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Alfred Kazin: Visionary of Words and Time

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> We wonder whether the dream of American liberty
> Was two hundred years of pine and hardwood
> And three generations of the grass
>
> And the generations are up: the years over
>
> We don´t know.
> --Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free*

There come times when I wonder how one person can know, and synthesize, so much knowledge and wisdom. Edward Said was one of those people. A flaming mastermind! Lewis Mumford was another. Pedro Susz Kohl of Bolivia, one more.

And Alfred Kazin.

Reading his 1942 treatise on American prose literature in the 20th century, *On Native Grounds*, I find myself incapable of making sense of the date of birth printed on the publisher´s page. 1915 it says. I make a stab at math: 1915 plus 10 takes us to 1925, then 10 more to ´35, and 7 equals…ah…*27 years old*. No. I must have it wrong, I need to write it down.

1942
--1915
27

(And pardon my lapse: he began writing the book not in 1942, but in 19*38*.)

I like to think that -- by virtue of sweep of vision, knowledge, and lyrical style -- such American prose as is offered in this volume can only be the result of more than half a century of lived experience, study, observation, and conversations with contemporaries, yet even then it would seem a miracle. Between the ages of 23 and 27, the accomplishment can only be the progeny of shamanistic channeling.

On Native Grounds reads like a blend of Lewis Mumford and Carl Sandburg, piercing analysis written with poetic fury. Its period of inquiry is 1890 through the Depression; its premise, that history is the author of literature, as Kazin puts it, "Our modern literature in America is at bottom only the expression of our modern life;" the point, that contemporary writing was not merely a retort to Victorian repression and propriety, but rather a reflection of a total makeover of post-Civil War society brought about by the forces of science, industrialization, and the amassing of power via rampant capitalism. The book is delivered by a young man who, spending endless evenings reading in the New York Public Library on 42nd Street, thought of himself – and indeed was – a "literary radical."

First, a display of that young man´s chosen task:

> Our modern literature was rooted in those dark and still little-understood years of the 1880´s and 1890´s when all America stood suddenly, as it were, between one society and another, one moral order and another, and the sense of impending change became almost oppressive in its vividness. It was rooted in the drift of the new world of factories and cities, with their dissolution of old standards and faiths; in the emergence of the metropolitan culture that was to dominate the literature of the period; in the Populists who raised their voices against the domineering new plutocracy in the East and gave so much of their bitterness to the literature of protest rising out of the West; in the sense of surprise and shock that led to the crudely expectant Utopian literature of the eighties and nineties, the largest body of Utopian writing in modern times, and the most transparent in its nostalgia. But above all it was rooted in the need to learn what the reality of life was in the modern era.

And:

> Modern American literature was born in protest, born in rebellion, born out of a sense of loss and indirection which was imposed upon the new generations out of a realization that the old formal culture – the "New England idea" – could no longer serve.

According to our author, 1890´s literature set out as an expression of repressed romanticism of the bourgeoisie; then, as the push westward took command of the entire continent, the full ramifications of long-simmering industrialism were made manifest, and people needed to understand what had happened, it steeped itself in reality and wrestled with the problems of life. World War I´s violence and disintegration of values produced a generation of "lost" writers who batted among hope for society through art, cynicism, and too-self-conscious frivolity, while the trauma of ´29 and FDR´s creative response to it gave us the sociological realism and documentary style of Depression Era writing. As Kazin put it: "Something happened in the thirties that was more than the sum of the sufferings inflicted, the billions lost, the institutions and people uprooted: it was an education by shock…The impact on American writing was obvious from the first, obvious as an earthquake, a breadline, or the living proof of Thoreau´s observation that one generation abandons the enterprises of the other like stranded vessels." Then, by *On*

Native Grounds´ pub date, that realist writing had mutated into unqualified celebration of land, people, and "democracy."

One is left with a sense of continuity between what appear to be decades separated by sensibilities as distinct from one other as exultation is from suicide, and titles as divergent as "Age of Confidence," "Roaring Twenties," and the "the Depression." Kazin helps us to see the flow from one generation to the next, and so a deeper understanding of the making of our own times is revealed.

So many of the cultural phenomena that I -- born just five years after *On Native Grounds* was published – encountered were not just the "revolutionary innovations" that exploded via "the new American ingenuity;" they have roots that reach backwards through history only to emerge and re-emerge, without resolution because the same societal structures and means persist.

The patriotic zeal of citizens like my grandparents, flinging themselves into World War II as they did, is a predictable outcome of the fabled "America! America!" patriotism that proliferated toward the close of the 1930´s. Paul Bunyan, Davy Crockett, Johnny Appleseed, all invented or revitalized during the Depression, were the unforgettable figures of my elementary school education in the ´50´s. And isn´t the 1960´s "Andy Griffith Show" a reiteration of an earlier turn away from the streamlined American Dream of the metropolis toward a revaluing of the traditional, the decentralized, the small-town folksy?

1950´s-60´s government and university administration attacks against radicalism in academia, perceived and real, can be tracked to the Progressive period when scholars like Thorstein Veblen set their minds as "disturber(s) of the intellectual peace" on deconstructing the philosophic underpinnings of the social sciences and analyzing the socio-economic repercussions of the Civil War. Perhaps needless to say, Beat and New Left fascination with the café as center for radical expression finds its antecedent in Chicago´s Little Renaissance, Greenwich Village´s Bohemia, and Paris´ Left Bank –- and earlier, back to America´s first literary society in Concord. (Could today´s Starbuck´s be the hollow shell of romanticism for same?)

The Smiling Yellow Face, self-help books, and New Age solipsism of the 1970´s reiterated long-celebrated myths of individualism, limitlessness, and self-improvement. 1990´s PBS docu-histories textured by nostalgic piano tones seem cinematic versions of the fact-based biography that flourished 60 years before. Today´s multiculturalism mirrors the appreciation of the folk cultures, from Appalachia to Cajun Louisiana and New Mexico Indo-Hispano, brought to light by the New Deal; bioregionalism is little different from the regionalism that rose up as the socio-political facet of that awareness.

By the same token, contemporary outrage about the U.S. Constitution as institutionalization of the founding fathers´ class interests mirrors the insights of Charles Beard in 1913. The postmodern stampede to religious fundamentalism, obedience to global homogenization, and Taylorism in the form of computer programming (note that word in regard to cult initiation) are recaps of earlier lunges toward Fascism and ideological "party lines" that arose like desperate coping mechanisms before the suffering and uncertainties of the post-World War I period.

What remains as the bottom-line same-old-same-old are those forces Kazin identifies as the genesis of modern literature: science, industrialism, and the amassing of power via capitalism. The world of his cohort, and ours, was forged, architected, and textured by their insatiable reach, a development some 10,000 years and 333 generations in the making. And so from the early muckrakers and sociologists pushing their way out of Victorian gentility, to the caustic intellectuals of the ´20´s and the hard-boiled detective writers of the ´30´s, to the renegade punk poets and slick bloggers of the iPad age, we go on striving for liberty, for justice, through words -- yet always, inescapably, stamped by the numerical tattoo of "Progress."

In his preface to the 40th anniversary edition, written in 1982, Kazin reflects on his experience of the evolution, thereby locating his own literary exploration in its moment in history:

> The "modern" spirit that was my subject, the "modern" hope in every field of intellectual endeavor from which my book had arisen, closed in on itself with the war (WWII), and after the war became an academic matter…But the young man who began it in 1938 was not interested in providing a history after the fact. He thought he was living in an age of hope – and he was.

Who was to guess that in his hope-filled 1942, or up-against-the-nuclear-stockpile 1982, those dark forces would strive to command not merely all of Mongolia, the Mediterranean, or the Free World -- but through technological adeptness every inch of every continent, this planet and any others that might be corralled; every drop of water; every culture; every thought, communiqué, and public act; every animal, plant, and burst of wind; every particle/wave; every molecule? Our era is an extension of forces that have been gathering for a long, long time. The main difference is that now -- with satellite vision and supercomputer data accumulation, genetic piercing and molecular assault, ecological demise and weapons of mass destruction -- we are more attuned to the possibility of a veritable End to Literature.

In his own time Alfred Kazin went on to become one of the keenest social observers/literary celebrants of his generation, writing such books as *New York Jew* and *Contemporaries,* as well as editing anthologies about F. Scott Fitzgerald, Herman Melville, Henry James, and Walt Whitman and collections of the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Blake, and Anne Frank. If there is an author in the American tradition with a full sense of history, it is he.

I just ordered *Starting Out in the Thirties*. I´m still trying to get some perspective on the age conundrum. What bolt of lightning struck this lad during his infusion in New York´s Bohemia that led to such brilliance-beyond-his-years? Here in the Bolivian *campo,* a person hit by lightning is recognized as a *curandero*, an *amaúta*, a visionary.