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He slept through my explanation of the new existentialism

12-15 minutes

From Humphrey Carpenter

To Colin Wilson

Sent: Friday, September 21, 2001 6:36pm

Subject: Re: Thanks for e-mail

Dear Colin (if I may),

Great! I'd love to come down, & a bed would be very welcome indeed. My diary is bad until the beginning of November, but thereafter very clear. When would suit you? You mention Bill Hopkins's address - how about Stuart Holroyd?

Looking forward to meeting you, all good wishes...

From Colin

Dear Humphrey,

It was extremely pleasant to make your acquaintance. Joy left out some melatonin tablets, which you forgot. If you send me your address, I'll post them on.

Best, Colin

From Humphrey

Dear Colin,

I must apologise for not writing before to thank you and Joy for such a delightful time - I had to spend all yesterday in Birmingham, BBC-ing, and have been out today (following a late

start!). You were wonderful hosts - smoked salmon, oysters, vintage wines, etc etc! - and it was fascinating to hear your reminiscences of the days of the Angries. I'm just about to write up my interview with you, and when that's done I'll print out the entire book and send it to you, for your comments and corrections. I will also speedily get the Sidney Campion book to the little firm who copy photos for me, and return it to you by recorded delivery. (I'm assuming Joy can't put her hands on the sleeping bag photo itself - perhaps you'd let me know if she does manage to locate it.)

It's awfully kind of you to offer the melatonin - I would indeed like to try it. My address is [. . .]. I wish I could send you a stamped addressed envelope via e-mail!

Warmest greetings, and renewed thanks... and I'm glad to see the Brady piece being given a generous spread in the Sunday Times.

Yours ever, Humphrey

From Colin

Dear Humphrey,

I wish you would be honest about this, and simply admit the truth: that you wrote the book, with your negative view of The Outsider, before you came to see me, and that to make any change in the views you expressed then would simply force you to turn your "light-hearted" book upside down. In other words, you are not showing your integrity by "sticking to your guns" - just your determination not to make changes in a book you have already written.

To treat The Outsider seriously would simply not suit the purpose you had decided on before you began it.

To do what you did was quite straightforward treachery and

dishonesty: all that “Dear Colin” stuff before you had even met me, and the inference that you were coming down here to find what I had to say and include it in the book. You had already decided in advance what you wanted me to say to fit in with your shallow thesis, and if I’d proved a combination of St Augustine and Jesus Christ you would still have left it unchanged - because it wouldn’t have suited you, or your editor, to acknowledge that what you did is called treachery. How a bishop’s son can live with such slippery morality is beyond me.

If you insist on printing what you wrote unaltered, then I want to make sure that a few small verbal changes are made.

1. The sneer about the Leicester accent. Please include “slight”.
2. The story about giving Amis whisky. Please include a footnote with my information that I only ever once gave Amis a bottle of whisky, and that was in 1957, before I had written about crime. (This, I am afraid, will really test your honesty since you have pivoted the first chapter on the silly Amis story.)
3. At the end of my comment about *The Outsider* going into thirty languages, please include my final sentence: “How come nobody has rumbled me before this?”

Please, if possible, include a footnote about the true version of the story about Mary Ure, and the fact that I would not have dreamt of telling Osborne what I really thought of *Look Back in Anger*.

In short, prove that your trip down here, and sending me the typescript, were not just a part of a cynical trick.

And now, on the remote off-chance that you are not as bad as I think, let me explain in words of one syllable what *The Outsider* is actually about.

The existentialism of Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, et al, ends in gloom and pessimism. In *The Outsider* I ask: “Is this inevitable,

or is there a flaw in their logic?" Both in *The Outsider* and subsequent work, I set out to show that THE PESSIMISM IS UNNECESSARY - indeed, a kind of schoolboy howler - and that if you take into account mystics like Ramakrishna and Blake, you end up with quite different conclusions.

So your footnote stating that "even if it is really just an anthology" is simply insulting rubbish. *The Outsider* is closely and carefully ARGUED, and the appendices to the recent Chinese edition make it clear just how closely. Where this, and the other material I have sent you, is concerned, you prefer to clap your telescope to your blind eye.

I trust you will not object if I publish our complete correspondence on my website, and in the quarterly *Abraxas*. I feel it should be as widely publicised as possible. I shall also ask the *Daily Mail* if I can review your book, and tell the story of how you came down to interview me after the book was written. May you be able to live with your conscience. I wouldn't want to.

Sincerely, Colin

From Humphrey

Dear Colin,

I'm sorry that you regard me as such a treacherous rat. I think it's a little unfair. It's perfectly true that the book - except the prologue - was written before I came to see you. But if anything you did or said during my visit had made me change my view of *The Outsider*, I would have altered my book.

I have made all the changes you asked for - the footnote about the bottle of whisky has been added; the Leicester accent bit has already been removed; the Mary Ure story has already been corrected; and the sentence "How come nobody has rumbled me before this?" has now been added.

I'm afraid that *The Outsider* still seems to me an anthology rather than an argument. By all means publish our correspondence (past, present and future) wherever you like, and I shall expect to be savaged by you in the Mail! I'm sorry to have disappointed you, and I do remain very grateful for your hospitality and all the trouble you've taken.

With best wishes, Humphrey

From Colin

Dear Humphrey,

You don't really have much of a leg to stand on, do you? You say you would have changed your piece on *The Outsider* if I had convinced you of its importance, and then slept through my explanation of my new existentialism.

What you don't seem to see is that *The Outsider* is the basis of my whole life's work, the cornerstone of my building, and that in denying its importance, you are trying to deny ME and my life work.

You haven't made the slightest attempt to understand the aims of my work - for example, to read *Below the Iceberg*. So you are basically a knife-in-the-back man, always protesting that no-one has more integrity than you - reminding me of one of Bill's favourite comments: "The more he talked of his honesty, the faster we counted the spoons."

Pity - you seemed genuinely decent and honest.

Best, Colin

From Humphrey

Sent: Saturday, January 26, 2002 11:34am

Subject: re letter from Roger Nelson

Dear Colin,

Thanks - and I have never doubted that *The Outsider* has many

admirers, whom it has influenced in a major way. I just don't happen to be able to admire and enjoy it myself.

I don't see in what way my behaviour has been "dirty and underhand". True, I had written my views on *The Outsider* before coming to see you, but at that time the book was only in a first draft, and I was perfectly at liberty to change my views after meeting you, should I have felt persuaded by our conversation. And almost immediately after my visit to you, I showed you what I had written, before sending the revised text to the publishers (indeed, I still haven't sent it off, because there are still a few loose ends). A true traitor wouldn't have done that - would have left you to read it for the first time in print. (I think you said that one or two people have done that in the past).

The biography of you that you kindly lent me is at the photographer's, so that three pictures can be copied. I'll have it winging its way back to you in a couple of weeks.

With best wishes, Humphrey

From Humphrey

Dear Colin,

I've spent this morning reading the Chinese postscripts and looking again at *The Outsider*. I'm very sorry, but my view of the book hasn't changed. I fully accept that in your own mind it was a long-term project with a firmly-pursued argument; but I'm afraid it still comes across to me as essentially a cornucopia of other people's ideas, with remarkably little argument on your part. (Surely the Chinese postscripts wouldn't have been necessary if the original book had had a clearer argument?).

I fully accept that many people wouldn't agree with me, and that this is reflected in the book's enormous readership over the years. But I do have Kingsley Amis on my side ("it is more

compilation than original work”), and also Ken Tynan. Clearly there are two camps - just as there are for Tolkien - and I’m afraid I belong to the antis.

I am nevertheless trying to be fair to you, and have added to the footnote which I think I have already shown to you. It now reads as follows:

“After reading my account of *The Outsider*, Colin Wilson wrote to me: ‘You are welcome to this view, if it is what you really think after reading the book. But if it is really just an anthology of quotations put together by a literary jackdaw, how do you explain the fact that it has never been out of print in England, America and Japan for forty-five years, and that it was translated into at least thirty languages (the most recent being Chinese)? How come nobody has rumbled me before this?’

“He has also supplied me with a brief summary of his intention in the book: ‘The existentialism of Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, et al, ends in gloom and pessimism. In *The Outsider* I ask: ‘Is this inevitable, or is there a flaw in their logic?’ Both in *The Outsider* and subsequent work, I set out to show that THE PESSIMISM IS UNNECESSARY - indeed, a kind of schoolboy howler - and that if you take into account mystics like Ramakrishna and Blake, you end up with quite different conclusions’.

“Whatever one’s view of *The Outsider*, it can certainly claim to be the first popular book to have made many British readers aware of such European writers as Hesse, Rilke and Sartre.”

I think this is pretty fair, but I expect you don’t, and I’m sorry I can’t offer you more. And thanks for all your trouble.

Best wishes, Humphrey

From Colin

Dear Humphrey,

I am sending you a letter I wrote to a scientist asking for information - I send it to you simply to draw attention to his postscript - about being so influenced by *The Outsider*. Does it not seem to you a little odd that so many people have been influenced by a mere collection of quotations?

The answer, by the way, to the question of why I wrote the postscripts to the Chinese edition is (a) they asked me to (b) I have learned many things since 1956. Does that somehow prove that *The Outsider* was inadequate?

From Humphrey

Dear Colin,

I've now read the introduction and title essay (the final one, I mean) in *Below the Iceberg*, and while these certainly give me a better understanding of you, they don't change my feelings about *The Outsider*. Please remember, however, that my text now includes that footnote we discussed earlier... I know my refusal to budge any further will infuriate you, and I shall expect to be scathingly reviewed! As I said earlier, you are welcome to publish anything I have written to you anywhere you want.

Yours unrepentingly, but with gratitude to you, Humphrey

From Humphrey

Dear Colin,

The Sidney Campion book is on its way back to you in the post – and thanks for letting me see that fan letter. I do appreciate - and have never denied - that *The Outsider* has been an important and influential book for a lot of people. It's just that I'm not one of them.

Incidentally Philip Pullman, whom I ran into at Sainsbury's a

couple of weekends ago, was praising your original Occult book. I confess I haven't read it, and must do so.

Best wishes to you and Joy, Humphrey

FOOTNOTE

With regard to Humphrey Carter's review of Dreaming to Some Purpose in the Sunday Times on June 20, 2004 (see the Autobiography section under Reviews), Colin pointed out: "Carpenter did not fall asleep after a large meal, but after breakfast, while I was explaining what is wrong with existentialism." GW