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Colin Wilson World Interviews

64-81 minutes

Colin Wilson at 70 (2001) By Geoff Ward

FOR the first-time visitor, knocking at the front door of Colin Wilson's home draws no response - one finds out later that this is because it is blocked off by bookshelves. Indeed, his house is half-home, half-library, with thousands of books on shelves lining the walls of every passageway and every room and filling three sheds in his back garden, not to mention the many thousands of records and videotapes he has collected over the years - a veritable information universe all his own.

Therefore, on my initial visit, it was the kitchen door that was opened by Wilson's wife Joy, to whom he has been married for more than 40 years. Wilson himself presents an imposing if craggy appearance. Tall - well over six feet in his carpet slippers and baggy trousers - and with a thatch of unruly hair; spectacles compound a studious look often broken by a boyish grin.

A warm greeting was immediately followed by an offer of smoked salmon and wine, the latter coming to flow copiously on this particular afternoon as one of his three sons, Damon, who has assisted his father in the compilation of recent works, and his daughter Sally's husband Mike, with their young daughter, arrived to visit. Wilson's eldest son is Roderick, by his first wife Betty, and his youngest son is Rowan.

Last year (2000), I felt no little sense of disappointment when another of those potted guides to matters philosophical was published in the UK, this time 101 Key Ideas in Existentialism, without any reference at all to Wilson, whose "new existentialism" has laid the foundations for fresh paths of philosophical and psychological inquiry in the 21st century, and prepared a paradigm for a renewed humanity.

But then, since the publication of The Outsider in 1956, Wilson, who is 70 on June 26, 2001, has presented critics with one of their most significant challenges of the past 45 years. Sadly, few have risen to this challenge, a jealous academia choosing instead to frown upon his "autodidactism", evidently still a pejorative term in those rarefied regions. Thus Wilson's works have always prompted an intense, and frequently negative, critical response, certainly in the UK.

Not surprising then, that during a series of attempts to place an article in the British national media to mark Wilson's 70th birthday, which I, as a journalist, regarded as a significant literary occasion, I came up against a disconcerting lack of interest - although one literary editor who rejected the idea of a birthday tribute article nevertheless told me that he saw Wilson as "one of our great forgotten writers". A back-handed complement indeed!

Meanwhile, Wilson writes on, as ever undeterred by such short-sighted attitudes. New projects under way at the moment are the fourth part of his Spider World series of novels, an introduction to child killer Ian Brady's autobiography, and a revision of The Outsider for publication in China, involving an explanatory postscript to each chapter. Next year, he plans to write a sequel to The Atlantis Blueprint.

In 1969, in his autobiographical Voyage to a Beginning,

Wilson asked: "Why has nature blinkered the human will? Why do so many of us die, bored and discouraged, at the age of 70, complaining that we have exhausted the world?"

Clearly, Wilson, as he himself arrives at the milestone of three-score-years-and ten, has not "exhausted the world" - although he may have exhausted the critics.

ACCLAIM for The Outsider, published when Wilson was only 24, reached a pitch previously unheard of in 20th century literature, but rapidly turned to rejection and personal abuse as follow-up works were received with hostility. It was the infamous horsewhip episode that seemed to symbolise the backlash of the English establishment - and explains how he and Joy came to live in a remote Cornish fishing village 250 miles from London.

Shortly after publication of The Outsider, Wilson and Joy, whom he had met in Lewis' department store in Leicester, were sharing a meal in his London flat when Joy's father burst in brandishing a horsewhip, uttering the immortal words: "Aha, Wilson! The game is up!"

The incident had been provoked by Joy's younger sister who had found some of Wilson's notes for his first novel Ritual in the Dark, thought he must be a sexual pervert, and had shown her parents. Next day, the papers were full of the story, which went global. The scandal resulted in Wilson leaving London; he took Joy first to Devon, then Ireland, and then to Cornwall where they were offered accommodation, and where they remain to this day.

Rather ruefully, Wilson will say that the ignoring of the ideas in his books has become a critical tradition in itself. He sees himself as the victim of a resistance to intellectual and emotional

challenges, of a kind of intellectual elitism, and to the idea that an individual can take responsibility for his or her own personal development.

However, the success of The Outsider had given Wilson an international audience, even if his books never sold enough copies to make him rich, "or even reasonably affluent". He continued to write and was glad to build up a large body of readers who sought genuine insight into themselves and their world, who felt that his Outsider cycle of books (between 1956 and 1965) contained key ideas for an understanding of our times, and that later works such as Beyond the Occult (1988) offered the beginnings of an explanation for the mind's "hidden powers". Indeed, Wilson describes Beyond the Occult as "probably my best book" because it is here that the two great streams of his work, existentialism and occultism, come together, the two strands being of equal importance. It remains the work that contains the essence of his ideas, and serves as the best summary of, and introduction to, the Wilson canon.

"But as time went by," Wilson wrote in his foreword to Howard Dossor's biography (1990), "I got used to the idea that I would remain a literary 'outsider', and that if there was ever a general understanding of my work it would probably be after my death . . . I regard my own work as a kind of existential jigsaw puzzle in which apparently disparate parts lock together to make a whole."

Nowadays, Wilson's daily routine begins when he rises at 5.30am for two hours of reading before preparing breakfast for himself and Joy, usually fruit and toast, which they share together in bed. Then it's to work at his writing desk until 4.15pm when he takes his two dogs for a walk in woodland a mile or so from his home - Wilson is worried about his weight and, as well

as dieting, insists on this daily constitutional. After that it's time to relax with some glasses of vintage wine from his plentiful cellar, and to watch the 6pm TV news, leaving a few hours in the evening free of the mental rigours of authorship.

These days, Wilson has cut back on speaking engagements because he dislikes too much travelling, and prefers to tie in such occasions with holiday breaks for himself and Joy, such as the trip he plans to Florida this autumn (2001) when he will be attending.the Prophets Conference. "I'm a Cancer, you see," he will say, referring to his astrological sun sign, one of the typical qualities of which is being a "home bird" who likes home comforts. In any event, he says he is rarely paid for these lectures, frequently accepting expenses for himself and Joy instead. Yet on his 70th birthday, and on the day before, he was to be addressing occult and psychic forums in the UK, at Brighton and London.

During our meetings, Wilson talked with great conviction and candour, free of affectation but with tremendous assertion of self, about his life and works - and not without a sprinkling of expletives as he occcasionally becomes moved by an angry emotion!

IN HIS seminal essay, "Existential Criticism" (1958), Wilson wrote: "It is my hope that, within the next two decades, the techniques of existential thinking will become commonplace in England and America. They would undoubtedly provide a solution to many problems which we now regard as peculiar to the mid-twentieth century."

Unfortunately for him, this was not to be; it was not Wilson's broadly humanistic stance which came to be the fashion in the next two decades and beyond, but the virulently anti-humanist

approach of the new wave of French thinkers such as Derrida (born 1930, a contemporary of Wilson's), Barthes and Foucault with their emphasis on deconstruction, the elusiveness of meaning, and the "death of the author".

It was ironic that these thinkers all took their cue from aspects of the work of Nietzsche, the German Romantic philosopher, who Wilson saw as having indicated "the road to a new phase in human evolution" through a form of mental concentration able to bring about a deeper perception of meaning, and make people stronger and healthier as a result.

Wilson, therefore, in view of the monumental effort he has put into formulating his new existentialism, which moves in the opposite direction to the pessimistic and nihilistic strands of the "old" existentialism, may be forgiven should he feel somewhat bitter about the success of these later and tremendously influential "post-structuralist" theorists - to whom he is also diametrically opposed, referring to their works, as he does, bluntly and with not a little bile, as "shit". Thus, a significant element of Wilson's output since the 1980s has been an attempt to debunk them and demonstrate their "theoretical fallacy".

However, Wilson realised at an early stage that he was never going to be an influence on his English contemporaries in the way that Sartre was on his in France. "To begin with, when I published The Outsider, the main streams were logical positivism and linguistic analysis. They gradually lost their grip and disappeared completely, but they haven't really been replaced by anything. All they've been replaced with is a kind of vague scepticism of the type you find in Rorty, or someone like that. All these people seem incapable of getting beyond this feeling that there's no next step.

"But this didn't really bother me, although I used to think, let's

say, back in the '80s, here am I saying the most important things being said in the world at the moment and none of these people pay the least attention. You'd think I was shouting in a vacuum. A friend of mine had a quote about a writer whose works pre-deceased him - I used to think, God forbid that should be me. But I never really believed it would be. I was always fairly certain that what I was saying was too important to pre-decease me!

"And little by little, to my great delight, I've found that over the past ten years or so that things are beginning to move very slowly in my direction. I shall have to be about 90 before I see any real results! Nevertheless, I see things like the new websites about me, or the enormous number of people who write to me. I think the world's full of people now who know my work and who have been deeply influenced by it. So all these years of working away in the dark, it wasn't really in the dark at all. There was a certain feedback."

He cites the example of British author Philip Pullman whose His Dark Materials trilogy is greatly influenced by the works of David Lindsay about whom Wilson wrote a book The Haunted Man: The Strange Genius of David Lindsay (1970) in conjunction with J. B. Pick and E. H. Visiak. Pullman's trilogy was "brilliant", said Wilson, his imagination "tremendous and overwhelming". In correspondence, Pullman told Wilson he had used Wilson's works as a "guide to literature". Everything Wilson had recommended Pulllman had read.

"On the other hand," Wilson went on, "It would have been terribly bad for me if that success of The Outsider had continued because I would have wanted to do all kinds of things, for example, making the same kind of success on the stage. I would have concentrated much too much on play writing. As it was, with the feeling that no one cared anyway, I just settled down

and wrote book after book in which I merely set out to please myself and express my own ideas. An example is that Books in My Life volume (1998) which still seems to me one of my best of recent years, and which was written at the behest of a Japanese publisher who asked if I could add a few more literary essays to those I'd already published in magazine form. Then I discovered that people were reading Books in My Life as a kind of literary guide.

"That gives me a feeling of satisfaction, that things are moving slowly, although it's been very difficult and I've never really made very much money, always having an overdraft at the bank until the past few years, since From Atlantis to the Sphinx (1997) came out, and managed to sell out edition after edition. For the first time in my life I found that we weren't in overdraft. We now continue to squeak along just on the side of being in the black instead of in the red."

For Wilson, the old existentialism emphasised man's contingency. It said that as there was no God, there were no transcendental values either. Man was alone in an empty universe, and a man's actions had no importance to anyone but himself. Under the new existentialism, Wilson calls for a phenomenological examination of consciousness with emphasis upon the problem of what constitutes human values.

"Everyday consciousness is a liar," he says, in a famous phrase, and most people have insights to this effect. The question was how to give such insights philosophical status, and how to investigate them. Wilson remains sure that there is a standard of values external to human consciousness, and that human evolution depends upon this realisation, and upon a renewal of the sense of overall purpose.

Does he know of any other contemporary authors who take a "new existential" approach? "Only me," he says with a smile.

ALTHOUGH existentialist issues per se comprise only one part of Wilson's prodigious oeuvre of more than a hundred books, they are the common thread linking his themes. As well as a series of novels - including the Spider World trilogy, The Tower, The Delta, and The Magician, which is being re-published in the USA in 2001-2002, to be followed by a fourth part, Shadowland, which he is now writing - he has brought his extraordinary powers of analysis and perspicuity to bear on a bewildering variety of topics. These have included criminology (notably serial killers - "I think I have a pretty good understanding of the criminal mind"), literary theory and criticism, psychology, sexology, occultism and the paranormal, wine and classical music, ancient civilisations and extra-terrestrials.

He has also produced a number of biographies, their subjects including such diverse figures as Rasputin, Jung, Strindberg, Hesse, Wilhelm Reich, Jorges Luis Borges, Aleister Crowley, Rudolph Steiner and Ken Russell. Wilson's latest work, The Devil's Party, a study of "charlatan messiahs", published in March 2001, is yet further testament to his diversity.

He confesses that the breadth of his interests may have created a problem for critics who like to pigeon-hole authors. And readers can find enough in any one sector of his works to keep them going indefinitely, such is the extent of the insights, illuminations and food for thought that he provides on any subject to which he turns.

But underlying all his works is a faith in the power and potential of the human mind to rise above the mediocre or the malevolent to new and higher levels of awareness, and to press

against and challenge the boundaries of everyday consciousness.

Central to his work is the question of how people can achieve those strange moments of inner freedom, of sheer delight, of "peak experience", or "ecstasy", when we feel our energies are more than adequate to cope with any challenge, those moments of "pure joy in which we experience an almost god-like sensation of power or freedom" - in stark contrast to normal consciousness in which we seem to sense our energies are never quite up to the mark, or feel ourselves to be in the grip of impersonal forces much stronger than ourselves.

One of the most important images in his work, Wilson points out, is that of people's "worm's eye" and "bird's eye" views, the former being the blinkered experience, languishing under limitations of consciousness, and the latter the capacity to grasp, or "conjure up" reality, linked to Faculty X, his term for the mind's latent ability to intensify and expand consciousness, to achieve a mastery over time - indeed, to reinstate the "visionary gleam" - and which he sees as the route to fulfillment of mankind's evolutionary potential, or, strangely, as a regaining of it. For it is Wilson's theory that for the people of an ancient civilisation 100,000 years ago - the Atlanteans - Faculty X was the norm in their intuitive right-brain-dominated way of thinking. After the destruction of their civilisation, survivors passed on knowledge to successive societies, notably the ancient Egyptians. Gradually, over the centures, the intuitive right-brain lost out to the rational left-brain, so that in modern man such attributes as precognition, telepathy, astral projection, telekinesis and so on - indeed, all the manifestations of the paranormal - are the remnants of the once-dominant Faculty X of our ancestors.

"Think of Faculty X as simply being a kind of faculty which is

natural to poets," he said. "When Keats talked about 'negative capability' he meant that funny sort of way in which in one single stride you can open up to the whole universe and become completely receptive to it. He was talking about a particular kind of receptivity. Now that receptivity is very close to what I've been talking about, the right-brain as opposed to the left-brain faculty. Keats was talking about the right-brain, certainly not about the left-brain.

"In the same way that some people are such good calculators that they can do quite large sums in their heads, whereas others have to have paper and pencil, some people can, when they consider a problem, see the answer quite obviously while others find it far more difficult, and really have to plod. It's like the difference between a person who can climb up a mountainside, leaping from rock to rock, and somebody who has to climb up with iron crampons.

"You can see that there is a sense in which an uneducated person is in a way better qualified to do that than a highly-educated person who tends to be so completely squashed by academicism that he finds it very difficult to do any genuinely intuitive thinking. And what we are talking about is intuition. Faculty X is intuition raised to a higher level."

DURING his career, Wilson, of course, has been no stranger to controversy, and one of his latest projects - writing the introduction to Janus, the autobiography of "Moors Murderer" Ian Brady, the notorious British child serial killer - could put him in the firing line again.

The book, written at Wilson's suggestion, is to appear only in the USA because it is felt that it would be insensitive to publish it in Britain where those appalling crimes of the mid-1960s are still

very much in the public consciousness. Janus was the Roman god of gateways and of beginnings and endings. He had two faces, one looking back to the past and the other looking forward to the future, just as every doorway has two aspects. Ovid describes Janus as the custodian of the universe, the opener and fastener of all things, looking inward and outward from the gate.

It was Brady who sought out Wilson, through an intermediary, having read a number of his works in prison. Wilson, who then sent Brady's book to an American publisher who specialises in works by and about criminals and serial killers, intends to give the $5,000 that Brady will make from the book to Brady's mother. Yet Wilson was surprised that the book was taken up because he said he did not find Brady's arguments for crime terribly convincing.

What had happened was that, one night in 1991, after Wilson had gone to bed, a young, blonde woman had called at his home and left a letter with Joy. The woman claimed she was a friend of Brady and left a letter from him. In the letter, Brady mentioned horizontal and vertical consciousness, terms invented by Wilson.

"The woman wanted to talk to me about the idea of writing an autobiography - she'd had a very hard childhood and had been in an orphanage and so on. She had decided to contact Brady purely for morbid reasons - to begin with, she thought that he might be her father. She didn't know who her father was. Brady committed the Moors murders at the time she was born and since there was some vague rumour around that Brady had fathered a child, she wondered if it was her. She wanted to quote Ian Brady's letters but I told her she couldn't do that, they were his copyright, and if they were quoted even though he was

in prison he could sue her.

"Then a few weeks later I got a letter from Brady asking if it was true that Christine - that was the woman's name - was about to write a book about him. I wrote back and said 'no' and told him what the circumstances really were, and then we drifted into correspondence. I was corresponding with him because he knew a lot of things about the Moors murders which I didn't understand and which I wanted to get straight from the horse's mouth, as it were, and that I did, little by little over a long period of time, from that contact with him.

"I could see he was in a no-win situation in jail. If you're in a situation where there seems to be no possible way in which you can ameliorate it, or win, the one thing you can do is turn inward and write a book, or do something like that. That's what I suggested to him, and this book is the long-term result of that suggestion. It's rather interesting, being about serial killers - to be written by a serial killer it has an unusual insight into their minds."

When discussing mass murderers, the question naturally arises: can an evil person have an evil peak experience? "That's interesting," said Wilson. "I'm writing at the moment the introduction to Ian Brady's book. I think that most people would say that Brady was, by definition, a wicked person - anyone who would murder children for sex must be a pretty nasty person. But he interests me because he's so highly intelligent and because his beginnings were very like mine in many ways, that is to say his foundations and the kinds of experiences he grew from. But he, at a certain point, dug in his heels far more, and set his jaw like a clamp, and said 'I've turned my back on the possibility of nice things happening to me.'

"In my teens I was in such a state of grimness, of feeling how

awful the universe was, and I came very close to suicide on one occasion. I got into such a low state of grim despair, but it never reached the same point as it did with Brady because when I was a child I'd been so loved and adored that I naturally generated a feeling of calm confidence and optimism which later stood me in good stead when I went through that long period of grimness in my teens.

"Now Brady didn't have that. Born the illegitimate son of a waitress, his mother didn't really have the time to pick him up and kiss and cuddle him and make him feel that he was the greatest person in the world. So he didn't have much to fall back on when he went into his time of total grim loneliness, and the result is that he's still stuck in the grim pessimism stage. I think that to some extent answers your question. It depends basically upon that sort of feeling of happiness that you get in the peak experience, that sudden feeling of what Chesterton called 'absurd good news'.

"When you ask, would it be possible to have a wicked peak experience, that's like saying would it be possible to have a wicked 'absurd good news', and you can see that in a certain sense you've got two words there that cancel one another out. But in another sense, Baudelaire saying 'Everything in the world exudes crime', and also saying that unless we actually treat sex as evil then we don't really begin to understand it, gives you a very interesting insight.

"Sex itself is deeply interesting because people find that when they are carried away by sexual excitement they get a kind of vision of sexual possibility - for example, let's say King Farouk, who wanted every attractive girl he saw in a restaurant and would send his grand vizier over to offer her £1,000 to go to bed with him. He totally wasted his time! That is the problem with

sex. It is an illusion - if you're not very careful, it will not only totally waste your time but, as in the case of Brady, totally screw up your life. The fact remains that I do believe that you can have that kind of 'black' peak experience with sex. Brady actually calls it the 'black light', and I'm sure that's what he's talking about.

"It's strange what an enormous number of people there are, apparently respectable people, who have found in fact that sex has given them experiences that strike them as their highest experiences. The sad result is, for example, MPs going to visit prostitutes to be whipped, and to be dressed up as babies, and so on! This is all the lure of the 'black light', the sexual impulse."

While the "black" peak experience may be "positive" for the serial killer, it obviously had a negative result on the victims and on the world at large. Roy Hazelwood, of the FBI, who had commented that sex crime was not about sex but about power, was absolutely right. When a man was experiencing his ultimate orgasm, because he was so thoroughly enjoying sex, what he was really enjoying was a feeling of power over a woman. This made him feel that he was better and cleverer than he thought he was.

"Probably exactly the same feeling that Sibelius felt when he'd written his first symphony, thinking that's a bloody good symphony! I think that is the real aim of human beings - we would all like to be creative enough to get that feeling. It's what I call the promotional experience. In the RAF I'd noticed that when someone was promoted to the rank of lance corporal, at first they were very embarrassed, having to give orders to their old pals in the billet, but very quickly they realised that the corporal who had made them lance corporals knew exactly what he was doing, and they were lance corporals, it was there inside them ready to come out. And it came out and then they were

genuinely promoted.

"Now what's happening with a lot of sex is that what people are hoping for is the promotional experience. Once they've experienced that feeling of the sexual orgasm then they suddenly get that feeling that maybe if they had this often enough, like the lance corporal, they would begin to feel like a lance corporal. They would no longer have the feeling of being an ordinary aircraftsman jumped up from his position but doesn't really deserve it.

"So that's what lies behind sex crimes, in particular repetitive sex crimes, like those, say, of Ted Bundy. What he gets from it is actually a feeling of being god-like."

WILSON recalled the struggles he had had during the years of critical rejection which followed The Outsider phenomenon.

"When The Outsider came out I was pretty well alone in being one of the few authors actually interested in the psychology of 'outsiderism'. The really fashionable people at the time, in fact nearly everybody else in Declaration, were left-wingers: John Osborne, Ken Tynan, Kingsley Amis, the lot - the Lefties! I was the only one who said I wasn't terribly interested in politics but I am interested in the human mind and the possibility of human beings evolving to a higher stage. Well, the result was that all of the Lefties - Bernard Levin, for example - howled 'fascist' and 'Nazi' at me when obviously I had nothing to do with fascism and Nazism. That went on for quite a long time and the result was that I was very unfashionable.

"But then The Outsider seemed to have started something - a trend in the direction of people I was interested in. For example, I was the frist person to write about Hermann Hesse. After The Outsider, quite suddenly, Steppenwolf came out again and all

kinds of other books by Hesse and, in the '60s, Hesse became a best seller, towards the end of his life. Then Americans began writing theses about Hesse and various books about him came out - but not one of them mentioned me! By that time I was totally unmentionable, you see."

Wilson recalled Time magazine's description of him as a "scrambled egghead". He continued: "I don't want to sound self-pitying, because I'm not self-pitying, but the fact remains that my name was shit. I felt that suddenly having achieved overnight this terrific notoriety, or fame, whatever you want to call it, quite suddenly I was back down on the ground from this height I'd been lifted to, with the feeling that everybody had now decided I was a total fake, and that the Colin Wilson boom had been a flash in the pan, and a mistake anyway. It was very, very hard to continue writing with this feeling that I was regarded in general as low-life.

"Fortunately, all those years that I'd spent working at my ideas had resulted in the feeling that Outsiders had got to stand alone, and this came to be to my advantage. All I had to do was to do again what I'd been doing for years and years, even before The Outsider came out - turn my back on the possibility of success, because years before The Outsider, when everything I sent to magazines or publishers was returned, I began to get the feeling that there was nothing I could do about it. But at a certain point I said to myself, what I'm going to do is continue writing books and even if when I've finished a book it's shoved on the shelf I'm going to end nevertheless with a row of books and I won't feel my life has been wasted.

"So I settled down and wrote The Outsider and, of course, it got published immediately, so I didn't have this complaint of everything gone wrong. Nevertheless, after the terrific back-

swing, I was forced to go back to the feeling I'd had before, that you've got to learn to stand totally alone. And that's what I did. I got through the '60s and the '70s in this way, but there was a real feeling, not exactly of despair, but for example, because of these violent attacks on me it meant that it was a pretty thin living writing books. Whereas The Outsider had sold about 40,000 copies in England and a lot more in America, none of the subsequent books sold really well.

"I was getting advances of maybe £500 or £1,000 and then seeing nothing more from the book because it didn't meet its advance, so I didn't make any money. What I was doing was anything that would keep me and my family alive. I went on writing books. But once when I was feeling particularly low because the last book hadn't done too well - the novel Necessary Doubt, I think - I suddenly got the idea of doing a book about Rasputin, and I went on doing books like that. And nothing happened. No breakthrough whatsoever. But with The Mind Parasites, I did get a few decent reviews, which was a total change because my books were usually slammed or ignored. And so it went on indefinitely, that kind of thing, and to some extent it still goes on. I can usually reckon that books of mine will not be reviewed. There is still this terrific anti-Wilson thing around."

Indeed, The Atlantis Blueprint (2000), which Wilson co-authored with Canadian Rand Flem-Ath, failed to be reviewed in any of the quality British newspapers or magazines. Yet after the book was serialised in the Daily Mail, a middle-market tabloid sympathetic to Wilson's ideas, it entered the British best-seller list. Wilson now plans to write a sequel to be published in 2002, expanding on the theories he introduced in The Atlantis Blueprint and From Atlantis to the Sphinx.

Looking back, Wilson sees the highest point of his career, not surprisingly, as the enormous success of The Outsider, and the lowest points the savage attacks made on him following publication of his follow-up work, Religion and the Rebel (1957), and the panic attacks he suffered in the early 1970s while engagaged on a punishing work schedule imposed by publishing deadlines.

He said: "In a way, nothing will ever surpass what happened waking up on that Sunday morning when The Outsider came out, May 26, 1956, and there were all these rave reviews, and suddenly I was famous overnight, appearing on television, and giving interviews to journalists., when I'd just got used to the idea of never becoming known. The same thing happened to Jack Kerouac. He had published a novel, and written three or four others which hadn't seen print, when On the Road came out, and he was sure that it might get him known, but he didn't expect to be hit by that fame, which of course destroyed him. Fortunately, I'd spent so many years plodding and swimming against the current that I wasn't destroyed by it. I simply, as it were, turned away, came down here (Cornwall), and settled down to Religion and the Rebel. A very low point was definitely the attacks on Religion and the Rebel, the way that overnight my reputation just evaporated.

"Then, of course, another pretty low point was when I started having panic attacks just from overwork in the early 1970s. I described that at the beginning of Mysteries (1978). The panic attacks took me lower than ever before - there was a feeling of tremendous potential danger, the notion that my mind might crash completely. This was the worst time. But I took great encouragement from T E Lawrence's phrase about having seen people in the desert push themselves to a tremendous extreme

but there was never a break unless it came from inside, from the mind itself. I was determined that whatever I did there wouldn't be break from inside.

"It's one of our basic problems - we get in these states by thinking about them. This was recognised a long time ago by the Roman philospher Epictetus. I realised after that experience, when I felt so close to total misery and despair and wondered really if my mind was about to snap, that it was my thought that was doing it. But I'd still find it very difficult. I'd go for walks, this deep depression would come on me and I would have to fight it off, inch by inch."

Wilson realised that the depression was due to the fact that he had got into the habit of thinking that he was going to suffer panic attacks. The American psychologist George Pransky had recognised that from the moment we woke up in the morning we were influencing our own states of mind by our thoughts and expectations, and Wilson had outlined a similar idea in his own 'Laurel and Hardy' theory of consciousness.

“As soon as you can see this is fundamentally true, as soon as you do things and they work out right, what happens is that you change your self-image. Suddenly, you're promoted - you really are a lance-corporal! It's not really complicated to enact once you've got yourself into the state of mind. Pransky is completely right. It is thought that is the basis of all this. He's the first to see this with absolute total clarity so, in my view, he's the greatest living psychologist."

Pransky had gained his insight from an ordinary non-academic, non-professional working man called Sydney Banks. Banks had been telling a friend how unhappy he was when the friend remarked: "You're not unhappy, Syd, you just think you are". As it sank in, Banks looked at him in amazement. "Do you

realise what you've just said?" he asked his friend. What had suddenly struck him was that nearly all our psychological problems arose from our thoughts. What the friend was saying was: people make themselves unhappy with their thoughts. Pessimists do not have peak experiences because they are pessimists. Optimists do have peak experiences because they are optimists. Banks was so overwhelmed by this insight that he began presenting it to audiences. Pransky was one of those who heard him and he was converted from the old pessimistic Freudianism. Pransky noted one interesting thing: all the people at the seminar struck him as exceptionally healthy and cheerful. They were "copers", people who felt in charge of their lives.

"This, I can now see, is the fundamental solution to the problem stated by the existentialists," said Wilson. "They all place undue emphasis on man's weakness and misery, and then insist that this is the human condition. It isn't."

The kind of re-invention of the self which occurred in the promotional experience, and which embraced a vision of fundamental human freedom, also returned one to the existentialist question, he agreed. We could all sustain that vision if we stayed on a slightly higher level of drive, and overcome the problem of the "robot", which is Wilson's term for that mechanism which does so much of our living for us, which allows us to drive our cars, or operate our word processors, hardly without thinking - our "automatic pilot" - but which often takes over completely and eclipses the "real me".

"That's the problem - promotion has got to stick, freedom has got to stick, become, so to speak, our normal way of thinking. As soon as you begin to realise you can roll back the boundaries of the robot then you've hit a really big revelation and, what's more, you discover , even more interestingly, that by collaborating

closely with the robot you don't treat it as an enemy but more as an employer treats trade unions, drawing it into negotiation."

After spending his whole life working at the problem, Wilson said he was now able to keep himself in a higher state of bubbling optimism than the average person could by having "learned the tricks" of how to do so. The panic attacks had taught Wilson a great deal about resisting the terrific weight of pessimism. "Once you get used to this idea that we are capable of being great, and of having peak experiences, you suddenly just turn your back overnight on that naturally pessimistic influence."

DISCOVERING the works of existentialist writers Sartre and Camus in the early 1950s, Wilson became deeply interested in the subject "for purely personal reasons".

He told me: "As a working class boy, I found that one of my chief problems was that I wanted to escape from being working class like mad! I was fed up with living in semi-poverty and having to work at lousy jobs in factories. The problem was that I noticed in myself that if ever I got into situations where I had plenty of time to spare, like long holidays from school - and I was a lab assistant for a while and got six or eight-week holidays - I tended to get bored. Obviously, I couldn't handle my own freedom, and this struck me as very interesting, this whole problem of freedom."

Sartre had remarked that he never felt so free as during the Second World War when he was in the Resistance and was likely to be arrested and shot at any moment. Sartre before the war, however, with his Nausea, for example, had a negative outlook, and saw life as meaningless. Sartre invented the term "the absurd" which Camus took up.

"I'd also, in my teens, had these moments in which I felt that life was absolutely, totally meaningless, and I'd come very close to suicide on one occasion," Wilson confessed. "This made me very clearly aware that this was a real problem. When I was about 10 I got terribly interested in science and it seemed to me that that was the answer to all the riddles of the universe. Then gradually I realised it wasn't and there was this sudden, awful feeling of being let down by science, by knowledge, and the result of all this was that I could see that existentialism was really putting the absolutely basic and essential question, the question of whether it's worth making effort - what Carlyle called the 'Eternal Yes versus the Eternal No'.

"Of course, in The Outsider, it was symbolised by Van Gogh painting the starry night, with all these wonderful trees surging towards the sky, on fire, and with the sky made of great whorls of vitality, and then committing suicide a few months later by shooting himself in the stomach, leaving a note that said 'Misery will never end'.

"There you've got the perfect balance between Eternal Yes versus Eternal No, and that's what really interested me. It's obviously a purely personal thing because there was I, struggling in a working class environment with no chance of getting to university - right after the war you just didn't get offered the chance. I'm glad now that I didn't - Iris Murdoch always had this obsession about sending me to university. That would have been absolutely disastrous, because I think it's essential that you go your own way. That basically was the theory of The Outsider."

Wilson had been fascinated by the story about Graham Greene playing Russian roulette while feeling miserable and bored and having an "overwhelming feeling of sheer joy" when

the gun failed to fire.

"He said it was 'as if a light had been turned on and I saw that life is infinitely fascinating'. Well, it suddenly seemed to me quite obvious that if you could find a method of making yourself see that life is infinitely fascinating then you've solved this great problem, the problem that Kierkegaard was talking about, the basic existential problem, that when intellect gets to grips with the real world it tends to be continually halted by the sheer solidness of matter and the problems then encountered. You get the feeling, in other words, that intellect just is hopeless in dealing with reality. Sartre and all the rest of them said, what's more, reality tramples you flat, and leaves you dead!

"So there was that feeling that intellect was of no use at all. Now I couldn't believe that because I'd always been optimistic. And one of the writers I admired most of all was H G Wells. I felt that there must be an answer to this. Kierkegaard had said that an existential system was impossible, meaning by that that you couldn't have a philosophical system, essentially an intellectual construct, if it was existential, because 'existential' really means stomach aches and diarrhoea and all kinds of down-to-earth things, and these things appear to be in basic conflict.

"Well, my feeling was that somehow an existential system has bloody well got to be possible! It must be possible to get above reality. In a funny sense, Van Gogh got above reality when he painted Starry Night, and Norman Mailer once made to me an interesting comment that what he really wanted to do was to be able to pin down the meaning content of the sexual orgasm. Again, I saw this as very important - the sexual orgasm gives you that odd feeling of pushing up from reality as if you are doing a push-up. You no longer feel, as Kierkegaard did, that an existential system is impossible because there's no conflict

between intellect and what you see.

"Now Sartre and the rest of them, Camus, Heidegger and so on, had always taken the view that, in fact, reality negates intellect and that there's nothing much we can do about this. Camus is amazingly like Thomas Hardy, there's exactly the same feeling of the world in a novel like L'Etranger and a novel like Tess of the D'Urbervilles. Edmund Gosse said he couldn't understand why 'Mr Hardy wanted to shake his fist at his creator all the time', which is basically what Camus was also doing. There's his play about a sailor who comes home without announcing his identity and his parents murder him in the night for his money, and Camus is implying this is what the world is like - these terrible misunderstandings. You know, I knew Camus and I didn't like this aspect of his thinking at all."

Wilson has an anecdote of an encounter he once had with Camus in France. Wilson pointed out to Camus that there were a number of places in his works where characters were actually "overwhelmed with meaning". Wilson asked Camus why he didn't pursue that personally, and Camus pointed to a Parisian teddy boy slouching past the window, saying: "What is good for him must be good for me also." Wilson said: "I got very excited, and irritable in a way, and said 'That's nonsense. Are you telling me Einstein shouldn't have produced the theory of relativity because a Parisian teddy boy wouldn't understand it?' We didn't get much further than that because we were talking in French, and my French wasn't very good anyway, and Camus had absolutely no English."

That, for Wilson, seemed to be the problem. Kierkegaard had got stuck in a cul de sac because he felt that existentialism had to be a philosophy which returned back to existence from abstractions, but having got back to existence he found he was

confronted with the question: where do you go from here? He was unable to move forward, except into religion, and Sartre and Camus, of course, rejected that route.

"It seemed to me fairly clear from the very beginning where you go," said Wilson. "What you do is to take your glimpses of meaning and build upon those. It may be true that when you are sitting in some cafe staring out at the rain pouring down the windows, looking at the pool of tomato sauce on the table, you cannot actually see any meaning in the world around you. Ionesco once said to me 'Look, it's raining outside - what's the meaning of that?' when we were arguing about precisely this thing at a party. I conceded that, sitting in a cafe on a rainy day, you could not see how you could penetrate beyond the curtain of boredom.

"But, on the other hand, take your sudden feelings of intensity, in fact, your peak experiences, and suddenly you get to see that Abraham Maslow (the American psychologist who studied the peak experience) was perfectly right. Peak experiences are a way through. Once you, instead of accepting Sartre's nausea, accept that we do have these curious moments of intensity - although Maslow thought you can't get these moments at will - what you can do is recognise the meaning of those moments and build upon that. Maslow didn't see that he had hit upon the solution. He discovered that when he talked to his students about peak experiences they began having them all the time, they were doing something about it. They were getting beyond nausea and actually learning the way to get these experiences."

YET how does one get from The Outsider and the new existentialism to the lost civilisation of Atlantis, the subject that

so preoccupies Wilson at the present time? He regards From Atlantis to the Sphinx as an extremely important work because it signalled a new direction for him which was continued in The Atlantis Blueprint.

"I got into the occult almost by accident. But I soon discovered it's very closely linked to the whole business of my new existentialism and so on because what the occult was really concerned about was the question of man's hidden powers, and therefore the evolution of man to the next stage. I explained that very thoroughly in an essay in Below the Iceberg (1998).

"In the same sort of way, when I got into this whole Atlantis business, what immediately became fascinating was this notion that civilisation is a great deal older than we think, and that that our ancestors were a great deal brighter than we think. Then everything began to fall neatly into place. The Atlantis Blueprint is about Hapgood's declaration that civilisation is 100,000 years old, and we start off the book with that, and I came to a very interesting conclusion, that in fact what Hapgood was talking about was Neanderthal man who had a rather higher level of civilisation than we think. I don't mean civilisation in the sense of skyscrapers, or even wheeled carts, or something like that. I think that there is very strong evidence that Neanderthal man not only studied the skies but discovered the precession of the equinoxes, and all kinds of other things, and that he was a highly intelligent being."

Wilson suggests that mental prodigies have a quite different form of intelligence to the norm. Enormously difficult mathematical computations made in an instant by calculating prodgies cannot be performed by the ordinary intellect, nor, for example, can ordinary intellect tackle the problem of prime numbers. A prime number is a number that cannot be divided by

any other number, except itself and one. It was not known which numbers were primes, and if you had a number "that long" - here Wilson stretched out his arms either side of him - there was no way of finding out whether it was a prime number or not. There was no simple way, and even a computer probably could not do it in less than 24 hours. Yet calculating prodigies were able to identify primes instantly. They somehow looked down on the whole field of numbers and were able to spot right away if a number was a prime.

"That's using something completely different from our usual left-brain intellect. It's using the right-brain in a totally different way. And that's what interests me so much. Now, I think that our ancestor was quite different from us in the sense that he was using his right-brain in the way that we use our left-brain. We've used our left-brain through this highly-technical civilisation of ours, whereas he used his right-brain to build a completely different kind of civilisation. I've come back to this idea several times, first of all in From Atlantis to the Sphinx, then in Alien Dawn (1998), and again for The Atlantis Blueprint.

"In the new book I shall propound the theory that ancient man had a completely different mind from ours, and that it could reach genius level, but not at all in our left-brain sense of the word. When I've completed the sequel to The Atlantis Blueprint I think I shall really be well on the way towards saying what seems to be so important, and making quite clear what is only hinted at in From Atlantis to the Sphinx, because that primarily is about the question of how old civilisation is. Far more interestingly in that book, is what a completely different state of mind the Egyptians had. They were basically right-brain thinkers who saw things in a completely different way. Their genius was of the right-brain.

"I've just reviewed a book about idiot prodigies, and that fascinates me because people who are total idiots can do these immense mathematical calculations. I spoke to calculating twins in New York who are actually very sub-normal but who can sit swapping vast prime numbers running into 20 figures. But what interests me so much is that we have this notion 'It's impossible - it can't be done'. And we have that about lots of things, because our minds are stuck in a certain viewpoint, in the way that Sartre and Camus were stuck in the old kind of existentialist pessimism.

"What I'm trying to do is to rip the mind completely out of that to a higher level in which you can suddenly see that it can be done. In other words, it's all a part of this original scheme of mine of the new existentialism."

IT STRUCK Wilson at the time of The Outsider that the answer to the basic problem encountered in Sartre and Camus, of boredom, nausea and the absurd, lay in the direction of the mystics and in their flashes of peak intensity and meaning.

"For me, this was the only valid way out of that cul de sac of existentialism," he said. "What I'm getting at is terribly simple. If Maslow's students, when they began discussing peak experiences among themselves, began having peak experiences all the time, then the one certain way to a peak experience is to turn your attention on peak experiences and mystical experiences. Then you gradually get into the right state of optimism and happiness, of drive and purpose, in which suddenly these things become possible. While you are in the state of mind of the leading characters in Sartre and Camus and Samuel Beckett there's not a hope in hell of you achieving this

kind of state of mind!"

In the 1960s, it had seemed to Wilson that structuralism might be a means of countering Sartre's view that the universe was "black and meaningless", and that reality always negated intellect, by suggesting the answer lay in underlying structures, and that life was not what you see on the surface, that the "surface" described by Camus in L'Etranger was not life.

And indeed, at the conclusion of L'Etranger when the central character is sentenced to death, he feels a sense of overwhelming joy in the universe, an affirmation of meaning, and says he knows he has been happy and he's happy still. "If he'd been happy why didn't he know it?" Wilson asked. "That's what always struck me as most puzzling. How can you be happy and not know you're happy? And then you suddenly realise, we do that most of the time. We're always looking back on some past time and saying 'that was a happy time' but you didn't realise it at the time it was happening!"

It seemed that what Levi Strauss was saying might be fairly sound, that the answer to some extent lay in the unconscious. Maslow, with whom Wilson had discussed this subject in detail - instead of dealing with sick people, had investigated the "peak experiences", or feelings of sudden overwhelming happiness, of healthy people. Wilson realised this was also what G K Chesterton was talking about when he referred to "absurd good news". And Pransky had taken Maslow's insight a stage further.

Wilson continued: "This bubbling sheer overwhelming happiness seemed to me to be a basic answer. Maslow quickly discovered that an enormous percentage of healthy people had these peak experiences. Instead of seeing the world as Camus and Sartre saw it, people suddenly saw it in a wonderfully positive way.

"It was obviously some terrific eruption coming up from the unconscious mind, like Nietzsche's experiences which I described in The Outsider - on the Strasbourg road when he had to stand back against the wall to let a troop of soldiers go past and suddenly recognised his old regiment. He was miserable and tired, because he'd spent all day in a nursing hospital station helping to saw off limbs and all that in the Franco-Prussian war, when suddenly he had this feeling of sheer happiness flooding over him. It seemed to me that this feeling of happiness was the answer. It comes bubbling up from the unconscious, and this is what philosophers can never take into account, because you can't cause it at will. Aldous Huxley thought you could with mescalin, but that doesn't really work, it doesn't cause the peak experience.

"It seemed to me that Levi Strauss was on the right track but, you know, I couldn't really feel very much trust in it. Well, then I heard about Derrida - so I proceeded to try and read him, and as you know, it's totally unreadable! I spent 18 months struggling with Derrida and gradually what I saw was that Derrida had taken his stand from Heidegger, his denial of metaphysics, which was just like Kierkegaard's denial of a system. He was saying that the reality of the world is in fact so real that any metaphysical system you try to impose on it just bursts at the seams - it just can't stay on this absolute reality.

"Derrida went on to say that we are living in a world which we try to make decent by covering it with language as if it were naked, but that this reality is continually bursting through from underneath. Now that would have struck me as absolutely fine. I would have cheered him, except that he wasn't saying it from a positive point of view, like G K Chesterton, he was saying it from, apparently, a completely negative and sceptical point of

view. What he meant, what Roland Barthes meant, was that there was no underlying meaning, that meaning would be completely useless to us.

"This notion that there is no underlying meaning horrified me. Once I grasped what Derrida was saying I began to hate him. I thought what he was talking about was absolute nonsense. He, in effect, handed himself over to pure materialism, a kind of Marxism. And this is the trouble with the French, they just have that kind of intellect. They love taking what they feel to be a healthy sceptical point of view.

"Incidentally, one of the reasons for Derrida's immense popularity was that in reducing a work of art to one level where it wasn't a kind of spirit-animating body made of words or paint or music or whatever, he was also telling the professor that what he was doing in criticising it was using exactly the same creative faculty that the writer, painter or composer used. Of course, the critics were absolutely delighted with this."

Wilson saw that Derrida derived from directly from Sartre and committed all the same philosophical errors that Sartre had made. Wilson tackled the issue head-on in a series of essays eventually collected in Below the Iceberg: Anti-Sartre and Other Essays (1998). For him, the post-structuralists had gone off in "completely the wrong direction" with their "peculiar theories". They had failed to get beyond phenomenology - they were back in that cafe with the rain running down the windows. Instead of taking a step forward they had taken a step backwards.

Wilson's existential approach to literary criticism, of course, is the antithesis of the post-structuralist outlook. Existential criticism runs counter to the "fallacy of insignificance" and is an attempt to develop the standard of meaning. It involves being totally aware of the writer and his or her virtues - as well as his

or her faults - whereas Barthes, for example, pronounces the writer's non-existence.

Wilson believes that existentialism is the one certain road to creative development of literature in the future. While his theory of existential criticism embraces humanistic formalism, it goes a radical stage further - to evaluate literature by assessing it in terms of its capacity to satisfy the depths of human need, to clarify the image of "what we are yet to become" on the evolutionary spiral. Wilson wants to know what, fundamentally, an artist is saying, what concepts of human purpose lie in the basic assumptions of the work, and how far the work succeeds in revealing existence as potentiality.

Certainly, for Wilson, the purpose of literature is nothing less than to liberate the imagination in order to point the way forward for human evolution, to act as a "magic mirror" in which the reader can see reflected his or her own soul.

"Existential criticism is not knowing a text in the same way that an academic knows a text," said Wilson, "By studying it with an awestruck attitude - 'Oh God, this is Milton, he's far greater than I am, I can only look up at him towering above me!' What I'm saying is that, in a way, in order to really appreciate a writer you must know that writer as intimately as a husband knows a wife, or a wife knows a husband. If a wife began to criticise her husband in a private conversation with her best friend - that would be existential criticism because it's based upon a total knowledge of her husband, or at least a much fuller knowledge than somebody who lives around the corner has. Now it seems to me that's quite important in an age like ours where we're often moving forward into absurdity.

"George Melly and I once had to appear at St Ives (Cornwall) in some debate, and the subject of the bricks in the Tate Gallery

came up. George tended to take a rather generous attitude towards them - 'Oh well, it's good fun, why not?' But the point is that the public felt that there was something irritating and silly about a pile of bricks, no matter what their intellectual justification was. Now there's an example, it seems to me, of totally losing contact with reality by letting the intellect take over. Existential criticism insists that you don't do that. You've somehow got to stay in touch with reality, with intuition."

Indeed, for Wilson, existentialism is a philosophy of intuition and, in a view first put forward in The Occult (1971), philosophy in general should be "the pursuit of reality through intuition aided by intellect" - a definition which stands the conventional way of thinking on its head but which is crucial to an understanding of Wilson's approach.

WESTERN philosophy has been like playing billiards with just two pockets on the table, maintains Wilson, in an analogy of which he is fond. "You can end up only in one pocket or the other: one is total negativism, the tradition that's run through philosophy since David Hume, which Kant did his best to fight against without any success, and the other pocket is a kind of optimism, of the G K Chesterton type, and really the only philosopher of this kind in the Western tradition is Henri Bergson.

"Heidegger's existentialism was supposed to be derived from Edmund Husserl, who seems to me to be the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, and probably the greatest philosopher since Plato, who tried to create a purely scientific philosophy, that is to say, a philosophy in which you try to examine things completely objectively by a sort of act of withdrawal, which he called the 'epoche'. It's a bit like watching,

say, a highly emotive television programme in a state of cool detachment - the opposite of that at football matches."

In a sense, Heidegger had taken over from Husserl, but he had a different kind of existentialism, and what he was doing, in a way, was saying "back to reality - back to the reality of actual existence". He said that one of the main troubles with human beings was what he called "forgetfulness" of existence. This was what Sartre had meant in Nausea when Roquentin looks at a seagull and says it exists, but he doesn't really believe it. It was also what Chesterton meant when he said we say "thank-you" for passing the salt at table but we don't mean it; we say the earth is round but we don't mean it.

Heidegger said that in our greatest moments we actually said something and meant it. It was like D H Lawrence's view, that in moments of magnificent intensity we really seemed to see the meaning of life, whereas philosophy or intellect tended to take that away.

Wilson referred to the famous passage in Alfred North Whitehead's Process and Reality in which Whitehead said that what philosophers really needed to take into account was every kind of experience - experience drunken, experience sober, experience mystical, experience sceptical, and so on. "He was perfectly right, but can you imagine though an Oxford philosopher saying 'Oh dear, I'd better go and get drunk because I haven't taken the experience 'drunk' into account'?"

While on the subject of Oxford philosophers, Wilson recalled how he was once asked to interview the Oxford professor of metaphysical philosophy Gilbert Ryle who, in The Concept of Mind argued that there was no such thing as "mind", and that Ryle agreed to the interview only on condition that his philosophy was not discussed.

"He obviously felt that his philosophy was very unsound," Wilson remarked. Ryle thought that to talk about spirit was simply to talk about the "ghost in the machine" - that one couldn't view a human being as something like a torch with a battery in it and which wouldn't work if the battery was removed. Wittgenstein took the same view.

Yet Ryle's favourite novelist was Dostoevsky, so he did have an opposite side which recognised his philosophy was extremely narrow. "You don't read Dostoevsky if you don't believe that the spirit really does mean something," said Wilson. "Dostoevsky said there is only one basic question: the question of whether there is life after death, and that's the most important question in the world. Of course, in a certain sense he was correct, because if we are merely products of material nature, merely machines, then there is a sense in which human life is profoundly meaningless."

ONE of the most central anecdotes in all Wilson's works is that of the Russian writers Gorky and Tolstoy walking together when they see two hussars approaching , resplendent in their uniforms. Tolstoy first says: "Look at them - bloody military idiots, strutting along," and then, as the hussars go past, he exclaims: 'My God, aren't they magnificent!'

Wilson said: "That's what I call dual value response, and it's being swept out of the world of intellect and suddenly seeing that there's far, far more meaning. Now that is the basis of my optimism. Pessimism is always based upon an intellectual, rational assessment of things. Whenever we catch a glimpse of 'the reality' we suddenly get this overwhelming sense of tremendous meaning.

"As I've often said, human beings are rather like blinkered

horses - we're deliberately blinkered because we couldn't bear reality, it would be simply too strong, too chaotic, for us, as Huxley points out in The Doors of Perception, so we have to have filters, blinkers, like a horse in traffic. So the very nature of human perception means that we are all in the position of philosophers, wandering around blinkered, unable to see the reality.

"You see, which would you say is most true? Tolstoy's feeling: 'Look at those bloody military idiots strutting along there' or 'My God, aren't they magnificent!' Obviously, the second, because he was entering more deeply into sympathy with the hussars when he said that. Bergson, of course, thought it ought to be possible to intuit your way inside things, and there is that passage at the beginning of Beyond the Occult, which I think is probably my best book, in which a man on a motorbike describes suddenly feeling time has stopped and he can see inside the trees. That's an example, I think, of what Bergson meant.

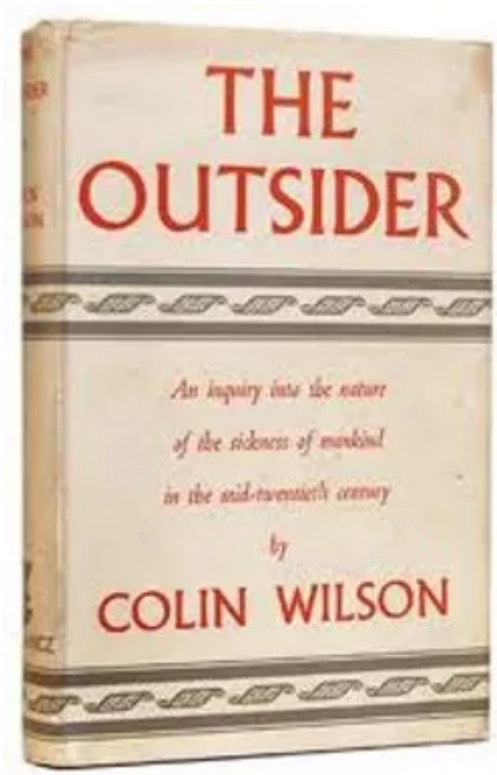
"Heidegger was saying the same kind of thing when he talked about forgetfulness of existence. Bergson said we filter the world through intellect, and somehow you've got to get back to that real world, in Bergson's case, he thought, with something called intuition. It's significant that he's one French philosopher who was very famous in his own time but who has totally lost influence and now nobody even gives Bergson's name the time of day.

"What Heidegger meant by hating metaphysics was anything like Plato's notion of Ideas, that the reality of things lies in the Idea behind them. You can see what this means. You couldn't, if you were a carpenter, make a table unless you had a clear Idea of the table. Therefore, in a sense, the Idea of a table is more

real than any individual table.

"Heidegger wouldn't have this, and he gave an interesting example of why he wouldn't have it, which, I think, was a hammer. He said you can't really have the idea of a hammer on its own because a hammer is connected with all kinds of things, with hammering, with carpentering, which are all connected, inextricably bound together, so you can't have the idea of a hammer on its own and separated out from them. Now that just seems flatly untrue. Of course you can have the idea of a hammer - the hammer is any kind of an object that's used to apply great force at a single point to another object. You've obviously got a very clear idea of what you mean by a hammer.

"Therefore, Heidegger's dislike of metaphysics, by which he meant Platonism, is rubbish. Derrida took over this complete - that's where he started from. One of the bitterest quarrels between Derrida and Foucault was when Derrida accused Foucault of metaphysics - it would be a bit like accusing Arnold Schwarzenegger of being an old pooftah! But you can see what that means though, if you say that the Idea does not exist, that only the reality of things exists, you are getting back to the old medieval dispute between nominalism and realism, and also going back to the basic philosophical dispute between materialism and idealism, or materialism and spiritualism, if you like, using spiritualism, of course, in the sense of believing that the spirit is reality."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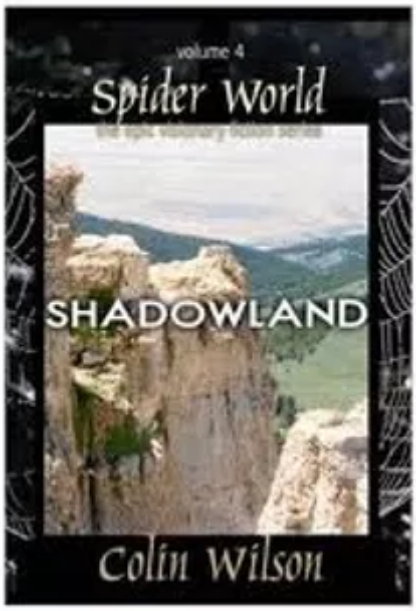
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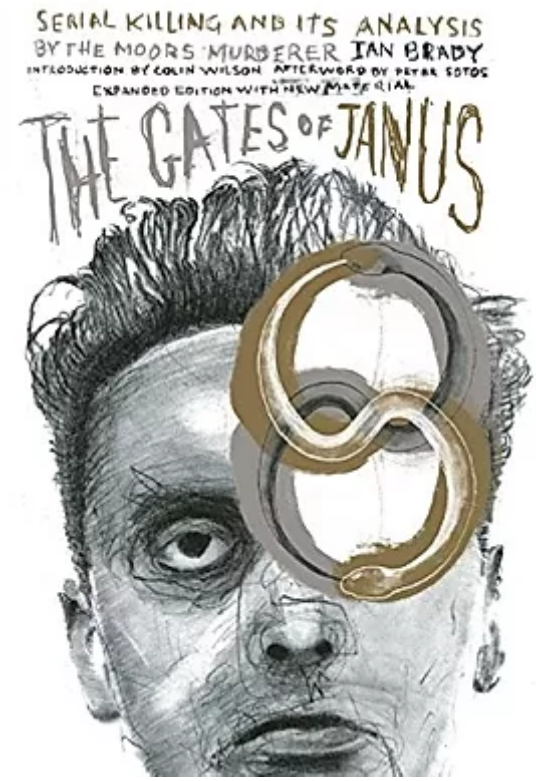
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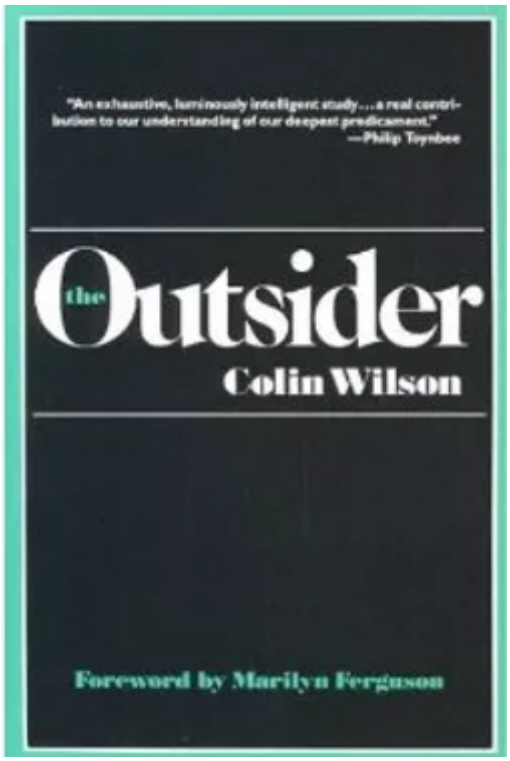
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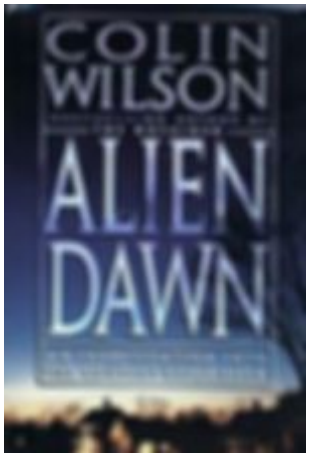
COLIN
WILSON
ALIEN
DAWN


COLIN WILSON

I was amazed to receive a phone call from Colin on the very morning he received my letter, inviting me to visit him at his home at Gorran Haven - a meeting where I received the gifts of two of his latest books, and after which he took the trouble to record on tape many further thoughts about our conversation, and mail it to me (addressed quaintly to "Mr G Ward, Esquire").

How many world-famous authors would go to such lengths for a stranger? Yet, as Dossor has remarked, Wilson is well-known for the generosity with which he gives his time to visitors.

Once asked by Punch magazine what he would like for Christmas, Wilson was moved to request a summer at home free from visitors - but he opted for a batch of record albums instead!

I can only say that I was extremely grateful to Colin for welcoming me to his home those summers and giving me some of his valuable time for the interviews on which this article, written in 2001, was based.

I first met Colin Wilson during a holiday in Cornwall in the summer of 1999. As I had chosen to study his existential criticism as part of an English and philosophy degree course I was pursuing as a mature student - having been an avid reader of his books since the mid-1960s - I was keen to meet him and so, having pieced together his address from clues in Howard

Dossor's biography, I had written him a letter, explaining my interest.

* Geoff Ward, founder of Colin Wilson World, with Colin Wilson in the garden of Colin's home at Gorran Haven, Cornwall.

Photo by Joy Wilson