Outside the Outsider

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"...we possess all kinds of unknown powers, and the science of the future will be an exploration of these powers."

with Colin Wilson

Colin Wilson was born in Leicester, England, in 1931, the son of a boot and shoe worker. He left school at the age of sixteen, spent some time working in taxes and the Royal Air Force, then became a tramp and did various laboring jobs for several years while writing his first novel Ritual in the Dark and then his first book The Outsider. Living on almost no money, he would sleep outside at night in London, and spend his days writing in the British Museum. After his first book became a best-seller in 1956, he took to writing full-time and moved to Cornwall, where he lives to this day. In the mid-1960s, he was commissioned to write a book about the "paranormal, " became fascinated by the subject, and has written a number of hooks on paranormal phenomena. He has also written several works on criminology, psychology, and numerous novels with science fiction and fantasy themes.

Colin is incredibly prolific, and has produced over sixty books to date. Some of his well-known titles include The Occult, Mysteries, The Mind Parasites, and The Philosopher's Stone. His favorite recreation is listening to music and at his home he has a large collection of opera recordings. Except for occasional lecturing trips abroad he lives near Mevagissey in Cornwall with his wife and two sons. I interviewed Colin, while Rebecca was abroad, outside the cafeteria at the Esalen Institute on the afternoon of September 16, 1990. There is a laser-beam-like intensity to Colin, and he has an extremely focused and well-disciplined mind. Colin spoke eloquently about his interest in the paranormal, the relationship between sex and creativity, certainty and ambiguity, life after death, and the new emerging species that he believes is evolving out of humanity.

DJB

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DJB: Colin, what was it that originally inspired your interest in the occult and the paranormal?

COLIN: I was simply asked to write a book about the paranormal by a publisher in 1968. At first I was not very interested, although I'd always been mildly interested in the occult. I would buy books in American airports about ghosts, weird coincidences, or whatever. Never the less I took it on as rather a lighthearted thing, and I would not have been the least upset to discover that the whole thing was just a tissue of nonsense and wishful thinking.

However, when I had agreed to write the book for the sake of money, and I

began to go into the subject, I became increasingly fascinated as I saw that there's as much evidence for the paranormal as there is for atoms and electrons. Moreover, what excited me so much was that my work had all been about this recognition that we possess powers that we do not normally know about or use. This appeared to be the perfect example of all kinds of powers we don't know about or use. So that it was a direct extension of my work in The Outsider, as it were. I stumbled upon it at just the right moment.

DJB: Aha, or it stumbled upon you. Why do you think that magic is the science of the future?

COLIN: In a way this supplements the last question that you asked. Because what I was saying is that we possess all kinds of unknown powers, and the science of the future will be an exploration of these powers. But at the present science does not accept the unknown powers, and it's still putting up a terrific struggle against the paranormal. You know this Society for the Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal, and so on. It seems to me that this is old-fashioned science, of the most narrow and materialistic kind. You have just got to be tolerant, and open up to this other possibility of unknown powers, which at the moment, we do not fully recognize.

DJB: I believe that you have said that if your first book made millions, you may have stopped writing at that point, implying that a lack of money motivated you to write more. Now I have always thought just the opposite--that a lack of financial freedom actually inhibits many people from creative expression. Are you saying then that it was money that motivated you to write your first book, and if not, what was it?

COLIN: Oh no, of course not. The first book, in any case, The Outsider, was written simply out of this compulsion that I have been speaking about all weekend. It was this basic fascination obviously that motivated me, not money. Neither have I said that if I had become a millionaire I would have stopped writing. I most certainly would not have. What I have said is, that if my first novel Ritual in the Dark had been turned into a movie, as it almost was in 1960, all of my subsequent novels would probably have been filmed and I would have been very comfortably off. But certainly I would not have been driven in the way that I have been driven, and I can not help feeling when I look back on this that the way that I have been driven is not necessarily a bad thing.

Once, Fritz Peters turned to Gurdjieff in a state of depression, and Gurdjieff was forced to make a terrific effort to get him out of this depression. Then at this moment crowds of people arrived, and Gurdjieff, from looking exhausted, suddenly looked absolutely, magnificently full of vitality. He said to Peters, you have forced me to make a terrific effort, but this has been very good for both of us. Thank you for reminding me. Now, very often the very efforts we do not want to make prove to be the very best that we could make. So, in a sense, being too successful would simply remove some of that inner pressure. You would slip into what I have been calling ambiguity.

DJB: What similarities and differences do you see between pathological or criminal minds and the creative process?

COLIN: Shaw said that we judge the criminal by his lowest moments, and the creator by his highest moments. So obviously, in a sense, they are absolute opposites, and that is what's so interesting about them. And yet you can also see very often that the criminal maybe, particularly nowadays, a quite interesting intellectual creative sort of person. And that when he explodes, as let's say Bundy did, into crime, he's choosing a path just as much as let's say a painter, like Picasso, or more Van Gogh, chooses to create this kind of thing.

The explosive sort of force behind Van Gogh's painting is obviously a force based upon a sort of frustration, and it's the same frustration that you would find in a criminal. The only difference is, of course, that Van Gogh deliberately makes the effort to transmute that to a much higher level. The criminal merely says, oh the hell with it, lets go, and invariably destroys himself in doing so, destroys something essential in himself.

There's a play by Pushkin called Mozart and Salieri in which he explores this myth that Salieri murdered Mozart. One of the main points of the play is discussion in which they state that a man who is a criminal cannot also be a great creator. When Salieri has poisoned Mozart, it suddenly strikes him that he's poisoned Mozart because he considers him his chief musical rival. But, in a sense, by poisoning him, he's proved that he himself is no Mozart. He's a second-rater.

DJB: You said this weekend that it is mathematically provable that "head consciousness is the answer." Do you think that the intellectual mind is superior to the emotional circuit in regard to solving the problems of human existence, as you seemed to imply here this weekend at Esalen? Don't you agree that one should integrate many ways of "Knowing," as you say, besides the intellectual mode of interpretation? For instance--sensory, emotional, phermonal, intuitive, perhaps telepathic, etc.

COLIN: What I have said basically is that up to now, the twentieth century culture has tended to emphasize these other modes you mention. So that, for example, someone like D. H. Lawrence said, what we have to do is so back to the solar plexus, to sexuality, and mistrust the intellect. Henry Miller would have said the same kind of thing. Walt Whitman also was saying in a way, trust the body. Now, all of this is perfectly correct in its way, but if Walt Whitman had said trust only the body, or D.H. Lawrence had said trust only the solar plexus, then they would have been totally wrong.

Now what I'm trying to say is that the body, the solar plexus, and all of the rest of them, play their part in this synthesis. You know the old Latin tag, men same encalporsano, a sane mind in a sane body. But, at the same time we have to recognize that the ultimate arbiter is the mind, and that when you see something to be true, as it were, you can see that it is true intellectually, Now it is this intellectual recognition of truth that must be the foundation of all these other things. No good having this D.H. Lawrence attitude that you should not trust the intellect because it will always tell you lies. This is the reason that Lawrence's novels, particularly ones like Women in Love and so on, always end with a strange feeling of bitterness, defeat, and futility.

DJB: What do you think happens to human consciousness after physical death?

COLIN: As a result of writing the book Afterlife, and studying this, I came almost reluctantly to the conclusion that it does survive, that there is survival after death. It would not worry me terribly if there weren't, because it seems to me logical that when I fall asleep, I disappear. I could not really complain if that happened to me after I died. It would seem natural to say that the solution to the problem of human existence lies elsewhere than in the notion that we have got to continue to exist. And yet the evidence is that we do continue to exist. And I don't think that there's any possible doubt about it.

DJB: Why do you think there's such a fear of death then?

COLIN: For the obvious reason that most people are not aware of this. I'm not even sure that it would be terribly good for them to be aware of it. As it is, people who have near-death experiences say that it's so exquisite that they are often resentful about being pulled back. It would be too bad if death became, as it were, the outlet for everybody in the way that drugs or alcohol can be.

DJB: That sounds like a good design for the universe. Have you ever had any experiences communicating with beings that you felt were extraterrestrial in origin, or not from this world?

COLIN: No.

DJB: You have said that evidence for free will stems not from recognizing that we robotically fulfill desires like hunger and sleep, but from the recognition that we can think what we want. But how do you know that you can think what you want--especially in light of the knowledge that by changing neurochemistry we change consciousness?

COLIN: I said that William James' proof that he was not just a machine, that he possesses free will, was this recognition that you can think one thing rather than another. And there's no doubt whatever that we can do that. You may feel that everything else is mechanically determined, that what I do next can be explained in completely mechanical terms. I am going to dinner because I am hungry, and so on and so forth. But there is that one thing that makes it absolutely certain that we do possess free will, and that is the fact that you can think one thing rather than another. You can change in mid-stride, so to speak, and think something else.

DJB: Why do you view the psychedelic experience as a step backwards in evolution--to our instincts, as you say--when so many people seem to claim just the opposite?

COLIN: If Tim Leary's claim was that you could, use the psychedelic experience to find your way into new realms of subjectivity, and then use it to find your way back there without the psychedelic, I would agree, it would be extremely valuable. What tends to happen is that when people get into these realms they find that there are no words to express what they are seeing, and so in a sense the experience is useless. They can just say, well it was wonderful. And what's more, of course, this kind of experience of--it was wonderful, but I can't express it--tends, I think, to cause a kind of pessimism, a feeling that the only way I can get the experience is by taking the psychedelic again. Which is the reason, you see, that, as I say, after taking it once myself, I would not dream of taking it again.

DJB: But if people were able to integrate it into their lives in a meaningful way?

COLIN: Yup. If they were able to integrate it, I would entirely agree.

DJB: How do you see human consciousness evolving in the future, and what do you think the next stage in human evolution will be?

COLIN: That is something that I've been trying to explain all weekend. At the moment we have passed through centuries in which the pendulum has swung backwards and forwards between total materialism and a curious desire of human beings to explore their own potentialities, a weird feeling that you know there's far more than the material world. Succeeding movements from the platonic movement in ancient Greece, right down to Romanticism in the nineteenth century, and this present consciousness explosion that you're now getting in America--all of these are back swings.

You see, when I wrote The Outsider most people were determinedly sort of Left-Wing. Any sort of intellectual you would talk to was almost certainly a Marxist or a Left-Winger. And they thought the only sensible question to ask was, how can we get a fairer, more balanced political system. In the sixties all that disappeared, and you suddenly began to get the consciousness explosion, which is still continuing. Now the swing is towards the recognition that the consciousness explosion is the answer. We have got to keep moving in that direction.

There must be no back swing into total materialism. This, you see, is the

really interesting and exciting thing that's happening. We've got to stop thinking in terms of possibly going back. Whatever happens now, we must go forward. I think that we have now reached a point in human evolution where we could go forward and permanently get up to the next step on which we would stay.

DJB: Do you know of any techniques to maintain what Maslow has termed "peak experiences" in our day-to-day lives?

COLIN: No, except as I say, knowing this; you see, the business about techniques, once again, means trying to do it the easy way. Obviously psychedelics would be one technique, and alcohol is another technique. Various yogic meditation exercises are another technique. But what's so important is to have the precise knowledge of what you want to achieve, and then to calculate how to get there. Now you must know what you want to achieve. So I keep emphasizing you have got to know in advance. This is what I am after.

It seems to me that what we are all aiming at is what Jean Gebser called "integral consciousness," these levels of consciousness in which you find yourself perfectly contented with the present moment. So if everytime we experience that feeling of tiredness, that feeling of, oh god what the hell, and so on, what we must do is to recognize clearly that this is telling us lies. Whereas, of course, what we very often tend to do is not only to accept it, but let ourselves therefore get into a state of discouragement, and then suddenly into negative feedback, where as it were, you're rolling down hill. This is the real danger--to go into depression.

DJB: You have stressed the importance of people having a strong sense of certainty about things in their lives. But we know from quantum physics that we can never really be certain of anything, because everything that exists, exists as vibrating waves of probable possibilities. What are you certain of?

COLIN: Now, as I say, that is not true in quantum physics. That is the Copenhagen Interpretation. All that Heisenberg stated is you can not know both the position and the speed of an electron. And Einstein said, well yeah, maybe that's true simply because we are dealing with sub-atomic events. In order to observe a sub-atomic event, you would need some way, as it were, of getting inside the atom or the electron, which is not possible without affecting it. So, in point of fact, it just appears to be a simple consequence of the fact that you are observing something so small.

On the other hand, Einstein did not believe there is any fundamental uncertainty about this. He went on to say, if you could devise an experiment in which you could somehow bombard something so that two particles shot off in opposite directions, you could in theory, measure the speed of one and the position of the other. And if they're identical particles shooting off in opposite directions, you would in fact have this double measurement. Of course this whole Bell's Theorem business seems to recognize that this is so. As far as I'm concerned, like Einstein, I do not believe in Bohr's Copenhagen Interpretation.

DJB: Do you see the non-local effect postulated by Bell's Theorem as being an explanation for such unexplained psychic phenomena as telepathy?

COLIN: No, I just don't know. I don't think that the two electrons are telepathic. But on the other hand, I have noted in my book Beyond the Occult cases of identical twins, where you get absolutely absurd similarities in their lives, even though they have been separated from birth. They have married people of the same name, on the same day. They go to the same place for holidays, and all kinds of other preposterous things like this. They

fell down and broke their leg on the same day. I do not know how you explain this. It does seem to me that there is something very weird going on.

DJB: What kind of relationship do you see--if you do-between sexuality and creativity?

COLIN: Well, I don't know. It seems to me tremendously important because sexuality is one of these examples where we experience ambiguity so often. This sudden feeling of-oh my god, is this really what I want? You know the old Latin tag about after sex one feels sad, because you suddenly feel--oh it's gone. There never was anything there in the first place. It's what I call the Ecclesiastes effect. There is nothing new under the sun--vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Which is the state we get into, when we get something we badly want, as Schopenhauer says. But on the other hand, you don't let it depress you that when you have eaten your dinner, you no longer want to eat another dinner. You just accept it and take it for granted, and it seems to me the same thing applies in this case. That the pessimism that Schopenhauer and Ecclesiastes believed is simply a sort of logical howler.

It seems to me that obviously sexuality can play an important part in creativity. But not simply because one feels that the essence of sexuality is so immensely important, like D.H. Lawrence. You see, William Barrett, writing about existentialism, used this phrase about return to the sense of power, meaning, and purpose inside us. We all recognize that somehow that's what it's all about--to get back to that sense of power, meaning, and purpose inside us. Now sex does tend to do that for us. It will jar us instantly, for example, into a sense of meaning.

If a man is feeling rather bored, and then suddenly catches a glimpse of a girl pulling up her stocking, instantly he's wide awake. You can learn from this to see your way, for example, through the kind of pessimism we have been speaking about. But on the other hand, what I have been saying today about this romantic revolution is the fact that I feel that human evolution can be explained, to a very large extent, in terms of woman and man's romanticism about woman. That may well explain the brain explosion. I feel that the romantic revolution, Goethe's eternal woman, draws us upward and on. This is really related to the creative process.

DJB: You have just begun to touch upon what 1 was going to ask you in the next question. What role do you think having a sense of purpose--or a lack thereof-plays in our lives?

COLIN: Obviously people are simply going to mark time. I mentioned yesterday, one of the things that struck me a long time ago, is that if you look at writers, the ones who produced something interesting and significant have been, in fact, the writers who have been forced to struggle like mad from difficult beginnings. So there's no question of them suddenly saying, oh what the hell, and letting go. They have a very powerful sense of purpose.

Proust is an example of a writer who started off from a pleasant middle-class beginning, and although he is a great novelist, A la recherche du temps perdu, is basically a vast pessimistic cathedral that I personally have never succeeded in reading all the way through, particularly the Albertine disparue volume, which really gets me down. What I am saying is that if you've gone through extremely difficult experiences that have forced you, whether you like it or not, to make efforts, then from then on, you never fall back into this facile pessimism.

DJB: Could you tell us about any projects on which you are currently working?

COLIN: I have just finished a book on serial killers. I intend to do two more equally big parts to my Spider World--the first four volumes of which are out in America, and which in a sense is complete in itself already. That, as it were, is the first part. So that when it is finished it will be a twelve volume work, about twice as long as The Lord of the Rings. This sort of fantasy novel, which I started a long time ago, strikes me as one of the most interesting things I have ever done. I have a feeling that one day all kids will know my Spider World. They will know me as the author of Spider World, in the way that they know Lewis Carroll as the author of Alice in Wonderland. Apart from that, I want to write a book called New Pathways in Human Evolution, to summarize all the kinds of things I have been saying this weekend, and I'm intending to write a study of the Female Outsider.

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