

Onside with The Outsider: Colin Wilson at 80

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You know individuals have become icons when they are referred to simply by their first names: Marilyn and Diana being perhaps the two most obvious. But in New Age, occult and esoteric circles there is only one Colin (while Wilsons may be thick on the ground). And as the last of the Angry Young Men has reached the age of 80, if ever there was a time to celebrate Colin (Wilson's) contribution to the world of the mind and spirit, this is it.

This is something of a personal paean, as he has touched both of our own lives in his typically exhilarating way. Back in the 1980s, when Lynn was Deputy Editor of the landmark weekly publication *The Unexplained*, he was one of its consultants. Thank the gods for Colin! Always polite and affable, he was also the consummate professional, being particularly noted for delivering an article on any subject at a moment's notice that was word-perfect and guaranteed to be a hot topic for discussion, not only among the readership but even among the cynical editorial team. He was never *grand*, although with his fame, he could well have been. And of course he has added to the list of his remarkable achievements in the quarter century after the last edition of *The Unexplained* saw the light of day.

His main achievement has always been to shake his readers up. Through his books on philosophy, psychology, criminology, parapsychology and the weirder aspects of the paranormal – even his novels – he has challenged consensus reality head on. Few authors have done this so consistently, bravely and anarchically, although many have tried. And in our view, no author has done so quite so successfully, if success is measured in kick-starting a mass awakening from spiritual and mental zombie-hood.

This intellectual dynamism – more akin to actual dynamite – has been there right from Colin's first work on existential philosophy, *The Outsider* (1956), through to more recent books dealing with weird phenomena such as his study of alleged ET encounters and alien abductions, *Alien Dawn* (1998).

It all stemmed from a profound dissatisfaction with the way most people experience the world – the feeling that we're all missing something important. Or "the vague,

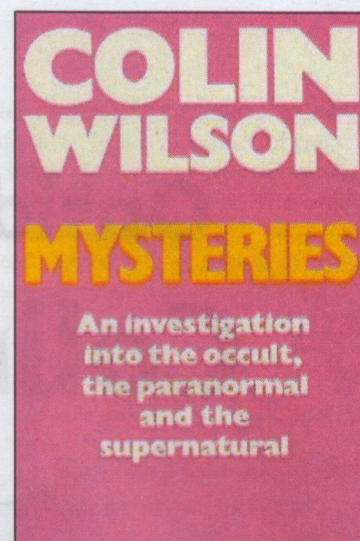
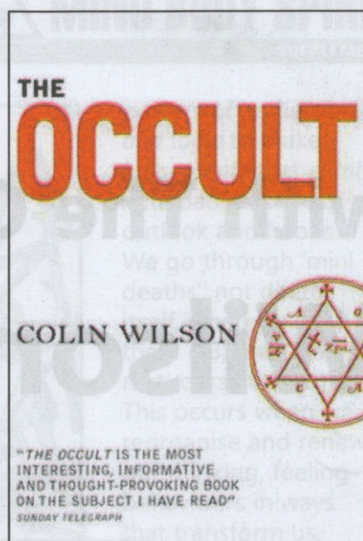
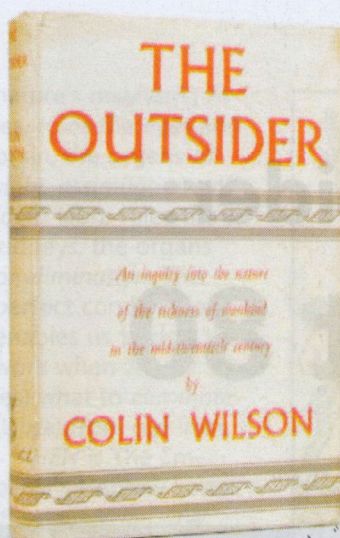


Photo credit: Tom Ordelman, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colin_Wilson

Colin Wilson, British author,
Goran Haven, Cornwall, 1984.

brainless, cow-like drifting of the people around me" Colin was aware of from adolescence.¹

The occasional individual – usually an artist, poet or mystic – may experience "certain moments when he feels curiously immortal, god-like, as if hovering above the world, untouched by its dullness."² But is this just an illusion? Which is the 'real' world: the mundane everyday reality or the mystics' and artists' glimpse of something bigger, brighter and considerably more joyful?



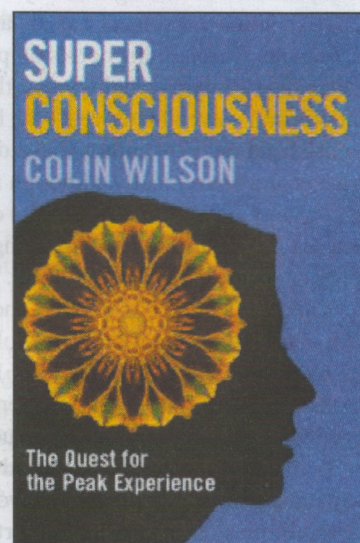
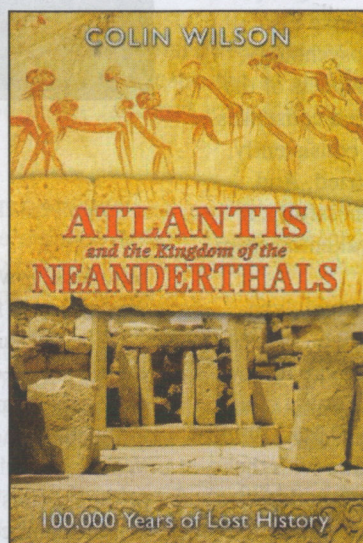
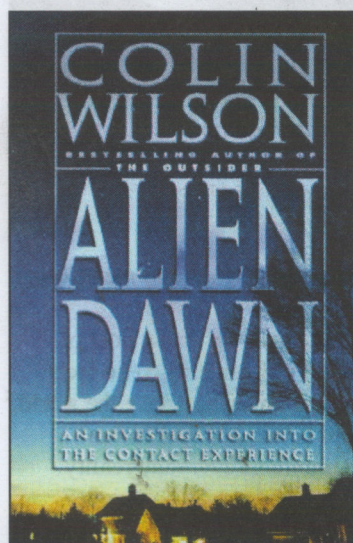
Pursuing such questions led the young Colin to existential philosophy, resulting in his first book, *The Outsider*, published in 1956 when he was 24. It was an immediate sensation. The term 'angry young men' was originally coined by *The Times* to describe both himself and John Osborne (whose *Look Back in Anger* premiered the same week as *The Outsider* was published).

Over the next decade Colin pursued his search for meaning through a mainly philosophical and literary approach. His 'Outsider cycle' of six books, plus a final summary volume in 1966 – covering religious experience, human sexuality and discoveries in psychology – developed his 'new existentialism', basically existentialism minus the customary pessimism. While Colin regards the flashes of meaning experienced by poets/mystics – or by many ordinary folk as a 'peak experience' – as evidence of a state of consciousness towards which humans are evolving, existentialists see them as the mind's trick to convince us that life's worth living. Colin has no truck with turgid pessimism – one of his most endearing and encouraging traits, which also, incidentally, makes his talks so life-enhancing.

All his work has continued to develop the original themes of *The Outsider*, right through to his 2009 *Super Consciousness*: essentially an update of *The Outsider* but incorporating all the other major fields of interest he has accrued throughout his long career.

But back in the early 1970s it was *The Occult*, his great landmark book that set the world alight. Ironically, as a sceptic, he only accepted the commission for the money, intending to write a noncommittal survey of the subject, but it was to turn his worldview upside down. His research not only persuaded him that psychic abilities are real, but it also transformed and enhanced his vision of human beings. (And the vision of many of its readers too, such as Clive, whose own life changed dramatically because of *The Occult* and its sequel, laying the foundations for his career as a writer of books on the esoteric and alternative history.)

It is hard not to gush about *The Occult*. In retrospect, it is probably not much of an exaggeration to say that this mammoth work, published in October 1971, worked the same blinding epiphany on many of its readers as did say, Darwin's *Origin of Species* in its day. And it had a happy





Colin Wilson. Photo courtesy of Joy Wilson, 2005.

spin-off: not only was *The Occult* a seminal book for a popular audience but it also revived Colin's career, which had languished since the heady days of angry young manhood.

Discovering that "the mind possesses hidden powers that can influence the external world"³ finally answered his question about whether the mystics' and poets' insights of a purposeful universe were real or illusory – and about whether or not the pessimist-philosophers are right. To Colin not only are they wrong, but their state of mind is actively dangerous, since it inhibits the human ability to tune in to and even order the world: "...there is something in our minds that can alter our lives – the 'something' that causes synchronicities, for example."⁴

Perhaps with all the gloom and doom centred on 2012 hysteria, the New Age community in particular needs to receive an injection of Colin's inspired optimism. Like the Hermeticists of old, he actively celebrates what it means to be human. O what a miracle is Man!

Mysteries (August 1978), his sequel to *The Occult*, explored in greater depth the relationship between the hidden

powers of the mind and the outside world, covering subjects such as dowsing and Earth mysteries.

Another major development in Colin's thinking came in 1980. Until then he had understood paranormal phenomena purely in terms of the interaction between the hidden depths of human consciousness and the physical world. But through his research into poltergeists (which he originally thought were projections of the subconscious) he came to accept the reality of spirits, the afterlife and also the existence of non-human entities. As he wrote in 1992:

More than twenty years of psychical research have led me to the conclusion that there is a 'psychic reality' which runs *parallel* to our physical reality. Ghosts, demons, poltergeists, fairies, even 'vampires', are incursions from this 'other reality' into our own.⁵

These, too, found a place in his all-encompassing philosophy:

...their effect is to remind human beings that their material world is not the only reality. We are surrounded by

Primitive man believed the world was full of unseen forces: the orenda (spirit force) of the American Indians, the huaca of the ancient Peruvians. The Age of Reason said that those forces had only ever existed in man's imagination; only reason could show man the truth about the universe. The trouble was that man became a thinking pygmy, and the world of the rationalists was a daylight place in which boredom, triviality and 'ordinariness' were ultimate truths.

But the main trouble with human beings is their tendency to become trapped in the 'triviality of everydayness' (to borrow Heidegger's phrase), in the suffocating world of their personal preoccupations. And every time they do this, they forget the immense world of broader significance that stretches around them. And since man needs a sense of meaning to release his hidden energies, this forgetfulness pushes him deeper into depression and boredom, the sense that nothing is worth the effort.

In a sense, the Indians and Peruvians were closer to the truth than modern man, for their intuition of 'unseen forces' kept them wide open to the vistas of meaning that surround us.

- Colin Wilson, Introduction, *The Occult*

mystery that cannot be understood in terms of scientific materialism. If psychic phenomena have a purpose, it is to wake us up from our 'dogmatic slumber', and galvanise us to evolve a higher form of consciousness.⁶

In *Alien Dawn* (1998) Colin came to agree with researchers such as Jacques Vallée and John A. Keel that encounters with apparent extraterrestrial entities, including alien abductions, belonged to that parallel, psychic reality – essentially as an updating of the ancient fairies and demons tradition. Discussing the work of abduction researcher John Mack he noted:

Since *The Outsider* was about people who feel that there is something deeply wrong with 'consensus reality', and that we need to broaden our views about what is real or possible, I experienced an instant rapport with his conclusions. I ended by coming to believe that although UFO phenomena seem to contradict consensus reality, they do not contradict the reality described by quantum physicists. Or, for that matter, mystics.⁷

Colin has, over an astonishing six decades, built a grand, all-encompassing and consistent vision of the universe and humanity's place in it. He started out with the basic question: why are we here? This is his bold and heartening answer (from his 2004 autobiography *Dreaming to Some Purpose*): "The purpose is to colonise this difficult and inhospitable realm of matter and to imbue it with the force of life."⁸

This gels astonishingly with the latest (if weirdest) sci-

entific thinking, such as physicist John Archibald Wheeler's idea that we live in a 'participatory universe' that is being created by human observation.

That's perhaps the most enviable of Colin's talents as an author – he is always *relevant*. From the days of the angry youth to the spiritually bereft and scared 21st century he has always understood the underlying mood. But instead of feeding off our angst like other authors he always has taken us by the scruff of the neck, shaken us and made us glad to be alive. With Colin's words in our heads we face the future with confidence and courage.

It also helps that he writes and speaks like a dream – always with utter sincerity and deep knowledge – and that he's a really, really nice guy.

Happy birthday, Colin!

Footnotes

1. *The Outsider* (Picador, London, 1978 edition), 296.
2. *Ibid.*, 300.
3. *Super Consciousness: The Quest for the Peak Experience* (Watkins, London, 2009), 141.
4. *Dreaming To Some Purpose* (Century, London, 2004), 386.
5. *Alien Dawn: An Investigation Into the Contact Experience* (Virgin, London, 1998), 295, quoting from a 1992 article.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Dreaming To Some Purpose*, 372.
8. *Ibid.*, 386.



LYNN PICKNETT and **CLIVE PRINCE** are just celebrating their 22nd year of co-authorship. Their joint career began with *Turin Shroud: How Leonardo Da Vinci Fooled History* and – eight books later – they have just published *The Forbidden Universe*. They are best known for their 1997 *The Templar Revelation*, which Dan Brown acknowledged as the primary inspiration for *The Da Vinci Code*. As a reward for their contribution they were given cameos in the movie (on the London bus). They also give talks to an international audience. Lynn & Clive both live in South London. Their website is www.picknettprince.com.

Colin Wilson & the War Against Sleep

© By **RICHARD SMOLEY**

Whether we agree with him or not, Colin Wilson has to be one of the most challenging and stimulating writers of the last half century.

— Gary Lachman, American writer & musician

I have heard Colin Wilson speak in person only once. It was in 1987 or 1988, when he gave a lecture at the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco.

The event was well-attended, with at least a couple of hundred people present. But what struck me most about the talk was the strange state of consciousness it inspired in me.

I had come in no special mood, and I remember nothing of the evening before or after. But I remember observing myself as Wilson spoke and finding myself possessed of a completely clear and attentive concentration. A great deal of the noise of the usual mental chatter was simply absent. At the same time I was alert and aware — I was not merely absorbed in the talk, as one can be in a particularly gripping movie thriller.

Because the state disappeared soon after the lecture ended, I can only believe that this peculiarly focused and alert attention was a reaction to something that Wilson himself was generating. I mention it here because this kind of concentrated attention is one of the central themes of Wilson's work and thought.

Born in Leicester, England, in 1931 (he celebrates his eightieth birthday on 26 June 2011), Wilson came from a middle-class background and as a teenager pursued a conventional education in the sciences. But at some point he discovered literature and philosophy, and he became so engrossed in these that he neglected his studies, dropping out of school at the age of sixteen. In the 1950s, he spent time among the political and intellectual circles of London, and for a while spoke at London's famed Hyde Park Corner — the world's capital for soapbox orators — on anarchical syndicalism. This was not, as he later admitted, because of any real sympathies for syndicalism but "because I was bored, frustrated, and had a vague feeling that something ought to be done about something. I also wanted to practise speaking in public, and would have been equally happy to

discourse on Communism, Mormonism, or Nudism." He also engrossed himself in an intense program of reading, which bore fruit in his first book, *The Outsider*, published in 1956.

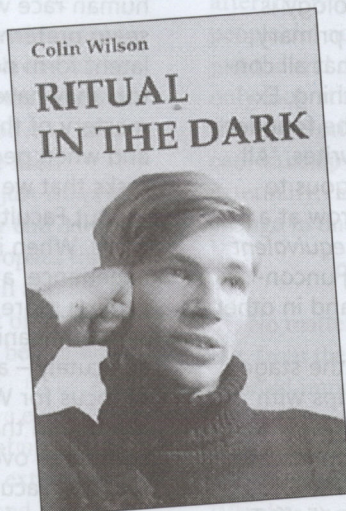
The Outsider was a tremendous success, and won accolades from mainstream critics such as Cyril Connolly, who in the *Sunday Times* of London called it "one of the most remarkable first books I have read for a long time." As its title suggests, this insightful

and gracefully erudite book deals with what Wilson contends is one of the central themes of twentieth-century literature: the individual who is isolated, set apart, alienated from the crowd. He is typified by Meursault, the central character in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, who starts the novel by stating, "Mama died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know." Meursault's affectless response to his mother's death is followed by an equally impassive love affair and the killing of an Arab (the novel is set in Algeria). Although Meursault has committed the act in self-defence, his utter apathy during the course of the trial leads to his conviction.

Twentieth-century literature (and nineteenth-century literature to a certain degree) is teeming with Meursaults: Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*; Joseph K. in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, who is arrested, tried,

and executed without even knowing what he has done; and the bored and alienated scholar Antoine Roquentin, hero of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* — all of whom Wilson discusses in *The Outsider*.

As this brief list suggests, *The Outsider* reflects Wilson's interest in existentialism. To most people today, existentialism is more of a mood than a philosophical system. One thinks of gloomy French intellectuals in smoky cafés, immersed in opaque but inevitably pessimistic discussions. But existentialism means something quite specific in philosophical terms. Unlike Thomas Aquinas and other Aristotelian philosophers who came to dominate Roman Catholic philosophy, the existentialists argued that man has no *essence* — that is to say, there is nothing he is at his core that God has created (most forms of existentialism are radically atheistic). Or rather, man's essence is derived from *existence*, from his actions in the world. Because God has not made man in any



A young Colin Wilson pictured on his 1960 novel *Ritual in the Dark*.

particular way, man is free. If he feels he is not free, this is only because he has failed to acknowledge his own freedom.

The notorious pessimism of the existentialists comes from the idea that man's freedom is the result of his existence in an alien and indifferent world. There is no intrinsic meaning in the universe, because there is no God who created it. It is up to man to make his own meaning.

Unfortunately, as Wilson recognised, this stance creates problems. You can take up carpentry to while away the time, but can you create meaning and purpose for your own life as you might make a workbench? Some of the existentialists – particularly Sartre – may have thought so, but Wilson argues that this creation of meaning, while necessary, cannot be accomplished just by taking up a cause at random.

Wilson also displays a deep affinity with another, less well-known twentieth-century philosophical school: phenomenology. While phenomenology is a vast and intricate system none of whose primary exponents completely agree, it contends that all consciousness is *intentional*; it is *toward* something. Explaining the thought of Edmund Husserl, the founder of the school of phenomenology, Wilson writes, "All mental activities are essentially *acts*, analogous to reaching out one's hand or shooting an arrow at a target." Indeed, he adds, "*the mind has no equivalent of the non-intentional act* – even becoming unconscious under anaesthetic" (emphasis here and in other quotes Wilson's).

Existentialism and phenomenology set the stage for Wilson's mature thought, but it is perhaps with the great twentieth-century sage G.I. Gurdjieff with whom he has the deepest affinity. Wilson discusses Gurdjieff in *The Outsider*, in his 1970 book *The Occult: A History*, and in other works, including *Gurdjieff: The War against Sleep*. Indeed, Wilson contends, "Gurdjieff's system can be regarded as the complete, ideal *Existenzphilosophie* [existentialist philosophy]." Why? Because it shows a genuine and realistic way to rise up from the sleep of ordinary, habitual life – the boredom and alienation that are the marks of the existentialist antihero – and awaken into a higher dimension of experience.

As Wilson points out, one of the central disciplines in Gurdjieff's teaching is "self-remembering" – which Wilson describes as follows: "Normally, when you are looking at some physical object, the attention points outwards, as it were, from you to the object. When you become absorbed in some thought or memory, the attention points inwards. Now sometimes, very occasionally, the attention points both outwards and inwards at the same time, and you find yourself saying, 'What I, really *here*?': an intense consciousness of yourself and your surroundings." It may have been Wilson's own self-remembering that stimulated a similar response in me during that lecture over twenty years ago.

It is this self-remembering, this awakening, deliberate or inadvertent, that Wilson discovers in many accounts of mystical experience. Gurdjieff might have

agreed. When asked once what higher consciousness was like, he replied, "Everything more vivid." For Wilson, this awakening is the gateway to what he calls Faculty X, which he calls "the power to grasp reality," and which "unites the two halves of man's mind, conscious and unconscious."

Wilson argues that "Faculty X is the key to all poetic and mystical experience; when it awakens, life suddenly takes on a new, poignant quality. Faust is about to commit suicide in weariness and despair when he hears the Easter Bells; they bring back his childhood, and suddenly Faculty X is awake, and he knows that suicide is the ultimate laughable absurdity."

It is Faculty X, and Wilson's exploration of it, that provides the key to much of his writing, which over the years has ventured further and further into the waters of the paranormal. For Wilson, Faculty X does not lie in some distant evolutionary future, when the human race will have evolved capacities that now seem preternatural; it is something we possess in latent form now, and which in fact our remote ancestors may have possessed in the past, when the human mastery of the physical world was far less complete and when people had to rely on inner resources for tasks that we now entrust to machines.

But Faculty X has more than merely pragmatic value. When it is awakened, it provides an intensity of experience, a lived reality that not only makes "everything more vivid" but provides the added dimension of meaning for which the existentialists pined so acutely – and which forms what may be the point of focus for Wilson's voluminous writings. If there is a thread that holds together a body of work that comprises over one hundred published books, it is, I suspect, Faculty X and the strange sense of vivid concentration of which I had a glimpse over twenty years ago.

How do Wilson's insights look today? We live in a time of change, which continues to accelerate to the point of destabilising not only nations and societies but the individual soul. There is a fascination with new technologies – with iPads and Facebook – that seems to take us away from the issues of meaning and presence that Wilson emphasises so strongly. But if these novelties distract us from the existential questions that face us, they neither answer these questions nor remove them. At best they are diversions, like a film or a game of chess, which might take our minds off our problems for an hour or two but which leave the problems waiting for us when they are done. Even politics and world affairs, I suspect, serve as this kind of entertainment for many.

I believe that Wilson is right. If we are to win the war against the sleep of everyday life, it will not come out of technology nor even from political or social reform, as much as this may be needed. It will come from the liberation of individuals who awaken from the dreams that pass across their televisions and computer screens – and their minds – and are able to say, "*I – here now.*"