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The Outsider 50 years on

16-20 minutes

The Outsider, 50 years on...

By Geoff Ward (2006)

"This pessimism is lying across modern civilisation like some enormous fallen tree and somehow we've got to get a bulldozer and shift it out of the way."

Early in May 2006, I travelled down to Cornwall to interview Colin Wilson on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Outsider*, which appeared on May 28, 1956. It seemed a pity that there was no anniversary edition of the book, one of the major landmarks of 20th century literature and philosophy, and I felt that the event ought to be marked in a meaningful way.

There is much in Colin's autobiography *Dreaming to Some Purpose* about the genesis of *The Outsider*, how it propelled him to fame overnight, and how the critics turned violently against him, savaging *Religion and the Rebel*, the second book in what was to become 'the Outsider cycle', and so there is no need to repeat much of that here.

This interview shows how, from his vantage point half a century on, Wilson contemplated his struggle against critical hostility and rejection, and how he underwent a personal

transformation which enabled him to rise above the implications of the disappointments and setbacks which he had experienced in his career.

"As soon as he decided to stop struggling and do what fate had intended him to do, everything went right. And this is what suddenly struck me, thinking about it. You have to go in the direction that fate appears to be pushing you into.

"I realised that what I'm doing is vitally important and will sooner or later make its proper impact. It's getting a bit late at 75, but at least I am reconciled to the idea of this and, what's more, I have the odd feeling that the changes I have talked about are beginning to take place in me, which is quite an interesting thing.

"You recognise something inside yourself changing and that you can actually do things with focused concentration that you could never do before. It's a fascinating business to suddenly realise that it's the mind itself that is the answer to all of these problems.

"Here was I saying, in *The Outsider*: 'Look, you've got to stop being self-pitying, somehow you Outsiders have got to stop being the miserable Outsiders saying you don't want anything to do with this lousy material world, because if you don't do something about this lousy material world, nobody else will. You yourselves have got to take over and become the leaders'. And this was what I was basically saying in *The Outsider*."

Did Colin then, in any degree, equate pessimism with materialism? "It's not exactly materialism. It's what Outsiders face in materialism - what a terrible world, etc. This is in a way a misassessment of yourself. It's what I call the fallacy of insignificance, the feeling that you personally can't do anything

about it."

What had long intrigued Colin was the ability to get things done, the people who were able to make a tremendous spiritual effort, such as St Francis, whose work had led to the Franciscan movement which spread all over Europe. It wasn't because Colin was against materialism in any way; he was currently reading a biography of F W Woolworth who had struggled for 10-15 years through a series of business setbacks before being able to create his retail empire.

On other levels, the Impressionists had had to fight for acceptance for decades, and the Norwegian author Knut Hamsun struggled for more than 10 years before he became famous with *The Hunger*.

"As with Robert Bruce and the spider, there's an enormous amount of spiritual energy that you have to put into something before you can get something out of it. Well, I can see that the problem with our civilisation is that we don't have that kind of feeling."

In the book that followed *The Outsider*, *Religion and the Rebel*, Colin went on to analyse the way the desire to change things had, in the past, been given a direction by religion. During the 19th century, there was the Church, but in the later 20th century this was not an option. In his next book, *The Age of Defeat*, Colin surveyed modern literature and how it had become impossible to write a serious novel in which the hero wasn't killed in the end.

"This pessimism is lying across modern civilisation like some enormous fallen tree and somehow we've got to get a bulldozer and shift it out of the way. That's what I was saying in those books, that this is a practical thing, we've somehow got to move the fallen tree. That's what I've been saying in various different

ways in my books ever since."

All the major Outsider figures that Colin discusses in his work are from the period before the Second World War. Could any such figures have possibly come into the world since the middle of the 20th century? His answer is both startling and intriguing. "If they do exist," he said, "it's because of me."

While Colin says that Samuel Beckett was at least serious in his intentions, there was no seriousness in any of the other writers of the 1950s, except Iris Murdoch, who was interested in existentialism. Colin was appalled when Beckett, effectively the arch-pessimist and the antithesis of everything Colin stands for, was awarded a Nobel Prize. Colin dismisses British novelists since that time, down to the present day, as having nothing to say, as having no interest in ideas.

"Things do seem to be going steadily downhill. There's absolutely nobody at all. This may sound terribly conceited, but I had never doubted from the time of my teens, when I started realising that I had something enormously important to say, that it really was terribly important to tell the history of the last two centuries, and I've gone on saying it to absolutely deaf ears" - he laughs heartily - "which, in a sense, is a contradiction because there are enough people who do understand me, like yourselves, to make sure that it is worth going on."

What is it, then, about the period since the Second World War that has not produced Outsiders, when earlier times did?

"What you've got to recognise, although it sounds an awful cliché, is that we are a decadent civilisation. History in a thousand years' time will see us like the last days of Rome. There aren't going to be any more Julius Caesars or Marc Antonys with everything gone downhill. I'm not all pessimistic about this because it does seem to me that what we're living

through is a new beginning. But the fact remains that there are no writers, thinkers or artists who have really got a glimpse of anything beyond this incredibly narrow focus. And, of course, the narrow focus in a way is inevitable in a civilisation as complex as ours.

"I would find it extremely difficult if I'd been born in 1990. It would seem to me that there's nothing you could do about modern civilisation - it's going one way and there's nowhere else for it to go - whereas I was fortunate in being born in 1931. I was born into the old world of the 1930s, an older, simpler world, like Agatha Christie's Poirot novels, and therefore, because of that, there was a strong feeling of a basic security and a basic foundation."

It occurs to me that, perhaps in the way that the Axial sages were able to produce a new philosophy and theology in the millennium before Christ in response to brutal and turbulent times, so today's "decadent" society might similarly trigger a meaningful reaction among enlightened thinkers - this may already be seen to have happened in the person and philosophy of Colin Wilson.

George Bernard Shaw, W B Yeats and H G Wells, said Colin, had had something interesting to say: "Let's change civilisation; let's change the world." But after the First World War, along came James Joyce, T S Eliot and Ezra Pound, leading in a veritable "Desolation Row" of pessimists. Negativity had sprung out of the new vision in the 19th century.

"Once you start to understand what has happened to culture over the past 200 years, you really are suddenly awakened. Marshall McLuhan was asked at one point: 'Why do you think your ideas are making such an impact?' And he said: 'Because I'm the only one who understands what the hell is going on!' I

sometimes feel exactly like that - that I'm the only one who understands what the hell is going on. Well, I've said it clearly enough.

"People don't understand what has happened over the last two centuries. They're too brainless to think it out, until one or two brainy people like me think it out for them. This is the basic problem. But there is room for hope. We've got to, like Wells said, build a stronger civilisation. Now is the time for change.

"I thought the autobiography would bring some understanding of who I am and what I'm doing, and that gradually you'd get change beginning to occur. Once people really began to understand, then everyone would begin to change. But that didn't happen. I found the critics were as negative and vicious as ever. It's quite obvious that what I'm saying is no more closer to being understood than it was 50 years ago."

Colin can be forgiven for such a view after a lifetime's work - and yet his readers around the world are legion, so why worry about the critics? "That's what I'm wondering," he mused, "that there are changes taking place without me really noticing it."

And, indeed, Colin does not forget the personal testimony of readers, many of whom have told him how much they value what he has to say in his books. He thinks that perhaps as many as 50 people have told him, over the years, that *The Outsider* had saved them from suicide. That's one a year, and one would have thought, something of which to be proud.

"So really I'm talking about something that's absolutely essential, basic, for serious people, that can actually stop people from suicide," he said.

In a postscript to *The Outsider*, written in 1967, Colin remarked on how the sheer malice of the critics had been hard to swallow. But he felt he held the final card - his long practice of

working alone probably meant he could go on writing longer than his critics could go on sneering, and the prospect of continuing the battle until he was 90 gave him "a certain grim satisfaction".

Today, however, nearly 40 years on, it seems Colin can at last put that battle behind him and head for 90 in a new, non-combatant state of mind. By then, he might even be widely recognised in his own country. In America, the East and the Far East, and in Europe, there appears to be greater understanding of Colin's work than in his own country; he believes this is because the English have no tradition of being interested in ideas. In that same postscript, he wrote: "It may happen in England if I can live to be 90 or so."

But he told me: "Howard Dossor (the Australian author of Colin Wilson: the Man and his Mind, 1990), said to me once: 'I don't think you'll ever be recognised in your lifetime'. I said" - changing his tone to one of mock affront - "What a rotten thing to say to somebody!"

Most people still don't understand what has happened in Western culture over the past two centuries, says Colin, how the long defeatist curve that originated in the early 19th century continues to cloud our way of thinking, and impede the expansion of our consciousness.

As ever, Colin talked with great candour and disarming honesty. While he may turn out to be a kind of literary martyr to the "new existentialism", he has the privilege of being the first optimistic philosopher in European history.

So what were his feelings as he looked back on *The Outsider* after 50 years? "It seemed to me at the time one of the most important books ever written, and 50 years later it still seems

one of the most important books I've ever written," he said.

The Outsider's origins can be traced back to Colin's fascination as a teenager with the Romantics of the early 19th century, including the poets Blake, Byron, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Keats. They were all saying the same kind of thing, that the world was a much more fascinating place than people realised. For the first time, nature was coming to be regarded as beautiful, and the poets instilled a sense of longing.

Goethe had invented the character of the Romantic Outsider in his Sorrows of Young Werther, about a highly idealistic young poet whose unrequited love causes him to shoot himself, a fictional tragedy which led to copycat suicides across Europe, perhaps as many as 2,000 of them.

There was a wonderful world there which people had never noticed before, but so many of the Romantics died young and tragically, all through the 19th century, in accidents, illness or suicides. They could experience "exquisite happiness" but then they would wake up the next morning and find that the real world contradicted this elevated state.

"I remember when my daughter was a child and we took her to see The Wizard of Oz. She came out of the cinema saying: 'I wish there was a land over the rainbow'. That's an encapsulation of what the Romantics felt, this desire for the land over the rainbow, and they felt that once they'd glimpsed it that life wasn't worth living."

This pattern in literature continued into the 20th century with, for example, Villiers De Lisle Adam's Axel who embodied the extreme Romantic position: the young lovers Axel and Sara commit suicide after Axel tells her: "Live? Our servants will do that for us."

The trend culminated, or perhaps reached a nadir, with

Samuel Beckett, 150 years on from the High Romantic period, and his notion that life was meaningless and not worth living, as expressed in his 1950s trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, and later in *Waiting for Godot* (which had its London debut in 1955) and *Endgame*.

"My feeling was that, somehow, all this has got to change," said Colin. "In a way, it was the proper conclusion of this great cycle from Goethe onwards. We're obviously talking of some kind of real evolution. I've been certain of this for the past 50 years. I remember saying this in a lecture when *The Outsider* came out, that man is on the point of an evolutionary leap."

The Irish poet W B Yeats had recognised the evolutionary implications of this long "Romantic curve" when, in *Under Ben Bulbin*, he wrote: "Proof that there's a purpose set/Before the secret working mind:/ profane perfection of mankind."

"So when we talk about what a dreadful world we're in, with things going from bad to worse, and no way out, what we're missing is the fact that we are in change, the whole human race is changing, and the change is really happening now. This is what has always fascinated me. When I was younger, I started this thing off as a Romantic myself, and I gradually realised that it's all very well writing *The Outsider*, about all these people who felt the world was not for them, and they had to find something better, but it suddenly struck me that all we have to do is somehow become vital enough to overcome the problem.

"It demands something from us, a new kind of strength, a new kind of vision. This is what I've been preaching all my life, you see. The interesting thing is that, little by little, I've discovered that I'm actually beginning to achieve this myself. This is obviously a personal thing.

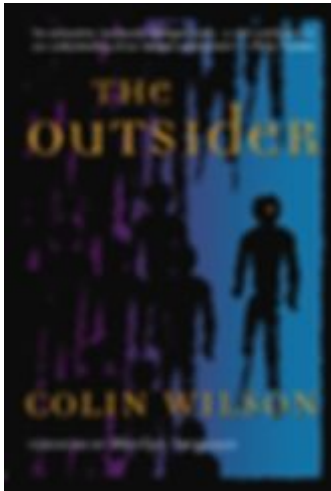
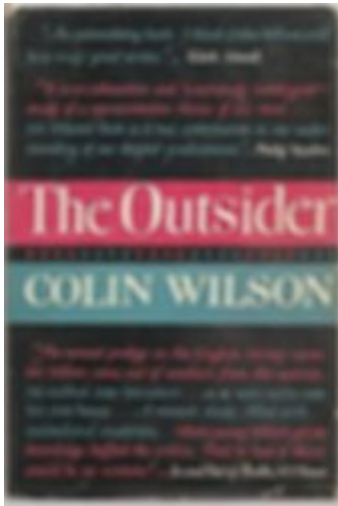
"And when the autobiography (*Dreaming to Some Purpose*)

came out a couple of years ago, I was pretty sure it would be a best-seller. But, in fact, it was attacked violently and, at one time, I would have felt completely cast down and miserable about all this, but gradually I'd got used to being attacked, and I feel this is going to be the hidden purpose of all the attacks" - here he began chuckling, his voice rising to an exclamatory pitch - "to make me a living embodiment of what I'm talking about!"

Colin also mentioned setbacks he had suffered concerning his attempts to find publishers for his book about the "angry young man" literary phenomenon of the 1950s, on which he is currently working, and for the reissue of his Spiderworld series.

"At such times you expect to feel something collapse inside you," he said. "But I realised that this hadn't happened - I was continuing to be my perfectly normal, cheerful self. I suddenly realised that something had happened to me, that after these years and years and years of disappointment and getting attacked that finally I had reached the stage in which I genuinely had risen above it and it didn't matter."

Colin recalled how the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, who studied the "peak experience", had struggled with financial problems as a young man but, instead of pursuing a lucrative post in a university department, had gone to work with under-privileged children. A couple of years later he still found prestige as a famous professor.





* Colin at home.

Photo by Geoff Ward