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Seeking the Philosopher's Stone

24-30 minutes

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This interview by Leigh Blackmore appeared in the December 1993 edition of the Australian SF Writers' News



* Colin Wilson with Leigh Blackmore, centre, and Howard Dossor, author of *Colin Wilson: The Man and His Mind*, in 1993.

Leigh prefaced the publication of his interview with the following remarks: "I first encountered Colin Wilson's writing at the age of 16 when I came across a book called *The Strength to Dream: Literature and the Imagination*. I was intrigued because in one chapter he discussed my then literary idol, H P Lovecraft; but

especially because the title of the book suggested an alternative to much of what was being said about the life of the mind; that it was unrealistic, that 'dreaming' was impractical and a waste of time.

"Here, I felt, was a book which expressed everything I felt about the importance of the imagination, and so much more besides. I soon read everything of Wilson's I could lay my hands on, including his first and most famous book, *The Outsider: an Enquiry into the Nature of the Sickness of Mankind in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, published three years before I was born.

"It became clear to me that Wilson was one of the century's most important thinkers, who has written insightful works on philosophy, psychology, sexology, criminology and occultism, as well as many acclaimed novels."

BLACKMORE: Do you agree with that?

WILSON: Well yes, I mean the opposite sex is obviously an ideal way of seeing your own face, but so are other ways. I sometimes really realise what I'm all about in the midst of a lecture, and then something clicks inside me and I go into overdrive and quite suddenly I know who I am much more than I normally do.

BLACKMORE: And with those sorts of "peak experiences" or those moments of insight - you talk about them coming unexpectedly. If, having looked into the fact that we should be able to do that, you have developed a way of, as you say, switching it on at will. To me that seems the hardest part of the whole process.

WILSON: That's because you keep raising this misconception of "switching it on". What I keep saying is, you've got to know who you are. Once you've got a basic idea who you are, even if, for the time being, this gets troubled by clouds, like the sun, provided you absolutely know the sun is there, this doesn't matter at all. So it's not a matter of switching it on. Very often, by making an intense effort of will, you can make the clouds go away, and that's the most interesting thing about the body... I mean, for example, when I landed in Australia a week ago, I immediately got this filthy cold. I've noticed that in all of my lectures, the cold has gone away. I've even got worried that my voice is going to go, that I would choke and cough halfway through. In fact, the moment I get into my stride, away it goes, and comes back as soon as it's all over.

BLACKMORE: I still want to pursue the idea of will. You've written about Aleister Crowley in a number of books, including Men of Mystery and The Nature of the Beast. It seems to me that a major element of his magick is about focusing will with the laser-like intensity. For instance, his maxims like "do what thou wilt", "love is the law", "lover under will", and that sort of thing - that doesn't sound far removed from the attitudes you're advocating. But on the other hand, you've called him a mountebank. What is your attitude to Crowley?

WILSON: Crowley went straight to the heart of the matter when he said that "every man and woman is a star". And he obviously understood about our untapped powers. But the main trouble with Crowley as a person was that he was such a nasty bastard. He's the only person that I've ever written a book about that I would not have wanted to know. I mean, to begin with, he sponged mercilessly on his friends. As you know, with one friend

he just went to the local liquor store and said "I'll put this on her account." She went back there about two months later after he'd gone, and found he'd run up a bill for a thousand pounds in bottles of gin, whisky and brandy.

BLACKMORE: You'd make a distinction then, between his ideas and his behaviour?

WILSON: This is the main problem, you see. Unfortunately, he was born into a more or less wealthy family, and once one has achieved that status of spoilt brat, it's incredibly difficult to get rid of. Nothing is more difficult to get rid of than spoiltness.

BLACKMORE: But it seems to me that quite often with a lot of the writers you've written about, or whose lives you have looked into, they don't really live up to the standards they're writing about. They drink, or they die in despair.

WILSON: This was the main problem in *The Outsider*, and this led me to this concept of what I called existential criticism. In order to evaluate a writer or a philosopher, never mind the work, one has to start by looking at the man, and then later try to see it as a whole: the work and the man. But never exclude the man and concentrate on the work, which is what they all want you to do.

BLACKMORE: I wanted to ask you about the bicameral mind, the concept of the left brain and the right brain. Society seems to be moving away very much from the right-brain-dominated attitude in a lot of ways. Western society is very much oriented to the left brain, technical, scientific frame of mind, isn't it? Presumably, a large part of your motivation in writing is to open minds which are "asleep" or to demonstrate there's something

beyond the sense of "contingency" many of us feel in our own day-to-day lives.

WILSON: Oh yes.

BLACKMORE: Given that, who do you expect to be your audience, in the sense that you're really writing for the people who are right-brain dominated?

WILSON: Obviously in a sense I'm an intellectual writer, which means I'm a left-brain writer. At the same time, unlike most intellectuals, I do my best to write in words of one syllable. My aim is simply to communicate ideas, whereas most French intellectuals, for example, you know - Sartre, Derrida and all the rest of them - their aim seems to be to impress people by how obscure they can be! (Laughter).

BLACKMORE: Those post-modernist philosophers, as I guess you could loosely group them, their attitude seems to be quite negative - in fact, it's a throwback to the sort of existentialism of Sartre, it seems to me, even though it's couched in different language.

WILSON: Yes, it is.

BLACKMORE: Would you see it that way, or do you feel that what they're talking about is important?

WILSON: No, I don't, and in fact I'd started reading Derrida. I took 18 months to understand what the bugger was talking about and then realised it was all rubbish! All he's done is go back to the point of view of David Hume, who said that when he looked inside himself, he didn't see any real David Hume, just a

lot of ideas and impressions - and a lot of these post-modernist thinkers take the same point of view - man is nothing but the sum of the things that happen to him. What I'm saying is obviously the absolute opposite, as was Husserl. And all of them have abandoned Husserl, that's the problem. Sartre started off by being tremendously impressed by phenomenology and by Husserl's concept of intentionality. He then wrote a little first book called *The Transcendence of the Ego* in which he said "Well yes, Husserl is quite right about the transcendental ego being the essential you, but it isn't directed from inside outwards - what happens is that you are pulled by the external world like the tides are pulled by the Moon" - huh! He completely abandoned the concept of the transcendental ego. The same goes for Derrida, who starts off by saying "Yes, I'm a Husserlian, however I have one or two small criticisms to make", and just like Sartre's criticism they completely undermine the meaning of Husserl.

BLACKMORE: I suspected that would be the case, that you'd actually be quite in conflict with that sort of thought...

WILSON: Absolutely...

BLACKMORE: ...because your work is essentially optimistic and about developing human potential.

WILSON: Oh yes. Apart from that, I mean someone like Michel Foucault is just a conman, an intellectual conman. The more you read his work, the more you realise that the basic motivation was a desire to be a famous intellectual (laughter), rather than to say something.

BLACKMORE: Yes, it's academically very clever, but not particularly meaningful.

WILSON: Right.

BLACKMORE: Howard Dossor makes a point in his book - the misconception that some people have that you're primarily a synthesiser of other people's ideas. I don't agree with that - to me, your work reflects a sort of intense grappling with the history of Western thought and major thinkers. And it is a synthesis but it's with a purpose, which is your own thought...

WILSON: I compare it in a way to Karl Jaspers, you know, who started off writing immense unreadable philosophical books, then ended by writing a very good work called *The Great Philosophers*, in which he expressed his own ideas in terms of other philosophers - you know, from Confucius and so on down to Kant. In a way, it is his best book, his clearest book, and the book in which he most expresses himself.

BLACKMORE: Do you think the critics have failed to grasp the import of your own thought?

WILSON: Of course they have. But don't forget that what happened was that, after my first book, there was such a tremendous backswing that for a while I was regarded as a total fraud and fake. Now, in England, this view still hangs on.

BLACKMORE: A lot of your recent work has been published by small presses, for example, Paupers Press. Can you tell us about them?

WILSON: Very often a publisher like Paupers Press is just a friend who started with desktop publishing and said "Have you got some essays I can do?" And they've managed to make a fair old success of it...

BLACKMORE: You mentioned earlier your new novel, *Metamorphosis of the Vampire*...

WILSON: Yes, this new science fiction novel, which I think is probably not only my best science fiction novel but maybe my best novel. I started doing this thing as a sequel to *The Space Vampires* and at the back of my mind was the idea that I wanted to make the novel about sex, as *The Space Vampires* of course is basically about sex. I mean it's about the notion that in fact what human sexuality is really all about is the exchange of a certain vital energy. What I wanted to do was to develop this idea. In fact, the sequel is turning out to be far more interesting - my most comprehensive attempt to study human sexuality in depth that I've ever done. So I mean, I suppose some people may say that it's pornographic. It's certainly a big book. It will end up some 150,000 words long, as big as *Ritual in the Dark*.

BLACKMORE: Who's publishing the new book?

WILSON: We don't know yet. I offered it to the publisher of *The Space Vampires*; he turned down the outline and then said he'd love to see the book when it's finished. I'd rather not sign a contract for it because it means that I can sit back and do it in my own good time. I've been on it way over a year now, which is for me unusually long - I mean, no novel except *Ritual in the Dark* took that long. So this is coming along very well. It's my

biggest science fiction novel except of course for Spider World, which is really fantasy rather than science fiction.

BLACKMORE: About Spider World - there are three volumes published in Britain, aren't there? And I think they did it in America as six. Are there more volumes to come of Spider World?

WILSON: Oh yes. I mean, those three volumes - the third volume is a half of a book, and then there'll be a fifth and sixth, so it'll be six volumes.

BLACKMORE: You've got the whole series planned out?

WILSON: Oh yeah.

BLACKMORE: I was curious because the publisher didn't make it clear; at first I thought it was a two-book, then the third one was published, and I began to realise it might be a continuing series.

WILSON: It'll be complete in six volumes, in other words, three volumes the six of that - you see the first two were really one big book, so they decided to do it in two volumes just because it was so big. It'll be twice as long as The Lord of the Rings when it's finished.

BLACKMORE: One of my favourites of your novels is The Glass Cage, which functions as both an entertaining crime story and as an intellectual adventure into the visionary ideas of Blake. Would it be true to say that most of your novels are novels of ideas?

WILSON: Well, yes. The great influence of my teens was Bernard Shaw, and what I wanted to do originally was to be a playwright. However, I started writing my first novel, *Ritual in the Dark*, when I was 18, because I was interested in criminology and Jack the Ripper, but *The Outsider* sprang out of *Ritual in the Dark*. I was talking to a friend about the characters in *Ritual in the Dark*, working them out. One of the characters is a typical intellectual Outsider with a powerful discipline of the intellect but not of the emotions or the body; one of them was a typical emotional Outsider with discipline of the emotions but not of the intellect or of the body, and the third one, based on the dancer Nijinsky, is a typical physical Outsider with a discipline of the body but not of the emotions or the intellect. And as I worked out this idea, it suddenly struck me that there was a basis of a book there. So that Christmas, when Angus Wilson had borrowed the first chunk of *Ritual in the Dark* (he was the superintendent of the British Museum Reading Room), having nothing else to do, I began *The Outsider* which is basically about this idea that sprang out of *Ritual in the Dark*. There is a sense in which all of my novels have run parallel with a non-fiction book, so that, for example, you'll find that the chunk describing the basic plot of *The Mind Parasites* is in the introduction to *The New Existentialism*, and so on. *Origins of the Sexual Impulse* was another one.

BLACKMORE: So the novels and the non-fiction books are all closely connected.

WILSON: They tend to be running parallel in fact, and this is still happening. I mean, there's a volume on serial killers called *The Story of Serial Murder* which is due out in a couple of months' time in which I say that it would be interesting to imagine a

society in which all the inhibitions were connected with food and not with sex. This is one of the ideas I worked out in this sequel to The Space Vampires called Metamorphosis of the Vampire.

BLACKMORE: The Space Vampires was made into a film, and it's been said that it didn't translate very successfully to the screen. What is your attitude to any other movies based on your novels?

WILSON: Yes, people keep buying options on my novels, and I forget how many options there are. Ritual in the Dark has been optioned three or four times. The Black Room has been optioned, so have Necessary Doubt and The Mind Parasites; The Philosopher's Stone has also been optioned.

BLACKMORE: I can see the crime novels being translated more successfully to the screen... The science fiction one had a lot of special effects in it, and perhaps left out some of the intellectual substance.

WILSON: Well, the problem is that the writer has absolutely nothing to with his film script. I mean, when I heard that the company which made Life-force couldn't get a script, I wrote to them and said "Look, I'll do you one for free", and they didn't even bother to reply to me. Instead, they got a very good scriptwriter, who actually scripted a film called Alien, but he turned out an absolutely bum script that had nothing whatever to do with my novel. The film of Life-force must be one of the worst films ever made, I should think.

BLACKMORE: You're not a horror fiction fan, in fact you find it to be something of an adolescent bore. Doesn't horror fiction offer

the same sort of potential as SF for exploring altered states of reality?

WILSON: Not really, because horror fiction usually depends so much on the kind of thing that horrifies you. Now obviously a child is horrified by all kinds of things which don't horrify an adult, so the more adult you become, the smaller the range of things that horrify you. If you think about it, horror normally springs out of your little neuroses, having a horror of being buried alive, and so on. If you don't have any of those neuroses, you're not likely to be a fan of horror fiction.

BLACKMORE: So the fiction won't work unless it preys on those sorts of fears?

WILSON: Absolutely. My American agent asked me once: "Why don't you try to write like Stephen King?" And (laughter), I brooded for a while on some horror fiction. If I really wanted to write a horror novel, I'd think up something that was truly horrific. It would be psychologically nasty that it would be more likely to cause mental breakdowns than...

BLACKMORE: Well, Love craft for instance... He was basically a horror writer in a sense, and in *The Philosopher's Stone* and *The Space Vampires* and *The Mind Parasites* you've taken ideas similar to Love craft's and extended them...

WILSON: But I put my tongue in my cheek before I started. (Laughter).

BLACKMORE: I wanted to run a few quotes by you. Howard Doss or quotes from a letter to your mother at the beginning of your career when you said "my one aim in life is to become the

foremost writer in Europe". To what extent do you feel you've achieved that aim at this stage of your career?

WILSON: I think I've probably achieved it to the extent of being the foremost writer in the world, in my own eyes. (Chuckles).

BLACKMORE: To move on to the philosophical ideas about consciousness and those things in your work. I wanted to quote from Stuart Hotrod's book *Contraries*, where he talks about you "shared conception of man as a creature with spiritual hunger, dynamic evolutionary drive". He says that "we held mystical experiences, visionary states of consciousness, moments of ecstasy, of joy, of life-affirmation, not only relevant to life, but to be the chief object of man's endeavour". Would that be an apt summation of your writing, do you think?

WILSON: Well, to some extent. Stuart's always a bit stuffy. He tends to put things in rather stuffier terms than I would, but basically we share many of the same ideas.

BLACKMORE: I'll come back to that business about the mystical states of consciousness. It's hardly fair to ask you to summarise 80 books' worth of writing in a few sentences, but all your work seems intimately connected to a central premise, that man can break out of, and go beyond, his normal everyday consciousness. How would you explain the main thrust of your work to someone unfamiliar with it? Perhaps you'd like to talk about some of the terms like "Faculty X" and "the 2% world".

WILSON: What do you mean, "2% world"? I'm not familiar with that one.

BLACKMORE: That was a concept I came across recently. I think Howard mentions it in his book.

WILSON: Well, I've forgotten what I meant by it. I've forgotten that one. I'm always coming up with concepts, which sometimes take - concepts like the "St Net's margin" or "Faculty X" - and sometimes they don't. But since I've been in Australia, I've come up with the concept of the "Third Degree of Control", which seems to me to be a very important idea. The notion that most people, when they wake up, take it for granted that their bodies are programmed to go through the day, and they don't realise that they have quite a degree of control over their bodies. They tend to be completely passive. Now when you get happy and excited, you go into what you might call the "Second Level of Control", at which suddenly you are aware that in fact you are controlling, this happens when you're happy, when you're a child at Christmas, all that kind of thing - when a racing driver is driving a car - but sometimes in moments in sort of extreme ecstasy - sexual ecstasy, for example, of mystical ecstasy - a sudden feeling of, you know, tremendous overwhelming freedom, like Graham Greene when he pointed the gun at his head. That is what I call the "Third Level of Control". Suddenly you have no doubt whatever that you are in charge. What you don't realise, of course, is that you are in charge all the time - you have to get up to that third level of control before it suddenly hits you that it really is so.

BLACKMORE: One concept you've written about is the "Robot" - the lower functions that automatically steer us in certain methods of behaviour and that sort of thing. It's only when we can break out of that consciousness that the Robot controls that

we're really free. Does that relate to these three levels of control?

WILSON: Oh, absolutely. It's very perceptive of you to say that, because that obviously is where the freedom comes about. In *Religion and the Rebel*, my second book, I talked at the beginning about what I call the "automatic pilot" which takes us over. This is what I tend to later call the Robot, pretty well the same thing. Also, what Gurdjieff meant by "the machine". When Gurdjieff says "understand the machine", he means "understand your own robot", the Robot being this part of us that does things for us, and which ought to be entirely good. It drives your car for you, it speaks French for you, it does all kinds of things. Unfortunately, it also does the things you don't want it to, like - you go for a walk which really moves you deeply the first time. The second and third time, it's the Robot walking instead of you; you listen to a symphony that moves you, the third or fourth time it's the Robot listening as well as you, and interfering. So this automatic level, which tends to cut in particularly when we're tired, is of tremendous importance, and obviously, because the Robot in human beings is so fiercely efficient, we are not aware of our degree of freedom. We just get so completely - I mean, imagine a rich person who is born rich, and has lots and lots of servants, and he could quite easily, if he was a gentle character, get used to the idea that in fact his servants were minders who told him what to do, until he had a feeling that he had no freedom at all. You know, he did what his butler and his maid and his secretary told him. Now we're rather like that with the Robot, and it's only in these sudden moments of freedom in which you suddenly realise that you're in charge, and not the

robot, and the Robot's a servant, not a master. It's very much tied up with this notion of the third level of control.

BLACKMORE: Given that "peak experiences" are often random or unpredictable, can we practise extending or maintaining these moments of heightened awareness? What about techniques for expanding consciousness, for achieving that level of freedom? I know you've talked about, for instance, the act of mental "clenching" and the notion of "intentionality".

WILSON: Of course, but you see, there's only one basic technique for switching off the Robot. If you were sitting in a class in school, staring blankly out of the window, and the master suddenly shouted at you, "Wake up, Leigh", what he's saying is "Pay attention!" Now, "Pay attention" is in fact what switches off the Robot and makes the real you come on. So the truth lies in that phrase "attention".

BLACKMORE: So it's a focusing of attention that is the crux...

WILSON: And the reawakening of attention again and again and again every time we "go to sleep". That story I love quoting of the master Ikyu, when a workman said to him "Will you write something significant on my tablet?" and he wrote "Attention!" And the workman said "Hmph, that's not very significant, can't you write something else?" And he wrote "Attention! Attention!"

BLACKMORE: That's a Zen parable?

WILSON: That's right. Then the workman said "And what does 'attention!' mean?" And Ikyu said "Attention! means attention!"

BLACKMORE: It's an important concept. Stuart Holroyd said that it's a basic tenet of your philosophy that "man must strive to be a god, and will never attain to the status unless he learns to focus his mind laser-like for long periods of time". That's from Contraries. How do you think we can become god-like, how we can achieve what the Outsiders you've written about were looking for, but were diverted from because of their own negative approach?

WILSON: No, you're rather missing the point there. The point that is made suddenly for us, in all moments of intensity and ecstasy, is that we are far stronger than we realise. For example, D H Lawrence talks about the sexual orgasm, "the rod that connects man to the stars". We have all kinds of untapped powers which we seldom use. It's not a question of "how do you discipline yourself into states of ecstasy?" The real question is "how can you suddenly get into contact with the untapped powers?" And this is not terribly difficult since they really are there.

BLACKMORE: You've said, for instance, that "we pant for breath when a single movement could open the window". But is it really that simple, do you think?

WILSON: What I'm trying to get at when I say that, is that in a certain sense it is a kind of stupidity that keeps us from doing it at will. It's also our poor concept of ourselves and who we are. I meant to write a book once called The Self-image, which is really about this fact that most people don't know who they are because we need a "mirror" to see our faces in. One German jurist said "even a man who believes in nothing needs a girl to

believe in him". In other words, he needs a picture, a mirror, to show back his own face.



* A bookshop talk in Australia, 1993.