

## INTRODUCTION

This book will complete the picture of Edmund Wilson, the writer whose candor, range, flintiness, and erudition have made him a major intellectual and moral resource for literary critics and scholars, social historians, and general readers since the 1920s when he first set up shop. His letters are part of the life blood of his achievement, a steady current of reactions that contain the ideas and emotions of a career. Elena Wilson's 1977 volume *Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912–1972*, with an introduction by Daniel Aaron and a foreword by Leon Edel, gave readers their first sense of Wilson the correspondent, but, in the main, it avoided the personal; this volume is rooted in the personal, the life of the man as son, lover, romantic mentor, husband, friend, neighbor, and day-to-day worker always about the business of using his talent. The letters that follow constitute the unguarded account of a writer's convictions and passions, tastes and prejudices, as they were registered from the late 1910s until the year of his death.

Wilson's famous journal—that decade-by-decade storehouse of impressions—planned; these letters are the spontaneous outpourings of a man in the midst of huge writing projects, overlapping love affairs, and new and long-standing friendships. They contain an atypical American literary success story: the narrative of a writer who transcended the distractions of the marketplace and mass culture and did his thousands of days' work despite the demons of drink, neurosis, and debt. Wilson's relentless schedule, kept up until he was well into his sixties, calls to mind Lionel Trilling's remark about Dickens's social life: the mere listing of its contents was exhausting. Just reading about Wilson's writing regimen and after-hours plans is enough to flatten most of us. And after all the planning and writing and romancing and talking and traveling, he found time to write pithy and forthright letters about what he had done—often exhorting his correspondent to engage in similar literary and social games of endurance. A note of patrician confidence is sustained throughout, a sense that one is entitled to firm positions, promising life chances, solid achievements, and stubborn resistances. Some of this could be overbearing and arrogant, but most of it seems invigorating in our age of victims and excuse-makers. Wilson's passion for reading and writing and for

vigorous exchange with friends never let up. Wherever he was—New York or London, Rome or Tel Aviv, Wellfleet or Talcottville—he got to work and also got out and about to observe and talk.

The contents of the present volume reflect what we least expect in American writers' careers—the second act that Fitzgerald said was most often missing. Wilson's work and life had the spaciousness and coherence of a European career, more like that of V. S. Pritchett or André Malraux than of Fitzgerald himself. Wilson's identity as revealed in the letters rests firmly on his habit of reflection and planning rather than on impulses and exigencies. His work—and the life that was given a measure of stability by the discipline of the work—represents a gradual maturation and clarity of purpose uncharacteristic of his American contemporaries.

This book consists almost entirely of material that Elena Wilson omitted from her edition; the exceptions are the restoration of the complete texts of letters where significant personal material was formerly elided. The sheer magnitude of the Wilson hoard—some 70,000 letters extant, of which a mere 800 or so have seen print, mainly in Mrs. Wilson's volume and in the Nabokov-Wilson correspondence edited by Simon Karlinsky—has required hard and often painful choices on the part of the editors. From the mountainous record remaining to be drawn upon, we have been able to reject notes about business matters and routines that do not resonate. Our decision has been to omit good letters—be they early, middle, or late—to correspondents who are well or better represented elsewhere. We have used flavor or substance or uniqueness as our standards.

And by the last of these criteria this unpublished correspondence does not merely supplement and parallel the letters in previous volumes; the new letters provide fresh evidence about Wilson's more private self. The best evidence of this Wilson has been unavailable to the general public. The fragmentary quotations in biographies and critical studies can never quite provide the authentic experience of Wilson to be gained by reading the letters themselves. We print here for the first time letters to Wilson's parents; his third wife, Mary McCarthy; Lionel Trilling; his English pals Cyril Connolly and Isaiah Berlin; and a less famous friend, Clelia Carroll. Also now included are valuable personal letters to major correspondents such as Elena Mumm Thornton, Morton Dauwen Zabel, and Upstate neighbors of his later years: Dick and Jo Costa, Mary Pcolar, and Glyn and Gladys Morris. His letters about literary business to William Shawn and Roger Straus are often memorable amalgams of hard-headed negotiation and abrasive or friendly banter. Taken altogether, in development, texture, and tone, these letters constitute a kind of autobiography.