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Edmund Wilson, Henry James, and the Function of Criticism

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REVIEW

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MICHAEL SWEENEY

*Edmund Wilson, Henry James,
and the Function of Criticism*

With his deep erudition, catholicity of taste, and sharp judgments, Edmund Wilson perhaps came the closest of his contemporaries to earning the title *man of letters*, in the sense that Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold were men of letters in the 18th and 19th centuries: active, working writers who not only elucidated and defended the best literature that had been and was being written, but connected it with the world outside the study, outside the classroom. In “A Modest Self-Tribute” (from *The Bit Between My Teeth*, 1966), Wilson recollects how impressed he had been when he first read Taine’s *History of English Literature*, especially the dramatic biographical-literary sketches of such authors as Milton and Swift. Citing with approval Taine’s critical method and stating what almost amounts to his own credo, Wilson notes that Taine “had created the creators themselves as characters in a larger drama of social and cultural history, and writing about literature, for me, has always meant narrative and drama as well as comparative values.”

Never limiting himself to English and American literature, Wilson read widely and in a number of languages, acquiring a truly cosmopolitan perspective. In “A Modest Self-Tribute” he apologized for not knowing Spanish and Portuguese but noted (prophetically, it turned out, with the emergence of such figures as Borges, Neruda, and Marquéz), that the literatures of North and South America would eventually cross-pollinate, to the advantage of both. Furthermore, unlike the New Critics, who would examine the text of a poem, play, or novel in isolation from any of the social, cultural, or biographical elements that had shaped it, Wilson did not hesitate to use new, non-literary systems of thought to help explicate an author or a work. His first important book, *Axel’s Castle* (1931), one of the first examinations of such quintessential modern works as *Ulysses*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, *The Waste Land*, Yeats’s poetry, and

Gertrude Stein's fiction, contained illuminating biographical sketches in which Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Valery became characters in Wilson's larger drama of the birth and development of the Symbolist movement. Many essays in *The Triple Thinkers* (1938), *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), and *The Shock of Recognition* (1943) (particularly "The Ambiguity of Henry James," "Dickens: The Two Scrooges," and "Morose Ben Jonson"), use Freudian analysis to help examine an author's life and works. And *To the Finland Station* (1940) is not, properly speaking, about literature at all, but an historical/economic/biographical analysis of how Marxism-Leninism came to fruition in Russia. Yet for Wilson such systems were only used to show how vital the best literature is, how it can actually, as Eric Bentley had said of Shaw's *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, change men's lives. In "The Historical Interpretation of Literature" (from *The Triple Thinkers*), Wilson stressed that various perspectives from which to interpret literature, such as Marxism and Freudianism, can only be means, not ends in themselves. His own reviews, journalistic articles, and critical essays never merely present an author or a work to display a pet theory or to dazzle the reader with intellectual pyrotechnics, but rather make use of what methods he had available to give us deeper insights into the literature itself.

"The Ambiguity of Henry James," for example, devotes much attention to its subject's life, but Wilson integrates the biographical analysis (some might say psychoanalysis) with a close examination of the characters and themes in James's work. Long before this essay appeared in *The Triple Thinkers* Wilson had been struggling to come to terms with James's later fiction. Though recognizing that James had "managed to master his art and practice it on an impressive scale, to stand up to popular pressure so as not to break down or peter out, and to build up what the French call an *œuvre* — indeed, Wilson thought James a more significant figure than either Hawthorne or Poe, both more popularly celebrated — Wilson, as a reader, was left unsatisfied with James's increasingly opaque narrative techniques. As early as 1924, in a review of Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, Wilson notes in passing that Cather is at times, like James, unable to describe an emotion except at second hand. In Cather's novel *One of Ours*, as in James's *The Wings of the Dove*, both narrators draw back from a direct recording of the protagonists' psychological processes as soon

as the situations become acute: in *The Wings of the Dove* Milly Theale is supposed to be dying for lack of love, yet at the climax of the action the reader sees her only through the eyes of Merton Densher, a fortune hunter. When the relation between Milly and Densher becomes dramatic, James, as Wilson sees it, sidesteps matters altogether and has another observer, who talks with Densher after Milly's death, report on the action. In Wilson's own novel, *I Thought of Daisy* (1929), he has a character comment on "the blank stretches where the climaxes should be, in the novels of Henry James."

Yet perhaps the most important stimulus for Wilson's writing on James was an essay written by Edna Kenton which appeared in the magazine *The Arts* in November 1924. Kenton's theory was that the ghosts in James's long story "The Turn of the Screw" were not real but manifestations of the governess's neurotic sexual repression. Wilson was intrigued with Kenton's thesis, corresponded with her about "The Turn of the Screw" and James's use of his characters as narrators, and began in earnest to examine the psychological similarities between James, who had always given the impression of being an aloof, clinical craftsman, and his creations.

"The Turn of the Screw," which depicts a young, innocent governess losing control of both herself and the two young children in her charge in an isolated country home when she begins to see the ghosts of two of the house's former employees, had been one of James's most popular stories. James himself was pleased with the story's success, but always deflected questions about any hidden meaning it might contain, asserting that "The Turn of the Screw" was a fairy tale pure and simple. However, Wilson notes that James placed the story between *The Aspern Papers* and "The Liar" in the collected edition of his works — the one about a "journalistic scoundrel" attempting to pry away a dead poet's letters from his now aged lover, the other referring not to the harmless pathological liar being described but the warped narrator describing him — rather than with the ghost stories. In "The Ambiguity of Henry James" Wilson cites possible instances of Freudian symbolism in the tale — the governess first sees the ghost of the valet on a tower and the ghost of the former governess on a lake — but views the story as more than either a mere ghost story or a cut and dried Freudian affair.

Wilson regards the governess as another one of James's "thwarted Anglo-Saxon spinsters" (Francie Dosson in *The Reverberator* and Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* are other examples), characters who, though not exactly perverted emotionally, are extremely apathetic and inhibited. James's men characters, though they may not be clinically neurotic, are masculine counterparts of the women; they are always deciding, for example, *not* to marry their fiancés. James can present such characters comically, as in the story "The Marriages"; he can deal sympathetically with a Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*, who realizes too late that he has not lived life to its fullest. James can even present his characters in such a way as to leave no doubt that the reader should disapprove of their conduct: the journalist in *The Aspern Papers* is an example, as well as Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians*, who may have had lesbian feelings for the young woman she attempts to pry away from her fiancé. Yet beginning perhaps in the late 1880s, James seems to have been less able to render experience directly; the narrators in his fiction seem to have no real fix on what is going on around them.

The Sacred Fount (1901) marked a turning point of sorts for James and his audience. Rebecca West wrote of it, only half in jest, that it is a story of how "a week-end visitor spends more intellectual force than Kant can have used on *The Critique of Pure Reason* in an unsuccessful attempt to discover whether there exists between certain of his fellow guests a relationship not more interesting among those vacuous people than it is among sparrows," and a well known parody of it was an indication that James had either baffled or annoyed the general reading public. His "ambiguity," then, serves no real technical purpose; Wilson believes that James was not totally sure in his own mind at this point what he wanted to do with his creations. He may even have been, without knowing it, identifying with them:

Hitherto, as I have said, it has usually been plain what James wanted us to think of his characters; but there now appears in his work a relatively morbid element which is not always handled objectively and which seems to have invaded the

storyteller himself. It is as if at this point he had taken to dramatizing the frustrations of his own life without quite being willing to confess it, without fully admitting it even to himself.

Wilson notes that the “typical Henry James heroes” are in many ways like the author himself: relatively well off Americans constantly traveling throughout Europe, unable or unwilling to put down roots in any one place; aesthetic, sensitive people who are repelled by American crassness and vulgarity but are too inhibited to respond fully to “Europe” and all that the old world had to offer. Early in his career James was able to keep firm control over his characters and themes. However, Wilson points out that while “the man who tried to get the *Aspern Papers* was a fanatic, a cad, and a nuisance, many of James’s inquisitive narrators who never take part in the action [e.g., the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*] are presented as superior people, and Henry James has confessed to being an inquisitive observer himself.” Wilson implies that going into his fifties James, who supposedly remained celibate all his life and who had cut himself adrift from America since his parents had died in the early 1880s, found it harder to keep his own insecurities out of his fiction.

In what may seem an eccentric judgment, Wilson rates James’s three long novels of the 1880s, *The Bostonians*, *The Princess Casamassima*, and *The Tragic Muse*, as his most fully realized achievements. In each book, James takes on important themes (politics, labor unrest, sex), and, for the first half of the books at least deals with them convincingly and incisively. Yet he considers even these books as flawed masterpieces: each novel flags just before its climax; it appears to Wilson that James is backing off from subjects he was too ignorant or skittish about. In his preface to *The Tragic Muse* years later, James wrote that the prudery of American magazines made it impossible for him to make the novel’s heroine, Miriam Rooth, become the mistress of Nick Dormer. Wilson notes, however, that Hardy and Meredith were becoming very successful publishing novels that supposedly scandalized a genteel reading public, and that James, if only instinctively, knew that he was incapable of dealing with, say, sexual passion convincingly.

If we accept Wilson's biographical analysis of James's fiction as valid, or at least plausible, two events in the 1890s can be seen as drastically affecting his work. In the early 1890s James announced he would write only shorter fiction; he then devoted most of his time to writing and producing plays, hoping to gain a popular audience. However, in one of the most significant and traumatic events of his life, he was hooted from the stage after the curtain call for *Guy Domville* in January, 1895. Wilson draws on this incident in "The Ambiguity of Henry James"; however, events Wilson was not aware of at the time he wrote this essay make his theory more solid. In *The Middle Years*, the third part of his five volume biography of James, Wilson's friend Leon Edel devotes much space to James's relationship with Constance Fenimore Woolson, a niece of James Fenimore Cooper and a relatively successful novelist herself. The two authors had known each other for years, and though she stopped short of any overt display of demonstrable affection, it became clear to James that Woolson loved him dearly and was wounded by his unresponsiveness. In a scenario that bears an eerie similarity to James's late story "The Beast in the Jungle," however, nothing at all came of this friendship; when Woolson, like May Bartram, passed away suddenly in January, 1894, a possible suicide, James seems to resemble no one so much as his own John Marcher, a man whose singular fate in life was to be a man to whom nothing significant happened. It may be reckless to say that these two incidents were solely responsible for plunging James into the creative and personal crisis that Edel, in the fourth volume of the biography, labels "The Treacherous Years," or even that Miss Woolson's death may have been one reason why the *Guy Domville* affair affected him so deeply. It is obvious, though, that this period was a crucial one for James, one in which he was forced to face squarely his limitations as an artist and a man.

Edel sees James traumatized for over five years, emerging at the turn of the century to produce his greatest work — *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Golden Bowl* — novels for which he became known as "The Master" to a small coterie of readers. Wilson doesn't value these novels as highly as Edel, but he notices that following the *Guy Domville* fiasco James recommitted himself to fiction and that sex does start to appear in his novels, although in "a

queer, left-handed way.” We have Maisie (*What Maisie Knew*) and Nanda (*The Awkward Age*), for example, young girls who, as the focus of novels, would naturally be unable to fully comprehend the swirl of illicit passions that surround them. While Wilson feels that James did not entirely free himself from the element of abstraction that dims his writing at all periods, he acknowledges that the artist loses some of his old formality and mechanical hardness, and sees his language as becoming increasingly poetic. When he writes of his impressions of his first visit to America in over twenty years in *The American Scene*, in fact, Wilson believes that James had seldom, if ever, been so limpid in his style and in his rendering of experience. Henry James had, then, if not conquered his demons, at least come to terms with them, sublimated them to the extent that his work would not suffer.

Admirers of *The Ambassadors*, *The Golden Bowl*, and James’s other late fiction may think that Wilson seriously misinterprets these works (in the same way he was accused of overrating Dickens’ later social novels in “Dickens: The Two Scrooges,” ignoring their less successful love scenes and stock characters). Yet in his essay Wilson makes it clear that he ranks James in a company with Flaubert and Tolstoy, and that James’s achievement can only be measured in relation to theirs. Wilson views James as being, conspicuously or not, in competition with his two contemporaries; the testy comments he made about them in his own criticism may well be a defense of his own craft, perhaps his own shortcomings. For example, James wrote that Tolstoy was not able to exercise enough control, enough selection in his novels, never keeping to a single, limited point of view but entering into the minds of all his characters; he even went so far as to categorize *War and Peace*, along with a novel like *The Three Musketeers*, as “large, loose baggy monsters, with queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary.” Wilson, of course, points to the grand coherence of both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, novels which give perhaps the most comprehensive views of entire societies and of the individuals within them, and speculates that James, in criticizing Tolstoy, may have been diverting attention (again, perhaps only his own) “from the inadequacies of his imagination.” Similarly with Flaubert (whom he had known while he lived in Paris), James acknowledges his great stylistic technique, but

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constantly belittles him for wasting it on such ignoble, uninteresting characters. Again, Wilson feels that in his novels Flaubert had hit too close to James's own situation: "it may be that Henry James's antagonism to Flaubert has something to do with the fact that the latter's all-permeating criticism of the pusillanimity of the bourgeois soul had touched Henry James himself." In *The Ambassadors*, for example, James can distill from Lambert Strether "all the sad self-effacing nobility, all the fine wan beauty" he is good for. Yet Flaubert can treat a Frederic Moreau in *L'éducation sentimentale*, a character who bears a close resemblance to James's Hyacinth Robinson, the would-be political revolutionary who commits suicide in *The Princess Casamassima*, with a devastating irony; it is clear when we read *L'éducation sentimentale*, according to Wilson, that we are to regard Frederic as a worm. In a sense, then, James may have been wincing from Flaubert's novels as if from a personal assault. Thus, though the James in "The Ambiguity of Henry James" is a more vulnerable, less Olympian figure than many thought him to be, he comes across as more appealing, more human.

We can see, finally, that "The Ambiguity of Henry James," the culmination of Wilson's grapplings with "The Master," fits snugly into *The Triple Thinkers*, whose overall purpose was "in the case of a familiar writer, to call attention to some neglected aspect of his work or his career." In "The Historical Interpretation of Literature," the concluding essay of this volume, Wilson writes "the purely impressionistic critic approaches literature as an exhibit of belletristic jewels, and he can only write a rhapsodic catalogue. But when Shaw turned his spotlight on Shakespeare as a figure in the Shavian drama of history, he invested him with a new interest as no other English." This is not to say that such critics' pronouncements should be accepted as Gospel — Shaw, in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, did not seem to fully understand what Ibsen was up to in his later, symbolic plays; Wilson himself, in the "Forward" to the revised and enlarged edition of *The Triple Thinkers*, admits that he may have undervalued James's later novels when he had first read them, because of their lack of any tangible love interest.

Ultimately, though, what someone would do after reading Edmund Wilson on James — or on Dickens or Hemingway — would be to go back to the author's work itself and find new sources of

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interest there. Throughout his life, Wilson responded to literature with an intensity that rivaled Matthew Arnold's when he stated, in "The Study of Poetry" (1880), that "the strongest part of our religion today is in its unconscious poetry." Throughout his critical writings Wilson was able to convey that intensity, and give the impression that the best literature was indeed a vital element in an examined life. As such, Wilson is an ideal touchstone for either specialists or beginners in literature; an essay such as "The Ambiguity of Henry James" is just one example where he was written about a significant author — in this case a popularly and critically acclaimed one — in such a way that enables readers to appreciate the writer, his complexity, and his resiliency, all the more keenly.