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By [Edward Mendelson](#)

Alfred Kazin: A Biography

by Richard M. Cook

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In both his life and his writings Alfred Kazin was divided between two ideas of what it meant to be a Jew in America. He was committed to one idea and tempted by the other.

Kazin was committed to the idea that a Jew was an outsider, with no special loyalties to any collective identity, not even that of other Jews, and that a Jew could therefore sympathize with other outsiders, regardless of their ethnicity, skin color, or other marker of identity. For him to be a Jew was to be an individual, with all of individuality's responsibility, loneliness, and willingness to take risks, someone whose deepest concern was justice—justice for all other outsiders as well as for himself. Whenever Kazin lapsed from this commitment, he later returned to it with a sense of exhilaration at seeing clearly again.

He was tempted by the idea that a Jew was a member of a separate and unique group of people, loyal to one another and their history, with a collective experience that differed from all others. To be a Jew, in this way of thinking, was to share in a group identity to which individuality must ultimately be sacrificed, and to be concerned most deeply with power—power wielded by other groups against one's own, and power that one's own group can gain through alliances with those more powerful. Kazin slipped into this temptation whenever he most despaired about politics or himself.

Kazin was a literary critic and a memoirist whose best books were *On Native Grounds* (1942), the first of seven volumes of criticism, all mostly about American literature, and *A Walker in the City* (1951), the first of three volumes of memoirs. He wrote hundreds of lectures, essays, and reviews on books, culture, and politics, and kept a journal which he excerpted in a late book, *A Lifetime Burning in Every Moment* (1996). He taught for a semester or two at each of a dozen different colleges, then had two tenured professorships. He spent much of his adult life on the road, giving public lectures and attending boring conferences.

His public life was not the kind that demands to be retold in a four-hundred-page book, but Richard M. Cook succeeds in making *Alfred Kazin: A Biography* readable and even fascinating. The young Jack Kerouac, after an hour in Kazin's classroom, wrote, "I like this guy because he is excited." Kazin suspected some of his intellectual rivals of using literature as a ladder for social climbing; his own excitement went deeper. His third wife, Ann Birstein, in her memoir *What I Saw at the Fair* (2003), reports that he was sexually aroused by intense literary discussion. His excitement over literature is less evident in Cook's biography than in his own writings, but Cook makes Kazin's excitement over his life alternately infectious and appalling: infectious when Kazin fights the good fight against hypocrisy, bootlicking, and complacency; appalling when he plunges into yet another self-destructive choice in his erotic and family life.

Cook's narrative is shapely and satisfying, if often awkward in detail. Kazin's personal life proceeds through three disastrous marriages punctuated by recurrent affairs, before he makes an apparently faithful and happy fourth marriage. His public life begins with the spectacular success of his first books, then loses its way with his later ones, and finally ends in high-spirited political commentary on the left-wing contemporaries of his youth who became power-hungry conservatives as they aged. Kazin knew he could not win these late battles, but died knowing that they were worth fighting.

Cook portrays Kazin as both Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, at times tilting against real and imaginary enemies or in ecstatic pursuit of a new Dulcinea, sometimes seeing grim political and personal reality when everyone around him is dazzled by self-serving fantasies.

1.

A summary account of Kazin's childhood sounds like the story of any of a dozen Jewish intellectuals of his time. He was born in 1915 to impoverished, mismatched, Orthodox Jewish parents who had emigrated from Poland to the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. His relations with his mother were intense, with his father distant. Kazin lost interest in Judaism, discovered radical politics, attended City College, overcame a stammer, and talked his way into the literary and political world of Manhattan. In his early twenties he was reviewing for *The New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and *The New Republic*.

The details diverge from the stereotype in ways that shaped Kazin's difficult relations with his City College and New York–intellectual contemporaries. His father had worked in the Chicago stockyards, had roamed the Midwest while working for the Union Pacific Railroad, and would have settled in Colorado had he found a Jewish girl there to marry. Kazin traced to his father's stories his own love of the American heartland, his identification with every kind of American wanderer. He was more of a literary loner than a political joiner. As Cook notes, Norman Podhoretz belonged to a Brownsville street gang as a teenager; Kazin never did. At City College Kazin thought of himself as a socialist, but avoided the sectarian political fights, fueled by the narcissism of small differences, that famously made a battleground of the cafeteria.

On Native Grounds, which made him famous at twenty-seven, was a spacious, enthusiastic history of the previous fifty years of American prose literature in the form of quick biographical vignettes of writers arranged to suggest an extended narrative of social progress. "In a word," he wrote in the preface,

our modern literature 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.

What was exhilarating about the book was Kazin's ability to use the wise-cracking style of an irreverent young rebel as a medium of praise; he aimed his wit at the previous generation of critics who had been too convinced by their own sense of themselves as enlightened rebels to perceive the greatness of the generation they had rebelled against. The "light-bringers of 1920" had dismissed William Dean Howells as a prude; Kazin saw in his novels the moral and social profundity of an American Tolstoy.

"There is a terrible estrangement in this writing," Kazin wrote. (He meant "the writings I discuss in my book"; Edmund Wilson warned him that his prose lacked precision.) "All modern writers, it may be, have known that alienation equally well." The theme of the book was not literary or cultural exile in a place distant from one's homeland, but "our alienation on native grounds," the condition of being alone in the place where one was born.

A telling moment in the book occurs when Kazin quotes Thorstein Veblen on the ability of a Jew to become an intellectual leader by escaping from his native culture and refusing to be assimilated into a Gentile one. As an outsider to both cultures, the unassimilated Jew is necessarily a skeptic, and "the first requisite for constructive work in modern science, Veblen continued, is skepticism." Kazin comments, "It was one of Veblen's rare self-portraits," and he thought it wholly appropriate for a lapsed Norwegian Lutheran to portray himself by describing a Jew.

For Kazin in the early 1940s, Jews were no more alienated than were any other recent arrivals in America. When the *Contemporary Jewish Record* (the magazine of the American Jewish Committee before *Commentary*) surveyed young writers in 1944 on their debt to their "Jewish heritage," Kazin went out of his way to renounce any sense of a special Jewish experience:

I think it is about time we stopped confusing the experience of being an immigrant, or an immigrant's son, with the experience of being Jewish.

Most of the other contributors to the survey, including Clement Greenberg and Lionel Trilling, shared Kazin's ambivalence about their heritage, but Kazin was the most blunt:

I know how easy it is for the American Jew, at least in my circumstances and of my generation, to confuse his timidity with devotion, his parochialism...with a conscious faith.... I learned long ago to accept the fact that I was Jewish without being a part of any meaningful Jewish life or culture.

He also learned, he added, "to follow what I really believed in, not that which would move me through associations or naive community feelings.... Like many another American, I have had to make my own culture."

When he was writing *On Native Grounds*, Kazin felt (as he remembered it later) a "world-historical sense of purpose," a belief that he was caught up in a great political transformation, a member of "the vanguard on the side of history." He accepted the Marxist assumption that literature was shaped by social forces and class conflict, but beyond a passion for socialism and a hatred for reaction, he endorsed no specific agenda and hated no class enemies. Edith Wharton left him sorrowful, not angry; if she was "not a great artist" she was at least "an unusual American, one who brought the weight of her personal experience to bear upon a modern American literature to which she was spiritually alien."

Kazin was too much of a skeptic to organize the minute particulars of history into a teleological plot, but his sense of historical purpose gave his book its energy and almost gave it a shape. He had begun to lose his political faith before he finished the book, and by the late 1940s he had lost it altogether. He never found a satisfactory substitute as an organizing principle for his later books. He wrote in his journal in 1947: "What all of us lack more than anything else is a political solvent for our ideas."

Reviewers of Cook's biography tend to divide between those for whom Kazin's criticism is "indelible" and those who call it "strangely unimportant." Both are right. Literary criticism can be influential and memorable when it performs the double function of history and aphorism. As history it tells the unique story of a single book, author, or era; as aphorism it offers a general principle through which to understand any of a multitude of books, authors, and eras. The greatest critics—from Samuel Johnson through Virginia Woolf, William Empson, and beyond—could combine history and aphorism because each had a cohesive ethical vision that made sense of the connections between unique persons and general principles, and between literature and life.

Kazin's criticism was almost all history. In place of aphorism, he offered vague spiritual uplift, as when

he wrote of Henry and William James that "they burned with that indestructible zeal we need so badly to recover," and underlined the point with incendiary adjectives such as "burning," "fiery," and "blazing." As a result, the experience of reading his criticism is often more memorable, more "indelible," than anything he actually said.

His memoirs tend to be more memorable than his criticism, partly because when writing about himself he never felt the same obligation to be factual that he felt toward the writers he revered. He constantly reshapes the facts of his past—marriages are foreshortened, the same wife gets different names in different books, his sister is never mentioned—but he does so in order to portray himself simultaneously as a universal allegorical type and as the boy who grew up in a unique family unhappy in its own way. In his journal he praises himself as a critic in terms that apply more accurately to himself as a memoirist:

I am...a sentinel of the truly universal experience and far, far closer to the central moral problems in modern literature by reason of my being a Jew, than I can possibly say.

The summaries in Cook's biography give few hints of the evocative precision of Kazin's memoirs. Cook describes the memoir that Kazin published in a magazine as "an account of a childhood conversation with a Mrs. Solovey, who lived on the first floor":

One day she came into our kitchen, looking for my mother to make a dress for her. I was alone, doing my French lesson at the table. When she spoke to me in her timid, Russian-gruff accent, I felt myself flying back to *Anna Karenina*. There was a grandeur of suffering in her face, in the spindly thinness of her body in the old-fashioned dress, that immediately sent me to that world I had heard of all my life. I was glad my mother was out; I felt I could now enjoy Mrs. Solovey alone.

The memoir itself is a quietly unsettling vignette of this much-traveled Russian woman who discovers the provincialism of the young Kazin with the same wonder with which he discovers her sophistication. Only someone who loved Proust could have written it, but the impoverished milieu gives Mrs. Solovey depths entirely unlike those of her more privileged original, Charles Swann.

2.

Kazin's first wife, Natasha Dohn, seems to have been sane, intelligent, and appealing—and resolute enough to refuse to take him back after his first extramarital affair. That affair began after a Greenwich Village party where Kazin met a beautiful young woman with a long history of affairs with writers and artists. She called these lovers her "educators," and imagined she could become more intelligent by going to bed with them, much as young stockbrokers imagine they can become more attractive by going to bed with fashion models. At twenty-eight Kazin was too naive to know what he was being used for, and too inexperienced to have learned that the all-consuming sexual excitement that he gloated over in his journals can occur only while each lover remains unaware of the other's personality. The affair apparently ended for the reason such affairs always end: the lovers finally saw each other as fallible human beings instead of ideal figures of myth—no longer the Love Goddess and the Great Mind, but Mary Lou and Alfred.

If Kazin's account in *New York Jew*, thirty-five years later, accurately describes his feelings at the time, he never stopped thinking about the affair in the same mythical terms in which it began. She was a "priestess" of love; their affair was a crime he had committed against the whole Jewish people. "I was as bad as any Nazi," he remembers himself thinking. "Breaking up the family—which is what happens with these things—it's breaking up the Tradition." Cook reports Kazin's breast-beating mythologizing without

comment, but it seems clear that Kazin was consoling himself by confessing to a grave fault that he didn't commit so that he could avoid thinking about the one that he did. To betray his people was exciting and demonic; to betray his wife was merely tawdry.

Kazin's second wife, Carol Bookman, appears in Cook's biography more as an elegant outline drawing than as a person. Kazin admired her stability and assurance, and never overcame his resentment of her prosperous, assimilated, German-Jewish family. It is only in the context of this second marriage that Cook alludes to the invidious hierarchy that divided German Jews from Eastern European ones; but the odors of snobbery on one side and resentment on the other are easily detectable in the otherwise often motiveless ill-will that Cook reports among Kazin and his literary and political rivals. Kazin's attempts in later life to find a Jewish identity that could unify him with a coherent group seem to have stumbled repeatedly over one kind of hierarchical division or another.

Kazin lived with his third wife, Ann Birstein, for twenty-seven years, most of them miserable. As matters got worse, the two screamed at each other all night over the sound of neighbors banging on walls. Then they settled the argument by enjoying the most intense sex they had ever had since the last time. Much of the misery seems to have been focused on Kazin's indifference to Birstein's novels. In *What I Saw at the Fair* she portrays herself as a passive victim of Kazin's intensifying rage; finally he began knocking her to the floor and once broke her finger when she deflected a blow. Cook, apparently retelling as little as possible of the hair-raising narrative in Kazin's journals and letters, alludes only to much shouting and plate-breaking, "bouts of physical violence on both sides," and what Kazin called a "big suicide drama that ended up with the police in our bedroom demanding that I commit her or 'accept the responsibility.'"

Kazin's version agrees with Birstein's in acknowledging that he made neurotic demands for her approval while offering none in return, but he also portrays her as consumed by rage because she blamed him for her lack of fame. She once accused him of "serving on the Pulitzer committee for the sole purpose of denying her the prize." In Birstein's version, Kazin was a monster of egoism, hypocrisy, and greed; but, except for her father and a few walk-ons, her book portrays everyone else as monstrous in more or less the same way.

Long before the marriage ended, Kazin wrote in his journals about his affairs: "Thank God for Carol and Carla and Rose and Jean, for Celia and Elsie and Sylvia and Rosalind, for Alice and Vivienne—for the other Sylvia, for Lou, Lou, Lou!" Cook's biography and Birstein's memoir tell more than I want to know about Kazin's habits in bed, but almost nothing about the more interesting question of what sex meant to him. The quotations from his journals in Cook's biography make it possible to guess, however, that sex could never relieve his loneliness because he experienced it as an awesome spectacle performed by his body for the solitary audience of his mind.

3.

In his criticism, Kazin was always alert to a novelist's failure to grant personal reality to any character other than his own stand-in (this was his recurring complaint against Saul Bellow), and in his journals he was often alert to his own failure to grant personal reality to wives, lovers, and friends. Even in his final and happiest marriage, to Judith Schwartz Dunford, he was still surprised to discover that his wife had her own inner life. (Cook doesn't mention this surprise, a recurrent theme in Kazin's unpublished journals.) Planning a memoir that he never finished, he imagined himself describing "our transcendentalist so sweetly pious hero, who has not yet sufficiently learned that *there are other people out there.*"

Always sensitive to slights, whenever he met someone warmhearted and intelligent he responded with a gratitude that was near to love. The critic Erich Heller was "a man I like so much and am so attracted to." Heinrich Blücher, Hannah Arendt's husband, was generally condescended to in Arendt's circle (Diana Trilling said Arendt kept him "chained to her bedpost" for use when needed), but Kazin noted his "irrevocable quality" after an afternoon of "glorious and strengthening talk."

Kazin's "sickening demand for love and protection" (as he wrote in his journal), his need "for the reassurance of being loved, that is infantile to the point of insanity," was sufficiently sane to make him immune to the counterfeit form of love that is personal charm. In 1961 he began a piece on John F. Kennedy and the intellectuals; Kennedy had invited artists and academics to his inauguration, hired them for his administration, and cited them at every opportunity. Kazin's friend Arthur Schlesinger Jr. got him invited to lunch at the White House, where Kennedy applied his charm, which for once failed to work. Kazin's essay portrayed Kennedy as a poseur whose main intellectual talent was his ability to manipulate self-important intellectuals.

Expert as Kazin was at reading character, he seems to have been helplessly naive at reading social situations. He loved novels partly because they clarified social relations that he could not otherwise understand, and he wrote in his journal, "The reason I do not write fiction is that I am not yet up to human conflict. I still portray people *alone*."

His social blindness caused him much anguish when he might have found sardonic amusement. One characteristic episode occurred after the publication of *New York Jew*, when a letter in *The New York Times Book Review*, signed by nineteen writers, denounced Kazin's portrait of Lionel Trilling (who had died three years earlier) as "a grotesque misrepresentation." Some of Kazin's friends were among the signers, and Kazin assumed he had lost their friendship, and disbelieved those who assured him afterward that they felt just as friendly to him as they ever did. Kazin wrote in his journal:

I feel humiliated, devastated, etc, by this onslaught against me.... I knew that the Columbia acolytes would organize this demonstration against me, but I did not suspect that so many "old friends" would join in.

He seems to have remained aggrieved by the letter for the rest of his life.

Still, merely by reading Cook's account of the incident, one can guess that Kazin got it entirely wrong. Letter-writing campaigns against an author are often about something that doesn't appear in the letter, and tend to be organized by someone who didn't sign it. It's easy to deduce that the letter denouncing Kazin was written by Diana Trilling, and that at least some of those who signed it had no strong views on the matter, but couldn't bring themselves to say no to the offended widow or to whomever she had commissioned to collect signatures. The three signers whom I asked about the incident all confirmed this guess; one doubted he had ever read what Kazin had written, and none could remember feeling any animus toward him.

If Kazin had reread his "grotesque misrepresentation" of Trilling, he would have seen that there was nothing objectionable about it. His tone ranged from mildly waspish to gratefully affectionate, and the worst things he said about Trilling were that he was ambitious, that he carefully managed his career, and that he protected himself behind a formal and reserved manner—scarcely shocking things to say about the first Jew promoted to tenure in the dignified Columbia English Department. What provoked the letter to the *Times* was more likely Kazin's acid portrait of Diana Trilling as a resentful scourge of intellectuals in public and of her husband in private. Had Kazin guessed this, he would have realized that she had confirmed his portrait of her, down to the detail that "her favorite literary genre seemed to be

the letter to the editor."

4.

In 1944 Kazin published an essay in *The New Republic* about the Nazis' murder of millions of Polish Jews. Cook notes that this was one of only a few essays in mainstream publications during the war in which an American Jew wrote about the destruction of European Jews. After the war, when the full extent of the Nazis' mass murder was apparent, Kazin began to identify himself with Jewishness—not with Judaism as a religion—in a way that he had never done before. He still thought of "the ambiguity and long ache of being a Jew" as central to all aspects of modern culture, but he began to experiment with a sense of unity with other Jews, and with a new pride in being one of them.

He exulted at being invited to Israel in 1960, and wrote in his journal soon after he arrived, "Feel very Jewish these days.... I have been seized, I have been pregnant with the Jews." But the feeling did not last, and he laughed aloud when his hosts told him that he and every other Jew in the diaspora was obliged to emigrate to Israel. After Israel's rapid victory in the 1967 war, he recorded his "inexpressible pride in our ability to live, to fight it through, to *live*." But when he revisited Israel three years later, he "felt the Jewish obsession...without a lifting of the heart." Part of his discontent, Cook writes, was the discrepancy between his longing for "transcendence" and the "grimly functional society" he found in Israel; part, as he wrote in his journal, was that he associated "so much pain, lunacy, and outrage with so many Jews."

Kazin never wavered from his sense that the Nazis' crime was "the sin of the centuries," but he distrusted any sense of Jewish identity that was based on the fact of the crime—on acts done to Jews by someone else—instead of being based on the actions and beliefs of Jews themselves. He wrote in his journal in 1981:

Holocaust, Holocaust, Holocaust ...The Jews [who] were once held together by God are now held together, or should I say scared together by the Holocaust....And to cap the sin of the centuries, the revived fascists and Nazis doubt that it ever occurred....

Throughout his later work he struggles with his double sense of the enormity of the crime and of the trivializing, self-serving ways in which its memory had been used. Kazin wrote a gratefully praising review of Elie Wiesel's *Night* in 1960. But after getting to know Wiesel in person, he became disillusioned by his "platform" manner, dismissed him in his journal as one of the "actors playing the Holocaust circuit," and finally, as Cook reports, wrote an essay

contrasting Wiesel's testimony with that of Primo Levi, whom he called "a far more trustworthy witness," provoking Wiesel to accuse Kazin of "lending credence to those who deny the Holocaust."

In 1963, when *Eichmann in Jerusalem* appeared, Hannah Arendt was accused of slandering the victims with her unflattering account of Jewish leaders during the war. Irving Howe organized a public meeting about the book which quickly turned into a hate rally against its author, memorably interrupted when Kazin walked to the podium, said, "That's enough, Irving. This disgraceful piling on has got to stop," and walked out. A recurring note in Kazin's later journals is his irritated sense that those who identify themselves as victims have not had this identity forced on them, but have willfully chosen it because it immunizes them against criticism: any complaint against them can be denounced as a defense of their victimizer.

Kazin's great gifts were those of critical enthusiasm and autobiographical reflection. Both were forms of gratitude. In his middle years, he tended to exchange those gifts for various forms of bitterness. In 1973 he published *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*, an often disgruntled sequel to the often ecstatic *On Native Grounds*. "The novel is the one bright book of life," D.H. Lawrence wrote in "Why the Novel Matters"; Kazin complained that the novel of the past fifty years, "the now chic teachable art object called 'the modern novel,'" through its irony and self-consciousness, had failed to live up to Lawrence's definition. Kazin's second and third books of memoirs, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (1965) and *New York Jew* (1978), substituted point-scoring and resentment for the elegiac depths of *A Walker in the City*. Yet he still believed that autobiography was "directly an effort to find salvation, to make one's own experience come out right."

In the end Kazin found salvation in his fourth marriage and in a new sense of political purpose, accompanied by a new sense of what it meant to be a Jew. The political turning point was an essay he wrote for these pages in 1983, "Saving My Soul at the Plaza,"^[*] in which he directed all his exuberant energy against the neoconservatives (including many of his Brownsville and City College contemporaries) who were trying to redefine Jewish group identity as a political movement allied with Ronald Reagan. The title of the piece referred to a phone call from Midge Decter inviting him to a neoconservatives' conference called "Our Country and Our Culture," at the Plaza Hotel. When Kazin said he was surprised to be asked, she replied, "It's not too late to save your soul."

His essay was a joyously devastating portrait of the conferees' infatuation with themselves and their inflated sense of their influence. Kazin understood that the Reagan administration actually regarded the Jewish neoconservatives as, in a phrase attributed to Lenin, useful idiots. They were invited for dinner at the White House, and, unlike Kazin twenty years earlier, were successfully seduced and manipulated, but for all their preening, they had no power. Kazin, who died in 1998, was spared the less jolly spectacle of the past seven years, when the useful idiots were invited back to the White House and put in charge of foreign policy.

Kazin's weekend at the Plaza effectively ended his temptation to find a Jewish group identity. His last book, *God and the American Writer* (1997), was, like his first, a celebratory literary history, based on a renewed commitment to his sense of Jewishness as one of many forms of the lonely search for transcendence that was central to the modern condition and the American experience. "I love being Jewish, but I pursue my own way in these things," he said. "I'm an Emersonian and always have been."

Two months after his essay on the neoconservatives appeared in 1983, Kazin proposed marriage to Judith Dunford. He had made his "own experience come out right," and, though not quite in the way Midge Decter intended, he had saved his soul at the Plaza.

Notes

^[*] *The New York Review*, March 31, 1983.