**Irving Howe**



**DISCUS BOOKS/PUBLISHED BY AVON**



**AVON BOOKS**

A division of

The Hearst Corporation

959 Eighth Avenue

New York, New York 10019

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Published by arrangement with Horizon Press, Ltd.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 57-6683.

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First Discus Edition, November, 1970

DISCUS BOOKS TRADEMARK REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. AND  
FOREIGN COUNTRIES, REGISTERED TRADEMARK—  
MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN CHICAGO, U.S.A.

Printed in the U.S.A.

TO THE MEMORY OF  
*Faye von Mering*

True tragedy arises "when the idea of 'justice' appears to be leading to the destruction of higher values."

—MAX SCHELER

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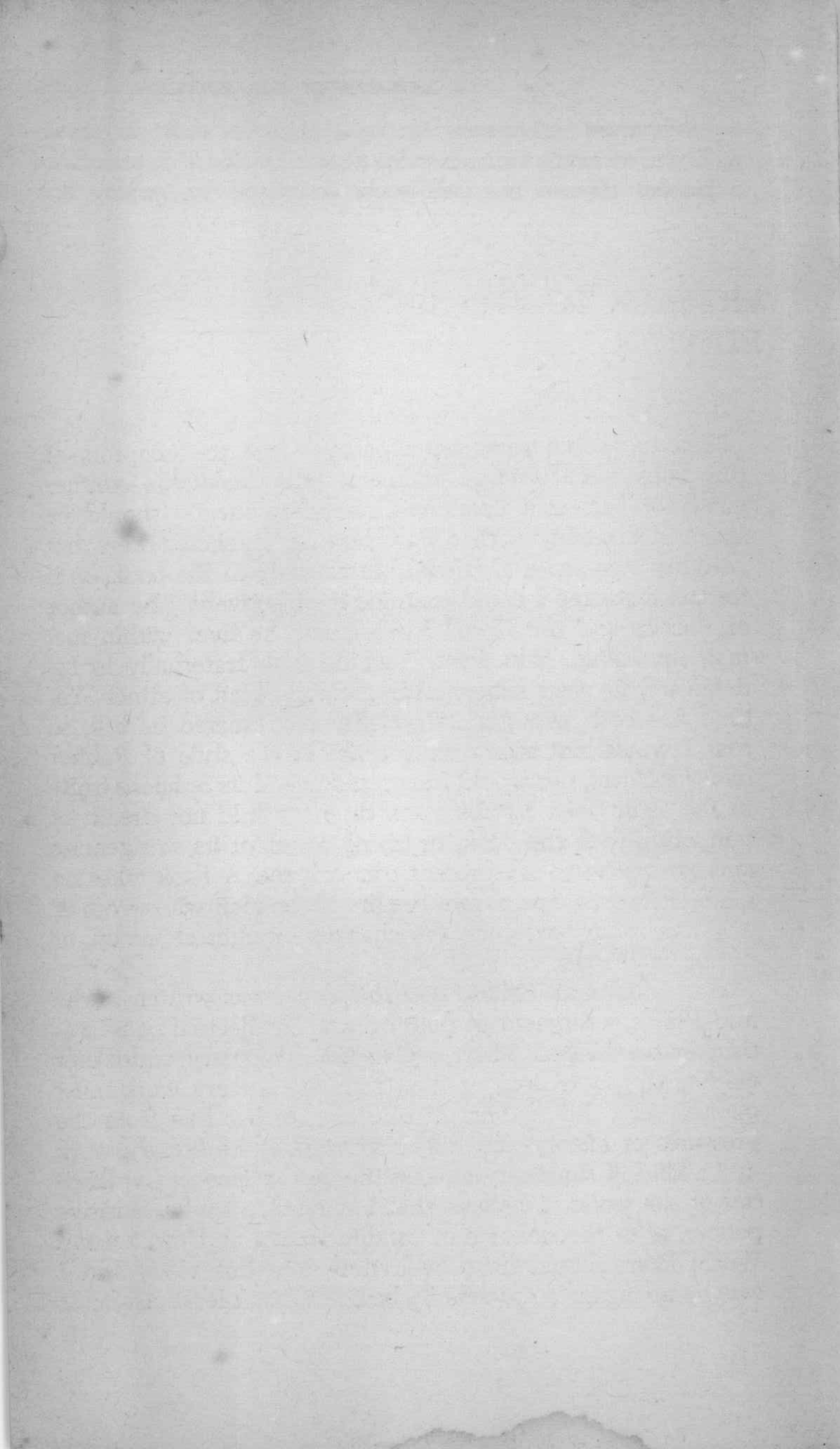
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## PREFACE TO THE 1967 EDITION

Ten to twelve years have passed since the chapters of this book were written. It seems only inevitable—neither good nor bad—that upon now rereading them I should be struck not merely with a flaw here or a felicity there but with my own sense of friendly distance from the book, as if for the first time I could examine it objectively. The author of *Politics and the Novel* I recognize; he lives within me, *mon semblable, mon frère*. I would rush fraternally to his defense if he were subjected to a certain kind of attack. Yet time has both wrought its benefits and exacted its toll, so that I would not today write quite in the style of *Politics and the Novel*, nor would I express some of its opinions quite in the same way. At the same time I would not dream of tampering with the book, or trying to adapt its stringencies and assurances to my present convenience. A book takes on a life of its own, apart from the life of the man who wrote it.

What, in any case, are the changes brought about by, or during, a decade?

One is cultural. *Politics and the Novel* was written in the mid-1950's, a moment of political and intellectual conservatism in the United States, when the customary outlook of cultivated people was to insist that the literary work must be seen as a self-contained structure, all but free from the pressures of history—indeed, to insist that the literary work was a kind of sanctuary against the corruptions and vulgarities of the world. I believe that I understand why sensitive people, after the debacle of totalitarianism and the Second World War, should have been drawn to this view; and I was by no means unqualifiedly hostile to it, at least insofar as

it helped restore some respect for the integrity of the literary work. Finally, however, I could not accept such an esthetic, if only because it tended, in the quip of Lionel Abel, to reduce literature to mere literature. So if you find an occasional sentence which, either in assault or defense, indicates an entangled response to the literary temper of the 'fifties, try to see it in this context.

A second difference concerns my own intellectual development. *Politics and the Novel* was written in the course of a gradual drift away from orthodox Marxism—by which I mean orthodox Marxism in its serious version or versions, and not the corrupt authoritarian catchwords of the Communist movement. I still hold firmly to the socialist ethic which partly inspired this book, but the ideology to which these essays occasionally return—both as a point of reference and a point from which to diverge—no longer has for me quite the power it then had. Yet no matter what one thinks of this intellectual change, I can see that for the author of *Politics and the Novel* there were notable advantages to be had from his involvement with Marxist categories. This involvement makes, I think, for a fruitful tension between object and image, the world recalled and the work considered.

It is an involvement, to be sure, which also leads to certain limitations in treatment. Strictly speaking, this book might have had as a hopelessly encumbered title: *Revolutionary Politics and the Modern Novel*. It pays little attention to the kind of novel—say, that written by George Eliot, Meredith, and Trollope—which portrays the political life of a settled society, one in which the normal interplay of group conflicts is regulated by democratic procedures. Yet it may be that I was more right than I knew in choosing to concentrate on fiction which deals with revolutionary crisis and apocalypse: for the novel, while closer to ordinary life than all other literary genres, cannot finally hope to encompass as a mere faithful record all the happenings and sentiments which fill up ordinary life. Even in its occasional programmatic devotion to the commonplace, the novel is still drawn, as it must be, to the test of extreme situations, the drama of harsh and ultimate conflicts.

Reading this book, I notice still another difference between its author and myself. He was clearly fond of epigrammatic sentences, tense verbal sequences, even occasional



displays of bravura. My own present inclination is to care most of all for lucidity. The writer of expository prose should strive, I now feel, for that most difficult of styles: a prose so direct, so clear, so transparent that it becomes virtually self-effacing.

But I also recognize certain advantages which followed from the atmosphere and condition in which this book was written. The single greatest advantage is that *Politics and the Novel* is not a mere exercise. It emerges from an idea—what can occur in the meeting between the novel as form and politics as ideology—even as, I hope, it is not overwhelmed by a fixed thesis as to what “must” occur during that meeting. And that is why, for me at least, the book retains its thrust and vitality. I am glad to see my name on its title page, together with that of the man who wrote it.

IRVING HOWE  
May 1, 1967





## PREFACE

This book is meant primarily as a study of the relation between literature and ideas, though a considerable part of it, I should say, consists of literary criticism. My interest was far less in literature as social evidence or testimony than in the literary problem of what happens to the novel when it is subjected to the pressures of politics and political ideology. In discussing nineteenth century writers I have employed more or less conventional methods of criticism, while in treating twentieth century writers I have found myself placing a greater stress upon politics and ideology as such; but this was not the result of any preconceived decision, it was a gradual shift in approach that seemed to be required by the nature of the novels themselves.

It is clear that, in addition to the books discussed in the following pages, there are a number of important novels that might profitably have been considered in the terms that I have here employed. Various friends suggested novels by Disraeli, Meredith, Mark Twain, Tolstoy, Pirandello and a great many contemporary writers. Some of these did not happen to interest me, others interested me too much. In any case, my intention was not to discuss every novel that might conceivably be treated as a "political novel"—nothing could be farther from my intention than a "definitive study"—but rather to bring to bear a certain approach upon those books where it would be most relevant.

Six of the chapters in this book were presented, in earlier form, as papers for the Christian Gauss Seminar at Princeton University; and to the directors of that seminar I wish to express my gratitude for enabling me to begin this

project. The possibility for completing it I owe mainly to the editors of *Kenyon Review*, who awarded me a Kenyon Fellowship in Literary Criticism; and to them, too, I would here like to offer my thanks.

I owe many debts to friends who have read all or part of the manuscript, offered helpful suggestions, made acute criticisms, and provided continuous encouragement. Let me mention only a few of these friends: Louis Kronenberger, Meyer Schapiro, Lewis Coser, David Sachs, Rogers Albritton, and Philip Rahv.

Parts of this book have appeared, in somewhat different form, in *Kenyon Review*, *Hudson Review*, *The American Scholar*, *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *The Western Review*, *The New International* and *The Avon Book of Modern Writing*. The section on *The Bostonians* forms part of an introduction to a Modern Library edition of that novel.

I.H.

## PART ONE



