

Hollins University

Hollins Digital Commons

The Hollins Critic

10-1967

Vol. IV, No. 4: Toward An Existential Realism: The Novels of Colin Wilson

R.H.W. Dillard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/critic>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dillard, R.H.W., "Vol. IV, No. 4: Toward An Existential Realism: The Novels of Colin Wilson" (1967). *The Hollins Critic*. 19.

<https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/critic/19>

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by Hollins Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Hollins Critic by an authorized administrator of Hollins Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lvilelle@hollins.edu, folckil@hollins.edu.

The Hollins Critic

Volume IV, No. 4

Hollins College, Virginia

October, 1967

Toward An Existential Realism: The Novels of Colin Wilson



We fight not for ourselves but
for growth, growth that goes on forever.
To-morrow, whether we live or die, growth
will conquer through us. That is the law
of the spirit for evermore.

—H. G. WELLS
The Food of the Gods

There is no need to recount the literary career of Colin Wilson. It follows an all too familiar pattern and unfortunately has a great many counterparts: the encomiums of praise and delight upon the publication of a writer's first book and the quick critical turnabout when a second book is released. The exceptions are few today, and the damage is severe. A young writer has fame thrust upon him and

The Hollins Critic

EDITORS—John Rees Moore, Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

EDITORIAL BOARD—George Garrett, Daniel Hoffman, Howard Nemerov, Walter Sullivan, Benedict Kiely, Robert Scholes, R. H. W. Dillard, William Jay Smith

COVER ARTIST—Lewis O. Thompson

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS—Elizabeth Tunstall Collins and Mildred Blair Burns

Published five times a year, in the months of February, April, June, October, and December, by Hollins College, Virginia. Second class postage paid at Roanoke, Virginia. Copyright 1967 by Hollins College, Virginia 24020.

All material appearing in *The Hollins Critic* is written by pre-arrangement with the contributors. No unsolicited manuscripts can be considered.

The Hollins Critic is one dollar a year (\$1.50 in Canada and overseas).

snatched away before he has assimilated it and adjusted to it; too many writers never recover from the shock. And if a writer keeps working, his readers still suffer, for once he has been dismissed by the critical press, his later books are seldom even mentioned; he becomes an invisible man. Like Melville, he may be "discovered" much later, but only after he has been lost to his contemporaries who simply have no way of knowing what he is doing and writing.

Colin Wilson's example is, of course, more exaggerated than most. His first book, *The Outsider*, published in 1956 when he was twenty-four, was an amazing critical and popular success. One critic wrote that "Not since Lord Byron woke up one morning and found himself famous has an English writer met with such spontaneous and universal acclaim." When his second book, *Religion and the Rebel*, appeared the following year, it was as universally condemned. The eighteen books which followed over the last ten years have received a small and varied response, but on the whole they have been more ignored than attacked or praised. To the great majority of the reading public, Colin Wilson has become, at thirty-five, a finished man, remembered only for his early success and not for his work which has continued beyond that success and despite its attendant critical reverse.

The publication in England of Wilson's seventh novel, *The Mind Parasites*, last spring roused, however, a revival of critical interest. Hilary Corke announced in *The Listener* that it was time the literary world stopped ignoring Colin Wilson, and Robert Nye, in *The Guardian*, called Wilson "one of the most earnest and interesting writers of his generation." In this country, *The Mind Parasites* was published in July by Arkham House, the small publishing house in Sauk City, Wisconsin, founded by August Derleth to print the works of H. P. Lovecraft and other books in the Lovecraft tradition. Since the tiny advertising budget of such a small firm and the force of critical inertia will probably preclude much serious mention of the novel in the American press, I should like here to greet its appearance and to discuss Wilson's novels and his development as a novelist of independence and real ability.

Of course, Colin Wilson thinks of himself primarily as a philosopher, and the bulk of his writing has been critical and philosophical, from *The Outsider* to his most recent *Introduction to the New Existentialism*. Although his "Outsider Cycle" (*The Outsider*, *Religion and the Rebel*, *The Age of Defeat*, *The Strength to Dream*, *The Origins of the Sexual Impulse*, *Beyond the Outsider*) is a sustained attempt to

define a new synthesis of evolutionary humanism and phenomenological existentialism, he is no systematic philosopher. He is rather a man thinking through his ideas in print, a philosopher who feels, to use Emerson's description of the wise writer, "that the ends of study and composition are best answered by announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit."

Wilson is as "a god in ruins" who must only be awakened in order to live, not because he is "Anglo-Saxon and empirical" but because he is specifically rational philosophy than Emerson's, but more faulty than creative intuition. By phenomenological methods and extend moments of vision like Nietzsche's mystic's vision of unity with God, can expand the "geography" of "the world of the inner mind." Wilson also find himself part of a larger identity, life fully "to purpose and evolution." Perhaps the brief account in the *Introduction to the New*

*A Thoughtful
Way To
Remember
Your Friends
At Christmas...*

man's experience of his inner freedom consists of a clash between two visions: the rational, and our vision of contingency; our everyday feeling of limitation cannot be reduced to simpler terms. The full battery of phenomenological methods of contingency, upon the problem of how to reveal how the spirit of freedom overcomes the complexities and safety devices of life. It suggests mental disciplines through which to be averted.

Wilson's absolute need for religion with a rational method is one of synthesis, a bringing together of the rational and the irrational. He is striving to reach a new synthesis of the rational, Wittgenstein and Whitehead on the one hand and Shaw on the other. It is a bold attempt, but one that does interest and concern me is that Wilson, like Shaw, has discovered a way to art rather than philosophy to shape his life. A shift similar to his earlier turning from science to art, he puts it in the postscript to the new edition of his novels that can be said in a work of fiction that are not fiction, and although he has by no means abandoned his commitment strongly to fiction (and drama) to bring his

"What I would like to do," Wilson said in a preface to one of his novels, "—what I feel it will one day be possible to do—is to write a white dwarf of a book, a book that is so dense that it can be read fifty times. Not a book of ideas, in the sense that my *Outsider* is a book of ideas, but a book that deals with life with the same directness that we are compelled to live it." His novels show him to be searching for a form, a proper metaphor, a true hero to give his ideas the directness of life. And the direction of his search has been toward more imaginative and artificial

The Hollins Critic

EDITORS—John Rees Moore, Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

EDITORIAL BOARD—George Garrett, Daniel Hoffman, Howard Nemerov, Walter Sullivan, Benedict Kiely, Robert Scholes, R. H. W. Dillard, William Jay Smith

COVER ARTIST—Lewis O. Thompson

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS—Elizabeth Tunstall

Published five times a year, in the months of February, April, June, August, and October, by Hollins College, Virginia. Second class postage paid at Hollins College, Virginia 24020.

All material appearing in *The Hollins Critic* is the property of the editors. No unsolicited manuscripts can be considered.

The Hollins Critic is one dollar a year (\$1.50 in Canada and elsewhere).

snatched away before he has assimilated it and recover from the shock. And if a writer keeps on once he has been dismissed by the critical mentioned; he becomes an invisible man. Like later, but only after he has been lost to his consciousness of knowing what he is doing and writing.

Colin Wilson's example is, of course, the book, *The Outsider*, published in 1956 which was critical and popular success. One critic wrote one morning and found himself famous has taneous and universal acclaim." When his appeared the following year, it was as universal which followed over the last ten years have been on the whole they have been more ignored majority of the reading public, Colin Wilson man, remembered only for his early success and beyond that success and despite its attendant

The publication in England of Wilson's *The Listener* that it was time the literary world was spring roused, however, a revival of critical Robert Nye, in *The Guardian*, called Wilson writers of his generation." In this country, *The Outsider* by Arkham House, the small publishing house August Derleth to print the works of H. P. Lovecraft tradition. Since the tiny advertising budget on

critical inertia will probably preclude much serious mention of the novel in the American press, I should like here to greet its appearance and to discuss Wilson's novels and his development as a novelist of independence and real ability.

Of course, Colin Wilson thinks of himself primarily as a philosopher, and the bulk of his writing has been critical and philosophical, from *The Outsider* to his most recent *Introduction to the New Existentialism*. Although his "Outsider Cycle" (*The Outsider*, *Religion and the Rebel*, *The Age of Defeat*, *The Strength to Dream*, *The Origins of the Sexual Impulse*, *Beyond the Outsider*) is a sustained attempt to

Last year so many of our subscribers took advantage of our Christmas offer, that we are repeating it this year.

For only \$1.00 (\$1.50 in Canada and elsewhere) we will send all five issues of *The Hollins Critic* for 1968 to anyone you designate, together with an attractive gift card. And . . .

If the recipient isn't already a *Critic* subscriber, we'll also send, at no additional cost, the December issue of *The Critic*, featuring Louis D. Rubin, Jr.'s essay review of the important new novel by William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

Won't you, therefore, list the names and addresses of friends you'd like to have receive *The Hollins Critic* during 1968? And send them along, with a check for \$1 for each subscriber, in the enclosed self-addressed, postage-paid envelope?

define a new synthesis of evolutionary humanism and phenomenological existentialism, he is no systematic philosopher. He is rather a man thinking through his ideas in print, a philosopher who feels, to use Emerson's description of the wise writer, "that the ends of study and composition are best answered by announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit."

Like Emerson, he sees man as "a god in ruins" who must only be awakened in order to fulfill his godly potential, but because he is "Anglo-Saxon and empirical" by nature and heritage, his is a more specifically rational philosophy than Emerson's, depending more upon the analytical faculty than creative intuition. By phenomenological analysis, he argues, man can capture and extend moments of vision like Nietzsche's on the hilltop in the storm or the mystic's vision of unity with God, can expand human consciousness, and can chart "a geography" of "the world of the inner mind." As he fulfills his own identity, he will also find himself part of a larger identity, life itself; he will be able to attune himself fully "to purpose and evolution." Perhaps the clearest statement of his aims is this brief account in the *Introduction to the New Existentialism*:

The 'new existentialism' accepts man's experience of his inner freedom as basic and irreducible. Our lives consist of a clash between two visions: our vision of this inner freedom, and our vision of contingency; our intuition of freedom and power, and our everyday feeling of limitation and boredom. The problem cannot be reduced to simpler terms. The 'new existentialism' concentrates the full battery of phenomenological analysis upon the everyday sense of contingency, upon the problem of 'life-devaluation.' This analysis helps to reveal how the spirit of freedom is trapped and destroyed; it uncovers the complexities and safety devices in which freedom dissipates itself. It suggests mental disciplines through which this waste of freedom can be averted.

His is an attempt to satisfy man's absolute need for religion with a rational understanding of his own nature. His method is one of synthesis, a bringing together of science and art, of reason and imagination. He is striving to reach a new synthesis of the ideas of William James, Husserl, Wittgenstein and Whitehead on the one hand, and Blake, Dostoevski, Wells and Shaw on the other. It is a bold attempt, and it is not my place to evaluate it here. What does interest and concern me is that more and more, like his direct literary forebears Wells and Shaw, he has discovered the limitations of exposition and is turning to art rather than philosophy to shape and transmit his ideas and belief—a shift similar to his earlier turning from science to philosophy. He has recognized, as he puts it in the postscript to the new edition of *The Outsider*, that "There are things that can be said in a work of fiction that are unsayable in a work of philosophy," and although he has by no means abandoned his philosophical writing, he has turned strongly to fiction (and drama) to bring his ideas artistically alive.

"What I would like to do," Wilson said in a preface to one of his novels, "—what I feel it will one day be possible to do—is to write a white dwarf of a book, a book that is so dense that it can be read fifty times. Not a book of ideas, in the sense that my *Outsider* is a book of ideas, but a book that deals with life with the same directness that we are compelled to live it." His novels show him to be searching for a form, a proper metaphor, a true hero to give his ideas the directness of life. And the direction of his search has been toward more imaginative and artificial

means which convey truth by effect more than by statement, by art more than by philosophy. Of his seven novels, the first three use the traditional form and methods of psychological realism, the fourth breaks out of those strictures by exploiting the freedom of the diary form, and the three most recent use openly artificial popular forms (detective and science fiction) to develop metaphoric and parabolic novels of vital imagination, of what Wilson calls "existential realism."

The creation of a hero has progressed as steadily as the search for a proper form. The thesis of *The Outsider* is "that religion begins with the stimulus which heroism supplies to the imagination," so that the hero is essential to the religious intensity necessary to evolutionary purposiveness. He is a hero detached by the condition of a complex and possibly dying civilization from the social and political problems of that civilization. As a part of an evolutionary vanguard, he must strive for essential power and disregard temporal power; he serves a saintly function by awakening us to our true selves by persuasion and example. He is a personification of the vision of inner freedom, of human possibility as Wilson describes it in the *Introduction to the New Existentialism*:

He has glimpses of a joy that is beyond anything possible to the born coward: the ecstasy of power and freedom. He knows about the miseries and insecurities of human existence, about weakness and contingency. But he does not believe in them, since he is certain that freedom is an absolute power. He knows that man is only subject to pain and misery insofar as he allows himself to be dominated by the coward, and that most human misfortune is another name for stupidity and self-pity. Consequently, he is inclined to suspect that even death may be a disguised form of suicide, and that human contingency will prove to be an illusion in the light of ultimate freedom. In short, he is totally the optimist and the adventurer; he cannot believe that human reason, powered by the human will to freedom, can ever encounter insurmountable obstacles.

The hero is any man who can see the "exit" from the human dilemma, and "is capable of making the choice that the insight demands." To create such a hero, to make him artistically plausible requires a newer and more imaginatively flexible art than that afforded by ordinary realism, so that properly the development of the hero progresses along with Wilson's search for a form; he takes on substance from novel to novel as Wilson searches for metaphors strong enough on which to build heroic novels. All of the novels are concerned with the same basic theme, an awakening and activating of the slumbering god in man, so that to some degree they are repetitive, but they are better seen as variations and developments of a theme, each one growing out of the preceding ones. Together they reveal the steady growth of Wilson's talent and his progressive creation of a viable hero for an existential realism.

Ritual in the Dark (1960), *Adrift in Soho* (1961), and *The World of Violence* (1963, in America: *The Violent World of Hugh Greene*), Colin Wilson's first three novels are all novels of initiation, of a young man's first painful encounters with experience and reality, and of the heightened awareness he gains from that initiation. They are concerned with the birth, the first real awakening of the hero to his evolutionary purpose. As in most religious initiation rites, the subject of the ritual is primarily passive, acted upon by the experience which will ultimately allow him to act himself in experience. Missing, however, is the wise older man who traditionally

Colin Wilson

Born in Leicester, England, on June 26, 1931, Colin Wilson was somewhat of a prodigy with hopes of becoming a scientist, despite an unremarkable scholastic record at Gateway Secondary School, which he left at 16. His father was a shoe factory worker.

After a variety of jobs around England and a period spent in Paris and Strasbourg, he began writing his first book, *The Outsider*, late in 1954. The book became a best seller as well as a critical success, but his second book, *Religion and the Rebel*, was met by a universally negative critical response. He has since written books of philosophy and criticism, eight novels (*The Black Room* to be published this fall in England), and several plays. He is presently also working on a screenplay of *Ritual in the Dark*.

He is married to the former Joy Stewart and has two children. He also has a son by a previous marriage. Wilson was writer-in-residence at Hollins College in 1966-67 and is currently at the University of Washington in Seattle.

—E.T.C.

guides the youth through the initiation, for Wilson's hero is alone, existentially isolated, able to seek advice from his elders but forced finally and always to discover and decide for himself. The three young initiates in these novels are all thinkers, budding philosophers to whom learning is in great part living; they are involved in understanding, while the more fully developed heroes of the later novels are involved in transforming understanding into action, idea into being.

Gerard Sorme, in *Ritual in the Dark*, is a young man possessed of an incubating vision, but he is not sure of himself so that his moments of vision are matched by feelings of vastation and utter meaninglessness. "There was a futility about physical existence that frightened him," but, as Wilson was to describe it later, he "sits in his room and hurls his mind at the problem of the negative nature of freedom." Gerard is an outsider, a man who has instinctively rejected everyday reality, "feeling that it is somehow boring and unsatisfying, like a hypnotized man eating sawdust under the belief that it is eggs and bacon." He is an outsider with a growing subjectivity, a developing harmony with the life force itself, and his initiation consists primarily of his confrontation with another outsider who is being destroyed by his sense of alienation and frustration. In *Religion and the Rebel*, Wilson described the novel, then in progress, as one "about two Outsiders, one based on Nietzsche, and the other on Jack the Ripper." Gerard, like the young Nietzsche, is on the brink of transforming his alienation into creative awareness; Austin Nunne, like Jack the Ripper, is releasing his frustration in a brutal series of sex murders. Nunne succumbs to and is destroyed by "the insanity of the age," the life-negating despair which convinces modern man too often of the loss of his freedom, while Gerard transcends his sense of limitation, develops an active subjectivity while makes the living world around him truly his, and expands his consciousness and vision to accept the complexity of experience and being (a continuing epiphany akin to Wordsworth's mystical moment on Westminster Bridge).

Books by Cpln Wilson

THE OUTSIDER

London: Victor Gollancz, 1956. 21/.
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956. \$4.
 New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1967. \$1.95. (pa.)

RELIGION AND THE REBEL

London: Victor Gollancz, 1957. 21/.
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957. \$4.
 Toronto: Bond Street Publishers, 1957. \$3.75.

THE AGE OF DEFEAT

London: Victor Gollancz, 1959. 16/.
 As **THE STATURE OF MAN:**
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959. \$3.
 Toronto: Doubleday, 1959. \$3.

RITUAL IN THE DARK

London: Victor Gollancz, 1960. 18/.
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960. \$4.95.
 Toronto: Doubleday, 1960. \$3.75.
 New York: Popular Library, Inc., 1961. \$.50. (pa.)

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF MURDER (with Pat Pitman)

London: Arthur Barker, 1961. 30/.
 Toronto: McClelland, 1961. \$6.
 New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962. \$5.95.
 London: Pan Books Ltd., 1964. 7/6. (pa.)

ADRIFT IN SOHO

London: Victor Gollancz, 1961. 16/.
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961. \$3.50.
 Toronto: Doubleday, 1961. \$4.25.
 London: Pan Books Ltd., 1965. 3/6. (pa.)

THE STRENGTH TO DREAM

London: Victor Gollancz, 1962. 25/.
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962. \$4.50.
 Toronto: Doubleday, 1962. \$5.

THE WORLD OF VIOLENCE

London: Victor Gollancz, 1963. 21/.
 Toronto: Doubleday, 1963. \$4.25.
 London: Pan Books Ltd., 1965. 6/. (pa.)
 As **THE VIOLENT WORLD OF HUGH GREENE:**
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963. \$3.95.

ORIGINS OF THE SEXUAL IMPULSE

London: Arthur Barker, 1963. 28/.
 New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963. \$4.95.
 London: Panther Books, 1966. 7/6. (pa.)

MAN WITHOUT A SHADOW

London: Arthur Barker, 1963. 21/.
 London: Pan Books Ltd., 1966. 6/. (pa.)
 As **THE SEX DIARY OF GERARD SORME:**
 New York: The Dial Press, 1963. \$4.95.
 New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1964. \$.75. (pa.)

NECESSARY DOUBT

London: Arthur Barker, 1964. 21/.
 New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964. \$4.95.
 Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1964. \$4.75.
 New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1966. \$.75. (pa.)

RASPUTIN AND THE FALL OF THE ROMANOVs

London: Arthur Barker, 1964. 25/.
 New York: Farrar, Straus and Co., 1964. \$5.50.
 London: Panther Books Ltd., 1966. 5/. (pa.)

THE BRANDY OF THE DAMNED

London: John Baker, 1964. 25/.
 Revised edition:

CHORDS AND DISCORDS. New York: Crown, 1966. \$4.95.

COLIN WILSON ON MUSIC. London: Pan Books Ltd., 1967. 5/. (pa.)

BEYOND THE OUTSIDER

London: Arthur Barker, 1965. 30/.
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965. \$4.95.
 London: Pan Books Ltd., 1966. 5/. (pa.)

EAGLE AND EARWIG

London: John Baker, 1965. 30/.
 Toronto: Nelson, Foster & Scott, 1965. \$6.75.

SEX AND THE INTELLIGENT TEENAGER

London: Arrow Books Ltd., 1966. 5/. (pa.)

THE GLASS CAGE

London: Arthur Barker, 1966. 21/.
 New York: Random House, 1967. \$4.95.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EXISTENTIALISM

London: Hutchinson, 1966. 25/.
 Toronto: Nelson, Foster & Scott, 1966. \$6.95.
 Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967. \$4.95.

THE MIND PARASITES

London: Arthur Barker, 1967. 21/.
 Sauk City, Wis.: Arkham House, 1967. \$4.00.

—R.H.W.D.

The confrontation is a dramatic one, for it takes place in the last weeks of Nunne's freedom and the terror resulting from his fear of that freedom. At first, Gerard sees Nunne as a fellow spirit, a rebel against the pervasive futility of ordinary life, and this belief continues even after Gerard discovers that Nunne is the White-chapel murderer. But stimulated by his sexual affairs (*loving*, but not really *love* affairs) with Caroline, a young drama student, and her aunt Gertrude, Gerard gains a human insight into and feeling for Nunne and at the same time a sense of superiority to him, for Nunne is not truly a rebel against disorder and meaninglessness, but only a victim of his own belief in disorder and his inability to impose meaning upon experience. But Gerard remains detached despite his new understanding, for he expresses that new vision not by decisive action but by a passive acceptance, a refusal to despair. He has learned from Nunne's failure, but he has not taken part in correcting the wrongs caused by that failure nor the wrongs that gave rise to it. But he has made the first step; he has not given in to complexity, but has rather decided to be of complexity; he does not choose between Gertrude and Caroline but maintains his involvement with both:

In spite of his tiredness, he felt a curious sense of certainty, of order. It was as if he could see inside himself and watch processes that had been invisible before. There was no longer a desire for simplicity; an accumulation of self-knowledge had made it less important. . . . A curious elation stirred in him, an acceptance of complexity. He stared at his face in the mirror, saying aloud:
 What do you do now, you stupid old bastard?
 He grinned at himself, and twitched his nose like a rabbit.

Adrift in Soho picks up the lightness and comic spirit of Gerard's mime in the mirror. In it, Harry Preston is initiated into free life and complexity by the bohemians of Soho whose careless lives attract Harry away from the problems of life and ultimately release him again to those problems but with the strength and desire to solve them. He rejects the bohemian way ("For better or worse I am a bourgeois"), but he gains from his experience an insight into himself which frees him for a life larger than the self, an understanding that the future is an extension of his belief in himself, that the future flows from within. He realizes that "there is no such thing as future success. It is either there all the time, or it is non-existent."

The novel is slighter than *Ritual in the Dark*, but it does develop the moral understanding a step further, pressing acceptance toward affirmation:

It was true that the only thing wrong with the world is human beings. But perhaps one day there would be a new type of human being who would understand that time is the same thing as eternity, that life is a million times more desirable than any man ever realized; that there is no such thing as evil, because the only reality is the power house, the dynamo that drives the world.

Although Harry finds an artist, Ricky Prelati, who approaches the "new type of human being," his real victory is, like Gerard's, the gaining of an insight into possibility, a glimpse of the dynamo. He manages, also, to move beyond acceptance to choice, even if his choice is one of rejection. That rejection is a necessary second step toward action and vocation.

If the dynamo that he sees is essentially Shaw's life force, the idea of the new man is very much H. G. Wells', as he stated it in such novels as *The Food of the Gods*, *In the Days of the Comet*, *Men Like Gods*, *The Croquet Player* and *Star Begotten*. It is appropriate, then, that Wilson's third novel, *The World of Violence*, which carries the hero a step closer to the new man, should sound very much in its first half like one of Wells' social novels (*Tono-Bungay* or *The New Machiavelli*). The tone is serious and comic at once, a wry Wellsian tone which is both warmly human and curiously detached and objective. The novel even comes complete with a set of eccentric uncles, each of whom has a distorted but true glimpse of the nature of things and all of whom influence young Hugh Greene in an intellectual and human way:

My grandfather had died of delirium tremens at the age of forty, and there is a tradition in the family that his uncle . . . was either Jack the Ripper or Peter the Painter (the leader of the Sidney Street Gang). My father's Uncle Sam (of whom I shall write later) was definitely peculiar, but had a talent for making money, so that the family never tried to have him certified. But Uncle Nick had once spent a year in a mental home, after he declared that he was a bird and jumped off the roof.

Springing from a background of madness and violence, however comic it may have been, Hugh Greene, the narrator of the novel and a young mathematical prodigy, becomes obsessed early with violence and the search for pure truth in chaos. Mathematics offers him an intellectual escape from the external violence and chaos, but it cannot free him from the fact of his own human inner darkness. His obsession and the frustration he feels in being able to do nothing about the way things are lead him into a Nietzschean belief in the will to power beyond good and evil, and also into an adolescent attempt to combat senseless violence with a murderous but seemingly purposeful violence of his own. His narrow escape in a scrape with a gang of Teddy boys which ends with his shooting one of his assailants, and his first sexual experiences, and his meeting with a half-witted sex criminal and murderer (modelled after Charley Peace), startle him out of his obsession and enable him to understand the lesson of his mad Uncle Sam who locked himself permanently away in a dark attic in order to "treat directly with God in behalf of my fellow human insects." He learns that to fight violence with more senseless violence is to surrender the real fight with the real problems inherent in and beyond violence, those of man's evolution and his sleeping consciousness. Like Gerard and Harry, he transcends his early intuitions and attitudes in a discovery of vocation, a conviction that he, too, like his Uncle

Sam, should take up man's struggle in the presence of God. His way is to aid in the evolution of a new science of man in the universe by thinking and by writing such books as *The Structure of Language* and *Mathematical and Phenomenological Analysis*. Hugh carries the hero from acceptance through new conviction to action, but his action is of description and understanding rather than doing and being. His is still a transitional stage in the development of the hero and the new man.

All three of these novels, then, develop a single initiatory metaphor of human awakening similar to one of Emerson's in "Self-Reliance," a fable "of the sot who was picked up dead-drunk in the street, carried to the duke's house, washed and dressed and laid in the duke's bed, and, on his waking, treated with all obsequious ceremony like the duke, and assured that he had been insane," which "symbolizes 'so well the state of man, who is in this world a sort of sot, but now and then wakes up, exercises his reason and finds himself a true prince.'" But the success of the novels rests in great part not on the metaphor but on the details of the narrative, the bits and pieces of color and flavor which are essential to realistic fiction. Wilson's purpose suffers, as he recognized, by the limitations of traditional realism, which suffices as the tool for fashioning novels of awakening but is useless, with its dependence on the present and the known, for the creation of metaphors for the shape of things to come, the world of action beyond the awakening.

Man Without a Shadow (1963, in *America: The Sex Diary of Gerard Sorme*) is Wilson's first attempt to break out of the fetters of realism. Using the form of the philosophical diary and the sex novel, he found the freedom to present his understanding of the life force in an elemental form. "The sexual urge," he has written elsewhere, "particularly in its purer forms, seems to reveal an underlying purpose. In the light of sex, we can occasionally glimpse the purpose of history." Gerard Sorme, already "awake" and trying to shape vision into experience, meditates in his sex diary on the insights gained from sexual experience on his vocation of overcoming the temptations of freedom and of disciplining himself for the task of beginning to map the unexplored inner mind. Caradoc Cunningham, a sex magician modelled after Aleister Crowley, is Gerard's foil in this novel. Both have discovered the revelatory orgasmic power leading through and beyond sex, but Cunningham is prey to his own weakness and an over-awareness of society; he is concerned with surfaces. Gerard, on the contrary, finds meaning beyond society ("I am evolution made conscious," he says at one point) and uses the sexual power for his own ends; he is concerned with essentials.

The novel is one of Wilson's most interesting, for the ideas are at the surface, and the sexual intensity drives them along. Gerard settles in, at the end of the novel, to his vocation (and his new wife, an example of his ability to exercise choice which he lacked with Gertrude and Caroline), but, like Hugh Greene, his vocation is primarily intellectual and descriptive. He is the author of *The Methods and Techniques of Self-Deception*, not the new hero who must act in the world without self-deception. He is a transitional hero, as his diary is a transitional novel, for in his three most recent novels Wilson moves into new forms which plunge their heroes from thought into action, from understanding into being. The new active heroes and the more imaginative modes of fiction all reflect Colin Wilson's own determination to carry his beliefs into action, to move from philosophy and criticism to art. Or, as he put it in an essay in *Eagle and Earwig*, "intellectual discussion becomes a bore; only some

form of action can redeem the existential thinker. And the only form of action that is meaningful is creative." The three novels, *Necessary Doubt* (1964), *The Glass Cage* (1966), and *The Mind Parasites* (1967), two detective novels and a science fiction novel, are his most imaginative, and they carry his hero from awakening into purposive and creative action. They are, to my mind, his best novels.

The title, *Necessary Doubt*, of Wilson's fifth novel is borrowed from the theology of Paul Tillich, and the central character is an aging existential theologian, Karl Zweig. He has become a television personality in England (on a show called "Ask the Experts"), although he is still an active thinker after thirty years of writing, but both his Christianity and his existentialism have failed him, have led him "to feel stoical about my life—to accept defeat as inevitable." By a series of coincidences, he finds himself involved with a motley set of associates in a private manhunt to stop one of his former pupils (the son of an old friend and associate) from continuing a series of murders of old men which he has apparently accomplished by means of a new habit-destroying drug and powerful hypnotic suggestion.

The stimulus and tension of the chase along with the sexual tension and desire which he feels and satisfies with Natasha Gardner, the wife of one of his colleagues in the manhunt, shatter Zweig's complacency and prepare the way for a new awakening. As events progress, Gustav Neumann, the quarry in the hunt, appears to him less and less a murderer and more and more a genuine "new man," working on the fringes of legality and morality to discover for the human race a means to new and higher conditions of consciousness. Neumann, cornered but not desperate, explains to him how the drug, neurocaine, was of his father's making and how, after his father's death, he has continued to experiment with it to discover its capabilities and proper uses. The drug destroys habits of thought and frees the brain from its fetters, but it gives its user "a sensation of existing in a desert of freedom" which is destructive to a mind weak in will and belief. The old men were, then, victims of themselves rather than of Neumann.

Reawakened to a new youth of insight, Zweig turns from his life's career as a theologian, which he recognizes has always been a shield to protect him from the necessity of acting, and joins Neumann in his quest for a method of freeing the mind from its purely physical limitations to a new consciousness and vitality. As he explains it, "You remember what Gustav said as he went out: 'I need your help.' His way can provide the vision, but what good is vision without purpose? A man needs a lifetime of discipline to make use of such a vision." Age and youth, reason and imagination, purpose and vision, all are united in heroic action as detective and "murderer" break together the conventions of a limited consciousness in order to free that consciousness to its own future. The novel is a metaphor for thought's freeing itself by necessary doubt to creative belief, an artistic rendering of an "unsayable" moment of truth.

The Glass Cage is also a detective novel and a reworking and development of the basic situation of *Ritual in the Dark*. In it, Damon Reade, a Blake scholar and recluse, is initiated and awakened by his love for a young girl and his need for human communion, and, like a medieval knight, he puts his love (and his new awareness) to the test in action; he goes to London from his home in the Lake District to solve a series of brutal sex murders which have involved the scrawling of quotations from Blake on walls by the bodies. Where Zweig was a man of reason,

A Vision Of The Goddess Kali As A Childhood Sweetheart

Modelled after the garden path, Lucille

Like a bride, she drew me down the aisle,
Gesturing, "Fear not my patronage";
And, dying then of her triumphant smile,
I met you in the garden of my age.

"Fear not, beloved!", says your hand, Lucille.
Decked as a bride, beside the pleasant fountain
You attend me; and again my will
Winds home upon the silken clew you spun.

The rising moon, above the garden wall,
Renews her countenance. Breath of my breath,
With either hand you grant my boon, Lucille,
And lead me, smiling, up the garden path.

—JOHN ALEXANDER ALLEN

The Hollins Critic

Box 677

Hollins College, Virginia, 24020

☐ Please renew my subscription to *The Hollins Critic* for 1968. (\$1 in U.S., \$1.50 elsewhere)

☐ Send gift subscriptions at \$1 each (\$1.50 in Canada and overseas) to the following persons:

1. _____ (zip code) _____

2. _____ (zip code) _____

3. _____ (zip code) _____

4. _____ (zip code) _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____

Zip Code _____

This envelope requires no postage; fold down flap and seal here.

whose memory the novel is dedicated, and as a detective (and as a hero) is a product of imagination and imagination like that of Poe's

George Sundheim, is, like Austin Nunne and a new man; modelled after Rasputin, he is a gargantuan appetites, who is so afraid of inheriting madness that he has crippled his action and energy rather than their master. The urban world which he abhors, solves the Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Judge and His* ice is served in the best and most humane the true nature of the "evil" being punished. He is on the strength of his vision, and Damon Reade, doing, no superman but a real man. The deal of pain and illness to be born anew with Reade assumes responsibility at the end of his metaphoric structure, appropriately the image and the promise of the future.

Derleth, *The Mind Parasites* moves further into a more active and comprehensive metaphor. Wilson

outlined it earlier in the *Introduction to the New Existentialism*:

To express the problem in science-fiction terms: it would seem that there is some mysterious agency that wishes to hold men back, to prevent them from gaining full use of their powers. It is as if men contained an invisible parasite, whose job is to keep man unaware of his freedom. Blake called this parasite 'the spectre.' In certain moments of vitality and inspiration, the spectre releases his hold, and man is suddenly

form of action can redeem the existential thinker. And the only form of action that is meaningful is creative." The three novels, *Necessary Doubt* (1964), *The Glass Cage* (1966), and *The Mind Parasites* (1967), two detective novels and a science fiction novel, are his most imaginative, and they move his hero from awakening into purposive and creative action. They are, to

The title, *Necessary Doubt*, of Wilson's theology of Paul Tillich, and the central character, Karl Zweig. He has become a television personality ("Ask the Experts"), although he is still a writer, but both his Christianity and his heroism lead him "to feel stoical about my life—to accept coincidences, he finds himself involved with a manhunt to stop one of his former pupils from continuing a series of murders of old men by means of a new habit-destroying drug."

The stimulus and tension of the chase which he feels and satisfies with Natasha G. in the manhunt, shatter Zweig's complacent awakening. As events progress, Gustav Neumann to him less and less a murderer and more a man on the fringes of legality and morality to new and higher conditions of consciousness. Neumann explains to him how the drug, neurocaine, after his father's death, he has continued to use its capabilities and proper uses. The drug destroys from its fetters, but it gives its user "a sense of power which is destructive to a mind weak in victims of themselves rather than of Neumann."

Reawakened to a new youth of insight, Neumann, a theologian, which he recognizes has always been the necessity of acting, and joins Neumann in his mind from its purely physical limitations. He explains it, "You remember what Gustav Neumann said. His way can provide the vision, but what he needs is a lifetime of discipline to make use of his vision and imagination, purpose and vision, all of which are broken together the conventions of the past that consciousness to its own future. The vision itself by necessary doubt to creative belief in the moment of truth."

The Glass Cage is also a detective novel and a reworking and development of the basic situation of *Ritual in the Dark*. In it, Damon Reade, a Blake scholar and recluse, is initiated and awakened by his love for a young girl and his need for human communion, and, like a medieval knight, he puts his love (and his new awareness) to the test in action; he goes to London from his home in the Lake District to solve a series of brutal sex murders which have involved the scrawling of quotations from Blake on walls by the bodies. Where Zweig was a man of reason,

THE HOLLINS CRITIC
BOX 677
HOLLINS COLLEGE,
VIRGINIA, 24020

BUSINESS REPLY MAIL
First Class Permit No. 819, Roanoke, Virginia



A Vision Of The Goddess Kali As A Childhood Sweetheart

You've led me up the garden path, Lucille.
I say that, though it isn't really true.
The maze I tread began in grammar school,
Thanks to your eyes, and it will end with you.

Commencement day, when Mrs. Grady stood
To ply her trade in the assembly hall,
I felt the virtue of your maidenhood
Go forth and name me to the principal.

High on the stage, in one propitious hand
She held my prize, a ribboned *Little Men*;
And bid me, with the other, understand
The hungry love a mother lends her children.

Like a bride, she drew me down the aisle,
Gesturing, "Fear not my patronage";
And, dying then of her triumphant smile,
I met you in the garden of my age.

"Fear not, beloved!," says your hand, Lucille.
Decked as a bride, beside the pleasant fountain
You attend me; and again my will
Winds home upon the silken clew you spun.

The rising moon, above the garden wall,
Renews her countenance. Breath of my breath,
With either hand you grant my boon, Lucille,
And lead me, smiling, up the garden path.

—JOHN ALEXANDER ALLEN

Reade is, like John Cowper Powys to whose memory the novel is dedicated, an instinctive nature mystic, and his success as a detective (and as a hero) is a product of a fusion of vision and reason, of ratiocination and imagination like that of Poe's Dupin.

The murderer in *The Glass Cage*, George Sundheim, is, like Austin Nunne and Carodoc Cunningham, a distortion of the new man; modelled after Rasputin, he is a man of enormous congenital energy and gargantuan appetites, who is so afraid (and, as it turns out, for no reason) of inheriting madness that he has crippled his mind and become a victim of his imagination and energy rather than their master. Damon Reade tracks Sundheim through the urban world which he abhors, solves the crime, and, like Inspector Barlach in Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Judge and His Hangman*, manipulates events so that justice is served in the best and most humane manner, tempered by his understanding of the true nature of the "evil" being punished. The reclusive mystic acts in the human world on the strength of his vision, and Damon Reade becomes himself a hero, being and doing, no superman but a real man. The serpent who changes his skin in an ordeal of pain and illness to be born anew (Sundheim's pet boa constrictor for which Reade assumes responsibility at the end of novel) is at the center of the novel's metaphoric structure, appropriately the emblem of evil become the emblem of change and the promise of the future.

Written at the suggestion of August Derleth, *The Mind Parasites* moves further from realism and is built upon a most effective and comprehensive metaphor. Wilson outlined it earlier in the *Introduction to the New Existentialism*:

To express the problem in science-fiction terms: it would seem that there is some mysterious agency that wishes to hold men back, to prevent them from gaining full use of their powers. It is as if men contained an invisible parasite, whose job is to keep man unaware of his freedom. Blake called this parasite 'the spectre'. In certain moments of vitality and inspiration, the spectre releases his hold, and man is suddenly

dazzlingly aware of what he could do with his life, his freedom. . . . On the other hand, if man can become fully conscious of the enemy and turn the full battery of his attention on it, the problem is solved. Man will solve the problem of 'alienation from the source of power, meaning and purpose,' and a new phase of evolution will have begun, the phase of the truly human . . .

The novel is both Volume III of the *Cambridge History of the Nuclear Age* (2014) and the new gospel of Gilbert Austin, an archeologist who, in communion with a handful of colleagues, defeats the mind parasites and sets man on the next leg of his evolutionary journey, only to "vanish in such a way that the human race could never be certain of his death." The novel both parodies and develops the manner and situation of H. P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow Out of Time*, and uses the full panoply of science fiction devices—rockets and space travel, ESP, telekinesis and even a "neutron dater" lifted from John Taine's *Before the Dawn*. With good humor (one of the characters did "a term on Wilson and Husserl" at college) and real imaginative force, Wilson combines the familiar pieces of science fiction in a new way to form his own myth, a metaphor for his own vision of human destiny. His heroes commune to become a larger self; from the new perspective, they are able to view other men both as apes and as brothers; they form an evolutionary vanguard for the future and leave the account of their victory (the gospel according to Gilbert Austin) behind to guide their fellow men in taking the evolutionary leap. In some ways less emotionally powerful than *Necessary Doubt* or *The Glass Cage*, *The Mind Parasites* nevertheless is the fullest picture of the new hero as he can be and an apocalyptic parable of Wilson's insight into the nature of things. It and those other two most recent novels are meaningful examples of an imaginative and transforming art, an existential realism.

The novels of Colin Wilson are, then, a developing and growing artistic expression of the serpent's statement in Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* that "every dream could be willed into creation by those strong enough to believe in it." He has used literary forms as he has needed them to create love and life from the crude materials of sex, violence and death, and, as he says in the preface to *The Mind Parasites*, speaking of his use of detective and science fiction, "In every case, it has been my aim to raise the form to a level of intellectual seriousness not usually found in the *genre*, but never to lose sight of the need to entertain." He has succeeded in that purpose, and his novel in progress, *The Black Room*, a spy novel and therefore less cosmic than *The Mind Parasites*, will, as the excerpts published recently in *The Minnesota Review* indicate, also make effective and meaningful use of a popular form.

Wilson once said that "a good novel can't be faked," for it can only show "what it is actually like to be the writer." If doing and being are somehow one, his novels, with their developing manner and matter, their movement toward a viable existential realism of inner as well as outer truth, show Colin Wilson to be a young man of real vision who has never ceased to grow and whose promise, for that reason, outshadows even his present achievement.

—R. H. W. DILLARD

SECOND CLASS
POSTAGE
PAID

at Roanoke, Virginia