

The New Criterion

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Castle adamant

by [Denis Donoghue](#)

On *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1920s & 30s* and *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s & 40s* by Edmund Wilson.

Edmund Wilson, by general consensus, was a great man of letters, indeed of many letters. In the first chapter of *Starting Out in the Thirties* (1965), Alfred Kazin recalls how he was in 1934:

I felt myself to be a radical, not an ideologue; I was proud of the revolutionary yet wholly literary tradition in American writing to which I knew that I belonged, and would say over to myself, from *Axel's Castle*, the last, woven sentence of Edmund Wilson's chapter on Proust: "Proust is perhaps the last great historian of the loves, the society, the intelligence, the diplomacy, the literature and the art of the Heartbreak House of capitalist culture; and the little man with the sad appealing voice, the metaphysician's mind, the Saracen's beak, the ill-fitting dress-shirt and the great eyes that seem to see all about him like the many-faceted eyes of a fly, dominates the scene and plays host in the mansion where he is not long to be master."

"I lived in the Heartbreak House of capitalist culture," Kazin reports, "waiting for it to stand accused by all writers worthy of the name." Wilson was already an accuser, subject to his interest in the production of memorably woven sentences. In "An Appeal to Progressives" (January 1931), he wrote of "the monstrosities of capitalism" and said that radicals and progressives must "take Communism away from the Communists, and take it without ambiguities, asserting that their ultimate goal is the ownership by the government of the means of production." But he retracted that claim in 1941 when he acknowledged, in "Marxism at the End of the Thirties," that "the taking-over by the state of the means of production and the dictatorship in the interests of the proletariat can by themselves never guarantee the happiness of anybody but the dictators themselves."

Meanwhile Wilson practiced cultural criticism, reviewing new writings, theater, music hall, and intellectual contingencies in the magazines, starting with *Vanity Fair*, and, over a long life of writing, going on to *The New Republic*, *The Dial*, *The New Yorker*, and other journals when occasion offered, reviews now collected in two Library of America editions.^[1] He thought of himself as a literary critic who also wrote notable fiction, plays, and poems: he was one of "the genuine connoisseurs who establish the standards of taste," one of those "who can distinguish Grade A and who prefer it to the other grades." Dedicating *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* (1931) to his admired teacher at Princeton, Christian Gauss, Wilson spoke of "what literary criticism ought to be—a history of man's ideas and imaginings in the setting of the conditions which have shaped them." The conditions were deemed to be mostly political, economic, and—for a particular writer—one's psychological constitution. Turning the pages of Johnson's

Lives of the Poets, Wilson noted that “almost all of them [were] clergymen, physicians, ambassadors, statesmen or courtiers,” and that the work of Milton, Waller, and Prior was “distinguished by an interest in public affairs and a large experience of the world.” Wilson judged that he had a similar force of apprehension in the world and could use it as he pleased; saying with self-charming archness that “in reading Eliot and Pound, we are sometimes visited by uneasy recollections of Ausonius, in the fourth century, composing Greek-and-Latin macaronics and piecing together poetic mosaics out of verses from Virgil.” In another mood, he could offer to improve Irving Babbitt’s Greek and in the next paragraph teach Paul Elmer More some manners. He could also indulge himself in pretty sentences, as in this review of Allen Tate’s shorter poems:

“Mr. Pope,” “Death of Little Boys,” and “Idiot” are like elaborate oriental ornaments which have been produced at an immense expense of materials, patience and cunning skill. We can have them around us and pick them up to examine them again and again, and we find that we do not get tired of them: they are as intricately patterned as cloisonné vases, as heavy as little bronzes (they differ in this from the inveterate lightness, sometimes flimsiness, of John Crowe Ransom). We admire the silver wire embedded in the blue and green enamel and the beautiful polish and glaze; we consider the precious alloy that has gone to make the grotesque image.

In short, he knew he could do anything.

Axel’s Castle (1931) is a study of modern poetry and fiction under the sign of Symbolism. The several chapters on Yeats, Valéry, Eliot, Proust, Joyce, and Stein are honorably responsive to those writers, especially to Eliot and Joyce on behalf of “The Waste Land” and *Ulysses*. “Symbolism,” a second wave of Romanticism, “may be defined as an attempt by carefully studied means—a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors—to communicate unique personal feelings.” Wilson’s observations are limited only by the constraints of symbolist considerations. In the last chapter he tries to dispose of those constraints by an elaborate and rather strained meditation on Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s Count Axel and the life of Arthur Rimbaud:

And whereas the Romantic, in his individualism, had usually revolted against or defied that society with which he felt himself at odds, the Symbolist has detached himself from society and schools himself in indifference to it: he will cultivate his unique personal sensibility even beyond the point to which the Romantics did, but he will not assert his individual will—he will end by shifting the field of literature altogether, as his spokesman Axel had done the arena of life, from an objective to a subjective world, from an experience shared with society to an experience savored in solitude.

Reciting a brief biography of Rimbaud, Wilson claims that “if actions can be compared with writings, Rimbaud’s life seems more satisfactory than the works of his Symbolist contemporaries, than those even of most of his Symbolist successors, who stayed at home and stuck to literature.” His career, “with its violence, its moral interest and its tragic completeness, leaves us feeling that we have watched the human spirit, strained to its most resolute sincerity and in possession of its highest faculties, breaking itself in the effort to escape, first from humiliating compromise, and then from chaos equally humiliating.” Wilson’s meditation ends with an invidious contrast:

And when we turn back to consider even the masterpieces of that literature which Rimbaud had helped to found and which he had repudiated, we are oppressed by a sullenness, a lethargy, a sense of energies ingrown and sometimes festering. Even the poetry of the noble Yeats, still repining through middle age over the emotional miscarriages of youth, is dully weighted, for all its purity and candor, by a leaden acquiescence in defeat.

Still, the Symbolists are to be revered, they “break down the walls of the present and wake us to the hope and exaltation of the untried, unsuspected possibilities of human thought and art.”

Furthermore:

Yet as surely as Ibsen and Flaubert brought to their Naturalistic plays and novels the sensibility and language of Romanticism, the writers of a new reaction in the direction of the study of man in his relation to his neighbor and to society will profit by the new intelligence and technique of Symbolism. Or—what would be preferable and is perhaps more likely—this oscillation may finally cease. Our conceptions of objective and subjective have unquestionably been based on false dualisms; our materialisms and idealisms alike have been derived from mistaken conceptions of what the researches of science implied—Classicism and Romanticism, Naturalism and Symbolism are, in reality, therefore false alternatives. And so we may see Naturalism and Symbolism combine to provide us with a vision of human life and its universe, richer, more subtle, more complex and more complete than any that man has yet known—indeed, they have already so combined, Symbolism has already rejoined Naturalism, in one great work of literature, *Ulysses*.

Here Wilson, coming to the end of the book, writes a summary that would have made the book unnecessary had he written it as the first chapter. He seems not to have consulted his friends, probably because he thought they were not good enough. “Most of the younger generation of critics either are badly educated or have never learned to write, and many suffer from both disabilities,” he complained. “At best, we have produced no literary critic of the full European stature.” He meant Taine, Sainte-Beuve, Renan, and Saintsbury. But if he had extended his glance a little further into the scene of English and American criticism, he would have found an adequate company of critics in Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Middleton Murry, F. R. Leavis, Lionel Trilling, Kazin, Malcolm Cowley, Kenneth Burke, and Irving Howe, enough to be talking to. Someone could have instructed him in the mysteries of Kafka, made him read Wallace Stevens with care, and stopped him from making a fool of himself about Frost: “Robert Frost has a thin but authentic vein of poetic sensibility; but I find him excessively dull, and he certainly writes very poor verse.” Stevens, Wilson wrote, “who is so observant and displays so distinguished a fancy, seems to possess emotion neither in abundance nor in intensity. . . . When we have gone all through Mr. Stevens, we find ourselves putting to him the same question that he himself, in the last poem of his book, puts *To a Roaring Wind*”:

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocallissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it.

Even on Henry James, Wilson could well have talked to Trilling or Kazin, who would have urged him to reconsider this pseudo-Jamesian sentence from *The Shores of Light*:

When all this has been said, however, there still confronts us, in connection with James, the question of a lack in his work of direct emotional experience—a lack which is naturally felt more disconcertingly in his later than in his earlier books, since it is less easily comprehensible in a mature than in a callow man.

The preacher’s tone came easily to Wilson, he fell into the habit of it week by week.

He was immensely productive, unafraid of foreign languages, ready to read everything, but he was not a close or a slow reader—like Empson, Eliot, Blackmur, Donald Davie, and Burke then or

Geoffrey Hill, Christopher Ricks, and Helen Vendler now. He hadn't the patience for it, or the aptitude or the leisure. He was a biographer by native gift, the "Brief Life" his ideal genre. That is why *To the Finland Station* (1940) is his most achieved book, despite the embarrassment of his having to withdraw most of the claims for Marxism before the ink of the book was well dry. It took him a long experience of Russia—a sojourn in 1935 and news of Stalin's purges—to divine "that the Marxist's conviction of rightness was the result of having swallowed a dogma and gone to live in a myth." Now that the political issues have receded, what remains of Marxism outside the seminar room is apparently the admonition that we should all treat one another decently. "The technique of analyzing political phenomena in social-economic terms" —which Wilson thought could be retained of Marxism—hardly requires Marxism to set it going. On the last page of *To the Finland Station*, Wilson writes:

When all this is said, however, something more important remains that is common to all the great Marxists: the desire to get rid of class privilege based on birth and on difference of income; the will to establish a society in which the superior development of some is not paid for by the exploitation, that is, by the deliberate degradation of others—a society which will be homogeneous and cooperative as our commercial society is not, and directed, to the best of their ability, by the conscious creative minds of its members. But this age is a goal to be worked for in the light of one's own imagination and with the help of one's own common sense. The formulas of the various Marxist creeds, including the one that is common to them all, the dogma of the Dialectic, no more deserve the status of holy writ than the formulas of other creeds. To accomplish such a task will require of us an unsleeping adaptive exercise of reason and instinct combined.

In other words: maintain at least the residue of a Protestant sensibility and persist as a man of the Enlightenment.

The book is not convincing as an argument, but it is most impressive, most touching as a great novel of character, with Marx the hero—flawed, indeed—and Engels second only to Marx, and moral nuances and contradictions extending from these two, with remarkable power of implication, to Bakunin, Lenin, and Trotsky. *Patriotic Gore* has some of the same imaginative strength, but Wilson lets the single great story of the Civil War—and even the characters, Lincoln chief among them—drift away in cadenzas and diversions.

The problem with Wilson is that he was hopefully and hopelessly susceptible to notions, ideologies, and big ideas, determined to make them explain every issue that came along. Scathing toward the myths employed by other writers, he enforced as myths and demi-urges a parade of intimidations: Symbolism, Russia, Marxism, Freud, the story of Philoctetes and his bow, the historical interpretation of literature. All he could do with a notion was apply it to every object of attention in his vicinity. Inevitably and within a few short years, he met the sore necessity of extricating himself from whatever creed of the *Zeitgeist* he had most recently fallen for. Usually he tried to save a remnant by translating the myth into American terms. Marx's limitation, according to Wilson, was that he knew nothing of America, where Marxist ideals could be achieved—many of them having been achieved—without a revolution. Like other socialists, he had to put up with the old embarrassment recorded in Werner Sombart's *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (1906). And with the same embarrassment as recently described by Philip Fisher:

The final characteristic of a democratic social space is particularly important for literature and intellectual life. Such a Cartesian space provides for no observers, for no oppositional positions. There are no outsiders. Everyone present is already a member, a participant, a citizen. . . . No one is able to reflect from an external point of view on society itself. There cannot, then, in the modern period, be a strong and effective Marxist reflection of the society, challenging it in the name of an as yet unrealized

alternative to itself. One of the important puzzles of American experience has always been taken to be precisely this question of why, unlike Europe, Asia, and South America, the United States did not develop a strong Marxist challenge over the hundred years between 1860 and 1960. But Marxism is only an instance of the fact that within a democratic social space there cannot be organized self-consciousness and self-criticism, that is, a recognized intellectual class, and, in America, there never has been one.

In his later years, on each side of *Patriotic Gore*, Wilson kept going by quietly withdrawing from the main public events—the official ones—and turning toward minority interests. In *Axel's Castle* he had quoted the passage in *Marius the Epicurean* in which Pater reports of Marius:

He was become aware of the possibility of a large dissidence between an inward and somewhat exclusive world of vivid personal apprehension, and the unimproved, unheightened reality of the life of those about him. As a consequence, he was ready now to concede, somewhat more easily than others, the first point of his new lesson, that the individual is to himself the measure of all things, and to rely on the exclusive certainty to himself of his own impressions. To move afterwards in that outer world of other people, as though taking it at their estimate, would be possible henceforth only as a kind of irony.

Wilson never went as far beyond the hubbub of the world as Marius did, but his later interests display a similar form of irony. The Zuñi festival of Shálako, Voodoo in Haiti, the scrolls from the Dead Seas, Nabokov's version of *Eugene Onegin*, doing right by the Iroquois, *The Cold War and the Income Tax*, and *O Canada, O Canada: An American's Notes on Canadian Culture*: these are worthy concerns, but they are the work of a gentleman scholar, various in merit but having no claim to centrality of reference. They are incidental to the sustained work of the early critic, the chronicler, who taught his reader how to haggle through the issues raised by Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Thornton Wilder, a few classics and many commercials.

Notes

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1. *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1920s and 30s*, by Edmund Wilson; Library of America, 958 pages, \$40. *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s and 40s*, by Edmund Wilson; Library of America, 979 pages, \$40. [Go back to the text.](#)

Denis Donoghue's latest book is *On Eloquence* (Yale University Press).

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