

# Alfred Kazin, champion of American literature: An appreciation

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Alfred Kazin, the noted literary critic whose memoirs forcefully evoked the immigrant experience in early twentieth century America as well as the political and cultural odyssey of the intelligentsia over the past 60 years, died on June 5, his eighty-third birthday.

Kazin came to be associated with the “New York intellectuals,” the term used to denote a group of politically active writers, critics and commentators which coalesced in the 1930s. These men and women, including Edmund Wilson, Sidney Hook, James T. Farrell and many others, were characterized by their political commitment and their attempt, at least at the outset, to distinguish between revolutionary Marxism and its Stalinist perversion.

In some ways, however, Kazin’s political and intellectual history differed from this circle. He never shared their original interest in Marxism. On the other hand, when most of the intellectuals turned sharply to the right, many becoming neoconservative Republicans and fanatical anticommunists, Kazin remained a liberal who was scathing in his comments about these ex-radicals.

The future writer of *On Native Grounds* and other studies of American literature was born in Brooklyn in 1915, to immigrant parents who had come from tsarist Russia. His father was a housepainter and a sympathizer of the Socialist Party of Eugene Debs, his mother a garment worker. The language spoken at home was Yiddish. The family lived in the neighborhood of Brownsville, then home to poor Jews.

Kazin was part of a generation of intellectuals forged out of a combustible mix of Old World and New World influences in the early decades of the twentieth century. He writes in his memoirs of his feelings of separateness and his determination to learn, to grow and experience everything around him. The process of assimilation did not mean that the immigrant or first-generation American was simply forced into the mold of existing society. It was an active process. Kazin was not merely absorbed by America; he absorbed the world around him, making his own imprint on the culture.

This journey is evoked in the lyrical prose of *A Walker in the City*, the first of Kazin’s books of memoirs. Published in 1951, it describes the author’s childhood and teenage years, in which his desire to learn drove him to the libraries and onto the streets of New York. Walking became a means of gathering knowledge. In Kazin’s memoirs it is a metaphor for the spiritual and intellectual journey which began in his earliest years. He began a lifelong passion for reading, focusing on the development of literature in the US, which had witnessed a tremendous burst of creativity in the half-century before Kazin was born.

“I still thought of myself then as standing outside America,” he wrote in *A Walker in the City*. “I read as if books would fill my every gap, legitimize my strange quest for the American past, remedy my every flaw, let me in at last into the great world that was anything just out of Brownsville.”

Walking the streets of New York, loaded with associations, deepened Kazin’s feeling for American literature, painting and history. “Everything

ahead of me now was of a different order—wide, clean, still, every block lined with trees. I sniffed hungrily at the patches of garden earth behind the black iron spikes and at the wooden shutters hot in the sun—there where even the names of the streets, Macdougall, Hull, Somers, made me humble with admiration.... I can never remember *walking* those last few blocks to the library; I seemed to float along the canvas tops.

“The automatic part of all my reading was history.... The past, the past was great; anything American, old, glazed, touched with dusk at the end of the nineteenth century, still smoldering with the fires lit by the industrial revolution, immediately set my mind dancing. The past was deep, deep, full of solitary Americans whose careers, though closed in death, had woven an arc around them which I could see in space and time—‘lonely Americans,’ it was even the title of a book. I remember that the evening I opened Lewis Mumford’s *The Brown Decades* I was so astonished to see a photograph of Brooklyn Bridge, I so instantly formed against that brownstone on Macdougall Street such close and loving images of Albert Pinkham Ryder, Charles Peirce, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Eakins and John August Roebling, that I could never walk across Roebling’s bridge, or pass the hotel on University Place named Albert, in Ryder’s honor, or stop in front of the garbage cans at Fulton and Cranberry Streets in Brooklyn at the place where Whitman had himself printed *Leaves of Grass*, without thinking that I had at last opened the great trunk of forgotten time in New York in which I, too, I thought, would someday find the source of my unrest.”

So it was that this son of immigrants wrote the first serious study of American literature dealing with the half-century from 1890 to 1940, from William Dean Howells to William Faulkner. *On Native Grounds*, the beginning of a life in literature which included in-depth studies of Whitman, Melville, Dreiser and other seminal figures, was published and warmly received in 1942, when Kazin was only 27 years old. It was the product of five years of research in the famous reading room of the New York Public Library, where the budding writer would typically spend more than 12 hours a day, five or six days a week.

*On Native Grounds* is a massive work, tracing the growth of American realism in reaction to Victorianism and under the impact of the enormous changes taking place in society.

This was a book whose method was far different from what passes for literary criticism in the universities today. While by no means ignoring the formal elements in the development of American writing, Kazin insisted on rooting his subject in society and history. “Our modern literature in America is at bottom only the expression of our modern life in America,” he wrote in his preface. It “came out of those great critical years of the late nineteenth century which saw the emergence of modern America, and was molded in its struggles.”

Kazin writes of “my sense from the first of a literature growing out of a period of dark and confused change,” and he begins with what he calls “the great symbolic episode in the early history of American realism—the move from Boston to New York of William Dean Howells, the Brahmins’

favorite child but the first great champion of the new writers.”

Kazin’s rejection of, on the one hand, an “art for art’s sake” formalism and, on the other, the mechanical reductionism of literary trends to the class struggle, which would find its most grotesque expression in the Stalinist doctrine of “socialist realism,” is the great strength of this early work.

He makes no secret of his anti-Marxist outlook. In his chapter on “The Revival of Naturalism,” for instance, his withering criticism of most of the “proletarian” literature of the 1930s, while merited, is marred by his repeated identification of the work of Stalinist-influenced writers with Marxism. Despite this and other limitations, Kazin is clearly engaged in a serious and substantial examination of literature, and the book remains a classic of criticism more than five decades after its appearance.

Kazin was also part of a generation of workers and intellectuals which turned sharply to the left in the wake of the Great Depression. The formative political experiences through which he lived while a student at New York’s City College and Columbia University in the early and mid-30s included Hitler’s seizure of power, the Spanish Civil War, the Moscow Trials and the rise of the CIO.

“From my first conscious moments I was absorbed in the most intimate problems of the working class, in the fire and color of immigrant life,” Kazin commented many years ago. “I was by temperament created for the idea of revolution, in the sense of making the world over and creating a new society.”

This was only part of the story, however. Kazin at an early age decided that he was not seriously interested in Marxism. He was shaped by the life of the immigrant working class, but he turned away from the struggle for political solutions to its problems. As he later wrote, “I really did not believe that the ‘socialism’ of my father and so many other Jewish workmen would change anything.”

While such prominent figures as Wilson, Hook and Farrell, and a younger generation including Irving Howe, Mary McCarthy and others, threw themselves into the battles of the turbulent 1930s, Kazin remained relatively aloof. Unlike so many others, he was not taken in by Stalinism, but he also never exhibited any sympathy for Trotskyism. He never investigated the revolutionary alternative to the Soviet bureaucracy. He considered himself a man of the left, an independent radical, but he was deeply discouraged by the rise of Stalinism and fascism. From very early in life, he considered the Russian Revolution a tragic mistake.

In the postwar period Kazin, like many of his fellow “New York intellectuals,” became increasingly prominent. *On Native Grounds* was followed by *An American Procession*, *God and the American Writer* and other works of criticism. *A Walker in the City* was followed by *Starting Out in the Thirties*, *New York Jew* and other memoirs. He taught at Harvard and Berkeley, in Cologne and Cambridge, and at the State and City Universities of New York. He wrote for *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books* and numerous other journals and periodicals. And, as the years passed, he became more and more discouraged about the world which, despite his skepticism, had fascinated him as a youth.

This is vividly detailed in Kazin’s last book of memoirs, *A Lifetime Burning in Every Moment*, selections from Kazin’s journals over a period of nearly 60 years, which was published in 1996. A summing up of Kazin’s views on literature, culture and politics, this volume also depicts the trajectory of a certain strain of American liberalism over the past 60 years.

Kazin was until the end still capable of making acute observations about US society in the Reagan, Bush and Clinton era.

He wrote in the 1980s about Houston, Texas in terms that are rather prophetic and perceptive: “[New York] *Times* story on Houston, the real United States we now have to deal with ... Houston’s deliberate policy of low taxes and minimal services. Those who run the city say this is the way to unleash growth and development to the benefit of all. The free-market

theory of government leaves hundreds of thousands of the poor to fend for themselves. Houston is planned by a ‘very narrow group, and in many ways a reckless group.’”

Kazin detested ex-radicals like Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* magazine, and Irving Kristol, the former follower of Max Shachtman who became one of the intellectual godfathers of right-wing Republicanism. Something in him rebelled at the spectacle of aging intellectuals shamelessly forsaking their own roots in the working class and radical movements.

He was also an opponent of postmodernism and other fashionable trends in literary criticism. “Post-modernists now place quotation marks around words like ‘reality,’ insisting that the old notion of objective knowledge has become obsolete,” he wrote in 1993. “Multiculturalists are for new curriculums not on the basis of factual accuracy but on the basis of ‘self-esteem.’ Truth and knowledge replaced by opinion, perception, credibility. Spin doctors use pseudo-events and photo-ops to market virtual reality of versions of themselves to the public. To the post-modernists the critic counts, not the author.”

At the same time, Kazin offered no alternative to the pervasive debasement of culture and intellectual discourse. Indeed, his lifelong hostility to Marxism led him to make the most venomous attacks on those who fought for genuine socialism. After a viewing of Margarethe von Trotta’s film *Rosa Luxemburg*, for instance, he wrote that Rosa was a “Jewish Marxist superrevolutionary ... in that land of dreams, the nineteenth century.” He was even more violent in his assessment of Marx (“an autocrat”) and Trotsky (“a murderer”).

Although far from a Marxist in his youth, Kazin would not then have employed such stupid slanders against his political enemies. While he remained a liberal in his later years, his outlook reflected the fate of liberalism. The optimism of earlier decades, the hopes for social reform, had come to naught. The loss of hope for the future can be traced in Kazin’s memoirs. *New York Jew*, written in the 1970s, is a very different book from *A Walker in the City*.

As he entered his ninth decade, Kazin openly acknowledged his gloom. In one his last journal entries, on the occasion of the Republican sweep in the 1994 midterm elections, he wrote, “on this crucial day that may augur the political rule of the Right for a long time to come—way past my lifetime! Born early in the century with the New Freedom, dying at the end of the century in the most reactionary and regressive climate I have ever known.”

In a virtual cry of despair, Kazin wrote in his journal several years ago, “Where O where did I lose that love of the world that was as real to me as being alive?”



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