CHAPTER VI
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Redemption Through Art: Also, a Study of Cross Purposes (art and chaos)

Setting the World on Fire (1980)

Wilson's eighth and last novel, Setting the World on Fire (1980) is, to a large extent, autobiographical. Its theme is presented through the life and career of two brothers, Piers and Tom Mosson - the former a protagonist of a life of action, and the latter of an ordered and disciplined life. These two form the main conflict as presented in the novel.

The novel is divided into three parts. Part I shows the two Mosson boys as young tots at Tothill. Part II which covers the period from 1956 - 1957 sees them as going to school at Westminster, and Part III, set in the year 1969, shows them as adults with Piers having inherited Tothill House and being firmly established as a producer of plays. Part II has eight chapters whereas Part III has three.

All along, the story of the two brothers resembles a fairy-tale, only to end in a tragic denouement. After the death of their father, Jerry, a fighter pilot, in the war, Piers and Tom are brought to Tothill House by their mother, Rosemary, and welcomed by their grandmother, Lady Jackie Mosson and Uncle Hubert who do not think much of the widow. Piers is impressed with the Verrio ceiling which has a painting of Ovid's 'Phaeton' flying towards the Sun in his chariot and by a clever connivance, falling into a malachite bowl. Piers adopts the Phaeton myth as a symbol of all his aspirations. As he gets older, his interest in theatre production takes root. His dream is to stage Lully's opera of the Phaeton at Tothill. For this he has to get support from his ninety-year old Great Grandfather, Sir Mosson, and his grandmother. Unluckily, his mother falls out with Lady Mosson over the former's desire to live in with Jim, her lover of years and her dead husband's friend. The instinctive decision of the two boys to side with their mother cuts them off from everything and everyone at Tothill.
Sir Mosson dies suddenly after announcing his wish for the boys to be taken back to the House. Their Uncle Hubert's sudden death and their grandmother's illness see them back at Tothill and in the midst of their dream production. After the grand success of 'Phaethon', Piers, now a celebrated producer, is ready to stage a play scripted by Ralph Tucker (who, besides being the head gardener and head carpenter at Tothill, is an aspiring playwright of the angry-young-man type). But the play is found to be a cover up for terrorist activities. Policemen from the Scotland Yard troop in to arrest the fanatical bombers, chief among whom are Ralph and his wife Magda Sczekerney – the archivist of Tothill library and Marina Luzzi. In the chaos that follows, Marina fires at Piers who is pushed away by Tom and, in doing so, takes the bullet himself. Tom dies but not before he exhorts his brother to go on and 'do things in his own way'. Momentarily lost at the thought of a life without steady Tom by his side, and a disordered, chaotic Tothill in front, and without anyone to guide him, Piers resolves not to go back on his own promise to his dear brother. He will 'fly' as Phaeton did in the limitless azure sky and try to set the world on fire. Thus the title of the novel is fully justified.

The narrative is an amalgam of several motifs, chief among them are the Phaeton myth, the ice motif, the architectural motif linked with Ibsen's play *The Master Builder*, the 'garden', and 'House' which is a symbol of the hopes and aspirations of its occupants.

The Phaeton myth which is recurrent in the novel is of enormous significance. Piers incorporates this myth thoroughly into his personality. The mythical Phaeton, driven by overriding ambition and goaded by his mother, Clymene, had aspired even to conquer the sun and had perished tragically having gone too near it. Piers' identification with the myth is deliberate and complete. All along, he celebrates the recklessness and courage of Phaeton in his character. At one point, Marina casting Piers as Phaeton predicts that 'In the theatre you would set the world on fire'. The
ever confident Piers finds no reason to refute her: 'Oh, I shall!' he said. 'It's my intention.' (55). Tom wants to know from his mother, 'Would you mind if (Piers) set the world on fire?' Clymene-like, she leaves no room for doubt as she replies, 'No, of course not. It's just what I know he will do.' (98)

If Piers is 'fire', Tom is 'ice'. It has been planted in young Tom's mind by his uncle Hubert in Part I with the description of the world as not 'altogether a safe place. It's a bit like an ice-covered pond - even a skater should never play the giddy ox, in case he falls through the ice'. (13) Tom's aversion to the ice-breaking Phaetons of the world is frequently reflected in the book. At the party held after the staging of Richard II, he finds that by her behaviour, Marina was 'breaking the ice beneath them all ...' (56) At one point, his uncle Eustace also ridicules his innate passivity by tap-dancing around him saying, 'I don't want to set the world on fire, I just want to be sitting alone'. (105)

Allusions to Ibsen's play show a parallel to Piers' aspirations, achievements, and fall. The frequent references to The Master Builder is centrepetal to Setting the World on Fire. The career of the hero of Ibsen's play, Halvard Solnes, unlike Phaeton's, begins with a conflagration; the burning of his wife's ancestral home results in a series of actions which bring him stupendous architectural success. Finally, the ending in both the cases is similar. Solnes' career ends like Phaeton's with a fatal fall just at the moment of his symbolic achievement. Even Tom in his final affirmative act of saving Piers finds an analogy in Halvard. Magda Sezekerny is cast in Piers' mind as Hilde Wangel, Solnes' temptress, when he first sees her. The allusion becomes total when Magda as a major agent occasions events which set Piers' world on fire.

A parallel constantly drawn between the two brothers shows off the theme of the novel - order versus chaos, discipline versus indiscipline, brilliance versus
mediocrity, courage versus temerity, and the real set off against the imaginary. Thus, Piers symbolises all that is enterprising in life whereas Tom epitomises order in disorder. Even their nicknames for each other, Tom is called 'Pratt' by Piers who is 'Van' to the other, underline the basic difference in their characters. The two brothers, descendants of the House of Tothill, also typify two different ways of life and belief of their ancestors. Thomas Tothill, who was a 'slow-moving, hard-headed man of affairs' and Francis Tothill, 'essentially a quick-witted, graceful courtier, in turn took the risk of choosing architects who were not easy, safe bets and were rewarded by the wonderful results'. (134) Tothill House, created by 'architects of opposing visions' - the first is Pratt, the exponent of the Palladian style, and the second, Vanbrugh of the Baroque style, who went in for daring innovations, set off Tom's 'desire to preserve its majesty and Piers' ambition to expand its grandeur'. These conflicting responses add to Tothill's splendour, yet 'the house was the enchanter that brought them all together in pleasure'. (216)

As Ted Billy says, 'Thomas and Francis Tothill, Pratt and Vanbrugh, Tom and Piers Mosson, the wild garden and the garden in the wild - each duality functions as a manifestation of the dialectic of creation and conservation in Wilson's own personality'.

Wilson's tale of the two brothers seems to be taken from his own childhood and his relation to an older brother:

As a child I was much with my brother next in age, thirteen years old when I was born. He was a youth of exceptional histrionic powers, strangely combining sharpness of wit and tenderness of heart, extremely effeminate, with deep powers of creation that were
never fulfilled. His wit and his fantasy have both
strongly influenced the texture of my free imagination,
giving it an unusual quality of severely moral
chi-chi and camp'.

As Ted Billy says, 'Setting the World on Fire may be Wilson's elegy for the unrealized
potentiality of his older brother. It may also chart the metaphorical course of action
leading to his decision to become a creative artist (i.e. to accomplish what his brother
might have accomplished)'. References to the boys' school at Westminster also remind
us that it was the author's first public school. Lady Mosson's belief in Christian Science
recalls that of the author's mother.

The story opens in the Great Hall of Tothill House where Piers stands looking
high up at the painting of Phaeton flying through the sky. Even as a child, he is
fascinated by the great lantern and tries to imbibe the spirit of the myth in himself.
His gay abandonment, reflected in his carefree dance, has never been liked by Uncle
Jim. Prohibited from dancing in the open, he carries the dance forward in his mind
until he merges with it. Hubert thinks the mythical Phaeton to be 'a silly chap' who
'thought he could drive the sun's chariot without any practice'. To him, the Great Hall
which is one hundred feet high from the floor and one hundred feet long and fifty feet
wide with its great lantern is 'just a glass lantern up in the roof.' (12) He is like Bill,
Meg Eliot's husband in The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, who grounds the awesomeness
of the desert into mere facts and figures while flying over it. To Hubert, Hitler is the
modern-day Phaeton, whereas to Piers, his father Jerry, fighting and dying in the war,
is the Phaeton. Hubert thought that even Vanbrugh, 'the architect who built [the]
room, great artist though he was, was a bit wild himself.' (13)

His defence of Pratt's design of the Great Hall with the big central staircase
influences Tom in forming his early view of life. Henceforth, Tom is always afraid of walking on thin ice, lest it cracks underneath him, but is goaded by Piers, 'Come on Tom, can't you ever take a chance?' (24). Tom's love and hero-worship of his brother who can deal with 'any' situation is apparent as the former seeks him out to escape from Uncle Hubert's suffocating company:

'... He was ready for any or all or none, for it was Piers who had shown him how to be all these things, who would decide, would have decided, where they were to be - in tulgy wood, jungle, or forest or ship or desert island or prison camp or, most recently, the dreadful cellar where the V.C. murderer brought his victims. Wherever it was, it was Piers who made it ...' (22-23)

In the first chapter of Part Two titled 'The First Performance', the school-going Piers is seen as a young producer of Richard II. The choice of his career is perfect as his vocation truly lies in the world of theatre. Tom, on the other hand, decides to pursue his academic interest. As Piers' first performance scores over the audience, deliberations are afoot for the staging of Lully's opera in Tothill. His excitement at the thought now requires only the green nod from Lady Mosson who, ultimately, gives in to his enthusiasm.

In Chapter Two titled 'The Planning of an Opera', the two brothers look up the history of Tothill in the Library. Piers tells Tom that Lully was a great innovator and his opera was played before Louis XIV 'with decorum, with a sense of hierarchy' (65) so that 'there was no unseemly defiance of the gods by the mortals and so on' (65) and he has the confidence that he will be able to do justice to Lully.
Wilson has here, once again, set up the polarity between the Pratt and Vanbrugh architecture and an irony is present in the former's design of the original Cabinet Room - 'the mummified marmoset, the petrified lava from Etna shaped like a negro's thick lips, ... a sea-serpent turned to rock as it rose in spirals to strike ... an anal fistula bottled in spirits, the skeleton of a great bat.' (76)

In looking for order and sobriety, Pratt's work becomes fossilized. Piers, always the Vanbrugh exponent in life and art, cannot wait to start his work,

'For a sight of the libretto, better still the first hearing of the score, above all the first rehearsal in the Great Hall. He would so enter the very being of the actor who played Phaeton that the whole cast, the lantern itself, the great Solomonic columns would be shaped and ordered to his design, and Phaeton would fall at last in all his tragic wayward beauty to the terror and sadness and satisfaction of a fine tuned audience that would stagger from their seats amazed.' (91)

But as Marina tells him, the production of the opera in the Great Vanbrugh Hall will pull in all important names, but 'All will be a risk ...' (90) The Great Hall stands as a silent testimony to Vanbrugh's eccentric genius and the Library becomes the favourite boyhood room of Tom and Piers:

They had called it the Van-Pratt room, not only for its intricate, almost paradoxical entwining of their beloved architect heroes, but in its union of themselves. (76)
The Library carries within itself the essence of Tothill House - all that is contrary in style fused into a higher order of art. Piers intuitively senses the solidity of Tom's presence in the Library which makes him realise the necessity of the merger of the two opposities:

It was impossible for him to breathe the air of the Library without feeling Pratt (Tom) there, in busy, orderly, methodical reading. (76)

Chapter Three titled 'At Home at the Nursery' sees a gathering of the Gordon family - Rosemary, Piers and Tom, their sponging uncle Eustace and Uncle Jim, their mother's friend.

What comes through is the boys' affection for each other and their mother though each is immersed in his own work. Tom, busy cooking for the family, tries to know the reason of his mother's scene at Piers' first production. Even Piers who is helped by Uncle Jim with sketches of the Phaeton is not oblivious of his mother's pain and sadness at Uncle Jim's leaving for his job in the army. The ever-sponging Uncle Eustace is a typical Wilsonian character present as Mr. Nicholson in 'Rex Imperator' in Such Darling Dodos, as Arthur Calvert in Late Call, and Bill Pendlebury in Hemlock and After and also typified by Wilson's own father in real life.

Chapter Four which is called 'The Auditions for Phaeton' shows a contrast in the character of the two boys. Tom who identifies himself with his conventional grandmother says that he has agreed to the furniture history session with her because of her loneliness and unhappiness. To Tom, 'a great house is a shape and it is also the way people have lived it over centuries and what they filled it with. That's what makes it a strong fortress instead of a weak shell' (109) But Piers thinks that way
one becomes a slave to history; 'one must break the mould of what actually happened by what might have been.' (109) [emphasis added]. His concern is about creating an epoch—a new work of art out of an old one. Tom finds the modern mechanical world of all chatter and noise to be a meaningless distraction. He feels he must hang on to his own identity in this milieu, 'must do his own thing' (112), go back to the subtle certainties of mathematics and the wondrous flights of pure intellect to remain sane. Phaeton's chariot ride is to Piers a brave gesture of defiance of the dismal routine life. He who is all for unrestrained freedom finds Phaeton's gesture, tragic though it be, dramatic and exciting: 'The life he looked for in the next few years, at any rate, must be a great deal larger than that moving, frightening, absurd, or all three in one, but large, larger than life' (118). He would not, like Hamlet, rest content with soliloquising but would walk 'on ice that might melt at the first' (121) and his future depends on the successful staging of 'Phaeton'. In his attempt to recreate history, he must undertake risks. Piers' love for the theatre world becomes all the more pronounced as he feels sure that 'he must give his life to staging plays, whatever checks and barriers must arise.' (125) Life, as he discloses to Nigel Mordaunt, the Music Director of his play, is 'something a bit beyond everyday pleasantness that's worth taking risks for.' (132) and now the stage is all set for the staging of the play as the auditions appear to be good.

In Chapter V which is named, 'A Marriage Has Been Arranged', Hubert declares his engagement to the temperamental Marina Luzzi. Meanwhile, even Hubert realises that a synthesis of the artistic 'Van' sensibility and the opposing practical 'Pratt' sensibility is necessary for a balanced view of life. Stressing on this aspect, and slightly misquoting T.S. Eliot, he says:

'This Great Hall of Vanbrugh's built into, even extending Pratt's splendid house, has always
seemed to me to explain that otherwise mysterious saying 'In my end was my beginning.' (136)

Chapter VI is titled 'Preparations'. It marks the frenzied preparations for the opera. Marina's engagement with Hubert breaks off abruptly. She riles him about his sexuality and his over submission to his mother, Jackie. In Marina's behaviour, we see the petulance and stubbornness of the too-rich for whom relationships and, for that matter, the sanctity of marriage, hardly count. Jackie's behaviour, too, is reminiscent of an overly possessive mother. In such cases, it is the man, here Hubert, caught between the two demands on his emotion, who is the sufferer.

Once again, Jackie's order of preference is obvious. She vouches for order, constraint, regularity, and conventionality: 'Luckily Pratt's rooms have such order and dignity that they can absorb so much of the exotic.' (151) Understanding the basic difference between her grandsons, she relies on Tom in whom she finds an echo of her sentiments:

'Regularity and elegance. They are the important things. Especially when chaos is trying to take over. Keeping beautiful things going. And really knowing about them, caring for them.' (160)

Jackie's words strike a chord of response in Tom who identifies himself with everything that is Tothill. It is to him, 'something real-objects, values, rooms, purposes - not just the abstract shapes or the dreams that it seemed to mean to Van.' (159)

Chapter VII, titled 'The Family Lunch' is a sort of revelation for Piers and the others at Tothill. Before the gathering of the Mosson family for lunch to celebrate the good health of Great Grandfather, the boys are asked by their mother to meet her
at the railway station, significantly called Waterloo. Piers being busy with his opera cannot make it and Tom is left to hold the fort. As Tom walks along the riverbank, he derives a feeling of peace and protection from the sky and the perennial flow of the water so that his 'fears, all dangers of unrule or chaos, seemed remote.' (178) But suddenly as he walks across the bridge, all signs of permanent peace abandon him leaving him susceptible to metaphysical vertigo:

Then suddenly there was no road nor traffic nor people but water whose depths he could not see. And then, looking up, high, high above him the sky, across which some clouds were moving. At once the bridge's pavement beneath him was insecure, trembling. The clouds above looming closer, threatening - the skies would fall in ... he felt only himself, his own body totally alone, himself, Tom, and, high above, the sky, nothing nothing between to save him from its fall, and below, the trembling bridge, the bottomless water ... (178)

Feeling a sense of being enveloped by the surrounding chaos and the emptiness inside him, Tom would like a permanent escape from all of life's travails:

'... No one was there but him, he felt, and nothing, nothing, would save him from finding safety in the depths of the river below, nothing could save him from throwing himself down where he would be cradled from all this frightening void above and around him... ' (178)
Somehow overcoming the emptiness within and the strong urge to leap over the parapet to the welcoming freedom below, Tom runs across the bridge in panic focussing his eyes all the while on the shot tower. Reaching the other side of the bridge, he alleviates his anxiety before meeting his mother. But whatever it was that Rosemary intended to say is left unsaid, perhaps because of the absence of Piers. The bickerings at the lunch table and Jackie's treatment of Great Grandfather only expose the lapses of modern society in its insensitive treatment of old people. They also show their dislike of Grandfather's moment of Phaetonic flight. When Great Grandfather clamps up after sometimes, Piers feels for him being unable to respond, 'Shame, too, for the old man's conventionality, his dead emotional shyness. Shame for his own failure to feel enough with the poor, lost, angry old man, shame that his self-conscious play-acting, his awareness of 'drawing the old man out' had perhaps stifled the real bond of feeling that had come to life in him'. (197) The old man's revelation of his past youthful days when he had deviated a little from marriage fidelity and of his incapacitated old days during the Great War startles the others out of their complacent, patronising attitude towards him. But to Piers, the old man's story was a 'perfect and moving work of art' (201) and in going down into hell, he had found 'illumination, a moment's grace there.' (201) This moment of illumination is worth a lifetime of ignominy and oblivion. Risks taken by treading on thin ice is what ultimately lends buoyancy and a peculiar charm to life and this forms the vital core of the life led by the Vitalists as against the Crustaceans who live life as passive spectators.

The horrors of modern life after the World War is presented realistically by Wilson. Grandfather Mosson reminisces about the East End of London which was 'a jungle world' with 'desperate sights' – dog fights on an island in the Seine where dogs tearing each other to bits 'with lumps of their bowels all over the sawdust' (198) is a sport to the Englishmen. The brutal part of it all is that the dogs are trained for it.
Blake's poem 'A Robin Redbreast in a Cage' also symbolically portrays this savagery of modern man:

... A game - cock clipped and armed for fight
Doth the rising sun affright ...

But another big horror, the horror of the Great War, effectively puts an end to all these public horrors. The horrifying picture of this modern hell drawn by Grandfather and Mrs. Searle in 'Fresh Air Fiend' in The Wrong Set recalls to us the havoc wrought by the bombing of the twin cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States of America.

If Great Grandfather belongs to the Vitalists variety, Hubert, sadly, is comfortable in the Crustacean group relying on passivity and inactivity Piers longs to 'pierce his uncle's layers of self-protective convention' (206) and 'get him to meet life on the basis of real intelligence that surely was hidden under all his pomposity' (205) Conrad's 'heart of darkness' is unacceptable to Piers who feels that even at the end of the dark tunnel, there is always a ray of light and joy. His view is refuted by Jackie who says that 'it's all joy in reality ... There is no darkness in light.' (206) Piers understands that the success of his play depends not only on the final pulling of the curtain but on the variant scenes and acts which together work towards the climax. He has to create the shape he wants out of history which is always there.

Tothill is the epitome of all his hopes, aspirations, and creativity and here in its ambient surroundings with the Phaeton looking on from the painted ceiling, where his every 'sense was united, even sex' (216), 'he would fly' (217) or dare to. [emphasis added].

Chapter VIII titled 'Rosemary's Confession' marks the climax of the second
part. It sets the ordered world of Tom upside down and sets fire to the boys' patterned life and their hopes and aspirations. Characteristically, Tom blames himself for this upheaval:

'He, who was ever conscious of the ice cracking beneath us, ... should have been on his guard ... But this had been the occasion for restoring order and civility and he, Tom, had failed to do it ... And all he could think of was that the pattern of order and civility he had set for himself was not an easy one; it often came near to contradiction.'

(218)

The event of Tom's death is hinted at here by Wilson who also hits out at the futile and unnatural basis of established order.

Rosemary's disclosure of the nature of her relationship with Jim and her immediate plans of getting married to him without a divorce being granted by his wife is a 'bombshell' to the others. Jim's wife - a Roman Catholic grudging other people happiness; is reminiscent of Marie Helene in Anglo-Saxon Attitudes who would not grant a divorce and give happiness to Robin and his mistress, Elvira.

In spite of this 'bolt from the blue', feelingly, the boys 'stand up' for their mother which also means standing up for the ways of the heart and for unbridled freedom in a constrained atmosphere. Tom's defence of his mother's 'wild ways' astonishes everyone including Jackie because he has always been a spokesman for order and civility. But even Tom understands that above everything else, 'there is an order of the heart' and if he turns against his mother, he'd be 'breaking up an order which lies deeper than any civilised orderly behaviour.' (234) Cut off from their new-found roots at Tothill for having sided with their mother and devastated by the shattering of
their dreams, Piers, nevertheless, is ready to face loneliness which is an inevitable part of life: 'And I expect to have that loneliness in my life, however exciting and magnificent I can make it.' (234)

Grandmother Jackie who, like the elderly Miss Havisham in Dickens' Great Expectations, tries to stifle emotions, ironically voted for the essentiality of change in God's world earlier on: 'there is no need to be afraid of change. God made a changing world. He does not want us to turn our backs on the future.' (219) But what eludes her limited realization is that the future of Tothill is the two boys and that change lends spice to life. Adjusting oneself with the changes, unconventional though they are, in this case Rosemary's proposed marriage, is the call of the moment. But she says, 'But Tothill House cannot be mixed up with all these squalors' (228) little knowing that a great house minus its people who add colour and lend it charm by dint of their contrasting personalities is practically unliveable.

Feeling the pangs of separation from Tothill too much, 'there's no question of their stopping the Opera, you know that, Pratt. That's just talk. It must be.' (235); Piers, nevertheless, stands up for what he believes in and that is the essence of an artist. Creativity can never flourish under stringent circumstances. Grandfather Mosson's courageous attempt just before his death to bridge the chasm by asking the boys to be recalled to Tothill is affirmative of the strange paradox of joy and horror that he had dwelt on earlier in Chapter III. But the rift in the two sides becomes irreparable as none is ready to shoulder the responsibility of Grandfather's death.

Part III of the book is set in 1969, twelve years later, when the boys have grown up and inherited Tothill after their uncle Hubert's death. By this time, the boys' careers have been charted. Piers has found a successful niche for himself in the world of the theatre, and Tom has become a lawyer, sometimes indulging himself in
his culinary prowess which is a direct result of his near obsession with preserving order.

In the first chapter of this part, titled 'The First Night', Piers exults in his triumphant staging of Lully's Opera just as Phaeton exults in the 'sky': 'I fly, My glory shines from pole to pole' (248) and despairs in his fall: 'Fall in thy pride'. Clymene's voice shrieking out, 'O terrible fate! O cruel fate!' and the other voices lamenting 'O unhappy daring! O sad defiance!' echoes the fall of Faustus in Marlowe's Dr. Faustus because of over ambition:

'Till swol'n with cunning, of a self-conceit,
His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
And melting, heavens conspir'd his overthrow..."\textsuperscript{15}

Piers' total involvement with his art has made him incapable of forming any wholesome relationship with the opposite sex. His marriage to Katherine White, the lead singer of their opera and his relationship with George, an actor, does not work out because of this very factor.

Indeed, when our work is made to interfere with our private life, the two suffer. We can never do justice to either in this way. Tom's delight rests in his first public work of art which is the sumptuous feast laid out after the play.

In the background, a buzz of rumour about terrorists and bombs so much redolent of today's world situation steadily gains ground.

The second chapter of Part III titled 'A New Play' also brings the novel to its tragic end. The astonishing change in Jackie is received in their respective ways of thinking by her grandsons. Piers thinks 'she's born again ... without our Father Mother
God to guide her and a jolly good rebirth it was proving.' (226) But Tom cannot acclimatize himself to the change in her which now gave 'the sense of almost macabre pantomime.' 'She who had been so rock-like, hard, egoistic, if you like, but reliable; firm in her knowledge of the things she valued, appeared to be like a feather on top of a wave ...' (267) Jackie's dislike of dwelling in the past now re-lives a thought from Rabindranath who also derided the past for being death-dealing.

Indeed, clinging tenaciously to the dead forms of the past has never offered any relief to anyone.

Like Meg Eliot, Slyvia Calvert, and Simon Carter, Jackie in this novel realizes at the end that for a healthy relationship, it is important to have an open mind and be receptive to changes. It never pays to be enclosed within oneself. The momentous change in her, obvious only after the accident makes her realise the importance of being real and having feelings: 'We do not want to fuss with flowers when I have people to enjoy' (267). Again, she says, 'I used to make a rule never to know the people who worked for me in the old days ... And, in any case, it is such fun breaking down boundaries.' (272) Here, the two ways of life is often in conflict – the way of the heart, loving and understanding, but also often confused and misguided, and the official way which, while rigidly preserving order, good form and convention, chokes genuineness.

Meanwhile, Ralph Tucker's play staged at Tothill stables at their Grandmother's wish is a clever subterfuge to blow up the House and 'get to' Parliament. The chaos and disorder that follow immediately as the Scotland Yard Police troop in to arrest the terrorists shatters into smithereens the dreams of Piers. Hitherto, any form of reality outside his dramatic art - even his marriage to Kate, the terrorist attacks upon the French theatres were all subjugated to his aesthetic calling. Even when the terrorist
plot at Tothill comes in the open, all Piers does is to complain that 'these fanatical
idiots have got in the way of art'. (293) The narrow vision of life propagated by Piers
is also expounded by Hamo Langmuir in As If By Magic who puts his life and faith in
the supposed magic of science and sexuality. A realization of the hollowness of his
supposed magics of life hits Hamo too late. In the world of Piers, illusion takes on
immense proportions, he accords it a value in life equal to that in his art. The novel's
denouement forces Piers to come to terms with realities outside the fragile boundaries
of art.

Tom, on the otherhand, is blessed to have realized this immediately before the
final tragedy. His adventureless mind finds Ralph's play incomprehensible as fiction
is outside the ambit of his life. Lamenting his lack of artist's insight on the last night
of his life, he questions himself: 'How could he have lived all these years noticing so
little of the creature world surrounding him?' (289) This moment of discovery recalls
similar moments in, As If By Magic, when both Hamo and Alexandra discover that
while coursing along life's placid waters, they had never stopped to admire the beauty
of the world around them. It is ironical that the steady, practical Tom first saw the
moving hands of the 'Medusa face with arms gesticulating, hair streaming' (295) and
pushed away his brother to safety before taking the bullet on himself. His brother's
death is a stark reality which Piers has to face and in his awareness of the need to go
on, he recognizes that external reality and aesthetic reality are interdependent, an
affirmation which had hitherto eluded him. Creditably, Piers becomes aware of his
responsibilities like Bernard Sands, Gerald Middleton, Hamo Langmuir and others,
his self-pity and absorption in himself turning to sympathy for the old actor, Tim
Pleydell.

Thus, what is affirmed in the novel is not the superiority of either side of the
dual views of life and art over the other but the inadequacy of one without its antithesis.
As Michael O'Shea says, 'The synthesis of the numerous mythic and artistic sources for *Setting the World on Fire*, like the juxtaposition of the opposing architectural styles of Tothill House, is a paradigm for the blending of viewpoints of which life is constituted'.

'As Piers crosses the bridge, he momentarily takes on his brother's character as every step that he takes now over the bridge seems to shake the world:

- The water flowing below, the starred sky above
- him, seemed ready to meet, to burst upon the human
- insects, upon him, in one shapeless flow of eternity
- Tothill in front, Pratt dead behind. (296)

The assimilation of the two contrasting characters is complete. The evoking of the image of Halvard Solnes of Ibsen's *The Master Builder* in the final passage of the novel affirms his artistic affinity with Piers even while acknowledging his mortality in this time-bound world:

- Go up, Master Builder, go up! Now. Lest
- delaying, You lose the power to ascend the
- towers of imagination. (296)

The mention of the transitoriness of life brings to our mind Marvell's 'Coy Mistress' where he speaks of the need to live life fully before his time runs out:

- But at my back I alwaies hear
- Times Winged charriot hurrying near.
- And yonder all before us lye
- Deserts of Vast Eternity. 7

The 'garden' motif is very strong in the novel. Wilson has put up contrasting
images of the formal garden and anarchic wilderness. Hubert who always opts for regularity in Tothill dreads the 'invasion by the wild, by the untamed' (21). Tothill's 'ravaged formal garden' stands as a testimony to its wartime use by the Coal Board. Rosemary, the boys' mother, identifies herself with images of spontaneous development:

'And the wilderness that's grown up at the end of the garden. Such wonderful shapes the bushes have made, like those creatures that jump out at one in dreams. It's the sort of effect that I've tried to create with the shrub rose end of the nursery.' (186)

In response, Jackie says, 'It isn't called the wilderness. They called it the woodwork.' (187) It is to her, 'the garden in the wild.' The garden serves as a therapy for frayed nerves. Rosemary retires to the garden to get over her moment of separation from Jim: 'I'm going into the garden'. (102) The wilderness that is Tothill garden also beckons Piers:

... A longer walk than usual would give time both to savour success and to expel doubt. He would go down to the extremities of the Woodwork, to that bosky wilderness which cut off the great house from the common gaze of Labour's Transport House and Conservative Central Office alike, a promenade of a full quarter mile in this hortus mirabilis that still survived in Central London ... (209-210)

Tom and Piers, unlike their mother, are illiterate in matters of horticulture. They are Rosemary's 'wild garden' — nurtured and nourished at Tothill where, as Ted
Billy says, the 'architectural union of opposites' stands as a permanent tribute to the creative merger of contraries.8

The 'house' in Wilson's novels is infused with a 'genii loci'. Meg Eliot's house in The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot, Vardon Hall in Hemlock and After and Tothill House in Setting the World on Fire are symbolic of the hopes, aspirations and ambitions of the owners. The 'genii loci' of Vardon Hall are among the forces which thwart Bernard Sands', 'high project of a writer's country home.' The thoughts of Bernard's brother-in-law and Mrs. Rankine: 'I could never settle down, I'm afraid, ... in a place full of ghosts – ghosts of happiness and miseries. Personality, especially a family personality like the Vardons' is so persistent9 drive home the point that Bernard's envisioned future of the House will never materialise.

Meg Eliot sees her house as inhabited by a benign spiritual force, it is to her 'the centre of all the life she had made for herself'.10 Later on, she mourns the loss of her house as much as of her husband, 'Tears came to her eyes; but it was for the house that she was weeping, not this time for Bill'.11 And to Piers, Tothill signifying his quest for identity is the 'enchanter that brought them all together in pleasure'.(216)

When compared to the other novels in terms of its social range and moral depth, Setting the World on Fire is found to be strangely limited. Here there is no dilemma tearing the protagonist apart or no obsessive concentration of any emotion. Characters are limited in number unlike the proliferation of them in Hemlock and After, Anglo-Saxon Attitudes or The Old Men at the Zoo. The 'camp' characters are also notably absent. Evil as in The Old Men at the Zoo is relatively absent except in a small measure in the characters of Magda, Ralph and Marina who are engaged in subversive activities. 'Edwardian' uncles occupy some of the centrepiece - one of them is the ever present sponging, raffish type seen in the character of Eustace and the other,
Hubert in his rather effeminate behaviour and penchant for an orderly patterned life recalling the character of Philip Herrington in Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*.

Like *Late Call* and *No Laughing Matter*, *Setting the World on Fire* also covers a time span but the action is not fast-paced and is carried forward mostly by dialogues which also offer an insight into the mind of the characters. Marina's 'Oh, it's so boaring', Magda's '... you will do it so ahmewsingly'. and Grandmother Jackie's belief in her Christian Science of 'Father Mother God' bring in a whiff of the theatrically absurd and the comic.

The tragic note of the novel's ending notwithstanding, what is vindicated at the last is that constant struggle towards the heights is often rewarded. Whatever the outcome of any enterprise, it is worthwhile to fight every inch of the way. That is what makes life more exciting and dramatic.

A happy synthesis of the opposing values of life – order and chaos in today's world of contraries without which life has no thrill and progression, is the message of *Setting the World on Fire* and this is, undoubtedly, a much relevant message for modern man.
### Notes and References


4. **Blake, William** : 'A Robin Redbreast in a cage'.


7. **Marvell, Andrew** : 'To His Coy Mistress'.


11. **Ibid.**