

the modernist literature of the 1920s and 1930s. The work of “generally upper-class writers,” it is a literature relying on “images not facts,” a literature charged with “the agony of change, the fear of the masses, the longing for an absolute,” above all a literature that has at last succeeded in turning history into art, into “style.” Kazin entitles this final section “Ruling by Style: History and the Moderns, 1900–1929” and includes essays or parts of essays on Adams, Faulkner, Pound, Eliot, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos — all of them geniuses of style. He attributes style’s victory over history in part to the crumbling authority of narrative history which by the twentieth century was becoming “as much a great ruin as religion.” Indeed Adams himself, the great philosopher-historian of sequence, had begun to realize in the late 1800s that as sequence history was no longer making sense. But it was left to the twentieth-century modernists to deliver the final blow, which they did by turning history into myth, particularly the myth of the great fall. Kazin also sees the triumph of style in the twentieth century as the inevitable response of the creative self defending its freedom at all cost from an increasingly intrusive public world, a world which by the end of World War I seemed to Hemingway, Eliot and their contemporaries to threaten the very survival of consciousness. Hemingway “knew that the public was pushing him and everyone else toward an abyss. But he still had a private code, . . . a form of conduct [that] was really a lean, wary style of writing, Hemingway’s style. This style thrived on the disasters of war but somehow saved a few exceptional people from destruction.” Style, in short, absorbing the public into the private, succeeded in mobilizing art into a lifestyle, a philosophy, a final strategy of defense. If in the nineteenth century style reflected a naive confidence in the transforming possibilities of consciousness, in the twentieth it reflects a desperate last stand of the free self against “the fatal ordering of things” and the unstated admission that literature could survive history only by swallowing it.

Kazin watches this retreat into style with obvious ambivalence and deep personal misgivings often breaking out into open irritation. After all this is not what modernism was supposed to be about — a defense against history, a self-pitying, self-protecting shield of style against the chaos outside. Modernism was rebellion, revolution, hope, the celebration of the “new,” the expectation of the future, the rebirth of American promise; at least so it had seemed to the aspiring young critic writing *On Native Grounds* in the New York Public Library reading room. Looking back fifty years later, Kazin sees all too clearly what his mentor Edmund Wilson had sensed at the time, that modernism was the end,