CHAPTER VII
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The Summing - Up

The foregoing chapters will give the reader an idea of the range and preoccupations of Angus Wilson as a novelist. A distinguished writer belonging to the great tradition of English Literature, Wilson has carved for himself a distinctive niche by virtue of his characteristic projection of some of the facets of the social realities of his time. These include the problem of the liberal humanist or the conflict between the public and the private life, the problem of the aged, reconstruction of the past, family matters and the ambiguity of existence.

In each of the novels, apart from the preponderant motif, there are other inherent strands of thought and attitude which combine to enhance the total vision of the world as a whole.

By the time Wilson came on the British literary scene, a reaction was slowly building up against the twentieth - century innovators like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and the traditional forms and techniques of writers like Trollope, Dickens, Thackeray and Dostoevsky were being advocated. Wilson's fiction was a result of this literary and social ferment. Though immensely successful in the traditional forms of fiction like the short story, he switched over to the longer form in order to explore more thoroughly his views and concerns about certain issues. The subjects close to his heart are delineated well in the short stories - family situations, false standards or insufficient standards, and the danger of 'preserved innocence'. The general atmosphere of the stories is very much of the thirties though the concern clearly is post-war.

Wilson is also highly critical of the actions and deeds of the so-called progressives and liberals who in decrying others, expose their own lamentable lack of values.
The realistic and the grotesque make an uneasy combination in Wilson's stories. In fact, the co-existence of the liberal moralist and the celebrator of the grotesque in Wilson contributes largely to his indomitable energy. Even his darkest comedy is not satirical because it appeals to our sense of pathos at the failings of mankind and of most human relationships even as it flays the inadequate. What is asserted time and again is the 'grit or energy' of these objects of Wilson's ridicule which makes 'living' easy and possible.

Wilson presents a complex genre of fiction. He has been seen variously as a moralist, as a satirist, and a social realist. There is much substance in this perception, but none of the labels is absolute. More precisely, Angus Wilson's fiction is a subtle amalgam of morality, satire, social realism and a number of other like elements.

Wilson can rightly be called a probing novelist, 'flaying the superficial and the hypocritical in the strictest terms. Other elements that engage the critical reader's attention in his writings are: his handling of the sense of fact, and his concern with attitudes. The reader is invited to dwell on responsibility and guilt, the tension between the busy life of public engagement and the private life of spiritual cultivation. He has shown his concern with cruelty and honour and the intrusion of the nightmarish into civilized society.

Wilson, the moralist, looks on at this world with compassion whereas the mimic in him is delighted at the chances it offers for utilising his talents. Every human flaw is exposed and every eccentricity ridiculed. He also observes sharply the whims, fancies, vogues, pretensions and pomposities of the time. He fastidiously condemns the attitude of the social climbers and the organization men who push people around.

Wilson has also been called a genuine satirist, taking the word 'satire' in the sense of criticism of society related to positive moral standards. He is also thoroughly
contemporary in the sense that he gives us a vivid and recognizable picture of some aspects of the society in which we live today. All through, it is his humanistic concerns which catch our attention. He is, however, not a propagandist given to a loud and blatant decry of the lapses of modern society.

Belonging to the 'Angry Young Men' group who are known for their bitter attacks on the hypocrisies and rigidities of much of British life of the Establishment, Wilson remains, nevertheless, as we observed earlier, a liberal humanist. Though accurate, his liberal humanism is detached and it entails watching from the outside. And despite an air of pervading pessimism in his works which has often been decried by his critics, his message that life is worth living is driven home time and again. It is in this that he comes close to Golding. Both are optimists. Despite his detachment, readers welcomed Wilson as a new voice representative of the new attitude of a whole generation. His writings provided a breath of fresh air in the 'bland cultural world of the time'.

In his lecture delivered on the future of the English Novel and on 'Diversity and Depth' in fiction and in an interview he gave to the Paris Review, Wilson has lamented the non-utilization fully of the elements of narration and description which are essential in a novel - it being a 'work of entertainment' and ultimately, a 'social statement'.

Examined closely, Wilson's novels also conform to these norms he sets. In dealing with social subjects, he expounds certain standards of behaviour for his characters.

Thus, notwithstanding a person's position in society, he is expected to follow the norms of correct behaviour and participate willingly in the process of living. His characters also refuse to be bogged down by adversities or trapped in the ennui of boredom and passivity.
A kind of preoccupation with evil in various forms is an important concern with Wilson. In his fiction, the emanation of evil is central. Portrayed openly in the 'camp' characters, it is also shown as inherent in the humanist's self. 'Evil' has also been presented in the form of a mother's possessive, and hence suffocative, love of her son, in the corrupt practice of the people in power everywhere, and in acts of cruelty and violence perpetrated on men and beasts alike by the human kind.

Wilson's portrayal of the women characters is really commendable. In Ella Sands of *Hemlock and After*, he has delineated well the psychological complexities of the human mind. Inge Middleton of *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* convincingly stands for the strong and dominating nature of the fair sex. The intense suffering of Meg Eliot in *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* and Slyvia Calvert in *Late Call* succeed in appealing to our sympathy. His other minor women characters also play a significant role in the adumbration of the themes.

The large canvass of the novel gave Wilson the perfect scope for exploring freely his various themes. As already seen, his first two novels, *Hemlock and After* and *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* constitute a conscious attempt on his part to colour English fiction with the social breadth of the nineteenth-century novel. *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* is a deliberate attempt to combine nineteenth-century diversity with modernist depth. This reflects Wilson's concern as a socio-moral novelist. His later novels like *No Laughing Matter* and *As If By Magic* are slight deviations from this in that he has had recourse to various alienating literary devices that show off his 'grand, guignol side'. At the same time, *The Old Men at the Zoo* marks Wilson's new attempt at mythic fable. Seen canonically, his novels since 1958 distinctly show a process of development.

In Wilson's fiction, recreating the past of an individual and yoking it with the
cultural past of a nation is a frequent affair. The solution to the problems the individual faces very often, lies in the relics of the past.

One other aspect of Wilson's fiction that has attracted the undivided attention of the critics is his emphasis on a kind of secular grace that colours all good works.

Wilson has often been charged with not making a proper distinction between the real and the imagined. Mr. Raymond Williams has pointed out that he has not exactly adhered to facts in delineating the English countryside in *The Old Men at the Zoo*. But Professor Frank Kermode thinks that it is his excessive care for 'reality' that is disturbing. He feels that for Wilson, only the 'real' matters. The fusion of the two is absolutely necessary for the creation of a novel but Wilson holds the 'real' as the less essential. He further says that the atmosphere fascinates him and many details go into its making. The facts are important to him just as they are to any reporter but more than that, it is the nature of his imagination colouring them with different hues which matters. His book on Zola who was notorious for his dependance upon 'exact fact for the stimulation of his imagination' made it clear that what counted was not the nature of his imagination but the facts that added impetus and stimulation to it.

Wilson's attempts to explore the boundaries of his art are largely fruitful. In his hand, the novel was kept alive and vigorously growing.

Yet Angus Wilson, like William Golding, is not a popular writer in the sense Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, or Thomas Hardy are. Like Golding, Wilson is a writer for a limited readership. The reason may be attributed to the nature of their subjects - rather academic and exclusive, and their style. The appeal of their works to the average reader is not instant as is the case of their famous predecessors. Their style and language may be partly held responsible for this.
By dint of his unique grasp of 'felt' life, Wilson has carved out for himself a niche among the humanists. He can be rightly called one of the most sensitive and penetrating psychological novelists of any age. By delving deep into the inner recesses of the mind, exploring to the hilt its mysteries and complexities, he brings us to an understanding of the elemental self through a continuous process of self-discovery. Wilson's novels are contemporary documents. His concerns are modern man's dilemma, the means of salvation thereof, ecological denudation and the threat of a nuclear holocaust. He provides us a singularly sharp insight into the political and social problems of the twentieth century. His focus is unique in that no one else has treated these subjects before him in British fiction. He also incorporates into it a whole sense of affinity with the universe, the flight from life, and yet offers an abiding affirmation of it. As we read his works, we are satisfied that here is a new voice brought in. In this sense, he is indeed, a modern writer.