



From Kafka's *Castle* to *Axel's Castle*: Nabokov vs Wilson as Critics of Modernism

Diment Galya

[Pour citer cet article](#)

Diment Galya, « From Kafka's *Castle* to *Axel's Castle*: Nabokov vs Wilson as Critics of Modernism », *Cycnos*, vol. 12.2 (*Nabokov: At the Crossroads of Modernism and Postmodernism*), 1995, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/430>

Lien vers la notice <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/430>

Lien du document <http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/cycnos/430.pdf>

[Cycnos, études anglophones](#)

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

AVERTISSEMENT

Les publications déposées sur la plate-forme épi-revel sont protégées par les dispositions générales du Code de la propriété intellectuelle. Conditions d'utilisation : respect du droit d'auteur et de la propriété intellectuelle.

L'accès aux références bibliographiques, au texte intégral, aux outils de recherche, au feuilletage de l'ensemble des revues est libre, cependant article, recension et autre contribution sont couvertes par le droit d'auteur et sont la propriété de leurs auteurs. Les utilisateurs doivent toujours associer à toute unité documentaire les éléments bibliographiques permettant de l'identifier correctement, notamment toujours faire mention du nom de l'auteur, du titre de l'article, de la revue et du site épi-revel. Ces mentions apparaissent sur la page de garde des documents sauvegardés ou imprimés par les utilisateurs. L'université Côte d'Azur est l'éditeur du portail épi-revel et à ce titre détient la propriété intellectuelle et les droits d'exploitation du site. L'exploitation du site à des fins commerciales ou publicitaires est interdite ainsi que toute diffusion massive du contenu ou modification des données sans l'accord des auteurs et de l'équipe d'épi-revel.

EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

From Kafka's Castle to Axel's Castle: Nabokov vs Wilson
as Critics of Modernism

Galya Diment

University of Washington

It may be somewhat unfair to put Nabokov's and Wilson's critical *œuvre* side by side without significant qualification. Nabokov, after all, developed most of his critical readings of books and authors in a series of undergraduate lectures, published posthumously and thus not even edited or amplified by the author himself, while Wilson was a prolific professional critic with numerous volumes of critical writings to his name. In fact, Wilson, who usually does not fare very well in Nabokov criticism because of his turbulent relationship with Nabokov, is often seen outside of Nabokov studies as this century's most important and most influential American critic. Thus Jason Epstein, who knew Wilson well, wrote recently in *The New York Review of Books* that his friend was undoubtedly "his country's foremost literary critic," and, in *The American Edmund Wilson*, Robert Alter describes Wilson as "the least bored of modern intellectuals, constantly finding new materials to read and new scenes to explore" (Epstein, 4; Alter, 171).

One should further bear in mind that Wilson's volume on Modernism — *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* — was one of the first of its kind not only in the United States but also in Europe. The book appeared in 1931, at a time when, as Wilson himself stated in the introduction, "it [was] not usually recognized that writers such as W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Proust and Paul Valéry represent a self-conscious and very important literary movement" (Wilson, 1931, 1). "Modernism" as a term was not in circulation yet either, and Wilson had to find ways to christen the new school himself. He opted to place it under the general umbrella of "Symbolism" yet he was never totally satisfied with this solution. "As for Symbolism," he wrote to R. P. Blackmur the same year the book was published, "it is a misleading word but it seemed to me the only word there was" (Wilson, 1977, 205). The word seemed misleading because Wilson felt that the movement was less homogeneous than the term may imply since the writers he was discussing appeared to have been shaped not only by Symbolism but also by Flaubert-inspired "Naturalism" (Wilson, 1931, 25).

By the time Nabokov came to deal with some of the same writers in a series of lectures he delivered at Cornell in the 1950s, the movement had been long identified and the terms long set. However, valuing individual talent far above any belonging to a school or a movement, Nabokov probably could not have cared less if Wilson (and other critics) had never bothered to identify yet another "-ism" in literature. And that was, obviously, not the only difference that existed between him and Edmund Wilson as critics.

These differences come out clearly despite the disparity in the volume or quality of their respective criticism, and they are definitely worthy of our attention. Those differences appear particularly revealing when one compares Wilson's and Nabokov's responses to two of the most influential figures of European Modernism, James Joyce and Franz Kafka. Thus Wilson, while a superb critic of Joyce, was totally inept when it came to appreciating Kafka, while Nabokov, a keen and superior reader of Kafka, was less than sufficient as a critic of Joyce. One of the more interesting questions for me — and one which I will try to explore in this paper — is why it was that the critical responses to these particular modernists came to crystallize the essential disagreements between Nabokov and Wilson in their approaches to art in general, and to Modernism, in particular.

James Joyce

Wilson was one of the earliest fans of James Joyce. Thus in 1917 he already hailed Joyce to Scott Fitzgerald as a writer to study and learn from: “you should read James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which is probably [one] of the best novels of the century” (Wilson, 1977, 30). In subsequent letters to Fitzgerald, Wilson consistently praised Joyce’s “rigorous form [...] polished style and [...] complete detachment” (Wilson, 1977, 46). He also remarked that Joyce’s first published novel depicted the “ugly sides of his life as accurately [...] as the inspired and beautiful ones” (Wilson, 1977, 46). Wilson’s early response to *Ulysses* appears to have been more mixed. “You must read Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” he wrote to Stanley Dell in May of 1922. “It contains some of the most brilliant and some of the dreariest and dullest writing of the age” (Wilson, 1977, 83). With each rereading of *Ulysses*, however, Wilson appeared to like the novel more and more. “I have been rereading parts of Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” he informed another friend in 1924, “and I am more than ever convinced of its importance” (Wilson, 1977, 121). By the time Wilson came to write *Axel’s Castle*, several rereadings later, his belief in the greatness of *Ulysses* was quite unshakable. “The world of *Ulysses* is animated by a complex inexhaustible life,” he wrote there, “we revisit it as we do a city, where we come more and more to recognize faces, to understand personalities, to grasp relations, currents and events [...] To have exhibited ordinary humanity without either satirizing it or sentimentalizing it — this would already have been sufficiently remarkable: but to have subdued all this material to the uses of a supremely finished and disciplined work of art is a feat which has hardly been equaled in the literature of our time” (Wilson, 1931, 210, 220).

As everybody here knows, by now critical literature on Joyce is vaster than that on any other twentieth century writer. Many of Wilson’s points about the novel may sound to us rather commonplace, since they have been repeated and amplified by subsequent generations of Joyce scholars, but it is important to remember that Wilson was among the first to make them. Thus, back in the twenties and thirties, while others around him were often still baffled by the figure of the cuckolded Dublin Jew and what he was supposed to signify, Wilson became one of the first to perceive Bloom as a superb literary achievement, a uniquely complex and, in the long run, heroic character:

It is the proof of Joyce’s greatness that, though we recognize Bloom’s perfect truth and typical character, we cannot pigeonhole him in any familiar category. [...] It is difficult to describe the character of Bloom as Joyce finally makes us feel it: it takes precisely the whole of *Ulysses* to put him before us. It is not merely that Bloom is mediocre, that he is clever, that he is commonplace — that he is comic, that he is pathetic [...] he is all of these, he is all the possibilities of that ordinary humanity which is somehow not so ordinary after all [...] (Wilson, 1931, 223).

Many years before Ellmann, Wilson precociously appreciated the importance of the autobiographical material not only in Stephen but also in Bloom (something Nabokov would largely dismiss). And, very much unlike Nabokov, he also aptly perceived that *Ulysses*’ “real depth and scope” could not be properly understood without the larger Homeric frame Joyce chose to impose on his novel by calling it *Ulysses* (Wilson, 1931, 192). Wilson was also one of the first to speak of Bloom’s triumphs, rather than failures (Wilson, 1977, 512), of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy as “one of the most remarkable things of the kind ever written” (Wilson, 1977, 82), and of *Finnegans Wake* as a serious work worthy of studying.¹

In 1939, after the appearance of Harry Levin’s monograph on Joyce, Wilson fervently argued with Levin’s — and later Nabokov’s — notion that most of *Ulysses* was just a clever stylistic play without deep philosophical underpinnings:

¹ See Wilson’s *Guide to Finnegans Wake* (Wilson, 1950), pp. 182-89.

I don't think Joyce is really at all frivolous. Underneath there is a masterly grasp of fundamental psychological processes. He is unconventional from the point of view of most serious modern literature in making these things humorous, but [...] I have always thought that his psychological researches were the most interesting of our time in literature, and in a way the most scientific because he analyses the human consciousness into a thousand combinations and nuances and yet always leaves it organic" (Wilson, 1977, 181-82).

This is the key to Wilson's love for and understanding of *Ulysses*, and this key provides an interesting point of comparison with Nabokov.

Despite the fact that Nabokov indeed considered *Ulysses* "by far the greatest English novel of the century" (as opposed to *Finnegans Wake* which he, unlike Wilson, "detested") (SL, 350), his praise for *Ulysses* is overall much more reserved than Wilson's. At several points Nabokov even appears to have Wilson, among others, directly in mind when he states to his audience that while "*Ulysses* is a splendid and permanent structure, [...] it has been slightly overrated by the kind of critic who is more interested in ideas and generalities and human aspects than in the work of art itself" (LL, 288).

Having said that, and about to start discussing in a wonderfully Nabokovian fashion the precious details of *Ulysses* that had caught his artistic and creative fancy, Nabokov then proceeds to give a quick summary of the main theme of the book which many a devoted reader of Joyce will find quite baffling. "It is very simple," Nabokov declares to his students, "1. The hopeless past [...] 2. The ridiculous and tragic present [...] 3. The pathetic future [...]" (LL, 288). Thus where Wilson — and by now a majority of Joyce scholars — sees triumphs, affirmations, and world-recreations, Nabokov sees only hopelessness and bleakness. To be fair, Nabokov also sees a wealth of artistic fun and games, many of which apparently eluded Wilson — which is not surprising, for, as a creative writer himself, Nabokov obviously was better equipped to see a fellow writer's hidden artistic treasures than was Wilson, whose main sensibilities were those of a critic and a journalist. It should be noted, however, that some of what Nabokov observes in *Ulysses* and states with the strength of conviction so typical of him, is not necessarily convincing to his readers, like his assertion that the man who appears in the novel wearing a brown mackintosh is "no other than the author himself" (LL, 320). As Julian Moynihan points out in the recent *Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, this is an instance of Nabokov "at his most playful and arbitrary" (Alexandrov, 441.) Other playful examples Nabokov gives are less problematic even if still arguable. My favorite among them is Nabokov's suggestion that "on the night of 15 June to 16 June, Stephen Dedalus in his tower at Sandycove, and Mr. Bloom in the connubial bed in his house on Eccles Street dream the same dream" (LL, 328).

But despite occasional gems and highly entertaining and illuminating close readings, Nabokov's treatment of Joyce's novel falls far short of the mark. As I have suggested earlier, and as you all obviously know, Nabokov dismissed both the autobiographical and the Homeric elements in *Ulysses*. "Critics tend to identify Stephen with young Joyce himself," Nabokov would tell his students, "but that is neither here nor there" (LL, 286). He also would warn them "against seeing in Leopold Bloom's humdrum wanderings and minor adventures on a summer day in Dublin a close parody of the *Odyssey*" (LL, 288). Some of his students apparently defied the admonition, for which they had to pay rather dearly since, as Nabokov proudly announced to BBC's Robert Hughes in 1965, he "once gave a student a C-minus, or perhaps a D-plus, just for applying to [*Ulysses*'] chapters the titles borrowed from Homer [...]" (SO, 55).

Having thus stripped the novel of its unique autobiographical elements, on the one hand, and universal Homeric dimensions, on the other, Nabokov, in essence, dismissed much too much of *Ulysses*' complexity and richness to give the novel full justice. In the process, he also severely handicapped his own ability to interpret the novel in general (as we can see from his

highly problematic summary of the book), and its main protagonist, Leopold Bloom, in particular.

When interpreting Bloom, Nabokov, in fact, sounds surprisingly prudish, literal, and simplistic. Thus, he complains, again and again, that “in the sexual department, Bloom is, if not on the verge of insanity, at least a good clinical example of extreme sexual preoccupation and perversity with all kinds of curious complications.” Contrary to his own literary practices and those he admired in others, Nabokov also all of a sudden demands nothing but verisimilitude from Joyce in his portrayal of Bloom as an “ordinary citizen,” and actually insinuates that there is a uniform way of thinking and feeling for all ordinary citizens: “[I]n Bloom’s mind and in Joyce’s book the theme of sex is continually mixed and intertwined with the theme of latrine. God knows I have no objection whatsoever to the so-called frankness in novels. On the contrary, we have too little of it [...] But I do object to the following: Bloom is supposed to be a rather ordinary citizen. Now it is not true that the mind of an ordinary citizen continuously dwells on physiological things.”² Nabokov even goes as far as to call Bloom’s tendencies “pathological” (LL, 287).

I will return to Nabokov’s seeming inability to deal with some of the more sexually explicit material in Joyce in the final part of my paper but now, as a convenient transition to our discussion of Wilson’s and Nabokov’s treatment of Kafka, I would like to point to one instance where Nabokov’s understanding of Joyce’s intentions actually surpassed Wilson’s. Having grasped almost everything else in the novel, Wilson, nevertheless, had a hard time explaining to himself and his readers why Joyce made Bloom a Jew. “Joyce has made him a Jew, one supposes,” he writes, “partly in order that he may be conceived equally well as an inhabitant of any provincial city of the European or Europeanized world” (Wilson, 1931, 222-23). Never having been an exile himself, and having always felt deeply rooted in his native country and culture, Wilson thus fails to comprehend the single compelling reason for Joyce’s decision. Nabokov is much quicker to see it, and, interestingly enough, his discussion of Bloom’s Jewishness also becomes one remarkable instance where he cannot resist bringing in parallels with Joyce’s own biography:

In composing the figure of Bloom, Joyce’s intention was to place among endemic Irishmen in his native Dublin someone who was as Irish as he, Joyce, was, but who also was an exile, a black sheep in the fold, as he, Joyce, was. Joyce evolved the rational plan, therefore, of selecting for the type of an outsider, the type of the Wandering Jew, the type of the exile. (LL, 287)

Nabokov obviously knew much more about being an outsider and an exile than did Wilson, and that affected, to a large degree, their different perceptions of Franz Kafka as well.

Franz Kafka

The tables are turned, I believe, when Wilson and Nabokov apply their critical and interpretive skills to Kafka. While some of Wilson’s observations on the author of the other *Castle* are apt and even prophetic — like the one where he states that “Kafka’s novels have exploited a vein of the comedy and pathos of futile effort which is likely to make ‘Kafkaesque’ a permanent word” (Wilson, 1950, 385) — his general attitude towards the writer is surprisingly dismissive. Wilson’s famous, or rather notorious, “A Dissenting Opinion on Kafka” first appeared in 1947. In it he declares that he “find[s] it impossible to take [Kafka] seriously as a major writer and ha[s] never ceased to be amazed at the number of people who can [...]. To compare Kafka, as some [...do] with Joyce and Proust and even with Dante, great naturalists of personality, great organizers of human experience, is obviously

² Joseph Frank makes similar remarks about Nabokov’s complaint that Stephen’s speeches are too long: “It is rather odd to see Nabokov, in view of his own novels, applying such a criterion of verisimilitude to Joyce” (Alexandrov, 253).

quite absurd” (Wilson, 1950, 385). In the opinion of Jeffrey Meyers, Wilson’s recent biographer, Wilson’s negative reaction to Kafka was the response of a critic who had to feel he was firmly in control and “who could not bear indecision and went to pieces when he could not make up his [own] mind,” all of which made reading Kafka a truly uncomfortable experience (Meyers, 452). Meyers may have a point, yet I believe the roots of Wilson’s inability to appreciate Kafka went much deeper than that. “What [Kafka] has left us,” Wilson complains at one point, “is the half-expressed gasp of a self-doubting soul trampled under. I do not see how one can possibly take him for either a great artist or a moral guide” (Wilson, 1950, 392). The word “moral” here is somewhat misleading but it is crucial in our attempt to comprehend Wilson’s response to the writer.

When you read volumes of Wilson’s criticism, you soon realize that the portrait of Wilson as an unbending champion of moral and social responsibility in literature is largely exaggerated. He did believe in a social mission for intellectuals and artists. “We are under a certain obligation not to let this sick society down,” he wrote to Louise Bogan, a poet, in 1931, the year *Axel’s Castle* was published. “We have to take life — society and human relations — more or less as we find them — and there is no doubt that they leave much to be desired. The only thing that we can really make is our work. And deliberate work of the mind, imagination, and hand [...] in the long run remakes the world” (Wilson, 1977, 206). Yet he also habitually upheld one’s absolute right to be a “pure artist” if the artist’s talents and inclinations directed him or her that way. In 1950 he vigorously attacked *The Saturday Review of Literature* precisely because it published an editorial which called for “The Destruction of Art for Art’s Sake,” the editorial’s actual title. Wilson condemned *The Saturday Review*’s view as ignorant, simplistic and extremely irresponsible for a journal devoted to literature (Wilson, 1977, 484). Wilson, obviously, could never have been a serious analyst and propagandizer of Modernism as a movement if he believed that moral components were an absolute must for literature. He could not possibly perceive Joyce or Proust as anyone’s “moral guides,” and yet his admiration for both of them was not diminished because of it. Why, then, is he so unreasonably strict with Kafka?

I believe Janet Groth and David Castronovo in their forthcoming book of Wilson’s uncollected writings give an excellent answer to that, when they state that “Wilson built his career around writers who master disorder and rise above chaos or who at least resist the attractions of cynicism and despair” (in Epstein, 7). This brand of optimism in the face of chaos and calamity may strike some as either naive or peculiarly “American,” which to some amounts to the same thing, but it is this life-affirming quality in literature that Wilson, for the lack of a better term, sometimes called “moral guidance.” And it is that quality that he found woefully and disturbingly missing in Kafka. Wilson’s reaction to Kafka was a response of the critic to whom the notions of “unrootedness” and despair were not only foreign but also deeply frightening.

Unlike many of his literary American contemporaries, Wilson chose to stay in the United States, rather than go to Europe, because, as he once told Scott Fitzgerald, “living abroad [...] is a great mistake for American writers, hard as America can be to live in” (Wilson, 1977, 202). Coming from an old and influential New England family, interested in his region’s history and possessing a strong sense of belonging to his native land, Wilson appears to find it virtually impossible as well as undesirable to appreciate the tenuous and uncertain nature of Kafka’s existence. Obviously threatened and unsettled by reading Kafka, Wilson at times even goes as far as to blame the writer directly for the position he, a German-speaking Jew living in Prague, found himself in:

[T]he denationalized, discouraged, disaffected, disabled Kafka, though for the moment he may frighten or amuse us, can in the end only let us down. He is quite true to his time and place, but it is surely a time and place in which few of us will

want to linger —whether as stunned and hypnotized helots of totalitarian states or as citizens of freer societies [...] (Wilson, 1950, 391).

Reading Wilson on Kafka, one gets a distinct impression that Wilson is actively trying to use his critical influence to put an end to Kafka's spreading influence in the United States. He does so not only by attacking Kafka's "spirit," or lack of such, but also by unjustly diminishing the literary, artistic quality of his work, calling both *The Trial* and *The Castle* "rather ragged performances — never finished and never really worked out" (Wilson, 1950, 385). The date of this essay is extremely significant. Written very soon after the war, Wilson's "Dissenting Opinion" bespeaks his desire not to dwell on the "denationalized, discouraged, disaffected, [and] disabled" for too long lest his own belief in a consistent triumph of good over evil may be threatened even further.

One of the most insincere remarks that Nabokov ever made in his early relationship with Wilson was, I believe, the one where he told the author of "A Dissenting Opinion on Kafka" that he liked his article (NWL, 192). There was actually no reason why Nabokov should have liked it, for his opinion of Kafka was the opposite of Wilson's. As was the case with Nabokov's interpretation of the exile and the outsider in Bloom, Nabokov, himself an outsider and an exile, had a keen sense and appreciation of similar qualities in Kafka, even if he did not share the depth of Kafka's despondency and despair. To him, Kafka was "the greatest German writer of our time," next to whom Rilke or Mann were mere "dwarfs or plaster saints" (LL, 255). On Nabokov's list of twentieth-century masterpieces, the greatness of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* surpassed that of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* and was exceeded only by Joyce's *Ulysses*.

"You will mark Kafka's style," Nabokov lectured his students at Cornell concerning *Metamorphosis*. "Its clarity, its precise and formal intonation in such striking contrast to the nightmare matter of his tale. No poetical metaphors ornament his stark black-and-white story, the limpidity of his style stresses the dark richness of his fantasy. Contrast and unity, style and matter, manner and plot most perfectly integrated" (LL, 283). As in his lecture on *Ulysses*, Nabokov gives but bare facts of the writer's biography — "born in 1883 [...] in Prague [...] German-speaking Jewish family [...] read for law [...] worked as a petty clerk [...] in 1917 [...] coughed blood [...] had a happy love affair [...] lived [...] in Berlin [...] not far from me [...] died [...] in 1924 [...] was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Prague [...]" Having thus summarized the main events in Kafka's life and death, and having emphasized Kafka's Jewishness as an important factor, Nabokov cannot resist a convenient occasion to attack Freudian critics who, in his opinion, read too much of Kafka's own complicated relationship with his father into the story. Nabokov is also happy to inform his students that "Kafka himself considered psychoanalysis [I quote] 'a hopeless error'" (LL, 255-56).

As a critic, Nabokov appears to be more at home in the small, rigid and claustrophobic world of the Samsas than he is in the largely chaotic and less structured world of the Blooms. Having lived in Berlin for many years, Nabokov finds in the Samsas the embodiment of his own worst vision of middle-class German families (which manifested itself so richly in his Russian novels). One can also argue that this vision sometimes even gets in the way of Kafka's, for Nabokov's judgment of Gregor's parents and his sister is extremely harsh. Where some critics see "a moving picture of the family restored to life and health" after Gregor's death (Gray, 7), Nabokov sees only callousness, cruelty, and hypocrisy.

Unlike Wilson, Nabokov is also much more at home in the world of Kafka's morbid fantasy than he is in the world of Bloom's sexual fantasies. To him, Kafka's world is but a continuation of the world he knows so well in Hoffmann, Poe, and, particularly, in Gogol. Nabokov, in fact, makes sure he immediately connects Kafka to his famous Russian predecessor: "In Gogol and Kafka the absurd central character belongs to the absurd world around him but, pathetically and tragically, attempts to struggle out of it into the world of humans — and dies in despair" (LL, 255).

While, like Wilson, Nabokov may be unsettled by the depth of hopelessness and despondency in Kafka, the feeling which, to a large extent, was as alien to him as it was to Wilson — and John Foster is right when he suggests that in his lecture Nabokov appears to be wishfully rewriting the end of the story by telling his students that, the kind of a beetle Gregor was, he actually had wings and thus could have flown away (Alexandrov, 448) — Nabokov, unlike Wilson, does not allow his personal discomfort to interfere with his appreciation of Kafka's art.

Conclusion

I would like to summarize now what I believe Wilson's and Nabokov's contributions to the study of Modernism and these two particular writers were. I would also like to probe a bit further what may account for the critics' respective "blind spots," as in the case of Wilson and Kafka, and Nabokov and Joyce.

As Janet Groth pointed out recently in her study of Wilson's critical writings, the peculiarities in Wilson's and Nabokov's approaches to literature are largely based in the fact that Nabokov was, after all, "quintessentially an artist and Wilson [...] quintessentially a critic" (Groth, 199). The quality of their contribution to the study of Modernism is also, I believe, largely determined by this essential difference between the two, one mostly a practitioner of art, the other largely an observer.

As a highly creative writer who shared many of the modernist tendencies with the authors he would introduce to his students, Nabokov is at his best when he does close textual readings, attempting to decipher other writers' artistic codes and to lay bare their artistic devices. When it comes to more general interpretations of the works, or placing these works within a larger literary tradition — in neither of which Nabokov generally believed — Nabokov's own biases get in the way, and he is often either unnecessarily dismissive or simplistic. Wilson, on the other hand, is not particularly strong with close artistic analyses, yet his sense of literature as a constantly evolving and metamorphosing whole is more acute and more comprehensive than Nabokov's. Wilson was among the first not only to link Modernism to Romanticism through the Subjective Impulse that drove both movements, but also to separate the two because, unlike Romanticism, Modernism, according to Wilson, thrives on dispassionately presenting the "ugly" as well as the beautiful, and the "profane" as well as the sacred.

Wilson's responses to Modernism were obviously also highly personal and subjective. Literature for Wilson did not necessarily have to contain a "moral" message but it had to be uplifting and reassuring. Thus he found solace in Joyce's ability to turn the profane and ugly into the all-transcending beauty of art, but he recoiled from Kafka in whom he found the ugly and the hopeless unredeemed by any life-affirming artistic and human triumphs.

Nabokov's "blind spots" were of a personal nature as well, and that brings us to the issue of Bloom and sexuality which I promised to come back to earlier in my paper. Unlike Wilson, whose remarkable candor about his sexual life is well known to anyone who read his journals, and unlike Joyce, who was equally explicit in his letters to Nora, Nabokov had a strong distaste for excessive frankness in describing sexual activity. Nabokov even once informed Wilson, while responding to his friend's graphic sexual scenes in *Memoirs of Hecate County*, that Wilson's explicit depictions of sex were a definite turn off, as far as he was concerned: "I derive no kick from the hero's love-making. I should have as soon tried to open a sardine can with my penis. The result is remarkably chaste, despite its frankness" (NWL, 165). On the matters of sex in general, Nabokov could sound very traditional and even puritan, *Lolita* notwithstanding. His uneasiness about homosexuality is well known: following his father's beliefs, and despite — or because of — several homosexuals in his own family, Nabokov seems to have considered preference for one's own sex a disease and a perversion. And so, apparently, was to him any obsessive preoccupation with sex, of the kind that Bloom displays

in *Ulysses*. While to call Bloom a pervert and a pathological sexual maniac, as Nabokov does in his lecture on *Ulysses*, totally distorts Joyce's own view both of human sexuality and of his protagonist, Nabokov is but true to his own sets of beliefs — as was Wilson when he dismissed Kafka because he did not share that writer's heightened sense of unsettledness and despondency.

Both Wilson and Nabokov were, after all, men of strong convictions, and their critical judgments revealed as much or even more about themselves than about the writers they chose to discuss. And in that, interestingly enough, there was virtually no difference between Edmund Wilson and Vladimir Nabokov as critics of Modernism or of anything else.

Works cited

- Alexandrov, Vladimir, ed. *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, Garland, 1995.
- Alter, Robert. *Motives for Fiction*. Harvard UP, 1984.
- Gray, Ronald, ed. *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall, 1962.
- Groth, Janet. *Edmund Wilson. A Critic for Our Time*. Ohio UP, 1989.
- Epstein, Jason. "The Man with Qualities." *The New York Review of Books*, June 8 (1995), 4-7.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Edmund Wilson: A Biography*. Houghton, 1995.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature*, Harcourt, 1980.
- . *Selected Letters*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Mathew J. Broccoli, Harcourt, 1989.
- . *Strong Opinions*. McGraw-Hill, 1973.
- Nabokov, Vladimir, and Wilson, Edmund. *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, ed. by Simon Karlinsky. Harper, 1980.
- Wilson, Edmund, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*. Charles Scribner's, 1931.
- . *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties*. Farrar, 1950.
- . *Letters on Literature and Politics: 1912-1972*, ed. by Elena Wilson. Farrar, 1977.