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The Colin Wilson Interview at E·ratio

22-28 minutes

Colin Wilson

interviewed by Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino

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GVST: You have a profound understanding of the condition/of the psychology of the poet and of the poetic consciousness, this goes beyond “to be in sympathy with,” beyond empathy or “identification,” indeed it is clear that you are writing about yourself when you write about the poet and such as “Faculty X” and the poetic imagination (and the freedom that is available to consciousness). You are obviously a poet. But I wonder, have you written any poetry?

Colin Wilson: When in my teens—but it was much influenced by Rupert Brooke and Yeats, and I would be embarrassed to see it in print.

GVST: Do you have any favorite poets, and is there any poetry that when you read it makes you say, *Wow, now that’s what I call poetry!*

Colin Wilson: I’ve loved poetry since my teens, when I had to leave school at 16 and go to work. This made

me so miserable—I was working in a factory—that I relied on poetry as an alcoholic does on booze. Eliot was specially important, so was Yeats, and poems like Wilfred Owen’s “Exposure” moved me powerfully. Otherwise, the earliest influence was Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, much of which I knew by heart. Matthew Arnold and Browning were favourites.

GVST: Let’s say, for argument’s sake, that were we to examine the phenomenon of poetry as it appears throughout the ages—starting, say, with Homer, and to Virgil, to Dante, and to the Metaphysicals and to Eliot—that in doing so we were able to identify, in that various poetry, Faculty X as it has made its impression in different ways and at different times and in varying degrees: I wonder, first, what exactly would it be that we recognize as Faculty X, as an instance of Faculty X (is it, *the emergence of symbols?*), and then, would we be likely to discern, in the various poetry, throughout the ages, an increase in the appearance/occurrence of Faculty X, an indication of what is to come, or would we discern a decrease, a lack, a lessening, and periods of abject absence?

Colin Wilson: Faculty X does not make for symbols. It is simply that feeling of wide-awakeness that you get on a spring morning, and Rupert Brooke is full of it. It is important to grasp that the mind can deliberately *change* the way it sees things. Brooke tells how he can wander about a village wild with exhilaration. “And it’s not only beauty and beautiful things. In a flicker of sunlight on a blank wall, or a reach of muddy pavement,

or smoke from an engine at night, there's a sudden significance and importance and inspiration that makes the breath stop with a gulp of certainty and happiness. It's not that the wall or the smoke seem important for anything or suddenly reveal any general statement, or are suddenly seen to be good or beautiful in themselves—only that *for you* they're perfect and unique. It's like being in love with a person. . . . I suppose my occupation is being in love with the universe."

You can see that this has more to do with Gurdjieff's "self-remembering"—that simultaneous awareness of looking at something and being aware of yourself looking at it—than with Arnold Toynbee's experience in Mistra.

GVST: It seems to me the appearance/occurrence of Faculty X is intermittent, and then always only imperfectly realized (albeit, *imperfectly realized* may be enough, or may be all that can be sustained/endured). It seems to me that in today's poetry Faculty X is almost entirely absent—this is not only to say that today's poetry is almost entirely "uninspired," but that it is almost entirely lacking in "consciousness," but as though it were written by a machine, a machine that while able to form sentences according to the principles of grammar, could never intuit the philosophy behind meanings and signification. I wonder, is Faculty X for the most part behind us, and when seen to occur is in some vestigial form, or if indeed it lies before us and is indeed a matter of evolution. . . ?

Colin Wilson: Again, poetry should not be equated with Faculty X. I often give as an example of Faculty X a woman who was sitting on the lavatory in the backyard of a Jack the Ripper murder site when the woman who was waiting for her pointed to the steps and said: “That where Jack killed Annie Chapman,” and the woman screamed and leapt to her feet. That is nothing to do with poetry, but everything to do with a sense of reality, the “shock of recognition.”

Although I have a bookshelf full of poets from Auden to Yeats, I don’t read much poetry—too busy writing.

GVST: You mention Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*. In 2000 Palgrave issued a special facsimile edition of that. It’s a little hardcover book—if you put your hands together like you’re praying, it fits right inside your hands. It’s a lovely, wonderful anthology—“Selected and Arranged with Notes by Francis Turner Palgrave”—and I am so happy to have a copy. I don’t think we have anything like this for the United States, nothing that is “a true national Anthology.”

Colin Wilson: I keep the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry by my bed.

GVST: Still with Faculty X and the poet: is it not so that poetry, that the poet can make of his poetry, the documentation of the experience of Faculty X, or, rather, of the experience that Faculty X makes available to us, that being the so-called “peak experience,” or, what you have termed “promotion”? Is it not so that

poetry can be the result of it, or, that, no, not *symbols*, but *insights*, and maybe it was the job of the poet to fashion symbols that stand for or that give form to those insights?

Colin Wilson: It seems to me that you over-emphasise Faculty X, which is essentially *a trick of the brain*. What is far more significant is what Chesterton calls “absurd good news,” and Proust “moments bienheureux.” It is true that what Proust experienced as he tasted the Madeleine dipped in tea was Faculty X, but what matters is his comment “I had ceased to feel accidental, mediocre, mortal.” Question: Is that true or an illusion? I would answer: True. So what prevents us from grasping it? Our own tendency to what William James calls “a certain blindness in human beings,” what I have called “the bullfighter’s cape” that confines our perception to CLOSE-UPNESS. (The matador defeats the bull *by not allowing it a clear view*.) Close-upness deprives us of meaning.

You don’t need symbols. Yeats says it with great clarity in “Under Ben Bulbin,” in quite clear and straightforward language. Shaw also said it quite clearly, and he is not poet. In *Back to Methuselah* he defines the problem as “discouragement.” Blake calls it “doubt,” and said “If the sun and moon should doubt / They’d immediately go out.”

The people who deserve blame are the pessimists, the poisoners of our cultural wellsprings, like Samuel Beckett and William Golding.

Idiots parrot “Beckett is a great writer.” He isn’t. With the exception of *Godot*, which justifies itself by being funny, he is a dreary shit. And in encouraging the notion that life is “a tale told by an idiot,” and that our attitude towards it ought to be one of weary resignation, he is an enemy of human evolution. Other writers have taken the same attitude, including Shakespeare, but there is a greatness in his language that contradicts his negativeness. In Beckett’s later work there is no such counterbalance.

GVST: In your book, *Poetry and Mysticism*, in the chapter on Rupert Brooke, you say that “to experience ‘promotion’ is the mark of a poet.” You say, “the poem is seen to be the honest expression of a personal emotion, and the record of a certain kind of promotion experience.” You write, “a poet is a certain type of person: one who is subject to unpredictable states of ‘promotion,’ a sense of ‘enlargement’ that is oddly impersonal.” I wonder if over the years since this book appeared (I have the 1970 edition), have any poets come to you and told you that what you were writing was true? And, but surely, this record of experience (that is the poem) is not (when at its best) just some narcissistic indulgence or biography, it conveys knowledge, does it not? Now this is not necessarily knowledge of the type that, say, a Virgil, a Dante or a Milton recounts, but it is, isn’t it, knowledge of some sort, say a knowledge of *the possibilities of consciousness*? In the case of Rupert Brooke, is it just that we have an instance of an awakening, an instance

of Keats' negative capability, of "the pure poetic experience, the sudden forgetfulness of personality," and that is that, that is the lesson, there is no need to look any further. . . ?

Colin Wilson: The promotion experience is, like Proust's "ceasing to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal," A GLIMPSE OF WHO YOU REALLY ARE. Which is why Nietzsche can talk about "how one becomes what one is." Cyril Connolly once said that inside every fat man there is a thin man struggling to get out. Well, inside every weak, modest man there is a Zarathustra trying to get out. That Zarathustra is the poet.

GVST: For the young intellectual, for the sensitive outsider (that was me, and still am), to come upon the books of Colin Wilson, whether by happy accident or by recommendation, he is soon come to see Colin Wilson as his hero. Beckett and Golding and for that matter Sartre and Ayer and Heidegger and Wittgenstein and Derrida are nobody's heroes. Alienation will never go away, in fact it's getting worse, and the young intellectual, if he has the brains, he can say a hundred reasons why the world should go straight to hell. (The death of God is as eternal as God is.) But the philosophy in *The Outsider* is affirmative, it is life-affirming, that is the trick, while at the same time being this unprecedented analysis and commentary of Existentialist literature. . . . My question is this: Are you still optimistic? In the Postscript to *The Outsider* (was this in 1967?) you say you feel exciting things are about to happen, that we are on the brink of some discovery

that will make our century a turning point in human history. . . . Given the state of philosophy, and of literature, and of politics and of the religions (and of what some say is today a war of religions!)—are you still optimistic?

Colin Wilson: Of course I am, because my optimism is a general basic verdict on human existence, as the pessimism of Beckett or Celine or Andrejev is their own assessment, and it seems to me to be full of their personal weakness and subjectivity—their poor emotional health, if you like.

In *The Outsider* my starting point was all those 19th century writers and artists who came to a sad end, and who ended by saying (in the words of a friend of mine) “The answer to life is no.”

My reaction was like that of an accountant who is reacting to the statement “We had better declare bankruptcy.” “No, no, no. You’ve plenty of better alternatives.”

GVST: In your book *The Occult*, in the chapter entitled, “The Poet as Occultist” (and just this chapter, in itself, is an education), you begin by saying: “The poet is a man in whom Faculty X is naturally more developed than in most people.” And you ask: “Do poets, in fact, possess a higher degree of ‘occult’ powers than most men?” Now, granted you do caution us (on page 59): “It would be a mistake to think of Faculty X as an ‘occult’ faculty.” None the less right prior to that you say:

“Faculty X is the key to all poetic and mystical experience; when it awakens, life suddenly takes on a new, poignant quality.” Now, I think there are indeed occult aspects to poetry, and by “occult” I mean only that they are hidden, hidden in that they are available to the adept only (but that anybody, given the talent or aptitude, may become an adept and read for himself these hidden aspects). But more, given his truck with symbols—and you write (page 106): “a symbol can gain a hold on the imagination and cause a more powerful response than the actuality that it represents”—I wonder, given his truck with symbols, is not the poet indeed a sort of magician (able to work change at a distance)? I wonder, given the idea of “the poet as occultist,” have you, since, modified your views at all?

Colin Wilson: In that chapter I was asserting that poets and artists have a naturally wider range of powers—second sight, telepathy, glimpses of the future—than non-poets. In fact, all men have wider powers than they realise, and underestimate them because of the human tendency to self-mistrust, the “fallacy of insignificance,” which I have been fighting all my life. If my “message” was clearly understood, it would be “You are stronger than you think.”

GVST: Your book *Poetry and Mysticism* (I have the Hutchinson of London edition, from 1970) is just loaded with ideas and insights and is of interest not only to the poet but to the student of literature as well, and with all these ideas there is what will be for many a fresh

perspective, a fresh approach to the whole subject. This book has definitely been a hand up for me in my education in poetry, and, what's more, in my discovering for myself the possibilities available to me. I say to any poet who has experienced inspiration—but I mean that profound, uncanny inspiration that has left you with a re-organization of your subjective life!—I say you must study this book. And there are probably copies of it in university libraries all over the place. (And it deserves to be reissued, indeed all your writings on poetry and on the psychology of the poet ought never to go out of print.) I think what is going on here (in this, *Poetry and Mysticism*) is a conditioning, a preparation, a propaedeutic (and not only for the poet but for the reader as well) for a new kind of experience of poetry. You write (on page 50): “Poetry makes us *slow down*. It is as if I was in a hurry, panting and rushing, and someone said: ‘Stop it. Slow down. Relax for a moment.’ The basic difference between poetry and prose is not so much a matter of the form as of the content. Prose is always in a hurry to get somewhere; it is either telling a story or pursuing an argument. When you read a poem—even if it is in a *vers libre* that is indistinguishable from prose—you automatically slow your mind down to a walk knowing that it can only produce its effect if the mind is relaxed.” Now that doesn't seem all that extraordinary, but what I think you're getting at is a matter of *deliberative reading*, a reading that is *conscious* (i.e., not mechanical, not by rote, not by routine but that is “slowed down and focussed”) and that is *intentional*. And this is in line

with what you write in the Postscript to your book *The Outsider*. It is there that you say: “perception is intentional.” That is so important to consider! This concept has become for me—and is, I think, for every poet—a key to many doors.

Colin Wilson: I said it most simply in telling that story of the Master Ikkyu, who was asked by a workman to write something on his tablet, and wrote, “Attention.” Disappointed, the man said “Cant you say something more?” And Ikkyu wrote, “Attention. Attention.” “But what does attention mean,” asked the bewildered workman. “Attention means attention,” said Ikkyu.

GVST: I can say that *The Outsider* has had two effects on me: One, I knew that then my mission was to read every work of literature, of philosophy, of psychology and of religion that you quote from or make reference to. And two, my whole idea of what reading was and of how to read had changed. Up ’til then I don’t know what I was doing (something called “reading,” I suppose), I would be reading Andrew Marvell and trying to visualize in my head, trying to make a motion picture out of the poetry, and I realized I was wasting all my energy, all my energy on this production, on what I thought was the production of the meaning of the poetry. My reading was intentional, but it was focused on the wrong thing. In my own, personal necessity to make sense of this concept (*perception is intentional*), I realized that as I was reading I was visualizing meaning, and at the expense of signification. The difference is between *visualizing* (which takes a great

deal of conscious energy) and *understanding*, between seeing—seeing, for instance, *identity*, *difference*, *contrariety*—and just allowing my powers of intellection to know them, to know them as they are and for what they are (—they are ideas, they are concepts, and they are clothed in sound and orthography). I say, given all your research, and all your scholarship and explorations, can you say that you have found confirmation that the answer does indeed lie with Faculty X, and the station where to be able to avail ourselves of it at will? Can you say that you have found confirmation that consciousness does indeed exist but such that there can be a growth in consciousness? And if so, is this the human potential?

Colin Wilson: For years I pursued my investigation into the question of the peak experience and how it comes about. And then, towards the end of 1979, I had a major breakthrough. This is how I describe it in a book called *The Devil's Party*: “On New Year’s Day, 1979, I was trapped by snow in a remote Devon farmhouse, where I had gone to lecture to extra-mural students. After 24 hours we decided we had to make an effort to escape. It so happened that my car was the only one that would climb the slope out of the farmyard. After several hours’ hard work with shovels, we finally reached the main road. The snow on the narrow country road had been churned up by traffic, but was still treacherous. And in places where the snow was still untouched, it was hard to see where the road ended and the ditch began. So as I began to make my

way home, I was forced to drive with total, obsessive attention. Finally back on the main Exeter road, where I was able to relax, I noticed that everything I looked at seemed curiously real and interesting. The hours of concentrated attention had somehow ‘fixed’ my consciousness in a higher state of alertness. There was also an immense feeling of optimism, a conviction that most of our problems are due to vagueness, slackness, inattention, and that they are all perfectly easy to overcome with determined effort. This state lasted throughout the rest of the drive home. Even now, merely thinking about the experience is enough to bring back the insight and renew the certainty.”

This experience of a “more powerful” consciousness seemed a revelation, because it was not some sudden mystical flash; *I had done it myself*. So it ought to be possible to do again.

I found it far more difficult than I had anticipated. I often tried it when driving, and achieved it briefly, but never for long. I did, in fact, succeed again on a long train journey. But when I tried again the next day, on the return journey, I found it impossible. Obviously, the effort had exhausted some inner energy. I began to suspect that it was the sense of emergency that had brought about my first success, and that this was difficult to create at will. But over the years I have gone on trying. And finally, about two years ago, I found I was succeeding in learning the “trick” that would achieve the kind of focused attention required to release this sense of access to some kind of brain-

energy. This focused attention brings with it an insight: that one of the main problems with the quest for insight is our tendency to what might be called “negative feedback.”

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