**The Metropolitan Critic**

Edmund Wilson writes in the 1957 chapter of*Upstate*:

Looking out from my window on the third floor, I saw the change made here by autumn in the landscape and the atmosphere: they become distinctly more serious, Nature begins to warn us, reassuming her august authority; the luxury of summer is being withdrawn.

In context, this passage carries many times the weight of any ordinary nature-notes: the book is already half over, a splitting head of steam has been built up and the reader is by now in no doubt that the luxury of summer is being withdrawn from the writer himself, from the historical district in which he writes, from all the artists he has ever personally known and from the America which he has for so long chronicled and which he is now ceasing even to distrust – Upstate shivers with the portent of an advancing ice-cap. Wilson’s monumental curiosity and zest of mind have not grown less, but by now they are like Montaigne’s, exiled within their own country and awaiting, without real hope, a better age which will know how to value them. Self-confidence remains, but confidence in one’s function ebbs; one’s books do not seem to have been much use; the public weal has proved itself an illusion and private life is running out of time. ‘C’est icy un livre de bonne foy, lecteur,’ wrote Montaigne, dampening the reader’s ardour.

Il t’advertit dez l’entrée, que ie ne m’y suis proposé aulcune fin, que domestique et privee: ie n’y ay eu nulle consideration de ton service, ny de ma gloire; mes forces ne sont pas capables d’un tel dessein.

Just so long as we understand each other.

Willson’s tone is similarly self-sufficient. ‘The knowledge that death is not so far away,’ he writes in 1963,

that my mind and emotions and vitality will soon disappear like a puff of smoke, has the effect of making earthly affairs seem unimportant and human beings more and more ignoble. It is harder to take human life seriously, including one’s own efforts and achievements and passions.

That was the year in which he was writing *The Cold War and the Income Tax* – a profound growl of dissatisfaction about owing the United States Government a swathe of back-taxes which it would only have wasted on building and dropping bombs if he had handed it over. Dealings with the revenue men were prolonged and wearying, making a general disappointment with life understandable. In 1966 things were going better, but his view of existence didn’t much lighten. To go with his Kennedy Freedom Medal he was given a $1,000 award by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a $5,000 National Book Award, but he found himself feeling let down rather than puffed up. ‘They make me feel that I am now perhaps finished, stamped with some sort of approval and filed away…’ He is hard on himself, and no softer on humanity as a whole. ‘Reading the newspapers, and even the world’s literature, I find that I more and more feel a boredom with and even scorn for the human race.’ In such ways his darkening mood is overtly stated, but what gives it power – and makes Upstate such an elegiac and at times unmanning book – is the way in which the selectivity of his impressions presents picture after picture of decay, confusion and loss. Talcottville, NY, is presented as a last vestige of the old, hopeful America, and Wilson – not hiding or even sheltering, just waiting – takes up residence there each summer to find that the new and vengeful America has always moved a bit closer. Not that it matters much any more.

By the end of the book we’re a long way from the mood in which Wilson first evoked Talcottville, in his ‘The Old Stone House’ essay of 1933, later collected in *The American Earthquake*. In the first place, that essay reacalled the hopes of the New Englanders who had grown sick of narrowness and were all for pushing on into the realm of unlimited opportunity:

I can feel the relief myself of coming away from Boston to these first uplands of the Adirondacks, where discarding the New England religion but still speaking the language of New England, the settlers found limitless space. They were a part of the new America, now forever for a century on the move.

The thrill of the great American experiment is still there in the writing, and even though this old essay was just as disenchanted as the new book is, the disenchantment worked in reverse: Talcottville was the opposite of a refuge, representing a past that needed to be escaped from, not returned to.

Thirty years or so later, in *Upstate*, he is cricking his neck to get back to it, but it is too late. Material progress has already made its giant strides. Juvenile delinquents and uproarious bikers maraud and destroy. The John Birch Society slaps up flagrant stickers. Treasured windows on which poet friends have inscribed verses with a diamond pen are shattered in his absence. The Sunday *New York Times* is too heavy for him to carry. There is a spider in the bathtub of a motel. An old acquaintance, Albert Grubel, keeps him abreast of the ever-escalating car-crash statistics. His daughter Helena grows up and starts having car-crashes of her own. In 1963 he finds out that he has for all this time been living virtually on top of a SAC air-base, and is therefore slap in the middle of a prime target area. By the end of the book there is a distinct possibility that a four-lane highway will be constructed a few inches from his front door.

The detail is piled on relentlessly, and if there were nothing else working against it, then *Upstate* would be a dark book indeed. But several things stop it being disabling. First, there are revelations of the Wilsonian character, as when he faces the bikers and asks them why they can’t ride on the highway instead of around his house, or when he argues about iambic pentameters with Nabokov (who insists that Lear’s ‘Never, never, never, never, never’ is iambic), or when he tells Mike Nichols that Thurber is not alone in lacking self-assurance and that he, Wilson, often gets up at four o’clock in the morning to read old reviews of his books. In bits and pieces like these there is enough singularity and sheer quirkiness to keep things humming.

Second, there is evidence of the Wilsonian curiosity, as when he deepens his knowledge of the county’s history, or when he becomes interested in the founding and the subsequent fate of the old Oneida community. Wilson can’t stop learning things, and it’s worth remembering at this point that the curious information which crops up in the book is only the topmost molecule of the outermost tip of the iceberg. In the period covered by*Upstate* (1950 – 1970), Wilson was producing exhaustively prepared books like *The Shock of Recognition*and*Patriotic Gore*, breaking into new cultures with books like *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea*, *Apologies to the Iroquois* and *O Canada*, turning out important investigatory pamphlets like *The Cold War and the Income Tax*and *The Fruits of the MLA* (a crucially important attack on boon-doggling academicism which has yet to be published in Britain) and editing A Prelude and the second and third in his series of literary chronicles, *The Shores of Light* and *The Bit Between My Teeth* – the first, *Classics and Commercials*, having appeared in 1950.

Only the European panoptic scholars come near matching Wilson for learning, and for sheer range of critical occupation there is no modern man to match him, not even Croce. If Upstate tends to give the impression that his wonted energy now only faintly flickers, the reader needs to remind himself sharply that the mental power in question is still of an order sufficient to illuminate the average city. Seemingly without effort, Wilson dropped A Piece of my Mind (1957) somewhere into the middle of all this hustle and bustle, and in the chapter entitled ‘The Author at Sixty’ announced:

I have lately been coming to feel that, as an American, I am more or less in the eighteenth century – or, at any rate, not much later than the early nineteenth. . . . I do not want any more to be bothered with the kind of contemporary conflicts that I used to go out to explore. I make no attempt to keep up with the younger American writers; and I only hope to have the time to get through some of the classics I have never read. Old fogeyism is comfortably closing in.

Taking him at his word on this last point, most critics and reviewers were relieved, which was very foolish of them.

But on the first point, about feeling himself to be an eighteenth-century or nineteenth-century figure, Wilson was making a just estimate, even if he meant only that he didn’t drive a car and couldn’t bear to pronounce the word ‘movies’. As Alfred Kazin argued in his review of *The American Earthquake* (collected in his fine book*Contemporaries*), the men to compare Wilson with are the literary artists driven by historical imaginations – men like Carlyle.

The third thing which lightens the darkness of *Upstate* is that author’s gradually revealed – and revealed only gradually even to himself – interest in a local young woman striving to better herself. Perhaps without really willing it, Wilson is telling a subtle story here: flashes and fragments are all we get. But by the time the book is over, we are convinced that her story is the story of the book, and that the story has gone against the mood. Kazin suggested that Wilson’s secret was to gaze at America with a cold eye without being cold on America.*The American Earthquake* inexorably recorded the shattering effects of industrialism and the spiritual confusion of the New Deal, but it was not a hopeless book – it responded to the period’s vitalities, even (while castigating it) the vitality of Henry Ford. *Upstate* very nearly is a hopeless book, and for a long while we suspect that Wilson has gone cold on America. But finally we see that he hasn’t, quite: as the girl Mary works to establish herself in a way that her European origins would probably not have allowed, the American adventure haltingly begins all over again, at the eleventh hour and in the fifty-ninth minute.

Against the Stygian background of the book’s accumulated imagery it is not much hope to offer, but it is not nothing, and Wilson was never in the consolation business anyway. Which leaves us – as we shelve *Upstate*beside *A Prelude* and prudently leave room for the books dealing with the thirty uncovered years between them – with the question of what business Wilson *has* been in.

What does Wilson’s effort amount to? Is there an atom of truth in his dispirited suggestion that his books have dated? Supposing – as seems likely – that Wilson belongs with the great, copious critical minds like Saintsbury, Sainte-Beuve, Croce, Taine: is he doomed to survive like them only as an emblem of the qualities a mind can have, Saintsbury for gusto, Sainte-Beuve for diligence, Croce for rigour, Taine for drama? Wilson makes Van Wyck Brooks’s output look normal, Eliot’s look slim, Empson’s, Trilling’s and Leavis’s look famished. Just how is all this avoirdupois to be moved forward? We need to decide whether critical work which has plainly done so much to influence its time vanishes with its time or continues. To continue, it must have done something beyond maintaining standards or correcting taste, important as those functions are: it must have embodied, not just recommended, a permanent literary value. And we do not have to re-read much of Wilson’s criticism – although it would be a year of perfect pleasure to re-read all of it – to see that it does embody a value, and embodies it in a way and to a degree that no other corpus of twentieth-century work has approached. But this value, so easily sensed, is very difficult to define, since it must perforce reside in whatever is left after opposing high estimations of Wilson have cancelled each other out. Lionel Trilling (in ‘Edmund Wilson: A Background Glance’, collected in *A Gathering of Fugitives*) says that an interest in ideas is the very essence of Wilson’s criticism. Alfred Kazin, on the other hand, says that ideas are things Wilson is not at home with. If both these men admire the same thing in Wilson, what is it?

The answer is that Wilson has a mental style – a mental style which reveals itself in the way he writes. He is proof by nature against metaphysics of any kind (sometimes to the damaging extent that he cannot grasp why men should bother to hold to them), and this characteristic gives his work great clarity. He never has to strive towards perspicuity, since he is never tempted even momentarily to abandon it. And in more than fifty years of activity he has put up such a consistent show of knowing what he means – and of writing it down so that it may be readily understood – that he has invited underestimation. The most difficult escape Houdini ever made was from a wet sheet, but since he was in the business of doing difficult-looking things he had to abandon this trick, because to the public it seemed easy. What Wilson was doing was never easy, but he had the good manners to make it look that way. If he could only have managed to dream up an objective correlative, or a few types of ambiguity, or if he had found it opportune to start lamenting the loss of an organic society, he would be much more fashionable now than he is. But we can search his work from end to end without finding any such conversation-piece. What we do find is a closely argued dramatic narrative in which good judgment and misjudgment both stand out plainly. The dangerous excitement of a tentatively formulated concept is absent from his work, and for most of us this is an excitement that is hard to forgo: the twentieth century has given us a palate for such pepper.

But there is another, more durable excitement which Wilson’s entire body of work serves to define. There is a clue to it in *Upstate*, in the passage where Wilson discusses the different courses taken by Eliot and Van Wyck Brooks:

They were at Havard at the same time, Brooks of the class of 1908, Eliot of 1910, and both, as was natural then, went, after college, to England. Eliot took root there, but Brooks said that, during the months he spent in England, he found himself preoccupied with American subjects. This difference marks the watershed in the early nineteen hundreds in American literary life. Eliot stays in England, which is for him still the motherland of literature in English, and becomes a European; Brooks returns to the United States and devotes himself to American writing, at the expense of what has been written in Europe. Eliot represents the growth of an American internationalism: Brooks, as a spokesman of the twenties, the beginnings of the sometimes all too conscious American literary self-glorification which is part of our American imperialism.

As it happened, Wilson was to go on to cover American subjects with all Brooks’s thoroughness and more; and to parallel Eliot’s internationalism while yet holding to the tacit belief that the American achievement could well be crucial in the continuity of that internationalism; and to combine these two elements with a total authority of preparation and statement. For that preparation, he had the brilliant education available in prewar Princeton to a young man ready to grasp it. For that statement, he was obliged to evolve a style which would make his comprehensive seriousness unmistakable in every line. Out of these two things came the solid achievement of judgments based on unarguable knowledge ably supplied to meet an historical demand. From the beginning, Wilson was a *necessary* writer, a chosen man. And it is this feeling of watching a man proving himself equal to an incontestably important task – explaining the world to America and explaining America to itself – which provides the constant excitement of Wilson’s work.

Commanding this kind of excitement his prose needed no other. Wilson grew out of the great show-off period of American style. He could not have proceeded without the trail-blasting first performed by Mencken and Nathan, but he was fundamentally different from them in not feeling bound to over-write.

Wilson’s style adopted the Mencken-Nathan toughness but eschewed the belligerence – throwing no punches, it simply put its points and waited for intelligent men to agree. It assumed that intelligence could be a uniting factor rather than a divisive one. In the following passage (from ‘The Critic Who Does Not Exist’, written in 1928 and later collected in *The Shores of Light*) this point is made explicitly:

What we lack, then, in the United States, is not writers or even literary parties, but simply serious literary criticism (the school of critics I have mentioned last, ie, Brooks, Mumford and Joseph Wood Krutch, though they set forth their own ideas, do not occupy themselves much with the art or ideas of the writers with whom they deal). Each of these groups does produce, to be sure, a certain amount of criticism to justify or explain what it is doing, but it may, I believe, be said in general that they do not communicate with one another; their opinions do not really circulate. It is astonishing to observe, in America, in spite of our floods of literary journalism, to what extent literary atmosphere is a non-conductor of criticism. What actually happens, in our literary world, is that each leader or group of leaders is allowed to intimidate his disciples, either ignoring all the other leaders or taking cognizance of their existence only by distant and contemptuous sneers. H. L. Mencken and T. S. Eliot present themselves, as I have said, from the critical point of view, as the most formidable figures on the scene; yet Mencken’s discussion of his principal rival has, so far as my memory goes, been confined to an inclusion of the latter’s works among the items of one of those lists of idiotic current crazes in which the Mercury usually includes also the recall of judges and paper-bag cookery. And Eliot, established in London, does not, of course, consider himself under the necessity of dealing with Mencken at all . . . Van Wyck Brooks, in spite of considerable baiting, has never been induced to defend his position (though Krutch has recently taken up some challenges). And the romantics have been belaboured by the spokesmen of several different camps without making any attempt to strike back. It, furthermore, seems unfortunate that some of our most important writers – Sherwood, Anderson and Eugene O’Neill, for example – should work, as they apparently do, in almost complete intellectual isolation, receiving from the outside, but little intelligent criticism and developing, in their solitary labours, little capacity for supplying it themselves.

Wilson’s innovation was to treat the American intelligentsia as if it were a European one, speaking a common language. ‘For there is one language’, he wrote in the same essay, ‘which all French writers, no matter how divergent their aims, always possess in common: the language of criticism.’ That was the ideal, and by behaving as if it had already come about, he did a great deal to bring it into existence. The neutral, dignified tone of his prose was crucial here: it implied that there was no need for an overdose of personality, since writer and reader were on a level and understood one another. As Lionel Trilling has convincingly argued, Wilson’s years in an editorial chair for *The New Republic* were a big help in getting this tone right – he was in action continuously (more than two-thirds of the pieces in *The Shores of Light first* appeared in *The New Republic*) before a self-defining audience of intelligent men, all of whom were capable of appreciating that opinions should circulate.

The literary chronicles, especially *The Shores of Light*, are commonly valued above Wilson’s more integrated books, and although it seems likely that the people doing the valuing have not correctly judged the importance of the latter, the evaluation nevertheless seems just at first glance. As has often been pointed out, there is nothing in criticism to beat the thrill of hearing Wilson produce the first descriptions and definitions of the strong new American literature that was coming up in the 1920s – the first essays on Fitzgerald and Hemingway will always stand as the perfect objects for any literary journalist’s envy and respect. But here again we must remember to avoid trying to nourish ourselves with condiments alone. What needs to be appreciated, throughout the literary chronicles, is the steady work of reporting, judging, sorting out, encouraging, reproving and re-estimating. The three literary chronicles are, among other things, shattering reminders that many of the men we distinguish with the name of critic have never judged a piece of writing in their lives – just elaborated on judgements already formed by other men.

A certain demonstration of Wilson’s integrity in this regard is his ability to assess minor and ancillary literature about which no general opinion has previously been built up: *The Shock of Recognition*and*Patriotic Gore* are natural culminations of Wilson’s early drive towards mining and assaying in territory nobody else had even staked out. Wilson is a memory; he never at any stage believed that the historic process by which writings are forgotten should go unexamined or be declared irreversible. Remembering is one of the many duties the literary chronicles perform: not so spectacular a duty as discovering, but equally important. For Wilson’s self-posed task of circulating opinions within an intelligent community (a community whose existence depends on such a process for its whole existence), all these duties needed to be scrupulously carried out, and it is the triumph of the literary chronicles that they were carried out in so adventurous a way.

Unless all these things are held in mind, the true stature of the literary chronicles cannot be seen, even by those who value them above the rest of Wilson’s work. In *The Shores of Light* it is necessary to appreciate not just ‘F. Scott Fitzgerald’ and ‘Emergence of Ernest Hemingway’ but also pieces like ‘The Literary Consequences of the Crash’, ‘Talking United States’, and ‘Prize-Winning Blank Verse’. In *Classics and Commercials* we need to cherish not only the stand-out hatchet-jobs like ‘Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?’ and ‘Tales of the Marvellous and the Ridiculous’ but also the assiduous labour of weighing up – never impatient, even when repelled – which went into essays like ‘Glenway Wescott’s War Work’ and ‘Van Wyck Brooks on the Civil War Period’. And unless we can get rid of the notion that picking winners was Wilson’s only true calling in life, we will have no hope at all of reaching a true estimation of *The Bit Between My Teeth* – a book disparaged as tried and thin by reviewers who in the full vigour of their youth could not have matched the solidity of the least piece in it. ‘The Pre-Presidential T.R.’ and ‘The Holmes-Laski Correspondence’ are masterly examples of what Wilson can accomplish by bringing a literary viewpoint to historical documents; and ‘The Vogue of the Marquis de Sade’ got the whole Sade revival into focus and incisively set the limits for its expansion.

The literary chronicles would have been more than enough by themselves to establish Wilson’s pre-eminence: to a high degree they have that sense of the drama of creativity which Taine had been able to capture and exploit. If people are going to read only some of Wilson instead of all of him, then the chronicles are what they should read. But it is one thing to say this, and another to accept the assumption – distressingly widespread in recent years – that *Axel’s Castle* and *The Wound and the Bow* and *The Triple Thinkers* have in some way done the work they had to do and may be discarded, like used-up boosters. There is not much doubt about how such an idea gained currency, books of long essays being so much harder to read than books of short ones. But there is no reason for anyone who has actually read and understood a book like *Axel’s Castle*to go along with such a slovenly notion. When, in the Yeats chapter of that book, Wilson compared the Yeats of 1931 to the Dante who was able ‘to sustain a grand manner through sheer intensity without rhetorical heightening’, he was writing permanent criticism, criticism which can’t be superseded, certainly not by pundits who are boning up their Dante from a parallel text instead of learning it the hard way from a teacher like Christian Gauss. It is barbarism of a peculiarly academic kind to suppose that truths of this order – not insights, explications, or glosses, but truths – can be appropriated to a databank or dismissed as obsolete. A Dantesque ‘epigrammitic bitterness’ is *precisely* the quality to see in the mature Yeats, and in 1931, before the last poems were written, it was virtually prescient to be able to see it, since that quality had not yet reached its full concentration.

Wilson paid heavy penalties for being plain – or rather we paid heavy penalties for not seeing the force of his plainness. In the Eliot chapter of *Axel’s Castle* he said something about Eliot that forty years of theses and learned articles have done their best to bury, something which we are only now capable of seeing as criticism rather than conversation, the intervening hubbub of academic industry having revealed itself as conversation rather than criticism:

We are always being dismayed, in our general reading, to discover that lines among those which we had believed to represent Eliot’s residiuum of original invention had been taken over or adapted from other writers… One would be inclined a priori to assume that all this load of erudition and literature would be enough to sink any writer, and that such a production as ‘The Waste Land’ must be a work of second-hand inspiration. And it is true that, in reading Eliot and Pound, we are sometimes visited by uneasy recollections of Ausonius, in the fourth century, composing Greek-and-Latin macaronics and piecing together poetic mosaics out of verses from Virgil. Yet Eliot manages to be most effective precisely – in ‘The Waste Land’ – where he might be expected to be least original – he succeeds in conveying his meaning, in communicating his emotion, in spite of all his learned or mysterious allusions, and whether we understand them or not.

In this respect, there is a curious contrast between Eliot and Ezra Pound.

With Pound, Wilson was like Tallulah Bankhead faced with a tricksy production of Maeterlinck: he wasn’t afraid to announce. ‘There’s less in this than meets the eye.’ With Eliot, he was bold enough to say that things were simpler than they appeared at first blush. Both these judgments were backed up by a deep learning which had nothing to fear from either man, by a sense of quality which knew how to rely on itself, and by a seriousness which was not concerned with putting up a front.

There is no need to go on with this part of the argument. It’s more merciful simply to state that Wilson’s entire critical corpus will go on being read so long as men are prepared to read widely and well. His strategy of using magazines – first *The New Republic*, later the *New Yorker* – as shipyards in which to assemble books was triumphantly successful. He is the ideal of the metropolitan critic, who understood from the beginning that the intelligence of the metropolis is in a certain relation to the intelligence of the academy, and went on understanding this even when the intelligence of the academy ceased to understand its relation to the intelligence of the metropolis. When Wilson called the Modern Language Association to order, he performed the most important academic act of the postwar years – he reminded the scholars that their duty was to literature.

For Wilson literature has always been an international community, with a comprehensible politics of its own. He learnt languages not just out of passionate curiosity but out of quasi-political purpose, becoming acquainted with whole literatures in the same way that a man who carries an international passport proves himself a part of the main. As late as the mid-1950s Wilson was apologizing for not having done enough in this line: he has always been a trifle guilty about failing to get interested in Portuguese and Spanish. But to a chastening extent he had already made himself the universal literatus, and in the later decades of his life we find him becoming increasingly conscious that this is his major role – if he has any significance in the realm of action, then this is it. Modesty has never been among Wilson’s characteristics, but a certain diffidence does creep in, of which the quietism and resignation of *Upstate* are the logical culmination. The central paradox of Wilson remains unresolved: he has put himself above the battle, inhabiting an Empyrean of knowledge by now fundamentally divorced from an unworkable world. The paradox was vicious from the beginning, becoming more and more so as modern history unfolded in front of him. Wilson was a born internationalist in literature and a born isolationist in politics, and there is a constant tension between the achieved serenity of his literary judgment and the threatening complexity of his self-consciousness as an American.

A patrician individualist by nature, Wilson was automatically debarred from running with the pack. His radicalism in the 1920s and 1930s had a decisive qualitative difference from any Marxist analyses currently available: it was elitist, harking back to the informed democracy of the American past, and therefore on a richer historical base than the hastily imported European doctrines which bemused his contemporaries. Wilson’s reports on Detroit are as devastating as Marx on the working day, but the intensity is the only connexion. Wilson was revolted by industrialism’s depredations – if the ecological lobby ever wants to put a bible together, there are sections of *The American Earthquake* which could go straight into Revelations – but the revulsion was just as much on behalf of what America had previously been as on behalf of what it might become. Marxism is future-directed metaphysics: Wilson’s thought was bent towards the literary recovery of the estimable past.

Making no commitment to communism, Wilson was never compelled to scramble away from it, and he maintained his dignity throughout the 1930s. By 1940 he had completed his analysis of the revolutionary tradition in Europe and published it as *To the Finland Station*. In the final paragraph of that book, he declared it unlikely that the Marxist creeds would be able to bring about

a society in which the superior development of some is not paid for by the exploitation, that is, by the deliberate degradation of others – a society which will be homogenous and cooperative as our commercial society is not, and directed, to the best of their ability, by the conscious creative minds of its members.

America went to war again, and again Wilson was isolationist: as with the First World War, so with the Second, he saw no point in America becoming involved. He was still explaining such phenomena by market pressures and the devious conniving of Big Business – it was a Fabian position, never much altered since he first picked it up from Leonard Woolf.

Wilson has difficulty in understanding how irrational forces can be so potent. In *Europe without Baedeker* and*A Piece of my Mind* he came close to holding the Europeans collectively responsible for pulling their own houses down in ruins about their heads. It was the high point of his isolationism, further reinforced by a commitment to the American past amounting to visionary fervour. In his admiration for Lincoln we find Wilson getting very near the mysticism he spent a lifetime scrupulously avoiding. Finally he found an historical base solid-seeming enough to justify the relieved discovery of a Platonic Guardian class. ‘To simplify’, he wrote in *A Piece of my Mind* (1957),

one can say that, on the one hand, you find in the United States the people who are constantly aware . . . that, beyond their opportunities for money-making, they have a stake in the success of our system, that they share the responsibility to carry on its institutions, to find expression for its new point of view, to give it dignity, to make it work; and, on the other hand, the people who are merely concerned with making a living or a fortune, with practising some profession or mastering some technical skill, as they would in any other country, and who lack, or do not possess to quite the same degree the sense of America’s role.

That was as far as he got: the Republic he loved began to be overwhelmed by the Democracy he had never been sure about, and in the new reality of the 1960s he found himself taxed but unrepresented.

In *Upstate* Wilson is faced with the ruins of the American Dream, and appears to be forgetting what we are bound to remember: that the fragments can be built with and that this fact is in some measure due to him. The intellectual community which is now fighting for the Republic against its own debilitating tumours was to a considerable extent his personal creation. That Americans of good will, in the midst of wearying political confusion, can yet be so confident of their nation’s creativity is again in a large part due to him. As Christian Gauss was to Wilson – master to pupil – Wilson is to nobody: nobody he can see. He now doubts the continuity he helped to define. But, beyond the range of vision now limiting itself to Cape Cod and Talcottville, there will always be young men coming up who will find his achievement a clear light. He is one of the great men of letters in our century.

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