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DEAN FLOWER

Justice to Edmund Wilson

You are a cold, leprous person, Bunny Wilson.
—Margaret Canby

WRITING IN 1995 ON THE OCCASION OF the centennial of Edmund Wilson's birth, Morris Dickstein pointed out that, despite an abundance of memoirs, letters, diaries, and biographies of Wilson, something essential was missing. "What we need, among other things," he said, "is a scrupulous and detailed *intellectual* biography." Italics mine, but you hear them in the original. He was reacting partly to Jeffrey Meyers' recently-published and rather racy *Edmund Wilson: A Biography* (1995), which never fails to quote Wilson's diaries *at length* when he goes into detail about what he did with his tongue or his "pink prong" to this or that wife or lover. Dickstein was also reacting to the recent spate of biographies and memoirs of Mary McCarthy, Wilson's third wife, in which Wilson is cast relentlessly as the villain. Now Lewis M. Dabney has attempted to redress these balances and include the scrupulous intellectual biography that Dickstein said was missing.[1]

It may be worth noting the uphill battle Dabney's project entails. No matter how distinguished a public intellectual and critic he was, Wilson's sexual urges loomed large in his life. He had numerous affairs, some brief and some prolonged, and some no more than flirtatious intimacies which *seemed* like affairs. They involved such people as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Leonie Adams, Frances Minihan, Louise Fort, Louise Bogan, Elizabeth Waugh, and Elinor Wylie in the 1920s and 1930s, and in his later years—despite an increasingly ugly and aging body—Mamaine Paget, Mary Pcolar, Penelope Gilliatt, Elaine May, and Dawn Powell. Meanwhile, of course, Wilson got married four times: to the actress Mary Blair in 1923 (they divorced in 1930); to the socialite Margaret Canby in 1930 (she died in 1932); to the critic Mary McCarthy in 1938 (they divorced in 1946); and to Elena Mumm Thornton in 1946 (she called their marriage, ending with his death in 1972, a "hell with compensations"). A scrupulous biographer cannot easily soft-pedal this interesting, potentially sensational material, but he may be accused of sensationalism or prurience if he dwells much on the priapic details.

[1] EDMUND WILSON: A Life in Literature, by *Lewis M. Dabney*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $35.00. Dabney is also the editor of *The Portable Edmund Wilson* (New York, 1983), *The Sixties: the Last Journal* [of Edmund Wilson] (New York, 1993), and *Edmund Wilson: Centennial Reflections* (Princeton, 1997) where Dickstein's essay first appeared.

The trouble is, Wilson himself encouraged that. He wrote frankly and plentifully about all his sexual relationships in his private diaries, and wanted them published. They began appearing in 1975, edited by Leon Edel, with each volume covering a decade of his life. It is no wonder that Jeffrey Meyers quoted them at such length. They are indeed interesting. And the best parts—i.e., what rises above mere notebook observation and has sustained narrative intensity—concern women. Dabney wrote in 1993, a comment not repeated in his biography, "The men of Wilson's journal are not as physically vivid as the women. He always discriminates about women's bodies and their changing appearances, and can also be seduced by their minds." Clearly his mind seduced them as well. Despite her husband's graphic invasions of her privacy, Elena Wilson chose not to censor anything in the diaries. And other women appreciated that. The late Barbara Epstein, Wilson's friend and editor at *The New York Review of Books*, once said of the diaries, "Oh, they're his masterpieces—I mean the whole lot of them!"

Masterpieces or not, the diaries provide a temptation to portray Wilson disproportionately. Another new biography appeared alongside Dabney's, as if to mock it, magnifying Wilson's sexual conquests and skimming over his intellectual life. Its title should give anyone pause: *Critic in Love: A Romantic Biography of Edmund Wilson*.[2] Despite the excellent credentials of its authors, both having written serious books about Wilson before, their new book is aggressively lowbrow. "Once he got going," they write, Wilson "was slaying the ladies from his mid-twenties until the day of his death at seventy-seven." Or, "The extraordinary thing is that [Wilson] did not leave in his wake—or at his wake—a single dissatisfied customer, sexually speaking." If you collect dated clichés, "slaying the ladies" is particularly fine, but talk about satisfied female "customers" is right up there too.

Dabney's account of Wilson's life grows more interesting as the decades advance. Indeed, the family history in Red Bank, New Jersey, where Wilson was born, offers surprisingly few portents. His father was glum and remote, a "brilliant" lawyer who fed on his own "nervous energy" but fell into despondencies. His mother was "a battle axe," Dabney tells us frankly, a literal-minded woman he resented yet depended on from childhood onwards. Uninterested in her son's achievements, she cared for his daughter Rosalind in the 1930s and doled out funds to him in emergencies until her death in 1951. Neither parent seems to have damaged Wilson that much. Dabney rejects Leon Edel's theory that Wilson's father was the key to a "wounded" or "traumatized" childhood.[3] Instead the young Wilson emerges as a reticent, somewhat uncertain, distinctly upper-class boy who began to thrive at school—taking advantage of inspiring teachers at the Hill School in Pennsyl-

[2] David Castronovo and Janet Groth, *Critic in Love: A Romantic Biography of Edmund Wilson* (Emeryville, CA, 2005).

[3] Edel edited the first four volumes of Wilson's diaries. See his "Introduction," *The Twenties* (New York, 1975), pp. xxi–xxv.

vania and training himself to write exceptionally well. At Princeton his intellect distinguished him from classmates like Scott Fitzgerald and John Peale Bishop, but his literary talents were no greater than theirs. He certainly learned more than they did about literary criticism, from Christian Gauss among others. His stint in the Army took him to France in 1917, where Dabney argues he learned much about social class and human suffering, serving as a hospital orderly. But Wilson always learned less from life than from books.

After the war he found an apartment in New York and, still jobless, did what he wanted most to do, which was read and write. Dorothy Parker saw a satire he had written and recommended him at *Vanity Fair*, which was soon publishing his "sprightly" essays—and making him managing editor. Wilson appealed to the postwar "smart set" by criticizing a repressive American culture and setting it against more sophisticated European values. He admired Henry James but feared that what most educated Americans learned from James was over-refinement. Instead, in a 1920 essay, Wilson championed Freud, whom he called "the extraordinary Viennese Jew with his rare equipment of combined creative imagination and scientific passion for truth." Dabney has a good eye for passages like this, moments that tell us something about Wilson as well as his subject.

Unlike Fitzgerald and Hemingway in the 1920s, Wilson's personality failed to take any distinctive shape at first. He helped them both with critical advice and publishers, in his brown-suited practical way, but emotionally he was a mooncalf. He fell hard for Edna Millay in the spring of 1920, awkwardly sharing her sexual favors with John Peale Bishop for a time. He wrote abject love letters to her, unable to accept her indifference. In response to his claim that they both would be famous at fifty, she told him, "You behave as if you were fifty already." Yet they remained close, even after his marriage to Mary Blair in 1923. When he told her of performing "trumped-up ecstasies" in bed with his wife, Millay commented bluntly, "You were never meant to be human." Dabney calls this devastating criticism merely teasing. Millay goes on, "Of course trying to compel yourself to emotions you don't have makes it worse." It is striking how many women, over the next several years, would echo Millay's sardonic tone. When he tried to kiss a girl he had once known in France, she informed him that "one kiss of his had lasted her two years." Elizabeth Waugh once compared the pain of his amorous lip-biting to bearing "a still-born child." She clearly liked his mind, not his body: "if you were just prose," she wrote to him in 1933, "I'd be mad about you." But she could not be: "Even your damned plays," she said, "get into my fallopian tubes." And his kind-hearted second wife Margaret Canby told him, in a moment of pained discovery, "You're a cold, fishy, leprous person, Bunny Wilson."

One is tempted to see the young Wilson as exactly the sort of male depicted in Edna Millay's 1923 sonnet "I, being born a woman," where the speaker, after admitting "a certain zest" in having sex with him and betraying her better judgment, declares

> Think not for this, however, the poor treason
> Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
> I shall remember you with love, or season
> My scorn with pity,—let me make it plain:
> I find this frenzy insufficient reason
> For conversation when we meet again.

Indeed, a skeptical reader of Dabney's biography might begin to agree with a prediction Morris Dickstein made in 1995: "It may well be that the more we learn about Wilson's personal life the less we like him." Yet what Dabney's narrative demonstrates is the long process of Wilson's personal development, from callow insensitivity and uncertainty to a complex, hard-won humanity. Understanding and compassion were not instinctive, and had to be learned. Gradually his sense of moral principle and personal integrity grew deeper and stronger. The early brilliance of *Axel's Castle* (1930)—with its magisterial command of Eliot, Proust, Stein, and Yeats—contrasts painfully with Wilson's confusions in love and marriage in the same era. But with the death of his wife Margaret in 1932, a deep distress began to humanize his soul. They had separated; she went home to Santa Barbara and died from a fall on slippery stairs, fracturing her skull. Wilson mourned as he never had before nor ever did again. Fearing her death was suicide, guilty and ashamed for what he had failed to feel, and to be, he wrote in his diary, "After she was dead, I loved her." Dabney argues that these "most intense of his autobiographical writings"—which he would return to and expand over the years—express feelings "not displaced by sex, as in the journal they would sometimes later be."

In the years that followed, Wilson lived on almost no money at all, shifting from one cheerless room to another, working on *To the Finland Station* and going back to an affair he had begun in 1927 with Frances Minihan, a Ukrainian wife and mother whose husband was a car thief doing time in Sing Sing (she became the frankly sexual "Anna" in *Memoirs of Hecate County*). Wilson now admitted his earlier class prejudice against Frances, a waitress and taxi dancer whom he once suspected of giving him gonorrhea. Now he began to notice her more carefully, and compassionately. He recorded the details of her oppressive household, living with in-laws, cooking for everyone while working full-time, and sleeping in the basement where she tended the furnace. In *Hecate County,* Wilson would speak of "the instinctive suspicion of people who talk differently and live differently from us" as well as of "the fear of the poor and the humbly employed, about whom we so often feel guilt." At the same time, Wilson was throwing himself into research for his account of the Russian Revolution. An amazed Louise Bogan once counted 86 volumes of Jules Michelet on his shelves, Wilson having decided it was the seventeenth-century French historian who would provide the book's point of departure, the argument that society is "certainly the work of men" and not ordained by God. Michelet, Wilson said,

> had the novelist's social interest and grasp of character, the poet's imagination and passion [which], instead of exercising itself freely on contemporary life, had been turned backward upon history and was united with a scientific appetite for facts which drove him into arduous researches. . . . [He was] simply a man going to the sources and trying to get down on record what can be learned from them; and his role, which claims for itself, on the one hand, no academic sanctions, involves, on the other hand, a more direct responsibility to the reader.

Again the quotation tells much about Wilson himself, not just his awesome appetite for facts, but his novelistic idea of historiography—triumphantly realized in *To the Finland Station*—and his role as an anti-academic critic who felt directly responsible to the reader.

The Communist writer Mike Gold once jeered at Wilson for being a snob, getting on "the proletarian 'bandwagon' with the arrogance of a myopic, high-bosomed Beacon Hill matron entering a common street-car." And in the 1940s, Vladimir Nabokov chided Wilson repeatedly for his uncritical acceptance of Bolshevik myths, particularly his mistaken admiration for Lenin. But Dabney shows that Wilson was neither the myopic snob nor the gullible romantic his critics made him out to be. While he undoubtedly projected his own idealism on Lenin, his portrayal of Marx and Engels was profound. He saw, as Dabney puts it, "that Marx's true authority was moral." In Wilson's words, "Nobody but a Jew in that middle nineteenth century could have commanded the moral weapons to crack the fortress of bourgeois self-satisfaction. Nobody but a Jew could have fought so uncompromisingly and obstinately for the victory of the dispossessed classes." Yet Marx is still seen as a complex character, with "his outraged conviction of the indignity and injustice of his own fate" mixed up with "his bad conscience at having inflicted that fate on others"—including his unconscionable betrayals of Engels. Sidney Hook found "nothing in any language which equals the insight, the eloquence, and the essential justice" of this characterization of Marx. Nabokov, too, in a 1940 letter to Wilson (not mentioned by Dabney), praised it: "But I loved your Marx. The way you examine those letters of his which hurt Engels who had lost his mistress, is beautifully shrewd; and they are really very pathetic, the clumsy attempts of a boorish person trying to atone for a 'gaffe' and making it still worse."[4] Nabokov also assents to Wilson's portrayal of Leninist theory, calling it a "horrible paradox" that "these materialists found it possible to squander the lives of millions of real people for the sake of the hypothetical millions that would be happy some day."

By celebrating Marx's moral authority ("Only a Jew . . ."), Wilson established his own. Yet he was never a spiritual man, least of all a Christian believer. He traveled to Russia in 1935 and began learning its language and literature simply because he admired the spirit of the

[4] *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940–1971*, revised and expanded edition, ed. by Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley, 2001), p. 38.

Russian people. Later he would defend the Iroquois tribes of Upstate New York against arrogant governmental land seizures—long before any such causes were popular—learning their culture and beliefs. He would defend Canada and Canadian culture against the ingrained condescension of America. In effect he was moral without being spiritual. He had long admired Old Testament prophets, and the moral authority of Jews like Proust and Freud (as well as Marx); then in 1953 he learned Hebrew and wrote *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea* (1955), a work which continues to be found "enthralling but also amazingly balanced and fair" by scholars. He adopted as his personal motto a phrase from the Torah, *Hazak, Hazak, Venithazayk,* exhorting himself to "be strong, be strong, take courage." That echoed his earlier assertion to Louise Bogan, "The only thing that we can really make is our work, and deliberate work of the mind, imagination, and hand, done, as Nietzsche said, 'notwithstanding,' in the long run remakes the world." For a non-spiritual man, Wilson could indeed be stirring. He once told Allen Tate, who had made what Wilson called a "slanderous" suggestion that he was at heart a Christian, "It doesn't imply Christian tendencies that one tries to cultivate kindness and respect for the rights of others." Wilson asked that Ecclesiastes be read at his funeral, a gesture taken by his old friend Daniel Aaron to be a kind of secular sermon whose message was, "What can we know of the future, much less of the hereafter, or of justice on this earth where the wicked prosper? Nothing. Cling to this life, do your work well."

As Wilson's moral stature grows, the mystery of why he was so compelling to women dissipates. He was attractive to men *and* women for such qualities as his sense of justice, candor, impartiality, generosity, curiosity, critical acumen, and sheer indefatigable energy. By the 1960s, his range of friendships included Isaiah Berlin, W. H. Auden, Ignazio Silone, V. S. Pritchett, André Malraux, and a host of American writer-intellectuals too numerous to list. That women were equally smitten by his interesting mind and moral intensity requires no further explanation. The brilliant young critic Mary McCarthy, working at *Partisan Review* in 1937, felt the authenticity of his intellectual passion, as he did hers. Unwisely they married and were wracked by competitive egos, age differences, quick tempers, reckless drinking, and violent quarrels. Yet McCarthy credits Wilson for encouraging her to become a novelist—she admitted it would not have happened without him. And in the good times—such as befriending the Nabokovs—they shared a mutually stimulating relationship. It even continued after their acrimonious divorce. Here, as in other cases, Dabney gets the balance right.

Where other biographers have seen rampant sexuality, Dabney proceeds with far greater care. He shows, for example, that despite much ambiguous language in their letters, Louise Bogan was not sexually involved with Wilson. He shows that Helen Muchnic, a professor and critic of Russian literature whom Wilson knew since the early 1940s, once answered the loaded question of whether there was ever any affection in his endless affairs by saying, "Yes, there was." Her long essay

on "Edmund Wilson's Russian Involvement" in 1978 attests to her own affection and respect in response to his.[5] Dabney also shows that despite Wilson's early mooncalf ineptitudes, Edna Millay remained a person he cared about and came to understand deeply. Nowhere is this clearer than in his poignant memoir, "Epilogue, 1952: Edna St. Vincent Millay," used to conclude his collection of essays on the American 1920s, *The Shores of Light*. Seldom has Wilson written so feelingly about his own emotional life as he does here: "Edna ignited for me both my intellectual passion and my unsatisfied desire, which went up together in a blaze of ecstasy that remains for me one of the high points of my life."

On Wilson's critical achievement, Dabney is not always so well balanced, and sometimes overzealous. Wilson once chided him, when they met in 1963, for being too absorbed in another writer's work. Obviously that never deterred Dabney. His slavish descriptions of each Wilson book sometimes lead to longueurs that can make you wish for Jeffrey Meyers' clearer, swifter narrative. He claims for Wilson's only best-seller, *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1947), a status equal to *Lolita* for its revolutionary treatment of sexuality, and the bolder for its being done eight years earlier—unpersuasive if not ridiculous claims. For better perspective on that, see John Updike's 1978 essay, "Wilson's Fiction: a Personal Account,"[6] which defines the dispassionate honesty of *Hecate County*'s graphic descriptions of sex. Of course Dabney tends to take Wilson's side, as all such Aspern enthusiasts do, in debates about who behaved worse in a quarrel, e.g., Mary McCarthy not Wilson, Vladimir Nabokov not Wilson, Evelyn Waugh not Wilson. More importantly, perhaps, Dabney fails to put into perspective the influence Wilson's literary criticism has had for the past fifty years or more. His Freudian interpretation of "The Turn of the Screw" in *The Triple Thinkers* (1938) is *still* the starting point for critical debates about James's ambiguous ghost story—and about Jamesian ambiguity generally . His essay on "Dickens: The Two Scrooges" in *The Wound and the Bow* (1941) defined the Marxian direction of Dickens criticism that is still with us. His analysis of "The Kipling that Nobody Read" in that same collection was decades ahead of its time, but now every multicultural post-Edward Said critic is "discovering" Kipling. His effort to render "Justice to Edith Wharton," also in 1941, anticipated by several decades the rehabilitation of a writer who used to be caricatured and dismissed (I heard Allen Ginsburg do it in 1968) but has in the last thirty years—especially but not only among feminists—been given justice. That Wilson's critical influence has been stylistic as well as substantive can surely be seen in the success of journals like *The New York Review of Books* and in the non-academic criticism of such writers as Louis Menand, Michael Wood, Terry Castle, and a host of others.

Nevertheless Dabney prevailingly does justice to his subject. He

[5] Not mentioned by Dabney, the essay is in *An Edmund Wilson Celebration*, ed. by John Wain (Oxford, 1978), pp. 86–108.

[6] *An Edmund Wilson Celebration*, pp. 163–173. Reprinted in Updike's *Hugging the Shore* (New York, 1983).

quotes voice after voice that evokes Wilson not just as a prodigious critic—he was nothing if not critical, of course—but as a passionate and deeply moral person. V. S. Pritchett, to cite only one instance, said about *To the Finland Station*: "Again and again its sudden queer asides, its touches of vernacular pugnacity, its minuteness, and—for that matter—its shrewdness, piety, and good will mark it as deeply American." One might add to this fine summation Robert Lowell's admiration for Wilson's pugnacity at a White House dinner given by President Kennedy: "of all the big names there, only you acted like yourself," said Lowell, while everyone else seemed "addled with adulation." In response to the President's question about *Patriotic Gore*, a work which began with scathing criticism of the U.S. government, especially "the ease with which an appetite for war can be created and wrapped in moral justification, [while] individual thought [is] surrendered to a corporate bureaucratic machine," Wilson told the President bluntly to read it for himself.

Kennedy, to do him credit, had already taken Wilson's side. When a representative of the IRS advised him that Wilson was delinquent on his income tax and should not be given the national Medal of Freedom, the President said, "This is not an award for good conduct but for literary merit." What President nowadays would say that? But I think Kennedy knew that Wilson's literary merit was good conduct after all.