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to a national interpretation of the social order—was what allowed the peculiarly modern arrangements of power and production to come about.

Corroborating Greenfeld's thesis, Gordon Wood, in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), shows that the civic ideology of the Founding Fathers transformed America from a feudal land to a modern state. And in fact America is Greenfeld's example of a benevolent nationalism, a nationalism that is "civic" rather than "ethnic." In the early American republic, she argues, nationalism did not need to rely on ethnic appeals (as it would in Russia and Germany) but could identify itself with universal Enlightenment principles of citizenship. Yet today America is preoccupied with ethnic questions in ways it never was before. Indeed, on the eve of the 21st century, America is itself uncertain what it is: a model for the world's future, or the heir to a decaying mythology from a more fortunate past.

### Arts & Letters

**THE SIXTIES:** *The Last Journal, 1960–1972.*  
By Edmund Wilson. Ed. by Lewis M. Dabney.  
Farrar Straus. 968 pp. \$35

When Alfred Kazin published *On Native Grounds* (1942), a study of American literature, he was invited to the home of Edmund Wilson. Amid formalities and drinks, Wilson's then-wife, novelist Mary McCarthy, let Kazin know that contemporary criticism was her husband's property. For all the presumption in such a remark, Edmund Wilson (1895–1972) possessed the intelligence, range, and determination to be *the* American critic. He wrote copiously about everything, from Civil War literature to the Iroquois. He was also the author of fiction, poetry, plays, and, not least, a 3,310-page journal.

Wilson kept this journal for 60 years, using as models the stylistic precision of Flaubert and the Goncourts, the expository thoroughness of the historian Macauley, and the revealing personal intimacy of Boswell. Readers entering into it will find themselves backstage among a goodly portion of the makers of 20th-century American literature. For example, Wilson describes a dinner

at the White House in 1962 at which Tennessee Williams misbehaves, André Malraux waxes pompous, and John Kennedy tells yet another assemblage that the White House has never seen so much talent together except when Jefferson dined alone.

As well as retailing gossip and wide learning, Wilson's journal may also provide an answer to why his works are less read today. Even Wilson's best books often seem motivated by an interest somewhat extrinsic to the subject, above all by social and political concerns that now seem outdated. Read today, many of Wilson's pronouncements sound strange, such as his comparison of Lincoln's keeping the Union together to Lenin's great achievement of "binding Russia, with its innumerable ethnic groups scattered through immense spaces, in a tight bureaucratic net."

But the journal itself is usually intimate rather than didactic, and here, rather than in his novels and plays, Wilson creates his most indelible character. How revealing the old seducer is, even poignant, when he describes himself resting his head in a woman's lap and yet so deaf that, when she utters an endearment, he has to lift himself up and "put my ear to her mouth and ask her to repeat it." These journals could well carry some 1960s-style title like "Eros versus Death," as Wilson—resembling an enormous bald frog, aging, his health failing (his exercise regimen was confined to downing strenuous quantities of alcohol)—records his heroic struggle to live a full life both off and on the page. His productivity during the final decade, from *Patriotic Gore* (1962) to *Upstate* (1971), was by any standard impressive. The last journal entry is dated July 11, 1972. The next morning at his desk, attached to an oxygen machine, he was found dead at his worktable.

**MOZART AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT:**  
*Truth, Virtue, and Beauty in Mozart's Operas.*  
By Nicholas Till. Norton. 371 pp. \$29.95

For contemporary audiences, Mozart's operas too often pass in a blur—a most pleasurable blur, to be sure. One opera seems much like another because there is so little intellectual engagement with the matter of each opera, with its libretto,