A Note on Edmund Wilson and Marxist Literary Criticism

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Fully a half-century after the publication of a critical piece on Marcel Proust that was to be the first step toward realization of Axel's Castle, Edmund Wilson remains today probably the most important American literary critic of the twentieth century. The final word has yet to be spoken on much of what Wilson wrote. The recent publication of a collection of his letters selected and edited by his widow has added new material to be incorcated into scholarship on Wilson's career. One of the areas of inquiry into his criticism that needs more study, and which may be aided by the newly-published source-material, is the question of Wilson's relationship to Marxism and Marxist literary criticism. The present paper seeks to suggest how Wilson's relationship to Marxist critical thought might be more fully explored, but limits itself to the example of his criticism on Proust.

By the time Axel's Castle was ready for publication a few years later (1931), Wilson had expanded and elaborated the original content of "A Short View of Proust," and had appended to its ending a new, supplementary (as it were) concluding part. The new essay that resulted from this was his well-known and highly-regarded "Marcel Proust," which forms the fifth chapter of Axel's Castle. René Wellek has written of Wilson that his "Axel's Castle was apparently the very first book which definitely conceived of symbolism as an international movement and singled out Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Valéry, Proust and Thomas Mann as examples of a movement which, he believed, had come to an end at the time of his writing." Wilson's belief that the symbolist movement was at the end of an era is clearly reflected in the conclusion to "Marcel Proust." At the end of that essay he wrote that "Proust is perhaps the last great historian of the loves, the diplomacy, the literature and the art of the Heartbreak House of capitalist culture..." (154). That Wilson was speaking in terms of a historical era is indicated by the choice of the term "capitalist culture." The juxtaposition of "capitalist" and "culture" indicates the writer's orientation toward economic determinism in social culture. Wilson's terminology strongly suggests the influence of Marxist thought. The author in Axel's Castle did not directly profess an adherence to Marxism, but the book

carried a letter of dedication to his former teacher Christian Gauss at Princeton in which he expressed the strong conviction that literary criticism ought to be "a history of man's ideas and imaginings in the setting of the conditions which shaped them." Wilson's Marxist-historical perspective no doubt contributed to his early recognition of symbolism as an international movement. The same perspective may have indirectly helped focus his appreciation of Proust esthetically, for in perceiving him as the writer who "comes at the close of an era and sums up the whole situation" (189), he saw Proust as thereby "more dramatic, more complete and more intense" (189) than the fin-de-siècle writers such as Chekhov.

Nevertheless the criticism in Axel's Castle exhibits a literary sensitivity and depth of understanding hardly to be explained as the fruit of the historical-deterministic approach his author professed alone. By 1937 Wilson felt it necessary to make a strong statement on the limitations of historical criticism, particularly as it was being interpreted and practiced in Stalinist Russia. In an essay on "Marxism and Literature" dated January of that year he spoke of the "commonsense" values of historical criticism, asserting that the historical was but one of the two necessary components of literary criticism—the other being the aesthetic. He stated flatly that "Marxism by itself can tell us nothing whatever about the goodness or badness of a work of art." Unlike most Marxist-Leninists later on, Wilson in "Marxism and Literature" stressed the role in art of imagination and taste. A person who may be an excellent Marxist but lacking in imagination and taste will be unable to make the choice between a "good" and an "inferior" book both of which are "ideologically unexceptionable." While vociferously opposing the infusion of party politics into art and criticism, Wilson argued in "Marxism and Literature" that the knowledge Marxism could contribute to literary criticism was indispensable. "What Marxism can do," he wrote in that essay, "... is throw a great deal of light on the origins and social significance of works of art." Moreover, he argued, if the study of literature in relation to social background is as old as Herder or even Vico, and if Taine was its great bourgeois master, it was Marx and Engels who demonstrated for the first time "inescapably the importance of economic systems."

To point out that Wilson proclaimed himself a "historical critic" in his dedicatory letter to Christian Gauss but made no reference in that document to the question of esthetics is not to declare that he ignored the contribution of esthetic appreciation to criticism at the time of Axel's Castle, his first book. In his essays on Paul Valéry and

4 Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870—1930 (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932). All quoted passages from Axel's Castle in the present essay are taken from this edition, with page numbers indicated in parentheses.
5 In Edmund Wilson, The Triple Thinkers (New York: Scribner's, 1948).
6 The Triple Thinkers, p. 104.
7 The Triple Thinkers, p. 104.
8 The Triple Thinkers, p. 104.
9 The Triple Thinkers, p. 104.
T.S. Eliot in *Axel’s Castle* he took the position that pure esthetic criticism is inadequate by itself alone, but at the same time held that any “detached” criticism, whether “esthetic” or “scientific,” 10 leads nowhere. In an essay on “Communist Criticism” 11 (1937) he condemned Soviet Russian critics for the injection of party politics into their work, and in “Marxism and Literature” he warned:

The man who tries to apply Marxist principles without real understanding of literature is liable to go horribly wrong. For one thing, it is usually true in works of the highest order that the purpose is not a simple message, but a complex vision of things, which itself is not explicit but implicit; and the reader who does not grasp them artistically, is merely looking for simple social morals, is certain to be hopelessly confused... 12

“Marcel Proust” shows that Wilson was concerned with moral questions already by his first book, but against the background of the social and historical situation. The same may be said of that essay and his first book in regard to the esthetic side of criticism.

To what extent should Wilson be considered Marxist-influenced? Charles P. Frank in his monograph *Edmund Wilson* 13 argues that Wilson was never a Marxist. In Frank’s view, Wilson’s literary criticism in *Axel’s Castle, The Triple Thinkers, and The Shores of Light* is best characterized as “largely ‘biographical’ and ‘psychological’—not merely in bringing facts concerning the author to bear on the analysis of the work, but in finding in the work itself revelations about the author.” 14 Frank argues that the role of the historical setting and conditions in *Axel’s Castle* is a very limited one, and that (in his words) “Wilson’s first three books of criticism do not deal with a work’s ‘context.’” 15 While this argument seems not fully supported by the evidence of *Axel’s Castle* or a recently published letter written by Wilson (more about the letter shortly)—it can be said that the author established a certain link between the times on the one hand and the works on the other through his psychologically oriented criticism without however failing to show the uniqueness of each instance—it is in the justification of his position concerning the influence of Marxism on Wilson that Frank misleads. He writes:

Because Wilson became increasingly concerned with a writer’s social and moral obligations, and in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s viewed Marxism as the hope for America, some of his readers have assumed that he was a Marxist critic. Marxism, however, has never been a significant part of his criticism, as it was so fundamentally that of Michael Gold, Granville Hicks, Joseph Freeman, and the other regular contributors to *New Masses*. Certainly Wilson has emphasized accurate social observation, which a Marxist critic would have done; certainly, too, like the Marxist—and Humanist—critic Wilson has always stressed the moral value of literature. The Marxist,

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10 *Axel’s Castle*, p. 123.
12 *The Triple Thinkers*, p. 205.
14 Frank, p. 31.
15 Frank, p. 33.
however, limited art to propaganda: he based his evaluation of a literary work on how well it defined for the proletarian reader his role in the class struggle, how closely this reader could identify with the characters, and how accurately the author's point of view reflected that of the proletariat.  

Where Frank misleads is in stating categorically that the Marxist limited art to propaganda. On the basis of this view, he supports his contention that Marxism played no significant part in Wilson's criticism, noting that "For Wilson, then, literature has never been merely a social service, as he clearly states in 'Marxism and Literature' ...."  Frank's position fails to take into account the possibility that Engels's preference for Balzac may be utilized to support the argument that the co-founder of Marxism did in no way limit art to propaganda. "Marxism and Literature" does not furnish evidence that Wilson rejected Engels's ideas on literature at the same time as he condemned propagandistic writing infected with partisan politics. On the contrary, Wilson pointed out in that essay that "Marx and Engels, unlike some of their followers, never attempted to furnish social-economic formulas by which the validity of works of art might be tested."  

This objection to Frank's argument is not intended wholly to refute his contention that Marxism was never a fundamental part of Wilson's criticism. In a recently published letter  (alluded to just above) Wilson wrote in September 1928 to Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins a description of the book that was to become 

This is partly, I believe, the effect of the war, either acting directly on

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16 Frank, p. 38.
17 Frank, p. 39.
18 Frank, p. 38.
19 The Triple Thinkers, p. 198.
20 In Edmund Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics.
the writers themselves or acting on the literary public who, after the war, began to interest themselves in writers who had interested them less before, but who now seemed more congenial to the post-war state of mind. This raises general political and social questions, which I propose to touch on at the end of the book. I believe that any literary movement which tends so to paralyze the will, to discourage literature from entering into action, has a very serious weakness; and I think that the time has now about come for a reaction against it.22

These remarks lend support to the view that Wilson related his subject to the determining historical conditions at the time the book was first conceived. It would be difficult to argue, however, that the gravity with which Wilson sees the six writers' withdrawal from the world necessarily originates from a Marxist turn of mind. It is relevant, perhaps, to note that Wilson's letter was written before the dramatic events which were to signal the start of the Great Depression; it was that deepening crisis of the Western economies which prompted Wilson to ask whether Marxism had any answers to the future. Yet, apart from the reference to the decline of capitalist culture in "Marcel Proust," there is nothing in Axel's Castle to suggest any influence of that economic crisis. The letter of 1928 as well as the chapter on "Symbolism," which sets the stage in Axel's Castle for the six essays, indicate that Wilson conceived the culmination of the symbolist movement essentially in terms of literary movements and reactions rather than as a stage in the historical progress of literature in the Marxist sense. The letter shows that from the beginning Wilson viewed the six writers as at a point of culmination in Western literature. Axel's Castle was conceived in terms of literary history, certainly with an acute awareness of the close connection between literary movements on the one hand and social and intellectual history on the other, but without particular reference to economic history in the Marxist sense. If the reference in "Marcel Proust" to the end of an era seems very Marxist, it may be because Marxism seemed to the author at the time to provide a possible historical confirmation of the crisis in Western culture he had already earlier sensed in its literature.

A comparison of the earlier version of "Marcel Proust" with the essay as it appeared in Axel's Castle lends support to this thesis. "A Short View of Proust" is appreciably shorter than the later essay, but it contains most or all of the basic elements of the essay as it was to appear in Axel's Castle. Although not formally divided into sections, its arrangement and content corresponds to the first two sections of "Marcel Proust." First there is the exposition of Proust's themes and the elucidation of his presentation of his main "truths," as in the later essay. This is followed by the questioning of the validity of Proust's "truths," as in the second section of "Marcel Proust." There is nothing in the earlier criticism to suggest what would be the third section of the later critical piece, which contains the reference to the decline of capitalist culture. It is reasonable to assume that this final part of "Marcel Proust" was never an integral

part of Wilson's thinking on Proust or his era. The reference to the end of capitalist culture was the result of a particular moment in time, and, as subsequent history has so far demonstrated, little more than a lapse in the critical thinking of a brilliant mind.

Taking a closer look at the content of "Marcel Proust" as finalized in the 1931 version, the essay is seen to consist of the three divisions of unequal length. On the whole, the first part of the essay devotes itself to a survey and interpretation of the content of A la recherche du temps perdu. In his letter to Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's Wilson told of his purpose for the proposed book on the six symbolist writers: "I shall devote a chapter to each of these; and those chapters will be an attempt to give complete and intelligible accounts of what those writers are all about.... I want to give popular accounts of them which will convince people of their importance and persuade people to read them." 23 In "Marcel Proust" he follows the development of the narrator-hero Marcel's consciousness and his gradual arrival at certain moral truths. He sees Marcel's social truths (which he finds to be close to traditional Jewish moral indignation and decidedly un-French) as marking the point at which he is at the height of his awareness of "reality" and a turning point in the work. In the second section of the essay he questions Proust's conviction that "it is impossible to know, impossible to master the external world" (147), which he shows had led Proust to turn to the world within himself in order to find the true reality. It is in this section that Wilson's psychological bent comes to the fore, for he undertakes to explain the by distortions of his consciousness and his gloominess as having been more profoundly affected his "physical and psychological ailments" (165) than was at first evident. What happened with Proust that he came to believe that one's relationship with others could never provide lasting satisfaction? asks Wilson. Pointing out that the Marcel of the work is not identical with the author, that "the man who is supposed to be telling the story represents only specially selected aspects of the man who is actually composing the novel, and he is kept strictly within limits" (166), he turns to Proust's earlier writing and his letters for answers: these are immature and thus "expose as Proust's great novel does not do, his special fantasies and preoccupations" (171). What he discovers in Les Plaisirs et les jours and other works is that the characteristic motifs of A la recherche du temps perdu, the disillusionment and valetudinarianism which seemingly had been "painfully learned by an arduous progress of the soul to maturity, had in reality been present in a completely developed form in the gifted and well-to-do young man scarcely out of his teens" (171).

The validity of Proust's pessimistic conclusions is thus seriously contested in the essay. Proust is seen as one who "had evidently come to use his illness as a pretext for escaping the ordinary contacts with the world" (167), one who "never had to meet the world on equal terms and who has never felt the necessity of relating his art and ideas to the general problems of society" (188). These judgements do not, however,

23 Quoted from The New York Times Book Review, p. 36.
prevent Wilson from admiring Proust's skill in the painting of social scenes or the creation of social criticism. He shows that there is a curious contrast in character between Proust's narrator-hero and the picture Proust paints of French society. The social scenes are “rich and lively” (136), and “dramatized” (136) by a rich imagination; their plentiful satire is “extravagant” (136). In Le Côté Guermantes and the first part of Sodome et Gomorrhe we begin to understand for the first time the author's moral attitude: “In each of these cases,” states Wilson, “Proust has destroyed, and destroyed with ferocity, the social hierarchy he has just been expounding. Its values, he tells us, are an imposition...” (143). Wilson recognizes Proust's great preoccupation with morality, “to the extent of tending to deal in melodrama” (143–144). He shows that the dreaming, repining character of the neurasthenic hero enhances the fullness of the satire and adds to the depth of the moral attitude which are associated with his narration.

Can it be assumed that Wilson's interest in the social satire of Proust's work owes greatly to Marxism? Some of Wilson's phrasing suggests an affirmative answer. His observation that the personages in the work (in his words) “all illustrate general principles and that they have been carefully selected by Proust to cover the whole of the world that he knows” (147) suggests a likely indebtedness to Engels's preference for typical characters in typical circumstances—especially when coupled to Wilson's praise for Proust's “colossal” figures which, he says, “without losing individuality—we hear the very sound of their voices—take on universal significance” (147). Also in his criticism of the limitations of Proust's social satire Wilson's viewpoint suggests probable Marxist influence. In the concluding chapter of Axel's Castle, entitled “Axel and Rimbaud,” he sees Proust as one of those “men of imagination” (289) of the modern world who decline to participate in its activities and try to keep their minds free of its plight. Such men, he asserts, usually succumb to some monstrosity or absurdity, as did Proust in his pessimism, and which we sense in “Proust's hypochondriac ailments and his fretting self-centered proximities...” (289). One of the characteristics, however, of the later symbolist movement that clearly attracted his interest was the fact, as he observes, that the later symbolist writers did not dissociate themselves from society so completely as had the earlier Symbolists. Referring to the later symbolist writers, Wilson points out that (in his words) “They have supplied us, as a matter of fact, with a good deal of interesting social criticism; but it is usually a criticism which does not aim at anything, it is an exercise—Proust is the great example—of the pure intelligence playing luminously all about but not driven by the motor power of any hope and not directed by any creative imagination for the possibilities of human life” (290).

It is this withdrawal from society which is the basic criticism Axel's Castle levels against

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24 In a letter written in English to an aspiring English novelist, Margaret Harkness, in April 1888, Engels responded to Miss Harkness's request for comment on her novel City Girl: A Realistic Story with the following observation: “Realism, to my mind, implies, beside truth of detail, the truth in reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances.” (Quoted from Marxists on Literature: An Anthology, edited by David Craig [Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1975], p. 269.)
the movement; whether or not it was wholly indebted to Marxist thought, it does have much in common with it by way of general attitude.

Bibliography