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Recommended Citation
Hazlett, John D. "Repossessing the Past: Discontinuity and History in Alfred Kazin's A Walker in the City." Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly 7.4 (1984): 325-340.

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JOHN D. HAZLETT

Repossessing the Past: Discontinuity and History In Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*

Critics of Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* (1951)[1] have almost always abstracted from it the story of a young man who feels excluded from the world outside his immediate ethnic neighborhood, and who eventually attempts to find, through writing, a means of entry into that world. It would be very easy to imagine from what these critics have said that the book was written in the same form as countless other autobiographies of adolescence and rites-of-passage. One thinks immediately, for instance, of a tradition stretching from Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* to Frank Conroy's *Stop-Time,* as well as fictional autobiographical works such as James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* We are encouraged in this view by the publishers, Harcourt, Brace & World, who tell us on the cover that "*A Walker in the City* is a book about an American walking into the world, learning on his skin what it is like. The American is Alfred Kazin as a young man." Even the most thorough of Kazin's critics, John Paul Eakin, writes of *A Walker* that the young Kazin's "outward journey to America . . . is the heart of the book."[2]

One of the few reviewers who noticed those elements that distinguish this memoir from others of its kind was the well known American historian, Oscar Handlin. Unfortunately, Mr. Handlin also found the book unintelligible: "If some system of inner logic holds these sections together it is clear only to the author. It is not only that chronology is abandoned so there is never any certainty of the sequence of events; but a pervasive ambiguity of perspective leaves the reader often in doubt as to whether it was the walker who saw then, or the writer who sees now, or the writer recalling what the walker saw then. Epi-

sodic, without the appearance of form or order, there is a day-dreamy quality to the organization, as if it were a product of casual reminiscence."[3] Handlin's charge that the memoir lacks a "system of inner logic" is incorrect, but he does identify a number of qualities that distinguish *A Walker* from other coming-of-age autobiographies.

One option that is not apparently available to autobiographers, as it is to novelists, is the removal of the author's presence from the narrative. And yet autobiographers do manage to achieve something like this removal by recreating themselves *as* characters. That is, we can distinguish between the author as author and the author as character (an earlier self). In some autobiographies of childhood, where the narration ends before the character develops into what we might imagine to be the autobiographer's present self, the writer may never appear (as writer) in the narrative at all. The earlier selves in such autobiographies remain as characters. Where the autobiographer appears as both character and writer, however, the distinction is by no means always clear. If the autobiographer actually follows the progress of his earlier self to the narrative present, then the distinction disappears somewhere en route. One can, in fact, distinguish between types of autobiographies according to the strategies they employ to achieve this obliteration of distance between earlier self (as character) and present self (as writer).

Kazin has complicated this aspect of his autobiography by recreating two distinct earlier selves: his child self and an adult self, the titular walker. It is this aspect of his memoir that sets it apart from other coming-of-age autobiographies. In none of the conventional works in this sub-genre is the present narrative "I" so conspicuous a figure (not only as a voice, but as an active character) as it is in Kazin's book, and in none of them is the chronological reconstruction of the past so purposefully avoided. His memoir, unlike most autobiographies of adolescence, is just as much about the efforts of the adult walker to recapture his past self as it is about his earlier attempts to go beyond that self. By granting his present self equal status with the re-creation of his childhood, he has produced a hybrid form.

The central characteristic of that form is the parallel relationship between the quest of the young Kazin to achieve selfhood by identifying himself with an American place and a portion of its history, and the quest of the older Kazin to resolve some present unrest about who he is by recovering his younger self and the locale of his own past. The former quest is that story which critics say the memoir is "about," but the latter is located in the memoir on at least two levels. Like the

child's quest, it is narrated, in that Kazin actually tells us of his return, as an adult, to Brownsville, but its significance is manifest only on an implicit level; we must infer why the quest was undertaken.[4]

Kazin emphasizes the symmetry of these two quests by describing each of them in phrases that echo the other. In the first chapter of the memoir, the adult Kazin, walking through the streets of the Brownsville neighborhood in which he grew up, describes what it means to him: "Brownsville is that road which every other road in my life has had to cross" (p. 8). By going back and walking once again "those familiarly choked streets at dusk" (p. 6), he is reviewing his own history in an attempt to settle some old doubts about the relationship between his past and present selves. In similar language, Kazin describes at the very end of the memoir how the boy's search for an American identity finally expressed itself in a fascination with American history, and in particular with the "dusk at the end of the nineteenth century" which was, he thought, "that fork in the road where all American lives cross" (p. 171).

The parallels that we find in language are repeated in the means by which the young boy finds access to America and the adult finds access to his younger self—by walking and by immersing himself in the historical ambiance of an earlier period. "I could never walk across Roebling's bridge," he says of himself as a boy, "or pass the hotel on University Place named Albert, in Ryder's honor, or stop in front of the garbage cans at Fulton and Cranberry Streets in Brooklyn at the place where Whitman had himself printed *Leaves of Grass,* without thinking that I had at last opened the great trunk of forgotten time in New York in which I, too, I thought, would someday find the source of my unrest" (p. 172). The young Kazin initially found his way out of Brownsville and into the America of the nineteenth century by walking into an historical locale. It is again by walking, by going "over the whole route" (p. 8), that the adult Kazin sets out to rediscover his child self in the streets of Brownsville.

One may detect, however, an ironic tension between these two quests. The child's search is the immigrant scion's search for an American identity. It is, in part, the psychological extension of the parents' literal search for America, and, in part, the result of his parents' ambivalence about their own place in the New World. The most significant frustration of the young Kazin's life was over the apparently unbridgeable discontinuity between "*them* and *us,* Gentiles and us, *alrightniks* and us. . . . The line . . . had been drawn for all time" (p. 99). This discontinuity represented to him the impossibility of choos-

ing a way of being in the world. Eventually, it takes on larger meaning in the child's mind to include the distance between the immigrant's past in Russia and the late nineteenth century America of Teddy Roosevelt, between poverty and " 'making out' all right," between, finally, a Brownsville identity and an American identity.

In the child's quest, these "petty distinctions I had so long made in loneliness" (p. 173) are overcome through a vision of the Brooklyn Bridge that allowed him to see how he might span the discontinuities that left him "outside all that" (p. 172); and through the discovery of a model for himself as a "solitary singer" in the tradition of "Blake, my Yeshua, my Beethoven, my Newman" and a long line of nineteenth century Americans (p. 172). The final element of his victory over "them and us," however, was the substitution of America's history for his own Brownsville history and his family's vague East-European history. His parents' past, he said, bewildered him as a child: "it made me long constantly to get at some past nearer my own New York life, my having to live with all those running wounds of a world I had never seen" (p. 59). To resolve this longing, he says, "I read as if books would fill my every gap, legitimize my strange quest for the American past, remedy my every flaw, let me in at last into the great world that was anything just out of Brownsville" (p. 172).

The adult walker, on the other hand, is searching for the child he once was and for the world in which he grew up; his intention is to recreate his old awareness of the adolescent's "gaps" so that he might resolve them. By the time Kazin begins his retrogression to childhood, ten years have elapsed since his final departure from Brownsville (p. 5) and (assuming that the narrative present is also the writer's present) some twenty years have elapsed since the final scene of the book. During that period, the writer has undergone a peculiar transformation. The adolescent's "strange quest" for an American identity through the substitution of America's past for his own has culminated outside the frame of *A Walker* in the writing of *On Native Grounds,*[5] a book that is obsessively and authoritatively alive with American history. The young boy has grown up to become one of America's established literary spokesmen; he has become one of "them." In becoming the man, the child has not, however, closed the gaps; he has simply crossed over them to the other side.

As a child, Kazin thought of himself as a solitary, "standing outside of America" (p. 172); as an adult autobiographer, he stands outside of his own past. The adult's attempt to imagine his own history, therefore, begins with the significant perception of his alienation from his

own child self and from the time and place in which that self lived. Brownsville is not a part of his present sense of himself, it must be "given back" (p. 6) to him; and "going back" reveals a disturbing discontinuity. The return to Brownsville fills him with an "an instant rage . . . mixed with dread and some unexpected tenderness" (p. 5). He senses again, he says, "the old foreboding that all of my life would be like this" (p. 6) and "I feel in Brownsville that I am walking in my sleep. I keep bumping awake at harsh intervals, then fall back into my trance again" (p. 7).

The extent of his alienation from his former self is attested to in the last of Kazin's memoirs, *New York Jew,* where he writes that *A Walker* was not begun as an autobiography at all, but simply as an exploration of the city. Dissatisfied with the "barren, smart, soulless"[6] quality of what he was writing, Kazin kept attempting to put more of himself into the book. Finally, he says, "I saw that a few pages on 'The Old Neighborhood' in the middle of the book, which I had dreamily tossed off in the midst of my struggles with the city as something alien to me, became the real book on growing up in New York that I had wanted to write without knowing I did."[7]

There is, naturally, a good deal of irony in this, as well as some pathos, for although Kazin does not expressly acknowledge the relationship between the two quests, it seems clear that the young boy's search for an American identity entailed the denial of his own cultural past.[8] Ultimately, this denial necessitated the writing of the book, for the adult's search is for the self he lost in his effort to become an American. The adult's problem is not resolved *within* the narrative, however, but *by* the narrative itself. It is the writer who establishes the connection between his earlier, lost self and his adult self. In doing this, he completes the bridge to America.

The writer in this sense may be distinguished from the adult walker who is, like the young Kazin, merely a character, a former self, within the memoir. In formal terms, the two quests that comprise the narrative material of the memoir make up its *fabula;* the resolution of both quests is to be found only in the coexistence of these two selves in the narrative *as* narrative. The resolution, in other words, is accomplished by formal, literary means. It is enacted by the memoir's *sujet.*

Given these two quests as the key to the memoir's form, the general structure of the book may be schematized as follows:

Chapter I: The walker returns literally to his childhood neighborhood and imaginatively to childhood itself.

Chapter II: The walker stops and the autobiographer (distinguished

here from the walker) contemplates the psychological/symbolic center of childhood, the kitchen.

Chapter III: The walker literally returns to the scenes of his adolescence and imaginatively to adolescence.

Chapter IV: The walker stops and the autobiographer (again, distinguished from walker) contemplates the psychological/symbolic center of adolescence, the rites of passage.

The use of this structure naturally gives rise to some difficulties of perspective. Mr. Handlin's observation that there are at least three different points of view: "the walker who saw then, or the writer who sees now, or the writer recalling what the walker saw then" was apt, even though he could not see that the complexity of perspectives followed a fairly careful pattern. An analysis of what those points of view are, and how they work together, must begin with the recognition that all earlier perspectives, both the walker's and the child's, are recreated in the writer's voice, which mimics them in a very complex form of literary ventriloquism. Given this, one may recognize that within the narrative the writer, the single informing point-of-view, speaks in three different voices: his own as writer, the voice of the adult walker, and the voice of the child.

Each of these voices gives rise to variations in narrative technique. In chapters one and three, the writer uses a fictive device to create the illusion that no recollection of the adult walker's perspective is necessary in the act of transferring his "walking thoughts" to the written word. The voice of the adult walker, an earlier self who made the trip, is identified with that of the writer by the frequent use of the present tense: "The smell of damp out of the rotten hallways accompanies me all the way to Blake Avenue" (p. 7). In these chapters, the walker's memories of childhood are emphasized *as* memories because his physical presence and voice call attention to the context and the mechanics of remembering. Thus, from the moment the walker alights from the train at Rockaway Avenue in chapter one, the text is sprinkled with reminders that this is the story of the adult walker pursuing the past through cues from the present: "Everything seems so small here now" (p. 7), "the place as I have it in my mind . . . I never knew then" (p. 11), "they have built a housing project" (p. 12), "I miss all these ratty wooden tenements" (p. 13). Similarly, in chapter three, after Kazin steps away from the more disembodied memory of his mother's kitchen: "the whole block is now thick with second hand furniture stores . . . I have to fight maple love seats bulging out of the doors" (p. 78), "I see the barbershop through the steam" (p. 79).

In both of these chapters, the writer/walker's imagination seizes upon and transforms the landmarks of an earlier period of his life. The literal journey back to Brownsville becomes a metaphorical journey backward in time so that the locale of the past becomes by degrees the past itself: "Every time I go back to Brownsville it is as if I had never been away. . . . It is over ten years since I left to live in 'the city'—everything just out of Brownsville was always 'the city.' Actually I did not go very far; it was enough that I could leave Brownsville. Yet as I walk those familiarly choked streets at dusk and see the old women sitting in front of the tenements, past and present become each other's faces; I am back where I began" (pp. 5–6).

This is, in fact, what gives the book that quality of "casual reminiscence" that Mr. Handlin found so unsatisfactory. Kazin's technique in chapters one and three is much like that of a person rummaging through an attic full of memorabilia. Each street, each shop serves to spark a particular memory. There is, of course, a danger in this kind of writing. It teeters constantly on the brink of random sentimentalism. The walker always presents the past in a hypermediated form, never through the coolly objective (and hidden) eyes of the "impartial" self-historian that characterize most conventional autobiographies. This is particularly true when he indulges in nostalgia, as he does when the walker inspects that part of his neighborhood which has been rebuilt as a housing project. There he subjects us to a series of iterated fondnesses, each beginning with the nostalgic "I miss" (p. 13). But in spite of this flirtation with sentimentality, the walker's presence is not merely an occasion for self-indulgence. In the context of the whole memoir, it clearly serves instead to highlight the drama being played out between the quest of the child and the quest of the adult.

As the walker nears the two significant centers of childhood and adolescence, in chapters two and four respectively, he undergoes a transformation. The mediatory presence of the walker disappears, leaving only the disembodied autobiographical voice of conventional memoirs. Unlike the first and third chapters, in which each memory was sparked by actual relics from the past, these chapters take place entirely in the autobiographer's imagination. To mark this change, chapter two opens with the writer's memory of a previous memory of his mother's kitchen which he compares with his present recollection of it: "the last time I saw our kitchen this clearly was one afternoon in London at the end of the war, when I waited out the rain in the entrance to a music store. A radio was playing into the street, and standing there I heard a broadcast of the first Sabbath service from

Belsen Concentration Camp" (p. 51). This is the voice, not of a rummaging memory, but of pure disembodied memory. The vision of the kitchen is not sparked by another visit there. In fact, at the opening of chapter two we lose sight of the walker for the first time.

The adult Kazin's presence is signalled in chapters two and four, not by reference to his present surroundings, but by verb tense alone: "It was from the El on its way to Coney Island that I caught my first full breath of the city in the open air" (p. 137); although at times, he intrudes into the narrative by referring to his present feelings: "I think now with a special joy of those long afternoons of mildew and quietness in the school courtyard" (p. 136). The adult walker, however, does not appear in these chapters at all. This transformation, from walker to disembodied memorial voice, draws the reader along the path followed by the adult quester: from the streets of the walker's Brownsville to the streets of the child's Brownsville. As the quester nears his goal, the present Brownsville fades from view.

The narrative strategy of *A Walker* recreates the adult's quest by revealing the increasing clarity and intensity of his perception of the child's world. The walker's mediatory presence, initially so conspicuous, deliquesces at crucial points so that memory becomes a direct act of identification between rememberer and remembered. The present tense of the walker's observations becomes the past tense of the walker's recollections which becomes the past tense of the writer's memory which, finally, becomes the present tense of the child's world. The final identification of writer and child occurs in the two most intense moments of the memoir: at the end of "The Kitchen" (chapter two) and toward the end of "Summer: The Way to Highland Park" (chapter four).

The first instance follows immediately upon the writer's recollection of the power of literature to bridge the gaps between himself and another world. He recalls the child reading an Alexander Kuprin story which takes place in the Crimea. In the story, an old man and a boy are wandering up a road. The old man says, "Hoo! hoo! my son! how it is hot!" (p. 73). Kazin recalls how completely he, as a young boy, had identified with them: when they stopped to eat by a cold spring, "I could taste that bread, that salt, those tomatoes, that icy spring" (p. 73). In the next and final paragraph of the chapter, the writer slips into the present tense:

> Now the light begins to die. Twilight is also the mind's grazing time. Twilight is the bottom of that arc down which we have fallen the whole

> long day, but where I now sit at our cousin's window in some strange silence of attention, watching the pigeons go round and round to the leafy smell of soupgreens from the stove. In the cool of that first evening hour, as I sit at the table waiting for supper and my father and the New York *World,* everything is so rich to overflowing, I hardly know where to begin. (p. 73)

The place and the vision in this curious passage are the child's, but the voice is clearly the adult's. Just as the child once tasted the bread, salt and tomatoes of his literary heroes, so now the adult writer achieves an intense identification with his own literary creation: his child self. He sees with the child's eyes, smells with the child's nose, feels the child's expectant emotions, but renders all these perceptions with the adult's literary sophistication. The intensity of expectation which the writer attributes to the child is amplified by the intensity of the writer's expectation that the forthcoming "richness" is as much his as it is the child's. The child's expectations are, ultimately, of that "New York world" which he discovers in the following chapter. The writer's expectations are of a completion of identity which can be accomplished only through the mediation of form. Twilight and the New York *World* have become formal touchstones in the literary recreation of his self.

The second instance takes place toward the end of the memoir and like the first, it immediately precedes a significant "passage through" to a world beyond the kitchen. Like the first, it also is a recollection of his home, at twilight, in the summer. And to emphasize its significance as a literary act, the writer echoes the Kuprin passage here:

> The kitchen is quiet under the fatigue blown in from the parched streets—so quiet that in this strangely drawn-out light, the sun hot on our backs, we seem to be eating hand in hand. "How hot it is still! How hot still!" The silence and calm press on me with a painful joy. I cannot wait to get out into the streets tonight, I cannot wait. Each unnatural moment of silence says that something is going on outside. Something is about to happen. (p. 164)

The pages which follow this merging of writer and child, and which end the book, complete the child's emerging vision of his "bridge" to America. In these pages; the writer employs a new method of recapturing and re-entering the past. The walk to Highland Park is undertaken by the adolescent and is recalled by the adult in the past tense, but it is given immediacy by the frequent interjection of the adverbial pointers "now" and "here": "Ahead of me now the black web of the

Fulton Street El" (p. 168). "Everything ahead of me now was of a different order . . . Every image I had of peace, of quiet shaded streets in some old small-town America . . . now came back to me . . . Here were the truly American streets; here was where they lived" (p. 169). The effect is peculiar, but appropriate. By using the adverbial pointers, 'here' and 'now,' together with the adult's past tense, Kazin is able to convey the eerie impression that he is, finally, both here, in the adult's present, and there, in the child's past. The bridge between them is complete.

The complexity of perspective and structure in Kazin's memoir caused Mr. Handlin to observe that "chronology is abandoned so there is never any certainty of the sequence of events." In most autobiographies, the inevitable discontinuities between present and past selves are overcome by the construction of a continuous, causally developed, and therefore "meaningful," story. By purposefully avoiding such a reconstruction with its solid assumptions of the reality of the self's history and the ability of language to convey that reality without serious mediatory consequences, Kazin refocuses our attention on the autobiographer/historian—not the past as it was, but history as recreated by the imagination. Self-history in *A Walker* is not continuous and linear, but spatial; the past is not a time, but a place. For the youth, it was a place from which he wanted to escape. For the adult, it is a place to which he fears to return ("the old foreboding that all my life would be like this") and to which he feels he must return in order to complete and renew himself. The child's world seems timeless; it is frozen in a tableau, like a wax museum, in which the adult can explore, in a curiously literal manner, his own past. That some of the figures are missing or that the present may actually have vandalized the arrangement of props, only intensifies its apparent isolation from adult, historical life.

This difference between the timelessness of childhood, as we perceive it in the memoir, and the adult's implied immersion in history may illuminate the nature of the quest upon which the autobiographer has embarked. We can see, for instance, that the motivation which lies behind the quest for identity is grounded upon assumptions about the nature of life in history. The discontinuity felt by both the child and the adult is not simply between a Brownsville identity and an American identity, but between the Timelessness which childhood represents and History.

Burton Pike, writing from a pyschoanalytic perspective, has suggested that autobiographies of childhood in general reveal a fascination

with states of timelessness: "the device of dwelling on childhood may also serve two other functions: It may be a way of blocking the ticking of the clock toward death, of which the adult is acutely aware, and it may also represent a deep fascination with death itself, the ultimately timeless state."[9] The adult's return to Brownsville becomes, in this view, a journey motivated not simply by a desire for completion of identity, but also by a desire to escape the exigencies of historical life—death, as Pike asserts, and, perhaps more obviously, guilt. The writing of *A Walker,* Kazin says in *New York Jew,* "was a clutch at my old innocence" and "the boy I remembered . . . was a necessary fiction, he was so virtuous."[10] What is of particular interest in Kazin's memoir, however, is the manifest content of the child's quest which offers a counterpoint to Pike's useful analysis. The "fascination" in *A Walker,* works both ways: the adult longs for the child's timeless world and the child longs for the adult's sense of history. Moreover, as the adolescent "stands outside of America," he longs not only to *possess* a history of his own, but to *enter* history. The child is never interested in the past for its own sake; he wishes to be one of the crowd, to be swept along in the irrevocable onward rush of political and social events. Entering history for him is the clearest and most satisfying form of belonging.

Kazin's memoir is not, therefore, reducible to a psychoanalytical model. Since he always handles the issue of life in history consciously, it is difficult to approach the relationship between the autobiographer and "time" as though the writer were himself unaware of the implications of his subject matter. His "escape" from history through the recovery of childhood was, at least on one level, a very conscious rejection of the autobiographical form dictated by Marxist historicism and chosen by many leftist writers during the 30s, the period of his own coming-of-age. Writers in this older generation felt that successful self re-creation, both autobiographical and actual, could be accomplished only by determining one's position *vis à vis* a cosmic historical force.[11] Kazin's choice of autobiographical form was partly a response to the effect that this philosophy had had on him as a young man. In his second memoir, *Starting Out in the Thirties,* Kazin recalls, with disillusionment, the sense of exhilaration that accompanied his own historicism during the Great Depression: "History was going our way, and in our need was the very life-blood of history . . . The unmistakable and surging march of history might yet pass through me. There seemed to be no division between my efforts at personal liberation and the apparent effort of humanity to deliver itself."[12]

One might argue, of course, that as an autobiography of childhood,

A Walker does not deal with the "historical" world, and therefore cannot address the problems of historicism. But to do so would be to ignore the overwhelming importance which Kazin places upon the relationship between the individual and history in all of his writings, and in particular in his autobiographical work. By emphasizing the adult's role in the reconstruction of the child, and by creating a parallel between the older man's reconstruction of his childhood and the child's reconstruction of the American past, Kazin locates the source of historical meaning, whether personal or collective, in the historian and undermines historicism's claim that the past possesses meaning independent of human creation.

Kazin does not, however, advocate a view of identity divorced from collective history, nor does he value the personal over the collective past. More than most autobiographers of childhood, Kazin has the sensibilities of a public man, a writer very much in and of the world. As we descend with him into the vortex of his reconstructed past, the larger world that he is "leaving" is always present or implied. Moreover, Kazin's return to his lost innocence provides more than a mere "escape" from history because the childhood he reconstructs was full of a longing *for* history, as we have seen. The child's Whitmanesque dream that he could become an American by assimilating America's past was born of a belief that the collective past might somehow deliver him from "us and them," from the feeling that as isolated individuals (outside of history) we are meaningless. By 1951, when he wrote *A Walker,* he had indeed been delivered by his dream out of isolation, but the post-War, post-Holocaust America in which he found himself was not the one which "his" history had promised. It is in this context that the return to childhood must be read. The young Kazin had dreamed that collective history would be the salvation of the self; the older Kazin, even while remaining committed to collective history, realized that history, far from providing our salvation, was the very thing from which we must be saved. The power of *A Walker* ultimately derives from the tension between this commitment to our collective fate and the belief that our only salvation from that fate lies in a consciousness of the past. The adult walker's reconstruction of his childhood may have begun as an effort of the historical self to connect with an apparently ahistorical self, but the ironic achievement of that effort was the discovery that the earlier self had, in fact, been firmly grounded in history, the history of first generation immigrant Jews.

The peculiar intensity with which Kazin identifies his personal past with the collective past raises questions about the relationship of both

to the larger question of life in history and makes *A Walker* an interesting example of the options available to contemporary American autobiographers. *A Walker* rejects the historicism of the 30s and the forms of the self that such historicism produced, but nevertheless maintains the belief that the self is never fully realized until it has defined its relationship to the issues of the times; that is, to "historical" issues. It is precisely this belief which distinguishes Kazin's autobiography from other coming-of-age memoirs. On the surface, it appears to appeal to a private and psychological explanation of the self, but finally it relies firmly upon the belief that only the determination of our relationship to collective experience can provide our private selves with worth. This belief provides the motivation for the two quests discussed in the first half of this essay.

In a *Commentary* article published in 1979, Kazin wrote that the "most lasting autobiographies tend to be case histories limited to the self as its own history to begin with, then the self as the history of a particular moment and crisis in human history . . . "[13] In its presentation of the latter, *A Walker* reflects not only the struggle of a first-generation immigrant son to become an American, but also the struggle of the modern imagination, which has lost faith in either a divine or a cosmic ordering of history, to recreate a meaningful past. "The life of mere experience," Kazin says in that article, "and especially of history as the supposedly total experience we ridiculously claim to know, can seem an inexplicable series of unrelated moments." In *A Walker,* the child and the adult are both motivated by the autobiographical belief that history still constitutes meaning and identity; both yearn for continuity. But by focusing on the context in which the past is reclaimed, Kazin emphasizes the difficulties and limitations of his task and places it on the insecure basis which attends every human effort to create meaning. Such an approach to the relationship between history and the self demands finally that the walker be able to tread a tightrope between the "reality" of the past and the solipsism toward which a reliance on imagination and language tends.

Burton Pike has stated that "as the twentieth century began, belief in History as a sustaining external principle collapsed," and suggests that the term 'autobiography' cannot accurately be said to apply to twentieth century forms of self-writing since it "might best be regarded as a historical term, applicable only to a period roughly corresponding to the nineteenth century; that period when, in European thought, an integrity of personal identity corresponded to a belief in the integrity of cultural conventions."[14] By using as his examples

authors who had come to autobiography from the Modernist movement (he mentions Musil, Stein, Rilke, Mailer), Pike has certainly overestimated the impact of Modernism (which "relativized" and "internalized" time) on our basic conception of history. Even within the literary community (and particularly among those, like Kazin, who were raised in a leftist political tradition), there was widespread resistance to ideas of time that impinged upon the nineteenth century notions of history. The weakest point in Pike's argument is, in fact, his failure to acknowledge the strength of the Marxist legacy in twentieth century thought, and in particular the effect of historicism on modern autobiographies. Even Kazin's *A Walker,* in spite of its rejection of ideological historicism and its attention to the subjectivity of the self-writer, retains a belief in history as fate.

Perhaps the significance of Kazin's book lies in its revelation of one man's response to the dilemma of his generation: their vision of the self, which was shaped and sustained by historicism, collapsed just when they were about to enter upon the stage of history. Confronted with the collapse of this "sustaining external principle" autobiographers committed to the idea of life in history were faced with the difficult task of defining anew how one might transcend the "inexplicable series of unrelated moments" that constitute our daily experience. Kazin's return to childhood in *A Walker* is one answer. Other autobiographers are still trying, with varying degrees of success, to find substantial historical movements and directions with which to structure the past, give meaning to the present, and help predict the future. Even a cursory glance at contemporary autobiographical writing reveals that there are many ways to do this; most clearly it can be seen in the increasing numbers of autobiographies written by members of newly self-conscious groups—Blacks, women, gays, a generation. The belief held by each of these groups that "their time" has come is a form of historicism (frequently unconscious) that allows the individual autobiographer to transcend "mere experience" by identifying him/herself with the historical realization of the group's identity. They provide ample evidence that autobiographies, even at this late post-Modernist date, remain both a literary and a historical form.[15]

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NOTES

1. *A Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1951). All subsequent references to this book will be given in the body of the text.

2. John Paul Eakin, "Kazin's Bridge to America," *South Atlantic Quarterly,* 77 (Winter 1978), 43. This article provides an excellent summary and discussion of the coming-of-age aspect of the memoir. Readers interested in a thorough reading of the memoir are referred to Sherman Paul, "Alfred Kazin," *Repossessing and Renewing: Essays in The Green American Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ., 1976), pp. 236–62.
3. Oscar Handlin, rev. of *A Walker in the City, Saturday Review of Literature,* 17 November 1951, p. 14.
4. One might add that most autobiographies are structured in this way: on the one hand, the explicit "journey" of the youthful "I" toward manhood, and, ultimately, toward a complete identification with the narrative "I;" on the other hand, the implicit journey of the adult, narrative "I" backward in time to find an earlier self, Kazin's memoir is distinguished by the way in which it makes this second journey such an important and explicit aspect of the narrative.
5. (New York: Harvest, 1942).
6. *New York Jew,* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 313.
7. *New York Jew,* p. 320.
8. Kazin's "loss" of his childhood is reflected indirectly in *On Native Grounds,* the monumental literary history that culminated his search for an American past. That work conspicuously omits any discussion of the contribution of Jews to American literature. Thus, Robert Towers remarks in "Tales of Manhattan" (*New York Review of Books,* May 18, 1978, p. 32): "The great immigration of East European Jews passes unnoticed, as though it had never happened . . . as though it had not deposited Alfred Kazin's bewildered parents on the Lower East side. So powerful has been the subsequent impact of Jewish writing upon our consciousness that it seems incredible that Kazin should have found nothing to say about its early manifestations in a history so inclusive as *On Native Grounds.*"
9. "Time in Autobiography," *Comparative Literature,* 28 (Fall 1976), 335.
10. *New York Jew,* pp. 232 and 321 respectively. The return to childhood as renewal through reconnection with an earlier, innocent self is common to many autobiographies and most eloquently expressed in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude:* "There are in our existence spots of time,/That with distinct pre-eminence retain/A renovating virtue, whence . . . our minds/Are nourished and invisibly repaired" (XII, 208–10, 214–15). For a discussion of this notion as an essential part of the autobiographical form, see Martha R. Lifson, "The Myth of the Fall: A Description of Autobiography," *Genre,* 12 (Spring 1979), 45–68.
11. See, for examples of such autobiographies, Joseph Freeman's *An American Testament* (1936), Anna Louise Strong's *I Change Worlds* (1934), Samuel Harper's *The Russia I Believe In* (1945), Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* (1934 edition), and Vincent Sheean's *Personal History* (1935). For an articulate example of the reaction against historicism, see Karl R. Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies,* Vol. II: *The High Tide of Prophecy—Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), chapter 25: "Has History Any Meaning?" pp. 259–80.
12. *Starting Out In The Thirties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), pp. 82–3.
13. "Writing About Oneself," *Commentary,* 67 (April 1979), 71.
14. Pike, p. 332.

15. The last decade has witnessed a revival of narrative in historical studies which provides further evidence of a continuing belief in historical, linear time as a controlling metaphor for the organization of the past. See, for example, J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 136–37, who says that "although the past manufactured by his ancestors will no longer do, it would seem that man in the West still seeks a meaningful past, one which will confer as much significance upon his life as the Marxist past does for those who can believe in it." See also, Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on the New Old History," *Past and Present* (November 1979), 3–24.