The Odyssey Of A Dogged Optimist

Robert Meadley

Robert Meadley read
Colin Wilson's autobiography,
Dreaming To Some Purpose
This is the result:

THE ODYSSEY OF A DOGGED OPTIMIST

with an afterpiece called,
ALMERIC WISTER,
or THE BLIGHTERS BIT!

Guest Appearances by
JOHN AUBREY, GEORGE BORROW,
the Poet VIRGIL, LUCY, and JOE ORTON;
& the Long Arm of
TESTICLES THE TAUTOLOGIST!

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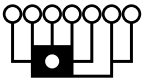

Also by Robert Meadley in Savoy Books
A Tea Dance at Savoy (2003)

1. The Serious Business

> *I left the crowd to gape and stare at the white marble Death Chamber, and, crossing South Fifth Avenue, walked along the western side of that thoroughfare to Bleecker Street. Then I turned to the right and stopped before a dingy shop which bore the sign:*
>
> Hawberk, Armorer
>
> Robert W. Chambers, ***The King in Yellow***

the mystery of naming

I was walking the dogs in Gledhow woods the other day, along the track by the lake, when we met a guy with a skittish young bitch, the sort of light-boned hound they send after foxes in the Lake District. The bitch stopped to play with my dogs, both male, and both unneutered, though no longer young. I'd have liked to discuss the bitch's ancestry, but the man—who I've never seen before, or since—seemed a bit harassed and in a hurry, and

walked on, calling the bitch to follow him. He called the bitch 'Rico'. I thought I'd misheard at first, but he had to repeat it several times before the bitch condescended to stop flirting and follow him.

It was really an inconsequential moment, but it left me with this nagging question: why on earth would you call a bitch 'Rico'? It doesn't matter. I'd just like to know.

Mind you, that's nothing to this one:

Back in the day, when I lived down in Liggertown, I lived for while in Clapham Old Town, and used to walk my dog on the Common.

We were walking across to The Windmill. It was a hot summer day. Gangs of roustabouts, involved in the preparations for the Country Show, were taking their lunchtime ease, lounging on rolls of paling fence that had been strategically piled beside the principle paths. Down the main path to the bandstand came a squattish medium-sized dog; quite old and a bit unlovely, but—to judge by the way he held his head—fairly pleased with himself. He had a stiff-legged gait with just a hint of scuttle. And the genitals of an elephant. They swung as he strutted. They seemed to fill the space between his front and back legs. The ground clearance of his enormous scrotum was minimal. Even a fairly modest pebble could have been hazardous.

Puffing along behind him with an ungainly trot, at a never-shrinking distance, was a flustered pink-faced man: balding, a bit overweight, at or about retirement age I would guess. The dog's lead hung limply from his hand. If it was a race, it was no contest. He hadn't even reached the Xeno's Paradox stage of making ground in vain.

"Cindy!" he called in an ineffectual voice. "Cindy!"

Like some poor Ancient Greek, he was doomed to run this gauntlet of bored roustabouts, women with children, and assorted passers-by. No-one said anything. What needed to be said? We just grinned English smiles, and exchanged dancing eye-contact.

"Cindy!" he was still calling as they dwindled towards Clapham Junction. "Cindy!"

Even the heat haze quivered with amusement.

It's a tricky business, this naming of things.

It's what did for Wittgenstein, as I remember. But he was too full of himself. He just wouldn't be told.

It's slippery stuff, language.
Different in everyone's mouth.

ecce homo

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley-sheaves,
The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
Of bold Sir Lancelot.

Tennyson, ***The Lady of Shalott***

Another who has suffered from the mystery of misnaming is Colin Wilson. He was one of the two original Angry Young Men, but since he wasn't angry he has always been somewhat bemused as to how he found himself there. Just happenstance really. There's usually a reason of sorts.

It begins, if I remember right, with an ambitious young journalist called Kenneth Allsop; an acolyte of Ken Tynan, the Kim Philby of British letters. The older among you may remember Allsop. He was employed by the BBC to represent the spirit of BBC2 for a while back in the black and white days.

Ken A wanted to puff a protégé of Ken T called John Osborne, who had written a play called *Look Back in Anger*. And he wanted to proclaim this as a revolutionary moment in the culture. (Well, it didn't take a genius to tell that the post-war claustrophobia was going to implode. We had *Rock Around The Clock*, for christ's sake. There was the beginnings of choice: you could be a winklepicker or a brothelcreeper man. Girls were showing off their knickers when they danced. Something was going on. Even if no good would come of it.) Anyway, to do this he had to suggest there was some evidence

of more general intellectual movement in the same direction. He needed A.N. Other.

Enter Colin Wilson, author of *The Outsider*. He had just achieved a sudden fame for producing at the age of twenty-five a serious critique of existentialism, after leaving school at sixteen, and researching and writing the book in the Reading Room of the British Museum (serious) while living on bread buns and sleeping rough on Hampstead Heath (romantic). He was good copy, even if his reputation did rest on a single book.

Ken snapped him up, lumped him in with John Osborne, and produced a piece titled The Angry Young Men.

It was more than a headline. It was a soundbite. It resonated in a culture that was irritated, stifled and bored. (When I describe the Fifties to our lads, they look at me as if I'm describing the Stone Age.) Things were going to change. We knew it. Even if we didn't know how or where.

For Ken's purposes, Colin had three wonderful qualities. He was working class, which was fashionable, he was photogenic, which is always useful, and he already had a legend. Added to which he had written a book on existentialism, which was vaguely understood to be an exotic continental form of British suburban miserablism, so he kind of fitted in with John Osborne.

The bedbugs of Bloomsbury had something to hop about. They took up Colin with enthusiasm. They wanted to be his friend. They wanted to help him belong.

But he didn't make it easy for them.

Colin thought, and said so, that they had misunderstood his book. He thought this because—for although he was clever, he was still quite green—he assumed that when they talked about his book, they'd read it. And that if they'd read it, they must have thought about it.

This just shows what an outsider his working class origins made him. A well-bred British writer knows that the first rule of survival is never read your friends' books. (And how they wanted to befriend him!) It makes it much more difficult to praise them. What you do is pick up the gist from the bits they insist on reading to you, if you are careless enough to pass within reading distance of them. You

only read your enemies' books, in order to savage them; and then you only skip-read to find the quotes you need—a technique learnt by most bright kids in the lower-sixth, or year 12 as it's called under our new Pol-Pot system of education.

Why, if a writer spent all his time reading, where would he find time to talk?

Colin could do both effortlessly, like Landseer drawing simultaneously with both hands. But Landseer had the savvy to keep it as parlour trick. Colin did it all the time. It was intolerable. How could you patronise a man—and every great authority from Ruskin to Eliot agreed that the working class existed to be patronised—who not only knew he was cleverer than you, but kept demonstrating it?

Colin was, and still seems to be, a romantic. He bounded with energy like one of those big dogs that keep jumping up at you. Clever though he was, and much though he had devoured, he had yet to learn that the cure for ignorance and stupidity is not education—though the ability to read and write is a powerful tool in the right hands—but muscular humility and grit, with a generous shot of low cunning to add wisdom.

He knew these people were educated. And he thought he knew what that meant.

He thought these people knew things. Real things. And that they wanted to know more.

He thought they wanted solutions to the problems they whinged on about.

He took them at face value.

He did not know the rules in this boudoir of the Lady of Shalott, and would insist on opening the window.

He did not fit in.

He had to go.

After that the ranks of the Angry Young men were filled by sickly recruits from the lower middle classes who knew their place, and could be relied on to wear the right ties and drink themselves to death slowly. John Braine was excellent value. He had a Yorkshire accent. You could pretend he was working class and show him off at parties. And there were hardcore British miserablists to be had

cheap in job-lots from a defunct movement called The Movement*, which was always more of a hoped-for movement; as their amused critics observed at the time, they needed more fibre in their diet.

Fortunately—since he could not take a hint—Colin decided unilaterally that if he stayed chattering at the chimps' tea party he would go insane, and took himself off to Cornwall to get time to think.

The press were savaging him for not playing the game. They had encouraged him to be pompous, as only a young man can. He had declared himself a genius—a word I dislike; it is always counterfeit to some degree. Now they turned on him. He was a fraud, an impostor. Why, he brazenly admitted—nay, insisted on saying and told us to our faces we were stupid for not seeing this ourselves—that he wasn't a miserablist of any sort, not even a continental one!

He wanted to overcome Despair!

Good Lord, if he succeeded the whole culture of the Home Counties would collapse. Without self-pity, how can the trivial feel superior?

It's against Nature!

The man was dangerous.

Miserablists would be begging in the streets!

It's only because this was England that he wasn't strung up from a lamppost or run out of town on a rail with a stiletto between his ribs. And even then, if he hadn't gone of his own accord, it might have been a close-run thing. The bedbugs still haven't forgiven him. They hate to see a healthy one escape.

fertile on stony ground

> … *he had laid violent hands on a book called* Gradus ad Parnassum*, i.e.,* A Step towards Parnassus*; on which account his master, who was a man of most wonderful wit and sagacity, is said to have told him he wished it might not prove in the event* Gradus ad patibulum*, i.e.,* A step towards the gallows.
>
> Fielding, ***Jonathan Wild***

*The Movement. Grew out of a group of Oxford undergraduates in the 1940s not fit enough—a common failing was myopia—to serve in the war.

Me? I was at school. I read *The Outsider* in my teens. I got titbits of literary gossip from my aunt, who had been at Oxford during the war, and loosely involved with *Isis,* before writing the sort of novels that journalists write, and my uncle, who had been in Burma, arguing with the Japanese, but now also worked in Fleet Street.

I was not unfamiliar with books, but *The Outsider* knocked me out. Apart from anything else, here was someone who had the heroic decency to read and share all those immense Russian and continental writers that I knew it would one day be my doom to read, but which I was determined to resist as long as possible. The man was invaluable. How had we ever got on without him? If he'd also read Dickens for me, he would have been a god.

And he had the good taste to make it look easy, thus relieving me of any future guilt if I never did get round to reading them. Why feel guilty, if it would have been easy anyway?

And, on top of that, I could now talk about these books as if I had read them. And I could do so with some confidence. Since I had read the philosophers he referred to, and he seemed sound on those.

It was an infectious book. A challenge. It created a whole frame of reference you could come and go in. It felt like a bandoleer full of cartridges, if only you could find a gun of the right calibre. It was many things to different people.

And it was about existentialism, which is about growing up—intellectually, not physically—so, since Colin had the decency to be readable, it was naturally of interest to us adolescents.

I can picture it. Lying in a pile with *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac and the poems of Li Po and Tu Fu, on top of a few albums by Mingus and Coltrane and *Ellington At Newport '56*, in the dubious attic at our school where the wrong'uns lurked in a sweat of mostly-passive mutiny.

Their energy, such as it was, derived from the ambitions of the scholarship boys among them. Parodied at the time as "We may not have an Inkling, but we know someone who has", they lived in the shadow of the Inklings, an earlier Oxford group that included Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. They aspired to wear the aegis of Minerva in a modern style, but the one they bought secondhand and clumsily retailored turned out to be an elven cloak of invisibility. Or else their hearts were not pure.

It was a rebel's book; romantic and arcane, shot through with dangerous foreign voices.

Of the seventeen of us who were expelled in batches throughout my final year—this wasn't typical for my school; just a flaring of the zeitgeist—I'd say that at least half had read the book—I don't remember anyone not enjoying it—and the rest must have known bits of it by heart from their relentless repetition in general conversation.

I don't mean it dominated our thinking. Its effect on many may not have been lasting. But for that important moment it was an intellectual reference point in our swirling universe, and there were few enough of those.

And since I also had friends in the rest of the school, I was aware that it had found its way among the livelier spirits there, and seemed to be well-received.

In fact, you couldn't get away from the damn thing.

It's amazing I didn't fall out with it.

Being a louche sort of boy—as some would say, a natural low-life, or what my housemaster called more pointedly 'a criminal type'*—I had acquired early the habit of moving freely, if warily, through the variegated spectrum of British society. And being passionate, among other things, about books, I was as likely to be found haunting the book exchanges of dour industrial cities as the secondhand bookshops of more genteel towns.

In both, but more particularly in the former, I would have been blind not to see ubiquitous copies of *The Outsider* in paperback. It was obviously a book that had not only sold well but reached far.

And gradually I noticed another thing.

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*He didn't say *Gradus ad patibulum*—he was a mathematician, and appeared to disapprove of reading on the grounds that it interfered with cricket—but it's what he meant. He must have had a point. A sergeant in Bath CID, who gave me half a night in the cells for wearing a motorcycle jacket after midnight while still at school, predicted that I would end up in Chelsea coffee bars, drinking double scotches and taking purple hearts. He got the spirit of it right. But Chelsea? I've seen it. You couldn't pay me enough to live there. Perhaps it was this healthy instinct that has so far saved me from the gallows.

Where, outside my own generation, I came across the book in people's homes or conversation, there seemed to be—though it was blurry, not distinct—a class divide.

Middle class people, even those who had bought or more likely been given a copy—which would usually be new and in hardback—because it was in the news, would ask if you had read the book, they might even ask you for your opinion of it, but they seldom admitted to having read it themselves, or of having an opinion about it.

Perhaps its presence new and in hardback gives a clue. I know plenty of sybarites who prefer reading new hardbacks, for the tactile pleasure of it—I understand it, I have fondled a few nice editions in my time—but serious readers buy paperbacks, or scour the dwindling realm of secondhand bookshops. You get more for your money. So perhaps these were not serious readers anyway.

But you never know. Middle-class life has its enigmas and elusive silences. They may have thought it was a dangerous book, or had a dangerous reputation.

Middle-class life tends to be about symbols, and books are symbols of sensibility. You have to be careful what you say about books, unless you know you're among friends, or you don't care who you upset.

Whereas working class people—and looking back now it is hard to imagine the scale and sense of identity of the old industrial working class as it was back then, which is not so long ago—not only tended to admire the book, they were proud of it. He was 'one of ours'. He had done something difficult and worthwhile. And he had done it on his own. He commanded their attention and respect.

Even those who were not hungry, made an effort to come and feast.

One thing was universal. The book was not everywhere, but it was around a lot. And a lot more than most other books.

If you were interested in books, you couldn't help knowing it was there.

getting closer

> *At the same moment, sounds of fighting were heard outside the cave, while boyish voices called, "Mitford! Mitford! Help! The roughs are upon us!"*
>
> E.C.Kenyon, ***The Heroes of Moss Hall School***

When I eventually ran aground on the lurking reefs of a university—and it took me nearly three years to get afloat again—I noticed a similar pattern.

Those from backgrounds which assume, with dubious credentials, that they are the custodians of the culture, would cheerfully admit to having been enthusiastic about *The Outsider* when they read it, like me, at school, but were now a bit nervous about the social consequences of continuing to admire it. After all, he hadn't been to university, had he? It was a wonderful attempt by an amateur, but we were about to become professional…somethings, and were now on the threshold of receiving the magic token that would allow us to patronise the world. It wouldn't do to put that at risk, would it, by suggesting that intellectual authority might not be a monopoly? And since we were practising to be patronising, where better to start than with a man who had done all the work himself?

Whereas those from less pretentious backgrounds would often give you a good argument. Not about whether it was interesting—that was almost invariably a given—but what were the relative values of the ideas mentioned in it, or—since the respect was not slavish—just how valid were the lessons Colin had drawn from his gargantuan intellectual debauch?

I felt happier with the latter group, although I come from a version of the former. But I was raised awkward. To worry ideas, like a pup, just to see what they're made of. Which bits are tough, and which tasty. And which bits tear easiest.

Three lessons I absorbed with mother's milk. Either a book earns your respect or it doesn't; the priestly status of the author is irrelevant. And if you believe in something, be prepared to say so, and then listen. You might find out whether your idea is defensible. And don't pretend one thing and then do another.

No-one likes Judas. He couldn't even stand himself.

Or, as Revelation has it: *So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.*

Of course, the more biblically literate among you might argue that Peter denied Christ three times and still ended up as the Father of All Popes.

But I'd beware of starting that hare.

Just look at the tenacious generations of papistical rent-boys and torturers and assorted self-loathers that have flowered on that dunghill.

Need I say more?

before my herd of hobbyhorses gets too restive

> *"Look here," said Braintree rather irritably, "I've only read Aristotle in cheap translations; but I have read them. It seems to me gentlemen like you first learn elaborately how to read things in Greek; and then never do it."*
>
> Chesterton, ***The Return of Don Quixote***

I haven't owned a copy of *The Outsider* for some while now, although I have owned several copies in the past. It's one of those books I have in my head but not on my shelves, because whenever I owned a copy I always found someone to lend it to, and they would feel impelled to lend it on, and I would have gone broke just replacing the beast if I hadn't made a stop. I hung on to my copy of *The Strength to Dream* for years with an iron grip, until one day, after a hard week down the opium mines, my concentration flickered and it slipped away.

I'm not sure how many books Colin has written to date—it must be getting on for a hundred—but I've read some of them, off and on over the years, and picked up the tints of others by osmosis from friends who've read and recommended them.

He seems to me a very English writer (or what I like about Englishness): stubborn, argumentative, idiosyncratic, oddly romantic, by turns shrewd and naive, and—when needs must—

mercenary, but not venal. His ego is robust, but I don't find it oppressive. And he's made me think from time to time, even when I haven't agreed with him.

So when some kind soul from Century Press lobbed a review copy of his new autobiography through the bars on my window, I was interested to know how the old boy had been going on all these years.

I was prepared to like this book, and I do. I liked the title to begin with: *Dreaming To Some Purpose*. The *mittelmarsh* between thinking and dreaming is somewhere I like to splash around myself. I may not always chase every will-o'-the-wisp, but I like the company of corpselights while I'm fishing for my dinner. Reason and folly should temper each other.

This seems to me an honest book. Not painfully so, but not squeamish about the truth. It has its eloquent silences, as good conversation should. You are hearing the man speak in his own voice. And he observes himself as an interesting specimen, not an object of worship.

As it should be, being an autobiography, its narrative is life-shaped rather than book-shaped. The drama is mostly in the first half when he sets out to bestride the world; in the second part the path is more varied, there is more of the pinball effect of life's eccentric chaos, as you might expect when he realises that the world is a bigger place than he thought it was and he has to maintain a stockade for his family while he roams out in search of game.

He tells his story well, with a dry, economical, North Midlands humour. It's no wonder he had to get out of the Midlands—they don't trust enthusiasm there—but although he has travelled with a light heart over many sorts of terrain, he has kept hold of the glum virtues of his native soil, and they serve him well.

This is nice:

> *I met Samuel Beckett, and was tempted to challenge him about whether he really thought life was totally meaningless, but he was obviously such an amiable and unaggressive person that I couldn't bring myself to do it. But I* did *challenge another playwright,*

Eugene Ionesco, about the assumption of meaninglessness that seems to underlie his own plays. Ionesco gestured at the rain outside the window. 'Look, the rain is falling—what is the meaning of that?'

And this:

I had grasped that same insight when I was thrown out of the RAF—the sheer joy of walking along that sunlit 'Roman road to Wendover, By Tring and Lilly Hoo', and knowing then that if it was a choice between Rabelais and Eliot's 'Hollow Men', I would choose Rabelais every time.

Or this:

All this talk of unmarried pregnancies shocked me, not because I was a prude (at ten I was indifferent to the moral issue), but because it seemed such a disastrous thing to happen. I swore that it would never happen to me, and when it actually did—some nine years later—I felt there was a kind of inevitability about it.

You want more? Go buy your own copy. The man's got to live.

He describes a world I've travelled through, and I recognise the portrait. Which inspires trust.

It's an interesting story. A pioneering story. For those who approach from outside, the world of knowledge may be tempting. The offshore wind carries the scent of rich promise and exciting dreams, but it is also an intimidating shore, shadowed with unknown hazards and defended by resentful natives, and it stretches from horizon to horizon and beyond.

His story may not be as bloody as that of Hawkins or Frobisher—I suspect he's a nicer guy, as well as living nicer times—but Colin is a literary and philosophical adventurer. If you treat his efforts as the result of plunder and farming rather than online-shopping you will better get the flavour of them. He is fearless with ideas, and can be brutal. He may slay a giant and take only his buttons, but if it's the buttons that interest you, go for it. They're only ideas after all. We are all just the footprints of phantoms.

Not all his adventures are profitable. That's the way of the world. But he usually brings something back, something to trade for beer and sandwiches down at the smugglers' inn. Magic stones, or maps of dubious provenance; penis gourds from Aldebaran or Arcturus; the deathmask of a virgin hangman; a collection of curates' wigs; cures for diseases you may or may not have; strange knives, weird bones, mechanical underwear and ingenious sunhats; the sperm of a ghost, in a familiar bottle; a unicorn's horn adapted for nocturnal murder; an invisible spider's web which if unravelled would match the circumference of our second moon… And he would rather bring a smile to the face of a native than club him and enslave his children; which I happen to prefer as a way of going on.

I was born lucky. I grew up roaming freely in the world of books. But my grandparents didn't. They had to conquer it with plough and gun. They slew the dragons whose trophy teeth I casually wear, besieged these city-states through whose old streets I lounge about. For me, their blood is on those stones, their bones beneath those trees, and I don't forget this. To do so would be weakness, and a lie.*

So I respect Colin's achievement. I have some idea what it cost him in courage and hard work. He's been accused of writing too much too quickly, but then he's had a family to support. (How's the consistency of your work?) The accusation is easy to make. The same charge is levelled at de Quincy, for instance. With some justice. But who, having read them, would be without *Walking Stewart* and *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts?*

And the method has its advantages. I'm reminded of this passage by T.C. Lethbridge, a writer I imagine Colin enjoys, in *Merlin's Island*:

> *A few years ago, after the publication of some book on archaeology, the late Dr.W.M.Palmer, the Cambridge medievalist, remarked to me: 'Who is this young man who has just written a book? No man ought to write a book until he has studied a subject for at least twenty*

*Was it Jefferson who said: 'I am a farmer, so my son can be a lawyer, so his son can be a poet'? Whoever. I hold this to be folly. I would rather say: I am a farmer, so my son can be a farmer who outwits lawyers, so his son can be a farmer who turns a good poem. Because, damn it, getting dinner on the table is important. And a worthwhile thing to do.

years.' He may have been right. Much that is written in this century, and which appears to be the result of careful research, is really work of a very superficial kind, but there is a great advantage in writing a book after a brief period of study. The longer a man works at a piece of historical or archaeological research the more difficult it must become for him to write anything at all. To begin with, it is comparatively simple. There are a few facts, and these can be written down with confidence…

After twenty years, however, it is a different matter. So many red herrings have been drawn across the line of scent that it is very difficult not to lose it and become bogged down in a morass of triviality. I should never have dared to begin at all had it not been that the war has made it possible to get far enough from the mass of detail that has been silting up my mind, so that I am now able to pick out a few salient facts which may be of general interest to others as well as to the few students of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic archaeology.

The ability to speak to the general reader is valuable. And, since I pay attention, I've never come away from one of Colin's books without some new thing, even if it was another way of looking at an old thing.

And if he's sometimes wrong-headed and a bit hasty, so what? I can be wrong-headed myself. And so can everyone I like. So you won't get much change out of me with that one.

So maybe he's not infallible… but then, just look at the mess God made, with all his advantages.

Will he be remembered?

History teaches us—if we can be bothered to listen—that this is a prediction it is foolish to make about one's contemporaries.

Remembered by whom? In what context? For what?

Go on. Tell me.

a *curiose* gent, *ingeniose* even

More than any other scientific discipline, parapsychology pushes the scientific process to its limits, and reveals where its faults lie. In

particular, it has highlighted that, contrary to the insistence of many scientists, data alone can never settle this or any other issue.

This does not bode well for parapsychologists hoping to amass enough evidence to convince even the hardened sceptics of the reality of ESP. It shows instead that there is only one way forward: for both sides to agree on their models for the results that emerge from ESP experiments. That, in turn, means working together in good faith to devise tests whose outcome can be agreed by all. For the key lesson of the mathematics of scientific inference is ultimately very simple: the credibility of all evidence is a matter of trust.

Robert Matthews, '**Opposites Detract**', in ***New Scientist***, 13 March 2004

We are wandering somewhat from the strict limits of the book, I guess, but since this is the story of a mind with a large appetite, it would be mean-spirited not to stretch the rubric.

Although Colin alludes to the development of his thinking occasionally in *Dreaming To Some Purpose*, where relevant to his tale, for the most part he's content to leave it in his other books where you can find it if you choose. Which is considerate of him, but I wouldn't have minded a bit more of it. After all, it's what he does. And it might have saved me the trouble of reading the ones I've missed.

His mind has taken him into many landscapes; some grim, some bright and fey.

So here are a few tasters:

His first concern was to find a cure for despair. He found a useful tonic, if not a panacea, in his theory of 'peak moments', whose memory could be summoned to stiffen you through the grim bits. This is a disciplined use of those intense experiences, for instance, which keep you going through the pursuit of any sport—some golden moments, some only memorable because you respect yourself for enduring the pain—the knowledge of which and the lure of repeating them, keeps you going through the frustrations of injury and the tedium of training, and the numbing repetition of repeatedly humping your gear to the crag only to get repeatedly rained on.

Peak moments can vary in intensity. They are personal, not portion-controlled. A simple form of it could be when you are slogging up a mountain in thick cloud and you suddenly step out above the clouds and the claustrophobia dissolves in light and there's only the tops of mountains and the immense sky and the sun is glittering on the cloud-tops below you and they stretch to the horizon and it just feels so fucking good to be alive… Or it could be the heart-in-mouth intensity of losing a child and then finding it safe. It might be the opening of a tulip, or buying new shoes that you find you actually like, or whatever gets you going. Even playing with suicide, if that's the way fate takes you, and you get away with it. This is the use of memory as a tool for survival. A way to keep on your feet through the bad bits.

It takes all sorts. I really enjoy being *in* cloud on mountains. But then I like damp pleasures.

Colin is inspired to learn and share. When not seeking a cure for depression, he might juggle with horoscopes while trying to inject benevolence into a serial killer, or experiment with mescalin.

It is fashionable in some circles to sneer at Colin for having got involved in the study of serial killers. It is offered as evidence of his low tastes.

So sex and death are too indelicate as themes for modern literary fops? Then they are the poorer for it.

His mescalin experience is instructive. It made him uncomfortable.

Me, I like mescalin. The first time I coincided with it, I met my spirit-guide in the form a badger and he took me flying with a bunch of his mates. Us badgers may be chunky but we're well agile in a big sky. The soundtrack was *Ziggy Stardust* and The Doors and Captain Beefheart. (Rossini, I've learnt, is better with acid. Like Stockhausen.) And I'm not unlike a badger. I like to pootle about quietly in the dark with a few friends, and if you poke me with a stick I'll likely give you a hard time.

Even that first time, in a lazy youthful urban sort of way, I understood why mescalin is considered magical.

But it's a drug of surrender.

I'm not surprised Colin didn't take to it.

Later he turned his attention to the occult and the paranormal. There's something quixotic about Colin. Just the sight of a windmill and his nostrils flare to catch the whiff of spent powder. It's the romantic in him. The thing that led him out of Leicester in the first place, and flung him first into the bony arms of the existentialists. Alchemy seduces him. He seeks the philosophers' stone. He's seen it in a dream. And if like other grail-knights his quest leads him through a maze of blind alleys to a bog full of phantoms, well, what the heck, at least we've advanced the study of the mathematics of scientific inference. Which is more than would have happened if we'd all stayed at home.

His enthusiasm may get the better of him, but I've enough salt to pickle a pig and no quarrel with wholeheartedness, and this isn't Wharton and the fairies, or even Conan Doyle. It might make Houdini twitchy, but he was sensitive. Being haunted by your mother tends to make you like that.

And—you never know—HE MAY YET FIND IT!

Then wouldn't us smart-arses look sick?

This diversity of Colin's reminds me of John Aubrey. Now there was a man who couldn't settle. His manuscripts would bury you, but he never finished a book. There were just too many books to write. And each of them was infinite. Aubrey wasn't shy of work. He couldn't stop, except for a drink or two. He was Thomas Hobbes' best friend. Which speaks volumes for his sticking power.

His manuscripts are lauded among the treasures of the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Although the bastards couldn't even be bothered to mark his grave.

The true Aubreyan (or should that be Aubreian? No! damn the Latinisers. No imperium here! Would you write 'Wesleian'? Of course not.) knows that you can never know the whole of anything. You can only bring what you find to the pile. In THE MASTER's words:

> *I have tumultuarily sticht up what I have many yeares since collected: I hope, hereafter it may be an Incitement to some Ingeniose and publick-spirited young Man, to polish and compleat, what I have delivered*

rough hewen: For I have not leisure to heighten my Stile.

There's just too much of everything.

You can never know the whole of even one thing. You'll never get the whole of it however good you are at disguising this awkward fact, either to yourself or others.

If you are inclined to dispute this, let me give you something to consider:

In order to know everything about just one thing you would have to be able to predict its behaviour in any given situation. So you would have to know all the possible circumstances that might arise. Which means that you would have to know all the properties of all things in all their permutations. Which means that in order to know one thing fully you would have to know everything. And even if you did know all the properties of all possible things, you couldn't know that you knew everything since it must always be possible that there are things you don't know. So even if you did know all about just one thing, you couldn't know that you knew it. You can never know everything because for a start you can't know whether you know it or not. So you can never even know one thing completely.

What? Never looked at our collective ignorance through a telescope before?

Big, isn't it? About as big as the universe, give or take a groat.

But, thank God for perversity, it doesn't stop some of us trying. Even if we do deceive ourselves to do it. Self-deception has its uses. As St Augustine observes in *The City of God:*

'I am deceived; therefore I am.'

Which is rather better than Descartes, don't you think?

Anyway, whenever Aubrey wants to pay a particular compliment, he describes a person as *curiose*, meaning driven by, not the particular object of, curiosity; or *ingeniose*, meaning inventive, or an original thinker.

Colin is undeniably *curiose*. And I would give him the white pebble for *ingeniose.*

So there you go.

ding-dong with the fighting tinman

> *Tired of various pursuits, he at last becomes an author, and publishes a book, which is very much admired, and which he loves with his usual inordinate affection; the book, consequently, becomes a viper to him, and at last he flings it aside and begins another; the book, however, is not flung aside by the world, who are benefited by it, deriving pleasure and knowledge from it: so the man who merely wrote it to gratify himself, has already done good to others, and got himself an honourable name.*
>
> George Borrow, appendix to ***The Romany Rye***

It was Lucy who led me to this one. After reading *Dreaming To Some Purpose*, she remarked that elements of the story reminded her of George Borrow, the author of *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*, which are the two volumes of a work that Borrow described as a dream, and in which I think most would agree, he dreams to some purpose.

Both Borrow and Wilson are self-taught intellectuals, both copious readers, both foragers in curious places, both authors of best-sellers, both savaged by and sensitive to the sneers of authorised education.

Well. George's critics are now only remembered because he is.

We all grin in the grave. Colin may yet have something to grin about.

A shared problem for Colin and George is that they like their freedom—and they mean to go on as they started—but they also want the approval of those who have been touched with the intellectual holy oil. They want the approval of the approved. But they're not going to get it. Dons and their henchpersons do not like having the bread ripped from their mouths—which is how, in their blindness, they feel it—not even to feed your children, or to give to the poor. Those crumbs are theirs to scatter. Even though you made the loaf. And however they smile, they still have the arrogance of priests, if not the identical vestments. (Just ask yourself, have you ever met a humble one?) The shadow of 'the-greatest-monopoly-

Europe-has-ever-seen' still infects them. If you sign up, you close the door behind you.

They would express this more delicately. But when push comes to shove, just listen to the bars slam home. I'm told things are changing. The expansion of the universities has led to colonies among the excluded, and mutinous graffiti is being scratched on the temple precinct's walls. A new future is upon us. A new dawn.

It may be so. I'll believe it when I see it. When I see Caesar's arse as lonely and abandoned as the foot of Ozymandias. I'm an old Carthaginian. I've known the Romans a long time. And I've seen dawns. They come and go.

It would be unseemly to mention Borrow without a Borrovian rant, so here goes:

It isn't surprising that writers like Borrow and Wilson are unpopular with the guild of monopolists.

The trouble with presumptuous outsiders is that they cannot give up the habit of thinking outside the drawing room. (Or, for more private thoughts, the toilet.) They will think in the garden and in the road, or even, Heaven defend us, in the kitchen and servants' quarters. There is no end to their insolence, and what is worse, they can't even see it.

Self-taught and independent-minded, they roam about in a disorderly fashion, with the stomachs of bushmen for feasting upon knowledge, and they tread their dirt through the drawing-room, if they happen to be passing, quite oblivious to the frowns of the dowager.

It is a professional conceit of the products of our universities* that the pursuit of knowledge is like pruning pot-plants, which should be displayed in the drawing-room, with their provenance in the jungle a dark professional secret, and the keys to the conservatory guarded as jealously as the keys to executive washrooms.

Now I like a good aspidistra—one of my dogs once disembowelled

*I know there are exceptions. Abraham knew he could find the odd good man in Sodom and Gomorrah. But the Lord still sleighted those towns with a firm hand. A university education can be a fine thing when it inspires self-discipline. But when it's just a forcing-house for vanity, it's a pain in the arse. If they produced more of the former, and less of the

a fine one that had taken fifteen years to flower—and I'm intrigued by clever *bonsai*; and while scissors and mini-trowel may have pride of place on the armorial bearings of tradition-bound academics; when you're clearing jungle you need a good cutlass and a grubbing mattock, and sometimes a stick or two of dynamite.

It's a question of choosing the right tool.

As Alberic of Maastricht says, in *On the Enigmas of the Obvious*: 'Any system or mode of thought is just a tool. Do not mistake the tool for the task.'

We've come on a bit since Nietzsche taught Colin to philosophise with a hammer.

A chainsaw can be used quite subtly if you know what you're doing. And even the delicate use of a wheeldigger can be learnt in time.

Sometimes you have to improvise. I have used a horsewhip, and even thumbscrews, to good effect.

Sometimes you just have to beat the truth out of the bushes with a stick.

Thinking is a muscular activity, like surgery or tub-thumping. It can be delicate. But it can be difficult, and messy. And laborious. And unpleasant. Painful, even. And difficult to face.

It's a question—if you have time before the thinking starts—of working out which muscles you might need, and which tools look useful.

Everything has its use. The trick is recognising what it is.

It's like when you're knocking the mortar off old bricks to recycle them. You come across mortar that's been mixed so green I'd be ashamed to build with it. But it comes off wonderful easy. And you'd have to be small-of-soul not to appreciate that. My muck sticks like buggery—and I pity the poor bastard who has to knock mine off in some future hell—but mine is appropriate to a different moment.

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latter, it would be easier to say a good word for them. But the attitude of universities to knowledge, all too often, is like a Whig government with an Act of Enclosure: *Keep Out! While we squander the proceeds, and award ourselves titles.* And it isn't as if they haven't had time to change their ways. These complaints are as old as the history of institutions. A Hittite would recognise them. Or the victims of any witchdoctor.

Lucy just read this over my shoulder and points out another echo that had sounded while she was reading *Dreaming To Some Purpose*: that in both writers, a glutton's appetite for book-learning is given grip by a practical, down-to-earth approach to the miseries we inflict upon ourselves. The episodes that had immediately sprung to her mind were those in *Lavengro* of the man with touching mania, and of the Welsh Preacher cursed with the belief that he had as a child committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. I revisited these passages and saw what she meant. They are too long to quote here—writers had room to write in those days—and if you want them you must find them for yourself, but this short passage from the encounter with the Welsh Preacher and his wife has a Wilsonian ring to it:

> *"I am thinking of London Bridge," said I.*
>
> *"Of London Bridge!" said Peter and his wife.*
>
> *"Yes," said I, "of London Bridge. I am indebted for much wisdom to London Bridge; it was there that I completed my studies. I was once reading on London Bridge a book which an ancient gentlewoman, who kept the bridge, was in the habit of lending me; and there I found written, 'Each one of us carries in his breast the recollection of some sin which presses heavy upon him. O! if men could but look into each other's hearts, what blackness would they find there!'"*
>
> *"That's true," said Peter. "What is the name of the book?"*
>
> "The Life of Blessed Mary Flanders."*
>
> *"Some popish saint, I suppose," said Peter.*
>
> *"As much of a saint, I dare say," said I, "as most popish ones; but you interrupted me…"*
>
> *The History of Moll Flanders.

The other thing about Borrow and Wilson is that they're popular. They speak directly to the general reader, without the need for any sort of middle-man. (Who says our universities aren't entrepreneurial. They're just not appreciated. Their products are petit-bourgeois to the core! Adding value? They've been doing that since the ark.)

Well, you can't please everybody all the time.

Some bugger's going to hate you.

just don't mention dante and his fucking terza rima

Facilis descensus Averni / Noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis / Sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras / Hoc opus, hic labor est.
(The way down to hell is easy. The gates of purple-tinted Dis are open night and day. But to go back and escape into the bright air—that is work, that is hard work.)

Virgil, ***Aeneid***

So there's nothing new under the sun.

Since we progress by generations and each generation thinks it is cleverer than the last, and since each generation contains the same cast of characters with the same range of humours, greeds and follies, it is inevitable that we will spend a lot of time inventing new ways of falling into old potholes, as well as re-inventing the wheel, and paving. So it behoves some of us from time to time to wander around with a doom-laden laugh warning that your bright new folly might not be as new as you thought it was, and that when passing Abanazars offer you new truths for old, you might do well to assess the value of the old truth before entombing yourself in the new.

We may also—if the weather is foul enough to keep us howling—warn against the dangers of retro-folly, which is usually the result of sentimentalising an old idea without examining it properly.

And if you find us curled up in the snug of The Sinking Ship, and have time to buy us a beer, we may have something useful to say on the subject of old truths and new, if you can sift it from our ramblings. Old ideas need to be rediscovered. Nothing is forever. Even if they are written in stone, they may as easily be a millstone round your neck as a means of grinding flour, and either way, they turn to sand in the end. Old ideas have value, but they are prone to carry woodworm, metal fatigue and dry rot. Use them thoughtfully.

And since I am too drunk to see if there's anybody there, but my glass seems to have refilled itself, let me just say this:

I was poking around in *The Aeneid* this morning, looking for the boxing match but with Wilsonian poltergeists squabbling in my brain, when I stumbled on the passage quoted above. Perhaps I was led there, perhaps it was just yellow car syndrome, but I couldn't help noticing that this Virgilian observation contains echoes very similar to those you will find in Colin Wilson's view of existentialism.

(Let us pause for a moment, and for the sake of any speed-reading jerk-offs who are scrabbling to catch up, let me say this slowly: I am not comparing Colin Wilson and Virgil. There may be a case for doing so—you can argue among yourselves about that—but it is not my purpose here. I am noting resonances and parallels. It's like the other day, I was struck by a resemblance between Michael Moore and Rudyard Kipling. You think this is affectation? After you've watched *Fahrenheit 9/11*, read 'Tommy' in *Barrack Room Ballads.* They speak with different voices, but you can't miss the shared sympathy, unless the old spermathoreal opthalmia has smothered your head with a cawl of cataracts, and you're fit for nothing but the knacker's yard.)

Colin doesn't start from a lesson by Virgil, but there is something Virgilian in the way he guides you through the often self-regarding hells of the existentialists and their relatives, and in the way he asks you to look at what you see.

There are many ways of looking at existentialism, some less delicate than others. Colin squeezes its ambiguities.

The central tenet of this group of ideas is that in the end you have only yourself, and that is a scary thought. So it tends to be pretty depressing.

But there are perverse qualities in despair. It is a form of pleasure perhaps closest to comfort, but lit with those paroxysms of self-indulgence that give the lurid quality to romantic gloom. There is an element of luxury here. Dis, if we are being Virgilian, is purple and not black. Your misery may not be much in the great scale of things, but it is at least yours, and if you can flog it to orgasm now and then, so much the better. It has this dubious virtue, that it spares you the inconvenience of thinking about others.

It is a reasonable question—which makes you wonder why it took a hundred and fifty years of European intellectual tradition to

ask it—whether a sustained form of this posture is a useful strategy with which to direct our brief flicker in material form. You can see the upside: selfishness makes life simple. But the consequences of selfishness tend to make life more complicated than it needs to be—How dare you intrude your selfishness on mine? Take that! and that! you whey-faced ghoul!—so don't think the answer is ever going to be easy. Simple, possibly, but not easy.

Colin's answer is at once practical and yet one of sensibility. He knows that mindset is the key to all human activity. (For a long explanation of this, you can start with Husserl.) So he seeks techniques to sustain a positive mindset. But he does so because despair offends him. He can't be doing with it. He can't see the point of it. He's a digger, not a wallower.

All existential positions are in the end aesthetic. A matter of choice. The recognition of this is what they have in common.

So should we wallow or not?

I can see both sides.

As one who has joined the quest to find the world's surliest Chinese waiter, and coming from the North, where the right to be miserable has been bought with the blood of our forefathers*, I know its pleasures.

I also know its down-side. It can produce a paralysing, parasitic dullness. And when despair sheds its luxury and shows its bones, then it is scary. I'm no expert—suicide is one of many things I've never tried—but I have dug around in the graveyard when the moon was up, and lashed myself to the yew trees while the Black Dog sang. And I've seen it. There's an occasional history of suicide in my family. My sister was the most recent. I've seen despair rampant and naked, posturing in the bath with its razor and its noose, although what it kills you with is a form of boredom.

It has many triggers.

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*In the North of England, where being miserable is a highly respected art form and knowingly admired, it is interesting to note the sub-regional variations. When Yorkshire folk are miserable, they cannot conceal a hint of relish, whereas over in Lancashire, where dourness is a discipline, they iron the emotion out of their misery until it has the texture of rolled steel. Geordies, who are weird and regionally anomalous, endure perkily, unlike

One of my ancestors—around the 1830s, I think—cut his own throat with a razor because he was robbed of the sextonship of the joint parishes of St Mary's and St John's in Beverley. Well, he lost it in an election, but to be fair, for the previous couple of centuries it had been informally hereditary. (OK. You got me. I'm just a hereditary sexton *manqué*. It's a fair cop) But every cloud has a silver lining. This financial catastrophe rescued us, as a tribe, from the quicksands of Anglicanism and set our feet on the granite of nonconformity. It was the making of us.

I smile—when I'm low on peak moments, I find a shot of gallows humour helps—but I also mean it.

Life is ambiguous.

Oddly enough, my sister became an Anglican—a symptom, I suspect, not a cause. But whatever livery she marched in, she fought the good fight. It's a pity she died of the wounds. Whether Colin's solutions could ultimately have saved her, I can't tell. But I respect him for trying. On this battlefield we need all the heroes we can get.

That's enough Virgil for one lesson, but just to annoy any beadling pedants who may be lurking outside the classroom, let me share this passage from Brewer:

> *In the Middle Ages Virgil came to be represented as a magician and enchanter, and it is this traditional character that furnishes Dante with his conception of making Virgil, as the personification of human wisdom, his guide through the infernal regions.*
>
> *Virgil was wise, and as craft was considered part of wisdom, especially over-reaching the spirits of evil, so he is represented by medieval writers as outwitting the demon.*

And Colin seeks the Philosophers' Stone. Now there's a coincidence.

---

the rest of the Borders where the purpose of life is to justify a grim glint in the eye. While down in Lincolnshire, where they eat stones for breakfast, life without misery would be considered meaningless; but this may be because they are a species of Northerner trapped in the Midlands, where enthusiasm is forbidden.

romulus & remus. at the dugs of the same she-wolf

> *The name Edna Welthorpe popped into my thoughts as I finished the letter. She was the pseudonymous phantom Joe Orton invented for the purpose of writing teasing and tendentious missives to institutions whose pomposity needed pricking (in his opinion). Sometimes she'd even fire off a prudish complaint to a newspaper about one of Orton's own plays, all publicity being good publicity. I felt instantly and instinctively certain that Derek had written to Leo in the spirit of Edna Welthorpe, calculating that I would see the joke—but that neither Leo nor Melvin would. But, though I saw the joke, I was also the victim of it. Derek really was mad, in the Ortonian sense. There was no telling what he might do next. If I'd thought I was in control of the situation, this letter showed me to be deluding myself.*
>
> *I handed it back to Melvin. 'I seem to have a prankster by the tail,' I said through a simulated smile. 'This is rather embarrassing, isn't it?'*
>
> Robert Goddard, ***Play to the End***

I don't know what it is but there must be something in the water around Leicester. They certainly produce samurai of an earth-trembling single-mindedness. Or did in the 1930s. Perhaps it was a magic spring blown open by some sort of occult explosion. Or perhaps they're all like that down there. It's only the ones that escape, that let on.

It was Lucy again who raised this one. Out of the blue—she'd been talking to some friends, I don't know who first mentioned this—she said, "What about Joe Orton? He was from Leicester. Wasn't he one of the Angry Young Men? He couldn't stand Osborne, either."

Lucy had made this connection through a passing interest in Philip Larkin, who was a librarian in Leicester from 1946-50, when Orton and Wilson, both voracious and precocious readers, both from working-class backgrounds that required them to haunt libraries, would have been respectively 13-17 and 15-19. A nice little coincidence to nibble at.

Orton was only two years younger than Wilson. He trained at RADA, so he wasn't self-taught, but he wasn't too popular with the establishment either. I can see why. He was a bit of a handful.

I don't know if he and Colin knew each other at any point. He gets no mention in *Dreaming To Some Purpose*. And although his critical success was equally sudden—and you could say equally short-lived, although Orton's life actually ended abruptly and violently—it was a few years later. His first plays appeared in 1964. He was murdered by his lover in 1967. He was one of the real 'burning boys'.

There is this other resonance. Orton's plays don't get revived much in the professional theatre, but he's hugely popular with amateur dramatic societies, so his plays must speak to someone.

If you dip at any point into the recycled world of literary commentary, you will find it a commonplace that Orton modelled his early plays on Pinter. The reason for this seems to be that they both modelled early plays around the idea of how the familiar occupants of a defined space can be feel menaced by the arrival of an outsider.

Are Orton's early texts Pinteresque? I can't remember them well enough to tell. Orton liked Genet, and that shows. Pinter, I guess, did the threatening-stranger thing first by a year or two.

Anyway…

Let us imagine the Bloomsbury incarnation of Wilson as it might have been seen by Pinter and Orton.

In the Pinteresque version, a conversation between two friends who already know by heart the three things each other has to say—are they the same things? or even meaningful?—is strewn with subtle silences; some mutinous, some elusive, some downright paradoxical. There is a knock at the door. It is Wilson asking for directions to the post office. They invite him in and begin to discuss what a post office might be, and where it might be if there was one, and why you might think so, but their efforts are still heavily syncopated. There is some business with a key, but I'm not sure what it means.

The pauses prove fatal. After a few, Wilson begins a monologue on Samuel Beckett, to whom he has written the letter he is seeking

to post. He cleverly strings together quotes from *Waiting for Godot*, with subtle nods to Laurence Sterne in their arrangement and editing. After a prolonged mutual silence, to let Wilson get warmed up, the friends begin discussing the whereabouts of that damned key again. The effect is ingenious and unnerving, almost disingenuous, like watching a four-part song in *The Gondoliers* performed by amateurs in rehearsal with only three voices. After much confusion, compounded by Wilson developing a Nietzschean *leitmotif* and offering to fetch a hammer, they locate the key, and one of them unlocks the wardrobe, releasing a team of vigilantes who drag Wilson from the stage, still explaining that his letter is *to* Beckett but *about* Nietzsche. Unfortunately the vigilantes are so highly educated—Wilson on footbinding would be interesting—that they cannot follow speech without the stepping stones of pauses, so he is hustled away to be locked up in some offstage gulag for violence to ideas.

The two friends, greatly flustered, now discuss the whereabouts of a second key. After more confusion they discover it is the same key they have already used. In fact they only have one key, but its different uses had muddled them. They open an escritoire and take out a neglected silver tea service.

They make tea.

"Phew!…" says one after they have drunk two cups each, with some but not too much business. Then curtain.

In the draft version, but wisely cut before production, they exchange these final lines:

"That…"

"A close-run thing…"

"Wasn't it, just…"

From which Pinter takes his title.

The Orton version, as you might expect, is a bit more lively. *Suburban Chainsaw Wedding* is more a satire on *Look Back in Anger*, in which the Priestleys, who have made money in boots but sent their three daughters to Oxford, are determined to marry their youngest daughter to a jazz musician in order to prove they are no longer provincial. Enter Wilson with a trumpet. He sees they have uncut first editions locked in a glass case, which he proceeds to ransack. Then he opens the window and perches on the window-sill to read.

He cuts the pages with the biro that he uses for making notes in the margins. The Priestleys watch nervously, uncertain how to interpret such behaviour. Is it Zen, or merely functional?

"You can get those in paperback if you have to read them," suggests Mr Priestley, patting his belly to show the opulence of his understanding.

"You don't have any paperbacks," says Wilson, looking over his glasses.

"Haha!" says Priestley, in an aside to his loved ones, "See how clever he is? I knew he was just pretending when he said he hadn't been to university. Why I wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't really the son of a top civil servant, or even a bishop!"

You can see how quickly and cleverly Orton conflates *King Lear*, *Cinderella* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy.*

After this the action accelerates briskly. The youngest daughter confesses to Wilson that she is a closet lesbian, obsessed by dreams of an unknown 'Mother', and that any marriage would be a sham. The second sister then confesses that she is the real mother of her younger 'sister', by their common father! Mrs Priestley tries to seduce Wilson, only to discover that he is the unrecognised child of her misspent youth, left in a gutter but rescued and raised as their own by humble employees at the boot factory, and now recognised by a birthmark on his penis. "Why couldn't you have given me a son!" demands Mr Priestley who has been voyeurising behind a screen. In floods of tears, Mrs Priestley confesses that their eldest daughter is a really man, but was brought up as girl because she was afraid that Priestley wouldn't keep trying for daughters once he had a son, and she already had two sons but she only wanted girls. That's why she hadn't allowed incest with the eldest daughter. Wilson tries to comfort all three sobbing daughters, who insist on comparing birthmarks. They plan to escape, but are given drugged tea by mother. Then father butchers the two eldest children and hides their bodies behind the sofa. Wilson wakes up while mother is holding the remaining drugged daughter steady so Priestley can sodomise her. Wilson tries to help the daughter but is whacked on the head by mother. He struggles to his feet again.

"I'm going to call the police!" bellows Priestley.

"You can't," screams his wife, whacking Wilson repeatedly with a rolling pin. "They'll find out about the incest!"

"Then I'll borrow a gang of Blackshirts from Mrs Tory next door. They'll do the trick."

Wilson wakes up again while being beaten up by Blackshirts—"Fuck me," he says, "I'm off to Cornwall for some peace and quiet. And if you live by the sea, you can always escape." He slips out through the window while the Blackshirts are buggering Priestley with the mangled remains of Wilson's trumpet. Some clever butt-plug play with the mute is required here. Only for the best farceurs. We hear the sound of police sirens approaching, drawn by the sound of the Blackshirts smashing up the house. Mrs Priestley tries to commit suicide by triple death but fails on all three counts. The action freezes while the stage is lit with beatific brightness. Mrs Priestley gives birth to 17 rabbits.

Curtain—if the Blackshirts haven't eaten it.

It could have been Orton's masterpiece. Pity he died so young.

But the play of this sort that springs most fiercely into my mind in this connection is Max Frisch's *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (usually rendered into English as *The Fire-raisers*, or *The Firebugs*; it means *Biedermann and the Arsonist*. First staged, by a nice coincidence, in 1958), in which a fat bourgeois invites an arsonist into his home and deludes himself about the man's intentions. It is a satire on the collusion of the Germans with Nazism.

Let us imagine—if this is not too close to science fiction for your literary sensibilities—a slightly alternative version, in which B, played by a tottering team of dwarves in a fat suit, is a Liggersville critic who invites a promising young arsonist, C, into his home in the hope that he will start fires that B can profit from, but is shocked and outraged when C wanders into the garden and ignites the dustbins and then the gazebo.

"But," says C, "I'm teaching you something about fire."

"I don't need teaching," screams B, in chorus. "I already know EVERYTHING!"

"Well, you didn't know what I would do when you invited me in," says C, not unreasonably.

You can end this with the arrival of Pinteresque or Ortonian goons, according to taste.

Lucy, who hadn't read any Wilson before *Dreaming To Some Purpose*, found a copy of *The Outsider* at the same friends' house and whizzed through it. (She reads at the speed of light. Physics has yet to find a way of measuring velocity when she speed-reads. It's just as well the world provides plenty of authors. A mere legion or two couldn't write fast enough to keep her in snacks.)

"I wish I'd read that at school," she said. "If I'd read that before I went to university, I wouldn't have been half so intimidated. One reason I didn't do the Modern Literature course, which I regret, was because the reading lists looked so intimidating. But with this you can link the familiar with the unfamiliar. You could find your feet, starting from here."

Ah, you might have been happier, old thing. But would they have given you such a good degree?

I've seen many sneering attacks on Wilson, but seldom one which tries to explain intelligently where he is wrong. Which suggests that the opposition is mostly unintellectual, despite the fact that much of the sniping comes from the foothills of Parnassus. To refute an argument you have first to understand it and be able to state it without falsification—read Schopenhauer, 'Stratagems' in *The Art of Controversy*—but these snipers are just lazy, self-regarding doylems for the most part.

I disagree with Colin on a number of things, and would qualify my agreement with others. If I were joining in those debates, believe me, I would tell you what I thought, and why.

"How nice to find someone who agrees with me about Dostoevsky," said Lucy. "I like a book that's someone's personal reaction to things. And he is very readable. But he can be quite rough with conventional critics. I can see how he's made enemies."

Rough with conventional critics? I know. It's the sin against the Holy Ghost. But, oh Lord, if you didn't intend to lead us by the nose into this Temptation, why did you strew such tasty Prey before us? With the rank scent of ignorance billowing from their anal glands! And such haunches, luscious with pomposity! And above all, oh Lord, why did you make them so slow, if you didn't intend them to get caught?

last orders, please

> *Quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus / verum operi longo fas as obrepere somnium.*
> *(Sometimes good Homer sleeps. It's a long job; he's earned the right to be ambushed by dreams.)**
>
> Horace, ***De Arte Poetica***

It's annoying, while still alive, to be pinned by butterfly-collectors, but if you have to be put into a category, one that includes Virgil, Aubrey, Orton and Borrow and de Quincey can't be all bad.

Oh, and Chesterton, of course.

When Colin is explaining his anti-pessimism, he mentions the Chestertonian phrase 'absurd good news', and refers to the story in *Manalive*, the tale of the great wind that comes to Beacon House, of how Innocent Smith held a loaded gun to the head of the Warden of Brakespeare College to see just how sustainable the Warden's pessimism was in practice.

Here is the affidavit of the sub-warden:

> *After a short time I heard two very loud shots, and distinctly perceived the unfortunate undergraduate Smith leaning far out of the Warden's window and aiming at the Warden repeatedly with a revolver. Upon seeing me, Smith burst into a loud laugh (in which impertinence was mingled with insanity), and appeared to desist.*

---

*This is often translated as '*Sometimes good Homer nods; but in so long a work, it is acceptable to drowse."* This strikes me as both insipid and patronising. The meaning turns on two phrases: *fas as*, literally 'the correct coin', which ranges in meaning from 'a fair wage' to 'an acceptable price', depending on whether you view it as a fellow craftsman or a proprietorial client. It seems likely to me that Horace would take the former, more sympathetic view. And *obrepere somnium*: *obrepere* means to sneak up on, to approach by stealth. *somnium* could embrace the whole gamut from daydreaming to nightmares; Horace does not qualify it, so 'dreams' seems reasonable. Our modern 'somnolent' originally meant dreamy, not drowsy. That's it. You can wake up now.

I sent the college porter for a ladder, and he succeeded in detaching the Warden from his painful position. Smith was sent down.

Smith is tried in a Chestertonian kangaroo court. Dr Cyrus Pym, an American criminologist, presents the case for the prosecution:

"There is but one result of this happier and humaner outlook which concerns the wretched man before us. It is that thoroughly elucidated by a Milwaukee doctor, our great secret-guessing Sonnenschein, in his great work, 'The Destructive Type'. We do not denounce Smith as a murderer, but rather as a murderous man. The type is such that its very life—I might say its very health—is in killing. Some hold that it is not properly an aberration, but a newer and even a higher creature. My dear old friend Dr. Bulger, who kept ferrets—" (here Moon suddenly ejaculated a loud "hurrah!" but so instantaneously resumed his tragic expression that Mrs. Duke looked everywhere else for the sound); Dr. Pym continued somewhat sternly—"who in the interests of knowledge, kept ferrets, held that the creature's ferocity is not utilitarian, but absolutely an end in itself. However this may be with ferrets, it is certainly so with the prisoner. In his other iniquities you may find the cunning of the maniac; but his acts of blood have almost the simplicity of sanity. But it is the awful sanity of the sun and the elements—a cruel, an evil sanity. As soon stay the iris-leapt cataracts of our virgin West as stay the natural force that sends him forth to slay. No environment, however scientific, could have softened him. Place that man in the silver-silent purity of the palest cloister, and there will be some deed of violence done with the crozier or the alb. Rear him in a happy nursery, amid our brave-browed Anglo-Saxon infancy, and he will find some way to strangle with a skipping rope or to brain with a brick. Circumstances may be favourable, training may be admirable, hopes may be high, but the huge elemental hunger of Innocent Smith for blood will in its appointed season burst like a well-timed bomb."

Not for the faint-hearted, huh? And you thought Chesterton was soft.

Make of this what you will, if you're still there. I've got to crawl to the bar again.

I advise you to do the same.

2. Almeric Wister; or, Old Foes In New Foetuses

"Woe to the inhabiters of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come among you, having great wrath, because he knoweth he has but a short time."

Mr Toobad, in ***Nightmare Abbey***

a whiff of gangrene

'*You are old, Father William,' the young man said,*
'And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?'

Lewis Carroll, **Alice in Wonderland**

I was just about to inter this piece decently under the pheasantberry,

when someone asked me if I had seen any other reviews of *Dreaming To Some Purpose*. I hadn't, but I thought it might be interesting, so I scratted around in the dustbins and outhouses of friends and came up with a fair crop.

The first I picked up was a piece by young Adam Mars-Jones in *The Observer*.

I have to admit I'm starting from a prejudice here, since the man's very name is an encrypted anagram of 'pretentious twat'.* But he quickly lightens my conscience. As soon as he starts writing you can see that whatever other sorts of twat he may well be—and we'll keep an open mind—he's certainly one that's looking for a fight.

Let us consider the three headers, designed as they are to give us the flavour:

> **I WAS A TEENAGE NAILBITER; *Colin Wilson's claims to intellectual greatness are fatally undermined—by the author himself;* WILSON'S HOUSE WAS NO COTTAGE INDUSTRY BUT A SWEATSHOP FOR MAKING SHODDY PROSE GOODS**

Not quite Pierce Egan, but not much doubt that frothing Mars-Jones has torn off the mail-shirt of objectivity and is wanking himself like a berserker. Go for it boy. Let's see just how scary you are.

How does he begin?

---

*The double-barrelling of names is a curious and pretty recent phenomenon in England, where it is almost invariably the brand of the parvenu. It seems to appear in the second half of the 19th Century, perhaps as one of Albert's less useful German imports. Why anyone would want to advertise that their immediate forbears were mushrooms-turned-lickspittles is beyond my humble understanding. But there's nowt so queer as folks.

W*hile he was incubating* The Outsider*, the 1956 book whose success freed him from the repetitive manual jobs he so hated, Colin Wilson considered another project: 'I had been observing my fellow men for years and meant one day to write a book called* The Methods and Techniques of Human Self-Deception.*' In a strange way, this volume of memoirs fulfils that ambition, entirely by mistake.*

As a self-taught intellectual…

We know where we are now.

There's more than a whiff of The Diary of an Intellectual Nobody *about* Dreaming To Some Purpose*…*

When he tries to distil his message, it's as if Patience Strong has joined Mr Pooter on his sofa…

In fact, Wilson wasn't tempted to stray. He only flirted with his students as you might with 'the 12-year-old daughter of a friend'. This means looking up their skirts.

There's half a page of this. Let's take a line at random. They are all either spiteful or foolish, but you can learn more from folly than spite, so let's take a foolish one.

If his reading list had been more familiar to a Fifties readership,…

Can I just say something. I was around in the Fifties—were you there, Adam? I don't remember you. In nappies, maybe—and the bookshelves at home had a pretty good range from the Classics to Dostoevsky, via Kierkegaard and Freud, Gibbon and Wells and Radclyffe Hall. We did read in the Fifties, more than people do these days—no television, not like now, remember, and not much money after the war—there wasn't much else to do of an evening, or an afternoon in the school holidays.

Still, keep going, Adam. You're frothing well…

it would have been clear that he had turned inside out much of what he learned from European thought.

You mean he didn't swallow it unthinkingly, like a dose from Matron? I'm starting to lose you, Adam.

You mean he stood traditional existentialism on its head?

But he said this was what he had tried to do. At the time. Repeatedly. It was only morons like you that couldn't grasp it then. I didn't realise you were still all struggling. Jesus, it's nearly fifty years ago. Just how thick are you Bloomsbury bumfluffs?

Or are you simply trying to say, 'The man succeeded in his task'?

It looks like one sentence.

It is in fact three separate statements conflated:

1. *If I had any general awareness of the 1950s, I might be eligible to comment on the sudden success of* The Outsider, *but I was only two at the time.*
2. *If I could conceive of challenging conventional thought, I might understand what drives Colin Wilson.*
3. *But, alas, I was born a twat and the curse of Peter Pan is upon me.*

—but like his name, it's in code.

I don't want to look like I'm nit-picking, so let me share the rest of the paragraph:

> *If his reading list had been familiar to a Fifties audience, it would have been clear that he had turned inside out much of what he learned from European thought. Instead of man struggling to make sense of an absurd universe, he assumes a meaningful one and cosmic good faith instead of bad. Is this still existentialism? If so, it's Pollyanna existentialism.*

I'll come back to this later.

I think Adam must be a dilettante. Or self-taught. Despite his egregious hyphen, there are surprising and unexpected gaps in his literary education. He seems not to have grasped the basic rule that in order to understand a metaphor you have to know what it alludes to.

Listen to this:

But if Colin Wilson was living in his head, what sort of a head was it? He has his own idea: 'When I am working, my mind is like a searchlight beam that can pick out and illuminate ideas. When I am very interested or excited, the beam seems to narrow until it has the power of a laser."

Surprisingly little of this candlepower reaches the page…

When the laser beam turns inwards, the dazzle factor is no higher.

OK, it wasn't the most exciting of metaphors to start with. Even Homer nods. Even Shakespeare. But poor Adam, he's so dazzled he thinks it's dark. He's still looking for the white light of a halogen bulb when he should be following the red dot. It's no wonder he gets lost.

It's an odd thing to not know, don't you think? What a laser beam is. I thought everyone had watched James Bond movies.

He must have had a friendless childhood, and been educated at home.

That would explain a lot.

He certainly lacks self-control.

In his frenzy, Mars-Jones even attacks Wilson's children:

The Wilson house in Cornwall was no cottage industry but a sweatshop for turning out shoddy prose goods… In due course, three of his children were taken on as piece-workers. He's proud of their talents in his own way, but certain sorts of talents don't seem heritable. They don't write nearly as fast as their father.

That's taking the gloves off.

Let's just shift this table.

Now we have room to move.

woodman, spare that tree

Cwaeth he on mergenne meces ecgum getan wolde sum on

galg-treowu to gamene.
(He said, in the morning he would get them with the edge of his sword, and he would hang some of them on a gallows-tree for the fun of it.)

anon., ***Beowulf***

I don't think I'm unduly squeamish. I haven't always been the paladin of delicacy that you see now. I have on occasion used the rosebud china for target-practice, and capered unkindly upon the sensibilities of the schoolmasters in the slavemarket. A bit of rough music doesn't bother me. I expect dogs to bark and kids to scream. That's life.

But I can't abide ignorance* and spite.

They make me restive.

You know that thing when you know it would certainly be easier and probably wiser to say nowt and let it pass, and you're reaching for your drink to help swallow your irritation, but somehow your fist is already wrapped around the haft of a knobkerry, or a length of lead pipe, and you're not sure how but you're already on your feet and the table's gone over, and your drink's hit the floor, which doesn't help, and the landlord's hand is on the phone, and it just goes off…?

Well, I feel a bit like that now.

So if Adam Mars-Jones wants to brawl, I'll give him a bit of an arm-wrestle just to help calm things down.

I know there doesn't seem to be much of him. I'll go easy. (I'm an old man. How much harm can I do?) But my parrot Hegel has just been possessed by a demon which tells me there are more of the gang outside. So you get the beers in while I use young Adam for a warm-up.

I'll try to go easy. But if the red mist rises, my strait-jacket's hanging by the bar.

I have no idea who these people are—I live on the free side of the

*In the North, where I choose to live, *ignorance* refers to lack of common courtesy, not the lack of bog-roll diplomas.

Humber, where the brief fame of literary apparatchiks are matters of no consequence—so I had to consult the *Pink 'Un* of the web for some hints about their form.

Adam Mars-Jones was easy. I googled 'I'm feeling lucky' and up came a profile on the British Council website. (So we have something in common. I used to work for the British Council at one time, but I was building customised crates for sculptures to travel in, a department that was scheduled for privatisation when I left back in the early Seventies. While I was there I saw a little poem of humanity in action. I came out of the tube at Warren Street to find a crowd of people on the pavement staring up at the tall glass pillar of the Euston Tower on the other side of the road. I asked what was happening. A man said, 'They think there's an IRA bomb inside. We're waiting to see if it goes off.' It seemed to me there had been a general underestimation of the range of flying glass, so I slid round the corner into our workshop a bit sharpish. If there was a bomb, it didn't go off; which was maybe just as well.)

You can google Mars-Jones for yourself, but here's a taste if you can't be bothered. I'm happy to let his friends speak for him.

Critical Perspective

Adam Mars-Jones had the unusual distinction of being selected in 1983 as one of Granta*'s 'Best Young British Novelists', and then again ten years later by the same magazine when his first and only novel so far,* The Waters of Thirst*, appeared.*

Did I just read this right? Why did he get selected the first time?

This might seem to indicate not just his continued air of youthfulness, but also of promise not yet fulfilled. But in his case the term 'novelist' is misleading:

Ah!

Mars-Jones' ideal fictional form has turned out to be the extended short story, and he is equally highly rated as an acute essayist and reviewer, where his ability to turn a wittily dissecting, always carefully nuanced phrase comes into play. He continues as a very much in-

demand arts journalist, often, but not exclusively, discussing gay issues; indeed, his purpose has been to bring them into the literary mainstream.

Well, I'm damned if I can see how Colin Wilson's work is a gay issue. Unless it's because of the story in *Dreaming yo Some Purpose* where he gets out of the RAF by claiming he's homosexual. It's a good story. And as Ben Jonson said to John Sylvester, shortly before running him through with a sword, "It need not rhyme. It hath the virtue of truth."

But to go on:

What 'happened' in his development as a fiction writer, from the virtuoso experimentation of his first collection of stories Lantern Lecture *in 1981 to the more conventional narration of his one slender novel? Mars-Jones had initially seemed to be a satirical gadfly to the Establishment—his father being a prominent High Court judge—perhaps a P.G. Wodehouse or Evelyn Waugh-like type. 'Hoosh-mi' was the story in* Lantern Lecture *that brought him a fleeting notoriety because of its facetious conceit: the Queen catches rabies from a royal Corgi infected by an off-course fruit bat, and starts to behave increasingly erratically. The narrative is interpolated by a polemical speech by Dr John Bull to the Republican Society…*

Wonderful. I couldn't have invented this!

Mars-Jones' lightly satirical view of affluent gay lifestyles is more apparent in his novel The Waters of Thirst *(1993). This has the sombre theme of love under the shadow of mortality, yet manages to be a kind of relishingly gourmet narrative. Its narrator, a voice-over artist suffering from kidney disease and awaiting a transplant, necessarily has an alcohol and salt-free existence. He is thus forced to have a rich fantasy life, to imagine pungent food and wine rather than tasting them; what he calls 'a tantalus'; in a wider emotional sense, something that body craves for and cannot have… If this sounds non-dramatic and even dry, in less dextrous hands it could be. But the narrative is studded with aphorisms which make a sparkling read: on cooking ('stock cubes are the death of love'), sexual*

choices ('monogamy is a style of life, not a standard of conduct') and of course transplant surgery ('everything depends on the freshness of the ingredients').

Marvellous. It has to be Jilly Cooper.

One of Mars-Jones' critical maxims is that fiction can have 'the paradoxical property of shielding an author from his own opinions, allowing them to develop independently'. His own stories, superbly written though they are, don't always achieve this freedom and autonomy from the author. Their pleasures have to do with adroit arguments and turns of phrase; he is a kind of anthropologist, offering acute insights into male behaviours. As readers we find ourselves perhaps too aware of Mars-Jones the brilliantly diagnosing essayist. This is not an inadequacy of imagination or emotion: simply a statement about the kind of writer he has turned out to be, a scrupulously humane observer of the contemporary dilemmas of gay men in the tradition of E.M.Forster and Christopher Isherwood.

So his father's a High Court judge, is he? What was that crack about some things not being 'heritable'? I hope it's true. If Adam got his startling forensic brilliance from his father, it's high time we culled a few silks for our own safety.

Did you just say, people who wear glass knickers should stay away from louts with catapults? I know. But since he's invited our attention, let's take a potshot, or two.

Remember that paragraph?

If his reading list had been more familiar to Fifties readership, it would have been clear that he had turned inside out much of what he learned from European thought. Instead of man struggling to make sense of an absurd universe, he assumes a meaningful one and cosmic good faith in place of bad. Is this still existentialism? If so, it is Pollyanna existentialism.

Pollyanna? I'll Pollyanna you, you fatuous little worm's-bladder. Optimism is the struggle against the dark, oh crapulent gobshite, as

you'd soon find out if you could first find the courage to slither out of adolescence.

And 'existentialism'? That's a big word for a tittering runt to pretend he understands. You should stop relying on *The Literary Fop's Almanac of Crap*, Adam. It may do for impressing Mummy and the bridge girls in the garden suburb that you call a mind—and who's your gardener, I might ask? Someone should have a word with him—but it just won't do if you want to roam the streets and brangle with those who read.

So let's begin at the beginning. But first, tie my hands behind my back before I rip the ears off this madly smirking toady.

Well, since you charge Colin with lack of understanding, let's look at what you haven't grasped.

> *Instead of man struggling to make sense of an absurd universe, he assumes a meaningful one and cosmic good faith instead of bad. Is this still existentialism?*

Well if it isn't, that excludes Kierkegaard, and he invented the fucking term, or gave it its current value, so where does that leave us?

That's the whole point of the metaphor of the Abyss…

Oh, I forgot, Adam can't do metaphors. Boy that must have screwed him if he ever tried to read Nietzsche!

Pay attention, Adam. We're talking about you!

And I'm pretty sure you haven't read Heidegger, because everyone knows that only three people have ever actually read Heidegger—which is one more than have read Husserl—and two of them are dead. I know. I shot them myself. It was mercy-killing. Compassionate homicide as the buddhists have it. And you may have read *L'Etranger* at school—in French, Adam? Or in English?—but you obviously haven't paid attention to the later Camus or you'd have seen him staring glumly at the Wilsonian question shortly before his fatal car crash.

So that reduces Wilson's charge-sheet to just crimes against St Sartre. (Who, while alive, was vibrant proof that life can be tedious and meaningless; although he did, during the war, record some

'peak experiences', which he lacked the discipline or spine to put to later use.)

Well, that's a gibbet you can hang me from. If you can catch me.

Let's just say a word about existentialism, for the benefit of those who were off shoplifting when it came up on the curriculum. It's not difficult to understand. These things seldom are once you boot the priests and their catamites out of the way.

It grows out of the European Protestant tradition; itself part of the larger struggle for freedom of thought. It begins with Søren Kierkegaard, in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. A devout but painfully honest Dane, Kierkegaard (whose name, curiously enough, means guardian of the church, or church watchman) agonised over the question of how belief in God could be compatible with the doubt that is an inevitable component of intellectual honesty. It's a question of certainty. For him, God is the source of moral authority, and the non-existence of God would render life morally meaningless. (It's not a problem I've ever had. I'm a Yorkshireman. God's related to us. I just don't always agree with him. It would be a waste of time anyway. He's always changing his mind and telling different things to different people…) On the other hand, how can you confidently assert the moral authority of a God whose existence you cannot demonstrate beyond a reasonable doubt?

Kierkegaard's solution is that we should hold fast to both faith and doubt simultaneously, however painful that might be. This, unless Kierkegaard has been completely rewritten in the years since I read him, is the meaning of his metaphor of the Abyss, across which we hang with a handhold on either side.

(Damn, I keep forgetting, Adam can't do metaphors. Don't blub, boy, I haven't put out my full strength yet.)

Next up comes Nietzsche, a petulant German protestant, who chose not to believe in God. He found the opposite problem. That doubt alone gives no basis for decision-making, so you have to affirm a belief in something just to get on with your life. So he invented the cult of the *übermensch**; which seems to me to be just

*Hollingdale, in his introduction to *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, has this comment: *The clue to the correct reading of Nietzsche's conception lies in the associations the word* 'über' *had for him. Zarathustra's first discourse begins:*

a lay version of the doctrine of entire-sanctification—but maybe that's because I was raised a Methodist—you may see it differently.

Then, in alphabetical order: Camus, a chirpy French-Algerian, found life disturbing and meaningless, but rather fun. He was just thinking he should get round to growing up, when he died unexpectedly. Heidegger you really don't need to bother with. He's never at home when you call. And Sartre, the Audley Harrison of philosophers, is only of interest to anally-retentive collectors of detail.

It's a school of philosophy for the self-important but interesting, not the self-important and dull—for talented middleweights and supermiddleweights: the Haglers and Durans of philosophy—like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Camus.

The point of existentialism—stop staring out of the window, Adam. Nanny will soon be here to rescue you—is not to wallow in self-indulgent absurdism, any fool can do that, but to discover a basis for moral action. All come to the same conclusion: that you have to either affirm an existing form of belief, or invent a new one. Their differences, such as they are, are merely a matter of personal choice. But it's not just about whining on, except in the case of Sartre.

Anyway, that's how Kierkegaard and Nietzsche explained it to me over a few beers down at the old Abyss & Clawhammer. It was a typical night down there. Camus was obsessively fucking the barmaid while babbling about football. Sartre, as usual, was whinging on because his patent self-operated enema machine still wasn't working. (If he wasn't already dead, you'd have to have him put down, out of pity.) And Heidegger, as always, was afraid it might be his round and had locked himself in the oubliette of his own abstraction.

---

*'I teach you the Superman (*Übermensch*). Man is something that should be overcome (*uberwunden*)'. A 'Superman' is a man who has 'overcome' man—that is, himself.*

This is where you can get into difficulties. Overcoming yourself, and overcoming others, are separate but not always separable tasks. I'm not persuaded Nietzsche knew—or cared—where the line lay, if there is a line. The first can lead to the second—all power is ambiguous—and the second can be a step to the first. That's the tricky bit.

They're alright, the existentialists. But they should spend more time whippet-racing.

Is Colin an existentialist? I would say so. He measures theory against his own experience, which is one criterion. He knows life can be a grim business, so he begins by affirming hope. Because he knows—will somebody let Fat Freddy's cat in?—that hope will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no hope.

But it could be a broad category. For instance, is Cervantes an existentialist? There's an interesting question to fill an idle moment.

You could say I'm an existentialist, to the extent that I believe we are so ignorant—have you looked at the universe lately? big, huh? and getting bigger!—that we have to wrestle continually with doubt.

What we know is a patchwork. We have limited opportunities to learn.

We have to make decisions. And we have to live with the consequences. The more we learn, the better. Where is there room for certainty? We just hope we can learn the right things in time.

We can wank as much as we like, but if we miss the bus, how far will wanking get us? Further than the bus maybe, if the bus gets hit by a bomb. The status quo? It can change in a flash. There is social collapse in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is famine and massacre in Darfur and Congo. There are fires in California and a hurricane just ripped through Florida. Life's a chancy business.

If we're wise, we try to learn. We make best-guesses and hope we'll get lucky.

That's life.

In a nutshell.

Well, Adam? If you complain about shoddy prose, you must expect to have your own unpicked. I know a bit about shoddy. I live in the West Riding where the wretched stuff was invented. We're not proud of it, but it made us rich.

What, you didn't know it was a metaphor? Sorry. I forgot. Just shows how old I'm getting. I'll be losing my drink next.

a domestic moment

I was just pouring beer over my hands to wash the blood off—well, I've dropped pints before because my hands were slippery—when Lucy said, "I don't think you should have called him a squealing little arse-bandit."

"Did I?" I said. "I don't remember. Must have thought it would hurt. It's the sort of thing you say when your blood is up. Stereotyping the enemy. Makes 'em feel lonely. Helps when you're recruiting. He sneered at Colin's panty-fetishism, as I remember. Tried to infer he was a paedophile. He started this, for fuck's sake. He set the tone. I'm just improvising round his three chords."

(A bit rash, Adam; waving that meathook when you're challenging butchers. Did you mistake us for candlestick-makers? Guess we all look the same on a Friday night in our drape jackets and drainpipes.)

"I know why you did it. But see that nice couple in the corner with the big poodle? Their son's gay, and they might think you were generalising. By the way, they said to thank you for the bit of Mars-Jones's liver that you threw over for the dog. Mars-Jones kicked their cat the other day and they were too nice to let the dog bite back. But they haven't forgotten. Now pass me that soda-syphon. I'll just clean the blood off this mirror so the nice couple can see if he tries to run behind the fruit-machine. Here's a bar towel to dry off your hands. Well? Back to work! The wretch deserves it."

"OK," I said. "I still think he's a jerk-and-squirt little so-and-so, but I'll be too polite to mention it. I like the nice couple. They used to tell me stories when I was young."

a bloomsbury ghost; or, the king of clones

> *And the children of Israel inquired of the LORD, (for the ark of the covenant of God* was *there in those days,*
>
> *And Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, stood before it in those days,) saying, Shall I yet again go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease? And the LORD*

said, Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand.

Judges, 20.27-8

A thing that's odd about Mars-Jones's review is this:

Why would Adam want to put on such an elaborate *auto-da-fe* for a *curiose* old boy like Colin, who according to Adam has never written anything worthwhile?

If you think a man's a fool and his books are a waste of time, how long does it take to say so? (Me? I was just lounging in the alley when Adam lurched by looking for a fight. I'm on my own time. I can take as long as I like.) There must be nearly fifty column inches here of Adam rattling his Iron Maiden.

You wanna get geeky and measure them? 9.6+3.3+3.3+3.3+1.6+1 1.4+10.2 = 42.7, if my mental arithmetic is still functioning. That's just the text. The whole thing, including an 8 x 7 photo of young Colin looking like a pouty gay icon, occupies over 170 square inches of a national Sunday broadsheet. It's the lead piece in the books section. That's a lot of prime literary real estate that could have been used to recommend something the editor thought might interest us. So what's the editor's game? Apart from being unfit for his job?

I mean, if he just wants to parade his gay friends wanking, he might—out of courtesy—have picked one who can do it without insulting our intelligence. There are some good ones about. I know one or two of them. Now, I don't care who wanks who, but I don't particularly want them ejaculating in my coffee, and preening all over the fucking place, while I'm stumbling around on a Sunday morning trying to find the thing that makes life worth living. Unless they can make me laugh while they do it, which before noon can be a hard thing to do.

I can see what's in it for Adam: the chance to show off—and no essential harm in that, we all like to flex our muscles for the amusement of our chosen objects of desire—and, I don't know, are they paying reviewers much these days? Surely they must have paid him something for a big one like this. But what I'd really like to know is, what was going through the editor's mind when he accepted this? Or did he commission it? Mars-Jones's amateurish

prose does have a tacky rent-boy feel, now you mention it. If it was a prostitute piece, that might explain its gabbling poverty.

I smell skulduggery here. I know the sound of wrong-'uns lurking in the shadows. In a better cause I might be one of them.

But let's finish kicking shit out of the contender, before we go hunting the promoter.

Get some more beers in, and put some money in the jukebox.

Hmm, the sirens seem to be singing in Chestertonian tones. Which is strange. Of course, Chesterton couldn't have written a character like Adam Mars-Jones. He couldn't do the bile and the spite and the wriggling *sac* of self-loathing. But he did capture the shallow pretentiousness and air of cultural possession rather well—in an amiable Chestertonian way—in a lesser known novel called *The Return of Don Quixote*, which I've always thought unjustly neglected.

Doesn't this ring a bell?:

> *Among them, it is needless to say, there was Mr. Almeric Wister. It is needless to say it, for there always is Mr. Almeric Wister wherever twenty or thirty are gathered together in that particular sort of social afternoon.*
>
> *Mr. Almeric Wister was, and is, the one fixed point round which countless slightly differentiated forms of social utility have clustered. He managed to be so omnipresent about teatime in Mayfair that some have held he was not a man but a syndicate; and a number of Wisters scattered to the different drawing-rooms, all tall and lank and hollow-eyed and carefully dressed, and all with deep voices and hair and beard thin but rather long, with a suggestion of the aesthete. But even in the similar parties in country houses there were always a certain number of him; so it would seem that the syndicate sent out provincial touring companies. He had a hazy reputation as an art expert and was great on the duration of pigments. He was the sort of man who remembers Rossetti and has unpublished anecdotes about Whistler. When he was first introduced to Braintree, his eye encountered that demagogue's red tie, from which he correctly deduced that Braintree was not an art expert. The expert therefore felt free to*

be even more expert than usual.

In fact, since there are so many of him, I must get an Adam of my own. I need a new yardstick of awfulness. (These New Labour ones just snap in your hands.) I'm sure I've got a spare corner to stand him in with his pointy hat. Do you think you can get one with the monogram AM-J embroidered over the big D? Or is that too much to ask?

You want to scrap, Adam? You punch like a girl. (And I don't mean a woman. I know some of those who can give you a crack that will make your head sing if the muse of battle inspires them. One is standing behind me, trimming roses. She can put the 'ding' in *das ding an sich*, if she's so minded. Look, she's off to the gym AGAIN!) If I were your trainer, Adam, I'd have to say that you need a lot more roadwork. And skipping, for your footwork. And at least two hours a day on the heavy bag.

You're too slow for a lightweight, and too flimsy for anything else. You need some speed in those feet and some iron in that fist.

Right now, you're not even fit for a sparring partner.

Ghastly boy. I don't want to pop the ampoule of your ego too suddenly, but you must go straight to Matron. You are raddled with the pox of self-deception. The result of too much frothing, if you ask me. Must be where you caught that hyphen.

Adam Mars-Jones, Adam Mars-Jones,
—the hyphen's for bolting together his bones—
Let's flay him and fuck him, this princess of clones
He's Dracula's bride, and he'll suck you quite BLUE!
…Adam Mars-Jones, I'm glad I'm not you.

Søren Kirkegaard, enjoying an unexpected peak moment in the abyss; communicated through a medium.

Where am I?

Nurse! Nurse! Bring my medication. I seem to be kicking a limp carcass.

enter the songbird of minerva

> *The best interviews—like the best biographies—should sing the strangeness and variety of the human race.*
>
> Lynn Barber, ***Independent on Sunday***, 1991

I was recovering rather well—even being allowed, under escort, into the sunlit grounds of the sanatorium—when an unfortunate oversight by the staff plunged me back into relapse.

I was forbidden access to anything that might be a review, even a good one, but—my gaolers being religious literalists—they let an interview slip through.

It was Lynn Barber interviewing Colin Wilson in *The Observer*. I read it with rising fascination. I read it twice.

It was the work of a moment to tear the bars off the window and hop over the wall. My parrot Hegel was waiting for me in a copse with my spare pistols and billhook and a large spliff that he had kept alight so I didn't have to wait for a toke.

My mouth was all dry from my previous medications, so I had to knock a couple of teeth out to help me whistle up the Wild Hunt. But such things are trifles in extremis.

Ah, my hounds! my steed! my friends! And a sly old vixen to pursue. Tally ho! View halloo! What more can life have to offer?

It was a slow start in the fog. Wasn't sure where I was for a while. Was this a good beginning:

> ***'Now they will realise that I am a genius'***
> ***In 1956* The Outsider *made him an overnight sensation, but ever since COLIN WILSON has been an outsider—a knicker fetishist, a social misfit and the author of 110 books that even his publisher didn't want. He hopes his new autobiography will finally convince the world of his greatness***

A social misfit, eh? Now just what does that mean in this day and age? And if his publisher didn't want any of his 110 books, why did

he publish them? Ah, he thought other people might want them. A bit business-like for a publisher, don't you think? But then we all know Colin's friends have no class.

This is the first time I interviewed a self-declared genius, also the first time I have interviewed a self-declared panty fetishist, so Colin Wilson is quite a catch.

He mentions women like you in his autobiography. There was one that threatened to commit suicide if he wouldn't let her give him a blow-job while he was driving. The line between suicide and giving the driver a blow-job while he's driving could be a fine one on Cornish roads, I should think. A nice distinction, as they say. So we shouldn't be surprised if Colin is a bit cautious when Lynn pops in grinning like the Merry Widow.

He has been declaring his genius ever since The Outsider *came out in 1956 and he awoke to find himself famous. He wrote it in the Reading Room of the British Museum while living in a sleeping bag on Hampstead Heath.*

No, he wrote the early drafts of *Ritual in the Dark* while he was sleeping on Hampstead Heath. He wrote *The Outsider* later, in a bedsit. He's quite clear about this in his autobiography. That's why you're here to interview him, isn't it? Because of *Dreaming To Some Purpose*. You should give your researcher a thorough whipping. She can't have read it either. She's just feeding you old clichés.

He was a Leicester factory worker's son who left school at 16 and avoided National Service by claiming to be homosexual. He supported himself in odd jobs while reading seemingly every book ever written

It was only 'quite a lot', Lynn. No need for hyperbole. The reason it looks impressive is because he picked so many good ones.

and writing The Outsider*, which was hailed as England's answer to Albert Camus.*

But he went from literary lion to pariah in less than a year.

His immediate crime was too much party-going, too much name-dropping, too much publicity,

Lynn doesn't like parties, name-dropping or publicity. I'll make a note of that. Because I hope she'll come to my party, and I want her to enjoy herself.

but his subsequent, much worse crime was writing too many books—110 at the latest count—

How many is too many? 109? Is there a quota? Who says so? You wouldn't like Aubrey, Lynn. He could start 109 books in an afternoon. I'll make a note not to invite him.

on subjects ranging from serial killers to alien abductions to The Lost City of Atlantis. The critics at first attacked him then ignored him—he has not had a serious review for years. But now, at 73, he has written an autobiography, Dreaming To Some Purpose*, of considerable charm. It is jaw-droppingly—one might say cringe-makingly—honest and often unintentionally hilarious.*

I'd stay away from the jaw-dropping if I were you, Lynn, especially if Colin's driving. Stick to the cringing. But not too much. He might think you were going to commit suicide.

Why are you assuming that the humour is unintentional? Not used to hearing the English talk to each other? Or just forgotten how to listen? I've read this book. I'd say Colin knew exactly what he wrote.

I particularly enjoyed his account of how, as a panty-fetishist and visiting lecturer at an American university, he contrived to look up his student' skirts with the aid of a glass-bottomed mug.

Thought that was the best bit in the book, did you? You should have read the bit where describes where he was living while he wrote *The Outsider*. And how the press garbled the two stories—sleeping on the heath and later writing *The Outsider*—and staged a photo of him in a sleeping bag on the heath, and then hung their myth round his neck for a millstone that they've never let him shed since. I thought that was more interesting. But no accounting for taste. Or

perhaps your researcher spilled coffee over those pages, or cut them up to make paper panties, and didn't like to tell you.

Here's another good bit you may have missed, Lynn:

> *One evening at the Royal Court Theatre I took part in a debate on modern theatre. Kenneth Tynan was the chairman, and others on the panel were Arthur Miller, John Whiting and Wolf Mankowitz. (Marylin Monroe sat in the front row.) Mankowitz was a novelist who specialised in cockney humour and pathos. Within a few minutes of the start of the discussion, Mankowitz suddenly described* The Outsider *as an anthology of quotations. This raised a laugh. Encouraged, Mankowitz kept up this line of attack throughout the evening.*

Who was in the chair, Colin? Do you think this might have been a set-up? I remember Mankowitz. He was like a pawn from a lost chess set. I'm sure Ken wouldn't have exploited that. Only I've just been reading Humphrey Carpenter's *The Angry Young Men* and that's exactly the line that Tynan took against Wilson. Must have been just coincidence that Mankowitz was on this panel spouting Ken's party line when Ken was in the chair.

Sorry, Colin. I interrupted you.

> *The following day, an unsigned report in a London evening paper declared: 'Mankowitz played with Wilson like a good-natured lion with a mouse.'*
>
> *The next day, I was asked to appear on television to argue the point with Mankowitz. I did, and the discussion was heated but not downright rude. Afterwards I asked Mankowitz who had written the report in the evening paper; he reddened, then scowled defiantly and snapped: 'I did.' I was asked to address some kind of spiritualist society at a Knightsbridge hotel. When I arrived, I discovered they were mostly mild old ladies. A gossip columnist from the* Daily Express *approached me, winked at me, and asked me to come and have a quiet drink. He intimated that we were fellow-conspirators among a lot of old tabby cats, and asked me to 'have a go at the old bitches'. I said I couldn't do that—they were my hostesses—but we went on drinking on friendly terms. In my speech after the meal,*

I said that I was tired of being described as a spokesman of the younger generation; I represented no-one but myself. The Outsider *was a personal statement, and I felt a fraud when it was taken to be an expression of a new anti-Establishment attitude.*

The next day, the Daily Express *appeared with a headline: 'Colin Wilson Admits He Is A Fraud'. I was quoted as saying '* The Outsider *was written with completely false intent…' Gollancz was immediately on the phone to me, roaring with rage, and two days later his solicitor managed to induce the newspaper to print an apology, but I got the feeling that many people would be only too happy to dismiss the book as a fraud.*

Not as good as the panty-peeping, Lynn? Or were you just flirting, you old groupie? Or did it sound only too familiar? I thought it might make you feel at home.

Lynn continues:

I go to meet him at his home in Cornwall, where he has lived for almost 50 years. He picks me up from St Austell in his ancient Jaguar and seems like the sort of amiable tweed-jacketed cove you see in glucosamine-sulphate ads. But as we tootle along the lanes his conversation becomes increasingly odd—he periodically throws out the word 'fucker' with extraordinary venom, accompanied by a sly, sideways glance to see if I am shocked. The fucker in question was Humphrey Carpenter, who had been to interview him and then betrayed him:

If you have just come down to interview him, and one of your fellow interviewers had just betrayed him, don't you think, Lynn, that the sly, sideways glances at your response to the phrase 'that fucker Carpenter' might be less concerned with whether you were shocked and more interested in whether it gave him any clue which side you might be on in this feud? Or is it just me that doesn't always trust people?

'We got on terribly well, I thought, though I did notice that Humphrey fell asleep when I was explaining what I meant by non-

pessimistic existentialism.'

'How awful,' I murmur, resolving to avoid the subject of non-pessimistic existentialism at all costs.

Do I understand you correctly, Lynn? You've come all this way *not* to talk to the man about the thing he's most famous for? Why are you here? Is this some new alternative form of spiritual exercise? Something to do with crystals, perhaps, or wearing white trouser suits? Am I missing the subtext of the Sunday broadsheets entirely? Baroque minimalism, perhaps?

It is a relief to arrive at his bungalow and meet his wife, Joy, who is reassuringly normal, friendly and in no way likely to say 'fucker'. She bustles round making coffee and apologising for the parrot hopping round the room.

Ah, perhaps Lynn's here to interview the parrot. Has he written an autobiography? Or a monograph on the evils of hopping and here he is caught out as a hypocrite! Must be some reason why Joy keeps apologising. Must be some reason why Lynn's here. Lynn should interview my parrot. He's hopping mad the whole time. She'd get some earache out of him. But I don't live by the seaside.

Still, I'm glad to hear Joy's so good at the 'bustling round', Colin. I must get her to have a word with Lucy. Lucy's very good at 'zooming', or 'high-speed linear bustling' you might call it, but her 'bustling round' is a bit…well, a bit 'linear'. I suggested 'zooming in slow motion', but that just led to explosions, or 'expansive bustling' if you prefer. Perhaps a physicist could explain it.

Lynn has the ability to convey what she doesn't intend. When I read this:

At this point Joy walks through the room and he tells her amiably: 'I was just saying how difficult it was the first time I got into bed with you.' Joy smiles her sweet smile and says: 'Well, I'm just taking the rubbish out.'

I don't think she intends me to imagine her trying to catch Joy's

eye, to collude against the male, fellow-bustlers together, and Joy astutely avoiding that eye because she knows what this is about. You may be dressed like a white elephant, Lynn, but Joy knows you could well be a Trojan horse. She's seen Greeks bearing notebooks before. Quite recently by the sound of it.

Are you sure that was the rubbish she was taking out? If Joy thinks you're a friend of 'that fucker Carpenter', she hasn't got time to hang around and collude. She's got to count the spoons before burying all the silver in the hoard-hole, and cleaning the blunderbuss.

Perhaps that was why the parrot was hopping. It was trying to tell her that Colin had moved the blunderbuss and it was now under the sofa, and Joy was trying desperately to signal that she knew and to shut up about it, in case Lynn could decode parrot-hopping.

Don't worry, Joy. I think Lynn's an *en*coder, not a *de*coder. Ah, the perils of specialisation!

Did you intend me to imagine that, Lynn?

Perhaps it takes one to know one, and that's why you attribute this ability to Colin. 'Unintentionality'. A sort of counter-Husserlianism, perhaps. Sounds almost like 'self-deception'. Another fine distinction? Lynn, your jaw's dropping again. I've told you about that. Get cringing, woman, quickly! Get a grip. No, not like that. You're frightening Colin again. Here, borrow my spare forelock. I always keep one for emergencies. You seem to have left yours on the train, or at the dry cleaners. You should shoot that researcher. She can't get anything right.

You don't want him to talk about his philosophical ideas. You don't want him to talk about his autobiography. You've already made your mind up about his books. (How many have you read, Lynn? There's an awful lot of them to generalise about.) Can I ask again, Lynn? Why are you here? It can't be to drop his name. You've made your position on name-dropping very clear. And it can't be to give Colin publicity, because we know how strict you are about his previous indulgences in that vice. And it seems a long way to go for a party when we know what you feel about exceeding our millennium party targets. Still, it's not much of a party, I suppose,

with just the three of them, and two of them in their seventies. You're kind of gig, eh. There's the parrot, of course. Maybe that's why the parrot keeps hopping so dementedly, just to pep things up a bit, and Joy has to keep apologising because she knows how down you are on party-going. If you weren't there they might all be hopping like optimistic fiends. It's all beginning to make sense. I think I'm getting there. But I'm still not sure why you're here.

You blunder and flap about. Seemingly oblivious of your subject. Regarding him as freak, as far as I can tell. Is this impression 'intended' or 'unintended'? Is this singing the strangeness and variety of the human race? Or whistling on the way to the bank?

Hang on. A resonance is forming.

Is it Dick Emery, 'Ooh, you are *awful*… but I *like* you!'? Well, there's a bit of that in there. Les Dawson, hitching up his bosom in the doctor's waiting room or over the back-yard wall, and gurning wonderfully with that great leathery face? That's part of the flavour.

No. I know.

Listen.

Clump… Clump… Clump…

CRASH!

"Oooh, Mr Colin, say panties again. It gets me all of a doo-dah. And don't bring that philosophy in the house. You're dripping ideas all over the carpet. And who has to clean them up? It's no wonder Joy's so good at bustling! Look! She's taking out the rubbish, again!"

It's Nanny from *Duckula*.

CRASH!

Clump…

Lugubrious bird butler rolls his eyes.

"Will that be all, sir?"

How much more of this can you stand? Let's scroll on a bit. Here's a little gem:

> *The obvious time to have produced his autobiography would have been in 2006—the 50th anniversary of* The Outsider*—but, as always, he was pressed for money, so he did it at the first whiff of a publisher's advance.*

A writer who's short of money! A writer who smells of the shop! How vulgar! What an anomaly! It can't be true!

It may not be. Try this:

"Colin Wilson wrote his autobiography because he'd reached 70, and that's a time when you look back. The 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Outsider* will be celebrated in two years time with a book on the Angry Young Man era from his viewpoint as the last surviving lion."

How precisely should he observe this sacred anniversary, oh baroque minimalist lawgiver? to the exact date of publication? are we allowed to mention the date? Or even the book? Title-dropping! Not allowed. Colin's already done time on Devil's Island for that. Still be there if Joy hadn't done some discreet but radical bustling. Oh! That's why you mentioned the 'bustling'. And I thought you were just being patronising. Just shows how wrong you can be about a person.

Surely you knew this, Lynn. About the Angry Young Man book. It's literary marketplace gossip. Even Jasper Gerard knew about it. It's in *his* interview. Too busy singing, were you? Got distracted by the strangeness and variety of the human race, perhaps. You weren't scooped were you? Not by Jasper Gerard!—well, I don't know who he is either, but it's got to sting if he pipped the Masked Beautician to the post. She's won prizes, you know. Ho yuss. The Holland Park Caucus Race, no less. And the Clone-A-Hack Deadline Handicap. And it's a great name to fling in someone's teeth. I'll set Jasper Gerard on you! No! No! Not Boneypart! Not the Bogeyman! Not Sir Jasper! Oh! Sir Jasper! Oh! Oh!—Whatever, Lynn. Looks like you were either wrong or fibbing. And if you were only wrong, you were passing off a malicious supposition as fact. Were you hoping to start a rumour, or merely repeating a canard? That's naughty, for a broadsheet journalist. Tabloid stuff. Give yourself a smack.

People might begin to wonder if you're worth listening to.

Here's a line you may regret writing:

It seems to constitute an attempt to classify human feelings and behaviour by a Martian who has never met an Earthling.

Just who is described here?

It's funny you didn't know it. About the Angry Young Man book, I mean. You being such a friend of Humphrey Carpenter. It's what the spat with Colin was all about. Their rival versions of the AYMs.

Just one last dip:

> *Does he think he's had much influence as a philosopher? 'Oh no. None at all. Daphne du Maurier, who I knew when we first moved here, said to me that everyone who has a great success finds that the next ten years are very difficult—they have a period when people take no notice of them. And I thought, No, not 10 years,*

He was 26 at the time.

> *I couldn't bear it! But I've been forgotten for almost 50 years. It's been a bit discouraging but I've learnt to swim against the tide.*

Not quite forgotten, Colin. *The Outsider* hasn't been out of print since it went into print. And how many books have you had published? Someone must remember you unless the world is full of amnesiac bookbuyers. I know publishers are pretty dozy, but you'd think they'd notice if they hadn't sold a book of yours in the last forty years. You'd think the accountants would have told them. They need a bit of profit in the petty cash for when they moonlight as embezzlers.

Why is Lynn here, if you've been forgotten? How much are the *Observer* paying her for filling a page of a Sunday broadsheet with a list of all the things she didn't talk to you about? That's pretty high-toned ignoring, if you ask me. Ah, it's because she doesn't like name-dropping! Found the most obscure writer in the country just to show how modest she was. Didn't want to talk to you about your work in case people thought it sounded interesting and you became a success again. Could have risked courting publicity—no, it's alright, Lynn, we know how you feel about publicity. You told us at the beginning, remember? Then someone might have wanted to throw a party! You know how people like to celebrate a good thing. And then some thoughtless idiot might ask who wrote her

piece and start talking about her work. You know how people talk. That's why you don't want them gathering at parties. Once they get a drink in them, they just can't shut up—and then she'd get publicity! Parties would soon be erupting all over the place. There'd be no way we could keep a lid on the name-dropping. Blow the whole baroque minimalist project into smithereens. Biggest disaster since the Millennium Dome.

I'm trying to keep up, Colin.

It's because I live up north.

We get a bit out of touch.

Baroque minimalism could blossom and explode—and we might not even notice.

That's why we like living in the provinces.

It's quieter.

I know you're just trying to help Lynn keep her job, Colin, but it still sounded like modesty to me—would that be 'intentional' or 'unintentional' modesty, Lynn. Or Martian modesty perhaps?

Why, I don't think Colin's an embittered egomaniac at all!

You've been lying to us, Colin.

I denounce you as a double-dyed fraud all over again!

the songbird sits for a portrait

These, in the days when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.

A.E. Housman, ***Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries***

I try to be fair. Which doesn't just mean cutting equally with either hand. I thought perhaps Lynn's handling of Wilson was a special case. She's obviously a big fan of Humphrey Carpenter—just see her reviews of his books!—so maybe she and Wilson got off on the wrong foot, him fulminating about Carpenter and all. I was wondering how to rectify this at the gallop, when—blow me—the copy of *The Observer*

with the Mars-Jones piece in it reconfigured itself to present the front page of the Review section and there—large as life—was Lynn Barber interviewing the painter Jack Vettriano.

I think I like Vettriano's stuff. By which I mean I've only seen it in reproduction or on telly, which can be misleading because the processes of print and transmission can change the colour and tone of the original, and texture is reduced to a two-dimensional version of itself.

I remember seeing the originals of some Impressionist paintings for the first time at the Courtauld Institute and thinking how small and pale they were. I'm not sure what I expected, but they weren't it.

So here was Lynn interviewing Vettriano.

OK, I thought. Let's see if she can sing a different tune.

The header didn't look too promising at first:

Hyped as Britain's most popular artist—one of his works recently sold for a record-breaking £750,000—Jack Vettriano is adored by millions who couldn't care less that art critics deride him. But there's a side to the painter that his fans are unaware of.

But at a second glance, it looked quite exciting. What is it that the fans don't know? There was a *South Bank Show* not so long ago that looked pretty comprehensive, and I'm sure most of his fans would have watched or taped that. I wonder what Melvyn didn't tell us? Must be bad. Melvyn's not unduly squeamish.

There's a big photo of Jack. He looks pretty glum. It could be because of the big secret, but it could be because he's got to look through an empty picture frame—portrait of Jack the painter, geddit—and he might just be thinking, 'I'd like to twat that photographer. When will they go?' There's something about the set of his shoulders that lends credence to this latter theory. But it could be just the weight of the frame. Or the burden of guilt, of course.

So what is it, the big secret?

Well, she's not going to tell us straight away, is she?

She wouldn't get much at penny-a-line if she did that.

The girl's got to live.

What inspires Lynn's interest is the fact that one of his paintings, *The Singing Butler*, just sold for £750,000. She likes Jack's wealth. She likes his property portfolio, if not his artistic one:

> *Vettriano's income from these reproductions runs to more than half a million a year…*
>
> *He has plenty to enjoy—a new house he has just bought in Oxford, a huge apartment in Kirkaldy near his parents, the flat in Knightsbridge, his precious old Mercedes. But actually what he most enjoys is giving money away…*

Shut that handbag, Lynn. There's a policeman on the corner…

> *He always complains of lack of recognition but he has been receiving accolades by the bucketload—a respectful* South Bank Show*, a ditto* Desert Island Discs*, a couple of honorary degrees and the OBE last year.*
>
> *As a consequence his prices have shot up…*

You weren't paying attention, Lynn. He got these attentions because his prices were shooting up under their own steam. Do you seriously suggest that Terence Conran and Jack Nicholson—whose names you can't wait to drop—phoned each other after *Desert Island Discs* to say 'Hmm. Pretty good one by that Jack Vettriano. Don't know what sort of painting he does, but let's pay over the odds for his pictures and push the market up. He might get a *South Bank Show* next week'? Or did they divine the quality of his painting by his choice of records? Eccentric millionaires, huh? You'll soon be telling us you recommended them to buy Jack's stuff. But you're saving that for next year, maybe…

What Jack complains of quite specifically—we saw it in Melvyn's programme—is not lack of general recognition, but that his paintings aren't in any important public gallery. Which you do sort of mention but somehow it becomes your point and not his, and you leave him holding a statement he hasn't made… Which is tricky of you, but clumsily done. You really should get better drugs. You lot aren't doing crack down there now are you? That will really

fuck you up. You're all *Footballers' Wives* and *Buy That House!* down South as it is.

It's true, the thing about the public galleries. Why Jack cares, I don't know. But he does. It's part of him. Perhaps it's the approval-of-the-approved thing again. Or maybe he wants ordinary people to be able to enjoy his paintings. Or perhaps he just doesn't have enough other walls to bang his head against. Whyever he wants it, there's a case to be made for indulging him. Melvyn went into this, but he couldn't find anyone from any of those public institutions who would tell him why they didn't want Jack's paintings.

He'd probably give them one, by the sound of it. You'd think they'd be grateful. But you can never tell with these curator types. Just look at the British Museum lot. You only have to mention the George Bernard Shaw bequest, and they go PURPLE.

But that could be a Virgilian problem.

I'm against this micro-management of art. Art is there to look at. Let's look at it.

The point, it seems to me is this: Vettriano is a well-known contemporary British painter. If his work hung in public galleries—even if it was just a travelling show—we would be able to judge for ourselves whether we thought he was any good or not.

We don't need some puffed-up lay hedge-priest to choose our art for us. If something's interesting, show it to us. What do you think we pay you for? To fart in our faces?

We can make our own minds up. So fuck off, art critics. Until you have something interesting to show us.

These are public galleries.

You can speak from the shadows. Just stop standing between us and the sun.

Lynn may not feel free to like Jack's painting, but she 'lerves, just lerves' his A-list fans:

> *As a consequence, his prices have shot up. At his last show, they were between £30-50,000, now they £35-130,000. But don't bother rushing to the Portland Gallery with your chequebook—all but three of the paintings have already been sold…*

If there are three unsold, why shouldn't I take my chequebook? Does Jack prefer cash? Or barter? Why do you raise these interesting questions and then ignore them? Must be more baroque minimalism. Never mind, the paintings aren't important to Lynn, but these names are:

to collectors who have been on the waiting list for years.

Why haven't those three been sold, if the waiting-list's so long? Slow down, Lynn. Your researcher, struggling along behind you under all those parcels? She can't keep up. Wait!… But Lynn has spotted celebrity. Hang painting! It's the downhill at Epsom. It's Ascot and Aintree and Badminton, all rolled into one… You won't stop her now. Not even over fences. Not even through Hell. See her buttocks clench for the *frottage*? What an athlete! Not God himself, not even a new Big Bang! is going to stop her flailing her way into this winners' enclosure:

Sir Alex Ferguson is the latest addition to the Vettriano owners' club; others include Terence Conran, Raymond Blanc (who has a 'Vettriano suite' at the Manoir aux Quat' Saisons), Robbie Coltrane, Tim Rice, Alan Coren and Jack Nicholson. (Tom Hewlett recently asked Nicholson if he'd be interested in selling, but the answer was no).

I don't know who Tom is, but he should try the Portland Gallery. I hear they still have three left. You could have told him that, when he was telling you Jack Nicholson wouldn't sell. You're a sly minx, Lynn. That's why we shouldn't take our chequebooks. You want them for yourself. Or is it that you think we belong to the 'wrong Vettriano owners' club'? You take our money. Where does that put you?

Vettriano is a painter of light and mood and ambiguity. And I'm not alone in thinking he's an interesting one. His range will have limits, like everyone else's, but he's done some intriguing things. And he should have plenty of painting left in him, barring accidents. It will be interesting to see how he goes on. And what we can learn from him.

He's interesting—if for no other reason—because he speaks to so many people. So he must know how to say something.

Jack's modest about his technical skills. He's completely self-taught—no formal training; he just got given a paintbox and said 'hey, let's make pictures!'—which means that his way of painting is completely self-invented. Which is one of the things that makes it interesting. Melvyn showed us some of the paintings Jack did when he was trying to improve his technique by mimicking the masters. The Stevenson technique, we academic types call it: 'playing the sedulous ape'. I'd like to see those close up.

Painters, I've noticed, are often intrigued by Vettriano. But they would be. They'd want to know just how he gets those effects. And how he makes so much money! But pity the poor art critic. He'd have to invent a whole new set of clichés to encode this new information. And what would happen to the Great Law Of Criticking?

The Great Law?—CRITIC KNOWS EVERYTHING!

Dummy!

Ah, fuck it! Let's shoot this fox, before it goes to earth. Lynn's had Jack's hospitality. She can say what she likes now.

> *And the couples in his airless hotel rooms—are they adulterers meeting for a quickie or hookers with clients? Anyway, the fact that there is all this exciting story in the images makes it easy to ignore the deadly flatness of technique.*
>
> *This is the answer to the question: why don't art critics take Vettriano seriously? Because there is nothing of interest in the way he paints—Vettriano is to painting what Jeffrey Archer is to prose. Nevertheless, he is interesting both as a person and phenomenon; a* self-taught* *painter who, by depicting his own fantasies, has*

*I don't understand this fixation with looking down on the self-taught. I've learnt a lot from people who are self-taught. Sometimes they can teach you things that no-one else knows. You can be taught well or badly. Just like you can learn well or badly. Most of the people I've known in my life have been so badly taught, in some area or other, that they'd be better off in those areas if they were self-taught. At least then they'd have the dignity of bearing responsibility for their own mistakes, not those of their teachers. Just look at Lynn and Adam. Who the fuck taught them their trade? Professor Shoddy at St Ignoramus Prep? Or are they betraying their master? Perhaps they should have taught themselves. It might have helped them learn to concentrate.

somehow managed to reach an audience who don't normally take any interest in art.

Don't we?

How would you know that?

Doesn't Jack Nicholson know anything about art? Or Terence Conran? Or your fellow customers at the Manoir aux Quat' Saisons? Or Robbie Coltrane? Or Alan Coren? Are these stupid and tasteless people? Is that what you're saying? Do you mean this? Or do you just like making enemies?

It's a contradictory world—almost Hegelian, perhaps? Remember Hegel on Logic, Lynn? 'Everything is inherently contradictory.' Does that ring any bells?—in which artists and their patrons know nothing about art. Are you a Hegelian, Lynn? (Or should that be *an* Hegelian?) Or can you do nothing but patronise?

A one-trick pony, huh?

Hey!

Does Vettriano rely on an editor as much as Archer is said to do, Lynn? Or would that be overstretching your metaphor?

And hey! again. Aren't we allowed content in art? Is there only technique?

Who says so?

Metaphor? Where have I heard that before?

A MOMENT OF ENLIGHTENMENT!

Of course! It's a turf war. Lynn's not a singer, at all. Was that your metaphor, Lynn, or just on loan? She must be a painter—well, I'm glad she can do something; her prose bears comparison with Jeffrey Archer—do you think they share an editor?—and her interviewees are invisible to her—but being middle-class and 'not-self-taught', her paintings are clever and conceptual, like the Prime Minister's new clothes. But, ah, if only you could see it, her technique… Exquisite! Flawless! Mandelsonian! And so breezy! You can almost smell the ocean. I'm sure she'll win prizes for it.

Hang on. If Jack's paintings are that easy to understand, how come you don't know whether they're hookers or adulterers in those airless hotel rooms. And Jack can't be that bad, if he can convey

'airlessness' in a painting. That's quite some trick, I'd say.

Oh, and the big secret? The Great Scoop? The thing the fans didn't know?

Well, it's just that Jack is no longer painting beach scenes and is now painting ambiguous sexual encounters. We all saw them when we watched *The South Bank Show*. As you would have, Lynn, if you hadn't thrown the tape to a researcher along with your unread copy of *Dreaming To Some Purpose*.

Lynn likes Jack's money but thinks his paintings are crap. She takes *x* column inches and *y* square inches of the lead feature (measure 'em yourself, but it's a lot; almost two full pages) to say this.

I'm beginning to wonder about the editorial staff at *The Observer*. Is this the Brainwashing House that Viv Stanshall mentions in *Sir Henry at Rawlinson's End*? Are they all hardcore pessimistic existentialists at *The Observer*? Is this the new freemasonry? Is there nothing good in their world? Nothing worth reporting? Apart from money? Nothing to enjoy, except through sneering at it?

They should get Jack to juggle an ambiguity…

Or have a word with Colin. He likes cheering people up.

Only kidding, Lynn. I love a girl with a slick semi-colon! Well, more than one with a hyphen, anyway.

It's only words, isn't it? We're just having a laugh.

It don't mean a thing, if it don't got that sting.

Tra-la!

Just shadow-boxing.

Just trash-talkin'.

It's a sneering match. Let's see whose lip can curl furthest.

in the bomb shelter

SAN FRANCISCO MAN BECOMES FIRST AMERICAN TO

GRASP SIGNIFICANCE OF IRONY.

SAN FRANCISCO—We spoke to Jay Fullmer, 38, who became the first American to get to grips with the concept of irony yesterday.

"It was weird," Fullmer said, "I was in London and, like, talking to this guy and it was raining and shit and he said, like great weather, or something like that." Said Fullmer: "And I thought—wait a minute, it's like, no way is it great weather."

Fullmer soon realised that the other man's 'mistake' was deliberate.

"This guy was pretty cool about it," Fullmer said.

Fullmer, who is 39 next month and married with two children, aged 8 and 3, planned to use irony himself in future.

"I'm like saying it all the time," he said. "Weekend last I was like grilling steaks and I like burned them all to shit and I said 'great weather'."

found at **http://groups.msn.com/BostonBrits/**

Rick copied this to me. I copied it to John Coulthart—you don't know who he is? Nor Rick either? Don't worry. I didn't know who Tom Hewlett is. Still don't. How do you think I feel? Still, I'm sure he's as nice as Rick and John—who replied:

Heh… I forwarded that to some Americans. Now if they could just grasp the meaning of hypocrisy we might be getting somewhere.

BTW, I asked a friend about Testicles the Tautologist but I've had no response so far.

Just thought I'd share that.

I found this quote from J.K. Galbraith in Emmanuel Cooper's *People's Art*, while I was looking for something else, and thought it looked relevant. Speaking on *Economics and the Arts* (1983) Galbraith said:

Deep in the inner soul and psyche of the poor there is

And JK means poor. Why, these people are so poor they've only got one soul/psyche between them!

there is—or must be—
A bit of a rhetorical flourish here, JK. Which is it? And why?

an instinctive artistic expression. It has only to be discovered. There is folk art, proletarian art, the art by implication of the masses.

Art by implication! Is this some new form of conceptual art? Oh, like junk bonds?

Surely these are superior to bourgeois art, art that has been blighted by money…

Why superior? Aren't the lives of the poor blighted by money? Are they poor in a socio-economic vacuum? From what I've seen, they get the rough end of being blighted by money. Does that make their art better or worse?

It is only when other wants are satisfied that people and communities turn generally to the arts; we must reconcile ourselves to this unfortunate fact. In consequence, the arts become a part of the affluent standard of living. When life is meagre so are they.

"It's the rich wot takes the gravy and the poor wot gets the blame!" Not a new song. Even Lynn could sing it if you hummed the tune for her.

Surely he's saying more than that? Well, let's fillet it. Can I borrow your scalpel? Pay attention. This could be course-work for an honours in whizzo-Hegelianism.

Now, I've got a lot of time in general for Professor J.K. Galbraith. I think his definition of revolution as the act of smashing down a rotten door, is as good a distinction between revolution and rebellion as you could wish for. And I've found it very useful for explaining things.

But even Homer nods. So let's not take anything for granted.

If his second paragraph means anything, it seems to argue that Lucien Freud must be a better painter than van Gogh because his life has been more prosperous. I admire Lucien Freud's work. Do I think he is 'better' or 'worse' than Van Gogh? In what sense? How are we attempting to compare like with like? Each can do things the other can't, or doesn't want to. I admire both painters, but somehow I doubt either would thank me for weighing his reputation in these Galbraithian scales.

So Galbraith can't mean that. He wasn't a fool, so he should mean something. Or was he asleep on his feet, perhaps?

Does he mean that when times are hard, art is less grand? Well, so are dinners. Is this news? You've been on a salary too long, JK. You should join the self-employed. It's always feast or famine with us. Sends our art all over the place. That's why we call it yo-yo art.

Still missing the point, am I? Let's try again.

See that fine necklace the cardinal's whore is wearing? And the string of coral beads that simple native clasps in her plump unringed fingers? Are they both art? If so, which is better? Is it just about money, or are there other forms of prosperity? If the cardinal's whore is bulimic and debt-ridden, while the simple native—does it matter whose breasts are bigger, or is that a different competition?—eats fresh food every day while watching her fine fat cows spread like melting butter across her luscious pastures; who is more prosperous? Can we tell by whose art is better? What does 'better' mean?

And what do we mean by 'art'? It's a slippery word in my experience. Sometimes it teaches us. Sometimes it entertains us. Sometimes it comforts and reassures us. These are all worthwhile things to do in their season.

But none of this matters.

Galbraith isn't interested in his subject. He's turned his back on the window, and is watching the faces of his friends in the mirror. He's having a knees-up, and singing "It's the rich wot takes the gravy…" for the amusement of his pals. Only he's doing it genteelly. Making them comfortable with it. It's just spun sugar. He's showing them what he's learnt at confectionery classes. And without once suggesting the smell of the shop!

In a minute the cardinal's whore will pop out of his cake—Ta-rah!—with 'reconcile ourselves!' tattooed round her navel, and wearing nothing but a credit card and a Louis Vuitton tampon-string—just look at the price-tag! If it ain't art, it's magic—lordy-lordy, did you ever see anything so inspiring?

(Well, I did once. I was marooned on this desert island and there was this native girl, and the things she could do with a handful of coral beads, why, it would make your eyes water! But you don't want to hear about that. Not when you're wearing a monkey-suit. Not 'til the women have withdrawn, anyway. I keep forgetting I'm only here to stand in for the regular footman.)

It should be an ugly guy with a machine-gun who pops out of the cake—like in *Some Like It Hot!*—but it seldom is. And anyway, the gangsters just turn into art collectors, if they live that long. And send their kids to university. And have holidays in Hawaii.

And leave you and me to mop up the blood.

You see what I mean about learning to listen, and not putting too much trust in the priestly vestments of the speaker?

'Reconcile ourselves'? Who does 'ourselves' include?

It's embarrassing to see intelligent people gibbering and fawning for money, but you need to get used to it. There's a lot of it about.

Still, no need to get embarrassed when Lynn's around. Her fawning is heart-felt, and her gibbering, I'm sure, is all her own. If it was art, you'd have to call it 'naive'. From a Galbraithian point of view, do you think if they paid her more, she'd get any 'better'?

I was still contemplating this passage from Galbraith, when I slipped into a shamanistic trance and my friend the badger led me to a dream.

The dark was full of noises. *Round the Horne* was playing on a radio somewhere. Kids were playing with shrapnel. A totter's cart went past. I was hanging on the wall of an old bomb shelter, being a damp print of *The Green Woman* by Tretchikoff. (You remember it, Adam. It was popular in the Fifties. People found comfort in it. Used to be fashionable to sneer at it, in some circles.)

Lynn's here. With a bucket of shit. She hates the picture. It's eyes are downcast. It won't look at her. It seems to have a story, but it won't tell her what it is…

Damn. The Man from Porlock just shouted, "Sail, ho!"

I've got to go. I see a ship's just anchored in the bay. It has blue sails. There'll be beer and sausages at Circe's gaff tonight! Trader Vic might be there, with some of his Javanese sate spice! JK might bring a cake!

Where's my yo-yo?

Must dash.

Party on, dudes.

It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings!

a tocsin at the iron gates

> ***Mars***. *The Roman god of war; identified in some aspects with the Greek Ares…*
>
> *The planet of this name was so called from early times because of its reddish tinge, and under it, says the* Compost *of* Ptholomeus*, "is borne thieves and robbers… nyght walkers and quarell pykers, bosters, mockers, and skoffers; and these men of Mars causeth warre, and murther, and batayle. They wyll be gladly smythes or workers of yron… lyers, gret swerers… He is red and angry… a great walker, and maker of swordes and knyves, and a sheder of mannes blode… and good to be a barboure and a blode letter, and to drawe teeth."*
>
> Brewer, ***A Dictionary of Phrase & Fable***

Stir your stumps, oh Yeo-persons of Bohemia! Shake off those hangovers—and tell our dubious Spartan allies, it's time to stop combing their hair. Fetch out that blunderbuss or pitchfork from under the bed. Unwrap that billhook, and that flogger's-maul. Put on the kettle! Give the babies guns!

The Roman tax-collectors are upon us! They want their tithes. Don't you hear their tocsin squealing in the south?

Gather the *fyrd*! Make balefires writhe!

Come wind, come wrack, at least we'll die with harness on our back!

Oh, good. Here's Wayland, with his sample case. We'll be alright now, my mutinous fuckeroos.

Clump… Clump… Clump…

Now we can see their awesome battle array.

First they send out a wriggling dervish to terrify us with his grimaces.

Then the elephant parades; its howdah crammed with impressive silverware. (I see they learnt something from Hannibal. They're not quite as daft as you think.)

But where is the lantern-jawed Varrus of these imposing legions? Where is he who can roll back the stone of ignorance and bring the light to us benighted heathens?

Advance, oh Juggernaut! oh, questing Cyclops!

Come into our wood, oh He-whose-car-can-crush-the-world. Try this ingenious chair, oh Scourge-of-No-Man.

S*hamma-lamma-dingdong!*

Vercingetorix and Sweeney Todd await you.

If you go down to the wood at night
The one you can't see for the trees
You'll find cold bones in the harsh moonlight
And laughter on the breeze…
And the thing that crawls up your trouser leg
Will give your crotch a squeeze.

O.S.Macfarlane, ***The Keepers of the Grail***

Come on, bold Varrus. Get a move on. It's gotta be better than a poke in the eye with a burnt stick.

the beard of moriarty. is it real?

'An old man of your age, brother," I said, and I started to rip up the book he'd got, and the others did the same with the ones they had, Dim and Pete doing a tug-of-war with The Rhombohedral System*…*

He went sort of staggering off, it not having been too hard of a tolchock really, going 'Oh oh oh', not knowing where or what was what really, and we had a snigger at him and then riffled through his pockets, Dim dancing round with his crappy umbrella meanwhile, but there wasn't much in them. There were a few starry letters, some of them dating back to 1960 with 'My dearest dearest' in them and all that chepooka, and a keyring and a starry leaky pen. Old Dim gave up his umbrella dance and of course had to start reading one of the letters out loud, like to show the empty street he could read. 'My darling one,' he recited, in this very high type goloss, 'I shall be thinking of you while you are away and hope you will remember to wrap up warm when you go out at night.' Then he let out a very shoomy smeck—'Ho ho ho'—pretending to wipe his yahma with it…

Then we smashed the umbrella and razrezzed his platties and gave them to the blowing winds, my brothers, and then we'd finished with the starry teacher type veck.

Anthony Burgess, ***A Clockwork Orange***

If you've ever strolled through the yellowplush world of literary vanities—I'd only recommend it if you happen to be passing; there are better things to do and more exciting things to see—you will notice this resemblance to the streetcorners of slum estates: those who are out and about tend to gather in shifting huddles and coalesce into gangs for the purpose of bullying or self-protection.

When you see them on telly in their Friday-night-best, at the Palais Booker or some other corporate potlatch, don't forget they are putting on a united front for your benefit. Just because they'll all take your money and applause, it doesn't mean they don't squabble among themselves over the spoils.

It can seem silly. The wounds are mostly metaphorical, the sort that only hurt if you imagine they do. But like all forms of bullying, if you get embroiled it can become important. As usual, in the end, its about money and power and identity and how we educate our children. And like all sources of paranoia, its poisons diffuse through the surrounding culture.

It's not a major hazard; just one to be aware of.

These little spats can linger on for years, even unto the second and third generation. And sometimes they boil over. And the waft of their stench can drift into your homes.

And if you've read this far, one just did.

You remember mention of Colin's spat with 'that fucker Carpenter', in Lynn's piece. It gets re-told in Jasper Gerard's too. And I've got a third version of it here. By the man himself. Or 'fucker', if we're being Wilsonian. Humphrey Carpenter, in *The Sunday Times*:

Now let's be clear about it,

We're paying attention, Humph! Close attention.

I'm not the most unbiased person in the world when it comes to reviewing this book. Colin Wilson and I are feuding,

Can't say fairer than that.

albeit in slow motion.

Seems a pity. Must be artistic. I may get lost here. I don't know much about dance.

*He took against my portrait of him in my book on the Angry Young Men (of whom he is the last surviving important specimen), and he dwells on this in a recent newspaper interview: "[Wilson] periodically throws out the word 'f****r'*

You remember this bit. It got Lynn in an awful tiswas, she didn't know where to look. Almost as bad as talking to Adam about nylon panties.

with extraordinary venom," writes the interviewer.

Yes, it's Humphrey's mate, Lynn Carpenter. No, Barber. My, they do have tradesmen's names, these critics. Hard to tell 'em apart. I

wonder Mars-Jones can mix with them. He must thank God for Jasper Gerard. He sounds posh. Well, posh-ish.

> *"The f****r in question was Humphrey Carpenter, who had been to interview him and then betrayed him: 'We got on terribly well, I thought [says Wilson], though I did notice that Humphrey fell asleep when I was explaining what I meant by non-pessimistic existentialism.'"*
>
> *True, I did: but my arrival at Wilson's Cornish home had been followed by a brisk walk, then a memorable supper (local oysters and smoked eel), washed down with superb wines. My snores were not intended as a comment on the Wilsonian* Weltenshauung.

German for 'world-view'.

> *Now here is his autobiography, and I feel I have been given a second chance. Stay awake at the back there Carpenter, or this time it's the headmaster's study.*

Time for whacks, eh? You have my full attention now. Does your headmaster favour a nice stingy rattan, or something more like a bamboo club? I've had both. Can't say I'm fond of either.

> *Well, I'll do my best, sir, and the autobiography is certainly a good read—I galloped through it without the slightest droop of an eye-lid. But I can't expect Wilson and his publisher to be content with that. ("It didn't send me to sleep"—Humphrey Carpenter,* The Sunday Times*.)*

Is that your intention, Humph? To make Wilson and his publisher content? Is Wilson your headmaster? No wonder you hate him. Or is it his publisher? Or did they rule conjointly, like the Spartan, or the Merovingian kings? No? Well, what have you done with the headmaster? Is Wilson (or his publisher) the housemaster (or head of department, perhaps?) that might send you to the headmaster? No, again? You live in a whirl of possibilities, Humph. In your leisurely, genteel way. It's dazzling, the amount you can pack into a sentence!

They want me to give a serious assessment of Wilson's philosophical ideas. Well, let me try.

Well, I'm glad they want it—it shows they're fair-minded, as well as optimistic—and I'm glad you're going to try. But get a move on, Humph, if you're serious. You've only 12.5 column inches left, and you've already used 7.2 talking about yourself. Not that we're not interested. We're following you avidly. And I know it's artistic, this feuding in slow motion, but daylight's burning. Some of us have to get to work.

A self-educated working class lad from Leicester, Wilson came up to London just as the Angry Young Man craze was hotting up and immediately made his name with The Outsider *(1956)*

Wilson went up to London in 1951. Five years seems a lot of hotting, or a prolonged state of immediacy. But perhaps this is high-toned hotting. Like Humph's feuding. In slow motion. Can't be just a twist of egregious cliché. Not when you're haunted by such a ferocious headmaster.

You're getting dreamy, Humph. You're supposed to be reviewing the book, remember? It should be in your hand if you want to check a fact. Wake up! And throw a cloth over that damned mirror. You're on stage now.

which gave thousands of readers their first taste of Rilke and Sartre.

Is that a good thing, or not? Don't ask me. I'd keep Sartre a dark secret.

The first of Wilson's vast number of books, it is more an anthology than an argument, but Wilson makes the case for existentialism without the pessimism that usually accompanies it.

Does he makes the case, or doesn't he? If he does, it's a successful argument. So where does the 'anthology' crack fit in? If he doesn't make the case, why do you say he does?

Do you mean makes *a* case for it? That would at least be equivocal. You've been talking to Mars-Jones and Lynn too much. Do you all buy your shoddy from the same whizzo-Hegelian factory. Are we back on the catwalk, at Almeric Wister's new collection?

> *In this autobiography, Wilson takes that further, and argues the case for a life built round 'peak experiences', moments of intense joy*

'Intensity' would be better. Joy is only one of the possibilities. Remember the book, Humph? Where is it? In your hand? Or on your head, like your glasses?

> *that illuminate the world. He gives as an example of this the occasion, many years ago, when his toddler Sally went missing in the middle of an unfamiliar town, and his overwhelming relief and happiness when she was found. Fair enough—any parent will recognise that experience—*

Could be why Colin used it as an example, Humph.

> *but how do we build a life philosophy out of it?*

How do we build a life philosophy out of experience? Get a grip, Humph! What else have we got? Or do you mean experiences that other people might recognise? It's going to get pretty mysterious if we can't use those to talk to each other. You're extremely strict, Humph. Is this your headmaster's example?

I'm beginning to flounder, but shall we go on? It is kind of morbidly fascinating.

> *Wilson has taken his 'peak experience' idea from the writings of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, and he meets Maslow during the course of the autobiography. Interestingly, we have Maslow's reaction to Wilson. In his journal, he describes Wilson as not interested in the experience of emotion, affection, or visual and aesthetic beauty. Wilson reports this quite cheerfully; but anyone familiar with Wilson's life and work may feel that this analysis is devastatingly accurate.*

Well, Wilson is familiar with his own life and work—it seems reasonable to suppose—and he thinks it's worth reporting, so just maybe he thinks there's something in it. Colin is frank about his opinion of Maslow, so he offers Maslow's opinion as an alternative voice. The two looking at each other, so to speak. You seem to have trouble with the conversational voice that Colin uses in *Dreaming To Some Purpose*, Humph. You seem to think it means he has no 'intention'. Perhaps you should listen more—just for practice, like—and maybe write a little less?

When you are a hammer, strike. When you are an anvil, be still.

I got that from a Charles Bronson movie.

Not bad, eh?

You should watch more TV, Humph. Good things are everywhere.

Or do you think that the experience of hearing other people's opinion of ourselves is too commonplace—perhaps it should be more so—to be appropriate for a book that I'm sure contains the words 'philosophy' and 'life'?

Ooh, you are strict, Humph. But you're growing on me. I like a tight-arsed young Jesuit in my conceptual bed. Don't disappoint me.

We are dancing dangerously close to pleonasm here, Humph. Don't overexcite yourself. We've got another six column inches before the cum-shot.

> *To this we add the fact that a considerable number of Wilson's books are about murder, serial killers and suchlike; at which point one remembers*

One? Do you mean 'I'? How general is this 'one'? How many of us are remembering? I'm not. I might be 'being reminded'… Damn! Lucy's put Oil of Pedant in the gin again.

one remembers that the ever-perceptive

Ever-perceptive!

the ever-perceptive Kingsley Amis claimed to be frightened of Wilson

and once (according to Wilson's autobiography) came near to pushing him off a roof.

Hang on! Amis came near to pushing Wilson off a roof? Who should be frightened of whom? I'm well-adrift here. I wish I was ever-perceptive! More Oil of Pedant!

If dark materials lurk within Wilson, they remain mostly hidden.

I'd noticed he wasn't on trial for murder.

The personality that displays itself through this book is less of a Maslow than an Adrian Mole. "I was becoming something of a character in Leicester, at least among the young," writes Wilson of his early days (you may recall that Mole comes from Leicester too). "It was time I had something published."

I think there may be more than one personality on display in print here. You come from Oxford, don't you, Humph? Are you Inspector Morse? Or what's-'is-name from that interminable Hardy novel? Or a character from Evelyn Waugh? Or was that Cambridge? Do you know who you are, Humph? Or where you're from? Just what sort of fiction are you?

You can take the cloth off the mirror now, Humph.

Hmmm.

You tell us.

That's enough of Humph's piece. That's most of it, anyway. You got the gist. Or lack of gist. The possibility of gist. Some recklessly ambiguous neo-antidisestablishmentarianist/whizzo-Hegelian form of gist. So let's move on. I'm a bit dazed after wrestling with Humph's piece. It's headed **His Dark Material**, but I'm still uncertain whether this refers to Humph's material—which is a welter of deep shadows—or Wilson's, who seems at least to be looking for a light-switch.

I think we can safely infer this much from Humphrey's accelerating pirouettes: he despises Colin for coming from and speaking to an audience that Humph doesn't regard as 'intellectual'*—a word as

much abused as 'genius', but luckily we have Humph's own text for a yardstick of what *he* means by it. And he believes Colin is so unfit to be set before the readers of Sunday broadsheets—whose delicacy requires them to be spoon-fed—that Humph and his choir are inspired to sing about Colin's inadequacies at great length all over those same Sunday papers. Paradoxical, huh? I must get my parrot to explain it to me.

Are these like Wellington's 'Red Sundays', Humph? A slaughter of the 'other'? Are you the redcoats or the French, I wonder?

Or is this a preaching contest? Mow Kop at dawn? Can anyone join in? If the spirit moves them?

We have two facts. They can be simply stated: Colin gave Humph a good dinner, but is now pissed off because of something Humph said in his book, *The Angry Young Men*.

Now read on…

a game of bowls

I can endure my own despair,
But not another's hope.

William Walsh, ***Of All the Torments***

So I bought a copy of *Angry Young Men* to see what the fuss was about.

In the event, I feel a bit like Drake when he boarded the gilded treasure ship of the Inquisition, and found it contained only instruments of torture and other low-rent scrap. But since Carpenter's royalty would be less than I'd throw to a beggar, it must be unreasonable to expect too much. The paperback wasn't that gilded.

Well, bugger me with a dead pike's donga, here on the first page is Humph's visit to Colin in Cornwall again. He gets mileage out of

*I used to annoy my father, who was clever but unhandy, by defining an intellectual as 'someone whose intelligence doesn't reach as far as their hands'. I just thought I'd mention that. It amused me, but I wasn't joking.

his material does Humph. Very professional.

But this is a darker portrait:

The taxi departs, I leave my suitcase just inside the front door of the house,

Very wise. It be all *Straw Dogs* and 'yer be dragons' down Cornwall. You be right to keep yer 'and on yer todger, young sir!

and Wilson hustles the two enormous dogs

Enormous, Humph? In the photo in Colin's book it looks like he has Labradors. Wolfhounds. Bargests. They're ENORMOUS.

the two enormous dogs into the back of an old Landrover. We drive off to a nearby wood to take them for a walk, even though it's now almost dark

Oooh-ooh!

(this is November).

Ah. The dark is seasonal, then? Even in Cornwall? My, you do go out late in the year, Humph. Don't catch cold.

As we follow the animals through the foliage, Wilson talks about Brady and his accomplice Myra Hyndley, and about sexually motivated killings in general.

Still talking about his own books, Wilson, is he? Lynn had that problem with him. He will talk shop. I'll have a word, if I see him. If I can get one in edgeways. But it is what he does, you know?

His recent books include The Corpse Garden *(1998), a chronicle of the slaughter carried out by Fred and Rosemary West. I can't help recalling that Kingsley Amis*

The Ever-Perceptive!

*Kingsley Amis claimed, not altogether jokingly, to find Wilson's interest in murder somewhat alarming. 'Between ourselves,' Amis wrote in 1987 to Harry Ritchie, who was working on a book about the Angry Young Men, 'I was too afraid to drink a bottle of whisky Colin Wilson gave me, and there it stayed until an intrepid psychiatrist pal guzzled it with no ill-effects, or none but the usual.'**

Sounds like my kind of shrink! I like 'em intrepid. Sorry. There's a footnote. I almost overlooked it:

**Wilson writes: 'I only ever once gave Amis a bottle of whiskey, and that was in 1957, before I had written about crime.'*

No mention of the roof business, then. Seems a rum sort of chap, Amis; *almost*-pushing folk off roofs and giving his pals booze he thinks *might* be poisoned. Must be some sort of Zen. Him being ever-perceptive and all. Bit like *Drunken Master*, the Jackie Chan movie, maybe?

Did you know that the Old English for 'ever-perceptive' is *ethelred*, as in Ethelred the Unready. 'Unready' has shifted its meaning a bit over the years. In Ethelred's time it mean 'not-knowing', or 'ignorant', so his nickname updates as 'Know-All the Know-nothing'. But I'm drifting off the point.

You get the idea: Humph is walking in the evening with two ENORMOUS dogs—"Eyes as big as saucers! Fangs like chapel hat-pegs!"—and a writer who talks about his own books—another rare breed?—and they're in a wood in autumn in Cornwall. I suppose that could be hell for a certain sort of Sartrean.

But why are you there, Humph, if you don't want him to talk about his books? And if you think he's so scary, why are you going into a dark wood with him? Seems a lot to put yourself through, with your delicate constitution. But you whizzo-Hegelians will dare anything for a paradox. I hope you dressed up warm, with a flak-jacket and ear-muffs. I can see it takes courage, the old quest for TRUTH. And JUSTICE. And EQUALITY UNDER THE LAW.

Why, you must be the Lone Ranger! I thought I glimpsed silver pistols under your wizard's cape. It was the mask that fooled me. I thought you were wearing it because you hoped Evil Colin wouldn't murder you if he thought you were a rapist or a burglar.

Seems to be working so far…

Oh good! It all has a happy ending:

Whereupon we reach the Wilson driveway, with it's warning sign to visitors

What does it say, Humph? 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here'? Got a bit more pessimistic, Colin, has he? Wonder why?

and he parks the Landrover and takes me into the house. Waiting for us—prepared by his wife Joy, who is out at a meeting—

Good. I'm glad we know where she is. And who cooked the dinner. You can never have enough facts. My old headmaster used to say that. Why, there might be a murder!

is a splendid supper of Cornish oysters and smoked eel, with two vintage wines. And no whisky.

I'm glad he did you well, Humph. It's what life's all about. Why, you could almost make a 'life philosophy' out of it. Generosity is getting rare enough nowadays, even for your exclusive and fastidious tastes.

There was no mention of the falling-asleep bit in this version. I still wasn't sure if this was important. Could the reason for all this excitement really be so petty. I mean, it was rude—no denying that—but I'm sure Humph made fulsome apologies at the time, and Colin seems like a man of generous spirit. Even Lynn didn't think that was the cause of the quarrel. In fact, she made Colin sound quite philosophical about it. So why mention it at all?

Mind you, Humph is a stickler for detail.

So keep your notebooks handy.

There might be a pop-quiz.

All the accounts I had, like the gospels, seemed to stem from a single source. So I emailed Colin Wilson—he's not hard to find—and asked for his account of the affair.

Here it is:

Dear Phil, how very nice of you. The book has certainly received some mixed reviews, which seem to prove that some people are just inclined to react to me with bitchiness and a sharpening of knives.

Knives? Is that all they've got? We're quids in here, Colin. You should see my tool-shed.

The Humphrey Carpenter story is rather an interesting one, and I intend to tell it fully (and try to shame the bastard) in my book on the Angry Young Men.

He deliberately lied in his review of me. He did NOT fall asleep after a large supper and a walk,

Not asleep after dinner! That blows Humph's alibi.

but the following morning after breakfast, when we had settled down to recording. But the full story of his treachery is worth telling.

In November 2002, he wrote to ask me if he could interview me for a book he was writing on the AYMs. I said yes, although I was suspicious because I had heard that he was friend of Harry Ritchie,

Who's he? Sounds like a dodgy ostler to me. I'd be wary of his tips.

who had written a book called Success Stories *about 4 AYMs, including me. He was very approving of Osborne, Amis and Sillitoe, since they were Lefties, (as I was before I wrote my book on Shaw, defending his socialism, but then de-converted myself—in the chapter on economics—when I saw that* Das Kapital *is illogical rubbish).*

You're succinct, Colin. With a nice flourish of baroque punctuation. I like that.

On the subject of me, Ritchie was murderous, claiming to detect fascist tendencies in The Outsider.

They all do that if you mention Nietzsche. Or Adler. It's a Pavlovian reaction. Will=fascist. Trying to frighten us away from the idea.

It was so vicious that I decided to abandon my usual pacifism, and ask a solicitor to write the publisher—Fabers—a letter asking them to remove certain downright libels quoted from journalists in the 50s. *(i.e. that in my journals, taken away by Joy's father after the horsewhipping incident*

Good one, that. Worth buying the book for on its own.

I had written about what I intended to do to Joy in bed—for fuck's sake who would bother to write about it?) Faber agreed that, if it reached a second impression (which it didn't) they would remove the libellous bits.

Carpenter openly admitted he was friend of Ritchie, but sounded a decent chap, so I invited him down. He proved to be an amiable bloke, suffering from Parkinson's and we had a good walk, then (because Joy had to go to an AGM of the local history society) I produced him a marvellous supper of oysters and venison,

Oysters and venison? What happened to the smoked eel? And you cooked the dinner. Not Joy? Are you giving Joy an alibi? No, she can't need one. She's got the local history society. Is this *Midsomer Murders* or Plato's *Symposium*? Well, I know which I prefer. Keep slinging those pies, lads. Will it be the Choir or the Dowsing Society that ends up strewn in bloody lumps across the common? When the dust settles, me and DS Troy will pop round to feel the collars of the victors.

with 1931 Beaune.

They do keep on about the menu, these writer-chappies. Did you have Stilton or Blue Vinny, after? I don't care. I'm just asking to be polite.

It was the following morning, when he had switched on the tape recorder, and I was explaining what is wrong with Sartrean existentialism, that he fell asleep.

Ah, discussing Sartre. Not worth it, Colin. Just shoot the buggers. I might have some sympathy with Humph here, if he wasn't always mentioning Sartre himself. Bad form to fall asleep. Could have just changed the subject. Husserl, maybe? No. That can get pretty snooze-inducing. A shot of Nietzsche always peps me up after a big breakfast.

But since I had already summed him up as a bear of very little brain I didn't let this bother me.

About 2 weeks later, he sent me a carbon of his book. I was a little surprised, since he had given me to understand that it was far from finished, and the chapter on me unwritten, but I understood when I read his Introduction, which described his visit to me—he obviously wanted to meet me to give his book a good beginning. The introduction struck me as a bit snide, but I merely pointed out a few factual inaccuracies. I didn't even bother to look at his main chapter on me, since I don't like reading about myself.

Then Joy read it and said: 'Have you seen what he said about you?' And when I read the chapter, I saw that it was a sneering dismissal, rather like Ritchie's, treating The Outsider *as an anthology of quotations, and dismissing all I had done since as derivative and uninteresting.*

I wrote to him pointing out that by anyone's standards this was a pretty low trick—that he had obviously written this stuff before he came to see me, and that for the son of a bishop (of Oxford) he had behaved pretty shabbily. And I sent him an article I had written, summarising my ideas in words I thought even he could understand. He replied that his chapter on me expressed his considered opinion of my work, and he couldn't see his way to making any changes. What it obviously amounted to was that since the whole book was a dismissal of the whole AYM movement (in favour of the satire movement of the sixties) he couldn't change his stance on me because it would have undermined the whole book. Besides, he wanted to get into print. Lazy shit.

So you have to bear this in mind when you read his review.

But after that virulent little queer Adam Mars-Jones, I don't suppose that Carpenter is too bad. And I was delighted to hear that Ritchie had left the Sunday Times *to become a travel writer.*

I just looked Ritchie up on the web. The reviews of his books seem generally unkind—it could be that he's good at making enemies too. Humph describes Ritchie's 1988 AYM book *Success Stories* as 'brilliantly researched', but I suppose that could be damning-with-faint-praise.

After I had threatened to sue, he subsequently told a publicity girl at my publisher: 'While I'm assistant literary editor of the Sunday Times*, Colin Wilson will never get a review in it, or even a mention'. And when* Atlantis to the Sphynx *managed to creep into the bestseller list, it wasn't listed in the* Sunday Times*. But I learned recently that the editor, John Witherow, admires my work, and he was responsible for sending Jasper Gerard to interview me, whose report, while* en haut de bas*, is on the whole favourable.*

So I think we're getting there slowly.

Well, something's going on. But where's the body?

PS: You should learn from Colin, Humph. That's how to write about your enemies. With an open face and bared teeth. Even Adam can do that. Although not as well as Colin.

a pause to cast

In France the science of venery has always played a larger part in hunting than it has in this country, where the riding angle has been superior for a long time. I am sure that both hare-hunters and fox-hunters will find a great deal of interest in this work by the Comte de Vezins, which has been so ably translated by Mr. Woolmer.

Some of the Comte de Vezin's view may appear rather unorthodox but certainly provide food for thought.

I agree entirely with his view that a small pack produces better sport than a large one: I used to have some of my best hunts with

> *seven or eight couple. He also makes the point that working qualities such as nose and tongue are of more importance than conformation. I feel that this point is sometimes over-looked in this country where undue emphasis is placed on conformation.*
>
> Sir Rupert Buchanan-Jardine, Bt., M.C., M.F.H. Foreword to Comte Elie de Vezins, ***Hounds for a Pack***, or *Les Chiens Courant Francais pour la Chasse du Lievre dans the Midi de la France*, trans. Leonard R Woolmer.

I'm with Sir Rupert and the Comte on *working qualities* vs. *conformation*. And the virtue of small packs. If I were an MFH, I'd slash the field as well. Go broke in a month, but—dream of it—what sport I'd have had. But then I'd hunt in ratcatcher with a terrier in one pocket and a pistol in the other. So you probably don't want to know what I think.

Have you read *Hounds for a Pack*? The best book I know on hunting with scenthounds. Apart from Jorrocks, of course. Remember the Yorkshireman? 'You provide the cash, and I'll provide the company.' Beautiful. Mind you, I prefer hunting on foot. Hunting at close quarters. With gazehounds and lurchers. I sit a horse like a sack of potatoes, when I can stay on it. Embarrassing. Outside my range. Horses sneer at me. Sit on the ground if you can't sit up straight! they leer, and as often as not they put me there. After a few such tumbles I learnt my place in the natural order.

That's why you don't get a lot of rodeo references in my text.

Still we're hunting by scent here, so let's see what Vezins suggests. I think we need the *chiens de centre pur*. They form, says Vezins, the hard-core of every well-organised pack. Not sure I'd call my pack well-organised—half the time they're all over the shop—but I've got a couple of wily old bitches that might do.

'They are usually superior in dealing with doubles and on bad-scenting days their persistence and application unravel the line on difficult ground when other hounds become frustrated or tired with so many difficulties.

'The *chien de centre pur* has sometimes the fault of being obstinate, cautious and a little inclined to hang on the line. This

fault should be corrected and shows the necessity for other hounds with more drive and for a good *chien de tete*.'

Sounds like what we need. Colin also sent me the email correspondence between him and Carpenter, which Carpenter gives Colin carte blanche to broadcast freely. So let's see if we can pick up the scent…

Keep your noses to the ground, girls. It's foggy and the wood is dripping. Watch out for badger setts and red herrings.

Not sure about the 'correcting faults' bit that Vezins sounds so confident about. My dogs all have minds of their own. I end up learning from them. Some of them are self-taught, you know. You should have seen my old whippet-cross Jessie kill rats. She could run 'em down and grab 'em, if necessary, and catch 'em in the air, of course, but what she liked to do was bowl 'em over with her paw and split 'em from gullet to arsehole with a neat, well-sharpened claw. Never saw that before. She didn't learn it in my pack. I think she found her way to it because it was a labour of love.

So we'll hold off on the correcting for the moment. Give the dogs their head. The ghost of my old bitch Spudge just materialised and gave me her 'my eye's gone pink' look. She could make one eye go huge and bloodshot—Look! I'm getting cross!—if she thought I was getting above myself. Never saw that before either. She taught herself to do that. And very impressive it was.

So we'll muddle through, as we usually do. Hunt humbly, if hungrily. We need a writer or two, to keep us going. They always seem to have a menu handy, even if they can't agree what's on it.

And here are Humph and Colin, right on cue

It's past midnight.
Time for a change of metaphor. So, 'Seconds Out'!
ding!
I hope you're used to reading emails.

Friday September 21, 2001
HC to CW
Dear Colin (if I may)

Great! I'd love to come down, & a bed would be very welcome indeed. My diary is bad until the beginning of November, but thereafter very clear.
When would suit you?
You mention Bill Hopkins's address—how about Stuart Holroyd?
Looking forward to meeting you.
all good wishes

CW to HC
Dear Humphrey,
It was extremely pleasant to make your acquaintance.
Joy left out some melatonin tablets, which you forgot. If you send me your address I'll post them on.
best

HC to CW
Dear Colin
I must apologise for not writing before to thank you and Joy for such a delightful time—I had to spend all yesterday in Birmingham, BBC-ing, and have been out today, (following a late start!).
You were wonderful hosts—smoked salmon, oysters, vintage wines, etc etc!

Smoked salmon and oysters? The only consistent thing in this bloody world is the oysters, and I can't remember if they were smoked or not! I'm running out of notebooks. And what's all this 'etc etc!' business? Tell us about the cheese, you bastards. I didn't care before, but I'm getting fractious.

and it was fascinating to hear your reminiscences of the days of the Angries. I'm just about to write up my interview with you, and when that's done I'll print out the entire book and send it to you, for your comments and corrections. I will also speedily return the Sidney Campion book to the little firm who copy photos for me, and return it to you by recorded delivery. (I'm assuming Joy can't put her hands on the sleeping bag photo itself—perhaps you'd let me know if she does manage to locate it.)
It's awfully kind of you to offer the melatonin—I would indeed

like to try it. My address is… I wish I could send you a stamped addressed envelope via e-mail!

You could send it by post, Humph. You seem to have the stamps and envelopes already. Get a grip, man. I'm beginning to despair.

Warmest greetings, and renewed thanks… and I'm glad to see the Brady piece is being given a generous spread in the Sunday Times.
yours ever

The order seems to get confused here. But this is the order they came to me in:

HC to CW
Dear Colin
I'm sorry you regard me as a such a treacherous rat. I think it's a little unfair. It's perfectly true that the book—except the Prologue—was written before I came to see you. But if anything you did or said during my visit had made me change my view of The Outsider*, I would have altered my book.*
I have made all the changes you asked for—the footnote about the bottle of whisky has been added; the Leicester accent bit has already been removed; the Mary Ure story has already been corrected; and the sentence 'How come nobody has rumbled me before this?' has now been added.
I'm afraid that The Outsider *still seems to me an anthology rather than an argument.*
By all means publish our correspondence (past, present and future), wherever you like, and I shall expect to be savaged by you in the Mail*!*
I'm sorry to have disappointed you, and I do remain very grateful for your hospitality and all the trouble you've taken.
best wishes

Not 'yours ever'? That was a quick 'ever'. You can move when you want to, Humph. Thought you were feuding in slow motion? Someone must have mentioned 'savaging'. But why only in the

Mail? You do have a narrow view of the world. Colin's from the working class. He might know people who know a bit about savaging. Tradesmen savagers, you might say. Craftsmen, as well as journeymen and cowboys. Cabinet-makers to the ghoul trade. Even a graverobber or two.

Wandering down our dark streets—looking for a post box, were you? Don't ask Pinter. He might send you to the tool shop. Oh, you're looking for an existentialist? Nope, they're all at the seaside today—why, you might get savaged by anyone. Remember, you're the outsider down here.

CW to HC

Dear Humphrey,

I wish you would be honest about this, and simply admit the truth: that you wrote the book, with your negative view of The Outsider, before you came to see me, and that to make any change in the views you expressed then would simply force you to turn your 'light hearted' book upside down.

I've read Humph's *The Angry Young Men*, and I'd say that's a fair assessment. The two chapters attacking Colin are hinge-points. It would be very hard to replace them with chapters saying Colin's right. You'd have to re-cast the whole book.

In other words, you are not showing your integrity by 'sticking to your guns'—just your determination not to make changes in a book you have already written.

To treat The Outsider seriously would simply not suit the purpose you had decided on before you began it.

To do what you did was quite straightforward treachery and dishonesty:

'Quite straightforward treachery and dishonesty'? How 'quite' is that? Or 'straightforward'? You're getting a bit whizzo-Hegelian as the blood rises, Colin. Starting to froth a bit. Reign it in, old fellow. Any more of this and you might hyphenate yourself. Save your spunk for after, as the tantrics say. But I'm glad you put 'guns' in inverted commas back there. I thought you said they only had knives?

all that 'Dear Colin' stuff before you had even met me, and the inference that you were coming down here to find out what I had to say and include in the book. You had already decided in advance what you wanted me to say to fit in with your shallow thesis, and if I'd proved a combination of St Augustine and Jesus Christ, you still would have left it unchanged—because it wouldn't have suited you or your editor, to acknowledge that what you did is called treachery. How a bishop's son can live with such slippery morality is beyond me.

Don't know much about bishops, eh? Or their sons. SOBs, we call 'em. You should have spent more time at sunday school, Colin, instead of reading all those books. University of life. Can't beat it. Can't join it either. Tricky things, universities.

If you insist on printing what you wrote unaltered, then I want to make sure that a few small verbal changes are made.
1. The sneer about the Leicester accent. Please include 'slight'.
2. The story about giving Amis the whisky. Please include a footnote with my information that I only ever gave Amis a bottle of whisky, and that was in 1957, before I had written about crime. (This, I am afraid, will really test your honesty since you had pivoted the first chapter on the silly Amis story.)
3. At the end of my comment about The Outsider *going into thirty languages, please include my final sentence: 'How come nobody has rumbled me before this?'*

Rumbled or rumpled, Colin? We've only just had breakfast. I know this is *West Side Story*, but Humph needs a nap after his cornflakes. Give him a sporting chance. He's going to need it.

Please, if possible, include a footnote about the true version of the story about Mary Ure, and the fact that I would not have dreamt of telling Osborne what I really thought of Look Back in Anger.
In short, prove that your trip down here, and sending me the typescript, were not just part of some cynical trick.
And now, on the remote offchance that you are not as bad as I think, let me explain in words of one syllable what The Outsider *is actually about.*

Keep it snappy, Colin. You know what Humph's like after breakfast. You've got less than a minute before his eyelids droop.

The existentialism of Sartre,

You just don't listen, Colin!

Camus, Heidegger, et al, ends in gloom and pessimism. In The Outsider *I ask: "Is this inevitable, or is there a flaw in the logic?" Both in* The Outsider *and subsequent work, I set out to show that THE PESSIMISM IS UNNECESSARY*

You do right to shout, Colin. But I doubt it'll help. Humph seems to be deaf, as well as dumb.

indeed, a kind of schoolboy howler—and that if you take into account mystics like Ramakrishna and Blake, you end up with quite different conclusions.
So your footnote stating that 'even if it is really just an anthology' is simply insulting rubbish. The Outsider *is closely and carefully ARGUED, and the appendices to the recent Chinese edition make it clear just how closely.*

A palpable hit! A Chinese edition. With appendices! There's a scary thought.

Where this, and other material I have sent you, are concerned, you prefer to clap your telescope to your blind eye.

Hold on, Colin. Don't let him be Nelson at Copenhagen. Not unless you want to go down in the frigate *Kierkegaard*, while sailing under French colours. Admiral Sartre! He'd be indulging in colonic irrigation while we served the guns. Lucky thing Humph can't remember where the middy put his telescope. You're getting wild again, Colin. Give me a break. I'm Hannibal at Cannae here, not Zukhov at Kursk. And Gort at Dunkirk might be romantic—I know what you're like—but I'd rather enter Rome like Attila.

If we have to get nautical, why don't you be Exmouth at the

bombardment of Algiers. Those Oxford types look like Barbary pirates to me. Terrorising us with the guns we gave them—where does that ring a bell?—and stealing our children for slaves.

You remember. We sailed our wooden ships so close to their battlements that they couldn't depress their guns, and then we blasted the fuck out of them. Saw the whites of their eyes, and lots of other bits of them in a rather random order. A hot day's work, and a bloody one. But we scuppered the bastards. They're not so cocky now.

Hot and close. That's the way to do it. No need for telescopes at close quarters.

Rumour has it that one of my distant relatives served on the *Queen Charlotte* in that battle. He may be the same one—the timing's about right—who was said to have been hanged later at Hull for smuggling across the Dogger Bank. Did the gundeck make him deaf, or was just that he wouldn't be told? A bit of both, knowing my family. Still, they could have just given him a few years on the hulks, in recognition of his service to his country. Expect no gratitude from mandarins, Colin. Never been known for it. "The spawn of thieves, misers, pikers and welshers," one if my great-uncles used to say, "with a Gradgrind or two they keep quiet about." Remember what happened after we sank the Armada? They kept us at sea with no rations til starvation and scurvy killed us, just to keep down the wage-bill. Makes you look at some of the great Gloriana's designer outfits with a jaundiced eye on a wet day. And don't get me started on the Cotton Famine! Or Peterloo! Or Wat Tyler! Or the Harrying of the North!

How's that for a mechanic's shuffle? Pick a card, Humph? We could play Persian Monarchs, I have some long-haired friends who'd like to join in that one. Oh, you only play three card monte? I'll deal in that case, you old thimblerigger. Sorry, Colin. I interrupted you.

I trust you will not object if I publish our complete correspondence on my website, and in the quarterly ABRAXAS. I feel it should be as widely publicised as possible.
I shall also ask the Daily Mail *if I can review your book, and tell the story of how you came down to interview me after the book was written.*

May you be able to live with your conscience. I wouldn't want to.
sincerely

Joy sounds much more fun than Humph's conscience, Colin. I shouldn't even consider a change. Still, I'm sure that 'sincerely' was sincerely felt. And a bit longer lasting that Humph's 'yours ever', I'd imagine.

CW to HC again
You really don't have much of a leg to stand on, do you?

Is he still Nelson here, Colin, or Long John Silver? Are you Squire Trelawney now, or Dr Thingummy? At least I know who I am. I'm always Billy Bones.

You say you would have changed the piece on The Outsider *if I had convinced you of its importance, and then slept through my explanation of my new existentialism.*
What you don't seem to see is that The Outsider *is the basis of my whole life's work, the cornerstone of my building, and that in denying it's importance, you are trying to deny ME and my life work. Why? Because you have a valid criticism of the book? No, because you happen to be pal of a trivial-minded little prick who libelled me in his own book, and who has nursed a lifelong resentment because I rapped his knuckles. And you feel that your book has to toe his party line. And Ritchie must now be chortling to himself that you have, in effect, repeated the essence of attacks and got me thoroughly irritable. The two of you have, in effect, collaborated in a robbery, and are now slapping each other on the back at its success.*

So that's why Humph was wearing the mask. Then where was Ritchie? Skulking behind the bike sheds, probably. Did he have a mask? Oh, lent his to Humph, did he? I think I knew boys like him at school.

You haven't made the slightest attempt to understand the aims of my work—for example, to read Below the Iceberg. *So you are basically a knife-in-the-back man, always protesting that no-one*

has more integrity than you—reminding me of one of Bill's favourite comments: 'The more he talked of his honesty, the faster we counted the spoons.'

And we don't have many spoons, us working class types—J.K. Galbraith borrowed most of them for some big dinner party and never brought them back—so it don't take long to count 'em. Keep life simple, that's what JKG taught us. Shoot first.

Pity—you seemed genuinely decent and honest.

ding!

Well, I'm not quite sure who hit who or when, but I'd say Colin was ahead on points. Still plenty of pepper left in him. And Humph looks groggy to me. But he could be dissembling*. Just boxing on the counter. A bit of rope-a-dope, maybe. Ah, well. Back to work, lads. Who's going to bounce out first? It's Humph again. Always seems to start a round well, but there are questions over his stamina. He should get a dog. To keep him company while he's doing roadwork. Let's see if he fades this time.

HC to CW
Dear Colin
Thanks—I have never doubted that The Outsider *has many admirers, whom it has influenced in a major way. I just don't happen to be able to admire and enjoy it myself.*

---

*Know the difference between *doing* and *pretending*? It's this simple: People who *do* things can always talk to each other—if they choose to—because *doing* is a common human activity. The frustrations of getting something to work are universal. People who *pretend* things are excluded from this conversation, not because we want to exclude them—although we might, they tend to get in the way—but at a much more basic level because they don't know enough to join in, and they're too full of themselves to stand and listen. People who pretend can only talk to each other, unless they can talk about pretending as a task—which it can be, sometimes it's useful to know how to do it. Called 'acting'. Otherwise they have '*not*-conversations' in which experience cannot be shared, or only very obliquely. A conversation is a two-way thing. It doesn't have to be a competition.

That was nicely Jesuitical. Want the fingerbowl, Humph? Or straight to the bedroom? How about 'or refute its arguments'?

I don't see in what way my behaviour is 'dirty and underhand'

Bowl underhand, do you, Humph? I used to bowl overarm myself, before I broke that collarbone the second time. Do you hunt, Humph? Dogs a bit big, I expect. Oh, I see. You're hibernating at that time of year. No wonder your diary is 'very clear' after the 'the beginning of November'. Must be why you fell asleep at Colin's. He said he thought you were a bear. Must have divined your spirit-guide. Learnt more than you realised from mescalin then, Colin? Ah, you read a book about bears. Each to his own, that's what I say. Can I borrow your pipe? And some of that fine black shag? Here, have some chewing tobacco. They used it down the mines, you know, so they didn't blow themselves up having a fag in a gas pocket.

True, I had written my views on The Outsider *before coming to see you, but at that time the book was only in first draft, and I was perfectly at liberty to change my views after meeting you, should I have felt persuaded by our conversation.*

The son of a bishop, eh? What's bred in the bone, comes out in the beef. That was a beautifully boneless handshake.

And almost immediately after my visit to you, I showed you what I had written, before sending the revised text to the publishers (indeed, I still haven't sent it off, because there are a few loose ends). A true traitor wouldn't have done that—

'A true traitor'! More whizzo-Hegelianism? Is this 'true' as in truth? Or 'true' as in straight? Or 'true' as in well-tempered, like steel? Are traitors fastidious about truth nowadays? Which sort do they prefer? They were a lot slipperier in my time. They could be lying. You just can't trust them. Oh, the 'true' was ironic. No? Emphatic! You mean you're a 'not-true' traitor? You mean you're a lying traitor? Seems a bit redundant to me. You must have been educated by the

medieval schoolmen. I can't keep up. There's more than a few loose ends here, Humph.

> *would have left you to read it for the first time in print. (I think you said that one or two people have done that in the past.)*
> *The biography of you that you kindly lent me is at the photographers, so that the three pictures can copied. I'll have it winging its way back to you in a couple of weeks.*
> *with best wishes*

> ***CW to HC***
> *Dear Humphrey*
> *I am sending you a letter I wrote to a scientist asking for information—I send it to you simply to draw attention to his postscript—about people being influenced by* The Outsider. *Does it not seem to you a little odd that so many people have been influenced by a mere collection of quotations?*
> *The answer, by the way, to the question of why I wrote the postscripts to the Chinese edition is (a) they asked me to, (b) I have learned many things since 1956. Does that somehow prove that* The Outsider *was inadequate?*

> ***HC to CW***
> *Dear Colin*
> *I've spent this morning reading the Chinese postscripts*

In Mandarin, Humph, or Cantonese?

> *and looking again at* The Outsider. *I'm very sorry, but my view of the book hasn't changed. I fully accept that in your own mind it was a long-term project with a firmly-pursued argument; but I'm afraid it still comes across to me as essentially a cornucopia of other people's ideas,*

How do you discuss other people's ideas without mentioning them, Humph? Or explaining what you think they say? If we can't use experience either, what are you going to leave us to talk with? Damn your headmaster. Too *sparing* with the rod, perhaps. I never thought

I'd say this, but I'll back mine against yours any day. At any odds you like. Double-or-nothing on the re-match.

> *with remarkably little argument on your part. (Surely the Chinese postscripts wouldn't have been necessary if the original book had had a clearer argument?)*

Perhaps the Chinese postscripts were for Chinese readers, Humph. They don't have your access to the Bodleian. You didn't read the Korean postscripts by mistake, did you? The censor mangled them to hell.

> *I fully accept that many people wouldn't agree with me, and that this is reflected in the book's enormous readership*

Don't take this as a compliment, Colin. We know what Humph's idea of enormous is.

> *over the years. But I do have Kingsley Amis on my side ('it is more a compilation than an original work'), and also Ken Tynan (I won't mention Ritchie!). Clearly there are two camps—just as there are for Tolkien—*

Why only two? Are only two views possible? Seems we can't have a third dimension, now. I'm beginning to think Humph's headmaster is an utter fool. Probably not a Jesuit at all. Must have been finding him in the priest-hole that confused me.

> *and I belong to the anti's.*
> *I am nevertheless trying to be fair to you, and have added to the footnote which I think I have already shown to you. It now reads as follows:*
> *After reading my account of* The Outsider*, Colin Wilson wrote to me: 'You are welcome to this view, if it is what you really think after reading the book. But if it is really just an anthology of quotations put together by a literary jackdaw, how do explain the fact that that it has never been out of print in England, America and Japan for forty-five years, and has been translated into at*

least thirty languages (the most recent being Chinese)? How come nobody has rumbled me before this?'
He also supplied me with a brief summary of his intentions in the book: 'The existentialism of Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, et al., ends in gloom and pessimism. In The Outsider *I ask: "Is this inevitable, or is there a flaw in the logic?" Both in* The Outsider *and subsequent work, I set out to show that* THE PESSIMISM IS UNNECESSARY*—indeed a kind of schoolboy howler—and that if you take into account mystics like Ramakrisna and Blake, you end up with quite different conclusions.'*
Whatever one's view of The Outsider*, it can certainly claim to be the first popular book to have made many British readers aware of such European writers as Hess, Rilke and Sartre.*

Unpopular books don't make many readers aware of anything, Humph. (Mind you, a lot of popular books don't either.) This is pleonasm, again. Do you want 'popular' or 'many'? One is redundant. The meaning changes slightly, depending on which you choose. But I won't let you have it both ways. And what should we infer from 'first'? How many books can make the same claim? Is this a large category or a small one? Is this pedantry, or precision? You're the expert. You tell me. We could make time for a little extra-curricular caning, perhaps.

I think this pretty fair, but I expect you don't, and I'm sorry I can't offer you more. And thanks for all your trouble.

'Supplied you with a brief summary', did he? A bit mealy-mouthed, that. HE SHOUTED AT YOU BECAUSE HE THOUGHT YOU WERE STUPID. Beef up your footnotes, Humph. It's what we pay you for.

HC to CW
Dear Colin
I've now read the introduction and the title essay (the final one, I mean)

'Final' or 'title', for chrissakes? How many titles are there?

in "Below the Iceberg",

Ah. Spare titles below the waterline? Cunning. Must be wartime.

and while these certainly give me a better view of you, they don't change my feelings about "The Outsider".

Do you know, I'm beginning to wonder if Humph has actually read *The Outsider*. When I argue about a book, I say, 'Well, *that* bit's dubious', or 'What's *that* example about?' I refer to points in the book. I don't think I've heard Humph do that once. Maybe he's just too polite. Must be his upbringing.

Please remember, however, that my text now includes that footnote we discussed earlier, which reads as follows:

You already have this. The text is unchanged from the previous email. It would be redundant to repeat it.

I know my refusal to budge any further will infuriate you, and I shall expect to be scathingly reviewed

And just *how* scathingly would that be? I'm on my mettle now. I'll try and put on a good show for you.

As I said earlier, you are welcome to publish anything I have written to you anywhere you want.
Yrs unrepentingly, but with gratitude to you

'Unrepent*ing*ly'. Nice use of tense there, Humph. Not a permanent state of unrepentance, then? Just don't happen to be unrepenting at the moment? Slipping towards agnosticism? Or the other way? Go for the body, Colin. I think he's groggy. Look, his head's come off. Colin?

HC to CW
Dear Colin
The Sidney Campion book is on its way back to you in the post—

and thanks for letting me see that fan letter. I do appreciate—and have never denied—that The Outsider has been an important and influential book for a lot of people. It's just that I'm not one of them. Incidentally Philip Pullman, whom I ran into at Sainsbury's a couple of weekends ago, was praising your original Occult book. I confess I haven't read it, and must do so.
Best wishes to you and Joy

That's it. Where's Colin gone? Must have taken the dogs out.

Ah well. Just you and me, Humph.

That's cozy.

You're looking a bit peaky. Can I give you a coat of gloss?

You must tell me all about meeting Philip Pullman at Sainsburys. That sounds interesting.

Ran into him, did you say?

Asleep at the wheel again, Humph?

Can't be from a navy family, then.

It's probably unfair, but a line from Chesterton just ran through my head: *He was the sort of man who remembers Rossetti and has unpublished anecdotes about Whistler.*

Is Pullman the new Whistler? Or Whistler the old Pullman? Is Pullman a train? Is that why he Whistles? You can't stop the nonsense, Humph. It just keeps bubbling up.

Try and learn from it.

So what is not disputed?

1. Humphrey got himself invited down stay at Colin's on the pretext of doing an interview for a book he had already written and which contained a personal attack on Colin.
2. Colin gave Humph a good dinner and a bed for the night.
3. Humph then publishes the book in which he rubbishes Colin's intellectual reputation and by implication his subsequent books wholesale—although he doesn't seem to have read many of them, not even Colin's second biggest bestseller. (Although he might, now that Philip Pullman's tipped him the wink. Useful place, Sainsbury's. Must go more often. You never know who you'll run into. Or what they might have read.)

4. As a result, Colin thinks Humph is a 'f****r'. Go on, Colin. Stretch yourself. 'a scurvy toerag'. 'a squirming boilsucker'. 'an egregious tapeworm'. 'a stuck-up, know-nothing, shit-spewing, arse-licking, judas of a son of a bishop'. That's better. Let it out, Colin. No harm in a controlled explosion. We don't mind. We understand. I think most of us would feel the same.

a whited sepultre. but whose?

> *"It is my life or his,' the King ended. 'What do you advise?*
>
> *Probably Montholon, the new Chancellor answered first. There was no doubt that Guise was guilty of treason. There would be ample proof. Let him be promptly charged, tried and executed. The King smiled sadly. And where would you find the Court to try and convict a peer of France and the Captain-General of the League? In Paris, perhaps?*
>
> *Marshal Aumont suggested a more direct expedient, and Alphonse Ornano seconded him bluntly: 'Kill him.' Ornano was ready, but there was no-one whom the Guisards feared and distrusted more. Ornano would never get within a hundred feet of the duke with a weapon in his hand. The King looked at Crillon. The captain of the French Guards blushed and stammered. Somehow it had never happened to him to have to stab a man without warning. He didn't think he could manage it. A duel, now. He would be delighted to challenge the duke to a duel. And felt sure he could kill him. Henry shook his head. It was no use trying to explain to Crillon what Guise would do with such a challenge. He thanked them all. He would think of something.*
>
> Garrett Mattingley, ***The Defeat of the Spanish Armada***

Do I think you behaved scurvily, Humph? Assuming that Colin is justified in his reading of your intentions in your book.

Given such facts as I can assemble. Yes, I do

Even by my standards of low, that was slimy. If you eat a man's salt, you incur an obligation. If you invite yourself into his home,

you double the obligation. It's not difficult. But I'm just an old savage. That's why I stay up north. With the moss-troopers.

You get too tricksy down in Oxford.

Is Colin justified? Let's look at Humph's version of Colin in *Angry Young Men*.

This is an interesting sentence:

> *Colin Henry Wilson was conceived out of wedlock and born in Leicester on 26 June 1931, three months before the marriage of his parents. 'My background was working class… '*

It seems to me that 'the son of working-class parents from Leicester' would have sufficed in the context. Or start with Colin's voice, 'My background was working class'. What more do you need? This is an elaborated point. Do we return to it? If we do, I can't find it. So what's it for?

Are you making the case that Colin's parents were feckless, Humph? That all working class people are? 'Semi-whores' and 'part-time prostitutes' and broken old men smoking shag? Life's scrap-heap? The road-kill of history? Are you trying to infer something from Colin's origins? You should talk to Mars-Jones. He's very doubtful on the qualities that are 'heritable'.

Kingsley Amis had to get married. Would Humphrey introduce Martin Amis as 'the first child of this alcoholic and serial-adulterer to be conceived in wedlock, although his elder brother was *born* into it', do you think? I can't see why he should, unless he wanted to sneer.

I don't think I misunderstand you, Humph, although I'm not your target audience. The comment is wasted on me. It's none of my business whether other people get married or not, and if it were I don't think it's important, except insofar as it may be important to them.

But Humphrey's dad gets fees for solemnising marriages. So you can understand he has a different viewpoint.

Got any 'Indulgences', Humph? Or shall I print a few up for you?

Got enough to be going on with, eh? Good. No, I'm alright for relics at the moment. I get mine from the Asian Tigers these days. But thanks for the offer.

He may have one hand on his wallet, but with the other Humphrey is very pointedly holding his nose. The diamonique glitters on his pomander. His foot recoils as if it fears pollution by the soil.

Colin's parents aren't just being convicted for being overcome by their hormones, for being reckless when young. Their real crime is being working class. And producing Colin.

But they were working class! The only value they can have is in being dragged from their graves by bullies to have mud rubbed in their faces. They're dead, anyway! What harm can there be in spurning their carcasses in front of their vulgar son? It's just a laugh. As Humphrey says, this is just 'a literary comedy'. That's what Oxford stands for, isn't it, oh tonsured parent? That's hierarchy. That's *noblesse oblige*. That's the power of money! The masque of Mammon. Surely that's what you taught me?

I smell you, Carpenter. I know your clones. You are the weak boy who trades malicious gossip for the protection of bullies and permission to have a kick or two at some poor unfortunate when it looks safe to get away with it.

Fancy a trip round Humph's pantheon? The Oxford/establishment nexus is obviously very important to him. His list of subjects includes Tolkien (Oxford don), Dennis Potter (Oxford alumnus), W.H. Auden (Oxford man and friend of Tolkien), Robert Runcie (ex-archbishop of Canterbury), Spike Milligan (vulgar but approved of by Prince Charles), while Amis and Larkin (Oxford alumni) appear scaled up like Pharaoh and his wife in *Angry Young Men*. Carpenter's convinced he's an INSIDER. But inside of what?

Humph collects anti-Wilson cracks like a trainspotter, and he can't wait to share them. In a chapter called *The Game Is Up, Wilson!* he scatters them like rosepetals before us swine:

As one who has ploughed through its inconsistencies, repetitions and flights of paranoid illogic (an experience rather like walking knee-deep through hot sand), all one could state with any certainty was that an 'outsider' was anyone whose books happened to have been on the author's recent library list.

That's Ken Tynan (1958). Couldn't be pique on Ken's part, could it? Because Colin wouldn't be patronised? If Colin had gone to the right school, would he have handled fame better?

"Flights of paranoid illogic", eh? We'll make sure we don't tolerate any of that.

"The author's recent library list"? Not 'shopping-list', or 'reading-list'? Colin couldn't have owned these books, couldn't he, Ken? That tells you which side of the class divide Ken's 'socialism' belongs. Right next to Brecht's velvet underwear. And Robespierre's jaw-bandage.

Would Ken have assumed that Cyril Connolly got all his books from the public library? If Ken thought Colin used the London Library, would he have said the same thing? Wasn't Larkin a librarian in Leicester about the right time? He said he spent most of his time handing out tripey novels to morons. But the rest of the time, could he have been priming a bomb to send south? Swore Colin to silence on a stack of *Mort d'Arthur*s. The Moriarty of a Midlands intellectual freemasonry? I never gave too much time to Larkin. But he's growing on me. He spent most of his adult life in Hull, you know? I was born there, that's why I had to get away. Now I live near Halifax. You know 'the dalesman's prayer'? 'From Hull, Hell and Halifax, oh Lord deliver us'? I haven't tried Hell yet. Wonder if it has decor by Sartre?

Dave 'Devilfish' Ulliott hails from Hull. It's an interesting place. Been a bit quiet since the Civil War. But it got pretty-thoroughly pasted in the 1940s.

At Christmas 1956, in the Sunday Times *'Books of the Year' column, Arthur Koestler wrote sardonically: 'Bubble of the year:* The Outsider*, in which a young man discovers that men of genius suffer from* weltschmertz*.'*

'Wrote sardonically' for the *Sunday Times*, did he? Just when and where did Arthur write any other way?

This sort of writing leads Harry Ritchie, in his book on the Angry Young Men, to heap scorn upon The Outsider*—'puerile pontification masquerading as analytical expertise… fatuous polemic which lack[s] the attractions of either an objective critique or a personal manifesto'. Ritchie complains of 'the absence of any coherent development' in the argument—indeed, the absence of any argument whatsoever', and suggests that Wilson's whole aim in* The Outsider *is simply to 'show off how many books he has read'. Ken Tynan came to same conclusion…*

This is high-toned bullshit. Or 'high-sounding' might be better. Silly stuff. *Erzatz-philosophie*. A sixth-form trick. The margarine of thought. You say your opponent doesn't have an argument so you don't have to refute it. Tynan does the same, but having a touch more class, garnishes it with a metaphor. These are lazy, arrogant boys.

Humph masquerades as fair-minded by quoting a few positive things that were said:

On the Sunday morning (Wilson remembers) he and Joy 'got up at about eight o'clock, hurried down to the corner and bought the two leading Sunday posh newspapers, The Sunday Times *and* The Observer*, and both turned out to have rave reviews of* The Outsider*. One by Cyril Connolly and the other by Philip Toynbee, both major reviewers of those papers.'*

Connolly's piece began:

I feel a quickening of interest in this extraordinary book because I suggested The Outsider *as the English title of M. Camus's* L'Etranger*, on which Mr Wilson extensively draws. He is a young man of twenty-four who has produced one of the most remarkable first books I have read for a long time, a blending of the philosophic approach with literary criticism…*

His book is far from being an anthology or a collection of appreciations of favourite authors wired clumsily together round an uncertain theme, like an ill-made bouquet… He has read prodigiously and digested what he has read… His faults are… a succession of minor inaccuracies in quotations and titles, a general

gracelessness and a hurried, pontificating manner inclined to repetitions…

(Lots of …s in this, Humph. Do you share an editor with Pinter?)

then undermines them, like this:

So why were Connolly and Toynbee so enthusiastic? In his cultural history of the Fifties, Robert Hewison points out that The Outsider *bears a certain resemblance to Connolly's own wartime journal-with-quasi-philosophical-aphorisms,* The Unquiet Grave *(1944).*

'Quasi-philosophical aphorisms'? Chamfort: *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse.* I first read that in *The Unquiet Grave.* Is that 'quasi-philosophical'? I doubt St Augustine would agree with you. I certainly don't. Goes right to the heart of the matter.

Connolly's biographer Jeremy Lewis offers another reason:

Abstract thought—as opposed to highly personalised musings on the human condition—was never one of Connolly's strong points… As A.J. Ayer remarked, 'What originally led reviewers like Connolly and Toynbee astray was their unfamiliarity with abstract ideas combined with middle-class guilt provoked by the work of an autodidact.'

Autodidact is Latin for 'self-taught', in case you missed that one. You'd trust 'Freddy' Ayer on this one would you, Humph? A logical positivist snarling in his den about existentialism? You're a more trusting soul than I am, or more something. I wouldn't trust a logical positivist any more than I'd trust a legal positivist. Both fascists, as far I'm concerned. I count the spoons if I just see one of either. Wouldn't trust either of them any further than I could throw them. (I wonder how far I could throw one? I could throw a logical one further than a legal one, that's for sure. Neither have much substance, but the legal ones have the weight of the law hanging in a little bag behind their shoulder. It has a black hole in it.)

Well, let's press on.

Lewis points out that Connolly gave up philosophy at Oxford and switched to history

Good man. The queen of sciences. Includes everything else. Did the same myself. Only not at Oxford.

because 'the whole area known as metaphysics was completely over my head, or rather outside it'.

Modest as well as sensible. I like that.

Toynbee, too, had read history at Oxford, and was no metaphysician, but a journeyman author and reviewer with a soft spot for religion…

"A journeyman author and reviewer"? Sounds just like you, Humph. But "no metaphysician"? Ah, that's the difference. Still, I take your point, Humph. You can't trust these journeyman-author types. At least, not when they're reviewing. Not even when they come from Oxford. Not until we've sounded 'em thoroughly and made sure they're metaphysically at least as reliable as Freddy Ayer in his cups on the subject of his enemies.

"'The whole area known as metaphysics was completely over my head, or rather outside it'." "Unfamiliarity with abstract ideas." You should read you own reviews, Humph. A lot of them comment on your inability to grasp abstract ideas. I'm not saying you are metaphysically-challenged. Just that some of your readers think you are. Too much 'slow-motion', perhaps. They're nodding off. Don't know what you're doing wrong, myself—the more art the better as far as I'm concerned, keep spreading it around, spin as many plates as you can—but you're obviously losing some of the stragglers.

Beware the web, old son. It feeds on gadflies.

And if it was a choice between you and Cyril Connolly in a balloon race? I'm sorry—or am I? Are we being polite or metaphysical? or pataphysical, for that matter?—but you'd be straight over the side. I love *The Unquiet Grave*. It's about loss. It speaks to a particular part of me. What have you ever done that compares with it?

Connolly's weightier than you—less metaphysical hot air perhaps? more weight of history?—but we'd fly higher with him.

Paradoxical, huh?

Think I'm being unfair? I couldn't find a snipe at Ken's comment. Or Arthur's. Or Ritchie's. Or even Freddy Ayer's for that matter.

Why not, Humph. Were they all infallible?

Hey, this is a good one:

> *A correspondent to* The Times Literary Supplement *(14 December 1956) said he had found '86 major errors… and 203 minor errors' in Wilson's quotations from other authors.*

And I'm sure Humph can tell you where every one of them is.

Boy, Colin, you do make some assiduous enemies. That's a wonderful statistic for Humph to toss about. But is it a charge against Colin, or his editor at Gollancz? Whatever. No general reader is going to check it. Do you think Humph's editor did? That must have been a labour of love, or they must have cursed him for it.

What's that, Humph? You didn't check it? You think critics never offer dubious evidence?

You didn't take it on trust, did you, Humph? Not with your friends! But they get things wrong and make things up all the time. You just can't rely on them. Even when they do manage to string a coherent sentence together. You should read them sometime.

Oh. That would breach the first rule. They'd have to become your enemies first. I forgot. It must be hell, being a writer. How do you ever know what's going on?

I'm sorry, Humph. I'm pulling your leg. It's fine to make mistakes. I always scatter a few—sometimes more than a few if I'm feeling generous—through my text. (Makes it like a medieval Latin manuscript, I like to think. Only on Word. In English. I can even do palimpsests [!], now we've got a Mac.)

It's important to make work for pedants. You never know when you'll need a good one.

And it's right to keep the readers on their toes.

You don't want your readers falling asleep do you, Humph? 'Mildly somnolent' is best, you think? Like the old folks in the day room? Well, make sure nurse gives 'em the right drugs. You know how dozy you can be. One accidental shot of adrenalin and they might want to dance.

Humphrey wants to hurt. Make no mistake. So long as he thinks he can get away with it. He loves kicking for the crowd. This is the cum-shot from his *Sunday Times* piece:

> *This naivety leads him, in later life to, to introduce himself to Graham Greene and W.H. Auden, blithely unaware that he is not their equal—although on a purely journalistic level he writes well about them.*
>
> *He will be furious when he reads that last sentence. He regards himself (and makes no secret of it) as one of the great figures in the history of literature, whose importance will eventually be recognised. Hence his irritation at creatures like me snapping at his heels. Perhaps he would have preferred me to stay asleep after all.*

So what happened?

Greene and Wilson chanced to be staying at the Algonquin in New York at the same time. They had a drink together. Auden invited Wilson to lunch, and they discussed Tolkien, of whom Auden was personally fond. Wilson gives his impressions of them. Is that presumptuous? And since when is 'journalistic' a slur? You're a journalist yourself, Humph. How else would you describe what you do? Have you no pride in your trade? Does it smell too much of the shop to be mentioned without a titter? Need a waft of the pomander, Humph? Or a nervous twitch of the trouser crease? Is this plain humbug, or well-dressed self-loathing?

Or perhaps you're not a real journalist. Just pretending about that too?

That apart, it's a bit of a damp squib. Greene and Auden? You wouldn't have to have that big an ego to imagine you were their equal—by the way, is that social or intellectual equal, Humphers? Mind you, Humph thinks Labradors are *enormous*, so there's something wobbly about his sense of scale—Dickens, Darwin, Brunel… that's the meat for us megalomaniacs.

If you had the chance to talk to them, Humph, would you be too frightened to take it?

You may wish you'd stayed in bed yet, Humph. Snapping at his heels, eh? Don't snap too close. Someone's hounds might eat you.

"For the first time in my life, I felt myself in the presence of a talent greater than my own." Is that Colin Wilson meeting God? No, it's Philip Larkin talking about Kingsley Amis. Weird. Still, it shows his modesty. Must be why he fled up north. It's a topsy-turvy world, my brothers.

Don't look at me like that, Humph. It's in your book.

I think Colin's interpretation of Humph's behaviour seems pretty reasonable. Looking at the placing and dramatic timing of the two chapters attacking Colin. Given the pre-existing shape of Humph's book, it would have taken dynamite to re-cast it.

The truth about the visit to Cornwall seems to me to be this:

Colin is the last of the Angry Young Men*. The last of the Big Ones. Humph had to be seen to touch the hem of Colin's garment—the book would look foolish without—even though he intended—like Pilate—to wash his hands very publicly afterwards. And for the amusement of his friends, he chose to wash his hands in the toilet, with much wild smirking to show he was being absurd.

This seems an eccentric attitude to pollution—but you never know with these whizzo-Hegelians.

They're too damned dialectical for me.

If you were planning to betray him, Humph—and it looks like you were—at least have the decency to take him out and buy him dinner. That's all we're saying. You could claim it as expenses if you're that hard up. It's like the stamped/addressed envelope. Humph. All you have to do is put one hand in your pocket and grab your hat with the other.

---

*Personally, I'd put Sillitoe up here too—a different type of AYM but still a big beast, and still alive and writing—but Humph has little time for him. *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* can't have resonated as much up in Oxford Castle as it did down in Sherwood Forest.

Bad form, old chap. Look like a cad.

He's in his seventies, Humph. There's a name for people who go knocking on old folk's doors and tricking them. Is this how you'd like us to treat your father? Or you, when you're that age?

You're not a 'traitor', Humph. That's hyperbole. You're just a toerag. Just a twat with no manners, who needs taking in hand. The vicar's son caught behaving badly. Folks'll enjoy that. (Yes, I've been there too, Humph. I don't need a headtorch. I can find my way around your mind blindfold.)

If you want to argue with the man, go for it. No-one will mind. He's an old bruiser. Maybe he can teach you something.

But tricking the man and then shoving shit through his letter-box, while you wobble about in your mother's shoes giggling for your pals? Not good enough. It's time some adult hoisted you by the collar and took you home to your parents to see what they think about it.

You may regret dropping your trousers so publicly.—'Oh Lord, lead us not into temptation!' I can hear my father saying it—'Cos, look! I've got CLOGS on.'

So shall I boot you into those brambles? Or drag you off to meet a switch from that pollarded ash?

Lucky I've got me billhook handy.

Well, you brought it into the public domain, Humph. You invited our opinion.

It's time someone said, 'Enough's enough.'

Oh, no-one told you we had voices too?
Well, now you'll know for next time.

a visit from beyond

And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitude concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken in the wind?

But what went ye out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.

But what went ye out to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.

For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Matthew, 11.7-10

Shall I be fair to Humph's book?

Come on, boys and girls. Oh yes I should? Or, oh no I shouldn't?

OH YES I SHOULD?

Or, OH NO I SHOULDN'T?

What's that? LOOK OUT!? BEHIND ME!?

Eek! It's Adam in his Winding Sheet!

Are we performing *Nightmare Abbey*? I thought this was *Misfortunes of Elphin*. I've got Seithenyn's big speech off pat.

There just ain't room for all the good things in life. Must be why the rich are always trying to take things off us. Just meaning to be helpful, after all.

Still, back to Abanazar. Daylight's burning. How shall we tumble him?

Well, just a touch severe then. I'll play this Dame with a *soupcon* of Nanny.

I found it an eerie book. It took me a while to figure out why.

Firstly, the viewpoint.

A look at the index is instructive here. The relative number of entries for each player should give us a rough guide to their importance in Humph's revisionist drama.

There are ten pages of index. I can't be arsed to count every entry, so let's just measure them. Never mind the quality. Feel the width. It's a ten-foot index. About 120 column inches. Just marginally under.

It's difficult to define the Angry Young Man phenomenon. It meant different things to different people. And it resounded in the culture as a reference point long after Fleet Street had fluttered after

new catchphrases. Still does. Otherwise we wouldn't be here.

But of the principal players that get mentioned in Humph's book, here's their index status:

Kingsley Amis (*Lucky Jim,* 1953) gets 9.8 column inches.

Colin Wilson (*The Outsider,* 1956) 8.3

John Osborne (*Look Back in Anger,* 1956) 6.6

John Wain (*Hurry On Down,* 1953) 5.4

Philip Larkin (I think most people would be surprised to see him in a list of AYMs) 5.2

John Braine (*Room at the Top,* 1957) 3.6

Alan Sillitoe (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* ?) 0.4

Braine, Wain and Wilson are all cross-referenced to Amis, but not to each other.

Shelagh Delaney (*A Taste of Honey*. 1958. Remember that?) gets one reference. She wasn't a man, but then Colin wasn't angry and Amis wasn't young.

She was self-taught. Let's see what Humph has to say:

> *Meanwhile in May 1958 Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in east London had staged* A Taste of Honey *by Salford-born Shelagh Delaney, who had failed the eleven-plus and left school at sixteen, and had begun writing the play—a portrait of the relationship between a 'semi-whore' and her worldly-wise schoolgirl daughter—when she was only seventeen.*

That's it. I thought that might be the tone, but I'm surprised by just how dismissive he is.

Carpenter's thesis appears to be that the AYM phenomenon was a continuation of the Oxford-based 'Movement', but hijacked by Tynan's left-wing entryists.

This seems to me the wrong way round.

If the Angry Young Man thing stood for anything, it was an outburst of working class anger. Against, among other things, everything that the Movement stood for. That's why Allsop needed Colin for his thesis. Not Kingsley Amis.

That's why Colin is central to the event, even though he wasn't angry in the right way. And why Amis isn't, however much he fumed.

Let's keep it simple. There were two of them originally. John Osborne was from a background that Humph defines as occupying 'a place in the pecking order that could be loosely defined as lower-lower-middle-class, or (less flatteringly) upper working-class.'

'Pecking order', eh? You tell me what order we peck in, and I'll tell you what order we bite in. Thought I'd just hoist myself up the food chain, if you don't mind. Must have spent too much time around dogs.

'Loosely defined'? Seems pretty precise to me, even if I'm not sure what it means. 'Lower-lower middle', or 'less flatteringly' 'upper-working'. Sounds like those French West Indian plantation-owners who recognised 400 distinct degrees of miscegenation. Wonder what happened to them?

Which way would you tighten it, Humph? More 'upper's' or 'lower's'? Don't stint yourself. We've got all day. How about 'upper-upper-working'? Or 'lower-upper-working' for that matter? Or 'quasi-working crypto-middle'? Oh, we're saving 'quasi-' to use somewhere else are we? How about 'crypto-working pseudo-middle'? No? Just 'upper' and 'lower'. Just up and down, like pecking, eh? I think I prefer biting, Humph. Gives you more choices.

Just as well I despise flattery, Humph, or I might just turn you upside-down to see how much you've got in your pockets. I dislike boot-lickers. If I catch someone licking mine, I stamp on their tongue. What you might call a free lesson. Like the ones in the original sunday schools, where we all taught ourselves to read, back in the day, while your lot tried to stop us, as I remember.

Humph further refines his definition of Osborne's background with a sentence that should be a mantra for all 1st-year whizzo-Hegelians:

> *He grew up in an environment that may have been Dickensian but was far from illiterate.*

You're a Trollopian, are you, Humph? Look down on Dickensians?

They're poor but honest, Humph. Voracious readers, when they can get their hands on books. It gives them hope, you know. Poor fools.

I don't think you're Nelson at all. Vision may not be all it could be, but the real problem is that you've got the telescope the wrong way round. Makes everything look further away than it really is.

Osborne, from some sort of social no-man's-land, raged against a fearful middle-class ethos that many people felt constricted by. Colin Wilson was definitely from the industrial working class, which was definitely feeling restive. He raged against the crippling effects of pessimism. Pessimism is submission. A lot of us weren't ready to submit, or be constricted. You can see why the Angry Young Men resonated. They spoke for a lot of people. Not just young or 'working class' ones. Not just men, either. And 'angry'? It's not precise, but rage against the unfairness of the universe and resentment at being diddled were the wind and current that drove that spring-tide of emotion.

Colin doesn't want to be a working-class hero. He doesn't find the idea of class useful. (I incline to agree with him.) But it's one of the things he is. It's how other people see him. A digit in his lottery number. And it's what Humph and the self-hyphenators hate and fear and cannot forgive him for. To them, he is Grendel, the thing from the toxic swamp, who stalks their corridors in the night, talking to the chained-up ghosts and carrying off treasures from their dream-hoard. He doesn't have to do anything. He only has to exist for them to fear him.

Well, you can stop worrying about Grendel, children. Grendel's the nice one. You just pissed off his kid brother.

Angry Young Men. Osborne and Wilson were both Young Men. In their mid-twenties. (Amis was ten years older.) I think Wilson and Osborne may well have been talking about the same thing. Both, in their own way, were raging against an attitude that would rather endure in misery than take the risks of freedom. But they had different temperaments and saw things differently and offered different solutions.

Horses for courses, you know. The old 'working qualities vs. conformation' debate.

Baked beans or free range bacon?

I'm not against enduring.

Nothing wrong with enduring in its place. You won't survive without it. Good thing to know how to do, and even how to wring drops of pleasure out of it, like blood from a stone.

But we'd done an awful lot of enduring, in many shades of misery, and all shades of social class, over the previous fifty years. We knew we could do it. We were just sick of doing it.

Here is the Movement's attitude to the working class. Humph catches this well:

> *Charles Lumley (the hero of John Wain's* Hurry On Down*) has just come down from Oxford with 'a mediocre degree in history', and, having no aim in life, has chosen to live for a few weeks in lodgings in the Midland town of Stotwell, a 'dingy huddle of streets and factories', while considering his next move…*
>
> *No sooner has Lumley embarked on working-class life than—like Dixon—he falls in love with an apparently unattainable woman, Veronica, supposedly the niece of a rich man (but in reality his mistress). Becoming crazily obsessed with this dream-girl, of whom he has initially caught a mere glimpse—like John Kemp in Larkin's* Jill*—Lumley immediately determines to increase his earning power, in the hope that he can buy his way into her company. Falling in with the wrong sort of people, he soon becomes knowingly involved in drug-smuggling, and is witness to a murder. (His morals are thoroughly tangled, since he walks out on the Froulish-Betty menage as soon as he discovers that Betty is helping to support them all by working as a part-time prostitute.)*
>
> *Nearly meeting his own death, Lumley retreats into manual labour, working as a hospital orderly and then a chauffeur. By now his determination to reject his own social class is arousing furious accusations from its members that he is 'letting the side down'. Yet it is evident that middle-class existence in 1950s Britain is even less attractive than life at the bottom of the pecking order.*
>
> *Working-class life is certainly dingy, characterised by greasy cafés selling 'chipped mugs of dark brown swill', and funereal pubs: 'A few old men sat staring with red-rimmed eyes into their pints, making the beer look like tears they had dripped into their glasses and were*

saving for some purpose.' Everything is clouded by the fumes of cheap Woodbine cigarettes, and an old man in a pub nearly suffocates Froulish and Lumley with a pipe stuffed with strong shag: 'Dense blue smoke gathered around Froulish… Charles started back before he, too, should be overwhelmed.' Violence erupts unpredictably: a huge 'rough' seizes Lumley and threatens him with a brass knuckle-duster, on the spurious grounds that he is 'takin' the bread out of other folk's mouths'. Yet when Lumley, rejected by Veronica, begins to 'walk out' with a working-class girl, Rosa, another hospital orderly, he finds reassurance in her family's way of life:

> *'This was Rosa's father's Sunday afternoon, and he believed in spending it as he always did, in his armchair by the fire with the* News of the World *on his knee, fast asleep… Stuffed with ham, cake, bread and butter, and pints of dark tea, they moved from the table… Charles felt that his search was over… his demands on life had grown smaller and smaller, until that stuffy, cosy room contained everything that he needed to fulfil them.'*

Felt at home, did he? Yup, even we—down here in the gutter—have our own version of Shalott. Here, get your knees under the table. Have some 'dark swill'! A slab of ham with your cake? Go On. You don't know where the next meal's coming from.

The Movement were playing at being Orwell, but just couldn't hack it. No-one would tell them where the good cafés were.

Thought they might be curates, probably, or *agents provocateurs*. Lucky they didn't get their throats cut, if you look at it like that.

This footnote, over the page, caught my eye:

In the 1950s most pubs were divided into a 'Public Bar' for working men and a 'Saloon Bar' for the middle-classes, plus a 'Jug and Bottle' counter, accessed through a separate door, from which drink could be bought to take away.

Didn't spend much time in pubs in the Fifties then, Humph? Not enough to get the hang of it. The distinction between public and saloon bars could be a convenient point for class lines to be drawn, if a class line happened to pass through the pub, but the basic difference is much older than the Fifties, and belongs to a time when

most work was more-or-less dirty. The public bar was for people in their working clothes. It was plain so you didn't have to worry about treading your working dirt around. There was nothing to spoil. The saloon bar was for when you're scrubbed up and changed. It was fancier, because you were going out to be entertained. And cleaner, so you didn't spoil your nice clothes. At least, not until you covered them in the blood of some pompous middle-class twat who'd come down here slumming and 'accidentally' stuck his hand down the front of the wife's new blouse.

What? Me?

Is this your knuckle-duster? I thought I'd left mine at home in me overalls.

Oh, yours has quotations from Nietzsche on it. No, this one's definitely Schophenhauer. Must be Dave's. Where's Dave? Off selling pies again? I'll hang on to it for him. No. Mine says 'Love from Hegel'. My parrot gave it me for Christmas.

The Movement had already failed. Because it couldn't accommodate the working class. It was camped in the ruins of the old order. It didn't know where to look for the kindling to revive those dying embers, although the wreckage from the war had left piles of it lying around everywhere. The Movement may have meant well, but it was looking back when everyone else was moving forward. It was Lot's wife. When it should have been his daughters.

If anything, Humph's clique were the entryists. Jumping on the bandwagon.

Humph seems to find the AYM thing hard to pin down. The Angry Young Man mood was a social phenomenon. Not a literary one. It was the culture talking to itself. That's why its manifestations and agents appear so random. Its voices so discordant and uncertain. Its representatives so socially various. You won't find that in the contemporary journalism, unless you know what to look for. You should look for a pattern, not a line, if you want to try. These things are surges of power, not a bagfull of soundbites.

This was the aftermath of the war. People were still angry about how their fathers and brothers were treated when they came back from the previous war—if they had come back. We knew which battles they died in, and where they got the wounds that saved their

lives. (One of my great-uncles died at Passchendaele. My grandad was gassed at Ypres. Shall I go on?) Then there had been the Great Depression. And the General Strike. And the sheer bloody awfulness of having to live through another war.

This was the mood that created the welfare state.

'Homes fit for heroes'? Where do you think that slogan came from, Humph? Just rhetoric, do you think? Remember the cripples selling matches on the streets in the Twenties? They'd be the subject of an anti-social behaviour order now. And the armoured cars that Churchill put on the streets during the General Strike? Do you really not understand why we threw him out when he'd served his purpose, after the war?

The welfare state is our monument to our war dead. That's one reason why we defend it from our hearts against the neo-con diddlers. Apart from the fact that it's a good idea.

That wasn't 'socialism', oh trembling mandarins. That was us mourning. We'd dug for victory—and fought a bit along the way. We quite like a scrap if you push us to it. I thought you'd have noticed that. You like sending us off to war, and clapping us when we come home. But this had been a long war. We were tired—and now we were burying our dead.

Didn't you hear the clunk of shovels, Humph, when you were growing up? The chunter of concrete-mixers? Did you think that was the sound of your gardeners re-arranging the Knot Garden? Just your pals the dodgy building contractors slinging up cheap homes? Or their pals the arms-dealers packing up the guns to trade for conflict diamonds? Or just the sound of your hiccupy old wind-up gramophone?

When the last old boy who thinks it honours him and his—and in its way it does—has marched over the horizon, we should take the Cenotaph and shove it up your collective privileged arse. We can clean it afterwards if people choose. We're not afraid of blood and shit. You'd have no use for us if we were.

Why should we need war memorials, when we can write the names of our war dead on the walls of hospitals and schools? We have graveyards already. Or did before the diddlers sold them off.

Between the wars one of my grandfathers—the maternal one, if it matters—was at a fund-raising dinner for the League of Nations

and found himself sat next to a bishop. The bishop complained about the behaviour of the miners in striking for more money when everyone knew that they were paid quite enough to live on.

My grandad asked, 'And how much does my lord bishop earn?'

The bishop changed the subject. It's vulgar to talk about people's incomes, you know. I thought my grandad would have known that. He wasn't stupid.

See those names on the walls of the chapels of public schools. I honour them. But where are the names of the rest of the fallen? Did they fall in a different war?

You know what those old boys are doing when they march at the Cenotaph? They're enjoying a collective 'peak moment'. They're honouring their own prowess and the memory of the loved ones that we all lost. And we draw strength from them.

That's why we honour them.

That's why we stand in silence, and buy them a drink down the Legion afterwards.

Because we *also* know, oh belching Humph and little humphs-in-office, what it's like to lose our children and *not* get them back.

For it's Tommy this, and Tommy that, 'Tommy, wait OUTSIDE';
But it's 'Special train for Atkins' when the trooper's on the tide,
The troopship's on the tide, my boys, the troopship's on the tide,
O it's 'Special train for Atkins' when the trooper's on the tide.

That's from 'Tommy'.

You were alright, Rudyard. I wish I could buy you a drink.

You wouldn't have let the bastards bury Gulf War Syndrome. At least you'd have howled while shovels clanked.

Those wars* left deep internal scars. I grew up in the Fifties. Those wounds were just scabbing over. Violent men and drunks and other failures had this excuse: 'He had a bad war'.

We grew up playing on bomb-sites. Envying our elder siblings

*Just one war, really. With a break in the middle to see if anyone wanted a civil war at half-time.

who had been old enough to gather the shrapnel for playthings while it was still warm.

What was warm for us? Only the memory of all those relatives who were no longer with us. Whose memories were rehearsed for us so we could learn from them.

And the cooling lives of those whom the war was still killing slowly.

'Bomb-blossom'. Willowherb. Might be the first plant I ever learnt the name of.

The bombs had stopped. But the echoes were still travelling.

When did rationing end, Humph? And national service.

We had fifty years of war to get out of our system. And the anger wasn't just expressed in the 'socialism'. It was everywhere. All the criss-crossing fault-lines of the culture were charged with it. Bottled up by the developing Cold War, by the claustrophobic fear of a return to chaos and a longing for some sort of normality. The only question was how were we going to release the pressure. In a big bang, or a series of more-or-less controlled explosions. Those aftershocks rumbled on for the next thirty or forty years. You can still feel them in some places. In others there is nothing but the scars.

What happened—I can say this with some confidence since it follows the narrative of my own lifetime—is that much of the working class migrated en masse into the middle class, because the climate changed and the grass got greener.

It's still far from perfect, but it's definitely greener.

Look on the bright side. We're social nomads. And we're making progress.

There is none of this mood in Humph's book.

Not a ration-book in sight.

His world is a cozy one. All Fleet Street and Oxford. All anti-macassars and gin-and-french. A man in a knitted tie! He looks dangerous.

When Colin arrives wearing a roll-neck sweater. Well, you can see how shocking it was.

Well, no, I can't. I was there and I couldn't understand it then. A lot of people wore roll-neck sweaters in the Fifties. They kept you warm. No central heating in the Fifties. Not unless you were in an institution. And we still used old pot hot-water bottles. Pigs. You had to wrap them in towels when they were hot. Rubber ones were still state of the art. Your parents got them. They were risky. Might perish and burst, unexpectedly. Or that's what they told you.

Roll-neck sweaters were cheap and hard-wearing. Ex-navy stock, originally—like duffle coats—from the army-surplus stores. Warm, and romantic. You could imagine you were flying in the Battle of Britain. (Seen the photos of those burning boys, Humph? Seen what they're wearing? No flyers in your family, Humph? No sailors? An army family, huh? We didn't really have the weather for khaki shorts in the Fifties. Must be why you forgot so quickly. I must send you a copy of Douglas Reed's *Lest We Forget.)* Once—I must have been about ten—I strapped my legs in splints and walked around like robot just to feel like Douglas Bader. (Only seen photos of him in a suit and tie, have you?) If you could borrow your uncle's old leather flying jacket to pose in—the sheepskin-lined one—that was magic. That was a thing of power.

Funny how things kept reminding us of the war.

True. Humph does pop his head round the door of the vulgar provinces, when he has to see Larkin and Wain at home. But you can tell it makes him uncomfortable. Someone might tell him something. (No need to read the book for this. Just imagine the curate calling.)

It's the one thing that he finds comfortable about John Osborne. He only has to go to Brighton to find him.

Passport to Pimlico. That's the landscape, Humph. They even had it in London.

You haven't seen the movie?

Oh. No point in mentioning that then.

How about *Brighton Rock*? That was filmed about the same time. See, it was all over the South-East. They got quite a lot of the war down there, I hear. Even Cowley must have copped it.

One thing he does get right. The history of the AYMs does show how easily radicals turn into reactionaries, if you pat them on the

head and tip them. But hell, you could time-travel at random and anywhere you land you'll find examples of that. Loads of them. A lot of radicals are just greedy loud-mouths, like a lot of reactionaries. That's why the two groups are so easily interchangeable. They have more in common with each other than with the rest of us. That's why so many of us have lost interest in voting.

You put the left leg in, you pull the left leg out—in, out; in, out—shake it all about. You do the hokey-cokey and you dance around. That's what it's all about. Ho.

No need to pick on Kingsley Amis.

Remember the Beatles, Humph? Did they resonate because they came from Oxford? (I don't mean Cowley.)

Oh, that was the Sixties, was it? Different thing, eh? Everyone from the Fifties was dead by then. Got killed in the Korean War, maybe. Or all emigrated to Australia. I must be dead, in that case. Locked with Humph in some yellowplush Sartrean hell. Perhaps the Fifties never existed. Or the Sixties. You should tell Tony Blair, Humph. It would really cheer him up.

Give him a peak moment.

The anger didn't just express itself in 'socialism'. 'Thatcherism' was another outburst. There were those among us who couldn't stomach the arrogance of the would-be robber-barons who abused the trade union movement when we trusted them with our power.

Miners used to disperse strike-pay in Methodist chapels, did you know? (Before that they did it in pubs, but they learnt to be leary of publicans.) I don't remember Thatcher mentioning that when she was flaunting her Methodism while sending peelers to beat up the miners. Did she forget, do you think? Or was she selling her birthright for a mess of pottage? And a title, of course. But she also smashed the power of the shire Tories. It wasn't just the miners she crushed beneath her wheels.

We make unexpected alliances. We're a complex nation.

Talking of Thatcher, I just noticed in the paper that her son just got arrested in South Africa for dabbling in conflict diamonds. Last I'd heard, he was run out of Texas for laundering Mafia money.

Where do you stand on 'heritable' qualities in that case, Adam?

Pay attention. We live in interesting times.

another drink down the legion?

While it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' 'Tommy, FALL BEHIND,'
But it's 'Please to walk in front, sir' when there's trouble in the wind,
There's trouble in the wind, my boys, there's trouble in the wind,
O it's 'Please to walk in front, sir,' when there's trouble in the wind.

Rudyard Kipling, ***Tommy***

Kingsley Amis is a big figure in Carpenter's eccentric universe.

You've probably gathered that.

So is he an intellectual heavyweight? Or just a brand-name excuse for not-thinking?

Well, he wasn't an intellectual heavyweight.

Ever-perceptive? I won't argue. A master of Zen. A martial artist. Star of the school of almost-pushing. Is that like 'fighting without fighting'? More like 'without'? A conceptual thing, then. The art of implied technique? My, you writer-chappies must make awesome poker players. I hope you stick to limit games. I'm with you, Humph. Won't say a word against him on the martial arts. Subtle as a snake in a drainpipe.

But an intellectual heavyweight?

No.

Amis speaks to and for a particular constituency. It's not one I much like, but every group is entitled to its own literature, and deserves to have it treated with respect on a reciprocal basis.

Amis was what he was. A counter-jumper from 'Pooter'-land with the heroic hop of a flea and a tapeworm for an ego. On his day he

mixed a clever cocktail of lemon juice, vermouth and acetic acid. His range of empathy is quite narrow, but he captures a particular flavour very well. He was bright enough, but he strangled his intelligence for the applause of establishment bullies and a groping lease on their wives. I have wondered if this was why he drank himself to death. Maybe he just wanted to make himself doubly miserable.

He got the approval of the approved. But did it make him happy? Did it improve his art? Was the deal he made the best he could have? I never knew the man, but the accounts of him don't vary much. In the photographs I've seen he never looks happy. Nor do the people around him. Wary seems to be the prevailing emotion. He looks like a con-man. Or sometimes an actor. And the older he is, the more helpless he looks. I'm not saying he was a con-man. Just that he looks like one. Always watching, as though he perpetually feared being found out, even though he might not have done anything. Like he knows he's just getting away with it, even though he doesn't know quite what *it* is. But maybe that says more about the sort of photos that editors like—one's with implied story in them—than about Amis.

Maybe it's just that he felt he was being marked out of ten all the time. The need for approval—if it gets out of control—can do that to you; you get a haunted look. Maybe that's why Humph identifies with him. Both haunted by the same conceptual headmaster.

It's 'Morton's Fork', I guess. If Amis had been mentally tougher, he could have written better novels. But if he'd been mentally tougher, he might not have felt the need to write novels, and done something else with his life entirely.

Like Edward du Cann said of Jeffrey Archer's progress through the Tory party, 'We have to make bricks with the straw that's available.'

We are what we do. The rest is just noise.

the beard of moriarty. a second look

Given his negative views about the writings of Osborne, Wain and Amis, I expect Wilson to be dismissive about Larkin. But I am wrong. 'I admire Larkin,' he tells me, adding that he particularly likes the

'Whitsun Weddings'. I ask if he can stomach the melancholy, pessimistic side of Larkin, which is certainly very far from Wilson's own outlook as expressed in The Outsider *and many of his subsequent books. 'It strikes me,' he answers, 'that when you do something as well as he does, it doesn't terribly matter if you're pessimistic or optimistic, because you're doing something with the real you.'*

Humphrey Carpenter, ***The Angry Young Men***

Scanning through these attacks on *Dreaming To Some Purpose*, it's obvious that Carpenter (not 'son of…' yet, thank God) is a common reference point in much of this. The repeated references to his visit to Colin and Colin's subsequent remark about "that fucker Carpenter" don't leave much room for doubt. He is the spider at the centre of some sort of web. But is he the real Moriarty?

I don't know. But he looks weak to me. If he is the jellyfish, and not just one of the stings that trail beneath it, then I can easily believe he's remote-controlled by some hunchbacked Dr Evil. I doubt Humph could stay awake long enough to orchestrate a campaign. He looks more like the bully's sidekick. The ventriloquist's dummy. It probably wouldn't be difficult to find out if someone's hand was up his arse. Perhaps it's the ghostly arm of Kingsley Amis, still groping from the grave. Humphrey suspects him of being a shirtlifter *manqué*. And it frees you up—they tell me—swapping the closet for the grave. Sometimes it's easier to think when you're horizontal.

Or maybe Moriarty is just some shifty-eyed verger at the shrine of St Ingrate. I don't really care, to be honest.

There might be a modest book in it, if you could stand to spend a year down the maggot farm researching it.

If you do, and it turns out to be interesting, let me know.

But I don't want my hounds rioting on that scent today. I suspect it's just a bunch of silly kids in the playground, spitting and sucking aniseed balls.

outside shalott, on dering tye

"A murderous trick, my lord, and worthy of ye. Now look around

you, note the beauty of this fair afternoon—'tis your last, my lord, for so sure as you hold sword, I mean to kill ye!"

The stamp of sudden foot, a flurry of twirling blades in thrust and parry, and they were motionless again.

"Kill and end ye, my lord!" repeated Sir John. "But first, for the behoof of our so numerous spectators, we will show 'em a few gasconading flourishes."

Jeffrey Farnol, **Sir John Dering**

So who is Lunchfrey Harbinger?

(It's true. I am the Green Knight—from my CHAPEL in the NORTH!—and:

I CHALLENGE HIM TO A BEHEADING CONTEST.

But I will take the first stroke—or two, since his heart is not pure—and he can scramble to strike back as best he can.)

From what I can find out, he is by trade a biographer of the recently deceased. A literary embalmer and undertaker. Not so much a vulture—I doubt he'd like getting his head slick—more a timid John the Baptist in search of dead messiahs to proclaim. I'd be worried if he was my friend. He is also the author of the *Mr Majeika* series of kids' books, in which a myopic, middle-aged schoolmaster takes pre-pubescent boys on magical adventures—say nowt, we're all thinking it—a sort of PR for prep-schools.

He is also apparently—I'm still saying nowt—the son of a bishop of Oxford.

So catechising schoolboys and assisting at funerals will come natural to him, him being born into t' trade, like. And being an Anglican, you'd expect abstract thought to be beyond him.

Still, it occurs to me that Humphrey really should wrestle with the writings of Husserl. Then he might understand the distinction between the attempt to see what is and what you want or expect to see, and even seeing things that just aren't there.

Nothing arduous. Just something to help him get the gist. There are some good introductions to philosophy about these days. And the real thing is tedious hard work.

Which reminds me, God just emailed me this little sketch; I think he got it from Phil May:

Humphrey Carpenter interviews the philosopher Husserl
HC: M'dear Husserl, what does your philosophy mean?
H: The first question is not what might I mean, but what might you intend to understand from any answer I might give.
HC: Haha, Mr H, you are a card. Why you're almost as clever as Kingsley Amis!
H: Hmmm. Perhaps intention *is too large a brainful for you to start with. Do you understand the word* 'WHACK'?

And while we're at it let's share these couple of ms. pages found and passed on to me by a masked friend who moonlights as a footman at The Corsetted Bohemians' Club:

Mr Majeika & The Secret of the Bike Sheds
The third form at St Ingrate's had their heads down over their pickpocketting prep, when Mr Majeika stopped polishing his halo and rapped the desk self-importantly with his wand.

"Boys," he said, looking fierce, "pay attention! I have something important to say, something that could change the whole direction of your lives.

"This term I have to prepare you to compete in the Almeric Wister Prize for Advanced Liggery. We need you to do well, and so do you. We don't want to give the impression that boys from our school might find themselves among the humble and untutored liggers that crowd around the stage doors and tradesmen's entrances of modern fame, and give themselves too cheaply to the Aladdins and Cinderellas of vulgar celebrity. I am preparing you to join the elite of liggers, and to do that I must introduce you to dark mysteries. I must lead you through the shadows of the grottoes of your souls. I must take you behind the bike sheds, where the smokers lurk and thieves gloat over the cigarette cards they have stolen from the staffroom.

"You must learn to be Abanazar, not Buttons, while masquerading as Dandini. And you must learn well. For remember, always remember, that beyond the billowing clouds of the Almeric

Wister Prize hang the awesome peaks of the Uriah Heep Cup!"

The classroom door flew open to reveal a familiar form.

"Hello, Matron," Mr Majeika's frown evaporated and he smiled the practised smile of the predatory pondskater at play, "Is it enemas or suppositories this morning?"

"Oooh, Mr M, I heard you were taking the boys on one of your special adventures, so I just popped in to dose them with melloids and cascara. We want to keep their brains regular."

"Quite right, Matron. Remember the school motto: Mens anus in corpore ano*, or 'A little Latin goes a long way!'."*

"Oooh, Mr M, doesn't young Mr Adam look pretty this morning?"

"Just like Shelley, don't you think? And such promise, Matron," sighed Mr Majeika. "Why, the boy almost brims with it. For a special treat, I'm going to let him throw stones at the groundsman when the cricket pitch is rolled."

Lunchfrey Harbinger lives in a windmill near Oxford, called *Dunslummin'*, with faithful Nanny—'Oooh, Mr H, you are well-connected'—and a yapping chihuahua called Adam.

He wears magic spectacles through which the view is always the view from Oxford, and he carries a pomander on a length of elastic because he can't manage a yo-yo. But I wouldn't go round just now. I hear someone just caught him without his gang and broke his magic glasses…

"Nanny, nanny, come quick. The roughs are upon us! They've broken my glasses and I'm seeing the view from somewhere strange. Nanny, come quick! It's horrid! It's the boys who steal the crumbs. I'm frightened they might debag me…"

"Oi! You up there, in the Windmill of Shalott—'Umphrey the Boneless!—come to the window! It's Ragnar 'Airybreeks down here, and the Bloodaxe brothers. We just got out and we're 'ungry, and we 'eard you wuz looking for a scrap.

"Remember the bishop of London and the beef bones? That was our work. We don't need paying. We work for the sheer joy of it. We'll give you minims, enough to choke you seventy times, and no discount for cash, you loveless spawn of the temple moneychangers. You want to get personal? We'll give you personal! Our work may

be messy, but we eat well afterwards. Come down and join us. There's plenty of room in the pot for a little one…"

"Nanny, nanny, call the police! Get an antisocial behaviour order!"

"Oooh, Mr H! Oooh, I'm sorry, but they're just so big and hairy and rough. They make my knees go all wobbly. (I hear the price of property is rocketing in the north. And it's mostly freehold up there, isn't it? Do you think they own their own houses?) Oooh, they touch me right on me women's trouble. (Is North going be the new South, d'you think? They have Harvey Nicks in Leeds! Do I need a new winter coat?)…

"Adam! Come and bite them! Adam?…"

Fade to tints of a Virgilian violet.

What's that? You think I am ungentle with young Harbinger? But he wants to play rough. He says himself, he's feuding. Are you suggesting we shouldn't believe him? Or that he's too cowardly to honour a riposte? And him a bishop's son! Judge not lest ye be judged! We are playing by his rules, so there's no place for the broken fingernails and calluses of such common old hags as Truth and Kindness on this jury. This is a black cap job. He and his gang are overdue for a bit of kick-and-dangle at the end of a faux-silk rope. Or at least a corrective visit from Mrs Do-as-you-would-be-done-by.

Oh, I'm going too fast, is it? My pace not genteel enough? Well, I'm a coarse lummox, especially when I've got a drink in me.

But that could be useful, if you can trick me into uniform.

That's how we know how to fight when we need to. We practice on each other when it's quiet.

plough monday, or a bit of pre-victorian morris dancing*

Fond, Fool, *or* White Plough. *The plough dragged about a village on Plough Monday. Called* white*, because the mummers who*

*You have to understand what morris-dancing is, or was originally. It's

drag it about are dressed in white, gaudily trimmed with flowers and ribbons. Called fond *or fool, because the procession is fond or foolish—not serious, or of a business character.*

Plough Monday. *The first Monday after Twelfth Day is so called because it is the end of the Christmas holidays, and the day when men return to their plough or daily work. It was customary on this day for farm labourers to draw a plough from door to door of the parish, and solicit "plough-money" to spend in a frolic. The queen of the banquet was called Bessy.*

Brewer, ***Dictionary of Phrase & Fable***

I've set my hand to the plough, so I'll finish the field. (And a bit of your lawn if it gets in the way, or the light begins to fail, or I get too pissed.) But this is somewhat of a digression, or a retrogression perhaps.

Skip it, if you like.

Or stay if you choose. We're coming to the end now.

I've been thinking, maybe Husserl would be just too much for Humph. He's pig-iron with knobs on to read, is old Husserl†. I wouldn't wish it on my enemies. (We don't want 'em getting over-educated.) So I'm casting about for a more cushioned way to ease Humph into the chair from which you can see the difficulty of simply seeing, never mind understanding.

So I thought, since Humph is a son of the clergy, he might like

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a war-dance. The way villages strutted at each other. The men showing of their footwork—like clog-dancing—before getting drunk and settling any outstanding differences with fists and boots. Outstanding differences? Like who was on which side in the civil war. Or at Stamford Bridge. Who sided with Penda—he's buried not far from where I live—or St Dunstan or Macbeth. We've been here a long time. We have deep roots and long memories.

†Years ago, a friend of mine did some sort of postgraduate paperwork on Husserl, during the course of which he was struck with a stiff bout of depression, so the quack sent him to a shrink. After a couple of sessions, the psychiatrist said, "If you find it useful to talk this thing out, then we can book more sessions; but I have to say, the concepts you deal in are utterly beyond me." Not too intrepid then, this psychiatrist. Not like

something ecclesiastical. And the debate about *haecceitas* came to mind.

Well, Humph says he's a metaphysician, not like Connolly and Toynbee.

Where Husserl considers the act of perception, haecceitists ask how do we distinguish the thing perceived itself? It's a question of *thisness*, or how do we individuate phenomena? What is the *sich* of *das ding an sich,* if you want to get continental about it. 'What makes a thing unique?' From the Latin, *haec*. And since existentialism—no going to sleep now, Humphrey—is essentially the exploration of individual experience—'just how do I define myself?'—*haecceity* might be a good direction to approach it from.

It was hot topic among the medieval schoolmen, and you might think it would have gone off the boil by now, but it's still simmering away.

Just google it, and you'll soon hear the sound of battle.

Max Black, in *The Identity of Indiscernibles*, offers this little problem:

> *Isn't it logically possible that the universe should have contained nothing but two exactly similar spheres? We might suppose that each was made of chemically pure iron, had a diameter of one mile, that they had the same temperature, colour and so on, and that nothing else existed. Then every quality and relational characteristic of one would also be a property of the other. Now if what I am describing is logically possible, it is not impossible for two things to have all their properties in common. This seems to me to refute the principle.*

One answer might be that they each have the unique quality of

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Kingsley Amis' pal. He could have *read* Husserl himself, of course—that might well be poisoned, it certainly puts you to sleep—but maybe he thought it would be safer and more professional to *almost*-push his patient off the roof. Symbolically, of course. They were both middle-class. If my friend had been working-class, it might have been more appropriate to *almost*-push him off a real roof. Not *really*-push, silly! You might need him to fix the damn roof tomorrow!

not being the other. You may feel that doesn't get us very far, but it seems to me that in order to know there are two they have to be distinguishable, even in an abstract hypothesis. Otherwise it's just tautology. You define them as indistinguishable and claim this proves they are. To be truly identical, in all relational characteristics, they would have to occupy the same space in the identical way, so how else could you know that there were two of them unless you could show some difference? Without *knowing*, can there be a question? And if *knowing* exists, how does one limit the definition of consciousness? If 'consciousness' has to be allowed, each of the spheres might simply be aware that it wasn't the other, so they wouldn't be identical anyway. But then again, they could be stupid spheres. You'd have to be pretty stupid, if there were only two things in the entire universe, not to know that the other one wasn't you. Even Humph could figure that one out, if he could wake up in time. I'm not sure about Adam. His mirror might get in the way.

The spheres suggested by Max Black seem to be complex phenomena, so it might be reasonable to ask is there a level of complexity at which consciousness naturally arises? And consciousness of self? That would seem to infer a class of individuals that could never be identical, however many of them you could superimpose in the same space with all the identical features, because each would be aware of its own uniqueness.

Of course, one of their shared qualities might be the belief that the others were just reflections of oneself—that opens a whole other can of worms—Or it might be one sphere, imagining it was two, or many… There might be zillions of spheres all imagining they were the same sphere. Or divided into two parties each imagining there were only two things in the universe. (Is it magic? or just sleight-of-hand?)

You can see why there's still life in *haecceity*.

Henry of Harclay was very hot on *haecceitas*.

Henry was one of a lovely triad of English medieval intellectuals—who says we don't have an intellectual tradition?—along with William of Occam (the Sweeney Todd of the schoolmen) and William of Sherwood, whose *Insolubilia* discusses paradoxes of

self-reference, like 'I am now uttering a falsehood'. Very useful. Add it to your reading list, Humph.

Like William 'Razor' Occam, Henry of Harclay was a critic of Duns Scotus—who had caused a bit of a stir by abolishing illumination (you'd have liked him, Adam), as well as disputing individuation (so he wouldn't have taken to existentialism) — although they attacked him from different angles. Henry was a sort of medieval Hypassus—you remember him, the Pythagoreans threw him off a cliff (for real!) for discovering irrational numbers; the square root of 2 was the cause of his downfall, if I remember right—and Henry got all sorts of people in a tizz by suggesting that there were numbers that were actually infinite, and of different sizes! and that a continuum contained an infinity of actual indivisibles, which were the proper units of its measurement.

Weird, the things people get murderous about; isn't it?…

Hmmm. Humph's nodded off again. I can see I'm not winning with *haecceity*. No, don't wake him up. I've just remembered. The triad? They all came from north of the Trent. Might not go down well in Oxford. They'd probably prefer Duns Scotus down there. He lived in Paris, you know; although he came from Scotland.

Wasn't sure where I was going for a moment, but now I think all this talking about Duns Scotus might just be leading us somewhere. Perhaps that's why the Harbinger gang have so much trouble with existentialism. Maybe they're all congenital Aristotelians. (Could that be 'heritable', Adam? Aristotelianism?) That would explain a lot. Like why they have to think by classes, not individuals. That's why they need so desperately to belong. To own. To nail down the leaves and stamp "Ours" on them.

Aristotelians are possessed with a need for certainty. In an evolving universe this makes them crazy. They whirl through life in an acid-trip-nightmare of mutually-exclusive categories that just aren't there. They throw the baby out with the bath-water because they can prove it's not the bath. That's why you so often see them crawling around on their hands and knees with hammer and rubber-stamp in hand and a fistful of nails clenched between their teeth. That's why the rest of us are forever tripping over them, the sad

beggars—watch out! they might nail your feet to the floor! They have their uses and their place in the scheme of things, but they stick to your shoes something rotten.

They fear the anomalous. That's what drives them. They need things to made safe. That's why the concept of *outsiderness* is so intolerable to them.

Adam, I seem to remember from his *Nailbiter* piece, had problems with the concept of anomaly. Yes, here it is:

> *In science, strangely enough, an exception doesn't prove a rule. An anomaly is either revealed as a false result or heralds the death of a hypothesis.*

Or if you want the whole paragraph:

> *He passes this on unquestioningly and then exempts himself from it: 'I could see at once that my relationship with Joy (eventually his second wife)*

Eventually, eh? They do have a thing about the timing of marriages, these whizzo-Hegelians. I must look into it. Maybe they practice feng-shui. That might explain quite a lot.

> *was something of an anomaly.' In science, strangely enough, an exception doesn't prove a rule. An anomaly is revealed as a false result or heralds the death of a hypothesis. But Colin Wilson has no trouble giving intellectual assent to a theory rubbished by his own experience.*

Fair enough?

What can we infer from this? Did Adam read science at university (I won't say which, I don't want to embarrass them), or arts? If he read 'science for illiterates'—well, they offer all sorts of courses these days—he might be excused for not knowing that *prove* in 'prove the rule', is archaic and means test. So his first (or second) sentence actually means: "In science, strangely enough, an exception doesn't test a hypothesis." Which is a novel view, and

has a mildly surreal absurdity about it, but seems to completely contradict the next (second or third) sentence. Unless of course he thinks an anomaly is some sort of mathematical function with a trumpet. Is this Pollyanna mathematics, Adam? Or just more trouble with metaphors?

If on the other hand he read arts, he might be forgiven for not fully grasping the concept of anomaly. An anomaly can destroy a hypothesis, or it may merely qualify it. Or it may simply be of interest on its own. Or as a member of a group. Have you ever tested a hypothesis, Adam? They're a lot more slippery than you seem to think. When you say "In science…", which is—you must admit—a trifle vague, are you referring perhaps to the white coats and cod-jargonising of soap-powder and shampoo adverts, much plundered for imagery by students of the University of East Anglia on their way to jobs in advertising? Is this the 'science'—'the scientists say this', 'the scientists say that'—much gabbled about by politicians, and aped by Fleet Street hacks? Is this just the bombast of another Bloomsbury bigot, after all? It can't be, surely. You're a Varsity man.

Or are you just slumming, Adam? I'd like to think there was more to you than this.

But we mustn't stand still. Daylight's still burning.

So where do you stand on the question of Anomalous Monism, Adam? Have you joined that debate? Your contributions must be interesting, but perhaps obscure.

And what about the 'anomalistic year'? Are we to abolish leap years and go back to the Gregorian calendar?

I know your instincts are reactionary, Adam, but really!

Of course, you must have read Classics. That's why you can't write English!

Must be why you don't know what a laser is.

It can be a curse, can a classical education, if it traps you in the past. Science is a lot less certain nowadays than when we were at school.

Let's see what Wyld has to say. He was an Oxford man. His evidence should be acceptable in a Roman court:

anomaly. *n. fr. Lat.* anomalia*, fr Gk.* anomalia, *'inequality', fr.* ***an-***

(priv.) & homalos*, 'even, level, of like degree', fr.* homos*, 'one of the same, belonging to two or more jointly'. This word stands for* somos*, & is cogn. w.Scrt,* sam*, 'together with', O.Slav.* sa*, 'with', Goth.* sama*, 'same', (cp.* ***same****). With the longer form,* homalos*, cp. Lat.* similis*, 'like' (see* ***similar****), & further under* ***homo-****.* ***1.a*** *Irregularity, departure from a common rule (applied to natural phenomena and to apparent irregularities in grammar &c.);* ***b*** *inconsistency, paradox (in human affairs and conduct).* ***2*** *Specif. (astron.)* ***a*** *angular distance of a planet from its perihelion or satellite from its perigee;* ***b*** *angle measuring apparent irregularities in a planet's motion.*

Henry Cecil Wyld, ***The Universal Dictionary of the English Language***

Great title, huh? I love old Wyld. My favourite among dictionaries.

Any wiser, Adam? Or do you begin to suspect Wyld of sneaking off for a few beers and a frolic in Carthage? Went native, did he? All that Sanskrit and Old Slavonic played the devil with his morals?

Lighten up, Adam. If you mean 'Wilson can be paradoxical', why not just say so? Try Walt Whitman—'Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)'—I'm sure he'd like to help you.

You're leading us into deep water here, Adam. It's alright for you. You just float along like flotsam, oblivious to the depth or breadth of the ocean. You think the sky is a mirror, and the sun is your reflection. But most of us can't rely on Nanny to drop titbits in our gaping mouths. We have to swim with a net in one hand and a trident in the other. We're looking for dinner.

This is an internal and endless struggle, as ancient as our species, between those of us who go out to fuck lively questions, and those more timid souls—maybe it's the piles that make 'em testy—who stand in line to be buggered by meek answers.

It's an odd sort of competition. Difficult to judge who wins. They may end up with bigger arseholes, but we beget stronger children.

Just a question, I guess, of whether you're more interested in getting laid or having a shit.

The word 'meek' is an interesting one. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? "And the meek shall inherit the earth." A New Testament scholar once complained to me—more than once, in fact, it was something of a hobbyhorse with him—that he thought this one of the poorer bits of translation in the King James Bible.

In the Concise Oxford Dictionary, *meek* is defined as "Piously humble and submissive; submitting tamely to injury etc;" and this is the meaning usually read into the sermon on the mount. But the word translated as 'meek', I was told—I forget the original. I'd need a medium to contact the scholar in question and I don't have any spare New Testament scholars about me at the moment. No doubt three will be along in a minute—is a word that refers to the breaking in of wild horses, and means something closer to 'disciplined' or 'tamed', but not 'broken-in-spirit'. Only a bully or a coward breaks the spirit of his horse. 'Tamed' can also suggest something insipid or humbled, so he thought, in the context, it would be better translated as 'self-controlled' or 'slow to anger'. I got to know this well, and it could come up at unexpected moments.

One time we were watching *Enter the Dragon*, and came to the scene where Bruce Lee demonstrates the art of fighting without fighting.

"That's what I mean," he said, stabbing at the screen with his finger. "That's what I mean."

I have to take this on trust—the gospels were originally written in some sort of Greek, I'm told. I never got round to studying any variety of Greek. My brother stumbled in and out of the ancient sort at school, but I never paid any attention. He's older than me, but it aged him even more, and it looked like an awful lot of brainache, and anyway I was always more interested in blowing things up—but I heard it from a man whose honesty never failed me when I had to depend on it..

"And the true martial artists will inherit the earth!"

Toughens up the Sermon on the Mount no end, doesn't it?

No wonder the bastards struggled so hard to keep it buried in Latin.

Although—of course—the original Greek text must be assumed to derive from an event likely to have taken place in some Semitic dialect, so God only knows what the original word was.

Another word that troubled him—if you're interested—was the use of 'moneylenders' in the passage where Christ whips them out of the temple precinct. My friend said they were money-changers, not money-lenders. In societies that practice symbolic sacrifice, as the Jews did at the time, it is common for priests to sell toy money—the Chinese still use it to comfort their dead, and you can find it in Roman shrines from Pompey's Pillar (see Brewer) to the forts on Hadrian's Wall—for transfer to more morbid realms via the coffers of God's chain of banks. For a fee, of course. A priest's got to live. Though he could always sell candles, I suppose.

What Christ was objecting to was not usury—although the priests did also arrange loans so the poor could buy favour with God by enmeshing themselves in debt, and He wasn't happy with that either—but the practice of spiritual counterfeiting and short-changing was his immediate target.

The Harbinger gang offer brightly coloured paper. (You think they're Euros? No, that's just whizzo-Hegelian accounting at *The Sunday Times* bureau de change. It's only Monopoly money.)

Do you think there's a connection?

They gather for drinkettes and tit-bits in the ducal turrets of *The Observer* or at the episcopal palace of *The Sunday Times*—they don't need phones; they communicate by pulling faces in the mirror, or tugging the anodised chains that bind them together—and they dream that we worship them, and that *their* word is LAW. They forget to feed the god they keep locked in the cellar, and now he's dead, but they don't care. They've got his money.

He was always too fond of the poor. Why, he might have given it away, just as Jack Vettriano is said to do with his. And then where would we be? Where would we go for lunch? The Maison aux Quat' Saisons is out already. They have Jack's vulgar paintings on the wall.

But I can write on the sky, if the spirit so moves me—in fireworks, or shrapnel bursts, or jailhouse tattoos, with a biro and pin, if need be—so let me scribble some common text on the corner of this cloud. Just to see if their myopic eyes can decipher it in the mirror.

Oh lordy-lordy.

I must share this.

Lucy bought our lads a *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* in a moment of optimism, and it was lying by the Mac while I was waiting for something to download, so I looked up *COMEDY* and found this:

> ***Further reading***
> *Gutwirth, M. (1993)* Laughing Matter: An Essay on the Comic*, Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press. (A synthesis of previous theories of laughter and an exploration of the values of comedy. Moderately difficult.)*
> *Morreall, J. (ed.) (1987)* The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (An anthology of philosophical writings on laughter from Plato to Roger Scruton.)*
>
> Plato to Scruton?
> !
> Boy, that must be a cosmic gale of laughs!
>
> Quick! Tie me down, girls! I'm losing it again.

a note on spinning. for shalott

> *What rage for fame attends both great and small!*
> *Better be damned than mentioned not at all!*
>
> Peter Pindar, ***To the Royal Academicians***

Well, Adam, is my prose close-woven enough for you? We know how to make worsted as well as shoddy up here. Don't despise shoddy. It has its uses. There are skills in making that too. And Lucy comes from Lancashire. Knows how to do a thing or two with cotton. I must get her to teach me, when I've got time.

That's how you learn to use metaphors. Wring the last drop of profit out of them. You never know when you might need it. You can always squander it if you're flush.

Do you know what shoddy is? It's old woollen material and wool

waste, shredded up and re-woven. The 'rag' in 'rag-and-bone man'. Cheap and cheerful. Doesn't last, but serves an ephemeral purpose. We made a fortune making shoddy blankets for the Union army during their civil war. Then we shipped the profits over to Liverpool and invested in blockade-runners to get the cotton out of the South.

We were neutral.

That's life.

Who has the pearls, and who are the swine?

olé! massacre at st ingrate's: man confesses

Let the victors when they come,
When the forts of folly fall,
Find thy body by the wall.

Matthew Arnold, ***The Last Word***

It's fun this, playing the picador with the egos of literary bullies.

It's easy. They're lazy, and vanity makes them foolish.

I'm lazy too, so I know how that works.

You'd think I might be more sympathetic.

I do like folly. Until it becomes tyrannical.

I was with a couple of friends, walking their dogs along the banks of the Ribble yesterday, and I mentioned I was doing a Colin Wilson piece, and how the critics had denounced him as an embittered, illiterate egomaniac, and Rick said that was odd, he didn't know much about Colin Wilson's books, although he well remembered *The Outsider*, but he'd heard the old boy interviewed on the radio the other day and he'd seemed interesting, genial and modest.

It's a mystery, I said.

Then we skinned up again, and went back to talking about Beefheart.

Oops, here they come again!

Squire! Where's my whetstone? and a BIG Pen! No! The ENORMOUS One. As big as a LABRADOR!

And bring me a stirrup-cup—that CASK will do.

dickens, or rough music for the pianoforte

When we went downstairs, we were presented to Mr Skimpole, who was standing before the fire, telling Richard how fond he used to be, in his school-time, of football. He was a bright little creature, with a rather large head; but a delicate face, and a sweet voice, and there was a perfect charm in him…

"I covet nothing," said Skimpole in the same light way. "Possession is nothing to me. Here is my friend Jarndyce's excellent house. I feel obliged to him for possessing it. I can sketch it, and alter it. I can set it to music. When I am here, I have sufficient possession of it, and have neither trouble, cost nor responsibility…

"It's only you, the generous creatures, whom I envy," said Mr Skimpole, addressing us, his new friends, in an impersonal manner. "I envy you your power of doing what you do. It is what I should revel in, myself. I don't feel any vulgar gratitude to you. I almost feel as if you *ought to be grateful to me, for giving you the luxury of generosity. I know you like it. For anything I can tell, I may have come into the world expressly for the purpose of increasing your stock of happiness…"*

And what with his fine hilarious manner, and his engaging candour, and his genial way of tossing his own weaknesses about, as if he said, "I am a child, you know! You are designing people compared with me;" (he really made me consider myself in that light;) "but I am gay and innocent; forget your worldly arts and play with me!"—the effect was absolutely dazzling.

Dickens, ***Bleak House***

The scared leaves only flew the faster for all this, and a giddy chase it was: for they got into unfrequented places, where there was no outlet, and where their pursuer kept them eddying round and round, at his pleasure; and they crept under the eaves of houses,

and clung tightly to the sides of hay-ricks, like bats; and tore in at chamber-windows, and cowered close to hedges; and in short went anywhere for safety. But the oddest feat they achieved was, to take advantage of the sudden opening of Mr. Pecksniff's front door, to dash wildly into his passage; whither the wind following close upon them, and finding the back door open, incontinently blew out the lighted candle held by Miss Pecksniff, and slammed the front door shut against Mr. Pecksniff who was at that moment entering, with such violence, that in the twinkling of an eye he lay on his back at the bottom of the steps. Being by this time weary of such trifling performances, the boisterous rover hurried away rejoicing, roaring over moor and meadow, hill and flat, until it got out to sea, where it met with other winds similarly disposed, and made a night of it…

It has been remarked that Mr. Pecksniff was a moral man. So he was. Perhaps there was never a more moral man than Mr. Pecksniff; especially in his conversation and correspondence. It was once said of him by a homely admirer, that he had a Fortunatus's purse of good sentiments in his inside. In this particular he was like the girl in the fairy tale, except that if they were not actual diamonds that fell from his lips, they were very brightest paste, and shone prodigiously… Some people likened him to a direction-post, which is always telling the way to a place, but never goes there; but these were his enemies; the shadows cast by his brightness; that was all…

Dickens, ***Martin Chuzzlewit***

Writing for money? That's the way to do it!

Well, cast your bread upon the waters…

Rumour having rippled through my pond that I was interested in Carpenter, a friend sent me a copy his biography of Dennis Potter, which Mike hadn't got round to reading but which I could "have gratis, if it helps with the hatchet job." Well, I'm more a billhook than a hatchet man, I like to think. But Mike's relationship with tools is intellectual, and the difference would take too long to explain.

The reason why Mike was affronted by Carpenter, I gather, was Humph's claim, or his collusion in the claim by his publisher on his behalf, to be the "official" biographer of a man who expressly said he

didn't want to be biographised. (Yeah yeah, Humphrey. We know. Dennis didn't mean it. Everyone's a liar. Everyone deep-down is just a scheming ego. Blah blah blah. I've been hearing that from conmen since I was old enough to break their legs. But Mike's a happy poacher; he didn't mind the grave-robbing; what stuck in his throat was you dressing up in a beadle's suit to foreclose upon the corpse.)

But that's another scrap for a different day. It's not, to be honest, one that interests me much. I was quite pleased to get the book; it's a fine big hardback, feels good in the hand, and Potter is a fascinating subject. Even Carpenter's rubber-stamp can't disguise that.

The reason I mention it is that after opening the first flyleaf and reading, "Humphrey Carpenter, Potter's official biographer,…" whatever that means, I turned to the back and there was a photo of the man himself.

The Great Humph!

Softly wafting hair above a fine high forehead, a plump priest's face…

"Good Lord," I said aloud, "it's Skimpole. Or do I mean Pecksniff?"

(Colin never did get round to reading Dickens for me, the bastard, so in my 30s I read them for myself. I was surprised how good they were, but glad I'd waited; by then I'd seen enough to really relish them. But they're getting hazy now.)

Lucy looked over my shoulder to see for herself.

"Dorrit," she said, "is the one that comes to my mind."

As a child she was a member of the Dickens Society. I bow to her opinion.

But I had a feeling there's yet another Dickens reference, or may be more, if only I could summon them.

Perhaps you could help me out here.

I could offer a prize for the best suggestion.

And then a circuit shorted in my brain. I knew vividly that this was not a Dickens thing. This was *him*! The rotten ex-Balliol man against whom Dornford Yates warned our forefathers. (You should learn to recognise him. He pops up everywhere.) So, if the great man was right, Humph should get remorseful—anyone got an imperilled damsel handy? That's often a useful catalyst. Lynn? Oh, she's gone shopping, has she? For ideas? No, don't interfere with her

intellectual pursuits. She'll be down at Oxfam, I expect. Helping the needy—and sacrifice himself for the common good some time soon. Which is positive. Unless, of course, Humph went to one of the lesser colleges, where standards are even lower.

The ghost of my father just appeared to me and said, "Go easy on young Harbinger. He belongs to a class to whom the English seldom speak with open hearts because we know they are too weak to understand."

Well, of all those who have earned my respect, among the dead my father is the first. So let us move on. There are other rats in my sack.

And don't worry about Humph and co, Dad. As you well know, they'll just bounce back. Their sort always do. It's all they can do. They can't change. You can hit 'em as much as you like—and forever, like a Greek doom—and—*doing!*—back up they come. That's why I don't usually bother. They're like those old dutch dolls you were always so fond of. All the weight is in the arse.

Sotto voce: *Utinam populus romanus unam cervicem haberet*
I wish the Roman people had only one neck!

Suetonius (on Gaius "Caligula" Caesar), ***The Twelve Caesars***

I just put that in for John.

a man who liked big poodles

VII

*Should the disputation be conducted on somewhat strict and formal lines, and there be a desire to arrive at a very clear understanding, he who states the proposition and wants to prove it may proceed against his opponent by question, in order to show the truth of the statement from his admissions. The erotematic, or Socratic, method was especially in use among the ancients; and this and some of the tricks following later on are akin to it.**

The plan is to ask a great many wide-reaching questions at once, so as to hide what you want to get admitted, and, on the other hand, quickly propound the argument resulting from the admissions; for those who are slow of understanding cannot follow accurately, and do not notice any mistakes or gaps there may be in the demonstration.

VIII
This trick consists in making your opponent angry; for when he is angry he is incapable of judging aright, and perceiving where his advantage lies. You can make him angry by doing him repeated injustice, or practising some kind of chicanery, and being generally insolent.

IX
Or you can put questions in an order different from that which the conclusion to be drawn from them requires, and transpose them, so as not to let him know at what you are aiming. He can then take no precautions. You may also use his answers for different or even opposite conclusions, according to their character. This is akin to the trick of masking your procedure.
They are all a free version of ch.*15** *of Aristotle's* De Sophistici Elenchis.

Arthur Schopenhauer, ***The Art of Controversy***

Tips on arguing, from one of the great masters. I told you to read Schopenhauer's *Stratagems.*

Do you know why I changed course from philosophy to history at university? Because a bunch of mirror-brained logical positivists—Oxford-trained, as it happens—told me that I would waste my time studying Schopenhauer.

Now I wonder why they said that?

I'd read a bit of Schopenhauer—that's how I knew he might be worth studying in detail—so I knew enough to know that anyone who dismissed him was either a fool or a knave. Or both. Now tell me: why might I want someone like that to teach me anything?*

So I read him myself.
You could say I'm a self-taught Schopenhauerian.

So you can rest easy, Humph. I can't really know anything.

The first was the poet Geoffrey Hill. His poems were like tight little jewels and many people regarded them as esoteric, which annoyed him. He said there was nothing in his poems that you couldn't get from a three-foot shelf of paperbacks. They'd need to be the right paperbacks, but you take his point. It would be work, but the dragons that guarded his treasure were quite mortal and not hard to find.

Next up is an old boy—I can see his face vividly, but his name eludes me at present—who taught the ancient philosophy course. He introduced me to Solon and Cleisthenes. I can't remember much about Cleisthenes—I know where to find him, which is all I need—but Solon was an eye-opener. Find him in Herodotus. In fact, find Herodotus if you don't know him. Loads of good stories in there and he tells them succinctly. Start with a short version in paperback, maybe, so you don't get muddled or frightened by the size of him.

The third was a history lecturer called Challis. He looked like the Henry V that Olivier tried to imitate. The same hatchet face and pudding-basin haircut. And megalomania. He ran our medieval tutorials like sessions of the Privy Council. He would start by saying, 'I am the king. Let us consider'—for example—'the treasury accounts for 1417-18', and his hand would snake out to the open drawer of his filing cabinet and as if by magic he would produce the relevant information. He taught me never to rely on any but primary sources. And to treat those with suspicion. (Lying, error and self-deception are not new vices.)

You don't need to know a lot. Just where the maps are, and how to read them.

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*A few of my lecturers at university I regarded with sorrow and contempt. Most were journeymen-lecturers. They did their job, but they didn't inspire. But there were three I remember with affection and respect. If I were to ride in triumph through the smouldering ruin of those old halls before I fall, I would bury these three with honour.

fine green critics preening on a wall

> *The duty of a true critic is to play the part of a leech, and not of a viper. Upon true and upon malignant criticism there is an excellent fable by the Spaniard Iriate. The viper says to the leech, "Why do people invite your bite, and flee from mine?" "Because," says the leech, "people receive health from my bite and poison from yours." "There is as much difference," says the clever Spaniard, "between true and malignant criticism, as between poison and medicine." Certainly a great many meritorious writers have allowed themselves to be poisoned by malignant criticism; this writer, however, is not one of those who allow themselves to be poisoned by pseudo-critics; no! no! he will rather hold them up by their tails, and show the creatures wriggling, blood and foam streaming from their broken jaws.*
>
> George Borrow, appendix to ***The Romany Rye***

> *Blode edrum dranc.*
> *Rivers of blood he drank.*
>
> anon., ***Beowulf***

Well, the rest are a bit of a disappointment, after all that. More mean-spirited and mimsy-mouthed than savage. Not much for a Grendel's thirst, really.

If you look at this as a poker game, here's how I see it:

Adam's in the small blind with one page. Lynn's in the big blind with two. Humph has raised with three chapters and a 'review'. I've just re-raised with this.

Adam's already on tilt. He could do anything. Lynn and Humph? Can't tell. Don't look to be flush with chips. But maybe they have cash or jewellery, or friends. Could be interesting. We'll see.

Then there are these other two. They've only called the big blind so far. Just dipping their toes in to see how it feels. I think they'll fold. If they're wise. I still have loads of chips. I've been hoarding them for years. (But don't be too shy to jump in, boys. Feel free. Re-

raise me, if the spirit moves you.) I can always raise cash. (Thank God for the black economy. It could save the nation. John Biffen said that. Lost his job for saying it. Pity. Looks like he might have made a good prime minister.)

I think I can bully this table.

Martin Rowson, somewhere or other, offers us a little cartoon, titled *The Abuses of Literacy,* of a man at a bookie's window saying, "I want to put a MILLION POUNDS on COLIN WILSON ultimately being judged as the GREATEST WRITER & THINKER of this or any other era." The voice from the window replies, "Oh alright then, but to be honest he's a bit of an OUTSIDER."

This only worth mentioning because of a little poem that accompanies it which includes these lines:

> *I've written books on serial killers,*
> *Outer Space and KIERKEGAARD*
> *'Cos I'm a* proletarian hero
> *And, like LIFE, both tough and hard!*

All things come to him who waits. I understand now. The Harbinger gang think Kierkegaard's a homicidal Martian (oops! sorry, Adam. Let's say a homicidal *outsider*…), or even worse, a PROLETARIAN! Why, he might even be SELF-TAUGHT! No wonder they have trouble getting their empty heads round existentialism!

Someone should tell them Kierkegaard's quite safe. As safe as Yorick, you might say. He won't bite you, even though we keep turning his grave over, when we're not trampling on it. He was a gentle, and suitably educated, philosopher from Elsinore. They should know where that is.

If not, a researcher could find out for them, and then Nanny could drop it into their open mouths.

Jasper Gerard, in *The Sunday Times*, (is that his real name? If he made it up, it's inspired) is just calling to see what's going on. Amiable. A bit condescending. His prose is neo-routine—pre-condimentised, portion-controlled, painless, readable. Sunday morning prose. Appropriate. Like cornflakes. A bit toffee-nosed, but you have to

flavour everything nowadays. Frosties, or Crunchy-nut? Go find it and judge for yourselves.

Again, only worth mentioning for a detail. At the end of his piece, I note, the reader is referred to ***His dark materials: Humphrey Carpenter reviews Wilson. Books. Culture. page 42***.

Someone should smack the sub-editor. Humph's piece on Wilson is titled *His dark material*; no "s". *HIS DARK MATERIALS* (all caps, with an *s*) is the title of Lynn Barber's piece on Jack Vettriano in *The Observer*.

Why, you'd almost think they were cribbing off each other. I wonder which of them first thought of sequestering Philip Pullman's title? Pullman's not another self-taught outsider, is he? What! another Oxford man! Of course! Humph must have picked his pocket when they were chatting in Sainsbury's! Or did he slip him a writ?

I hope Pullman's not allergic to black plumes. If he so much as coughs, poor soul, Humph's hearse will come rattling by. Or Nanny will arrive to dose him. Or even worse, Adam will bring dandelions.

Maybe I'll give Sainsbury's a miss. Too full of undertakers and their chums. Bit of a busman's holiday for me.

a salutory shock

> *Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out.*
>
> Thackeray, ***Vanity Fair***

What's this?

> Dreaming To Some Purpose *is a readable, entertaining and candid review of Wilson's life and work. It goes a long way to justifying his early decision to put the stopper back in the bottle… Wilson isn't afraid of holding unfashionable views. Poltergeist phenomena are most likely caused by spirits. The earth was probably visited by extraterrestrials in the ancient past. Civilisation probably*

started much earlier than archaeologists believe. There's sufficient evidence of some form of life after death. Wilson remarks on these with a "take it or leave it" brevity, and we may not agree with him, but an open-minded reader recognises that he didn't arrive at these views easily, and that they are not essential to his basic insight into the "curious power of the mind that we hardly understand".

In person warm, cheerful and generous, Wilson admits that "being alive is grimly hard work". Dreaming To Some Purpose *is a good argument that the reward is worth the effort.*

A reviewer who's read the book, and the same book I did? I can't handle this. How tactless! How dare he agree with me? And me standing here with the jawbone of an ass in one fist and me dragon's teeth in t'other! Me, with my reputation!

It's someone called Gary Lachman in *The Independent*, the only paper with a weekly poker column. Good for them. No affirmative action for uppity liggers there, then.

The thing with the Harbinger gang—and one rule serves for all; without their badges and rosettes and scarves they'd be a test for haecceitists, these clones of Almeric Wister—is in the end quite simple. They exist to patronise. If you won't be patronised, they have to sneer. And if their sneers don't shrivel you, they have to vilify. And that's it.

Not much to it, when you boil it down. But these are shallow people. (Look! I just waded through them!) What else might you expect?

At least, since they like to get so personal, we can all feel free to speak our minds.

Enough. Whatever. It's not my fight. I just happened by, and overheard rough music, so I joined in with my wooden spoons. But with a reason. I'm just a passing Myrmidon*, but it irks me to see the Vigilantes of Complacency throw stones at Don Quixote. He's

---

**Myrmidons.* The followers of Achilles, famed for their intolerance of ignorant behaviour. Thus:
The murmur of the Myrmidon 'e's fettled, 'ard and wick.
If 'e mutters, run like fuck; 'e's cock is long and thick,

done good things and he's interesting; he's in his 70s, and he's still battling. Pay him some respect.

The sole object of their campaign—and that's what it appears to be—is to bully an old man into thinking his whole life has been worthless. To rub shit in his face, and strangle his cat. Why? Because he's working-class, and should be made to grovel for their patronage. It would be an unworthy enterprise, even if the charge were true that Colin had never said or done anything worthwhile or interesting. Since it isn't, they should have the lie rammed down their throats with a shovel, or other suitable shit-propelling implement.

Colin makes mistakes. We all do. They say it's because he's self-taught. Could be. If so, what's *their* excuse?

So when these Children of the Pharisees squirm out to sneer while the Don reminisces about past encounters with a variety of promising windmills… Well, it's just the way it is; my whetstone has to dance.

Are you thinking, it must be tedious hard work to shovel shit with a billhook? It can be. And I got tainted by a splash of Oil of University—it just won't wash off!—so I mustn't touch a shovel. It might burst into flames! So I thought I'd just paunch the buggers and stuff 'em. If that's all right with you. Do you want them filleted as well? Heads and tails off? Kippered? I'm easy.

Is it worth the effort? Nah, not really. Who wants liggers, with or without shit? Even smoked ones…

The trivial, like the poor, are always with us.

If we have leisure, it's sometimes fun to put big boots on and play leapfrog with the fleas. Or flick matchsticks at their house of cards. And it may help temper their collective vanity, which is always good. You have to suffer now and then for your vanities; you don't value 'em else.

'N' when it waggles, then by 'eck, 'e likes to get it slick—
'E'll stan' fowersquare upon tha land
An' fuck thee 'til tha understand.
Alfred, Lord Tennyson, ***Dialect Poems: Achilles Recruiting in Barnsley***

Yes, I did find Brad Pitt's performance in *Troy* inspirational. So did Tennyson apparently. He came from Lincolnshire, you know. Tennyson that is. Read *In Memoriam*. It shows. I have family there, have had for centuries. We could be related. Just fancy, me related to a lord!

Should we cull the buggers? Nah. I'm superstitious, like the old vikings who believed that if your headlice disappeared, it meant you were marked for death.

I'm damned if I'm ready to give Humph my business yet.

And if I've spent more time on them than you might have troubled to do—it's because I'm just a soggy old liberal. I'll always give a person enough rope.

Should I say, "Oh Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do"?

No. They know enough, the bastards. So, Lord, allow me this Don Camillo moment with them.

OK. I'll settle for *'Bendy's Sermon'*.

You don't know it? Here's the climax:

But the roughs they kept on chaffin' and the uproar it was such
That the preacher in the pulpit might be talking double Dutch,
Til a workin' man he shouted out, a-jumpin' to his feet,
'Give us a lead, your reverence, and heave 'em in the street!'

Then Bendy says, 'Good Lord, since first I left my sinful ways,
Thou knowest that to Thee alone I've given up my days,
But now, dear Lord,'—and here he laid his Bible on the shelf—
'I'll take with Your permission just five minutes for myself.'

He vaulted from the pulpit like a tiger from a den,
They say it was a lovely sight to see him floor his men;
Right and left, and left and right, straight and true and hard,
Till the Ebenezer Chapel looked more like a knacker's yard.

Platt was standin' on his back and lookin' at his toes,
Solly Jones of Perry Bar was feelin' for his nose,
Connor of the Bull Ring had all that he could do
Rakin' for his ivories that lay about the pew.

Jack Ball the fightin' gunsmith was in a peaceful sleep,

Joe Murphy lay across him, all tied up in a heap,
Five of them was twisted in a tangle on the floor,
And Ikey Moss, the bettin' boss, had sprinted for the door.

Five repentant fightin' men, sittin' in a row,
Listenin' to words of grace from Mister Bendigo,
Listenin' to his reverence—all as good as gold,
Pretty little baa-lambs, gathered to the fold.

So that's the way that Bendy ran his mission in the slum,
And preached the Holy Gospel to the fightin' men of Brum,
'The Lord,' said he, 'has given me His message from on high,
And if you interrupt Him, I will know the reason why.'

But to think of all your schoolin', clean wasted, thrown away,
Darned if I can make out what you're learnin' all the day,
Grubbin' up old fairy-tales, fillin' up with cram,
And didn't know of BENDIGO, the pride of Nottingham!

Arthur Conan Doyle, ***Bendy's Sermon***

That feels better. Doesn't it?

Cleared the air a bit.

Not getting too *anthological* for you, are we, Humph?

'Other men's flowers'? Isn't that what *anthology* means?

Well, it's good to share them. They were a gift in the first place.

Strew 'em around a bit.

There's plenty. We can afford it. We know where to get more.

Know what they say about Yorkshiremen, Humph?

'Scotsmen with the generosity squeezed out of them.'

If I can do it, why can't you?

all's well that ends well.

For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen,

Before we go to Paradise, by way of Kensal Green.

G.K. Chesterton, ***The Flying Inn***

I'm going deaf with my own noise. (But those sanctimonious beggars have a practised deafness from ignoring the cries of the poor, so you have to shout and slap 'em about a bit just to get their attention.)

It's time to pause. Just as Homer ended his *Iliad* with the funeral of Hector, I shall leave the burning of Liggersford* to our own Virgil. He's earned it. Perhaps Athene/Minerva, in the guise of Mentor, will appear at his side to inspire him, as she did for old Laertes, when she gave him the strength to nail Eupeithes through the cheek-guard of his helmet. (But that's another story…)

Or I'll lend him my lighter if need be.

Let us meanwhile sit down for a few starbright pints, and a dish or two of oysters, in the stubborn inn of Wilsonian optimism.

Be positive!

(But keep your knives in your boots, me hearties; those micro-managing buggers will be back.)

There's usually a bright side.

Even the *fewmets* of Almeric Wister, properly divined, can yield a useful warning:

To wit: if you're a vainglorious snob, you might do well to stay away from *Dreaming To Some Purpose*.

Otherwise…

Enjoy.

And after that we'll take the dogs out. Even if it is dark.

Looks like a clear night. We could lamp for foxes.

They have loads of fleas. As you'll soon see, if we get the chance to watch one cool.

**Ligger*. slang: a freeloader, a hanger-on, a parasite. orig. dialect: a bedbug, or an idle gobshite. from Old English *liggan*, to lie down.

Ford. A shallow place where you can wade through water; convenient for baptisms, or the triple death. from Old English; related to *faran*, to go.

just one last after dinner mint

Sir Henry, mending the electric light,
Died of a shock, and serve him right.
'Tis not the business of a wealthy man
To steal employment from the artisan.

Hilaire Belloc, I think. Thunderclap Newman taught me that.

Feeling well roasted, Humph? I haven't left you too bloody? I can always pop you back in the oven if you want.

Got a bit fancy at times, did I?

Well, I wanted to do you well. Didn't want to look like a piker after the way Colin fed you. You invite yourself into all our homes, remember?

And we are bit vulgar down here at the Maison Aux Quat' Saisons. Counter-jumpers, you know. Can't help splashing our money about and showing off our kids' educations. Look! We even have Jack's paintings on the wall. Hey, that's a new one! I like that. Where's my chequebook?

Not over-done? Oh God, you're not veal, are you? Oh dear. I was sure there was an *n* in the middle. (That's the trouble with working from palimpsests.) Still, the dogs will enjoy you. They've been looking wistful since our evening stroll through that Cornish wood.

Hey, look the sun's come out!

Let's go outside.

You know, gang, I've grown quite fond of Humph. In the way that you do with a plump carcass when you're spit-roasting it.

I think I'm going to miss him.

I hope I've shown him something useful.

As for the rest of his gang. You have 'em. I have other fish to fry.

Enjoy yourselves. Let it all go. Have a Wilsonian moment.
Go on. Barbecue the bastards.
Just think, back in the Fifties—when times were lean—we'd have pickled 'em and kept for winter. No telly, no fridges, just books.
Lord, do you remember shredding and salting runner beans?
No wonder we were angry.
Thank God for credit cards and Tesco's!

X Josey Wales, his mark
notarised by Robert Meadley
at the School of Longinus
Missouri, 1862.

"Damn their eyes!"

The Odyssey Of A Dogged Optimist*

***For those who like such things. If you know Homer's *Odyssey*, you will note that I have allotted roughly the same space to the kippering of pseudo-critics—it's a technical term; see *Borrow*—as Homer does to Ithaca, and Odysseus's masterclass in ligger-handling. Just thought I'd point that out. By coincidence, it's about the same proportion as Humph gives Wilson's book in his *Sunday Times* 'review'*. Me, Humph and Homer. That's a curious triad. I hope Humph won't get tongue-tied with embarrassment if he has to speak to the old boy. I don't speak any Greek. Still, Humph speaks to Philip Pullman in Sainsbury's. So he can't be too afraid of talents greater than his own.**

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*Do you know what the difference—funny, I just typed deference, by mistake—between a reviewer and a critic is? A reviewer sees something, often under pressure, and reacts. A critic takes time to think, then tells you what he's thought. Neither should be confused with an authority, which is whatever you want to believe it is.

WHACK THE POLICEMAN!
WHACK THE BABY!
THAT'S THE WAY TO DO IT!

a few for the road?

Might as well riffle some chips while we're waiting for the others to bet.

Fancy a short cocktail of anthologising?

> *"Speaking of deals", he said, "reminds me of a poker game I once seen in Reno, Nevada. It wa'n't what you-all would call a square game. They-all was tin-horns that sat in. But they was a tenderfoot—short-horns that sat called out there. He stands behind the dealer and sees that same dealer give hisself four aces offen the bottom of the deck. The tenderfoot is sure shocked. He slides around to the player facin' the dealer across the table.*
>
> *"Say," he whispers, "I seen the dealer deal hisself four aces."*
>
> *"Well, an' what of it?" says the player.*
>
> *"I'm tryin' to tell you-all because I thought you-all ought to know," says the tenderfoot. "I tell you-all I seen him deal hisself four aces."*
>
> *"Say mister," says the player, "you-all'd better get outa here. You-all don't understand the game. It's* his *deal, ain't it?"*

Jack London, ***Burning Daylight***

Another self-taught Jack. He knew a thing or two.

Odysseus's masterclass in handling liggers. Just thought I'd point that out. By coincidence, it's about the same proportion as Humph gives Wilson's book in his *Sunday Times* 'review'†. Me, Humph and Homer. That's a curious triad. I hope Humph won't get tongue-tied with embarrassment if he has to speak to the old boy. I don't speak any Greek. Still, Humph speaks to Philip Pullman in Sainsbury's. So he can't be too afraid of talents greater than his own.

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Lucy just dropped this on my desk:

> *Gerald Durrell was a square peg, a rebel. 'He was looked on by the zoo establishment as a meddling upstart, a dangerous lunatic,' a friend and colleague was to recall. 'Here's this chap, they said, no degree, no qualifications, goes around giving interviews saying we're making a mess of things and tapping funds that could be better spent. My God, we can't have amateurs wandering round the world causing trouble. Dammit, his chimps are* bonking*! What's more, he seems to think it's a* good idea*! Gerry always used to think he was under siege, an outsider, didn't have the respectability, the backing. He had to start with a blank sheet of paper and create his own structure—so you could hardly blame him for feeling paranoid. His sense of isolation—I'm a man against the universe—came out a lot in conversation. Never bitterly, but he felt rejected because ideas he thought central were regarded as bone-headed and eccentric.'*
>
> Douglas Botting, ***Gerald Durrell***

Another offering from Lucy:

> *Lowry's fund of apocryphal yarns was littered with tales of the amateur triumphing over the professional. It was one of his favourite themes. He relished the spontaneity of amateur artists, the innocence with which they painted what they wanted to paint rather than the commercial or the acceptable. 'They have a naïveté and an approach that the professional, or the amateur that becomes professional loses after a time. I find far more pleasure in an amateur's work, or a local art society, than I do in a proper show. With the amateur you don't know what you're going to see… but in the art trade you've a pretty good idea. I remember once I wanted to do a bridge, a transporter thing across the river—was it Runcorn or Widnes?—and I went with friends and made this drawing and then tried to do it. I found it very difficult. Then, by chance I went to an art exhibition by children in Hyde and a girl of about eight or nine had done something there on the same sort of subject. I said: "Great Scott, after this it is no use me attempting to do it." Wonderful, it was a wonderful piece of work.' In Newcastle in 1968 he dragged a television crew to the town's public*

lavatories to see the paintings of Sam, the attendant there. 'I don't care if he's the lavatory man or the King of Siam,' he remarked, 'I like his pictures, they've got something.'

…he was enough of a name locally to be included in a contemporary novel about an itinerant artist by Howard Spring. 'There are only two painters in Manchester with any guts at all—L.S. Lowry and myself.' Spring, who came to enjoy a 'comradeship' with the artist, had perceived the very essence of Lowry's spirit: courage. Such a belief he had made his character express because it was his own, and he knew it to be quite out of tune with popular opinion of the time. As he later explained, he had heard specific criticisms of Lowry's work that 'assume Lowry is a well-meaning amateur who has failed to do what he set out to do. Nothing could be further from the truth.' Spring who was the first but by no means the last to equate the art of Lowry with Dickens, was, immediately after the First World War, a reporter on the Manchester Guardian*, and thus came to see the poorer streets of Manchester and Salford much as the artist had done in his rent-collecting days. It was this exposure to the reality of his surroundings that helped Spring to the conclusion that Lowry was 'one of the most romantic of contemporary painters. For what is romance but the normal experienced with awe?'*

Lowry. There's a thought. He was highly trained, but I've heard his stuff sneered at as 'naive'. Just suitable for posters and Christmas cards and children's wallpaper.

Highly trained! He was taught by Pierre Valette, for chrissakes. The best painter of industrial fog I've ever seen. Valette could do golden fog. Wonderful. Or catch the blues in a fog that send an early morning chill through you.

You youngsters would never be able to judge his paintings, because we don't have that sort of fog here any more, and even if you saw something similar in Russia or China or wherever, the light and the landscape and climatic conditions would be different. These are Pennine paintings. From before the clean air acts. Before the collapse of the old industrial infrastructure. Either you knew it or you didn't. But if you want to glimpse that dreamworld of sulphur and coke and steam, go and look at *York Street leading to Charles Street* or *India House* or any of the others in Manchester Art Gallery.

If you haven't seen his paintings, this might help:

Mr Monsieur wore dark hats, sombre suits,
was quiet, sad, kindly and shy;
earned his living at the School of Art
teaching Life Class to draw with finger and thumb;
twenty years, craved Provence, clear light,
red poppies in cornfields, shimmering seas;
grieved to watch his Brazilian wife waste
and die in foreign parts under cold hills.

Stuck it out to catch on canvas, drop
by drop, the last honey from our streets:
trams, hansom cabs, long skirts, barrowboys,
golden cobblestones in Albert Square,
Mersey flats moored under Bailey Bridge,
smoke dissolving railway arches at blue dusk,
the mystery of fog on still canals.

Passed on a pupil greater than himself,
a cold-eyed giant whose city has no shadows,
where fogs are shrouds and every man an island.

John Ward, ***Valette in Manchester***

I was emailing back and forth with John while he was doing the layouts for this squib—I knock 'em out, John lays 'em out, Dave cooks the soft bits in pastry and Mike brews the embalming fluid. We're a happy little team here at Savoy Undertakings & Resurrection Men. Usually poor and occasionally honest. And we read a bit. Fills the time, you know, while we're waiting for the carcasses to drain. Crypto-Dickensians, you could say, with a hint of Bram Stoker—and I found this embedded in his text:

> *Oh and all that "self-taught" bollocks when applied to art never fails to boil my blood. Since when did attendance at an art school confer any kind of authority or aesthetic sense? Or creativity? Or imagination? Whenever I hear that epithet applied to artists I*

immediately ask when was the last time anyone referred to John Lennon or Jimi Hendrix or Frank Zappa as "self-taught musicians"? The same with writers… If it's a valid criticism in one medium, why is it not valid in another?

See, you've got me going now, I'm sharpening the ancestral leister in preparation for the Great Journo Hunt…

Which made me think, I've never heard anyone call Eddie Izzard and Billy Connolly 'self-taught' comedians, although if what they do doesn't stand astride the line between philosophy and art, I don't know what does. Very clever, what they do. You should pay attention. You might learn something.

A *leister*, by the way—yeah, it was a new word for me too—is a multi-pronged spear for catching fish by stabbing, and if you want to catch many, you corner 'em first with nets. Sounds useful, a leister. Must get one. I like a bit of salmon, with my oysters.

Here's a big beast:

It is clear, then, that Logic deals with a subject of a purely a priori *character, separable in definition from experience, namely, the laws of thought,… the laws, that is, which reason follows when it is left to itself and not hindered, as in the case of solitary thought by a rational being who is in no way misled. Dialectic, on the other hand, considers the interaction between two rational beings who, being rational, ought to think in common, but who, as soon as they cease to agree like two clocks keeping exactly the same time, create an argument, or intellectual contest. Regarded as purely rational beings, these individuals would, I say, necessarily be in agreement, and their variation springs from the difference essential to individuality; in other words, it is drawn from experience.*

Logic, therefore, as the science of thought, or the science of the process of pure reason, should be capable of being constructed a priori. *Dialectic, for the most part, can be constructed only* a posteriori*; that is to say, we may learn its rules by experimental knowledge of the disturbance which pure thought suffers through the difference of the individual natures of two rational beings engaged in argument, and also by understanding the tactics they use to impose on each*

other their own individual thought, and to show that it is pure and objective. For human nature is such that if A and B are engaged in thinking in common, and are communicating their opinions to each other on any subject, so long as it is not a mere fact of history, and A perceives that B's thoughts on the same subject are not the same as his own, he does not begin by reviewing his own thoughts, to find any mistakes he may have made, but he assumes that the mistake must be B's. In other words, man is naturally obstinate; and this quality in him is attended with certain results, treated of in the branch of knowledge I should like to call Dialectic, but which, in order to avoid misunderstandings, I shall call Controversial or Eristical Dialectic. Accordingly, it is the branch of knowledge which studies our natural obstinacy. Eristic is only the harsher name for the same thing.

Schopenhauer, ***The Art of Controversy***

You should read *The Art of Controversy*, Humph. And then re-read this. See how many tricks I've used.

Sometimes it's just a question of emphasis. This little exchange, overheard while I was strolling through an orgy, might help:

She: Let's get stoned and fuck our brains out!
He: OK. How much of this do you want? Are we drugging or fucking?

Here's an echo from my childhood:

He knows not grief who has not seen the tears of warlike men.

I read that in the Fifties. I found it a plump green anthology called *A Child's Garland of Verses*. It's stuck in my head ever since, perhaps because I had seen the grief of warlike men. And women. It's Mrs Heman's, I think. I suspect it's from *The Siege of Valencia*, but I haven't checked. I knew it as a shortish piece called *Alphonso's Revenge*, in which a false king offer's the life of Alphonso's father as the price of Alphonso's submission, then delivers the corpse of the father with a laugh, 'Haha, see I've given him his freedom!' Or words to that effect. Some stylish and energetic business with a

falchion follows, during which the false king has a brief moment to regret getting out of bed that morning.

Congreve does a different version of the same story in *The Mourning Bride*. Not one of Congreve's snappiest, but the dedication has this rather nice pirouette of sugared irony:

> *'Tis from the Example of Princes that Vertue becomes a Fashion in the People, for even they who are averse to Instruction, will yet be fond of Imitation.*
>
> *But there are Multitudes, who never can have Means nor Opportunities of so near an Access, as to partake of the Benefit of such Examples. And to these, Tragedy, which distinguishes it self from the Vulgar Poetry by the Dignity of its Characters, may be of Use and Information. For they who are at that distance from Original Greatness, as to be depriv'd of the Happiness of Contemplating the Perfections and real Excellencies of Your Royal Highness's Person in Your Court, may yet behold some small Sketches and Imaginings of the Vertues of Your Mind, abstracted, and represented in the Theatre.*

Keep blinking, Humph. Ignore the roaring of the wind in the trees and concentrate on feeling where your feet are. Relax your legs. Feel the balance muscles moving in your feet. It isn't only the fluid in your ears that helps you balance. That's just a spirit-level. It's the elasticity in your legs that keeps you upright. Feel the whole thing. Feel the ground you stand on. Feel what you really are. Fictions don't stay upright in a real wind. They just blow away. I know it's hard, but we'll have you seeing in the dark before morning.

Hey, here's a self-taught Robbie:

Oh, wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.

Robbie Burns, ***To A Louse***

Critics in kilts! Now there's a whole new sport! Should we

stalk the buggers, do you think, or tie a Judas goat to a bottle of whisky while we hide behind a haggis with our dogs? No, John's right. They're slippery characters and we're hunting them in the *mittelmarsh*. This is a case for refurbishing the ancestral *leister*. I wonder where mine is? I must go among my ghosts again. Could take some time. I need my father's maternal ancestors from Skye. If they don't have one, I bet they know someone who does. Just as well some of them speak English. That's how they got out of Skye, you know. One was a bi-lingual schoolteacher from Minginish who got a job with the redcoats (the Ordnance Survey was part of the army originally) when they were mapping Scotland while netting Jacobites.

That's treachery, Humph. Go LARGE. Life's a BIG game. Your idea of *enormous*—Amis, Greene, Auden—that's just small change, bus fare. Throw it to the beggars, Humph. Get some sovs in your fist. Look in Colin's wallet. He's got loads.

(Not too bright, Bonnie Prince Charlie. Over the sea to Skye? Didn't anyone tell the papistical fool the place was swarming with mutinous Wee Frees? Want to know what *eristical* means? Try arguing with Presbyterians!)

I don't speak Scots Gaelic, but I can read a bit. I got interested because that ancestor of mine was hired to interpret for the redcoats and note down all the Gaelic place names. I'd take some of them with a pinch of salt, knowing my ancestors. You know that big black brute at the back of Balmoral that Prince Charles is so fond of? Lochnagar, they call it. It has two summits. One's called *cac carn mor*—'the big pile of shit'—and the lower one's *cac carn beag*—'the little pile of shit'. The queen can see them from the back-bedroom window on a clear day. I like to think God put them there to give her a sense of proportion. So she can see 'em in the mirror while she's playing with the crown.

Went all over the place, that bit of the family. The next generation helped in the surveys of Palestine and Ireland. Got married in Ireland. The wife turned out so well that when she died he went back to the same village to get another one. Here's a titbit for my Irish cousins, so they don't feel left out. I found this on a scrap of paper I'd used as a bookmark in Ronald Holmes' *The Legend of Sawney Bean*:

The Synod of Armargh, 1170

"it was unanimously resolved that… divine vengeance had brought upon them [the Irish] *this severe judgement for the sins of the people* [who] *had long been wont to purchase natives of England… and reduce them to slavery; and that now they also, by reciprocal justice, were reduced to servitude by that very nation. It was therefore decreed… that all Englishmen throughout the island who were in a state of bondage should be restored to freedom."*

Giraldus Cambrensis, ***The Conquest of Ireland***

Oh, didn't you know that Waterford and Dublin were originally slave-ports? History, you know. Just pops up everywhere. Might be worth studying on a wet afternoon.

Or, it's just occurred to me, I could look for a leister among my mother's family. They came from Norfolk but the name seems to originate in Angus, so they probably drifted south with the herring trade. (The Angus glens used to be notorious for cannibals. Must be why the food at the Glen Clova Hotel is so tasty.)

Or Lucy's side of the family might have one. They have McTaggarts from Paisley (more weavers, Adam!) in among the black Price blood (a few of them were hanged, I hear) and the fighting Boyds (three generations in the 14th Kings Hussars. They had to be withdrawn from Dublin after they buried a priest in horseshit for raising a mob to cut the hair off a girl who had walked out with a trooper) and the Parkers (feisty little chap, by all accounts, grandpa Parker. Played the banjo. Took to end-of-the-pier entertaining when he retired. Would fight anyone who wanted to leave before the end of the show) and the Ardreys (invented the Ardrey chuck. Made a fortune in Russia before the revolution) and the gentle poetical Evans's.

Lucy's grandad was groundsman at Manchester Grammar School. Had a tied house. When he retired he had to go into council housing. They wouldn't let him take his dog. It broke his heart. We're still angry about that.

That's not the wind, Humph. That's our lads' ancestors, stretching and yawning.

An oral tradition is a useful thing. Complimentary to books.

Only the spawn of semi-whores and broken old men—could it be the young men were away at war when you came snuffling around to offer our women nylons?—but if you visit our gutter we might show you something. Fuck Dickens, we'll give you Pierce Egan. Teach you how to write with bareknuckles.

We're private people, for the most part. We like to look before we speak. But if we've got time, we'll likely talk to anyone who'll stand and listen…

Think on. We built this country. You're just the plastic bridegroom on this cake. This is our history, and our art. We won't let you steal it. And if you come to throw shit at us, we may just rub your nose in it, if the spirit moves us, and we've nothing 'better' to do.

Remember the sledge, on which tradesmen who gave short weight used to be dragged through the streets to be pelted? And the pillory, for petty thieves and pickpockets? And the stocks? The heads on spikes, and the carcasses in chains? Your lot taught us the importance of making an example. We may not always say much, and our nature may be more indiscriminate, but we watch and learn.

Part of what I felt when I read the attacks on Colin was that these 'critics' have forgotten how to speak their own language. I'm just trying to rescue them from ignorance. (I never realised that teaching could be so much fun.)

Where do John's family come from? Dumfries, eh? Don't know it. But it sounds like the sort of place that critics should avoid.

Over the gate of Skipton castle the motto says, *Henceforth*. Or, 'if you come to fuck with us, be ready to go the distance.'

I like that. I understand it.

And they're tough bastards in Skipton. Took us years to choke 'em down in the civil war. Mind you, they'd been helping keep the Scots out for the previous few centuries. That kept 'em sharp.

I was discussing the nature of Englishness and our liberal tradition once with an old war-horse, and asked him how he saw it. He said, "We stand with the left hand out to receive a fair wage, and

the right fist cocked in case some bugger tries to short change us. And the children and the old folk and the wounded stand behind us, as we have and will in our turn."

I don't have much to add to that. Except a little larceny, just to keep in practice. And a pantomime on Boxing Day.

Care to our coffin adds a nail, no doubt;
And ev'ry grin, so merry, draws one out.

Peter Pindar, ***Expostulatory Odes***

Another Wilsonian! They pop up everywhere! (Useful tip: sometimes it helps to take the *r* out of *grin*, when you're more in the mood for a tonic than a clawhammer. Some Oil of Pedant may be added here, if you like a dash of bitters.)

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.

Shakespeare, ***Julius Caesar***

Best line in the play. A man after my own heart!

Here's some useful advice:

It must be a matter of record that I'm a card manipulator by trade. I know how to shuffle, and I'm going to take the liberty of assuming you'd like to be taught by a professional. Nothing fancy about it; it won't take much time; and, while I don't guarantee to transform you into a magician, I think that the next five minutes we spend together will insure you against ever being embarrassed by shuffling badly…

The G.I.s used to call this the Scarne shuffle. It's foolproof, crookproof, and tidy as a conman's tuxedo… and it'll save you money if you never play anything but Solitaire…

Before each game… do yourself the justice of counting the cards, just to be sure the whole pack's there and nothing is missing by any accident. And don't play when you're disturbed…

When you play cards, give the game all you've got or get out;

not only is that the one way on earth to win at cards; it's the only way you and the rest of the players can get any fun at all out of what ought to be fun. You can't play a good hand well if your mind's on that redhead down the street or the horses or your boss's ulcer or your wife's operation. When you don't remember the last upcard your opponent picked and you throw him a like-ranked card that gives him Gin, it's time to push back your chair and say "Boys, I just remembered I have a previous engagement."

John Scarne, ***Scarne's Encyclopedia of Games***

Arguing in abstract. That's what card-play is.

Not going are you?

One more for the road?

Here's one last drop of 'Old Sporting' that I just dragged out from the back of the cellar:

Upon the whole, I rejoiced that Lorna was not present now. It must have been irksome to her feelings, to have all her kindred, and old associates (much as she kept aloof from them) put to death without ceremony, or else putting all of us to death. For all of us were resolved this time to have no more shilly-shallying; but to go through with a nasty business in the style of honest Englishmen, when the question comes to "Your life, or mine."

There was hardly a man among us who had not suffered bitterly, from the miscreants now before us. One had lost a wife perhaps, another had lost a daughter—according to their ages, another had lost his favourite cow; in a word, there was scarcely anyone who had not to complain of a hayrick; and what surprised me then, not now, was the men least injured made greatest push concerning it. But be the wrong too great to speak of, or too small to swear about, from poor Kit Badcock to rich Master Huckaback, there was no-one but went, heart and soul, for the stamping out of these firebrands.

The moon was lifting well above the shoulder of the uplands, when we, the chosen band, set forth, having the short cut along the valleys to the foot of Bagworthy water; and therefore, having allowed the rest an hour to fetch round the moors and hills, we

were not to begin our climb until we heard a musket fired from the heights, on the left hand side, where John Fry himself was stationed, upon his own and his wife's request, to keep him out of combat. And that was the place where I had been used to sit, and to watch for Lorna. And John Fry was to fire his gun, with a ball of wool inside it, so soon as he heard the hurly-burly at the Doone-gate beginning; which we, by reason of waterfall, could not hear, down in the meadows there.

We waited a very long time, with the moon marching up heaven steadfastly, and the white fog trembling in chords and quavers, like a silver harp of the meadows. And then the moon drew up the fogs, and scarfed herself in white with them; and being so proud, gleamed upon the water, like a bride at her looking-glass; and yet there was no sound of either John or his blunderbuss.

I began to think that the worthy John, being out of all danger, and having brought a counterpane (according to his wife's instructions, because one of the children had a cold), must veritably have gone to sleep; leaving other people to kill, or be killed, as might be the will of God; so that he were comfortable. But herein I did wrong to John, and am ready to acknowledge it: for suddenly the most awful noise that anything short of thunder could make, came down among the rocks, and went and hung upon the corners.

"The signal, my lads!" I cried, leaping up and rubbing my eyes; for even now, while condemning John unjustly, I was giving him the right to be hard upon me. "Now hold on by the rope, and lay your quarterstaffs across, my lads; and keep your guns pointing to heaven, lest haply we shoot one another."

"Us shan't never shutt one anoother, wi' our goons at that mark, I reckon," said an oldish chap, but tough as leather, and esteemed a wit for his dryness.

"You come up next to me, old Ike; you be enough to dry up the waters; now, remember, all lean well forward. If any man throws his weight back, down he goes; and perhaps may never get up again; and most likely he will shoot himself."

I was still more afraid of their shooting me; for my chief alarm in this steep ascent was neither of the water, nor of the rocks, but of the loaded guns we bore. If any man slipped, off might go his

gun; and however good his meaning, I being first was most likely to take far more than I fain would apprehend.

For this cause, I debated with Uncle Ben, and with Cousin Tom, as to the expediency of our climbing with guns unloaded. But they, not being in the way themselves, assured me that there was nothing to fear, except through uncommon clumsiness; and that as for charging our guns at the top, even veteran troops could scarce be trusted to perform it in a hurry, and the darkness, and the fighting before them.

However, thank God, though a gun went off, no one was any the worse for it, neither did the Doones notice it, in the thick of the firing before them. For the order to those of the sham attack, conducted by Tom Faggus, was to make the greatest possible noise, without exposure of themselves; until we, in the rear, had fallen to; which John Fry was again to give a signal of.

Therefore we, of the chosen band, stole up the meadow quietly, keeping in blots of shade, and the hollow of the watercourse. And the earliest notice the Counsellor had, or anyone else, of our presence was the blazing of the logwood house, where lived that villain Carver. It was my especial privilege to set his house on fire; upon which I had insisted, exclusively, and conclusively. No other hand but mine should lay a brand, or strike steel on flint for it; I had made all the preparations carefully for a good blaze. And I must confess that I rubbed my hands, with a strong delight and comfort, when I saw the house of that man, who had fired so many houses, having its turn of smoke, and blaze, and of crackling fury.

R.D. Blackmore, ***Lorna Doone***

Good stuff, eh? I put that in for Rick. He likes ghyll-climbing. Gave our lads a good day out in the Lakes once. More than once, come to think of it.

I started with Blackmore when I was learning to write in the first person.

Oh no! I'm a self-taught writer! I can't know anything about anything!

Shall I quietly fold my cards and slip away into the night?

Nah. Fuck it. Let's gamble!
I feel lucky.

WHERE'S THE HANGMAN?
WHERE'S THE CROCODILE?
JUDY?