

Alfred Kazin and his Generation: Bellow, Trilling and Others

Alfred Kazin's work has always been of singular interest to me, not only because it is so good, but also because he belonged to a generation of writers and artists who came from impoverished immigrant Jewish families and established themselves as the kings and princes of American culture in the decades that followed the end of World War II. At the peak of Kazin's career, which his biographer Richard Cook pinpoints as the late 1950s and early 1960s, he may have been the best-known and most influential critic in the country. His life and career can be grouped with that of other famous critics and writers, including Clement Greenberg, Irving Howe, Delmore Schwartz, and Harold Rosenberg. He knew--and often wrote about--the great novelists of the day, including, inevitably, the trio of Bellow, Roth and Malamud, whom Bellow famously referred to as the Hart Schaffner & Marx of American literature. Poets like Stanley Kunitz and Karl Shapiro and the essayist/novelist Stanley Elkin likewise belonged to that generation. A number of painters and graphic artists entered the lists, including Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Philip Guston, and Saul Steinberg, the last a Rumanian who became famous in the U.S. in the post-war years. Isaac Rosenfeld, generally forgotten, seemed destined for eminence with his precocious and brilliant reviews from the 1940s, but went into decline by 1950 and died prematurely young in Chicago just when he seemed to be reestablishing a career. B.H. Haggin, another Jew, is one of the few music critics from the post-war era whose collected reviews are still worth reading. Susan Sontag began publishing in the 1960s, and others, including Lionel Trilling and Leslie Fiedler, scholars rather than "men of letters," flourished in what seems to us the golden post-war years, above all the 1950s, when a professional academic

could find an attentive, respectful reading public far beyond the halls and libraries of the academy. A vanished period, that, when Kazin himself--excluded from war-time service because of a severe stammer--became sufficiently accomplished as a public speaker to appear on television to discuss literature with other critics.

I originally read Kazin's work as a young man in the late 1970s. A reporter with a degree in the social sciences not long out of college, I was developing a taste for serious fiction. In Argentina, where I worked for a year as a wire service reporter, I read some stories and novels by Bellow and Malamud, and read more when I moved to Chicago. An interest in post-war America fiction inevitably leads a reader to Kazin, whose career is inseparable from the subject, and in addition to the essay-reviews published in various books--*Contemporaries* and *The Inmost Leaf*--I eagerly read his three volumes of autobiography, the last of which, *New York Jew*, came out in 1978. *A Walker in the City*, published in 1951, was and still is considered a classic of Jewish immigrant life in the first decades of the last century. I cannot pinpoint the date, but he came to Chicago around 1982 or '83, delivered a well-attended lecture at the old Chicago Public Library on Randolph Street, and talked about local writers from Dreiser to Bellow. His knowledge and range of reading seemed to me vast; I remember that the lecture even included a reference to the famous ironwork above the entrance to the old Carson Pirie Scott department store in the Loop, a Louis Sullivan design from the 1890s.

Kazin became a star during the war, in 1942, when *On Native Grounds* was published. He was only 27 when the book came out. It charted the rise of the new realism in America, not just in literature but in the arts generally, including architecture and social thought; it is probably his most important book. Collections of essays, including *The Bright Book of Life* and *An American Procession*, appeared in the seventies and eighties, but failed to elicit the enthusiasm

his initial book did, in part because they drew on reviews that had already been published and seemed somewhat idiosyncratic or, if you prefer, "personal," in their choice of subject matter and style of presentation. There isn't any doubt that by the late seventies and eighties, he was quite remote from the academic trends that repelled him--narrow specialization, identity politics, and a regrettable attraction to theory. He himself began to feel excluded, seen as less important, the *Journals* reveal, a source to be mined by scholars looking for material on the 1940s, perhaps, but not a figure of contemporary relevance. He remarks in an entry from May 1981 on one advantage of reaching old age: "So many people do not share my past that I am free to invent it--even to seem to occupy it."

His antiquarian status--if that is what it was--never stopped me from reading him. Kazin's special interests were the nineteenth-century masters, above all Emerson, Melville, and Thoreau; kingpins like Hemingway, who started writing after the Great War; and the Jewish writers who "made it big" in the post-war decades. But he belonged to a generation of generalists, exceptional figures like Orwell and Edmund Wilson, and he wrote on a much wider range of topics--Freud, Simone Weil, President Kennedy, Norman Mailer, the rise of the neo-conservatives in the 1970s--than academics usually touch upon. Kazin considered himself a writer, not simply a critic, and would have become a novelist had he had the gift.

All of this and much more becomes evident in *Alfred Kazin's Journals*, selected and edited by Richard M. Cook, who reports that this 580-page volume has been culled from the 7,000 pages on deposit at Yale University. The collection is rich, an important source for anyone interested in American literature in the second half of the twentieth century, the politics of publishing, social ties among the writers and their publishers and patrons, and relations among the scholars and writers themselves. Kazin's complex views on some of the figures he wrote

about, especially when the journal entries diverge slightly from the "official version" of the autobiographies, add fresh information for those interested in the subject. Richard Cook, who produced a fine biography of Kazin, has written a useful introduction to the collection, and has divided the book into various segments that seem to mark distinct periods of Kazin's career. These segments in turn are introduced with a brief summary of events the journal entries enlarge on. Numerous footnotes that identify figures Kazin writes about are informative and scholarly. On balance, Cook has produced an effective, readable and professional apparatus for the *Journals*.

Alfred Kazin was often bored and frequently lonely; occasionally exhilarated by books, teaching, women, and sex; and tormented by his youthful pre-war visions of socialism and the success and careerism of his generation of writers and scholars in the post-war decades. He was especially enraged by "turncoat" Jews who moved to the right during the 1970s and embraced Ronald Reagan in the eighties. Obsessed by Jews and his Jewishness, including the outstanding successes of his generation, Saul Bellow and Isaiah Berlin, Kazin puzzled over the grounds of their success, which could also stimulate his envy. He sought to interpret the meaning of his own experience as a "secular Jew" who found himself bored by synagogues and their liturgy, who seldom visited any (though his third father-in-law was a rabbi) and considered Spinoza and Einstein, the teachers of mankind, as true rabbis. He was married four times, felt guilty decades later over a war-time infidelity with the beautiful Mary Louise Peterson (then married to the historian Hans Meyerhoff) that ended his first marriage, and had such tumultuous exchanges with his third that alarmed neighbors sometimes called the police. His parents' generation, people married near the turn of the twentieth century, often had arranged marriages that lasted until one of the spouses died, which was true for many of their children as well. But the

breakers-away, like Bellow and Kazin, were very different. "I keep wanting two things," Kazin writes in an entry from late 1949, "the family, and freedom of sexual exploration." A common enough experience, and he expands on this from the perspective of middle age in an entry from January 1964. "What happened in the '40's," he writes, doubtless considering the generation of writers that started out then, "was just the beginning of the current sexual sophistication of the Jewish middle class. Everybody of my generation had his...great search for 'fulfillment.' There was, God knows, no break with convention, there was just a freeing of oneself from all those parental attachments and thou-shalt-nots." Only Judith Dunford, his last wife, appears to have brought Kazin any peace. He seems to have established close and durable ties with his son, the historian Michael Kazin, the product of his second marriage, after the latter settled on a career as a scholar; relations with his daughter, Katey, the product of his third marriage, were apparently more strained. She gained a Ph.D. in English, abandoned a college teaching career, went to law school, and seems to have thrown that over as well for a life in Israel. She disappears from the published *Journals* in the final years, and may not have been with him at the end of his life. He died in June 1998, on his eighty-third birthday.

The great divide in Kazin's life is the enthusiasm for socialism in the 1930s, shared by so many young people of his generation, with its promise of solidarity and equality, and the sodden correlatives of prosperity and success that came so unexpectedly and on such a grand scale in the decades that followed the war. The individual's intense and private struggle for recognition, jobs and money replaced the communal struggles against Fascism and for progressive government. This in turn helped produce the loneliness and boredom that afflicted him for so much of his life after the war. And there is no sense--a really central point for Kazin--of a common good. Most of these figures in his life may belong to the left, at least until the mid-seventies, but their

sympathies are reserved for large and remote groups, such as disenfranchised blacks or the working class, rather than for individuals that are loosely called friends. It was easier to be charitable toward people the further away they were from a writer's personal ambitions, whether personal, sexual or financial. With one another and in a more general way, they felt little but competition, rivalry, envy, ill-will. Among the former radicals there is little comradely fellow-feeling. Kazin notes in a journal entry from July 1963, shortly before assuming a decade-long appointment at SUNY Stony Brook, that "The beggarly Jewish radicals of the 30s are now the ruling pundits of American society--I who stood so long outside the door wondering if I would ever get through it, am now one of the standard bearers of American literary opinion." That may sound like self-praise, and there might be an element of satisfaction in the remark, but the truth is that Kazin was not very happy with the outstanding success of the Jewish talents of his generation. Their transformation from "beggarly radicals" to "ruling pundits" reflected an ego-driven scramble for "success," success for its own sake, that hardened the "winners" and probably embittered the less successful. "The more I see of life around me," he reflects in a journal entry from December 1955, "the more I am convinced of the utter lack of any true opinion in most places, of there being no solid core of thought anywhere. The real joke of our modern egomania may not be that we are struggling with unconquerable passions for ourselves, but that we may have nothing else very sure to talk about." Four years later, in May 1959, he comments that "it is the increasing rejection of the way the world is going in favor of our own personality alone, that seems to me the really decadent and self-referring thing about contemporary American society." These remarks apply as much to the writers and scholars of his generation as to the average American struggling for his own survival. "The golden age of the Jews--the Age of our Success," he comments laconically in November 1968, and then

proceeds to simply list the best known examples of what he is describing--Peter Gay, Hanna Arendt, Harry Levin, Daniel Bell, Leonard Bernstein, Saul Bellow, Irving Howe, Harold Rosenberg, Herman Kahn, and so on, including, of course, himself. The entry mostly consists of a list of names from the arts and sciences of people who have "made it," in the language made famous (or notorious) by Norman Podhoretz, in his 1967 biography *Making It*. "The winners and the losers," Kazin observes. "Jews and non-Jews: write an essay on what we successes owe the others...The sweet smell of success."

And who are these people, proud of their success, of rising in life, attracting attention, earning money that far exceeds their Depression-era expectations? Egocentric, hyper-competitive people, eager to prove their superior gifts, frequently unattractive, and ultimately boring, to tell the truth, at least collectively and in social gatherings, where people are wearing their masks and, as Kazin describes it, drenched in self-satisfaction. In December 1963, work at Stony Brook prevents him from attending a *Commentary* symposium "on the Negro," but he chooses to drop in on the social affair afterward at the home of the publication's editor, Norman Podhoretz. He writes later in the evening :

I...came back in such a state of moral fatigue and irritability with all those familiar faces that I must sit down here for a minute and put something down of it...The uncouthness of these people as a group, plus the uncomfot of standing so long, and the sick stimulation of tepid scotch and water, makes for an atmosphere that is like a Jewish family feast in which the reproaches and hostilities and jealousies and grapplings become a thick, viscous medium in which you move. My overwhelming feeling when I saw this group en-masse...all thickly cooked together in the room, was: My God, how tired I am of all of you! And they looking at me with the same weariness and familiarity.

Vacuous social occasions, preening, appealing to others to confirm one's self-regard, while the wives remain mostly out of it, appendages, with "their faces stuck on the air as on hat-poles." In August 1963, he remarks that "we Jews have become the intellectual standard-bearers

and leaders of the American community." But this achievement involves an unwanted transformation: "Emphasis on career rather than on works. But all this smugness hides a great boredom and sense of unreality." "When did it begin," he asks himself in February 1964, "this idea of the self as disengageable, whole, from 'society,' as the first victim then the opponent of circumstances?" A moment before, he comments that "There is a self, a Me, whom I race against. A Me whose identity is given only by Others," the "others" being childhood influences, fashion, the requirements of family, job and money. But this is a falsification, because the "authentic self wants to be free of the self that can only race, succeed or fail."

Kazin seems to have regarded himself as an outsider, always. He came from Brownsville, an impoverished and dangerous neighborhood on the edge of Brooklyn, closer to the ocean than it is to Manhattan, and more than a score of subway stops away. In some sense, a part of his spirit may have stayed there. "I've *never* felt like an American," he declares roundly to the playwright William Gibson at a social occasion in New York in 1963. A lengthy entry from May 1959, when he has entered middle age, registers his dismay:

I have this sense, I say, of the utter triviality and materialism of most of the culture around me, of living for the values of a vanished period. Anyone over forty now lives for a vanished period, while the younger writers no longer know what to live for, except themselves, find themselves treading water, are alone and lost in the great big void.

An instructor at Harvard, Stanford, Amherst, the State University of New York at Stony Brook and finally the City University of New York, he never acquired a doctoral degree, and was no more at home with professional scholars than he was with other critics. In April 1965, he sits with Harold Bloom, then a young prodigy near the beginning of his career, and comes away extremely impressed but also disturbed. Bloom fires "cannonades of lecture at you" and leaves Kazin feeling "like I know nothing and have read nothing about the English romantics [about]

whom I prate so much." Bloom is an "arrogantly possessed young scholar....He is a brilliant representative of an academician, which, as always, I am so out of that I can only suffer the exclusiveness of it..." Later, Kazin had "a horrible four-in-the-morning crisis over this, but I shook myself free of it eventually and got back to sleep."

Socialism as a practice--government management of the economy, the abolition of private property--was no longer an option for Kazin in the post-war years, but he maintained a life-long loyalty to the ideals it represented. A very important entry from May 1964, too long to quote in full, recounts the impact of the war. Referring to that apocalyptic age of 1933-1945--from Hitler's accession to power and up to the German surrender--Kazin writes, "During those twelve years, Hitler and Stalin were prime builders of the totalitarian system and the destroyers, at the same time, of the myth that politics could be the saving force and prime interest of my generation." Rejected by Selective Service on medical grounds during the war, Kazin was employed by the U.S. Army to produce educational materials for the war effort, and was allowed to travel to England shortly before the German surrender in May 1945. The memories of walking the English streets and helping tend the injured stayed with Kazin for the rest of his life. "Every day in those English streets," he writes in December 1951, "there was some small gentleness, some kindness, some civility that made me stop and gasp with surprise." And: "Oh ladies of Walthamstow, oh kind ladies...who would not let me go that night--oh my cockney Angels, who fed me and talked to me and saved me...good nurses of war, how we watched all night long over the men and women in their separate rooms--all of us together, the Arab doctor and the German refugee...." In December 1955, the activist days of the thirties long behind him, he observes that "Socialism did have the true quality of a belief, in the number of unconscious attachments it included---to the 'oppressed,' to Europe itself as the umbilical continent of our

Socialism, and to solidarity." These remarks came as he was preparing a review of *An End to Innocence*, a collection of essays by Leslie Fiedler, who chides the left for its support of Soviet Communism and its putative inability to recognize the danger and moral degradation of Stalin. "Fiedler finds his answer in the sophistication of post-Stalinism," Kazin writes. But signally important for the Depression years was the release it offered from the atomized life of most Americans. "Whatever the thirties came to," he writes, "there was a feeling then of having one's beliefs shared, of being with others because of this."

Kazin was longing for true community, the ability to draw on a collective source of strength. He remembers the wartime unity in January 1960, when he describes his return to New York in the summer of 1945 on the *Queen Mary* with thousands of veterans of the campaign in Europe, all taking in "the lights and bands of the harbor": "Society, a mass, acting in concert with you, *expressing the deepest part of you*, the unconscious part of you, in fact, just the opposite of being submerged in a crowd." A cello recital in 1958 disappoints by the poorness of the performance, but the shared attentiveness of the audience abates his loneliness.

Often Kazin seemed to cultivate his aloneness, and identified with those who experienced it as well--one of the few things, perhaps, that he could share with others. "My New York remains the New York of cafeterias, the salesmen, the evening session students, the counter-men, the kibitzers," he writes in November 1951. "The New York of the tired men who eat in their overcoats and with their hats on, of the dressmaker old maids on their way down from the Amalgamated....Only cafeterias in NY are places for me to sit down in." The nineteenth-century writers he values the most saw themselves "as queers and different ones in a violently expansive society." He thinks of Hawthorne's stories, Poe's tales, Emerson's *Journals*, Whitman's "long, lazy lines": "sensitive, solitary brooders and fantasts working with a language outside the big

world," men who criticized a society "from which they personally felt alienated" but who also "shared its postulates."

Kazin was trapped in a peculiar and painful dilemma. An August 1956 journal entry composed in the South of France laments that "I am no longer fighting...because like everyone else of my generation and background, I have 'graduated' from suffering. I have joined the great middle-class world of daily self-satisfaction." The cost of "happiness" and "fulfillment" is a banking of the fires of social struggle. Russia, which he visits briefly as a cultural ambassador in September 1959, is every bit as dreary as he expects it to be. But when he returns to New York, he remarks on "the absence of this stinking frivolity and mindlessness and skepticism, this poisonous careerism," that has overtaken nearly all social strata in America. Nihilism, a word that recurs in the *Journals*, eventuates when people believe in nothing but financial and professional success. Kazin wants to be, needs to be, an individual--not to fit in, to be merely a particle in a mass--but instead to be "a true radical in favor of knowledge, of an openness toward society, experience, history, the world. It is not to favor the ideal self over the world, or the world over this self, but to bring the self back into the world as its natural home." But in the 1950s, "the flame of individual consciousness has nothing to burn on but itself." The "individual" with no meaningful attachments finds himself asserting his own personality, which often amounts to "middle-class greed" and "animal appetites." The professional and social success gained by his generation of Jews in the fifties, including and perhaps especially his own, "represents the death not merely of 'alienation' but of the vital and fiercely hungry intelligence. We wanted to get *out* of Brownsville, the steerage--and we got *into* the 'American' business." Success has come at the expense of being "outside, [as a] a free and single agent."

Kazin does not seem to have taken--from the evidence of the *Journals*--quite the pleasure out of his great success a reader might have expected him to. One reason may be that he appears to compare himself often to others as or more successful than he--the American social disease--and finds the experience embittering. He is continually at war with "the state," which he calls in a May 1967 entry "The Lion in the path, the secret, central issue in everything we touch nowadays, the State, the High and Almighty State...Now all bad dreams are of getting into trouble with this high almightiness. All success even in the intellectual field is somehow connected with the State." Part of his distress, of course, is that the vast system of education of which he is a part draws support from the government. And as one who saw himself as a perpetual outsider, institutions of power, government or otherwise, very often offend him. But Kazin was still able to take pleasure in fundamental aspects of his life. "Evening--writing--the bliss of writing," he says in November 1961. "How lucky I am to be able to write, to be able to write this quickly. To be able to tune in whenever and wherever." In the first of January 1959, not often a time of the year that stirs enthusiasm, Kazin says "I feel that I have only to sit down every day and to *think* in order to get my work done. The world becomes increasingly fuller, richer, denser, more beautifully complex every day." In February 1954 he has an obscure vision while gazing at 125th Street, apparently near Riverside Drive and Columbia University, and wonders why, amidst what he terms "a grimy, workmanlike street, this most ordinary of passageways," the experience is so new. "Because I had seen something from the ordinary, because the rest of this vision was, in my own city experience, bound up with something one mentions so casually as 125th Street." Invoking Emerson and Thoreau, he concludes that what writers "seek to capture in the end is the actual, to make it tangible: to wrest it out of abstractness, the generality, the anonymity of the daily, unthinking experience, the miracle of the

real." What he begins to understand, he concludes, "is the full and unexpected depth of 125th Street itself."

An entry from August 1955 concerning Lionel Trilling indicates what would prove to be a major animus of Kazin's career, one that he went public with in *New York Jew*, his third and final volume of autobiography, published three years after Trilling died in 1975. "I suppose what it is I dislike most in Trilling's writing is this specious air of reasonableness which he gives to his prudences and fears and prejudices, the air of connecting logic which makes so many of his points seem external....Trilling's writing is so audience minded...." Trilling, as many readers know, was one of the best-known critic-scholars of the 1950s, the first Jew to acquire a tenured appointment in Columbia University's English department during the Depression. He is said to have competed with Clifton Fadiman for the position, because the school would not grant the distinction to more than one Jew at a time. In a June 1962 diary entry, weighing the careers of writers he knew in the 1940s, Kazin remarks that Trilling "emphasized his career--Isaac [Rosenfeld] his soul. But in each case the concern was personal; art became secondary...The whole concern with the self, the career, the problem. Isaac became his own problem."

Some of Kazin's ill-will is stimulated by class resentment, a sense of being snubbed, excluded from the Columbia English Department. In a shocked diary entry from October 1968, after learning unexpectedly that his distaste for Trilling has long been reciprocal, Kazin decides that the elderly scholar after all "cannot stand the ghetto Jew in me." The depiction of Trilling (dead by then for three years) in *New York Jew* as a cautious, mannered and self-protective careerist was critical enough to draw an indignant letter in his defense published in the *New York Times Book Review*. It was signed by Robert Penn Warren, M. H. Abrams, Robert Kermode, Arthur M. Schlesinger, and other prominent figures who claimed to have known Trilling well

and to have seen none of the qualities that offended Kazin. In a June 1978 entry, Kazin allows that he is "devastated" by "this onslaught": He expected a reaction from Trilling's "Columbia acolytes," but not one that would involve so many of his personal attachments. Still, "there is not a single line about Trilling that I would take out of my book or apologize for."

But Kazin had a reputation as an abrasive, prickly and sensitive man who made few concessions to others while appealing to them for support. "I am not gentleman nor do I wish to become one," he writes in March 1984, after attending an elegant luncheon hosted by the art critic John Russell. "All this concentrated *gentillesse* makes me want to send the dishes flying...." Richard Cook in his biography indicates that Kazin could make derogatory remarks to students, on one occasion even heaving a book at one. At the same time, he regrets that he lacks the social polish that he observes, for example, in Arthur Schlesinger. He had a natural fascination with those who rose to great heights of visibility and influence. Isaiah Berlin, on friendly terms with Churchill, a social and intellectual star with an international reputation, was another Jewish scholar of obsessive interest, though Kazin's relations with Berlin--a liberal whom he seems to have met no more than a few times--were too remote to involve active like or dislike. Trilling was different. Kazin believed that Trilling tried to pass himself off as a couth, proper, cultivated English gentleman, a careerist who sought to "fit in"--unlike Bellow, who concealed his religion from no one and apologized for nothing. "Our Country and its Culture," the well-known symposium that *Partisan Review* organized in 1952, brought together a number of eminent contributors to assess the condition of the country and its culture. An oft-quoted passage from Trilling's essay, where he deploys his characteristic Johnsonian style, oracular, stiff, and formal, suggests the grounds of Kazin's opposition. In "The Situation of the American Intellectual," Trilling writes that "In many civilizations, there comes a point at which wealth shows a tendency

to submit itself, in some degree, to the rule of mind and imagination, to apologize for its existence by a show of taste and sensitivity. In America, the signs of this submission have been visible." Sentences like this produced Harold Rosenberg's famous jibe, which Kazin could not resist quoting in *New York Jew*: "When I first encountered the style of Lionel Trilling, I looked for the joke. Then I discovered there wasn't any." (The remark appears in the essay "Couch Liberalism and the Guilty Past.") Rosenberg, who also never seems to have made concessions to anyone, elicits Kazin's grudging approval. He hears Rosenberg harshly attack an English critic in person in September 1964, and decides he is a "ruthless in-fighter," an "intellectual rabbit-puncher," and even "destructive of all other writers." Yet "he inspires confidence, pleasure, joy, because he so positive...A forward-looking man; carries you forward with him." (Kazin also wrote a favorable private obituary in his *Journals* when he hears of Rosenberg's death in August 1978.)

Trilling was not entirely wrong in his *Partisan Review* essay; the problem is that his claims for American culture proved short-lived. As I wrote, the early 1950s seemed culturally promising to many, and Kazin himself often appeared on TV before a large audience; at this early stage, the medium was also broadcasting serious drama. Trilling was comparing post-war America to the U.S. he knew as a boy in the teens and twenties, when popular culture and the technology that supports it was in a relatively nascent stage. By 1952, the great age of post-war prosperity which seemed to offer the prospect of stimulating cultural as well as material progress was well underway. Work was being transformed into something more intellectual and complex, and university training was more extensive than ever. The universities themselves, no longer an unimportant enclave for eggheads, enjoyed greater prestige. But in that same symposium, Delmore Schwartz offered a comment, Nietzschean in tone, that seems closer to the mark: "The

more we reflect upon the changes of past and present, the clearer it becomes that the present, whatever else it may be, is essentially an intermediate period...a time of waiting in darkness before what may be a new beginning and morning, or a catastrophic degradation of civilization." And with piercing acuity, Schwartz identifies the conformity of intellectuals like Trilling as a "flight from the flux, chaos and uncertainty of the present, a forced and false affirmation of stability in the face of immense and mounting instability."

Questions of value and purpose, so important to Kazin after the war, when the radical hopes of the Popular Front were long forgotten and conservatism of the fifties took hold, became more explicit in the 1960s. The era starts with the Civil Rights movement in the south, and the progress it records, codified by formal legislation in the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts of the early 1960s, thrills Kazin, as it did many liberals. But the published entries, to the extent they involve politics at all, are mostly about, especially as the decade draws toward the 1968 presidential election, "the war." For much of the last century, the goal of the liberals from the Populists onward was to consolidate power in the Federal government, which was seen as the most effective agent for advancing progressive causes--civil rights, full employment, poverty relief and the like. But for Kazin, the government--or "the state," as he often calls it--was a source of danger. There is an accretion of power adhering to "the state" that sets in and dangerously expands with the developing Cold War and anti-communist campaigns that run for at least a quarter of a century following the collapse of the Axis in 1945. The government introduces the Loyalty Oaths in 1947, investigates and prosecutes spies, including Hiss and the Rosenbergs, executing the couple; the Eisenhower fifties are commonly seen as socially repressive. By the 1960s, the government begins prosecuting another war in Asia, this one deadlier and more violent, more publicly visible, because of TV, than the ones preceding it, and

Kazin, like all on the left, grew to hate it. The insoluble problem was how to oppose the war in a way that was both effective and legal.

In January 1968, he observes that Benjamin Spock, William Sloan Coffin and Marcus Raskin have been indicted by the government for abetting draft resisters, and asks "And where am I in all this? It's true that I don't believe in civil disobedience, but the Viet Nam war is so sickening that anything is justified against it." And in March 1968, shortly before Lyndon Johnson announced a bombing pause over North Viet Nam and abandoned his presidential campaign, Kazin presents a lecture and leads a discussion among Catholic students at Villanova University in Philadelphia. He finds the campus friendly and receptive, "But all the while, the thing on my mind is the insanity of war, the *failure--moral failure--my failure--to do enough by way of resistance and response.*" The question blended in with family issues. To the problem of his chronically unstable third marriage was added the ordeal of dealing with his son from the second, Michael, who was active in the SDS at Harvard. A willing participant in "teach-ins" and "read-ins," Kazin could not bring himself to break the law or encourage others to do it. The breakdown and ultimate failure of law to protect Jews in other times and places in the century undoubtedly affected his thinking.

Another central issue of student discontent, the "relevance" of the university curriculum, may have entered into his *Journals*, but not the published version that we have before us. The subject does not seem to come up at all.

I cannot touch on most of the topics that come up in this document of nearly 600 pages, but no discussion should omit the relations that blossom and later sadly wilt between Kazin and Saul Bellow. As others have pointed out, if Kazin was *the* critic of his generation, at least for much of his life, then Bellow was *the* novelist. They met in 1942, when Kazin was literary

editor at the *New Republic* and in a position to assign reviews. They knew many of the same people, attended many of the same social gatherings, and both were close to Isaac Rosenfeld, who came to New York from Chicago a year before Bellow and at the time was a rising star. It is not easy, from either Cook's biography or the *Journals*, to gain a very clear sense of the relationship between Bellow and Kazin, at least in the early years. Coming from poor, Russian and Yiddish-speaking families was obviously insufficient for them to establish a friendship, and even less so the fact that they were born ten days apart in June 1915. Kazin clearly admired Bellow for his talent, his wit, his general (if wary) friendliness. But a diary entry from November 1950 suggests limits: "Why I do not like Saul Bellow, no--*au fond*, I don't: *kalte mensch*, too full of his being a novelist to be a human being writing." The reaction did not prevent Kazin from generously praising the novella *Seize the Day* in a brief review in the *New York Times* in 1956. In that passage from June 1960 about Trilling and Rosenfeld that I quoted before, Kazin remarks that while the latter "used his work to clarify and to advance his own experience, Saul has always used his life, in the grand manner, to advance his *work*--The typical Jewish concern with one's self as a 'problem,' as a battleground." Like many intellectuals, Kazin was ecstatic about *Herzog*, Bellow's greatest novel, published in the spring of 1964: "*Herzog* overwhelms me," he writes in June. "Saul's greatest book, and the book of his generation. He has learned from all of his troubles and consciousness. *Equal* to the ambiguity of circumstances." After a dinner-reception among friends in September in New York to celebrate the great commercial and critical success of the novel, Kazin comments that "Saul alone of all the old gang has achieved first-class status."

But matters deteriorated in 1970. The occasion was a review Kazin prepared of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* in the *New York Review of Books*, an organ Bellow disliked, not least because

of David Levine's unflattering caricatures. *The New York Review of Each Other's Books* is how Bellow renamed the publication. If the 1960s fit in with many of Kazin's natural sympathies, they seem to have stimulated Bellow's antagonism. The issue of Bellow's "politics" is highly problematic, but I have always had the impression that he remained something that might loosely be called a liberal, even though he was sharply pilloried by the academic left in the 1990s. He became so pessimistic about American life--what his former friend Schwartz called "catastrophic degradation"--that he had little faith in any political answer to our problems. Kazin, on the other hand, did not so much veer to the left as remain a part of it, loyal, I think, to his sense of solidarity with outsiders, failures, and the culture of Europe. One of his best-known essays came in what might be called a belated phase of political activism, with the conservative turn of American politics that culminated in the 1980 presidential victory of Ronald Reagan. His hatred of the conservatives was intensified by the equivalent rise of the rightist Likud party in Israel under Menachem Begin. Israel was another state that, Kazin remarks in October 1953, can be expected to become nationalistic, military, cynical, hypocritical; Kazin was never a staunch Zionist. Most grating of all was the willingness of the *Commentary* writers, including Podhoretz, and Irving Kristol, to endorse America's conservative political turn and provide it with an intellectual grounding. "Saving my Soul at the Plaza," published in *The New York Review*, ridicules a conference conservatives organized at the Plaza Hotel in the winter of 1983 to which, somewhat perversely, he had been invited. The invitation came from Midge Decter, "executive director of The Committee for the Free World," and also--this should not be omitted--the wife of Podhoretz. One year later, it is worth noting, Bellow wrote a polite but explicit letter to Decter asking that his name be removed from the editorial board of a Committee publication of which she was an editor, a journal suitably named *Confrontations*. After a special issue was given over

to faulting a variety of new books, Bellow wrote, "Although the books you attacked seemed squalid enough, your own reviews were in such bad taste that it depressed me to be associated with them....About Nicaragua we can agree well enough, but as soon as you speak about culture you give me the willies."

This is what Kazin had to say in a review of *Sammler* that appeared in the December 3, 1970 issue of the *New York Review of Books*:

Mr. Sammler's Planet is a brilliantly austere set of opinions, more than usually impressive because of the decisive intellectual elegance that by now Bellow has turned into a language of his own. But Sammler's opinions are set in a context so uncharitable, morally arrogant toward every other character in the book but one, and therefore lacking in dramatic satisfaction, that the book becomes a *cri du coeur* that does not disguise the punitive moral outrage behind it.... The unsatisfactory thing about Mr. Sammler is that he is always right while most other people are usually wrong—sinfully so...

Kazin went on to fault "the austere, dismissive jeremiads, the open contempt for the women in the book as crazy fantasists, improvident, gross, careless sexpots, 'birds of prey.'" Bellow responded with an angry letter--not included in his published correspondence--quoted by Cook in his biography, in which Bellow complains that the critic has crossed the line between criticism and "slander." "What offended me was that you were not reviewing my novel, you were saying that its author was a wickedly deluded lunatic." Bellow, in other words, felt that Kazin was collapsing the distinction between the author and his creations, and he had a reputation for not receiving unfriendly reviews very well.

Matters improved--at least from Kazin's side--in the summer of 1975, with the publication of *Humboldt's Gift*. "Bellow amazes me all over again with Humboldt," he exclaims in his journal in July.

Saul is wonderful....He has decided to become immortal. In the midst of this life--and many marriages--"Charles Citrine" has discovered that the outside world is

all in us--*we* are nature, by a perfect correspondence...The effect of such a book, such a man on us....How he turns me on....What is it *but thinking the world differently?* This is the only test of a real book, it influences us by turning our usual mental life inside out....All the time Saul was thinking, thinking of making life different by an act of superb imaginative projection....We become supernatural, in this book too, by turning ourselves inside out....How marvelous. How grateful I am...

This remained a private expression; I am not aware that Kazin reviewed the novel or published any remarks on it. The response is a bit unexpected, because I think many reviewers discounted (or worse) precisely the element of the novel that Kazin found so attractive. I have written elsewhere in my Web site about Bellow and anthroposophy, but Kazin's enthusiasm--for "thinking the world differently," for the assertion that "*we* are nature, by a perfect correspondence," and for "turning our mental life inside out"--is to single out for enthusiastic approval the specifically anthroposophical elements of the novel. I have not found in the published record--letters, diaries and biographies--any evidence that any of this was communicated to Bellow.

There is a brief reconciliation, of a sort, in a lunch the two shared in Chicago when Kazin was visiting in 1979. In a May entry of that year he remarks that Bellow is "very cordial, elegant and precise in his speech and manner. Struck by the difference the years do *not* make. Sad in a reserved kind of way." But there is a hint (and perhaps more than just a hint) of persisting envy from a passage recorded nearly three years earlier, in August 1976, two months before Bellow was awarded the Nobel Prize. Kazin, passing through Akron, Ohio, returns to the subject of Bellow, describing him with a combination of envy and malice in his journal:

Thinking obsessive about Bellow as "success," as the man who of us all somehow did it right. It's really a quality of intelligence, of matter-of-fact--Harold Rosenberg has something of this successful pirate too--*the invader and marauder of an entirely new country*. The ability to smell out opportunities---above all, *the ability not to let oneself down, not to lose necessary morale*.

Relations worsened again in June 1985, when Gerald Freund, the former director of the MacArthur Foundation, brought the two together for a joint seventieth birthday party at his New York apartment. Intended to help reestablish the friendship, the occasion simply sparked an angry political argument that concluded with Bellow's abrupt and silent departure; the experience is described in the published biographies of the principals, and apparently marked a decisive end to the friendship. In the summer of 1987, Kazin penned another unfavorable review in *The New York Review of Books* of a Bellow novel, *More Die of Heartbreak*, which I wrote about myself at the same time and found far more successful as a novel than he did. As in the *Sammler* review, Kazin complained that the voice of the narrator of the novel, Kenneth Trachtenberg, was inseparable from the author's and concluded the piece by claiming the story was "fired by misogyny." Because of his prestige and the sense that few critics knew Bellow better or longer than Kazin, the remark seems to have affected public discussion of the novel, and obliged the author to rebut the critic's charges. In an interview Bellow gave that summer to the *London Sunday Times*, he said that "Misogynist really means that we are expected in every novel to redress the injustices of history. I grant you it is a bad history. I'm not guilty of all of it myself." Without mentioning Kazin, Bellow went on to claim that reviewers leveling the accusation of misogyny were "currying favor with the feminist public. I really dislike the McCarthy style of this criticism, labeling me without having to prove anything."

I think that Kazin was by then too old and alienated, from academic life as well as public opinion, to bother with "currying" it. We get Kazin's reaction in a journal entry from later in June, shortly after the aborted dinner, when he writes that the experience "comes to me days later as primum exemplum of *ours* as a lost generation--poor boys, 'intellectuals,' to their

fingertips, brought up to be adversaries of power types and the 'established order'--who now turn out to be voices of privilege, *messengers*, auxiliaries, 'conservatives'--but I don't suppose that SB's disgust with Chicago is anything but 'personal,' an affront rather than a prime index of our civilization." This is a serious misjudgment. Bellow dealt with the decline of the city in the novels and stories of the 1980s, and I don't have any doubt that he did indeed regard the decay of the city as "a prime index of our civilization" and the source even of personal anguish. In one of his essays he calls the city "a microcosm of the country." If his objections were no more than a personal complaint, he would not have dealt with the subject at such length, nor would he have documented the rampant criminality that he believed had overtaken the city in his final decade or so as a resident; many of the crimes in *The Dean's December* and short stories come straight from the Chicago press. Kazin's misunderstanding of a novelist that he knew so well reflects, I suspect, his intensified ill-will (owing to political differences) and his possible envy of Bellow's success.

Kazin apparently believed that Bellow had become a traitor to the left, an arch-conservative, an ally of the *Commentary* right. Charges of this sort against Bellow go as far back as 1965, when he attended a Festival of the Arts in Washington organized by the Johnson Administration. The matter became a regrettable *cause celebre*, when many writers and artists who had been invited chose to boycott it and pressed Bellow to do the same. Already, the issue was the Viet Nam war. Bellow was opposed to the expansion of the war but felt it inappropriate to reject a presidential invitation to celebrate the arts. Kazin's doubts about Bellow were more than stoked by *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, and became unappeasable by the 1980s. A large particle of the radicalism of Kazin's youth clung powerfully to his spirit. In a long entry from July 1957, too long to quote in full, he remarks that he belongs to a "baffled generation." His generation

came of age in a period of "revolutionary militancy," but since the advent of the Cold War, has been "brought down to a period more or less statist, 'big,' bureaucratic, reactionary." His thoughts turn to World War I and the chaos it inspired, stimulating, as he believed, the emergence of "miserable, reactionary literary philosophers, Eliot and the Southerners." "Snively philosophers of slavery, the Eliots and Tates and the rest," as Kazin calls them, going on to describe them as "contemporaries and half-friends and stupid, genteel colleagues who are always telling us over again and again that man is bad and sinful!" The Southern Agrarians he then connects to the South's legacy of slavery and the guilt it inspired. But the intellectual's true task is "to stand up and shout as loudly as one could for these old generous ideas and ideals, for all these things so easily condemnable these days as 'sentimentality,' for feeling that it is a moral judgment on the world, no matter how directionless it seems."

The Holocaust is never far from his mind--never--and, on coming across an account of the Warsaw Ghetto in Philip Friedman's *Martyrs and Fighters*, Kazin remarks, in August 1962, "I keep thinking of *the* problem: Jewish submission, Jewish passivity and quietism. It's as if the phrase used in the ghetto for death at the hands of the Nazis--*Kiddush ha-shem*, sanctification of the name--expressed the distraction, the God-intoxication that made everything else unworthy." But, pondering the question of other-worldliness, resistance and murder, Kazin concludes that "To believe in the Jews as a necessary sacrifice is to express a nearly Oriental fatalism...It is impossible to explain the terrible Jewish passivity on religious grounds. In this view, the human being is actually held in contempt by God, is nothing to him, merely exists to demonstrate His greatness." Kazin writes that "I do not believe in the new God of Communism or the old God of the synagogue--I believe in God. I cannot live without the belief that there is a purposeful

connection that I may yet understand which I can serve. I cannot be faithless to my own conviction of value."

But there is another dimension to his religion, and it emerges in a late entry, from April 1985, when Kazin remembers a distant encounter with Chagall in Midtown. Jewishness, he remarks, "is a kind of sealed treasure, so deep within oneself....And what is it? Solidarity...especially with those who silently died at the hands of one power mad group or another."

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