

# Edmund Wilson And the Public Intellectuals

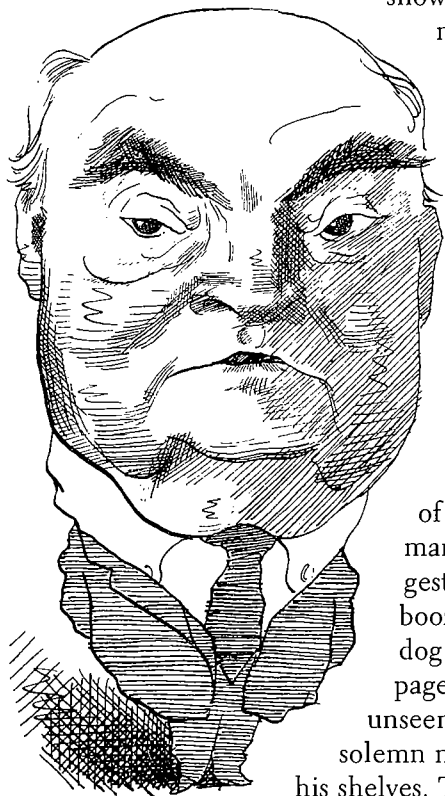
by David Samuels

It is hard to think of a phrase whose revival in the language was as welcome, and whose subsequent history has proved quite so disappointing, as “public intellectual.” In 1990, Russell Jacoby’s *Last Intellectuals* gave a name and an appealingly scrappy history—the rise of the *Partisan Review* crowd in the 1940s and ’50s—to the declining practice of literate criticism of politics, history, and the arts. What followed was a time of great if borrowed nostalgia, as restive academics and magazine editors celebrated the passions of the City College cafeteria and imagined themselves outdrinking the Rahvs in the heat of a vanished Greenwich Village.

In contrast to their mythic predecessors, however, the newest generation of public intellectuals exercise their talents not in the writing of poetry, fiction, history or essays but in the fabrication of up-to-the-minute opinions for the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, or—at best—in high-toned book reviews for the *New Republic* and the *New York Review of Books*. The most public of the new intellectuals—Cornel West, Stanley Fish, Camille Paglia, William Bennett, Dinesh D’Souza—appear less occupied by ideas and books than by the opportunity to haul ammunition and fire off the canons for their respective parties in the culture wars. If Russell Jacoby’s heroes were intellectuals whose ideas gained them some measure of public significance, the order now is abruptly reversed: the public intellectuals have become personalities, gifted with the talent of reducing ideas to sound-bites neatly packaged for the producers of *Nightline* and *Charlie Rose*.

Edmund Wilson, the centennial of whose birth was celebrated last year with a biography by the prolific Jeffrey Meyers, an ongoing lecture series at the New York Humanities Center, and a major conference at Princeton University, his alma mater, would have relished the moment, or at least been amused. If Wilson, whose literary criticism, histories, essays, and reporting shaped American literary culture from the early 1920s to his death in 1972, detested academics, he loved performers and performance. He loved the vaudeville acts of his youth, burlesque shows, the French chanteuse Yvette Guilbert. Most of all he admired Harry Houdini, “an audacious and independent being” who declared at an early age “I am Houdini!” and, as Wilson wrote in an admiring early essay, collected in *The Shores of Light* (1952), worked hard all his life to “perfect himself in the pursuit of his chosen work.”

A photograph of Wilson, reproduced on the jacket of *A Piece of My Mind* (1956), alludes as well to his lifelong love of magic, and it is tempting to analyze the image as the critic Wilson might have done. It



shows a heavyset man with appraising, melancholy eyes, his eyebrows slightly raised, suggesting a willingness to suspend for the moment his native state of disbelief. He is dressed in the three-piece suit of a lawyer or banker of his father's generation, a gesture toward his love for the past and the professional security which he attained only late in life. Between broad, workmanlike fingers he balances a deck of cards. The card facing us, the eight of hearts, reminds us of Wilson's reputation as a ladies' man, despite a demeanor that suggests—in less flattering portraits—a boozy salesman being chased by a dog or an angry husband. Manuscript pages sprawl across his desk toward an unseen deadline, in counterpoint to the solemn march of bound volumes across his shelves. The author of more than 40 published books, Wilson worked all his life to

transform his own sensibility—divided between his formal attentiveness as a critic and his feel for individual psychology and the grand movements of history—into prose that could be read with pleasure by a literate audience.

**A**s a critic, Wilson was the founder of the vital modernist tradition in American literary criticism that began with his early essays and reviews—in *Vanity Fair*, the *Dial*, and the *New Republic*—and that attained its first mature expression in *Axel's Castle* (1931). Despite his formal acuity, Wilson was at heart a literary historian, whose love of good writing and of independent minds kept him from reducing the writers he loved—Eliot or Yeats, Proust or Joyce, Marx or Michelet—to textbook illustrations of historical forces. And though he inaugurated the psychological method that rules what remains of the practice of literary criticism outside academe, the breadth and humanity of his approach sets it far apart from the reductive trivialities of pathography.

Most of all, what distinguishes Edmund Wilson's writing is the voice, rich with the unresolved tensions of an adult personality, pulled between the opposite poles of literature and history, artistic form and lived experience. "The fiction writer in Wilson was real," writes John Updike—one of our few working critics who shares Wilson's need to present the strengths and the weaknesses of writers as individuals making moral choices, as craftsmen working their craft—"and his displacement was a real loss." Yet

to see Edmund Wilson as a failed novelist, an unsuccessful Updike, is unjust. In the best of his writing, we can witness the transformation of critical skill and historical scholarship, the familiar provinces of the academic, into art.

Wilson was always tempted, if never overcome, by the alluring promise that literary art could somehow be explained by the patient accumulation of commonplace detail about the writer, his or her family, childhood, and later experiences. If Wilson lacked the attachment, or the patience, required to pursue this program in the form of a full-dress biography of any of the writers he admired, he was consistently, and extraordinarily, interested in himself. And so, from his early autobiographical essays to the thinly disguised erotic autobiography, *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1946), to his posthumously published diaries, he left us as complete a record of his life as we could require, seen through his own eyes, in retrospect, and set down as it happened, documentary style.

From Wilson's autobiographical writings, we know that the critic was born in Red Bank, New Jersey in 1895 to an erratically protective mother and a distant father, a former state attorney general and intimate of Woodrow Wilson who suffered greatly, as did his son, from depression. Educated at the Hill School and at Princeton, where he became a disciple of the bohemian professor Christian Gauss and a friend of John Dos Passos and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Wilson served in Europe during World War I. Moving to New York, he worked as managing editor of *Vanity Fair*, later supporting himself—hard to imagine—as a free-lance literary critic and then as an editor of the *New Republic*. He married often and unhappily. His first marriage was to the actress Mary Blair, a great favorite of the playwright Eugene O'Neill; the most famous of Wilson's marriages was to Mary McCarthy, whose acid portraits of Wilson as brutish husband have unfairly if predictably overshadowed his literary reputation. Wilson's great and stormy friendship with Vladimir Nabokov has left us with a wonderful collected correspondence in which Nabokov's inventive genius shines through, though Wilson's own voice is strangely muted. During the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, he reached a broad audience as the literary critic of the *New Yorker* while writing some of the better reportage of his time. He married Elena Thornton in 1946, and lived happily with her, through middle age, and despite several affairs, until his death in 1972.

A more revealing self-portrait of Edmund Wilson can be found in his mature writing, which begins with *Axel's Castle*. In that book, his first as a critic, the 35-year-old Wilson used his formal knowledge as a poet, the skills he had sharpened at the *New Republic*, and his own inclination toward historical narrative to give a lucid and sweeping account of the "symbolist movement" in modern literature. *Axel's Castle* begins with the French poet Baudelaire's reading of Edgar Allan Poe; individual chapters trace the development of

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symbolist art in the work of leading writers, including Yeats, Eliot, Valéry, Proust, and Joyce, whose books the critic had championed throughout the 1920s. Wilson illuminates symbolist art through the working out of an analogy between imagery in prose and the notes and chords of the leading art of the romantics: music. Proust's great novel was constructed as a symphonic structure rather than a narrative in the ordinary sense. The shifting images of the symbolist poets, Wilson explains, were transformed by Proust into "characters, situations, places, vivid moments, obsessive emotions, recurrent patterns of behavior." Joyce's *Ulysses* is also a symphony, whose themes are the minds of individual Dubliners.

What marks *Axel's Castle* as the beginning of Wilson's mature criticism, however, is the critic's insistence on the tensions and ambiguities contained within his elegantly appointed metaphor. The prose-music of the symbolists was not only an exercise in form, Wilson writes, "but an attempt by carefully studied means . . . to communicate unique personal feelings." Yet form and feeling were opposing and hostile pursuits. If the artist in Wilson identified with Eliot and Yeats, with Proust and Joyce, there was also something in him that recoiled. He took the title of his book from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's "Axel," a young man who inhabits a half-Gothic, half-Wagnerian castle in the Black Forest, where he gives himself up to the isolated study of alchemy and prepares to receive the mysteries of the Rosicrucian order. A beautiful assassin, Sara, is sent to kill Axel. They fall passionately in love, and, rejecting his bride's pleas for a night of wedded bliss, Axel persuades her instead to join him in suicide. At the heart of the symbolist art Wilson admired, inherent in the relentless pursuit of the self, was something pale and splintered, neurotic and deadly, that could be neither successfully embraced nor avoided. The pursuit of experience was no less sterile. The poet Arthur Rimbaud, who fled Paris for the life of a gunrunner in the African deserts, would die a meaningless death at 24.

**W**ilson's once-original conclusions have by now been thoroughly absorbed into the critical literature on modernism. But what gives *Axel's Castle* its enduring force is the critic's ability to project his own psychological tensions so directly and honestly onto the page. In response to the conflict within himself, Wilson saw modern literature as divided into two opposing camps. There is that of Rimbaud, whose influence can be felt in "D. H. Lawrence's mornings in Mexico and his explorations of Santa Fe," in "Blaise Cendrars's negro anthology," and in "the fascination for white New Yorkers of Harlem." Against Rimbaud's pursuit of raw experience, Wilson set the inward-looking spirit of Axel, which lives on "in Proust's hypochondriac ailments and his fretting self-centered prolixities; in Yeats's astrology and spirit-tappings and in the 17th-century cadence which half puts to sleep his liveliest prose; in the meagerness of the poetic output of Paul Valéry and T. S. Eliot contrasted with their incessant speculations as to precisely what constitutes poetry." Neither will do. At a time when American writers and critics were alternately enthralled and appalled by the new literature, Wilson stood alone in his ability to see the strength of the modernist art and to feel its limitations with equal ferocity, as representative of a violent struggle within himself. The task

Wilson set himself was to find a way out.

The social and economic chaos of the Great Depression impelled Wilson, and an entire generation of American intellectuals, away from modernism and toward a search for historical causes and explanations that led many to the work of Karl Marx. If Wilson was drawn to Marx, the path he chose did little to endear him to the Marxist faithful. What interested Wilson in *To The Finland Station* (1940)—“A Study in the Writing and Acting of History”—were not the scientific laws of Marxist history but the promise that modernist methods of introspection, in the hands of historians, could have a lasting impact on human lives. History was made not by abstract forces but by the combination of social circumstances with the inner lives of great historians as expressed through their art.

Wilson's determined focus on his own inner life, rather than on the topical concerns of contemporary Marxist thinkers, allowed him to produce a history that transcends the period in which it was written and that prefigures the psychologically attuned scholarship of present-day historians such as Simon Schama and Jonathan Spence. The forces that animate *To The Finland Station* are not capital and labor but the historians Michelet and Marx, writers who—like Wilson—use their art to realize their own psychological tensions in the stories they tell. “The great rooms of Fountainebleau and Versailles seem to get colder and larger and the figures smaller and more alone,” Wilson writes of Jules Michelet's *Revolution* (1852):

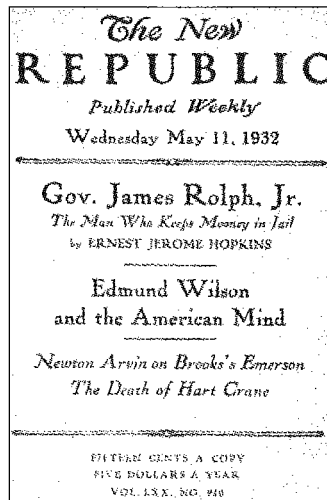
They are not usually made odious so much as wretched—Michelet remembered the poor queer relics of the sanitarium in which he had lived; and we are finally startled but not surprised to find Louis the Sun King himself eclipsed in his windowless inside room, bored with the old and deaf Madame de Maintenon, nagged by the quarrels of the monks. . . . To give us a final symbol for the monarchy, Michelet has only to describe without comment the expense and clumsy complication of the great waterworks at Marly which make the Versailles fountains play and which fill the air for miles around with their agonized creakings and groanings.

Michelet's art was the history of France, created through an exercise of a literary talent that could punch through the hardened crust of tradition to reveal the living historical forces that shaped the lives of his readers.

If history was meaningful art, the methods by which it was produced bore little relation to the scientific pursuit of fact or to the strategic pronouncements of Marxist intellectuals. The historian's art was the product of a passionate, modernist attention to the inner music of the self.

“Massacred at the Abbaye,” Michelet writes to a friend, “I am on my way to the revolutionary tribunal, that is to say, to the guillotine.” The lasting influence of Michelet's history was not as politics but art. In Michelet's conclusion to the fifth book of the *Revolution*, “History is time,” Wilson glimpses the origins of the sensibility of the French historian's truest heir, Marcel Proust.

Nowhere was the dominance of the artist over history more apparent than in Wilson's portrait of Marx, the historian whose style was most con-



genial to his own. Showing little patience with the tenets of Marxist historical science, Wilson was the first critic to read *Capital* (1867) as literature. Marx's masterwork was the historian's *Ulysses*, "a welding together of . . . diverse points of view," of "distinct techniques of thought . . . a treatise on economics, a history of industrial development and an inspired tract for the times," a morality "no more self-consistent than the economics is constantly scientific." Outside this immense structure, "dark and strong like the old Trier basilica . . . swim the mists and the septentrional lights of German metaphysics."

What began as an attempt to escape from the self-consciousness of modernist literature into the solid world of history ends with a triumphant affirmation of modernist technique, the inward-looking exploration of the self. The violence and the prophetic anger of *Capital* came not from a scientist's insight into history but from the miserable and oppressive circumstances of Marx's own labor. The historian's "grim parading of the afflictions of the poor," Wilson wrote, was not the product of historical science but of his outraged conviction of the injustice of his poverty and his bad conscience at having inflicted that fate on others—on his wife Jenny, their children, and his friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels. The Marx of *Capital* is "not only the victim, the dispossessed proletariat," Wilson writes, "he is also the exploiting employer." Unlike the art of the modernists, however, Marx's ability to project himself into the writing of history would have far-reaching effects: through the agency of Lenin and Trotsky, the inner life of the historian Karl Marx would transform the world.

In *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), Wilson's most influential work of criticism, the critic returned to literature with a newfound faith and purpose. In essays on Dickens, Kipling and Hemingway, and the Philoctetes myth, Wilson pioneered the psychological criticism that drives our ever-expanding biographical interest in literature. The creative effort of the writer, Wilson concluded, was an attempt to explain and to transcend the original trauma that impelled him to write. Charles Dickens's father

was shut up in a debtors' prison, his 12-year-old son sent to work in a blacking factory. The success of Dickens's art was the product not only of his formal mastery but of his ability to use the novel to explain how and why his childhood was disrupted, and to give a coherent and tolerable picture of the England in which such injuries were inflicted on a child.

**W**hat separates Wilson's psychological approach from the biographical criticism that prevails today is not only the critic's characteristic refusal of the doctrinaire language of Freud but also his intense concentration on the quality of the writing itself. If art begins with trauma, trauma was hardly a recipe for art. Nowhere was this distinction clearer than in Wilson's essay on Rudyard Kipling, in which the critic created a compressed and terrifying image of the six years the author spent with his guardians—as depicted in Kipling's early story "Baa, Baa, Black Sheep"—walking to school with a placard between his shoulders reading "Liar"; enduring a nervous breakdown accompanied by partial blindness; punished by separation from his sister, and by hallucinations in which a thick mist separated him from the world and in which he imagined "blowing curtains were specters or that a coat on a nail was an enormous black bird ready to swoop down on him."

In a close reading of Kipling's work, Wilson convincingly asserted Kipling's skill as a craftsman. Yet Kipling's art, he concludes, was finally a failure, because he could not—as Dickens did—give a morally convincing account of himself and his place in the world. "The bitter animus so deeply implanted by the six years of his childhood," Wilson writes of Kipling's later work, "has now become almost entirely dissociated from the objects by which it was originally aroused. It has turned into a generalized hatred of those nations, groups and tendencies, precisely, which stand towards the dominating authority in the relationship of challengers or victims." Kipling's failure—it must be noted—came not because he sympathized with British colonialists instead of with the colonial peoples of India: it was the result of having "resisted his own sense of life and discarded his own moral intelligence in favor of the point of view of a dominant political party."

Wilson's distinction between Kipling's moral failure—unforgivable in fiction—and his failure to champion some political cause—irrelevant, if not destructive to art—is underlined again in his essay on Hemingway, whom the critic introduced to American readers in 1924. "We can see clearly what an error of the politics it was to accuse him of an indifference to society," Wilson wrote, responding to charges that Hemingway's concentration on the personal lives of apolitical characters was politically irresponsible. "His whole work is a criticism of society: he has responded to every pressure of the moral atmosphere of the time, as it is felt at the roots of human relations, with a sensitivity almost unrivaled."

**F**ifty years later, in an age of unrivaled interest in the personal lives of artists, and a corresponding lack of attention to the formal qualities of their work, it may be useful and natural to rebel against the idea that genius and disease are inextricably bound up together. Wilson's criticism provides an instructive alternative to the pathology that characterizes so many of our published lives of artists. Wilson's psychology

was the instrument of a profoundly moral imagination, whose object was to find meaning in art and in human suffering, to envision a personal art with a high moral purpose. Philoctetes, with his suppurating wound, is inseparable from his powerful bow; the critic, Wilson, is Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, who brings the wounded man back to Athens against the orders of his chief: "Only by the intervention of one who is guileless enough and human enough to treat him, not as a monster, nor yet as a magical property . . . but simply as another man, whose sufferings elicit his sympathy and whose courage and pride he admires."

It was a lesson that Wilson—often difficult in personal relationships—would try his best to take to heart. In Wilson's published diary, *The Fifties*, we see—through the eyes of the diaries' editor, Leon Edel—the critic sitting at a seminar table at Princeton, as the young John Berryman recites from work in progress: "What struck me was the way in which EW, not usually given to this kind of empathy, helped the poet over highly emotional passages by feeding back, in quiet even tones, lines Berryman's personal shyness or anguish tended to obscure and mumble."

**I**n the years to come, Wilson would apply his skills as a critic and historian to the making of a formally complex and highly individual art of his own, work that might take its place alongside that of Joyce and Proust. Yet his attempts to express himself through the more conventional forms—poems, plays, stories, and novels—were failures. *Memoirs of Hecate County*, Wilson's one commercial success in fiction, was dismissed by Raymond Chandler as having "made fornication as dull as a railroad timetable." Pronounced Vladimir Nabokov, "I would have soon as tried to open a sardine can with my penis."

Wilson did succeed, however, in writing some of the better nonfiction of the postwar period, as a contributor to the *New Yorker*. *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea* (1955), a light but enduring intellectual detective story, was a popular success. *Europe without Baedeker* (1947), Wilson's reporting on the aftermath of World War II, is suffused with a doughty Yankee disdain for English snobberies, balanced by his apprehensive vision of a doe-eyed America caught in the oncoming headlights of imperial power. Sentence by sentence, the book is proof of the practical merits of Wilson's decades-long efforts to marry his developed literary style to his feel for history, culture, and psychology. "Monelli," Wilson wrote of a then-prominent Italian novelist,

in spite of his journalist's slang, is still enmeshed in the ancient rhetoric of festooned sentences that go on for pages, show-pieces of literary vocabulary that accumulate adjectives and nouns with a minimum of "functional" effectiveness, convolutions of statements that grow up inside statements, like the whorls of a navel orange, and that give the impression at once of exasperating deliberation and of eyebrow-heaving vehemence (there is in a single sentence of *Roma 1943* one parenthesis two pages long that contains a subordinate parenthesis of over a hundred words).

What makes the sentence exciting to read is not only the perfect weighting of Wilson's own subordinate clauses but the dawning realization that it is both a parody and a lesson in craft. Wilson is unwilling, however, to end



with a display of superior skill. "This is a style one associates most readily with the intrigues of a Renaissance court or the maneuvers of the Council of Trent," he continues, shifting his ground from the quality of the writing to the more general subject of style as an expression of national culture, "But then, as one reads on, one has to accept the fact that modern Italy is still partly like this." If parts of *Europe* read like his diaries—from which they were drawn—the style they reveal was the perfect instrument for his thought—witty, sharp-edged, shifting easily from literature to history and back, with a structure that balanced but never struggled to contain the protean movements of his mind: the critic in Wilson had become identical with the writer.

**P***atriotic Gore* (1962), Wilson's baggy masterpiece, is the culmination of his work as a critic, historian, and stylist, the expression in prose of his highly individual mind. More than 800 pages long, the book is composed of 30 essays on the writers of the Civil War—Stowe, Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, Frederick Law Olmsted, Mary Chesnut, Sidney Lanier, George W. Cable, Ambrose Bierce, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. His Lincoln—the unacknowledged inspiration for Garry Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992)—is the first and still unrivaled attempt to see the president as a writer who self-consciously employs his craft in the service of his political ends. Tracing the development of the president's prose, Wilson quotes from an early letter from Lincoln to a friend (italics are Wilson's): "The second is, the *absence of all business and conversation of friends*, which might divert your mind, and give it occasional rest from that *intensity* of thought, which will sometimes wear the sweetest idea threadbare and turn it to the bitterness of death." Even in his private letters, we can see the writer in Lincoln at work, "the balance of vowels and consonants, the assonance and alliteration, the progression from the long 'e's' of 'sweetest idea,' over which one would want to linger, to the short and closed vowels of 'bitterness of death,' which chill the lyrical rhythm and bite it off at the end—all this shows a training of the literary ear that is not often taught in modern schools."

Wilson's attention to literary style, which we now find unusual in a historian, was the foundation of a larger conception of Lincoln that could have come only from Wilson himself. In the figure of Lincoln, the inspiration of Marx and the purposefulness of his Lenin, the two warring sides of Wilson's own personality, are dramatically combined. "With nothing of the deliberate histrionics of the Roosevelts or of the evangelical mask of Wilson," the critic concludes, "he created himself as a poetic figure and he thus imposed himself upon the nation." The force of Wilson's own image is the product of his successful and highly individual synthesis of literature and history, of attention to form and to social circumstance, allowing him to see the writer and the politician in Lincoln as one and the same. Like Gore Vidal, a contemporary essayist of Wilsonian verve, Edmund Wilson imagined historical actors through their prose. Beneath the abstract play of the historical forces so dear to modern historians Wilson sees individuals, mastering their worlds just as we attempt to master our own. The reliance on the prose of his characters is not the product of a narrow application of critical skills—or of its alternative, exhaustive academic research—but of Edmund Wilson's broad and encompassing mind, able to move with ease

from his own experience to that of his historical subjects, urging them triumphantly into life.

**I**f Abraham Lincoln is the author of the North, the South was the literary creation of Sir Walter Scott. “He did measureless harm,” writes Wilson, quoting Mark Twain, “more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote. . . . Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in a great measure responsible for the war.”

In the art of the southern writers of the Civil War, Wilson sees a many-voiced and doomed rebellion against the chivalric romance, the literary form that offered moral justification for the slave society. “There was no irony whatever in Sidney Lanier,” Wilson writes of one of his favorite subjects, “a rapturous young man from Georgia.” Lanier sought refuge from the romance of the South in the heady abstractions of German romanticism; the result was a superheated version of the chivalric formula, “inflated and irised, made to drip with the dews of idealism, to a degree that is rather startling even to one who has become familiar with its earlier manifestations.” Yet if Sidney Lanier is “limited, sometimes a little stupid,” Wilson writes, he is also a poet of talent, and his passion for his art “commands our respect, even our admiration.”

By taking the writers of North and South—rather than abstract historical forces—as his subject, Wilson creates characters that speak to us with a directness lacking in contemporary histories that, filled with numbers, tables, and abstruse methods, seem to have more in common with algebra than with literature. If Wilson’s method has its uses as art, it is also the reflection of a broader approach, of his dedication to the individual perceptions of his subjects, a technique that allows him to make hard moral judgments without the easy taking of sides.

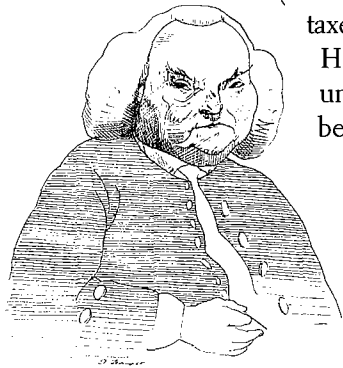
**T**hough the individual essays sparkle with wit and critical acuity, they are all finally subordinated to the overarching movement of the author’s curious mind. The effect is that of the modernist novels Wilson loved, of hundreds of conversations overheard while traveling from North to South in a railway car crowded with poets, novelists, politicians, generals, diarists, and historians. The criticisms most often repeated about *Patriotic Gore*—that the book lacks a thesis, that the whole is diffuse—ignore the note of moral urgency with which Wilson begins his book, and with which he concludes in his essay on Oliver Wendell Holmes. “If we would grasp the significance of the Civil War in relation to the history of our time,” Wilson writes in his preface, “we should consider Abraham Lincoln in connection with the other leaders who have been engaged in similar tasks, Bismarck and Lenin, together with Lincoln the founders of the great modern powers of the Twentieth Century.” Our national unwillingness to see the drive for power at the heart of our history, Wilson fears, will result in a new, unselfconscious form of imperialism, as “the American dream,” “the American way of life,” and “the defense of the free world” are added to the historical dictionary of “warlike cant.”

If Wilson’s fears reflect those of many intellectuals on the Left, the impulse behind them has less to do with politics than it does with the life of the mind. The Roman figure of Oliver Wendell Holmes, with whom

Wilson concludes, embodies the endangered republican virtues of his time, and, by extension, our own. Never corrupted, never discouraged or broken by the conditions of the war, Holmes is able to retain the independence of his mind while all around him his contemporaries, North and South, are losing theirs. The question of how Holmes managed to preserve his independence under such alien conditions is the question that *Patriotic Gore* is designed to answer.

The answer Wilson finds, in the past and the present, is not the pursuit of political controversy or the hermeticism of scholastic debate, but a profound dedication to the direction of one's own thought. The public intellectuals of Wilson's imagination would follow their thoughts wherever they led, and cultivate the skills necessary to keep their fellow citizens informed. This was not an easy thing to do. In his diaries, and in *The Cold War and the Income Tax* (1963), Wilson would wonder again and again at the pressures exerted on the American imagination by officially propagated fear, by the bureaucratization of knowledge in government departments and universities, by the Internal Revenue Service

(whose wrath he incurred by neglecting to pay his taxes), and by the Modern Language Association.



He warned of "the crowding of an often unavowed constraint," the tacit understanding between intelligent people that certain subjects and opinions should be avoided, a pressure that we feel today, in the strictures of the politically correct, and in the pressure from so-called "intellectuals" on the Right to ban books and movies or to teach "creation science" to children in school.

If Wilson was a determined opponent of the imperial American politics of his day, he was also, and above all, an American writer, whose championing of the individual subjectivity belonged to a self-consciously American tradition. What he missed, most of all, was the patriotic freedom enjoyed by the writers of the Civil War "to weave fantasies out of their dreams; to reflect upon human life, upon man's relation to Nature, to God and the Universe; to speculate philosophically or euphorically, to burst into impetuous prophecy on the meaning and the promise of the United States."

The promise Wilson sought, of a public literature that would combine the personal and the political, the formal achievements of the modernists with his own interest in history, is still before us. Endless reasons have been advanced for the decline of our intellectual life, from the rise of rents in Manhattan, to the shallowness of the press, to political correctness inside the academy. Edmund Wilson's lifework, produced under circumstances that were never easy, suggests yet another explanation: a failure of ambition on the part of intellectuals. Now that we have celebrated the centennial of Wilson's birth, we might all profit from the example of his work, and look forward to its revival.