

Edmund Wilson's literary essays and reviews from 1920 to 1950: Just in time

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There is fortunate timing to the Library of America's bringing out in two volumes Edmund Wilson's *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1920s & 30s* and *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s & 40s*. Their publication may help dispel the mausoleum feel to the comments Wilson receives with every appearance of his own writings or writings about him. He was, many reviewers insist, America's preeminent "man of letters," with the word "last" added to drive the final nail in the coffin housing a man of action, as he was in reality for the early, most productive and interesting decades of his life.

The young Wilson of these volumes is very different from a man of letters, the pose Wilson projected in old age. He was in the twenties and the thirties the most engaged of intellectuals, more like Albert Camus than Samuel Johnson, a whirlwind of activity, a "journalist and writer," as he liked to think of himself. Like H.L. Mencken, his contemporary, Wilson found in magazines a means to engage and shape a following open to fresh directions in thought and literary expression, especially when delivered by a sleek, new type of publication employing stylish photography, attractive graphic design and an intimate style of address to readers.

In his early reviews, Edmund Wilson displayed a wonderful trust sorely lacking in contemporary criticism—trust in the intelligence and interest of his audience, and dislike of the literary pretensions and genteel ways of America's patrician elite and the nouveau riches, "the boobocracy" as Mencken aptly named them. Today, when leading critics set texts adrift in a sea of signification free of reference and write a pre-literate prose under a post-modernist dispensation, it is good to read someone who writes lucid prose and makes literature come alive as a shared experience, each review a little drama of intellectual ideas upon historical or psychological circumstances of artistic production, all in the vivid, alive style of magazine writing, the path Wilson created by walking it in the period between two terrible World Wars.

There are three distinct phases in this intellectual journey: a bohemian phase in Greenwich Village after the first World War, when Wilson introduced modernist literature in its earliest heroic phase to a newly prosperous and more sophisticated American audience; a period in the Hungry Thirties when he rode various leftist currents as a socially engaged writer seeking to firm up his liberalism with an admixture of Marxism; and, finally, starting with his classic study of the historical roots of the Russian Revolution, *To the Finland Station*, published in 1940, the abandoning of his hopes for culture as an instrument of social change over a period of the remaining decade covered by the two-volume Library of America collection.

In his sunset years, Wilson seduced age-appropriate women in the first ranks of literary and cultural life, and dwelt on obscure personal interests ranging from forgotten American Civil War literature and Canadian literature before there was much of it, to Iroquois land claims and the Dead Sea Scrolls. He was studying Hungarian at the end of his life to read Endre Ady in the original. To this image he cast in his later years as an

eccentric man of letters is added, with no little help from his spicy diaries generous on details, the image of Wilson as a great fornicator, with an unusual taste for some of the most talented, powerful and difficult women of the twentieth century.

Knowledge of Wilson's sex life adds to, but in no ways deepens our understanding of what he actually stood for at the height of his influence, nor are we closer to learning the reason for that astonishing transformation from the reviewer who met each new exciting work or idea at the port as it arrived in America, to the one who paid scant heed to new writing and ideas. At the end, Wilson wrote exclusively for the *New Yorker* and in its style of those years, favoring obscure details on topics of no social relevance to emulate stuffy, late Victorian erudition of the pompous, eccentric and boring with a lot of time on their hands.

But let's see what it looks like from the other end, from 1920 onwards. At the height of the Depression, in *American Jitters* (1933), Wilson remembered a vow he had made: "I swore to myself that when the War was over I should stand outside of society altogether, I should do without the comforts and amenities of the conventional world entirely, and I should devote myself to the great human interests which transcend standard of living and conventions: Literature, History, the Creation of Beauty, the Discovery of Truth." Society meant the upper-middle class of Great Neck, New York, where Wilson was raised, the son of a distinguished lawyer, and Princeton, where he was educated among America's elite, insulated from real life until the carnage of a World War he witnessed as a medical orderly forever changed him. "Outside society" meant the open intellectual world of bohemia, joining avant-garde thought and writing from Paris, London to New York, or for that matter, Tokyo and Tashkent.

This is the period when modernism in the arts flared before the war and turned into a conflagration after. The Edmund Wilson who took up a post editing *Vanity Fair* from its founding in 1920 was, like many of his contemporaries, a "man of 1914," of "the lost generation," the jazz age writers shaken out of the windy rhetoric and patrician certainties of their class by the imperialistic slaughter, turning toward bohemian enclaves for shelter, and the international avant-garde culture in its modernist phase for inspiration. Wilson hung about with Edna St. Vincent Millay, no less, and partied hard. This was the jazz age youngsters in high school study when they are assigned *The Great Gatsby* (1925), written by Wilson's closest friend from their Princeton days, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Wilson was the first American reviewer of Ernest Hemingway who wrote of expatriate life in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), while Wilson himself records the period in his bohemian Greenwich Village novel, *I Thought of Daisy* (1929).

Here was the right place and time for a writer inventing a new genre of book reviewing and literary criticism as journalism, more specifically magazine writing. Wilson sat down with James Joyce for a chat in a cafe and rushed into print to explain *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* to an audience growing in sophistication and self-confidence. He saw writers participating in a worldly activity as part of a community, and believed

that modernist literature, even in its most extreme innovations of Joyce and Gertrude Stein, is not so much difficult to read, as that we have not learned to read it with care as a social exchange within a marketplace of ideas. We still talk in his terms about Proust, Joyce or Dickens and owe him gratitude for launching the careers of Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Henry Miller. He contributed to our understanding of modernist literature in more ways than it is possible to thank him.

And that is still another reason why the publication of Wilson's writing is most timely. Wilson's engagement with literature was of such a completely different order at the beginning of his career from what it became at its end that these collections of his earliest writings, with some hitherto unpublished additions, also serve as a rare window to a very interesting and unsettled period from the postwar jazz age and triumph of modernism (Wilson preferred Symbolism), through the rise of American liberalism in its still-progressive period. As all about us has risen, in journals like *New Republic*, associated with the early Wilson, a complacent and ugly liberalism which sanctions war crimes, torture and a collapsing of ancient civilizations under the boots of American marines, it would be good to see how it all began, and find out whether it could have ended differently.

Edmund Wilson's father, a prominent lawyer and supporter of progressive Democratic Party forces under Woodrow Wilson as New Jersey's Governor, gained fame cleaning up the rackets in Atlantic City. It would have been a typical stepping-stone to political power had he not come down with a debilitating depression that afflicted his son as well at various times in his life. In 1925, carrying on the progressive family tradition, Wilson joined as editor and writer for the newly founded *New Republic*, the magazine an attempt to give voice to a more sophisticated and newly rich middle-class which elbowed out the patricians with a social conscience of an earlier age, like Wilson's father. The new agenda emphasized a cultural war on Philistinism, national chauvinism, commercialism and bad taste. It was called "liberalism" rather than "progressivism," and we are at its birth in its American and modern incarnation.

As we saw, Edmund Wilson and his contemporaries were at first soothed by the pleasures of the jazz age and by the cosmopolitan culture that flared and flourished in New York as Wall Street, flush with cash, spread honey around, at least until 1929. Then came the Headless Horseman of the Great Depression to Sleepy Hollow, and shook America's liberalism out of its complacency and easy formulations. "The stock market crash was to count for us," Wilson wrote, "almost like a rending of the earth in preparation for the Day of Judgment." Wilson couches in religious terms the experience of a devastated economy bringing social and cultural institutions to financial ruin that came to him as a bolt from the blue, an apocalyptic event. In a period eerily reminiscent of the one we are entering, progressives, now liberals, looked into their bag of reform tools and found it empty. Cutting wit and advanced tastes did not cut it any more. Like Washington Irving's Ichabod Crane, Edmund Wilson, under the pressure of the times, got on his horse and rode off in all directions.

He dropped literary criticism as his main area of activity and instead employed his not inconsiderable skills as a writer to report political and historical events. Wilson joined the Solidarity Express to Harlan County during the great miners' strike and attended the trial of the Scottsboro boys. Wilson recorded the cutting of school budgets in Detroit, of wages in Flint, Michigan, rising suicides in San Diego, and working people starving everywhere. His was a stylistic documentation, as if Balzac and Zola had become reporters. Wilson's work had imitators, none successful until the incomparable and unjustly neglected record of the period in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Michael Harrington's *The Other America* and Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* also belong to this genre of writing.

There was a need for action, Wilson insisted, and any idea that delivers the goods or has cash value, any "myth" that can be believed and taken up by heroic men like Lenin and Trotsky could be of use to liberals who did not know which way to turn. This is Marxist "science," reframed as a form of pragmatism, and comes from his close association with Max Eastman and Sidney Hook, both students of John Dewey, the leading pragmatist philosopher of the period. Earlier, Wilson had mocked in "T.S. Eliot and the Church of England" (1929) Eliot's declaration of his political position as a classicist, royalist and Anglican and his proposed solutions to rising social problems. Interestingly, the reason Wilson gave for his rejection did not have to do with the oddness and eccentricity of Eliot's propositions, but rather on their inability to capture people's imagination and compel them into action.

Wilson identifies quite honestly in "Thoughts on Being Bibliographed" (1943) the opportunism and need for direction that brought him to Marxism "In any case, at the end of the twenties, a kind of demoralization set in. ... There was very little money around," he writes. And so the "new intellectuals," poor already, surveyed the wreckage with Marxist glasses, or so they thought: "This at least offered a discipline for the mind, gave a coherent picture of history and promised not only employment but the triumph of the constructive intellect." On this basis, in "Appeal to American Progressives" (1931), Wilson urged liberals quite earnestly to get with the times and to "take Communism away from the communists." Rallying Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank, John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Van Wyck Brooks and Edna St. Vincent Millay, Wilson circulated another manifesto in 1932 identifying the root cause of the crisis shaking the United States as more than politics and economics and, closer to Wilson's concerns, a "crisis of the human culture" requiring "new social forms, new values, a new human order." While economics is a "crucial symbol," whatever that means, "the need of human growth" is paramount. There are any number of academic Marxists today who think of revolution in this way as a cultural activity, but Wilson was always ahead of his time.

In 1932, the call for revolution and the formation of American Soviets, the program advanced by the Stalinist American Communist Party sounded good to liberals bereft of ideas of their own. Over a hundred leading American intellectuals, including Wilson, signed a manifesto in support of the Stalinists who thereafter gained the largest number of votes they ever had, before or since, in an election. The Communist Party in its "leftist" phase called Roosevelt and the Democrats America's fascists, and Communist goons wrecked a Socialist Party gathering in Madison Square Garden in 1934, thinking in their madness that they were attacking America's Hitlers. Wilson protested, but that didn't prevent his taking the following year the champagne and caviar trip to the Soviet Union sponsored by Stalin, "a moral light at the top of the world," at a time when Stalin cracked his whip and turned sharply right, allying himself with bourgeois liberalism in politics and the arts under the banner of the Popular Front.

Wilson then set down in a garret to work out the history of the Russian Revolution from a safe distance, beginning with historians of centuries ago. A friend of the then prominent novelist James T. Farrell and married to Mary McCarthy, both strong supporters of Leon Trotsky, he defended Trotsky against the monstrous Stalinist frame-up during the Moscow Trials of 1937 and underlined Trotsky's place beside Lenin in his account of the Russian Revolution in *To the Finland Station* (1940). There were limits, though, to Wilson's understanding of Marxism from the beginning of his engagement with it. Like so many of his friends, Wilson was a pragmatist. Unable to grasp reality in its contradictory movement and development in the rapid course of startling events, the insurgent liberals all fell away from Marxism with horror. By 1940, when Wilson finally published his epic history of socialism, *To the Finland Station*, six years in the making, none of those who declared themselves for the CP in 1932

were still with the Communist Party.

Edmund Wilson summed up the experience in “Max Eastman in 1941.” Dialectical materialism was in Wilson’s words, “the Marxist substitute for old-fashioned Providence.” “But then,” he remembers, “within the decade that followed, the young journalists and novelists and poets who had tried to base their dream on bedrock had the spectacle, not of the advent of ‘the world’s first truly human culture,’ the ideal of Lenin and Trotsky, but of the rapid domination of Europe by the state socialism of Hitler and Stalin, with its strangling of political discussion and its contemptuous extermination of art; and they no longer knew what to think.” It took another few years for an observer and associate of Wilson, Lionel Trilling, to take charge of drifting liberalism and tell the folks Wilson led on a leftist safari what to think, starting with *The Liberal Imagination* (1950). By that time, Wilson had withdrawn from his former enthusiasms, especially the belief in the revolutionary or even socially redemptive power of art.

He left behind a gathering of Marxist literary criticism in his *The Triple Thinkers* (1938), which discussed the effect of the failure of the 1848 revolution on Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* and explained how the minor, insignificant characters in Chekhov illuminate the social world of pre-revolutionary Russia. In “Marxism and Literature,” Edmund Wilson was among the first to launch a frontal attack on Stalin’s cult of proletarian literature and defend Trotsky’s position on the role of literature and culture as a product of centuries of development, not the result of bureaucratic meddling. Still, in the last analysis, Edmund Wilson remained a pragmatist. His well-known statement that literature is “an attempt to give meaning to our experience—that is, to make life more practicable for by understanding things we make it easier to survive and get around among them” is a pure expression of the pragmatic philosophy by which analysis has value to the extent that it works, not as a correspondence between reflection and reality.

These volumes shed much needed light also on the years when Wilson and his extended family of writer-friends thought of literature and culture itself as a means of social transformation, grounding thereby the formal aspects of even the most modernist writing in the real world we share. At the end of his very first and still influential collection, *Axel’s Castle* (1931), observing Rimbaud’s escape from bourgeois culture by going native, Wilson thought modernism which built romantic castles on remote islands, the work’s controlling image, could be pushed too far, become solipsistic, “based on language as a creator of illusions, and not on language as a transmitting of realities.” In an era when postmodernism and its associated currents rule academic life, we can only think this prediction prophetic.

In two densely packed volumes in the Library of America collection, Edmund Wilson left us a precious heritage of his most productive years. It is sad then that in the first sentence of his last undistinguished book about his boring life in upstate New York called *Upstate* (1971), Edmund Wilson, who thought he could move society by the power of art and of ideas, would write: “I sit here in this old house alone.” At the end, in his own way, Wilson too moved into a solipsistic world created by the isolated imagination, to “Axel’s Castle,” whose dangers Wilson had warned about in his youth.



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