

1954

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Recommended Citation

Honig, Edwin. "Edmund Wilson's Chronicles." *New Mexico Quarterly* 24, 1 (1954). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol24/iss1/15>

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BOOKS and COMMENT

Edwin Honig

EDMUND WILSON'S CHRONICLES¹



EDMUND WILSON is that rare sort of American writer, a master of prose style. This can probably be proved at length from any of his ten books of critical and discursive prose. His writing has no crotchets. It reads easily; it is often brilliant without being simply slick. He seems unwilling to let a dead or merely dull sentence slip by. Though occasionally his periods seem protracted, they easily pass scrutiny because they are not densely freighted or rhetorical and carry their weight of modifiers and parentheses squarely. The right sense of conviction and discriminative zeal keeps them afloat. Such qualities are remarkable enough even in a critic of deliberate intent who publishes only infrequently. But the example of Edmund Wilson, a literary journalist of thirty years standing whose work was composed for weeklies like *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker*, has qualitatively almost no precedent in our literature. He has written more variously, more flexibly, and probably more searchingly than Eliot or Tate, Ransom or Trilling, on the literature, politics and intellectual movements of the past hundred years. A tough-brow rather than a highbrow, he offers more usable intelligence, a more consistently solid and assimilable fare of ideas than any contemporary critic writing in English.

In mastering his craft, he has dignified and elevated a profession that requires as much practice and energy of a man as cham-

¹ *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties*, by Edmund Wilson. New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1952. 814 pp.

Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties, by Edmund Wilson. New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1950. 534 pp.

pionship tennis, swimming or wrestling. Poe, De Quincy, Shaw, Balzac, France, Dickens, Joyce, and to some extent Huneker and Mencken, have been his chief models. They are all vigorous creative writers with acutely independent styles. Thus Wilson has learned not only that forthrightness is the best critical policy, but also that a personal code, a sensitive social conscience, and a willingness to go out on a limb are all aspects of intellectual courage without which a critic falls into academicism or Sunday-review philistinism. He has also admired the French for their lucidity, the sociological bent of their critics, and the dual enterprise of their invention which undertakes, whenever possible, to deal equally with the man and the work. And all his books reveal that his sympathies are sooner engaged by a literature of ideas, the naturalistic novel, the political works of social idealists, than by the poetry and prose of the literary schools. His best historical study, *To the Finland Station*, surpasses in interest and scope and judgment Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, its apparent model. In it Wilson abides by the historian's typical aim of dispassionate comprehensiveness, but he is most persuasive when describing his subject's lives, their intransigencies, their ideas in action. *Axel's Castle*, another product of enthusiastic research, is a much less successful job because similar concerns lead him astray into sociological and psychological analyses of his subjects which mainly reveal his temperamental disdain of their works. In it he can dispose of Valéry for being an "introverted, narcissistic and manic depressive," or explain his preference for *Ulysses* over Proust's masterwork (which he otherwise likes only when it reminds him of Dickens) in that the latter is "vague and dreamlike" while the former "has been logically thought out and accurately documented to the last detail." His condemnation of the Symbolist writers for their personal habits, irrational weak lives, and "sick thinking," shows up some of the inadequacy in Wilson's symptomatic approach to literature as social-historical document. For the symbolists not only refuse to stand up as constructive thinkers, they refuse to have any ideas at all; frequently they also refuse to be-

have like gentlemen. Yet Wilson's method, one realizes, has little to do with his best insights; one still recalls, for example, his cogent statement in *Axel's Castle* about the temperamental weakness of *The Waste Land*:

We recognize throughout 'The Waste Land' the peculiar conflicts of the Puritan turned artist: the horror of vulgarity and the sympathy with the common life, the ascetic shrinking from sexual experience and the distress at the drying up of the spring of sexual emotion, with the straining after a religious emotion which may be made to take its place.

A long causerie on Christian Gauss, his revered French professor at Princeton, opens *The Shores of Light*. Gauss was a gentleman of the old school, intellectually resilient, drily critical of literary fashions, and courageously expressive of social injustice. It is not just the man Wilson admires, but his style, his personal code and intellectual integrity as a public figure. It is a style Wilson himself tries to recreate (Gauss wrote practically nothing) in his own writing. The lost and disaffected, the baffled and baffling expense of genius or high ideals also intrigue him. Essays about vivid personalities are numerous in his chronicles, but Wilson's particular sense of them is nowhere better felt than in the reminiscent essays on Edna Millay and Paul Rosenfeld. And yet it is from these essays that we get the impression that though he knew his subjects intimately as human beings, having sympathized and reflected upon them often, he was never content to "understand" them simply as persons, as friends, as writers. True, he saw their faults and virtues; he did not overestimate their work. Yet something constrains him in the end to put a judgment on them—to make them serve as examples or as products of a social condition or as victims of a psychological pathos that hinges on such a condition. In this guise they seem to fade into a pattern of historical forces mechanically at work, grinding out causes and effects.

Yet one soon senses, in going through these chronicles, that there are few contemporary American writers about whom Wilson is free to write without some extremely determining personal

note. The result is not gossip but something close to it, something, at any rate, of special interest. Being fair at such times, as Wilson is especially constrained to be, is not the same as being dispassionate. The effort itself rather enforces an attitude of patronage or irony. It produces the kind of criticism that has the appearance of epigram, the epigram that would already seem to be pushing past the subject's work and surviving beyond it. A very early piece (written in March, 1922) on F. Scott Fitzgerald provides a striking example of this sort:

It has been said by a celebrated person [identified in a footnote as Edna Millay] that to meet F. Scott Fitzgerald is to think of a stupid old woman with whom someone has left a diamond; she is extremely proud of the diamond and shows it to everyone who comes by, and everyone is surprised that such an ignorant old woman should possess so valuable a jewel; for in nothing does she appear so inept as in the remarks she makes about the diamond.

The person who invented this simile did not know Fitzgerald very well and can only have seen him, I think, in his more diffident or un-inspired moods. Scott Fitzgerald is, in fact, no old woman, but a very good-looking young man, nor is he in the least stupid, but, on the contrary, exhilaratingly clever. Yet there is a symbolic truth in the description quoted above: it is true that Fitzgerald has been left with a jewel which he doesn't know quite what to do with. For he has been given imagination without intellectual control of it; he has been given the desire for beauty without an aesthetic ideal; and he has been given a gift for expression without very many ideas to express.

There is something in this dutch-uncle statement that is beyond the act of criticism itself, something that is being forced into the words by the need to make the style a weapon in an exhibition of superior taste. One can scarcely be wrong if one is sententious and amusing and still serious underneath. We are caught, as readers, in the spell of a mind asserting itself well about another mind which presumably asserts itself differently; and the epigram wins us over. Thirty years later Wilson's dictum on Fitzgerald continues to be compelling, though Fitzgerald had not yet written his best novels in 1922. Many reviewers are still para-

phrasing Wilson. Yet one can't help feeling that the important distinction is not in Wilson's epigram on Fitzgerald's defects but in the difference between Fitzgerald's assertion of "mind" in fiction and Wilson's in criticism. Or is it simply a form of the same dislocated emphasis by which the best critics transform the best writers into precocious cretins?

By a more irreverent twist of the same perception which makes for the epigrammatic sentence, Wilson can also turn out a very telling sort of satire. Consider the first paragraph of his review of a Louis Bromfield novel in 1944:

In the days of *The Green Bay Tree* and the *Strange Case of Miss Annie Spragg*, Mr. Louis Bromfield used to be spoken of as one of the younger writers of promise. By the time he had brought out *Twenty-four hours*, it was more or less generally said of him that he was definitely second-rate. Since then, by unremitting industry and a kind of stubborn integrity that seems to make it impossible for him to turn out his rubbish without thoroughly believing in it, he has gradually made his way into the fourth rank, where his place is now secure.

In the same vein, but with more verve gone into the act of filling out the picture, Wilson reports on Auden in the late thirties:

Mr. Auden himself has presented the curious case of a poet who writes an original poetic language in the most robust English tradition, but who seems to have been arrested at the mentality of an adolescent schoolboy. His technique has seemed to mature, but he has otherwise not grown up. His mind has always been haunted, as the minds of boys at prep school still are, by parents and uncles and aunts. His love poems seem unreal and ambiguous as if they were the products of adolescent flirtations and prep-school homosexuality. His talk about 'the enemy' and 'their side' and 'our side' and 'spying' and 'lying in ambush' sounds less like anything connected with the psychology of an underground revolutionary movement than like the dissimulated resentments and snootiness of the schoolboy with advanced ideas going back to his family for the holidays. When this brilliant and engaging young student first came out for the class struggle so strongly, it seemed an audacious step; but then he simply remained under the roof of his nice family and in the classroom with his stuffy professors; and the seizure of power he dreams of is an insurrection in the schoolroom.

On the other side, where Wilson's satire on defects turns into encomiums on human courage and spiritual energy, are the eloquent tributes to friends on the occasions of their death. In addition to those on Millay, Rosenfeld and Gauss, there are magnificent ones on Elinor Wylie, Herbert Croley and T. K. Whipple. Often as convincing, if not quite as eloquent, are the well-drawn cases he makes out for certain serious writers cursed by brief popularity and subsequently dropped by the critics. Among these he has considered Wilder, Firbank, Waugh and Steinbeck. But those pieces which are most explicit in their documentation and sense of the times concern the last days of the old burlesque in New York, the death of Houdini, and "Thoughts on Being Bibliographed." They show him at his liveliest and maturest as a social critic, and they make one wish that Wilson had somewhere, somehow, during the last thirty years disentangled himself from the fetters of reviewing long enough to write a personal book on American culture. There are fine examples from almost every essay here of the sort of thing Wilson is capable of doing. Perhaps the best example are his comments on the Luce publications, coming at the end of a discussion on political journalism in "Thoughts on Being Bibliographed." It is worth quoting at length:

The kind of reports that you find in *Time*, factual, lucid, terse, give you something that you cannot get from the newspapers or the liberal weeklies; and they compensate by compactness and relative perspective for the shredding and dilution of the radio. But the competence of presentation tends to mask the ineptitude and cynicism of the mentality behind the report; and the effect on the public consciousness may be almost as demoralizing in its more non-committal way as the tirades of the old Yellow Press. For you cannot have a presentation of facts without implying also an attitude, and the attitude of the Luce publications has been infectious though it is mainly negative. The occasional statements of policy signed by Mr. Luce and others which appear in these magazines are on the level of Sixth Form orations or themes; they confirm the impression one gets from the rest of a complete absence of serious interpretation on the part of the editorial director; and the various points of view of the men who put *Time*

together, appear to have been mashed down and to figure in what they print only as blurred streaks of coloration that blot the machine-finished surface. Their picture of the world gives us sometimes simply the effect of schoolboy mentalities in a position to avail themselves of a gigantic research equipment; but it is almost always tinged with a peculiar kind of jeering rancor. There is a tendency to exhibit the persons whose activities are chronicled, not as more or less able or noble or amusing or intelligent human beings, who have various ways of being right or wrong, but—because they are presented by writers who are allowed no points of view themselves—as manikins, sometimes cocky, sometimes busy, sometimes zealous, sometimes silly, sometimes gruesome, but in most cases quite infra-human, who make speeches before guinea-pig parliaments, issue commands and move armies of beetles back and forth on bas-relief battle-maps, indulge themselves maniacally in queer little games of sport, science, art, beer-bottle-top collecting or what-not, squeak absurd little boasts and complaints, and pop up their absurd little faces in front of the lenses of the Luce photographers—adding up to a general impression that the pursuits, past and present, of the human race are rather an absurd little scandal about which you might find out some even nastier details if you met the editors of *Time* over cocktails.

George Orwell, Cyril Connelly, occasionally Dwight MacDon-ald, and years ago H. L. Mencken, have all made astute appraisals of contemporary culture in this vein. But we need something of greater scope and drive, something of the toughness and imagination of Wilson's irony and reverence in it—written in a style which transcends the jargons and methodologies of literature, sociology, psychology and science that tend to make Frankenstein's of us all. Meanwhile Wilson's chronicles are the closest thing we have to an almost week-by-week document of taste covering significant literary events in America during the last thirty years. They stand alone in our criticism as the product of a creative mind, growing and ultimately functioning to its fullest capacity—a zealous, humane and penetrating intelligence that finds out the pretentious, the almost-genuine, and the rare real thing through a congenital sense for the commonplace, while almost always escaping its more numbing absurdities.