

What Matters Who Hears? Edmund Wilson and the Pragmatics of Literary Critical Discourse

Joshua Kates

Attention to literature, it is commonly believed, is attention to *how* what is said is said, along with what is said. Whether understood as New Critical irony, deconstructive textuality, the referential density of literary discourse in the new historicism, or the overdetermined signifier of cultural studies and ideology critique, the foregrounding of the way in which discourse comes to expression – to the point of breaking the confines of the volume and surmounting the identity of the author – distinguishes literature as an object, and literary studies as a discipline, from all others, such as philosophy or history. Less reflected upon, however, is whether such a distinction rebounds upon literary criticism itself. Beyond this minimal correlation of literary criticism and its object, is there a way of saying, a how of discourse, appropriate to literary critical work – a stance, a voice, a texture most suitable to its own positioning? The specifically political valences and reference points of contemporary criticism make this question an urgent one. Though such political concerns most often have emerged intertwined with the ongoing preoccupations of literary studies just identified, as the political stakes of literary criticism become more dominant, the question arises of how literary studies itself speaks, and, in particular, of its ability to speak to the widest possible audience.

Does a tension, a conflict potentially exist, then, between literary criticism's political aspirations and its attention to the texture of the text, to the how of its saying? The ongoing fascination with the work of Edmund Wilson suggests that it might. Wilson looms as *the* Ur-cultural critic, writing before cultural criticism per se existed in a North American context. And his texts – exemplifying a criticism at once able to speak to a wide audience, to a large segment of our actually existing political community, yet always informed, thoughtful, judicious – are perennially held up as a corrective for all that is said to be lacking in contemporary critical discourse.¹ Indeed, Russell Jacoby, decrying the inability of the humanities to intervene in a wider public sphere, originally modeled the notion of the 'public intellectual' upon Wilson.² Wilson, moreover, can seem strong where literary studies may appear weak: in respect to its mode of address, with regard to the relation of its political aspirations to their putative audience, in a word, in respect to criticism's *pragmatics* (which is the technical name for the study of a discourse's relation to its audience).³ One need only look at the advertisements of university presses in an issue of, say, the *New York Review of Books* to register this concern. Such presses consistently promote historical rather than literary scholarship, believing that unalloyed history garners more attention from the reading public, a practice that indeed suggests that the reach of contemporary literary studies may be somewhat attenuated.

The knottiness of this problem, however – the difficulty of evaluating if something really has gone wrong with literary studies' relation to its audience, and if so, identifying what that something may be – also makes itself felt within the sphere of Wilson criticism, in the work of a scholar who has done as much as anyone recently to keep Wilson's work before our attention: Louis Menand. Menand, in a 2005 piece on Wilson, distinguished Wilson's work from that of contemporary literary criticism on the following basis. Wilson, unlike academic literary critics, Menand claimed, could not "give attention to the idea that literature is overdetermined, that a text is shaped by forces in the language and the culture that can multiply and ambiguate its meanings, and that can make it party to the very conditions that its author is attempting to criticize or transcend."⁴ Yet insofar as Menand, one of our most widely read academic literary critics, himself never supplies this sort of attention to texts – his own corpus being almost self-avowedly Wilsonian – the possibility arises that Wilson's oversight is indeed a necessary one, and that what Menand himself concedes to be a defining characteristic of literary critical work

may *structurally* prevent it from reaching a wider public. What constitutes literary critical work as such, a certain wild card when it comes to reference and meaning, visible in Menand's avowal that literature is 'overdetermined,' may inflect the pragmatics of literary critical utterance, shrinking the reach of its address, thereby bringing it into conflict with some of its wider-ranging political aspirations. Menand's own example indicates that this kind of attention to the medium of expression may make it impossible for literary studies' investigations to become accessible in a more public way – leading to those by now familiar (and of course often unfair) complaints about 'critical jargon,' newspaper parodies of MLA talks, etc., as well as the ongoing valorization of Wilson himself.

I

Let me turn now to Wilson, eventually to complicate (and indeed contest) this scenario. I will soon propose that Wilson's work, rather than failing to take account of language, as Menand intimates, gestures toward a different model of language, toward a new way to engage with discourse, and that it assumes a signal contemporary importance thanks to proffering such a paradigm. Nevertheless, Wilson's own critical output, at first glance, may well appear to confirm the notion that its power of address, the reach of its discourse, is owed to the omission of just those concerns that inform literary studies' understanding of literature. At least from a distance, Wilson can indeed seem fundamentally allergic to examining the 'how' of what is said: the form, overdetermination, noise, or textuality of literature.

A particularly glaring example of such a refusal can be found in Wilson's first book, *Axel's Castle*, a work generally credited with introducing literary modernism to the US reading public. This occurs at the moment when Wilson glosses the writings of Stéphane Mallarmé. As a now long and hoary tradition of critical writing attests, the experiments of the symbolists with language, and those of Mallarmé in particular, remain almost unparalleled in their investigation into language's way of working, into the means of expression beyond the confines of what is expressed. In *Axel's Castle*, however, Wilson instead construes these experiments as manifestations of Mallarmé's *personality*. Really at issue in these writings, according to Wilson, are new, highly personal, and essentially obscure *emotions* that the hieratic Mallarmé and his followers intentionally cultivated. Wilson converts that impersonality that Mallarmé strove to reveal in all of language's operations into just the opposite. Language emerges as an issue for Wilson only insofar as the "poet's task," Mallarmé's concern, is "to find, invent, the special language which will alone be capable of expressing his personality and feelings; such a language must make use of symbols."⁵ Wilson's restoration of the old Aristotelian hierarchies – in which *signs* in writing and in speech are secondary to the *thoughts* behind them, and these thoughts to the *things*, the realities at which they aim – thus reinforces the suggestion that the reach of his criticism, and perhaps any critical writing, depends on how far it strays from Aristotle's seemingly 'intuitive' framework.⁶ Wilson's criticism, it indeed appears, earned its tremendous public reach only by being blind to the role of language, even in the case of a writer like Mallarmé, who places this theme front and center. Moreover, so construed, Wilson's work would indeed exemplify a more general correlation, according to which the more criticism gives attention to language the less popular it can be – a covariation arguably visible not only among works written by different critics but by the same ones over time: think of the early and late Harold Bloom, or Stephen Greenblatt's now similar trajectory toward greater popularity.

Settling on such a law is to be avoided, however, in part, as mentioned, owing to pressures of our current discursive situation in the academy, where criticism's explicitly political ambitions make such a foreordained narrowing of readership especially awkward. Furthermore, as urgently, the effects of the peeling back of speech to the conditions of pure language that Mallarmé himself first broached today, under the pressure of its repeated recycling, threatens to fall into cliché. It thus remains possible that not every sustained attention to the medium of language yields diminution of readership, but that a too narrow, partially moribund construal of the means and the 'how' of language has taken hold, with

the result that the tools of which we currently dispose, our present techniques of reading, betray us as we attempt to expand criticism's reach.⁷

Might Wilson himself, then – a perhaps less familiar Wilson – be able to teach us a less well-known and perhaps more congenial lesson, a new version of literariness? In what follows, I will suggest the answer is yes: that Wilson's reading practice can offer a new template for construing the 'how' of language and for going about the critic's work. Wilson's model, by giving primacy to the *literary representation of audience*, permits attention at once to the formal or impersonal properties of language (albeit ones somewhat different from those highlighted by most literary formalism), as well as to the situation in which such forms go to work – to the political and social character of these speech-acts more generally. Wilson's own readings convey a remarkable subtlety in their appreciation of the text's *pragmatic* texture, a concern that unites Wilson's criticism to broader social and political concerns, without extinguishing the text's textuality altogether. At the same time, it must also be noted, by way of anticipation – precisely because with the mechanism of language so construed, the membrane between what is said and how it is said becomes more porous – that taking up Wilson's example and pursuing his innovation will lead to the disclosure of a still deeper problem potentially facing literary studies' speaking, an appreciation of a still greater, ultimately political-theoretical horizon for our current impasse (an horizon inclusive of Wilson as well), as much as it does to any straightforward resolution of the issue at hand.

To make available this new paradigm focused on audience, before unveiling any further problematization of it, closer attention to Wilson's own corpus must be paid. For, in *Axel's Castle*, his first major collection, Wilson in fact does show himself aware of those dissonances that repeatedly bedevil literary studies, not only between the formal (or aesthetic) aspects of literature and the referential contents that it presents, but between such a fusion of form and content and the manner in which literature projects its *readership*. In *Axel's Castle*, Wilson discloses a multi-layered problem-set relating to both content and form, as well as, finally, the relation of *both* to audience.

In a piece of genre analysis perhaps still unrivaled, Wilson charts a hybrid birth for modernism, establishing both symbolism and naturalism as its precursors. To be fully or truly modernist, Wilson argues, literature must *combine* a concern for language and the medium of discourse (a concern for some sort of experimentation with the means of expression, inherited from symbolism, however this last is understood) with an interest in depicting the real, including its social and political aspects. Modernism as a whole, as conceived by Wilson as early as 1931, thus fuses linguistic experimentation (the heritage taken from symbolism) with a range of realist or referential commitments (owed to naturalism). The best modernist writing (Wilson's example will be Joyce) never jettisons reference, or abandons 'objective reality,' according to Wilson. Instead, it brings an appreciation of these features, inherited from naturalism, to bear, perhaps in an hyperbolically detailed fashion, alongside a now burgeoning variety of radical linguistic experiments.⁸ Declaring his preference for Joyce's *Ulysses* over Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Wilson thus plumps for the former, he tells us, because "Joyce has, in *Ulysses*, exploited together, as no writer had thought to do before, the resources both of Symbolism and Naturalism . . . Joyce's grasp on the objective world never slips . . . yet . . . we are in a world as complex and special, as fantastic or obscure, as that of a Symbolist poet – and a world rendered by similar devices of language" (*Axel's Castle*, 165).

Wilson's analysis of Joyce's modernism even today is something of a breakthrough, departing as it does from the formalist or New Critical paradigm still evident, for example, in Hugh Kenner (and also at work, often in a more subterranean vein, in some deconstructive readings) without tilting over into a simple historical recounting. Nevertheless, the overall lesson of *Axel's Castle*, in the case of Joyce, as well as the other modernists that Wilson treats, it must be emphasized, is the ultimate *failure* of this modernist meld: the intrinsic impossibility of modernism's alloy of symbolism and naturalism achieving what modernism hoped it might achieve – a collapse indeed anchored, in Wilson's eyes, in modernism's *relation to its audience*.

Paying careful attention to the depiction of readership *intrinsic* to these texts, modernism, Wilson argues, ultimately falls prey to a deeper rupture lying beyond its own novel synthesis of the referential

and linguistic. A gulf, a rupture in the real, brought about by the advent of what Wilson calls "industrial society" (and what we would today call 'later' or 'second-stage' capitalism) marks the very texture of these texts, their internal organization, one visible at the moment their depiction of audience comes into view.

Wilson devotes the entirety of his last chapter of *Axel's Castle* to this matter. The name, "Axel's Castle," from which Wilson takes the title of his work, refers to a novel by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, in which the fictional hero, Axel, seeks refuge from society (in a crenellated fortress), at first to live in self-sufficient isolation, eventually enacting a version of Wagner's famous *Liebestod*. Axel's attempt, itself a wholly literary or fictitious instance, thus serves Wilson as an emblem for the relation of the entirety of the work that he has previously treated – of all modernism, in other words – to this crucial dimension of audience. To whom would modernism speak? Like Axel, all modernist literature, Wilson avows, speaks and lives only for itself – or, at best, solely for the few. Wilson's is not a claim in the *sociology* of literature, however, or a chapter in the history of the book, let me be clear. Rather, these works mark this distanced relation to audience *within themselves*. Between the confines of these volumes, beneath the shell of their covers seemingly accessible to all, exemplary modernist texts enact a ritual of divorcing themselves from their readers in form and in theme, as signaled especially by their privileging of such motifs as self-isolation, forgetting, sleep, and death.

Bringing his entire work to close, Wilson thus returns to Joyce, and, discussing *Finnegans Wake*, he now reverses his earlier evaluation of Joyce as the premier modernist, owing to just this issue of his self-presentation of audience. Though Bloom was already a marginal and rather passive character, Joyce's 'new hero,' the protagonist of *Finnegans Wake*, Wilson avers, "surpasses even the feats of sleeping of Proust's narrator, remaining asleep within an entire novel" (*Axel's Castle*, 212). Such sleep metonymically enacts the *Wake's* internal disengagement from its audience, the complete withdrawal of Joyce's text from his readers and their world.

Wilson's final chapter takes this immanent criticism of modernism focused on its pragmatics still further, however, by staging a contrast of the fictional Axel to the French symbolist poet, Rimbaud. This second pole of Wilson's closing salvo is as telling concerning this problem of audience, as is Wilson's re-evaluation of the relative merits of Joyce and Proust. For, in Rimbaud's case, what interests Wilson most of all is finally not any example of his actual literary output, but the moment of its absence: when Rimbaud's literary production ceases, in favor of a life devoted to what Wilson calls "pure action" (*Axel's Castle*, 224). The juncture at which Rimbaud removes himself from *literary production entirely* for Wilson registers Rimbaud's most profound expression of (modernist) literature's relation to its readership. Rimbaud, as glossed by Wilson, in effect performs the negation of the modernist negation. Not only does Rimbaud reject Europe and its norms; at the moment he stops writing he also distances himself from this rejection, from just that style of literature that works in *opposition* to these surroundings. "Rimbaud, with genius equal to any's," Wilson writes, "had rejected Europe altogether – not merely its society and ideals, but even the kind of sensibility which one cultivated when one tried to live at odds with it *and the kind of literature this sensibility supplied*" (*Axel's Castle*, 224, emphasis added). Rimbaud alone, according to Wilson, recognized the unsurpassable rupture within society at large that modernism unwittingly points out through its own autotelic rejection of audience; in what is in effect his final piece of poetry, Rimbaud names this chasm by way of exiting from literature altogether. Rimbaud's gesture itself, however, remains but a further escape: as glossed by Wilson, it is also but a "*getting away*." Although it is not on its own a meaningful piece of political action, Rimbaud's departure delivers modernism's final word on that insufficiency with regard to its audience, which for Wilson is constitutive of modernism as such.

II

Rimbaud's escape, this rejection of the scission on the inside of modernism marked by its portrayals of sleep, self-isolation, and death, is the best that this literary movement can do, in Wilson's eyes. And,

despite some 'happy talk' at the end of *Axel* about an eventual merger of science and art, it is perhaps no surprise that as the 1930s approach their end Wilson devotes his next, and probably greatest, text, to writings that pertain to the realm of action and events, to histories and social histories, rather than to fiction and to poetry. In his 1940 book, *To the Finland Station*, Wilson thus surveys a body of work polarly opposite to modernism, one essentially concerned with genres of writing defined through their relation to history and to society. *To the Finland Station* consists of a series of treatments of the lives and works of historians, social theorists, and social innovators, as well as political actors. And what interests Wilson throughout are 'discourses' – written histories, political and economic theory, as well as historical *actions* – 'written' with an awareness of that radical division in the real that Wilson had already identified in *Axel*, and which, accordingly, embody and enact novel forms of address.

To grasp Wilson's approach to these discourses, especially their interaction with audience, it will be useful here briefly to further flesh out the notion of pragmatics, the pragmatics of discourse – a term Wilson himself never uses. Distinct from *pragmatism*, and, in part, owing its invention to the pioneering work of the analytic philosopher H. P. Grice, "pragmatics" is the technical name for the investigation of the presuppositions of a discourse in respect to its auditors or recipients. Recently having attracted a wide literature, the facet of pragmatics most of interest here is its founding claim that one irreducible axis of significance in discourse depends on an auditor or viewer recognizing a piece of language as bearing a certain meaning, owing to it having been used by a speaker with the intention of creating effects in the recipient or hearer, thanks to their grasping the existence of such an intention.⁹ Think of irony, for example, where this kind of zig-zag, or reciprocal intentionality – what I mean by saying 'great' in front of the sign saying that the movie we had intended to see is sold out – is clearly irreducible to any linguistic semantic component (any verbal meaning) or any syntactic component (any grammatical arrangement) of the uttered or written phrase. Generalizing this lesson, it becomes apparent that pragmatics as a field of linguistic inquiry breaks down the presumed membrane separating the inside from the outside of linguistic systemacity – between language's supposedly autonomous internal mechanisms, on the one hand, and, on the other, its use, its ongoing worldly career. Viewed pragmatically, language's operation becomes more variable, inconstant, its ability to generate significance now depending both on 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' connections between language and the 'who' who takes it up – on a panoply of heterogeneous relations to an actual, as well as a possible, set of receivers or readers.

In *To the Finland Station*, Wilson, then, *avant la lettre*, treats thematically this aspect of the discourses that he takes as his subject (some of which 'discourses', thanks to this model, being able to take the form of historical *actions*). The centrality of this conception for Wilson becomes visible in the conclusion of his work. *To the Finland Station* ends on a decidedly speech-pragmatic note, with a restaging V. I. Lenin's address to his waiting comrades on the eve of Russian revolution. Indeed, the "Finland Station" of Wilson's title is an actual railway terminal in St. Petersburg, at which Lenin, returning from exile, disembarked to join the nascent Russian revolution, and thereupon memorably addressed the waiting crowd. Wilson's title thus places his entire book within the optics of the *railroad*, positioning it as a series of stations, a 'train' of sketches, and it establishes its endpoint as a moment of *address*, a piece of discourse, pragmatically viewed. In *Station*, moreover, such a pragmatic perspective also operates from the start – in a fashion that orients all that follows. Wilson begins *Station* with the life and work of Jules Michelet. Michelet, who, according to Wilson, for the first time explicitly composed history from the perspective of *society* (rather than as the chronicle of the deeds of great individuals), is privileged. He appears as Wilson's inaugural figure, precisely because he had for his own ultimate concern that radical rupture within society that Wilson foregrounded at the end of *Axel's Castle*. Michelet's work, unlike that of the modernists, however, exhorts its audience *to the future redress or restitution of this rupture*. It *constitutes* its readership by appealing to the overcoming of this gap, thanks to invoking an ideal, the name of which for Michelet, and also for Wilson, proves to be 'humanity.'¹⁰

More specifically, throughout his treatment of Michelet, Wilson, in order to capture the pragmatic significance of his writings, shows how the circumstances surrounding the composition of Michelet's

different works interpenetrate the central motifs of these same texts. Michelet's first major work, his *History of the Middle Ages*, is according to Wilson undertaken in the wake of the failure of the 1830 Paris uprising and the coming to power of the house of Orleans. In it, Michelet's portrayal of Joan of Arc itself represents a *form of address*. As presented by Michelet, Joan does not function as a paean to medieval mysticism or even a lost organic community, but appeals to, and thereby configures, its audience in terms of a specifically modern and national spirit ("anti-clerical, democratic"), reinvoking the French revolution, a spirit otherwise suffering eclipse at the moment that the House of Orleans takes command (*Finland Station*, 13).¹¹ In a similar vein, focusing on the pragmatics of Michelet's discourse, Wilson shows Michelet's concern for nation being overtaken by the theme of class in the lead-up to the revolution of 1848. At this epoch, Michelet sets aside his *Early History* to chronicle the French revolution itself. In this work, Michelet's invocation of the nation, of the unity of the people in *the history that he writes* simultaneously exhorts his readers to overcome divisions of class *at the moment in history in which he and they live*. The concern with *nation* at this moment stands proxy for a concern with *class*, not figuratively, but pragmatically, as Michelet's use of nation embodies an intention to move his audience in terms of class in a way that they themselves reflexively and constitutively grasp.

Wilson, commenting on this text, fixes on this moment in Michelet's depiction of the revolution in which all *class differences* have been overcome. He himself underscores the subsequent *collapse* of this achievement. Citing Michelet, he states: "At no other time . . . has the heart of man been wider and more spacious – at no other time have distinctions of class, of fortune, and of party been more completely forgotten." Wilson quickly adds, "it was a moment only; after that the back flow of old instincts and interests . . . was to bring years of confusion and disorder" (*Finland Station*, 18). The fleeting unification of the nation during the revolution in Michelet's account thus ultimately attests a still living, albeit unfulfilled possibility of a more unified and more just humankind as a whole, in Michelet's, and finally in Wilson's own text. This uniquely "wide and spacious" expanse of the "human heart," pragmatically discerned, establishes a vantage point from which to address and exhort in fact all society past, present, and future, at least in Wilson's eyes. Without doubt, it shapes Wilson's own discourse's relation to its audience in *Station*. By emphasizing the subsequent dissolution of this social apex, Wilson again appeals to a common humanity, echoing Michelet's cry, in the name of a more just world. Indeed, just imagine how Wilson's own audience would have felt coming across this passage, how called, how interpellated they would have been, reading these lines when these writings appeared at the heart of the Depression.

The complex pragmatics of *Station* will be pursued later in this essay. It suffices at the moment to see that Wilson indeed begins his work, and orients it going forward, through an elucidation of the pragmatics of Michelet's corpus. Wilson demonstrates how Michelet's awareness of the same social rupture that Wilson had already identified in *Axel's Castle* informs Michelet's historiography across the axis of speaker-receiver. Through the pragmatics of his discourse, Michelet employs the past he chronicles to address, and intervene in, both the present and the future. Not being able to review the whole of Wilson's 600-odd page text, the scope of Wilson's version of pragmatics, the reach of its capacities as a working methodology, as well as some of its other motivating concerns, must be registered by turning to perhaps the most unusual sequence in his work, which by dint of its uniqueness also deserves attention. In part two, chapter three of *Station*, Wilson takes up the life and works of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen. Treating these social innovators, Wilson applies this same audience-centered point of view to these authors (and actors) who really stand outside the direct line of his history. In this chapter Wilson thus explores the pragmatics of figures who have a far more tenuous relation to audience than any of Wilson's other examples. After all, as institutors, innovators aiming to establish, virtually from scratch, new societies, new systems, and eventually new worlds (novel social formations lacking any dialectical basis in preexisting ones as, for example, would be true in Marx), Fourier and Owen, almost by definition have no genuine peers. Owen especially, who initially addressed the upper class, and always eschewed revolution or political activism of any kind,

propounded his utopian schemes from an intrinsically isolated position, especially as his actual followers soon abandoned him or were abandoned by him in most instances in any case.¹²

In terms of the pragmatics of Owen's ultimately politically isolated discourse (and this holds true of Fourier's as well), Wilson ultimately sketches a pragmatics of 'zero degree'. Owen's (or Fourier's) endeavors, that is, do not simply forfeit the notion of audience; the implicature of their discourse, however, the question of to whom it is addressed, rather remains virtual. These 'founders' of new settlements, new societies, in truth found communities forged from absence and difference, in some ways akin to what others have called inoperative communities.¹³ They institute a 'literary', rather than an actual, 'communism', the pragmatics of which in fact approximates that of Derridean iterability.¹⁴ Such simulacra of foundation, like the latter, entail not the wholesale absence of audience, but the lack of a known, finite reception; they thus enact an expansion and deformation of the concept of audience beyond any finite or knowable bounds.

Of course, Wilson would be a good deal less sanguine about the political possibilities these novel configurations afford than a Nancy or a Derrida.¹⁵ Wilson was not one for seeing a political opportunity in such an essentially errant trajectory, for finding in the pragmatic wandering of a discourse a possible opening on to a new politics conceivably more suitable to the world in which we are coming to live. Still, for Wilson too, these portraits of impossible communities and their founders, this pragmatics of a zero-degree, retains a value at once exemplary and singular, insofar as for him as well it directs attention toward a unique ethical dimension. With regard to such ethics (the fascination with which arguably actuates all of Wilson's studies), Wilson's portrayal of Robert Owen proves particularly memorable. Wilson recounts how Owen, when young, yet already wealthy, initially came into contact with those whom Wilson calls "personages" – "prime ministers, archbishops, princes." Owen could not at first believe, Wilson tells us, that "for persons like them, in positions of high responsibility, it would be possible to desire anything other than the amelioration of humanity," that it would be conceivable not to desire the great social change that Owen himself envisioned and had begun to attempt to implement (*Finland Station*, 94). Quickly disabused of his faith in the benevolence of such persons, Owen became increasingly isolated from those around him, from his class and his peers. This was due to the failure or deformity in his ideal's self-manifestation, just because what was self-evidently good and right to him did not seem so to anybody else.

Owen, as Wilson limns him, thus eventually comes to sacrifice the totality of present existence – first and foremost, his own present existence – to the service of radical social change and to a profoundly unknown future. He indeed answers to what one might today, following Levinas, call 'the Other'. And Wilson, supplying a further sign of Owen's untimeliness, perhaps now not surprisingly, portrays Owen at the end of his life communing *spectrally*. Owen, says Wilson, "came in his last days to believe that all the magnanimous souls he had known, Shelley, Thomas Jefferson, Channing, the Duke of Kent . . . all those whom he had felt that they had really shared his vision, and were lost to him now through death – he came to believe that they were returning from the other world, to make appointments with him and keep them, to talk to him and reassure him" (*Finland Station*, 97).

Of course, the notion of radical repetition that undergirds Derrida's notion of the specter, implying that everything 'begins' with spectrality, self-disjunction, and self-effacement (thereby, among other things, calling into doubt the possibility of any straightforward historical periodization) is far from Wilson's more solid vantage point. Nevertheless, for Wilson, too, Owen's peculiar intercourse with ghosts, his final pragmatics, remains tied to the singularity of an ethico-political imperative. It signals an out-of-jointness of Owen to his time, deriving from that call for radical justice to which Owen in his own remarkable way responds. Nor are such ethical concerns by any means foreign to Wilson himself. Fourier and Owen, those two halting visionaries, though standing apart from the main line of his argument, indeed embody Wilson's own most prominent preoccupation throughout *To the Finland Station*: namely, the extreme personal sacrifice loyalty to a radically novel future and a non-present ideal requires. Throughout his work, Wilson shows us the *terrible* character of any truly radical action (with 'action' again here comprising writing as well as deeds), the intense cruelty not only to oneself, but often to those around one (as in Marx's case), entailed by any kind of profoundly novel, truly

eventful, intention or 'performance'. Wilson repeatedly exhibits the severity and isolation of all who insist on living for new worlds and new forms of life. And these depictions arguably remain critical for the rest of us at a time like the present, when instances of just this sort of outsized commitment appear to be largely lacking (especially in the wake of the demise of such radically inaugural figures as Derrida, Blanchot, and Foucault), or at least suffering an obscurity analogous to the one that for a time enshrouded Owen.

Wilson's interest in the pragmatics of those upon whom he writes having here begun to be taken into account, both in the more normative case of Michelet and the seemingly exceptional one of Owen and Fourier, the pragmatics of Wilson's own work, of *To the Finland Station* itself, must now finally be more fully examined. The manner in which such pragmatics plays out in Wilson's own text proves especially thorny, however. Despite almost everyone's expectations, the ultimate lesson for literary scholars in Wilson's own example turns out to be far from clear: Wilson's situation, his relation to his own audience, popular or critical, is by no means as transparent as most who discuss it imply. Doubtless, no one familiar with *To the Finland Station* can deny that Wilson's writing does position itself as in some way speaking from within this same social division (and in the service of its overcoming) that he shows at work in the writers and historical actors who furnish his subjects, from Michelet to Lenin, and that he thus proposes a similar understanding of his own authorial position. Wilson, too, especially at this epoch, clearly writes in the name of a future world, a more just society and a more equitably associated humanity. Yet the total situation of his own discourse cannot be simply identified with any of those he presents (nor with these endeavors taken in totality), and the differences, as well as the similarities, demand notice.

To grasp both of these, we must attend to *Station's* concluding gesture. Wilson closes his work with a portrayal of V. I. Lenin. As presented by Wilson, Lenin here emerges as something like the 'Rimbaud' of Marxism (and of Wilson's entire work), albeit in this case a more successful Rimbaud. Lenin is the figure who completes the series of portraits by departing from that series altogether, here by exiting into truly decisive action, thereby bringing all the other writings, theories, and acts discussed to fruition in a genuine historical invention, an authentically new institution, a new state. To be sure, the almost tender, hazy, golden hues in which Wilson paints Lenin are something of an embarrassment today. (Wilson dwells at length on things like the supposedly charming character of Lenin's boyhood home.) The decisive point for assessing the pragmatics of Wilson's own utterance, however, turns out to be that by the time Wilson finished writing *To the Finland Station* and published it in book form, Lenin's reign had given way to that of Stalin. Wilson resoundingly rejected and denounced the latter figure, and when it comes to the pragmatics of his own discourse – how it positions its readership and its own speaking – this means that Wilson himself now crucially lacks that belief in a linear progress, that *confidence* in the *future* (and a vision of what it will look like), that he himself cheerily imparts to the writings and actions of almost every figure whom he himself treats. After all, Wilson portrays all the labors that he sketches (even the virtual ones) as leading (or, as in the case of Taine or Renan, tending away from) a single goal: as literally and literarily taking us to the Finland station (to Lenin's arrival from exile at this depot in St. Petersburg). Yet prior to the completion of his work, the events of the second half of the thirties had unfolded, including the Moscow show trials, bringing this very terminus into doubt for Wilson himself.¹⁶ Wilson, to put it otherwise, already lived and worked in the wake of a version of what some call 'the collapse of the Soviet experiment'; and this makes the pragmatics of his own discourse in *To the Finland Station* – to whom it speaks and in the name of what – much more complex than is usually acknowledged. While his text fashions a clear narrative arc, employing the obvious teleology of the journey (even the terminus, the railway station), the underpinnings of all this 'archeteleology' have already come into doubt for its author, and for him alone, a predicament that deposits highly visible traces in his own text.¹⁷

The complexity of Wilson's own stance, wrought from an ambivalence deeper than any he finds in the writers that he treats, becomes readily apparent in Wilson's discussion of the most central figures of *Station*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. On the one hand, Marx and Engels' doctrine indeed

imparts to Wilson's own history whatever conceptual rigor it has. Marx and Engels' writings are the privileged link in the chain, the unique member of the series that furnishes the key to all the rest. Their work permits this larger social divide and this ongoing rupture in audience to be diagnosed both systemically and historically by Wilson – its actual social and economic causes to be identified. Indeed, what Wilson says of Marx's analysis in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is also true of his own: for Wilson, Marx "knocks away the masks, and provides a chart of the currents running below the surface . . ." (*Finland Station*, 198). To Marx, in sum, Wilson believes he owes his own access to the real – both with regard to the historical framework he employs, as well as the diagnosis that accompanies and informs it (*Finland Station*, 288). Wilson in *Station* thus had a deep investment in a Marxian perspective's ability to get its hooks into actually existing history. Given this investment, however, his treatment of Marx and Engels's own understanding of whence these powers originate surprises. Because on the other hand, in the chapters devoted to them, Wilson almost wholly discredits the totality of Marx's later analysis and what he himself takes to be the linchpins of Marxian thought: historical materialism (which he calls the "dialectic" or Marx's "philosophy of history"), as well as Marx's economic theories, in particular the labor theory of value.

With regard to the latter, Wilson frankly admits to finding the labor theory of Smith and Ricardo as reworked by Marx in *Capital* entirely unconvincing. He believes it to have been discredited by an analysis of the actual rise and fall of prices (*Finland Station*, 293). Accordingly, he takes Marx in this phase of his thinking really to be what he calls "a poet of commodities." Marx is *aesthetically* – not scientifically or economically – attuned to the ravagements of nineteenth-century capitalism. Marx, as presented by Wilson, thus offers nothing more than the Charles Dickens of *Hard Times*. Wilson is unable to affirm the validity of Marx's most central notions, doubtless spurred by the current context in which he writes and the vexed condition of the Soviet state. As a result, Wilson fails to credit the concepts that furnish the very framework of his own narrative, that lend shape and intelligibility to his own history. Marx and Engels's thought, by Wilson's own avowal, is indeed the member of the series "To the Finland station" that allows the whole series to be identified. Yet, even as their corpus continues to do this decisive work, Wilson no longer grants it any status as genuine knowledge – a refusal which permeates the pragmatics of his own text. No longer clear as to how to draw a dividing line between Marxian fact and fiction, Wilson necessarily cannot know what side he himself is on, whom precisely he wants to address, or in the name of what cause he wishes to appeal to his audience.

Matters are still more complex and telling, however, when it comes to what Wilson calls Marx's philosophy of history – historical materialism in its most standard form, which today, of course, unlike the labor theory of value, has almost wholly fallen into disrepute even for most Marxists.¹⁸ For, given these doubts about Marxism, how does Wilson identify the ultimately *liberatory or emancipatory* potential in the various discourses and actions that he has been discussing – given his present inability or refusal to credit the major tenets of Marx's program, or its most notable historical product? How, in his eyes, are these 'discourses' (both speeches and deeds) to be construed as aiming at, or even achieving, a greater freedom? Wilson's own understanding of the advance represented by Lenin's 'arrival', and the type of freedom implied by it, in fact, depends on this same notion of a 'philosophy of history' that in his discussions of Marx and Engels Wilson otherwise discredits. To grasp how this can be, however, how 'philosophy of history' can at once play a central and discredited role, a fuller picture of Wilson's use of this term must be gleaned – first, by recurring for a moment to the beginning of Wilson's book, since seeing how this term works there lets its function at its end be more readily comprehended.

As does his book and journey as a whole, Wilson's treatment of the philosophy of history in *To the Finland Station* begins with Michelet – in this instance with what Vico, according to Wilson, contributed to Michelet's project. This is said to consist of 'a philosophy of history'. Vico's philosophy, though itself also clearly untrue (*Finland Station*, 9), nevertheless permitted Michelet to write history, according to Wilson, from a perspective unique in the history of historiography (*Finland Station*, 6). Wilson claims that the specifically social history that Michelet first wrote is owed to Vico.

More specifically, he argues that Michelet's own writings did two things: firstly, they set out a new, more global view of a society and its times (following Vico in seeing all the different aspects of a society or culture as interrelated); secondly, they understood everything in this society, all its facets, as what today we would call 'constructed' – i.e., as made, not divinely handed down – as formed and developed through immanent historical processes, and thus open to further human shaping (*Finland Station*, 7).

At the end of his book, then, Wilson returns to this theme of a philosophy of history (having dropped it for nearly some 400 pages) and celebrates the completion of Lenin's journey in just these same terms: as the entry of a philosophy of history (again, a *philosophy discredited in its contents*) now, however, into *the enactment of actual history*, not just the mere writing of it, as in Michelet's case. For Wilson, such an insertion of philosophy of history into 'real' history represents a clear gain in overall human freedom. Looking toward Lenin's achievement, in stentorian tones, Wilson declares: "for the first time in the human exploit, the key of a philosophy of history was to fit a human lock" (*Finland Station*, 460).¹⁹ Lenin and the Russian revolution bring Marx's *philosophy of history* into *history*, and this insertion, for Wilson, represents a new step or stage in 'the human exploit,' an increase in total freedom, though of an entirely and oddly formal sort, with which Wilson himself feels uncomfortable and which thus inhibits or deflects the pragmatics of his own speech. Again, Marx and Engels's philosophy of history, Wilson has already gone out of his way to make clear, is in no way *true*. He brands it repeatedly as a "mystical" inheritance left over from Hegel.²⁰ Its contents, its substance, for Wilson, have no genuine pertinence to the world, no veridical value or hold (just as Vico's cycles did not). Nevertheless, this actualization of Marx's (false) doctrine for Wilson somehow represents a signal autonomy, a new, unprecedented, albeit entirely formal, historical self-assertion or directedness.

The strange, wholly formal character of this affirmation of Lenin's arrival, in fact, has several intriguing consequences. For one thing, his interpretation of Marx, his understanding of Marx, turns out to be the 'motor' of Wilson's narrative in a surprisingly literal sense. This commonplace figure in this instance proves to be no metaphor. Without doubt owing to his own uneasiness with the continued role these (for him) already discredited writings play in his work, Wilson himself repeatedly refers to Marx and Engels' teachings in just these terms, by means of mechanical examples, taken largely from what Wilson himself would call 'the industrial age.' Marx and Engels' thoughts are thus "pistons" (*Finland Station*, 114); their writings "a pyrographic needle." Their texts are "electrical," having "the packed power of high explosives" (*Finland Station*, 156). Engels' writing is like a "high-powered torch" (*Finland Station*, 199); Marx's mind is "like a warship with her steam up" (*Finland Station*, 258). Finally, Marx and Engels themselves twice stand together as the twin "electrodes of a voltaic cell," "copper and zinc" (*Finland Station*, 140; 304). Marx and Engels' works and thought thus figure 'mechanically' in Wilson's own descriptions, but they also work this way, according to him, in "history itself." Their writings, their philosophy of history, are indeed the linchpin, the lock in the key (again a mechanical metaphor), for Wilson, at the moment Lenin and the Bolsheviks come to power, as we have just seen.

As so conceived, as at once literarily and historically mechanical, Marx and Engels' writings ultimately have the status of 'text' in so-called 'classical' deconstruction. Deprived of any fixed truth, they nevertheless continue to function without regard to their ultimate contents or substance. These bits of language are themselves purely performative – sheer happenings – even as they still remain in some sense recognizable as texts, as actual pieces of writing. Real yet fictitious, undecidable yet radically decisive, poised between sense and nonsense, life and death, they work: they labor, they perform, mechanically, remorselessly, unavoidably, just as language itself in its so-called materiality was said to perform in the writings of 'high theory.'²¹

Indeed, noting this dimension of Wilson's work, the possibility in fact arises that at least some post-structuralism is implicated in this same radical pragmatic uncertainty that we have just witnessed reveal itself in Wilson's discourse. With respect to Wilson himself, a truly profound absence of bearings makes itself evident at this moment: an inability, at once historical and systematic, to

conceive any longer of what freedom and its enactment may mean, what these might actually signify in a political, social, and historical context, and, along with that, who one is to address and what sort of action one actually wishes to undertake. In Wilson's case, moreover, this absence of bearings, this compasslessness, has the effect of leading, all the more vertiginously, to a still greater endorsement of freedom: the endorsement of a now radical, unbounded, *productive freedom*, a 'freedom' beyond every possible conceptualization (and one not far from that *autonomization* identical with *automatism* of which Derrida speaks in a similar context).²² Poststructuralism is, of course, far more sophisticated in its conceptualizations. Nevertheless, one wonders whether this same hyperbolic production, this same coincidence of autonomy and the automatic, itself a trademark of so much of its recent thought, might not stem from a related source, from a similar collapse of historical and pragmatic reference points.²³ At the very least, remaining within the parameters of my main argument, it should by now be clear that Wilson in *To the Finland Station* in fact failed to master the pragmatics of his own discourse, and thus failed to resolve the problem which I began by setting out concerning the pragmatics of literary criticism's address in general. The standing of his audience, the reception projected by his work, in the name of what, and to whom, he speaks – all of these remain in doubt. By the time he had completed *To the Finland Station*, Wilson had indeed lost control of this dimension of his own presentation in a way that is in fact deeply reminiscent of that indictment contemporary 'Wilsonians' bring against practitioners of literary studies today. The premises from which his speech starts, where it aims to go, as well as in the name of whom and to whom it speaks – none of these are clear; and, viewed in this light, his work is at least aporetic, if not an outright failure.

Matters indeed come full circle. Contemporary literary studies' own speaking and political commitments, on more careful examination, rather than departing from Wilson, turn out to exhibit a further unfolding, a deepening, of the problem that already had bedeviled him. As I have begun to hint (the full exposition of such a claim is of course beyond the scope of this sort of paper), the ferment characteristic of the field of literary studies, at least since the sixties, and perhaps even extending back to the thirties, is arguably continuous with the disturbance that also becomes apparent in Wilson – fostered by, though not reducible to, the implosion of what amounted to the single most comprehensive stance available to criticism (at once political and intellectual, as well as inclusive of its relation to a wider public): namely, classical Marxism. Nor should this deep resemblance of Wilson's criticism to a criticism supposedly defined by its difference from his own finally be so startling. After all, Wilson's combination of Mallarmé and Marx (in *Axel's Castle* – and his new focus on pragmatics that builds on, even as it swerves from, this in *To the Finland Station*) in the end may not be any more unlikely than that admittedly very different combination of these same reference points that a young German-Jewish author named Walter Benjamin had been cooking up a few years earlier. As should by now be plausible, the notoriously esoteric Benjamin and the seemingly far more exoteric Wilson may ultimately not stand all that far apart, when the pragmatic dimensions of their own discourses are plumbed. Both were responding to the same breakdown in vantage point, and both shared a focus on the 'art-science of history', one that perhaps ultimately led to not such different outcomes.

The ultimate lesson here, then, may be this. To come up with new, fully successful, pragmatically felicitous models of critical discourse and language today (of the sort toward which Wilson's strivings at least begin to point us), it will also be necessary to respond to the absence of a credible plan for radical structural social-political change, the absence of a meaningful template for an extension and transformation of the Enlightenment's commitment to further progress and a future more *human* humanity – that void in our political understanding into which Wilson himself so resoundingly fell in *To the Finland Station* that continues to confront us at present, even as it continues to remain largely unnamed.

Notes

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¹ For Wilson as 'corrective', see, for example, Janet Groth, *Edmund Wilson: A Critic for Our Time* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989), xii; for a more nuanced view, see Giles Gunn. *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 18-20.

² As recounted by Paul Berman, "Wilson and Our Non-Wilsonian Age" in Lewis M. Dabney (ed.) *Edmund Wilson: Centennial Reflections* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 270.

³ 'Pragmatics' is often joined with syntactics and semantics, the former understood as investigating the realms of linguistic grammar and ordering (a true logical grammar, or, later, a universal 'deep structure', being once thought the key to grasping language's truth), and the latter, semantics, focusing on linguistic meaning (which initially was to supplement the failure of a pure syntactical program). The term itself is traceable back to the pragmatists (especially Charles Morris who took the notion over from C. S. Peirce), though pragmatics as a contemporary discipline differs from anything he or they envisioned. See John Lyons, "Semantics", *New Horizons in Linguistics 2*. eds. John Lyons, Richard Coates, Margaret Deuchar, Gerald Gazdar (London: Penguin, 1987), 155.

⁴ Louis Menand, "Missionary: Edmund Wilson and American Culture" in *The New Yorker* 81.23 (8/8/05): 82-88; 87.

⁵ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (London: Fontana, 1984 [1931]), 24.

⁶ See Aristotle *On Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1983), chap 1, a16, 4-9.

⁷ Just to be clear, this is by no means a "knock" against Mallarmé himself, or the criticism of such direct descendants as Maurice Blanchot or Walter Benjamin. What is at issue is the more commonly truncated version of Mallarmé's teaching, which views all language as figural and ignores the syntactical (and even performative dimension) of Mallarmé's experiments. For Mallarmé's influence, see Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), and Benjamin's "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 62-74. For an exploration of the role of syntax and performance in Mallarmé's writing, see Jacques Derrida's "The Double Session" in *Disseminations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 173-286.

⁸ In a recent reinterpretation of naturalism, Jennifer Fleissner, turning around a suggestion of Lukács, has suggested that a hyperbolic attention to the detail marks this literary movement's insertion in history: see her *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10-11. For the detail's relation to modernism in particular, see Naomi Schor's "Lews, Loos, and Lukács" in Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 45-74.

⁹ H. P. Grice in his article "Meaning," which is sometimes retrospectively taken to have inaugurated this field, laid out this criterion, which came to be known as Gricean implicature. See Grice, H. Paul. *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 219.

¹⁰ “Humanity, “the human,” “human history,” and the “human spirit” are constant references in Wilson’s discussion of Michelet in *To the Finland Station* (New York: *New York Review of Books*, 2003 [1940]). See pp. 6, 20, 22, 25, 34, as well as his references to these terms in the rest of this work (e.g., 196).

¹¹ For a similar reading of Michelet, see the use to which Fredric Jameson puts his text in “Marxism and Historicism.” See Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, Vol II. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 158-9.

¹² It may seem odd to view Fourier, and, above all, Owen, as Wilson does, as authors (or actors) who were distant from their own and subsequent generations. Not only is Wilson doubtless in the grip of the standard Marxian interpretation which views them both as “Utopian,” but with regard to Owen he focuses on the widespread collapse of Owen’s own social schemes and projects within his lifetime, rather than on Owen’s arguably more lasting contributions to working-class culture or education. For a good overview of the history of the interpretation of Owen and his legacy in the Anglo-American tradition, see J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: The Quest for the New Moral World*. (Aldershot: Gregg Revivals, 1969). For a more recent examination of Owen’s relation to politics (particularly his disavowal of all political activism) in the context of early British socialism more generally, see Gregory Claeys’ *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 63-105.

¹³ “Inoperative community” and, in my next sentence, “literary communism,” both come from Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community*. Just to be clear, the inoperativity or inexistence of this community for Nancy is not due to any factual failure but is the condition of this community itself, which, as he says, as “a community . . . inscribes . . . the impossibility of community.” See Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 15.

¹⁴ See Derrida’s *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 320-21. For more on the notion of a “literary” communism, see Nancy (1991), 26.

¹⁵ J. Hillis Miller has recently reminded us that Derrida, unlike Nancy, keeps a significant distance from the notion of community (see J. Hillis Miller, “Derrida Enisled” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Winter 2007): 248–276). See my treatment of Derrida’s *Le Toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000) for a discussion of the roots of this difference, which originates from Derrida’s and Nancy’s distinct stances toward Husserl’s analysis of the constitution of intersubjectivity in *Cartesian Meditations V*, see Joshua Kates, “A Problem of No Species: Derrida’s Contribution to Phenomenology,” *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology* 6 (2006): 199-235.

¹⁶ See Menand’s introduction to *To the Finland Station* (v-vi).

¹⁷ Just such archeteleology is conspicuously missing from Wilson’s next major work, *Patriotic Gore*.

¹⁸ A now classic statement of this denial is, of course, Althusser’s in *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1975), 118-44.

¹⁹ See Gunn (1984), 32 for an alternative interpretation.

²⁰ See, among others, *To the Finland Station*, 186, 195.

²¹ For materiality, see Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 210; See also Paul de Man's *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): 67-82 and his *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 27-53.

²² See Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 153, 166.

²³ In *Specters of Marx*, almost in passing, Derrida offers a genealogy of the origins of deconstruction that sees it as rooted in a crisis of Marxist thinking, one stemming from many of the same historical factors that influenced Wilson (15).