

**PARTISAN REVIEW**  
**September 1948**

**BLACK MAGIC AGAINST WHITE;  
ALEISTER CROWLEY VERSUS W. B. YEATS**

**by Richard Ellman**

The death a few months ago of Aleister Crowley, Chief Hierophant of the East and West, Master of the Flaming Door, Crowned and Conquering Child, and Beast of the Apocalypse, seems to have passed almost without notice. Yet in the old days men and women lived in terror of his evil eye, and responsible governments excluded him from one country after another lest he bring to bear upon their inhabitants his hostile psychic ray. It became the unpleasant duty of William Butler Yeats to uphold the forces of white magic during the nineties, and now that Crowley is dead the battle may be recorded.

Both Crowley and Yeats were members of a secret magical order, the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn; they evoked symbolic and visionary forms through incantations, they called up spirits from the vasty deep, they sought to penetrate the secrets of life and nature. But when Crowley showed a tendency to use his occult powers for evil rather than for good, the adepts of the order, Yeats among them, decided not to allow him to be initiated into the inner circle; they feared that he would profane the mysteries and unleash powerful magical forces against humanity.

Crowley refused to accept their decision. He went to Paris, and there persuaded the chief of the Golden Dawn, a Celtophile magician name MacGregor Mathers, to deputize him to wrest control of the London temple of the order away from Yeats and his friends. Mathers furnished Crowley with appropriate charms and exorcisms to use against recalcitrant members, and instructed him to wear Celtic dress. Equipped accordingly in Highlander's tartan, with a black Crusader's cross on his breast, with a dirk at his side and a skindoo at his knee, Crowley arrived at the Golden Dawn temple in London. Making the sign of the pentacle inverted and shouting menaces at the adepts, Crowley climbed the stairs. But Yeats and two other white magicians came resolutely forward to meet him, ready to protect the holy place at any cost. When Crowley came within range

the forces of good struck out with their feet and kicked him downstairs.

Crowley's defeat was not final. Though he gave up his attack upon the Golden Dawn, he was soon infecting London with his black masses, and his bulging, staring eyes corrupted many innocents. Among them was a young painter name Althea Gyles, an unconventional young woman whose work had appeared in the *Savoy*. Althea felt herself surrounded by Crowley's insidious aura, and went to her friend Yeats to ask if she could do anything to save herself. The poet was deeply concerned. "Bring me a drop of his blood and I will exorcise it," he said. Althea thought that might be possible, but would nothing else do as well? "Bring me any object from his rooms."

Althea accordingly went to Crowley's rooms for tea, and covertly manages to steal a hair of her host's head and, for good measure, to hide one of his books under her arm. But Crowley suspected foul play. "Before you go," he hissed at her, "you must visit the *sanctum sanctorum*." Althea wanted to refuse, but dared not. Helplessly she allowed the magician to lead her down a long corridor, dimly lit by the light of one taper, until at last she arrived in front of a tabernacle covered with mystic signs and symbols. Crowley, after invoking the chthonian powers, suddenly pulled open the door of the tabernacle, and a skeleton fell into Althea's arms. She screamed, dropped the book, and ran off in terror.

But she still had the hair of Crowley's head, and when she had recovered from her fright, she carried it to Yeats. The poet cast the requisite spells and exorcisms, and Crowley was not long in feeling their effect. That night when the black magician went to bed, he discovered a vampire beside him; all night long she bit and tore at his flesh. His best charms proved of no avail against her ferocious advances, and for nine nights the torture went on.

At last, desperate from loss of blood and sleep, Crowley went to consult another magician, more experienced in such affairs than he, and was instructed as to what to do. On the tenth night, as soon as the vampire put in an appearance, Crowley took her by the throat and squeezed with all his might. And then, just as the other magician had predicted, she suddenly groaned and disappeared. Her power was ended, and she returned no more.

Althea unfortunately did not fare so well. In spite of Yeats's best efforts, she was willy-nilly drawn back to Crowley and finally forced to give way entirely to his baleful fascination. She

even confessed to him the whole story of Yeats's abortive attempt to overcome black magic with white. So, at any rate, Crowley told me in Hastings a few months before his death.