

alexander kern

an analysis and interpretation

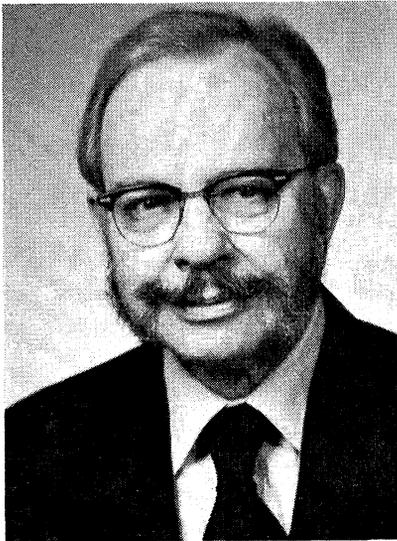
My first encounter with Alexander Kern was so characteristic of the man that I have retained it through the more than twenty years which have intervened between that time and the present. I was just about to be discharged from the army and was inquiring about programs in American studies at several different institutions. All but one replied courteously enough, but with typewritten letters obviously based on standardized forms. But I did receive one painstakingly handwritten reply which carried with it the aura of a uniquely personal and unpretentious human being, a quality that is rarely encountered in the process of making application to an institution. That letter had a great impact on my life for it decided me on a graduate school and thus determined the angle from which I would approach my profession for the rest of my life. And I was not wrong, as it turned out, to give such great weight to that letter. Alex Kern, as I came to know him as teacher and friend, always sustained that sense of the person, conveyed to me at first glance by his unforgettable hand.

Alexander Kern was born on September 23, 1909, and grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, graduating from Erie Central High School in 1925. After Honors in English at Yale (1930) and an M.A. (1933) and Ph.D. (1936) in History at the University of Wisconsin he came to the University of Iowa where, except for brief detours at Wisconsin and Allegheny College, and visiting professorships at the University of Maryland, the University of Ankara, Turkey, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the University of Wyoming and American University in Cairo, he has been for many years professor of American literature and chairman of the American civilization program. He was also a Fulbright lecturer in Hyderabad, India in 1969. Under his direction the American civilization program at Iowa developed from a pioneering enterprise into one of the major American studies programs in the country and it now has graduates teaching at colleges and

universities all around the United States. Kern has also played an important role in the development of American studies on a national level, serving many terms in the leadership of sections and chapters in the Modern Language Association, the American Studies Association, the Mississippi Valley Historical Association and the Midwest Modern Language Association.

Alex's scholarly writings have been quite varied. He has done texts like the Barnes and Noble outline of *American Literature* (with B. V. Crawford and M. H. Needleman) and the Scott-Foresman anthology *Sources of the American Republic* (with Marvin Meyers and John Cawelti); editions such as his *Thoreau: Two Fragments* and *Huckleberries*; literary analyses such as his "Dreiser's Difficult Beauty" and "Frost's 'The Wood Pile'"; theoretical and methodological discussions, historical studies, encyclopedia articles and many book reviews. This diversity reflects his wide-ranging curiosity, his openness to a variety of ideas and methods, and the remarkable interdisciplinary competence he has developed over the years. Yet, there have been two central threads woven in and out through his scholarly accomplishments.

The first is his long-term interest in the relationship between literature and the social sciences, particularly the sociology of knowledge. Beginning with his 1940 article on "Emerson and Economics," and coming down to an interest in the work of Peter Berger which he has



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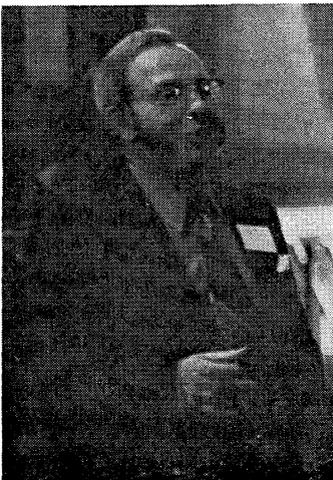
passed on to a number of his recent students, Alex has been particularly interested in the reflection of ideological patterns in literature and with the ways in which the exploration of this relationship can help elucidate both literature and currents of belief and attitude in the society which produces it. His 1942 article, "The Sociology of Knowledge in the Study of Literature," which developed the implications for literary study of Karl Mannheim's work was a landmark in this field of study and a widely influential essay. Alex followed up his own methodological prescriptions with an exemplary study of "The Rise

of Transcendentalism" in the 1955 *Transitions in American Literary History*. In this brilliantly systematic analysis, he used a wide range of materials to set forth with great clarity the changing patterns of thought which separated the various phases of the transcendentalist movement from earlier American ideologies.

Alex's other great interest has been in the writings of Henry David Thoreau. He has produced a number of articles and is currently working on further material for the new Thoreau edition. It might seem a bit strange that Alex Kern, one of the most sociable men alive, should be so attracted to the writings of the great American hermit, yet Thoreau was not really that, but a lover of human society when it did not compromise his own integrity or impede his deeper relationship with nature. Perhaps it is this which has so attracted Alex to Thoreau; for Alex, too, has managed far beyond most other men to become a great teacher and friend, while remaining uniquely and ineffably himself.

While the larger community of American studies scholars has known Alex primarily through his publications and his work in our professional organizations, those of us who have had the good fortune to be his students will never forget those classes and seminars, for Alex's style as a teacher is unique. It's not that he is a brilliantly charismatic lecturer or a rigorous systematizer who overpowers you with the intricate logic of his arguments. If he has a grand theory of American studies he has kept it well hidden all these years perhaps because he feels very keenly that his function as a teacher is to work *with* rather than *on* his students. Moreover, he has always been too curious about new intellectual developments to be satisfied for long with a particular methodological or theoretical formulation. But what he does offer more than any other teacher I've had is the sense of a personal reaction to literature and culture, of what I think Emerson may have meant by the phrase "Man Thinking." Alex brings his whole self in all its uniqueness to bear on the material before him. His commentary flows in a kind of associative free form pulling his wide and diverse range of knowledge into focus on the problem or book at hand. Sometimes the very spontaneity of his reflections leads to momentary gaps when he

reaches for a reference or a concept that temporarily eludes him—"I'm blocking on that" used to be one of his characteristic expressions—but this willingness to think aloud along uncharted paths was for us a symbol of his fresh and ever renewed delight in the play of thought. Alex gave us a model of thinking as the daring to be open to new possibilities. Yet his reflections, though open and inquiring and sometimes even hard to follow, were never woolly or ethereal, Behind them there was always an extraordinary range of humanistic learning, enriched by personal contacts and experience in many different countries, and an incisive critical intelli-



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gence which could be very tough and demanding. I've known Alex to spend many hours of his own time looking into his students' subjects. Sometimes he came to know the literature better than they did. It can be embarrassing to be handed an extensive bibliography of secondary sources that you should have consulted but didn't.

Something of the Kern style comes across in the following Alexisms, a few of those which Ted Weissbuch playing Boswell gleaned from his notes on a course in Early American literature and kindly shared with me in a recent letter. They bear for me, as I'm sure they will for other former students, the stamp of the essential Alex, though they are not, of course, the same, without that quiet, insistent, somewhat droning, yet warmly engaging voice:

My answer to your question will mislead you in the right direction.

Definition of Calvinism: Everyone's afraid he's damned, but in the Old Testament everyone at least gets a share of heaven.

On Jonathan Edwards: Here I'm not talking through my hat, because it's a foggy idea.

On Benjamin Franklin: His career in our open society permitted him to hobnob with kings. Being a shoemaker was no longer heredity.

One of the chief indoor sports, historically, is soaking the government somehow, as you may well know.

Hamilton did not sit home and sulk when his ideas on the Constitution were turned down.

Hooker was as sharp as a needle, and just as narrow.

Whenever Charles Brockden Brown thought of his father, he got all burned up—spontaneous combustion, that is.

Some of the writers—but not necessarily Edward Taylor—used the oxymoron—and were.

No one is born with the knowledge of what the Gothic novel means.

I have just returned from an American Studies meeting and heard three papers on the frontier that went from solid to brilliant.

William Ellery Leonard did the Cambridge History of American Literature article on Bryant. Leonard was insane, but no fool.

James Fenimore Cooper is at the bottom of the top class of American novelists. Interest in him arose among scholars when they discovered Cooper had a mind.

Cooper has a Quaker background, and they're not a very ritzy group. He was baptized in later life, but didn't just jump in.

(Cooper) can make a story stand still for longer than almost anyone, there is no doubt.

If we go off in that direction it will only lead us up a stump to no end.

The Kern style is unique and inimitable, yet most of his former students have tried to take at least some of it into themselves. As one put it to me, “a good many of us whom Alex taught at Iowa, I can testify, have tried to take him as a model—even though trying to match his mixture of amiability, tact, receptiveness and intellectual rigor has been a thoroughly humbling exercise. Nobody with his crammed schedule could have been more accessible, patient and helpful toward us; nobody of his standing and achievement in American studies has been more generous-minded toward younger colleagues with new approaches to propose; nobody I’ve met from the Now Generation itself has been more up front.”

But the teaching and the dissertation advising were only one part of Alex’s vital role in our lives. The other was his position as what another student refers to as the “perfect genuine host.” Nobody ever gave more delightful parties than Alex and his wonderful wife, Jean, who is a superb scholar and teacher in her own right. Between the two of them, they have a genius for sociability which they have always used with particular generosity toward students. They created a special ambience of friendship and good conversation, a perennial salon where students and faculty could talk together outside the boundaries of classrooms and seminars.



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Who of my vintage in Iowa City will forget the old stone house on Market Street, and the many parties where Jean’s punch and Alex’s legendary collection of records formed a perfect background for the circulation of ideas? Most of the interesting people in Iowa City—all of whom Alex and Jean seemed to know—were there and approachable to a graduate student. The result was a social as well as pedagogical initiation of the graduate students in American Civilization into the larger intellectual community of the university on a level that I have seen at no

other institution. It’s a rare gift to a student to make him feel part of a university against which, in the normal course of events, he is struggling. Alex and Jean have done this for generations of students, and it is fortunate for all of us that they apparently feel this responsibility extends off campus as well. I never attend a convention without checking in with Alex in hopes of joining the interesting group he has put together out of students and friends for dinner at some particularly

good restaurant—among his other talents Alex is the world's most reliable walking Baedeker.

Alex's retirement from teaching seems surprising, not because it was sudden or unexpected, but because the sustained freshness of Alex's thought and the intensity of his interest in each new generation of students has made him seem eternally unchanging and youthful. Even now, retiring will certainly not mean the end of his work as scholar or of his career as host and friend. More than most men, Alex Kern exemplifies one of the maxims cited by his own great literary interest, Thoreau:

They say that characters were engraved on the bathing tub of king Tching-Thang to this effect. "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again." I can understand that.

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(with the assistance of Ted Weissbuch)

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