

[colinwilsononline.com /faculty-x-2/](http://colinwilsononline.com/faculty-x-2/)

Faculty X

48-61 minutes

Too much reportage on Wilson leaves a yawning fourteen year gap between the success of his debut and his commercial rebirth as an ‘occultist’ in 1971, all the while suggesting that this was somehow unexpected or a descent into naivety. But because Wilson’s new existentialist work from that fourteen year period is not being taken into account, the continuity is lost.

Far from being a radical departure, *The Occult* expanded his insights into states of unusual and affirmative consciousness which had preoccupied him from the beginning. *The Outsider* included the first in depth study of the Gurdjieff ‘work’ by someone not part of the system and discussed the then largely forgotten Hermann Hesse, as well as mystics such as Ramakrishna and Blake. In the [sequel](#) – often named but rarely investigated – Blake’s influence Jakob Boheme is analysed along with Swedenborg and other mystics. The fourth instalment (*The Outsider* was the first part of a seven volume series, not a standalone book) was one of the very first attempts to analyse another half-forgotten writer, Howard Philips Lovecraft, placing him in the tradition of imaginative fiction alongside Strindberg, Kazantzakis and Dürrenmatt. Wilson would study Rasputin, create fictional portraits of Aleister Crowley, parody Lovecraft’s *Cthulhu Mythos* philosophically (another first) and offer an ‘interim report’ about his new existential ideas under the title *Poetry and Mysticism*. All this would happen before the end of

the sixties – in fact, most of it was presented before the sixties had even started swinging.

Wilson's 'new' existentialism returns to the phenomenology of Husserl and away from the existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre, who had essentially abandoned Husserl's notions of intentionality and the aim for the state known as the 'transcendental ego' for something more personal or committed. "Implicit in the ultimate 'existential' question "Who am I?" is the possibility that 'I' may turn out to far more than I had assumed", said Wilson when queried by the journal *Philosophy Now* on his interest in the 'paranormal' (which he actually regards as perfectly normal possibilities of human consciousness). By investigating the hermetic tradition and its many revivals, Wilson found a dynamically active attitude towards consciousness which was similar to Husserl's, and he was keen to point the out this correspondence. For instance, he makes a seemingly unusual comparison between Husserl and Crowley – as they both used the word apodictic (beyond question) – later pointing out that Crowley's philosophy revolves around the discovery of the 'hidden I', the 'genius' (or transcendental ego in Husserl's Kantian terminology). "Magic is to do with a subconscious process", writes Wilson. But "the actual ceremonies and rituals are not 'apodictically related' to it, as treading in a rake is apodictically related to it hitting you on the head". Magick, as Crowley preferred to spell it, "eludes consciousness altogether", a process Wilson sees as analogous to Husserl's notions of intentionality: consciousness is so far removed from the powers that drive it that we make the mistake of thinking it a passive reflector of reality, except, Wilson notes, in "moments of crisis or excitement" when we complete our partial mind (as Yeats said).

Crowley states that every intentional act is a magical act, a 'willed' act, in his *Magick in Theory & Practice* (1930), noting metaphorically throughout the book that this includes *any* activity which involves change to occur in conformity with the will. The practical discipline outlined in Wilson's *Introduction to the New Existentialism* (1966) is to cultivate a constant awareness of the intentionality of conscious acts; Crowley notes that "any duffer can 'pull himself together', devote himself to study, break off a bad habit, or conquer a cowardice". But he goes on to say that this is in fact the most important work, as it "involves the most intimate analysis" and "includes initiation in it's highest sense" – in Wilson's language, this would be the unveiling of the 'hidden I' and the development of the state of understanding he labelled 'Faculty X'. After noting the importance of intentional acts, Crowley goes on to say that "even unintentional acts so-seeming are not truly so". Wilson, strongly influenced by Gurdjieff's teachings which regarded humans as mostly mechanical, used the term 'robot' to describe "compacted layer upon layer of willed intentions", with phenomenology likened to either an archeological dig sifting through this strata, or (in Gurdjieffian or science fiction terms) as an engineering process on the circuits of the robot. This is dealt with in greater detail in his 'Outsider Cycle', (1956 – '66) in which his new existentialist ideas are developed.



G.I. Gurdjieff

These layers of willed intentions descend from the surface of the everyday personality through to the next layer of of acquired habits, reading, writing, driving etc. We take these as ‘mechanical’ but Wilson points out that although they have become mechanical or rather, *habitual*, they were originally learned via difficult or clumsy intentional efforts; they are willed intentions which have become automated, and they now quietly hum away in the background. “Another two or three layers down lie my sexual intentions, which can actually be studied as willed intentions if I develop a certain skill in descriptive analysis” (c.f. Wilson’s *Origins of the Sexual Impulse*, 1963). “The archeological equivalent of these layers would be Troy or Babylon” says Wilson. “And below these lie the mental equivalents of the Miocene, The Jurassic, the Carboniferous”. All these are the ‘unintentional’ acts Crowley was referring to, and occultists will doubtless notice the similarity with Austin Osman Spare’s ‘formulae of atavistic resurgence’ in which primeval levels of consciousness are apparently reified via a personal system of aesthetics. “The mind’s archeology”, Wilson continues, “must be made accessible to present

consciousness". If we could bring these deep layers to conscious inspection with phenomenological analysis, and uncover what Wilson calls our "intentional evolutionary structure", we would be a completely different type of human. In fact, Wilson remarks that it is difficult to imagine what type of "creature" or "being" we would be. "My body may be doomed to die" he writes, but mentally "I am as timeless and impersonal as the stars". In the language of phenomenology, "I have placed the 'world' in brackets and become aware of myself as a transcendental ego".

Wilson comments that we are unaware of the "deeper layers of intentionality". These layers are hidden, occluded or 'occult', and it was the study of these depths, rather than any specific belief in the supernatural, which drew him further towards the subject. On the final page of *The Occult*, he states that he does not regard himself as an 'occultist' "because I am more interested in the mechanisms of everyday consciousness". His concern was adjusting these 'mechanisms' (habitual intentions) so they could admit more reality, as per his new existentialist work. Religion and hermeticism tend to speak of two realities, two 'worlds' or truths, but Wilson insists that these are two aspects of the same reality, as seen through either the microscope of rationality or the telescope of poetic intuition. The detailed rational view is our everyday attitude, the other may come to us as glimpses of a larger meaning (the last chapter in *The Occult* is called 'Glimpses'). These glimpses, however, tend to happen accidentally, and we need to learn how to make them happen *intentionally*, by labelling them, as you would the levers and buttons on a complex machine.

We could think of these ‘two realities’ as the difference between the Apollonian and Dionysian in Nietzsche, or the ‘presentational immediacy’ and ‘causal efficacy’ of Professor Whitehead, or of the left and right hemispherical sides of the brain as once discussed by Sperry and Ornstein or Julian Jaynes. Referencing the Platonic myth of the gods dividing the human into male and female, Wilson states that this is not far from the phenomenological idea, “except that, for the phenomenologist, the division is between passive consciousness and an intentional subconscious mind”. Wilson agrees with Whitehead that the two ‘types’ of perception (small details and overall meanings) should actually function together, symbolised by the hermetic ‘as above, so below’, micro-macrocosmic state of awareness. This is documented by all denominations of mystics and occultists throughout *The Occult* (and its two sequels, *Mysteries*, 1978, *Beyond the Occult*, 1988, and also in engaging biographies of Rasputin, Gurdjieff, Wilhelm Reich, Jung, Rudolf Steiner, Crowley and Ouspensky). Wilson compares this state of ‘duo consciousness’ to the planes which dropped the bombs in *The Dam Busters* where two searchlights had to be focussed on an exact spot before the bomb could be released. In Whitehead’s philosophy, the two ‘beams’ are usually slightly out of sync (with details being more apparent than meaning) except in these moments of true insight where they converge. These mystical states – ‘peak experiences’ in the language of humanistic psychology – are regarded as somewhat ineffable or vague, but the new existentialism wishes to examine such states rigorously (i.e. phenomenologically) via language and values. Underneath its variously complex rehearsals and beliefs, occultism has the same fundamental aim, to discover the ‘true will’ or hidden self.

In *Beyond the Outsider* (1965), Wilson makes the interesting statement that ‘mystical’ experiences are a “temporary reversal” of Whitehead’s two types of perception, with all-over meaning briefly overwhelming the usual dominant state of immediacy (but, says Wilson, without the usual weakening of the latter). The phenomenological method itself depends on reversing what Husserl called the natural (naive) attitude to show that perception is an intentional act, like Crowley’s definition of magical practice (Crowley also suggested an exercise to read, walk, talk and think backwards, “so that the memory reaches back into aeons incalculably distant”). Occultism is commonly associated with reversal and reversion, an attempt to undo the ‘fallen’ state we find ourselves in (existentialism would use the term ‘thrown’ as in thrown into existence without an explanation).

For Wilson, rational consciousness is not a ‘fall’ – he sees it as an evolutionary choice (while agreeing that consciousness is restricted, he also insists this restriction is *voluntary*) which is more useful than the relaxed state of awareness of antiquity or prehistory. However, it’s sharp precision has a tendency to cut out too much overall meaning. This was the dilemma of the romantics and their descendants, the existentialists. Wilson notes how the stiff language of romanticism (ecstasy, rapture, etc) “collapsed under the weight of it’s verbal imprecision” and a pessimistic gloom descended, culturally speaking. This ‘romantic defeatism’, as Wilson calls it, still thrived in the existentialist attitude (not just in the philosophy, which Wilson refers to as “intellectualised romanticism”, but also in the poetry of Rilke and Eliot, the fiction of Joyce and even in H. G. Wells). So despite their tougher linguistic precision, romantic fatalism

festered inside existentialism, it's stoic pessimism a far cry from it's origins in phenomenology. Later, the pseudo-phenomenology of postmodernism (particularly deconstruction) would claim a meticulous precision over language, but fail to analyse it's own glib acceptance of meaninglessness. Wilson's new existential method throws this attitude out first and "accepts man 's experience of his inner freedom as basic and irreducible". This is generated by "the most rigorous phenomenological analysis" of these glimpses of freedom.

It should be remembered that the word 'occult' is merely the Latin for 'hidden'. Wilson would refer to the transcendental ego as the 'hidden I' in his new existential texts, and stress the intentional nature of conscious acts, intentional acts being magical acts, according to one infamous practitioner. "Both Husserl and Heidegger" Wilson writes, "felt that the phenomenological quest would give man the possibility of 'mystical' experience without the need for specifically Christian or Yogic disciplines. Husserl said that the study of intentionality in action would lead towards the 'keepers of the key to the ultimate sources of being' (a thoroughly Heideggerian phrase), and to the 'unveiling of the hidden achievements of the transcendental ego'" (a phrase like "the key to the ultimate sources of being" wouldn't have sounded out of place in Lovecraft's *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*). Wilson would also insist that phenomenology is an active philosophy of the will – a "doctrine of the will" in fact – like that of Nietzsche. The will is also a very important factor in occultism; Crowley states that all intentional and seemingly 'unintentional' acts are 'willed'. One commentary he wrote stresses the one-pointedness of the will,

referencing the philosopher Fichte, also an influence on Wilson, for good measure.

Wilson points out the continuous importance of the will from the ancient grimoires through the various texts from the many magical revivals throughout history in *Mysteries*: “all these definitions involve the underlying assumption that the ‘will’ is of a special kind”. He then quotes a contemporary handbook of ritual (which he wrote an introduction to) which says that “human will-power is a real force, capable of being trained and concentrated [...] the disciplined will is capable of changing its environment and producing paranormal effects”. But, it goes on to say, that this will-power must be directed by the imagination (these are two basic points about occultism, found in almost all types of teachings; the other two are that the universe is not a mixture of chance factors, but an ordered system of correspondences; and that the physical universe is a part of reality, not its totality). After discussing the visualising exercises of the influential nineteenth century magical society the Golden Dawn, Wilson notes that the stress upon will and imagination is identical to the phenomenological study of intentional perception. “If I have an idea of the god Jupiter, this god is my presented object, he is ‘immanently present’ in my act, he has ‘mental inexistence’ in the latter, or whatever expression we may use to disguise our true meaning. I have an idea of the god Jupiter: this means I have certain presentive experience, the presentation-of-the-god-Jupiter is realised in my consciousness”. This is not from Regardie’s Golden Dawn papers, but from the second volume of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* (1901).

Wilson was particularly drawn to this combination of will and imagination found in the magical tradition as he had been

concerned with both of these things, as evidenced from his first book. “Behind man lies the abyss, nothingness; the Outsider knows this; it is his business to sink claws of iron into life, to build, to Will, in spite of of the abyss.” He places equal importance on the development of the novel, drawing particular attention to Richardson’s 1740 work *Pamela*. The sensationalistic realism of this novel was the spark which set off the imaginative explosion known as romanticism (Wilson discusses this in his 1975 work *The Craft of the Novel*). Compared to this rich imaginative landscape, occultism appears somewhat arid; the biographers and editors of Crowley, John Symonds and Kenneth Grant, have both said on separate occasions that Crowley lacked imagination, despite his powerful will, and Symonds’ own amusing study, *The Great Beast* (1951) demonstrates this point well. However, we can turn to Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, Wilson says, with “a sense of excitement, a feeling that he was on the right track, and that a complicated magical ritual would not have brought him any closer to his goal, any more than it brought Mathers, or Crowley or Dion Fortune to theirs”.

When *The Occult* was published in the early ‘70’s, a new type of occultism was fermenting, which was less interested in curating the hierarchical strictures of the Golden Dawn system and more concerned with the creative potentiality of the imagination. “A whole school of young practicing magicians has sprung up”, Wilson wrote in his introduction to Nevill Drury and Stephen Skinner’s *The Search for Abraxas* (1974). “They are not sensation-seekers or hippies. They pursue their subject with the same seriousness that they might study electronic engineering or radio astronomy”. With their attempts to discipline the mind

and imagination, Wilson noted, they were a far cry from the grey pessimism of the fifties when his own books about the limitations of consciousness “ceased to be attacked, and were simply ignored. The tide seemed to be as far out as it could possibly be. Then, round about 1966 or 67, the change began.” Works by the half-forgotten or obscure names which littered Wilson’s previous books – Hesse, Lovecraft, Tolkien, Gurdjieff, Crowley, Philip K. Dick, David Lindsay – were either gaining serious cult status or selling in huge numbers. The rumbling that had started with Pauwels and Bergier’s rather disreputable *The Morning of the Magicians* in France in 1960 had now turned into a serious intellectual avalanche; writing in 1979, the occultist Kenneth Grant looked back on the previous decade and was suitably amazed by the “vast new body of literature which fuses science, fantasy and metaphysics in a manner that may ultimately reify the wildest nightmares of an H. P. Lovecraft”.

The Occult also became a bestseller, with Wilson returning from the margins back into literary society – for a while. The byline on the first UK edition accurately described it as “a study of the latent power that human beings possess to reach beyond the present”. But the huge paperback with the fluorescent green cover published by Mayflower a year later had what Wilson later described as “some nonsensical quote about it being ‘a book for those who would walk with the gods’” (in the same year, Mayflower offered this gibbering description of occultism as “all sciences concealed or “covered over” by the mechanical straightnesses of society, particularly Western, that hide from the senses and from understanding the more liberating facts and fantasies of our cosmos”). *The Occult* still reads well today, it’s narrative amusing and informative, it’s phenomenological

undercurrent still unique but under-appreciated, particularly by occultists themselves. Considering that “every intentional act is a magical act”, this is disappointingly unimaginative.

A short Lovecraft digression

“My old friend August Derleth had kept the works of H. P. Lovecraft in print since his death in 1937” Wilson remembered, “but his customers almost amounted to to a Lovecraft Book Club; you couldn’t walk into a bookshop and buy them off the shelves. I suspect that the audience for all these books remained about as large for the audience for LP records of train noises”. Derleth helped create a specialist publishing concern – Arkham House – due to lack of interest from publishers in a collection of Lovecraft’s best fiction which had originally appeared in pulp magazines. *The Outsider and Others* (1939), a hard cover omnibus of over 500 pages with a \$5.00 cover price, sold very slowly over four years, with only 150 pre-orders (at a mere \$3.50) of the entire run of 1,268 copies (a mint copy will now cost over a thousand dollars). Wilson must have been one of the very few people in the UK to have read this book, twenty years after it’s publication, but a long time before the mainstream revival of interest. (Wilson’s publisher Victor Gollancz had published equally small runs of *The Haunter of the Dark and Other Tales of Terror* and the novella *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* in 1951, but wouldn’t publish any more Lovecraft until 1966).



H.P. Lovecraft

During the summer of 1959, Wilson was staying at the Dorset farmhouse of an American friend (“a highly literate American, [who] had married a farmer’s daughter out of a desire to return to the simple life”). After an evening spent drinking home made cider, he retired for the night and looked around for something to read. There wasn’t much apart from old bound volumes of *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News*, but a book with a similar title to his own debut caught his eye. Wilson was certain that he had not heard of Lovecraft before (although he later said that “I had probably read some of his contributions to *Weird Tales* when I was a child, but had forgotten them”). As he cracked open the black cover and flicked through the musty, crumbling yellow pages and read *The Outsider*, *The Rats in the Walls* and *In the Vault*, he immediately recognised a very important writer, in spite of his reservations about Lovecraft’s style. Borrowing the book, he quickly began to write *The Strength to Dream*, the fourth volume of his ‘Outsider series’ which is a study of the literature of imagination and one of the very first books to take Lovecraft seriously. After publication Wilson was actually in Lovecraft’s home environs of Providence,

lecturing at Browns University (which Wilson and others have suggested may have been the model for Lovecraft's Miskatonic; Lovecraft himself dreamt of attending Browns). Wilson often thought about Lovecraft while staying in Providence, his imagination "haunted" as his stories came back to him a dozen times each day: he spent hours in the university library reading Lovecraft's letters in manuscript, he read a thesis which made him even more familiar with the *Mythos*, and even saw the house where Lovecraft had lived. Writing to Derleth at the address of Arkham House, the two eventually struck a friendship (Derleth knew Wilson's work) and, after toning down certain comments for the expanded American edition of *The Strength to Dream*, Wilson took up Derleth's challenge to write a 'Lovecraft novel' producing *The Mind Parasites*, which was published by Arkham in 1967 to 'underground' critical acclaim (William S. Burroughs favourably reviewed it in a countercultural magazine).

Wilson thinks of Lovecraft as an archetypal 'Outsider', and he has said he would have included him in his debut, had he come across him a few years earlier. Like Strindberg, Lovecraft seemed to be anticipating the irrational horrors of the twentieth and twenty first century. Unlike Strindberg, Lovecraft maintained that he was a committed rationalist, a stance documented in his letters (which run to five volumes) and in his few non-fiction works.

The faculty beyond

While collecting material for what would become *The Occult*, Wilson asked Derleth if Lovecraft had ever heard of Crowley, as he found the tonal parallels between their works "so striking that

I wondered if Lovecraft and Crowley had been acquainted”. Derleth correctly thought not (although Lovecraft had heard of Crowley). So “reluctantly, I gave up the idea – which I had hoped to introduce into *The Occult* – that Lovecraft’s mythology was based on his acquaintance with the western magical tradition”. The year after *The Occult* was published, Wilson was asked to review *The Magical Revival* (1972) the mainstream debut by Kenneth Grant, a practising occultist who had known Crowley in the forties and had co-edited the reissue of his ‘autohagiography’ in 1969. Wilson would favourably review Grant’s book, noting that it skilfully answered the question he had put to Derleth several years before regarding the archetypal similarity between Lovecraft’s fiction and Crowley’s investigations (to give one striking example from a later volume: two decades before Lovecraft published *The Call of Cthulhu*, a baffled Crowley ‘received’ the word *Tutulu* “as it is written in that ancient book”). Grant’s interpretations – they would eventually fill nine interconnected volumes, of which *The Magical Revival* was the first – were controversial but Wilson would be one of the very few ‘mainstream’ authors to support him, voicing his appreciation in his introduction to one of many editions purporting to be Lovecraft’s infamous *Necronomicon* in 1978.

When Wilson first turned the brittle pages of *The Outsider and Others* in the late fifties, Grant was beginning to self-publish tiny editions of a monograph discussing esoteric interests which would run to ten numbers between 1959 and 1963. The seventh of these, which recommended Lovecraft’s *The Haunter of the Dark* amongst other horror novels, mourned the “loss of a faculty for accepting natural truths” and suggested that fiction was now the primary substitute for this atrophied sense. Wilson

was saying much the same thing at this time, and by the seventies, there would be another unnoticed convergence.

Out of his new existentialist “foundation work” of 1956-‘66, Wilson developed the notion of “faculty x” (as it was originally written for a lecture presented to a meeting of psychologists in 1967). This concept of “the reality of other times and other places” came to him in on a snowy day in Washington DC in late 1966, although he had been speaking about such things since the fifties (as documented in Kenneth Allsop’s book *The Angry Decade*). The seminal example of this faculty is that of Proust in his novel *Swann’s Way* – “the *moment bienheureux* triggered by the madeleine” – when he could say that he was a child in Combray and *mean* it. “It is as if he has suddenly acquired another dimension – a time dimension”. The historian Arnold Toynbee experienced it as brief understanding of *all* history; the poet Robert Graves once described it as if he “knew everything” intuitively and the playwright August Strindberg experienced it as a kind of ‘duo consciousness’, a strange feeling of being in two places at once. In *The Occult*, Wilson gives many more fascinating examples, bracketing them under the umbrella term ‘Faculty X’. The psychologist Abraham Maslow told of a marine on leave who suddenly realised *that women are different to men*, and it is this realisation, this understanding of ‘otherness’ which powers the Faculty which Wilson labels with an X (until better knowledge of it comes forward with experience, that is; earlier, Wilson had spoke of it as the ‘phenomenological faculty’, the ability to grasp reality). Perceived through our everyday consciousness, reality appears to be a cheap simulation which lets in little otherness or difference, but when Faculty X is operative, we know this to be a lie. In light of this, Wilson

rejected Baudrillard's literalist notions of 'simulation' and Derrida's *différance*. "The moment man began to develop symbol memory, language, and so on, he had begun to create a new faculty. His very continuity is a new faculty, a new dimension of his being".

Although seemingly unaware of this side of Wilson's theories, Kenneth Grant's researches into the surrealistic aspect of mysticism are, like Lovecraft and Crowley's, strikingly similar – in fact, even more so (he once refers to his own work as a "phenomenology presented in this and previous volumes"). As his series of 'trilogies' progressed Grant would become less concerned with ritual and yogic disciplines and stress the need to "cultivate a new faculty" instead. This faculty, "which has remained dormant in the majority of individuals for a very long time", is analogous to the intuition or imagination; but, Grant says, the imagination must be free of negativity to be truly creative. "Negative thoughts", he states, "should be aborted, they are vampires feeding on the [...] mind stuff" – a concept Wilson had expressed in the plot of his Lovecraft pastiche *The Mind Parasites*, itself drawn from his new existentialist researches. Grant regards intuition as identical to initiation in that true initiation can only be self-initiation, and this is supported by Gurdjieff's observations as documented by Ouspensky in his *In Search of the Miraculous* (1950). "There is not, nor can there be, any outward initiation" says Gurdjieff. "In reality, only self-initiation, self-presentation exist". Grant describes this intuitive state the "faculty of understanding" locating it beyond rational consciousness. To become more aware of it, we must tune our aesthetic senses so that "they respond to the slightest vibration from those 'other' times, those

‘other’ spaces, those ‘other’ dimensions” that are actually ourselves”. Wilson’s description of Faculty X as the realisation of the reality of other times and other places is conceptually identical. Proust stated in the second volume of his vast series of novels that “our faculties lie dormant” due to our reliance on habit, and it is this habitual trance which Gurdjieff tried to break. The faculty Wilson speaks of is the antidote to such sleepwalking. “We say something and mean it only when Faculty X is awake” writes Wilson. “Faculty X is the key to all poetic and mystical experience”. In volume four of his massive novel, Proust writes: “If I do not know a whole section of the memories that are behind me, if they are invisible to me, if I do not have the faculty of calling them to me, how do I know in the mass that is unknown to me that there may not be some that extend back much further than my human existence?” It is this faculty which Wilson wished to develop so we could dig into such primitive layers of consciousness (what Husserl described as “habitual sedimentations”) and understand our hidden intentional structure, rather than a belief in anything supernatural. “Faculty X is not a ‘sixth sense’, but an ordinary potentiality of consciousness” wrote Wilson in *The Occult*.

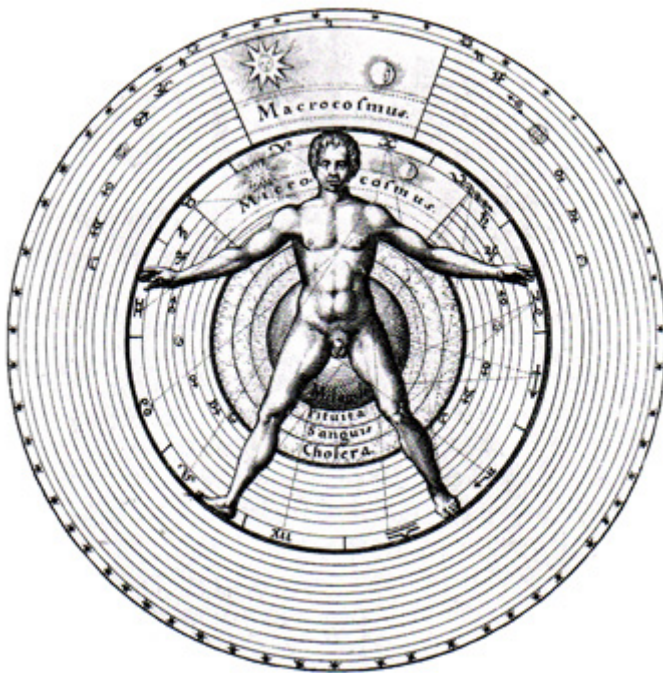
Grant states that this faculty is *beyond* or *outside* (two of his most used words) of rational consciousness; it is, in cabalistic terminology, ‘above the Abyss’. He symbolises this threshold with the letter X (a crossing) with the image of a desert and remarks that it is connected with a spatial paradox of “infinity, endurance, and remoteness” which is simultaneous with “the infinitesimally near and infinitely fleeting” which he says is an awareness (understanding) of the “sudden insight into the real substratum of Being”, sounding uncannily like Heidegger (Being,

an X, 'abyss'). These symbols also appear in what Wilson describes as the paradox of 'the near and far' (after a forgotten L. H. Myers novel of that title). "The young prince Jali gazes out over the desert in the light of the setting sun, and reflects that there are two deserts, 'one that was a glory for for the eye, another that it was a weariness to trudge' – the near and the far. And the horizon, with all it's promise, is always 'the far'. The near is trivial and boring". But imagination can solve this problem – in his novel *Against Nature*, Huysmans' decadent narrator craves to go to London, but after eating in an English tavern he abandons his travel plans as "a clumsy change of locality" could never be so satisfying as the version he has just conjured up. Wilson calls this stare of consciousness the 'other mode', "with it's tantalising hint of a new *kind* of perception, in which distant realities are as real as the present moment".

So Wilson, like Grant (and Proust) is interested in reviving a dormant faculty which utilises the aesthetic imagination and the intuition (Wilson's definition of philosophy is "intuition aided by intellect") which can enable us to truly understand, to genuinely *realise*, the reality of other times and places, against the oppressive sense of being trapped in the here and now. "After all" says Wilson, "we know perfectly well that the past is as real as the present and that New York and Singapore and Lhasa and Stepney Green are as real as this place I happen to be in at this moment. *Yet my senses do not agree*. They assure me that this place, here and now, is far more real than any other place or any other time. Only in certain moments of inner intensity do I know this to be a lie". (Hence Wilson's new existentialist maxim that 'everyday consciousness is a liar' and Crowley's collection of paradoxes, *The Book of Lies*). Against this oppressive illusion,

Wilson quotes one of his favourite books from his youth, the *Bhagavad Gita*, wherein Krishna states “I am not here, neither am I elsewhere”. This type of ‘near and far’ spatial awareness was described by everyone from Rabelais and Pascal, from Crowley himself to media theorist Marshall McLuhan as :

**A PERFECT SPHERE WHOSE CENTRE IS EVERYWHERE
YET WHOSE CIRCUMFERENCE IS NOWHERE**



This concept of space, which is an ancient definition of God or nature, is the opposite of Renaissance perspective, with the vanishing point (the far) in the distance and the viewer as the static ‘near’. This is the illusion of realities as “distant” in pictorial form, but of course perspective is an illusion, a mathematical gradient of objects becoming increasingly smaller on a flat surface, whereas this ‘other mode’ is more like reversed perspective, with the viewer as the vanishing point. We are back to the reversal of our ‘natural standpoint’ (as Husserl defined it) and Wilson’s description of mysticism as a reversal of Whitehead’s two modes of perception. This other mode is rare

because our minds impose patterns on perceptions, therefore “it is natural that our experience includes little ‘otherness’. The mind automatically filters off the otherness”. The mind’s basic mechanism, Wilson continues, “is to perceive similarities between one set of impressions and another”, and so the mystical ‘glimpses’ of poets are few and far between – “poets and mystics seem to be generally in agreement that that language cannot express the mystical vision of ‘otherness’”, hence what Wilson labelled romantic defeatism. It is true that the ‘form imposing faculty’ has a relentless drive towards homogenisation and it’s desire for order and simplicity can become self-destructive (“Nietzsche emphasised that it is more important to ask: ‘Freedom *for* what?’ than ‘Freedom *from* what?’; the same is true of order”.) Kenneth Grant even describes it as “the Arch Enemy – the Active Form Producing Mind”. But the mechanisms of the form imposing faculty should first be carefully analysed and adjusted to slowly admit more otherness, rather than rely on random or accidental glimpses, like Proust’s awakening of his dormant faculties. The problem with mysticism, as Gurdjieff said to Ouspensky, is that unprepared minds cannot grasp “a temporary connection to a higher centre” and are left with a dim remembrance of the beginning and ending of this flood of new information, with a large useless blank in between. We must first adjust the receptors before we try to understand anything.

“The basic position of this book”, Wilson says of *The Occult*, “is that if the machine [i.e. the layers of intentional habits or ‘mechanisms’ of consciousness] could be made to work *normally*, man would acquire, or learn to use, various powers and faculties that at are present are ‘occult’ (latent, hidden) and

would discover that they were perfectly natural after all". Proust said that his faculties were dormant, obscured by habit. Kenneth Grant insisted, like Wilson, that we cultivate a faculty which has lain dormant for a long time, but that "in the West, this faculty has no precise designation" (although Wilson clearly defined this very thing within a framework of western philosophy). This faculty, Grant says, is an "insight into the hidden side of things" or "pure consciousness wherein all ideas are stored and which under stands or *stands under* the mechanism of mentation".

Two Places at Once

One of Wilson's most important new existential concepts is known as the 'indifference threshold', a kind of margin in consciousness in which our vitality is paradoxically stimulated by pain and inconvenience, but indifferent to comfort or pleasure (consciousness without crisis, Wilson has noted, has a tendency towards negativity). It could also be thought of as a measure of how far our vital energy is asleep: it slumbers underneath this plimsoll line until a crisis wakes it, therefore glimpses of vitality and meaning appear to just 'happen' randomly. Of course, Husserl has shown that we aren't perceptual victims – things do not just happen to us at all, as it our minds which order our perceptions with subconscious selective processes. Because we have restricted our consciousness for survival, we exclude most 'otherness' and reality appears monotonous or indifferent ('excluding' is a deep, willed intention). Wilson sees this a form of Heidegger's 'forgetfulness of existence'.

Borrowing the term 'threshold' from William James, Wilson comments on James' essay *The Energies of Men* that "what we are dealing with here are underground energies, invisible

reserves way below the surface of our conscious awareness. Being so far below the surface they are not available for conscious inspection.” A crisis or emergency can powerfully rouse these energies, however; an essay Wilson wrote on Nietzsche, *Dual Value Response* (1972) discusses this paradox.

Invisible, underground forces slumbering underneath a threshold, brought to consciousness via a crisis, could be the typical plot of a pulp horror novel. Of course, Wilson parodied such forms with particular (phenomenological) intention towards the style of Lovecraft, although this was in order to discuss the voluntary limitations of perception as much as to critique Lovecraft’s own materialistic philosophy. In his Crowley inspired ‘sex diary’, *Man Without a Shadow* (1963) ‘Gerard Sorme’ (a fictionalised Colin Wilson) writes “it is the powers inside ourselves that are ‘forbidden’, that we know nothing about, and yet which we have a *right* to know about”. These are the hidden, latent or ‘occult’ powers Wilson speaks of, but he is speaking the language of phenomenology – so by that reasoning they are ‘forbidden’ only in the sense that we have somehow forbade ourselves to access them.



Aleister Crowley

Writing in an introduction to *The R'lyeh Text* (1995), a sequel to the 1978 *Necronomicon*, Wilson references Kenneth Grant's assertion that the "strange entities" documented by Crowley "are not, as in Lovecraft, powers of evil. This, he says, is Lovecraft's own distortion". Subjective distortions are the concern of the phenomenologist; they should be analysed, not trusted as objective. Against this, Wilson describes an unusual experience partially recounted by one of Lovecraft's heroes, the horror writer Arthur Machen in a volume of autobiography aptly entitled *Things Near and Far*. There was "no vision of horror, of evil entities; only a conviction that the material world had shown itself to be a veil over deeper reality". This is essentially what Wilson thinks we should be investigating, and how we should investigate it, without any subjective distortions. "If man is really to evolve", says Wilson in *The Occult*, "then he must develop *depth*, and power over his own depths". Against accusations of pessimism, Lovecraft refers to himself as "an indifferentist" (in a letter from 1929) and attempts to stress that this state is completely impartial. If this were so – if it were truly phenomenological – he wouldn't have went on to ask his correspondent if he cared about "the welfare of some lousy Chinaman or god damn negro" a few pages later. Judged from his letters, Lovecraft does come across as a pessimist, as lethargic as Sartre. At worst he sounds like a complete nihilist ("life is a hideous thing" etc.) like Wilson's rather shocking yet accurate original comparison, the mass murderer Peter Kürten (who dreamed of blowing up cities with dynamite). Lovecraft's self division is expertly analysed both by Wilson and Kenneth Grant.

Wilson insists that underpowered perception will falsify the objects of perception, as insight depends upon an upsurge of vital energy – the kind that happens when the indifference threshold is crossed when stimulated by a crisis. Nietzsche experienced this in the two episodes discussed in chapter five of *The Outsider*, during a thunderstorm on Leusch hill in 1866 and four years later (during the Franco-Prussian war) when he drew against a wall and saw his old cavalry regiment riding past. Out of an abrupt change of focus from a state of fatigue to a state of exultation, caused by an apparently random set of factors, Nietzsche began to formulate his philosophy of the will to power. This sudden change of focus is what Wilson calls ‘dual value response’, the ability to view situations from the immediate details to the overall meaning in an instant. Our restricted consciousness can analyse the details from the ground easily but larger meanings require a more powerful drive, like a bird hovering over the landscape (both Wilson and Nietzsche use the term ‘bird’s-eye-view’: in *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche speaks of it as “the sole possibility” against “an anxious fear, as though something inimical lay behind it all from which everything had to take flight”).

In the same book, Nietzsche speaks of energies erroneously described as ‘evil’, the kind of destructive forces he would associate with the Dionysian (he uses the image of immense hollows left by glaciers). These energies are “the cyclopean architects and road-makers of humanity” because although destructive, they clear the paths for beautiful woodlands, towards “a gentler civilisation”, he says. Readers of Lovecraft’s late masterpiece *At the Mountains of Madness* will recognise the symbols of glaciers and frightful, ‘evil’ cyclopean energies, but

Nietzsche presents these images without any overt moral interpretations: they have more in common with what William Blake referred to in his illuminated poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as “the Antediluvians who are our energies”. These are the subterranean forces slumbering underneath the threshold, but Lovecraft, an ‘indifferentist’, could only understand them as malignant or, at his most objective, alien. Until we understand the form-imposing faculty, we are, Wilson says, “in no position to pass judgements on questions about the meaning and purpose of life, human nature etc”, because those doing so “may mistake part of themselves for an alien, an intruder” (Wilson’s Lovecraftian pastiches play on this latter point). The selective faculty of consciousness picks out details or matters of attention but it leaves out so much more. So “no matter how alien or meaningless life may appear to immediate consciousness”, Wilson points out, we are all “fully aware of it’s meaning on some deeper level” and it is these deep levels that the phenomenologist wishes to investigate. A huge area of our own being is “inaccessible to the beam of consciousness”, but there are moments or glimpses when we become aware that we contain “a ‘god-like chaos’ the potentiality of being “an enormous force”. This, says Wilson, is the opposite of Sartre’s nausea, his feeling that we are isolated in a world of exterior objects from which we must draw our meaning (Sartre describes a waiter in *Nausea* with the devastatingly accurate put down “when his establishment empties, his head empties too”).

By studying intentional (‘magical’) acts we begin to comprehend that ‘unintentional’ aspects of our conscious lives are also intentional, although we are generally unaware of this, as the compacted layers of willed intentions (erroneously labelled

‘mechanisms’) lie far below our conscious awareness. In moments of crisis, they appear, and we assume the crisis itself was responsible. What we should do in order to analyse these states properly, is separate the intention from its object (“the noema from the noetic act”) by ignoring the stimulus itself and concentrating on the act of intention instead. “Evolution is simply the capacity to register meanings that are already there” writes Wilson. Occultism, so-called, is fundamentally the study of these hidden depths, and Wilson’s interpretation of it opens up new possibilities for inspection, free of moral or cultural distortion and away from specific yogic or ritual practices (it should of course be remembered that Wilson practiced meditation as a youth). The ‘phenomenological quest’, which starts from the study of intentionality in action – phenomenology is an activity, not a mere philosophical label – intends to reverse perceptual processes which we take as ‘normal’ and unveil the “hidden achievements of the transcendental ego”, which is the fundamental aim of occultism, if we disregard the traditional paraphernalia. “Magick, no less than science”, writes Kenneth Grant “has erected effectual barriers that deter individuals who are sometimes better equipped to undertake such investigations than the ‘specialists’ themselves.” Grant remarks that the artist, the poet – we may as well just say ‘outsiders’- are usually more successful than occultists themselves; “mystery-mongers, and their dupes” lose themselves in “classification and analysis”, missing “essential linkages”. Lack of awareness of Wilson’s radical phenomenological take on occultism would in fact be but one perfect example. Grant then remarks that we need to cultivate a faculty that has remained dormant for a long time; without it, “no amount of explanation avails to penetrate the so-called mysteries of magic and mysticism”.

As we have seen, Grant's description of this faculty is identical to Wilson's Faculty X: the awareness of other times and places (or spaces). Grant writes that these 'other' times and 'other' spaces are in fact ourselves – Wilson has noted that we have little capacity for 'otherness' due to the relentless drive of the form imposing faculty or intentionality (which we still barely understand), and so we are unwise to make existential judgements on the meaning of life until we have investigated what we regard as 'alien', as these alien states, so-called, are likely to be a part of us, such as the layers of willed intentions inaccessible to rational everyday consciousness. The faculty of "re-activating all past and future states of consciousness" is, according to Grant, known "as the *93 Current* because of its association with the Great Old Ones" of Lovecraft's *Mythos*. The '93 Current' is a technical term for Crowley's philosophy of *Thelema* (θέλημα is ancient Greek for 'will' or 'wish', although in classical philology – Nietzsche's specialist subject – its forerunner was βουλή, meaning 'intention', 'project' or a purposeful will, which are also of course terms used in phenomenology and existentialism. Husserl's *Logical Investigations* contains a typically thorough analysis of 'willing', 'wishing' and 'intention', and Sartre suggested we design and perform our own 'projects' towards a lived freedom). Like Blake's Antediluvians or Nietzsche's "cyclopean builders and road makers of humanity", Lovecraft's Great Old Ones are seen as 'evil' from the rational, natural standpoint of humanity, as famously depicted in Lovecraft's own tales (note how Nietzsche suggests the powerful drive of a birds eye view to combat "an anxious fear" of something "inimical": a drive that Lovecraft completely lacked). Grant, like Wilson, has noted how Lovecraft suffered terrible self division with his rational personality at war

with the depths of his imagination – Wilson even suggests that that this bifurcation actually killed him. And Grant, as co-editor of Crowley's own *Confessions*, has noted that the book documents Crowley's own "struggle against accepting the Current", a point also made by Wilson at the end of a short monograph on 'the Beast' which he presented in 1987. Writing about "the birth of a new faculty" in a brief collection of essays 'towards truth' in 1938, Crowley rightly prioritises "direct experience" (existentialism) over faith, yet he still declares this faculty "alien".

Grant defines this 'Current' as the "*mode*" of magic (intentional acts) which can reactivate both the past (the deep strata of willed intentions) and the future (our hidden evolutionary intentionality). It is Wilson's 'other mode' – a new type of perception, the *new* existentialism, in fact – where "distant realities are as real as the present moment", or Faculty X (the phenomenological faculty). The complex web of poetic relations between Crowley's 93 Current and Lovecraft's mythical Great Old Ones are best understood by reading Grant's nine volumes of trilogies. In the fifth volume he says that the Great Old Ones and the Elder Gods (also know as the Forgotten Ones) are "interchangeable". Occultists associated with Grant have described these as dwelling "in the individual and irrational unconscious. They are the gods of survival, they are pre-rational, they are blind and immensely powerful. Their force manifested in man as hunger, the sex urge, the 'fight or flight' adrenaline reaction and the tribal cohesion factor. Hunger constitutes the primary link between the Elder Gods and the forgotten ones" (rather like Whitehead's notion of prehension). These forces manifest in humans as hunger, sex, safety and

security – the pyramid of Maslow’s needs which must be met before self-actualisation (the true will, in magical terms) can occur. So Lovecraft’s fictional ‘Great Old Ones’, like Blake’s “Antediluvians who are our energies”, like the forces described by Nietzsche in his ‘Cyclops of Culture’ aphorism, are the deep willed intentions of Wilson’s phenomenology, which are “forbidden” to our conscious minds. But as Wilson says, we have a *right* to know about them. The study of intentionality is the start: Wilson compares this power to a kind of hand, tentacle or pseudopodium reaching into a new dimension, a new ‘organ’ grasping these new perceptions.

“The lop-sidedness of Western man has made him, up till now, a highly successful evolutionary experiment” says Wilson in *Beyond the Outsider*. But “a time has come when it must be consciously recognised and compensated. Otherwise there can be no ‘next step’ in evolution” (the phrase ‘next step’ was also used by Crowley). In studying the ‘nightside’ of human consciousness by the clear light of phenomenological enquiry, Wilson created a powerful synthesis. But the implications remain barely comprehended by ‘specialists’ in either philosophy or esoterica as neither have noticed the underlying connections. Specialism is part of the lop-sidedness which has made us so successful, but at a price: we remain trapped in narrowness, unaware of broader meanings. This must be compensated by the development of an awareness of the hidden (‘forbidden’) layers of intentionality.

‘If the ignorance of my unconscious mind is untrue – a fake – then how about my ignorance of who I am, what life is about, where I was before my birth and where I’ll be after my death...? Could I say that my birth was ‘intentional’ too? This certainly

seems true in moments of mystical insight”. These remarks, from Wilson’s emendations in his own copy of *Introduction to the New Existentialism* (privately published in 1995) go on to ask “are we propelled into birth and death by a deep intentionality, just as we are propelled into sleep or waking?” Until we study these deep intentions we will likely never find out, and what Wilson calls “the secret of life” will remain alien to us. “As long as this remains true”, Wilson writes at the end of *Beyond the Occult*, “man will continue to mark time at his present stage of evolution. The moment it ceases to be true, the next stage of human evolution will commence”.

Further reading:

The ‘Occult Trilogy’:

The Occult. (Hodder & Stoughton, 1971) [kindle](#)

Mysteries. (Hodder & Stoughton, 1978) [kindle](#)

Beyond The Occult. (Bantam, 1988) [kindle](#)

Also:

Rasputin & the Fall of the Romanovs. (Arthur Barker, 1964, Panther, 1977)

Poetry and Mysticism. (City Lights, 1969; expanded: Hutchinson, 1970, City Lights, 1986)

Strange Powers. (Latimer New Directions, 1970, Abacus, 1975)

The War Against Sleep. (Aquarian, 1980) [kindle](#)

Poltergeist! (NEL, 1981)

Witches. (Dragon’s world/Paper Tiger, 1981)

The Quest for Wilhelm Reich. (Granada, 1981)

The Psychic Detectives. (Pan, 1984)

Rudolf Steiner: The Man and his Vision. (Aquarian, 1985, Aeon

Books, 2005)

Afterlife. (Harrap, 1985, Grafton, 1987; expanded ed. Caxton Editions, 2000)

Aleister Crowley: The Nature of the Beast. (Aquarian, 1987, Aeon Books, 2005)

The Encyclopedia of Unsolved Mysteries. (Harrap, 1987)

Unsolved Mysteries: Past & Present. (Headline, 1993)

The Strange Life of P.D. Ouspensky. (Aquarian, 1993) [kindle](#)

From Atlantis to the Sphinx. (Virgin Books, 1996, revised ed. 2007) [kindle](#)

The Atlantis Blueprint. [With Rand Flem-Ath] (Little, Brown & Co. 2000)

Super Consciousness (Watkins, 2009) [kindle](#)