

Review Essay

Edmund Wilson's Journals

Melvin Landsberg

THE TWENTIES: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Leon Edel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1975.

THE THIRTIES: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Leon Edel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1980.

THE FORTIES: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Leon Edel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1983.

THE FIFTIES: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Leon Edel. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1986.

THE SIXTIES: The Last Journal, 1960-1972. By Edmund Wilson. Edited with an Introduction by Lewis M. Dabney. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1993.

If we judge critics by their range, knowledge, intelligence, standards, readability, and productivity, Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) is the most important

critic in twentieth-century American literature. From 1943 on he published regularly in the *New Yorker*, where he had, for a literary critic, a large audience, most of them educated non-academics. During a career of over fifty years, he also published in *Vanity Fair*, the *Dial*, the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Partisan Review*, the *Nation*, the *Reporter*, and the *New York Review of Books*.

Drawing on his journals and his periodical articles, many of which were based on notes in the journals, he produced over a dozen volumes of criticism and journalistic essays. Among Wilson's most memorable books was *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931), which firmly established his reputation as a major literary critic. In it Wilson presented Symbolism as a literary movement and introduced and commented on the writings of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and others to a generation of readers. In *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (1940), he extended his range and demonstrated his intent to write intellectual history relevant to social and political concerns. Here he portrayed the background and growth of the Socialist idea in Europe, and showed its culmination in Lenin's arrival in Russia in 1917. In *The Wound and the Bow...* (1941), he linked the themes and achievements of a number of authors (e.g., Charles Dickens) with psychological traumas they had suffered.

Topics that he treated in his other works of non-fiction (he also wrote novels, plays, and poems) include hardships in the United States during the Great Depression; the devastated condition of Europe at the end of World War II; the Zuni, Haitian, Soviet Russian, and Israeli civilizations; Canadian culture; and the Dead Sea Scrolls. And, of course, works by individual authors: Sophocles, George Bernard Shaw, Swinburne, Henry James, Flaubert, Malraux, Pushkin—the list could go on and on.

As a critic, he read a work in the original language—whether English, French, Russian, or Greek—and stressed the author's biography and the culture and history from which the work emerged. Wilson's prose was usually clear and unmannered, rarely calling attention to itself, and rarely, if ever, catchy. He did not coin tag terms and phrases, like Matthew Arnold's *Philistines* and "high seriousness" or T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative" and "dissociation of sensibility." Writing straightforward prose was a necessity for his journalistic career, but he sometimes employed traditional rhetoric memorably, as in this passage from his essay "T.S. Eliot and the Church of England" (1929). I quote from it partly because it furnishes an instance of his skill with traditional rhetoric, and partly because he used it to distinguish himself from a number of other American writers and critics:

Most Americans of the type of Dos Passos and Eliot—that is, sensitive and widely read literary people—have some such agreeable fantasy in which they can allow their minds to take refuge from the perplexities and oppressions about them. In the case of H.L. Mencken, it is a sort of German university town,

where people drink a great deal of beer and devour a great many books, and where they respect the local nobility—if only the Germany of the Empire had not been destroyed by the war! In the case of certain American writers from the top layer of the old South, it is the old-fashioned Southern plantation, where men are high-spirited and punctilious and women gracious and lovely, where affectionate and loyal Negroes are happy to keep their place—if only the feudal South had not perished in 1865! With Ezra Pound, it is a medieval Provence, where poor but accomplished troubadours enjoy the favors of noble ladies—if only the troubadours were not deader than Provençal! With Dos Passos, it is an army of workers, disinterested, industrious and sturdy, but full of... good fellowship and gaiety...—if only the American workers were not preoccupied with buying Ford cars and radios, instead of organizing themselves to overthrow the civilization of the bourgeoisie! And in T.S. Eliot's case, it is a world of seventeenth-century churchmen, who combine the most scrupulous conscience with the ability to write good prose—if it were only not so difficult nowadays for men who are capable of becoming good writers to accept the Apostolic Succession!¹

In 1967 Wilson published *A Prelude: Landscapes, Characters, and Conversations from the Earlier Years of My Life*. There he wrote: “In the summer of 1914, I began keeping a notebook, which eventually turned into something like a journal.... [I] aimed to catch *sur le vif* things that struck me as significant or interesting.”² *A Prelude* was followed by five posthumous volumes, each named for the decade it covers, and together running to 3,500 pages. The series began with *The Twenties* (1975) and concluded with *The Sixties* (1993). Wilson himself arranged for the publication of the journals, and edited parts of the first two volumes. After he died, his friend Leon Edel took over, completed their editing, and provided introductions; subsequently, Edel edited and wrote introductions to the next two volumes. Lewis M. Dabney, Wilson's biographer, edited *The Sixties*, also with an introduction.

The journals are relatively unstructured, usually undramatic, and often leisurely in pace. They have enough of the mundane about them to make us feel that we are being borne along in the stream of the writer's life.³ Sometimes they appeal to us intellectually, but they display many aspects of the man besides his intellect, e.g., his sexual impulses and activities, his dreams, his relations with his family, and his familiarity with and responses to flowers. Wilson's descriptions of his interactions with other writers are among the most intellectually exciting features of the journals. There are accounts of his Princeton college-friends F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Peale Bishop; of his lovers, among them Edna St.

Vincent Millay, whom he met in Greenwich Village and with whom he had his first sexual intercourse; and of his numerous other friends from the Village and from Provincetown, Massachusetts. Wherever he was, he would meet authors about whom he wrote or might write—Santayana, James Branch Cabell, Faulkner, Max Beerbohm, W.H. Auden, D.S. Mirsky, Isaiah Berlin, S. Y. Agnon. His relations with such writers were varying mixtures of friendship and professionalism.

Each volume of the journals has its special interests and intensities, of which I can present only the minute, sometimes random, examples below:

In the twenties, he partied without stint. On a visit to Boston in 1927 during final efforts there to save Sacco and Vanzetti from execution, he was drinking and being convivial with friends, but feeling uneasy over the ironic coincidence. A passage of reminiscence about the decade, inserted when he was in his old age, states: "I could not really accept a life that had no aim except drinking and laughing."⁴

In the thirties, as a reporter for the *New Republic*, Wilson described factory conditions in Detroit and industrial warfare in Harlan County, Kentucky, a coal mining region. He declared that he would vote for the Communist candidates in the presidential election of 1932.

In the forties, he traveled to Europe for the *New Yorker* to report on the end of the war, and in his journal complained about Allied savagery in the bombing of Berlin.

In the fifties he studied the Iroquois' national movement in northern New York. Of these Native Americans, he wrote: "One must realize that they have the conviction and the courage of a once independent people who have been decimated and pushed into a corner by an alien and unscrupulous race."⁵

In the sixties, he received garlands of recognition for his career. (Not having filed income tax returns for years, he also received heavy assessments from the IRS.) One award, in June 1968, was \$30,000 from the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies for his contribution to American culture. At the dinner for the presentation, the wife of the president of the Institute, seated beside Wilson, asked him, "You wrote *Finlandia*, didn't you?"⁶

Wilson was born into an upper-middle-class family with deep roots in the northeastern United States. His maternal ancestors came to New England from England in the seventeenth century, and his paternal ancestors were among the earliest settlers in central New York State. His mother's father graduated from Hamilton College, in New York, and practiced medicine in New Jersey, and his father's father graduated from Amherst College and Princeton Theological Seminary and became a Presbyterian minister in the same state. Edmund Wilson's father went to Exeter, Princeton College, and Columbia Law School, then practiced law in New Jersey and became attorney general there. Wilson himself went to Hill School, forty miles from Philadelphia, and then on to Princeton.

At Princeton Wilson was greatly influenced by Christian Gauss, a notable professor of French and Italian, who became a lifelong friend. In August 1920 he wrote of Gauss, in a poem which appears in *The Twenties*:

I heard him speak of books and politics and people,
With his incredible learning and his cloudless mind,
But he was really talking of life...
A last champion of man's divine pride of reason and imagina-
tion...
I was swearing again an oath I had many times sworn already:
That, so long as I should live, I should honor nothing but
Gauss.... (61)

In August 1917, a year after Wilson graduated from college, he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private, and did hospital service in France, and then—after his father arranged a transfer, and promotion to sergeant for him—intelligence service in France and Germany. Soon after returning from the war he settled in New York and began free-lance writing. Then, in 1920, Wilson became managing editor at *Vanity Fair*. After leaving that magazine in February 1921, he took an editorial job with the *New Republic*.

He was in Europe in the summer of 1921, having gone to Paris in hope of winning Edna St. Vincent Millay. While there he saw the American poet Djuna Barnes, who was living in the city. Over three decades later, writing in *The Fifties*, Wilson said that Barnes had once attacked him for insisting that American writers should live in their own country. Life was much pleasanter in Paris, she said. Why shouldn't the writers live there? "I realize," Wilson said in another passage in *The Fifties*, "how much—unconsciously—the determination to make something out of America must have biased me against what was really good in Europe: attractively built cities, good and quiet manners, appetizing food, respect for the arts, and—in Paris, at any rate—feminine chic" (392).

To make something out of America! Thomas Jefferson could have employed some such phrase. So too could Walt Whitman, whom Wilson in *The Forties* called America's greatest writer (152). But Wilson in his later years clearly disliked mainstream American culture. He saw life in American cities and towns as "no longer exciting but rather repellent" (*Fifties*, 392). Probably while he was in Paris he wrote in his journal for 1956: "I begin for the first time to be able sympathetically to enter into the feelings of the Americans of an earlier generation who chose to live in Europe. Yet an American, except to a limited extent or in the case of some special situation, has no business here" (392).

He had inherited a house in Talcottville, in rustic northern New York State, in 1951. Spending his summers there, he thought often of an earlier America, where there had been a relatively educated and cultured upper class. "Today," he wrote in his autobiographical volume *Upstate*, "every young American enjoys the

inalienable right to enroll at a state university and, as soon as he pleases, drop out. Negro and white children both may go all the way through primary school without ever learning to read.”⁷

Continually amid Wilson’s observations and thoughts, he gives details of his experiences with liquor and sex. He began drinking in Greenwich Village in 1920, and was a heavy drinker through the rest of his life. In 1967 he wrote of having about a pint of whisky a night. Drinking could make him quarrelsome, and it took its toll of his constitution, but it did not prevent him from writing.

One is startled by the details about his sexual life with wives, mistresses, and prostitutes. He gives accounts of his adulteries, of his seductions and attempted seductions of female acquaintances, and of his conjugal performances. In 1946, after Wilson and his third wife, Mary McCarthy, separated, he seduced Elena Thornton, a married woman with a fourteen-year-old son, and won her as his fourth. Though the two had an excellent marriage in most ways, he hurt her with his adulteries and attempted adulteries late in life. And in the journals Wilson recorded vivid play-by-play accounts of his sexual acts with her.

Violating a book bothered him more than violating a marriage. In *The Twenties* he tells about an outrage that Frank Crowninshield, the editor of *Vanity Fair*, committed. Crowninshield, needing the text of one of Voltaire’s letters, borrowed a volume of a beautifully printed and costly edition of Voltaire from Putnam’s bookstore, located beneath the *Vanity Fair* offices. He then cut out the pages he wanted and returned the volume, confident that Putnam’s would not discover the mutilation. For Wilson this was “the most shocking thing I ever knew him to do—an incident that I never quite got over” (43). Wilson was entirely true to only one mistress—literature.

HERE IS THE WHOLE MAN!—this is the implicit message of the journal. And this is ultimately why the journal is important. Critic that he was, Wilson knew that in literature truth is the only legitimate currency; furthermore, his thinking was strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud’s work on human motivation. But why all the physical details and the terms *cock*, *cunt*, etc.? For Wilson they were the naked truth. Humans, individually and collectively, were fundamentally animals.

Wilson in *The Sixties*, at age 72, wrote: “That all this fuss should be made about getting one’s penis into a woman—filling people with rapture and despair and stimulating them to all kinds of heroisms and excesses” (642).

He had similar recourse to natural history when he explained human wars in his preface to *Patriotic Gore*:

Everything, past, present and future, takes its place in the legend of American idealism. . . . This prevents us from recognizing today, in our relation to our cold-war opponent, that our panicky pugnacity as we challenge him is not virtue but at bottom the irrational instinct of an active power organism in the

presence of another such organism, of a sea slug of vigorous voracity in the presence of another such sea slug.⁸

An experience that Wilson records in *The Thirties* shows him bothered by the paradox posed by man's animal nature. Probably his description of the experience provides a key to understanding how he saw both himself and his work:

My hand on a book—At Stamford [Connecticut] one day, when I had long been absorbed in reading and writing, I looked at my hand on the page of the book I was reading and suddenly saw it as an animal's paw with the fingers lengthened to claws and become prehensile for climbing around, in strange, in incredible contrast to the detached and limitless life of the mind: that was what we were, we still carried with us those animal paws, those were what we had to work with: stubby fingers with nails at the service of the dreaming horizonless mind: a shock to me then in my detached and dreaming literary life. (660-61)

He was an animal, he believed, but also more than an animal. Passages on his relationships with Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elena, and Margaret Canby (his second wife, who died in 1932) show considered and, in differing ways, complicated relationships. But his major exploits in going beyond the animal, as the last quotation indicates, were through thinking and writing. His references in his journals to Negroes and Jews show him rejecting animalistic dominance based on force.

In Wilson's *The Thirties*, in entries through 1932, he used the term *nigger* for Negro over ten times, and the term *coon* once. His uses do not seem to be due to an attempt to satirize contemporary practice. Nothing in their context shows them to be anything but his own way of expressing himself in the privacy of his journals.⁹ But writing in *The Forties*, from a hotel in Port-au-Prince in 1949, he reflected on the effects of the characteristic treatment of Negroes in the United States:

I am very much impressed with the Haitians. You have only to see them to realize what a wretched life we have made for the Negroes in the States. The Haitians with whom I traveled on the plane and the officials who handled the passengers at the airport were entirely different from our Negroes. It is not merely that they are quick and polite but that they have no consciousness of inferiority—so that their faces and bearing are different. I went out for a walk yesterday afternoon and got the same impression from the ordinary people on the streets. (318)

References to Jews are frequent in the journals. Almost everyone who is Jewish is referred to as being so, however extraneous his or her being Jewish would seem to be to the immediate situation. What with Jews' features, gestures, intensity, curiosity, activism, and self-consciousness, they were not "like yourself"—an expression he used in 1932.¹⁰

Wilson, in editing parts of *The Twenties*, interpolated a passage he labeled "my moment of anti-Semitism." He was trying to win over a young woman, Katze, in 1926, but could never separate her completely from her friend Franz. Finally he told her that he thought she and Franz were both Jewish. She answered that his remark was in bad taste. Wilson, in commenting on the "moment," wrote that he had no reason to believe that they were Jewish; even if he had known they were, that would not have helped him with Katze. "I am not at all proud of this....," he added. "I regard it as an example of the way in which a purely superstitious idea—that the Jews were responsible for executing Jesus—instilled into one's unconscious, may irrationally influence behavior" (300).

Wilson's recollection demonstrates that he came to confront a deeply based prejudice with reason. In *The Thirties*, despite his seeing Jews as in varying degrees alien, he was annoyed by the anti-Semitism he encountered. Hitler's anti-Jewish activities, he wrote in March 1933, seemed to be affecting social relations in New York City, encouraging "latent anti-Semitism" and giving people "courage to be impolite" (328). When at a family Christmas party in 1933, one of Wilson's uncles talked about the power of Jews in Germany before Hitler and complained about the strong presence of Jews in Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, Wilson answered that the Nazis' persecution of Jews was "a terrible thing" (411). In 1937 Wilson, visiting Christian Gauss, who had become Dean at Princeton, noted that "in connection with his duties, he had succumbed to some of the stupidities of Princeton: signs of anti-Semitism..." (698).

Much later, while participating in the Christian Gauss memorial seminars at Princeton in 1952-53, Wilson studied Hebrew at the Princeton Theological Seminary. In the spring of 1954, he went to Israel to learn about the Dead Sea Scrolls, and he was there again in the spring of 1967. "In the 1960s," Dabney writes, "he tacked up in his study the words *hazak, hazak, venit-hazayk* at the end of the Torah—'Be strong, be strong, let us make ourselves strong,' was Wilson's translation. He sometimes used the phrase as a grace over the orange juice at breakfast, telling this writer that it helped him 'jack up my waning powers.'" ¹¹

One sees in Wilson's dealings with ethnic prejudices examples of the strong links between his intellectual, moral, and literary development. These journals abound in material to help fill out the picture of his *Bildung*. Wilson worked hard at his writing to the end of his life; it had become his *raison d'être*. But, despite his relatively wide audience, he did not believe that his "determination to make something out of America" had met with visible success. "Are not my literary activities..." he asked in the Epilogue to *Upstate*, "clumsy gestures in the interest of ends that can only be reached...in the course of innumerable centuries that are now entirely unimaginable?" ¹²

Notes

1. Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light* (New York, 1952), 439-40.
2. Wilson, *A Prelude: Landscapes, Characters, and Conversations from the Earlier Years of My Life* (New York, 1967), 1.
3. Sometimes we are stranded on sandbars. Edel's editing of the first four volumes is deficient, although he furnishes some excellent biographical and critical commentary on Wilson. Again and again, one finds no identifications of people Wilson discusses or mentions. Dabney did better with identifications in *The Sixties*, providing a glossary of names at the end of the volume. Given the situation, the reader would do well to consult Dabney's glossary while reading Edel's volumes. He or she would also do well to read a current biography of Wilson before going through all five volumes. A helpful one, by Jeffrey Meyers—*Edmund Wilson: A Biography* (Boston)—appeared in 1995, and Dabney has long been working on what I expect will be a fuller and more critical one.
4. Wilson, *The Twenties*, 173.
5. Wilson, *The Fifties*, 467.
6. Wilson, *The Sixties*, 716.
7. Wilson, *Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York* (New York, 1971), 379-80.
8. Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York, 1962), xxxi-xxxii.
9. I did not notice any use of the pejorative terms in the later volumes. Of course, all five volumes have been edited. I have not read them in Wilson's original notebooks and diaries.
10. Wilson, *The Thirties*, 174.
11. Lewis M. Dabney, Introduction to *The Portable Edmund Wilson* (New York, 1983), xxxiii-xxxiv.
12. Wilson, *Upstate*, 385.