

The Prometheus of American Criticism

Michael Weiss

Edmund Wilson has been an object of saintly veneration and nostalgia to those old enough to remember when literary critics were arbiters of how people spent their time between meals and work. Who now, in the age of the hatchet job and the shrinking Books section, speaks of ‘permanent criticism,’ the criticism that endures because it ranks as literature itself? The Library of America has just published Wilson’s collected works in an elegant two-volume set spanning the critic’s most productive decades – the 20s, 30s and 40s. Coming a year after Lewis Dabney’s definitive biography, the resurrection of such sorely missed volumes as *The Shores of Light*, *Axel’s Castle* and *The Wound and the Bow* surely qualifies an ‘event’ publication. Now there’s a term the owlish sage of Red Bank would have loathed to no end.

It’s a shame, though, that Wilson’s magnificent survey of socialism, *To the Finland Station*, has been left out of this series because it represents not just the yield of seven years of hard study, for which he learned German and Russian, but also the culmination of one of the lesser examined leitmotifs of his interdisciplinary and breathtaking oeuvre: his political radicalism.

Wilson always preferred to think of himself as a journalist rather than a critic; writing for publications such as *Vanity Fair*, *The New Republic* and *The New Yorker*, he reported from the squalid underbelly of the Jazz Age as well the breadlines and courtrooms of the Great Depression, serving witness to many of the formative scandals and uprisings that impelled progressive opinion. Even his classic literary essays on the hierophants of the canon – Proust, Dickens, Flaubert, Joyce – were scarcely free from reference to Marxism, or the materialist conception of history, with which he had a longstanding and complicated relationship. Wilson began a tenuous fellow traveller of Communism and wound up an idiosyncratic left-libertarian, all the while never committing to any faction or party in either his struggle against current or historic injustices. His intellect was keen and rapacious enough prevent his lapse into any kind of ideological or critical dogma, and his slightly cultivated role as the aloof but opinionated observer of the major convulsions of his age, whether in art or revolution, made him one of the most perceptive chroniclers of it.

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Dabney is quite right to locate Wilson's overarching sensibility as Hellenistic, and in deep sympathy with Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. He always harboured a strong attraction to the Old Testament and Jewish morality. As a neo-classicist, he was an especial fan of the 'Athens-and-Jerusalem' tribal offshoot, which informed his later archaeological interest in the Dead Sea Scrolls and impelled him to study Hebrew. More than that, Dabney asserts, 'his evocation of the shaping of God's institutions from the things of this world marks the Hebraism that would be liberated when it appeared to him wrapped in the flag of Marx's scientific socialism.'

Wilson's sympathy for the underdog, not to say the working class, can be glimpsed in some of his early dispatches from the twenties. Very often his sense of the heroic moulded his conception of the indignities and inequities of American society. For instance, in 1925, he extolled a promising young magician who was the son of a Wisconsin rabbi and went by the stage name Harry Houdini. The illusionist, nee Erich Weiss, had risen up, wrote Wilson – himself a lifelong practitioner of the parlour trick – from 'the East Side cabarets and dime museums' and personified 'the struggle of a superior man to emerge from the commonplaces, the ignominies and the pains of common life, to make for himself a position and a livelihood among his less able fellows at the same time that he learns to perfect himself in the pursuit of his chosen work.' Houdini was a great debunker of superstition and mysticism, so this Nietzschean panegyric to the hard-knock school of 20th century materialism was not wasted on a mere celebrity figure. It is also worth noting that Wilson was at one time the protégé of H.L. Mencken, of whom it is impossible to imagine a likeminded paean to the Yiddishkeit vaudeville circuits of lower Manhattan.

As the learned eminence of the *New Republic's* 'back of the book,' Wilson spent a good amount of the twenties doing what we'd today call advocacy journalism. One example was his deft prose sketch of the participants in the murder trial of Dorothy Perkins, a seventeen-year-old girl charged in New York with the Chicago-like crime of fatally shooting her male suitor. The presiding judge – viciously lampooned by Wilson, not usually thought of as a proto-feminist – had based his harsh sentence of the minor on the fact that 'women have done too much killing.' That might have stoked the fires of any progressive muckraker, but Wilson took to a fiery stanzaic indictment of the entire creative class, which he felt had not done enough to highlight Perkins' plight. In 'To a Young Girl Indicted for Murder,' he intoned: '[T]hose praisers of the past, accepters of defeat, / The ghosts of poets – violent against God / no longer in my day.' Well, it was one way of saying that poetry makes nothing happen.

Wilson's reporting on the more prominent capital murder trial of Sacco and Vanzetti was particularly fascinating, given that, unlike so many of his radical colleagues, he was sceptical of their innocence – a prescient judgment, given the new evidence unearthed about the twin martyrs of the American left. Nevertheless, he was angered by the tendentious state of their prosecution, which he blamed on the chauvinism of an Anglo-Saxon establishment abetted by the Boston Irish. Two immigrants couldn't get a fair trial in New England, and that was that. When his editor at the *New Republic*, the celebrated liberal Herbert Croly, author of *Progressive Democracy* and *The Promise of American Life*, thanked him for not filtering his indignation through the sieve of class warfare, Wilson regretted that he hadn't done so. Opposition, in other words, was in his blood.

Guilt over his sub-Marxian handling of Sacco and Vanzetti might have led him to draft his famous editorial in 1931, titled 'An Appeal to Progressives.' It came at a time when the flapper had given way to the ledge-jumper, and the gravamen of Wilson's argument was that liberals should 'take Communism away from the Communists, and without ambiguities.' How was this to be done? He advocated a policy that was a measure beyond the imminent redistributionism of the New Deal: state ownership of the means of production. (No wonder Freud conceived of the 'narcissism of the small difference' the same year the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia). It took Wilson a full decade to become thoroughly disillusioned of the desirability and feasibility of this model, but until then, he remained an enthusiast for the Soviet 'experiment.'

He had served as a hospital orderly in World War I, and so was well positioned to witness the collapse of parliamentary democracy and capitalism first-hand. It was Wilson's appreciation of the seductiveness of the ideological alternatives that rose from the pyres of Europe – Fascism and Communism – that gave his literary criticism such exigency. He saw how modernism, of both the reactionary and revolutionary stripes, was the product of what Orwell later termed, in discussing T.S. Eliot's late poetic decline, 'the escape from the consciousness of futility.' Yet Wilson saw through the escapes, too. Here is his critique of Eliot's *For Lancelot Andrewes*:

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...With Dos Passos, it is an army of workers, disinterested,

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industrious and sturdy, but full of the good-fellowship and gaiety in which the Webster Hall balls nowadays are usually so dismally lacking – 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!

As it happens, Wilson was not immune from fashioning his own agreeable fantasy about his place in the Republic of Letters. Dos Passos was a close friend who bestowed on him the deserved epithet of 'Anti-Christ,' ostensibly to reflect the critic's thoroughgoing distaste for Christianity – like Byron, whom he profiled repeatedly in the twenties, he had a hard 'Calvinistic conscience'; like Byron, he fell hard from grace, satisfying appetites literary, intellectual and carnal. But the positive connotation of 'devil's advocate' should also be kept in mind. Wilson's natural style and sensibility was dry and Johnsonian, but he was self-aware enough to view himself as something of an oddity in the tempestuous epoch in which he lived. Consider this autobiographical verse he drafted in his youth to win the affections of Edna St. Vincent Millay, who went on to take his virginity:

He could have been happy in the XVIIth century,
Before the Romantic Revival...
But now Byron has spoken
And the damage has been done;
He cannot rest quietly among his books
For thirst of dramatizing himself.

The man of ideas struggles to emerge from the cork-lined chamber a courageous man of action. Wilson played up this image of himself because it was the image he liked to ascribe to those literary and historical figures he admired most. 'Yeats, Freud, Trotsky, and Joyce have all gone in so short a time, it is almost like the death of one's father,' he wrote in his journal in 1941, in what I would nominate as the most zeitgeist-capturing sentence ever committed to print.

Indeed, the Promethean fire-stealer, 'Satan who suffers, a Job who never assents,' the 'deliverer [who] is never delivered' – these were highest allegorical compliments Wilson would pay to Karl Marx in *To the Finland Station* (1940). The greybeard

of the British Museum Wilson described as a veritable ‘poet of commodities,’ and *Das Kapital* his Dickensian novel of injustice in the 19th century, a point well taken up recently by Francis Wheen in his short, instructive ‘biography’ of Marx’s masterpiece.

In Marx, Wilson discovered that perfect if uneasy fusion between what he termed the ‘turbulent insubordinate soul’ of the Romantic with the scientific theorist of a mechanical universe. As with his best biographical squibs, he was covertly writing about himself in writing about his subject, whom he labelled the ‘moral genius of Judaism’:

It is Prometheus who remains his favorite hero; for Prometheus is a Satan who suffers, a Job who never assents; and, unlike either Job or Satan, he brings liberation to mankind. Prometheus turns up in *Das Kapital*... to represent the proletariat chained to capital. The Light-Bringer was tortured, we remember, by Zeus’ eagle’s tearing, precisely, his liver, as Karl Marx himself – who is said to have reread Aeschylus every year – was obsessed by the fear that his liver would be eaten, like his father’s, by cancer. And yet, if it is a devouring bird which Father Zeus has sent against the rebel, it is also a devourer, a destroyer, fire, which Prometheus has brought to man. And in the meantime, the deliverer is never delivered, the slayer never rises from the grave, the resurrection, although certain, is not yet; for the expropriators are yet to be expropriated.

And again:

Like other great satirists, he punished in others the faults he felt to be dangerous in himself; and it was precisely this blinded and paralyzed side of Karl Marx’s peculiar personality which had made it possible for the active and perceptive side to grasp and to explain and to excoriate, as no one else had been able to do, that negation of personal relations, the responsibility of man to man, that abstract and half-conscious cruelty, which had afflicted the life of the age.

Note the touch of the Freudian in these excerpts. A careful cross-pollination between the Viennese and Rhinelander schools would occur in *The Wound and the Bow*, Wilson’s stunning *pleiade* of psychological studies of Dickens, Kipling, Casanova, Wharton, Hemingway, Joyce and Philoctetes, whose myth furnished

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the title of the book. Wilson's thesis was that art could be read as the byproduct of trauma – just as Marx's polemics, he might have added, were driven by subjective as well as objective forces of history. For his essay on *Finnegans Wake*, 'The Dream of H. C. Earwicker,' Wilson relied heavily on Max Eastman's controversial depuzzling of the epic that took seventeen years for Joyce to write and might take as long for the average reader to get through. Eastman, better known as Trotsky's English translator, had charged Joyce with trafficking in a 'cult of unintelligibility,' a judgment he would soon license for his famous dust-up with Sidney Hook over the scientific versus 'mystical' foundation of Marxism. Wilson tended toward the latter view, having never really apprehended the Hegelian dialectic (he got it confused with the Fichtean one). But even in a psychoanalytic cast of mind, when it came to treating Dickens, he found that he could not discuss *Bleak House* without citing Engels's tours of industrial Manchester and the inhumanity of British factory conditions.

It was *Axel's Castle* (1931), the book that traced the origins of literary modernism through French Symbolism, particularly as embodied by Mallarmé, and that situated the role of the critic in mapping a 'history of man's ideas and imaginings in the setting of the conditions which have shaped them,' that Wilson made the most use of the hermeneutic of economics. The most famous passage in all of the works reprinted in the Library of America editions is this closing stave of his celebrated essay on Proust, which has either charmed or bedeviled contemporary readers:

Proust is perhaps the last great historian of the loves, the society, the intelligence, the diplomacy, the literature and the art of the Heartbreak House of capitalist culture; and the little man with the sad appealing voice, the metaphysician's mind, the Saracen's beak, the ill-fitting dress-shirt and the great eyes that seem to see all about him like the many-faceted eyes of a fly, dominates the scene and plays host in the mansion where he is not long to be master.

What exactly is Shaw's *Heartbreak House* and 'capitalist culture' doing in there, asked James Wood, who concluded that Wilson's absorption of Marxism 'permeated, and sometimes badly distorted, many of his literary judgments.' In fact, Marxism enhanced them. It is impossible, for instance, to think of *L'Education sentimentale* in quite the same way after reading 'The Politics of Flaubert,' an essay originally published in *Partisan Review* and repackaged for *The Triple Thinkers* (1948). In this subtle and acute exegesis of Flaubert's correspondence and fiction, Wilson

showed how the obsessive master of *le mot juste* 'had more in common with, and had perhaps been influenced more by, the socialist thought of his time than he would ever have allowed himself to confess.' After all, in the Frenchman's novels, the great foil of the bourgeois is never the nobility but the peasantry and proletariat:

It is... in *L'Education sentimentale* that Flaubert's account of society comes closest to socialist theory. Indeed, his presentation here of the Revolution of 1848 parallels in so striking a manner Marx's analysis of the same events in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* that it is worth while to focus together the diverse figures of Flaubert and Marx in order to recognize how two of the most searching minds of the century, pursuing courses so apparently divergent, arrived at almost identical interpretations of the happenings of their own time.

The protagonist Frederic is a contemptible figure, whose mistress, the daughter of silk mill workers, gives birth to his bastard child, which dies just as he is planning his next assignation with the boring wife of a banker. No tract on the failure of the Paris Commune has better filigreed the 'disastrously unenduring union between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.' Wilson marked the lone point of divergence between Marx and Flaubert in the development of the pharisaic character Senecal. Was it his fundamental middle-class nature, as Marx would have argued, or his socialist instinct for despotism, as Flaubert had it, that led him to sell out his comrades on the barricades, put down the June Riots and, 'like certain radicals turned fascists,' realise that 'strong centralization of government is already a kind of communism and that authority is in itself a great thing?' By 1948, Wilson, as we shall see in a moment, was firmly in Flaubert's camp on this question.

However, it must be emphasised that what Wilson always understood, and is not given enough credit for understanding, is that Marx was never the vulgar Philistine that so many of his epigones were – or that, more ominously, the Soviet commissars became. He disdained the post-Revolutionary catechism in Russia for 'Proletcult,' and esteemed Trotsky and Lenin for at least keeping the worst wolves of censorship and artistic prejudice at bay. Wilson also shared Marx's revulsion for judging a work of art strictly by its relation to history, social conditions, or the artist's political disposition. Did Engels not famously say that one Balzac was worth a thousand Zolas? Did not Trotsky say, in *Literature and Revolution*, that Mayakovsky was at his best as a poet precisely where he was at his worst as a Bolshevik? 'Marx and Engels,' Wilson wrote in 'The Historical Interpretation of Literature,' a Princeton

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lecture transcribed and collected in *The Triple Thinkers*, ‘were deeply imbued... with the German admiration for literature, which they had learned from the age of Goethe. It would never have occurred to either of them that *der Dichteer* was not one of the noblest and most beneficent of humankind.’ And it only occurred to *Herr Doktor* that Heine’s political shortcomings had no bearing on the majesty of his verse. As Marx’s daughter wrote of her father, ‘He used to say that the poets were originals, who must be allowed to go their own way, and that one shouldn’t apply to them the same standards as to ordinary people,’ a quotation which appears in ‘Marxism and Literature,’ another essay in *The Triple Thinkers*.

Leftist intellectuals of the twenties and thirties neglected this sane dictum at their peril, and Wilson should therefore be seen as an early and prescient detractor of what we would now call critical ‘theory,’ manufactured in excess by the dark Satanic mills of academe. ‘What a Marxist can do,’ he noted, ‘is throw a great deal of light on the origins and social significance of works of art,’ as, say Franz Mehring, Bernard Shaw, Mike Gold, James T. Farrell or Dos Passos and Hemingway in their time all were capable of doing. No procrustean bed need be laid or padded:

In art – it is quite obvious in music, but it is also true in literature – a sort of law of moral interchangeability prevails: we may transpose the actions and the sentiments that move us into terms of whatever we do or are ourselves. Real genius of moral insight is a motor which will start any engine. When Proust, in his wonderful chapter on the death of the novelist Bergotte, speaks of those moral obligations which impose themselves in spite of everything and which seem to come through to humanity from some source outside its wretched self (obligations ‘invisible only to fools – and are they really to them?’), he is describing a kind of duty which he felt only in connection with the literary work which he performed in his dark and fetid room; yet he speaks for every moral, esthetic or intellectual passion which holds the expedencies of the world in contempt.

Proust again. Wilson once called the author of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* the ‘arch-bourgeois, arch-snob and arch-aesthete’ and did so, astonishingly, in a ‘Letter to the Russians,’ which appeared in *Internatsionalnaya Literatura*, a Soviet journal, in 1936, and was later reprinted in *The Shores of Light*. (An editorial rejoinder accompanying this piece, which was a devastating review of *The Green Hills of Africa* conjoined with a broader indictment of dogmatic Marxist criticism, credited Wilson for ‘taking an active part in the Left movement of the intelligentsia...though

he has not arrived in the camp of revolutionary literature, stopping halfway.) That same letter closed with Wilson suggesting that his recent tour of the Soviet Union was a mnemonic trigger for evoking the great champion of ‘moral obligations that make themselves felt in spite of everything, and that seem to have reached humanity from some source outside its own wretched self – obligations “invisible only to fools – and are they really even to them?”’ That telling Bergotte passage *again*. Such a seemingly outré *madeleine*-dunk was actually a smuggled-in allusion of great power and moment. One who could think of Proust – the antidote to socialist realism if ever there were one – in the author-killing steppes of high Stalinism was one whose conscience could overcome ideology, as Wilson’s in fact did.

1936 was the tail end of the Great Terror, and there were still a few hiccups of Wilson’s fellow travelling to be got rid of. In that year he published a credulous book of Tocquevillian dispatches called *Travels in Two Democracies*. The first half was about the United States, the second half was about the Soviet Union, with passages that might easily come from the typewriter of Sidney and Beatrice Webb or Walter Duranty. Moscow here was ‘the moral top of the world where the light never really goes out.’ (Wilson wasn’t referring to the interrogation lamps of the Lubyanka.) Yet he did manage to make some shrewd observations despite his cloying impressions of Soviet healthcare and sanitation. He satirized Stalin’s personality cult, joking to the photographer Paul Strand at a Russian travel agency that ‘Comrade Stalin has just stepped out of the toilet,’ ‘Comrade Stalin is at home with a severe headache.’ He also knew that the ‘charges and the evidence’ of Moscow show trials were ‘frauds.’ To his everlasting credit, Wilson also correctly surmised – before Orwell did – that the glowering Kremlin mountaineer Stalin lurked behind the murder of Sergei Kirov. If he had stopped ‘halfway’ at subscribing to revolutionary literature, by now his volte-face was beginning with respect to the revolution. *After Travels in Two Democracies* came out, the scales fell completely from his eyes, such that he spent the remainder of that low, dishonest decade at Manhattan cocktail parties telling people that the Russians ‘haven’t even the beginnings of democratic institutions’ and ‘have totalitarian domination by a political machine.’ Or, as he put it in ‘Marxism at the End of the Thirties,’ the antipodal essay to that earlier ‘Appeal to Progressives’: ‘The taking-over by the state of the means of production and the dictatorship in the interests of the proletariat can by themselves never guarantee the happiness of anybody but the dictators themselves.’

Wilson’s Russian period was marked by another admixture of folly and magnanimity. Much has been made of his relationship with a certain Volodya, the aggrieved son

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of a nobleman, born into a household filled with broad spirits, books and butterfly nets, later exiled and tormented by a political assassination. Make no mistake about it: Vladimir Lenin got off easy in *To the Finland Station*. The book's title – redolent of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* – was taken from the Petrograd rail terminal whence the Bolshevik leader disembarked in April, 1917. In true modernist fashion, Wilson rendered this event as a kind of ideological moon-shot, the telescoping of centuries of radical struggle into one cataclysmic footfall. But whereas Lenin burned up in a haze of revolution, it was that *other* Volodya in Wilson's life who made his mark for a different Haze altogether. 'And now we come to Ilyitch – and here I itch (sorry),' wrote Vladimir Nabokov in 1940 to his new acquaintance and patron who had helped the émigré procure review work. Though Nabokov enjoyed Wilson's portrait of Marx in *To the Finland Station* – probably because he had done a similar, albeit meaner, thing to Chernychevsky in *The Gift* – the two argued about the legitimacy of a 'workers' state' (signs that a few of Wilson's 'thistles of conventional radicalism,' as Nabokov put it, clung to him still) and the morality of Lenin. 'That bluff geniality, that screwing up of eyes,' seethed the author of *Bend Sinister*, 'that boyish laugh, etc., on which his biographers dwell so lovingly, form something particularly distasteful to me. It is this atmosphere of joviality, this pail of milk of human kindness with a dead rat at the bottom...' Remarkably, Wilson and Nabokov's largely epistolary friendship saw past the politics and expired only when Pushkin came to shove.

In *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties*, Murray Kempton noted that '[s]ome of the writers who supported the Communist ticket in 1932 were gentlemen who detested the values of a commercial civilization; Edmund Wilson, for example, writing in 1931, sounds oddly like Henry Adams describing Washington after the Civil War.' Yes, but Henry Adams never wrote admiringly of Alexander Stephens, the Vice President of the Confederacy, nor would he ever have dreamed – had he lived long enough – of comparing the Union's invasion of the South in 1865 to the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary in 1956. *Gone with the Wind*, meet *Darkness at Noon*:

All the vindictive animosity of the North was now being visited on Davis and – in a way that today suggests Stalinist Russia – also on his wife and the rest of his family. When Mrs. Davis with her sister and four children, one of them a baby, had been separated from Davis at Hampton Roads, they were not allowed to go to Richmond or Charleston in order to be with friends, but had been forced to return in the same ship to Savannah. Their baggage

was raided by an officer, who took most of the children's clothes and all of the provisions they had brought with them, giving them hardtack instead, and they had thereafter to run a gauntlet of insult.

Wilson's prose mosaic of the central figures of the American Civil War, *Patriotic Gore* (1962), caused more than a few nervous bleats for its fondness of moral equivalence as well as its presentation of Lincoln as a megalomaniacal dictator. 'Bismarck, Lenin, Lincoln?' was a *Life* magazine editorial that ran shortly after the book's publication, and such an unholy triumvirate, minus the question mark, is one that paranoids and sinister isolationists have taken up ever since. The more gothic elements of this contingent believe that a Leninist-Masonic elite, usually of Jewish origin, has been calling the State Department's shots since the 1860's. F.D.R. (or 'Frankie Rosenfeld') gets tossed into the mix whenever the subject is U.S. entry into World War II, a war Wilson opposed, albeit, like Dorothy Parker, Clement Greenberg, James T. Farrell and Wilson's second wife Mary McCarthy, on leftist 'anti-imperialist' grounds. Still, the 'America First' cabal of the fascist Charles Lindbergh would have felt the shock of recognition in Wilson's all too 'evenhanded' recounting of the fraternal conflict that saved the Union.

If Dickens offered the fictional counterpart to Marx's treatise on political economy, then another patriotic Gore, last name Vidal, provided the fictional counterpart to Wilson's history of the Civil War. Here is how Gore Vidal deals with the assassination at Ford's Theater in his excellent novel *Lincoln* (the speaker is the late president's advisor John Hay): 'Lincoln, in some mysterious fashion, had willed his own murder a form of atonement for the great and terrible thing that he had done by giving so bloody and absolute a rebirth to his nation.' Now here is Wilson: '[Lincoln] must have suffered far more than he ever expressed from the agonies and griefs of the war, and it was morally and dramatically inevitable that this prophet who has crushed opposition and sent thousands of men to their deaths should finally attest his good faith by laying down his own life with theirs.' Not by coincidence did Vidal write a number of laudatory essays about the great critic, whom he said was the 'perfect proof of the proposition that the more the mind is used and fed the less apt it is to devour itself.' In its own way, this was more astute than Vidal realised, for cannibalisation Wilson came to associate, in his final political incarnation as a pacifistic left-libertarian, with sea slugs and nations: both devoured themselves without heed to the long-term consequences for the species. (One of Wilson's late books was titled *The Cold War and the Income Tax*. Badly in arrears with the IRS himself, he argued, with some justification, that American

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citizens should not be forced to fund nuclear armaments. He had rebuked Kennedy for the Bay of Pigs fiasco, snubbed Lyndon Johnson after the Gulf of Tonkin, and violently opposed the war in Vietnam.)

It is curious, though, how squarely at odds his Civil War book stood against even the classical Marxist interpretation of that seismic event. Joseph Epstein, sneering his way through the Dabney biography in the pages of *Commentary*, could not have been more wrong to say that Wilson never had a political opinion that was out of step with *les bien-pensant*. No less a figure than the ‘moral genius of Judaism’ himself had written brilliant and mordant articles – or had Engels ghostwrite them for him – in defense of the North for Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*. (In another turn of irony, it was Henry Adams, the son of the luckless American ambassador to Britain during the time of war, who wrote in his memoirs that Fleet Street was solidly ranged against the Lincolnian enterprise, save for one unlikely foreign correspondent.)

It was clear, then, that after his repudiation of Soviet Communism Wilson could no longer abide by teleological struggles that ravaged civilisations and were purportedly waged on right or wrong ‘side’ of history. The rational theorist of a mechanical universe had at last given way to the more Romantic conception of great men and tragic heroes. Signs of this realisation, or resignation, in Wilson’s evolved *weltanschauung* were evident in *To the Finland Station*. This passage, for example, seems a dress rehearsal for the full-on morality play of *Patriotic Gore*:

For anyone but a Marxist it would appear as if history in the ordinary sense of the description of stuff of past events might well approach with moral animus the casualties of both North and South in the American Civil War. Should the historian, even in assuming that one side in a given conflict represents a progressive force and the other a retrograde one, have ‘different yardsticks’ for the heroism or cruelty of the one and of the other?

This occurs in one of the last chapters of the book, entitled ‘Trotsky Identifies Himself With History.’ It is Wilson’s cool response to a comment Trotsky makes that ‘History has different yardsticks for the cruelty of the Northerners and the cruelty of the Southerners in the [American] Civil War. A slave-owner who through cunning and violence shackles a slave in chains, and a slave who through cunning and violence breaks the chains – let not the contemptible eunuchs tell us that they are equal before a court of morality!’ Recalling Trotsky’s animadversion on Julius

Martov, the Menshevik leader he now relegated to the ‘rubbish-can of history,’ Wilson wrote, “There sometimes turn out to be valuable objects cast away in the rubbish-can of history – things that have to be retrieved later on. From the point of view of the Stalinist Soviet Union, that is where Trotsky himself is today; and he might well discard his earlier assumption that an isolated individual needs must be ‘pitiful’ for the conviction of Dr. Stockman in *Ibsen’s Enemy of the People* that the “strongest man is he who stands most alone.”

Even in this rather crankish surmise of the Civil War, Wilson’s humane rejection of messianism and ideology seems as lucid as ever. And his foil against the founder of the Red Army was uncanny. He could not have known it at the time because it was only disclosed a decade later to Isaac Deutscher, but when Trotsky was expelled from Norway in 1936, the play from which he thundered against Trygve Lie, the Social Democrat who engineered his exile, was *Enemy of the People*. The line in particular was Dr. Stockman’s condemnation of his villainous brother: ‘We shall yet see whether meanness and cowardice are strong enough to close the mouth of a free and honest man.’ Trotsky was another Promethean radical bound forever to his rock, who, in his final hour of judgment, looked to literature for redemption. It was a gesture Edmund Wilson, above all, would have appreciated.

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