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Colin Wilson | Issue 49

16-21 minutes



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Interview

Colin Wilson is an author, existentialist philosopher and scholar of the occult. He has been writing fact and fiction for nearly fifty years. On the launch of his autobiography, Alan Morrison

thought this might be an apt time to speak to the man himself.

Wilson was first catapulted to fame in 1956 with the publication of his seminal philosophical work, *The Outsider*. It was written over two years in the reading rooms of the British Museum while Wilson slept rough in various London parks to save on rent. On its publication he was instantly hailed a genius and billeted in with the likes of John (*Look Back in Anger*) Osborne as one of the new generation of Angry Young Men. But this comparison was a specious contemporaneous cop-out according to Wilson himself, who disassociates from that movement.

Wilson followed *The Outsider* with *Religion and the Rebel*, and his debut novel, *Ritual in the Dark*. But after his early meteoric rise to fame, he was suddenly plunged back into relative obscurity as the sages of the time turn-coated on him, deciding they had judged too impulsively.

It was only with the rave reviews of his 1971 tome, *The Occult*, by those same critics (particularly Philip Toynbee and Cyril Connolly), that a deserved reassessment of Wilson came about.

Colin Wilson, the writer “much battered by reviewers” (Toynbee), has continued unstintingly in his literary pursuits, producing countless novels, works of criticism, books on philosophy and the occult. Aided by his legendary staying power, he has steadily gained a cult status through the decades. *Abraxus*, a Cornish literary magazine, dedicates an entire supplement to him, *The Colin Wilson Newsletter*.

In The Flesh

Although this interview has been conducted by post, I did meet Wilson briefly when he visited Brighton to give a talk on his theories on psychical phenomena and synchronicities as part of an occult festival.

Wilson isn't how you'd expect him to be in the flesh, if you predict the manifestation of the rebellious thinker who penned the likes of *The Outsider* and *Religion and the Rebel*; nor the possibly misanthropic, misogynistic writer of the sublime *Ritual in the Dark*.

With a full head of hair at 74, tall, fairly imposing, somewhat reminiscent of the eminently mature Tom Courtney, Wilson peers eruditely through owlsh glasses, replete in a country gentleman's tweeds and hat. He does, after all, live somewhat reclusively in a Cornish village, in a house evocatively called Tetherdown.

Wilson looks not unlike the average uncle from the more intellectual end of the family tree, but one guesses at what probing thoughts and observations might be simmering away beneath the surface. So, I trip clumsily into the fascinating and contentious inside of this seminal outsider, in the hope of sparking off some serendipitous responses...

The Interview

Your book The Outsider examines Outsiders in literature, but you obviously believe that this isn't just a question of understanding a few writers, but a way to grasp something crucial about the human condition. What is it?

I wrote *The Outsider* to try to express what is wrong with us. And I originally began it with an Introduction (later dropped) about T.E. Hulme, and Hulme's feeling that man is suffering from something that was once labelled Original Sin.

Now the average man, looking at himself from what Husserl called 'the natural standpoint', doesn't feel there is anything much wrong with him. But some men develop a curious inner dissatisfaction, which may amount to a vague feeling of "Who am I?", or to the agony of Bunyan's "What must I do to be saved?" Gurdjieff came as close as anyone when he said we are all asleep, in which case, the question becomes: "What can I do to shake my mind awake?"

In The Outsider I was struck by the theme of living at an intense and heightened state of consciousness – you used the examples of Van Gogh, TE Lawrence and Nijinsky, who arguably couldn't get beyond this state to a more balanced one. Since writing this book, is there anyone else you would put in this category apart from the aforementioned persons?

Only Knut Hamsun. He also never matured beyond the Outsider phase.

What are your views on Nietzsche's metaphor of the camel, the lion and the child, and how do you think The Outsider's philosophies tie in with this, if they do?

Nietzsche is quite right: thinkers do start off as lions, full of energy and aggression, then (if they are successful), find themselves carrying burdens like a camel – wife, family, or academic responsibilities – and if they are lucky, end by

returning to a kind of innocence. I think I have been through these three phases.

Didn't you mention in The Outsider about Nietzsche being able to be made ill by a mere thought? How would you interpret what Nietzsche meant and can you relate to this yourself?

No, I didn't quote Nietzsche about being made ill by a thought. You must be thinking of me quoting Aldous Huxley saying in *The Doors of Perception* that negativity could make someone permanently paranoid.

Though you are an existentialist yourself, you once wrote an essay called 'Anti-Sartre'. Could you tell us briefly what you found to be the main problem with Sartre's work, and whether you think he said anything which was of lasting value?

Sartre belongs to the French sceptical tradition that runs from La Mettrie and Cabanis to Derrida, and I feel an instinctive rejection of a statement like "Man is a useless passion". Certainly, Sartre is preferable to La Mettrie, for he believes we are 'free'. But since he also rejects the notion that we possess a real 'self' (or 'transcendental ego'), he sees us as 'hollow men'. With that as his premise, he seems to me to have spent his whole life on the wrong track, stuck in his own unfruitful pessimism.

I feel he only once came close to getting on 'the right track': when he noted that he had never felt so free as during the war, when he was in the Resistance, and was likely to be arrested and shot at any moment. If he had asked himself "Why do I feel free?" he might have answered: "Because when I am in danger, I make an effort of will, which makes me feel more alive." But he

never succeeded in creating a real philosophy because his foundations were all wrong.

At the beginning of your novel Ritual in the Dark, I was intrigued by the nakedness of the main character Gerard Sorme's thoughts regarding his dislike of people around him and his sense of 'nausea'. Is or was this representative of a form of misanthropy on both the character's and the author's parts?

Gerard Sorme is a pretty accurate picture of me at the age of 19. My first wife Betty once wrote me a letter deploring the Christie murders, and I replied saying that people were so stupid and feeble minded that I couldn't really feel much sympathy for them. In my teens I wrote a story about Jesus dying on the cross (influenced by Hemingway's *Today Is Friday*) in which I made the dying Jesus think such thoughts – that these miserable idiots were really not worth dying for, and it had been a mistake to be taken in by pity when they needed a good kicking. Of course, this was pure teenage rebellion, after enduring years of stupid landladies, employers, officers (in the RAF) and so on. This explains why I can sympathise with the type of murderers I call 'assassins' (in *Order of Assassins*) – those who kill out of a kind of rage at life, what Gauguin meant when he said "life being what it is, one dreams of revenge."

Still on Ritual in the Dark: I found it an intriguing but deeply disturbing book, especially with its dissection of misogyny and social morality as manifested in the amoral Austin Nunne. Do you think elements of this novel could be misinterpreted as seeming to partially justify Nunne's actions? How much of yourself was in this character, and how much in the more tormented central protagonist Gerard Sorme?

I am much more Gerard Sorme than Austin Nunne. The point of *Ritual* is that Gerard thinks he can empathise with Austin, believing (wrongly) that his type of revolt is like his own. Only the sight of a dead woman in the morgue makes him aware of the abyss that exists between his own intellectual rebellion and Austin's sadism.

I found the lack of any twist/the sudden, quite subtle and ambiguous ending of Ritual quite baffling. Did you deliberately intend to go against convention by not having any twist at the end, and an almost petering-out conclusion?

No, my original ending showed Gerard having a kind of semi-mystical insight. But nothing is harder to describe than an epiphany – at least, unless you are writing in the first person. So Victor Gollancz suggested cutting the last half dozen pages and ending with Gerard twitching his nose like a rabbit in self-mockery.

You wrote a biography of the magician Aleister Crowley. What did you think of him?

He is the only person of whom I have written a biography that I would not have wanted to meet. Where people were concerned he was a treacherous shit.

One or two writers, admirers of your existentialist writings, have shaken their heads over your later interest in the paranormal as if it was an unfortunate distraction. Your book The Occult (1971) was a spectacular success, but have you ever regretted turning so much of your attention to writing about the Paranormal?

Your question seems loaded, like asking a girl “Have you ever regretted becoming a prostitute?”

Implicit in the ultimate ‘existential’ question “Who am I?” is the possibility that ‘I’ may turn out to far more than I had assumed. It is even implicit in Sartre's discovery that he never felt so free as when in danger of death, for that implies a ‘stronger’ Sartre, a more Nietzschean Sartre. (Note: Sartre's *Le Diable et le Bon Dieu* admits such a possibility as the hero claims that he can transform himself from devil to saint and back again.)

Now as I began to look into the paranormal, even into a phenomenon as simple as dowsing, I began to realise that man possesses powers of which he is totally unaware. The first time a divining rod twisted in my hands as I approached a stone megalith, I gaped in astonishment, feeling that this had nothing to do with the ‘ordinary me’. As to precognition, which is extremely well authenticated, it seems to reveal a totally different self.

Herbert Spiegelberg described Husserl's aim as “to unveil the hidden achievements of the transcendental ego”. Well, I believe, as a result of my researches, that these hidden achievements include such powers as telepathy, ‘second sight’, precognition and out-of-the-body experience. So there is, as far as I am concerned, a meeting point of existential phenomenology and the so-called paranormal (which is not really paranormal at all, but a normal possibility of human consciousness).

You are convinced of ‘the other side’, that there is an after existence for the human soul – could you briefly expand on this?

I finally came to accept the reality of the afterlife and of synchronicity as indicating the existence of 'guardians', or whatever you want to call them.

Do you think religion and other forms of 'belief in the immortal spirit' (spiritualism, guardians etc.) are basically driven by our fear of death?

In some cases perhaps, but generally, no. I thought so when I was in my teens, and dismissed life after death as wishful thinking, but gradually came around to it.

What is your view of Christianity in the light of all you have studied and experienced in your lifetime? Would you regard yourself as, in any sense, a Christian?

No, I am not a Christian. When I was younger, much influenced by T.S. Eliot's *Idea of a Christian Society*, I would have said that we in the West are all Christians whether we like it or not, and should be grateful for that fact. But I could never accept the nonsense about Jesus dying for our sins, invented by St Paul. (See Shaw's preface to *Androcles and the Lion*.) Now I think that the sooner the Catholic Church goes under, the better.

Do you hold any theory on a link between creativity and mental illness? Is there, in your opinion, an evolutionary thread to it, and if so, to what purpose?

I certainly don't feel that mental illness can aid creation, any more than a toothache can. Blake was pre-eminently sane, so were Shaw and Goethe. In my teens I struggled with intense frustration and misery, but never came within a mile of mental illness. Mental illness is usually genetic and is pure bad luck.

The kind Schumann suffered from is a kind of surrender to the camel's burdens and accompanying miseries. He and Clara should never have had children.

Do you think there is a clear dividing line in creative people between mental illness and what is more philosophical illness, and can you give any examples of the two in your opinion? Where would you class yourself in all this?

The chief characteristic of humans being laziness, any problems that jerk us out of our robotic state can be good for us. In that sense, the mental problems of van Gogh, Nietzsche, etc. served a positive function. This has always interested me – for example, the hero of *The World of Violence* deliberately makes himself sick because vomiting is followed by a deep sense of peace. But mental illness only turned Nijinsky into a worse dancer. So to want to be mentally sick, like the wife in Sartre's *The Room*, who wants to join her husband in his loony-ness, strikes me as absurd.

What would you say to the controversial theory that aural-hallucinatory illnesses such as schizophrenia could be related to spirit possession? That mental illness might possibly have a paranormal dimension to it?

I am convinced that spirit possession is a fact, as I explained in *Poltergeist*, or in the chapter on possession in the *Encyclopaedia of Unsolved Mysteries*. A book by Carl Wickland called *Thirty Years among the Dead* contains some highly convincing cases, including that of the murderer Harry Thaw. It was correspondence with the serial killer Danny Rolling, now on death row, which finally convinced me of the reality of spirit

possession. Read the opening pages of *Afterlife*, where I argue that this is true.

Which particular creative and philosophical figures have specifically inspired you in your life and writing, and why?

My chief intellectual influences? Shaw, Gurdjieff and Nietzsche. Shaw because I share his evolutionary optimism, Gurdjieff because he seems to me the greatest spiritual teacher of the 20th century, and Nietzsche because he outgrew Schopenhauer's pessimism, saying 'I have made my philosophy out of my will to health.' In that sense, he seems to me the greatest of all philosophers.

You say Nietzsche made his philosophy out of a will to health – but Nietzsche wasn't in any objective sense 'healthy', was he? I mean physically or even mentally in the end?

Nietzsche said he made his philosophy out of his will to health, not out of his health.

You don't come across as a particularly political individual – I suppose often philosophy takes one on a possibly more transcendental path than the more material nature of politics – but if you hold any political views at all, what in essence are they, and would you affiliate yourself to any particular wing?

I became interested in politics because Shaw said that all serious thinkers are interested in religion and politics. So, like Shaw, I became a socialist. It was not until I began writing a book about Shaw in the sixties that I decided to devote a chapter to explaining how Shaw became a socialist, and noted his assertion that under socialism, coal would become cheaper

because capitalist mine owners would cease to keep the price high. Then I wondered why under Harold Wilson that had proved untrue. And as I proceeded to expound Karl Marx, I saw what unmitigated nonsense it is, and thereupon ceased to be a socialist. It was Marx's theory of surplus value that struck me as rubbish. (See my chapter 'The Economic Basis' in my book on Shaw.) So I became a conservative, and still am, although I approve of Blair because he is also a conservative.

I also had this anti-capitalist dream in my teens, wanting to retire to an island in a lake, like the kind Yeats wanted to build an artistic colony on. But artists tend to be too weak and neurotic to get any benefit from such a place. Shaw said in *The Intelligent Woman's Guide* that it's all very well talking about our lack of freedom due to society, but what about our endemic lack of freedom due to our inborn physical and mental limitations?

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists is a good novel – I have it opposite my eyes as I write – but bad social theory.

Specifically in terms of your writing and philosophies, how would you like to be remembered, and how do you think you will be remembered?

I suspect I shall be remembered as a turning point in modern culture, after the old romantic pessimism that started with Rousseau's *Nouvelle Heloise* and Goethe's *Werther*, and reached a kind of nadir when they awarded the idiot Irishman Beckett the Nobel Prize for trying to persuade us all that the best option is surrender to fatigue and the sense of meaninglessness.

And on that note of meaningfulness, Colin Wilson, thank you for your time.

[Alan Morrison, poet, playwright and journalist, currently works for Survivors' Poetry, a mental health charity in London]