A Conversation with Sir Angus Wilson
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Catbird Seat

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Only after the play is written, sometimes many months later, do I really see it for the first time and understand what drove me to write it. It is never a profound discovery, just a surprise, and usually something that was perfectly obvious to everyone but me.

This admission from Alan Jay Lerner in his memoirs, On The Street Where I Live, sounds familiar. Indeed, Angus Wilson in the pages that follow says something quite similar ("If you were conscious of [things about a book] while you were writing, they would overdominate your writing"), applying that statement especially to academic writers. The writer, as Joyce Cary points out in Art and Reality, has to walk a fine line between inspiration and self-consciousness in order to produce the impression of spontaneity in art. So writers tend to be cagey in their public pronouncements about how they work; some, like Hemingway and Faulkner, carried caginess to the point of lying about their working methods.

But as Sir Angus shows in other parts of his conversation with Ruth Fisher, he has obviously given much thought to such matters as craft and effect. And it shows in his work. But Lerner is not, I think,

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A Conversation with Sir Angus Wilson

RUTH D. FISHER

FISHER: It is wonderful that you have written so much, in so many varied genres—novels, criticism, a play, short stories—and so beautifully. I especially enjoyed Setting the World on Fire. One of the first books that I read, however, was The Wild Garden, and I'm glad.

Sir Angus: That was a result of the lectures that I gave at UCLA. William Golding gave some and you were supposed to publish them. I'm awfully silly and so I just did what they told me. And when Bill Golding saw it, he said, "Well, I'm not publishing mine just because you did." He also said most shrewdly that it was amazing what a childhood I had managed to survive.

Fisher: It seems to me that there's a strong connection between the two books. In The Wild Garden you talk about fusing "the wild garden" and "the garden in the wild," or, I suppose, the polarities of art and life. Setting the World on Fire deals with the same reconciliation, doesn't it? When I got to the end of that novel, I was sad, sad not only because Tom had died but because the dualities had not been fused. You have really not solved that dilemma yet.

Sir Angus: Yes, reality is sad. Tom is a nice man, I think. Well, it can't be solved, I don't think.

Fisher: And I thought that the title, Setting the World on Fire, was not really one's imagination and genius metaphorically "setting the world on fire," but that this chaos which is bubbling just beneath the surface is literally "setting the world on fire."

Sir Angus: I think that if you look at my early short stories—I began to write in my late thirties, having no intention of being anything, just for hobby—all of them have titles that are ironic. Ironic, you see, of commonplace phrases. "The Wrong Set," for example. In "The Wrong Set," there is a woman, Vi Cawston, who is working in a nightclub with a dreadful crowd of sordid, gossipy racketeers, prostitutes, and goodness knows what. But she feels that she is a lady—a very important thing in England even as late as the forties. Then she finds that her nephew has got involved with a left-wing group. So she rings up her sister and says, "I
think I ought to tell you, Norman is in ‘the wrong set.’ ” She is making an excuse for her wrong set by finding another wrong set. So I take a phrase like that, “setting the world on fire” in the belief that I have that we must mitigate evil. But we must not, we cannot, hope to live as though the world were suitable for romantics or artists. Meg says it in The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot.

**Fisher:** And in Setting The World on Fire, Piers says, “I’m going to keep the imaginative fires burning.” Though they are affirmative words, the book ends on a note of terrible pessimism.

**Sir Angus:** Well, he is saying that to keep his spirits up. But there is an affirmation there. He says we must keep the spirit of imagination alive and that we can do, we must do it, or try to do it. But we can’t say it will be kept, because we know, for example, that under Hitler, it was suppressed, and you can’t say you will. I’m not an optimistic man. In some ways, I’m a very happy man, but I’m not an optimistic man.

**Fisher:** There’s a phrase you use in many of your books, Piers’s and Tom’s mother is called a romantic. “Well, she’s a romantic.”

**Sir Angus:** Yes, well, there, you see, there is another meaning for the phrase, “setting the world on fire,” which is in the mind of someone like Marina, this terrible kind of romantic . . .

**Fisher:** Luzzi . . .

**Sir Angus:** A rich, radical, chic Italian who finances terrorists. When she says, “I adore chaos,” she means brutal terrorism. And you know I think that art needs order. But also order can destroy art. Excessive order and anarchy are both my enemies. Both lead to tyranny and tyranny is my principal enemy.

**Fisher:** I thought that one of the things you were trying to do in most of your books was to use art as a means of order, that you saw, almost in a Forsterian sense, art as perhaps the only order possible in a chaotic world. The architecture of the Mosson mansion, the great baroque hall in Tothill House each, in a way, was a means of order, so to speak.

**Sir Angus:** Yes, it may be true. It may be the only order we have. But I would comment about that. Unfortunately, Forster didn’t help in setting the order of the world right, however much he may have espoused art. And though I like his work well in many ways—I knew him a little—one thinks his phrase, “if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country,” sounds very good. It sounds a Bloomsburyian attachment to private principles. But it can mean betraying all the basis of order on which finally personal relationships depend.

**Fisher:** Yes, of course.

**Sir Angus:** And Bloomsbury used to refer to anything political as the “big bow-wow noise.” But unfortunately politics isn’t just a big bow-wow noise. I have a story I often tell when I am talking about Bloomsbury to
my students. And that is of J. M. Keynes. When the War first came, most of the Bloomsbury people became conscientious objectors. But he accepted a job with the Government because he was a famous economist. And they refused to see him. They cut off from him like that, although he was one of the closest members. But towards the end of the War, there was a problem. The French had to find a way of paying their debts to England, and Keynes said to the Prime Minister, Lloyd George, who had no understanding of art at all, “Why don’t we ask them if they will give us some Renoirs and some Degas instead of paying money.” And they did. And Bloomsbury then sent a telegram: “All your sins forgiven.” You see, that’s all very well. But there is something childish about not seeing that these things are interdependent. Art and society, I mean.

Fisher: Oh, yes.

Sir Angus: Because you see, if the War had been lost, there wouldn’t have been any Renoirs to give. They would have gone to Germany, if anywhere.

Fisher: Of course.

Sir Angus: So . . . .

Fisher: You knew some of the Bloomsbury Group personally, did you not? You were working there in that area at that time, at the British Museum.

Sir Angus: Yes, but mind you, this was in the forties when I began to write. Virginia Woolf committed suicide during the War and I never knew her at all. I met her husband, Leonard Woolf, and I met a number of the Strachey sisters, and various other people in the Bloomsbury Group. And I met Forster a number of times. I did admire them. And I love Woolf’s work greatly. She is one of my great heroines. But they have mixed art, I’m afraid, in a peculiarly English way—well, it’s also to be found in France, if you read Proust, you will find it—with a kind of snobbery, which is incredible. But theirs was cultural snobbery; Proust’s was social and, therefore, more superficial, less harmful. The first time I was ever invited to a Bloomsbury dinner party, I went, and they were charming and we got on well. When I was leaving, one of the Strachey nieces—of course, Strachey had been dead for a long time—one of his nieces showed me to the door, and she said: “Well, we did enjoy you. You know we had another new writer the other day and he was like a station detective. But you are the sort of person we might ask to dinner anyway.”

Fisher: Well, thank you very much. (Both laugh). I was thinking of something you said about the British Museum in Setting The World On Fire. It’s a recurrent symbol in several of your books, notably The Wild Garden. The Westminster School is another.

Sir Angus: Well, let me say something about that. One sees things about a book only after it has been written. If you were conscious of them while you were writing, they would overdominate your writing. But after
I wrote the book, I realized that although I was consumed with a feeling for the Vanbrugh houses, with their baroque domes and all that, it was also a memory of having worked for many years, as I did, under the great dome of the Library of the British Museum.

Buildings have become increasingly important to me as I've got older. Unless people are unusual or else not truthful, when they get older, sixty or sixty-five . . . . I love people. I think you can see that I am a person who loves people. Once I was simply passionately fond of being in the world of people. Now I like to spend most of my time in the world of wild life, in architecture, and artifacts. The trouble about it with new people in old age, and I've mixed a great deal with people all my life, is that inevitably some of it seems to be a replay of a play you've seen before.

_Fisher:_ Yes. And I think too that when you are a writer, you need time to be alone. You need something to give you that sense of order to overcome that chaos that seems constantly to be just beneath the surface.

_Sir Angus:_ Yes. You are right, absolutely. I had a precarious sort of childhood, with very loving parents, but financially very precarious. And that probably started it all. But I've always been a person of high tension and that makes you precarious. And then I was born in 1913, so I've been through two world wars, and this is the second economic crisis. When I came down from Oxford, the difficulty of getting jobs was enormous, and for a whole year I couldn't get anything. When I talk to students today, I feel as though I'm living my whole life all over again. So, you know, this precariousness is sort of . . . .

_FISHER:_ One of the things that I thought was fascinating in _The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, Setting The World on Fire, Hemlock and After_, and in some of your other books, too, is this distance between the narrator and the characters in the story, and the narrator and the author himself. I feel somehow that what holds it all together—the text, context, reader, writer, and other characters—is the narrator's ability to stay apart from what is happening. And I see the author as being at an even further distance from the narrator—almost as though, like the characters in the novels, he wishes to be there, yet to remain at a distance. It seems as though he, like the characters in the novels, is communicating but not in communion with others. I think that in only one of your novels you have used the first-person narrator. _The Old Men at The Zoo?_

_Sir Angus:_ Yes. _The Old Men at The Zoo_. And yet the hero, Simon Carter, is not at all like me. I just decided at that point that I wanted to try to see public events as though through one person's eyes. And this novel is again an example of a stable world which suddenly goes into chaos. But Simon was chosen—if there is any origin in that, and you know that the origins of one's characters are mixed—but if there is an origin, it is not at
all me. I don’t find myself in any of my novels until later. And I think I find myself in both the brothers in *Setting The World on Fire*, and I find myself in Meg Eliot, and I find myself in two of the children in *No Laughing Matter*, in Margaret, the novelist, and in Marcus. Yet, on the other hand, if I were to be asked the character I feel fondest of, it would be the very simple, elderly heroine in *Late Call*, and she’s certainly not me. But I feel a great affection for her. I feel affection for Tom in the new novel. Perhaps it isn’t just me; other authors too feel this way. But no, identification is something that I couldn’t very well say that I do when I write a book. I wonder if this kind of picture that I give comes from two things: from a childhood and grownup time filled with people, and a little boy, you see, with five brothers, the next of them thirteen years older, with wives, grandparents, aunts, uncles, living in a hotel, going to school in London, a big populous city; therefore hundreds of people, enormous casts: and this rather sulky, rather cut-off boy, making shapes of the world around him, out of this vast number of people, all talking and all obviously, when I was very young, very strange, and some of them even inexplicable. But I was making shapes out of them. And that was doubled later by my choice of subject, which I chose to study at school and at the University—History. In England, you know, public school, that’s what you call high school, you specialize in your last two years. And then I went on to Oxford and, for three years, I specialized in History. And history always was to me a process I was used to, shaping and putting in order a large cast. I think you will find in my work, whatever defects it has, you won’t find mistakes of chronology.

Things happen at the right time. Simultaneity—when I am thinking of a book, I always have all the characters in my mind all the time, though I am only dealing with one at that moment. *The Old Men at The Zoo*, for example, could be cast in the form of a history book, an account of the last War as it might have affected the zoo.

**Fisher:** It certainly could.

**Sir Angus:** So I think this ordering and putting together, connecting and shaping is for me, and I can always imagine myself, had I lived then and been able to paint, painting Benjamin West paintings or something, where you bring a great cast together and create an historical picture.

**Fisher:** Yes. But I want to get at something beyond that, this narrator, this hidden observer who yet keeps himself separate from others. And perhaps this mask extends to something in the characters? I’m thinking of a scene in *As If By Magic* which suggests how the distance of the narrator extends itself thematically into the novel. Alexandra, her mother, her father, Hamo Langmuir, Rodrigo, and Ned participate in a highly charged scene before Hamo leaves on his trip around the world. Each person in that room is talking, yet each is separate. No one is in communion with anyone. Rodrigo and Ned and Alexandra have even devised a game
of riddles which puts them at an even further distance from the others in
the room. And it seems to me that thematically the human failure in that
novel, as well as in many others, is the failure to communicate, the refusal
of involvement. Somehow this third-person narrator who stands above
exemplifies the characters in the novel. The one time that you chose the
first-person narrator, you found that it was not what you wanted. In that
case, everything has to move back outside the frame of the novel.

Sir Angus: Yes, it’s true. I wasn’t altogether happy with the results of
The Old Men at The Zoo. But it’s true even there, you see, what I can’t take
is any concept of an introducer or reciter who is omniscient, or who is wise.
I find, much though I admire other aspects of Conrad’s work greatly, I find
the character of Marlow, for example, simply, absolutely unbearable—the
know-all quality.

As soon as he starts to speak. I don’t believe a word he says. I belong
to a club in England and I know what that session at the club of men in
Lord Jim is, and I know how little I take notice of what they say when the
last drinks have been served and we’ve been sitting around, “it’s strange
how one forgets the old country” and so on and so on. “Give me my glass of
brandy,” I said so and so and so on, and some terrible kind of worldly wis-
dom comes out: “The older a woman gets, the less she feels old,” or some-
thing like that (both laugh) and there goes the story. Those English clubs
abroad in Imperial days were terrible. And I think from the moment
Marlow starts to speak, he’s had a drink too many. That’s very alien to me.
You find it in Somerset Maugham and some other authors. But I want
always every book that I write to illustrate and to demonstrate this pre-
carious world in which we walk and every character must be involved in
this precariousness. There can be no Marlows who know best. And I want-
ed to try the first-person figure in The Old Men at The Zoo and he’s
involved. He is torn in two as all my characters tend to be. He wants to be a
naturalist; he wants to be an administrator. Which will he end up? And we
end on a note of agnosticism. Will he get the job at the zoo in the end? Or
has he been destroyed by all this chaos that began with the giraffe killing
its keeper and all? And then his little child says, “Daddy, can giraffes
kill?” and he says, “I don’t know.”

Fisher: Another narrative technique you use—in Anglo-Saxon
Attitudes—is employing words and phrases and images to move from one
person to the next to obtain what is essentially a multiplicity of points of
view. That is extremely Proustian, isn’t it?

Sir Angus: Yes, Proust is an author who obviously interests me a
lot.

Fisher: I was interested in the fact that although Middleton is the cen-
tral character. there are multiple points of view, so that one sees
Middleton from many angles, almost as a disembodied being.

Sir Angus: I reread Anglo-Saxon Attitudes only recently because it
has been my most successful book and like all successful books, or perhaps like children, I don’t know, I haven’t had children, the one that does best you rather let look after itself. But recently I thought, well, I must read it again. Even though it is my successful child, I mustn’t let it look after itself entirely. And I thought that although I did like a lot of it, though Gerald is a fairly moving man, he’s a bit dead. And I also felt that though that is quite a good device—for example, at the Christmas party, once again some commonplace platitude is stated that takes him up and sets him off into the past—I think it’s a slightly obvious device. But I think it works and it makes a nice shape.

Fisher: Yes, it does.

Sir Angus: But I didn’t then feel quite satisfied with it. And with Mrs. Eliot, I did a different thing. I went back in memory again to the central event but a central incident which takes place in the novel, whereas the Melpham fraud, and the burning of the little girl’s arm, in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, took place before the novel began. With Mrs. Eliot, not so. Her husband is shot in the book.

Fisher: In the center of the book, yes.

Sir Angus: But that book, you see—I’m not going into the defects of my books—what I thought was wrong with it, though it is quite good to set her brother and her against each other as different types, and I think it’s a good moment, almost a George Eliot type of moment, if I can aim so high, when her brother takes for granted that she will stay and puts his hand back and she is gone. I think that’s good.

Fisher: Yes, that is a moving image, an intensified image, which captures not only that moment but also a vision of the past and of the future.

Sir Angus: Yes, I like that, but I think that there was too much put in of her brother’s life. We didn’t want all that.

Fisher: I see that as a beautiful balance—that nursery, that country. And he is an extremely interesting person and that inclusion of his personal life somehow balances Meg’s life—his garden against her world of the city, as it were.

Sir Angus: But it took away from her at that point, I thought.

Fisher: Well, I thought it was a good balance.

Sir Angus: I don’t want to get into the defects of my books, but when I came to No Laughing Matter, which is perhaps the book I admire most of my work, I began... I wonder if this isn’t to do with teaching in a university. I am sometimes worried about teaching. But let me say at once that I’ve never done it except for part-time, won’t do more—it’s essential. But there I did start to use—and it occurs again in As If By Magic—references to literature. All those parodies of plays in No Laughing Matter. I think they are good, but I’m a little bit worried. I think that just as I have been criticizing Conrad and Forster, now I’ll criticize Joyce. Joyce’s work is full
of the wonderful discovery of the relationship between Molly, Leopold Bloom, and Stephen and it’s that I admire, not as I did when I was sixteen and said, “oh, I know what that is, it’s a parody of Beowulf or something” (laughter).

Fisher: Still, those parodies do work.

Sir Angus: I think they do, and I enjoyed doing it, but I’m a little bit inclined to say, “yes, you enjoyed it a bit too much.”

Fisher: Gransden, the critic, said that No Laughing Matter is probably one of your best books. He likes it very much.

Sir Angus: I like it very much. It was a great step forward, I think it was the first book in which I really moved forward. All the other books from Hemlock on—I’m talking about the novels now—all the other books were of somebody looking back and asking when did it all go wrong. And from that point, with No Laughing Matter, we start at the beginning when they are children and we move forward and see what happens. And I think it was a good thing to get away from this business of saying, “Now look, let’s look back and see what happened.”

Fisher: Still, the looking back is extremely important, isn’t it? The importance of the past in the present and to the future.

Sir Angus: Well, I don’t think anyone who reads No Laughing Matter or Setting The World on Fire could fail to see that I have an intense fixation on childhood and its relation of the adult. The child within us still. That’s why I give these seminars on the development of the child in English fiction. Why I worship much of Kipling’s work. But I cannot be a true Wordworthian, let alone someone like Sir James Barrie. I think there is always this duality. Yes, the child is within us. But for the child’s imagination, but for the artist who is the child inside us, we would be of no use whatever. Yet you’ve got to mature because if you don’t mature, you’ll be lost . . . .

FISHER: You were speaking of teaching a few minutes ago, this combination of the teacher and the artist, or the writer in particular, who attempts to combine teaching and writing. What are your views on that?

Sir Angus: Well, my views are like everything to do with my writing. It seems as though it happened by chance. And I think I can say I began to write as a hobby. I only started to teach at all because a new university was founded near where I live, in East Anglia, and the man who started the English school was a man called Ian Watt. You possibly know him?

Fisher: Oh, yes.

Sir Angus: And he was a man who, although an Englishman, had been trained in America and he went back to America. He asked me to come and teach there [at East Anglia]. Now no English person would have
ever asked me. No English person would have asked a writer to teach at a university. There are no writers teaching at universities in England. I’m the only one I believe, except for Malcolm Bradbury, who began as a university teacher. He teaches full-time. And also Dan Jacobson. But I was the first. It’s unknown, unknown. And I accepted and discovered that I liked it and apparently I was successful. But then I said I don’t want to do it more than one term a year. So that’s what I do. And if you are asking if it’s been a help. Yes. I think it’s been an enormous help. It has made me think more consciously about my writing and that’s good, and it has kept me in touch with young people, and this is vital. I couldn’t have written Setting The World on Fire, and I couldn’t have written As If By Magic, if I hadn’t been in touch with students. The girl and her friends in that student hippie world in As If By Magic came straight from my students. And that’s really important to me. All this I think is vital. But, but… I think you have to be very careful. I said I saw dangers in the devices I used in No Laughing Matter. This overliterariness. I think, I prefer not to name names, that there are many writers at present, especially in America, who thank God for the teaching in the universities. Otherwise, I don’t know how writers would live now. But, there are some in this country who have given themselves wholly to academic things, and I think it has destroyed their writing. It has made them over self-conscious. It’s as though they were writing literary critical theses instead of works of fiction.

Fisher: I think that also comes from many writers who are critics as well as writers. Having once criticized someone else’s work and knowing what to look for and then attempting to write oneself makes one very conscious of this, I would think.

Sir Angus: Especially that very theoretical criticism. I do some critical work, but I often think that, in university circles, I’m a sort of Trojan horse.

Fisher: Oh, no. Your Dickens and Zola and Kipling are excellent critical works.

Sir Angus: Yes, but my way of teaching is biographical. It goes into the question of what the writer is like. It’s concerned with the history of the writer and it’s concerned with social history, the background.

Fisher: But what is wrong with that? One needs that.

Sir Angus: Yes, but it is not liked by a great number of modern critics.

Fisher: Yes, I suppose starting with the New Critics, with Warren, Brooks and that group. But even there, particularly with Warren, they included some biographical and historical background, although they did emphasize the text itself as the primary focus. But, of course, one thinks of critics today, of Culler and the Structuralists, of Ronald Barthes and the Phenomenologists, and most particularly, of Jacques Derrida and the Deconstructionists, and Derrida’s followers at Yale, especially J. Hillis
Miller. It’s difficult to know with the Deconstructionists whether one can even write any more.

Sir Angus: Yes. I think it’s largely a menace. I think all writers I have talked to feel that it is a menace to them because it is as good as saying: “you write all that stuff down and we’ll then make a shape out of it.” I talked to one of these Structuralist people and I said. “I wonder what position the writer has in the future? The novelist?” Well, he said to me, “Oh. I think it is perfectly clear. I think the novelist is going to be the most valuable critic of Structuralism in the future that there is.” I thought, oh, that’s what is left to us is it?

Fisher: Many of the anti-novels . . . I don’t know whether they are trying to show the shape of the world we are living in today in the shape of the novel, or merely the new shape of the novel itself. It seems that the novel is drifting into a kind of chaos, a kind of formlessness, and the world is drifting into a kind of chaos and formlessness. What do you think will be the form of the novel in the future, if it has a form? Not many of our contemporary American writers write the kind of realistic novel that you write, novels that adhere to, if not traditional techniques, at least some recognizable form. Donald Barthelme, for instance, and Pynchon, Barth . . . . These are experimental novels, far from what one thinks of as the traditional concept of the novel.

Sir Angus: Very remote from anything I write.

Fisher: Sometimes even Mailer . . . .

Sir Angus: Well, Mailer is near to me.

Fisher: Mailer has combined journalism with the novel form.

Sir Angus: Oh, well, after all, you know, Virginia Woolf was making great experiments. James Joyce . . . I’m not without experiment. My books are not at all traditional. I don’t feel very happy with traditional works like those of C.P. Snow, for instance, nor do I feel very happy with works of Barth. I mean there are . . . what I want to do is to make a statement about life using the world as I see it and people as I know them. And I will use devices, if I can, of various kinds to bring this across more strongly. And I don’t mind how experimental they are, if they are going to help me. On the other hand, I don’t mind how traditional they are going to be. I think there should not be so great a division between Alex Haley on the one hand, what ordinary people read, and Barth on the other, which is what the elitists read. I believe that it should not divide, and I’m afraid it’s happening. And it means to me that this is the death of the novel.

I think if that division were to happen, some people would come along and impose a harsh and arbitrary order to put an end to the anarchy. And then the people who wrote purposely shapeless novels would be thought to be anarchists and would be put in jail. (Both laugh). I shouldn’t be on the side of the tyrants, but I should think these writers were asking for much of what came to them. You have to understand what keeps society from
chaos and from tyranny and express yourself within some framework. Within that framework, of course, a writer has the right to express all that he wishes. And I, for one—I am a sponsor of INDEX, which monitors censorship in all countries and defends the artist’s right to self-expression. But not to a wanton denial of art itself. A writer is free to find his own expression—indeed, he must. To impose so-called scientific or philosophic laws upon the imagination spells imaginative death as well as artistic chaos.

Fisher: Not to destroy the novel, because that will lead to what Susan Sontag calls the “aesthetic of silence.”

SIR ANGUS: Yes. What is the reason for destroying the novel? I don’t understand this destructive impulse. And you know how distasteful it is to me, the character of Marina [Setting The World on Fire], that clever people should be so bored that they end by saying all they want in life is chaos. It comes to that.

Fisher: Yes. I suppose so.

Sir Angus: That woman, Marina, came from an experience I had when I lived in Rome for a bit. And I would meet them at parties. I met these very grand, very rich Roman ladies. At one party, this grand lady said to me, “Oh, I’ve just been to Haiti; it’s so boring. And I was at Dominic. Oh, it’s so boring.” She was the wife of a rich industrialist, I think. “I went to Haiti,” she said; “it was so boring. And now I’m going to Mexico. Oh, it’s so boring.” So I thought, I can’t stand all this. So I said, “why don’t you go to Guadeloupe, it’s very interesting.” You know what she did. She didn’t understand me at all. She turned to her husband and said: “Alberto, here’s a man who finds something interesting,” as though I was an unknown species or a survival or something from another world. (Both laugh).

Fisher: You said in The Wild Garden that many of your characters are based on real people. Who are some of the characters based on in Setting The World on Fire, in addition to Marina?

Sir Angus: Yes. You know there are mixtures always. I can say that the two brothers are two sides of myself, in a way, though there are other people mixed in them. And some are nearer to real people. I wouldn’t talk about who they are, really. In England, you have to be very careful because the laws of libel are very strong indeed.

But I wouldn’t say that many real people are in my novels. It very seldom happens. It’s nearly always a fusion of two or more people. You know what can happen, you meet someone and you say, “oh, how like…” and then you think of someone quite different that you’ve known ten or fifteen years ago. Then the fusion comes from two apparently unlike people who have something in common, and in working it out, you produce a character. I think this is the way it happens. When I wrote Anglo-Saxon
Attitudes, the characters were fusions again. There was, for example, Rose Lorimer, who was a mixture of three women scholars that I had known in my time; Professor Clun was a number of professors I had known. But they weren’t easily recognizable. Now Elvira was an almost invented character, but the way she talked was just like somebody I knew—the widow of George Orwell. And I wrote it without remembering that, and that was the only thing that caused trouble, because this person . . . . People went to her, people always do, and told her: “Oh, I saw you in Angus Wilson’s book.” And she was very upset and I’m very fond of her and that was awfully difficult. But I didn’t even know it at the time. I just said, ”oh, that’s just how people talk.” But, in fact, it was the way she talked. So it’s the external gestures or speech, not character, that one is most likely to copy without realizing it.

Fisher: One can see that you have a fine ear for the nuances in speech that identify the person so well.

Sir Angus: Well, Peter Faulkner has written this book called Angus Wilson: Mimic and Moralist. And I suppose mimicry is one of the things I have as a basis for writing.

Fisher: I understand that you began this latest book, Setting The World on Fire here in America on your previous trip.

Sir Angus: Three years ago. I started writing it here in Delaware three years ago. Well, you see, it has come out in England this summer, and it was six months at the publishers before they published it. So it wasn’t so long that it took me. But I started to write in the Battery at New Castle, Delaware, because I like to write outside, always. And it was lovely weather there. Then I went to Ceylon and I wrote quite a lot there. Then I finished it off in England that summer because the weather was good and I could be out-of-doors. But for the first time in my life, I destroyed a whole part because I had taken Piers and Tom on to the next generation. They were to be married and have children and the culminating events were not to occur until their children’s time. The big horrible thing, that is, Tom’s death. But then I thought I had got into a cumbrous device, and it’s there in so many of my books. In As If By Magic, for instance, you go back to the mother, then to the grandmother, then the great-grandmother. And you can’t leave the people alone. So I thought, I’ll destroy it. And it makes a smaller book. But revision is not a thing I often do. Usually I spend ages preparing and then that’s that. And I don’t look at it afterwards at all.

Fisher: Were any of the people in Setting The World on Fire based on people you met in Delaware?

Sir Angus: No, the novel was already in my mind for a few years. The American woman in it is much more like a famous woman . . . . Did you ever know the American woman who married into a grand English family, Nancy, Lady Astor? The Astor family was American as well. But she was our first woman MP and she was a great figure. Very, very rich.
Christian Scientist.

Fisher: Yes. That Christian Scientist appears in almost every book, doesn’t she?

Sir Angus: Christian Scientist with this kind of Rhode Island background?

Fisher: Yes, recurs constantly. Is that one of your autobiographical impulses?

Sir Angus: Well, my mother was a Christian Scientist, but she wasn’t American. Yes, they do. The old woman that Meg Eliot speaks to on the plane is a Christian Scientist. I always have, not always, but very frequently, characters like Inge in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes, people who have a very sweet vision of life. And you will find, usually, for me, a sweet vision of life means either a kind of—this is the wrong end of the child—either an unwillingness to face reality at all, like Inge, or a hard, hard firmness, a refusal ever to change.

Fisher: Yes, like Jackie Mosson. I recognized that combination in Setting The World on Fire, of goodness and sweetness, symbolized by both food and flowers, when one is evading reality. Jackie, the grandmother, does that with her flowers.

Sir Angus: Yes, you see, almost from the New Testament: “except that you become as a little child.” She has a stroke and she does become . . .

Fisher: She becomes like a child. She is rather an interesting character in her movement from this dominating matriarch to this child-like simplicity in the end, and always with her big blue flowers around her.

Sir Angus: Yes, everything sweet. She is not a nasty person. She doesn’t want to hear anything to do with sex, nothing nasty.

Fisher: I wonder whatever made her think it was nasty.

Sir Angus: I don’t know. (Both laugh). Well, you see, Rosemary, the mother, who is very sexy, is a perfect example of someone who is always in a real old muddle all the time. So she reinforces Jackie’s idea that sex means muddle, not looking after your money and so on.

Fisher: Yes, everything that is quite bad, really, all these combinations.

SIR ANGUS: I think Jackie’s coming into my book like that is a sign of my coming a lot to America in these last few years. I love it, this country—but there is one aspect that is very strange to me and I don’t find it very easy to come to terms with and that’s the work ethic, the money value thing. And she stands for that. The kind of Puritanism about work ethic.

Fisher: That is totally opposite to what one would think in England, I suppose. In America, one discusses money, I think. This is result of a country based upon newness, money, and work ethic.
Sir Angus: And the pioneer spirit. A kind of open ruthlessness and it's easier to take that. In America, it's disguised by straight-forward, manly attitude about money.... I am always amazed that when I have lunch in restaurants and listen to conversations, four times out of five, people are talking about money. Whereas in England, four times out of five, they talk about nothing, just small talk, genteel. That kind of ruthlessness, if it were there, would be disguised by sweetness.

Fisher: You see and attack that false kind of sweetness and light that evades reality in your novels, especially Anglo-Saxon Attitudes.

Sir Angus: Oh yes. The whole idea of class which is so strong in England is a kind of covering life over with nothing.

Fisher: It would be disguised differently here in certain professions.

Sir Angus: But I think that it is interesting that a religion like Christian Science should come up in a country where such strong money values are, and I particularly point, rather, I hope, sympathetically, to the hypocrisy of some of it when Jackie's thinking about some of the other Christian Scientists, you know how they are all temperance, and they don't drink. She loves her martinis, and she thinks, but then if you are a millionaire, you are bound to do something different from other people. (Both laugh).

Fisher: You were speaking earlier about American students and universities. Having taught both in English and American universities, how do you perceive the intellectual differences between English and American students?

Sir Angus: I should have thought that, at the moment, they were both on the defensive in a world of financial stress that sees education as a rather low priority. But American Puritanism gives a much higher priority to providing basic education to the young than to providing welfare to adults who, for one reason or another, have failed. In England, I think, the priorities are reversed. But these differences are somewhat hidden in the present bad financial climate. Such a world as the present one—apart from the danger of chaos—also shifts imaginative sympathies in people, care for education and so on, because the self-protective instinct overshadows every other impulse. But I am very much impressed by the life and intelligence of students here in America. I think that there is a certain lack of basic education. Education would be the wrong word. But I think they try to teach people too many things in the early stages in this country. I know it's a good idea to give you an all-round education and so on. But, on the other hand, here I will get students who have an insight and a sense for bringing the novel alive that they are reading from their own lives, which is better than I would get in England. But then the same student, in a paper, will put someone like Rousseau as an early nineteenth century figure. They lack overall comprehension of the general shape of civilization. I think this American student would write a perfectly marvelous
paper as far as comprehending what the book is about, and feeling it, and relating it to his or her own experience, but he would be capable then of getting centuries wrong. There is a kind of what I would call lack of simple sophistication. Sometimes, Not in all students, of course, but in some. A rather astonishing combination which you could not get in England. What you will get in England is a very good sophistication, but, very frequently that is spoiled by a kind of dullness, a kind of taking for granted so much. They know the general plan of culture so well that they don’t let themselves feel below the level of that plan.

Fisher: There is a great hue and cry in our country now about television and its impact on students, about the diminishing level of intelligence of our students. Many educators point to the recent SAT scores as apparently indicative of this trend. Of course you have television in England and also have to be concerned about its impact on students.

Sir Angus: Yes, oh, yes. You see, this is terrible. I don’t know whether you know that we managed to get an Act through Parliament which gives a small percentage of ... every time a book is borrowed from a public library, a small percentage will go to the writer.

Fisher: Oh. I was not aware of that.

Sir Angus: And I was foremost in campaigning for this. I’m a great one for campaigning for all sorts of things. And we’ve got it now. It has not yet started, but it will next year. And it’s now going in Germany as well. When I was asked to address a Committee at the House of Commons, of all parties—the Labor Party was in power then, they were conservative liberal labor—I gave the reasons why they should pass this Act. I urged upon them the reasons why government should actively encourage the writing and the reading of books as opposed to sponsoring television. One of the reasons, I said, is this: I think you are often very worried because people are not enough in control of their lives, are not making enough of themselves, that they are too passive and too receptive. For this reason, you should do everything to encourage reading, because in a book, it’s the only art which you have where people can make the book themselves. They can go forward or backwards. They can skip and read over again. The book is theirs to do what they like with.

Now in television, this is just not true. You just watch—you are totally passive. And do you know, so bad has this got that in that meeting of intelligent men and women of both parties, all they said was, “Oh, but I don’t think you can say that. Mr. Wilson. I mean you can always turn the television off.” I said, “but that’s not what I’m saying. I didn’t say you can’t turn it off, what I’m saying is that you can’t make it your own.” I’m afraid you can’t even with the theater, and I love the theater. And it took me something like half an hour to get it over to them. These really clever men and women. In the end we won that bill. But that seems to me that people have just not grasped what they are losing by letting books
disappear. And between the academic use of books as a kind of way of inventing clever arguments and puzzles, and the television use of books—between the two of them, books are in danger of being destroyed. And the thing that shocks me most of all in the academic world—here as well as in England, more here—I am constantly surprised at academic people saying to me: “Oh, did you see the last episode of Old Curiosity Shop? Or, “What did you think about Far From The Maddening Crowd on television”? I don’t watch great novels made nonsense of on television screens. I am quite shocked. I don’t know whether they see this shock on my face. So I say, “Oh, I don’t watch that sort of stuff.” I say it in rather a grand manner.

Fisher: Do you think that this passiveness, this not reading, not participating, might lead not only to a temporary lowering of intelligence but possibly to a whole generation of people with lower intelligence? One can see students sitting in class, not reading, not wanting to think, and adults even, just sitting, non-active, waiting for the whole world to act upon them.

Sir Angus: Yes, I’m afraid you will get very static people and the only thing is, of course, that the imagination may be working away inside, but then that is rather dangerous because what you get then are dreamers.

Fisher: Yes, as opposed to people who act . . .

Sir Angus: Who will make something out of what they see and do. I think there is a grave danger of this kind, and it sometimes depresses me. I’m not a sporting man at all. I was brought up in a world of sport and I reacted rather against it. But I sometimes speak against it, this enormous thing about the game here, in America. It isn’t so much people playing the game. It’s watching. I’ve never known such an amount of passive watching. It’s just the same as with television serials. The amount of time they consume watching something they ought to be playing.

Fisher: It is a way of escaping from the rigors of life, almost as though one would read what Northrop Frye calls the “wish-fulfillment dream” literature, the lower end of the scale, escape literature, and not move up to the tragedies.

Sir Angus: Yes, but even in the escape literature, detective stories, you do participate; you play around with the book yourself . . .

Fisher: Yes, yes, but you don’t get the balance . . .

Sir Angus: In a way that is not open to you on the television screen. And I’m afraid it’s not good to be—just as it is for a tired people because they are tired. It can be a rather menacing thing in a country so taken up with work ethic. Because you work so hard that then you feel that you have a right to say, “well, I finished work today, and I shan’t need to think again. I’ll relax.”

FISHER: Many of your novels are concerned with social injustices.
Another whose are is a writer from your mother's native country, South Africa, Nadine Gordimer.

Sir Angus: Nadine! I know her well.

Fisher: How do you think she combines the didactic with the aesthetic in novels so much concerned with social injustices?

Sir Angus: I like her work very much. I think she would naturally be a less socially concerned writer than circumstances have made her. But I think they have made her one. She is naturally a European in many ways. Her husband is an art dealer. Their roots are in European art and so on, although she is a mine manager's daughter. I think an enormous amount of her energies are being put into—and this is not to say I don't like her work, a lot of her work is very good—seeing that she can continue to write and, at the same time, to write in defiance.

That is not an easy thing to do. Because if she had gone one step further, she would have been silenced, or she would have had to go out of the country. The same is true of Alan Paton. I have recently met, by chance, in of all places, Iowa City—where they do magnificent things in their International School—writers from all parts of the world, and there I met Miriam Tlali, a black writer who is from Soweto, the black enclave of Johannesburg. Her work is limited, I think, but she is a very delightful person. I find what is happening in South Africa so worrying because so much lunatic energy is used to turn people into a state of frenzy. I mean she is really a darling person. I think she is by nature a wife and mother figure, the old style, and certainly a very religious woman. And she came to England on her way back from America and I gave a party for her when her book came out. We saw quite a lot of each other. She has been to stay with me. When she was going back, she was worried what would happen when she got back. And I said to her, "I don't think I know South Africa well enough to talk about it, all the same, I don't honestly think you are going to get imprisoned over this book." "No," she said. "I think I could bear that, but I think they will stop me going to the Anglican church." That, for her was the worst thing she could think of. But in a way, it seemed incredible, because those very people, that's the kind of person they are trying to break.

Fisher: Yes.

Sir Angus: It seems almost inconceivable that it could happen like that, but it is so extraordinary. I also regret a bit . . . . I went back in 1961 and I wrote some articles. I specifically wrote about the two white races there—the Afrikaners and the English and the difference between them. I was horrified by what I discovered had happened since I was a boy, horrified. And I joined the anti-Apartheid group and I spoke in Trafalgar Square. In a way I am very pleased I did, but in a way I regret it also, because that put a stop to my going back now. Had I not done that public thing, I would have gone back, and I could have written some novels which
would have been horrendous and would have done more good than my talking in public. The choices are subject to . . .

Fisher: Perhaps it’s a matter of one’s conscience.

Sir Angus: Well, it is, it is. But yet in a way, one says that, but the important thing is to do something useful. It is so incredible. The whole tensions, and with my own family in South Africa. The absurdity of how they see things. You can’t believe it, really. My family belongs to the English South Africans, and the difference between these two white races is the whole history of white people in racist situations. The one, the Afrikaner people, really have a strong feeling for South Africa and a strong feeling for the position of black people there and so on. But they are horrified by racial contact. They would do anything for their servants, but don’t let us ever have black barristers or black doctors coming to sit at our tables. Now my relations, the English ones, would be happy to see black barristers or black doctors at their table, but they are afraid they would lose their servants.

Fisher: Oh, why?

Sir Angus: Because if there were not Apartheid, cheap labor would soon vanish and they want to live like English people did in 1900. It’s so terrible.

Fisher: I was thinking then of freedom and my mind went to Meg Eliot in *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot*. She is really the harbinger of what we call here in America our liberated woman. It occurred to me that you are far advanced in the themes you use in your novels.

Sir Angus: I have tried and tried to get my publisher to issue that book here in paperback. Recently I met a woman who was a New York writer. She said to me, “yours was the first women’s lib novel.”

Fisher: Yes, it predates our women’s lib books and movement of the sixties.

Sir Angus: 1957. As far as the women’s lib goes, one has to be a woman writer to be believable. That’s the thing that depresses me. I’m a supporter of women’s lib but, if you take Victorian novels, George Meredith, as much as anyone, said the most liberating things in *The Egoist* and *Diana of The Crossways*. Tremendous, passionate pleas for women’s liberation. But this is put out of court. He was a man. Yet someone like George Eliot, whom I like very much, when you look at *The Mill on The Floss*, you see exactly what she thought the heroine should do, go back and drown with her brother.

Fisher: You have also confronted other issues, like homosexuality, in your novels.

Sir Angus: *Hemlock* was an early one of this kind.

Fisher: You are confronting the issue honestly and openly, not in the same way as some novelists.

Sir Angus: Well, I always try to put them into the traditional novel. I
always determined—and I still feel this, in relation to the position of women, to the position of homosexuals, to the position of Blacks, everyone—to treat them all as part of the whole of society. I think it’s so boring, these books which are just about a little group of people, cut off from the rest of society. Because for me the success of any of these movements is when those people are given their place in society that they deserve, but in society, not as some sort of little group waving banners. They can give so much to society and society can give so much to them; but it takes a long time for this to happen. . . .

Sir Angus: I’m so glad you enjoyed my books so much.

Fisher: Yes, I enjoyed Mrs. Eliot most, one would expect that, perhaps because I identified so closely with her.

Sir Angus: I’m very fond of Late Call as a book about a woman too. Because I think the problem of an old woman when she has been told “you are nothing,” how to find you are something, that is quite a thing. And also, although I think there are lots of defects about Magic, the part about Alexandra is also an important thing about girls. All this business about the new liberation, the new morality—I saw it in my students in the sixties. It raised for girls all sorts of new problems.

Fisher: Oh, yes. Quite more than they anticipated.

Sir Angus: Because they could do this, they could do that. They could sleep with two men, if they wanted to; they could have abortions. They could do all this but, though men are not nasty, they will take advantage, just as they did before. And in a way, they have got more to take advantage of.

And I felt that in Alexandra—and it wasn’t perhaps seen by the critics—that in Alexandra I was making a blow on behalf of the modern girl. So Late Call takes in the old woman; the middle age is Mrs. Eliot; then Alexandra is the young girl. And I do honestly think . . . a girl came to me in great despair. And it was obvious that much of what happened, much of her breakdown had been caused by an abortion. And you know, with Sylvia it’s almost a Victorian world. When she drives the little girl to do something she wanted her to do, her parents beat her and say, “you’re nothing.” Then comes Meg Eliot who has been a famous hostess, on top of the world, and she suddenly realizes that she has got to be herself, not just Mrs. Eliot, but Meg Eliot. And then comes Alexandra who is a liberated girl, but she is faced with all the time: what does it mean, this liberation? What can I do with it?

Fisher: One can see Elvira [Anglo-Saxon Attitudes] as a precursor of Alexandra—her affair with Robin Middleton and her almost affair with Mr. Middleton.

Sir Angus: Yes, she is an earlier version. And those hippie groups, I saw them in India, and I saw them in Morocco, and there was much to be said for them, but also a great deal of self-deception. And again this was
always a difficult thing for a young middle-class girl like Alexandra, who joined the hippie movement in that period, because of the “way-outness” of it, because of the newness of it, because of the experiment, there were inevitably a number of extreme hysterical people. And so it was a difficult thing for an ordinary girl to find her way about in that world.

Fisher: Yes, of course it was. So you think literature is safe for the future?

Sir Angus: Oh, what a question. I don’t like to say whether it’s safe or not. I don’t think anything is safe. I don’t believe in safety. But I will certainly try all I can to keep the imaginative spirit alive.

Newark, Delaware December 13, 1980.

The End of the Good Months
HARRY BRODY

I used to sleep
In the little tree
In her left eye
Holding to the
Falling light
Falling from
Her face
As I
Pulled
The shade
Only to waken
Tentacled
In the tree’s
Twisted fingers
That opened
And closed
The way our mouths do
When they know for certain
What must be said

Summers
THOMAS FEENY

How you slipped thru gold days
sun licking the back of
your neck

summers gone
Something Old, Something New

MARY ALICE AYERS

THE IMMEDIATE APPREHENSION of an obvious but previously hidden truth—there it was. And it was so simple: simple as turning her head. Crossing 57th Street, she had done just that. She had turned her head quickly to one side to see if the light had changed and discovered a low XKE swinging into her thigh and in it a young man whose eyes were glued not on the changing light but on her legs. In a flash, she was conscious of all that Out There. And that her marriage was over. Done. It was that simple. The young man had made her aware of how young she still was. She had been married for years, but she had all of life before her.

All of life Out There. She was not any part of it. That would have to be changed. But she would be practical about it. Because she had worked, and contributed fifty percent of their usable income for five of the six years she’d been married, she would take half of their estate. That was only fair. But how to divide it?

Cash was easy: so, too, were investments and property—these could be sold, and turned into cash. But the paintings, the furniture, the pieces of past and forever lost time skillfully garnered from the limited wealth of centuries gone by . . . . the antiques: it was agony to think of parting with any one of them. Each represented the best not only of the world’s past, but of their marriage. For it was their shared belief in a love eternally true that had led them to purchase pieces of eternal value.

She had discovered that love was not eternal, but she still believed that beauty was. Now she was going to get a divorce, and sacrifice some of the beauty. But freedom was worth the loss.

Yet how, how divide up all those beautiful things? By size? Many were mammoth constructions of mahogany or rosewood that frustrated her housekeeping—she wasn’t strong enough to move them herself, and therefore couldn’t clean behind them. Now, when she wanted a new life that would be light and free, it would be foolish to take the heavy from the old life along with her.

Then, too, she suspected that some of the larger pieces were not as valuable as the smaller ones. Size was not a criterion of worth—her hus-
band was a big, overpowering man—and she wanted to be fair. She would have to call in an appraiser, something she should have done a long time ago anyway. The pieces, all auction finds, had never been properly insured, and were worth more than what they had paid for them.

One night, her husband came home from work early and discovered her making up a list. “What are you writing?” he asked.

She had to lie. “We should change our insurance policy, don’t you think? To cover all the new purchases. I’ll handle it; I know how busy you are.”

He was not to know, on no account was he to know what she was up to, until it was all over. Unless she laid a proper foundation for it, he might ascribe her decision to excessive emotionalism. If he could see the divorce cut and dried, totalled up in dollars and cents, in the columns of figures his business mind readily comprehended . . . Then he might buy her decision without any fuss.

The appraiser, recommended by a friend, had a beautiful little antique shop on Second Avenue in the Fifties. While there, she fell in love with a huge gilt mirror, and instead of lessening her difficulties, she added to them. She bought it.

“LOOK, LADY, are you telling me I don’t know my job?” The man was an authentic Italian from Bleecker Street, heavy and cumbersome as the mirror he had come to hang.

“No, no, of course not.” She tried to placate him. “Several people said you were wonderful at hanging mirrors.”

“Why’s this the first mirror I’m hanging for you then?”

Her former mirror-hanger had sold his shop and bought a farm in Pennsylvania, somewhere near Easton. She liked to think about that farm. It also promised openness and freedom. At eighteen she had loved a farm boy in the mountains near Albany. She said: “We were economizing; my husband hung those two over there.” One lie followed easily on the heels of the other. The man of the house did nothing in it; although he was physically more able and although he had promised to, she had hung every curtain, picture, shelf, and towel rack.

“Look, lady, don’t tell me to hang a mirror so high. It’ll look lousy.”

She was sorry, at a time like this, that she had given up her job. Workmen could drive a housewife mad.

“I want the mirror hung high. The glass is antiqued; it is not meant to reflect, but to be.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“What do you think this is, lady, a social call?”

“No. Please hang the mirror where I asked you to.”

“Get me a beer.”
She got him a beer.

Sometimes, in a passion during an auction, she would buy a piece she had never seen before. At Parke-Bernet, she felt quite safe losing control of herself—the velvet hangings softened the blow of parting with money, and she trusted the auctioneers there. Particularly since Sotheby’s had gained control. Now the mother country’s stamp of approval rested invisibly but firmly on every English eighteenth-century piece she brought home.

When an impulse purchase made at Parke-Bernet fitted in especially well with what she already had, she was in ecstasy. Most recently, she was delighted when a brilliant black and gold lacquer chest, snapped up on a whim, came home and held its own in the living room. But it needed restoration, the appraiser said, if she wanted to get a good price for it.

The appraiser looked so juvenile and lost she expected him at any moment to suck his thumb. She offered him a piece of homemade cake and he leaped at it, even licking the fork. With chocolate on his tongue, he talked and talked and talked. About aggressive women—deserting the home and demanding what men had by right and by nature. What was happening to the world?

She said the world was changing and women with it. She said perhaps women were developing a new spirit of adventure. Or maybe men had lost theirs and women were getting desperate. About the lacquer chest—did he know the name of a man who could restore it?

Chinese he was, the restorer, and that was just perfect, because the lacquer chest, although English, was decorated in the Chinese manner. Wah Lee had done work for the White House, and believed he had remarkable talent. It was an art, what he did. He was a painter, not a restorer.

“I artist, Mrs.,” he said. “Artist.”

He walked through the entire apartment without being invited to, and she followed along meekly, wondering what he was looking for. He finally asked: “How much rent you pay, Mrs.?”

She didn’t tell him, but reminded him of the street address. Not Park Avenue, she added, hoping his price for the job wouldn’t be too high. “Three hundred,” he said. “Mrs., if this Park Avenue, five hundred.”

Three hundred for what? What exactly had to be done? How would he fill in the small gashes in the lacquer?

“Putty,” he said. He pronounced it “poo-tee.”

All right then, with putty, three hundred. She offered him some tea.

“Mrs., vodka?”

Vodka it was, and while he was drinking it, his eyes fell on a George III tole tray they had picked up for a song and never used because it was too heavy. “Restored, Mrs., worth much more, maybe one fifty more.”

In the end, she let him take the chest and the tray. She would spend
much of what she had to sell all she had. But all she had would be perfected first. Her husband accepted the fact that she had a need for perfection that was difficult to satisfy. Restoring the antiques would help her, he rationalized.

Wah Lee knew what he was about; that was obvious when the pieces were returned. All that gold; it quite took her breath away. Like Galileo, who had looked at the sun and been blinded for a week, she was temporarily blinded her to her husband’s faults by the beauty of the spectacle. But in a short while, the film fell away from her eyes. She could see again, and was again dissatisfied with what she saw.

One afternoon, thinking not of what she was doing with her time, but of where she was going with her life, she dropped a copper kettle on the tray. An enormous dent marred the perfection that had been so expensively obtained. Clutching the tray against her like a shield, she cried. I can’t tell him, she said, I won’t tell him; if she did he would think her a fool. Now more than ever she had to be viewed as serious and responsible. She would simply say that the restoration was not perfect, after all. One scratch up near the rim disturbed her, and she had sent it back to be repaired. Meanwhile, until she left him, she would hide the tray far in the back of the hall closet, which was ten feet deep.

NOW SHE HAD DONE IT. Pushing and shoving things aside in the closet, she heard the door start to swing shut (why had she oiled the hinges?) but too late to catch it. It was dark, and for a moment she felt she had left the world of light forever, but she could hear on the radio Duparc’s “L’Invitation Au Voyage”:

\[
C’est pour assouvir \\
Ton moindre désir.
\]

\[
\text{In order to satisfy} \\
\text{Your least desire.}
\]

Propping the tray up against what she thought was the far wall, she felt her way back past the skis, the curtain rods, the ice skates, the tennis racket, the floor waxer. She stumbled at one point and got a splinter in her finger.

The doorknob turned but wouldn’t catch. She guessed it was fifty years old. It needed new screws, but the ones made today didn’t fit. Every door in the apartment closed too solidly or not at all. The answer was new doorknobs, she thought, mentally adding them to her shopping list; but they lacked charm, or élan, or individuality.

A hanger, she thought. If she could twist a metal hanger and force the latch with it . . . . But the opening was too thin. At this time even a thief, one
who knew about breaking locks, would look good to her—anyone would who could find a way to get out.

She hated being closed in. and she hated the dark: both were getting to her now. She tried to clear a space on the floor but there were too many things in the closet. Skis, and ski poles, old and new. Her old ski poles had had very sharp points, and she had been afraid of them. Why hadn’t she given them away? They dated way back; they were the ones she used that weekend at Stowe before they were married. It was an adventure, that weekend. He was very athletic and very lively when involved in sports. She closed her eyes against the dark and imagined her husband before he was her husband, and Stowe, cold and white.

Ice everywhere. The thermometer outside the hotel window read eight degrees in the morning, and later crept up to fourteen. Feeling confident because, novice that she was, she had finally managed to complete a snowplow turn on every try, she tackled the chair lift. Down, for a novice, was only in one direction, via the Toll House Road, which was very narrow. To turn when it turned was the challenge. He insisted she go first, and she felt safe knowing that an intermediate who could parallel ski was right behind her.

A combination drop and steep turn fouled her up. She fell, sharp poles flailing the air, and he fell over her, and two more skiers fell over him and her and each other. Skis went sliding hither and yon. No one was hurt but she thought he would be angry. The others went on their way and she waited, shivering. “You silly,” he said. Then he kissed her and they sat down together on the icy trail, and kissed until their bottoms froze.

She had loved his body then, and could fully enjoy it: he had not then made the many demands he made later. That day she remembered he could stand before she could—she, being more emotional of course, was left weaker by the kiss. He went first the rest of the way, and she remembered watching his sky-blue jacket flash down and around the turns, and she hurried so she could get close to it again.

What was he wearing today? The weather was springlike. Had he worn a coat when he left that morning? She tried not to look at him any more now than was absolutely necessary. When he came home he wouldn’t expect to find her where she was. If he hadn’t worn a coat that he’d have to put away, she might remain in the closet indefinitely. He might work late; she might fall asleep and not hear him come in. . . . But he would wonder about the radio.

She opened her eyes to light, the hall light shining behind her husband, and his face dark against it. She could not see him fully but what she saw had never looked so good to her. He was offering her some freedom for once. Or perhaps she had always been her own confiner—she had allowed her life to be limited. But he demanded to know what her problem was. “What are you doing in the closet?” he asked.
Among the Amish

ANTHONY MERCER

The buggy lamps don fireflies
in communion with June.
The puckered earth
hangs suspended on the lingering
taste of a billion finales
and one new birth.
A remote land
where June and fireflies were alone
is slipping by as lightly
as a transparent aroma.

The days swing around
like a tetherball on a rubber string
in the tiny schoolyard.
They stretch for all
they are worth in summer
and snap short in winter.
The seasons are ground to powder
and sprinkled at the feet of the holy
pillars of Christmas and Easter.
History is before, behind, and always
between the furrows,
somersaulting by the plow.

Skin of finely etched tributaries
traversing hands and cheeks
preens the open palm of earth
on a journey to Heaven.
Iridescent skin, pinched with rose
and set in ebony frame,
is the summit of a mother's care
and an inkling of the only land
allowed in their dreams.
being cagey—he’s being honest. His memoirs contain no evidence that he has thought out the questions Sir Angus talks about, and his work in the theatre has been extremely spotty. Significantly, the passage appears in the chapter on Camelot, which has one of the worst libretti in the history of musical comedy. The only one I can think of that surpasses it in this respect is his script for On A Clear Day You Can See Forever, whose messiness is objectionable not only in itself but also in its obscuring of a lovely score by Burton Lane. True, he has had his successes, mainly as a lyricist (a profession he has nothing to say about in his book), but even the vaunted book of My Fair Lady has some major flaws. Lerner is, in short, one of the merely talented, content to be blown to whatever heights and depths the inspiration of the moment may determine.

Of course, it will be said, Lerner works in the theatre, a collaborative medium, and specifically musical comedy, which is more collaborative than drama. We all know the stories (real or apocryphal) of the intransigent composer, the temperamental star, or (most likely) the overreaching director who forces the sensitive artist to compromise his high goals in the interests of cheap effects. Indeed, this does happen in the theatre—but not to people like Lerner, Neil Simon, Eugene O’Neill, George M. Cohan and a host of other talent-mongers. They have what theatre-people call “muscle,” for one thing. For another, they just don’t (as Lerner admits) go into production with any such high-minded goals or the artistic technique to implement them. Surely it is the shame of the American theatre that such like have attained their power and stature by such slapdash means—and the shame of American audiences that they have been taken in by such bad art.

The American theatre has produced some first-class art. (I like Virgil Thomson’s statement that there are not “five American ‘art composers’ who can be compared, as song writers, for either technical skill or artistic responsibility, with Irving Berlin.”) Even lately. But for every Wings (Arthur Kopit) or Fifth of July (Lanford Wilson, the off-Broadway, published version especially)—plays that have something significant to say and the technical skill to say it—there is a legion that have neither.

Pauline Kael has said of the film director Blake Edwards, “he’s careful; he doesn’t take any real chances. (That must be what some people mean when they say he’s ‘a professional.’)” She might be describing Neil Simon. Simon’s plays are clusters of gags. He does have a primitive talent for them. But they have become more and more dehumanized, if indeed the characters in his plays ever resembled humans in the first place, and the clustering is hopeless as dramatic
development. He ignores the thematic possibilities of his material altogether. In *The Tavern*, George M. Cohan went one step further in his "professionalism." Despite its jokiness, the play at one point seems to be moving into an almost Pirandellian world: we begin to wonder if the characters are really what they say (believe) they are; the play seems to be turning into a work about playing. It's clear too that Cohan saw that he was instinctively working toward such an ambitious theme and deliberately backed away from it. The play reverts to its native woodnotes wild; talent overcomes something bigger just in the nick of time. Cohan trusts neither his instincts nor his audience's.

That Simon is incapable of craftsmanship is most vividly illustrated by his revision of his libretto for *Little Me*, produced on Broadway last season. This show, originally done in 1963, is based on a very funny book by Patrick Dennis, a parody of a movie star's memoirs. Partly at the insistence of a star, Sid Caesar, and partly on his own initiative, Simon distorted the focus and contents of Dennis's book and produced an unsatisfactory book. Simon saw that he had made mistakes (after the fact, of course) and was determined to rewrite. The result was a fiasco. The revision was worse—cruder, less focused, flatter than the original.

Another fact of the theatre that has been often mythologized as an excuse for artistic laxity is that some work always has to be done in rehearsal. In a way unique among artists, the playwright cannot know how effective his work is until it has been mounted and acted. I do, however, reject outright the idea that plays are pure theatre and not judgeable as literature. Technique is indispensable to good drama, whether popular or highbrow. Anyone who has had to sit through a performance where spontaneity has been used as a rationalization for lack of control can understand the misuse of a legitimate need. Consider this classic story. Edward Chorodov and Norman Panama write a thriller, *A Talent for Murder*. During rehearsal and the out-of-town run, they revise the play, changing the identity of the murderer three times. Now, how could anyone, let alone men who've been kicking around the theatre (albeit hardly its artistic heights) for years, write a murder mystery without planning who the murderer is to be? Even Conan Doyle, with his slapdash structuring of action, never sank that low. (Sorry, Jack). And they wouldn't even take responsibility for their devil-may-care, "professional" attitude that talent will out in the end; for what must be the first time in history, the program listed a "script consultant." Even theatrical producers, who are notorious for bringing in wives, other playwrights, and doormen to interfere with artists, have never put the names of those people in the program! And this isn't even the worst example of excessive
spontaneity I can think of: I believe Anthony Shaffer made up Sleuth as rehearsals progressed.

But when the theatre mounts what it thinks is serious drama, the full and depressing implications of the glorification of talent and the neglect of art becomes clear. Tom Stoppard stands high above Simon in reputation, largely on the basis of his wonderful wit. But what’s the difference?—his work displays the same assembly-line quality, the same dramatic emptiness. Frank Rich, the drama critic of the Times and a man who has no idea of what dramatic art is, keeps rewriting his review of Michael Bennett’s glitzy Dreamgirls in the hope, I suppose, that it will thereby become the triumph of dramatic art it so signally is not. Nor can he understand how Christopher Durang, with the triumph of “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You” behind him, could not write a coherent drama in Beyond Therapy. The truth of the matter is that “Sister Mary” is perhaps the worst piece of dramaturgy ever. Even if one were disposed to entertain its anti-Catholic sentiments, the total failure to dramatize them renders the play insupportable. A talent for invective does not an artist make.

On a far superior level, John Guare is full of the desire to say important things in experimental form, as was O’Neill before him. But neither has the mind or grace to deliver. O’Neill lacked even talent; all he had was instinct and chutzpah. Guare is smarter and more accomplished, but his plays still come out muddled and fuzzy. Michael Cristofer’s The Shadow Box won a Pulitzer Prize; what it should have won was a B— in Senior Playwriting, with its hackneyed themes, cardboard characters, and the faintest glimmer of theatrical or literary flair. The Gin Game might have had merit as a seven-minute sketch for Carol Burnett and Harvey Korman; stretched to a two-hour play, it was hopeless.

And speaking of stretching, consider the most recent jewel in Broadway’s “professional”/artistic crown: Bernard Pomerance’s The Elephant Man. It started as a one-act play with some moderately interesting (though hardly fresh) things to say about the problems of the handicapped (the physically distorted Merrick and his spiritually comatose doctor, Treves) and the theatricality of theatre people (Mrs. Kendall). And so it should have stayed. I wish the one-act play would have made a major comeback; it would make the work of talented but in the long run inept playwrights less trying. There’d be less likelihood of their getting in trouble. And get in trouble Pomerance did when he attempted to expand his work to a full evening. He has reached the end of his thematic tether by the end of the first act (as well as all the potential for stage effect). The rest is all padding: an assemblage of religious and sociological statements, combined with
some transcendentally irrelevant symbolism. There is no through-
line; there is not a single line in Act One that in any way foreshadows
the realization Treves arrives at in the end. And this psychological
superficiality and inconsistency is hardly covered up by the alleged
plot: Pomerance falls back on a sloppy plot expedient that has
ruined two films I’ve recently seen ("Julia" and "The Great Santini")—
throwing in subsidiary plot lines instead of exhausting the implications
of his main plot and idea.

I could go on with this catalogue indefinitely, but list-making is
not my idea of interesting. And besides—I’ve just remembered what
happened when Alan Jay Lerner tried to mate Brechtian theatre
techniques and their ideological implications with conventional patrio-
tism and traditional theatricalism in 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. I
can’t think about this any more . . . .

JCK

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PLAY

Schwartz, Robert M. The Master of Ceremo-
nies, 31:2 (Winter 82), 3-47.
ANGUS FRANK JOHNSTONE-WILSON was born August 11, 1913. After education at the Westminster School and Merton College, Oxford, he worked at the Foreign Office and was later Deputy to the Superintendent of the Reading Room at the British Museum. He began writing in 1946. His professional accomplishments were later acknowledged by the tendering of academic posts at the University of East Anglia and Cambridge, and at Yale, Chicago, Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, the University of Michigan, and the University of Delaware, among others. He has been awarded honorary degrees by various English institutions, and is a Chevalier de l' Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. He is a Companion of Literature and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1968. Novels: Hemlock and After (1952), Anglo-Saxon Attitudes (1956), The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot (1958), The Old Men at the Zoo (1961), Late Call (1964), No Laughing Matter (1967), As If By Magic (1973), Setting the World on Fire (1980). Short Stories: The Wrong Set (1949), Such Darling Dodos (1949), A Bit Off the Map (1957), Death Dance (1969). Critical works: Emile Zola (1952), The Wild Garden or Speaking of Writing (1963), Tempo: The Impact of Television on the Arts (1964), The World of Charles Dickens (1970), The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling (1977). Drama: The Mulberry Bush (1956), and several television plays. Non-Fiction: For Whom the Cloche Tolls: A Scrapbook of the Twenties (with Phillipe Julian, 1953). Mrs. Eliot has just been republished in paperback by Penguin.

RUTH FISHER’s interview with Robert Penn Warren, conducted when she was still a student at La Salle, appeared in our RPW issue (May, 1972), and was later reprinted in Robert Penn Warren Talking (Random House, 1980). She has since earned a Ph.D. from Temple University, and has taught at Temple and the University of Delaware. She is currently revising her dissertation on Warren’s poetry for publication, has a novel and a volume of nonfiction in the works, and teaches at Villanova University.

Welcome back also to MARY ALICE AYERS, whose story “Articles of Faith” appeared here in Autumn, 1977. She lives in Miami. Iowa-born HARRY BRODY now lives in Temple Terrace, Florida with his wife and child. His collection, As Once to Birth I Went Now I Am Taken Back (New College Press), is forthcoming. ANTHONY MERCER apparently received the inspiration for his poem around his hometown, Lancaster, where he is a display specialist for the J.C. Penney Co. From Raleigh, N.C., THOMAS FEENY reports that he has been writing poetry and fiction for nine years. His work has appeared in Hiram Poetry Review, Southwest Review, Pale Fire Review, and elsewhere.

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