

Alfred Kazin: A Biography

by Richard Cook, Yale University Press, 2008, 464 pp.

Michael Weiss

In 1959, Alfred Kazin wrote ‘The Alone Generation,’ an incisive and brilliant essay about the failures of modern literature. The critic who would later describe himself as a ‘cultural conservative’ and, semi-seriously, a ‘literary reactionary’ uttered this *cri de coeur*:

I am tired of reading for compassion instead of pleasure. In novel after novel, I am presented with people who are so soft, so wheedling, so importunate, that the actions in which they are involved are too indecisive to be interesting or to develop those implications which are the life-blood of narrative. The age of ‘psychological man,’ of the herd of aloners, has finally proved the truth of Tocqueville’s observation that in modern times the average man is absorbed in a very puny object, himself, to the point of satiety.

Not many people write like this anymore, with daring subjectivity. Rare today is the freelance reviewer who sees compassion as an insufficient measure of aptitude in fiction. Kazin avoided the Marxian gloss or the close reading of the New Critics, preferring instead a full-blooded, fist-pounding approach to telling good books from bad. He was demanding, irritable and shrewd; and for almost half a century, he was well sought after for his opinions.

In fact, it would be hard to mistake the author of the above passage for a man of any other generation or milieu. ‘Herd of aloners’ sounds suspiciously like Harold Rosenberg’s famous epithet for the detractors and unwitting apologists of mass culture – the ‘herd of independent minds’ – which Rosenberg applied as cuttingly to the highbrow *Partisan Review* crowd as he did to the purveyors of passive entertainment, for whom the common denominator could never be low enough. Also, ‘psychological man’ had been around a while before Jack Kerouac and Herbert Gold laid their unsure pens to paper, so we glimpse at once the longing of a recovering radical for the literature of size and social engagement; the literature of the 1930’s, in other words. Finally, *alone* – it is a word that stalks like a golem through his entire oeuvre, from his first, career-making work, *On Native Grounds*, to his mature series of sensitive and meditative memoirs. If Kazin deploys it here to

underscore the undesirable aspects of the novel – solipsism, or the puny object of the self, is denigrated because it ignores an engagement with the way we live now – then we should applaud him for self-criticism, too. Alienation was a sentiment he mistrusted most in literature because he mistrusted it most in himself.

A major achievement of Richard Cook's fine biography is the reconciliation of two contradictions in Kazin's life. How did one of the most temperamentally and spiritually isolated writers of his time become such an astute chronicler of it? And how did a man who hated tidy schools of thought, artistic or ideological, maintain an abiding belief in the liberating social possibilities of literature? The answer to both lay in Kazin's Jewishness, a lodestone to which his intellectual pursuits and personal torments kept returning.

Gallons of ink have been spilled trying to capture the peculiar blend of anxiety, optimism and self-doubt that defined the New York Intellectuals, those sons of Eastern European immigrants who discovered Marx and Shelley in their outer borough tenement kitchens in the thirties, waited for a revolution that never came, then went on to become grand old men of the cultural landscape – or at least a ten-block radius of the Upper West Side. 'Most were literary men with no experience in any political movement,' reminisced Irving Howe, a near contemporary with whom Kazin was inevitably compared, much to his chagrin. '[T]hey had come to radical politics through the pressures of conscience and a flair for the dramatic; and even in later years, when they abandoned any direct political involvement, they would in some sense remain 'political.' They would respond with eagerness to historical changes, even if these promised renewed favor for the very ideas they had largely discarded.' Most significantly, they would try to escape their humble working-class origins, whether by way of City College, agitational street theatre, or a gentlemanly assimilation into the Gentile mainstream – usually all three in due course. But see how well Kazin stakes a claim for himself and this whole milieu of comers in *A Walker in the City*, his first and best volume of autobiography, dealing with his perpetual flight from his hometown of 'darkest' Brownsville:

We had all of us lived together so long that we would not have known how to separate even if we had wanted to. The most terrible word was aleyn, alone. I always had the same picture of a man desolately walking down a dark street, newspapers and cigarette butts contemptuously flying in his face as he tasted in the dusty grit the full measure of his strangeness. Aleyn! Aleyn! Did

WEISS | On Alfred Kazin

immigrant Jews, then, marry only out of loneliness? Was even Socialism just a happier way of keeping us together?

Unbounded optimism enabled the brightest of this bunch to break free of the confines of their New World ghetto, not to say their neighbourhood faction, and earn admittance into that reified idea of *beyond*. They started out and they made it. Without 'New York,' Kazin affirmed in 'The Jew as Modern Writer,' a 1966 essay for *Commentary*, 'there would have been no immigrant epic, no America.' Fans of Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* will, allowing for the substitute of Chicago for New York, recognize the familiar cadences, as they probably will the perspicuity of this judgment: 'My quarrel with [*Henderson the Rain King*] has to do with my feeling, suggested to me even in so good a work of its kind as *Seize the Day*, that these Jacobs give up to life a little too eloquently, that they do not struggle enough with the angel before crying out in reverence and submission, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."'

Kazin's own experiences in this early line of endeavour were both typical and unique: He had a 'raging life-force' of an Orthodox mother who sewed homemade dresses during the Depression and kept the austere nuclear family intact; a silent and largely absentee father who read *The Forward* in Yiddish and bonded with his precocious son only in occasional discussion of Red politics. That covers the typical. But Kazin stood apart from the Trotskyist demimonde as well. Like Howe, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, and Kazin's future brother-in-law Daniel Bell, Alfred attended City College but refused to participate in the high-calorie debates of the celebrated Alcove 1, which made ironical sport of chivvying its leaden Stalinist counterparts in Alcove 2 and was subsequently fingered as the incubator of neoconservatism.

As Kazin later wrote in his journal, he found the environment 'odorously male' and the 'radical ambience... fanatical, arrogant, quite violent at times, and by no means to my liking.' But Kazin was hardly a political innocent: 'Communism has method, substance and form,' he recorded in 1934. 'It lacks the sentimentalism of social-democracy, that particularly opprobrious impediment which disguises the ineffectuality of endless reformism by poetry of the deep-water variety.' This posturing toughness – possibly delayed compensation for a boyhood stammer which had made him diffident all throughout adolescence – culminated in flashes of socialist heresy: 'More and more, Stalin is becoming the symbol of dash, the organization, the Allies long for and need – is he Jeb Stuart or Bedford Forrest – the enemy respected?... Yes, I admired the old bastard as never before.' So that

encompasses the unique, I'd say. It also points to another vice Kazin shared with his peers, namely the selective memory. Sidney Hook, who had a real dalliance with the Party, accused Kazin of depicting himself as an 'incorruptible radical' in his second memoir *Starting Out in the Thirties* – the critic could not substantiate his claim that he publicly opposed the Moscow trials or reprehended Malcolm Cowley's defense of Stalin in *The New Republic*, the first magazine to publish the twentysomething's astute essays. Old grudges die hard, and what first appears a petty antagonism will be renewed and picked at in years to come as cause for an ended friendship here, a literary feud there. The reliable friends for Kazin were Richard Rovere, Richard Hofstadter and Bertram Wolfe – all of whom operated at a safe remove from the parlous City College cliques, living in close proximity to one another in Brooklyn Heights, a brighter promontory overlooking the metropolitan Mecca.

After obtaining a Masters degree in history at Columbia, Kazin was egged on by Carl Van Doren to write *On Native Grounds*, a panoramic study of American prose since the *fin de siecle*. Underwritten by a Guggenheim grant (one of several he would finagle out of the endowment over the years), his original thesis was consistent with so-called 'progressive history' or what on another shore would be dismissed as 'Whiggishness.' Charles Beard and Vernon Parrington were Kazin's interpretive models, and it was the people versus the plutocrats in this grand narrative. The whole enterprise was a dialectical struggle between the American tendencies for absorption and alienation. 'What interested me,' he wrote, more or less limning his own psyche, 'was our alienation on native grounds – the interwoven story of our need to take up our life on our own grounds, and the irony of our possession.' That a Jew could give such shape and colour to a half century of American letters was as bold an undertaking as it seemed, also one highly redolent of Edmund Wilson. The leading critic in the country was Kazin's hero par excellence, and how thrilled the junior writer must have been to see his first piece for *The New Republic* appear in the same issue as the maiden instalment of Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, his own epic literary history of socialism.

There would be setbacks and reversals in Kazin's bold design: 'exquisites' interrupting the march of the realists Veblen, London and Dreiser; the seismic atrocity of the First World War, which threatened to derail an otherwise steady evolution of our 'militant democracy.' But the 'superciliousness' of Mencken and the disillusionment of the Lost Generation were brief interludes. Hope sprung resurgent in the so-called 'Literature of Crisis,' the age of 'commitment,' which saw the proletarian scab novel emerge as proof that writers appreciated the urgency and

WEISS | On Alfred Kazin

‘responsibility’ with which to address collapsing society. Dos Passos was Kazin’s gold standard, and *U.S.A.* ‘one of the saddest books ever written by an American.’ The pens of Richard Wright, James T. Farrell, and Kazin’s future confidante, the now-forgotten Josephine Herbst, were celebrated and chastised in alternating paragraphs. In the course of finishing the book – Kazin’s *Kapital* was laid down in Reading Room 315 at the New York Public Library – the author found himself plagued by doubt and waning interest. By 1942, when his galleys were ready, he believed that leftist literature had become irrelevant amidst a reviving economy and an incipient bourgeois nationalism. The worker was now being drowned out by cheers of ‘America! America!’ Cook is especially good on this point: ‘The Literature of Crisis is perhaps best understood as a record of personal crisis, a crisis of faith at a time when, [Kazin] later told Malcolm Cowley, “I was losing my faith in the only religion I ever had.”’ Lionel Trilling called *On Native Grounds* a ‘good book and a saddening book.’ The melancholy would be a well-worn trope.

When intellectuals can do nothing else, they start a magazine. When they’re at the top of their game, they work for Henry Luce. Following the overnight success of his debut volume, Kazin took a job at *Fortune*. The conservative press baron with the ‘ferociously oversized eyebrows that looked as if they had been planted and watered to intimidate subordinates’ (some of Kazin’s best writing took the form of physical description; T.S. Eliot resembled a ‘sensitive question mark;’ Edmund Wilson had the ‘red face of an overfed fox-hunting squire’) had a honourable reputation for employing cerebral radicals and ex-radicals like Dwight Macdonald, Howe, and Whittaker Chambers. But Kazin’s tenure with the media empire was abortive. Shortly after Luce asked him to provide a ‘space for think pieces from intellectual stars... that could be fashioned into a coherent and positive ‘philosophy’ for the country’ (how many features desks are saddled with *that* type of assignment anymore?) he wisely decided that full-time hackwork had its distractions and drawbacks. Though he would remain a freelance to his dying breath, Kazin’s cynicism for this deadline-bound rough trade would endure; he later issued his own lowly confession of a book reviewer, which certainly hit home with this one: ‘The literary profession – what a misnomer, what a horror. This very profession (of faith) to which I entrust my life...is also a mad scramble for social prestige and a job.’ So, following *Fortune*, perhaps in both senses of the term, and acting under the aegis of yet another scholarship, Kazin hopped it to Europe, ‘still the greatest thing in North America,’ as his friend Delmore Schwartz declared.

Part of the reason for Kazin's escape, which led to a fascinating series of post-war cultural correspondence from the ravaged continent, owed to his difficulties with girls, another congenital defect. Unfortunately, the man who would accuse Norman Mailer of being the 'Talmudist of fucking, the only writer in years who has managed to be so serious about sex as to make it grim' was himself prone to making look-away observations about the subject, which read like Rothian self-parodies. A certain boyish pride competes with masculine stupidity in Kazin's treatment of his sexcapades. He couldn't understand why one wife (there were to be three in total, and many more mistresses) found it so objectionable that he proposed to write a book called *The Love of Women*, recounting and glorifying all the ones he had bedded. Here he is in *New York Jew*, his third and final memoir, describing intercourse with Mary Lou Peterson, a flamboyant hanger-on of the trans-Atlantic smart set with whom he took up in late forties:

I was looking at the candlelight behind her head as I thrust my way ahead in her, and I have never felt anything so keen as the vibration that joined me to her, to the candlelight, to the golden helmet in the Rembrandt portrait that shown upon an open picture book on the floor... All that I had carried in silence and secrecy so long, all that I had held against the world – all this burst apart as her body, fully stirred, moving in one sinuous line, heaved up at me when she whispered my name.

But was it good for her? Cook loses himself trying to glean literary meaning from mere crotch-mindedness: 'While the rhythm and diction of this passage strangely echo Melville's climactic account of Captain Ahab's passion against the whale,' he begins, inspiring little confidence, 'it is not hate that Kazin is celebrating here, but a discovered pleasure and sense of release that he had never known before.' This is one way of putting it.

Legendary are the peacock hauteur and blithe misogyny which characterized such professors of desire, as Diana Trilling and Mary McCarthy have sourly attested in their own against-the-grain reflections. But we should remember that those who toyed with Reich's orgone box had also felt themselves narrow escapees of Hitler's ovens; the struggle between Eros and Thanatos was as pronounced for the New York Jews as the one between intellectual independence and institutionalization, or 'selling out.' After all, if Chagall's rebbes 'sprouted wings over the thatched roofs of Vietbsk and sang the joys of the flesh,' did not the latter-day orphans of Diaspora have an even stronger need to thrive and procreate? Accompanying this Freudian

WEISS | On Alfred Kazin

impulse was a modernist nostalgia, a rediscovery of Judaism on American terms, with an emphasis on the new nature of Jewish power and patriotism.

Kazin was *sui generis* in many respects: He had little sympathy for Zionism (although he cried when reading articles about the founding of Israel), and mistrusted the militarism of Israeli society when he visited. Upon being hectored by Yigael Yadin, hero of the War of Independence and now IDF commander, that Jews were not safe outside of the holy land, Kazin laughed: 'I hadn't realized American Jews were so much in danger, and the dear old U.S. of A. so much on the rocks.' He lamented the absence – both literal and metaphorical – of Kafka in Jerusalem, which can only be read as a cosmopolitan's longing for the creative yields of destruction. (The first American reviewer of *Night* thought Elie Wiesel was a windbag; Primo Levi was his preferred chronicler of the Shoah.) It's ironic, though, that Kazin chided Edmund Wilson, who was as philo-Semitic as gentlemen gentiles came, and Saul Bellow for their late-stage pessimism; he shared this trait fundamentally, too, whether he realized it or not.

In the 1950's, not only did Kazin buck the complacent, conservative trends anatomized in Howe's essay 'Our Age of Conformity,' but he even alienated that author by not taking up the cause of liberal anti-Stalinism vigorously enough. Kazin's travels through post-war Italy had convinced him that Communism's dire effects on the intellectual and spiritual lifeblood of a nation could be meditated by that nation's cultural traditions: He returned to the U.S. depressed at what he thought was an unnecessary consolidation of 'sides' in the incipient cold war, and the absence of anything like Croceism here. This was both a sentimental and naïve complaint because our cultural tradition is one of *rejecting* the easy co-existence of ideological extremes, which cannot be diluted, in a great melting pot, by shared folk heritage. Nor did it help his case that, while hosting an academic seminar in Salzburg, attended by Party students and ex-Fascists from around the continent, he had led everyone in an extracurricular rendition of 'The Internationale,' a sentimental episode the seminar co-host and shameless fellow traveller F.O. Matthiessen subsequently recounted in *From the Heart of Europe*. (Howe denounced them both in a review of the book for PR as maestros conducting a 'gang of future cultural commissars,' an assault which caused Kazin no small amount of grief.)

Though a frequent contributor to *Commentary*, Kazin preferred Politics, Dwight Macdonald's short-lived but vibrant one-man journal that attempted to carve out a 'third way' between Communism and capitalism. Cook is less sure of himself in

anatomising the angry and loud disputes that took hold among former comrades in this period – he can sound as innocent as his subject sometimes. This can't really be forgiven, since he has benefit of hindsight; 'alleged traitor Alger Hiss' is exactly one word too long. There is also this problem:

In March 1949, Sidney Hook, leading a select army of prominent anti-Stalinists, organized a conference and rally to counter (and subvert) the famous Waldorf Conference to promote peace and understanding between America and the Soviet Union. Kazin was not asked to join. Hook later attributed Kazin's notable absence to the fact that he was not enough of a 'big shot.' Kazin said Hook didn't consider him anti-Communist enough.

The Waldorf Conference was as much to 'promote peace and understanding between America and the Soviet Union' as the Moscow Trials were to ferret out gravediggers of the revolution. It was a pro-Soviet propaganda-fest made up of 3,000 delegates, from imported apparatchiks from Russia and Poland, to quivering and hounded luminaries like Shostakovich, to home-grown dupes like Matthiessen. Howe reported on the Conference for *PR* and recalls in his memoir *A Margin of Hope*: 'The CP kept discreetly in the background, knowing that an open defense of Soviet policy – this was soon after the takeover in Czechoslovakia – would be unpalatable even to long-trying fellow travellers.' Gatecrashers also included Macdonald and McCarthy; their protest was one of two final instances in which the New York intellectuals acted, in Howe's words, as a 'coherent group.' Opposition to Ezra Pound's receipt of the Bollingen Award for his *Pisan Cantos* was the other, and here Kazin was included in the debate, which broadened into one over the long history of anti-Semitism in *Weltliteratur*.

He agreed with Leslie Fielder's pronouncement in *Commentary* that, after the Holocaust, Jews would have to make an inventory of the violent Jew-hatred in works of genius they had spent their youths gushing over. The 'nasty ones,' wrote Kazin, 'the modern ones – a Dostoevsky, a Henry James, a Henry Adams, an Andre Gide, a Santayana, a Cummings, a Celine, an Eliot, a Pound. How we love them, though they love us not.' He would later revise his opinion of Pound in the 1980's, arguing that the poet's fascism and bigotry were actually integral to his talent. This volte-face can be explained by the fact that he had become as much a part of literature as a surveyor of it, and had grown to see himself as resembling those non-Jewish Jews before him simultaneously cut off from and at one with the spirit of the age. Look at how much self-identification and self-confidence are on display here:

WEISS | On Alfred Kazin

These revolutionaries, writers, scientists, painters were the ‘new men,’ the first mass secularists in the long religious history of the Jews, yet the zeal with which they engaged themselves to the ‘historic’ task of desacralizing the European tradition often came from the profound history embedded in Judaism itself... These ‘new men’ had a vision of history that, as their critics were to tell them, was fanatically all of one piece, obstinately ‘Jewish’ and ‘intellectual’ – a vision in which some subtle purposiveness to history always managed to reassert itself in the face of repeated horrors. But what their critics could not recognize was that this obstinate quest for ‘meaning’ was less a matter of conscious thought than a personal necessity, a require for survival, the historic circumstance that reasserted itself in case after case among Jews, many of whom had good reason to believe that their lives were a triumph over ever possible negation, and who, with the modesty of people for whom life itself is understandably the greatest good, found it easy to rejoice in the political and philosophic reasoning that assured them civic respect, civic peace, and the life of the mind.’

A decade or so before composing these lines, Kazin had come to the more melancholy conclusion, upon reading Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform*, that ‘I have joined the great middle-class world of daily self-satisfaction. What has happened to the story of America...? All those fat Jews – Jason Epstein and my own Richard H, all the Beichmans and Cultural Freedom overseers – all this represents the death not merely of ‘alienation’ but of the vital, fiercely hungry intelligence... We wanted to get out of Brownsville, the steerage, and we got into the “American” business.’

None did so more than Lionel Trilling, the ghostly Banquo who flits through nearly every chapter of this life story and whom Kazin viciously mocked in a notorious portrait in *New York Jew*. Trilling’s crime was that he was self-hating variety. Even worse, he was a self-critical liberal at a time when the HUAC and McCarthy were regarded as the Control Commission and Vyshinsky of the Stars and Stripes. But there was other beef between the two critics. Kazin thought Trilling had blocked his appointment to the Columbia English Department because the latter didn’t want ‘another Jew’ on the staff. Maybe. We’ll never know if Cook does not, but it does seem supremely unfair of his subject to have sniped, in 1968, the middle of his own journey, that a celebrated essayist of Isaac Babel ‘cannot stand my temperament – he cannot stand the ghetto Jew in me – he cannot stand my vitality.’ This reeks of envy and status anxiety, two understandable but annoying traits sharpened by Kazin’s detachment from his natural cohort. If Norman Podhoretz made a name

Democratiya 13 | Summer 2008

for himself in denouncing 'ex-friends,' Kazin insisted he never liked them in the first place. Oh, what a lot of parties... those *vile bodies*:

The minute you enter the house, see the drinks laid out, the first conversational gambit given, you know it all in advance... a competitive, soused-up intellectual is a mockery of the arts and the religious man's vision – he comes in always walking in shoes that are too large for him, he talks by habit, he lives in a routine. You never know with these people whether you are talking criticism or gossip. I'm sick to death of all this talk, self-perpetuating, competitive talk.

Hannah Arendt, who maintained her own exclusive salon with her husband Heinrich Bluecher, was a thundering exception, likely because of her European indifference to American social ambition, and because she collected promising male protégés with something like a sexual fervour. She chose Kazin to help 'English' the text for *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and he, to his credit, became one of her stalwart defenders during the brouhaha over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. (It took Arendt's snubbing of Kazin's second wife, the novelist Ann Birstein, to end this largely epistolary relationship.)

It would be gratifying to think that Arendt toughened Kazin's mind for politics. His outlook actually grew keener in the 1960's, owing to two separate but equal ruptures: the one he had with the 'liberal consensus,' and the one he had with his son Michael, his 'Kaddish,' as Daniel Bell phrased it. Kazin was inextricably 'on the left' all his life, and on the great questions of his middle years, he was more or less representative: he wearied of the status quo under Eisenhower, whom he accused of 'sell[ing]-out to McCarthy;' he advocated early on for civil rights; he opposed the Vietnam War; and he loathed totalitarian Communism enough not to commit the sin of comparing the United States to the Soviet Union. Cook writes: 'To follow Kazin through the politics of the late sixties is to get a glimpse of the chagrin, the shame, the bewilderment, and the anger, but also the reflective and self-critical openness of a liberal trying to be honest with himself about a historical, moral (and parental) predicament he self-admittedly did not understand.'

Having been a divorced and absentee father, he made every effort to try to understand. In the course of writing this review, I chanced to meet Michael Kazin at one of the many the post-mortem lectures on the sixties and their enduring discontents he's delivered over the decades. I mean no offense by saying he's now the

WEISS | On Alfred Kazin

picture of scholarly liberalism he once rejected in high Oedipal fashion. Kazin *fills* shrugged when I suggested that his violent disagreements with *pere* over Cuba, the New Left and the counterculture actually contributed to the old man's continuing political relevance. The paladins of 1930's socialism, he thought, had been 'impaled on their own bitterness;' theirs was a generational conflict straight out of Turgenev. Thus where Howe hectored from his senior perch at *Dissent*, Kazin screamed at the dinner table about the nihilism of campus takeovers and pseudo-revolutionary cant, then agonized in his journals about whether or not he was being too hard on the kids after all. Drawing from his own experiences, he likely suspected that they'd be someday hoisted on their own soixante petard, so to speak, as indeed they were. But even before the clash of Fathers and Sons, Alfred was no pushover to being won over. He accused Hubert Humphrey to his face of suffering 'from the Hemingway syndrome: you can never be tough enough, and you have to prove your masculinity.' And he never, to his everlasting credit, succumbed to the Kennedy fever-dream, despite numerous entreaties made by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., now regarded as the best court stenographer of 'Camelot.'

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco he was full of 'doubt and wonder' about the young executive who inspired so many to embarrassing displays of utopian homily on behalf of 'President Jack.' When Kennedy learned that Kazin was working on a trenchant piece about the new administration and its dubious, cultivated relationship with courtier-intellectuals, he instructed Schlesinger to invite him to the White House to see if he might not like to join the fold. The evening resulted in an only slightly emended exposé titled, 'Kennedy and the Other Intellectuals,' easily one of the best pieces of political journalism Kazin ever wrote, and one of the best things ever written about Kennedy. As Philip Larkin once put it to Kingsley Amis, 'The papers call them the brains trust. I don't trust their brains.' How well that dictum applies in 2008 as much as it did in 1961:

[W]hen I ask myself, as I increasingly must, what it is in Kennedy's ambition to be an 'intellectual' statesman that steels him for his awesome responsibility, what in his convictions can carry him over the sea of troubles awaiting all of us, I have to answer that I do not know. At this juncture, Kennedy's shrewd awareness of what intellectuals can do, even his undoubted inner respect for certain writers, scholars and thinkers, is irrelevant to the tragic issues and contributes nothing to their solution. To be an 'intellectual' is the latest style in American success, the mark of our manipulatable society.

Notwithstanding Kazin's assumption that *Profiles in Courage* was 'indubitably written by the author himself,' the essay hit its mark, causing Kennedy to bitch to Schlesinger, 'We wined him and dined him and talked about Hemingway and Dreiser with him, and I later told Jackie what a good time she missed, and then he went away and wrote that piece!' Whether he knew it or not, Kazin in this respect enjoyed the esteemed company he sought all his life: Edmund Wilson was one of the only other belletrists to laugh off Kennedy's attempts to co-opt him.

Of course, as we saw with Trilling, Kazin could be nasty, stinting and hypocritical, as when he assailed Bellow, then under Allan Bloom's tutorship, for the race hostility evident in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. He made the philistine case that Bellow's protagonist spoke verbatim for his author. Kazin also forgot that he himself was not immune from grumpy white man syndrome: he had complained about his academic posting in Puerto Rico, where Bellow was also residing at the time in a higher state of enjoyment, that the natives suffered from 'their famous docility... the apathy of tropical countries... and Step'n Fetchit sloth.' Nor was he much of a feminist either. Kazin belonged to New York's Century Club, an all-male 'association' on West 43rd Street, and wrote hilariously of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*: 'There hasn't been so much public exploitation of a woman's parts, a woman's fantasies, a woman's 'chemistry,' a woman's idlest daydreams since cosmetic ads were invented.' A 1984 journal entry has him sighing: 'If liberal America is dead or dying, the culprit is liberal America – the feminist separatists, the black separatists,' all mired in identity politics which any classically trained Marxist could diagnose as just a lot of competing little nationalisms.

Kazin was a cultural conservative, yet the dialectic between belonging and alienation, between fitting in and staying out, could be hazardous to his sense of fair play. For instance, Kazin knew he had invited ideological opprobrium by penning a much passed-around piece in the *New York Review of Books* about his unlikely presence at the Committee for the Free World conference in New York in 1983. He gave the Epsteins their cold war satire on a triumphalist neo-confab. But the reporter should not have felt so out of place. There was a blizzard in the city that February, and it kept Kazin from attending Hilton Kramer's keynote address on the tragedy of the American writer's estrangement from his own society – minor shades of the alone generation, if argued from the opposite political direction. 'Saving My Soul at the Plaza' was straight out of the *PR* playbook of ironical dressing down, written in a mock-sentimental tone of 'What has happened to all my old friends?' Odd though

WEISS | On Alfred Kazin

it was to see a self-confessed ‘political coward’ don his sparring gloves, it showed he wasn’t averse to staying in the game by picking fights into his late sixties.

In a strange way, his combativeness a decade before his death marked the final reconciliation with tradition – the immigrant ambition tempered by the late failure of radical hopes – as well as a definitive break with it. Most of the New York Jews had long made peace with the establishment because that is what getting older meant and, let’s be honest, they never *were* going to settle for low-level apparatchik duty when the revolution came – they all wanted to be Trotsky. It took Reagan to make this a reality.

Kazin, ill at ease with the parochialism of academia (he had no patience for ‘theory’), and angry about declining educational standards in America, evolved into own species of nostalgic curmudgeon. He was still a liberal because he thought the responsibility of politics was similar to that of criticism, to traffic in a ‘*histoire morale*, that sums up the spirit of the age in which we live and then asks us to transcend it, that enables us to see things in the grand perspective...asks us – not only in the light of man’s history but of his whole striving – to create a future in keeping with man’s imagination.’ That might sound self-aggrandizing and silly to modern ears, but for the New York intellectual Robert Alter once called ‘a kind of hidden stranger,’ it was a reliable catechism.

Michael Weiss is the New York Editor of *Pajamas Media*. His work appears frequently in *Slate*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *The New Criterion*. His essay on Edmund Wilson appeared in *Democratija* 12.