In 1983, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch reissued Alfred Kazin’s first book, *On Native Grounds*, in a fortieth anniversary edition, an event that went virtually unnoticed save at Hilton Kramer’s *The New Criterion*, where the knives were being sharpened in the wake of Kazin’s observations, in *The New York Review of Books* ("Saving My Soul at the Plaza") in March, on the Committee for the Free World’s conference on “our country and our culture” at the Plaza. Kazin’s strictures on that conference – on the callowness of its prevailing attitudes and its shrillness of tone – earned him a rebuke by *The New Criterion*: a reconsideration of *On Native Grounds* by Kenneth Lynn, who took it to task for its errors of fact (the Manhattan-bound Kazin had thought, as a young man, that there were mountains in Hemingway’s northern Michigan) and for its unbridled leftism. Written in the dog days of the depression, *On Native Grounds* was, it seems, unaccountably sour on the prospects for American society and irresponsibly “radical” in its scorn for American business.

That flawed but promising book (Lynn gave it passing grades for style) was, we were told, the high water mark of Kazin’s career, and even it has not stood the test of time so well as its contemporary volumes: Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* and F. O. Matthiessen’s *The American Renaissance*. "’No one can tell us,’” Lynn solemnly quoted Kazin, "’all that F. Scott Fitzgerald meant when he said that “there are no second acts in American lives” or why we have been so oppressed by the sense of time, or why our triumphs have been so brittle.’ When he wrote those searing words in the preface of the first edition of *On Native Grounds*,” Lynn concluded, “the twenty-seven-year-old Kazin was unwittingly composing the epitaph for his own career.”

They don’t mince words at *The New Criterion*, just reputations, their mission in American letters being to grind literary reputations into rubble. The careful discriminations that once marked T.S. Eliot’s original *Criterion* in the 1930s have degenerated into demolitions in
Hilton Kramer’s new magazine, whose first criterion of judgment sounds like nothing so much as the slogan of the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War: no pasaran. But even by the lowest New Criterion standard, which holds that no career is so exalted that it cannot be blackened, this assault was uncommonly foolish, for it singled out for special reprimand Kazin’s “radicalism,” a posture so elusive that no one lacking a neo-conservative radar gun can spot it. Kazin, it seems, had fancied himself a radical in On Native Grounds and taken the usual swipes at capitalism, and Lynn, sounding quite as if he had just pulled a major cache of microfilms out of a pumpkin, took him at his word. To most readers, on the contrary, Kazin’s rhapsodies on America, from On Native Grounds to the present time, sound more like the Gershwin brothers than, say, V. I. Parrington, to whom Lynn compares him. As for his failure to come out for the second act, it comes as a distinct surprise to those legions of critics who would gladly swap Kazin’s dismal record – seven books since On Native Grounds – for their own and be only too happy to take the blame for a vagrant mountain or two in Michigan’s upper peninsula as the price of such failure. In our time, which lacks a single great critic to dominate and define the landscape, Kazin is the closest thing we have to a master, a curious master to be sure, caustic and poetic and fonder of rhapsodies than of analyses, but a master in terms that any student of American literature can appreciate. He commands a major literature; he possesses a distinct point of view that charges whatever it touches with meaning, and he writes with a pungency and concision that no other American critic can equal.

An American Procession is the chronicle of a hundred-year period in American literary history, from 1830 to 1930, starting with Emerson and halting abruptly with Eliot, Pound, Faulkner, and Hemingway in mid-career. Kazin begins with Emerson because “Whitman . . . predicted correctly that ‘America in the future, in her long train of poets and writers, while knowing more vehement and luxuriant ones, will . . . acknowledge nothing nearer [than] this man, the actually beginner of the whole procession . . . .’” It was Emerson’s commanding sense of self that precipitated so much of what was militantly individual in the American character. This God-intoxicated man was the intellectual Godfather of the writers who came after him, even those like Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, who took a dim view of Emerson’s indwelling divinity and held themselves in strict opposition.” . . . What Emerson called his ‘one’