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THE WORLD OF COLIN WILSON

By the same author :

SUNLIGHT ON THE FOOTHILLS

TOWARDS THE MOUNTAINS

REACHING HIGH HEAVEN

ONLY THE STARS REMAIN

The World of Colin Wilson

A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

by

SIDNEY R. CAMPION

FREDERICK MULLER LIMITED
LONDON

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S. R. C.

FOREWORD

by

COLIN WILSON

My feelings about this book are mixed, and I want to explain why. I have known Sidney Champion's work since I was about ten years old. I have read his four volumes of autobiography, and was bowled over by *Sunlight on the Foothills* and *Towards the Mountains*. It was the archetypal success story—the working-class boy, born in a slum, who devoted most of his life to self-education, and ended with half a page in *Who's Who*, and a string of letters after his name. Fifteen years later, after I had published my own first book, I could still recall certain incidents from his life as if they came from some esoteric Leicester mythology: how his mother used to arrange her weekly money into neat little heaps on the kitchen table, one for the butcher, one for the grocer, etc.; how he climbed a greasy pole at a fairground and won the ham on top, with cheers from the crowd; how the principal citizens of Leicester invited him to a banquet, and he burst into tears when asked to stand up and make a speech. His extraordinary frankness about his sexual life had also haunted my adolescence—but this is no place to speak of that.

My mother was fascinated by his books—she ranked him only second to D. H. Lawrence. Like myself, she found these pictures of slum boyhood, in streets we knew so well, a kind of cathartic—or perhaps consolation is a better word. Sidney Champion's childhood had been very like her own—and like my father's: their playground was the railway embankment; the 'Recky', the waste ground used as a rubbish dump. In the light of Sidney Champion's autobiographies, their own lives could appear to be a meaningful progress from poverty and near starvation, to comfort and respectability in a council house.

I think my mother sometimes confused Sidney with D. H. Lawrence, for she came to Lawrence through Sidney's books. Sidney had read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from beginning to end in one sitting when it first appeared, and had written an

impassioned defence that never found a publisher. I know that she read *Sons and Lovers* immediately after *Sunlight on the Foothills* and *Towards the Mountains*, and then went steadily through all the books of Lawrence she could find in the public library. I tried to read Lawrence, but found him a bore; I rated him a long way below Champion.

Consequently, I was filled with excitement when my telephone rang one day in June 1956, and a voice with a perceptible Leicester accent introduced itself as Sidney Champion, I asked incredulously: 'Not *the* Sidney Champion?' I think I would have been less startled if the caller had been D. H. Lawrence or Bernard Shaw. I was disappointed when the caller explained that he wanted to sculpt a bust of me; this was obviously not the right man. But the matter was soon clarified; sculpture and painting were two more of the spare-time occupations of the famous Leicester author.

I had another surprise when I met him. I remembered the photograph in *Sunlight on the Foothills*—the handsome hawk-faced man with folded arms and firm jaw, who had been overwhelmed by fan-letters from adoring women when his autobiography had appeared. When I went into the front garden of his neat suburban house in Merton Park, Wimbledon, I was met by a medium, mild-faced man with greying hair, and the delightfully vague manner that is the result of partial deafness. His wife Claire was introduced to me. I must confess that I had been looking forward to this meeting with considerable curiosity. Although it would be untrue to picture Champion as a second Frank Harris, he has written about his love-life with a lack of reticence that is unusual in England. In the many years that had passed since I read his books, I had retained in my mind a picture of Claire that was a sort of compound of Constance Chatterley, Miss Blandish, and Hemingway's 'Rabbit'. I now shook hands with a small, fair-haired woman who reminded me overwhelmingly of my favourite grandmother. She gave me tea (she could see at a glance that I had had too much to drink), and asked me exactly the kind of questions about my father and mother that I would have expected if she had been my grandmother.

I soon came to enjoy the afternoons and evenings spent at Sidney's house in Wimbledon. 'Literary celebrity' had hit me too quickly after years of living and working alone, and nothing

seemed real. I drank too much, went to too many parties, and was surprised that so many people seemed prepared to detest me without having met me. I had no internal resistance to cope with this sudden change in my habits, and even less to cope with the hostility. Spending an afternoon with the Champions was like turning back the clock fifteen years, when I used to spend every Saturday evening with my grandparents and listen to Music Hall and Saturday Night Theatre. I left them feeling like a human being again.

It came as surprise to me when Sidney suggested writing something about me. I knew he was a freelance writer, although at that moment he occupied a high post in the Civil Service. I would not have objected to his writing an article about me; a full-length book was a different matter. By this time I was fairly closely acquainted with Sidney, and could recognize at first hand the amazing romanticism that had endeared itself to me in his books. His enthusiasm about self-help was the real Samuel Smiles article, with a dash of the sophistication of Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale. But I was also aware that I deserved no medals for self-help. I had always been devoid of ambition in Sidney's sense of the word. Sidney had received very little education, and had left a small local school at fourteen to help support his family, after years of newspaper-selling in the streets of Leicester. He had taught himself in his spare time, had been taken under the wing of a man who eventually became Prime Minister, read for the Bar, and ended as a high-ranking civil servant, with an O.B.E. I had been given an education grant at the age of eleven, and had matriculated at sixteen; even then, I had a further year of part-time studies for a science degree. My parents were not rich; but we had never known actual poverty; consequently I was able to spend the money I earned delivering newspapers or green-groceries on chemicals and to equip my own laboratory in our spare room. I had a great deal of free time, which I spent reading the books borrowed from the public library, and 'education' came easily to me. Admittedly, my desire to be a writer meant that I could not accept a 'respectable' job, or even try for a university scholarship, and I lived a vagabond existence until the publication of my first book. But this was less ambition than a kind of physical discomfort; I could no more help writing than a dog with fleas can help scratching. When

I actually began to think of publication, success came very easily; the first publisher to whom I submitted half a dozen pages of my projected book accepted it.

Nothing I could say would convince Sidney to take this viewpoint. His own story could have been used as a sermon by Henry Ford; I had achieved national notoriety and a best-seller at twenty-five; consequently, I was an even fitter subject for a sermon.

All the same, I was too flattered by his offer to write about me to press this objection. I wrote a delighted letter to my mother telling her that Sidney wanted to write about me. She produced piles of my letters and journals; Sidney went to Leicester to see her. I answered his letters and questionnaires at length, handed over to him stacks of journals, diaries, letters, press-cuttings, and spent a great deal of time talking with him, and I shall never forget our hours together in his studio at the bottom of the garden.

By the time the book was finally completed a great deal had happened to me, as well as to other young writers who had made a success in the mid-nineteen-fifties. There seemed to exist a widespread belief that I had welcomed the constant newspaper publicity that had surrounded me (as it had surrounded John Osborne, Michael Hastings and many others) since the publication of *The Outsider*. At the beginning, this had been true; but I soon came to understand its effect on my reputation as a writer. It meant, of course, that my books were not read with an open mind. It meant that I was judged by my notoriety, instead of by what I was trying to do.

This was true of all my contemporaries who had made overnight reputations with first books or plays—Braine, Osborne, Amis, Shelagh Delaney, Wain and the rest; in America it happened to Norman Mailer and James Jones, and later to Kerouac; in France, to Sagan and Schwarz-Bart.

Its most important consequence is that a writer is hurled into 'professionalism' at an early stage. He feels that a certain product is expected of him. He is no longer allowed to 'try to' do something; he is expected to do it, or be judged harshly for his failure to do it. One result of this pressure is to turn the Osbornes and Amises into Rattigans and Wodehouses. Another is to turn Mailers and Kerouacs into professional rebels with a permanent resentment. The kind of leisurely development that

was possible for Yeats and Shaw becomes a remote dream of a less complicated age.

As far as I was concerned, there was no point in indulging in self-pity about all this. As a writer, I wanted to spend my life developing a kind of new science, a philosophy that would be a logical development of the work of Whitehead and Heidegger, and yet which would go deeper than either. It meant that my own definition of philosophy was an attempt to apply the machinery of Science to the process of living. This aim had little enough in common with the kind of publicity I was receiving through the gossip columns. But the gossip columns can be left behind. Moreover, a writer's chief business is to build up a body of work that expresses the line of his development. A writer who stops developing because each book is either attacked or misunderstood is a weakling.

In 1957, I moved to Cornwall, and settled down to building a 'body of work'. Two years later, Sidney showed me his book about me. Naturally, I was flattered to read it. But common sense told me that it would come between my writing and my potential audience more than a hundred gossip columns. There was nothing in the book that was actually untrue. It was a straightforward autobiographical account, with a brief examination of my books. But since my aim was to be read as an existentialist thinker, the autobiographical part had no *raison d'être*. Certain writers have produced autobiographies in their twenties—like Beverley Nichols's *Twenty-Five*—with the intention of creating an *enfant terrible* reputation—in the spirit in which Max Beerbohm's first book was called *The Collected Works of Max Beerbohm*. Others, like Stuart Holroyd, have written semi-autobiographical books in order to provide their ideas with a simple framework. But as far as I knew, no writer of twenty-eight—whose first book had appeared only three years previously—had ever had a *biography* written about him.

Reluctantly, I wrote to Sidney, pointing this out, and suggesting that the book might be more palatable if it could be turned into a sociological study of the 'angry young men' instead of a book exclusively about myself. But I was aware that this was asking rather a lot when he had written the whole of the book, and was not surprised when he replied that he was not particularly interested in writing about other young writers. I then asked if he would at least reduce the biographical portion

of the book, and increase the part about my writings. Obliging, he agreed, but insisted that sufficient biographical material must be retained to show my evolution as a thinker and a writer. The present version of the book is another two years of suggestions on my part and revisions on his—four years in all. His patience has exceeded anything I had reason to expect.

A typical anecdote about Sidney will explain the grounds for my original trepidation. As a young man, he was highly valued by his friends. One day at the age of twenty-four he decided, like King Lear, to put their affections to the test. So taking advantage of his wife's absence, he wrote letters on black-edged notepaper to all his friends announcing his own death. He signed them with his wife's name. Consoling letters came flooding in by every post, together with glowing testimonials to his ability and character, and to the greatness he would have achieved had he been spared. Sidney was touched, and decided it was unfair to prolong the sorrow of his friends a moment longer than necessary. He wrote to them all under his own name, explaining that it was a joke. He was surprised when many took the joke in bad part, and refused to speak to him again.

Many men have daydreamed that they might, like Tom Sawyer, attend their own funeral; Sidney is the only man I have ever known whose romanticism actually led him to find out. He was also idealistic enough to be puzzled and hurt when his friends were offended.

It is this combination of idealism and nervous energy that makes him an unpredictable biographer. His vitality is a constant source of amazement to me; but I recognise that it is directly related to the innocence that is occasionally a source of exasperation.

Having said this, I have fulfilled my original intention of explaining my ambivalent attitude to the present book. I would prefer that it completely ignored the biography and concentrated on my work. Why should anybody be interested in the biographical facts about any man under the age of eighty? But it would be ungrateful to me to make any more of this grouse. Besides, I am thinking of getting my own back by writing *The Life and Works of Sidney Campion*.

Gorran Haven, Cornwall,

September 30th, 1961

INTRODUCTION

THIS book began as an essay on the ideas of Colin Wilson, of which I have never seen a satisfactory assessment. In tracing the development of his ideas, I had many conversations with him in my home, in my studio, in clubs and restaurants, and wherever we met. I have read his diaries and journals, remarkable in themselves, and have quoted extensively from them. He has a fair amount of unpublished work which I have carefully studied. I have seen many of the thousands of letters that Colin Wilson has received from all parts of the world, and they have been useful as an indication of the public reaction to his various books. I have gone through hundreds of letters that he wrote to his mother from the moment he left home to wander about the world, not aimlessly, in search of a platform from which to present his ideas to mankind. I have met all the members of his family, and they had been helpful in the writing of this book.

I quickly saw that it would be impossible to write about his ideas without calling upon a considerable amount of biographical material, and when I began collecting the facts of his life story, I discovered that here was a boy and a youth of quite exceptional talent and calibre, whose unceasing determination to become a writer was certain to be fulfilled. Although faced with more than the average share of obstacles from his earliest years, immediately he became conscious of his direction, long before his teens, he went straight ahead and triumphed in his own particular way. It was not a hollow triumph, for it was based upon profound reading for one so young, an excellent memory, an analytical mind, serious purpose and an intense personality. No man of power and character can go through life without blundering, and Colin Wilson has learnt from his blunders.

This young man is an unusual creative literary force, and his first book, *The Outsider*, captivated the critics and became the talk of the world; there has been nothing quite comparable to it in this century. Thus, at the age of twenty-four, the unknown

sleeper on Hampstead Heath became comparatively rich and famous within a matter of hours.

It has given me considerable pleasure to write this book; there are enough points of similarity between us to make me feel that I was writing autobiography, having already written four large autobiographical books. We were both born in Leicester in working-class families, and lived in the same district. We were both largely self-educated, and at an early age we both made up our minds to become writers of world renown. We both worked in warehouses, factories and woodmills, before we rebelled. We both set out for London to make a start—I, in a snow blizzard in January 1909, with one shilling; Colin in a 1951 June heat-wave with three pounds. Luckily, the Rt. Hon. James Ramsay MacDonald took an interest in me and I became a journalist, schoolmaster, barrister and author, but I had to wait thirty years before I published my first book, *Sunlight on the Foothills*, declared to be too frank and ought to be banned. Among my readers was Colin Wilson, aged 10, who borrowed the book from the Leicester Public Library, and after reading it, insisted upon his mother 'sharing my delight'. He was able to quote accurately from it thirteen years later when I first met him. His vivid memory of the book convinced me that he was not flattering when he told me that it had been a powerful stimulus in his determination to become a writer.

A prolific writer in his boyhood, Colin Wilson was critical and courageous enough to destroy his million-word diary in his early teens because he considered it too infantile for others to read. In his diary he wrote of science, space travel, religion, novels, poetry, plays, biography, and his fellow human beings. That enormous diary would have been very useful now.

A man can be judged by the publications for which he writes. Since his emergence from obscurity, Colin Wilson has contributed to a wide variety of publications, many of them of high quality, on both sides of the Atlantic—newspapers, magazines, periodicals. The majority of his contributions have been the review of important books, articles expanding ideas in his own books, and comments on current affairs in his own field of activity. He has broadcast and appeared on television on several occasions, has lectured at many European and American universities, engaged in public debate, has appeared in one of his own plays, while his books have been translated into a

dozen languages. At one point he became so involved in newspaper headlines, that he has had to move from London to Cornwall for peace and privacy in his work.

The convention that a man should not be biographed until he has reached three score years and ten has no validity in this quickly moving era. The convention may have been necessary in the more leisurely days up to the twentieth century, because one had to live long to live deeply. Nowadays, a man can live intensely and travel over vast spaces, mental and physical, while in the twenties; have experiences in that short period equal to the old-style octogenarian; and meet a wide range of people of world stature. Surely it is the depth and intensity of living, and not the mere expanse of years, that warrants a personal study of this kind? Let me have five years of depths in preference to fifty years of shallowness, for a vital pulsating book! It is upon this basis that *The World of Colin Wilson* is submitted to the public.

SIDNEY R. CAMPION

Merton Park,
London, S.W.19.

1

HOW WE MET

IN June 1956 the newspapers and periodicals were carrying a great deal of information about a young writer whose first book, *The Outsider*, had made him a reputation and a considerable amount of money in a very short time. Eminent literary critics had praised the book in superlatives. In *The Observer*, Philip Toynbee asked: 'Who is Colin Wilson?'; and after comparing the book favourably with Sartre, ended his review: '. . . Mr. Wilson's book is a real contribution to our understanding of our deepest predicament.' Cyril Connolly in the *Sunday Times* was equally favourable: 'He has a quick, dry intelligence, a power of logical analysis which he applies to those states of consciousness that generally defy it. He has read prodigiously and digested what he has read, and he loves what is best.'

In view of some of the later comments that have been made about Colin Wilson's work, it may seem difficult to understand why many of the first reviewers of the book were so uncritically enthusiastic. The answer may be supplied in a sentence in Toynbee's review: 'It is an exhaustive and luminously intelligent study . . . and what makes the book truly astounding is that its alarmingly well-read author is only twenty-four years old. I know that such extraneous facts ought not to affect one's judgement, but . . . it is pointless to deny that this fact has coloured all my reading of this remarkable book.'

It certainly coloured my own attitude towards its author, and my interest quickened when I saw him referred to in one of the daily gossip columns as 'this Midlands D. H. Lawrence'. Lawrence had been the passion of my youth and early manhood; my first complete book had been a study of Lawrence and a defence of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In the gale of publicity that followed publication of *The Outsider*, I discovered that Colin's

early background had many points in common with my own—as well as with Lawrence's. I decided to contact him and suggest making a bust. I rang him late one afternoon. When he replied, I told him that I was Sidney Champion of Leicester, and that my wife, Claire, and I would like him to come around to tea one day, and that I'd love to sculpt him. He accepted immediately.

'You don't sound like a Leicester lad.'

'How do you mean?'

'You haven't got a Leicester accent.'

'Thanks. I spent years getting rid of that. But I think you can tell sometimes.'

(I discovered later that this was one of his pet theories—the idea of a classless accent, neither 'Oxford' nor BBC nor specifically local, which would be the first step towards a real classless society.)

I hung up feeling rather pleased with myself. When I had dialled the Notting Hill number, it was not without some faint apprehension that the call might be regarded as an invasion of privacy; instead, my vanity had been liberally nourished and a definite contact established. The next day I began working on the bust, using newspaper photographs to get the basic structure, and so save time. (I had a feeling that Colin Wilson might not enjoy sitting still for any length of time.)

* * *

He arrived late, very late, long after I'd decided he wouldn't come. I happened to be looking out of the front bedroom window when I saw him turn the corner on a bicycle with a mini-motor attachment. Rain was beating down, and he was wearing a plastic mac that flapped in the wind. The machine zigzagged erratically along the road, and he peered short-sightedly at the numbers on the houses. I hurried downstairs to meet him, and discovered him three houses up the road, wheeling the contraption. His first comment was:

'Why aren't you in the phone book? I've been trying to ring you to explain I'd be delayed.'

He staggered, and almost fell flat across the bicycle.

'I'm not really drunk . . . the rain gets on my specs and I can't see. Still, I've had too much to drink. Got through a bottle of Volnay. I've got mixed up with some people who want

to make a gramophone record of *The Outsider*, and they seem to do nothing but drink.'

We parked the bicycle at the side of the house, out of the rain. I said:

'Come on in and have some tea.'

'Ah, what a splendid idea. My mouth's dry. Awfully sorry I'm late. Still, you shouldn't be ex-directory. . . .'

He dumped his raincoat and the wet beret on the banisters, and I introduced him to Claire. He kissed her and said he'd been wondering what she looked like ever since he was ten. Claire looked pleased and went off to make the tea. Colin immediately asked if he could ring his girl friend and tell her he'd probably be back late that evening. I left him in my study and went off to help with the tea. A quarter of an hour later, he had still not emerged, and I peeped round the door; he was sitting on the floor, looking through my books on law and criminology. He brought Lord Birkenhead's *Famous Trials* back with him into the sitting-room, and declined to be parted from it until he left two hours later.

'I didn't realise you were interested in crime,' I told him.

'Good lord, yes. The subject always fascinated me. I wrote a chapter on *The Outsider* as Criminal, but there wasn't room for it in the book.'

Claire asked him if he didn't think such an interest a little morbid.

'I don't think so. Dostoevsky was fascinated by crime—he used to keep newspaper cuttings of all the current cases. I can understand why. It takes you deeper into human psychology than any other subject, except sex.'

He quickly located my own books on the shelf, and made a pile of them on the floor. Looking through *Sunlight on the Foothills*, he said:

'It's funny to look through this again. I last read it thirteen years ago. Ah, this is one of the bits that impressed me—about the church you built in the backyard when you were a boy. I used to be a religious little imp as a child—used to walk around praying under my breath. And my mother liked the bit about how your mother used to separate the week's wages into piles on the table—one for the grocer, one for the butcher. . . . Some of my family still live in the streets around where you were born.'

This carried us into lengthy reminiscences of the Charnwood Street district of Leicester (known to locals as 'Charny'; it is also a shopping district, and you will hear Leicester housewives say: 'I'm going up Charny'; as pronounced in the broadest Leicester accent, this sounds like: 'Ah'm gooin oop Charny'). When he grinned, I noticed that his teeth were wine-stained, and some of his words were slurred. After a quarter of an hour, he complained that the warmth of the room was abetting the wine and making him feel drunk again, so we walked down the garden to my studio. As we walked, he placed his hand on my shoulder as if we had been acquainted for years (possibly also to steady himself).

I was pleased with the shape of his head—it promised to make a good bust. While he sat, buried in Lord Birkenhead, I took calliper measurements of his head. Colin commented that he had always wished he could work with his hands. In various factory jobs, he had learned to be efficient at tasks requiring ordinary engineering skill, but it had produced no creative aptitude. He added that, come to think of it, he had always wanted to write music too, but never been able to master the intricacies of the piano keyboard.

'You like music?' I asked him.

'More than anything else. I sometimes think that if I had to choose between music and sex, I'd give up sex. If *The Outsider* makes me much money, I intend to buy a gramophone and lots of records. I seem to spend such a lot nowadays. I bought that puff-puff bike off a friend for twenty pounds to save taxi fares. It's amazing how much you can spend when you start meeting journalists and publishers and eating out in Soho.'

I asked him what he thought of the paragraph about him that had appeared the week before in the gossip column of the *Sunday Times*. The writer had implied that *The Outsider* was being bought for snob reasons only ('furniture sales' they are called in the trade), and that no one really wanted to read it.

'He's probably right. I didn't expect to reach a large audience with it. You know, before it came out, I expected a reaction like the one Nietzsche's first book got—*The Birth of Tragedy*? All the professors slaughtered it and Nietzsche was unpopular ever after.'

'Don't you think that perhaps people are intelligent enough to see the qualities of your book?'

'I don't know. Either they're less stupid than I thought, or they've made a mistake. I'm inclined to think they've made a mistake.'

I remembered these words eighteen months later when his second book was savaged by every critic in Fleet Street!

Towards seven o'clock he declared he had to leave. It was still raining and blowing hard. I asked him to sign two copies of *The Outsider* that had been bought by friends of mine, and also my own copy. While he was writing in them, I told him:

'You know, I'd like to write something about you. What you've been saying throws some interesting light on your book.'

'I'd be flattered.'

Nothing more was said, although after he had gone I made some notes about our conversation, as well as the talk over the phone. We had arranged that he should come over on the following Saturday, and bring his girl friend, Joy.

* * *

They arrived in time for lunch, both very hungry. Joy Stewart proved to be a slim, blonde girl, with a soft and curiously pleasant voice. Her slimness gave an impression of height, although I doubt whether she is more than five foot six. She and Claire immediately hit it off; they had both been schoolteachers and studied languages. So after lunch, we left them to talk and do the washing up, and went down to the studio. Colin took his place on the 'throne' and watched me manipulate the soft clay; he seemed astonished at the progress the bust had already made. (He had been sitting for a professional sculptor who was taking a great deal longer over it.) He had brought another book on crime down with him, but he preferred to talk and answer questions as I worked. Halfway through the afternoon, Joy came down to see the progress the bust had made, and when she had gone, Colin began to tell me about her. She had taken an honours degree in English at Trinity College, Dublin, and had later taught for a year in France. She had been engaged to a fellow student at Trinity, and had intended to travel out to Canada to marry him when Colin met her working in Lewis's, the big departmental store in Leicester. He had then been working as a carpet salesman, while Joy had a temporary job as an assistant sales manager. I asked him what first attracted him to her. 'Her voice, her

smile, and the graceful way she walks.' I advised him to marry her as soon as possible. 'I can't. I'm married already.' I stared at him in astonishment. 'When? And how? Where is she now?' He then related the whole story of his marriage to a nurse in Leicester, appearing to be glad to unburden himself. He talked for a long time, and when he had finished, it was no longer light enough to do any more work on the bust (I prefer not to work by artificial light).

This was the first of the long conversations about his background and ideas that became the groundwork of this book. Several more took place in the studio while the bust was in progress, and others on walks around London, over lunches, in pubs, and in my home; and most of them are utilised or recorded somewhere or other in this biographical study. They gave me an insight into the Colin Wilson who has little in common with the one who has posed for photographs or given interviews to journalists, or deliberately played a part on some TV appearance. He was always frank, sometimes too frank, intensely interested in his own ideas, and assuming the same interest in everyone he talked to, and capable of overstating them in a moment of excitement. The result was frequently an impression of an extraordinary naïvety, which Kenneth Allsop has also noted in his book *The Angry Decade*:

'It is, I think, this single-minded drive that has brought him a lot of the trouble he has recently seen. In the summer of 1956 he, his friend Joy Stewart and I went down with Daniel Farson to . . . North Devon. . . . I was driving, and Wilson sat beside me, and for all the journey, we talked about Outsiderism—except for one brief divergence. I saw a rabbit and exclaimed with surprise, for this was at the peak of the myxomatosis plague, and the countryside has been wiped clean of them. Wilson did not understand my surprise, which was redoubled when I discovered he had never heard of myxomatosis. The reason was simple; he never read a newspaper because he would not sacrifice from his work the amount of time this required. His thinking is formidable in his own chosen routes: like a river which has scoured into limestone until it runs densely in the depths of a ravine, yet there are vast areas it has never encountered.

'On another occasion, when I was in Birmingham with him on a television programme, he mentioned lunching with Sir

Oswald Mosley, whom he thought "rather a decent chap". As the opponents of the Wilson group have accused them of Neo-Fascism . . . and as the Wilson group have recently been going to some considerable trouble to deny this . . . this seemed an injudicious remark. A journalist present acidly took him up on his meeting with Mosley, and in the conversation that followed, it emerged that Wilson had no knowledge *whatever* of the history of Mosley and the British Union of Fascists, and, even more amazing, nothing but the vaguest notion of the big political issues of the thirties and forties. On either side of Wilson's self-acquired education are vast virgin forests of naïvety. I think it has often been his genuinely innocent ignorance of the complex, dangerous forces of publicity he has blunderingly stirred up which has been mistaken for arrogance and impudence.'

This has certainly been my own impression of Colin Wilson's approach to questions of public relations. The 'genius for publicity' that certain journalists have alleged he possesses, seems to amount to a candour that usually provides good copy.

2

THE UNUSUAL BOY

COLIN made no bones about being flattered by the interest I was taking in his life and ideas. He had talked to many journalists about his ideas, and had always been disappointed with what finally appeared in print. He once confided to me: 'Talking to journalists is a science in itself. You know what will come out at the other end will be quite unrecognisable. So you try to make adjustments at your own end to try to judge what the public image will look like when it gets out at the other end.' I pointed out to him that Shaw and Yeats both believed it impossible to 'get across' a sincere public personality, and chose to act a part that they judged suitable for public consumption. He replied gloomily: 'I'm beginning to think they were right.'

But a lengthy study of him was quite a different matter. One day he brought me an immense pile of journals, letters and unpublished manuscripts, packed into an ex-paratroop rucksack. 'Keep them as long as you like. I'm glad to get them out of the way. That place of mine is becoming impossible. You can't move for the mess.' I understood what he meant; I had visited the place—a first-floor flat in Chepstow Villas, Notting Hill Gate—which consisted of two large bare rooms with naked floorboards, naked electric light bulbs, no curtains, an enormous and ancient kitchen table (for which he had paid ten shillings in the Portobello Road) and thousands of books and papers on home-made wooden shelves.

The journals were not easy reading. For the most part they were in stiff-covered notebooks, quarto or foolscap size; the handwriting varied from moderately neat to wholly illegible. They dated from his seventeenth year onwards; earlier volumes had been destroyed.

His willingness to allow me to read the journals was another

example of the frankness I have mentioned. It was obvious that they had not been written with the idea of a reader in mind; they are 'personal' in the most complete sense of the word (and, in fact, any kind of publication would be impossible without a great deal of censoring). The inhibitions of the public writings are absent; the result is that it is possible to form a particularly complete picture of the writer from them.

My interest in the journals led me to contact Colin's family and establish certain basic biographical details which I now give.

* * *

Colin Wilson was born on June 26th, 1931, at 3.30 a.m., the first child of Arthur and Annetta Wilson (*née* Jones). Both parents were barely twenty; both were the children of large working-class families in Leicester. Arthur Wilson was a shoe operative, earning between four and five pounds a week. Eighteen months later, another son was born. Later still, another brother and a sister joined the family.

Colin's father has commented that he was a 'damned nuisance' as a baby, always yelling for attention or breaking something. After one sleepless night, he told Colin's mother to 'throw the little devil out of the window'. Other stories reinforce the impression that Colin was a difficult child. There was the occasion when he opened the food cupboard and emptied every bottle and jar over the furniture. And one day, when his mother noticed that he seemed to be unusually quiet, she discovered that he had placed the best cushion in the centre of the room, relieved his bowels on it, and then fallen asleep.

Annetta's health was never robust. Twice in Colin's early years she was in hospital with phlebitis in the leg. Her husband, although he was a steady worker who refused to stay away from work even when sick, was fond of a game of darts in the 'local' and spent relatively little time at home. In a letter to me, Colin wrote:

'I think Mum got disillusioned with marriage pretty early. It must have been pretty difficult for her with two children (always fighting and yelling) and a home to run on about three pounds a week. She was often in tears, and used to tell me about her worries from quite an early age. She didn't have many women friends—I can only count three or four in the past twenty years—and used to spend all her free time reading

magazines about romance or murder, or books borrowed from the library.

‘When I say Mum got disillusioned with marriage, I don’t mean that Dad beat her, or got drunk every night, or anything like that. They used to row sometimes, but they were both having a hard time of it. Dad used to take me and Bas (Colin’s brother, Barry) out for a walk every Saturday evening and buy us sweets. On Saturday night, he and Mum went to the Spinney Hill Club, and they used to bring us back a bar of chocolate and an orange for Sunday morning. We were both very fond of Dad until I was about seven, when he began to develop stomach ulcers, and became so unpredictable and irritable that we kept out of his way for days at a time. I suppose the main thing I can remember about those days is the Christmasses.’

Annetta was glad when Colin was four, and she could send him to school. By this time, the family had moved from the small flat in Asfordby Street (where his grandparents lived) to a council house in Coleman Road on the outskirts of Leicester. The council house seemed an unbelievable luxury to both parents; it had a front, as well as a back, garden, with lawns; Coleman Road is a wide, tree-lined avenue with broad grass verges, leading up to the hill on which stands the City General Hospital. From the top of the hill there is an immense view over Leicestershire. Within a quarter of an hour’s walk of their home at 5 The Littleway, there was the open countryside towards Scraftoft village. A favourite Sunday-afternoon walk was towards Evington village, along a narrow country road known as Cut Throat Lane (because a girl is said to have been murdered there). Colin’s father had bought a tiny saddle that was attached to the crossbar of his bicycle; on this, he used to take Colin for Sunday-morning rides, looking for mushrooms or blackberries.

On the morning Colin started at the Coleman Road Infants’ School, he could count up to fifty in English and twenty in Hindustani. The latter had been picked up from his Uncle Ernie, who had soldiered on the Northern Frontier of India. He had also been taught by some relative to recite chunks of Dickens, and to sing a song called ‘Standing Outside a Lunatic Asylum’. These accomplishments were all produced on his first day at school, to the surprise of the teacher, Miss Glover.

Later, Miss Glover had to warn Annetta that Colin was taking her into his confidence about the domestic affairs of the Wilsons, and was reproducing for her benefit some of Annetta's confidences about the disadvantages of marriage. The candour that I noticed later, seems to have been present from a fairly early age.

On the question of the relationship with his mother, Colin had the following comments:

'It was never what you'd call a Proustian relationship. I was very fond of her, of course, and would listen endlessly to her stories about her childhood. (It was always the same formula when she was ironing: "Tell us about when you were a little girl, Mam.") But I hated being caressed, or any hint of sentimentality. I could never work up the least sympathy or understanding for the relationship that Lawrence describes in *Sons and Lovers* or Proust in *Swann*. It was a relation based largely on curiosity and explanation; she never tried to hide anything from me, and explained the 'facts of life' when I was about six. She also talked with complete frankness about various grown-up affairs—her opinion of various friends and acquaintances.'

While on the subject of Colin's sexual education, it is worth remarking that he was almost the victim of a sex maniac. Once on his way to the local library with his brother and a friend, a man pushing a bicycle asked them if they wanted cigarette cards. The other two refused, but Colin agreed to go off with the man. They walked a few hundred yards through some allotments, and into a small wood. There the man leaned his bicycle against the tree and asked Colin to wait for a moment. Colin followed him cautiously, and saw him peeping over the top of a bush at a man who had been standing in the gateway of a nearby allotment, and who had observed them entering the wood. By this time, he had gathered that the cigarette cards were bait of some kind, and ran frantically out of the other side of the wood. A few minutes later, he met his brother and friend looking anxiously around for him, convinced that he was about to be murdered. The episode was never reported to the police.

While never physically inactive, Colin did not display any interest in games, and told his mother that chasing a piece of leather around a field was a stupid thing to do.* But, as with

* Note: This was years later. I didn't have to play football at school until I was eleven.—C. W.

the mother-relationship, this distaste for games does not fit the Proustian pattern. He was never an over-sensitive or sickly child, was never ill (except for mumps and measles), and was abnormally interested in fighting. His father had been an amateur boxer, and spent a great deal of time impressing on him that he must never allow himself to be bullied. Whenever Colin met any of his father's friends, he would ask with interest: 'Can you fight Dad?' (meaning, in Leicester schoolboy parlance, 'Could you beat him if you fought him?'). At school, Colin fought a great deal and, until the age of about thirteen, invariably won.

His background as a child seems to have been exceptionally propitious. Since he was the first grandchild to be born into the family, he was the favourite of his maternal grandparents, who spoilt and petted him. His ability to hold his own with other boys meant that he never developed any sense of physical inferiority. More important still, he showed a tendency to invent stories at an early age, and was often asked to stand in front of the class and tell stories, or to recite poems that his mother taught him. This also helped to produce a degree of self-confidence, and assisted to form the cast of mind that led to his later denunciations of 'the fallacy of insignificance' in so many modern writers. He wrote to me:

'I always felt lucky as a boy, and Mum often used to say "You'll always be lucky". Somehow, I've always taken that for granted. I don't mean that I never feel unsure of myself—I frequently do—but I don't feel that the universe is basically loaded against me.'

When he was seven years old, Colin learnt to read. The first thing he ever read from beginning to end was a story about Tom Thumb in a comic paper, *The Beano*. He quickly progressed from picture comics to boys' weeklies. At about this time, Annetta had to go out to work to increase the family income; Colin recollects running beside her all the way to work, crying for twopence to buy a comic. He also adds: 'Of all my childhood, I think that is the thing I'm most ashamed of. She had a hard enough time without a mardy* little devil like me yowling his head off.'

Colin and Barry also started going to the cinema for the

* Mardy—Leicester expression meaning tearful, petulant. I have never heard it used anywhere except in Leicester.—S. R. C.

'tuppenny rush' on Saturday afternoons, where he first saw Joe E. Brown, the Three Stooges, Laurel and Hardy, and the Tarzan films with Johnny Weismuller or Bruce Bennett. Reading and the cinema produced a sudden stimulus to the imagination, and he began inventing enormously long stories, which he recounted to Barry in bed, or to the boys in the street. In some American film-comic he read about Frankenstein, and began to produce horror stories. He also invented a character named Stark whose speciality was to bury himself in the middle of country roads, covering himself with a tombstone that would dent the bumpers of unwary motorists. The horrified driver would then see the ground heaving until an immense hairy arm emerged. . . . Fragments of the Frankenstein and Dracula stories were combined with the nastier bits from his mother's detective magazines to make lengthy and perambulating 'gruesomes'. Also, his mother and grandmother were carefully cross-questioned for every detail they could remember about the Jack-the-Ripper murders.

When he was eight, Colin discovered—to his surprise—that he had won a school prize. The idea of scholastic eminence had never before struck him, but he now began to make mild efforts to win more prizes. But perhaps school prizes were not usually given at the Coleman Road School—at all events, he has no recollection of winning another until many years later. The following anecdote is taken from an article he wrote in January 1960 for the magazine *Education*:

'When I was nine years old, a friend of my father's offered me half a crown if I could make myself top of the class. (I believe he was drunk at the time.) So for a whole term I made a more-or-less sustained effort. I don't think it was a very sustained effort, but the others in the form probably made even less, so I managed to reach the position fairly easily. Unfortunately, the girl who normally sat next to me—her name was Janet—was ill during the exams, and had to take her exams separately when she returned to school. As the most apt pupil in the form, I was sent into the small box-room to see that she didn't cheat, and placed on my word of honour not to tell her any answers. I didn't keep my word (what schoolboy can resist showing off, if he knows an answer?) and our combined knowledge was enough to shoot her to the top of the class. I was almost speechless with rage and self-disgust. And when my

mother came to the school on parents' day, she overheard Janet's parents telling one another how clever their daughter was, and had to hurry out of the room to preserve self-control! So I never got my half-crown.'

His school career thereafter was never particularly distinguished, but always slightly above average. At ten and a half he took the 'scholarship' examination, and won a place to the Gateway Secondary Technical School in the Newarke. In his first year there, he was bottom of the form, but gradually managed to achieve a slightly higher standard. It was at about this time that his mother bought him a chemistry set for Christmas, and his grandfather made him a present of a science-fiction magazine. Together, these laid the basis of the interest in science that made him, at one point, determined to be a great scientist. In the Introduction to *Religion and the Rebel*, he writes: '... Secretly I admired Newton, for I imagined him as occupying the place in the hierarchy—Archimedes, Galileo, Newton, Planck, Einstein—which would one day include myself.'

The war had begun when Colin was eight and a half, but it had no particular repercussions on his life, apart from making boys' magazines thinner and scarcer. Arthur Wilson went into the army for a few months, and when he was on Xmas leave, decided to stay at home for an extra day, claiming he had stomach trouble. When he returned to camp, his stomach was X-rayed and several ulcers discovered; he was immediately discharged, and took a job working in a Royal Engineers Stores. This was, on the whole, a happy and prosperous time for the family: men were scarce, so wages were high. Arthur frequently did an evening job as a barman in the Coleman Road Social Club as well as his day-job, and so made a very comfortable living. The ulcers were easily soothed. Annetta got a larger wage than ever before to bring up the family, and since she was still at work (she finally left in 1942, before the birth of her third son, Rodney) there were now some luxuries in the home—more clothes and food, in spite of the rationing. Leicester had several air-raid alarms in 1940 and '41, but few bombs were dropped, and crowds of people sat around in the cellars of the Coleman Road Club—including Colin and Barry—where refreshment was close at hand. Quantities of whisky that disappeared during the raids could be attributed to damage

from the vibration of bombs! And the children were not expected to arrive at school early on mornings after a raid. The early years of the war left an impression of a long public holiday in Colin's mind.

The first real inconvenience from the war came in 1942, when Colin became simultaneously interested in chemistry and in science-fiction magazines. Chemicals were hard to come by, and science fiction could only be obtained through the exchange system at shops where they still had a stock from pre-war days. By dint of a great deal of calculation and manipulation, Colin finally acquired a stock of about forty copies of *Amazing Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories*, and the rest. Their impact on his mind was tremendous; for about a year, he read them avidly in every leisure hour. At the same time, the fascination with chemistry increased; unable to get hold of enough chemicals to conduct experiments, he devoured volume after volume on the subject. His grandfather worked at this time as an air-raid warden, and was able to get him quantities of the magnesium and gunpowder used in the 'incendiary bombs' which the A.R.P. had for demonstration purposes. Colin made a lucrative business out of selling 'bombs' at school. It was also possible to buy potassium chlorate in the shops; mixed with sulphur, this produces a mixture that detonates with an explosion when struck with a hammer. He made nitrogen iodide from iodine crystals and strong ammonia; this could be scattered on the floor at school while in a liquid state; when it dried out, it made explosions when trodden on.

It was at about this time that he earned the nickname 'Professor' among his schoolfriends.

* * *

The actual decision to become a writer seems to have taken place by chance. The Introduction to *Religion and the Rebel* mentions a girl friend who 'chucked' him when he was thirteen years old. In his own words, 'I retreated to my bedroom and stayed there for three years, reading and writing.' His first book, written at fourteen, was an attempt to summarise in one volume all the scientific knowledge of the world. Up to this time, his scientific interests had been limited to chemistry and astronomy (the latter stimulated by a book called *The Marvels and Mysteries of Science* that an uncle had presented to

him on his tenth birthday); he had never been particularly interested in physics, and even less so in mathematics. In an effort to remedy this, he began a volume entitled *A Manual of General Science* which contained essays on physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, aeronautics, philosophy, atomic physics and psychology. In the first three subjects he had some general grounding; but the others were completely unknown fields. He borrowed books from the library on philosophy, psychology and geology. The philosophy proved to be the most unexpectedly interesting, as expounded by C. E. M. Joad in his *Guide to Philosophy*, and Bertrand Russell's *Outline of Philosophy*. Admittedly, a kind of basis had been laid by the reading of Jean's *Mysterious Universe* and Eddington's *Nature of the Physical World* at the age of twelve.

'I see now that it was Jeans and Eddington who were responsible for my sudden mental awakening at the age of twelve; at the time, I thought of Einstein as "the master". I believed that Einstein had taught me the impossibility of making a final judgement on anything. I tried to explain to school friends that space is infinite and yet bounded; and it seemed to me that the possibilities of human life were also infinite and yet bounded; that within its framework of endless repetition, anything could be done . . . but this notion was of secondary importance compared to that of the Will to Power. . . . In some popular textbook on psychology, I had read summaries of the systems of Freud, Jung and Adler. Freud's insistence on childhood influences and the sexual urges seemed to me even then to be nonsense; Jung's theory of types struck me as equally irrelevant. But Adler's idea of the Power-instinct came to me as a revelation; it seemed to tie together all my observation of human beings. . . . A great deal of a child's time is spent in being treated unfairly and wondering about the rights and wrongs of the case; also in observing that, although all adults seem to him to be equally self-possessed and balanced in judgement, yet there are some who are badly spoken of by others, or labelled as shifty, dishonest or stupid by one's parents. It is all very confusing. It leads the child to realise that he cannot leave the business of making judgements entirely to the adult world. And when a child tries to form his own judgements, the real confusion begins. In most issues between adults, there seems very little to choose. It is less a matter of

rights and wrongs, than of individuals with their own Will to self-assertion. So my summary of the situation went like this: "right" and "wrong" are relative terms; they have no final meaning; the reality behind human conflicts is only a Will to self-assertion. Nobody is right; nobody is wrong; but *everyone* wants to be thought right.

'Adler's use of the term "inferiority complex" supplied me with my fundamental idea. I decided that the desire of every human being is to appear in as good a light as possible to himself. And since the opinions of other people affect the way we see ourselves, we seek to preserve our complacency by winning their respect or friendship. Of course, there is another way: to cut oneself off completely from the opinions of other people, and build a wall around one's own self-esteem. The lunatic who believes he is Napoleon or Christ has done this—so I felt. The difference between the lunatic and the sane person is only that the sane person prefers to get other people to co-operate in maintaining his delusions.'*

It can be imagined that such notions as these, combined with the idealism of Bishop Berkeley, make an upsetting mixture for a thirteen-year-old. It is hardly surprising that Colin's mother has noted that she seemed to 'completely lose touch with him' from the age of twelve onwards.

The single volume of the *Manual of General Science* expanded into three or four volumes during the long August holiday of 1949. For exercise, Colin took long cycle rides around Leicestershire, sometimes pedalling a hundred miles in a day, and arriving home exhausted in the early hours of the morning. He was driving himself hard, physically and mentally, because it had become a necessity to do so. The short 'affair' with the girl when he was thirteen had brought about a belated sexual awareness, although, so far, no sexual experience. But the tensions that accompany a sexual awakening often made the long hours of reading and writing seem intolerable, and cycling until he was exhausted was the only outlet he could conceive.

In a letter to me, Colin has commented: 'At the age of thirteen, I was completely gripped and possessed by the spirit of science. It seemed to me absurd that human life should be so messy and stupid when human beings have in their power the ability to conjure order out of chaos, to create certainty and

* *Religion and the Rebel*, pp. 15 and 16.

light. The scientific method—as discovered by Newton and Galileo—seemed to me the greatest discovery of the human spirit. It first burst on me in all its clarity when I read somewhere that Aristotle had made various statements without bothering to test them—such as that women have fewer teeth and ribs than men, that a body dropped from the mast of a moving ship falls behind the mast, that the increase in weight of a growing plant is due to matter absorbed from the soil. All these statements are, of course, untrue, and Aristotle had not bothered to test a single one of them. Galileo's discovery of 'the scientific method' seemed to me the achievement of a new dimension by the human spirit, total freedom from all fears and bogeys. And as fears and bogeys of various kinds are an active component in the mind of all adolescents, I suddenly had a vision of men like gods.'

It is no doubt the same kind of reason that made Colin an ardent disciple of Bernard Shaw after he first heard the third act of *Man and Superman* on the Third Programme. The clarity and logical brilliance of Shaw's thought was probably an escape from a dangerous tendency in himself to over-emotionalism.

'As a child, I was almost destroyed by pity. The sight of a blind man in the street could send me off into hours of doleful reverie. I do not regard this as particularly creditable; it was largely sentimentality. My father could always make me cry by singing a song called 'Goodbye, Old Ship of Mine', or 'Do the Roses Bloom in Heaven?' One morning when my mother sent me to school without any sandwiches because there was no food in the house, I spent the whole morning in the deepest misery, feeling as if we were involved in some appalling tragedy, although the truth was probably that she had simply forgotten to go to the grocer's the night before.'*

Inevitably, the newly discovered notion of men made into gods by the scientific method clashed dissonantly with the emotional tensions and miseries of adolescence. This emerges with great clarity in two passages in *Religion and the Rebel*:

'... When I read... of Jouffroy's feelings of terror while analysing his own unbelief, I remembered that night in 1944 when I wrote my Essay on Superiority at a single sitting. It seemed that I had penetrated deeper into unbelief than any

* Letter to the author.

other human being; that by questioning too deeply, I had cut myself off from the rest of the human race. My brother came to bed in the same room while I wrote. Towards three o'clock in the morning, I turned out the light and climbed into bed beside him, feeling at the same time an awful fear that God would strike me dead in the night. I felt that I had destroyed in myself a certain necessary basis of illusion that makes life bearable for human beings. I had done this in the name of "truth", and now I felt no elation, only a sort of fatigue of the brain that would not let me sleep. Truth, it seemed, had no power of intensifying life; only of destroying the illusions that make life tolerable.

'I still remember my surprise when I woke up in the morning and found I was still alive. God either didn't care or didn't exist. This was the beginning of a long period in which the key word for me was "futility".'

And after hearing the third act of *Man and Superman*, he felt a similar sense of a mental cataclysm, of another human mind that had actually considered the same questions of the meaning of life and the threat of 'futility'. He goes on:

'I went to bed that night with a sort of mental numbness. I felt that something of tremendous importance had happened to me, something which I could not yet fully grasp. During the night, I woke up and put out my hand to my brother; the bed-clothes had slipped off him, and he was as cold as ice. For a moment I believed him dead, and it seemed the natural and inevitable result of knowing too much and prying too deep. It was an immense relief when I covered him up and he grew warm again; and as much of a surprise, in its way, as the morning I woke up and found I was still alive.'

* * *

In the period between his twelfth and sixteenth years, the relation between Colin and his parents changed to something like hostility. This is not surprising; he had very little to give, being wholly occupied with his internal states. All his spare time was spent in the bedroom he shared with his brother. Since there was no fire in there, he spent the winter evenings in bed reading; this habit annoyed his father, who used to refer to it as 'stinking in bed'. He enjoyed listening to concerts on the radio, but it was impossible when his father was in the house, since the latter found music 'a bloody row', and switched the

radio over to Wilfred Pickles or Gracie Fields (for whom, in consequence, Colin developed a cordial loathing). Even the relationship with his mother had deteriorated badly. She found his talk about the relativity of moral values absurd (especially when he illustrated it by explaining that we have no way of being certain that madmen are really mad, or whether it is we who are insane). She developed something of a habit of telling him that he was mad himself, and these differences of opinion sometimes ended with his losing his temper, and screaming at her that he'd get even with her one day. On one occasion when she was nagging him, he quietly said to her, 'Do you know what's wrong with you?' She asked him what was wrong. He answered: 'There's something wrong with your sex life.' She says she was so astounded that she couldn't find words to reply. His father frequently commented that he wished Colin had not gone to a secondary school—that he should have been at work earning money. To make matters more difficult, his brother Barry left school six months before Colin did (in the Christmas of 1946). As a child, Colin had been immensely and protectively fond of Barry; now they scarcely spoke to one another. Barry worked as a butcher's boy and sneered at Colin for wasting his time at school. The two brothers were agreed on only one thing: their dislike of the latest brother, Rodney, born when Colin was eleven; they both agreed that Rodney was a spoilt brat. It was not a particularly happy family at this period and violent 'blow-ups' were frequent.

This was the situation when Colin left the Gateway School at the age of sixteen, in July 1947.

'SHAW'S NATURAL SUCCESSOR?'

THERE were further rows when Colin Wilson left school. He had intended to matriculate, which involved gaining five credits and two passes. This was irritating, since the only idea he had for a career was to take a job in some chemical works (like the I.C.I.) and study for a B.Sc. in his spare time. There was no prospect of a university; the Wilson family needed the extra money. But most large chemical firms demanded a matriculation, and Colin was short of a credit. He applied immediately to take the maths exam again, and spent a large part of August 1947 in the disagreeable task of brushing up his maths. There was no alternative but to look around for some manual job as a stop-gap. His father found this inability to pass exams a further proof of his belief in his son's uselessness.

The question of work was put off for two weeks while a French pen friend stayed at 5 The Littleway; he came from Strasbourg. But when he left, things could no longer be delayed; Colin went to the Juvenile Employment Bureau and was directed to apply for a job at Cranbourne Products Ltd., Cranbourne Street. Here wool arrived in hanks, and was wound on to spools by women who worked in an upstairs room. The spools were then packed into crates and sent out. Colin's job was to weigh the wool when it came in, and to weigh it again when it went out; and to keep a roomful of women supplied with hanks of wool. The wool was weighed in and out in a warehouse below the winding-room.

It was harder work than he had ever done before in his life, starting at 8 a.m. and ending at 6 p.m., with an hour for lunch. The job completed the process that Shaw had begun: transferring his interest completely from science to literature. To avoid boredom while lugging around crates of wool, he began to plan literary works. The first was a short story called *The*

Atmosphere Machine. Parts of the manuscript of this, written in green ink on lined paper, are in my possession at the moment. It deals with an inventor who invents a machine for creating 'atmosphere' in films. The machine produces vibrations beyond the range of the human ear, and the vibrations are capable of inducing a wide range of emotions, from a feeling of absurd well-being to an undefined horror. The machine is used at the climax of a horror film, and causes the audience to rush for the exits in panic.

But the most ambitious work from the Cranbourne Products period was a long play based on Shaw's *Man and Superman*, called *Father and Son*. Colin had been struck by the revolutionary optimism of *Man and Superman*, and wanted to contrast it with a pessimism of the T. S. Eliot type. It seemed an amusing idea to write a play about a John Tanner who is twenty years older than in *Man and Superman*, and who now has a son of his own, a disciple of Joyce and Eliot. Colin bought a pile of lined foolscap, and settled down to producing a three-act play, keeping at the back of his mind only the stipulation that each act should be as long as the third act of *Man and Superman* (two and a half hours!), and possibly longer.

After a few weeks, the work at Cranbourne Products 'became a bore and a misery'. Colin locked himself in his bedroom every evening and wrote the play, or read Eliot's poetry, Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, and *Paradise Lost*.

He visited the Gateway School to borrow maths books several times, and one day was taken aside by the headmaster and offered a job as a laboratory assistant, if he could gain a credit in maths. Two months before, the offer would have delighted him; now he was less certain. He felt that he had definitely abandoned science for literature. On the other hand, a job in the school meant shorter hours and longer holidays. A few weeks later, he took the maths exam at Birmingham University, travelling there every day for a week, and in due course, discovered that he had the required credit. By this time, he was already working at the Gateway School as a lab. assistant.

The year as a lab. assistant was pleasant, but in many ways it seemed to Colin a retrograde step. He was back at school and he was back 'in science'. The work was easy, designed to leave a great deal of time for study. Instead of studying, he continued

to write stories, essays and plays. He made friends with a youth of twenty, Bruce Russell, an ex-Gateway boy who had returned as an English Master, and persuaded Russell to listen to his writings. Another large-scale story had been conceived, using his favourite metaphysical themes. It was called *The Mirror*, and was based on the idea that all human relationships are founded on fortuitous differences of personality, 'truth' playing no part in them. There was a fundamental nihilism underlying the story—the old feeling that, when the delusions disappear, men have nothing left. Truth was still conceived in scientific terms as some ultimate mathematical formula, a final 'why' or 'wherefore' about the universe. This view had developed from his own discussions with such friends as Bruce Russell: the feeling that no two men have an intellectual argument to arrive at truth, but only to satisfy the primeval need for a tussle, a sparring match. If a man, then, wanted to arrive at truth in an argument, he would have to argue with someone exactly like himself in every way, so there could be no 'clash of personality'—with a man as like himself as his own image in a mirror. But if a man could argue with his own double—his mirror-image—where would be the point in talking? What could one say that the other would not already know? In that case, what use is argument? Man is left in a vacuum, with nothing but himself, completely alone. *The Mirror* dealt with such a man, an idealist in search of someone so like-minded that truth could no longer escape in personal clashes and, having learnt to conjure with his own image from a mirror, finds himself faced with total nihilism.

The story was a curious mixture: a style derived from Poe or Dickens, and a dialectical manner borrowed from Shaw. It was about fifteen thousand words and closer in spirit to German romanticism than to any modern writer. Bruce Russell listened to the first five thousand words of the story, and expressed qualified approval. His caution probably due to a realisation that, if his encouragement was too warm, he might have to listen to the rest of the story page by page, as it was written! 'I must have been a great nuisance in those days,' Colin commented.

Several one-act plays were also written at this time. The most ambitious of these was called *The Reformer*; it dealt with Shaw going to hell after his death, and immediately proposing to turn

the place into a seaside resort. This was typed out by an agency, and copies were sent to the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and to Bernard Shaw. The copy sent to Shaw was accompanied by an immensely long covering letter, explaining that he considered himself Shaw's natural heir. All three copies were returned without comment. With the Shaw copy was enclosed a printed postcard which explained that young writers might suppose that Mr. Shaw's approval could influence a publisher into printing the work; but that this was not so; on the contrary it might actively damage the young writer's chances of being accepted. . . !

A second one-act comedy dealing with a fur robbery met with no better luck.

Another work, for which he envisaged no possible market, was a ten-thousand-word dialogue between the young Jesus and a priest in the temple; Jesus was naturally made to speak as if he were Colin Wilson! The play ended with a particularly violent outburst from Jesus on the subject of his father.

As might be expected, tensions soon began to develop in the physics laboratory. The new physics master was perhaps not particularly pleased to have an aspiring writer instead of a competent laboratory assistant. Bruce Russell took Colin aside one day to warn him that there was some talk in the staff room about the necessity to get rid of him. But by this time, Colin didn't care particularly. He was beginning to suffer from an emotional problem that might, perhaps, have been anticipated. The job bored him; he disliked it so intensely that he occasionally rode off to Bradgate Park, seven miles away, in the lunch hour, eating no lunch and returning to school hungry and exhausted; he found this reduced the tedium of the afternoon. The sense of un-used energy tormented him. For a few weeks, he tried getting up at six in the morning and running five miles or so before breakfast, then walking three miles to school instead of cycling. But although he now disliked the laboratory job intensely, at least it gave him free time; the alternative—another factory job—seemed even worse. 'There was a sense of being trapped by boredom and frustration.'

There was at least one good outcome of all this ennui: Colin decided to keep a journal. Once the idea was conceived, it became an obsession; he wanted to buy an immense foolscap notebook with a thousand pages and fill it with his thoughts and

ideas and frustrations; it seemed a way of releasing the energy that was being dammed up inside. A thousand-page notebook was unobtainable, but he bought the largest he could find, and began writing in it one Saturday afternoon. One of the first thoughts he confided to the paper was the feeling that he was Shaw's natural successor. He even noted the paradox that he might have more right to call himself Bernard Shaw than Shaw had, for, at sixteen, he was probably more capable of writing a Shavian play than Shaw was at ninety-one. (He was thinking of *Father and Son*, now a bulky manuscript of two hundred pages, and still only half finished.) And on the morning after he began the Journal, he recorded a scene with his father, caused by Rodney.

The cover of the journal was inscribed with the word 'Rien'—nothing—Faust's opening exclamation in Gounod's opera. Long before he had heard of Sartre or Heidegger, Colin Wilson began to evolve an idea of the positive principle of nothingness. This is explained in some detail in the Introduction to *Religion and the Rebel*:

'The worst insight came during the long Easter holiday of 1948. I had been reading far too much—out of boredom—and spent a whole day reading Janko Lavrin's book on Russian literature. It is not very cheerful reading, with its descriptions of the stories of Chekov, Saltykov's *Golovlyov Family*, Goncharov's *Oblomov*. I went into the kitchen to switch on the stove to make tea, and had a black-out. It was a strange sensation. I stood there, fully conscious, clutching the stove to keep upright, and yet conscious of nothing but blackness. There was an electric-like sensation in my brain, so that I could readily have believed that I had been given an electric shock. It was as if something were flowing through me, and I had an insight of what lay on the other side of consciousness. It looked like an eternity of pain. When my vision cleared, I switched on the kettle and went into the other room. I could not be certain of what I had seen, but I was afraid of it. It seemed as if I were the bed of a river, and the current was all pain. I thought I had seen the final truth, *that life does not lead to anything*; it is *an escape from something*, and the 'something' is a horror that lies on the other side of consciousness. I could understand what Kurtz had seen in *Heart of Darkness*. All the metaphysical doubts of years seemed to gather to a point, in one realisation: what *use* is such truth? Later in the day, I went out cycling; there seemed to be a

supreme irony in every manifestation of life that I saw. Eliot's lines from *The Waste Land* ran in my head:

*'On Margate sands
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands . . .*

'Later, I wrote about it in my journal with a sense that futility had now come its full circle, for until then, writing in my journal had been the one action that did not seem futile; now I was recording my certainty of the futility of *everything*. And yet I recorded it with a compulsive sense that everything should be told.

'I think I recognised how far the source of these periods of exhaustion were physical. It seemed a further reason for nihilistic unbelief. All things depended on mere physical energy. Therefore, there was no will.

'I had seen the word "nihilism" somewhere, and asked the English master at school what it meant. "Belief in nothing", he told me, and at once I thought I had found a name for my own state of mind. It was not just *lack* of belief in *anything*—it was active belief in *Nothing*. I cannot now understand the significance that the word "Nothing" carried for me then. I remember, though, how I discovered the *Tao Te Ching* in a compilation called *The Bible of the World*, and read:

*There is a thing inherent and natural,
Which existed before heaven and earth.
Motionless and fathomless,
It stands alone and never changes;
It pervades everywhere and never becomes exhausted;
It may be regarded as the Mother of the Universe.
I do not know its name.
If I am forced to give it a name,
I call it Tao, and I name it Supreme.
Supreme means going on;
Going on means going far;
Going far means returning.
Therefore Tao is supreme; heaven is supreme; earth is
supreme; and man is also supreme,
There are in the universe four things supreme, and man
is one of them.*

'I was certain that "Tao" was my positive principle of Nothingness. The line "Going far means returning", I took to mean a recognition that all thought chases its own tail; *vanitas vanitatum*. As to the last section, with its "man is supreme", my already Swiftian views on the stupidity and futility of human beings led me to decide that "Man" was a mistranslation for "I"; that in fact, Lao Tse was merely expressing his inability to escape complete solipsism. I could not (and still do not) accept the view that Taoism is a humanism.

'My solipsism I had arrived at by reading of Berkeley and Hume in some text-book of philosophy. I remember explaining to a group of friends in the playground at school why a bar of chocolate existed only in their own minds.'

Colin goes on to describe how the boredom and minor humiliations of the lab.-assistant's job finally decided him to commit suicide. 'I arrived home one evening in a state of nervous exhaustion, and tried to "write away" my tension in my Journal. . . . And after about an hour of writing, I found my resistance slowly returning. I thought clearly: This must cease immediately; *I will not go on living like this.*' These words echo a sentence from *Crime and Punishment*, quoted in *The Outsider* (p. 163), ' . . . that all this must be ended today . . . because he would not go on living like that'. He cycled to the evening class, having made up his mind to poison himself with hydrocyanic acid. But as he took the bottle down from the shelf, he received a sudden clear insight, a recognition that it was not less life he wanted, but more. The decision to commit suicide brought an immense emotional freedom.

In a letter to me later, he enlarged on the 'suicide attempt':

'I think I can best explain it by saying that I felt as if life was playing cat and mouse with me. Events seemed actively malicious, designed to suck away the optimism and energy that I managed to accumulate by reading poetry over the weekends. I wasn't sure who or what I was angry with. Sometimes I felt that "society" owed me a living, that it had no right to pitchfork a potential poet into a completely boring job. I never felt this for long, recognising that "society" is not a reality, only a word to cover millions of half-alive, bewildered human beings stumbling on from day to day. Sometimes I felt my parents should take more interest in my desire to be a writer; but that never lasted long either. Finally, it seemed as if some fate was

at work. I never let myself slip as far as Hardy into a view of the malevolence of destiny, but I felt somehow, vaguely, as if "life" were to blame. The idea of suicide was an attempt to "get at" life. The only thing it wanted me to do was to live; I felt myself out-manoeuvred in all my attempts to live, and the only way to beat it seemed to be to determine to die.'

The reasoning, it can be seen, is completely subjective; but no more so than Kafka's or Hardy's. It is the lonely individual posed against 'It' or 'Them'.

Colin remained at the Gateway School as a lab. assistant for nearly a year. During this time, he made one or two close friends; there was his fellow lab. assistant, Colin Harris, a lanky athlete, who spent a great deal of his time 'covering up' for his unpunctual colleague. Then there was John Orford, a youth of his own age, who sat next to him in the mathematics lesson. Orford loved music, and played the piano excellently; Colin often spent evenings at his home, listening to Debussy or talking philosophy. One evening, he read out passages from his journal to Orford, who listened carefully, and finally commented: 'It's all shockingly morbid.'

On one of the few occasions when Orford came to visit Colin at 5 The Littleway, the visit caused a family row. They spent a couple of hours in Colin's icy bedroom, talking philosophy as usual. Finally, they went downstairs and stood by the front door, still talking. Their 'parting words' were always interminable, and sometimes went on for hours. On this occasion, John Orford was talking about a girl he knew, who had read one of Colin's essays; the girl lived in a large house in Stoneygate, the fashionable end of Leicester. Orford finally went, and then the storm began. Colin's mother, and his brother Barry, began to pour scorn on Orford's 'lah-de-dah' accent; they both suspected that the talk about the girl and her 'posh house' had been intended to impress them. The quarrel became more heated, and suddenly Barry and Colin came to blows. It was the first time since they were children that they had fought. The incident left Colin with a curious feeling of having completely lost contact with his family; the last vestiges of understanding or tolerance seemed to have disappeared.

In the summer term of 1948, Colin sat for the annual exams. It seemed absurd to take them; there was not one question in ten that he could answer. When the results came through, it was

obvious that he had done no work for a year. The headmaster sent for him one morning. He was surprisingly sympathetic. Colin explained frankly that he had lost all interest in science the year before, when he left school. The headmaster—E. C. White, who later wrote a warm letter of congratulation on *The Outsider*—pointed out that many excellent writers wrote in their spare time, and suggested that Colin pass his B.Sc. exams before thinking of a writing career. The talk developed into a long discussion on religion, Bernard Shaw, and the existence of God. (Mr. White was a well-known Quaker.) At the end of an hour, they parted on the most amiable terms, and Colin was instructed to think it over for twenty-four hours. He did. He explained that he now felt no interest in science, and that it would probably be best if he left. This was shortly before August 1948. Mr. White generously allowed Colin to remain on the school staff until the beginning of the autumn term—which meant an eight-week holiday with pay—and 'regretfully sacked him'.

The holiday was spent reading Dostoevsky—*Crime and Punishment* and *The Possessed*—and in re-reading *Ulysses* and trying to make sense out of *Finnegans Wake*. In mid-September, he visited the Juvenile Employment Bureau again. They directed him to the office of a firm of wool merchants in Albion Street, where he was interviewed by a plump, blue-suited man. He made no secret of his ambition to be a writer. The man asked whether he felt he really wanted to rise in the wool trade; Colin said yes, 'adopting an expression of sickly enthusiasm'. The man said he would let him know. Colin went home, and wrote gloomily in his journal: 'It's like two confidence tricksters. He wants as much work out of me for as little pay as possible; I want as much pay for as little work as possible. It's a jungle relationship. Does he think my only purpose in being alive is to increase his miserable fortune?' However, the blue-suited wool merchant had the penetration not to give Colin the job. 'He little knows how much trouble he saved us both,' Colin commented. He went back to the Juvenile Employment Bureau.

THE CIVIL SERVICE

HE was interviewed at the Collector of Taxes office in Albion Street, Leicester, by J. W. Sidford, whom Colin described as 'an amiable Londoner'. To Colin's surprise, there was very little discussion of his qualifications for being a temporary civil servant. Instead, the conversation turned immediately on philosophy. Mr. Sidford explained his belief that a good writer studies 'life', not philosophy, and lent Colin a copy of Howard Spring's *Fame is the Spur*, to demonstrate how it should be done. After an interview lasting an hour, he told Colin he could start on the following Monday. Colin went home and read three pages of *Fame is the Spur*.

After a few days, the job in the tax office began to bore him, even more than the laboratory had. There was hardly enough work for an office boy. He was put in charge of filing Schedule A forms; this occupied about an hour in the morning. There was then very little to do until mid-afternoon, when he attended to the post. Soon the familiar feeling of unused energies, 'a sort of emotional constipation', began to return.

On his second day there, Mr. Sidford passed through the office and enquired how he was enjoying *Fame is the Spur*. Colin replied that he was finding it excellent. Mr. Sidford then asked if he had yet reached the death of the grandfather, and Colin said no, not yet. In the lunch hour, he glanced at the book, and realised that the death of the grandfather occurs within the first few pages. That evening he settled down and determinedly read the book; it proved more interesting than he had expected. Its portrait of a man who climbs to the top out of sheer talent and vivacity struck him as thoroughly sympathetic. When he returned the book a few days later, he was able to make more intelligent comments on its plot; another two-hour discussion

Arthur Wilson, 1930



Annetta Wilson, aged 17



Colin Wilson, aged two

A birthday party for Grandfather, 1941. Colin is on the extreme right, a writing pad peeping from his pocket



on 'life' followed! Mr. Sidford seemed to enjoy having an audience for his theories, and Colin was grateful for the break from the Schedule A forms.

In his first days at the income-tax office, he finished another long-short story called *The Dead and the Living*. This was heavily influenced by Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*, and dealt with a young man who falls in love with the ghost of a beautiful girl that haunts the family mansion. This effort was typed out at considerable expense, and sent to various magazines. After its third or fourth rejection, it went into a drawer. But the expense of typing agencies decided Colin to learn to type. He got Mr. Sidford's permission to stay behind after office hours and practise on an old typewriter. After a few days' practice, he settled down to copying his story *The Mirror*, and completed it in about a month. Although his speed gradually increased until he could type much faster than he could write, his method was never professional; he uses three fingers of each hand and has to look at the keyboard most of the time. The first half of *The Outsider* was later written in longhand; but after that, all his work was written direct on to the typewriter.

The period in the income-tax office produced at least one important friendship. This was with a married woman, about ten years his senior. When Colin met her, she had only been married a few weeks, and the marriage was not turning out as idyllically as she had expected. Her main interests were amateur dramatics and reading; her husband preferred the dog-track and the cinema. With her encouragement, Colin joined the office drama group, and also the drama group and literary society at the Vaughan College in Great Central Street. His first evening at the office drama group was not a success. Priestley's play, *An Inspector Calls*, was being cast; Colin was called upon unexpectedly to read. He described the result: 'My heart began to pound, and I could hardly see the book. I had to keep it on my knees, because my hands were trembling too much to hold it. I began to read in a horrible, shaking voice, and was glad when the producer interrupted with "That's enough, thanks".'

The Vaughan Drama Group provided another valuable acquaintance, Alan Bates, a year older than Colin; he was engaged on an enormous novel, intended to be as long as *War and Peace*, called *Sons Without Mothers*. Alan Bates's character

fascinated Colin. He claimed a total epicureanism, and was, at this time, an ardent admirer of Oscar Wilde, Theophile Gautier and the French romantics. Although his family were by no means well-off, he somehow managed to stay at home all day reading and writing. His character and ideas were as unlike Colin's as possible; where Colin was dogmatic, aggressive and assertive about his 'genius', Alan Bates was languid, indolent and completely contemptuous of the idea of general recognition. (Some of these characteristics were later moulded into the portrait of Austin Nunne.) They were alike only in one important respect—a detestation of the provincialism of Leicester, and an avid interest in literature and music. Colin found in him a valuable antidote to the boredom of the office. They would wander around the Blackbird Road and the New Parks Estate late at night, talking of literature and ideas, then return to Alan's home in Bassett Street, Woodgate, in the early hours of the morning, and drink coffee until the dawn began to break. Then Colin would walk back five miles to his home on the other side of Leicester, (or cycle back) and snatch a few hours' sleep before going to the office. This deliberately 'bohemian' existence helped to combat the dullness of the office, where the women who sat opposite talked about nothing but the Royal Family.

After the first few weeks, he abandoned all attempt to appear a diligent civil servant, and openly took a satchel full of books to the office. This made him unpopular with everyone in the office, with the exception of J. W. Sidford, and Mr. Joiner, an easy-going Scot who was in charge of the office. He also slipped out to the library close by when the tedium became too much. He commented irritably: 'Being a good civil servant consists in knowing how to look busy when you have nothing to do.' He saw no point in looking busy when there was nothing to do, and openly read novels.

One day, Mr. Sidford suggested that he should take the examinations to become an established civil servant. To avoid argument, he agreed; the standard in all subjects was about the same as that required in School Certificate. He sat for the exams and, to his surprise, passed. In *Religion and the Rebel*, he mentions celebrating his establishment as a civil servant by writing a long, pessimistic story about the end of the world. This story was called *Lasciate Ogni Speranza* (the words above

the gate of Dante's Hell), and described how the world was destroyed by a comet, and how, thousands of years later, an expedition from another planet landed on the dead earth and investigated the ruins of a great city. 'No one ever liked it,' Colin said. Immediately after his establishment, Colin asked Mr. Joiner whether, if he could live his life over again, he would spend it behind a desk in a tax office. Mr. Joiner replied emphatically: No. 'What would you do?' 'I don't know . . . travel about, perhaps. Anything. . . .' Colin Wilson remembered this answer later, when it was a question of returning to the civil service after the R.A.F.

His establishment meant that he had to be 'posted'. The posting came through in a letter dated August 9, 1949. It was to the office of the collector of taxes in Rugby, nineteen miles from Leicester.

He moved there reluctantly. He was eighteen, and was expecting to be called up any day. And yet in so many ways he was glad to leave Leicester. In speaking of it to me, he used the words Shaw used in describing Rosscullen: 'That hell of littleness'. The Vaughan College particularly had been a source of frustration and embarrassment. 'I always seemed to be saying the wrong thing or knocking something over.' He had acted in a play—Dryden's *All for Love*—as one of the guards (with Alan Bates as the other), and read one of his short stories aloud to the Vaughan Literary Society. It had been long and Jamesian, and the society received it without enthusiasm. He also attended folk-dancing classes, and joined a course in modern poetry, during which he was called upon to read Yeats's poem *The Fisherman* aloud, and had the same voice-failure as in the casting of *An Inspector Calls*. 'It was pleasant to leave behind the scene of so many embarrassments.' But the idea of working in another office in a strange town was less appealing.

He arrived in Rugby with his bicycle and case full of books; writing to his parents a few days later, he said:

'I started my career in Rugby pretty well, being two hours late for the office. The train arrived at Rugby at 9.15. I was reading, and forgot to get out, so it took me over twenty miles to Woodford. I got back in Rugby at 10.30 and discovered that the porter had taken my bike out at Woodford. Rugby Station phoned for me, and I got the bike back later in the day without

extra charge. It cost 6/3 altogether to get here. The office isn't bad—it's quieter and smaller than Leicester, and although it's less easy going, I like it better. The hours are from 9 til 5, with an hour for lunch, and overtime on Tuesdays. I've been given a lot of something or other to copy out. I can't make head or tail of it yet, but it's quite easy. My digs are OK, but the dear landlady will insist on serving me fish and meat.

'Rugby is very small and quiet—no phone ringing [he had been the telephone operator in Leicester] nor babies squalling [this is no doubt a reference to his sister Susan—the most recent addition to the family]. I've got a bed sitting room with a three-piece suite in red velvet. I haven't started to miss Leicester yet.

'At lunch time I go to the milk bar. I get egg on toast and coffee for 1/3. I could get cheese rolls for less, I suppose. I'm always very hungry by tea time.

'I soon found a library and a college. The latter is called the Guildhouse, and does all sorts of things, like the Vaughan College in Leicester. It has already cost me five shillings. The library is far better than Leicester's. I shall probably be home on Saturday. I shall bike, as I can't afford the train. I have just got 7/6 left to last me til Thursday—and I want to train it to Leicester next Wednesday! I must also remember a belt. My trousers have been flopping round my shoes, and I can't do a thing about it. I've sewn the button further along—it's just as bad.'

Rugby in late August was hot and quiet. His lodgings were in the Hillmorton Road, and the sound of the school bell became familiar. The mention of meat and fish is explained by the fact that he had decided to become a vegetarian in Rugby—a resolve opposed by his landlady. He also decided to call himself by his second name—Henry instead of Colin. And the last—and final—resolve was to obliterate the last of the Leicester accent from his speech. In Leicester, he had tried to improve his speech—inspired by Rex Harrison in *The Rake's Progress*—but had stopped at substituting the long 'a' (as in 'father' and 'grass') for the short Leicester 'a'. (In Leicester, 'grass' is pronounced as if it rhymed with 'mass', as in Lancashire and Yorkshire.)

For a few weeks, he enjoyed Rugby. The sunlight and silence, the lack of heavy traffic in the Hillmorton Road, the country

lanes around which Rupert Brooke had walked, all soothed and refreshed him. Then the quiet became oppressive. Besides, the heat was oppressive that summer, and his bedroom was immediately under the roof.

Relations with the landlady were not of the best. To begin with, her terrier took a dislike to him, and always chased him along the garden path as he wheeled his bicycle, snapping and growling. Secondly, he disliked eating meals with the family, and always rushed to his room immediately after meals. A week later his landlady asked him if he would mind sharing his room with another man, a young motor mechanic. He agreed, and a red-faced, good-tempered youth was installed in the bedroom; he became a great favourite with the family, who seemed to develop a dislike for Colin as they developed a liking for the mechanic.

After a few weeks, he began to loathe the office even more than he had loathed Leicester; his relations with his superiors deteriorated steadily. One day, he decided to feign illness, and stayed at home reading poetry. The collector of taxes knocked on the door and demanded why he was not at work. He said he was feeling ill; the collector replied frigidly that he was obviously not ill. Colin lost his temper and told him to mind his own business, and a row ensued on the doorstep. The offended superior officer left, saying: 'I shall remember this, Wilson', and Colin shouted: 'You can do what you like.' The quarrel outraged his landlady, who promptly gave him notice. The local students' lodging bureau helped him to find another place immediately, and he moved into a local hostel, just outside Rugby, 'blazing from head to foot with humiliation and distaste', and wishing the most unpleasant fate imaginable on his ex-landlady. Long experience of landladies led to Sorme's violent outburst on the subject in chapter one of *Ritual in the Dark*.

The few weeks spent in the hostel were exceptionally happy. He shared a small room with another youth, and had meals in a big dining hall. It was all pleasantly impersonal; he could read at meals and spend days without speaking to anyone, and nobody paid any attention. Alan Bates had lent him several volumes on painting, and he was studying the subject with his customary enthusiasm, as well as reading Maugham's *Moon and Sixpence*, based on Gauguin. The result was the development of an interest in Van Gogh and Impressionism.

It had been Alan Bates who had been responsible for introducing Colin to the world of ballet, and in particular to the *Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky* (which he handed to Colin with the comment, 'I think that's more your cup of tea than mine'). After reading Arnold Haskell's *Life of Diaghileff*, Colin developed the idea of becoming a ballet dancer, and while at Rugby, began to practise pliés and basic ballet steps. All this he was able to do in the hostel at Rugby, without feeling that an irritable landlady might knock on the door at any moment.

When he was posted from Leicester to Rugby, he applied to the Civil Service Commissioners for a transfer grant. He demanded this on a pure technicality; a newly established civil servant is not allowed a grant when he is first posted; but Colin had remained in the Leicester office for several weeks after his establishment; consequently, it was arguable that the switch to Rugby was a transfer and not a posting. At all events, a grant of twenty pounds was allowed, to his delight. He immediately purchased a new bicycle, and took a fortnight's leave for a holiday.

Since Colin was nine when the war began, he had never before been on holiday. Before the war, his family had been too hard-up to manage more than an occasional day-trip to the seaside. So, in a sense, this was his first real holiday. He immediately announced that he was going to the Lake District (although his geography was so vague that he thought the Lake District was in the South of England). So one day in early September, he left Leicester on his new machine, and cycled north to Matlock. He spent a chilly night sleeping in his tent, wrapped in a single blanket. (Every night, thereafter, he used the tent as a sleeping-bag, and slept without discomfort.) The next day he cycled through Manchester, and as far as Bolton. It seemed amazing to him that he had never seen this much of England before; an enormous excitement and a longing to travel possessed him as he cycled further north, through Preston and Kendal. At Kendal, heavy rain drove him to stay overnight at the youth hostel. The next day he cycled to Bowness, by Windermere, and camped the night there. The sight of the lake and the hills excited him, although at the time he found Wordsworth unreadable. The next day he set out for home again, with only a few shillings left. A night was spent in a field near Halifax; the next day he cycled from Halifax to Leicester,

mixing the remaining foodstuffs—margarine, sugar, cocoa, condensed milk—into a chocolatey mess which he smeared on bread.

A few days after he returned to the Rugby office, his call-up papers arrived, and he was ordered to report at Padgate, Lancashire

5

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE

MILITARY service had been one of the experiences that Colin had dreaded for some years. This feeling was due, in part, to his father, who, when he lost his temper, had been in the habit of saying: 'Wait til they get you in the army—that'll knock some sense into you.' On the morning before he set out to catch the train, he wrote in his journal:

'Times like these make me feel I am completely ignorant about life. I haven't the faintest idea of whether life is basically hostile or friendly, or just indifferent. I feel like a man who has never ridden anything faster than a bicycle, and who is about to climb behind the wheel of a fast motor car. Will the R.A.F. change me, or shall I be the same when I come out as now?'

The immediate experience was less disagreeable than he expected. There was a week of waiting around Padgate in civilian clothes, reading paperback novels. He had taken with him copies of Hemingway's *Fiesta* and Hilton's *Random Harvest*. Then they were moved to Bridgnorth, Shropshire, for their 'square-bashing'. It was harder work than he had ever done before, but he found it refreshing. There were continual periods of drill, rifle practice and gymnastics, interspersed with large meals and evenings spent polishing the floor of the billet and cleaning buttons. As an additional stimulus, he tried running around the camp late at night in track-kit. This made the muscles of his legs swollen and stiff. He reported sick, hoping to miss a couple of drill periods, and was sent into the hospital with 'muscle fatigue'. Colin commented: 'It was rubbish, of course. I felt perfectly alright the next day, but they wouldn't let me out.' His letters home give a full picture of his experiences in the training camp; on Sunday, 24th September 1949, he wrote to his mother:

'... It has been a pretty cozy week here in hospital. At 7 a.m.

we have our temperatures taken and our pulses measured. They've come to the conclusion that I'm either dead, or hatched out of an egg. A fellow brings breakfast in bed—that is, if you're too weak to get out yourself. So I always close my eyes and pant like an exhausted dog. I tried to persuade them to feed me with a spoon, but I think they guessed I was shamming. . . . At 11 a.m. the M.O. comes round. We all have to stand at the end of our beds if we are "up" patients while he's in the room. It is a very big ward, so most of us are pretty fed up by the time he arrives at this end. When he gets up to me, the conversation goes something like this:

M.O. Morning Wilson! How are you today?

Me Morning sir. Fine, thanks.

M.O. Good. (He is prepared to move off, then asks me as an afterthought:) Did you hear the Beethoven Pastoral last night?'

That same day, he wrote to his grandmother:

'I suppose you know I'm in hospital. . . . I get into an awful lot of rows here, even in hospital. Two nights ago, the corporal in the next bed to me told me to hurry up with the NAAFI list. (I am the only one allowed out at nights to the NAAFI.) I am used to taking my time over things, so I told him to go to hell. I was reported to the sergeant. . . . Then last night I had another row with the corporal. He told me to go to the NAAFI, and I told him the usual thing. He admitted he couldn't force me to go, but promised to make things hot for me when we leave this place.'

As in his schooldays, the nickname 'Professor' was soon stuck on him. He seems, on the whole, to have been regarded with amused tolerance. 'Dear Grandma,' he writes from Bridgnorth, 'I'm pleased to hear that Aunt Connie enjoys my letters. In fact, I'm surprised that anyone can read them; I often feel completely exhausted when I write them, and I can never remember what I've written later. . . . We had a lecture from our flight sergeant yesterday. He said: "Well lads, I'll bet you think you've done some hard work over the past seven weeks, but believe me, it's nothing to what you'll get during the next week. I'll work you 'til you drop." It was fair warning, so I reported sick again this morning. . . . We presented the corporal with a watch last night. I gave a brief speech, and then called for three cheers for him. When everyone had brought the

roof down I called for silence again, then said: 'Just one more thing, Corporal Warden, while you're still in a good mood. Can I go out tonight?' He smiled through his tears and said: "Yes, Wilson, my son, when you've polished the floor." I had a good mind to ask for my watch back.'

It has been said that Colin Wilson is humourless; his letters and diaries hardly bear this out. Here is an account of a ragging affray in which he was the central figure:

'There was a terrific rag in the billet last night. It's a damned nuisance caused by the airmen who are awful roughnecks for the most part. They go about tipping beds up after lights out. Last night as I came in I was expecting to find all the springs removed from my bed, as on the previous night. Nothing seemed wrong until I got in, and the bed collapsed. Then someone overturned a can of water that had been balanced on a rafter over the bed, soaking me and the bed too. I jumped out of bed and ran to fill my own mess tin with water. I forgot there are two fire buckets in the billet. When I came in again, they all had mess tins full of water, which they slung all over the place. I emptied my mess tin over someone and filled it again at the fire bucket and went around soaking all the other beds. Finally, I got my bed made up when some so-and-so crept up in the dark and turned it upside down. So I ran around the billet and turned some of their beds upside down. When I got into bed I threatened to murder anyone who did it again. So half a dozen of them got together and tipped me out. I remade the bed in the dark, and then sat on it with a huge piece of wood. When I heard them creeping down the room again, I said I'd knock anyone's head off who interfered. I didn't get to sleep finally until about one o'clock this morning. I think they'll do the same thing tonight. I miss the nice quiet Sundays of relaxation, but even so, I somehow manage to stand the noise. . . . My idea of a pleasant weekend is settling down in my bedroom and reading in peace. If I have to stand this place much longer I shall Rest in Peace. I lost a notebook containing several of my latest stories and a play in Bridgnorth. I went back for it last night but couldn't find it. Considering the stuff it contained, someone must think the author is mad—apart from wanting to blackmail me. Fortunately—or unfortunately—it doesn't contain my name or address.'

One of the stories he had taken into the R.A.F. with him was

called *The Maze of Maya*. It was among the first of his mature works, and dealt with a young man who has an affair with a Jehovah's Witness. In order to get the material to describe a Jehovah's Witness meeting, Colin had attended several in Leicester. Another story that went into the R.A.F. with him was a short novel about a man who murders a prostitute; its first title was *Symphonic Variations*. Later, the two were combined in the earliest versions, of *Ritual in the Dark*. (In these early versions, the Jehovah's Witnesses are described in far greater detail than in the published version.) Another story that accompanied him into the R.A.F. was called *Ritual of the Dead*, which dealt with a ballet dancer who went insane; it was based on a Ben Hecht film called *Spectre of the Rose*, and on his reading of the lives of Nijinsky and Diaghileff.

Another letter from Bridgnorth describes how he spent his Saturday afternoons: it is addressed to his grandmother:

'Oct. 10. . . . I've been amusing myself going into Bridgnorth and Wolverhampton, and pottering around the public library. I bought a huge wad of paper in Wolverhampton and began a new play in the reference library. It was the first peaceful afternoon I spent in a week. I remembered some of those Saturday afternoons when I came to Asfordby Street to write my plays, and had tea and listened to the radio. . . . I had something to eat at Woolworths, and then returned to the library until they put me out with the cat. . . . We've been on the rifle range training all afternoon. That means they march us for miles and miles to a remote field, and then tell us we're surrounded by the enemy. Personally, I never do anything. The corporal told me to lie on my stomach and snipe at the enemy as they came over the crest of the hill. I asked where the enemy was; he said I had to imagine them. I said: "Can't you imagine I'm shooting them instead of making me lie on my stomach?" He called me a "bloody horrible gremlin", which is one of the nicest things I've ever been called. I wish I knew what he meant. The corporal says I hold a rifle as if it's a cross between a baby and a billard cue. I said I'd never seen a cross between a baby and a billiard cue, but I bet it took a lot of practice to hold a rifle as if it were one. . . . I've told the men in my billet that I'm a devil worshipper. Now they're all trying to convert me to a belief in Christianity—all except the corporal, who wants me to get him an introduction to the

devil. . . . I got into a lot of trouble with an Irish corporal in the billet next door. Someone sneaked in to get him late at night, while I was expounding my devil worship after dark. He got pretty nasty because I had R.C. written on the card above my bed. I couldn't very well tell him that this was only so I could get off church parades. . . . Sometimes they ask me to give them a sermon, and I get on a chair and tell them they're hopeless sinners, and that none of them will go to heaven. They seem to like me calling them brainless idiots and all that. I have to give a lecture on Thursday to the English class. I'm talking on "Morals in the R.A.F.", which means I'll insult them for 15 minutes. I've told them to address me as "Mr. Wilson" or "Sir" and *that I'm a genius of the first order. They believe that too, which is more than my own family does.*'

In another letter home, he says:

'I've been writing a long one act play on Saturday afternoons. I go to Wolverhampton, ten miles away (2/3d. return on the bus) and write in the reference library. I call my play *Swansong for Two Ducks*. I read it aloud to one of the officers the other night, and he liked it so much he offered to get it performed for me at Xmas in the camp. . . . I really hope he does. *The works of Wilson are pretty well known among intellectual circles. . . .* Believe me, I delivered an address in the barracks today. I began: "Gentlemen, today I want to talk to you about a great modern genius—in fact, probably the greatest modern genius. I was born in Leicester in 1931 . . ." They seemed to enjoy it. I could have sold a dozen copies of my novel on the spot. What a pity it isn't finished! . . . Eighteen days more, and I'll have finished with this camp. I shall be more than glad to see the back of it. The cold and discipline are too much. I still don't know about my commission. There's almost no chance of getting an 18 months commission. I'd have to sign on for five years. Do you think it's worth it, just to be called "Sir" and have a lot of airmen saluting me if they pass me in the street?'

He has an interesting description of the passing-out parade from Bridgnorth:

'It was an odd experience. I'd come to feel such contempt for the R.A.F. and everything it stood for. I used to repeat to myself that comment of Einstein about strutting imbeciles in uniform. Well, on the last morning in Bridgnorth, we were all on the square, and all I wanted was to get the whole stupid

farce finished with and get home. Then suddenly the sun came out. I stood there, with the band playing the R.A.F. march-past and the sun shining and all of us moving like a single great machine, and suddenly I felt a tremendous exhilaration and a love for it all. It was quite irrational. Do you remember Gorki's story about Tolstoy, how they were walking along the pavement when they saw two hussars marching towards them, and Tolstoy began snorting about "military idiots, only good for obeying orders"? Then as they came abreast, marching in perfect step, Tolstoy was carried away by their grace, and exclaimed: "My God, how splendid, how superb." . . . The theories disappear, and you are suddenly overwhelmed by the life that floods from under the surface, the power house.'

But the next batch of training revived all the old boredom and dissatisfaction. Colin had applied to be a medical orderly; instead, he was sent to Wythall, near Birmingham, to be trained as a clerk, general duties. This meant learning the names of dozens of R.A.F. forms (reviving unpleasant memories of the civil service) and sitting in a large, cold shed while the other clerks learned to type. Since he could already type, he was allowed to write letters.

In the evening, he frequently cycled into Birmingham, where he had relatives in Hall Green. Saturday afternoons were now spent in the central Birmingham public library—one of the finest in the country.

The winter was cold and wet, and Wythall, unlike Bridgnorth, was a slovenly and dilapidated place. He read Huxley's *Antic Hay* and *Point Counterpoint* (enjoying the former and detesting the latter) and looked forward to the weekends, when he frequently cycled or hitch-hiked the thirty miles to Leicester. In Leicester, he was taking a girl out occasionally—she was a fellow folk-dancer from the Vaughan College—but 'I was hopelessly awkward and embarrassed, and it all came to nothing very quickly'.

Before he left the camp, a curious incident occurred which later had some bearing on his discharge from the R.A.F. He had been placed on a charge for untidiness, and had to report to the guard-room twice a day for extra duties. One evening, 'X' began to make friendly conversation, and was soon proposing that Colin tie him up and beat him. The suggestion made Colin startled and uneasy; he pretended to treat it as a joke, and was

glad to get away. The next day, 'X' went home on leave, and a few days later Colin also went home for Christmas. Shortly after Christmas, the training period at Wythall ended, and he left the camp without seeing 'X' again—to his considerable relief.

His first posting as a fully fledged airman was to Hucknall Torkard, north of Nottingham. Unfortunately, Hucknall was as slovenly and undisciplined as Wythall; in Colin's own billet, there was a mixture of soldiers, airmen and the R.A.F. Regiment. Colin was transferred into the latter.

The pattern of boredom quickly reasserted itself. He worked in a small office, doing the clerical work for an anti-aircraft unit manned mainly by weekend auxiliaries. The 'regulars' took their weekends at mid-week. Apart from Colin and the clerk he was replacing, the staff of the unit consisted of one corporal, one sergeant and a flight-lieutenant, the adjutant. To begin with, the adjutant was delighted to have Colin in the unit; he found the clerk incompetent and lazy. But soon the other clerk was 'demobbed' and the adjutant discovered that the efficiency of his new clerk was hampered by a keen distaste for the work. Relations became strained.

To escape from the society in the billet, Colin often returned to the office in the evenings, stoked up the fire, and settled down with a book. He also discovered a drama group in Nottingham, and became a member, taking a small part in Norman Ginsbury's play *The First Gentleman*.

Matters in the unit came very quickly to a head. A week arrived when everything went wrong. Colin went into the office late one morning, assuming the adjutant was on leave; he was mistaken, and his own weekend leave was cancelled. Furthermore, on the weekly parade he had been pulled-up for growing his hair too long, and put on a charge. Finally, when feeling particularly outraged and exasperated by the R.A.F. routine, he was attacked by the adjutant for typing a letter badly. 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' the adjutant asked. Something in him revolted; his hatred of being bullied suddenly asserted itself; he scowled and answered; 'No'. The adjutant gasped; the corporal and the sergeant stared with surprise. The adjutant ordered him to go and wait in his office. He sat on the edge of the adjutant's desk, feeling: 'This is it. It's the guard-room. . . .' But the point of revolt had been reached; he decided not to retreat or apologise, even if it meant spending

the rest of his eighteen months in Bedford gaol. He contemplated throwing the inkwell through the glass door.

It turned out there was no need. The adjutant entered in a troubled but friendly mood, told him to sit down, and asked him what was the matter. Colin replied that he was sick of the R.A.F., which he considered a 'Boy Scouts institution'. The adjutant asked him what he would prefer to do. Colin explained that he had applied to become a medical orderly. The adjutant expressed willingness to get Colin transferred to the Medical Corps. But there were formalities to go through; Colin was sent to see the M.O. If the M.O. would certify that Colin was 'emotionally unsuited' to clerking, he could get a transfer.

An interview with the M.O. followed. It was not encouraging. The fact that an A.C.2 detested the R.A.F. was not sufficient, in itself, to prove his emotional instability. However, the M.O. promised to do what he could; he was not very hopeful, though. . . . Colin left the office, racking his brains for some way of proving his insanity beyond question. An idea struck him; it was a forlorn hope, but worth trying. He turned back, and told the M.O. he was homosexual.

Colin wrote: 'The effect was electric. He seized two pencils in both hands and began writing with them both at once. It was delicate ground. My knowledge of homosexuality was not encyclopaedic, but I had known a homosexual in Leicester, and even encountered one or two in the R.A.F. I explained gravely that my mother had always wanted a girl, and had intended to call me June, the month of my birth (this, oddly enough, was true). Until I was nine years old she had kept me in petticoats, wearing my hair long, like a girl. And so on. . . .' The case history was compounded of the homosexual he had known in Leicester, and some odds and ends he remembered from the trial of Oscar Wilde. The M.O. noted it all down. He finally explained that it might not be possible for A.C.2 Wilson to remain in the R.A.F.; homosexuality was a serious matter. Colin adopted a horrified expression, and exclaimed: 'Oh, I wouldn't like to be thrown out sir. . . .'

Back in the office, the adjutant asked him what had happened. It was obvious that the M.O. would pass the story back, so Colin drew a deep breath and repeated his 'confession'. The adjutant listened with horrified fascination, made Colin repeat the juiciest bits of his 'life story' several times, and finally gave

him the rest of the morning off to 'recover'. Colin cycled over to Newstead Abbey, the home of Byron, chortling to himself. It seemed amazing. A few hours before, life had been static and detestable; suddenly, something was happening; he was playing a part, and enjoying the charade. When he got back to camp after lunch, the adjutant had another long discussion with him. He kept repeating in an astonished voice: 'But Wilson, I can't see why you don't prefer women. There's nothing *like* a woman. . . .' Colin explained that his inefficiency as a clerk was due to mental strain. 'All those beautiful male bodies in the billet at night. . . .'

The next day, a less pleasant note was sounded. The adjutant had gone home on leave, and the Special Investigations Branch of the R.A.F. police—the S.I.B.—sent for Colin. They wanted to know if he knew of any other homosexuals in the camp. Had he had intercourse with any since he came into the R.A.F.? In his anxiety to convince the officer that he was homosexual, Colin answered innocently: 'Oh yes, lots. . . .' A moment later, he realised he had let himself in for trouble. The officer wanted names and ranks. (Colin commented: 'It would have been easy to give him some, of course. Everybody knew the queers in the camp.') He explained that he couldn't possibly give names—it wouldn't be fair. The interrogation went on for two hours, and Colin was dismissed. The next day it happened all over again. This time it went on for even longer. Halfway through the interview, the officer asked suddenly: 'Did you know "X"?', mentioning the name of the man who had asked to be tied up and beaten. Colin admitted that he had. The officer then explained that 'X' was now under arrest for sadistic cruelty to an animal—and asked Colin if he would give evidence against him at his trial. Again, Colin refused. This time the officer got tough. 'You'll spend the rest of your eighteen months in gaol.' Colin was dismissed, with the promise of further investigations the next day.

But the next day, the adjutant returned; Colin immediately reproached him for involving the S.I.B. in the matter. The adjutant apologised, and told him to go on leave for an indefinite period! So Colin returned to Leicester for several weeks, journeying to Hucknall only to collect his pay packet. He spent the time re-reading *Ulysses*, studying the works of Blake and Synge, and reading for the first time the Bhagavad Gita, in Isherwood's translation.

In due course, he was sent to Wendover for a psychiatric examination. This passed off better than might have been anticipated; the psychiatrist was sympathetic; Colin now had a convincing case-history off pat. There was only one further examination, before a board. They were tougher, and took the view that he was 'working his ticket'; Colin summoned his histrionic abilities and enacted a hysterical outburst, which seemed to convince them. He was given his 'ticket'. He writes: 'The day after the examination, I travelled down to London, feeling absurdly happy and remembering Mr. Polly's words, "If you don't like your life you can change it." It was one of those strange occasions when theory and belief seemed to have come down to intermingle with experience; "stubborn, irreducible fact" was yielding to conviction and the need for self-expression. Besides, in the past weeks I had become radically re-oriented; instead of Eliot and Dostoevsky I was reading Rabelais, Shakespeare, Synge, Burns. Now I read *Ulysses* with distaste for Stephen Dedalus, and all my admiration going back to Buck Mulligan, with his ribaldry and love of physical life. I knew that Oliver St. John Gogarty was the origin of Mulligan, and I loved Gogarty's poem, 'Ringsend', beginning.

*I will live in Ringsend
With a red headed whore . . .*

and ending:

*And down the back garden
The sound comes to me
Of the lapsing, unsoilable
Murmuring sea.*

'This seemed to contain the essence of all great poetry, like those last pages of *Finnegans Wake* where the soiled and sluggish river with its burden of dead cats and dead leaves flows back to the sea.

'I went down to London repeating Brooke's lines:

*Thank God that's done! and
I'll take the road
Quit of my youth and you
The Roman road to Wendover
By Tring and Lilley Hoo
As a free man may do!*

'No doubt this was pure association of ideas; but I was determined never again to surrender to self-contempt and boredom in an office. I would, if necessary, take navvying jobs, and every time I got sick of one I'd move on. I travelled from Aylesbury to Trafalgar Square, repeating to myself "Never again, never again" and feeling absurdly happy.'

The question he had asked in his journal six months before had been answered; he no longer suspected life of a basic hostility. A few weeks later he received his discharge papers, and left the R.A.F. with an overwhelming sense of emotional freedom.

6

EXTRACTS FROM A JOURNAL

THE real man is to be found in his diaries, his personal memoranda, because there the inhibitions of public writing are generally absent. The purpose of diaries and notebooks is to record the real 'I', keeping us informed of our inner selves, to be studied in the more tranquil future with critical eyes. The private thoughts that accompanied our actions, the emotions to which those actions gave birth, or vice versa; the impact of the occasions upon the personality, the picture of the moment and the picture of the future, are put down in symbols for reference at any time in the days to come. Knowing that we are writing for ourselves alone, the mask is discarded, the shams are thrown aside, the body is stripped of sensation and desire, we reach down to the inner core and revel in the momentary freedom, as we try to transfer the sublime exaltation to paper.

The diarists and the notebookers are ruthlessly introspective. What they discover they bring to the surface, as it were from the bottom of the well, presenting a more accurate picture to the privileged onlooker, and to the subject himself. Diaries of this character are eternally fresh and universally stimulating, being independent of Time and of Location.

Colin Wilson must be one of the most remarkable diarists among the younger generation of writers. He was never urged to keep a diary or notebook. At ten, when he began mature reading, he found his mind overflowing with thoughts and ideas. The books brought him into touch with other minds, and he discovered that he himself was already thinking along those lines, and delving in that territory. This was a revelation to him, and to satisfy a craving for self-expression, he bought

stacks of notebooks and filled them, contributing day by day without any thought that ultimately they might be for others to read.

At one time or another Colin Wilson has destroyed a million words since he began keeping journals, notebooks, diaries and writings on most subjects. His ten volumes of notebooks would have enabled anyone who was interested to learn something of the thoughts and feelings of a precocious boy, and would have been of value to the professional psychologists. To the students of Colin Wilson, the man, the thinker, the creator, the expressionist, the material would have helped to explain some of the idiosyncrasies of the grown man now on the threshold of the thirties. Self-analysis is not an uncommon feature in adult life: in boyhood it must be unusual, if not unique.

When I asked Colin why he had destroyed his notebooks, he said that on re-reading them he was overwhelmed with shame. He had "poured all his miseries and resentments into them". He tried to build up the Colin Wilson he wanted to be, modelled on Keats and Shaw, and to ignore the Colin Wilson whom his family knew so well. He says that he actually blushed when two years later he read of his attempts to re-make himself. "They seemed just a lot of yowling and moaning."

The reasons he gives for their destruction are just the reasons why to have them now would be a revelation. But they have gone up in flames. We can never know them. We can, however, learn something of the later Colin Wilson, from the diaries and journals he kept in his teens.

It is to the credit of Colin Wilson that he ever busied his mind and his pen with these daily examinations of himself and others. Just think of his contemporaries! While we cannot particularise upon how they were spending their evenings, their weekends and their leisure time generally, it would not be unfair to say that in the main they scarcely had two original thoughts to rub together, and that they soaked up blaring headlines from which they gained their knowledge of the world, and the massive problems concerning it.

In the course of this volume I shall reproduce extracts from diaries and journals of Colin Wilson. Some of the entries were obviously never intended for anyone else to read. Other entries have had to be 'censored'.

The following extracts are evidence of a less inhibited Colin

Wilson, and it is for the reader to draw his own mental picture from them.

Sunday, March 26th, 1950

'I feel sick of the R.A.F. and I'll kick up hell until I'm thrown out. But playing hell happens to be good fun, and I see no reason why it should make any difference to my temperament. Two days in the R.A.F. at Hucknall can have a disastrous effect on one's conceptions. I almost envy the stable types who live life so calmly, without trying to see things. Unrest is always the penalty of seeing visions. . . . Genius is no more than the striking of coloured matches. . . . It is no more than a fireworks display. . . . I saw George Baxter. He couldn't understand my unrest. . . . He remembered our plan for running away to South America at the age of 12.'

March 29th, 1950

'I have had on the whole an enjoyable three days. . . . Aunt Rhoda strongly advised me to ignore the stage and get an office job. I was quiet and tried not to look too derisive. . . . On the radio I listened under protest to Priestley's "An Inspector Calls" which needs no comment. Priestley's plays have always struck me as stereotyped, and he might be adequately represented to posterity by any one of the dozen he has churned out. . . . *Next morning I told Aunt Rhoda that I am a genius, and that I am too much interested in watching the pattern of my own life to allow it to degenerate into office routine. I also told her that I was a pagan Roman Catholic, and that I would prefer to sell my soul to the Devil rather than live a bored and Christian sort of life, all of which was show-off, and of which I am heartily ashamed.*' *

Monday, April 3rd, 1950

'It seems that no complete combination of charms is ever allowed to enter my world. We have so many people and things—all with that *something* subtly wrong with them. I see a woman get on a bus. She has the groundwork of remarkable beauty, overlaid with a downright careless structure that spoils the whole effect. No woman I have met so far in my social meanderings has anything more than an excuse for attractiveness. Some have pretty faces (usually vulgar), some pretty

* My italics throughout.—S. R. C.

voices (usually married), some, very rare, interesting minds. But none ever has the slightest suggestion of worth-while combination. I suppose the gods are giving me no excuse to get entangled. . . . *I have never yet met a woman who could lure me from the much more interesting occupations like writing or just dreaming. . . .* Lucretius remarks that we only get entangled with a woman because we blind ourselves to her defects. At first she fails to attract; one by one we blind ourselves to her defects, drugging the senses, numbing those parts of the brain that sneer at her, until we can believe ourselves in love. And why? Because we want to be in love. . . . *The conceptions I have formed of myself change from day to day with my new discoveries of personality, and lead me to conclude that I myself am not a person but a divine spark, a force, a godhead. . . .* I am passing the rapids of youth—with its oversensitiveness and folly. I hope now that I behave a little less precipitately in society; I certainly find myself a good deal more amused by it than formerly. . . . The special R.A.F. police asked me this morning about ——. I believe I mentioned my skirmish with him, when he suggested I tie him up and beat him. The idea didn't much alarm me—even though it never came off. . . . The Flight Officer took upon himself to advise me at great length about my perversion. . . . All life is a donkey chasing a carrot!

Saturday, April 8th, 1950

'Vaslav Nijinsky is dead! I wish I had met him. It is numbing. . . . It is strange—he died on the same day as Christ. . . . Oh Christ and Vaslav, two expressions of the fire that will consume the flesh, help me now! I go out into the world and face many dangers. My life may become a hell, because hell is the dullness, the sloth, the terrible lack of desire. . . . I have been fed on little things for a long time—for many months and years—ever since my birth. *Because I am a god, and may not be deceived or imposed upon, nor entirely blinded, I found the way of poetry superior to the way of human beings and their interest. Then I ceased to be a man.*'

Sunday, April 9th, 1950

'Today I opened my eyes and thought "today is the day of Christ's resurrection. Shall I find something to do that will thoroughly satisfy me?" Well, the day has gone by normally,

and now I come to think of it, nothing I could do, short of getting crucified, could compare with the Easter Day. The way of liberation is as follows:

- (a) Keep the body fit—with ballet exercises if possible;
- (b) Meditate continually on the Gita or if not, read Shakespeare, and *think* about your own past. Better still, read about it. . . . *One has only to live in self expression to realise that one is god.*'

Friday, April 14th, 1950

'Now for over a week I have been quite serenely contented, as man should be contented, always. For when God created man He said: "I will guarantee you a beautifully pointless life. You will stagnate when you might meditate, and the emotions will clot like blood when you most want them to liquefy." . . . I have spent a peaceful Easter, reading, writing my *Ritual of the Dead*, and repeating Shakespeare and Shelley aloud to myself.'

Thursday, April 20th, 1950

' . . . I hate my physical needs. Why should I have to desire? There is so much good. . . . *This weekend I shall take all the money I have and go to hell. I am thoroughly tired of all the misery, the short-sightedness, the desires unsatisfied, the half smelt fragrance, the glimpsed love. I am tired of men and women who are not gods.* When I look around at all the misery, all the nervous irritation that exists in the world, I feel that it should be changed. . . . *I read my earliest constructive prose yesterday. It was full of me, the person one calls Colin Wilson, not the god who is the voice, the light.* . . . It is apparent that Colin Henry Wilson is a positive factor. The problem is—*is he capable of indefinite expansion in my hands? Is he capable of tasting all the sweets, of grasping the Universe in his brain, of becoming flesh made impersonal by my flame? Or is he a puppet, a lantern slide who can only yield up so much, who has his prescribed part to play, and must be destroyed?* . . . Let me say I am "being" him. I am acting his life. I am seeing the world through his eyes. All events that happen to him must hide me. If he lusts after a woman, a cloud of greasy flesh, burnt smoke, must hide my face. If he is humiliated, or loves, or hates, his loves and hates must flow over me like the waves of a sea. Now for myself. I am in a cramped body of this creature (whether I will or no), and am forced to live his life. Well, I soon taught his plebeian brain to taste new

sensations in music and poetry. I was hard, because he was stubborn and intractable. But his strong body and healthy brain proved a blessing, and I refined much of his coarseness in my fire. I turned on him the flame of self knowledge. By assailing him with various trivial misfortunes, I made him see how the fruits of the world are pointless, how the things he desired are the desires of an ignoramus and a beast. By letting the wind of knowledge blow through his brain, I taught him what things were really desirable and what were not. *Yet his ignorance is still great. He lusts after the ignoble, and would throw away his loves on dung and worthless matter.*

Friday, 21st April, 1950

'This is typical of my worthless and pointless days, that I can spend time writing this stuff. . . . I read Synge yesterday. The great truth of his observations on poetry struck me. It must be of ordinary life. . . . Now I examine the life of the being called Wilson, and find it as much a brief candle design as Marie Bashirtseff's. This is intolerable. I want to be a Shakespeare, not a Shelley. The one promise is, that I shall not be insignificant. If I do wax full like the moon and be a mature artist, and not a youthful flash in the pan, all this early stuff will be pointless—I might as well tear it up tomorrow. It would be about as valuable as Browning's Juvenilia, or Shaw's novels. On the other hand, one more alternative strikes me. Why be either a Brooke or a Browning? There is an alternative of detachment. I don't particularly want to be a person at all. The best thing once seemed to be an artist—who, in his intellectual activity, frees himself from degrading bondage, as freely as anyone can. But I found out quite a long time ago that you can be pretty free without creating a thing. . . . It becomes apparent to me that, if I am to survive as an artist, I shall have seriously to modify my personality. A person who wilts at the impact of everyday things is bound to die early. He is bound to be a flash-in-the-pan. Beyond a certain mark, his life will be pointless. The attempt to see and think clearly, which goes on up to the age of 25 or so, peters out hopelessly in the face of old age. . . . If you would be a poet, you must know the world. You must be triumphantly free from boredom and frustration. . . . Now to an analysis of the practical aspect—ME. While I'm at home I'm very like to become bored, gravelled and moody. Now place the light of God behind such a lantern slide, and you get a kind of projection

which is very much Dowson, Shelley and Poe. . . . I want to produce stuff as vital as Shakespeare's, as jolly as Polly, and as pyrotechnic as Shaw or Christopher Fry. Once and for all, I'm gonna get away from this frustration stuff. I've had enough of it. Man was never intended to have dark patches on his character. I'm going to knock as many as mine off as I can before I start shining again. It's impracticable! Something's sure to go wrong! But with the aid of the gods, I'll do it—and, dash it, without their aid, too! Well, here's what I would say—for many years now, my writing has been a product of REACTION to life. My everyday life has notably oppressed me, made me a degraded thing in my own eyes. I have poured out what I felt was a realler "me" in my writing. The consequence is that most of this diary is reaction. . . . If I am a genius (ah! ah! that's funny), then I've been a genius on paper, and not in practice. If I am a god, I have expressed that godhead in reaction, not in living. Well, an "accident" made me react more violently than before—and I broke the chain. I gained a queer kind of freedom—a freedom in life as well as in Literature. Now I am determined not to go back on that freedom. I want to live with life instead of against it. I want to show my power in love, as well as in hate. I want to be strong in life, as well as in poetry and on paper. Now I am going on reacting—violent, instead of static reaction. Luck and will power can make it successful. Intellect is the one guiding light and—one more thing—I have begun to feel in the only real sense, lately. The dreary mists are clearing up quickly. . . . I have lived an adolescence of numbness and lack of energy. Now—thank heaven—I really have gone one step further.'

Saturday, April 22nd, 1950

'Today I cycled over to Rugby. *At first I meditated and was god. Then I became bored and a little tired, for it requires sustained effort to be a god. . . .* Through my youth my mind has been dead. Human beings have bored me intensely. If I have been lucky I have found some book that I could sympathise with, finding it less futile than living. I have kept discovering that there is a world full of interest outside the covers of a book (Hence my hankering for a stage career).'

Sunday, April 23rd, 1950

' . . . If wandering can make a Rabelais or a Joyce of me, then it's worth while. For I'd be better mending roads than living between home, an office and "M".'

May 3rd, 1950

'I have lived at home for three weeks now. I have done little work besides digging the front garden, and helping the vicar to dig his garden. Apart from that, I have thought, read the Bible and the Gita, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and Rabelais. *I have learnt a little of the art of not getting bored, which is tapping the universal energy at its source.* I have practised the primary steps of ballet in my bedroom, and various other exercises, to prevent myself from fossilising. . . . I am waiting for the Air Ministry to send me my long awaited cash and discharge papers. Now I am tired of both, and am leaving home tomorrow. *My aim*, to avoid the boredom of offices and other forms of routine, and the state of mind they engender (a state downright dangerous to life). *My intention*, to support myself as best I can; if possible to get a job on the stage. *My hopes*: the gods. It is such a queer arrangement of a world, and there's so little you can get to know about its workings. . . . We seek in the depths of our beings for some reality. We discover that the depths of our being have no intention of showing us Reality. Its message is "Go back to your world of motion and play your part".'

May 9th, 1950

'Now I am back home after five days. During that time I have wandered all over the country—York, Bradford, Kendal, Grasmere and now home. Oh damn! I have destroyed all my early work, lest I should incur the censure of the personality that wrote them. Joyce released the same squid in *Ulysses*. That book is the nearest thing to a slap in the face for God that I have ever found. It is the "Faust" theme exaggerated a dozen times. Hemingway, I notice, never stops taking shrewd punches at life. He seems to loathe it more than Swift. It seems that the aim of Life is to goad authors into producing miles and miles of abusive print. But to what purpose, I'm damned if I know. . . . Now I seem to see that to take life so seriously is death. One ought never to be involved in it. . . . *As man grows more mature he grows wiser and kinder, so one kicks against circumstances that constantly reveal that immaturity. . . . So all my life has been reaction against these things. Yet now I wonder whether I was meant to achieve maturity—or just to produce a good deal of poetry and prose to help others?* I don't believe in others, never did. The highest things a man produces are reflections of beauty, undistorted by his personality. If man

would be highest, he must cease to act altogether, because while he acts Fate will pester him. . . . *I have come home and Dad wants me to stay at home. He is afraid he may fall ill. I place reliance on God or the gods—and, oh, make me free, make me free—*'

May 17th, 1950

'There is a law which says "Hate is stronger than Love: for Hate attaches to Repulsion, just as Love attaches to Desire". My girl friend, "M", asked me the other evening why I sometimes tried to hurt her with my words. *I explained as well as I could that while I have a body to betray me, the objects that body fixes on are to be hated by the soul. As my body desired her, so my mind, wanting to be strong, hated her. . . .* The two paths of attainment are these: to desire and to obtain nothing; or to desire, and to obtain all. The Brahmin follows the first, desiring nothing, non-acting. Christ and Nijinsky followed the second, desiring to transcend physical limitations by discipline. *All attainment comes through discipline. . . .* I have been at home four days now, and have worked in a woodmill in Needham Street. Tomorrow I shall leave. It is good discipline to work there. The hours are long and the work hard, and the body rebels strongly, so the body must fight strongly to overcome it. That is discipline. I leave because my body is too weak physically, and grows very tired. It is good to restrain the body's energies, but it is not good to overtire it. It is good to discipline an army of insolent and rowdy soldiers, but not to discipline a tired army.'

May 22nd, 1950

'I ought to write a great deal of all that happened during the past month but since I have destroyed ten volumes of my diary, it doesn't seem very important. . . . *I have spent much time thinking on the problem of Madness and Escape. However one tries to overlook it, a madman, a murderer, is in a sense an artist, for he is reacting violently to a real stimulus in an effort to escape from personality. . . .* Very clearly, a man should concentrate on his aspect of God, rather than his physical desires or needs which will, if given half a chance, hog his whole attention. . . . I have got a sort of job at a Fair. I start tonight, in about an hour in fact, from 5 p.m. onwards every evening. My excuse for such work over and above ascetic studies, is simply that Reality becomes a prison if the spirit gets lazy, and although work is objectionable

because it makes the spirit lazy, experience is never a nuisance. . . . My work at the Fair would seem entirely without finer shades, without being excruciatingly boring. *Is it a penalty of my life that nothing seems awfully real to me?* . . . Is it a cue for life to come to an end when it ceases to be violently interesting? What should I do then? *I would very much like to risk my miserable neck every day to earn my living, like a French girl at the circus, who climbs a pole to an enormous height and sways about on top of it.* To attempt to live in a Fair ground atmosphere—live, I mean, in the sense of having one's whole subjectivity bounded by it, would be rather like eating nothing but sugar. The problem is that many people live on just that diet.'

May 26th, 1950

'I came home from the Fair feeling unusually broody. There had been no Fair as it had rained for hours, and I went to see the circus. . . . *But I read the Gita and knew the "Enemy" was unusually strong.* Then for an hour I practised breathing exercises and concentration to draw my mind away from desires, for I felt an unusual realisation of what I am, *and knew I must fight. Reality was strongly around me and I was prepared to fight all night (as on Stonehenge) to reach some conclusion and carry the battle one stage further.* And earlier in the evening I had gone to "M", and had helped to wash and dry her hair, and enjoyed caressing her. *She told me how she had been afraid of me two nights before when I visited her, reading "The Gates of God"; and kissing her good night because of a queer passion that made me want to kill.* Yet not her—the "Enemy", that was making me dissatisfied, and all action pointless, all pleasures bitter. That is what *The Gates of God* is about. I explained this, that it was desire which made me want to kill, and yet not her, but for something even less attainable—a terrible dissatisfaction. . . . When I explained this she was glad, and thought I was "sane" again because my voice was not monotonous and high pitched, but deep and changing its tone, and because I laughed a great deal. *I came away knowing, as I have always known, that if to murder her had been insanity, then insanity is no more than writing a novel, or choosing any other means of being oneself. When a dog grows angry he is no longer safe among children. When a genius grows angry, he is not safe among men.* Whether I laughed and stroked her hair, or seemed as if prepared to kill her, *I still have no regard for her life; it is not*

*important to me. . . . I do not want to live. . . . It is like sitting through a very boring play. I can find reality of a sort in writing and reading and thinking, writing bitter strange things that express what I feel. I want to be something else, someone else in a different world. I hate the necessities of life. When that hate begins to boil and fester inside me, it should be allowed to develop in solitude where I can fight what causes it, the "Enemy", instead of being dragged into the villainous foul society of the Fairground with its popular tunes and all the fatuous jokes, all the petty hates and annoyances that move the fantastic puppets. *Because I am not, and never shall be a human being, I shall never enjoy meeting French acrobats and ringmasters' daughters. I would be God. Human beings seem very unreal to me.* I know now what drove Vaslav "mad". It was the remembrance of what is possible. When a man had paid homage to the goddess of all loves and powers in 'Sacre du Printemps', he could never find anything but hate for human beings. To seek for God and to find sexual complications, a wife, a Diaghileff, would drive all geniuses to frenzy. *That was Vaslav's madness—which possesses me at all times. The remedy—solitude, meditation, constant and continuous thought to conquer the "ENEMY". . . . There are two ways to fight the "Enemy". To discipline the body until it affords him no refuge. But there are limits to that.* Trying to stand on my hands, on a box, I fell down and bruised my legs and shoulders, and was made to feel at His mercy entirely for a few moments. *Discipline of the body is not always possible. The alternative is separation from it, not by Death but by contemplation.* I would hear the symphony that the stars in their courses make; I would see the loveliness of all the light that is in the Universe. Yet I have to sit here—and tomorrow I work at the fair from 1.30 p.m. selling tickets at 6d each. . . .'*

Saturday, May 27th, 1950

' . . . First I was a child and was full of pride of body, yet also shame, pity and desire. But the child strongly desired to become another. The rebirth came in the form of knowledge that flooded all the stagnant pools in his brain. Then he was a young poet, writer, who aspired to the stars, yet was full of desire that produced terrific conflicts, many works. Yet one day he saw that he was a young poet and fated to die. So he desired his own down-going and death. He was replaced by yet another being,

a mystic who sought the shapes of God. Yet always there was within that being born of the womb of time, a spark that showed him beyond himself, desiring his own destruction. He must live many lives and die many deaths. He shall accomplish many changes, and yet no sooner is one complete than he shall desire another. That which is truly he shall say: "I shall not be me, I do not wish to be this being here." And so passing through many lives we shall become depersonalised, being no longer one thing or another. . . . I have decided to give up my job at the Fair. I must move on. *I am not seeking merely change, for no change is real, but for a new being. I wish for different eyes to see with, different senses to feel with.* . . . On Tuesday I made friends with a small girl on the Fair. Her name is "S". Now she is most in my mind, with her pale hair in two tails, and wide blue eyes. I feel that she means some kind of freedom. God, I wish I knew.'

Friday, 2nd June, 1950

'All the events of the past weeks, and they have been many, have only brought me closer to my original knowledge, that no event can come between a man and his soul. *I have spent so long in frantically searching for "the way", that will be the kind of freedom a child dreams of sometimes, and now have found it is there, inside me, for conquest at any time under any circumstances.* . . . On Wednesday I was tempted by a small girl. She was attracted by my appearance selling tickets at the Fair. I found her amusing, even though I anticipated no pleasures of her body or mind. But on Thursday when we went out to Bradgate, I found this untrue. She took my body quite frankly, offering her own. Yet not merely as a slut. I talked of Poetry and Love. . . . Now I have no money and must take action.'

Tuesday, 6th June, 1950

' . . . *I have found what is desirable. It is to perceive all things in heaven and earth, to be no longer a person full of personal desires but to be as impersonal as God. This is the aim.* The method of attaining it—Yogi. The person who sits down every day to control his mind (which is to force it to perceive) can never become a mere puppet who never sees beyond his own existence. A man must do that continually. . . . *In order to become a god man must endeavour to think like one.* This by continual effort he can do. . . . The "S" business would die a natural death—the only minor problem

being that she seems to be violently attached to me. *I always find friendships tiresome. I have, thank God, been born fairly devoid of sexual desires. . . . My own body has cost me several years of long slow battle, intense depression, intense joys, periods of near madness, when my thoughts were scattered and sick.* Nevertheless, "S" is a new pleasure when she's not sentimentalising and pretending that I'm Prince Charming. . . . She bursts into tears, and accuses me of not loving her for herself but for her body. Christ help me! *Are there no frank, joyous women who don't snivel about sex and "love", but take their pleasures like whores and are sufficient unto themselves? Christ, to meet one!*

Saturday, June 10th, 1950

'Dangerous and swift, this my youth, and I would be rid of it. For while yet a youth I must fight all battles that are inevitable, accept defeats and disappointments that are bound to be. A strait wire cage, is this my youth. . . . *I have always refused to live the life of a youth, which is a poor thing and governed by his body.* I have sought in books and in thought, an escape from the body. For I would have no part in that which is bound to happen, that which is inevitable, and unless my body's experience can teach me to live, I would have none of it.'

Monday, June 12th, 1950

'*The only way to knowledge is through suffering. Unless a man suffers constantly he may not live.* Only through suffering does mankind learn the good things that may be. . . . The man who has learned to suffer is greater than all mankind. The man who is capable of suffering is the greatest of all. . . . *Let a man be afraid of comfort.* For out of his comfort shall come an urge which says, "Suffer, or be stifled by thy contentment." . . . "S" is pretty and affectionate, easily hurt, sensuous, limited in experience. For two Sundays in succession I have spent days in the country with her . . . the days are long and hot . . . I have worked for three days on a building site, wheeling barrows of concrete at the rate of two hundred a day. My body is brown and healthy, my brain relatively perceptive. I am personal. I want to see many things, yet at the same time to learn restraint. For at one moment it seems good to think and practise austerities, and then in the next it seems good to eat, love, travel and work. I think of entering a monastery, and of travelling to Italy, of

writing fairy stories and religious tracts. *Ye gods, I have lived for nineteen years to act like a will o' the wisp!* How can I restrain my imagination? In the meantime, I suffer the rebukes of friend and parents who are giving me up for lost. . . . *Life is a queer affair and I am living many lives besides my own; I am living the life of young Goethe, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Coleridge, Nijinsky, Dostoevsky, and "S"*. It would be rather a good idea if "S" had a child. She deserves one. Alas, I warn her of my peculiarities, that I am insincere, a seeker for liberation, driven by winds that never chill me. With bland, childlike misunderstanding, she will never let me go and she will be patient for me, comprehending my evil, waiting though my demons drive me to Tartary. And when all's said and done, all the understanding has to be done by me. Get thee to a Nunnery!'

Wednesday, June 14th, 1950

'Touching leave taking from "S". Lord, show me sincerity! I'm a halfwit and twenty different kinds of misfit. And what precisely am I supposed to be? Another man who lost himself? A minor poet? A diarist in the manner of Marie Bashkirtseff? *No, I destroyed him with the ten volumes of my diary. A neurotic without a past? A religious maniac? God, what have I not done to escape from being anyone at all?* I am glad that my past gives me no ground for trying to penetrate my future. It's thankless work. *I hereby declare (the gods sustain me) that I am not a person or a poet, a youth or even a nondescript. I have no intention of obliging any destiny. I refuse to live. It is an indignity. I merely accept.* So "S" seems to become part of my "life", just like my family. Well, so be it. I've borne my family for 19 years. I suppose I can bear "S" for another 19, if Fate so decrees. Ye gods, all who are almighty—this is your hand. I'm ready when you are. Get started as soon as you like.'

Sunday, June 18th, 1950

'I have been a farmer's boy for three days. It means rising at 5.45 every morning and milking for two hours before breakfast. Then work from 8.30 to 12.30 and 1.30 to 5.30. A long day and a long week. As to the facilities, I am rather too comfortable. . . . When I know I must change this, I shall move on.'

Friday, June 23rd, 1950

'Marching orders came sooner than I expected. They came last night. The Squire had the consummate intelligence to take

me for a fraud, and has arranged for my transfer from his farm. So be it. . . . *Lately a very great depression has come upon me for the life I am living. This life I am tied to, for all its effort at vision, is narrow. I have spent so long trying to see into my own future, to control my life with reason and intellect. It is too much. Now I am tired. I no longer see and feel. It is very easy for Destiny to close the gateways of the senses, that all one's will means nothing. . . . My life is like a room before dawn, when the clock ticks loudest and I wait for the first grey in the sky. . . . Where shall I find a land that is my home? Where shall I find that place that I glimpsed as a child, and thought I might find in years to come?'*

June 25th, 1950

'Have had "S" all day. She is one of the pleasures of living. How could one be a nihilist with such positive pleasure? . . . Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!'

HYMN TO MYSELF

*Lord of Life, I bow down before Thee
Calm and all certain
Full of all Knowledge and Power
Moving without fear over turbulent waters
Silent, untouched by humiliations of the flesh
Watcher and Witness, Glory who are
United for ever with the Absolute
Brother of the winds and cold as thy brother
Of the deeps of space and of the
Circling planetoids
Controller and preserver, I pay thee homage
I offer thee my worship.'*

6th July, 1950

'An increasing disgust with Wilson. Unless, very soon, he does something worthy of me, I shall lose patience with him. Once full of potentiality, now flagging, hopelessly involved, becoming steadily incapable of living. What is he fit for, what worthy of? Bowing his miserable head before God, acknowledging his utter helplessness, I have tried to make him worth while. When he lost passion in masturbation, when he forgot my covenant, full of petty spite and jealousy, only then I remained with him, bringing hope in his weakness, showing him

strength. Sometimes I threatened to kill him, then relented, thinking: yet he has potentialities. What are they? Continued misconduct, continually involving himself with fools, contrived triviality, inability to think or feel for more than a moment or two. His flesh forgets its lessons as soon as a cat forgets being put off the table. Now in as fantastic a mess as ever . . . still vacillating, impotent, full of self importance and desire for sweets and frillys. Unless he repents I shall discard him for the worthless imbecile dolt he is. . . . To him I say this: if at any time in the future you are forgetful, fretful, full of doubt, desire, if you have so forgotten me, then you are damned. You may rot in Hell for one of the lost. I will no longer try to save you. Unless you are strong, I have no use for you. If you forget that nothing is important, if you cease to perceive how all things are as drops of water that fall into the sea, then you are damned. I have finished with you.'

15th July, 1950

' . . . I found my vision partly in books, partly in my own reason, strengthened by other minds. As often as not it was gone when I returned to look for it—but a renewal of the vision always brought a further determination not to allow it to escape so easily next time. I would that my life were still. . . . David presented me with a recorder lately, and this gave me an idea of further means of self expression—a convenient instrument of expression. . . . I spend a long, lonely day struggling with moods and thoughts until I have achieved tranquillity and mastery. Yet tomorrow I shall be back where I started this morning. When I think on my past, seeing so much that seemed to me at the time, and that has now faded into the rustling of leaves, *I feel despair that I have not yet learned what is real and what is not.*'

Tuesday, July 24th, 1950

'Shall I analyse the promptings that move me to wonder? It will be of no help, but one does it all the same. So life is a matter of sensory impressions, and without sensory impressions it has no meaning. The fluctuations of the "S" relationship have brought that to mind. Years past have brought some sort of reprieve from the horror, but now it returns. After the increasing but undefined dissatisfaction with farm work, the lull has come, and I have my days to myself. Now the question is, supposing that happiness is dependent upon intensity of impulse or

sensory impression? For instance, I was of the opinion that losing "S" would be rather a good idea, enabling me to grasp at essentials again. Now, with long days to read and write in, I begin to wonder, and out of the wonder springs bewilderment. *For my whole philosophy believes there is something more important, more satisfying, than the love of women and the eternal mutterings of this world. Now I begin to doubt, I always doubted in a way but never faced it before. . . . I remember the one occasion when I decided to face the meaning of self knowledge, and to kill myself. When I uncorked the cyanide bottle, the whole meaning of my action came to me. I was no longer full of uncertainty and sterility. Yet the fact remains that for years I battled with that spiritual rot, that disease of the soul, and all my attempts to combat it were failures. . . .* So when I threatened to kill the body, the instincts retreated in the face of the greater calamity, Death. And the Wisdom who was there was calm. . . . And I may be glad, at any rate, that these years since I was sixteen have brought that much freedom from desire. The years to come will bring ever more. . . . All creative art that is a deliberate attempt to clarify the feelings, or to project a mental situation, is basically great art, and Art is no more than a step in the attempt to free the mind from the body. My own attempt produced ten volumes of a diary beginning in January, 1948. . . . *If I die now I lose a strong body, a finely trained brain and nineteen years of learning. This spirit has won a victory over body of brute and animal. It has forced generations of animals to the wisdom that made them the first men, and it raised those semi-anthropoid creatures to a vision of a quiet land, a Universe that is a whirlpool of power, controlled by that force that at present moves them to wondering at Life and Death. . . .* How great that two people should loathe one another, and yet engage in coitus. It is all part of the attempt to murder the trivial. Sin is the attempt to assert freedom of will. . . . Life is to be borne, not lived. All our good is a respite from bad; all our pleasure a lessening of the pain; all our interest a release from boredom. . . . *The Life Force will ultimately produce something with an intellect fifty times as bright as man's—a fire which the most inspired visions will seem a mere candle beside a bonfire.'*

August 27th, 1950 (Weekend at Northampton)

' . . . I have worked three days navvying, using pick and shovels. "S" works at the cinema in the evenings to earn enough to take us on holiday. And becoming involved in a quarrel with

the staff foreman, I was violently handled and almost threatened with assault. And after a hard day at work I kiss her, feeling her responding to a false masculinity. But today I gave the job in, no longer tired, yet strong of body, being sick of soul. I was introduced to the R.A.F. corporal "S" met in the cinema—he was pleasant and sane. To feel her looking afterwards, with the same adoring eyes, I would shout "What the hell *do* you love? I disown all that might attract you. *In reality I leave a slug's trail of slimy, silvergreek loathing* and there is liquid black squid acid inside me. My salvation is (possibly) the Virgin Mary, the Beatific One." . . . There is exhilaration in the nude body of a woman, yet there is the greyness of flesh made bitter by Time. I ask myself—shall I ever be completely free of the things of my life—environment, experience? And in the answer I see that Death is but the damp cloth that wipes the slate clean.

*You will never be free
You will never be free
So kill yourself now
Be done with futility. . . .*

Yet the thought of extinguishing even this tiny spark brings me back again to an apprehension of my Purpose.'

September 9th, 1950

'I've been working on a building site in King Street (Leicester) since Wednesday. I can just about stick the work and the money's good. But Dad told me that I'd better get out if I can't settle down, so shall go, next week probably. . . . I speak with men whose lives are confined to a home or their work, and their only pleasure is copulation, fouled by words and thoughts. *The pathetic narrowness of their purposeless lives is a bitterness to me. . . . I work among men who are the slaves of the lives they live. . . .* My own desires were never destined to give me permanence or happiness. I recognise this, and so am suspicious of gratifying them, or accepting the pleasure that offers itself. Holy mother, virgin queen, now send me light and faith. For I have faithfully sought after the purity of thy strength, and have striven to cleanse my heart of passion. Yet now I am bewildered, torn between shadow and shadow. I would escape into eternity, yet know not how to escape. Holy Mother, pray for me. Holy Mother, purify me.'

19th September, 1950

'I thought I had a battle to fight. I've just realised that the battle is won. The battle is the battle for spiritual sensitivity. *Whenever I found work intolerable, it was because it displaced fineness of spirit.* Yet perhaps now it is different. No matter how I may feel myself involved in the circumstances that close around me, a few hours' relaxation—Music, Plato—and I'm free again, a kindred soul of Socrates or Mozart. No, the battle is fought. I am that I am—Nijinsky, Blake, Nietzsche. Now the standard is established I may measure anything. Now the anchor is firm, I may sail anywhere.'

February 24th, 1951

'I must write of the *last betrayal*—the betrayal by the body. The punishment of men who do not know how to live. Why is there eternal suffering? Might I be dead before this time next week. That would be a relief. It would be pleasant to think of an end to this. I am very tired of it all. Living is exhaustion of life. It is pleasant to think of atmospheres: intellectual atmospheres of music, poetry, depravity. But they all vanish in the ordeal of living. *Where is God in this mess of everyday life?* . . . I can find no system of Philosophy that fits, ever so remotely, the facts of my everyday existence. All seem untrue in the face of mud and boredom. I must create my own system or be enslaved by reality. . . . I want to write a story about the last betrayal. . . . *What is my work? Loathing at high temperature because my life seems a prison.* Yet what's the good of anything I've written? Has it cleared me out? Played the cathartic? Has it Hell! I'm still under the necessity of re-expressing it. What's the good of Art if you're no better off when you've expressed everything?'

February 28th, 1951

'I think an important stage in my art begins to crystallise. Working at navvying is a battle, and I have to fight it. And it all but squashes me. Digging holes is no fun. Yet I see a new stage. . . . Physical fatigue, and the dislike of the people I work with induces a mood that isn't optimistic. *I'm afraid that the duties involved in everyday living have always been a bit too much for me.* . . . I believe that life is basically glorious and made to be enjoyed. I believe that Eliot's pessimism and suffering of children

—they're due mercy to immaturity. Eliot howls over his broken doll, and Hemingway moans because he wants an electric train for Christmas. *I never believed children to be wonderful little innocents.* To me they are, at worst, possessed by all the devils of pettiness, selfishness, superstition and total egotism. The child's only happy moments are in his imaginative freedom, and only the imaginative child escapes the full taint of selfishness. They are in a state remote from godliness. Only as men escape their childishness do they become gods. . . .'

7

THE 'WANDERJAHRE'

I LEFT the R.A.F. a convinced disciple of rashness.' The main lesson Colin drew from his discharge was that 'one's salvation can lie in proceeding to extremes of indiscretion . . . ignoring the possible consequences'.

The discharge caused some slight inconvenience to the Nottingham drama group, who were relying on him to play the lawyer in *The First Gentleman*. Consequently, the plans for following in Synge's footsteps were temporarily shelved; he stayed in Leicester until the play came on, and then travelled nightly to Nottingham for a week to act his part.

One of his ideas for a career was to train as a ballet dancer. He wrote to Arnold Haskell and Sir Kenneth Clarke, asking for advice. Both replied sympathetically but discouragingly; eighteen was too old to begin training as a dancer.

The weeks in Leicester were spent studying religious philosophy, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, the Tao Te King, various Buddhist texts, and the meditations of Marcus Aurelius. He studied the latter on the bus travelling to and from Nottingham, and for a while kept the copy in his pocket wherever he went.

Finally, the R.A.F. discharge pay began to run out, and his father began to talk about returning to the civil service. To forestall this, Colin sent his resignation, and received a reply pointing out the gravity of the step, and suggesting he reconsider it. He replied politely that he had already considered the matter fully.

The old question was back again: what to do for a living? If ballet was impossible, perhaps it might be possible to break into the theatre as an actor? The Leicester Theatre Royal were not helpful; they explained that they had room for a few

students at a premium of a hundred pounds each, but a hundred pounds was as unobtainable as a million. He decided to try other theatres in the North, which, rumour had it, were more prosperous than in the South. In April 1950, he set out with a haversack containing a few clothes and some books, and a wallet with five pounds. The first stop was York, where he stayed overnight at the youth hostel, and spent a few hours looking at the castle and the cathedral, and thinking of Henry James, another literary wanderer, who had possessed, however, the basic requisite for detachment—an independent income. During the next few days he approached theatres in Bradford, Harrogate and Leeds, enquiring about a stage manager's job. There was nothing available. He crossed the Pennines and spent a night at Grasmere. Here an amusing incident occurred. In the past few weeks, he had acquired a habit of sitting cross-legged in meditation on Brahman. While the other youth hostellers were out at supper, he sat cross-legged on the floor of the dormitory and meditated successfully, quickly achieving a condition of detachment and calm. Supper finished earlier than he had anticipated, and the other hostellers began to come back into the dormitory; this irritated him; he sat on determinedly, staring into space and refusing to move. If the other hostellers were startled, they took care not to show it, moving around him as if he were a piece of furniture. At the end of an hour, he touched his forehead on the floor—the ritual at the end of a session of meditation—and stood up. No one made any comment whatsoever; he joined in the general conversation, and nothing was said. 'An astonishing example of British restraint,' Colin commented, 'They were far too polite to ask me what I was up to.'

Another night was spent at Catterick R.A.F. camp in Yorkshire. Colin went in on the pretext of enquiring about his final discharge papers, and was allowed to stay overnight, and given two good meals. This was just as well, since it was a cold and windy night, and he had only a few shillings left.

A moment of sudden violent indignation came as he stood at a bus stop in Bradford in the cold and rainy dusk. 'It seemed suddenly so *unreasonable* that life should be so damnably awkward.' For a while, the optimism and determination to live the life of a tramp—like Sygne—evaporated; there was again a sense of being caught in a trap. He decided to return to

Leicester and accumulate some more money, then think about travelling to a warmer climate—India, for example—where the life of a mendicant was less hampered by climate. A few days later, he was back home, penniless; his first attempt to escape had lasted barely fourteen days.

In Leicester he decided to put into practice his plan of working at labouring jobs. So he got the labour exchange to direct him to a building site. The work was by no means as difficult as he had anticipated. His fellow workers were not particularly surprised to have him working with them; students often took labouring jobs during the holidays. But he found it at first astonishing, and later irritating, to work among men who seemed to live on a curiously aimless physical level. Since he had so accustomed himself to living with romantic ideas of the future, it was somehow incomprehensible to work with men with no future. Even the R.A.F. had not been like this; the nearest approach to it was Norman Mailer's picture of American G.I.s in *The Naked and the Dead*. They were pleasant and sociable enough; yet, with the exception of the foreman, they were all drifters who had drifted into the job, and might drift out again in another week. In fact, two men were dismissed for shirking after Colin had worked there for a couple of days. There was only one subject—SEX. One habitual drunk, who spent a large part of his time in Leicester gaol for wife-beating and brawling, described how he made love to his wife, and then embraced his daughter afterwards. The first question asked every morning was who had been 'on the nest' the night before. Colin listened with interest, read the Bhagavad Gita at meal-times in the canteen next door to the site, helped to mix concrete and dig holes, and thought about taking a boat to India. The first experience as a builder's labourer led him to one conclusion: that the humanity of human beings consists in expectation of the future and the sense of purpose. Without this, a man belongs with cows and creatures of the jungle.

A few weeks of this work was enough to accumulate a few pounds; then he set off again, this time south, wearing the cement-stained R.A.F. uniform. While passing through Amesbury, he decided to sleep a night on Stonehenge; Blake's drawings of 'Druid altars' in *Jerusalem* had created a romantic nostalgia.

The actual sight of Stonehenge was a disappointment; he had

somehow expected great stones towering into the sky like Himalayas; the circle of small stones, each one no higher than a small tree, was an anticlimax. He clambered over the barbed wire (another disappointment) and sat on the altar stone, staring up at the darkening sky, and thinking about Shaw's definition of the philosopher in *Man and Superman*: 'he who seeks in contemplation to discover the inner will of the world, in invention to discover the means of fulfilling that will, and in action to do that will by the so discovered means'. The idea produced a sudden overwhelming sense of certainty, the opposite of the boredom and rage he had experienced in Bradford, and a sense of joy and confidence so overpowering that it seemed to approach the *samadhi* mentioned so often in the Bhagavad Gita. The difference was that *samadhi* plunges the 'sage' into a state like unconsciousness, oblivious of the world; this certainty produced a consciousness so heightened that it was almost unbearable. 'It was a sense that defeat was totally impossible.' He realised suddenly that he was hungry, and he began to walk to Amesbury for a meal in the transport café.

Two hours later, in a high wind that whistled off Salisbury Plain he walked back towards Stonehenge. On the way, he passed an inviting haystack and crawled into it. He slept heavily until the first streaks of dawn appeared in the sky, then hurried on to Stonehenge. By this time, it was light enough to see that his overcoat was covered with fine needles of hay that gave him the appearance of a woolly bear. He spent half an hour trying to brush them off, but it was impossible; they were too deeply embedded. There was nothing for it but to carry his overcoat over his arm, inside out. By the time he had finished plucking the needles of hay from the bottoms of his trousers and made himself look presentable, the sun had risen. He had missed watching the sun rise over the altar stone, but at six in the morning, with an icy wind blowing, this seemed unimportant.

On his way back into Amesbury, he was stopped by two R.A.F. policemen, who took him for a deserter. He explained that he had been discharged, but had not yet received his discharge papers, probably owing to some clerical error at R.A.F. records. They advised him to get them before he went any further. So he enquired the way to the nearest R.A.F. camp—which was on the far side of Amesbury—and walked there. In the guard-room he explained his position, and asked

them if they would contact R.A.F. records for him. The duty officer was at breakfast, so Colin was also sent to the mess for breakfast while enquiries were made. When the officer finally appeared, he regarded Colin with violent hostility, convinced that this was simply a ruse for getting a couple of free meals out of the R.A.F. Colin remarks:

'Everyone in the guard-room was terrified of him. It gave me immense pleasure to glare at him insolently, and know that there was nothing he could do because I wasn't in the R.A.F. any more.'

The morning drifted by, and the hostile officer contacted the Leicester police to check if his story was true. Colin's parents were alarmed when a policeman knocked on the door, and annoyed when they learned the reason. They declared that they wanted him sent home immediately. So he went, leaving the R.A.F. camp on Saturday afternoon, staying the night at the Birmingham youth hostel, and arriving in Leicester on Sunday morning, only two days after he had left it.

He was not particularly popular at home. Neighbours made disparaging comments, or compared him unfavourably with sons of their own who were settling down to various types of career. His father, Arthur, had been a member of the Coleman Road Social Club since 1935, and it didn't please him to be asked: 'What's your eldest lad doing nowadays?'

Again, Colin applied to the Labour Exchange. They asked him if he was interested in a temporary job on a fairground—it would only last for two weeks, but the pay was good. He accepted, and went to be interviewed. His new employer ran a gambling machine called a 'spinner', and wanted a ticket-seller. He immediately offered Colin a permanent job, travelling around with the circus. Colin accepted with pleasure; it was a chance to do an interesting job and see something of England without the insecurity that he found so demoralising on his 'tramps'. That night he started work on the spinner, selling tickets, shouting to attract customers. He found the job enjoyable and exciting. This seemed to be the solution to the problem of how to earn a living without selling out to security. It made it possible to live on one plane mentally, and another physically. In his pocket he always carried one of a number of books: *The Pocket World Bible*, Whitman's poems, *Thus Speak Zarathustra* and Marcus Aurelius.

During his second week on the spinner, a young girl offered admiring comments. Colin walked home with her, and agreed to meet her the next day. She worked in a store, selling ice-cream. Colin found her exhilarating; unlike the girl from the Vaughan College, 'S' had no pretension to culture; she came from a large family with very little money. Besides, she was only fifteen. They spent an afternoon at Bradgate Park, just outside Leicester, and Colin recited Rupert Brooke and talked incessantly. 'I wouldn't have dreamed of trying to make love to her, but there was no need. The second time I met her, she almost raped me.' It was his first sexual experience, and her second. '. . . It contributed to the tremendously optimistic state of mind I experienced all that year.'

The afternoon spent at Bradgate caused him to miss his usual evening on the spinner; the next day he was sacked. By this time, he had definitely made up his mind; he would go to France and visit the pen friend who had stayed with him two years before. But the affair with 'S' delayed the setting out. He took another job as a builder's labourer, and wheeled hundreds of barrow-loads of concrete a day up an inclined plank. It was now early June; he worked stripped to the waist. Whenever there was a delay to refill the cement-mixer, he slipped inside the half-completed building and sat cross-legged on the floor, meditating on the Gita. As he wheeled concrete, he thought seriously about becoming a Roman Catholic and entering a monastery. (There is an abbey not far from Leicester, near Coalville.)

When he grew tired of labouring jobs, he applied for a job as a farming student under a Government scheme. He was sent to a large farm at Newbold Verdon, run by the local squire. This he found in some ways embarrassing. He lived in the Hall with the family, and ate his meals with them; to some extent, he felt socially awkward. It was a long, hard day, beginning at 6 a.m. with the milking (he learned to use an electric milker) and continuing sometimes after supper with the haymaking. To begin with, he enjoyed it; it was pleasant to work in the fields, hoeing turnips; it allowed time for contemplation. At this time, he was using the El Sordo episode from *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as a focus for meditation; it stripped life of its trivialities, made the reality of death clear, and so enhanced the value of the basic act of living and accepting. 'It became clear to me that

we live in the world of personality, of other people, of human relations; it sustains us, keeps us sane, and finally strangles us. The artist drives through this world to the reality of the raw life force underneath, naked power, indifferent to human standards.' He was making his first attempt to write a popular novel, in a style similar to Peter Cheyney's; he wrote it in the local pub in the evenings, sitting alone in a corner of the bar.

This was the first of three farming jobs that followed one another in quick succession. The squire of Newbold Verdon soon saw through him: 'Admit it—you're doing this thing for a lark.' The board transferred him to a farm near Melton Mowbray. Disagreements with the farmer followed after a few weeks; the farmer's mother objected to Colin playing a recorder in the middle of a field full of cows. He was transferred to another farm at Houghton on the Hill, where he was able to live at home and travel to work by bus every day. By this time he was sick of farming and bored with the English countryside. After a few weeks at Houghton on the Hill, he ceased to be a farming student.

Quarrels and reconciliations with 'S' had been a regular pattern all through the summer. At one point, she even got herself engaged to a friend of Colin's, but the *status quo* was soon restored. Now, the farming jobs at an end, he took her to the Lake District on a hitch-hiking holiday, their last week together before he journeyed to France. They stayed four nights at Windermere, Grasmere and Ullswater; 'S' spent most of the week in tears; finally, they separated in Leicester. Colin had used most of his spare cash on the holiday; nevertheless, he was unwilling to take another labourer's job to make enough money to cross the Channel. The autumn was coming on; it would soon be too cold to sleep out at nights. He borrowed five shillings from his mother, and set out again.

The action was not as rash as it seems. He had a friend in Northampton, and was fairly confident that his friend would accompany him to Dover. They could do some hop-picking; he would make enough money to repay what he had borrowed, and would cross the Channel.

All went according to plan. They left Northampton on the Monday morning, and arrived in Canterbury the same evening. The next day they found jobs as hop-pickers. But it was less lucrative than they had anticipated. The Londoners who

made money at it worked at a tremendous speed; they talked philosophy as they picked hops, and the result was often less than ten shillings a day between them. Still, the farmer supplied a tin hut to live in, and straw for beds; they ate a meal of bread and cheese at lunch-time, and egg and bacon at a Canterbury café in the evening. After two weeks of this, the friend had to return to Northampton—he was due to return to Leicester University. Colin continued to Dover, where he was joined by Alan Bates.

Unfortunately, Alan had no money. So they tramped inland, and found jobs as apple-pickers at Marden in Kent. After two weeks of this, they had made a little money, and had several differences of opinion. These differences led them to separate; Colin returned to Dover and looked for another job. He found one as a potato-picker. The farmer gave him permission to sleep in an old ruined cottage whose ground floor was used as a storehouse for the potatoes; he had to enter through the window aperture, clamber over the potatoes, avoiding holes in the floor, and climb the rickety stairs. The centre of the floor in the upstairs room was missing, and there was a drop through to the cellar; so it was dangerous to move about after dark. He borrowed a lantern from the farm, to be able to read in the evenings (he was re-reading Anatole France's *Thais*, a book for which he had an immense admiration), and cooked his meals on a fire outside the cottage. After a fortnight, he had saved enough money to cross the Channel. On his last evening there, the farmer's wife allowed him to come to the farmhouse for a bath, and gave him a meal afterwards. He talked until late at night about his ambition to become a writer and left with her best wishes and two weeks' wages.

Early the next morning, he went into Dover; two hours later, he was sailing for Calais.

* * *

The experience of being at sea filled him with excitement; he sat on the upper deck, on an exceptionally calm and sunny morning, reading F. O. Matthieson's book, *Henry James: The Major Phase*, and was again possessed by the idea of being a detached observer of life, uninvolved.

A few hours later, he landed in Calais. To the enquiry 'How much money have you?' he replied, 'Twelve shillings'. (This

had been changed to its equivalent in francs—600—by the purser on the boat.) The customs authorities looked dubious. 'What did he intend to do?' they asked. 'Go to a pen friend in Strasbourg.' So he was allowed to go through. On the outskirts of Calais, he saw a wine shop, and was amazed to see wine priced as low as 100 francs a bottle. This was irresistible; he bought a bottle. Next, he stopped by a grocer's and asked for Spanish onions. 'How much?' they asked, and he read the price tag, and answered: 'A kilo.' He was surprised to be presented with about two pounds of onions; he had thought a kilo to be half a pound.

By the roadside, a mile beyond Calais, he sat down, cut a slice of bread, and forced the cork from the wine bottle with a penknife. His first taste of the wine puzzled him; he had expected it to be sweet, like port. For a while, he wondered if the wine had 'gone off'. But he was hungry, and dismissed his doubts, washing down chunks of bread and onion with wine. After a few minutes, he found himself feeling absurdly happy and confident—which was, under the circumstances, unwarranted. He heard a car in the distance, and stood up to thumb a lift; his body felt curiously light, and he realised that he was slightly drunk. It was the first time in his life he had ever felt like this.

The car stopped, and the driver gave him a lift as far as Saint-Omer; his condition must have been recognisable, for he heard the driver remark to his wife, 'Il est sou'. In Saint-Omer, he hitched a lift in the back of a covered van. Twenty kilometres further on, again walking by the roadside, he realised he had left his copy of the Nonesuch Blake in the back of the van. He swore solidly for the next two miles. Towards evening, he arrived in Lille, and decided to stay overnight at the youth hostel, and set out early the next morning for Strasbourg; a glance at the map revealed that he had about three hundred miles still to go.

But plans were altered. In the Auberge de Jeunesse were two English girls, clerks from the Midlands, taking a fortnight's holiday. During the evening, one of them approached him and explained that a Frenchman had invited them to spend the next day looking at Lille; they were suspicious of his intentions; but if Colin, an Englishman, would consent to go too. . . . Colin explained that this was impossible; he was on his way to

Strasbourg; the girls united to be persuasive. Eventually he agreed to spend another day in Lille.

The next morning, the girls introduced him to 'Michel', who produced a business card bearing the name of a French noble family, and explained that his parents were rich wine-growers in the South of France. They wandered around Lille, looked at the museum, and ended in the public gardens, where Michel quickly found a quiet corner and proceeded to kiss one of the girls, the blonde named 'J'. Colin was left with the other—'W', a brunette; it was obvious that she expected to be kissed, so he kissed her 'experimentally'. Towards evening, a sentimental relationship had begun to develop, and 'W' was suggesting that they had both been victims of love at first sight. The thought was not displeasing to Colin; in a foreign country, with very little money, it produced a certain sense of warmth and security. But it was important that he should go on to Strasbourg, and that the girls should continue on their way to Paris. Early the next day, Colin and Michel accompanied the girls to the main Paris road. Michel went into a transport café, and came out a few moments later announcing that he had found a driver willing to take the ladies to Paris. Colin and 'W' took fond goodbyes and promised to write; the driver got into the cab of the lorry, and the girls followed. Then Michel had an idea; he seized Colin's arm, and exclaimed: 'We will go too.' He had relatives in Paris who would put them up overnight; they could return to Lille the next day. So Colin and Michel clambered into the cab too, and the driver, looking a little bewildered, started the engine.

A hundred kilometres along the road, the lorry had a breakdown. It was now growing dark; Colin and Michel took turns standing in the middle of the road with a torch, trying to hitch lifts. While he was away, 'J' confided that Michel had asked her to marry him; when his parents died, he explained, he would be a rich man. She was not in love with him, but the proposition flattered her. At this point, Michel called to them; he had found a driver to take them to Paris.

Sitting beside Michel, Colin heard him explaining to the driver that his parents were rich underwear manufacturers from Belgium, and would one day leave him a fortune.

They arrived in Paris in the early hours of the morning. A police car stopped and asked them what they were doing.

Michel explained that they needed a bed for the night (it was too late to go to his relatives, he explained) and the police car took them all to the Commissariat in the Place de l'Opera. The room was full of prostitutes who had been pulled in for the night; they smoked and laughed loudly, and eyed the 'foreigners' with curiosity. A sergeant examined their passports and took their names. Colin was surprised to hear Michel explaining that he was an American, and speaking French with a curious drawl that he probably took to be an American accent. He peered over Michel's shoulder at his identity papers; the name on them was certainly not the distinguished name on the visiting card.

They were shown into a small room with two tables in it, and told to sleep as best they could. Colin and 'W' wrapped themselves in their coats and slept on one table; Michel and 'J' occupied the other. Two hours later, the sergeant woke them up, and they walked out into the Paris dawn, and the lighted globes that stretch the length of the Avenue de l'Opera. They were all feeling tired and light-headed from lack of sleep. They ate a breakfast of hot *brioche*s and coffee, then wandered around the Jardins du Louvre. While Michel was elsewhere for a moment, the girls begged Colin to take him away, to persuade him to go back to Lille. They had had enough of French amorousness and eccentricity. So when Michel returned, Colin broke the news to him. Michel burst into tears, told 'J' he would always love her, but nevertheless agreed to go back to Lille. Towards midday, they said goodbye to the girls and set out.

Colin now suggested that they should first call on Michel's relatives and beg a meal, but Michel became strangely evasive. They had only a few francs between them. With this, they bought a loaf of bread, and took the *Metro* to the outskirts of Paris. They arrived back in Lille in the early hours of the following morning in a heavy rainstorm, and crept into the *auberge*, shivering and hungry.

Colin spent most of the next day in bed with a fever. Michel came in, promised to lend him enough money to pay the hostel bill, and left. A few hours later, the police appeared and made enquiries. The *mère auberge* explained to Colin that Michel was a confidence trickster, and was wanted, among other things, for bigamy. He was working, apparently, for some kind of

a charitable institution in aid of war veterans, and had been spending the money he collected.

It seemed obvious that Michel was unlikely to return. And by this time, Colin was in no condition to care; he was suffering from an attack of 'flu. Against all the better advice of the *mère auberge*, he decided to go to Strasbourg that night. He explained to the *mère auberge* that he would return to pay the hostel bill later, and left his spare pair of shoes as a security. The only problem now was money. He approached a friendly young man who spoke English and asked if he could lend him some money; the young man, a commercial traveller named Claude Guillaume, lent him a hundred francs (two shillings), and told Colin to call on him if he should ever go to Paris.

At seven o'clock on a cold and rainy evening, still suffering from fever, Colin began his journey to Strasbourg. There seemed to be no traffic on the road; a few lorries went past without stopping. Finally, a friendly Frenchman offered a lift for a few kilometres, and, as they drove along, advised Colin to turn back and try again the next morning. It was obviously going to be a rough night. The Frenchman was returning to Lille, so Colin accepted a lift back. *En route*, they stopped at a café, where the Frenchman insisted on Colin drinking a coffee and a glass of Schnapps; then he dropped him outside the *auberge* again. That night, Colin's temperature rose steeply; but after a night of fever and perspiration, he woke up feeling exhausted and clear-headed. The next morning, a postcard arrived from Paris, signed 'your lonely "W"' and asking him to go back to Paris. So plans were altered again. He made for Paris.

It was a lucky trip; he was picked up by the chauffeur of a Belgian car; the man spoke little French and no English, but he seemed to be glad of the company, and the high-powered car roared on towards Paris. At a point on the road where Colin had spotted some apple trees three days before, he got out of the car and filled his haversack with apples. This was to be the main part of his diet for the next forty-eight hours. He arrived in Paris in the late afternoon, and immediately went to the Youth Hostel at Porte de Chatillon, where 'W' was staying. He found the girls, but there was no happy reunion; since she posted the card, 'W' had discovered a tall and handsome Dane, and started an affair with him.

The hostel was full; many hostellers were sleeping on the

floor. But Colin was in his customary luck; he happened to be sitting in the dormitory when an American entered and began to pack his bags hastily; he had been called away unexpectedly. So Colin persuaded him not to mention his departure to the warden of the hostel, and occupied his bed for that night. 'W' was sleeping on the floor in the next room—in the arms of her Dane. Colin experienced 'a violent sense of humiliation and rage', but there was nothing to be done. Early the next morning, he slipped out of the hostel without paying, as he had little money. As he walked towards the *Metro* at Chatillon, he wondered how deep the humiliation had sunk? Suddenly, the sun came out, and shone on the red leaves of the trees; he felt a violent joy and a realisation that the fever had sweated 'W' out of his system, as well as the influenza.

With his last few francs he took a ticket to the centre of Paris, and made his way to the *Bibliothèque nationale*, where he spent the day reading an edition of *Ulysses* illustrated by Matisse. It was a psychological relief to relax with a book and forget the indifference of a foreign country. He has written: 'In England, I never lost the fundamental certainty that whatever I did was the right thing for me—an obsessive conviction that I was a man of genius. In Lille, it seemed as if I had always deceived myself. I had no ineluctable destiny, and if the ground in the Rue Solferino opened up and swallowed me, no one would notice.' In Paris, it felt worse. He lunched off apples and fishpaste, walked past the *Comédie française*, and wondered how long he would have to wait before he would be free of this irritating problem of worrying about the basic necessities of life. Even this aimless existence seemed preferable to a daily routine. 'I detested the idea of starting to work. I wanted to be free to observe, to meditate; it always seemed appallingly unfair that the gods had arranged my life so that I had to work; my hatred of work has been almost pathological.'

In the evening, when the *Bibliothèque* closed, he walked up the Rue Faubourg St. Honore to the Rue Bayen, the address Claude Guillaume had given him. A beautiful slim young woman answered the door. M. Guillaume was not in; could she help him? She was Madame Guillaume. Colin explained why he was there; she invited him in and gave him a meal. Her name was Marie, and she was studying English to become a schoolteacher. Colin spent the next two hours helping her

translate Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Then Claude came home; he seemed delighted to see Colin—so much so that he immediately went out for a bottle of wine. Two hours later, as Colin lay on an air bed on the floor, wrapped in his sleeping-bag, he reflected that his luck had sustained him again. He comments: 'I was in love with them both; they seemed the most beautiful couple I had ever seen.'

The following day was a Saturday; Colin decided to leave for Strasbourg on Monday. In the meantime, he relaxed completely, for the first time in many weeks.

On Sunday, at lunch-time, Colin noticed on the piano a bulky hand-printed volume of poems by Raymond Duncan. Claude explained that Raymond Duncan was an American millionaire who ran an 'Academy' for starving artists and musicians in the Rue de Seine. Raymond was the brother of the dancer, Isadora Duncan, who had been killed in a motoring accident in 1927. Colin had heard of Isadora. There is the famous story of Isadora approaching Shaw and suggesting that he should be the father of her child, which, with her beauty and his brains, should be a remarkable infant. Shaw asked: 'What if it has my beauty and your brains?' Isadora also infuriated Romola Nijinsky by approaching Vaslav with the same kind of proposition.

Colin decided to pay Raymond Duncan a visit, and he went immediately after lunch. A woman dressed in a white nun's habit made of coarse fabric asked him to wait; later, a 'bent old woman' came into the room. This, Colin realised after a moment, was Raymond, dressed in a long smock and wearing his hair down to his shoulders. A conversation followed, in which Colin explained that he needed somewhere to live while he wrote novels. Duncan explained that the rumour that he was a millionaire was untrue; but he managed to support himself by his own hands, and believed, like William Morris, in returning to the idea of the medieval craftsman. He had an intense distaste for the 'decadent' type of writer, and believed that all artists should be capable of mending a pipe or building a house. These ideas chimed in closely with Colin's own beliefs; it was for similar reasons that he had rejected Eliot and preferred Synge and Burns. After half an hour of enthusiastic agreement, Duncan invited Colin to come and live in the Rue de Seine and learn to 'be useful to himself'. Colin returned to

the Rue Bayen bubbling with excitement and weaving day-dreams. Duncan had his own printing press and his own theatre; he published also a weekly newspaper. All the opportunities were there. Claude and Marie were equally delighted. The next morning, Colin moved into the Akademia Duncan in the Rue de Seine. There was no room available for him, but there was a spare couch in the dressing-room behind the stage. The practical business of the household was run by the woman attired like a nun, Madame Bertrand. Three vegetarian meals a day were supplied. Raymond worked all day weaving tapestries and printing his newspaper. No alcohol was drunk.

The day's work proved unexpectedly dull. Colin had to break up type and distribute it into its appropriate boxes. Raymond worked in the same room, but he made no conversation; he was too old to discuss ideas. The 'nun' seemed to feel no deep liking for Colin, who in turn regarded her with irritation. 'The dislike smouldered beneath the surface at our communal meals.' Colin attended one of Duncan's lectures, and then attended no more: it consisted of the vaguest and most airy kind of pantheism.

After two weeks at the Akademia Duncan, it had become apparent that Duncan's ideas and Colin's had, in reality, very little in common. And disagreements began to appear. There was also a Scandinavian girl staying at the Akademia, who was learning the art of weaving from Madame Bertrand; Colin felt that the 'nun' bullied her, and he therefore incited her to rebellion. One evening he and the Scandinavian girl, Sybil, went down to the Porte de Chatillon hostel to collect some gear Colin had left behind; they returned very late, and Mme Bertrand expressed disapproval. Colin began to spend as little time as possible at the Akademia; as soon as the day's work was over, he disappeared to the *Bibliothèque St. Geneviève* and read Joyce and Melville. Matters came to a head when an American woman invited Colin back to her hotel for tea. The invitation was perfectly innocent, and the woman convulsed Colin by taking his hand when they parted and saying: 'I have a feeling that one day you will be as great as Somerset Maugham.' But for some reason, the invitation to tea enraged Duncan as well as Mme Bertrand; that night at supper, he told Colin he regarded him as an adventurer and a waster, and that he

considered that he had entered the Akademia under false pretences. He indicated that the sooner Colin left, the better.

The next morning, a letter arrived from the pen-friend in Strasbourg, enclosing five hundred francs, and urging him to come to Strasbourg immediately. Colin needed no further urging. That day he took his leave of Duncan, thanking him for the hospitality, and went over to Claude's room in the Rue Bayen. He spent the following day with Claude and Marie, and set out early the next morning for Strasbourg.

The journey took longer than he had expected. The first night, he slept in the kitchen of a friendly farmer; the second, he found himself in Nancy. He had practically no money left, but stayed the night at the Youth Hostel, and left his hostel card behind as security for the two shillings he owed. The following day, a coal lorry deposited him in Strasbourg, where the first person he met was his pen-friend, Willi, going to a football match.

Willi received Colin enthusiastically; he must stay for a long time—at least until Christmas! His family had a large flat with many rooms; Colin was given a small spare room directly under the roof. Willi's father worked as a rag merchant; his business consisted in driving out to distant factories and picking up lorry loads of old rags, which were then taken back to a storehouse in Strasbourg, sorted out and re-sold. Colin and Willi accompanied him on these trips.

Colin found his way to the central library, where he read English books—particularly Henry James. On his first day there, he became acquainted with an American student, James Lufkin, who lived nearby; they got into conversation and Lufkin invited Colin to supper. Colin spent a great deal of his Strasbourg time with the Lufkins.

Willi was not pleased about these absences at the library, and still less pleased about the acquaintance with the Lufkins. Further, he and Colin found they no longer saw eye to eye on any subject. To Colin, his attitude seemed shallow and adolescent. They had many disagreements that frequently came dangerously close to quarrels.

After two weeks in Strasbourg, Willi's mother informed Colin one morning that he would have to leave. They needed his room immediately for a relative who had arrived unexpectedly from abroad. . . . Colin spent an evening with the Lufkins,

during which he read them a story he had just completed describing the Crucifixion, and said goodbye. The next day he visited the Consulate, borrowed enough money to pay his fare back to Leicester, and bought a ticket. There was a last-minute suggestion by the Lufkins that he should take a job in Strasbourg and find a room, but it appeared that the only work available would be heavy labouring; and French labourers worked longer hours and were paid less than their English counterparts.

The upshot was that, in early December, after barely six weeks in France, Colin returned to England by train. He arrived in England after twenty-four hours' travel, exhausted but glad to be back. Since leaving Leicester in September, a great many things had happened, and Leicester no longer seemed so oppressive. A few days after returning, he paid his routine visit to the Labour Exchange, and was directed to a well-known large engineering works, where he took a clerking job at three pounds a week. In spite of the low wages, his father was relieved to see him once again in an office; it represented a kind of respectability.

8

MARRIAGE AND LONDON

ALTHOUGH the French trip can hardly be said to have 'accomplished anything', it had performed a valuable service for Colin. Until he left the R.A.F., his main problems had been boredom and frustration; this meant that there had always been an element of nineteenth-century 'decadence' in his writing, an emphasis on the meaningless of life and the weakness of human beings. There was too much sensitivity of the Dowson-Eliot variety. The events of 1950 had made him far more 'tough-minded'; he felt that anyone who regarded boredom and frustration as an important problem must be weak-minded. The real problems were human inadequacy and death; the only remedy for them: development of the qualities of a visionary, the urge to the superhuman.

The determination to 'be a visionary' had developed steadily since the R.A.F. days; he always carried with him a copy of the Bhagavad Gita, Blake's poems or Buddhist scriptures.

For about two weeks, the memory of freedom and the hardships of past months made the office easy to endure. Then, little by little, the boredom became too much. He was the office boy, and had the job of walking around the works delivering various documents to the foremen of different departments. He writes:

'It snowed a lot that December. Some evenings, walking around the works, picking my way over girders covered with powdered snow, moving towards the white glow that came from the welding shops, the world would suddenly seem altogether good, no longer alien, and my feeling of self-contempt would vanish.'

The affair with 'S' had come to an end. She had found herself a young apprentice engineer who wanted to marry her, and decided that he offered security. While abroad, Colin had hoped

that something of the sort would happen; he had found her determination to marry him embarrassing. He had no intention of loading the dice against his career by marrying. So he was surprised to discover how much it hurt to be 'jilted'. He began to pay attentions to Betty, a slim, shy girl. She invited him back to her flat for a meal one evening; he went and stayed very late, talking and reading aloud to her from the novel he had begun about Strasbourg. After that, he began to go there frequently; it made a welcome change from 5 The Littleway, where he had to read in his bedroom if he needed quiet. He could go to Betty's to listen to radio programmes he wanted to hear; one evening, he listened to the complete *Tristan and Isolde*.

As January and February drifted by, he began to feel that the office was an intolerable bore; besides, the pay he considered disgraceful, and he never had any money. As soon as the weather became a little less cold and wet, he left the engineering firm and took another navvying job, this time with the Leicester Corporation. It was hard work and at the end of his first day he was too tired even to read Blake or Dante. He was working for the electricity board, laying electric cables. After a few weeks, they moved to the Stocking Farm estate, near his old school playing-fields, and began digging miles of trenches to supply the new prefabs with electricity. It began to rain continuously; the gluey mud made digging difficult. One day, an old navy advised him: 'Get out of this trade as soon as you can. Everybody looks down on a navvy. When you're an unskilled labourer, you've sunk to the bottom.' On the same job as Colin were several youths, one of them just out of the reformatory; they talked all day about sex in a furtive and gloating manner that convinced Colin that none of them had ever had sexual experience. After a few weeks, he found the job more depressing than the office.

Then he had a bright idea; the pay here was much better than in the office, and he could live on less than three pounds a week. Most of the workmen were a casual, floating population. Why not ask the Leicester Corporation if he could work three days a week only, and devote the rest to writing? It seemed an ideal solution, and excited him greatly. He went to the Corporation offices and explained he was a student and needed more time for study; they answered that there was no reason why he shouldn't work only three days a week. Unfortunately,

the scheme had to be abandoned; his workmates resented it, and threatened to quit. In a fury of disgust, Colin handed in his notice and walked out.

His next job, which lasted until June, when he went to London, was in a factory. Unexpectedly, Colin enjoyed the work. He was entrusted with making the solvent for the rubber that is used on sticky plasters and had to boil a mixture of resin and lanoline in a great vat, then run it off into tins to cool. He liked the man he worked under and was kept busy without being bored. For the first time since he had left school, he had found a job that he could enjoy. His friend, John Orford, had also taken a temporary job in the factory, and they saw a great deal of one another. Colin also saw much of John Orford's girl friend, later his wife, Bobby, and fell in love with her. But the affair with Betty, the nurse, was still continuing, and it culminated in marriage in the Leicester Registry Office in early June 1951.

The marriage began inauspiciously. They had nowhere to live, and there was no question of Colin moving into the flat. Colin decided that London would be preferable to Leicester, and the day after the wedding he went to find a home for his wife.

He hitch-hiked to London with three pounds four shillings, made up of two pounds from Betty, one pound from his grandmother, and four shillings from his mother. He arrived at the Youth Hostel, Great Ormond Street, at 6 p.m., cooked himself a meal, and went to the theatre to see John Clements in *Man and Superman*.

The next day he looked for work and rooms. There was no point in going to a Labour Exchange until he had decided where he was living, but this was not easy to determine. He spent two days tramping the streets of London between Barons Court and Highgate, looking for a flat or a double room. The rents were always too high. After two days of hopeless search that used up most of the three pounds, he decided to take a single room, temporarily, and use it as a base for searching for a flat. The Students' Lodging Bureau directed him to a house in Kentish Town, where he rented a top floor room for twenty-five shillings a week. This room is depicted in complete detail in *Ritual in the Dark*, even to the Frenchman living in the next room, with whom he shared the upstairs kitchen.

He now approached the Camden Town Employment Bureau, who directed him to St. Etheldreda's Church in Ely Place, Holborn, where workmen were required to help with the restoration of the roof. He started work there two days later. In the meantime, more money and a large food parcel arrived from Betty. He found this comforting. The idea of marriage had never appealed to him, but undoubtedly, it had its agreeable side; there was no longer the sense of complete abandonment that he had felt in France. At least, somebody cared about his existence!

As usual, the job proved to be a bore. But it had some compensations; he made friends with a Catholic brother, Norman Carter, who visited his room in the evenings and listened to the new beginnings of his novel—which was beginning to resemble *Ritual in the Dark* in its present form. Brother Carter suggested that they conduct some experiments in telepathy, and lent Colin a pocket watch, which he later presented to him; this was Colin's first watch.

Some quarrels with Betty followed; she had kept her marriage a secret at work, but the news leaked out, probably through a friend of Colin's. One letter from her was so bitter that Colin took a day off from work to hitch-hike to Leicester, when they made up.

After answering many advertisements and seeing many rooms, he found a small double room in East Finchley at two pounds ten a week. His landlady in Camden Town had a flat available, which she promised to him, but finally let it to two students for a higher rent.

Two months after Colin had come to London, Betty joined him, and they moved into the room in East Finchley.

Colin found himself contented during these first months of marriage, and completely in love with his wife. He had taken a job in a plastics factory, only a few minutes' bus ride from their new home. Betty always had a meal cooked when he came home in the evenings; later, they would wander along to the North Finchley public library or take a walk in the fields, which were not too distant. There was an emotional security which he had not felt for many years (since his teens had been spent mostly in disagreements with his parents), and an easy, pleasant routine of working during the day, and reading and writing at the weekends. He had discovered the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in

the North Finchley public library, and was studying it with great attention, considering how it might be used as a basis for *Ritual in the Dark*, as Joyce had used the *Odyssey*. He was also reading *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* for the first time, and finding Lawrence's character wholly absorbing. He had copies of the Crucifixion story (called *The Last Betrayal*) and the *Symphonic Variations* typed out, and sent them to Robert Penn Warren, who had been recommended to him by James Lufkin in Strasbourg. Warren never replied, and many years later, he told Colin that he had never received the stories.

This idyll came to an end when the landlady got worried because Colin had not yet found a room, and gave him a fortnight's notice. A foreman at the plastic factory had a room, and they moved into this. It was even closer to the factory. In due course, a baby arrived, a healthy boy, whom they named Roderick Gerard—the latter name being taken from the hero of *Ritual in the Dark*. Their new landlord had assured them that he didn't in the least mind the sound of a baby crying; nevertheless, much to their surprise, he gave them notice, explaining that a cousin from Australia was arriving unexpectedly. Betty went to Leicester for a few weeks, and stayed with Colin's parents; Colin found a large single room in Golders Green, moved in all their baggage (to the indignation of the landlady) and lived alone for a few weeks.

The place had its disadvantages; Colin describes the landlady as 'snobby, sham-genteel, house-proud and a confirmed leaver of spiteful notes'. Still, after six months of living with Betty in a single room, it was, he says, a relief to be alone again. He felt no enthusiasm about searching for a flat, not because he disliked being married, but because the endless wandering from landlady to landlady, the mounting expenditure of pennies for phone calls, the stifling of anger and disappointment, left him exhausted. But Betty had an idea; she was advertising in *The Nursing Mirror* for posts as a resident nurse, where they might get free accommodation in exchange for her services. Something turned up sooner than they expected; an old man in Wimbledon, suffering from asthma, wanted a resident nurse; Betty was interviewed and got the job. She told Colin: 'It seems too good to be true; it's a largish semi-detached house with plenty of room, and he lives alone in it.' Colin was relieved to give notice to his landlady; their relationship was turning into

a continuous cat-and-dog fight, and he felt an unpleasant anticipation every time he approached the front door of the place.

They moved into the Wimbledon house in the early spring of 1952. Betty was right; it seemed too good to be true. Admittedly, it was a very long train journey to North Finchley every day, but Colin could read both ways. The old man kept a draper's shop in Wimbledon, and had been a councillor for many years. He showed himself generous and easy-going; Colin was given the run of his study and typewriter, and promptly settled down to typing the beginning of *Ritual in the Dark*. They were better off than ever before, since they paid no rent. Above all, there was now plenty of space, and a large back garden where Roderick could be left in the sun. The Wimbledon public library proved to be excellent, and there were good second-hand bookshops in the area. On Saturdays, Colin developed a habit of going to the British Museum for the day, armed with sandwiches. He admits: 'It was mostly a romantic desire to write in the same place as Samuel Butler, Karl Marx, Shaw and H. G. Wells.' It was one of these afternoons in the Museum that he decided to give his novel the basic pattern of a thriller by introducing a series of crimes based on the Ripper murders. He spent an afternoon reading about the murders in *The Times* for 1888, and then cycled over to Whitechapel when the Museum closed to look at the sites.

The disadvantages of Wimbledon revealed themselves slowly. The old man, extremely demanding, tended to become querulous. And it soon became obvious that he would have preferred to have his nurse to himself; he was greedy for attention, and resented the husband who shared it. He lent the typewriter to his part-time secretary, thus bringing the typing of *Ritual* to a temporary halt. He used to call for Betty from the other end of the house; when she arrived he would want her to pass some object that he could easily have reached himself, or ask her to remake a perfectly tidy bed. As the summer drew to an end, Betty decided she could bear it no longer; the only thing was to give notice. When she announced her intention to the old man's brother and sister (who were frequent visitors) they both begged her to reconsider; as an inducement to stay, the brother presented her with a cheque for twenty pounds, intimating that there would be another one every six months for as long as she stayed. This was the first time they had

possessed so much money in a lump; it came at exactly the right moment, when they were about to take a fortnight's holiday. Instead of going to Leicester (as they had intended), they bought a tent and went to Hayling Island for a week. It was windy and sunny; at the end of the week, they were both suntanned and the baby's hair was bleached. They returned to Wimbledon, *en route* for Leicester, and received a shock; the old man had died in their absence. His heart had failed, following an asthmatic attack. The old man's sister told them that they could remain in the house for another two months, until it was sold; she also made Colin a present of the typewriter.

The remaining two months in Wimbledon were idyllic, being free of any external unpleasantness. Betty advertised again and was offered a job in a house in Kensington. It was obvious that Colin would find it difficult to get from Kensington to North Finchley, so he reluctantly gave notice at the plastics factory there, where he had worked for over a year, and found work in a plastics factory in Wimbledon. The new job was less pleasant; it involved night work, and standing for eight and a half hours a day in front of a machine, working like a machine. After two weeks Colin was sacked—he was having difficulty handling the machine and keeping it at the right temperature. Before they moved to Kensington, Colin took another job, at a toy factory in Wimbledon. The work was even harder, and Colin found himself, for the first time, fulminating against the exploitation of the workers. The jobs were incredibly monotonous; Colin had to stamp out small pieces of tin, and swing a heavy bar backwards and forwards about fifty times a minute for eight hours a day. He left after a week, experiencing a strong desire to blow the place sky-high with home-made bombs. (This desire may have been encouraged by his association with the London Anarchist Group, of which I shall speak in another chapter.)

Their run of ill-luck with landladies and landlords seems incredible, but it was not yet at an end. The woman who owned the boarding-house in Kensington, to which they now moved, was a pathological case. Her husband was rich, and she had developed a violently despotic temperament that often exploded in bursts of insane rage. Betty moved in as a nurse-housekeeper; they were given a basement flat in exchange for this work.

Colin was on the dole, for the first time in his life. He went to the Fulham Labour Exchange three times a week, and drew a few pounds every Friday—just enough to supply the family with food. Betty moved her own furniture from Leicester—a costly business. Colin spent his days writing—a long essay on Nijinsky, which he sent to Madame Nijinsky, who never replied—and new chapters of *Ritual*.

The temper of the landlady was capricious, and sometimes her outbursts left Betty in tears. In a rage one day, Colin spoke to her frankly about the curious accusations she sometimes hurled at Betty (only to apologise twenty-four hours later!). His frankness drew another outburst, and she told him to get out of the house if he felt like that. He was obliged to placate her, and went off smouldering with indignation and invoking the gods to strike her dead.

Through the Anarchists, Colin found a temporary job with Robert Copping, the 'progressive schoolmaster', who had at that time been obliged to close down his progressive school, and had started up as a painter and decorator. Colin kept his job a secret from the Labour Exchange, and so was able to go on drawing dole money, as well as earning a few shillings a week from Copping. (The wages, in any case, would have been less than his dole money!) The job with Copping came to an end when Colin quarrelled with his wife.

Towards Christmas, it seemed as though the curses Colin had invoked on the landlady were having an effect; she visited a clinic to be X-rayed, and was told that she had a cancer of the womb, and had only a few months to live.

It might have been expected that the news of her illness would cause some change in the woman's character, and, in fact, for two days she was gentle and subdued; then the insane rages returned with greater force. The house-agent warned Betty that he had heard the woman planning to dismiss her. (Betty was the sixth housekeeper who had left—or been dismissed—in one year.) Betty decided to anticipate, and handed in her notice just before Christmas.

In a sense, though neither of them knew it, the marriage was now over. It had been, on the whole, a happy marriage, although they had occasional quarrels. On Christmas Day, a bitter quarrel blew up—probably exacerbated by nervous tension on both sides. As a conciliatory gesture, after lunch

Colin began to read her Lawrence's story *The Man Who Loved Islands*; after a few pages, she interrupted him and said she found the story unutterably dull. Colin was enraged (it was one of his favourite stories—one of the few of Lawrence's he liked), and left the house in a fury. 'I cycled down to Wandsworth Bridge, and stood looking at the river, and thinking about Van Gogh, and of how he had lived and worked alone, and made himself great by being alone. It suddenly seemed intolerable that I should always have another mind close to my own, looking over my shoulder, criticising me for immaturity. I stared at the river, and suddenly felt a tremendous rush of emotion, and said aloud: "*Oh God, free me from this marriage.*" Immediately, I felt cleansed and relieved.' On another occasion, he remarked: 'I think I had to separate from Betty because she didn't admire me enough. She wanted me to think that she knew me better than I knew myself.'*

On New Year's Day, a van collected the furniture from the basement in Kensington and Colin and Betty said goodbye; both were genuinely distressed, and promised to see one another again as soon as possible. Betty, with Roderick, took a train for Leicester, and Colin started a job he had just found—as a porter in the Western Fever Hospital, Fulham.

The foreman had arranged for him to move into the hospital; he had a tiny cubicle, with low wooden walls over which it was possible to look into the next cubicle. As soon as he found himself alone, an immense feeling of relief overwhelmed him. It was not that he was not in love with his wife; only that eighteen months of continuous worry, of moving from room to room (there had been six different homes in this time), had left him sick of responsibility and marriage. He wrote to Betty, admitting his sense of relief. Betty replied by return of post to him, declaring that she was sick of his 'selfishness and cruelty', and had no intention of living with him again until they had a house of their own.

'I don't think either of us meant it. It was just a reaction from the strains of eighteen months. But it was the end of our marriage all the same', said Colin.

There were several attempts to patch up the marriage. The most determined of these occurred later that year, when Betty borrowed a hundred pounds from her mother, and Colin

* Betty says this is completely untrue.

located a flat in Forest Gate, East London, where the tenants wanted a hundred pounds for 'furniture and fittings'. They had actually agreed to take this flat, and had paid over a half of the money, when Betty unexpectedly decided that it was too much to pay, and that perhaps the agent was a swindler. (In fact, he later went to jail; but the present offer seems to have been above-board.) So the whole deal was called off by telegram, and Colin, who had made great efforts to secure the flat, wrote Betty telling her that if she wanted a home, she had better find one for herself. This was their last attempt to make a fresh start in their marriage.

EXTRACTS FROM A JOURNAL

FURTHER extracts from Colin's diary and journal will help to fill in the picture so far painted, and cast a light on other chapters. These private entries are the most revealing of all Colin's writings. They are potential material for *The Outsider*. In reading them, we have to remember that Colin is only twenty, and in the light of these young years, they are astonishingly mature. There is no attempt at any kind of literary style. They represent the man, because much of the material has been written at great speed and with a deep intensity of feeling. They indicate a mind that abhors insignificant triviality, and tries to grapple with the great problems of our times, and of all times. If there are faint echoes of Shaw and others, there is also the voice of Colin Wilson sounding across the pages. The voice cannot be mistaken: the message is easily identifiable.

27th April, 1951

'I remember about a year and a half ago, reading *The Golden Ass* on a train journey to Rugby. That was the beginning of the emergence of my optimism. Apuleius seemed to be the good way of living—that chapter on the seduction of the servant girl. . . . Huxley's attitude to sex fascinates me. I recall the episode in *Point Counter Point* where Lucy picks up an Italian in Paris and describes their sexual frenzy in a letter to Walter. . . . Nothing more should be demanded of life than that things should happen continuously. Meditation and loneliness are all very well for the sage. For the inexperienced they are of no use at all. *I made an inferno of my own thoughts while I was at school until my art began to reflect frustration. Well, since then, I have other things to write about.* What about the joy of copulating four times in succession on a Derbyshire hillside, then walking on, limp of loin, hand in hand, in a roaring gale, to feel how marvellous it

is to be alive? Now *that* was the thing that Lawrence wanted to express. . . . *Yet surely the stupidest thing of all is to restrict sexual impulse by marriage. Man will naturally outgrow sex when he has outgrown the neuroses that go with it.* So it seems to me that life is a mixture of impulses that can entangle and strangle one another—but there is no Antagonist. As to the Fall—man did not have to fall to his present position—he had to climb up to it. The Garden of Eden, like the Protestant's Heaven, is only an invalid's Paradise. *There is certainly no death. Yet the chief problem is to recognise the continuity of life.* The *Gita* recognises that. My *Things Do Not Happen*, as also the *Ritual in the Dark*, deal with the reverse of this—the state when time has almost stopped and the dominion of the senses is absolute. . . . Literature is normally an affirmation of faith—in its simplest form. Like music, it is simply a hymn of praise. This, I affirm, is its most basic function. . . . Broadly speaking, the material for art of any value must be drawn from the *lived* experience of the artist not, for instance, from his reading or unaided imagination. . . . In the early stages of my own literary art, I expressed the conviction out of a depth of hopelessness, that without illusions there can be no life at all. But it is not true. I go on living in spite of it, and have made a strange discovery. Happiness does not count. It is only a form of pleasure. One had always assumed that happiness is the only measure of how much alive one is. That's not true. To live more is to pass beyond anything that human beings could recognise as happiness, or misery. There is not happiness or misery but only Power. . . . *I remember my first venture in theology at about the age of six. I thought: there is one thing that is impossible even for God: to UNHAPPEN an event after it has happened. This is not a time of great happiness for me, yet the prospect of being obliged to marry is not so appalling.* I know this though: that increase of intelligence means a more delicate balance of the Life urge. Amoebas live and die without thought; cows are never bored although their vision is restricted, and the sky's a coverlid to their world. *Yet for me, to fall into the cow's state of mind is torture.* The higher the intelligence, the looser the hold on living. I mean that the finer intelligence finds it more difficult to accept the world, day after day as he wakes up. . . . *I have tried continually to get out of my world of schoolboy neuroses into a world where I can handle facts. I have wanted to suffer in order to be strong.* The only thing I hate and fear is the inability to suffer—

the world of comfortable drudgery where one feels there is no reality, only old neuroses, wrapped in cotton wool and carefully preserved. *I fear nothing for the future but the boredom of no-suffering, of steady day-in-day-out work, with the illusions closing tighter every day.* . . . It is most certain that all power is within man. Even sexual pleasure, which appears to answer only to another being, is in reality within a man's loins, and will answer just as well to imagination and masturbation. *The first time I experienced copulation I wondered how, and in what way, it was superior to masturbation.* . . . When I masturbated, I imagined it was a woman I was with. Now I was with a woman, it was no more real than masturbation. But if copulating is only a glorified form of masturbation, then where's the pleasure of sex—if not in that *excitement* that's due to a purely mental element? Sexual symbols—a pair of women's knickers over a chair, a crumpled stocking—had as much power of exciting me sexually, as the woman herself. And what's the female body but a sexual symbol? Either it has a positive value, or its power is in mental suggestion. . . . So the sexual energy rises, in fact, to a mental call, and moreover, a species of illusion, since the mental call is specifically associated with the female body. It would seem that the human mind has been 'fixed' like a gambling machine. Why should man associate pleasure with female bodies, unless some power has 'fixed' it for his own purpose? That Power is the great blind urge for life that finds expression so slowly. So man both knows and does not know the answer to the problem. He doesn't know—on the level of mere personality—yet he knows all in that depth of his being that seems to have 'fixed' everything. Why should I have to be with a woman, or imagine a woman present, to conjure up that glory? Why should that glory be restricted to 'The rod that connects man to the stars'? Why should not the whole being be capable of that swelling loveliness like electricity, to be called up, not by the beauty of women but by the beauty of the Universe? And—further yet—*what is the beauty of the Universe but a species of freedom from personality, the body, dead flesh?* So the perception of that beauty is the freedom of man from his body, his power over the flesh—the progress from no-life in a dark vacuum like sleep, to eternal conscious glory.

'Dear God, who art moving everywhere, teach me to be fruitful in spirit. Save me from the aridity of a Universe without

Thee. Save me from a Universe in which is no will but my own. Thou, who art greater than I, save me from Personality. I ask this in the name of the Holy Virgin, mother of mankind. . . . *I have always found this—that no matter how objectionable I seem to other people, it's merely something in me that reacts objectionably.* Other people are the trouble. Blake felt the misunderstandings that arise between human beings to be due to the personal equation that arises naturally in any human society, and that Personal Equation is based on the great truths, Fear and the Inferiority Complex. So now we are back to my earliest essay, in which I declared the only human motive to be desire to feel "superior"—and the natural tendency to feel inferior. *Man is born with a disadvantage*, for he comes "into the universe and why not knowing", and the universe includes all the other human beings who got there before him. From then on, the urge to self-restraint is continuously frustrated by other human beings all the time. He is a stranger in the world, and all other men are enemies. He must at all costs rave and bombast to be "one of them". He must try to preserve his personality against the rest of the mob. Ultimately, he learns to behave like everyone else; then he is so pleased with the deception, that he is quite willing to act as one of the mob. "Good morning, Algernon!" "Good morning, Percy!" I often used to wonder how people could spend so much time in futile talk about the weather, and mutual compliments, when no one could possibly feel a desire to talk like that. Then I discovered the answer. Every man feels himself to be the Outsider, and carefully watches how others behave, and then behaves similarly. So all men live in perpetual self-deception, each looking to the next man . . . until finally, the original feeling of strangeness becomes so submerged, that he wouldn't recognise it on a plate with watercress around it, and he acts his part comfortably, glad to have a useful façade until he dies.

PERVERSION

*Out of the lucid dullness of the afternoon
Out of the ticking and the wood polish smell—
The veins run acid, the unchanging room
Flakes under the bitterness of hell . . .*

Art is a by-product of spiritual development—my dictum.'

May 20th, 1951

'Can any single person satisfy entirely the complexities of another personality? Supposing a couple are married happily—that implies non-effacement of one personality by the other? Yet in that combination, in that mutual surrender, how many possible personalities are they effacing? When all mental adventures are taken together, the limitations of the one become the limitations of both. . . .

*Marriage is but keeping house
Sharing home and duty
What has this to do with love. . . ?*

Apropos of my early work, this is a rough list of my early attempts, none of which now exists:

1. THE DEAD AND THE LIVING—12,000 WORDS

A long and conscientious attempt at a ghost story, begun in Easter, 1947, after reading Le Fanu's *Green Tea*. I put a terrific amount of work into it, and it was a valuable lesson in the shaping of material.

2. BEHOLD THE MAN

A long dialogue between the young Christ and a priest in the temple (out of Luke 11). I made Christ sixteen years old and caused him to argue on all my themes.

3. LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA—2,000 WORDS

A depressing little effort, describing the psychological reactions of mankind in the face of extinction. Based on, or derived from, Wells's *The Star*, but with a good deal of emotion in it, and a genuine attempt at detachment.

4. HESTER—A PARABLE

In feeling, pure Hawthorne. (I'd just read *The Scarlet Letter*.) Subject—the fact that evil is merely the closing up of the senses against beauty. The devil who visits Hester is almost Stavrogin in bottle-green.

5. THE REFORMER

A one-act play about Shaw in Hades. He wants to change the place into a seaside resort. Both Shaw and the B.B.C. sent it

back without comment. I wrote several one-act plays at this time. One, very personal, dealt with my relations with "M".

6. WINGS OF THE DARK ANGEL—3,000 WORDS

Again based on "M", also Shelley's "Epipsychidion". Style Jamesian, and analytical of a mental situation. On the whole the maturest work to-date. (About September 1947—aged sixteen.)

7. HEAD OF MEDUSA (Two versions, first finished)

Again "M", now style fragmentary, stream of consciousness, extremely analytical of what I felt then. . . . The advance in a year's writing had been in the direction of making my work a personal vehicle. But still with a good deal of fantasy present. I had read *Ulysses* early in 1947, and had disliked it.

8. THE MIRROR

The first large positive achievement, and the first real contact between what I had felt and what I could write. So far, my work had been no expression of the maturity I had then reached. Even the essays On Superiority I wrote at fourteen were a clearer statement of my observations than the stories I wrote at sixteen to seventeen. *The Mirror* was good. It treated the unreality of personality with power and insight. The plot was fantasy based on the idea that a man might evoke his own image from a mirror and thereby have created another self, the same, *except in the essential*. It was sheer luck that I stumbled on a symbolism so apt—the perfect objective correlative. . . . When I conceived the idea I allowed it to develop itself. It began with a 5,000 word discussion on "love" as a spiritual value, developing the theme of reaction, continued with a description of a necromancer's laboratory in language that outdid Poe in pomposity—and ended with the suicide of Vandermist—a gesture of weariness in the face of unbelievable futility. . . . My months at Rugby produced nothing but a fairly amusing couple of chapters of a novel that were high spirits. No serious work, for a couple of months, felt like a fish out of water. In August, 1949, I went into the R.A.F., and finished *Maze of Maya* within the first month. I also wrote *The Eternal Exile*, an impressionistic episode with Crice from *Ulysses* vaguely in mind. This was definitely an advance. I had broken new ground with it. . . . There has, apart from this main current, been a good deal of

turning into blind alleys. Once I toyed with the idea of impressionistic prose, like music, appealing more directly to sensation—anything to get beyond the “tyranny of words”. The *Symphony No. 2* is the unfortunate result. There have been numerous attempts to treat insanity in short stories. Of all this early work, I should say that—in spite of its technical failure—it remains clear-cut and honest. The diary I kept from 1948 onwards ran into ten volumes—notebooks longer than this. I destroyed it because I felt myself trapped in my own words, fearing myself to be incapable of action.’

June 4th, 1951

‘I come to believe that the modern dilemma can be comprehended in one word—INACTION.’

June 6th, 1951

‘I was married to Betty at Leicester Registrar Office 1 p.m.’

June 7th, 1951

‘Hitch-hiked to London, leaving Leicester at 11.30 a.m. and arriving at Y.H.A., Great Ormond Street, at 5.30 p.m. Left home with £3. 4. 0.—£2 from Betty, £1 from Grandma, 4/- from Mum. Spent 14/- that evening in Y.H.A. charges, Tube fares, food and drink, and 2/- for the gallery in a theatre.’

June 13th, 1951

‘I have been in London nearly a week and impressions are new and coloured. I work in St. Etheldreda’s Church, Ely place, and have a small room in Camden Town. Betty has provided financial support so far. The chief problem is only a clouding of vision. I have here with me Blake, *The World Bible*, *Ulysses*, *London Book of Verse*, *Oxford Greek Verse*, *Nietzsche*, Eliot’s poems, the *Quartettes*, the *House of the Dead* and *Brothers Karamazov*, *The Inferno*, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Except the last, a carefully chosen selection, designed to counteract bewilderment or loss of motive.’

14th June, 1951

‘Youth for me at any rate, has been a constant war between the feeling of adolescent impotence and the knowledge that a large part of the

essential me is totally unaffected by my body's tumult, and sees it visions as clearly now as it will when my loins are withered. My chief hope has lain in the thought—all power can be turned to account—even adolescent sexual frenzy. Hence, my work has been my chief means of obtaining a distilled vision, a way of concentrating the diffused light of my knowledge into a point. . . . I am drifting into a system whose ideal is the total effacement of personality, and whose manifestations leave open a door which is labelled 'I am not all'. . . . Give men a purpose and then measure their strength by it. Without a purpose they go neurotic, hypersensitive. Maybe, my sole difficulty—and I now put my finger on all that has ever concerned me—lies in that—in, I mean, not having found a purpose that takes what I have. I find hard physical labour a blessing. It strengthens the body and distracts the mind. . . . I flatter myself that I'm a little better than the other credulous fools who demand action at any cost. For in the midst of action there is a cool place inside me where all beauty rises. And I know it all. Might as well be there as here. . . . Genius is the art of being lonely.'

June 27th, 1951

'All is strange, and I am alone in London. During the day I work in St. Etheldreda's Church until I'm tired and nothing seems good. *Oh, if I could find some quiet country in the brain. There is the pattern. What is the use of having a past and a future if you're stuck in the treacley present?* . . . I would like to recount everything I can of my earliest sexual experiences with factuality and point. It was with "S". On our first day together—it was Thursday, we went to Bradgate Park (Leicestershire) and walked over to Swithland. She was a common little trollop, but sincere. We lay on the dry leaves in the wood, and I rhapsodised about poetry and love, being full of the impulse to talk. . . . Then we walked back hand in hand, and she declared she loved me and would never leave me, and I was much embarrassed with such devotion, but still talked and talked and talked. We were very late getting home. When she kissed me goodnight . . .

I walked home very happy. Things were happening. New frankness was taking the shame out of sex, letting fresh air into a "mastabateurs'" nightmare—that unwholesome steam chamber in the brain. The following evening we went out to Evington Park (Leicester). . . .

'On Saturday we had an opportunity to take matters further. We lay together in the park, Humberstone this time—in the shelter of trees. . . .

'And on Sunday we went out for the day—to Blaby (Leicestershire). We found a field near the brook, full of buttercups. We opened bottles of cordial and packages of food in the trees shade. . . .

'All through that day I was aware that the reality of sex is less exciting than the dreams. I think I was feeling: *This is the thing you've so often suffered agonies in desiring; this is what you lost your self-control for; this is the reality whose imaginings make you lose all faith in your own strength and godliness. I felt renewed. But only because I felt as if I had exploded a bogey man for ever, and could now go clear-eyed, no longer a neurotic youth.*

'Many times after that it happened. . . . Once somewhere near Warwick. . . . All that afternoon I recited Rupert Brooke. And later on our holidays together in the Lake District. . . . Yet I have found sex a strange and altogether new sensation, but unequal to the dream. *It is a material sensation, like first going to school, or being in the R.A.F. Not an ecstasy.* And there has been no good or evil connected with it. No Baudelairean sense of committing a sin; no Swinburnean raptures of 'Red lips long since half kissed away'. *It is not a mature pleasure. One does not feel adult in indulging. And that, after all, was my sole reason for so lusting—it was that desire to be mature, to escape the misery of being adolescent. But much of my misery is still present. Sex has not helped to lift that. After my sexual lapses I feel rather as if I've been used as an instrument, as if I've lost self-control in a rather childish business. I think one could grow out of sex. . . . Betty is different. There is not a great deal of lust in me. Rather, I'm astonishingly fond of her for personal qualities. . . . But the brain's a fine and private place. No one can be admitted into it, so no love can ever be a union of the deepest. Rather, one has to forget the deepest and be carried away by comfort and physical wonder.'*

30th June, 1951

' . . . I hate my life's pointlessness. Don't tell me I'm "facing reality" when I dig roads or stack the corn—*reality is the last thing I face. Instead, the work becomes a mechanical routine, and the*

*rivers of mental energy are dammed up. . . . One day I must begin notes for my book *The Night of the Soul*.*

28th July, 1951

' . . . I noticed a curious phenomenon in the early years of my "life proper"—*the tendency of the intellect to rob me of natural impulse. This made all social relations difficult, as I had no impulse to spare for social guidance.* Like the girl in *The Waves*, I had to look to other people to see how life should be lived. Other people seemed to have room for spontaneous "likings" and "dislikings" of people. *I was totally indifferent to people. The only impulsive relation I was capable of was intellectual.*'

10

ANARCHISM AND AMATEUR DRAMATICS

FOR a large part of 1953, Colin was a member of the London Anarchist Group and, later, of the Syndicalist Workers Federation of North London. His interest in anarchism had come about by accident. One pleasant Sunday afternoon when they were living in Wimbledon, Colin and Betty took their son out for an afternoon in Hyde Park. At Speakers' Corner, they paused to watch a big, red-bearded man speaking on the anarchist platform. Like most people, Colin's idea of an anarchist was derived from Russian novels like Dostoevsky's *Devils*, or from newspaper reports of bomb-throwing incidents in South American countries. He listened with interest to the red-bearded man, hoping to hear moral passion and a defence of nihilism and revolt. In fact, the anarchist doctrine of social *laissez faire* struck him as nonsense; its belief in the basic freedom of human beings seemed to be a fallacy of the same order as Rousseau's humanism ('Man is born free but he is everywhere in chains'). He interrupted the speaker with several questions, and the red-bearded man replied promptly and wittily, displaying a knowledge of literature and philosophy. Colin decided to see more of him. So a week later, he returned to the park, listened to the talk, and afterwards approached the speaker and professed himself converted. He regarded the insincerity involved as wholly pardonable, since he had a genuine desire to find some way to make use of his own moral fervour. (To the same end, he had once approached two young Americans who were preaching Mormonism in the Leicester market-place and offered to become a Mormon preacher if they would pay his expenses. They had the sense to turn down his offer.)

The red-bearded man introduced himself as Philip Sanson, and gave Colin the address of the Anarchist Bookshop in Red

Lion Street, as well as a promise that he could speak on the platform as soon as he had learned something about anarchist doctrines.

In an *Encounter* article called 'On the Bridge', Colin writes: 'I had no particular political convictions, anarchist, syndicalist or otherwise. My sole bias was a certain pro-Wilson tendency; I spoke in Hyde Park 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.'

A week later, he made his debut as a speaker in Hyde Park. It was wholly successful. On the way to the park from Wimbledon, he had tried to dodge paying his fare on the Tube, and had been caught and was subsequently fined ten shillings; he explained all this to the crowd, and told them how to get away with it next time they felt inclined to try. This went down very well, particularly as one speaker had already explained that it was a part of anarchist doctrine to avoid paying fares on buses and Tubes whenever possible. At the end of half an hour, Colin stepped down from the platform, leaving an enormous crowd for Philip Sanson to take over, and feeling pleased with himself. One of the veteran anarchists took him to Lyons' for tea, and told him it was one of the best maiden speeches he had ever heard. Colin assumed that he was already an established member of the London Anarchist Group. He felt less happy later when Philip Sanson explained kindly that his speech had been full of heresies, and that he couldn't be allowed to speak again until he had mastered the doctrines of Malatesta. Colin felt irritated; he had no intention of preaching somebody else's brand of anarchism. However, he kept this to himself, and as the winter of 1952 came on, he often cycled into town at night and attended the indoor meetings of the L.A.G. at a restaurant in Holborn. After some of these meetings (which always began with a talk), he startled the members by propounding various heresies and generally defending religion (which was regarded as a device invented by the capitalists and ruling classes to dupe the poor).

Early in 1953, he volunteered to give a talk and spent a fortnight preparing it. When delivered, it was definitely not what the anarchists expected, and marked the beginning of the

end of Colin's relations with the L.A.G. He spent most of the talk trying to enforce his point that human nature is far too complex and irrational to be left to look after itself, and that anarchism must take this into account if it is not to be wholly out of touch with reality. To illustrate this point, he read aloud pieces from various books, beginning with Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*. The anarchists listened seriously, imagining that Colin was attempting to demonstrate the corrupting nature of power. But as the lecture proceeded with passages from some of the Church Fathers, they began to feel uncomfortable. He read a section of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, and then proceeded to explain that human nature is fundamentally irrational, hates the 'common daylight', and aims for greater intensity of life, not for 'peace on earth' and universal tolerance. The business of the anarchist is to help towards the creation of vitality; his ultimate aim is not to produce a society of peace-loving mediocrities, but of men of genius and imagination. To drive home his point, he started to give a detailed account of the Jack-the-Ripper murders, and spoke of the perpetual fascination of violence. Half the women in the audience got up and left. After the talk, the anarchists pitched in and attacked him vigorously. One of them—a woman friend of Philip Sanson's—told him that she felt he had spoken with the intention of getting something nasty and discreditable out of his system, and that if she had known the nature of his ideas, she wouldn't have come to hear him. Philip Sanson commented, with some penetration: 'Most people would say they disliked the Catholic Church for its doctrines, but found the individual Catholics likeable enough. It's typical of Colin to say he finds nothing wrong with the doctrines, but loathes most Catholics.'

A few weeks after this, Herbert Read, a leading anarchist (whom Colin had never met), accepted a knighthood, and the anarchist group split into squabbling factions. Half of them felt that Read had 'sold out' to respectability and should be ejected from the L.A.G. (of which, however, there was no official membership); others felt that Read's excuse was reasonable—that his knighthood was a recognition of his services to art and literature, not to the State, and that therefore he had a perfect right to accept it. The latter were mainly the 'old guard' among the anarchists, including Philip Sanson; they relied on Read's name as an instrument of propaganda, and felt that it would be

folly to dispense with it. Colin felt no interest, since he was not a true anarchist; but most of his closest friends in the movement were opposed to the knighthood; so he agreed to make a gesture of disapproval and leave the group. He and a close friend, Murray Edgehill, a violent little Welshman, approached the North London Syndicalist Workers Federation, led by Ken Hawkes, and offered to speak on their platform. The Syndicalists were less particular than the L.A.G. about heresies; besides, they had no good speakers, and wanted new recruits. So, as the spring of 1953 came on, Colin again began to speak in Hyde Park, attacking the trade-union movement, and advocating small syndicates of workers who should 'take over' the factories.

The break-up of the L.A.G. had interrupted another interesting project: an 'Anarchist Review' of twentieth-century history, for which they had intended to hire a hall in Holborn. Colin had been asked to write a few sketches to illustrate the period from 1910 to 1920, and had actually done this when the Read quarrel began. He was unwilling to scrap the work, and decided to go ahead and write the rest of the review, and find his own cast and stage it. In the Coffee House, at the top of Northumberland Avenue, where the anarchists often met for coffee after meetings, Colin had become acquainted with many art students and bored girls who wanted something to do with their spare time. He now proposed to two or three of them that they act in his review. A young artist offered to let them rehearse in his room in Fellowes Road, Hampstead; a cast was soon gathered together, and the 'Twentieth Century Review' began rehearsal.

Colin had now moved into the Western Hospital. He found the work easy, but, like many other jobs, boring, and, after a short time, degrading and depressing. 'The porters had too little to do, so they passed the time listening to football matches on the radio and talking about one another behind their backs.' As usual, the conversation was about little besides sex, and Colin writes: 'It seems to me that the atmosphere was heavy with sex. I suppose this is because a large proportion of the patients were women, and we had to carry them around a great deal for X-rays, etc. The bodies of Christie's victims were discovered in Notting Hill at about this time, and increased this consciousness of sex. (One of the victims had been a ward

maid at St. Mary Abbots Hospital, which I often visited as a messenger.)'

In reaction against the boredom of the hospital, Colin spent as much time as possible rehearsing the review, and in writing the second version of *Ritual in the Dark*. He was also seeing a great deal of an eighteen-year-old girl who had written some short stories, Laura del Rivo. The affair was purely platonic, and he often cycled over to her home in Cheam, Surrey, to spend Saturday or Sunday.

It soon became obvious that the difficulties of staging the review would be enormous; the cast was not big enough and the only available stage was far too small and had no curtain. It was decided that the review should be read aloud, with the cast sitting around a table, like a broadcast performance. This also meant they would read their scripts, and that a minimum of memorising of lines would be required. At last, the review was performed, in the large room above the Holborn restaurant where the anarchists used to hold their Thursday meetings, with an audience of more than a hundred. Coffee was provided free in the interval, and the audience was invited to make a voluntary contribution for the general costs. The collection just about covered the rent of the hall and the price of the coffee.

The cast had enjoyed the rehearsals so much that they asked Colin to write another play. So he settled down to a play about a Soho artist trying to paint a picture, and being continuously interrupted by all kinds of Soho 'weirdies'; it was called *The Metal Flower Blossom*, and the writing progressed slowly at the hospital; the cast started rehearsing the completed Act One, while Colin was writing the other two acts simultaneously.

About this time Colin made the acquaintance of a young writer who was to become his closest friend. One day, in a Cypriot café, he heard a young man expounding some political theory in a loud voice, surrounded by a circle of admiring girls, and a few teen-aged youths. From where he was sitting, the ideas sounded fallible; he asked a girl sitting nearby if she knew the name of the man who was holding court. She said: Bill Hopkins, and that many people regarded him as the most brilliant and promising writer in Soho. He was attempting to launch a magazine, *The Saturday Critic*, to be devoted to the attempt to create new standards in all the arts—including the cinema, the theatre, ballet and journalism.

Colin hastened to make his acquaintance. At the beginning both felt slightly suspicious of the other; Colin felt Bill Hopkins to be a romantic of the Rousseau school; Hopkins felt that Colin was 'too dry' and distrusted his advocacy of T. S. Eliot and Hulme. Colin lent him the first two hundred pages of *Ritual*, and was flattered when Hopkins returned them with a note saying: 'Congratulations; you are a major writer! Welcome to our ranks!'

As the year went by, the Western Hospital became steadily more intolerable, with its squabbling porters and general inactivity. Besides, Colin admits: 'I was beginning to experience a curious lassitude, a strange inability to feel anything or enjoy myself. This was partly due to rushing around too much (I cycled everywhere), and partly to the boredom of the job. I ceased to feel anything, and I never experienced those moments of sudden illumination, of insight, that Priestley calls "delight". I knew that if I didn't get away, I'd simply stop writing.'

Besides 'rushing around too much' there were other complications; after the initial quarrel with Betty, they made it up and quarrelled again several times, and he spent hours and days searching for flats or rooms again. After the final breakdown of his attempt to secure the flat in Forest Gate he resolved to leave the Western Hospital. The attempts to rehearse *The Metal Flower Blossom* were also proving too difficult; the cast was too large, and rehearsals were irregular. He decided to give it up and return to France. 'In a way, this decision is a measure of how morally bankrupt I felt. I had been to France before, and I knew it would solve nothing. I simply knew that I wanted to get away, and I didn't much know or care where I'd finish up.' In late August, he gave his notice at the Western Hospital; the final break was caused by a quarrel. He had asked to be allowed to work with the mortuary porter, who was also the garbage collector. He had been working on a novel about a murderer, and yet the only body he had ever seen was that of his grandfather when he was fourteen. However, the foreman porter saw nothing unusual in the request, and allowed him to attend a few post-mortems, as a preliminary to becoming morgue-porter. 'The other porters objected; not because they saw any reason why I shouldn't work in the morgue, but because they had too little to do, and needed something to occupy

their minds. So the foreman porter changed his mind and put me back on ordinary duties. This was the last straw.'

He spent a night in the office of the *Saturday Critic* in Southwark. (Bill Hopkins had installed himself with two telephones and an enormous desk in a tiny room above a barber's shop, and was trying to find a printer for the first issue.) Early the next day, he hitch-hiked towards Dover. In the evening, he camped in a wood near Canterbury, sleeping in a waterproof sleeping-bag under a tree. The following morning, he embarked again for France.

* * *

This time, he landed in France with about twelve pounds. Immediately on arriving in Calais, he went into a restaurant for a meal. 'It was great long barn of a place, like a works canteen, with a radio playing some Spanish music. I ordered a steak and some wine. As I sat there, eating and listening to the music, a strange warmth rose in me, and suddenly I was deeply and immensely glad to be back in France. It was one of those moments of vision when the mind seems to jump out of the present. I became aware of all Europe stretching around me—perhaps it was the Spanish music—of people and things and ideas—and I knew I was right to get out of England.'

He stayed overnight in the Auberge de Jeunesse in Lille, and hitch-hiked the next morning to Paris. Immediately on arriving he went to the room in the Rue Bayen. Neither Claude nor Marie was there—they were both living at Chauny, in Aisen—but the *concierge* had a message to give Colin the key and let him use the room. (He had written to Marie before leaving England.) The next morning, Colin looked for work. In a bookshop window, he noticed an advertisement for *The Paris Review* with an address in the Rue Garancière; he went and met the editor, George Plympton, a young American. They had supper out, and Plympton offered him a job selling subscriptions for the magazine; he would receive 200 francs for every 1000-franc subscription he sold. It sounded an excellent idea; he wrote to his mother, telling her of the job; the letter goes on:

'I want to stop trying half-measures and compromises. *My one aim in life is to become the foremost writer in Europe. From what I can see of the literary life over here, there's no one to stop me.* I've contacted a couple of English Magazines, and one of them has

offered me some work that will keep me alive at all events. . . . *Anything can happen if I have enough courage and determination.* . . . I'll let you know if any real luck turns up. Paris is a difficult place to get a foothold in. . . . I'm not allowed to take a job, of course.'

After the first day's work, it seemed that selling subscriptions was less of a sinecure than the editor had indicated. Colin located the addresses of all the Americans in Paris from the membership list of the American Club. Then with a street map of Paris, he planned how to visit them all, taking an area at a time. Unfortunately, he had no means of transport, and had to walk around; this meant that the distances covered were often immense. And there was no guarantee that the Americans would be at home during the day. And some of those who were at home were downright rude at being pestered. 'I still burn with rage when I remember some of those ill-mannered swines. Americans can be the nastiest and rudest bastards in the world.' One spell of eight hours' work yielded only one subscription; the commission was 200 francs (four shillings), although he had spent 500 francs (ten shillings) in that time on food and drink. He returned to the room 'hungry and gloomy' and read Shaw's *Collected Plays* or *The London Book of English Verse*, until the depression lifted. The next day he canvassed the Ternes district for several hours without selling a single subscription; but he cheered up on returning to the room and finding a letter from Laura del Rivo enclosing ten shillings and announcing that Bill Hopkins would be arriving in Paris any day in search of a printer for his magazine. The next day, Colin was luckier: he sold two subscriptions within half an hour, and spent them on a mild celebration, getting slightly drunk, and reading Shaw until the early hours of the morning. He left a note on his door in case Bill arrived in his absence. The next day, he decided not to go to work and spent it indoors reading Shaw and writing a short story about Leicester. Towards evening, he heard someone outside the room; it was a friend of Bill's named Philip, who told him that he and Bill had arrived earlier in the day and had spent most of the day on the pavement downstairs, waiting for Colin to return! The note of the previous day pinned on the door said 'Be back later'.

After a twenty-four hour stay, Philip returned to England, and Bill stayed on to look for a printer. He was discovering that

the usual rates of English printers were ruinous for a magazine, and the *Saturday Critic* was already bankrupt. He and Colin arranged to team up for a while selling subscriptions; they took it in turn to sleep in the single bed, the other sleeping on the floor. Bill's luggage—a spare pair of socks and a portable typewriter—did not take up much room. (Colin had left his own typewriter—a desk model—in the office of the *Saturday Critic*. When the magazine went bankrupt, it was impounded by the landlord in lieu of rent.)

The 'second English magazine' Colin mentions in his letter to his mother was *Merlin*, run by an American woman named Jane Lougee and a Scottish writer, Alexander Trocchi. Colin and Bill borrowed several copies of this from the office and canvassed the Champs-Élysées for subscriptions; when an American was mildly interested but felt no desire for a year's subscription, he could often be induced to buy a single copy for 200 francs, and this was enough to buy cigarettes for Bill and chocolate for Colin (who has never smoked). Back in the room, they talked and drank wine until late at night; Bill began a new novel (later to be called *Time of Totality*) and Colin started a short story for the *Paris Review*. In the early hours of the morning, they walked out and wandered around the empty boulevards, looking for cigarettes for Bill (who chain-smoked) and talking about writing. Colin comments: 'During the first day there had been an endless "will-to-power" struggle going on between us, a non-stop argument about writing and philosophy that really began and ended in the temperamental differences between us. Besides, Bill tended to be patronising, and I resented this and attacked his own writing violently (I had read a short story) and jeered at his Celtic romanticism. After twenty-four hours when we came near to blows, we got on excellently.'

After another week of Paris, Bill declared he was sick of tramping the boulevards looking for subscriptions. They had made a few literary contacts, including a meeting with poet Christopher Logue, and Colin had tried to sell a subscription to Jean Paul Sartre, who changed his mind when he discovered that Montherlant wrote for the *Paris Review*. Finally, Bill borrowed money from the Consulate and returned to England. Colin stuck it for a few more days, and also returned to England on borrowed money, explaining to the editor of the *Paris*

Review about 'the harsh economics of selling subscriptions' and leaving the addresses of the Americans who had actually contributed a thousand francs (they were not many).

On returning to London, Colin stayed overnight with a friend he had made in anarchist days, Alfred Reynolds. (Reynolds is described, under the pseudonym of George, in the *Encounter* article 'On the Bridge'.) Reynolds had asked Colin over for a couple of meals shortly before he went to France, with the idea that Colin might help to build up Reynolds's movement called 'Bridge'. In fact, it turned out later that his ideas and Colin's had nothing in common, Reynolds, like the anarchists, being an optimistic humanist with a belief in tolerance as a universal panacea. But these differences had not yet developed, and Colin stayed on at Reynolds's new house in Dollis Hill for three days, listening to Bruckner and Mahler and luring Reynolds into discussions on the metaphysical nature of freedom. A few days later, Colin went up to Leicester. The turning point in his career was drawing close.

WRITING *THE OUTSIDER*

COLIN returned to Leicester shortly before Christmas. He approached a big store in Humberstone Gate—Lewis's—and was given a temporary job in the carpet department during the Christmas rush.

The job was not particularly interesting, and after a few days of selling rugs and doormats, he tried to start an amateur dramatic society in the store and present a Christmas concert. The manager seemed agreeable, and a couple of salesmen were known as talented comedians; Colin planned that the first half of the show should consist of the first act of *Man and Superman*, with himself playing John Tanner. It was difficult to arouse any interest, but he managed to get a cast together. This included a girl who had also taken a temporary job in the store—Joy Stewart. Colin found himself much attracted to her, and was able to use the excuse of rehearsals to see her a great deal. She was in lodgings in Leicester; her family lived near Peterborough.

In due course, the show went on; it was not particularly brilliant, and Colin was the only one who remembered his lines; the Lewis's sales-girls seemed greatly puzzled by it all, but they cheered up when the comedians appeared in the second half of the show. A week after Christmas, Colin left Lewis's with some relief—bored as usual—and took a job in a shoe factory to make enough money to return to London. By this time, he had also persuaded Joy to return with him.

Back in London, he obtained work in a laundry in North Finchley, returning automatically to the place where he had had his most agreeable job, and found a room in Archway. After a quarrel with his landlord about a gasfire that Colin had dismantled in an effort to repair it, Colin left Archway and took rooms in Summers Lane, North Finchley, and only a few hundred yards from the laundry.

He describes the laundry work as 'the hardest I have ever done in my life, including navvying'. It consisted in loading wet clothes into spin-driers (of which he had four under his supervision) and unloading them when they were more-or-less dry. He was reading continuously—as usual—Huxley's *Grey Eminence* and Hesse's *Bead Game* were two books that made the deepest impression—and accumulating a considerable library again. (He had sold all his books prior to leaving for France.) After a few weeks, Joy came to London, and rented a room in Hampstead; a certain amount of trouble also accompanied her, for her parents had only just discovered that she no longer intended to marry; her father paid Colin a visit and ordered him to stop seeing his daughter, assuring him that he would 'end in the gutter'. The interview ended with indignation on both sides, and an unfriendly parting. Colin and Joy continued to see one another. Joy took another temporary post in a big store in Oxford Street. After a few more weeks of the laundry, Colin decided to give it up and have another try at an office, overlooking his vow never to sit behind an office desk again. He found employment with a car firm in Finchley, but was dismissed after a few weeks; knowing nothing about cars, he found it difficult to master the filing system and keep a check on the whereabouts of spare parts in the stores. He tried working for the Victoria Wine Company in Finchley; this also lasted for less than a fortnight. 'Even that was too much,' Colin remarks in his journal. Further complications arose; Betty had started to sue him for non-maintenance but dropped it when Colin made promises, which, she alleges, he failed to keep; so a clerk's wages were hardly adequate. He therefore looked for another plastics factory and found one in Whetstone, between Finchley and Barnet. This was less boring than the office and less hard than the laundry; there was also a great deal of overtime. But it was work, and it was distracting him from writing. One day, after a quarrel with his landlady, he began thinking some way out of the vicious circle. It would be simpler to sleep in the open in a tent. Then the only basic necessity would be food. He immediately put the idea into practice, and bought a tent and a sleeping-bag, together with a waterproof outer-cover for the sleeping-bag. For his first nights, he slept on the golf course near the Whetstone factory. There had been a quarrel with the foreman that had

resulted in Colin being sacked again—the fourth time in a year, counting Lewis's where the 'temporary' job had been terminated by the manager. After the period of notice came to an end, Colin began to sleep on Hampstead Heath, close to Joy's lodging. Joy looked after his books and other possessions. She had now applied for a position as librarian, and obtained one at Stanmore; this necessitated changing her room from Hampstead to Swiss Cottage; her new landlady gave her notice to quit after a week during which Colin appeared for breakfast almost every day. Colin's experience with landladies seems to have been uniformly unpleasant. Joy then moved out closer to her library, and Colin shifted his location, frequently sleeping on the Harrow School playing fields.

Without rent to pay, he found it possible to live very cheaply. Betty was compelled to take a post as housekeeper to maintain herself and her son Roderick; the money he had saved when he left the plastics factory lasted a long time.

Hampstead Heath was convenient for the British Museum, where Colin spent his days writing *Ritual in the Dark*, now in its fourth version. A typical day began with tea and bread and dripping in a busman's café at the bottom of Haverstock Hill; then to the Museum by half past nine, with more bread and dripping wrapped in paper. Lunch consisted of beer and sandwiches in the pub opposite the Museum, or egg and chips in the Tottenham Court Road. Part of the evening he spent with Joy—or occasionally in some library where she was working late—and to bed on the Heath at about midnight. A policeman had told him that it was illegal to sleep in the open air anywhere in England, but that this is not strictly observed on the Heath. In all his months sleeping there, he never saw any other 'vagrant' sleeping in the open. One night, he passed a policeman as he wheeled his bicycle towards the Vale of Health; when he was settled in his sleeping-bag, the policeman obviously felt some curiosity about his whereabouts, and began shining a powerful torch over the grass; Colin was concealed behind a tree, and lay watching the beam as it moved like a searchlight over the Heath. The policeman got tired of looking and went away.

In the British Museum, Colin met Angus Wilson, who was then an official in the Reading Room. He had discovered Wilson's writing by accident in 1952, when he had read a

review of *Hemlock and After* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which devoted a whole page to it. 'My first feeling was one of fury—that someone with MY name had become a literary celebrity before me.' However, when he met Angus Wilson, he found him amiable and apparently only too happy to be of use to young writers. Angus Wilson offered to read the manuscript of *Ritual*, and submit it to his own publisher if he found it readable. A few weeks after this offer, Colin heard that Angus Wilson intended to leave the Museum to devote his full time to writing. He began writing night and day to try to finish the first part of *Ritual* before this happened.

August came, and Colin ran out of money. He also wanted to take his younger brother, Rodney, aged twelve, for a holiday to the Lake District, and so found work in a dairy at Chiswick where he unloaded thousands of crates from a moving belt every day. The work started at 6.30 a.m., so he slept in some playing fields near the dairy. After a few weeks he had made enough money and took his brother on a hitch-hiking holiday to Windermere and Grasmere. (Colin and Joy had already been on a camping holiday to Cornwall earlier in the year—their first trip to the country where they were later to live.) On his return to London, Colin took a job at the Lyons' Corner House in Coventry Street, working as a kitchen porter. He continued sleeping in the open until October, when the rain set in; then, one Friday night, he cycled along the Old Kent Road and consulted all the advertisement boards outside newsagents: in this way he located a room in Brockley (New Cross) for thirty shillings a week. Here, at last, he bought a cheap typewriter. The first part of *Ritual* had been completed; he typed it out, and submitted the first part of the manuscript to Angus Wilson early in 1955. The Christmas of 1954 was spent alone in his room in New Cross, correcting the manuscript. He had given up his Lyons' job by this time and had worked in the Post Office (St. Martins-le-Grand) during the Christmas season. The money lasted until a few days after New Year's Day, when he applied to the Labour Exchange for another manual job. He was landed with another laundry—it proved to be most unpleasant. The morning shifts started at 6 a.m., the snow was thick on the ground as he rode to work in the dark.

To increase his dislike of the place, one of his diaries was

stolen from his pocket while he worked; it was probably taken as a practical joke. But it contained entries for over two years, including the period in Paris with Bill Hopkins, and its loss angered him. One afternoon, after the morning shift, he cycled into the centre of London to try to find employment in a restaurant or coffee bar.

3. I don't see any prospect of my succeeding as a writer for another ten years. I know other writers do -- and probably I could if I wanted to write simply to make a living. But I don't. I'd rather starve for a few years and pick up the experience to write something worth doing. I'm not likely to give up now. I've been determined enough for the past eight years, and don't care if I have to wait another twenty. I think I can write a great novel. It may take years, but I know I can, and don't intend to give up for anything.

An extract of a letter from Colin Wilson to his mother before *The Outsider* was acclaimed.

Colin recognises this decision as the turning point in his career; the laundry was the last wholly disagreeable job that he would take. He was lucky enough to find work immediately at the newly opened Coffee House in the Haymarket. It was evening work—from 5.30 till 11 p.m.—with evening meal thrown in. To begin with, he was washer-up. The job enabled him to spend all day in his room, writing and reading; the conditions under which he worked were clean and pleasant; compared with previous jobs, they seemed luxurious. Most of

his fellow workers were unemployed actors or students from RADA or LAMDA. Colin writes: 'After years of doing detestable jobs, the relief was unimaginable.' Now that Angus Wilson was reading the first part of *Ritual*, he began to plan another book, this time a critical volume. Stuart Holroyd had taken Colin's suggestion to write a book dealing with certain poets in religious terms; Colin resolved to do something of the same kind, but with a wider range. One day in the British Museum, he read through Barbusse's novel, *L'Enfer*, and opened his book with a quotation from it: 'In the air, on top of a tram, a girl is sitting. . . .' The book was to be called *The Outsider in Literature*.

Difficulties began to appear again. Betty wrote demanding a regular allowance and threatening legal action. The wage at the Coffee House was hardly big enough to support himself; it would mean giving up the job for another factory post. He decided to change his lodgings once more, and took a room in Gray's Inn Road in a working-class flat. He was in this place for only two weeks; his landlady threw him out one day after he brought home a Soho acquaintance to sleep the night on the floor. She anticipated his notice by twenty-four hours; he was getting sick of the noise her children made in the early morning which disturbed his sleep. The manageress at the Coffee House found him another room—a basement flat in Nottingham Place, near Baker Street. This proved to be entirely satisfactory; his new landlady didn't seem to mind if he brought home friends who talked until dawn. He continued writing the Outsider book there.

Encouragement arrived from an unexpected source. He had typed out the introduction to *The Outsider* (later omitted from the published edition) and sent it, together with a summary of the book, to a publisher. The publisher returned the Introduction within two days, with a note to say that he would be interested to see the book when completed.

By this time Colin had begun sending Betty an irregular allowance, and this necessitated taking a day as well as the evening job. One of his friends was about to leave a post that involved sitting by a telephone four hours every day, taking messages. No other work was demanded, so Colin succeeded his friend, and continued writing *The Outsider* in a small office opposite the Connaught Rooms, near Covent Garden. As usual, disagreements with his employers developed—this time with the

foreman, who objected to Colin cooking himself meals in the office, and frequently hid the gas-ring, or turned off the gas. Colin would then bring his own cooking stove to the office or a new gas-ring, or find out where the gas was turned on and off. For two weeks, this was played like a silent game of chess, neither of them making any comment. One morning, Colin challenged the man, who responded by giving Colin notice. The head of the firm later tried to persuade Colin to take his notice back, but by this time his dislike for the foreman was too intense. Half of *The Outsider* had now been typed out and sent to the publisher. From Leicester came bad news; his mother was in hospital, suffering from peritonitis; after two operations, there had still been no improvement, and she was becoming steadily weaker. He hurried to Leicester, and was shocked by her appearance; in a few weeks, she seemed to have aged ten years. Several more operations proved to be necessary, while she slowly made a way back to recovery. In Leicester, Colin heard from the publisher; he had read the first half of the book and would definitely accept it. Coming at the time it did, the news caused Colin less excitement than might be expected. (Certainly he was less overwhelmed than Scott Fitzgerald, who had rushed along Broadway stopping strangers to tell them his first book had been accepted; Colin had always assumed that his reaction would be the same.) The book was only half-finished; he suspected that the second part might disappoint the publisher's expectations. Still, the news certainly gave Anetta, in her bed in the Royal Infirmary, something to look forward to.

Back in London, he started to type the book direct on to the typewriter—a new procedure for him. The 'deadline' was late September; it was now mid-June. The Coffee House job was beginning to exhaust him, with a hard day's work on the book already behind him before he started in the evenings.

The book was finished in early October and delivered to the publisher. By this time, Colin was working at the Coffee House for only three evenings a week. He had also decided to have the remaining fifty pounds of the advance and give up work altogether; the decision was taken after a great deal of thought. His job in the Coffee House had been the most enjoyable he had ever had; he had made a great many friends there, and enjoyed the atmosphere. Still, it was work, an interruption of writing.

Without a regular income, the Baker Street room became too expensive. Work at the St. Martins-le-Grand Post Office over Christmas produced a temporary solvency, but immediately after Christmas he started looking for a cheaper room. This was finally located in Chepstow Villas, Notting Hill. It was a completely bare bathroom, and he was told he could have it for a pound a week if he helped to decorate the rest of the house, which was in a dilapidated condition. He moved in his books, slept on the floor in a sleeping-bag, and used the lavatory pan as a desk for the typewriter; the lavatory not being in use! He was now rewriting *Ritual in the Dark*. Shortly after Christmas, Angus Wilson offered to lend Colin his cottage in the country near Bury St. Edmunds for a fortnight. He accepted with gratitude and cycled there, loaded with a haversack, and a portable typewriter borrowed from Laura del Rivo. The cottage was isolated, in the middle of a field, and after a few days it began to snow, making it even more isolated. Colin typed at top speed every day, and the novel was completed in about three weeks. The extra week was due to the snow; Angus Wilson could not motor from London, so Colin was allowed to stay on. When the snow melted, he cycled back to London. The finished version of *Ritual* was a great deal shorter than in its published version—barely half as long. Colin immediately sent it to his publisher, who returned it a few weeks later, saying that it would be impossible to print it for various reasons—the most important one being that no printer in England would dare to set it up. A story about a homosexual sadist, a painter who falls in love with a 'nymphet' (this was some years before *Lolita* was heard of in England), and an 'outsider' who justifies the murderer, was apparently too much.

On returning to Chepstow Villas, Colin felt indignant to discover that his 'room' had been changed into a lavatory in his absence; he at once moved his books to a lower room in the house, and put a big padlock on the door. Bill Hopkins was, at this time, in need of a room, so he moved in too. Colin bought an air-bed, and he and Bill took turns to sleep on the floor. Bill, at this time, had found a well-paid job as a sub-editor in the London office of the *New York Times*, so he was able to lend Colin money to supplement the dwindling advance. In the meantime, Colin took on various temporary posts, including a few weeks in the Coffee House in Northumberland Avenue,

and a brief period with the Students' Employment Bureau organising a flag day. The room in Chepstow Villas was furnished from the Portobello Road with ancient armchairs (at five shillings each), an outsize oak table (ten shillings), and a few pieces of carpet to cut out the draught that whistled up through the floor-boards.

The Outsider was due to be published—May 26, 1956.

On Saturday, May 24, the London *Evening News* published a review of *The Outsider* by John Connell, with a headline:

A MAJOR WRITER—AND HE'S 24.

Colin was launched, although he did not know it. He had bought a copy of the *Evening News*, but somehow overlooked the review! But the Sunday papers were to leave no doubt about the success.

12

THE PROBLEMS OF NOTORIETY

EARLY on the Sunday morning, Colin hurried to the news-vendor on the corner of Westbourne Grove and bought the *Sunday Times* and *The Observer*; back in his room, he settled down to Toynbee's article 'Unlucky Jims'. Joy exclaimed: 'Conolly's done it too!' At that moment, one of the upstairs lodgers came down to ask if Colin had seen John Connell's review of the previous evening. Colin commented: 'In a way it was too exciting—like Christmas as a child. Everything at once.' Almost at once, the downstairs tenant called up the stairs to say that Colin was wanted on the phone; it was the first of the calls from friends ringing up to congratulate him. During the next weeks, the basement tenant had to show a great deal of patience, for his phone rang dozens of times every day.

Later that day, Bill Hopkins came around, and they went for a walk in Hyde Park. 'By this time, the excitement had gone past and an exhaustion was starting to set in. The odd thing was that it was against all my premonitions. The previous evening, my bike had been stolen from outside the house while Joy and I were at the cinema. And in the night, I had wakened up with that terrifying feeling of absurdity, "nausea", that I describe in *Ritual*, and which I have called "the vastation". Later, I remarked to a friend, Hugh Heckstall Smith, that these vastations often seem to occur on the eve of success, and he suggested that they might be simply inverted premonitions of pleasure. This is why Sorme, in *Ritual*, suspects that the vastation might be "a benevolence whose aspect is nothingness".'

Complications began immediately. Colin had decided to spend publication week in Leicester. 'I had some sentimental idea about going to look at my own book in bookshop windows.'

Betty wanted to spend a week in London, so Colin offered to let her have the use of his room for that week. (He had now moved into a larger room across the hall, with a kitchen attached, and painted the walls with symbols from *The Book of the Dead* and the Lorentz transformation formulae.) But the success of the book made it impossible to leave London; newspapers were ringing up with requests to interview him; he was asked to do a television appearance; Cecil Beaton's secretary telephoned to ask if he would be photographed by Beaton. So Betty arrived, and Colin shared the room with her for a week. Colin writes: 'It was upsetting for her to see all this success suddenly breaking over me in a wave. We had never really separated officially, and in the eighteen months we'd lived together, we'd often talked about literary success and what we'd do with the money. But now I was committed to Joy—after all, we'd already been together for more than eighteen months—and the marriage was definitely at an end; and of course, it should have been Betty sharing my success, and not Joy. She would never believe that Joy wasn't the vilest kind of scheming woman. . . .' A violent quarrel developed a few days later when the *Daily Sketch* printed an item about Joy in its gossip column, declaring that she was the 'little woman' behind 'this Midlands D. H. Lawrence'. 'Altogether,' Colin writes, 'it was not a happy week.' Early in the week, Godfrey Smith of the *Sunday Times* phoned, asked Colin out to lunch; he wanted Colin to do a series of six reviews for them, with a view to becoming a permanent *Sunday Times* reviewer. It seemed that success had arrived with a bang. On publication day, an article by David Wainwright appeared in the *Evening News* describing how *The Outsider* had come to be written, the sleeping-bag on Hampstead Heath, etc. Undoubtedly, it was the sleeping-bag that started the publicity wave. Colin was photographed for television in his sleeping-bag on the Heath; *Life* magazine photographed him in the same location. A *Sunday Times* photographer who turned up explained that he had just been photographing another young writer—John Osborne, whose *Look Back in Anger* had opened at the Royal Court Theatre the week before *The Outsider* came out. (In due course, Dan Farson—another new friend, then writing for the *Evening Standard*—took Colin along to see the play—he hated it.)

The merry-go-round went on for many weeks, and soon it

ceased to be fun. Colin had never eaten more than one meal a day; now he was frequently taken to Soho restaurants for lunch and dinner, with only a few hours between the two. He began to suffer from indigestion, a chronic complaint, inherited from his father. When he arrived back home completely exhausted, and hoped for a few hours' rest, the door-bell would ring and some old friend would come in: 'I decided to look you up again.' Or the telephone rang. In a letter, Colin remarked: 'You ask me what overnight fame feels like? The answer is simple; it doesn't *feel*. After twenty-four hours I was anaesthetised and ceased to feel anything.'

But there was another element in 'overnight fame' that worried him more than the non-stop activity; for the first time in his life, he was making enemies. Or, to be more precise, his success was arousing envy and spite. Curiously enough, it was the *Sunday Times* who led the sniping with a gossip-column item that appeared shortly after Colin's first review for them; they quoted someone in the book trade as saying that a large part of the sales of *The Outsider* were 'furniture sales' (i.e. books bought for snob reasons, to be left around on tables by people who wish to show their culture), and went on to make some acid comments about Colin's 'genius for publicity'. The hostility sprang from this publicity, and from such causes as the headline of Dan Farson's article on Colin in the *Daily Mail*: 'ONE BOOK AND HE'S WEALTHY'. (This, in any case, was untrue; in its first weeks, the book sold towards 30,000 copies, which represents about £4,000. After income tax had been taken, this left a comfortable sum, but hardly untold wealth.) Other friends reported hostile comments heard at parties—that Colin was a cheap showman, a fraud, or simply a bad writer who had been overrated by a vicious system. Colin relates a typical example:

'I was asked to speak at a dinner at some hotel. While we were all drinking cocktails, I was approached by a man who said: "I hope you're going to say something spectacular." I said I hadn't intended to. "Go on, have a go at somebody. Attack these old cats. . . ." He gestured around at the old ladies drinking sherries. I said: "I can't do that; they're my hostesses." "Well, have a go at *somebody*." I obligingly attacked Freud in my speech, in the course of which I said that I was tired of being regarded as a spokesman of the younger generation; that I spoke

for no one but myself. I went on to explain that *The Outsider* was really a fraud, since it pretended to be a detached examination of man in the twentieth century, and it was actually nothing but an expression of my personal convictions. The next morning, the *Express* came out with a headline: COLIN WILSON ADMITS HE IS A FRAUD. The article reported some of the things I'd said, but omitting all I had said about my real intention in writing the book. The writer concluded: "This is what I have always suspected myself." I thought it was rather unkind but it didn't upset me much.'

The story is typical of Colin and of his dislike of making enemies. It explains why he once said, when asked what were his feelings on overnight fame: 'Horror at the number of enemies it creates.'

Money from *The Outsider* was spent very quickly; he made friends in the literary world who took him out for meals and he always returned the meals. He found taxis a more efficient and less exhausting way of getting around London than the bicycle. (The old one had never been recovered, but he bought a new one and had it fitted with expensive gears and special tyres.) And he had bought a gramophone, and started to buy records.

Life was hectic, and it was many months before he thought about beginning another book. He decided he wanted to do something immense and encyclopaedic—perhaps 2,000 pages. The book would begin with man's pre-history and try to explain how the twentieth century has become the 'age of Outsiders'. It would also include a great deal on science and mathematics, and on the conflict between mysticism and the scientific method. The underlying theme of the book would be an attempt to define the meaning of the word 'knowledge', and the way in which knowledge has come to mean scientific knowledge.

His publisher soon squashed the project of a 2,000-page volume; a book of that size couldn't be sold. Colin was asked to keep it under 150,000 words. This hardly seemed adequate, and he made half a dozen false starts on the book, finding it hard to decide what to put in and what to leave out. It was difficult to write in London with frequent interruptions; above all, the sense of almost universal hostility made it difficult. He found the malice of some of the attacks incomprehensible, being aware of having done nothing actively to provoke them. Shortly

after we met, Colin mentioned this to me, and I told him of something J. B. Priestley once said to me. When Priestley's *Good Companions* was such an overwhelming success, he commented that he could *feel* hostility and envy as an almost physical force when he entered literary parties. Colin's own success was in no way comparable to Priestley's from the financial viewpoint, but the publicity he received probably even exceeded Priestley's, and there is a widespread impression that publicity automatically involves wealth.

Although Colin never developed any kind of a persecution mania about the attacks, there was always a faint nagging sense of them in the background. He began to think seriously about moving to the country.

An unexpected event precipitated the decision, and brought another flood of publicity. Joy's father attempted to horse-whip Colin, and the newspapers made the best of the story.

The reasons behind the horse-whipping incident are worth telling. The family had accepted Colin as Joy's official suitor, without knowing he was already married. After the success of *The Outsider*, there could be no further excuse for not marrying, so Joy's family had to be told that he was already married, and that his wife refused a divorce. They took it well, and Colin's relations with them were thereafter more-or-less amiable. But a few weeks before the horse-whipping episode, Joy entered a Bedford hospital to have her tonsils removed, and Colin stayed with her parents for a few days. While he was there, Joy's younger sister found one of his journals lying on a table and read it. She gained a muddled impression that Colin was carrying on several affairs at the same time. This was untrue; the journal dated back to a year before *The Outsider* was written, and mentioned the names of several girls. But Colin had adopted the peculiar habit of giving his dates in a mixture of Greek and Finnish, which confused the issue. The journal also contained many notes on sexual murders, taken down in the British Museum for use in *Ritual in the Dark*. For some reason, Joy's sister kept her knowledge secret until a week later, when Joy had returned to London. Then one evening, while Colin and Joy were giving supper to a friend, Gerald Hamilton (the original of Isherwood's Mr. Norris), Joy's parents strode into the room accompanied by her sister and brother, and accused him of supporting several mistresses. Colin found the accusation

comic in its wild inaccuracy, and treated it lightly. This enraged Joy's father, who produced a horse-whip and tried to use it. A scramble ensued, which finished with Colin lying on the floor, roaring with laughter, and tenants from the other flats trying to stop the argument. Someone scurried out to phone the Press, while her parents tried to drag Joy down to a waiting car. Colin phoned the police, who arrived quickly and persuaded Joy's parents to leave. Almost immediately, the Press began to ring. Colin admits: 'To begin with, I was relieved. When a thing like this has happened once, you begin to worry in case it happens again. And what worried me was that all human communication seemed to have broken down; we were speaking different languages. I knew that if the Press got hold of it, there wouldn't be any more horse-whipping attempts.' But when, half an hour later, photographers arrived at the front door, Colin and Joy asked the other tenants to say they had left, and crept out of the back door to stay overnight with a friend. The next morning they went to Negley Farson's in North Devon. There Colin's solicitor contacted him; the *Mail* was offering a large sum to print extracts from the journal that had caused all the trouble. He told them they could print it for nothing; there was nothing in the journal that worried him. After two days, they were located by reporters, and tried to escape by the back way again. This time, the *Daily Express* representative offered to do a deal. If they would give him one photograph, he would take them to any place they liked and leave them with a promise of no further pursuit. They decided to accept; Joy was collected from a public house where she had been hidden in case of another 'rescue' attempt by her parents, and the *Express* man drove them to Bristol, getting a photograph of them in the meantime on Taunton station. In Bristol, he confessed that he would be unable to keep his promise not to pursue them further; his editor had ordered him not to lose sight of them. They had decided to embark for Ireland; so they embarked accompanied by two *Express* reporters and a photographer. 'Actually, they were very decent sorts, and we soon got to like them. They offered to leave us completely alone if we promised not to try to get away. So we promised.' They moved out of Dublin when the *Express* published a photograph of them sitting on the rocks of Sandymount Strand, and went to Tralee—no longer accompanied by the Press. A quiet and pleasant week in

Tralee followed, terminated when *Time* magazine published a picture of them and they were recognised in the hotel (where they were staying under a false name as man and wife). They decided to go back to England.

Colin's publisher impressed on him the importance of getting out of London. Colin was inclined to agree. Another tenant in the house at Chepstow Villas had a cottage in Mevagissey, Cornwall, which he offered to let. Colin had refused this offer some time before, since the place lacked electricity, but he now decided to go, and install a generator to provide power for the gramophone. They moved to Cornwall in April 1957, and Colin immediately settled down to finishing his second book, *Religion and the Rebel*. The cottage was called Old Walls; it was situated on a farm, half a mile from the farm buildings and two miles from Mevagissey. Although the second-hand generator gave endless trouble, they both found the total isolation an enormous relief after London. But Colin remarked: 'The one jarring note was the weekly press-cuttings. They were still full of venom, and it would outrage me that people who didn't know me—who knew nothing about me apart from my work or some newspaper paragraph—should pour out this kind of nastiness.'

Bill Hopkins frequently came to stay at the cottage and finish work on his first novel, *The Divine and the Decay*; Colin once described him as 'the only person I ever met with a sense of the world akin to my own'; Bill's presence helped to counteract the sense of general hostility. But it also had the opposite effect sometimes. At about this time, Colin sent his first play, *The Death of God*, to the Royal Court Theatre; the director of the Theatre, George Devine, had asked him to write a play which would then be examined and criticised by the actors; if it was unsatisfactory, Colin would be shown precisely why it was unsatisfactory. In fact, Devine returned the play finally with a mere rejection slip and no further comment. Colin wrote him an irritable letter demanding an explanation, and Bill Hopkins persuaded him to send copies of the letter to some of the newspapers. This idea proved to be disastrous; the treatment of the story by the newspapers was wholly hostile, and Ronald Duncan, on the board of the Royal Court, was quoted as saying that the play read like a bad child's TV serial and that Colin ought to be a soap advertisement salesman. One newspaper stated that Colin had boasted openly that Olivier would play

the lead; in fact, the same newspaper had, only a few weeks before, printed an interview with Olivier in which he had stated that he would be interested to consider acting in Colin's play!

On October 21st, seventeen months after *The Outsider* was published, the real massacre began. *Religion and the Rebel* was published and universally condemned. Colin wrote in his journal: 'The anti-Wilson reaction has set in about as vigorously as it could today, and I'm surprised to find that I feel almost relieved. Toynbee has retracted his praise of *The Outsider*. Generally speaking, the outlook is black. Yet I'm not really depressed. When I condemn Dostoevsky for lacking self-discipline because he let the switch-back reaction to his second book plunge him into despair, I feel that I have more discipline than he had. . . .' The reaction, in fact, was so violent that a certain opposite reaction set in, and letters appeared in the *New Statesman* and *The Spectator* defending him. The later verdicts on *Religion and the Rebel*—when the shouting died down—was that it was neither better nor worse than *The Outsider* but simply a continuation of it.

A month after the panning of his second book, Colin and Joy set out for Oslo, where he had been asked to deliver two lectures to the university students. It was a relief to leave England behind. On the day they left England, they saw the first review of Bill's novel, *The Divine and the Decay*, in *Books and Bookmen*; it was a highly favourable review, which gave the impression that the novel would become a best seller. Colin determined to get his own novel out as soon as possible, and try presenting his ideas in a medium where irresponsible criticism would have less foothold.

The Oslo lectures were wholly successful, and he found it refreshing to talk with students until the early hours of the morning on the problems that interested him. And the journalists who interviewed him asked him about his ideas, not about his private life or his views on women's fashions. From Oslo they flew to Hamburg, where Bill Hopkins had gone to do some research for his next novel, *Time of Totality*. They arrived at an opportune moment; Bill was just cursing his publishers for failing to send the first instalment of a weekly allowance they had promised, and wondering where to find money for his rent. They quickly found rooms in the Pension Heimhuder, and once

again Colin and Bill began to pace each other on the opening pages of their novels. Colin had some difficulty finding a new opening for *Ritual*, until Bill suggested the Diaghileff exhibition, which had run with such enormous success in London in 1955. Later reviews of *Divine and the Decay* were sent from England, and many of them were almost as murderous as the reviews of *Religion and the Rebel*. It was a kind of consolation for them to read one another's reviews, and perceive the same kind of stupidity and incomprehension at work. They stayed in Hamburg throughout December 1957, enjoying the sense of total anonymity in a foreign capital, and finding the atmosphere of German seriousness more congenial than London's 'cultural' atmosphere, with its emphasis on logical positivism and on 'the destructive bitchery of the left-wing highbrows'. On Christmas Eve, Colin and Joy returned to England; in January 1958, he began to work seriously on *Ritual*, and continued steadily for the next eighteen months, completing the second version of the whole manuscript.

In spite of the attacks, *Religion and the Rebel* had sold about ten thousand copies in England, and the same in America; this brought in a sum just large enough to enable him to work on the novel without pressing financial worry. Another project was also debated: a book of essays on the theme of the hero, to be written by Colin, Bill and Stuart Holroyd. The way in which this came about may be worth mentioning. In 1956, Bill had suggested the idea of a volume of essays by the 'Angry Young Men' (the collective label that had been applied to Amis, Wain, Osborne, Hastings, Stuart Holroyd, John Braine, and including Colin and Bill). This idea had been taken up by Bill's publisher, and in due course, *Declaration* appeared. The critics quickly discerned that there were, apparently, two clear-cut groups of 'Angry Young Men': a left-wing group, led by Osborne, and including Kenneth Tynan and Lindsay Anderson, and a 'metaphysical' group, consisting of Colin, Bill and Stuart. Soon a rumour came to Bill's ears that the same publisher intended to issue another similar 'symposium' composed only of left-wing writers. Colin, Bill and Stuart decided to produce their own volume, defending their own position and attacking the left-wingers. So the volume on the hero was conceived. Colin was to deal with its literary and philosophical aspect, Bill with its political implications, Stuart

with its religious and moral aspects. Colin was impatient about breaking off work on *Ritual*, so he hammered away in the autumn of 1958, and produced his essay in a few weeks. Bill and Stuart had still not begun theirs. Victor Gollancz was approached as a publisher. He read Colin's contribution, pointed out that it was too long to be a third of a book, and suggested publishing it on its own. He offered to publish the essays by Bill and Stuart separately. So Colin's hero essay was eventually published under the title *The Age of Defeat* (original title: *The Fallacy of Insignificance*). When it was published in 1959, its reception was remarkably balanced and free from the violent antagonisms that had characterised reviews of *Religion and the Rebel*. *The Times* commented on the stamina required to live down the slaughter of *Religion and the Rebel*, and to go on writing without any noticeable changes of policy, and ended by commenting: 'He is here to stay.'

During all this time, Colin was living quietly in Cornwall; in 1959, when the lease of the cottage expired, he bought a house in the fishing village of Gorran Haven, a few miles south of Mevagissey; the only long break had been a lecture tour of South German universities (undertaken under the auspices of the British Council) in the summer of 1958, which confirmed his liking for Germany and German thought. The play, *The Metal Flower Blossom*, was rewritten and was, at one stage, actually in rehearsal at the Plymouth Arts Centre, with Colin taking a minor part (Roehmer in the third act). Unfortunately, the cast of sixteen proved to be too much for the resources of the Arts Centre, and when several of the naval officers who were taking part dropped out of the cast because of an article in a Sunday newspaper that implied the play was obscene, the producer gave up in despair. The prologue of a play about Strindberg (never completed) was performed by Theatre in the Round in their 1959-1960 season; this, at the time of writing, is Colin's only appearance on the boards.*

In early March 1960, *Ritual in the Dark* appeared. The reception was as mixed as that of *The Age of Defeat*; this mixed feeling was typified by the two reviews that appeared in *The Observer* and the *Sunday Times* on the day before the book's publication; the *Sunday Times* review by Dame Edith Sitwell

* *The Metal Flower Blossom* was later presented at Southend-on-Sea (Autumn 1960) with Colin as Roehmer.—S. R. C.

was wholly favourable, speaking of the book's psychological penetration into the problems of murder, its 'terrible and tragic insight', and commenting that the characters are 'so full of life that one can almost hear [them] breathing'. In *The Observer*, Karl Miller spoke of the book's 'lively picaresque' and admitted that it was 'rather a success', but went on to speak of 'the odious *Outsider*', and ends by hinting that he considers the hero's sexual exploits to be autobiographical: 'What he believes in is girl friends and gods, the kind of gods who come down in golden showers and go to bed with pretty art students and write wonderful, successful books.' Within a fortnight of publication, the novel had drawn over a hundred reviews. A large proportion of these were favourable, but some were not: notably, George Millar in the *Daily Express*, and the *News Chronicle* reviewer. But it was still obvious that the book was being reviewed as a first novel by *Colin Wilson*, and if the result was less disastrous than in the reviewing of *Religion and the Rebel*, it was none the less apparent. For example, the *Daily Mirror* had only a single paragraph on the book: 'Colin Wilson's first novel has only three faults: it is long-winded, pedestrian and boring.' It should be observed that Colin had conducted a controversy with Cassandra of the *Mirror* on the subject of Sir Oswald Mosley a few weeks earlier. The *Scotsman*, while offering some criticisms, commented: '. . . I cannot imagine you will be bored. If it holds your interest at the beginning, you will read to the end of the 160,000 words . . . to achieve this is the novelist's cardinal gift, and Mr. Wilson displays it here.' In fact, even the hostile reviews were prepared to go further than the *Daily Mirror*, and acknowledge that the book holds the attention throughout. Undoubtedly the most violently adverse review came, as usual, from the left-wing newspaper *Tribune*, who had pursued a policy of attacking Colin since publication of *The Outsider*. 'After *Ritual in the Dark* there remains not the slightest excuse for treating its author as a major literary figure—or even as a literary figure at all. . . . We get a pointless sub-plot about an artist and his ten-year-old model (but didn't *Lolita* do rather well?). We get a Catholic priest's interminable dissertations on sin (Graham Greene is a best-seller, isn't he?).' The review concluded by remarking that *Ritual* revealed 'the continual degeneration of our culture'. (Colin might have pointed out that the Christine sub-plot was introduced many years before

Lolita was ever heard of, and that after his comment on Greene in *The Age of Defeat*, he is hardly likely to use him as a model for a best-seller.) By way of contrast, the Glasgow *Sunday Mail* spoke of it as 'brilliant, dynamic and challenging'. The *Yorkshire Post* found it 'extraordinarily readable'. The *Bradford Telegraph* went even further and stated that the book proves its author to be 'one of the most important young thinkers of our age', and adds: 'Most un-English in atmosphere (in places it is reminiscent of Dostoevsky), it is keenly aware of Nietzsche's philosophy, and indeed, triumphantly transcends it.' In America, there was the same divergence of opinion; the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *New York Herald-Tribune* published 'rave' reviews; *Time* and *Newsweek*, following a policy of attacking his books, were patronising and contemptuous. (*Newsweek* spoke of *The Outsider* as a 'hodge-podge' and 'adolescent'.)

At the time of writing, it seems unlikely that these divergences of opinion will disappear for many years. Some of the reasons for them are obvious and require no further comment; but some are due to an actual misconception of what Colin Wilson is attempting to do. In the remainder of this book, I shall state my own view of his work and aims.

13

THE COCKTAIL PARTY

COLIN invited me to his first big cocktail party in his flat to celebrate the success of *The Outsider*. So, on December 19th, 1956, an icy and windy night, I managed to find his flat in Chepstow Villas. Number 24 stands on a corner, two large trees in his tiny front garden; the front door stood wide open, and a few Lambrettas and small cars were parked along the pavement near the garden gate. In the dimly lit hall, old picture-frames leaned against the wall. The floor and stairs were carpetless; a food-stained electric cooker stood in a corner under the stairs. Colin was on the first floor—his fourth move since he had been in the house. A pretty child in a white nightdress leaned over the banister upstairs and said hello. As I pushed open the door, she added: 'Tell them I want some wine—or sherry will do.' I said I'd do my best.

The room was crowded; it took me five minutes to locate Colin, who was concealed around the corner, ladling out punch from a huge bowl. He wore bottle-green corduroy trousers and a snow-white sweater, with brown sandals; he looked a successful something—painter, musician, novelist or actor, but certainly not a critical philosopher. (His flat in Chepstow Villas is described in *Ritual in the Dark* where its tenant is Oliver Glasp; it was an L-shaped room, made up of two rooms that were originally connected by a sliding door.)

The number of people over thirty in the room was negligible, and the youngest looked about sixteen. Many of the girls wore pony-tails. I was introduced to everyone simply as 'Sidney Champion'. For all I know, they thought I was Colin's grandad. They seemed to be made up of a mixture of Colin's old friends—the Soho crowd of art students and would-be writers and painters—and new acquaintances made since his success. There were half a dozen young men he had met when he

lectured at Eton recently; one of them—Lord Gowrie—confided to me that he intended to be a writer. I was introduced to Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch, John Osborne and Mary Ure (they were not then married) and Bill Hopkins. A pretty blonde girl of about sixteen introduced herself as Carol Anne, and when I mentioned that I intended to write about Colin, told me that she was in *Ritual in the Dark*. Joy was moving among the guests in a sleeveless dress of blue and gold, dispensing drink. I got myself a drink and tried to find a quiet corner of the room from which I could observe the party. I wanted to learn something about the opinions of Colin's generation, but first general impressions had to be gathered.

There was no carpet on the floor of this room, and the electric-light bulbs were bare. The wall was lined with home-made bookshelves and probably about a thousand books. A record-player in the corner was playing Beethoven's *Appassionata* when I came in, but as the room got even more crowded some modern jazz was substituted. I wandered around looking at the books; I have always had a belief that you can judge a man by his books more than by his friends. Undesirable friends sometimes accumulate because they don't intend to be abandoned, but a book is bought because its owner wants it. I was surprised by the curious variety in Colin's library. It included the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in a new edition, and Toynbee's *Study of History* in ten volumes. There were many books on subjects that I had not known him to study; mathematics and physics, for example, of which he had several shelves. There was a shelf full of language primers, including Chinese, Greek, Sanskrit and Russian. There were many books on music, housed above the record shelf, and some scores and opera librettos. I also discovered a shelf on murder and kindred subjects—crime detection, fingerprinting, forensic medicine and sexual pathology. But the largest shelves—which occupied most of one wall of the room—contained novels and books on religion and philosophy. Many of these were new, and had obviously been purchased since *The Outsider* had made money.

The walls had been newly distempered in a primrose yellow; where they were not hidden by bookshelves, they were decorated by a few photographs and prints: a picture of T. E. Lawrence, in Arab attire, several Van Goghs, a photograph of

Colin in evening dress (for the first time ever), and a large abstract painting that was obviously a present from one of his friends. On a large chest covered by a plastic cloth, Colin dispensed drinks (Since he had worked in a coffee bar, he did this with great expertness.) About every half-hour, a new bowl of punch was mixed; it seemed to consist of a basis of cider and Sauterne, with gin, vodka, whisky and fruit juice to pep it up. I was introduced to a striking-looking girl with full lips and long black hair over her bare shoulders; she was Colin's landlady, and apparently the mother of the child upstairs. I took the opportunity to pass on the child's message, and her mother departed with a cupful of orange juice.

The telephone bell rang constantly; it seemed to be either people apologising for being late or explaining that they were on their way and hoped there was some drink left. In a momentary lull in the conversation, someone shouted a message across the room to Colin; one of his friends wanted to know if the party was likely to run dry before he arrived. 'It can't run dry,' Colin exclaimed, and there were loud cheers, 'there's ad lib in the lavatory.'

It was still early, and more guests were expected. It was a mystery to me where they would all stand when they arrived. A tall, slightly stooped figure who edged into the room was introduced to me as our foremost living poet, Stephen Spender; he stood there, a glass in his hand, staring at the crowd of unkempt writers and painters (most of them using long cigarette-holders that would have amused Edgar Wallace) with a kind of alarmed amazement. He brightened up when Sir Herbert Read arrived; so, to some extent, did I, for I had admired his work for a long time; added to which, he was the only other member of my own generation in the room. He seemed a great deal more at home among the noise and cigarette smoke than the poet.

I noticed a slightly tense look on Colin's face as he talked to Mary Ure, and moved closer to listen in. Holding a large glass of brandy, Miss Ure was taking Colin to task for expressing his lack of sympathy with Osborne's work in *Reynolds News*. Osborne tried to intervene to comment that he had also attacked Colin's work, but Miss Ure seemed determined to have her say. She went on to declare that John Osborne was the most original playwright who had appeared in the English

theatre since Sheridan, and then added that *The Outsider*, full of quotations, was a book anyone could have written. Osborne was shifting from one foot to the other in an agony of embarrassment; as Miss Ure turned away to refill her brandy glass, I heard him say to Colin: 'Don't mind her, she really doesn't mean it.' Colin, smiling amiably, assured him that he didn't. Their disagreements in public did not seem to be extended to private relations. At this moment, a fresh wave of people arrived, and Colin was forced to go back to his role of drink-server.

At one point in the evening, a young man climbed on a chair and called for silence, then made a speech congratulating Colin on the success of *The Outsider*, which was followed by cheers. Colin replied to the toast, saying that the party was also in honour of Angus Wilson's novel, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, which had been published at the same time as *The Outsider*, and that he wanted to express his admiration for a writer who seemed always ready to offer help to young and unknown writers. Mr. Wilson also got his share of cheers.

Over in a corner, sprawled on the settee, a young man was being violently sick; a pretty girl with an American accent was solicitously stroking his head, which seemed to have no particular effect. The girl explained to me: 'I keep telling him he can't mix red wine and whisky but I can't stop him.' The young man finished being sick and fell into a doze. I went back to report to Colin, who fetched a mop and bucket and proceeded to clear up the mess.

I had a long way to go, and the route was circuitous, so I kissed Joy and wandered downstairs carrying another armful of Colin's journals and manuscripts. The pretty blonde girl waved to me from the other side of the room. From the banisters overhead, the child in the white nightgown shouted good-night.

COMMENTS ON REVIEWERS

NINE months after I met him, Colin moved from London to Cornwall, following on the 'horse-whipping' incident. But while he remained in London, I saw a great deal of him, and had a chance to discover many aspects of his personality. It became clear to me that nothing I had ever read about him in the newspapers gave anything like a true idea of him. This, of course, is to be expected, and applies to anyone in the public eye. No doubt the husbands of 'sex symbols' like Marilyn Monroe and Brigit Bardot feel that the whole legend surrounding their wives is a preposterous lie with no relation to the reality. Bernard Shaw never ceased to protest that the public G.B.S. never had existed, and never *could* exist; but perhaps he protested with a little too much satisfaction, for not everyone took him seriously. This is an inevitable part of any age, but particularly of the twentieth century, when the population in the urban centres is so immense, and 'shooting stars' are so much more frequent; the relation between the 'star' and the mass of unknowns who remain below is inevitably based on misconception. For my own part, the 'celebrity' that came with the success of my autobiographical books came too late to make any violent impact on my personality; I was nearing fifty when the first appeared. In a sense, therefore, it seemed to me that Colin Wilson was an alternative version of myself; he had experienced in 1956 the sort of things I dreamed about in 1909. He was, too, much younger than myself for me to feel any envy; but I examined him with the curiosity of an entomologist with a new species of beetle under his magnifying glass. The results seemed to me well worth chronicling; not simply because he was Colin Wilson, a young man who, since he was fourteen, had lived and worked under the assumption

that he was 'one of the most important writers Europe has ever produced', or because he had become a friend of an ageing writer named Sidney R. Champion; but because he was, in some way, completely typical of England in the mid-twentieth century.

He himself has always been exceptionally conscious of some of these forces at work in our society, and has dealt with such questions as the writer's relation to publicity with considerable insight. The subject came up for frequent discussion while he was sitting for me in my studio, and he later amplified his comments in the answers to a questionnaire I sent him.

'Neither England nor America are "serious" countries. There is no tradition of real metaphysical discussion. When I get to Germany or France or Norway, I instantly feel more at home. "Intellectual" concepts like human freedom are less debased among the educated classes of Europe. Here, as in America, the popular press and the glossy magazines affect our whole approach. It is impossible to make any serious statement without getting a horribly distorted reflection of your own words back at you.

'Now this situation is not unusual, and I do not wish to appear to be wallowing in self-pity. Hermann Melville and Edgar Poe were *infinitely* worse off in nineteenth-century America than I am in twentieth-century England. And in spite of the European tradition, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky encountered a concrete barrier of misunderstanding and distortion in their own lifetimes. Some were lucky. Schopenhauer managed to live long enough to be acknowledged and understood. But Shaw didn't; and he still isn't.

'This has created a situation that is immensely interesting. Because so many writers in the past century or so have died misunderstood, the Outsider idea has crystallised (I merely happened to give it expression). This idea says: "If you are deeply serious, you will die misunderstood, and you will live at odds with society. Society was made for the pigs, the materialists."

'This naïve idea is still the basis of our literature; all the "beat" literature of the 1950's (including Osborne's "beat" Entertainer) is based on the idea that success is for the hogs. I am here using Shaw's terminology; he says, in *Heartbreak House*, that the Mangans of the world regard society as a machine for filling



Living in a cottage can have its advantages...

...and disadvantages: the result of mistaking a can of petrol for paraffin





The bronze bust sculpted by author Sidney Campion

Bill Hopkins, author of *The Divine and the Decay*, which impressed Wilson



their snouts and greasing their bristles. He adds that when we have the courage, we shall kill them. I still know a great many people who feel that, in order to succeed, I must somehow have "sold out", compromised with the hogs. So the artists retreat into their ivory towers and write a deliberately esoteric prose or poetry that the hogs won't understand, and they read nothing but Ezra Pound and *Finnegans Wake*.

'I daresay my own attitude was changed by the success of *The Outsider*; I imagined I'd be received by the British intellectuals as Nietzsche's first book was received by his university colleagues—with contempt or total silence; when the walls fell down with my first onslaught, I thought I was totally wrong. It wasn't like that at all. People were honest; they acknowledged seriousness when they saw it; what is more, they subsidised it. Of course, I was wrong—as wrong as the pessimistic intellectuals who think that society hunts the "outsider" to death as a matter of course. The truth lies between the two extremes. As I soon discovered when the acclaim of my first book changed to violent hostility and sneers. But this only means that the writer has also to be a sociologist and to understand his own age. His salvation depends on accurately assessing his position in society.'

All of this was of considerable interest to me; it answered some of the questions that were forming in my mind. The editor of a Sunday newspaper had once said to me: 'We don't want to hear anything more about Colin Wilson'. A woman friend dismissed him as 'a clever publicity man'. When he quarrelled with the Royal Court Theatre, Ronald Duncan (a member of the committee) said that 'he ought to be a soap advertisement salesman'. More recently, Lady Epstein declined to be introduced to him on the grounds that he was a disciple of Mosley; the impression had been gleaned from some newspaper paragraph which she was unable to quote—another example of publicity getting out of hand.

When I met his closest friend, Bill Hopkins, I suddenly began to suspect that here was the Svengali behind the publicity. Colin admitted that the open letter to George Devine had been published at the instigation of Bill Hopkins. He admitted that the *Daily Mail* photograph of his Notting Hill flat (which was published when he and Joy returned from Ireland after the horse-whipping episode) was another example of

Bill's 'Machiavellianism'. (Caption: 'The Genius Comes Home'. Kenneth Allsop quotes this as an example of Colin's publicity-seeking.) I was also present at a violent argument between Colin, Stuart Holroyd and Bill Hopkins, when Colin and Stuart argued against publicity and Bill insisted that 'there's no such thing as bad publicity'. But when I suggested that Bill was the hidden Svengali, Colin denied this categorically. 'Bill goes further than I do in believing in the value of publicity, but we're in basic agreement. The writer has got to come to terms with his society, and use its language to convey his beliefs. We both hate this idea that the artist has to lie down and allow the pigs to trample on him. So we both try to speak the language of society. Sometimes we get discouraged. The slamming taken by *Religion and the Rebel* and *The Divine and the Decay* made it a lost cause for a time.'

In his article *On the Bridge* I noticed a paragraph that seemed to have some bearing on these comments: he writes of his friend 'George':

'He was the first member I had met of a species that I have since come to know and like—the cultured, metaphysical mid-European. I wonder occasionally if it is a species that is becoming extinct. They are not numerous. Thomas Mann belonged to it; so (to judge by *Lolita*) does Vladimir Nabokov. I know only a few others: Erich Heller of Swansea, Heinrich Walz of Heidelberg. . . . I can count them on the fingers of one hand. *For them, questions of human destiny and human freedom are of great importance; they know Dostoevsky's Legend of the Grand Inquisitor by heart.*' (My italics)

I drew attention to this in a letter, and received the following reply:

'You're perfectly right. I feel this paragraph symbolises my problems as a writer in England. No such tradition has ever existed here. The "serious" side of English cultural life is represented by an unimaginative empiricism, that runs from Locke to Freddy Ayer, and its only alternative is the mass-culture represented by the *Daily Mirror*. I am awkwardly jammed between the two, and both are totally alien to me. I find astonishing the number of reviews that speak of my "mysticism" (meaning mystification) or simply mumbo-jumbo, hot air, confused generalities. This may be some fault in my writing, but I think it is also a total lack of sympathy in these

people for the language I speak. The language of Mann and Dostoevsky is foreign to them.

'I noticed the same thing in some reviews of *Ritual*. The reviewer would say that it is an excellent and fast-moving story, but the ideas are silly, or poisonous, or confused, or showed a morbid interest in violence and death. But in no case did the reviewer make any attempt to say what its ideas were, or to explain where his own ideas differed. In some cases, of course, this is simply irresponsible reviewing; it gives a man a sense of power to condemn what he doesn't understand. . . . But it is also, I think, the English suspicion of questions of human existence. For them, philosophy must not come too closely home.'

These comments are borne out negatively by the reception of *The Outsider* in European countries; its success in France, Germany, Italy and Spain has been in no way comparable to its English and American success. (Strangely enough, it aroused great excitement in Japan, where all Colin's subsequent books and articles have been translated.) Where a similar cultural tradition already existed, the book was considered seriously, but without immense excitement. In England and America, its novelty created a furore; then, when the novelty wore off, the ranks were closed again; the 'establishment' who had welcomed him obviously regretted having paid him any attention.

SUCCESS AND ANTI-SUCCESS

MARSHALL PUGH wrote in the *Daily Mail*: 'Less than a year after his emergence, the very people who built him up are engaged in the ancient English blood sport of tearing the hero down. This has happened to almost every legendary figure other than Nelson, but a decent interval between the build-up and the tear down is usually allowed to elapse. Colin Wilson's success began with loud praise from the literary cliques. His destruction is now being arranged by quiet whispers of condemnation from the same group.'

This prophecy proved to be justified on the publication of *Religion and the Rebel*. On the whole, Colin survived his 'destruction' pretty well. But, as he pointed out in *The Writer and Publicity*,* this building-up and tearing-down is one of the interesting phenomena of our time. The more I came into contact with Colin and his group of friends, the more forcibly this struck me. To previous generations, literary success came after a slow build-up. Wells, Shaw and Chesterton all began as free-lance writers, and gradually built up a reputation. T. S. Eliot had been writing for nearly ten years and James Joyce for over twenty when fame arrived. Consequently, the strong reaction against them lasted for a short time only. (Before the end of the twenties, Joyce and Eliot were regarded as 'classics' by a younger generation.)

When *The Outsider* and *Look Back in Anger* achieved success simultaneously, a 'young-writer' craze was started. The publicity-drums boomed in a way that was unprecedented. This in itself was something of a psychological shock for all of them. It is not easy to survive early fame—especially when it is

* *Encounter*.

not accompanied by a financial success that makes it unnecessary to worry about everyday problems. Of course, in some cases there *was* financial success; but it was usually far smaller than the general public supposed. Michael Hastings, for example, was nineteen at the time the 'boom' started, and his first play, *Don't Destroy Me*, was being presented for a short run at the New Lindsey Theatre in Notting Hill. He was asked to open the *Daily Express* series 'Angry Young Men', explaining what he was angry about. Colin and John Osborne were also asked. From then on, Michael Hastings was 'in'; his activities gained non-stop publicity. He went to America as a guest; he was invited to turn his literary talent to advertising for impressive salaries. The BBC offered him a job as a script-writer, which he accepted for a period. His private life was written up by the *Daily Express* when he announced his engagement to Stuart Holroyd's wife, Anne, before her divorce, and the ups and downs of the romance were given in detail in the following months. But his play, *Don't Destroy Me*, ran for a few weeks only in a tiny theatre. His second play, *Yes and After*, was presented for a Sunday evening performance at the Royal Court Theatre. His third work for the stage, a 'fairy play', was accepted by the Royal Court, but the director of the English Stage Company decided that it might be better as a pantomime with music. After some months, during which Hastings wrote lyrics for his pantomime, the work was quietly dropped by the English Stage Company. A short novel, *The Game*, was published, but was received by the critics without enthusiasm.

I found Michael Hastings of particular interest because, being younger than other young and 'successful' writers, he was less prepared to withstand the shock of the press ballyhoo. I frequently asked Colin for news of him, and learned that he had bought himself an expensive car, and was thinking of buying a mansion in Wales with many acres of land attached.

At this stage, it is hard to assess the effect of 'overnight success' on Michael Hastings's work. His early poetry and his play *Don't Destroy Me* make it clear that his gift is lyrical; he is not a writer with a 'message'. There is no doubt whatever in my mind that he would have been better off if he had continued to publish poetry in the little reviews, and occasionally had a chance to see his work presented on the stage *without the publicity* (as, for example, Yeats was able to see his own early plays).

Living 'in the public eye' is disastrous for any writer, but particularly so for a poet. It has brought the lack of privacy of success, without enough money to live remote from the storm-centre. He may, of course, survive and become an important and individual writer; but if he does, it will be no thanks to the popular press.

Although Michael Hastings strikes me as the hardest-hit by the success-splurge among Colin's friends and acquaintances, his case is typical of many of them. Before Stuart Holroyd's book, *Emergence from Chaos*, was published, an article by Marshall Pugh appeared in the *Daily Mail* announcing his advent as a new 'messiah of the milk bars' and warning critics in advance not to make fools of themselves, as they had over Colin Wilson. There was no need for the admonition; *Emergence from Chaos* received very little attention, and its first review—from Philip Toynbee in *The Observer*—began with a sneer about his publisher's tendency to 'catch his authors young' (with the implication that the book's main claim to attention was its author's youth). The publisher had mentioned Colin Wilson's success on the blurb, and stated that Colin and Stuart Holroyd were friends. *Emergence from Chaos* was the first victim of the success of *The Outsider*. Bill Hopkin's *Divine and the Decay*, and Colin's own second book, followed the same path.

The subject need not be laboured; it has already been dealt with in *The Writer and Publicity*. But for my own part, I often find myself speculating about the future of a writer like Jane Gaskell, who published her first novel at sixteen, and who is still under twenty as I write; or of John Braine and John Osborne, who, like Michael Hastings, are not intellectuals with a 'message' (this, perhaps, is the chief misunderstanding of Osborne's work—the insistence on *what* he has to say, which is only of temporary interest, rather than on his ability to convey emotion to an audience; Osborne himself has shown signs of misunderstanding his own abilities in his *World of Paul Slickey*).

It seems probable that the beginning of the anti-success mechanism, where the 'Angry Young Men' were concerned, was the series 'Angry Young Men' in the *Daily Express*. John Braine continued the tradition by having his *Room at the Top* serialised in this newspaper, as well as doing a stint as its film-critic. Subsequent bursts of publicity gave the anti-success mechanism its momentum. There was the 'horse-whipping'

affair involving Colin and Joy's father (mentioned in another chapter), Osborne's marriage to Mary Ure, Michael Hastings's marriage to Stuart Holroyd's ex-wife, and the quarrel that ended in fisticuffs on the evening Stuart Holroyd's play, *Tenth Chance*, was presented at the Royal Court, which hit every front page in London the next morning. (The play was booed by the left-wing poet Christopher Logue, and interrupted by the noisy exit of Kenneth Tynan—who later panned it in *The Observer*; a quarrel followed in the pub next door.)

The role of the Royal Court in 'success stories' of some of the young writers is puzzling. Stuart Holroyd's *Tenth Chance* was given its 'try-out' on a Sunday evening, with a view to a longer run if its success justified it. But in spite of favourable reviews and widespread publicity, nothing more was done with it. The same thing happened to Michael Hastings's play, *Yes and After*, and his 'fairy play' is still unproduced. Sandy Wilson—another close friend of Colin—wrote his *Valmouth* for the Court; it was finally rejected, and later produced with conspicuous success, under Wilson's own impetus, at the Lyric, Hammersmith. Even John Osborne, whose success may be said to have 'made' the Court, later fell out of favour, and had to produce his musical, *Paul Slickey*, elsewhere. More recently, Christopher Fry's latest play was rejected on the grounds that 'to accept it would be to surrender to the Establishment'. (I am quoting from a duplicated statement—a denunciation of the Court's policy—issued by Mr. Ronald Duncan, its founder-member.) Altogether, it is hardly surprising that many of the 'Angry Young Men' nowadays speak of the Royal Court with some bitterness. (I shall mention Colin Wilson's own relations with them—and his play, *The Death of God*—in another chapter.)

These comments are relevant because they underline a problem that is common to most of these young writers. When a serious writer is unknown, he works in a vacuum, sustained by subjective beliefs and dreams of the future. When an 'unknown' writer achieves overnight success, he is plunged immediately into a highly personal world of intrigues, back-biting, sales and contracts, and agents and figures. It is hardly surprising if the shock of assimilating this world robs him of the subjective certainty that he was able to pour into his first work. And unless he happens to be a born business-man and publicist, like Shaw, the change is wholly for the worse.

My acquaintance with Colin Wilson made it obvious to me that this was his chief problem. In one of his letters, he mentions a typical example:

'Before *The Outsider* came out, you know that two publishers were after it. I spent an afternoon in the office of one, listening to him on publishers and authors for several hours, and when I left, I was reeling with fatigue. As I crossed Hyde Park, the colour of the grass suddenly revived me, and I felt a blind rage, not entirely with the publisher, but with the whole damned business world. *I was a writer*; it was my job to express my feeling as accurately and as honestly as I could, not to listen to hours of talk about contracts and the advantages and disadvantages of being with such and such a publisher. Thus I became sick of business-men and all they stood for.'

When *The Outsider* was published, the problem was suddenly magnified tenfold. There was an initial shock of pleasure—the feeling that, after all, the world isn't such a bad place, it recognises sincerity and merit, etc. Then came the reversal. One Sunday morning, a few months after the book appeared, Colin rang me from Notting Hill; he seemed to be excited and upset. The *Sunday Pictorial* had published a story about his relations with his wife and child, headed 'The Golden Boy isn't such a Golden Husband'. In this, his wife was quoted as saying that she had 'nursed him through mental illness'. (This was totally untrue, and she later claimed that the words had been 'put into her mouth'.) He wanted to know whether, from my own experience with the Press, I could suggest how he should rebut the suggestion that he was neglecting his wife and son when, in fact, he had bought them a flat and was allowing them twenty-five pounds a month? After some discussion, we decided it would be best not to bother about the story; it would die of its own accord. But this was the first of the personal attacks, and the beginning of the 'turn of the tide' as far as success went.

After the publication of *Declaration*, a new anti-success mechanism was started; and since it is in every way typical of something in present-day English culture, it may be of interest to trace its development. The writers in *Declaration* were divided into left-wingers (Osborne, Tynan, Anderson, Lessing) and 'reactionaries' (Bill Hopkins, Stuart Holroyd, Colin Wilson). Since they were plainly not young Tories, the label

'Fascist' was very quickly dug out. In a review of *Religion and the Rebel*, Wolf Mankowitz was quick to speak of 'a Reich of the spirit'. And Kenneth Allsop, whose attitude towards Colin had always been friendly, went out of his way, in *The Angry Decade*, to comment on the dangers of neo-Fascism in Hopkins, Holroyd, and Wilson. He quotes *Religion and the Rebel*: 'The Outsiders must seek political power over the hogs', and comments: 'At the end of his Introduction there is the final, ominous implication that he has other activities fixed with a glittering eye. He was glad, he says, to have his books published, "but their publication was not an essential part of my purpose. I am not necessarily a writer. The moment writing ceases to be a convenient discipline for subduing my stupidity and laziness, I shall give it up and *turn to some more practical form*" (My italics).' In his *News Chronicle* review of *The Angry Decade*, Colin remarked mildly that what he had in mind in making this statement was the idea of entering a monastery, not of becoming the new Hitler!

Bill Hopkins and Stuart Holroyd came in for the same kind of misunderstanding. Holroyd's relatively innocent statement, 'a man may be uncharitable, intolerant and self-centred, and still be profoundly religious', was quoted, and its 'fascist colouring' observed. (On this kind of showing, any author in the English language could be labelled a Fascist). Bill Hopkins (whose intolerance of fools, I have noticed, is far deeper than Colin's) is violently savaged. He is quoted: 'My religious belief is the Glory of Man—but the Glory is to the most highly developed and highly disciplined of men, not to one and all. . . . I hate that socialist emotional claptrap'. This typically Celtic and provocative statement is dismissed as 'puerile poppycock' and labelled 'Fascism'.

By this time, it should be obvious that the root of the 'Fascist' label lies in the essentially religious attitude of Hopkins, Holroyd and Wilson. In the same way, T. E. Hulme and D. H. Lawrence have been accused of fascist leanings. Like Auden in the thirties, they regard youth as a 'time of discipline', and unlike Osborne and Tynan, their attitude towards their own time is optimistic and idealistic. These qualities are interpreted by more 'realistic' minds on a political level where, indeed, they might easily result in Fascism if loosely interpreted.

Although Christopher Logue has expressed his opposition to

this kind of idealism, he was, in fact, useful in averting an unpleasant incident on a later occasion. After Colin had moved to Cornwall, Bill Hopkins formed a 'party' to propagate his ideas of spiritual anarchism, and called it The Spartacans. One day, he was approached by two young men from some other small political group, whose ideas seemed close to his own. (Bill comments: 'They talked about how men ought to be more alive, have more imagination, etc.')

Bill and Stuart agreed to speak at a meeting of this group, without realising that it was, in fact, distinctly neo-Fascist in its ideas. Logue heard a rumour in Fleet Street that certain journalists intended to use the meeting as a starting point for a denunciation of Bill Hopkins, Stuart Holroyd, and, incidentally, Colin, who had been completely uninvolved. Bill and Stuart immediately cancelled their agreement to speak, and insisted on their names being removed from the posters.

But the most important outbreak of political accusation came as a result of an article Colin wrote for the December 1959 issue of *The Twentieth Century*. The article spoke of Mosley's policy in Notting Hill Gate, and expressed disagreement with his racialist views and his political methods. Colin had met Mosley (as mentioned in an earlier chapter). He goes on:

'When I heard that Mosley intended to stand for Parliament, it seemed an excellent idea. . . . The idea of Mosley in Parliament seemed preferable to the idea of Mosley in Notting Hill or Trafalgar Square (where his followers always seem to get into fights with the Communists).' He goes on to describe, how walking in Notting Hill Gate, a loudspeaker van came past, blaring 'Vote for Mosley. He will free England from the niggers.' He comments: 'And yet I remember questioning Mosley about this a year before; he had stated categorically that he was not, and never had been, anti-Negro or anti-Jewish. . . . For my part, I am willing enough to believe he said these things in good faith (although his account of what went on before the war hardly tallies with that of certain of my Jewish friends). But *why* allow his followers to use these methods? It seems to me not only a bad thing to do, but from the political standpoint, a silly and incompetent thing. In many ways, Mosley shows a disturbing lack of insight into his own time. The tone of his weekly newspaper, *Action*, strikes me in the same way; its methods of attack often seem downright

childish, guaranteed to alienate any intelligent man. When Macmillan went to Moscow, *Action* made a point of referring to him as "MacWobble", and a recent example is even more damaging. When Pirow died, "Cassandra" of the *Daily Mirror* commented in his column that he hoped Pirow would arrive in heaven with a Jew on one side of him and a Negro on the other. Personally, I usually find "Cassandra" and his views pretty detestable, but this comment seemed to me quite fair, and rather milder than one might have expected.

'But an article in *Action* really let rip. If "Cassandra" liked Negroes so much, why didn't he have one down to stay in his posh suburban villa? And of course, "Cassandra" daren't say anything against Jews; he only worked for them . . .

'It is not the malice of this passage that irritates me so much as its sheer *illogicality*, and it underlines my point about the incompetence of Mosley's political methods. On the two or three occasions when I have met Mosley, he has struck me as likeable, sincere, and above all, as intelligent. (He is far and away the most intelligent politician I have ever met.) But unless he has no control whatever over his followers, why on earth does he allow this sort of thing to go on? Either way, he must plead incompetence. If he has no control over his loud-speaker vans and newspaper articles, then he ought to have. But if, in fact, he is actually responsible for them, then it is the worst kind of incompetence, because it shows a completely false sizing-up of his opponents. For better or worse, England is a democratic country, and a country run by an establishment. This means that, in English public life, stupidity is not necessarily a great handicap, if backed by sincerity and honesty. But the major demand *is* for sincerity and honesty. Mosley's mistake lay in not realising that his best hope of election lay in keeping his newspaper as solid and respectable as *The Times*, and his election methods as dull and dignified as Lord Hailsham's. His method was bound to leave an unpleasant impression of opportunism. Mosley remains a puzzle to me. I meditate on the causes of his failure. . . . Still, there is an ultimate obstacle between me and an understanding of Mosley. I cannot identify myself with him closely enough. If I try to imagine myself in his position with the type of following he seems to have attracted, I cannot ask myself the question: "How would *you* deal with the situation?" Because I *wouldn't*.

I'd pull out and get back to writing books and listening to music, as I did with the anarchist movement. . . .'

Colin experienced considerable surprise when 'Cassandra' launched a violent attack on him in his column in the *Daily Mirror*, accusing him of being a Mosley supporter. To justify his contention that Colin was a Fascist, 'Cassandra' quoted parts of the article out of context—the statement that Mosley was sincere, the most intelligent politician he had ever met. (Colin admitted to me that this wasn't saying much, since the only other politician he has met has been Gaitskell!) He even quoted Colin's statement, 'I cannot identify myself with him closely enough', to make it look as if Colin was reproaching himself about it. On the whole, it was an unpleasant episode. It stemmed, says Colin, from his remarks about 'Cassandra', and failed to mention that they were actually *in defence of* 'Cassandra' and against *Action*. Colin immediately wrote a letter to the *Daily Mirror*, protesting at this quoting out-of-context. His letter was printed, together with a further attack. 'Cassandra' took up his comment that Mosley was incompetent, and implied that what Colin was reproaching Mosley for was not being more competent at political chicanery, beating people up, etc. Colin described the attack as 'a disgrace to British Journalism' and it gave the idea that Colin was a 'Mosley supporter' a wide, if vague, currency. So, also, did an attack in *The Twentieth Century* by Philip Toynbee, to which Colin replied, and further hints of Mosley-ism from Bernard Levin in the *Spectator* and Leonard Russell in the *Sunday Times*. All of these were not outright assertions, or even lengthy attacks (which might have merited an equally lengthy reply), but passing references that gave the reader the impression that here was something he must already know about. In a letter to the *Spectator*, Colin stressed that he was a socialist and a supporter of World Government, and could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be called a Mosley-ite. By taking up the subject of Mosley, Colin had placed in the hands of people who disliked him a convenient rod to beat him with.

The moral that some people may draw from all this is, that a serious writer would do better to take up a position of Yeatsian disdain towards the modern world, and say what he has to, without troubling his head about misunderstandings. This is certainly not Colin Wilson's attitude—or it becomes so only

periodically, in moods of depression. In March 1960, he spoke at a Paternosters luncheon in the Connaught Rooms, with myself as his sponsor; after speaking of the problems of publicity for the modern writer, he went on to say: 'You soon discover that the Press is a treacherous machine. You say something, hoping it will convey a certain impression; but what appears in the newspaper is a fantastically distorted impression. You put something in at one end and something quite different comes out at the other. But it's a challenge. It ought to be possible to calculate, once you've become familiar with the workings of the sausage machine, so that if you wanted to make a particular thing come out at the other end, you'd know exactly what to put in at your end. Still, I must confess that I've never learned the secret. The workings of the sausage machine are too erratic.'

After reading through a great many of his letters and journals, one fact strikes me very forcefully: the original success of *The Outsider* was unusually good luck for him. Long before its publication, he had written in his journal: '*I shall probably be attacked and condemned as violently as Nietzsche was. I'm not sure yet how great the strain will be. It smashed Nietzsche.*' In fact, he has been attacked and condemned as violently as Nietzsche; but only after the first enthusiastic reception. The reception made all the difference; as well as making him known and producing a large public of potential readers, it gave him a fundamentally optimistic outlook, a resilience to withstand the violence of the attacks. It is only necessary to read Kenneth Allsop's chapter on him in *The Angry Decade*, to realise how violent has been the opposition he has aroused. If the opposition had started with the publication of *The Outsider*, I doubt whether he would have continued to write with the same resilience. His friend Bill Hopkins, who, in fact, *did* encounter the opposition with his first book, has published nothing since; at the time of writing, the long-announced *Time of Totality* is still unfinished. This may not be due entirely to the opposition encountered by *The Divine and the Decay*, but it can hardly be completely unconnected with it. In the same way, Stuart Holroyd's third book, *The Despair of Europe*, announced as long ago as 1957, has apparently not even been started at the time of writing! In spite of the Welfare State and unprecedented newspaper publicity, the way for young writers in the 1960's is by no means a primrose path.

16

THE BOOKS

THE OUTSIDER must be one of the most difficult books to summarise ever written, and this is reflected in the reviews of it. No one who has ever read the book could find much similarity between it and the work described by reviewers.

The difficulty begins with its sub-title: 'An enquiry into the nature of the sickness in the soul of man in the mid-twentieth century.' I have always contended that this arresting sub-title gave the book its initial impetus. Contrary to general belief, the sub-title was not Colin Wilson's but was added by his publisher; Colin's first knowledge of it came when he saw a proof copy. *The Outsider* is not particularly about man in the twentieth century, nor is it finally about sickness.

Colin told me that he found himself embarrassed during the first weeks of the book's success because journalists and TV interviewers would ask, 'What is an Outsider?', and he found the question almost unanswerable. Honor Balfour came closest to it when, in *Time*, she called the Outsider 'Wilson's invisible man'.

Colin has also admitted to me that he now finds his Outsider concept far less relevant to his ideas and outlook than he did four years ago. In fact, the idea sprang from his sense of 'alienation' in his teens, and the idea that certain men feel alienated from the life around them because they possess some insight or genius beyond that of their fellows. In fact, the Outsider can best be defined as a religious concept. In ultimate terms, man is either a completely social animal who would have no meaning and no existence if he was removed from all relation with other living creatures (imagine, for example, a man totally alone on a dead planet, like Mary Shelley's *Last Man*), or he is a being whose reality requires only one other

reality to complete it—that of God or the Life Force (or simply ‘otherness’ if you dislike these religious terms). Aristotle, like Marx, held that man is a political animal; St. Augustine held the other view, and apologises to God (in *The Confessional*) for ‘committing fornication’ when he allowed other men to come between himself and God.

But this is what all human beings do continuously. I am not now speaking in religious, but in psychological terminology. In *The Outsider*, the phrase ‘other people are the trouble’ is repeated many times. It means roughly what Sartre meant in *Huis Clos* by ‘Hell is other people’. Even an atheist may be glad to get away from some exhausting and uncongenial human relationship to turn to some more abstract pursuit—mathematics or music or political idealism? In its narrow and least controversial sense, the word God could be defined as the Abstract. This is the sense in which Plato seemed to understand it.

In its simplest definition, then, ‘Outsider’ means a man who finds human relationships particularly wearing, and hungers for ‘the Abstract’ far more than the average. His resistance to other people and his need for ‘the Abstract’ is on a lower level than that of most people; just as a man’s resistance to noise (and his need for silence) might be lower than other people’s.

In a sense, then, as he is conceived in the early chapters of the book, the Outsider is the early and uncomfortable stage of genius; it is the spiritual mumps of remarkable men. This is verified in *Religion and the Rebel* when Colin reveals where he first discovered the word Outsider: in Shaw’s autobiographical preface to *Immaturity*. In this preface, Shaw speaks of his very early days, when he first left Dublin and came to London. Shaw comments: ‘When a young man has achieved nothing and is doing nothing . . . it is rather trying to find him assuming an authority in conversation, an equality in terms, which only conspicuous success . . . could make becoming. *Yet this is what is done, unconsciously, by young persons who have in them the potentiality of such success*’ (my italics). Shaw goes on to say that when he was forced to leave the realm of imagination for that of actuality, he was uncomfortable, and felt ‘the Complete Outsider’. His descriptions of his disgust with the Dublin of his teens completes the picture. He goes on to say that all men are in a false position until they have realised their potentialities. The Outsider, as

Colin first conceived him, was a man who has not yet realised his potentialities. He had in mind his own experiences—the sometimes brutally candid criticisms of his early writing by the schoolmasters he showed it to, the embarrassments and awkwardness of his period at the Vaughan College (where he admits he used to think of himself as ‘Napoleon among the mice’).

And this is undoubtedly the basis of the enormous popularity of *The Outsider*. Today, there are thousands of men and women who possess more than average intelligence and who feel that their everyday lives give them no opportunity to realise their potentialities. This is particularly so among young people. Colin’s *Outsider* caught the imagination of frustrated youth, and became its symbol of revolt, just as Goethe’s *Werther*, Schiller’s *Karl Moor* or Scott Fitzgerald’s *Amory Blaine* had done in the past. His success is comparable to that of other figures of romantic revolt in the nineteenth century: Byron in England or Pushkin in Russia. I am not now making any sort of literary comparison, but only pointing out that the nature of romantic revolt does not change in the course of centuries. (Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kruger* achieved this kind of success in the early years of this century.)

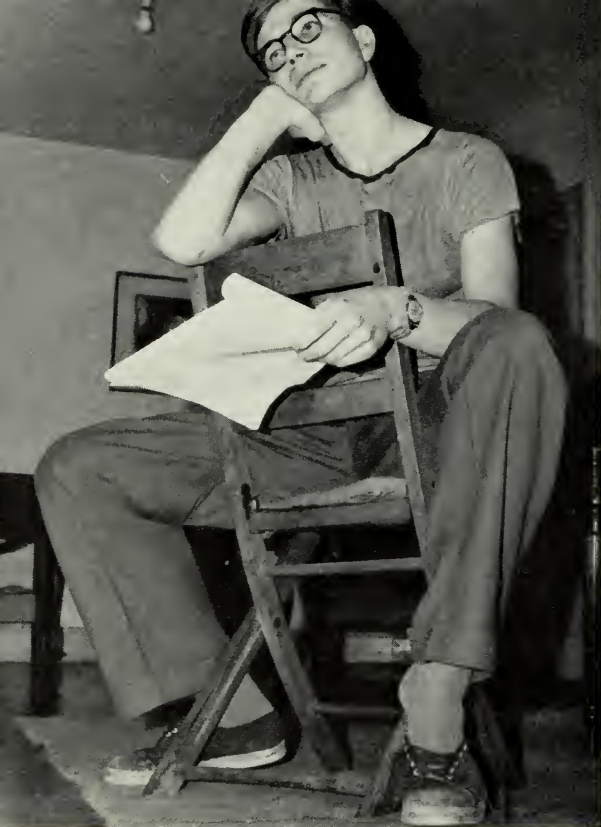
The mechanism of romantic revolt is always the same: a frustrated writer produces an idealised image of himself, and appeals incidentally to the general frustration of others of his own type. To this mechanism Osborne’s *Jimmy Porter* and John Braine’s *Joe Lampton* undoubtedly owe their success. *Lampton*’s success was even more notable than that of *Jimmy Porter*, because he also symbolised the revolt against the sexual frustrations of young people. ‘In my own youth,’ says Colin, ‘Lawrence’s *Paul Morel* became this symbol of revolt for me.’

But once the revolt is over—once the romantic writer has established his position—what happens then? He continues to write and draws on a more general talent, with less specific relevance to revolt. After *Werther*, Goethe moved steadily to classicism; after *Childe Harold*, Byron produced adventure stories in verse. It depends completely upon the fundamental nature of the writer’s talent; how far his interests are universal and how far they are particular. Lawrence’s revolt continued after *Sons and Lovers* and persisted to the end. It is difficult, at this stage, to see how far the revolt of Braine and Osborne will

Two of Wilson's contemporaries: Stuart Holroyd . . .



. . . and Michael Hastings, both of whom have brought their pens to bear on the social shortcomings of our time



Wilson holding an audition
for his play, *The Metal Flower
Blossom*

One of Wilson's most successful contemporaries is playwright John Osborne, author of *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*



continue, and how far they will be thrown back on their most general talent as (respectively) novelist and playwright! General talent has no immediate message, as such; it is simply a power of observation and of depiction.

The Outsider was remarkable because its author was much farther from his subject than most romantic revolutionaries. This becomes apparent in reading *Ritual in the Dark*; even in its earlier versions, Sorme is *always detached*. He never becomes a Jimmy Porter, or anything remotely like a Werther. Like his creator, he is essentially an observer. *The Outsider* goes beyond most romantic revolts—its author is busy thinking his way out of the problems he sets himself, and goes far beyond the stage of merely expressing dissent. This is amusingly demonstrated in *Ritual in the Dark*, where Sorme meets the two Beat Generation characters (who seem to be based on Ginsberg and Corso); his reaction to them is one of mild surprise and intellectual disdain, reminiscent of Mr. Eliot's attitude to G. K. Chesterton in 1917.

This seems also to be the basis of Colin Wilson's dislike of Osborne's work; not that he fails to sympathise with its sense of revolt, but that he feels it doesn't go far enough. Or, in one of Bill Hopkins's favourite phrases, 'it lacks extension'. Braine's *Room at the Top* seems to arouse more sympathy in him because it comes closer to his own conception of the nature of sex (of which I shall say more when speaking of *Ritual*).

Colin had in mind the intensely personal nature of *The Outsider* when he referred to it as 'a fraud'. 'It's dressed up to look like an academic thesis.' (Although a professor of my acquaintance has remarked that, if the book had been submitted as a thesis, it would certainly have been rejected.) It is a completely personal book. The archetypal Outsiders he had in mind when writing it were Marie Bashkirtseff, W. N. P. Barbellion (whose *Journal of a Disappointed Man* had struck him as 'terrifying and unbearable'), James Thompson and Thomas Lovell Beddoes. All these had been studied in his late teens, together with Van Gogh and Nijinsky, with a certain self-lacerating pleasure. Barbellion was of particular interest because, unlike the others, he was probably not a man of genius. The aspirations of the Outsider, the feeling of alienation from society, are not necessarily accompanied by any creative ability or power of self-expression. For this reason it is significant that the first 'Outsider' in the book is Barbusse's hero in *Inferno*, who

says, 'I have nothing and I deserve nothing', and professes to have no particular talent.

In many ways, *The Outsider* was an offshoot of *Ritual in the Dark*. During the early stages of that book, Colin was one day explaining the plot to Bill Hopkins; to try to clarify the relation between Gasp, Nunne and Sorme, he explained that Gasp has emotional discipline, but no physical or intellectual discipline; Nunne has physical discipline, but not emotional or intellectual; Sorme has intellectual discipline, but not physical or emotional. The three men complement one another; an early notebook on *Ritual* states: 'Nunne, Sorme and Gasp are the body, the heart and the intellect of the same man, like Blake's Tharmas, Urizen and Luvah. Their separation is a kind of legend of a fall.'

When he explained it to Bill Hopkins, the idea was completely new to Colin, but he quickly worked it out and applied it to his favourite 'Outsiders'—Nietzsche, T. E. Lawrence, Nijinsky, Van Gogh etc.

The first three chapters of *The Outsider* are devoted to trying to demonstrate that the Outsider is a man who sees deeper into chaos than other men; he tries to show that, seen with a certain metaphysical penetration, the world is alien and terrifying. The heroes of Sartre's *La Naussee*, of Camus's *L'Etranger*, of Granville Barker's *Secret Life* and some of Hemingway's short stories, are called upon to attest to this sense of the world's terrifying alienness, and H. G. Wells is called upon as a surprise witness. Then the heart-body-intellect trilogy makes its appearance in a chapter on Lawrence, Van Gogh and Nijinsky, and dominates the rest of the book. Nietzsche and Tolstoy are examined at length, and are followed by two long sections on Dostoevsky, who begins to pave the way for a solution to the problem of alienation. Then various solutions are examined in the remaining chapters, where there are studies of George Fox, Sri Ranakrishna, Thomas Traherne, William Blake, George Gurdjieff, T. E. Hulme and (in passing) Bernard Shaw. The book also contains the first lengthy discussion of the work of Hermann Hesse that has so far appeared in England.

Many critics complained that no 'answer' had been provided; but this is not a view that its author would take, or that I can take. The problem is quite simple; it was clearly propounded by Ivan Karamazov in the Pro and Contra chapter: to accept life. There is no doubt whatever at the end of

the book that the answer *is* to accept life. It is true that Sartre, Camus, Hemingway and even H. G. Wells (in his last years) seem to doubt whether this is advisable and the 'romantic Outsider' positively rejects it and turns towards death or some ideal world. (This is epitomised in the words of Villers de L'Isle Adam's Axel, who finally commits suicide: 'As for living, our servants will do that for us.')

But the problem that remains, at the end of *The Outsider*, is: *How* is life to be accepted? The answer lies certainly in the vision achieved by the mystics—a naïve vision, 'touched with wonder' like a child's. But, life being what it is, and man's limitations being what they are, how can this be achieved?

This is the subject of all Colin Wilson's work after *The Outsider*, and seems likely to continue to be its subject for a very long time to come.

Religion and the Rebel

It would not be accurate to call *Religion and the Rebel* a sequel to *The Outsider*; it does not follow on from the previous book so much as *extend the ground*. Perhaps its two most important chapters are the Autobiographical Introduction and the final chapter on Wittgenstein and Whitehead. (No critic has so far commented on the importance of this later chapter, which may possibly be due to their having not read to the end.)

In a sense, the book is a static extension of *The Outsider*. The question: How is life to be accepted? is taken for granted, and the answers of several religious figures are examined. To some extent, the book is an introduction to mysticism, an elementary treatise. (Colin admitted to me that he was impressed in his childhood by the articles he read in a magazine, *Everybody's*, which often told the life story of a writer or of some historical character with great clarity, and with no assumption of previous knowledge on the part of the reader.) This 'elementary treatise' aspect probably annoyed some academic reviewers. (For example, Philip Toynbee may have been irritated by the exposition of his father's *Study of History*.) Colin's own reply to this accusation was: 'It took me several years to find my own bearings among these writers and religious figures. I want to provide a complete introduction for readers who haven't the time or inclination to study Nietzsche, Kierkegaard or Pascal

for themselves. Besides, I would like my work to be self-complete. Years ago, I read Angus Wilson's book on Zola, and was irritated that it meant nothing whatever to someone who had not read all Zola. I don't want readers of my work to have to go outside my books for their basic facts. If this habit of stating the elementary facts irritates my well-informed readers, it's too bad.'

But the central importance of *Religion and the Rebel* is its attempt to re-define existentialism and create a characteristically English brand of existence-philosophy. The problem is, 'How to accept life?', and so the subject of this philosophy is life itself. Colin's remark, 'I am interested in the force of life in exactly the same way that Faraday was interested in the force of electricity', is relevant here. A philosophy that wishes to examine human existence, not 'the universe', is an existential philosophy. Colin defines existentialism as 'the need to treat life as an experiment'. He also speaks of 'applying the mathematical intellect to the stuff of everyday living'. This is precisely what *The Outsider* attempts; in its ponderous move forward, its attempt to relate a host of 'psychological' facts, it brings clearly to mind the training as a scientist that preceded its author's interest in writing.

Certain chapters of *Religion and the Rebel* attempt this even more clearly. The book tries to show the way that rationalism has gained a kind of stranglehold on our culture, and tries to formulate an alternative philosophy. Considering the seriousness of its aim and the difficulty of some of its concepts, it is surprising that so many journalists and vaguely literary book-reviewers decided to criticise it. A typical example is Nancy Spain's review that appeared in the *Daily Express*, which concentrated on Colin's private life, and referred to him as 'the boy Colin'. The answer is that it would not have been attacked if *The Outsider* had received only specialist criticism and sold three thousand copies; the attacks from the non-specialist reviewers were the penalty paid for a success that had no real reference to *The Outsider's* merits.

In the chapter on *The Outsider and History*, he attempts to show how the scientific method has moved steadily closer to human existence. The first science was astronomy; next came mathematics, then physics. Only the remote was regarded as fit subject for science. Geology and biology were very much

late-comers, and psychology might almost be called the invention of our own century; the opposition it aroused was due to the feeling that the scientific method could not possibly be applied to the human mind. Today, we are beginning to make a study of psychical phenomena and 'extra-sensory perception', although many scientists would not allow these subjects the rank of sciences. The most recent example of bringing the scientific method into the raw stuff of human existence is the attempt to treat history as a science. Colin offers brief sketches of the predecessors—Vico, Ballanche, Burckhardt, the Adams brothers, Georges Sorel, Wilfredo Pareto and Nicholas Danilevsky. But the great part of the chapter is devoted to Spengler and Toynbee. The ideas of these two historians are not seriously considered as an answer to the 'Outsider dilemma', but their interest in 'existential' modes of thought is emphasised, and Toynbee's affirmation of basic religious concepts is noted. While writing the book, Colin contemplated adding a chapter on modern psychology, showing how the complete materialism of Freud was rejected by his disciples, Jung and Adler, and how it has developed, in Otto Rank, into an acceptance of religion similar to Toynbee's. Reasons of space made him reject the idea, as well as his unwillingness to speak of Freud and Jung, without a systematic study of their works.*

In the introductory chapter to Part Two, *The Making of Christianity*, he examines the decline of Christianity with the development of heresies within the Church and of the rise of the scientific method. His account of Jesus and St. Paul owes heavy (and acknowledged) debts to Shaw. Then, in a series of chapters on religious figures, ranging from Boehme (born in 1575) to Newman (born 1801), he shows the effect of the increasingly scientific culture of men of naturally religious temperament. Shaw is included in this list of religious figures; Colin Wilson feels that his temperament qualifies him for inclusion. These chapters—on Boehme, Ferrar, Pascal, Swedenborg, Law, Newman, Kierkegaard and Shaw—should really have been included in *The Outsider*, and, in fact, the chapters on Boehme and Swedenborg were originally sketched for inclusion in the earlier book.

The final chapter in the book—dealing with Whitehead and

* I couldn't have done this without repeating what Ira Progoff has done in his excellent book *The Death and Rebirth of Psychology*.—C. W.

Wittgenstein—is its most important; it is possibly the most important single chapter in Colin Wilson's 'philosophical books'. Alfred North Whitehead, the English philosopher, was an existentialist born into an environment of empiricism. Beginning as a mathematician and a philosopher of science, his views changed steadily over the years, until his mature philosophy is an attempt to restate the human position and predicament in philosophical language. Because he was trained in England, Whitehead never writes in the dramatic language of Sartre or Heidegger; no one could claim that he treated life 'in the manner of a thriller'.

Whitehead reacted to philosophical problems with the mind of a poet. Up until 1920, he attempted to construct a purely scientific philosophy, in the manner of English empiricism, attempting to explain 'the universe' without assuming that, for us, the universe is basically the thing human beings live in. The universe ought to be explainable without considering that our only knowledge of it comes from our observation. By 1920, Whitehead had come to realise that a philosophy cannot be constructed with the complete exclusion of the 'human element'. He was therefore committed to an existentialism, although he did not call it that. In *Science and the Modern World*, he attacks the belief that philosophy ought to be the study of 'the world out there', and insists that man's subjective experiences are just as much a part of reality as a railway timetable. In other words, science and art cannot be considered as separate domains any longer; science must invade art, and vice versa, and the result will be a philosophy that tries to treat life as a whole, as a single organism.

Like Continental existentialism, Whitehead's philosophy is very close to psychology—it is based on observation of the workings of the human faculties. His most basic concept is the idea of *prehension*—which can be defined as the *grasping* and *digesting* of experience. Human beings 'prehend' non-stop; if experience bombards them too hard, they deliberately limit their outlook and lives to avoid the effort of prehension. This is what happened when the 'scientific outlook' was introduced into European thought; it made the world into an attractively simple place, and man's life into a simple intellectual quest. Finally, 'knowledge' and 'intellectual knowledge' were regarded as synonymous. Until the end of his life (he died at

eighty-six, in 1947) Whitehead continued to fight the narrowness of academic philosophy, and to 'attempt to apply the mathematical intellect to the raw stuff of human existence'. In a passage describing his concept of the ground that ought to be covered by philosophy, he writes: 'Nothing can be omitted; experience drunk and experience sober. . . .' A long list of different types of experiences follows, ending 'experience normal and experience abnormal'.

Having examined Whitehead's philosophy at length, Colin points out that a programme such as the above is closer to the programme of the novelist than of the academic philosopher. In spite of his totally different language and approach, Whitehead is close to Goethe or Dostoevsky.

The point is driven deeper by a study of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher who taught at Cambridge. Wittgenstein devoted his life to a study of language. In his first book, the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, he argues that language is an attempt to *show* things, like a Guinness advertisement, that tells its story without the need for words. Language developed to serve the same function as a picture. And just as no picture could convey the idea: 'God is the absolute', or 'Evil is separation from God', so language is also incapable of conveying such ideas. If language *seems* to convey them, it is because we let the words muddle us. The world is made up of the visible and the invisible; the invisible is the realm of the spirit, of good and evil and the life force. Language has no reference to this realm and cannot express it, since language can only express 'facts', and 'facts' are essentially connected with the visible world.

This belief led Wittgenstein to suppose that most of the problems of metaphysics are actually a misunderstanding due to the misuse of language; he saw philosophy as an attempt to prevent the bewitchment of the senses by means of language. He developed these views in his unpublished lectures and notes, and in *Philosophical Investigations*, his fragments of a work in progress.

What is interesting about Wittgenstein is, that he was in no way the complacent academic, refusing to acknowledge that anything beyond his limited range has the right to be called philosophy (like Professor Ayer's attack on *The Outsider*). He lived a life reminiscent of a fourteenth-century ascetic; after the 1914 War, he gave away all his money and went to live in a

monastery, according to Tolstoy's precepts. He was a nervous, gloomy, over-serious man whose photos all show the same thin, tired, eagle-like face. And he had one important thing in common with Whitehead; he realised that the attempt to treat philosophy as a 'science' and to explain the universe in some glorious System, has resulted in much confusion, loose-thinking, intellectual dishonesty and short-sightedness. In demanding that language should get back to its real concern—expressing the expressible—he was clearing away a great deal of philosophical deadwood.

It may seem surprising that such an apparently negative philosopher—in every way a critic rather than a creator—should hold any interest for Colin Wilson. The answer is, that Colin found Wittgenstein's criticism unanswerable, and realised that, by throwing metaphysics out of the realm of 'scientific philosophy', Wittgenstein had restored it to its own realm—the realm of existentialism, of human life. He describes Bertrand Russell as a man who has always believed that he could talk his way to the heart of the universe. Wittgenstein is right to emphasise the inadequacy of scientific language. For in traditional religion, speculation has to stop at a certain point and *action* has to begin. Where Wittgenstein's philosophy stops, Gurdjieff's begins. Wittgenstein worried himself to death, making it clear that philosophy was the cross on which he crucified himself; but an actual discipline towards 'mystical insight' never seems to have struck him (although he often meditated on giving up philosophy to become a monk or a musician—he was a passionate lover of music). He speaks of the 'mystical' as the realm with which philosophy cannot deal. In this, Colin Wilson believes he was right. Colin's criticism of Wittgenstein is that he took the easy way out; instead of abandoning philosophy and pursuing the mystical, he abandoned the mystical and devoted his life to an arid and precise criticism of metaphysics.

He has a further criticism of Wittgenstein. Scientific language (i.e. everyday language) has no ability to express the 'invisible'. But the language of poetry and music is continually expressing the inexpressible. In fact, Eliot's contention that true poetry can communicate before it is understood, implies that poetry has some mysterious *but precise* way of expressing 'the inexpressible'. Here again is the material for a definition of

existentialism—it is the pursuit of the mysterious *with precision*.

And so the argument of *Religion and the Rebel* culminates in a plea for an existential attitude, and an attempt to define its bases. Just as Nietzschean philosophy means the 'death of God' in the Lutheran sense—Blake's Old Nobodaddy—so Wittgenstein's philosophy means the death of philosophy in the Aristotlean sense. Nietzsche was too involved with his Protestant ancestry to realise that what he had killed was not God but the Protestant God; he lacked the positive mysticism of Blake. So Wittgenstein failed to realise that what he had killed was not creative philosophy, but only the scientific philosophy that Whitehead denounces as inadequate; he also failed to see beyond, to the need for an existentialism.

Religion and the Rebel is, then, an attempt to define the philosopher of the future; with all its digressions, it pursues this aim single-mindedly, and comes near to achieving it. In conclusion, Colin admits that he has now *thought* as far as he is able for the moment. To be meaningful, the thought must be assimilated into a whole, with the body and emotions taking an equal share of the process of knowing. 'Like a mountain guide, thought is tied by a double rope to its two companions, the emotions and the body. . . . The other two have to be induced to follow it before it can advance. At the end of *The Outsider*, I still had a great deal of rope left; I have now gone as far as my two companions will allow.' In fact, Colin is attempting to restate the concept of wisdom as distinguished from knowledge, and to replace, as the corner-stone of philosophy, the idea of *maturity*. Although it is not stated in so many words, it is obvious that the next step for the author must be a kind of synthesis—not a critical book, but an attempt to deal far more directly with human life in novels and plays. The body and the emotions must be allowed to catch up on the conclusions of the intellect.

In view of the range and depth of *Religion and the Rebel*, it may seem astounding that its reviewing was not merely unfavourable, but largely irresponsible. *Time* magazine, not always noted for the depth of its thought or the seriousness of its approach, produced a review headed 'Egghead Scrambled', THE TOHU BOHU KID. It commented: 'With the volume, Wilson's game of intellectual hooky is certainly up . . . sequence of unblinking non sequiturs, half-fashioned logic and firm dis-

regard for the English language. . . . As for the present state of Colin Wilson's mind and thought—tohu bohu.' Nancy Spain's reference to 'the boy Colin' was quoted with approval. There was no attempt to point to non sequiturs; there was no attempt of any kind at criticism. In a sense, this may be as well, since nothing that *Time* said could have the slightest relevance to what Colin Wilson was trying to do in *Religion and the Rebel*. *Time* was by no means the only offender; the book was reviewed by practically every daily newspaper in England and the United States. Some reviewers with no conception of what its author was trying to do, without the training or the reading to follow his ideas, seized the lead offered by the reviews of the leading papers, of Professor Ayer's attack, headed 'Folie de Grandeur', Philip Toynbee's retraction and attempt to pretend that he had never thought *The Outsider* so good after all; and Raymond Mortimer's scathing review which began by acknowledging that *The Outsider* and *Religion and the Rebel* were not his cup of tea, although he favourably compared their author to D. H. Lawrence, another writer for whom he admitted his lack of sympathy. The whole affair will undoubtedly be regarded in the future as one of the most remarkable episodes in English literary history. Even some of the people who were disposed to defend Colin Wilson, showed no sense of the qualities of the book. Marghanita Laski wrote: 'Surely literary history can show no other example of such a major effort to destroy a very bad book. . . . Certainly some of the reviewers seem to be using Mr. Wilson as a scapegoat. . . .' The reviewing of *Religion and the Rebel* established a certain precedent in treating Colin Wilson's books with no attempt at understanding. In his *Observer* review of *Ritual in the Dark*, Karl Miller refers airily to 'the odious *Outsider*'; while a reviewer in *Newsweek* felt himself qualified to refer to Colin Wilson's three critical books as 'examples of unripe philosophy'. The situation is surprising; it is rather as if Einstein's general theory of relativity had been sent to all the daily papers for criticism, as well as to the responsible scientific periodicals, and the reviewers had all taken Einstein to task for his slipshod mathematics.

There is, perhaps, no point in labouring the subject further, for the solution of the problem has already been stated and analysed. After the publication of *The Outsider*, Colin received a letter from T. S. Eliot which referred to the question of his

overnight success, and showed considerable insight into the problems that would arise. Eliot said: 'It seems to me that the right way is first to become known to a small group of people who can recognise what is good when they see it; next, to become known to a slightly larger group who will take the word of the others on what is good; and finally, to reach the wider public. To do it the other way around could be disastrous.'

The final comment on the subject can perhaps be left to Colin Wilson:

'As I see it, the problem is whether I would prefer to be known to a small audience who follow me fairly closely, or whether I should be widely known and widely misunderstood. From the sales point of view, the latter position is probably the best. In the first case, one can expect it to take twenty years or so before one's reputation reaches its highest level. In the second case, it will probably take twenty years for the clouds of dust to settle so the clear outline of one's work can be seen. On the whole, I think I prefer the second position, although I may yet have reason to change my mind.'

'THE AGE OF DEFEAT'

IN August 1958, Colin published in the *London Magazine* an article on the work of Aldous Huxley. His attitude towards Huxley seems to be ambivalent; next to Henry James, Huxley is mentioned more than any other writer in the journals. And yet there is obviously a fundamental distaste, as in the case of D. H. Lawrence.

The article on Huxley shows this ambivalence. Although a great deal of it is devoted to praise of Huxley's humanity and intellectual integrity, it is also a detailed attack on his work. What seems to irritate Colin chiefly about Huxley's work is the weakness of all his heroes, and the assumption Huxley seems to make that, in order to be sensitive, one must be weak.

In *The Age of Defeat*, this thesis is built into an indictment of most modern writers; it is an attempt to point out a fundamental corruption that seems to affect all contemporary writers. In a way, the thesis of *The Age of Defeat* is as sweeping as that of Nordau's *Degeneration*. There is one important difference: Nordau simply denounces and attacks, basing his charges on some hypothetical 'healthy art' which he seldom bothers to explain; Colin's analysis lacks the tone of moral indignation; it is a careful attempt to define a new attitude and envisage a new type of art.

The best way to summarise the theme of *The Age of Defeat* is perhaps to consider his reasons for rejecting Huxley. Here Colin utilises Sartre's concept of 'bad faith'. '*Mauvais foi*' is any kind of deliberate self-deception. As Colin conceives it, it is the source of a great deal of mental illness and neurosis in modern society. If, for example, a fundamentally shy person decides to 'put on an act'—to wear the façade of a boastful extravert—then he is guilty of bad faith. But only in so far as he allows his own façade to take him in. The danger in this attitude lies in the fact that

a man who attaches so much importance to what other people think of him is, in fact, only nurturing his own weakness and protecting it. And in protecting it, he is ruining his own chances of maturity, or, to borrow Nietzsche's phrase, 'self-surmounting'.

Huxley is aware of this, and he never ceases to analyse the 'bad faith' of his characters. Perhaps the most obvious—and repulsive—example is Burlap in *Point Counter Point*. There are only two types of Huxley character—the weakling who has the integrity or 'good faith' to face his own weakness, and the strong man whose strength springs from stupidity and insensitivity. The Huxley hero is either the 'chinless intelligent man' or the 'big-chinned moron'.

It is at this point that Colin Wilson parts company with Huxley. Huxley's analysis is, of course, basically pessimistic, since it assumes that 'the world' belongs to the brutal and stupid, and that the sensitive and intelligent are bound to fail. This attitude, which is already present in his earliest stories and poems, has become increasingly explicit in his more recent social writings, where one feels that the world is in the hands of madmen and liars, and that this is inevitable. In a sense, Huxley's novels are simply a fictional presentation of romantic pessimism; under a witty exterior, they conceal an assumption that is not dissimilar from the beliefs of Thomas Hardy or Schopenhauer. It is always taken urbanely for granted that the intelligent man is also ineffectual.

In a sense, Huxley is only doing what any important novelist does: allowing his own temperament to dominate the novels. In consequence, he gives the impression that he not only dislikes most people, but also that he dislikes life. And this is the root of Colin Wilson's objection. He has quoted with approval Rilke's comment that the purpose of art is 'to praise in spite of'. All great literature, from Homer to Gogol, has an inner- vitality, so that reading it has the effect of increasing the reader's acceptance of life. If, therefore, a writer 'rejects life', he should do so fully and positively, as Schopenhauer does, with Buddhistic thoroughness, and thereby arouse a strong response on the part of the reader.

Many modern writers, Colin argues, fail to do this. A perusal of their work produces a feeling of mild disgust with life that cannot be easily defined. This disgust—as it appears in Huxley,

Greene and Lawrence—may be due to laziness on the part of the author, a failure to ‘snap out’ of some orgy of self-pity or resentment. And yet it is presented in their work as if it were a valid and universal emotion, like the horror Ivan Karamazov feels for the torture of children. This disgust has become a ‘literary climate’; there are very few modern novels in which traces of it cannot be found.

Colin contends that this rejection is, as often as not, a purely personal matter. But unfortunately, we lack any real critical standards. Most reputable critics are cultured humanists whose criteria are ‘purely aesthetic’. Confronted with writers like Huxley or Beckett, they have no comment to make about their basic attitudes, and confine themselves to remarks about their ‘artistic ability’.

The problem, then, is to try to formulate a set of values by which the unexpressed rejection of these writers can be assessed.

The whole of Colin Wilson’s work is concerned with creating just such a standard: *The Outsider* is an attempt to expose ‘world rejection’, to examine its fundamental components, its ‘objections’ to life, and to decide whether they are really ultimately valid, or whether some even deeper vision resolves them and ‘cancels them out’. Shaw has already dealt with Huxley’s position—that the ‘world’ is in the hands of the hogs; that the men of imagination are forced to ‘kill the better part of themselves’ every day to propitiate the hogs. But Shaw’s final position is made quite clear in many of the plays, particularly in the figure of Andrew Undershaft in *Major Barbara*; it may be true that the armaments manufacturers (the ‘hogs’) will never become Outsiders, but there is nothing to prevent the Outsiders from becoming armaments manufacturers, if they can overcome their feeling of inferiority. (Here is an example of what Shaw meant when he claimed to have solved every major problem of his age; twenty years after he had solved it, Huxley was still explaining the problem!) There is in the Shavian temperament a feeling for strength and optimism that seems to be lacking in most modern writers.

Although it would not be true to claim that most modern writers are pessimists or nihilists—in the sense that Leonid Andryev is a pessimist—there is still an overwhelming feeling of defeat in their work. It is so basic that it amounts to a *premise*. Very occasionally, as in Hemingway or Kerouac, there is an

attempt at a positive vision, but it never lasts for long; for the most part, modern writers seem to be appalled by the horror of a machine age, by a vision of overpowering complexity and inhuman detachment.

In *Religion and the Rebel*, where this problem is dealt with in more definitely philosophical terms, Spengler is quoted with approval because he obviously felt the same about the 'machine age' as Andrew Undershaft. In this, like Shaw, Spengler was plainly too much in advance of his time.

The horror at the inhumanity of the machine age expresses itself in works in which the individual is crushed by the State (or by society). The archetype of these works is Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but the pattern has been established in modern literature for a very long time; it is present in nearly all American writing from Dreiser's *American Tragedy* to Elmer Rice's *Adding Machine*, and the plays of Arthur Miller. In England, where the 'machine age' expresses itself less brutally, the ineffectual hero has been in fashion for the past half-century. He may rebel (like Lucky Jim or Jimmy Porter), but he is still the lonely dissenter who cannot change anything.

But here, a new facet of the question arises. It is not merely that society has become more mechanised and inhuman; the sensitive individual may also be divided against himself. He may—like Gerard Sorme—feel that his sensitivity prevents him from choosing any course of action, and hence robs him of identity. Hamlet was the first of these self-divided men, the archetype of the romantic hero. Hamlet's inner problems prevent him from dealing firmly with the outer world, but *not* because he is weaker than most men.

It can be seen that this problem of the hero is only a restatement of the problem of *The Outsider*. Its solution, one might suppose, is the solution proposed in *Religion and the Rebel*. And, in fact, this proves to be so. The first necessity is a clear analysis, that places modern man and his problems in an unambiguous light. The second necessity is some positive belief that will form a starting point for new creation. In *The Age of Defeat*, this is spoken of as 'a new existentialism', but its bases are not stated. In fact, it seems fairly obvious to me that Colin has deliberately refrained from stating his basic belief too positively, in case it diverts attention from his analysis, which he regards as more important. But conversations with him, as well as a study of a

great deal of his unpublished work, makes it clear that his ultimate view is close to Shaw's. The belief in 'maturity' (stated in *Religion and the Rebel*) must lead to a belief in the *changeability* of man—in fact, to the idea that man may be on the brink of some new evolutionary leap, and that a new consciousness has to be brought to birth. He conceives his own role in the light of some such belief. He answered my question, 'What is your ultimate aim as a writer?': 'To change the direction of a current of unstated presuppositions that has gathered force over three centuries.'

To me, this is one of the most surprising and the most refreshing things about Colin Wilson's writing. I came to maturity in the world of Wells, Shaw and Chesterton, and have since seen their optimism discarded as shallow and unrealistic. It is true that, like the optimism of the Victorians, it was founded on a belief in human rationality that has been destroyed by many years of war. Yet it always seemed to me that the pessimism that replaced it was equally a matter of temperament. Joyce's determined 'realism' veiled a lack of intellectual staying-power; Eliot's despair was fed by several years of twelve-hour-a-day routine in a city office at two pounds a week, and colours his world as clearly as chronic indigestion. But 'realism' and despair, according to Colin Wilson, made an excellent cloak for intellectual laziness, complete failure to assess the problems of the age, just as the new 'obscure' techniques of self-expression could be used to hide a complete lack of anything to say; and the followers of Joyce and Eliot have made the best use of these aids to self-expression. Kenneth Allsop points out that Colin is the first writer of his generation deliberately to acquire a *European* standpoint, instead of a narrowly insular one. He is also the first writer for several generations to attempt a synthesis of Victorian optimism and post-Edwardian pessimism. There has been no attempt to dodge the issues; moreover, there has been a persistent desire somehow to get back to fundamentals, as revealed in his unending preoccupation with the work of men like Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer. (He told me once of a plan for a giant novel called *Positivism*, which would attempt to analyse in terms of the twentieth century the same problems Dostoevsky intended to analyse in his projected novel *Atheism*.)

At a relatively late stage in the writing of the 'hero essay'

(his name for *The Age of Defeat* while it was in progress) he decided to incorporate a study of certain American sociologists—Riesman, Whyte, Packard and Galbraith—who had concerned themselves with the evils attendant upon an over-prosperous society. The aim of this, he tells me, was to attempt to show that the 'hero problem' is not simply a question for writers and literary critics. The consequence was an opening section of the essay dealing with the evidence of sociology, which may have come as a surprise to some of his critics. It reveals a Colin Wilson who is beginning to take an active interest in politics and current affairs, thus bringing himself into closer alignment with contemporaries like Sartre and Camus.

The starting-point is the conception of David Riesman of 'other-directed' people and 'inner-directed' ones. The 'other-directed' are mainly influenced by TV advertisements, or keeping up with the Jones's. The 'inner-directed' are the pioneer type—or, ideally, the creative geniuses. Riesman argues that the other-directed type is steadily increasing. In *The Organisation Man*, William H. Whyte examines the running of big companies and shows that the 'organisation ethic' is largely concerned to make the individual surrender his individuality to the 'organisation' or to society. Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* shows the role of American advertising in making people 'other-directed'.

Riesman's terminology is easy and convenient, but it is by no means necessary to an understanding of the problem. Stated simply, people are losing their capacity for independent thought through the pressure of mechanised civilisation, and its strains and complexities. To borrow Whitehead's term, their capacity for 'prehension' is buckling under the strain, and *prehension is the ability of the human being to judge for himself and direct his own life*. The thesis of *The Age of Defeat* is, that this is reflected in literature, as well as in society at large. The writers have also given up the struggle to tackle the complexity—apart from the fact that many of them lack the intellectual toughness to attempt the task. If literature is becoming sluggish and unambitious, it is because the mess is accumulating and (to continue the metaphor) blocking the current. *The Age of Defeat* is a sort of one-man attempt at a cleaning-up operation. It also throws much of the responsibility squarely on the writers, and criticises writers for shirking this responsibility, and adding to

the mess by spreading disaffection and generally 'lowering morale'.

The demand for the 'new hero' is really an excuse for framing the indictment against the writers. Colin comments in *The Outsider* that there can be no action without belief; therefore there can be no hero without belief. The first necessity is belief.

Why then, Colin's critics persist in demanding, does he not attempt to formulate some kind of positive belief? (In America, before *Religion and the Rebel* appeared, one critic prophesied that it would be Colin's attempt to formulate a new religion.) An immense percentage of reviews of his four books have ended with the comment that 'no final answer is given', as if a volume of philosophy is like a compendium of mathematical puzzles. But the answer is surely obvious. Even if the author's personal convictions and beliefs are far more clear-cut than he is willing to admit, it would be no answer to state them with a cry of 'Eureka!' In fact, it would be disastrous, since it would distract attention from the analysis, which is so far only fragmentary and tentative. The problem is not to propound an answer, but to persuade other people to undertake the analysis, and help towards 'clearing up the mess'.

The only kind of 'answer' that is suggested in *The Age of Defeat* is a plea for a 'new existentialism'. A large section of the book is devoted to show that the American sociologists and the European existentialist thinkers are talking about exactly the same thing. The section examining the writings of Sartre and Camus is a brilliant essay in exposition. But both Sartre and Camus came to a dead-end many years ago, and have almost admitted defeat in their more recent writings. This dead-end is clearly shown, and a question is asked: Where did they go wrong? The answer suggested is, that they lacked the imaginative power to progress beyond reasoning; that is to say, they lacked the 'prehensiveness power' to reduce the facts sufficiently to get beyond them.

The Age of Defeat ends with a postscript in which it is stated: '... the fact that Victorian optimism was premature is no final argument against optimism. It is only the indication of a need for a more determined realism.' This more determined realism can be defined as the central aim of all Colin Wilson's writing. If a general programme could be attached, it could be labelled 'analytical realism'. For analysis is the most basic factor in the

work of Colin Wilson; it is clearly apparent in everything by him that I have read—in the stories and plays as well as essays and journals. His final criticism of modern English analytical philosophy is that it is not analytical enough, and certainly not serious enough. It has become a kind of game. In his *Declaration* essay, 'Beyond the Outsider', he comments: 'The philosophers who have devoted their lives to these games should not be classified with Plato and Goethe, but with W. G. Grace, Alex James and Henry Cotton.'

'RITUAL IN THE DARK'

ALTHOUGH *The Age of Defeat* was published several months before *Ritual in the Dark*, it was written when the novel was almost completed. *Ritual* is the logical continuation of *Religion and the Rebel*, the attempt to deepen its conclusions and extend its notion of existence-philosophy.

The first version of *Ritual* was begun in 1949, before Colin went into the R.A.F., and travelled with him to France. Because it passed through so many metamorphoses, it may be worth tracing its development from this early version.

Ritual began as a short story about a man who murders a prostitute; its original title was *Symphonic Variations*. The subject of the story was frustration, and the idea that a man who is completely inactive can have no identity; his 'identity' can be discovered by himself only in action. Through all its transformations, this has remained the basic theme of *Ritual*. In the original story, Sorme is the murderer, who kills a prostitute as an expression of his disgust at the meaningless of life. He feels that the world is inscrutable, giving no clues to its laws of good and evil, rather like Eddington's picture of the final inscrutability of nature:

*For I was thinking of a plan
To dye one's whiskers green
Then always use so large a fan
That they could not be seen.*

Sorme hopes that, by committing a 'definitive act', he will have lifted his life permanently—for better or worse—above this sense of *not having started*. In fact, the murder is the last act in a complete breakdown with hallucinations; in a dream he sees an old man who assures him that he is not real, that nothing

is real. At the end of the story he attempts to commit suicide, but his stomach rejects the poison; after vomiting he is left staring at the wall, aware that life is still inscrutable; his actions have changed nothing.

The most important point in the story is a speech made by Sorme to a girl to whom he confesses the murder. He speaks of a strange weight inside him, a lump of unexpressed emotion that he can find no way of releasing. He speaks of it as being like a child wanting to be born; but something prevents its birth; at last it begins to come away in pieces, a hand or a leg at a time. The speech probably expresses Colin Wilson's own emotional state at the time of writing the story; it certainly expresses the disgust he had come to feel at the 'cumulative ignobility' of being a civil servant, and doubting his final ability to escape to some more meaningful way of life.

After completing the story, Colin decided to turn it into a full-length novel. To emphasise the sense of being trapped in unreality, he now made it doubtful whether Sorme had really committed the murder, or whether he only imagines he has committed it. At the time of writing the new version, Colin was reading a great deal of Pirandello, and was impressed by Pirandello's way of suggesting that truth is relative. In *Così è se vi pare*, for example, the audience is left in doubt as to which of the characters is mad and which is sane; Pirandello tries to imply that no one can know. Colin found this unsatisfactory; in the situation posited by Pirandello, one of the characters would quite definitely be mad, and it would be possible to determine which, even though the audience is not let into the secret. The completely relative nature of truth could be better demonstrated in a novel in which everything is seen through the eyes of a man suffering from delusions.

Unfortunately for this early version of *Ritual*, the technical problems were immense. The essence of the novel was the idea that when the world is not surveyed through a curtain of action, it appears to be meaningless. So everything depended on *having nothing happen*. At this point, the novel was given the title *Things Do Not Happen*. But a novel in which nothing happens is hardly satisfactory (although Robbe-Grillet has since attempted something of the sort). Sorme sat in his room, took a walk in the local cemetery (based on the cemetery at East Finchley), sat in cafés drinking tea, talked with friends with whom he felt no

sense of contact. The technique consisted in emphasising Sorme's sense of having no contact with the world; this is increased by the continual emotional self-delusion practised by most people with whom he comes into contact. It is present, for example, in the palpably untrue or sentimental inscriptions on the gravestones in the cemetery. Sorme has a hard, dry sense of reality, but it brings him no pleasure; only freedom from the illusions under which others labour. He studies Saint John of the Cross, who describes this sense of complete emotional suspension as the first stage of the way to sainthood—it is the 'dark night of the soul'. Unfortunately, his contact with a Catholic priest is no more satisfactory; he feels that the man's faith is based on illusions, although he may be closer to reality than some of Sorme's other contacts. And still somewhere in the background, there are echoes of murder that arouse a response in Sorme; he broods on Gauguin's comment: 'Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge.'

Woven into the basis of the story, even at this early stage, were references to Nijinsky. In reading about Nijinsky, Colin had come to feel that the dancer is the most extraordinary example of the modern 'self-division'. A half of him was god-like; when he danced, he was in contact with 'the power-house'. But in his everyday affairs, he was inarticulate, bullied by Diaghileff, and regarded with faint contempt by the 'intellectuals' in the company. Often, he identified himself with Christ. Colin writes: 'I was told that some of his jumps defied gravity, like Christ's feat of walking on water. Another man who seemed to me to possess the same kind of power was Grigory Rasputin, and certain stories told of him attest his ability to perform miracles. Unlike Nijinsky, Rasputin experienced no self-division; he was betrayed from outside, not from within. Nijinsky and Rasputin were basic to the symbolism of the story; they were hints of the man-god.'

But writing a novel without a plot proved difficult, and Colin's discovery of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* made a considerable difference. The *Book of the Dead* was compiled by Budge from funeral texts on the walls of pyramids. The Egyptians believed that the soul of the dead man takes the day of his death and the whole of the following night to reach the Egyptian underworld, Amentet. In the course of this journey, he meets with many perils—various monsters, vampire worms,

evil spirits, etc. The prayers of the *Book of the Dead* were charms, to be repeated by the 'soul' to defend it against these perils. (The procedure in the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* is, of course, very similar, expect that the 'perils' are delusions of the soul entangled in Maya.) The dead man is known in the texts as 'the scribe Ani' or 'Nebsemi', and he frequently identifies himself with the god Horus or Ra to escape the demons.

Colin found in this scheme a possible structure for his own novel; he regarded it as a kind of omen when he discovered that one of the titles of the *Book of the Dead* is *Ritual of the Dead*, one of the early titles of the 'Sorme-book'. (*Ritual* is referred to consistently in journals as 'the Sorme book'.) Sorme is also travelling through a kind of night—the dark night of the soul; his hero Nijinsky, like the scribe Ani, had repeated, 'I am God, I am God.' The symbolism was beginning to accumulate; he was studying *Ulysses* and James's collected prefaces to try to find the clue that would help to unify the book. He writes: 'It seemed to me that the novel has not even begun. With his preface (*The Art of the Novel*) James did for the novel what Newton did for physics with his *Principia*—and yet people go on writing the same old-fashioned, rule-of-thumb novels as if James had never existed. What I wanted to do was perhaps absurdly over-ambitious; I wanted to produce a Dostoevskian novel, using the techniques made available by Joyce and James.'

In order to give the novel a plot, the story about the seduction of the Jehovah's Witness was utilised; so was an episode from the earlier *Ritual of the Dead* about a painter who feels an inexpressible desire for his ten-year-old model. In the story *The Mirror*, one of the characters had said: 'There is often no way of satisfying the appetite for certain kinds of beauty. When I first saw the Lake of Geneva from a hilltop, it aroused an inexpressible agony, for I knew its beauty was untouchable. I could not feel it by swimming in the lake or by drinking its water; it was a desire with no real object.' This is still the most important theme of *Ritual in the Dark*; Glasp's agony comes from his realisation that the feeling aroused in him by Christine is not a physical desire, and cannot therefore be assuaged in the normal way.

But most important of all was the reflection of this theme in Sorme's sexual explorations. In a letter about *Ritual*, Colin wrote:

'No man has ever experienced sex in its purity. The violence of sexual desire has nothing to do with having an affair with a woman, taking her to bed. It is instantaneous. In a love affair, the personalities make contact, and the love-making is essentially personal. Turner expressed this when he wrote in *Epithalamium*:

*Can the lover share his soul
Or the mistress show her mind;
Can the body beauty share
Or lust satisfaction find? . . .*

*Marriage is but keeping house
Sharing food and company,
What has this to do with love
Or the body's beauty? . . .*

*I have stared upon a dawn
And trembled like a man in love,
A man in love I was, and I
Could not speak and could not move.*

'It might seem, therefore, that a man could attain that violent, instantaneous contact ("can lust satisfaction find") in lust-murder or necrophilia, where the personality of the woman becomes unimportant. . . . The question, of course, is why on earth should anyone want this kind of "purity of violence"? My answer, I think, would be that the sexual orgasm is the nearest that most men ever come to a unifying vision of the world, to the affirmation of the saint. Sorme is most impressed by the *impersonality* of sex on the occasion when he fails to make love to a communist tart he is sleeping with; he says: "She reminded me of mathematics." This is why he comes to excuse Nunne's crimes; he feels that perhaps Nunne is simply a reflection of himself, with the courage to carry his theorising into action.'

Sorme is obsessed by a feeling of the ambiguity of reality; in its early version, the novel simply documented a series of his contacts with people who seem to be unaware of this ambiguity, who all feel that the world is a simple and straightforward place (as Broadbent does in *John Bull's Other Island*). There are various degrees of self-delusion, ranging from the priest's insight into human weakness, to Miss Quincey's simple belief in a future

heaven on earth—a belief which she is too intelligent to accept wholly.

I asked Colin why he had chosen the Jehovah's Witnesses. Miss Quincey would seem far more plausible as a Catholic or even a Methodist. His reply was: 'It seems to me that there is one valuable and true element in their beliefs; they hold that *this world* will become Paradise after the Last Judgement. This is a curiously mystical belief for such a literal-minded sect, and it corresponds with the views held by Traherne, Dostoevsky and Blake. Life is actually good; the world *is* heaven; hell is man's subjective states. If we were freed from delusion, we would know that men are gods and the earth is paradise. It is because the life-current that flows through us is so low that we live in misery and boredom. But there *must* be some way to increase the current.'

From its very earliest versions, the style of *Ritual* is deliberately flat, two-dimensional. This was also the reason for excluding inverted commas. Shaw has defined style as 'effectiveness of assertion', and remarked, 'He who has nothing to assert has no style.' In the earlier versions of *Ritual*, Colin was in revolt against his own early style (borrowed from Poe) and against tortuous psychological language—a heritage of James. His story of how this change first came about is amusing and worth quoting:

'I was asked to read a story to the Vaughan Literary Society (Leicester) when I was seventeen; my friend Alan Bates was also asked to read a story. He produced some work in which a pianist falls asleep at his piano as he reads a score of Chopin, and has a dream in which he becomes Chopin, sitting in George Sands's house. I decided to use the same theme, and turn it into a psychological study of "vision" in the manner of James's story, *The Great Good Place*. The evening was a fiasco. Alan read his story first, then I read mine; everyone was prodigiously bored, and started up conversations before I'd finished. Afterwards, I heard a woman friend of mine describing it to another girl: "Oh it was *ever so* soulful—all about a garden or something. . . ." I went home in a miserable rage, feeling humiliated and sick of my own work. I started to read Dostoevsky's *Possessed* again; the savagery of his portraits of Stephan Trofimovitch and Varvara Petrovna gave me a feeling of relief; it was the way I felt about the Vaughan Lit. Soc. Then I started

to write a sort of fantasy in the manner of the Night Town scene in *Ulysses*, in which I tried to obtain an effect of irony by contrasting the trivial with the violent and horrible. From that time onward, I dropped the "Jamesian" style and tried to write flatly, without charm, with an undercurrent of violence.'

A further elaboration of this manner was the determination to do without the usual novelist's devices of switching from character to character and giving the reader 'inside information' on what his characters are thinking. Instead, Sorme was treated as if he were a camera with a built-in tape-recorder; nothing is observed except what he could have observed. (Joyce takes this technique to its logical extreme in the Aeolus chapter of *Ulysses*—in the newspaper office.) In later versions of the novel, however, this extreme rigour was abandoned, and the 'narrator' occasionally comments on Sorme's feelings.

Little by little, sub-plots were introduced into *Ritual* to try to carry the 'metaphysics'. The close adherence to the scheme of *The Book of the Dead* was dropped, although its essentials were kept. The final effect of this, as Colin admits, was to give the novel far more plot than it needed. There are half a dozen themes; the relation with Nunne, with Miss Quincey, with Caroline, with Glasp, with the priest, and with the old man in the room above (introduced for comic relief). There is also, of course, Sorme's 'relations with himself'—and these were primarily the reason for abandoning the 'camera' scheme of writing; to describe such episodes as Sorme's 'vastation' in the basement flat, his visions of affirmation on the roof of the house, the narrator *has* to take over, unless the episode is restricted to Sorme's thoughts (which might fairly be 'picked-up' by the tape-recorder).

A rather late—but nevertheless important—influence on *Ritual in the Dark* was Berg's opera *Wozzeck*. For the greater part of the opera—a pathetic story of a soldier who murders his mistress and then commits suicide—Berg remains completely detached. Other composers—like Puccini—allowed the audience to feel their own emotions, to feel the composer's pity for Butterfly or Liu. Berg, with his charmless atonal music, presents the irony and tragedy with no personal involvement. His involvement only occurs at the end of the opera, in the final interlude in the key of D flat, in which the composer's pity for Wozzeck and Marie can suddenly be felt. (This is the only part

of the opera with a definite key.) Colin was struck by the method—conveying violence and horror in an 'alien' language, free of the emotional overtones that have slipped into ordinary language through imprecise use. He spent a great deal of time brooding on the possibility of a literary counterpart to the style of *Wozzeck*. The result of this study was a careful revision of the novel, removing any words that seemed tinged by emotion, attempting to produce a 'flat surface', broken only by the events, not by the author's intervention.

But the centre of the dialectic in *Ritual* is the problem of sex. One reviewer referred to Sorme as 'the usual promiscuous young ruffian', but there is more than ordinary promiscuity in Sorme's relations with Caroline and Gertrude. Just as, in the earliest version of *Ritual*, Sorme committed murder to try to produce in himself a certain sense of having broken the laws of nature, so in the later version, he seduces both the aunt and her niece as an experiment in immorality. In fact, the result puzzles him. He believes himself completely unattached to Caroline, and yet suddenly feels himself to be in love with her when he goes into her bedroom. After a night with Gertrude, he feels in love with her, and confesses to her about Caroline. The problem seems to be solved; it is Gertrude he is really in love with. Then, at the end of the book, Caroline rings him, and he realises that things cannot be simplified so easily; the emotion he feels for Gertrude is not exclusive; he can also feel it for Caroline; it is even remotely possible that he may come to feel it for the child Christine (with whom he is preparing to embark on a new 'experiment' at the end of the book). As the novel ends, he realises that the complexity must be accepted; it is not like a mathematical equation that can be reduced to simplicity by allowing some of the elements to cancel themselves out. The contradiction might be resolved if Sorme reaches an altogether higher level, if he attains some new maturity; but on the level upon which he lives in the book, there is no simple answer, and certainly no solution in simply choosing Miss Quincey or Caroline.

Finally and most fundamentally, *Ritual* is a *Bildungsroman*, an attempt to trace a certain moral evolution in its central character. This, in a way, might have been expected from Colin Wilson, considering the importance he attributes to the *Bildungsroman* as a form in his 'philosophical books'. In *Religion*

and the Rebel he writes: 'In the twentieth century, the only serious form of literary art is the Bildungsroman'. What is emphasised in *Ritual* is the importance of the idea of maturity, of education in the processes of living. Sorme, who began as a murderer with no sense of values, achieves one certainty in the course of his involvement with Nunne and Gertrude: that maturity is an ultimate value. 'Ripeness is all.' The world is inscrutable and unchanging; only man's perception of it changes as he matures.

This leads to an important observation on *Ritual* that, as far as I know, has been noted by only one critic. P. N. Furbank wrote in *The Listener*: 'One expects a prophet of anti-humanism to be filled with agony and pessimism in the face of everyday futility; but what, in fact, shines out in this book is a buoyant Edwardian optimism'. In fact, this is precisely what distinguishes Colin Wilson from the majority of his contemporaries. Many reviewers of *The Outsider* spoke of it as a typically gloomy book, full of suicide, madness and despair. Certainly, he is in every way aware of the contemporary material utilised by Kafka, Eliot, Joyce. His work is an attempt to fashion a philosophy of optimism from the material of 'contemporary chaos'. 'The stupidest literary heresy of our time', he writes, 'is the belief that Shaw's optimism has been superseded by the more realistic vision of Eliot, Joyce and the rest. (Pound stated this in a particularly silly article on Joyce and Flaubert's *Pecuchet*.) In fact, Shaw's vision is a great deal deeper and wider than that of any contemporary pessimist. I see my problem as this: to start from Eliot's "sense of his age", to take into account everything that he took into account, and still to finish with an overwhelmingly affirmative vision.'

19

STUDIO CONVERSATIONS

COLIN WILSON is an ideal subject for a sculptor, and I was delighted when he came and sat for me while I modelled a life-sized bust of him. During the first sitting he read *Famous Trials* by Lord Birkenhead. I asked him why he had selected that book from the thousands of volumes in my library, and he answered that he was particularly interested in crime and criminals. In fact, he had made a detailed study of Jack-the-Ripper, and had written a novel based upon the crimes of the unknown and mysterious murderer who terrorised London towards the end of the nineteenth century. He thought this novel, titled *Ritual in the Dark*, if ever it were published, would be an earthquake in the literary world.

‘How did you come to be interested in Jack-the-Ripper more than in some of the other notorious murderers of history?’

‘Because for me he symbolises the dark forces of the irrational, before they learn to adjust themselves beyond revolt. That is to say, he was a kind of artist in embryo—though of a pretty disgusting kind.

‘I have been familiar with the story of Jack-the-Ripper since I was ten when one of my relatives told me much about him. It is not true that I am related to Jack-the-Ripper, because his identity is unknown, although there are suspicions that he was a medical man, plus a religious crank. The story of my being related to him went the rounds of the Cambridge colleges, much to my amusement and disgust, and that just shows that one must be very careful what one says in Cambridge, where they seem to lack a sense of grim humour. Some fool of an undergraduate asked me if I was related, and I gravely replied that he was my great uncle. I thought no more about it until I saw in print that some of Jack’s blood was flowing through my veins.’

'Have you made a detailed scientific study of the Ripper and his murders?'

'I daresay I have made as detailed a study as anyone could. I have been to all the spots where the murders were committed. In fact, I have made several tours. You must remember that the area has altered considerably since the Ripper days, mainly due to destruction in two world wars, particularly the Second, when whole streets were wiped out. I have spent days at the British Museum reading the newspaper accounts at the time of the "reign of terror". The East End was much more squalid then than now. There was the Swedish woman who had her throat cut one Saturday night, quite clearly a ritual murder, and not just a taking of life for no reason whatsoever. Once the Ripper had begun his ritual murders, he had to continue to fulfil what he conceived to be his mission.'

'Many books have been written on the Ripper murders,' I said. 'Various theories have been propounded about why the murders were committed and the type of man who performed this bloody ritual in the dark. Have you read them, and, if so, have you formed any theories?'

'I think I've read all the important books on the subject,' replied Colin. 'I'm full of ideas and theories, which I hope to publish one day either in fictional form, or in an *Encyclopaedia of Murder*. There were six Whitechapel murders in all, and I believe them to have been the work of a quietly spoken and cultured sadist, a Dr. Jekyll if you like. No doubt the most spectacular was of the East End prostitute whose body was cut into small pieces, and placed about the room to form a pattern. Jack-the-Ripper was an anti-hero type, and he has had several followers determined to become even bigger heroes. Remember the French Ripper, Joseph Vacher, who six years after our own Ripper murders disposed of fourteen people and earned the title of the Murder King? Then there was Peter Kurten of Dusseldorf who, in 1927, horrified not only Germany but the whole of Europe with his sadistic crimes. In 1941 a new kind of Ripper struck in the London blitz darkness, and Gordon Cummins after a week of women murders was caught. Had he not left the clue of his gas-mask which led to his arrest, we might have had a series of murders worse than the original Ripper.'

'You mentioned an *Encyclopaedia of Murder*. Do you think such a work is necessary? I can understand the need for an

encyclopaedia on many subjects such as music, poetry, art, etc., but one on murder seems quite unnecessary. It will really amount to a catalogue of evils!’

‘Looked at in that way, yes. But such an encyclopaedia would be of value to every police officer, to every criminologist, every psychologist and psychiatrist. There have been so many sadistic murders, and there is such an increase in sex crimes, that it’s time someone showed the general pattern, for the purpose of arriving at basic causes, and finding a remedy. An *Encyclopaedia of Murder*, if properly prepared, would list the most important murders in the Western world, analyse their causes. If possible, all future murderers should be psycho-analysed. The results should provide first-class material for the holder of the Chair in Criminology at Cambridge, and for students everywhere.’

‘You wrote to me that you want to use murder to illustrate your ideas of existentialism.’

‘That’s correct, Sidney. Just as we must treat life scientifically, so I believe that we should likewise treat murder. There is a dreadful gap in the life of the twentieth century, or, I might express it in another way, and say there is a bottomless pit in the landscape to which some are naturally attracted, and to which some are drawn by a series of fortuitous circumstances, while others just accidentally stumble into it and are lost for ever.’

Throughout this discussion on the Jack-the-Ripper murders, I was busily modelling Colin, who sat fidgetting on the ‘throne’, reading the Birkenhead book, and answering my questions. Then I asked him to hold a certain pose for three or four minutes, and to keep silent while I caught the pose. He sat like a piece of marble, his complete stillness and pale skin giving the marble statue effect. He never flickered an eyelid. When I released him from the pose, he talked to me about his mother, Annetta, whom I had met in Leicester, and to whom I was greatly attracted with her deep-brown eyes, her handsome features—passed on to Colin—and her natural intelligence, very much above the average wife and mother.

‘As small boys,’ Colin said, ‘we were very fond of her. I found myself, although I didn’t fully realise it until later, romantically fond of my mother. She had the romantic aura. Her people were connected with the stage, and the artistic strain in her was pronounced. I matured early, and my mother encouraged us to

tell her anything that we heard about sex, the idea being to correct any false impressions we might form. I told her everything, including dirty stories I heard from lads in the street. In retrospect, some of the things I told her would be considered shocking. Nevertheless, this complete candour on both sides kept me clear of a lot of silly notions which can be so harmful to boys on the verge of adolescence. It also led to the most perfect frankness between us, with no inhibitions whatsoever. There is nothing I dare not tell my mother, and on her side, there's nothing she can't mention to me.'

'I suppose you drew closer to your mother as you grew older?'

'On the contrary, I didn't,' Colin answered, much to my surprise. 'You see, Sidney, while we were emotionally much akin, in the sphere of the intellect we were wide apart, and the gap tended to widen with the years. When I began to develop my own ideas and expound them, my mother was not sympathetic, just because she couldn't understand. She changed completely. I suppose most mothers dislike losing their hold on their children, even if there's no element of fear regarding the loss of economic support. It is easy to understand at this distance of time how she who had put me first in her life, and discussed with me her many problems and difficulties, was afraid of losing her one great contact with the world.'

'In this new phase of non-stop reading and enthusiasm for ideas, there were times when she aroused me to furious anger. For instance, when in my immature way I first tried to express my philosophical ideas to her, hoping that she would reciprocate and co-operate, she told me that I was crazy, and this led to one of the biggest quarrels we have ever had. I felt frustrated, because I failed to enlist her sympathies, and could not get her to understand what I was aiming at. There came a time when there was no communication between us, and that was a hard blow after our complete freedom of expression. She grew critical without rhyme or reason. If I attempted to argue, she would give vent to an irresponsible streak and treat me like a child, instead of a growing teenager. Yet she would listen to my short stories when I read them to her, and express her opinions on them.'

'But how about now that you are well-known, and an established author?'

'Things are different, I suppose. But not just because I'm the

author of a best-seller. I'm a grown man, married, with a child. I've done much these last few years to interest my mother in what interests me. I've encouraged her to read some decent books, and she is reading at the rate of three a week, often very serious books, and she is able to understand their drift and to discuss them intelligently. This means that she is now better able to appreciate my own writings and to display an intelligent sympathy and interest in my work and ideas. Ever since I left home I have always kept in daily touch with her. I must have written her hundreds upon hundreds of long letters, telling her of my experiences. If she has kept them, they should make an interesting volume of adventures in various parts of England and the Continent, and they tell the story of the evolution of my ideas like a Bildungsroman. As I have often said, thinking is not enough. Too many thinkers and too few doers can render a community sterile and futile. The world of thought ought to lead to the world of action, although I don't suppose I'm a good example.'

'I have an idea, Colin, that you had an unusual grandmother! In what way was she unusual? The conventional granny is a child-spoiler!'

'I've told you how close I was to my mother; I was even closer to my grandmother on my mother's side. She had sympathy and imagination and seemed to know my difficulties. The dear soul used to let me spend the whole of Saturday and Sunday at her house when I wrote and drank pots of tea. She gave me my meals, and the conditions were ideal for serious writing: no interruptions, complete freedom, endless encouragement. It was there that I wrote my first play. It was there, too, where I wrote my first critical book, *The Quintessence of Shavianism*, running to ten thousand words. I was sixteen at the time, and thought I had performed a good job of work. My grandmother was proud, and so was I, for I felt that at last I had created something.'

I asked Colin to remain silent, and to keep perfectly still while I modelled his mouth. His mouth and lips have a distinctive character of their own, and play a considerable part in his facial expression. The lips and chin suggest warm humanity, generosity and will-power. Then he resumed the conversation, this time about his father.

'There isn't a great deal I can say about my father. I can well understand that I get many of my "Outsider" tendencies

from him. He's always wanted to be free and to roam around. He has worked tremendously hard ever since he was married twenty-five years ago. At the age of nine I developed quite an appetite for reading, and I was ever asking for books, books, books. My father didn't like this phase of my career, and I never knew why. Then he grouched and grumbled when I passed from the elementary school to the Gateway Technical School at eleven, probably thinking that I would be that much longer before going out to work and earning some money. On leaving the Gateway School, he was bitterly disappointed that I didn't use my education to get good job where I didn't have to take my coat off. I entered the civil service, and he was happy that I would have a good post for life, with a decent pension. His disappointment when I left was intense, and that disappointment persisted until the publication of *The Outsider* when it brought me money and a degree of fame. He saw then what I had often told him—that I couldn't settle down to the ordinary type of office job and must follow some urge inside me to write and become an author, which at the time he thought was nothing but bosh. I think he now feels differently. In fact, I'm afraid he boasts a bit about me to his friends. And I'd rather have it that way than the other.'

I offered Colin a cigarette. Although I am a non-smoker I sometimes have a supply for visitors. He declined, saying that he had never smoked, although his mother had told him that he could. 'She used to get me to light her cigarette while she washed the clothes, and smoke it until she was ready. I have never had any incentive to smoke because I have been too much occupied. I remember that I rather despised the tough-necks round our way who started to smoke properly at ten, and my refusal to smoke was just another way of trying to be different from the rest.'

'Did you mix with other boys when you were about twelve?'

'In my early teens, I didn't mix much with lads of my own age—partly because I didn't know anybody else interested in chemistry. I had a friend named George Baxter, and we used to go for long cycle rides on Sunday—I used Grandad's bike. Then I got myself a girl-friend—I was thirteen—and my shell of puritanism began to crack. I didn't like to admit it, but she excited me horribly. But she got tired of my temperament and threw me over for a friend of mine—the boy I took her from in the first

place. Then I locked myself in my bedroom for several years and churned out a few million words. My mind thought about nothing but science, and my body thought about nothing but sex, so I spent my time between Einstein and auto-eroticism. This latter never gave me "guilt" feelings—I felt it was natural enough.'

Here followed a welcome period of silence because I was modelling the ears, which, for me, demand the utmost concentration. Ears are difficult in themselves, and difficult in relation to the rest of the head. Unless they are accurately sited and correctly modelled, the whole portrait looks unreal, especially if the ears stand out and are clearly seen in a front view of the face.

When Colin said he envied me my ability to work with my hands with such apparent ease, I asked him if he worked with his hands, apart from tapping on a typewriter? He said that he could neither paint nor sculpt. If compelled, he could do practical things, such as re-bind books, which was a boyhood hobby. 'I suppose I could wire a house for electricity, and if I lived on a desert island I could build a house and make the furniture for it. I've always felt that one must be prepared to be practical in this way. I did once want to paint when first I discovered painting, but I never got far with it.'

I said to Colin, as I was modelling the fine lank of hair that falls slantwise over the right side of his high forehead: 'You are now twenty-five, and the world is at your feet. Although you are so young, is there anything you regret? And where do you hope to stand when you are fifty, seventy-five, a hundred?'

Colin smiled. 'I wish you wouldn't use phrases like "world at your feet". I can say I regret relationships where I get deeply involved, and I suppose the answer to that is, not to get deeply involved? By way of example, I was regretting my first girl-friend a month after I'd slept with her, because she was so possessive. But these regrets don't count for much alongside the things that are really important, and things that have to be done, no matter how much you would like to sidetrack yourself with other pleasures. I tend to get involved with people who have really nothing to give me, but who seem to derive pleasure from knowing me. Perhaps they are not aware of it, but they are exhausting people. They appear to devitalise me. I have been warned about this form of vampirism—weaklings sustaining themselves on the vital-

ity of the very young. You ask me where I hope to stand at fifty, that is, twenty-five years from now? I hope then to be reaching the peak of curiosity and ambition. By seventy-five or eighty, that is, by about the year 2010, I should be writing my best works. By a hundred, I'd like to be the legendary old eagle that Yeats wanted to be. I intend to study Greek and Sanscrit more fully when I have the time, and I should like to develop into a good mathematician before I'm fifty. But I would also like to continue to have a deep interest in poetry and music. I cannot say precisely where I should like to stand. I only know this, that I sometimes feel my possibilities to be boundless.'

'And what would you like to be?'

'To be a saint, and to live to be three hundred. I would also like to become a major dramatist and novelist, comparable to Dostoevsky, and to be a millionaire and have several daughters.'

Colin had occupied the 'throne' for a long time, and we broke off for a rest and a cup of tea. He stretched his long legs, which might have been the legs of a ballet dancer if one of his early aims had been realised; and he stretched his long arms and loosened his muscles. Next he wiped his glasses and then closely inspected the modelling so far, still a long way from completion. 'Magnificent!' he exclaimed dramatically. After a few moments' silence while contemplating the clay figure, he said: 'Surely I'm not as handsome as that?' He examined the bust from several angles and was delighted at the representation of himself. 'I like it because, among other things, it makes me resemble Lawrence of Arabia, whom I admire very much. He's a great hero of mine.' Viewing the bust from the far corner of the studio, Colin observed with a grin: 'If this bust is publicly exhibited I'll have the young ladies running after me, and you must accept the blame if I yield to temptation.' We had several cups of tea, and a dish of pastries, and discussed Van Gogh, whose paintings, Colin declared, had the 'Outsider' characteristics, and that he was an 'Outsider' who had happened to choose painting as his special medium of expression.

Colin chose another book, this time *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the unexpurgated edition. He said he would like to quote from it in his forthcoming book, *Religion and the Rebel*. He wished to borrow it, and did. He was struck by a paragraph after a long chapter dealing with the sexual intimacy between Constance Chatterley and her gamekeeper, in which Lawrence describes her hurrying

away: 'As she ran home in the twilight, the world seemed a dream; the trees in the park seemed bulging and surging at anchor on a tide, and the heave of the slope to the house was alive.' Colin Wilson thought that paragraph denoted how sexual ecstasy had altered her vision of the world, that the fulfilment of her natural instinct had transformed the world for her.

I asked Colin where he placed D. H. Lawrence in contemporary literature. Was he a major force, and would his influence be felt down the centuries over a wide field?

'Frankly, Sidney, although you are a Lawrence admirer, I can only regard him as a second-rater, and not a very high one at that. He had his great moments, but on the whole he was trivial-minded, obsessed with triviality, and he had a silly little personality from which he never tried to escape. Read any biography of Lawrence, and you will find throughout evidences of a completely self-centred, petty-minded man who had to be coaxed by passionate women, unable to resist the attraction of his 'big blue eyes', or be gently persuaded by he-men to put aside his feeding-bottle and turn to a diet of solids. He wasn't a man of heroic proportions, and he represented STAGNATION. There are some who regard Lawrence as greater than Shaw. Of course, they just don't compare. Shaw is immortal! Lawrence will be almost, if not completely, forgotten by the year A.D. 2000. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* may survive as a museum piece, and as evidence of the intellectual and moral cowardice of our times. You know as well as I do that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was the monument to Lawrence's sexual impotence. He was enraged at not being able to find physical fulfilment through Frieda, a magnificent woman by all accounts, physically and mentally, and he wrote *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as the expression of that rage. Had he not been a writer, or a painter, he might have been a murderer. I can understand his feeling, or lack of feeling, especially in the face of his wife's healthy sexual demands. She suffered agonies in this failure of D. H. to respond; she did not blame him; she gave him her sympathy and understanding. Yet her deepest instincts cried aloud, and they cried uselessly, because the creative sexual fire had died out, leaving cold ashes as a reminder of warmer days. I hope I'm not appearing to blame Lawrence for this physical tragedy. I'm stating the facts. What Lawrence missed in the sphere of the passion, he partly realised through the intellect,

when he gave the detailed account of the love-affair between Lady Chatterley and the gamekeeper. He then mentally relived the exquisite occasions he had spent with Frieda, and the book can be regarded as a classic example of vicarious pleasure. That is why *Lady Chatterley's Lover* must be considered as a work of art, and not as a grand example of pornography. Frank Harris was the supreme pornographer of the twentieth century, for he revelled in his "revelations" and joyfully accepted the cheques. It is inconceivable, whatever else may be said against D. H. Lawrence, that he wrote *Lady Chatterley's Lover* with any thought of L.S.D. For all his pettiness, Lawrence was not a mercenary, but he was a strident Puritan. Most of his novels have many folk who are tiresome with their brainless meanderings and lack of intensity of purpose. I have had my fill of Lawrence. I was never drugged by his puerile prosiness and lamentable lambasting—the village idiot banging his head against the village pump! All his talk about the "dark mystery of sex" was because, as we have seen, that he himself had little or no sex, and the poor fellow in his own pathetic way was attempting to find an element of compensation. He knew he had been cheated, and he sought to have his revenge.*

* Did I really express these views on Lawrence in 1956? They now seem to me very shallow. I must repeat, however, that I have always disliked Lawrence's literary personality. It seems to me that, in spite of his undoubted greatness as a writer, he was also a mean little man who was far too involved in his own personality. Consequently, I have never been able to read his work with any enjoyment. And yet I have all his books on my shelf, and have read most of them. (Some, like the *Studies in Classic American Literature* and *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, several times.) My favourite work by Lawrence is a story called *Love Among the Haystacks*, which seems to me to have all his virtues—love of the countryside, an intense feeling for freedom—and none of his usual faults—meanness, egoism, ultimate pessimism. I suppose my sympathy for him has increased since the stiff, up-hill struggle after the publication of my first book. Realising the odds he fought against—neglect and poverty—I can admire him more as a tough fighter who gave very little ground. To have created ten novels, five 'general' books and some great poetry, in spite of the unending malice of enemies, is a major achievement. Yet the 'mentors of my teens were Flaubert, James, Eliot and Joyce; so when I actually try reading one of his novels, I am irritated by its artistic sloppiness and by the amount of personal feeling—malice and egoism—he allowed to creep in. I can feel a warm sympathy and admiration for Lawrence provided I do not make the mistake of reading his work. For just as, no matter how much I disagree with Shaw, his work charms me into speechless admiration, so, no matter how much I agree with Lawrence, his work jars me into flinging the book across the room.—C. W.

I reminded Colin that he had written *The Quintessence of Shavianism* at sixteen. If he had absorbed so much of Shaw at that age, when did he begin reading his works?

'I can't pinpoint an exact date, but I must have been about ten when I first began to notice Shaw's name in the newspapers, and in books I was then reading. You mention him several times in your first book, *Sunlight on the Foothills*.

'When I heard *Man and Superman* on the radio, I became immediately fascinated, for here was a man with a message that struck a responsive chord. His outlook seemed to be my outlook. He was writing what I was thinking. I borrowed some of his plays, which I read without fully understanding them. Yet I had a sufficient background of knowledge to find them interesting, and to give me a desire to re-read them. I began to see that they were amusing as well as intellectually stimulating. This was a fresh experience and new vistas were opening out for me. Whenever I picked up a Shaw book, I had the feeling of entering upon a voyage of discovery. I attended lectures on Shaw, and never lost an opportunity of seeing his plays. If I met anyone who had personal knowledge of Shaw, I drained him dry with my questions concerning the Master. There can be no doubt that this discovery of George Bernard Shaw was one of the most exciting periods of my life. I became so absorbed in Shaw, and what he represented, that I had no interest in the boys of my own age. I seemed to have matured all at once. Hence, what interested other boys seemed to me to be childish. I not only felt like a grown-up person, but I was happier in the company of my seniors than those of my generation. It is not for me to say whether this was a healthy development, but looking back, I would not have had it otherwise. I can only think that this experience might be paralleled with that of the youth who has seen the "light", who has been converted, and who spends much of his time in prayer and reading the Bible; an adolescent revolution! I began to live in a Shaw atmosphere, and he was ever in my thoughts. I memorised many of his statements and sayings, and was constantly repeating them. I can quote Shaw endlessly these days in consequence. This preoccupation with Shaw, some people would say, was an obsession. Perhaps it was; I was so full of Shaw that I wrote a play about him and gave it the title of *The Reformer*. Looking at it now, I can see that it was a very juvenile effort,

and I would not let anyone read it. One day the play may have value as my only personal contact with Shaw.'

'I'm surprised, Colin, that you never met Shaw. He was alive when you were keenly interested in him, and I should have thought that you would have stepped out of your little council house in the suburbs of Leicester and hitch-hiked to Ayot St. Lawrence, and seen and talked to one whom you fervently admired as the "Master".'

'I often thought about trying to see him, but was sure he wouldn't let me in. What an experience! I can't say what my reactions would have been, but it's possible that I might have poured out a Niagara of words to conceal my nervousness, or I might have sat completely dumb while the "Master" talked. In that case, I'd have been the ideal listener: I would have carefully listened to every word, listened to the periods of silence and watched his features and noted their variations. Now you've mentioned it, I feel miserable at what I missed in not meeting G. B. S.'

'Didn't you write to him?'

'I did write him a ten-page letter in which I poured out my natural arrogance. I wish I had kept a copy. Talk about this side idolatry! It was the sort of letter that St. Paul would have written to Jesus if he'd been drunk. I never heard a word. I daresay Miss Patch read the letter, and considered it too much for him, and finally put it in the wastepaper basket!'

'Do you look upon yourself as Shaw's successor in the fullness of time?'

'Oh no. No one can succeed Shaw, in the sense of occupying his throne. He ruled over his own dominion; his entire creation. I shall rule over mine, small at the moment, but it will extend with the years. It's possible that I shall rise to the same height as Shaw, or go even higher. So far, Shaw is the greatest mind in Europe for the last four hundred years, and to have lived in his day and generation is an experience that's enough of a privilege for any of us.'

'I suppose your admiration for Shaw will not extend to modelling your life upon his in becoming a strict vegetarian, an uncompromising Socialist, grow a beard, enter public life, reform the alphabet, get lost on the Welsh mountains, barricade your doors against a daily invasion of visitors, refuse an earldom and die worth £300,000?'

'I'd hate to be just a Shaw imitator. Vegetarianism makes no appeal to me. I enjoy a slice off the joint, such as your wife Claire gave us today. I shall grow a beard when I'm too lazy to shave, or when I want to save money by not buying razor blades. I wouldn't want to enter public life because I'm much too interested in extending my own boundaries. Even a benevolent despot would have to assume the role of some sort of a schoolmaster, and I can think of nothing more boring. The idea of being influential, which I think the main reason for wanting to enter public life, doesn't attract me. I've always been certain that my influence will be of the kind of Plato's or the Buddha's. Social work would be drudgery by comparison. It would be almost as bad as entering the civil service. It's enough for one man to reform the alphabet; two on the job would mean no alphabet at all. Better stick to what we've got. I wouldn't wish to get lost anywhere in Wales. I don't mind getting lost in Cornwall, because that would give me the opportunity of living the life of a hermit in a cave and producing my best work, while the world searched for my dead body. As for barricading my door against visitors, I have had to do worse than that. I have had to flee and hide away in the remote countryside so that I could continue my serious writings. There would be no difficulty in refusing an earldom; my difficulty would be refusing the Crown of the Immortals. As I have planned to live three hundred years, I shall not be able to leave £300,000, because by that time inheritance will have been abolished. I shall spend all I get, just as I am doing at present.'

The conversation and the modelling was interrupted by a personal telephone call from Paris for Colin. He answered in excellent French, which reminded me that he had spent some considerable time in various parts of France. After five minutes, we walked round the lawn several times for exercise, and we spoke of our early days in Leicester. Returning to the studio, Colin referred to the telephone conversation, and said it was from a friend saying how much *The Outsider* was being read in France, and asking if he could go over and celebrate. He replied that he would within the next few weeks, if he could cut out some of his commitments. His diary was full of engagements for lectures, luncheons, dinners, parties and with people who wished to meet him for one reason or another. I commented upon his fluent French, and he said he was deeply interested in languages,

because every new word he acquired in any language increased his sense of power and self-mastery. He found French easy, but that probably arose from his comparatively long familiarity with it. When a boy he had a French pen-friend who came and stayed at Colin's house and French conversation was frequent. He had also studied Greek and Sanskrit, and intended making himself more proficient in those languages when he had time to spare. He could read Italian moderately well. He had mastered Finnish to the extent of being able to correspond regularly with a Finnish friend. He had bought a Chinese text-book, but had made little progress because the language was basically different from the West.

Was it a foolish question, I wonder, when I suddenly asked Colin if he ever prayed? I asked it because, while I was modelling him, I remembered *The Outsider* being blurbed as 'primarily about the need for a new religious attitude'.

'I don't pray,' replied Colin, 'and I haven't prayed since I turned atheist at thirteen. In my childhood I prayed intensely for long periods, and I'm sure that the prayers were a vehicle for my emotions, for I was an emotional kid, quickly excited by pity and terror. And although I was very close to my mother, it was only to God that I could say all, ask all, confess all. I needed to believe in power and glory, not sympathy, so it was necessary that I should commune with the highest; no ordinary mortal would suffice; after periods of prayer, I felt refreshed and clean and a new sort of person. Such wonderful exhilaration I have never since experienced, at least not in that pure unsullied form. Then at eighteen I passed through another curious religious phase. This took the form of addressing supplications to the gods of ancient Greece. If I pray in the sense of addressing myself to the "old man in the sky", a phrase coined by Yeats, if I can be said ever to pray, it is a release of emotion, like being suddenly moved by music. But this happens, maybe, once a year. Nevertheless, I have great belief in the idea of prayer for channelling the emotions, like the writing of music, and I shall no doubt apply it to myself one day.'

'Do you privately tear yourself to pieces, analyse each part remorselessly, and thank God that the world does not know you as well as you know yourself? And would you agree that this ruthless self-analysis makes us acceptable citizens, because it's the discernment of the clay common to us all?'

Colin sat bolt upright and said: 'Just stop modelling and listen to me for a minute—I don't tear myself to bits and analyse the pieces. I did to some extent in my early teens, but not now, thank you. The certainty of what I have to say has made me lose all this rather Aldous-Huxleyan sort of inferiority complex. I resent Huxley's way of saying, "My heroes are essentially trivial—human-all-too-human, and aren't-we-all?"' I feel that myself, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Shaw and God are beyond this imputation. I detest and repudiate all this "common clay" idea—it revolts all the romantic in me. I believe that if the romantic had will-power enough, he could become as great as his dreams. I believe that if the realist had sufficient determination and imagination he could become a kind of God. This is one of my most fundamental and important ideas. This feet-on-the-earth doctrine is negative and retrogressive, and the denial of man's control over his destiny. Maeterlinck says in *Wisdom and Destiny* that we should live as though we were always on the eve of the great revelation, and the great revelation can be as each individual sees it, or aspires to. But the constant reminder of our common clay is apt to be a powerful brake upon endeavour and put an end to the grand hero of history.'

I resumed my modelling and Colin turned again to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Noticing that it was a privately printed and numbered edition, he asked how I had acquired it. I said I had openly bought it at a shop off Holborn, learning afterwards that the book had been smuggled into this country concealed in a case of lemons from Italy, although how true that story was I couldn't say. I thought the book had been banned, not because of the love-making scenes, but on account of the use of the four four-letter words which were universally known, if not universally used in the appropriate context. I confessed that when I first came across those four small words I was startled and stimulated; now the words were just black symbols, and being accustomed to them, they were like other words in conveying information. I thought it was Lawrence's intention in the first instance, that we should not be frightened by mere symbols, and that one set of symbols was not fundamentally different from other symbols, expressing the same thoughts and ideas.

In reply to Colin's enquiry whether I had met Lawrence, I said that I had just missed meeting him, to my lifelong regret.

There was a period when D. H. Lawrence was always in the news, and he became the literary idol of the universities. If an undergraduate had not read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, he was deemed to be a backwoodsman. Many demanded to meet him and, like Shaw, he had to be protected from irrational admirers. I had a fierce ambition to get away from the eight million Londoners and London's millions of houses and live next door to Lawrence, or if not actually next door in the London sense, to be a fairly near neighbour, and to spend my time writing on the sun-baked slopes of the Italian Mediterranean. I made provisional plans for disposing of my goods and chattels to provide a few hundred pounds to keep me barely alive while I wrote my way to recognition and success. I would become a member of the Lawrence circle and share in all their activities. It was my intention to write novels, poetry, plays, essays and to paint. The tiny cottage I envisaged would look out on to the blue Mediterranean, and all day long the sea would be in view; the cottage, surrounded by olive trees and orange groves, would add the romantic aura. It was a period of dreams, and dreams of action, and dreams of realisation. My wife was reluctant, and the Yorkshire hard-headedness of Claire Champion held me in check a little. The speed only slackened, to give time for a little more practical planning of selling up, buying the ideal cottage and living on a maximum of one pound per week for five years, by which time it was hoped that I would begin to earn a few shillings, as the prelude to earning many pounds sterling. But the dreaming and the planning and the hopefulness came to nothing, for at the decisive moment Lawrence died, and I felt his death, just as much as Colin felt the loss of Nijinsky.

But I met Frieda in London shortly afterwards, and found her lively, charming and invigorating. I also became friendly with two of his closest friends, Catherine Carswell and Richard Aldington; and I established correspondence contact with Middleton Murry. I enjoyed mixing with what was known as the 'Lawrence crowd', and I always left their company emotionally enriched. They were splendid men and women, courageous, original, real adventurers and explorers, who tore away shams and masks, so that the original could be seen in its nakedness. Lawrence anecdotes and Lawrence legends I heard by the hundred, and I regret that I trusted to my memory instead of noting each one. Yet I recall one which vividly

impressed me. It was told to me by John Raynes, at one time Industrial Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, and before that, editor of a number of provincial weeklies, including the *Leeds Weekly Citizen*. He came from Heanor, not far from Lawrence's home, and knew the family. D. H. Lawrence fell in love with a local girl, and became very much in love. It happened that another local man also sought her hand, and she rather favoured him against Lawrence. She imagined Lawrence to be a little too unusual. While she never ignored him, it became clear to Lawrence that he was fighting a battle that he was likely to lose. He tried all his persuasion, all the artifice he could employ, but the other man was strongly entrenched in her affections. In desperation, to prove his deep and abiding love, Lawrence suggested that the two rivals should undergo a Trial by Ordeal, and she to marry the victor. She became amused, and thought he was perhaps joking. She asked him what he had in mind for a trial by ordeal? It was this, that each should hold out his left arm with his hand full open, palm upwards, on which should be placed a live coal, and the one who held out longest was to have the right to marry her. She thought Lawrence was crazy, and said so. She remarked that he was becoming theatrical and was not sincere. This charge of insincerity stung Lawrence, because it was the first time in his life that his sincerity had been questioned. He blazed with anger and his blue-violet eyes shone with passion. 'I'll show you whether I'm sincere or not!' he shouted, and there straight away took a live coal from the firegrate, and held it on his outstretched palm. The young woman screamed with fright and terror and dashed out of the house, thinking among other things that Lawrence had gone mad. Neighbours ran out in response to the cries, and then accompanied her back to the house, where they found Lawrence standing erect by the firegrate, calmly smiling, with the light of triumph in his eyes. He had demonstrated how intensity of faith and belief could dominate the flesh. But the girl would not change her mind, and she married the other man. When she became a widow years later, she went back to Lawrence, and she offered to submit to the ordeal he had undergone, to prove that she now loved him more than anyone else. It was too late, however, for D. H. had made the decision with another woman, and there could be no altering of that.

Colin listened intently to 'an astonishing story' which he could never forget. He agreed that the incident confirmed what had often been demonstrated, that a state of mind could be induced when bodily pain might not be felt, in which case, of course, there would be no pain. It is doubtful whether the Christian martyrs burnt at the stake experienced the excruciating agonies normally associated with burning. Their intense spiritual exaltation would transcend bodily sensations, and they would yield up the 'Holy Ghost' probably with no more physical suffering than a man dying a natural death. Christ on the cross might never have suffered in the sense of suffering, although His appearance there, nailed to the cross, and the blood flowing from His side, and from the thorns that pierced His brow, were symbolical of suffering. It was the robbers, crucified alongside Him, who really suffered all the physical pain, and they are always shown writhing in their agonies. In the case of Christ, He is invariably depicted just dead, never within my knowledge expressing his physical agonies, like the male figures in the 'Lacoon'. Christ appears resigned, accepting his fate without a struggle, which I have always thought contrary to the teachings of the Church.

We had been together in the studio for three hours, and I told Colin that we had better finish, and resume the work as soon as he could spare a day for a final sitting. He consulted his diary, and found he was booked up with lectures and other engagements, and it was agreed that he should phone me as soon as he had a clear day. A month later he came along looking more refreshed. He had lectured at Leicester and Swansea and elsewhere; he had made a trip to Paris; he had appeared on television and sound radio and he had spent much money on books and gramophone records. After a month's absence he viewed the unfinished bust in a new light, and was so pleased that he did not think it required any more attention. However, much was necessary before completion. After he had taken his seat, I asked him:

'Would you regard yourself as the newest voice of the younger generation?'

'Certainly not! *The Outsider* is not a new voice, either in its content or in the matter of time. Really, I have been writing *The Outsider* for years, and the book is the final product of

fifteen years' reading and thinking. I see it as a mere basis for later work.

'What do you say is wrong with the world at the moment?'

'Too many echoes, and too few original voices, if I may sum up in that brief sentence. In fact, there seems to be about one original voice in a generation. It is a frightening position, and a still more frightening prospect. Education, instead of being an instrument of liberation, has become an instrument of oppression. Vast communities, indeed whole continents, are now gigantic prisons, with millions of prisoners. Education has enslaved them, enabled them to read the wrong literature and to arrive at the wrong conclusions. Instead of working for power, they assume they're helpless and cringe at the feet of the man at the summit, whether he be a Stalin or a Hitler, or one of the many lesser dictators.

'The ability to read is increasing and will soon be universal; for those aspiring to unholy power know from contemporary history that a well-read people are easier to handle than a mass with no mental focal point. Arrange for all people to read the same newspaper, to listen to the same radio, to receive the same education, and you have weakened the ability to think and partly crippled the will to power. Thus, everything is made ready for the demagogue, on the platform and in the Press, to seek and achieve his dictatorial end. The great educational pioneers never believed it possible for good to become evil, and for the iron-rusted fetters to be replaced by chromium-plated manacles, and that articulation could enslave as well as set free. That is what I think is wrong with the world.'

'I agree, but how will the beneficial change take place?'

'Ah, we *all* come into that problem, at least all of us who are engaged in appealing to the mass mind—the writers and the preachers. I have purposely excluded the politicians, for I am coming to the conclusion, as the result of personal observation and historical study, that politics is a game played with marked cards and loaded dice. It isn't enough to write beautifully, or to be eloquent on the platform; there must be a basic evolutionary optimism in the ideas. Or to express it in another way, we want the right kind of propaganda. In these so-called democratic days everything depends upon propaganda. A dictator cannot step up to the summit of power unaided; he must prepare the way, and that it done by preparing the mass mind for demand

and acceptance. The technique of preparing for dictatorship, and the mystique of dictatorship itself, present exciting material for the sociologist, and several other -ists. I would say that the last great battle to be fought by mankind is the triumph of the forces of liberalised humanity over the sinister despots who have placed ignorance upon the throne, robed in glittering splendour, to deceive the simple trusting masses. It is a pitiful and heart-searing spectacle.'

'Would you describe *The Outsider* as propaganda, or does the idea offend you?'

'Propaganda? Why, *The Outsider* is definitely propaganda, and I wish people would recognise it as such. And it's not subliminal propaganda but absolutely blatant, and I not only make no apologies but glory in it. Christ was a propagandist, and the Bible is propaganda. My propaganda in *The Outsider* is designed to show that our civilisation could perish, in the absence of new spiritual values. I'm a preacher like Shaw, and Shaw has done more in seventy years of active preaching towards saving civilisation than all the popes and archbishops of the same period bundled together. I hope I shall never cease to be a propagandist; the moment I cease, that moment I shall be dead.'

'You are speaking now like an Angry Young Man. Are you proud to be their leader, and whither are you tending?'

'Contrary to the popular notion, I'm not an Angry Young Man, and never have been. Of course, I can't accept responsibility for what the newspapers say, or for the labels they try to pin on me. One daily newspaper, to whom I protested against this constant reference to me as an A.Y.M., promised that they would drop the phrase and apologised. I've done nothing whatever to get myself mixed up with John Osborne, the real instigator of the Angry Young Man movement. I personally admire John Osborne. I only realised the other day that at one time we were both temporary postmen helping the G.P.O. at Mount Pleasant in the days of our comparative obscurity and penury. Although I'm proud to know him, and to have grown up along with him, I'm extremely critical of his writings, and he knows it. My experience of the Angry Young Men I have met is that they are generally right off the beam, and the majority of them are just running down side alleys. And what about the Angry Young Women? There must be a whole army of them.'

Why don't they get a hearing? I suppose they spend too much of their time making their pony-tails, choosing the colour of their stockings, and jiving in the lights of the television cameras. My main quarrel with the Angries is that they are just *angry*. That's not enough: it doesn't get anyone anywhere. One of the major difficulties of modern life is the negative attitude rather than the positive, destroying, and not creating something finer. No, Sidney, the John Osborne attitude is emotional and negative; it has no answer. I'm pretty convinced that I have solved that problem in my own particular way.'

'Although there has been much praise for you personally, and for *The Outsider*, there has been some hot criticism. We all like genuine praise, but how do you react to criticism? Does it upset you, shake your confidence, cause you to look around, and make you wonder whether you actually wrote the book that created a literary sensation?'

'I like worth-while praise, discriminating admiration, and I enjoy sensible criticism, with the cut and thrust of debate. But I can't stand a lot of silly nonsense where there is nothing but sawdust instead of flesh and blood. And if anyone ventures a critical biography of me, I hope it will be critical. I don't want anything like those awful silver-paper-wrapped royal biographies where everybody is so respectable that you would believe the women never went to bed with their menfolk, though by the laws of Church and the Realm they are entitled to. I don't care who attacks me publicly, but I strongly object to being misrepresented, as I have been on several occasions, by printing statements of mine out of context, and making me appear an utter idiot. I want to be treated as fairly sincere, even if I appear mad to those who know nothing about me beyond what they have read in the cheap gossip columns. I'm quite happy when I recall that men like Cyril Connolly and Philip Toynbee hailed *The Outsider* as important; I wrote it in all sincerity, and hence I am not seriously disturbed if an illiterate goes for me. I know *The Outsider* is not the perfect book. What can you expect at twenty-four?'

'There was a letter in *The Times Literary Supplement* accusing you of many misquotations in *The Outsider*—if that accusation is correct, why did you misquote so extensively?'

'It's true, as John Carswell says in his letter, that many misquotations appeared in the first edition. Some were corrected

as new editions were issued. I have no defence, beyond saying that in no instance, as far as I can discover, does the inexact quotation alter the spirit of the quotation, which is important, and at any rate proves that the misquotations were accidental and not deliberate. In some of the inaccurate quotations the inaccuracy amounted to no more than omitting a comma, which can, we know, be a vital omission. In other instances, perhaps one word was incorrectly quoted. The reason for the errors in quotations is simply this, that I did not exercise the care demanded of me, and I shall know better another time. I relied wholly upon my memory without checking, and when you think of the scores upon scores of quotations, my memory proved to be quite good. However, I have learnt my lesson, and I shall verify all future quotations.'

'You once mentioned the anarchist phase of your career, and it has always interested me. For a short period when I was seventeen, I toyed with anarchy, and found the anarchist literature the most difficult of all political literature. How and why did you become an anarchist, and how have you managed to escape becoming a Communist?'

'My nature and my philosophy would never form an alliance with Communism, for it's alien to all my thoughts and feelings. I am a Liberal Socialist, but there was no place for the individual under Stalinism. It is always the mass mind, the mass thought, the mass action, regimentation undreamt of in the worst period of Prussian history. As for anarchy, my introduction and associations were unusual, and I owe much to Alfred Reynolds, at whose home I first met Stuart Holroyd. I don't think I am doing Stuart an injustice when I say that he was completely under the influence of Reynolds, a fine Hungarian Jew who taught complete tolerance, and the brotherhood of men. Most of what Reynolds said was sense, except that he could never realise how little freedom men really possess. He had no concept of evil, and his ideas of religion were as primitive as those of a Hyde Park Corner speaker. At first, I thought his meetings would be an opportunity for me to develop friendships and ideas. However, I quickly discovered Reynolds's sloppy thinking just intolerable, and I used to argue so vehemently that he finally threw me out. But even so, he agreed to my giving a 'literary reading' to his circle, thinking it would be harmless. I really used the occasion to attack

Reynolds's viewpoint, and in this I was surprisingly assisted by Stuart Holroyd, and that was the beginning of my friendship with Stuart. Much of that particular lecture was later used in *The Outsider*. From that I developed into a Hyde Park Corner speaker for the anarchists.'

'You've been lecturing frequently to university crowds, and I wonder how they have accepted you? Have they been interested in what you had to say? Were they in any way critical? Do you think the present generation of university students are on your side?'

'On the whole I detest universities and the university mentality. The students are all right, although I have yet to meet one who can think for himself. Now and again some of the dons are impossible because of their sterile imagination. I could name a few but won't. The young students are generally full of adventure, and my ideas strike them as challenging, and that is what universities are there for, to challenge! I was recently at Cambridge, and I've had a letter from a friend there saying that Cambridge has been arguing all week whether I am a great writer or a bloody fool. What the final decision was I don't know, and I don't care. Wherever I go, there are always two camps—the Wilsons and the anti-Wilsons. I wonder why? I regard it as a tribute to me that this should be so. If everybody is in agreement, then be sure that there's something wrong, and you had better keep your eyes open. After so much university lecturing, I have decided to make fewer public speeches and to deliver fewer lectures, because, strange to say, they do not add to my reputation, but rather detract from it, and that is not good for a young and rising author seeking world recognition. *And nothing is going to stop me from becoming the foremost writer of the age!* By constantly appearing in public people get used to looking at me, and hearing me, and somehow they lose their curiosity about my writings—familiarity breeding contempt! Now I can't afford that: I must think of the future, and the ultimate impression I want to make on people. I don't know why, but I always receive a batch of abusive letters when I've made a speech in public. It would seem that my challenging remarks arouse antagonisms, stimulate latent prejudices, and add fuel to the envy that so many seem to feel. Since becoming a public literary figure I have been surprised and distressed to discover the little-mindedness of people!'

'I quite agree,' I couldn't help interrupting. 'Among writers and painters—I can't speak for the poets and musicians—there is an abundance of enmity, completely inexplicable by ordinary standards. Author "A" comes swiftly to the top, and authors "B", "C", "D", and right on through the alphabet, begin their job of disparagement, some more than others. Gossip and recrimination, lies and half-lies, innuendoes and near-smears are the parts of the pattern designed to down "A", to bring him to earth, to force him to realise that he is no more than an ordinary mortal against the background of the universe. It's a dreadful experience to suffer. One of the most notable authors of today, a man with a universal reputation in his own line, mentioned how he suffered when he suddenly became a world figure and stepped into a comparative fortune. He could hear on all sides whispers of a derogatory nature; he could feel the waves of hostility when he entered a literary gathering; he read that this success was a flash in the pan, that in due time he would sink into obscurity. At first, when I encountered this extraordinary line of conduct by my literary colleagues, I was distressed, but now that I have come to recognise the evil for what it is, I smile. There is no other way of tackling this particular viper. But answer me another question:

'In view of your experiences arising out of your public appearance, do you intend abandoning the public platform? It has been said that you seek publicity regardless of the consequences, and would give your head for a headline in the papers. Is that so?'

'I think I shall give up making speeches in England. It discourages me too much. I'm looking forward to moving down to Cornwall in a few weeks. I don't expect it to be any better than London, but at least people will have to go much further to disturb me. I don't expect to get enthusiastic about the countryside. I've got a kind of theoretical love of the English countryside—oddly enough, I feel quite Rupert Brooke-ish about it—but I don't really feel at home in the open air. I'm lazy. I prefer a roomful of books and records. I'm slightly worried in case I find it difficult to get hold of records down there. As to the Cornish themselves, I don't have many illusions about them. Compared with Londoners, they're lazy and inefficient, and they're all being ruined by the holiday racket. If Cornwall isn't far enough away from London, I'll probably move to the Hebrides. One of

the things that worries me a little is that Joy and I want to have some children, and my wife won't divorce me. So I want to live in a part of England where they won't care much about such things. This may entail coming back to London one of these days.'

'Do you regard yourself as a genius, and have you at any time had any doubts about it?'

'Since my early teens I have always looked upon myself as quite beyond the ordinary, and in fact a genius. If I don't recognise it, how can I expect others to do so? There's nothing wrong proclaiming oneself a genius, if one is really in that category. The trouble arises when those without a spark of genius rave about their genius from the housetops. I have always worked on the assumption of my own genius, but I never fail to bear in mind that I may be mistaken, although I'm fairly certain that I'm not. Many who thought they had genius were found to be mistaken, but the world was none the worse for the interlude. The tragedy of every age is the failure of certain geniuses to recognise themselves as such. Take two modern examples, T. E. Lawrence and Van Gogh, men of immense stature, yet assailed with doubts about the validity of their labours and their message. Van Gogh destroyed himself by his own hands, and T. E. Lawrence would have taken a similar course had a motor-cycle accident not deprived him of that supreme moment of despair, the final challenge to the world. It is when men are absolutely sure of their genius and tell the world to go to hell that they produce their masterpieces and leave posterity to trade them for fabulous sums of money!'

'When did you first become conscious of this genius of yours, and if you had never become aware of it, what would have been your mode of development?'

'The first glimmering came at about the age of twelve,' replied Colin, 'and I was fully and unashamedly aware of my genius at fifteen, and from then onwards I went ahead with knowledge and self-assurance which carried me through thousands of difficulties. I knew who I was, what I was, and whither I was going. When the ignorant laughed and scoffed, when the semi-ignorant taunted, when the enlightened felt pity for me, I resolutely continued, scribbling millions of words under the momentum of my newly discovered powers. That was the most marvellous period in my life so far, and I cannot

imagine it being repeated. I felt as big and as important as the universe.'

'I suppose you would agree, Colin, that the creative artist never had it worse than today, and perhaps never had it better?'

'Yes, that's true both ways. Television and sound radio have made all the difference between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In an instant, television can sway millions of minds, north, south, east and west. There has been nothing like it in the history of mankind. For generations, the "local" was the main centre of news and views; then came the coffee-houses and the sparsely printed news-sheets; next, the Northcliffian Press era, devastating in some of its operations; sound radio superseded it, and now television is the great dominating factor in the life of everybody. We had an example when "Panorama" gave a detailed factual report on the Stock Exchange one Monday evening, followed the next day by a tremendous downward slide in Stock Exchange dealings, attributed wholly to television, and becoming known as the "television slide". By some odd chance, or freak performance, an unknown and illiterate person can become a national celebrity overnight, and in quick time constitute himself a limited-liability company, and garner an enormous income from his special line, plus his patronage of well-advertised products, to which must be added large sums for personal appearances, larger sums still for appearance and performance, and fantastic fees for newspaper articles which he need never write, and indeed, never see. There seems to be a complete absence of ethics and personal morality in this extraordinary crazy age.'

Later Conversations

'Vera Brittain at the P.E.N. Congress referred to you as "an unfortunate young man whose career has been laid in ruins". What was your reaction to that?'

'I'm obliged to her—she's actually a delightful woman, and the wife of my friend George Catlin. But I don't think things are as bad as she makes out. Alec Waugh apparently replied to her and said that poets aren't really killed off by a review—like Keats—not if they're any good, anyway. I agree with him. Vera Brittain's prophecy seems to have been based upon the possibility of my being a one-book man, that is, having produced *The Out-*

sider, I was not likely to have further literary successes. True, *Religion and the Rebel* was badly mauled, and in the light of events I can now see that as a fairly regular happening. A first successful book is rarely followed by a second, because of ye ancient sport of knocking people off their pedestal, no matter how worthy they are, or how superb the quality of their output. I have seen it happen time and again among my own generation. Authors of an older generation have told me the same story of suffering a similar fate. Even poor old Puccini went through the mill, but he had the joy of seeing the jealous critics flayed by the public's approbation of his operas.'

'But surely the vicious attacks on *Religion and the Rebel* would tend to put you out of your stride? You cannot be wholly impervious to attacks, however unjust they may be?'

'On the contrary, I was relieved to feel myself back on solid earth again. I know my capabilities better than anyone else. I know I am a good writer, but I also know that I am not all that good. Nothing in the foreseeable future can destroy my self-confidence, without which all worthwhile creative work must resemble a wobbling jelly!'

'I have often wondered what were your innermost thoughts during the height of the public interest in *The Outsider*? Were you old enough to learn from personal experience that many authors have their day and sometimes cease to be, or did you in some vague way think that adulation might go on for ever?'

'At the beginning of the *Outsider* craze, I was completely flattened by it all. I'm not a person of great social vitality; on the whole, I don't care for too much social life. Added to this, I drank quite a lot. The Argo record company got the idea that they'd like me to make a record of *The Outsider*—selected bits, of course—and I persuaded Anthony Quayle to co-operate on it. Esme Percy—of whom I was very fond—introduced me to a group who spent a lot of time in Henekey's in Thayer Street. So I began spending a lot of time in there, with Esme and the Argo people, and we'd order bottle after bottle of Volnay. That's where I'd been the first day I ever came here. Somehow, the idea of the record fell through—partly because of some unwelcome publicity about it. Anyway, as I say, I saw too many people and drank a lot—although, as you know, I'm not what you'd call a drinker. Added to all this was the psychological shock of sudden success. I'd been working alone for so long. I'd sold myself the

confidence-trick with extraordinary efficiency. So I'd conditioned myself not to *want* success. When it came, I felt like an eskimo who is suddenly transported to the Sahara desert. I was drowned in approbation and praise. I'd spent years in a tug of war, and suddenly the other team let go of the rope.'

'For the last four years, Colin, as a literary figure you must have had more publicity than any other literary person in a comparable period in history. Among the reasons for this must be the greater reading public, the vast radio listening audience, and the enormous television public. Some of this publicity was spontaneous and natural, the outcome of the place you have created for yourself in modern letters. Some of the publicity appears to have been deliberately sought in many odd ways. Looking back from the eminence you now occupy, do you regret the bidden publicity, and what advice in this respect would you offer to any other newcomer to the literary scene?'

'I'm inclined to agree that one of the chief mistakes I made early on was to accept too much publicity. Even so, I don't think I'd act otherwise if I had it all to do over again. I certainly don't feel any resentment against Fleet Street, and I can't understand why Osborne and Wain are so thin-skinned about it. I agree with Shaw and Chesterton—it's not an insult to be called a journalist. However, I can't help feeling that you're over-emphasising the problems that hit the "Angry Young Men" in those first years. In a few years' time it will all seem as out of date as flappers and the Charleston. It's a misplacing of emphasis to keep asking me questions as "a young writer". I shan't be young for long. A few years after your book appears I shall already be middle-aged, and anyone who reads it to learn about my ideas will find it strangely dated.

'This I see as a writer's first duty—to try to think "timelessly", to recognise that he'll probably survive all the present annoyances and problems. I try hard to ignore them.'

'Is that why you left London for Cornwall?'

'No, I don't dislike London. And I'm not idealistic about Cornwall. But I don't like people much—or rather I'm easily tired by them. Besides, I know that I'm arrogant and conceited by most standards. But my conceit is my only "working assumption". So if I intend to do any serious work I'd better get away to some place where people don't keep making me aware that I'm arrogant.

‘I listen to gramophone records for hours while I write, and find time for prolonged serious reading in preparation for other books. I have always loved serious music. You will find evidence of this in my early diaries. Fundamentally, I have always preferred music to literature, and were it left to me to decide my fate, I would rather be a composer than a writer—I have ambitious plans for an oratorio worthy of the Third Programme. But in Cornwall I am not left completely alone and in isolation, which I would prefer. Periodically, I find reporters from London knocking on my door, asking if they can interview me on a theme that will make headlines in the *Popular Press*. Having come all that way, I can’t find the heart to send them back to their editors, empty-handed. I try to play the game with them, but I couldn’t say that they have always done the same by me. They have rarely misquoted me, and if they have, I am sure it hasn’t been intentional, but sometimes they quote my words completely out of context, with the result that I appear to make the most ridiculous statements. This has happened particularly in the *American Press*, and I have no doubt that, in consequence, some of the Americans have a distorted picture of me in their minds which helps to colour their attitude towards me. I don’t object to people opposing me as long as they get the image right. I haven’t been to the States yet: when I do get there I suppose I shall be faced with newspaper statements which I have never made, and with interviews which I have never given. Frankly, I’m not a coward but it’s an ordeal I dread, and for that reason I shall delay going to the last moment.’

‘You’ve let yourself go against the Press. But where would you have been without the Press? Still working in the Fulham morgue, or mixing cement at 6 a.m.?’

‘The Press gave me publicity, but they also prevented my books being read with any attention by serious people. The rooftop Press would have discovered my “genius” and the gutter Press would have found my weaknesses and exposed them to the popular gaze. I have much to thank the Press for, but they are also indebted to me for the many columns I have been able to fill. The Press invariably creates an image of an author that is misleading. This explains why the public, when they meet their favourite author, find him unlike what they had pictured, due to Press snippets and angles which gradually

build up an image alien to the authentic one. I know in my case of people who, seeing me on television, expressed agreeable surprise and astonishment because I was unlike the picture of the gossip writers and the slanted news items. While the public can't be bothered reading a play by Shaw, they will swallow wholesale any amount of triviality about his eccentricities, such as whether he puts his beard underneath the bedclothes or whether he wears wool next to the skin. But then, this is the age of the insignificant.'

'There is an impression, Colin, that you are a homosexual. I can't reconcile this with your known heterosexual experiences. What are the facts?'

'Yes, I know the current gossip in certain quarters, and perhaps it arises from an incident in the Royal Air Force while I was serving my two years of National Service, which you have already dealt with. But let me state quite definitely that I am not a homosexual, never have been, and I don't think I ever shall be.'

'But you have been mixed up quite a lot with homosexuals, even if you haven't indulged in their practices.'

'That's perfectly true, Sidney. I met my first homosexual in my teens, and he was years older, clever and charming. Strangely enough, I was introduced to him by a girl friend at a time when I was just becoming acutely aware of the whole world of sex. He had a languid, cultured voice and a bored manner. I was quite impressed, for he was a new phenomenon to me. At one point when we were close together, he whispered something in my ear in French, and I am certain he did it to overawe me, and was confident that I wouldn't understand. Instantly, I whispered back a maxim of La Rochefoucauld which I had learned by heart, rattling it off fast, equally certain that he did not understand it. Thus, the scores were equal. A few days later I lent him a long story I had written, called *The Mirror*, full of metaphysical conversation and Dostoevskian overtones. Two days afterwards he sent me two tickets for a play which he said would interest me. I saw him, and asked him for his opinions of my story. He described it as utterly worthless, said in a manner clearly intended to hurt me. Some days after this he took me home, and there he declared that he was a homosexual. I looked at him in astonishment and fear. I had the idea from what my mother had told me that homosexuals

were murderous sex-maniacs who generally killed little girls. A feverish excitement was mounting within me, and I was awaiting the next step, whatever it might be, for I thought that at last I had met the evil monster in person, and he might prove at least a relief from office boredom. Then, very soon afterwards, I received a long poem based upon one of the Eclogues of Virgil, and with it was a letter containing a declaration of love for me. Never before had a man written me a love-letter. While I was thrilled at the prospects of a mysterious experience, I wondered whether there would be deeper and involved complications? I wrote a long letter in reply in which I said that I saw myself as a Dante, and not a Beatrice. He answered that I could inspire him to write great poetry.'

'And did you?'

'Well, you will see for yourself as the story proceeds. I had been with him and some friends to the theatre, and afterwards he said airily: "Call in, Colin, sometime and have a *crème de menthe*", and he gave me his address. I thought that things were now going to happen. The next day I called on him, excited and curious. I was astounded to be met at the door by clouds of steam and a tired-looking middle-aged woman who called to him upstairs. I could hear his cultured drawl floating downstairs: "What is it, Mother?" He came down looking dishevelled and unkempt and took me into a tiny living-room, with the table still crowded with breakfast things and the cloth stained with egg-yolk and tea. He was obviously amused by my bewilderment and took me into the front room, where he had a bookcase full of pretty-expensive limited editions. I just couldn't make him out. He had given me the impression of being highly cultured, of rich parentage and a gorgeous home, and here he was with a home and background even more working class than mine. We, at least, lived in a house with a large garden back and front.

'This initial surprise wore off, and we became close friends. The interest on his side was the drama. On mine, it was a desire to be listened to, cared about. I just hadn't any histrionic ambition. I used to go and see him in the evening and we'd often talk and walk all night. He had developed his cultured drawl and interest in art and drama in sheer reaction to the whole of his surroundings, including his barbaric broad hometown accent. And who could blame him? We often talked

and drank tea until 5.30 a.m., when I'd walk home and sleep until 8.30 and go to the office.'

'And still not the homosexual experience?'

'No, not beyond declarations of love. He was a very emotional person, and like all that type was not a deep and serious thinker. He was writing a long novel that was all Gautier, Wilde and Proust. He adored Wilde as a literary figure and tried to model himself upon him. He was older than I, and much lazier as a writer. I wrote a great deal and my output astonished him. He had the virtue of being able to listen to everything of mine that I read to him, although I must say that he was never complimentary and encouraging, but I never allowed that to deter me. For a while, I let myself be absorbed into his world of art and drama. It was, as Shaw says, perfumed as a hairdresser's shop. But for quite a longer period I enjoyed the experience, reading Oscar Wilde, not for the first time, but with a new insight. It was at this stage that I began to look at paintings, for, until then, I had never bothered with them in any shape or form. Music also became a hot subject for interest and discussion, and it was not long before I became completely immersed in painting and music. Perhaps the most important aspect of this phase of my life was the feeling of sophistication I developed. This gave me tremendous satisfaction, and it seemed as though at last I had shed my immature youth and had become a man of the world.'

'So that is really the end of the homosexual legend, I suppose?'

'Yes, I sincerely hope so. I continue to have homosexual friends, but I can't imagine ever developing a taste for it.'

'You were saying the last time we met that you find it difficult to talk to writers of an older generation. Why so? After all, it was a writer of a generation before yours who assisted to put you on your literary feet by helping you with his knowledge and influence to get *The Outsider* published. Further, it was the older generation of writers and critics who brought you into immediate prominence, and made you for some months the most discussed literary figure of the century.'

'That's quite true, Sidney, and I hope I'm not ungrateful for their contribution. But gratitude is not the same thing as being in harmony with one's own generation, and not quite so much in harmony with an older generation. Such an attitude is not

illogical, and no snobbery is intended. The plain fact is that the two generations are vastly different, and if they aren't, then we had better have a Royal Commission to find out why! Your generation saw the First World War and a revolution. My generation saw the Second World War and also a revolution. The revolution after the First World War was political. After the Second World War it was literary. Hence, a difference in outlook, in the forward view, in terminology, in everything. Your generation had a Labour Government for the first time in history, and then a second Labour Government, followed by a world collapse. My generation had a literary Renaissance, and with the departure of Bernard Shaw, the field was wide open for *Look Back in Anger* and other plays and novels and theses, where your generation came in for a good whacking.

'Basically, the two generations don't speak the same language and are unfamiliar with each other's idiom. There isn't an activity of any kind which has not been vastly altered, whether it be painting, sculpture, music, buildings, crime, dress, hair-do's, travel, plays, novels, poetry, science, politics, pot-walloping, wife-beating, fornication, religion, spending, and so on. When I am speaking to the members of my own generation, I enjoy a freedom of feeling and expression which is never present when I am talking to my seniors. I have to be careful what I say, lest I should be misunderstood, because of the different backgrounds and apperceptive masses. Such knowledge induces a certain amount of reticence, an unhealthy feature in any human relationship, where there should be a complete identity of interests. In spite of all my hero-worship of Shaw, if ever we had met, I should have been pretty dumb, not overawed, but divided by the gap of seventy years of personal experience. And so it must always be. This is not a complaint, and there is no reason why anyone should take offence at the declaration. I daresay that you, Sidney, are more at home with members of your generation, the later Victorian, than with us of the generation of George VI and Queen Elizabeth II.'

20

THE PLAYS

How far Colin Wilson will succeed as a dramatist is problematical at the moment, but one thing is certain: if he fails, it will not be for lack of determination to write for the stage. As has already been mentioned, his earliest writings include an immense play based on *Man and Superman*, and at least three one-act plays. Since *The Outsider* was published he has written three full-length plays, had a one-act play produced by Theatre in the Round and planned and written large parts of at least three more. In the present chapter I shall attempt some kind of a summary of these plays, with special reference to their attempts to extend the ideas of the 'philosophical books'.

The first of these plays was *The Death of God*, commissioned by the Royal Court Theatre and later turned down by them with no kind of explanation. Ronald Duncan, one of the three-man board who rejected it, told the *Daily Express* that it read like a child's TV serial and (rather surprisingly) that it revealed that Colin Wilson possessed no talent of any kind. This rather curious statement was later explained by Mr. Duncan as being due to the fact that he was wakened up by the Press at midnight, and was feeling somewhat irritable.*

It is true that the plot of the play is set in the future and involves a rather fantastic circumstance, but the element of 'science fiction' is by no means obtrusive. Briefly summarised, it concerns the conflict between two abbots who live in the same monastery, one a liberal Christian, and one almost a Jansenist, in his pessimistic view of human weakness. The play is centrally concerned with the problem of ends and means; to use Camus's

* I perfectly understand his reaction. We have since met and become excellent friends.—C. W.

phrase, 'whether innocence, the moment it begins to act, can avoid committing murder'. In other words, whether an idealist can put his ideals into action without their becoming changed by some process *inherent in the nature of action*. It is a variation on the theme of *The Outsider* and *Religion and the Rebel*: must the 'Outsider' be doomed to ineffectual brooding? Is it true, as Christ says, that his kingdom is not of this world?

The two abbots in the play take opposite views. One of them—Father Carleon—is an extremely old man who holds, like Undershaft, that the 'Outsider' who lets the world go to the devil and sticks to his ivory tower is making his unreal dichotomy (the world/the spirit) an excuse for laziness and inefficiency. The other abbot, Dominic, a much younger man, is in the throes of a passionate evangelical 'purism' and believes that the spirit should stick to the realm of the spirit, and let the world go hang.

The argument is dramatised by a simple device, which constitutes the science-fiction element in the play. The world is divided into two warring factions—as in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The monastery at the foot of the Carpathians is the last one in existence; religion is almost dead. But the old abbot has one remarkable card up his sleeve; in the monastery, he has the dictator of the southern hemisphere; various drugs have induced complete amnesia and Carleon is now attempting to 'brain-wash' the man, and to turn him into an instrument by which the Church might regain power. The dictator is generally presumed dead or in enemy hands and his place is occupied at present by a Goebbels figure, his deputy. In the first act, Carleon explains his plan to Dominic, and is met with horrified rejection; entering into political intrigues, Dominic claims, is not the business of the Church. They must 'watch and wait'.

In the second act, the memory of the dictator is restored suddenly when he shoots the lover of the woman who is his 'nurse'. It immediately becomes apparent that Carleon's attempts to indoctrinate him have been a total failure. He is still a man with a power-mania, a one-track mind. The abbots are now faced with a new problem: shall they continue to keep him a prisoner, and run the risk of ultimate discovery, or shall they take the simple and obvious way out, and kill him? Both are sincerely religious men; the idea of murder horrifies them.

In the third act, the problem is artificially solved. The dictator's 'deputy' arrives at the monastery. His own policy has been less extreme than that of his former 'leader' and he is embarrassed to find that the leader is still alive; he solves the problem by having the dictator murdered. The abbots are informed that they have made a mistake; the man was an impostor; if they say nothing, their disloyalty will be forgotten. So, at the end of the play, the situation is left unchanged, except that some of the former enmity between the abbots has dissolved; the younger one has recognised the ultimate impossibility of the 'ivory tower'; the older man has learned the dangers of being drawn too deeply into politics.

The central problem of the play had been stated in *Religion and the Rebel*, where Shaw's analysis of *The Ring of the Nibelungs* has been examined. Wotan represents godhead—the purest form of idealism. But in order to gain the power to put his ideals into practice, he has to form an alliance with Fricka, who represents the forces of law. And in exchange for Fricka, Wotan has to give one of his eyes. The loss of the eye symbolises the compromise that 'godhead' is forced to make when it sets out to implement its ideas.

Immediately after *The Death of God*, another full-length play was begun but never finished; this was called *Express to Nowhere* and dealt further with the problem of absolute dictatorship. The dictator, the central character in the play, has achieved his position, not because he lusts for power, but simply because he happens to be the ablest and most far-sighted man of his time. The play—of which two acts were written—deals with the dictator's rise to power in a series of 'flash-backs' (it was conceived for Theatre in the Round), and focuses the dictator's major problem: that since the world has been at peace for fifty years, the suicide rate has become fantastically high; people are bored and fundamentally dissatisfied. The play was intended as a comment on the modern idea of political progress and universal peace, and an attempt to trace the probable outcome of certain contemporary trends—particularly the increased 'other-direction', the tendency to shirk the basic problems of our time, the refusal to 're-analyse' and start from the beginning. The play was finally abandoned because the number of characters soon came to exceed the number of actors available in Stephen Joseph's company.

Colin's next play was altogether less serious—in fact, he has described it as 'an intellectual romp' and as 'a highbrow farce'. The *Metal Flower Blossom* is about a painter in Soho, who is trying to paint a picture called 'The Metal Flower Blossom' and who is continually interrupted by all the layabouts, bums, queers, cranks and perverts in Soho. The play was written mainly because incompleting versions of all three acts already existed from anarchist days. The Plymouth Arts Centre's production of it was abandoned after comments in the Press on its 'obscenity'. The number of characters—sixteen—again caused a great deal of difficulty.

The only play by Colin Wilson that has been performed so far is the twenty-minute curtain-raiser, *Viennese Interlude*. This was written as the prologue for a full-length play based on the life of Strindberg, which was also abandoned for technical reasons. But the introduction contains the essence of its ideas. In an unpublished essay on Strindberg's Autobiographies, Colin argues that what makes Strindberg so astonishing is that he came closer to complete insanity than Nietzsche, Nijinsky or Van Gogh and yet managed somehow to avoid the final step. Parts of the Autobiographies are madder than anything in Nijinsky's diary or Nietzsche's last letters. Strindberg suffered from a persecution mania that must be the most extreme in literary history. And yet because he refused to give way to total despair, because he never ceased to try to write his problems out of his system, he survived.

The play is in the form of a dialogue between Strindberg and a Doctor Steinmetz, outside a café in Vienna. Steinmetz expounds to Strindberg his own view of his 'case' and his general theory that insanity is due to an *internal collapse*, a moral defeat, not to any inevitable buckling under strain.

The thesis of the play has a twofold importance. It is another attempt to argue against the pessimistic view of the 'Outsider'—that failure and despair are inevitable. The collapse of Van Gogh, Nietzsche and Nijinsky does not demonstrate the irresistible nature of the social forces, but only the collapse of will-power of the 'Outsider'.

Second, and more important, the play is speaking of the modern failure to meet the analytical challenge. Strindberg never ceased to attack his own problems, to try to analyse and express them; in doing so, he kept one step ahead of insanity.

He brings to mind Eliot's line about we 'who are only undefeated/Because we have gone on trying'. But one of the most alarming things about present-day society is that it has stopped trying; we live in a spiritual 'age of defeat'. A few penetrating minds—like Whitehead's—have attempted to gain a total view of our problems. But the general prospect is one of defeat—an age overcome by its own complexity. Strindberg's example is full of significance for these days.

21

WORK IN PROGRESS

AT the time of writing, Colin Wilson has just had published *An Encyclopedia of Murder* (in collaboration with Pat Pitman), and is engaged on a play called *The Power House* and a second novel, which so far has no title but is referred to in notes as 'The Sub-world'.

The Power House deals with his favourite theme: the relation between sanity and insanity. Its basic idea could be summarised as follows. In a Yorkshire mental home there is a madman who believes he is Rasputin. Actually he is an Irishman named Rafferty. But his belief that he is Rasputin seems to endow him with some of the miraculous power attributed to the Russian monk, and a power flows through him that is perceptible even to the doctors, and that completely dominates his fellow lunatics. A middle-aged writer, Broderick, is fascinated by this. He believes that many saints and men of genius achieve contact with their inner 'power house' after long discipline; like sensitive radio sets, they learn to pick up its vibration. But some men seem to be born with this extraordinary power with none of the corresponding moral superiority; Hitler and Genghis Khan were probably such men. Others, like Nijinsky, receive the power on a physical level but lack the intellectual equipment to express it fully on all levels of their personality.

Broderick is now in his mid-fifties; he has spent a life expressing his ideas and intuitions in a series of books that were frequently unprintable in England, and had to be brought out in Paris. But he has decided that it is time to make an immense effort: to devote all his life and energy to studying 'the power house'. It is he who makes the remark: 'The force of life fascinates me exactly as the force of electricity fascinated Faraday.' He is, in fact, another plea for Colin Wilson's concept of existentialism—the attempt to apply scientific analysis to the

raw stuff of everyday life. Little more of the plot of the play can be detailed here; it takes place in a country house, and involves an archaeologist and his family as well as the writer. It is being written with Theatre in the Round in mind.

The *Encyclopedia of Murder* is less definite in aim than *The Power House*, although a very long preface explains Colin Wilson's view of murder. Murder is the ultimate human failure, and a far more frequent extreme than its counterpart, sainthood. All murderers can therefore be studied profitably as examples of messy lives; murder is a definite act, but all it defines is meaninglessness. And yet in an age with no values, an age of total confusion, it might be more profitable to study the embodiment of meaninglessness, than to speak of meaning. Murder shares one important characteristic with atheism and logical positivism; its appearance is definite and concrete and yet, when investigated, it usually proves to be based on shallowness, or inexperience, or simply stupidity. The aim of the study is to *provoke a definition* of values by exhibiting situations in which values are plainly absent. The Preface attempts to expand this view by analysing a number of cases. But the book itself can be regarded as a kind of do-it-yourself kit, full of hundreds of cases, each of which is a challenge to the concept of the value of life. Here is an attempt to present the raw stuff of existence philosophy, a conscious revolt against the turgid analyses of Sartre and Heidegger, an attempt to produce the naked *perception* of value.

Of the second novel, little can be said at this point, except that it is again a sexual analysis of the life-urge. The starting point, apparently, has been Alban Berg's unfinished opera, *Lulu*, based on two tragedies by Frank Wedekind; Lulu, for Wedekind, symbolises the life-urge; she is simultaneously completely innocent and completely destructive. Colin has commented many times that Wedekind seems to be the only writer who holds a view of sex close to his own; it remains to be seen how far Wedekind's conceptions will appear in the final version of the novel.

22

TOWARDS THE NEW EXISTENTIALISM

'*Encyclopaedia of Murder*'

IMMEDIATELY after finishing *Ritual in the Dark*, Colin Wilson began compiling the *Encyclopaedia of Murder*. The book can be considered a by-product of *Ritual*; during the writing of that novel he had been collecting all kinds of information about murders and murderers—particularly sex murders. Let me quote from a letter I had from Colin:

'The idea came to me in the lavatory at our old hang-out, 25 Chepstow Road, Notting Hill, which no doubt you remember? (Strange how my best ideas come to me when I am in the lavatory.) I was thinking about the comments of the critics on my *Age of Defeat*, and how many of them said that I had announced a "new existentialism" but hadn't even started to define it. When I tried to define it myself, I was sure of only one thing: that Sartre and Heidegger and the rest *were not existential enough*, i.e. were not close enough to the raw actuality of life. Their philosophy still occupied the ground of the academic, as if they were afraid of getting their hands dirty. But I ask you, Sidney, how can you decide whether man is a god or a worm, if you are unwilling to contemplate man at his most worm-like?

'Later, I discussed the idea with Bill Hopkins and Stuart Holroyd. Stuart seemed to think that the chief danger of the idea was that it might distract attention from my serious work. People might assume that I had "gone commercial". Critics might object that I had talked of the necessity for a new existentialism, and then, instead of producing some new philosophical idea, produced *this*. At once I became excited. Anyone who wishes to understand the basis of the new existentialism should contemplate the *Encyclopaedia of Murder* until he has thoroughly grasped the idea that "existentialism" is not a

“philosophy”; it is an active preoccupation with human futility. To the question, “What is existentialism?” I would reply by indicating the *Encyclopaedia*, much as the Zen masters used to reply to the question: “What is God?” by kicking the pupil downstairs. This reply is not an evasion, but the only way of indicating something fundamental, and of freeing the mind from the abstraction in which all existentialists have so far trapped themselves.

Colin luckily discovered the ideal partner for such an undertaking. In the autumn of 1959, John Braine had introduced him to Robert Pitman of the *Sunday Express*, and to Pitman’s wife, Patricia. Pitman and his wife were both interested in murder, and had been planning a book on the subject for years, without actually settling down to write it. They had a large collection of books on murder cases. When Wilson decided to compile the *Encyclopaedia of Murder* he immediately decided to ask Mrs. Pitman to collaborate. She was delighted at the idea.

I asked Colin why he chose Pat Pitman as a collaborator, rather than any one of the dozens of other people who might have been equally efficient in collecting data on murder? Here is his interesting reply:

‘We were at Dan Farson’s house and Dan mentioned the Crippen case. He asked me if I could remember the name of the street where the Crippens lived. I called to Pat, who was on the balcony, “What was Crippen’s address?” and the answer came back immediately, “Thirty-nine Hilldrop Crescent”. I decided that a woman with that kind of memory was ideal for my purpose. When we began work she proved to be a born writer, with a natural style. Her entries are distinguishable from mine because she has more sense of humour’.

When Colin approached his publisher he met with disappointment. He then approached another publisher, who offered an immediate and large advance for the book, and finally a contract was signed. The two compilers then began work—first of all making a list of about five hundred murder cases, and dividing them between them. Jeffrey Gibian, the novelist, Wilson’s neighbour in Gorran Haven, agreed to contribute articles on German and Japanese war crimes.

There were many problems to discuss. The volume had to be comprehensive, for this was its justification. Of the five

hundred cases of murder, it was decided to deal with four hundred, and each case to have a minimum of five hundred words, so that the book might be read as an Anthology of Murder. Reluctantly, about a hundred cases were dropped, and these will be included in a future sequel.

The *Encyclopaedia* finally appeared in November 1961, and became something of a best-seller over the Christmas season. Unfortunately, the collaborators had had some disagreements by this time, and Colin was already engaged on its sequel, *The Origins of the Sexual Impulse*.

In many ways, his Preface to the volume, 'The Study of Murder', is one of his best and most lucid pieces of writing and provides an excellent summary of his ideas and approach. *The Outsider* was a series of studies of lives with unusual values, living in a society without values. It was an attempt to approach the problem of values (and of religion) from the standpoint of the 'frustrated great man'. In the *Encyclopaedia*, the approach is from the opposite side. Writes Colin: '. . . for me, this volume represents 300 or so watch-cases containing unknown powers, each one a challenge in analysis. . . . Many murderers are spiritual corpses, but we can learn as much from dissecting a corpse as from a living body'. Its most important concept is stated briefly in a footnote: what Wilson calls 'the St. Neots margin', or 'indifference threshold'. (The first idea of this occurred to Colin Wilson when he happened to be travelling through St. Neots, Huntingdonshire.) 'There is a certain margin of boredom or indifference when the human mind ceases to be stimulated by pleasure, but can still be stimulated by pain or discomfort. Its cause is usually mental exhaustion . . .' In other words, when human beings grow indifferent to positive values—God, human evolution, beauty—they might still be jarred into an examination of their standards by presenting them with cases of men who have sunk much further in the direction of substituting their own convenience for 'social values'. Wilson's Preface attempts to erase all artificial boundary lines between the criminal and the 'ordinary man'. He writes: 'All our values are makeshift. . . . *Belief in the abnormality of the murderer is a part of the delusion of normality on which society is based*'.

After this twenty-seven-page Preface, which contains some of Wilson's most exciting thought, the remainder of the book

is rather a disappointment. In very few cases is there an attempt at the 'existentialist analysis' that Wilson defines in the Preface. Just a succession of murder cases in alphabetical order, with a cold recital of the main facts which become tiring when not critically analysed. When I suggested this to Wilson he agreed immediately.

'What about *The Origins of the Sexual Impulse*?'

'The book was conceived as a kind of appendix to *Ritual*. The sexual theories advanced in *Ritual* were hardly noticed, and its theory of the bases of sexuality and the meaning of "abnormality" received very little discussion. I decided that the next major step in expounding my "new existentialism" was to apply my methods to the problems of sex. The book therefore discusses at length the problem "What is normal sex?" On the first page, its basic thesis is stated: the problem of sex can only be discussed adequately by asking questions about the meaning of human life. In its first sentence, the problem is stated: What part does sex play in man's *total being*?'

'I have never ceased to feel that sex is the key to the mystery of man's deepest being. In some respects, I suppose my view is Lawrentian; but in the "sex" chapter of *The Strength to Dream* I explain why I reject Lawrence as a "sexual mystic" and regard Frank Wedekind as far more important. This book is an attempt to explain exactly how I conceive sex. I begin this one by asserting that the psycho-therapist's view of sex is necessarily too narrow, and can provide no real insight into the problem. It is like Kipling's question: How can they know England who only England know? I am arguing that you cannot know anything about sex until you get outside the psychiatrist's consulting room and realise that understanding sex demands the full equipment of the existential philosopher. Freud once reduced religion and sex to a matter of subconscious urges and frustrations. His view of religion is now generally regarded as too narrow and materialistic, and has been replaced by the views of Jung, Rank and existentialists in many circles. But soon we shall have to recognise that even his vision of sex is too narrow. I might express my own feeling in an extreme form if I said that religion cannot be reduced to sexual frustration; but we are beginning to discover that sex may be closer to the "religious impulses" than we ever realised.

'The book is a careful analysis of the question: What is the

meaning of the word "perversion"? All kinds of perversions are examined, from fetichism to sexual murder. Two extreme views are stated early in the book: Tolstoy's view that *all* sexual intercourse that is not aimed at having children is perversion (so that you are not even allowed to make love to your wife unless you want to impregnate her), and Gide's view that there is no such thing as sexual perversion, because human sex is "mental", and therefore relative. To Tolstoy, even a simple act of intercourse with an unmarried woman is "perverse" or abnormal, and the promiscuity of a Casanova or Frank Harris would be regarded as a hopeless corruption of all man's sexual impulses.

'I hope to include a considerable analysis of crime and its underlying motives. I am particularly interested in the relation between the criminal's resentment and his feelings about "life" and "destiny". Many criminals seem to be goaded by fate into committing crimes. They want to bite something, and they can't bite fate. They can't even bite "society". They can only take out the resentment on some unfortunate human being. Besides, I want to do a much fuller analysis of the problem of sex crime, because it is closely bound up with the problems of sex that I consider in *Ritual*, and in my *Lulu* novel. In this work, I would like to treat crimes under different headings—the neurotic criminal, the psychopath, the "wide boy", and so on. I want the second volume to be less about mere facts and more about criminal psychology. I only discovered recently that a school of existential psychotherapy actually exists—a school of psychologists who attempt to base their work on Heidegger and Kierkegaard rather than on Freud. I would like to bring some of their methods to bear on the problems of twentieth-century criminality.'

By way of demonstrating that his interest in crime is not a sudden development, Wilson has included in the *Encyclopaedia* a discarded fragment of *The Outsider*: 'The Outsider as a Criminal', or 'The Faust Outsider'. The original chapter was intended to lead to a discussion of Goethe's Faust, Mann's Doctor Faustus and the whole problem of 'demonic possession' (that appears briefly in *Ritual in the Dark* in the mention of Isobel Gowdie). It was discarded in favour of the chapter 'The Outsider as Visionary' and the mention of Faustus was tacked on to the previous chapter as a coda.

As a final note on the *Encyclopaedia*, I quote from a letter that Colin Wilson wrote to me in 1956:

'As far back as 1953, Bill Hopkins and I agreed that *Crime and Punishment* was our ideal of a great novel. It makes a direct assault on the reader's sensibility and overwhelms him by its brutal force; then, having compelled attention, it proceeds to develop ideas of depth and importance. Too many contemporary novelists seem to think that they cannot be taken seriously unless they are "difficult" and experimental. Bill and I agreed that the novel should aim for the widest possible audience and that its subject may be crime or violence. Graham Greene is the only contemporary writer who has come close to this ideal; unfortunately, although he is honest, he is no thinker.*'

'*Adrift in Soho*'

In a television interview, Wilson dismissed his novel, *Adrift in Soho*, as a pot-boiler. This comment seemed to me to be misleading; although the book is Wilson's slightest work to date, it develops many of the ideas of *The Outsider*.

I was also aware that one of its central characters—'James Compton Street'—was a very real person, since I met him in a pub in Poppins Court, Fleet Street, lurching off bread and cheese and a glass of beer, when he told me that he was collaborating with Colin on a book.

Adrift in Soho appeared in late September 1961, and was, generally speaking, better received by the critics than any of Wilson's books since *The Outsider*. I suspected that this was because it was the least ambitious of his books and contained no general ideas; it could therefore be judged simply as a novel; and as a novel it is undoubtedly well written and very amusing. I wondered whether the author's attempt to dismiss it as a pot-boiler was only another effort to mislead the critics

* Wilson's attitude towards Graham Greene seems to be ambivalent. In *The Outsider*, Greene receives only one brief dismissive reference, while in *The Age of Defeat* he is attacked in a section called 'Literary Faking'. However, in *The Strength to Dream*, he comes in for a longer and more detailed attack, while he is quoted with approval in the 'Study of Murder' preface. It seems that, in spite of his disapproval of Greene's methods, Wilson regards him as a writer of considerable importance.

who might dislike it as a novel of ideas? This question drew forth the following letter from Colin:

‘Gorran Haven,
Cornwall

Oct. 2nd, 1961.

‘My Dear Sidney,

‘Thank you for your kind remarks about *Soho*. The *Sunday Express* story is accurate as far as it goes. The book was certainly based on Charles Russell’s manuscript, although not nearly as much as the *Express* piece suggests.

‘What actually happened was this: I met Charles in Soho in 1953, just after I had separated from my wife, Betty. He was known as the heart-throb of all the Soho girls. Even in those days he always described himself as a “out of work actor”. I hardly knew him; in fact, I didn’t really speak to him until after *The Outsider* was published.

‘One day he sent me the manuscript of a kind of autobiographical novel called *The Other Side of the Town*. I get lots of manuscripts in my post, and usually send them straight back to their authors. However, I glanced at Charles’s manuscript—it was only about 60 pages—and was very amused. The style was tight and witty—although it reminded me of Peter Cheyney. (It’s opening sentence was: “Take your tongue out of my ear.”) Charles described very openly how he bummed around Soho, and “conned” people for money. He also spent a lot of the book expounding his philosophy of Freedom—that modern society is corrupt, and such people as he are honest enough to “opt out” and refuse to play the game.

‘I was very excited by this book—not because I thought it well written, but because I could remember feeling exactly like Charles when I first came to London. London is full of people like Charles; people who are too talented and mercurial to accept a routine job, and yet not talented enough to dictate their own terms to society and live off their talent. But even the most talented man can doubt himself, and wonder whether society will accept him at his own valuation. So all these people—all the would-be artists—are in the same boat. Supposing society will *never* acknowledge your right not to work at a routine job? Supposing that it will never pay you for “expressing yourself” on paper or canvas? You have two alternatives—to capitulate and take a job, or to live like Charles,

taking what you can get as your "right", since society refuses to give it.

'Of course, there is the third line of action: to take a routine job, and work patiently at your books or paintings in your spare time, until recognition comes. But this may require more patience or strength than you possess. In that case, what do you do? According to Charles, you pit your cunning against society and pursue the "philosophy of freedom".

'One objection had occurred to me. I had tried living "outside society" for years, and found it boring and demoralising. All the stories about "la Bohème" are untrue. However, Charles's book excited me. Admittedly, it had no depth. But it posed the basic problem, the same problem posed by America's Beat generation: do we need a new "class" in our society, a class of "dharma bums"? Our society is too rigid; there is too big a gap between the unsuccessful would-be artist and the successful artist. Is it any wonder if any of the misfits become criminals?

'I decided that I would re-write Charles's book. I would give its central character the kind of depth that he did not at present possess; he would become a "displaced metaphysician". Charles came down here to Cornwall to provide me with additional information and I began to work on the book in the winter of 1959. However, it was hopeless. The narrator was still Charles, but a Charles who no longer over-simplified the intellectual issues. But here a problem arose. I had to make Charles do various discreditable things, like swindling girls in the National Gallery, etc. But this was completely inconsistent with the kind of sensitivity and intelligence I had given him as a narrator. I was baffled and abandoned the book.

'Then one day, looking through some of your letters—you must be our most prolific letter-writer—I read how you were once baffled when attempting a portrait bust of Eustacia Vye who so captivated you whenever you read *The Return of the Native*. You, too, abandoned the effort, but only temporarily. You hid the unfinished work for a few weeks, and when you brought it out into the full daylight and saw it afresh, your creative spirit found a new force and you quickly finished the bust. Reading that gave me a new impetus, and when I saw the story again the solution came to me. I decided to keep Charles as the central character, and to introduce a narrator, a

young man who goes to Soho from a Midland town and who is also searching for the elusive "freedom". He meets Charles in Soho, and Charles offers to show him how to avoid working for a living.

'Under this fresh stimulus I wrote the book in January 1960. I ran out of adventures—Charles's supply was very short—and so I used chunks of my play, *The Metal Flower Blossoms* (remember Ricky Prelati?), and included a lot of anecdotes told to me by my neighbour, John Pennell. Then I sent the manuscript to my publisher before it was completed, and he liked it so much as it stood that there was no need to add more, and that explains why the book is not actually finished.

'There was an amusing incident after publication. Following the *Express* story about Charles and myself, we were invited to appear on television together, and it was suggested that we should have a good row. We agreed, and I said I would try to defend myself if Charles wanted to accuse me of "stealing" his book. In the midst of his argument with me on the programme, he leapt suddenly to his feet with his back to the camera and pretended to give me a tremendous blow on the chin. The interviewer had to separate us, and I had great difficulty in preventing myself from smiling. . . . To my amazement and relief, the incident did not receive a single comment in the Press.*

'*The Strength to Dream*'

The long and rather dreary task of writing up murder cases was not without its good effect, for by way of relief, he wrote four books in quick succession after the *Encyclopaedia of Murder*. The first of these, which had been planned for a long time, was on the imagination. He had been toying with the theme for years, and it finally blossomed forth as *The Strength to Dream*. An important characteristic in common with the *Encyclopaedia* is an attempt to define the positive by examining the negative. In his attempt to answer the question, What is imagination? Wilson confines himself almost entirely to second-rate works of

* I rebuked Colin at the time, and I rebuke him now, for allowing himself to become involved in such an episode. He is now of a stature when his public image should evoke admiration and respect. It is not enough to say that he did it largely for the benefit of Charles Russell.

imagination—at least, in the early chapters. It is a lively and stimulating book, and will be regarded as one of his best.

Although the book was written in ten weeks, from March to May, 1961, Colin Wilson had spent at least two years in active preparation, thoroughly exploring the vast territory he proposed to cover. Years ago I recall his continually talking about the pathology of the imagination, and I knew he wouldn't be happy until he had crystallised his thoughts in literary form.

The Strength to Dream has certain close parallels with *The Outsider*. The earlier book began by examining the crudest type of 'outsider': the man who instinctively rejects society, but whose revolt begins and ends in his rejection; who remains simply a violent misfit with a tendency to the criminal. As the book proceeds, the 'outsiders' become more intelligent and perceptive, advancing beyond mere revolt until it is seen that 'outsiderism' is only a form of frustrated creativeness and that the answer must lie in creativity. In the same way, *The Strength to Dream* begins by examining the simplest kind of 'escapism', rejection of social reality (in such writers as H. P. Lovecraft and Strindberg), and ends by trying to define the 'authentic' use of imagination—not an escape from, but an escape to, reality. In a sense, it might be said that W. B. Yeats is the hero of the book, since he is a typical example of a writer who was great enough to make this kind of journey; from the 'escapist' fairyland of the earlier poetry to the intellectual rigour and affirmation of the later work.

As is customary, Wilson uses the book to discuss various writers with whom he sympathises, and to express ideas that are implicit in his own novels. Like Wilson's other 'philosophical books', *The Strength to Dream* could be read solely as an introduction to a number of important and (at present) neglected writers. Wilson once stated that his aim in his non-fiction books was to examine and summarise every important cultural trend of the past two-hundred years, in an attempt to find out how twentieth-century thought arrived at its present cul-de-sac. *The Strength to Dream* is an important addition to this encyclopaedic attempt at a 'summary'.

'Voyage to a Beginning'

This book, written in 1961 and which I have not yet seen, is a short 'autobiography of ideas'.

'*The World of Violence*'

Wilson's third novel, *The World of Violence*, was written July-September 1961. The basic theme is the conflict between the world of the intellect and the world of physical violence. The central character, a young man named Hugh, is a mathematical prodigy who possesses a 'will to power' that convinces him that he is born to be a leader. The first part of the book is concerned with his childhood and with the development of his conviction that he will be a 'great man'. The second part is a detailed account of an incident in his teens that threatens to destroy his self-belief. Hugh sees a gang of juvenile delinquents attacking a youth outside a dance hall and watches the youth being beaten up and kicked unconscious. Hugh is horrified; the fear of violence has always obsessed him. He learns that the local police can do nothing about the gangs: there are too many 'Teddy boys' and not enough policemen. To relieve his sense of impotence and fear, Hugh decides that he will personally do something about the Teddy boys. He has to prove to himself that he is 'not like other people'. He is a member of a pistol club, and he evolves a plan whereby he will empty a revolver into the group of Teddy boys, and claim that it was in self-defence.

The shooting incident does not work as Hugh had planned; only one juvenile delinquent is shot, and he is not fatally wounded. The affair is almost a fiasco. Hugh is not caught, but he knows that the police are likely to track him down. His original plan of being a national hero or martyr has now collapsed; instead, he finds himself in the position of a criminal trying to evade the law. His obsession with violence now overwhelms him, and he recognises it as an obsession with death. He reaches a point of complete moral breakdown. However, luck is still with him; although he is finally known to be responsible for the shooting, he is allowed to leave the town and go to London. On the train occurs an incident with a drunk in which Hugh acts instinctively and immediately; this leads him to recognise that there are forces inside him that transcend all his conscious knowledge of himself. These forces may not answer to the call of conscious purpose, but they are nevertheless present as a subconscious 'power house'. The book ends with Hugh still on the train, travelling to London and to new disciplines and insights. He no longer disowns his actions

during the past few weeks; he understands their inner meaning.*

An important secondary character in the book is Hugh's Uncle Sam, who has started a 'one-man strike against God' and lives in a dark room for twenty years, refusing to 'live' as a mere human being; in his obscure way, Uncle Sam also feels the evolutionary force that drives Hugh; but his response to it is negative.

The reader of Wilson's 'philosophical' books may at first be puzzled by certain aspects of the novels. *The Age of Defeat* denounces the 'fallacy of insignificance', and speaks with admiration of 'strong heroes' like Shaw's Caesar and Under-shaft, Melville's Ahab—even the villainous Bel Ami of Mau-passant. Yet Sorme, Harry Preston and Hugh are not heroic figures; in fact, although they possess their own kind of strength, they emerge as quiet, modest, essentially decent young men. (This applies to Hugh, in spite of his 'will to power'.) The answer is undoubtedly that Wilson is far more interested in presenting a problem than in supplying cut-and-dried 'answers'. It must also be remembered that the Wilson novel is essentially a *bildungsroman*, and that the central character is bound to be receptive rather than active. This also answers the frequent criticism made of his books: that they do not really 'end'. The *bildungsroman* is not supposed to end; life goes on, and so, presumably, does the hero's 'education'. Wilson's criticism of most 'tragic' literature is that the tragedy is often artificial and attempts to give the work the appearance of a real 'conclusion'.

Colin Wilson in America

Colin Wilson made his first trip to America in the autumn of 1961, for a three-month lecture tour of universities. This was arranged by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Washington and partly financed by the Ford Foundation. The main subject of his lectures was to be the 'New Existentialism'. Uppermost in many minds was that tragic story, *Dylan Thomas in America*, and would Colin Wilson survive all the pressures and temptations accorded a visiting celebrity? He had been there a month when I received a long letter from him:

'I find it hard to get used to the enthusiasm of the response

* This book is at present in process of revision.

over here. It is startling after English universities, and fortifies me in my conviction that England is intellectually dead. When I speak at Oxford or Cambridge I get a feeling that all the bright boys, all the potential Union Presidents, are taking notes, waiting to leap to their feet and start raising objections or pointing out minor contradictions. I feel that nothing I say is ever "grasped" intuitively; it is carefully pulled to pieces according to the methods taught by their English professor. Over here, the response is immediate and vital, the audiences huge (they frequently have to transfer my lectures to bigger halls), and the question periods would go on for ever if the moderator didn't call a halt. It makes me feel that England, like France, is intellectually decadent and at the end of its tether.

'Mind, I suspect this is bad for me. It may be very flattering to be treated as a living classic, but it doesn't make for hard work. . . .'

The college newspaper at Colorado College, Colorado Springs, described Wilson's effect on his audience as 'an intellectual Elvis Presley'.

I was anxious to know how Colin was standing up to the Dylan Thomas form of hospitality, and news came in the next letter:

'It is quite clear to me what killed Dylan Thomas in America. The visiting lecturer—if he is at all popular—is followed around at all times by a crowd of over-eager students and invited to an endless succession of parties at all hours of the day and night until he is utterly exhausted, unless he keeps firm control of himself, and that I determined to do before I came. . . . I suspect that the students like the basic optimism of my ideas; in fact, many of them have said so. I don't think they necessarily follow what I mean by a new existentialism, but they seem to feel that it is something important that runs counter to the usual pessimism about the H-bomb and modern society.

'This trip has so far been an excellent thing for the development of my ideas. I find that I've learned a simple and clear presentation of the problems of existentialism, and of my own "new existentialism", that goes a lot further than *The Age of Defeat*. I shall probably write a short book about it when I get back. It will interest you personally to know that I've been

ending my lectures with an account of Bill Hopkins' *Divine and the Decay* as a good example of a power existentialism that goes beyond Sartre. I begin to feel that I was too cautious in my estimate of the book in *The Age of Defeat*. If I write about it again in my new book, I shan't make any bones about stating that I think it the most important novel that has appeared in England since the war.'

In a further letter, long before the end of the tour, Colin said he was feeling less enthusiastic about it. He remarked that this was not due to any dislike of the Americans, but to his dislike of continuous travel and being whirled from place to place. This is what he wrote in his final letter:

'I'm now counting the weeks until I can get back to England and some peace and quiet. The whole tour is beginning to exhaust me. The only consolation is the amount of books and records I've bought over here. [Before he went he had nearly a hundred complete operas on gramophone records.] I don't really mind the lecturing—in fact, I enjoy it, because I keep getting new ideas, and thinking of new ways of presenting my thesis, so I tend to re-charge my own batteries as I talk. But the rest is horribly repetitive. Always new faces—more or less like the last lot—and the same parties, the same stupid questions. Poor Dylan Thomas! Would you believe it, Sidney, a man came up to me and said as large as life: "Mr. Wilson, I haven't read any of your books or attended any of your lectures, but would you mind briefly summarising your ideas?" Knowing me, you can well imagine what I replied. Frankly, at these parties I get sick of human communication. . . .'

I asked Colin to let me have something about the 'New Existentialism', and he wrote the following:

Tentative Outline of a Book on Existentialism

by

Colin Wilson

The book is intended to serve a double function: to present a simple and clear outline of the history of Existentialism, and to lay down the basic ideas of my own 'New Existentialism'.

One of my central points is the following:

Existentialism is only a new name for Romanticism—the 19th-century type. The Romantic poets—Shelley, Novalis, Schiller, Goethe, etc.—all asked the same question: why is

man not a god? *This is a question that had never been asked before in Western cultural history*; (in England particularly, the 18th century was the century of Rationalism and Humanism; 'The proper study of Mankind is Man', not God . . . etc.).

Goethe in *Faust*, Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* and Schiller in *The Robbers* all asked the same question: How can man cease to be a worm? How can he become more godlike; how can he escape the basic indignity of being merely human? And yet, by the end of the 19th century, this aspiration of the Romantics had petered out in nostalgic defeatism—Verlaine, Dowson, etc., 'fin de siècle' sadness that implied: 'Man may be godlike in some paradoxical sense, but he can never rise much above his basic humanity: we must all die; we must all suffer, etc'.

But 19th-century thought was partly betrayed by the sheer sloppiness of its language—an overblown ecstatic language that did not make for accuracy of thought.

Along came Existentialism—the child of Romanticism originating in two arch-Romantics, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and developing through Husserl to Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, etc. *Its basic question was the same*: why is man not a god? It used far more precise language to attack the question, a new terminology. But by 1950, *Existentialism was also completely dead*, as dead as Romanticism had been 50 years before. Romanticism had ended in total misery and defeat:

*'The fire is out, and spent the warmth thereof
This is the end of every song man sings'* (Dowson)

Existentialism made a small advance. It answered: 'Man cannot be a god, but at least he can die defiantly. He can increase his stature and his dignity by a stoical attitude'. So Existentialism is summarised by Hemingway's words: A man can be destroyed but not defeated'. Camus, Sartre, Heidegger and Faulkner have all expressed very similar attitudes—heroic stoicism.

* * *

Now I am intensely dissatisfied with this 'heroic stoicism'. Undoubtedly, my driving impulse is a romanticism as total as Goethe's. The answer of modern Existentialism seems to me a poor compromise. I have now spent hundreds of pages, in four

'philosophical books', carefully re-sifting all the thought of the past 200 years, to try to find where philosophers made the mistake. I feel like a mathematician, attacking for the hundredth time a calculation that mathematicians of the past have all found insoluble (the proof of Fermat's last theorem is an example that occurs to me). And at last it seems to me that I am making headway—that I have escaped the cul-de-sac into which Heidegger and Sartre have moved modern philosophy.

Part of the New Existentialism consists of an attempt to refine the language once again, for I feel that Existentialism, like Romanticism, has been defeated by the imperfection of its language.

A simile might make my point more clearly. The problem might be summarised: has life any obvious meaning?

When theology lost credit as an 'explanation' of the purpose of nature and God, science tried to take over. And science had to admit finally that there is no over-all purpose discernible in Nature. When puzzled human beings examine the world for 'meaning' they are baffled; the face of the world is inscrutable; it is like a good poker-player. Eddington once said that if Nature has any purpose, it conceals it very carefully, like the White Knight in *Alice*, who dyed his whiskers green, 'then always used so large a fan that they could not be seen'.

The 19th-century Romantics said: 'Oh, but nature must have a purpose'. There must be a grain discernible in the wood, if only you examine it closely enough. So all 19th-century idealist philosophy was an attempt to put the wood under the microscope, and find which way the grain runs. But the microscope was not strong enough; language betrayed them. They ended in defeat.

Existentialism produced a far more powerful microscope, with its complex and delicate terminology, its new insights into human psychology. Once again the 'wood' was put under the microscope and scrutinised far more minutely than before. But, by about 1950 the Existentialists also had to admit defeat. 'There is no grain discernible in the wood; life is meaningless'.

Now this is my problem. I must believe that there is a 'grain'; I would go mad otherwise. And I believe that this grain would be apparent if only we had a powerful enough

microscope, i.e. an even more delicate language, a more penetrating methodology. It can be conveniently taken in two parts: a critique of the old Existentialism, and an attempt to create a new language and method.

I have rejected most of the conclusions of Heidegger and Sartre, and go back to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl—Heidegger's source and inspiration. I also relate this to some of the techniques of *gestalt* psychology. *It might be said that I am attempting to create a kind of bridge between linguistic analysis and Existentialism*, for my concern with language is essentially of the same nature as that of Ludwig Wittgenstein. It might almost be said that the New Existentialism utilises the method of logical positivism. Its basic claim is to create a methodology, and to avoid discussions about 'ultimates' or mysticism. Mysticism is betrayed by its language. A basic axiom of the New Existentialism is that it is not permissible to discuss any general idea about 'human nature' or destiny until it can be discussed in a language that is capable of covering all its implications, or expressing them within the framework of some pre-defined methodology.

The second part of the book will not be entirely concerned with the question of the new methodology; it will also discuss various writers and thinkers whose aims are related to my own: Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Koffka and the school of existentialist psychoanalysis; more recent developments in fiction are also discussed—Dürrenmatt, Kazantzakis and Bill Hopkins.

To some extent, this book covers the ground of my previous books, particularly *The Age of Defeat*. However, its main purpose is to develop the New Existentialism, which was left as a mere suggestion at the end of *The Age of Defeat*, and most of the book will be concerned with defining it. A second aim of the book is to give a very clear and simple exposition of Existentialism as it has existed so far, so that its first part, at any rate, is a simple, popular 'Guide to Existentialism'.

* * *

My reason for writing this book was a feeling that Colin Wilson is one of the most interesting, and certainly one of the most misunderstood, writers alive today. It is difficult to get a contemporary—especially a young contemporary—into any kind of perspective. In some ways, it is perhaps hardly worth

bothering, since time will do it more effectively. And yet his ideas seem to me to deserve a more immediate ally than time.

Again, the story of his literary career to date throws some interesting sidelights on the present age. If these are not visible to readers of today, I hope they might at least supply some useful material for some sociologist in the future.

But finally, and most important, there is the fact that I have enjoyed telling the story. From my own point of view, no other justification is needed. I can only hope my reader feels the same.

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‘THE POSSIBILITY OF A POETIC BURIAL’

OR

‘A LOVER FOR THAIS’*

FOR AN UNWRITTEN BOOK ON THE
PHASES OF THE MOON

(Written 1952)

by Colin Wilson

LIFE is a strange and beautiful and complex thing, yet it can only be so to people who know how to live. To the average human animal, its subtleties are as hidden as the harmony of Plato’s style to a den of foxes.

One begins the approach to learning how to live through Art—especially through art that emphasises the harmony of an ‘unlived’ life—Gaston, de Latour, Marius the Epicurean, Dorian Gray, a Rebours, Axel, Yeats, Dowson, Henry James.

You see a steady progression in the names given. Dorian Gray and Des Esseintes are rich profligates. If a man of genius tried living according to their pattern, he might find it amusing in his youth—but if his genius had anything of Beethoven about it, he’d soon be bored beyond words. He’d progress to the Marius and Gaston stage, aestheticism turned cold, detached, no longer interested in our peurile ‘sins’. Axel is the principle of death to the flesh. Nietzsche would have some comments to make on him. Henry James, a grown-up Des Esseintes, half way towards the cold mathematical delight of Shaw’s ancients.

Dowson and Yeats both created a child’s paradise—a

* This Fragment from a Note book appears to be an early sketch for *The Outsider*.—S. R. C.

beautiful inhuman other-world, as unfleshly as a child's. When Dowson died, it seemed natural that tragedy should accompany such a dream. But that was a mistake! Dowson's death was not beautiful and pathetic, like Little Nell's. It was not the consummation of a dream, but its defeat. Only Yeats lived out his life, still dreaming of 'The beauty that has not yet come', and discovered that a battle for detachment, like James's, could give a certain degree of peace—

*Lost a cold eye
On life, on death.*

One day I must write a book about these people: a chapter on Wilde, Des Esseintes—the fleshly lure—maybe adding Anatole France's *Thais*. Then one on Dowson, Yeats, Axel—the unfleshly lure. Then maybe to Whitman, Nietzsche—even Hemingway—for the swing to the other extreme, with Hemingway 'holding up his head of earth', and utterly failing to give meaning to the earth. Then a digression for Pater, Proust, the ineffectual dreamers; and maybe, to finish up, Thomas Mann, Henry James, H. G. Wells and a final chapter on Bernard Shaw.

Of course, Aldous Huxley represents an interesting departure from the mood of objectivity—subjectivity, the phases of the moon. A subjectivity too intellectual to content itself with emotions—and its thought drives it, against its will, to objectivity, and the goal must be Religion.

The human being must be MADE TO WILL. Only in this way can he develop his living essence. Otherwise, he will remain a *personality* that develops according to the pressure of the externals, which arouse no responses from his will—that is, dissociating themselves from outside influences enough to use the real will, which is the purpose of the Life Force.

For instance, *I have been married for over two years. Except for a few occasions during early married life, I have never once felt free to develop myself.* At Christmas I made a great mental effort to escape the various external affairs that occupied me, and concentrate on my inner world. I did this by deliberately re-creating the period of freedom of three years ago—brooding on it until it was real again.

The result was a state of mental clarity that expressed itself in Blake's words: 'Everything that lives is Holy, Life delights in Life.'

Since then I have lived apart from Betty, but life has been unsatisfactory. There have been enough irritations and frustrations to convince me that I am not serving the Life Force here in London, in spite of producing a revue and writing a play that express my feelings.

Here, in hospital (Western, Fulham), the emotions are like a python. When I first came here I thought that life has its resemblance to a monastery. I work, I write, I read, I think, and have no material responsibilities, except supporting a wife.

That's not true. I involve myself with people and things, and they keep my mind occupied. It's impossible to burst outside the emotions here. Reason as much as I will, run round with 'L', talk with Bill Hopkins, write and produce the play (which will now not be finished)—the dream never breaks to free my imagination. When my mind wanders, it comes to a brick wall.

I think I was fourteen when I first asked myself the question: 'Who am I?'

Normally, human beings have a clear instinctive 'sense of being'—of the drive that originates somewhere in the depths of consciousness. They have a vague, blurred sense of PURPOSE, and all their lives are devoted to obeying this, as far as they can (considering environmental difficulties). When a man becomes a conscious personality through the use of Reason, he becomes aware of his BEING, and immediately asks: 'Who am I?' *But*, the reasoning process has already separated him from the instinctive knowledge of his own purpose. In becoming reflective, he is divided from the instincts that justify his being—just as a painter when he stands back to examine the total effect, is not able to put the paint on the canvas while he is able to see the whole.

Later, if one doesn't try to develop by letting light into the personality, one falls asleep. Then the urge to develop is felt as a vague frustration that nothing can free, or can imagine oneself travelling to the moon and being quite bored by it all, saying 'So what?', like the hero of Mann's story, *Disillusion*. Then comes a fear—stupid actually—that no *action* can free these tight, strangling emotions, because all action is futile—*vanitum vanitas!*

This is false, because re-connection with the physical earth—supposing one takes to tramping as I did—promptly restores the balance, sometimes swinging it too much in the opposite direction.

It is a bad thing to be stuck in some routine at these moments of spiritual crisis. The routine makes the physical world less and less able to stimulate the senses of wakefulness, and so the mind falls asleep. Consequently, the Will is unable to act.

An act like deciding to kill oneself—as I did—is quite enough to jog the system out of its laziness, and make one realise that all one's complaints about the futility of the world etc. were due to being asleep, so nothing from the real world really penetrated and stirred the Will.

Self-remembering is only the recognition of the need for self change. That is why it occurs at such moments as—say—determination to master a language, or some new subject, or when one plans out the use of one's time and energy for some project. It is the same as enthusiasm. *Any sort of work, done with joy and energy, brings self-remembering.*

The thing to remember, considering the present state of civilisation, is that almost no one works with joyous energy. I remember vividly a murder case I read when I was about fourteen. A youth driving a lorry along some quiet road saw a young girl student. He turned his lorry and followed her and knocked her down, then raped her, and threw the body into a well. Later he blew the well up.

Examine this! Once upon a time, primeval man would have carried off the woman, raped her, made her his wife and produced a family. Modern civilisation bottles up the urges, so that when they escape, they destroy other lives and their own.

Waking up always involves a loss of Individualism, a feeling of normality and brotherhood with all men.

This applies both ways. It is more difficult for men of extraordinary powers to escape the sense of 'I am', given by those powers. Waking up involves a relaxation of inner strain.

Awakening meant for me a sense of direct contact with life, instead of living in an insulated, subjective shell of my own dreams, tortured by my desires and attachments.

So for an enlightened man, life becomes a search, yet really a *search within himself*. If he literally 'wanders', it is only that the weaknesses which form with stagnation should not overcome him.

When a man has learnt NOT TO THINK (i.e. to stop the flow of his thoughts) he is taught to THINK—to think of what he wants to think of, and not of anything that comes into his

head. Complete concentration of mind on one subject, and at the same time the capacity not to be drawn into thinking of something else, gives a man enormous powers. He can then force himself not only not to think, but not to feel, not to hear, not to see; he is able to avoid heat and cold or suffering, and made insensible to all pain.

Clarity of mind depends on how simple one can keep one's life. The more simple-minded it is, the easier it is to control it.

Fundamentally, one must act. Thinking without action cloyes the mind and makes the organism subject to many passions and emotions, that otherwise wouldn't hold up its development for a moment. The opposite of action is dreaming. It means the system fills with stale poisons, and becomes incapable of coping with everyday events.

Enthusiast—Prophet—how far are the words interchangeable?

Would that all God's people were enthusiasts, relativists, scientists, archaeologists, mathematicians!

A self-remembering is a moment of alertness due to enthusiasm, excitement.

The whole process of Evolution can be defined as finding a Lover for Thais.

Some call Thais the White Goddess; others, goddess of swine and the unsightly phallus. Goethe called her the 'eternal womanly'. She made Creation in order to evolve a man who would be worthy to be her lover. Many legends contain the seed of this, Atalanta for instance. But to become a 'Lover for Thais', a man must strive to become what is godlike. *So we can define the whole process of human evolution as man's attempt to become godlike.* Now let's examine the various examples of strivings to be godlike, and see in what they fell short: Socrates, Keats, Dostoevsky, Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Shaw, Whitman, Hemingway, Blake, D. H. Lawrence, T. E. Lawrence.

Examine them in turn! Men must have all five centres working together—THINKING, EMOTIONAL, MOVING, INSTINCTIVE, SEXUAL. For Socrates, although the thinking and emotional centres worked well enough, one feels in him a definite deficiency of 'real joy in life' in Nietzsche's sense—proved by his acceptance of death (Existentialist!).

Socrates, like the tragic generation, believed that a life of thought, of imagination, involves a separation from the physical world, and an embracing of death as something pleasant as sleep (meaning something that will relieve the strain of frustration of the other centres).

The logical counterpart of Socrates is Hemingway, whose instinctive, moving and emotional centres developed in harmony, the emotional centres making an artist of him, and the other two (instinct and moving) giving his art its subject and direction—a glorification of life as the work of three centres, and a jibing at men who failed to develop—or rather use—the instinctive and moving centres.

It's observable that anyone who deliberately refuses recognition to any of the centres aims at the logical conclusion that death is inevitable. An aeroplane with only two of its engines working cannot keep a straight course. A bird with one wing damaged will fly in a circle if it tries to go straight. Unbalance in the centre means a friction in the mechanism that will finally wreck it.

John Keats believed that instinct and emotion are the main props of a poet. He used his moving centre and his thinking centre, and did not regard his sexual centre as unimportant. Consequently, he gives a far more balanced impression than Shelley, whose thinking centre and emotional centre almost totally excluded the sexual, moving and instinctive. But look for Keats's weakness—and it lies in his failure to develop his capacity *to act* at the same time as his capacity to feel and express. Dostoevsky is an example of highly developed emotional and instinctive centres, without any development of sexual or thinking centres. His best efforts at thought are associated with the most intense working of emotion and instinct—emotion in the case of Ivar's Great Pro and Contra—instinct in the case of Alyosha's vision. Michaelangelo lived in instinct, as all visual artists do—yet he has as much of the 'disease of the self-reflective' as most poets—he was not the deep-chested, powerful man that Yeats idolises—but a man of delicate health, tending to self-torment, self-reproach. Yet his works reveal him as a man who reached harmonious development of his centres at certain times—instinctive, emotional, thinking (his prophets) and moving. Not sexual. His sexual centre worked mainly with emotional energy.

Man's evolution proceeds through thought—then the other faculties follow behind this spearhead.

Leonardo is greater than Michaelangelo in this: that he developed his capacity for thought and kept the other centres—(except sensual)—following close behind. So although his instinctive centre never reached Michaelangelo's development, yet he was more harmoniously developed than the Florentine, only his sexual energy received no release.

Shaw obviously developed the thinking centre most but succeeded in keeping the others in fairly close harmony, never allowing the thinking centre to steal the energy of the others, and thus his general harmony is not often noticed. *Man and Superman* proves that he knew of the sex centre working on its own energy.

He combined intellectual energy with physical movement, in the same way as his contemporaries, Wells and Chesterton, did. Later in his life his instinctive and emotional centres ceased to work. And so he died lopsided.

It is interesting to note in Wells the sense of mastery of emotions—there seems a sense of air and light about his writings—which admittedly came mainly from the thinking centre. Wells's trouble was his susceptibility to negative emotions.

In my list, Whitman and D. H. Lawrence are the only ones who did full justice to the sex centre. Whitman, of course, was no thinker—if he had been, perhaps his development might have been less harmonious. Lawrence discovered the work of the sex centre and made a great song and dance about it. This weakness was Wells's—irritability, failure to live instinctively—too much variety and self-consciousness, not the unconscious pride of the lion. When I think of Whitman, I think of a man whose harmony precluded constructive thinking about himself or society. And when I think of Lawrence, I think of a man not big enough to be free of pettiness.

Of everyone on my list, T. E. Lawrence was the only man who realised that self-expression can be relieved through the moving centre—through physical courage.

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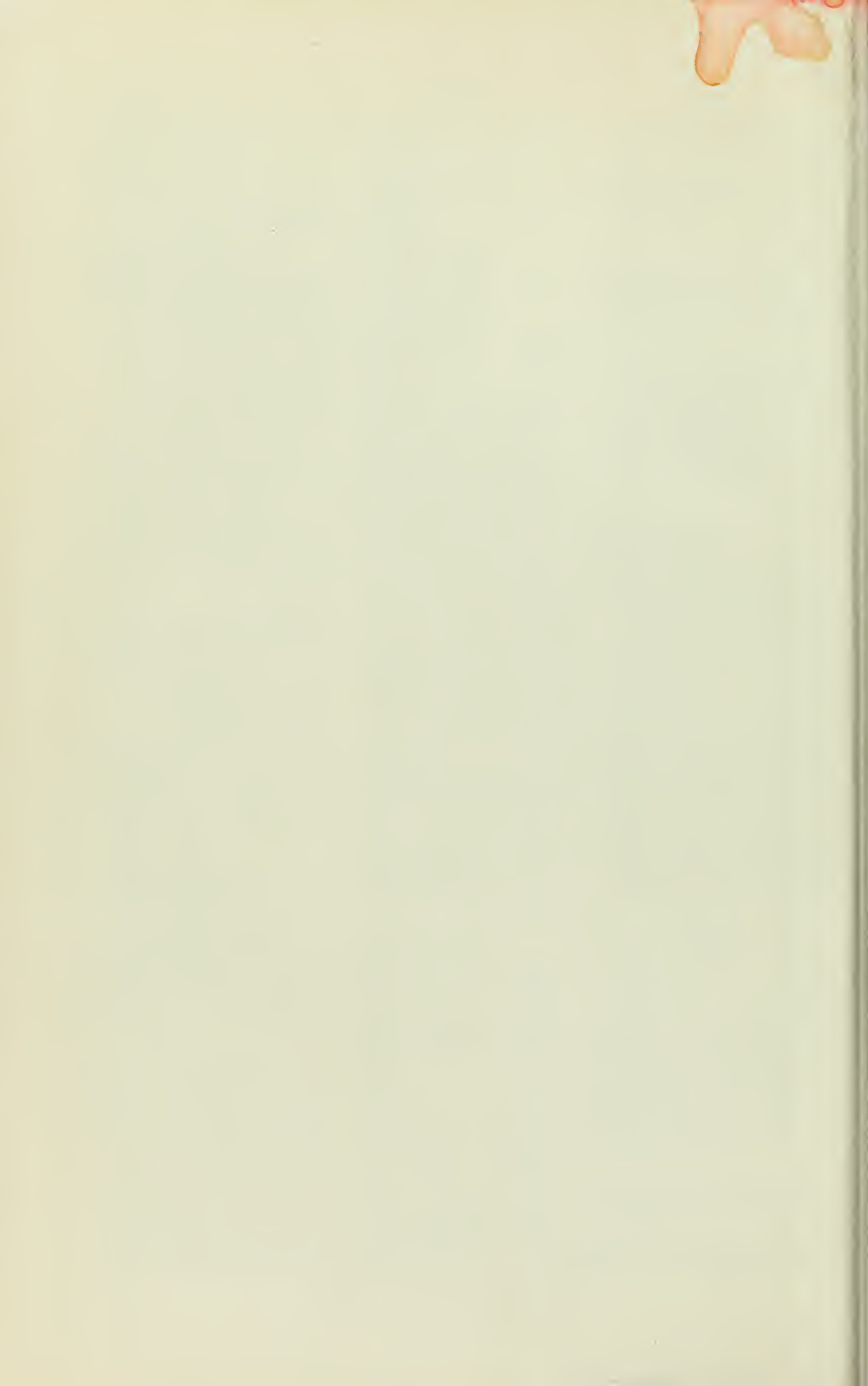
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