

NOTES FROM: *Religion and the Rebel*, by Colin Wilson

SUMMARY: This is the follow-up to one of my favorite books of all time, *The Outsider*. Here we're going over many of the same themes – existential anxiety and the urge to more intense life and *being* – with a special focus on, well, religion and rebels. Outsiders and rebels want *more* life, not less, and we feel horribly constricted by a society of self-assured and ignorant Insiders who have never wondered at the miracle of their own existence or felt horrified by their own inevitable death.

This book is for people who actually *enjoy* being alive, and who don't want to shrink from it any longer. Colin Wilson also explains how the religious attitude is the one appropriate to those who love life – in fact, it's probably the only “reasonable” response when faced with all this beauty and grandeur and mystery. This doesn't mean accepting some God “out there” who's going to come and save everyone, but rather an overwhelming acceptance of life as it is, regardless and in spite of the harsh necessities and bitter tragedies.

“If a civilization is spiritually sick, the individual suffers from the same sickness. If he is healthy enough to put up a fight, he becomes an Outsider.”

“The more one has to fight against, the more alive one can be. That was why, for me, the problem of living resolved itself into the question of choosing obstacles to stimulate my will. Instantly, I came to realize that our civilization is flowing in the opposite direction; all our culture and science is directed towards enabling us to exercise as little will as possible.”

“Too much experience flows over us like water through a channel: it means nothing to us; we are unchanged by it, unconscious of it.”

“In that moment, I was suddenly supremely aware that what I wanted was not less life, but more.”

“It was not until I was eighteen, and read the Bhagavad-Gita, that this suspicion finally loosened its hold on me, and I recognized that the visionary disciplines himself to see the world always as if he had only just seen it for the first time.”

“I always felt exhausted and ill at ease as I cycled around London with my sleeping bag rolled up on the back; it was a strange sensation, having nowhere to go, nowhere to retire to at nights, nowhere to spend the evening reading.”

“Although I have always used writing as a medium to clarify my thoughts, I have never thought of myself as primarily a writer. Writing is an instrument of my main purpose, and that purpose is my own business and no one else's. I am convinced, like my 'Outsider,' that all men who have ever lived have been failures. As a child, I thought of every adult I met: I shan't waste my life like that. This problem is the impetus that drives my living, and my writing is merely one discipline for solving it.

The answer seems to lie in achieving a certain state of mind called 'vision'; and above all other things I prefer to study the evidence that men have left of their moments of vision: Nietzsche's glimpse on the hilltop, Van Gogh's Green Cornfield, Pascal's Memorial, Boehme's 'pewter dish,' the moment of great insight in which the purpose of all life is seen. Ultimately, this is the only thing worth achieving. Yeats called life 'a vast preparation for something that never happens,' and yet one minute of such vision could turn all preparation into achievement."

"In any case, my business is clear: to present my vision as capably as I can, and then to carry my sense of urgency back into my own personal life."

"The simplest way to define an 'Outsider' would be to say that he is a man for whom the world as most men see it is a lie and a deception."

Rilke: "Is it possible...that nothing real or important has yet been seen or known or said?"

We are imprisoned inside paper walls, which we could knock down if we had the courage.

Rupert Brook: "It's the sort of day that brought back to me what I've had so rarely for the last two years - that tearing hunger to do and do and do things. I want to walk 1,000 miles, and write 1,000 plays, and sing 1,000 poems, and drink 1,000 pots of beer, and kiss 1,000 girls...The spring makes me almost ill with excitement. I go round corners on the roads shivering and nearly crying with suspense."

"It consists in just looking at people and things as themselves - neither as useful nor moral nor ugly nor anything else; but just as being...I can watch a dirty middle-aged tradesman in a railway-carriage for hours...I know their states of mind are bad. But I'm so much occupied with their being there at all, that I don't have time to think of that. I tell you that a Birmingham gouty Tariff Reform fifth-rate businessman is splendid and important and desirable."

"The Outsider is in revolt against deadness and abstraction, which contradicts the life he feels within himself."

"Toynbee's attitude, like Spengler's, was existentialist. He protested against those historians who write as if they are in some way standing outside history. This is precisely the same as the existentialist's dislike of philosophers who write as if they were standing outside life."

Gurdjieff's image for human beings: "they are safe while they are asleep, but when they wake up, the danger begins."

Kierkegaard: "I will not be a mere element in your system; I am."

"It is a deliberate discipline of the imagination to develop a sense of personal participation in history."

“On each of the six occasions just recorded, the writer had been rapt into a momentary communion with the actors in a particular historic event through the effect upon his imagination of a sudden arresting view of the scene in which this long-past action had taken place. But there was another occasion on which he had been vouchsafed a larger and a stranger experience. In London in the southern section of the Buckingham Palace Road, walking southward along the pavement skirting the west wall of Victoria Station, the writer, once, one afternoon not long after the end of the First World War - he has failed to record the exact date - had found himself in communion, not just with this or that episode in History, but with all that had been, and was, and was to come. In that instant, he was directly aware of the passage of History gently flowing through him in a mighty current, and of his own life welling like a wave in the flow of this vast tide. The experience lasted long enough for him to take visual note of the Edwardian red brick surface and white stone facings of the station wall gliding past him on his left, and to wonder - half amazed and half amused - why this incongruously prosaic scene should have been the physical setting of a mental illumination.”

“Western Civilization is just one of about thirty civilizations that have smashed and disintegrated; Nature has made thirty or so attempts, and Nature usually makes a thousand or so attempts before succeeding. But that is to assume that a civilization and an individual species are subject to the same rules. A civilization is a far more complicated thing than a plant or an insect; thirty experiments may not be such a ridiculously low figure. At all events, we cannot condemn our civilization out of hand because it is only Nature's thirtieth attempt, and Nature usually takes several thousand tries to make a species worth perpetuating. The rules may be different.”

“The religion of the majority has to be simplified, and coated with sugar.”

“For Boehme, as for that great German thinker who has most in common with him, Nietzsche, the visible world is a deliberate deceit, hiding an internal reality which is so glorious that all men would be drunk with ecstasy if they could see into it.”

“Life is a fundamental issue, which cannot be further broken down or analyzed, and life is based on will power. But will cannot operate without purpose, and the concept of 'purpose' belongs essentially to the material world. Without the material world to reflect it, will is nothing at all, unmanifest. So will requires a purpose to manifest itself. And life is the outcome of purpose (it's son). So there is a sort of vicious circle: increased purpose requires increased consciousness (one cannot gain more purpose by becoming less conscious), but increased consciousness requires increased will power. And increased will power requires increased purpose, for without a purpose, the will is useless.”

Nijinsky: “God is fire in the head.”

“The man intent on 'becoming a visionary' now has a definite aim: to learn enough about the structure of his own brain to be capable of flooding it with energy at will.”

“Having a ‘vision’ is like being connected with a powerhouse; floods of energy and vitality sluice into the brain, and the brain lights up, like a mansion in which every light in every room has been turned on. This is the ecstasy of self-knowledge.”

“The Outsider develops, by immense spiritual effort, into the mystic. He does this by turning his life into a state of warfare, and living with the mental alertness that is necessary to warfare.”

“Our psychological language knows nothing of the extent of man, and the number of layers of his being that stretch from the material surface, whose rule is expediency, to the ultimate depth of purposive godhead.”

“Man accepts happiness and health unquestioningly; it is only in misery that he begins to question.”

“A violence of pure affirmation.”

“Outsider and Insider differ in degree, not in kind. But it is also true that the difference between the caveman and Professor Whitehead is a difference of degree; that doesn't make it any less real and important.”

“The obsessed man is great; the satisfied man is not.”

Reason and logic can give a person power over the outside world, but it can never give them power over themselves.

Nietzsche: “I love only what a man has written with his blood.”

Wittgenstein: “The meaning of life must lie outside life.”

William Law was the tutor of Edward Gibbons' father!

“Law's argument is, of course, unfair, but it takes several minutes' thought to see where it is unfair, and most of his readers did not bestow that much time on it.”

“Man is his own enemy. All men are murdered by an enemy they carry around inside them, and all men's lives are robbed of meaning by self-division.”

Law's rule for judging whether men are religious: “Do they live as if they belonged to different worlds?”

“No life is any longer a burden.”

“This is what the Outsider is seeking. His life is a burden; moments of vision tell him that life need not be a burden, but an ecstasy of will power and love.”

“He was religious in the most essential meaning of the word; not out of any emotional need or human weakness, but out of sheer strength: the craving of a powerful mind and a vital will for still greater health, and deeper consciousness and vitality.”

The religious mystic Newman once offered that since we infer the reality of the external world from the fragments of reality that our senses give us, we can infer the reality of God by the glimpses of love that we see and feel.

There is the universe all around you, and then there is the universe behind your eyes.

“What a man wants is an assumption upon which he can act: *a belief that will give him purpose*. And the final criterion of the value of a belief is: *How long* can a man go on acting by it? Alexander had a belief that gave him a tremendous sense of purpose; his belief that it was his destiny to rule the world. But when he had conquered the world, he asked despairingly: What now? That is the test of any belief. If a sense of purpose can come to an end, then it is not one of real purpose, of ultimate purpose. But religion is supposed to supply man with a sense of ultimate purpose, a purpose which would not fail him even if he lived to be a million years old.”

“The individual who understands the problems must attempt to bear them on his own shoulders. Even if he is completely alone, he must make the effort. Newman’s example proves how great can be the influence of one man’s attempt to shoulder the problems; his strength became the strength of a whole generation. If the twentieth century could produce even a few men of Newman’s stature, the whole course of history might be changed.”

“This idea of Kierkegaard’s – that a man’s despair may be unknown to him – is of inestimable importance in the study of the Outsider. For the retort of the Insider who dislikes being told that he ought to be an Outsider is: Let me alone; I’m happy enough. His challenge tends to be: If I’m happy as an Insider, can you give me a single good reason why I should be an Outsider? For Kierkegaard, this is tantamount to saying: If I am suffering from a deadly disease without knowing it, can you give me any good reason for being healthy?”

“Let me finish by dogmatizing: In the twentieth century, the only serious form of literary art is the Bildungsroman.”

“No man could have developed such powers without a long period of agonizing immaturity.”

“It is this longing for the heroic that makes the Outsider; and his greatest enemy is ‘nausea’: discouragement, boredom, and the pettiness of so much modern life.”

“One type of man alone in our civilization has recognized that free thought leads back to religion – if it is free enough and ranges far enough: The Outsider.”

Shaw said that while Shakespeare understood everything about human weakness, he knew nothing of human strength.

“The Outsider cannot begin living until he has solved the question of how to live.”

“That is why the great bulk of modern literature must be detestable to the Outsider: for, like Shakespeare, it cares only about human weakness; it looks at human beings through a microscope, not a telescope.”

“The truth is that the higher form of life will always be chased by the lower. The woman with elements of greatness will always be chased by men; the man with elements of greatness will always be chased by women.”

“I tell you that as long as I can conceive something better than myself I cannot be easy unless I am striving to bring it into existence or clearing the way for it. That is the law of my life. That is the working within me of Life’s incessant aspiration to higher organization, wider, deeper, more intense self-consciousness, and clearer self-understanding. It was the supremacy of this purpose that reduced love for me to the mere pleasure of a moment.”

Outsiders are far more concerned with human greatness than human weakness.

“In this Palace of Lies a truth or two will not hurt you. Your friends are all the dullest dogs I know. They are not beautiful: they are only decorated. They are not clean: they are only shaved and starched. They are not dignified: they are only fashionably dressed. They are not educated: they are only college passmen. They are not religious: they are only pew renters. They are not moral: they are only conventional. They are not virtuous: they are only cowardly. They are not even vicious: they are only ‘frail.’ They are not artistic: they are only lascivious. They are not prosperous: they are only rich. They are not loyal, they are only servile; not dutiful, only sheepish; not public spirited, only patriotic; not courageous, only quarrelsome; not determined, only obstinate; not masterful, only domineering; not self-controlled, only obtuse; not self-respecting, only vain; not kind, only sentimental; not social, only gregarious; not considerate, only polite; not intelligent, only opinionated; not progressive, only factious; not imaginative, only superstitious; not just, only vindictive; not generous, only propitiatory; not disciplined, only cowed; and not truthful at all: liars every one of them, to the very backbone of their souls.”

In the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna reaches the same stage of thinking as Hamlet, who dwells on the futility of fighting.

“If the corruption of our society is to be fought, the Outsider must fight it from inside, not outside.”

“Lavinia: ‘My faith has been oozing away minute by minute whilst I’ve been sitting here, with death coming nearer and nearer, with reality becoming realer and realer, with stories and dreams fading away into nothing.’

The Captain: ‘Are you then going to die for nothing?’

Lavinia: ‘I don’t know. If it were anything small enough to know, it would be too small to die for. I think I’m going to die for God. Nothing else is real enough to die for.’

The Captain: ‘What is God?’

Lavinia: ‘When we know that, Captain, we shall be gods ourselves.’”

“All life is a struggle to reach this inner power, and to assimilate the endless complexities of the outer world, which sap the energies and destroy the appetite for life.”

“You are looking for a rich husband. At your age I looked for hardship, danger, horror, and death, that I might feel the life in me more intensely. I did not let the fear of death govern my life; and my reward was, I had my life. You are going to let the fear of poverty govern your life; and your reward will be that you will eat, but you will not live.”

“Salvation lies in extremes.”

“Even the men of genius – or the Outsiders, who are men of genius in embryo – never have enough time to really settle down in the world with a serene sense of purpose, and to set out to create more consciousness for the human race in full knowledge of what they are doing. For the strength of the Outsider and the man of genius lies in his inner life, and the world is a complicated place which demands a great deal of attention. Often, by the time an Outsider has fought his battles, and developed courage and certainty, and has started to feel ‘at home in the world,’ it is time for him to leave it.”

“When Shaw is read in the light of the existentialist thinkers, a new philosophical position arises from his work as a whole, a position of which he himself was probably unconscious. It is this: that although the ultimate reality may be irrational, *yet man's relation to it is not*. Existentialism means the recognition that life is a tiny corner of casual order in a universe of chaos. All men are aware of that chaos; but some insulate themselves from it and refuse to face it. These are the Insiders, and they make up the overwhelming majority of the human race. The Outsider is the man who has faced chaos. If he is an abstract philosopher – like Hegel – he will try to demonstrate that chaos is not really chaos, but that underlying it is an order of which we are unaware. If he is an existentialist, he acknowledges that chaos *is* chaos, a denial of life – or rather, of the conditions under which life is possible. If there is nothing but life and chaos, then life is permanently helpless – as Sartre and Camus think it is. But if a rational relation can somehow exist between them, ultimate pessimism is avoided, as it must be avoided if the Outsider is to live at all. It is this contribution which makes Shaw the key figure of existentialist thought.”

Wittgenstein was taken prisoner in 1918 while carrying the only copy of the Tractatus. It could easily have been lost had something happened to him.

Wittgenstein and Krishnamurti both thought that reading books stopped people from thinking for themselves. To an extent, of course, they're both correct.

“People who knew him there speak of his curious power over birds; a Galway resident has told me of seeing Wittgenstein with his head and shoulders covered with birds, which flew off when he approached.”

“Poetry can present certain mystical issues, but it cannot investigate them. It can only show them in the way that a flash of lightning lights up a landscape.”

“The only question in which existentialism is interested with regard to a human being is: Master or slave?”

“Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness... Thus religion is solitariness; and if you are never solitary, you are never religious.”

“The misconception which has haunted philosophic literature throughout the centuries is the notion of ‘independent existence.’ There is no such mode of existence; every entity is only to be understood in terms of the way in which it is interwoven with the rest of the universe.”

“For Shaw, life is all-pervasive in space and time, but can only manifest itself by inserting itself into matter and by imposing its own world of order and pattern on the chaos of matter. The fact that there are ‘laws of nature’ at all is a manifestation of life. If life did not pervade space and time, the universe of matter would be *tohu bohu*, complete chaos. The fact that the earth circles around the sun is a manifestation of life. This is also Whitehead’s concept of organism.”

“What I am objecting to is the absurd trust in the adequacy of our knowledge. The self-confidence of learned people is the comic tragedy of civilization. There is not a sentence which adequately states its own meaning. There is always a background of presupposition which defies analysis by reason of its infinitude.”

“*Science and the Modern World* is the *Unscientific Postscript* of the twentieth century – with the additional advantage of being readable.”

“Time saved cannot be spent later. Without creation, all time is waste.”

“The chief problem of life is not to learn how to think correctly, but simply to live.”

“Boredom is the real evil of the world.”