



**TO THE FINLAND
STATION**

EDMUND WILSON

INTRODUCTION BY
LOUIS MENAND

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

TO THE FINLAND STATION

EDMUND WILSON (1895–1972) is widely regarded as the preeminent American man of letters of the twentieth century. Over his long career, he wrote for *Vanity Fair*, helped edit *The New Republic*, served as chief book critic for *The New Yorker*, and was a frequent contributor to *The New York Review of Books*. Wilson was the author of more than twenty books, including *Axel's Castle*, *Patriotic Gore*, and a work of fiction, *Memoirs of Hecate County*.

LOUIS MENAND is Distinguished Professor of English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. He is the author of *The Metaphysical Club*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for History and the Francis Parkman Prize in 2002, and *American Studies*, a collection of essays.

**TO THE
FINLAND STATION**

A STUDY IN THE WRITING AND
ACTING OF HISTORY

EDMUND WILSON

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FOREWORD

THE HISTORICAL ROMANCE

TO THE FINLAND STATION was published in September 1940. It was not the ideal moment for a book about the intellectual origins of the Russian Revolution to appear. A month earlier, in Mexico City, Leon Trotsky had had his head split open with an ice axe. A year before that, the Soviet Union had signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, effectively allowing Hitler to invade Poland—the start of the Second World War. For five years before that, beginning with the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934, Stalin had systematically liquidated political opposition within the Soviet Union. The purges were preceded by an economic program of collectivization that led to the deaths of more than five million people. By 1940, disillusionment with Soviet communism was well established among intellectuals in the West. André Gide, George Orwell, and John Dos Passos had written firsthand accounts of the brutality and hypocrisy of contemporary communism—Gide and Dos Passos after visits to Russia, Orwell after going to Spain. *Partisan Review* had already become the organ of the anti-Communist left.

By the time his book came out, Wilson himself had stopped trying to defend the “Soviet experiment.” In 1935, when he was beginning work on *To the Finland Station*, he had tried to persuade Dos Passos that Stalin was a true Marxist, “working for socialism in Russia.” Soon afterward, Wilson went to Russia himself. He published his journal of the visit, along with material about travels in the United States, in a book pointedly entitled *Travels in Two Democracies*. In fact, Wilson had had to censor his own diaries in order to conceal evidence of the fear and

oppression he had seen. By 1938, he was no longer pretending. "They haven't even the beginnings of democratic institutions; but they are actually worse off in that respect than when they started," he confessed to a friend. "They have totalitarian domination by a political machine." He understood the implications for the book he was writing. "I am about to try to wind up the *Finland Station*," he sadly informed Louise Bogan in October 1939, "(now that the Soviets are about to annex Finland)."

To the Finland Station was published by Harcourt Brace. By January 1947, it had sold only 4,527 copies. Doubleday took over the rights and reprinted it in 1947, but sales continued to be slow. The book did not begin to attract readers until it came out as one of the first of the Anchor paperbacks, in 1953. Anchor reprinted it in 1955 and 1958. It sold decently in the 1960s, and in 1972, the last year of Wilson's life, Farrar, Straus and Giroux published a new edition with an introduction by Wilson reassessing his interpretation of Soviet communism. "This book of mine," he explains, "assumes throughout that an important step in progress has been made, that a fundamental 'breakthrough' had occurred, that nothing in our human history would ever be the same again. I had no premonition that the Soviet Union was to become one of the most hideous tyrannies that the world had ever known, and Stalin the most cruel and unscrupulous of the merciless Russian tsars. This book should therefore be read as a basically reliable account of what the revolutionists thought they were doing in the interests of a 'better world.'"

This didn't entirely meet the difficulty. Wilson did know what was going on in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, as the pages on Stalin in *To the Finland Station* make clear. The problem wasn't with Stalin; the problem was with Lenin, who is the hero of the book, its ideal type of the intellectual as man of action. Wilson admitted that he had relied exclusively on publications controlled by the Party for his portrait of Lenin. (It is not true, as he suggests, that no critical accounts were available to him: the English translation of the émigré Mark Landau-Aldanov's *Lenin* was published, by Dutton, in 1922.) Lenin was charismatic, and he could create an impression of selfless humanitarianism. He was also a savage and ruthless politician—a "pail

of the milk of human kindness with a dead rat at the bottom," as Vladimir Nabokov explained to Wilson after reading *To the Finland Station* in 1940. In his introduction to the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition, Wilson provided a glimpse of the rat. He did not go on to explain in that introduction (though he had done so in an appendix to the Anchor edition, "Summary as of 1940," which is reprinted elsewhere as "Marxism at the End of the Thirties" and is included as Appendix E in this edition) that the most notorious features of Stalin's regime—the use of terror, the show trials, and the concentration camps—had all been inaugurated, in Russia, by Lenin.

And yet *To the Finland Station* is, if not a great book, a grand book. It brings a vanished world to life. Writing history is an imaginative act. Few people would deny this, but not everyone agrees on what it means. It doesn't mean, obviously, that historians may alter or suppress the facts, because that is not being imaginative; it's being dishonest. The role of imagination in writing history isn't to make up things that aren't there; it's to make sensible the things that are there. When you undertake historical research, two truths that once sounded banal come to seem profound. The first is that your knowledge of the past—apart, occasionally, from a limited visual record and the odd unreliable survivor—comes entirely from written documents. You are almost completely cut off, by a wall of print, from the life you have set out to represent. You can't observe historical events; you can't question historical actors; you can't even know most of what has not been written about. Whatever *has* been written about therefore takes on an importance which may be spurious. A few lines in a memoir, a snatch of recorded conversation, a letter fortuitously preserved, an event noted in a diary: all become luminous with significance—even though these are just the bits that have floated to the surface. The historian clings to them, while somewhere below, the huge submerged wreck of the past sinks silently out of sight.

The second realization that strikes you is, in a way, the opposite of the first: the more material you dredge up, the more bits and pieces you recover, the more elusive the subject becomes. In

the case of a historical figure, there is usually a standard biographical interpretation, constructed around a small number of details: diary entries, letters, secondhand anecdotes, putatively autobiographical passages in the published work. Out of these details, a psychological profile is constructed, which, in the circular process that characterizes most biographical enterprise, is then used to interpret the details. It is almost always possible, though, by ranging a little more widely or digging a little deeper, to find details that are inconsistent with the standard interpretation, or that seem to point to a different interpretation, or that have been ignored because they are fragments that don't support any coherent interpretation. And usually there's a level of detail below that, and on and on. One instinct you need in doing historical research is knowing when to keep dredging stuff up; another is knowing when to stop.

You stop when you feel that you've got it, and this is where imagination matters. The test for a successful history is the same as the test for a successful novel: integrity in motion. It's not the facts, snapshots of the past, that make a history; it's the story, the facts run by the eye at the correct speed. Novelists sometimes explain their work by saying that they invent a character, put the character in a situation, and then wait to see what the character will do. History is not different. The historian's character has to do what the real person has done, of course, but there is an uncanny way in which this can seem to happen almost spontaneously. The "Marx" that the historian has imagined keeps behaving, in every new set of conditions, like Marx. This gives the description of the conditions a plausibility, too: the person fits the time. The world turns beneath the character's marching feet. The figures and the landscape come to life together, and the chart of their movements makes a continuous motion, a narrative. The past reveals itself to have a plot.

This may seem a fanciful account of the way history is written. It is not a fanciful account of the way history is read, though. Readers expect an illusion of seamlessness, and they will try to project one onto even the most static or disorganized text. Once the illusion locks in, they credit the historian with having brought the past to life. Nothing else matters as much, and it is

hard to see how the reader could have this experience if the historian had not had it first. The intuition of the whole precedes the accumulation of the parts. There is no other way, really, for the mind to work.

This is why historical research is an empirical enterprise and history-writing is an imaginative one. We read histories for information, but what is it we want the information for? The answer is a little paradoxical: we want the information in order to acquire the ability to understand the information. At some point we want the shell of facts to burst, and to feel that we are inside the moment. "Tell me about yourself," says a stranger at a party. You can recite your résumé, but what you really want to express, and what the stranger (assuming her interest is genuine) really wants to know, is what it is like to be you. You wish (assuming *your* interest is genuine) that you could just open up your mind and let her look in. Information alone doesn't do it. A single intuition of what it was like to be Marx, or Proust, or Gertrude Stein, or the ordinary man on the late-modern street, how they thought and how the world looked to them, is worth a thousand facts; for when we are equipped with the intuition, every fact becomes sensible. A residual positivism makes fact and intuition seem antithetical terms: hard knowledge versus subjective empathy. This has the priorities backward. Intuitive knowledge—the sense of what the world was like when we were not there to experience it—is precisely the knowledge that we seek. It is the true positive of historical work.

Wilson had a gift for getting inside the writers he liked (and no gift at all for the writers he didn't like). The only American critic of his time with a comparable talent, I think, was Alfred Kazin. Getting inside a historical moment is a more complicated thing. In *Axel's Castle*, Wilson attempted to create a narrative about modernist literature; in *Patriotic Gore*, he attempted to create one about American culture in the aftermath of the Civil War. Neither book successfully transcends its parts. This is because Wilson had a journalist's queasiness about big ideas. Complication is the reporter's natural enemy, and Wilson favored nice, low-concept metaphors: the pendulum theory of literary form in *Axel's Castle*; the wound theory of artistic creation in *The*

Wound and the Bow; the sea-slug theory of history (the larger entity consumes the smaller) in *Patriotic Gore*. These are premises that kill context, because they reduce everything to the same, single-term explanation. Wilson could get inside Proust and Joyce in *Axel's Castle*, and inside Lincoln and Holmes in *Patriotic Gore*; but those books read more like a series of portraits than a narrative.

To the Finland Station is something else. Wilson was clearly excited to find a subject with the natural arc that this one seemed to have, and his excitement is transmitted to the reader. It is not surprising that the title was inspired by a novel—Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Wilson saw his book as a story, and he aimed for a story's sense of suspense. Even when you know where the characters in *To the Finland Station* will end up, you are eager to find out where they end up. The plot is simple enough: the decline of the bourgeois revolutionary tradition, the emergence of revolutionary socialism, the triumph of communism. There are things Wilson left out that would have complicated his story: the persistence of a non-Communist socialist ideal in England, France, and Germany, for example; the liberal tradition in Russian politics (to which Nabokov's father belonged); the success and failure of the Mensheviks, which is barely mentioned. And, of course, if the book were being written now, the vicious side of Marxist and Leninist thought, mostly a subtext in Wilson's account, would guide the direction of the arc, and the story would touch down in Siberia or Berlin rather than the Finland Station.

But we don't read *To the Finland Station* today as a book about the Russian Revolution. It's not the promise of the title that draws us; the interest is in the subject named in the subtitle: "A Study in the Writing and Acting of History." History is the true subject of Wilson's book, and what he so successfully evokes is what it felt like to believe—as Vico and Michelet, Fourier and Saint-Simon, Hegel and Marx, Lenin and Trotsky all believed—that history holds the key to the meaning of life. Though he was mistaken about the character of Lenin, and mistaken, too, about the future of capitalism, Wilson was justified in arguing, in the in-

roduction to the 1972 edition, that his book constituted “a basically reliable account of what the revolutionists thought they were doing in the interests of a ‘better world.’” His portraits of Babeuf, Owen, Lassalle, Bakunin, and so on, figures whose ideas already seemed remote in 1940, have that inward quality: they show people thinking in response to circumstances. W. H. Auden once wrote that a man trying to save himself from drowning is an intellectual, because he is thinking about his condition. Almost all the characters in Wilson’s story believed themselves to be drowning, and the belief drove them not to panic or to despair, but to thought. And they *were* drowning: their dream of social justice was destroyed again and again after 1848, just as the dream of brotherhood and equality had been destroyed by Napoleon after 1789. This pathos is part of their story, and Wilson knew it. If he had made Lenin into the Napoleon he was—if he had made Lenin’s betrayal of socialism repeat Napoleon’s betrayal of the rights of man—he would have given his story its true trajectory.

He couldn’t bring himself to do it. Wilson’s evocation of the belief in history is so successful because when he first came up with the idea of writing *To the Finland Station*—he remembered that he had been walking one day, in the midst of the Depression, down a New York street in the East Fifties—he believed it, too. Wilson was instinctively skeptical of Marxism—he distrusted theory—and never a member of the Party. But he, too, thought that history had a design, and that the Depression was an event fully comprehensible within the context of that design. It was the long-predicted collapse of the capitalist order. Along with its value as a window on the nineteenth century, *To the Finland Station* is a poignant artifact of the 1930s, a time when many people thought (and the world gave them good reasons for thinking it) that history was something you could get on the right side or the wrong side of. It was an idea indistinguishable from faith, and for many people Marx was its prophet.

Like many of the artistic, political, and philosophical movements in the North Atlantic states in the second half of the nineteenth century—like pragmatism and aestheticism and anarchism—Marxism was a response to modernity, to the rise of industrialism, urbanism, and a global economy characterized by

legalistic and bureaucratic authority, and by gradual cultural homogenization. The response of each state, and of groups within each state, to these developments was different, because each state and each group was propelled into modernity by distinctive events, and drew on distinctive traditions to make sense of what was happening. Marx was a man of the 1840s—as were Dostoevsky, Herzen, Bakunin, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Wagner, and Mazzini. They were all shaped by the promise and failure of the European revolutions of 1848. They dreamed that the world was about to turn a corner, the corner it had tried to turn once before, at the time of the French Revolution, and that nothing would ever be the same; when they awoke, the old order was still there—in many ways, it seemed, more reactionary and more philistine than ever. This is the generational story Flaubert told in *Sentimental Education*, and it is what Marx was referring to in the famous phrase in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” In the decades that followed, the North Atlantic states (including the United States, which was launched into modernity by the Civil War) underwent what is sometimes called the second industrial revolution—a ratcheting-up of technology and productive capacity that completed the process of modernization.

What is the feeling of modernity that all these figures were reacting to? “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation”: the words were written on the eve of the 1848 revolutions. They are, of course, from *The Communist Manifesto*. “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” Capital is the great solvent. Change is the new, the only, constant.

In premodern societies, the ends of life are given at the beginning of life: people do things in their generation so that the same things will continue to be done in the next generation. Meaning is immanent in all the ordinary customs and practices of existence,

since these are inherited from the past, and are therefore worth reproducing. The idea is to make the world go not forward, only around. In modern societies, the ends of life are not given at the beginning of life; they are thought to be created or discovered. The reproduction of the customs and practices of the group is no longer the chief purpose of existence; the idea is not to repeat, but to change, to move the world forward. Meaning is no longer immanent in the practices of ordinary life, since those practices are understood by everyone to be contingent and time-bound. This is why death, in modern societies, is the great taboo, an absurdity, the worst thing one can imagine. For at the close of life people cannot look back and know that they have accomplished the task set for them at birth. This knowledge always lies up ahead, somewhere over history's horizon. Modern societies don't know what will count as valuable in the conduct of life in the long run, because they have no way of knowing what conduct the long run will find itself in a position to respect. The only certain knowledge death comes with is the knowledge that the values of one's own time, the values one has tried to live by, are expungeable.

Marxism gave a meaning to modernity. It said that, wittingly or not, the individual performs a role in a drama that has a shape and a goal, a trajectory, and that modernity will turn out to be just one act in that drama. Historical change is not arbitrary. It is generated by class conflict; it is faithful to an inner logic; it points toward an end, which is the establishment of the classless society. Marxism was founded on an appeal for social justice, but there were many forms that such an appeal might have taken. Its deeper attraction was the discovery of meaning, a meaning in which human beings might participate, in history itself. When Wilson explained, in his introduction to the 1972 edition of *To the Finland Station*, that his book had been written under the assumption that "an important step in progress has been made, that a fundamental 'breakthrough' had occurred," this is the faith he was referring to.

Projecting the meaning of life onto the future, imagining the individual as an incomplete element in a larger process, was an activity by no means restricted to Marxism in the nineteenth

century. *On the Origin of Species*, which was published eleven years after *The Communist Manifesto* (and was much admired by Marx), also described a universe ruled by chance and change. But Herbert Spencer, and the Social Darwinists, found a teleology in Darwin's theory, and a rationale for change. Social Darwinism figured individuals as limited partners in the enterprise of racial perfection. Individual failure or success was not arbitrary, according to their interpretation of Darwin; it was a byproduct of the natural operation of "selection."

The thinker standing behind Marx was not Darwin, of course; it was Hegel, and Hegel gave Wilson the most trouble in writing his book. "My great handicap, I find, in dealing with all this is my lack of grounding in German philosophy," he confessed to his old Princeton teacher Christian Gauss in 1937. "Dialectical materialism, which was in revolt against the German idealistic tradition, really comes right out of it; and you would have to know everybody from Kant down to give a really sound account of it. I have never done anything with German philosophy, and can't bear it, and am having a hard time now propping that part of my story up." He never did get it properly figured out.

The dialectic was just the sort of high-theory concept that Wilson reflexively avoided. At the same time, he was never a man quick to concede his ignorance of anything, and he devoted a chapter of *To the Finland Station* to explaining that the dialectic is basically a religious myth (a characteristic exercise in journalistic debunking). Wilson had no idea what he was talking about. The two-paragraph explanation he gives of the term at the beginning of the chapter on "The Myth of the Dialectic"—the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model—is not the dialectic of Hegel. It is the dialectic of Fichte. And Marx and Engels did not name their method "dialectical materialism." That was a term assigned to it by Georgi Plekhanov, the man who, after Marx's death, introduced Marxism to Russia. Marx and Engels referred to their method as "historical materialism."

Still, they were Hegelians. Hegel's dialectic was part of their way of doing philosophy, and they did engage in extrapolations of it—for example, to biology and the differential calculus—that Wilson was not mistaken in ridiculing. But the use of the

dialectic as a historical method is the strongest element in Marxist philosophy. In every social formation, there is a relation between (in Marxist terms) the material base and the ideological superstructure, and the relation functions dialectically: each is analytically quasi-independent of the other, yet each is also completely imbricated in the other, because they are both aspects of, abstractions from, a single spatiotemporal whole. And in every ideological formation, there is a flip side, a negative image of the dominant belief system, because belief systems depend on what they suppress, exclude, and ignore. From one perspective, the outside—the suppressed and excluded—defines the inside. And every paradigm contains the seed of its own undoing, the limit-case that, as it is approached, begins to unravel the whole construct. You don't have to be an enemy of bourgeois capitalism to think this way. It's just a fruitful method of doing historical criticism.

Wilson was not drawn to dialectical thinking—he mocks “the Dialectic” in all his writings on Marxism—in part because thinking dialectically is something American intellectuals don't naturally do. John Dewey was one of the few who did, and Dewey was trained as a Hegelian. American critics tend to prefer a binary analysis: thumbs up or thumbs down, high or low, tonic or toxin. It is difficult for them to see that most cultural products work in several ways at once. It is even harder for them to see that each element in a cultural system is implicated in, depends for its value on, all the others—so that to alter one element is to alter every element. Their overpowering impulse is, like Wilson's, to isolate and to simplify. Yet what makes *To the Finland Station* stand out from the rest of Wilson's work is that it succeeds in representing history as a reciprocal interaction between individual agency and social change. And, whatever Wilson's hopes and intentions, it does reveal Marxism to contain the seeds of its own undoing. Like Carlyle and Dickens and the Dostoevsky of *Notes from the Underground*, Marx was a great hater. Wilson saw this, and he drew out the implications. It was possibly a personality trait that, at some level, he identified with.

What is best in American criticism is something that Wilson had plenty of. He was a skeptic. He believed, when he started his book, that Marx and Engels were the *philosophes* of a second Enlightenment. The notion appealed to him because he was himself, in many respects, a man of the eighteenth century (and liked to say so in later life). The pose of seeing through other people's illusions and the distrust of abstract ideas were part of this persona. Empiricism and common sense—Hume and Johnson, the reporter and the critic—were all the philosophy Wilson required. Marxism is part theory and part praxis. What Wilson most admired about it was the practical side: people were suffering under the conditions of industrial capitalism, and something needed to be done for them. He thought of the theory as an interesting example of the use of ideas as a spur to action.

Wilson understood the central flaw in Marx's *Capital*: the labor theory of value, on which the prediction of capitalism's collapse depends. Marx had assumed—and he was by no means iconoclastic in this: it is a view shared by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, as well—that the value of a commodity is a function of the labor required to produce it. This assumption gave Marx the notion (which he *did* invent) of "surplus value," which represents the manufacturer's profit, "stolen work." As economists after Marx pointed out, the value, or price, of a good is also, and legitimately, a function of demand. Buyers will bid up the price of a scarce good no matter how little labor was required to produce it. Of course, workers want to get the value of their labor back; people don't produce commodities that no one will buy. But labor and demand are just two of many factors that determine price. "The truth," as Wilson wrote, "is that all such theories are incomplete: real prices are the results of situations much more complex than any of these formulas, and complicated by psychological factors which economists seldom take into account." Still, Wilson thought that Marx had at least identified the disease of modern life and had courageously set about anatomizing its symptoms, and the pages on *Capital* are, intellectually, the most astute in the book.

As attracted as he was to the idea that history has a meaning, Wilson was also wary of the hypostatization of history that he

saw as endemic to Marxism, and that he condemned particularly in Trotsky. "History, then," as he describes this tendency at the end of the chapter on Bakunin, "is a being with a definite point of view in any given period. It has a morality which admits of no appeal. . . . Knowing this—knowing, that is, that we are *right*—we may allow ourselves to exaggerate and simplify." And in the chapter called "Trotsky Identifies History with Himself," Wilson describes Trotsky's speech to the Mensheviks following the Bolshevik seizure of power, in which he told them, "You are pitiful isolated individuals. You are bankrupt; your role is played out. Go where you belong from now on—the rubbish-can of history!" Wilson observes, mildly, that "there sometimes turn out to be valuable objects cast away in the rubbish-can of history—things that have to be retrieved later on. From the point of view of the Stalinist Soviet Union, that is where Trotsky himself is today; and he might well discard his earlier assumption that an isolated individual needs must be 'pitiful' for the conviction of Dr. Stockman in Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* that 'the strongest man is he who stands most alone.'" This, too, was something Wilson saw and admired in Marx, and something he might have wished to feel, with some justice, about himself.

Wilson's consistent disparagement of Trotsky in *To the Finland Station* is striking, given that many of the writers Wilson knew in the late 1930s and early 1940s, at *Partisan Review* particularly, were or had been Trotskyists. But it is not atypical of Wilson. Wilson was a dissident even from organized dissidence. He voted for the Communist candidate, William Z. Foster, in the 1932 presidential elections, and he signed, in the same year, a manifesto calling for "a temporary dictatorship of class-conscious workers . . . as the necessary instrument for abolishing all classes based on material wealth." But the manifesto, as he carefully pointed out when it was being circulated for signatures, was drawn up without the collaboration or knowledge of the Communist Party. Even while he was writing *To the Finland Station*, Wilson was sparring with Communists and fellow travelers at *The New Republic* and elsewhere, and he took his lumps from them in return. The more one thinks about Wilson's own headstrong instincts and his antipathy to systems, the more remarkable

his devotion of eight years of his life to this book—which required him to learn both German and Russian—comes to seem. Possibly it can be explained by saying that in the end, Wilson was a writer. He thought he had found a good story to tell, and for a writer, that is usually enough.

The stubbornness helps to explain why, unlike many other American intellectuals of his generation (Kazin, again, was like Wilson in this), Wilson did not rebel against the politics of his youth. He renounced communism and the Soviet Union in the 1950s, but he did not become an anti-Communist crusader. One of his later books, *The Cold War and the Income Tax*, was an attack on anticommunism and American foreign policy, and a book so intemperate that it was received as virtually anti-American. After Wilson published it, he set out to create “an American Pléiade”—the project now realized as the Library of America. He chose to be a patriot on his own terms. Among other surprising things, *The Cold War and the Income Tax* disclosed how little money Wilson made from his writing. Wilson’s sense of vocation was too urgent for him to calculate the impression he might be creating. In the last decades of his life, he shuttled between Wellfleet and Talcottville, indifferent to almost everything but his story of the moment: Russian writers, the literature of the Civil War, the Dead Sea Scrolls. Wilson had lost his faith in history, but he still resembles, in his final years, the great isolatos he had brought to life in the pages of *To the Finland Station*: Michelet, Saint-Simon, above all, Marx himself—writing ceaselessly in a chaotic household, his books selling few copies, his wife ill, his children crawling all over him, the rent collector at the door, and his inner gaze fixed raptly on history, the courtesan of every ideology.

—LOUIS MENAND