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REVIEW OF *AMBERGRIS*
By Edward Storer
(An Alias of Aleister Crowley?)

It is perhaps not uncharacteristic of the poet of these verses that he should give them a title which has really but little connection with them. A certain perverseness or wilfulness is manifest in much of his work, and surprise and paradox are effects which seem dear to him. For these poems are of Grecian rather than of Arabian or Persian origin, and the fragrance of *Ambergris* is a much lighter and more spiritual thing than the rich and arrogant perfume of Arabia. Maybe Mr. Crowley so entitled his poems, as one christens a child Rose or Wilhelmina or Théophile, without any descriptive or moral intentions at the back of one's mind. Maybe, he just fell a victim to the charms of a pretty word, as any susceptible poet might, and made her forthwith the doorkeeper of his poetic seraglio.

Perhaps it was not worth writing, since he who can afford to be vain can afford to forego the demands of his vanity, yet there it is, and of itself it would make one wonder if the author of *Ambergris* and some thirty other volumes had any right to be piqued because he is not as well known and as well acknowledged as he would like to be.

A glance through his press notices convinces one that there is at least a chance that he has such a right

He has been roundly condemned, treated to impertinence, and in some cases extravagantly praised, but no one seems to have given him that deadly kind of appreciation which is the lazy critic's heart-felt thanks that there is nothing to criticise. Nobody has called him a classical poet, or "one who is preserving the best traditions of our noble heritage of song," or assured him that he is " of the true succession," or anything of that kind. This shows that there is, at least, a fair chance of his being a good poet, though of course it does not prove it, for it is possible for a man to be a very bad poet and yet not be praised by the Weary Willies of academic criticism. A first glance at *Ambergris* shows Mr. Aleister Crowley as perhaps the most passionate disciple poet ever had. Such imitation of Swinburne's manner, as is revealed in most of his early work, could

only have been born of the strongest love for the champing colourous rhythms of the Victorian. By itself, for the passion which inspired it, it commands respect. But there is too much of such work included here. It prevents access to what is strong and personal in the book. It shows a passion which was one day bound to define itself in letters of original flame. It prophesied, but a sceptical world only believes such when they come true. That something has come true in our poet's case will be admitted, I think, on reading *Alice*:

> The stars are hidden in dark and mist,
> The moon and sun are dead,
> Because my love has caught and kissed
> My body in her bed.
> No light may shine this happy night—
> Unless my Alice be the light.
>
> This night—O never dawn shall crest
> The world of wakening,
> Because my lover has my breast
> On hers for dawn and spring.
> This night shall never be withdrawn—
> Unless my Alice be the dawn.

Mr. Crowley is very successful in this kind of thing. These love-songs of his have a wonderful ardour, an almost Sapphic fury. They flash and shine with images that are like little streaks of flame. Sometimes, though, he is more delicate and more ethereal as in the following verse from *Red Poppy*:

> One kiss like snow to slip
> Cool fragrance from thy lip
> To melt on mine;
> One kiss, a white-sail ship
> To laugh and leap and dip
> Her brows divine;
> One kiss, a starbeam faint
> With love of a sweet saint
> Stolen like a sacrament
> In the night's shrine.

The verse with which the book opens is a beautiful stanza. It has all the hard brilliance and the lustre which are character-

istic of the writer's work. The opening picture breaks on the senses like a shaft of sudden sunshine.

> Ere the grape of joy is golden
> With the summer and the sun,
> Ere the maidens unbeholden
> Gather one by one,
> To the vineyard comes the shower,
> No sweet rain to fresh the flower,
> But the thunder rain that cleaves,
> Rends and ruins tender leaves.

Among many things that occur to one in reading Mr. Crowley's verses is their singular disseverance from the things of the day, their entire lack of what is called "the modern note" in poetry. Of course such a devotion as in his early work he gave to Swinburne, Browning, and Shelley would not allow him to serve other masters. We must think that he deliberately shut his eyes to the writings of the intimate, romantic, impressionist school, or else how could so susceptible an artist have escaped its infection?

Another thing that is apparent in this poet's work, despite the cumulative effect of his poems, is the fitfulness of his inspiration. His gift, splendid as it appears at times, is unique and occasional rather than rich and sustained. A journey through the garden of the poet's verses has all the excitement and the drawbacks of making one's way by means of the illumination of lightning. There is a lot of darkness to a small proportion of extreme brilliance, though, perhaps, as with all rare and superfine things, this is necessarily the case. It is their price

I will now take some single images or metaphors from the poems and place them by themselves. It is in these things and by their quality that the poet is shown. Is this not natural, for what is art after all but one vain adjective for ever seeking its impossible noun? What is all poetry but one imperfect metaphor, an analogy made with one of the comparisons only half guessed at through Eternity's veil?

Observe the tremendous compression of thought in the lines, where the poet speaks of old love buried and seemingly forgot, rising up and breaking out from

> . . . the untrusty coffin of the mind.

Again, what a delightful picture is suggested in the

winged ardour of the stately ships.

How closely those two words *winged* and *ardour* are bound! Welded in the original passion of creation, they hold their idea with a noble security. Criticism cannot sunder them. Beautiful, too, I fancy are the lines:

To some impossible diadem of dawn.

The trampling of his (the sun's) horses heard as wind.

My empire changes not with time.
Men's Kingdoms cadent as a rime
Move me as waves that rise and fall.

Of poetry Mr. Crowley says:

Thou art an Aphrodite; from the foam
Of golden grape and red thou risest up
Immaculate; *Thou hast an ebon comb*
Of *shade and silence*, and a jasper cup. . . .

This, of a lady:

So grave and delicate and tall—
Shall laughter never sweep
Like a moss-guarded waterfall,
Across her ivory sleep?

There are some noble and vigorous images scattered among Mr. Crowley's verses, whose invention alone marks him out as no inconsiderable poet.

For the rest, great metrical force, rhythms so violent as almost sometimes to exhaust themselves, and, in some of the later work, a curious employment in his philosophy of paradox—that Mr. Facing-Both-Ways of literary effects.

I will end on a lighter note, and quote the beautiful and tender song from *The Star and the Garter*. Is there not in it a reminiscence of all the beauty of our lives that has passed like water through the helpless senses? Is there not a certain very fairy and frosty note in this song, such as—to be ridiculously fanciful—an elf might make with a rose-leaf and a fretted mandoline of hoar-frost, something cold, yet warm at heart, like a very lovely yet unreachable lady, the lovelier for the pedestal of snows on which she is set?

Make me a roseleaf with your mouth,
And I will waft it through the air
To some far garden of the South,
The herald of our happening there!

Fragrant, caressing, steals the breeze;
Curls into kisses on your lips:—
I know interminable seas,
Winged ardour of the stately ships.