Current Books

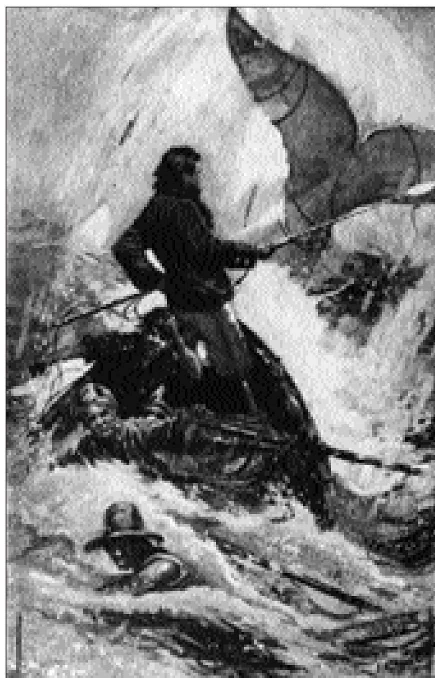
Wrestling with God

GOD AND THE AMERICAN WRITER.
By Alfred Kazin. Knopf.
288 pp. $25

by Amy E. Schwartz

At last summer's University of Mississippi conference honoring the centennial of William Faulkner's birth, I happened to be waiting for a shuttle bus alongside a Faulknerian from Portugal and a Hawthorne specialist from Japan. "Maybe you can answer a question for me," said the Faulknerian to the Hawthornian. "We in Portugal find this American Calvinism very confusing. Would it be right to say the Presbyterians are Calvinists? They are the same as Protestants, no?" The Japanese scholar replied, "I don't know, exactly. I find it confusing too."

Alfred Kazin, alas, was not with us at the bus stop. Had he been, aside from answering the question, he would have been pleased at such direct evidence for his view that American literature is the last place to look for an explanation of religious orthodoxy. In his deeply informed and passionate *God and the American Writer*, which, coincidentally, begins with Hawthorne and ends with Faulkner, the distinguished critic argues that America's greatest writers, "these strange minds"—the quotation is from Emily Dickinson—are as far as possible from endorsing any sort of "official" religious belief. Instead, they slug it out with the Deity from a position of autonomy, almost one of equality.


Illus. from Herman Melville's Moby Dick

In the introduction, Kazin declares that his interest lies "not in the artist's personal belief but in the imagination he brings to his tale of religion in personal affairs." This turns out to be only half true. The author proves to be curious about a collective literary experience of God in the United States, which invariably requires reference to a writer's own beliefs. And as the half-guilty disclaimer makes clear, he knows that any such description requires inference and ventriloquism. It risks becoming reductive or, worse, manipulative—pressing the complex writer's complex beliefs into shapes that the lover of the work finds congenial.

In this regard, Kazin's lifetime literary intimacy with the figures he treats here—he dealt with most of them at length in his *On Native Grounds* (1942) or *An American Procession* (1976), or both—poses dangers. It is hard not to suspect that his fondness for a writer sometimes tempts him to see doubt or conflict where there is none, to overdraw the parallels between the religious thought of a Harriet Beecher Stowe (to take one case in which a stretch seems most painfully obvious) and the restless, relentless struggles

over religion expressed so vividly in Kazin's own published journals. A few writers whom Kazin admires display in these pages just the sort of certainty that he considers outside the major American tradition. Saul Bellow falls in this category; so, more famously, does Flannery O'Connor, whose celebrated exchange with Mary McCarthy on the subject is duly noted. (McCarthy had told O'Connor that as a lapsed Catholic she considered the Host a symbol, to which O'Connor replied, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.") Kazin quotes O'Connor wistfully—if only this were the American experience, this conviction!—but sticks by his belief that theological and moral sparring is the American writer's more traditional earmark.

Kazin seeks to rebut claims that American literature or culture has historically reflected a religious orthodoxy, or that Americans—especially their great writers, "standing a bit apart"—have ever done less than build their God from scratch, whether confidently or with agony. His thesis fits intuitively with Americans' traditional if now bitterly contested self-image as a people of pioneers and immigrants, trusting to an internal compass, lighting out for open territories, starting again and again from scratch. But the view against which Kazin defines this distinctively American quest—those groups of artists more tightly immured within a religious tradition, or more overwhelmed by the remains of one—is evoked only by scattered references to non-American poets and novelists: now Tolstoy, now Stevie Smith or Amos Oz. "I don't think it can be said of Faulkner what Tolstoy said to Maksim Gorki: God is the name of my desire," he observes. "That is not the way really good American writers today think or talk about religion, if they ever do." (The comment is a fair reflection of the book's intimate, offhand, yet peremptory style.)

At many points in *God and the American Writer*, Kazin appears to be arguing fiercely against some larger cultural sensibility, one whose particulars he never quite identifies but which has something to do with the rise of conservative politics and its effort to inject Christianity into the public sphere. After discussing Abraham Lincoln's humility and anguish, for example, the author declares: "Religion was to him a matter of the most intensely private conviction. Did he suspect that a wholly politicized religion would yet become everything to many Americans?"

Kazin's independent thinkers essentially fall into two categories. In one category are those who, insouciantly and self-assuredly, create their own systems of belief: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, William James (the "natural believer"), and even Thomas Jefferson. Cameo portraits of such figures, rather than analysis, carry Kazin's argument here. When James, feeling the pull toward belief, finds he has no idea what sort of a God could compel it, he works until he comes up with one. Emerson, an ordained minister, declares to his flock that he cannot believe in the Incarnation or transubstantiation, and takes off to preach the new spiritual framework of transcendentalism. Walt Whitman's God in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) "comes a loving bedfellow and sleeps by my side all night," though by the 1881 edition this has been made less explicit.

None of these freewheeling thinkers give any impression of seeing their spiritual projects as problematic. Of course, as Kazin notes, none of their innovative versions of God and religion attained much popularity or permanence, either—not even Jefferson's—though Emerson attracted disciples and Whitman was "for awhile almost a religion in England."

By contrast, the torments of the doubters—Kazin's second category—came to reflect not just the American but the entire modern experience. Nathaniel Hawthorne engaged in internal dialogue with his Puritan ancestors, wondering in the preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) what they would think of so frivolous and insubstantial a figure as a writer of stories. Herman Melville, whose widow at his death could find no buyer for his extensive library of theology, struggles like the raving Ahab to "strike through the

mask" at the "inscrutable thing" that infuriates him. Ahab is mad, but Melville is no surer of what lies behind the veil—only of its intensity. He writes to Hawthorne, whom he idolizes, that "I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces." Having created Ahab and been rebuffed by the reading public, Melville trails miserably around the Holy Land searching for meaning, which he packs into the unreadable poem *Clarel* (1876). His inability to leave God alone is mirrored in Mark Twain, who is so obsessed and infuriated with God that he pens declaration after declaration of his beliefs—God, yes, religion, no—but is unwilling to permit publication of the openly antireligious musings in *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916) until after his death.

For Kazin, Emily Dickinson manages to combine the struggling mode with the serene transcendentalist one, "absorbing a tradition without having to obey it," and telling a correspondent that "it is true that the unknown is the largest need of intellect, although for this no one thinks to thank God." A Dickinson quotation serves as the book's epigraph: "We thank thee, Father, for these strange minds that enamor us against thee."

Dickinson's importance is matched for the author by that of another key figure: Lincoln, depicted as a doubting man, facing the mutually exclusive but passionately held convictions of North and South about the will of God, forced to build a conception of his own. This vision of Lincoln is evidently fundamental to Kazin's idea of the book. In his published journals and in a 1996 preface to the 20th-anniversary edition of his *An American Procession*, Kazin talks about a book he is working on called *The Almighty Has His Own Purposes*—a phrase from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address—which has become *God and the American Writer*. In this preface, Kazin suggests that slavery and the Civil War, more than any other factors, are responsible both for Americans' deep religiosity and for their inability to accept any theological answer as final. "On this terrible subject," he writes of slavery, "all true and ancient believers outdo the Biblical Jacob—they wrestle with Him forever."

This idea, though elegant, has problems, and the book's change of title may reflect their belated surfacing. The trouble is not the inclusion of Lincoln (or Jefferson) in the procession of American literary writers; this is hardly unprecedented, though it does produce complexities. (For all its eloquent reflections on divine will, Lincoln wrote the Second Inaugural to fulfill a public end, not a private vision.) The problem lies elsewhere. To begin with, the view that American theological independence flows from slavery, or from agony over the competing certainties about slavery, contradicts and in some ways trivializes Kazin's category of unconventional but confident writers—those who hold their ground before orthodoxy, whose self-assurance is the wellspring of their religious enthusiasm, and whose insistence on calling God as they see him is bound up in what is most American about American life.

Does the Second Inaugural show a would-be believer in agony before a divine will that seems unfathomable? Kazin draws our attention to a key sentence: "If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?"

Faith versus doubt does not seem exactly the right framework here. Lincoln's analysis of the moral situation is entirely consistent with a religious view of history. And, having asked the question, Lincoln famously answers it: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by anoth-

er drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' "

These words—magnificent and familiar—do not support Kazin's notion that the Civil War threw faith radically and irremediably into doubt. Instead, they support another of his arguments: that the American tendency to moral assurance, especially in the hands of a great creative intelligence, could respond to unprecedented American travails such as slavery with a gripping and individual theology.

Kazin tries too hard to tie race, the moral struggle that looms largest in American history, into the very different question of why Americans, set free of compulsion, stick enthusiastically to God and religion. Some writers who agonized over the slavery question did experience it as a challenge to their views of the nature of God, but others did not. One of Kazin's weaker moments is his attempt to complicate Stowe's theology in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) into "a continuing Christianity all her own," merely because she saw that the organized church had fallen short.

It seems finally somewhat reductive of religion to argue that the urgency of its appeal can be felt only in times of public moral crises that rise to the awful heights of the Civil War. So high a standard for God wrestling also keeps Kazin from seeing anything akin to his writers' questing sensibilities in today's public discussions and expressions of faith that so infuriate him. Were American religion, then or now, radically public and conventional, the space would be much reduced for the kinds of bold theological excursions honored in this book. Fortunately, Kazin's own analysis offers ample evidence that such is not the case.

>Amy E. Schwartz *writes about cultural issues for the* Washington Post.

What to Make of China?

THE GREAT WALL AND THE EMPTY FORTRESS.
By Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross. Norton. 352 pp. $29.95

THE COMING CONFLICT WITH CHINA.
By Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro. Knopf. 245 pp. $23

by Anne Thurston

American perceptions of China have traditionally alternated between distaste and adulation. The pendulum has swung again. Deeming the scenario "unlikely but not unimaginable," veteran journalists Ross Munro and Richard Bernstein devote an entire chapter of *The Coming Conflict with China* to a chilling scenario: in 2004, China blockades Taiwan; soon the missiles are flying. Taiwan asks for help, and the United States steps in. "And," predict Bernstein and Munro, "no matter how we intervene, there's going to be a good chance of some kind of direct shooting war with China." Such an outcome is not in China's interests, but "it is in the interests of the ruling clique." The China of Bernstein and Munro is to be feared and contained.

For those seeking the certainty of a new cold war, China offers easy prey. The country has the world's largest standing army, fastest-growing economy, and biggest population. Its annual trade advantage over the United States has passed $40 billion. Its government promotes an assertive, often anti-American nationalism. China undertakes corporate espionage against the West; this year's congressional hearings probed (to no avail) for evidence of political meddling as well. But while there's ample ground for wariness, the present hysteria (a term increasingly invoked by China scholars) is hardly justi-