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LIFE WITH CROWLEY

John Symonds: *The Great Beast. The Life of Aleister Crowley. Rider. 21s.*

Charles Richard Cammell: *Aleister Crowley. The Man: The Mage: The Poet. Richards Press. 15s.*

The unpleasant and the ludicrous are mingled so closely and so copiously in the career of Aleister Crowley (who died in 1947) that it would be hard to blame anyone for refusing to take further interest in a figure whose partisans themselves find the greatest difficulty, even within his own terms of reference, in vindicating. For many persons, indeed, the whole question of "magic," white or black, is so much mumbo-jumbo, and to concern themselves with one whose life was devoted to becoming a magician might not unreasonably appear to them sheer waste of time. However, it could equally be argued that a useful purpose might be served by minute and practical examination of magic, as it were "from the inside," to establish its connexions, not only with religion, but with such things as hypnotism, poltergeist phenomena, and matters coming generally under the heading of "physical research." In addition to this, Crowley is not without interest, on the one hand, as what might be called a "post-decadent," representing that curious residue of the nineties that lived on into Edwardian days, side by side with early elements just beginning to take shape, of the "Modern Movement"; and, on the other, as illustrating, in our own day, the technique of existence of men like Cagliostro, who flourished on a similar stock in trade in former epochs.

Mr. John Symonds, in *The Great Beast*, writes in a jaunty journalistic style, but his book covers the ground and conveys a good deal of information. He was Crowley's literary executor and had access to his private papers. Mr. Charles Richard Cammell, in a quieter and more personal study, presents merely his own impressions of Crowley, the result of an association begun in 1936. He writes particularly as an admirer of Crowley's verse.

Edward Alexander Crowley (he named himself "Aleister") was born at Leamington in 1875, the son of a brewer, of Quaker stock, who had become a Plymouth Brother. The name (Crowley or Crawley) is common in Ireland, and Crowley's appearance suggested in later life, as his portraits show, an isolationist senator or New York policeman, so the Irish origins may have been fairly close. Crowley himself does not mention his grandparents in his memoirs: and certainly his family had nothing whatever to do with the noble Breton house of de Quérouille, dragged in by him optimistically as distant relations, a genealogical fantasy apparently given some countenance by Mr. Cammell. His father left him £30,000 or £40,000. and at Trinity, Cambridge, he seems to have begun to take an interest in writing, occultism and mountaineering.

His admirers cling to his chess and his mountain climbing as activities at which Crowley incontrovertibly excelled; though Mr. Symonds points out that even in the latter sphere—his ascent of Kanchenjunga and the rest—a certain amount has to be taken on trust. He plunged almost immediately into the world of occultism (which brought him in contact with, among others, W. B. Yeats), taking a house in Scotland in order to work in appropriate surroundings on the ritual described in the *Book of Abramelin the Mage*, defined by Mr. Symonds as "a kind of teach-yourself system in which some practical guidance is given for those who wish to impose their will on nature." During this period he called himself (after the house in question) Lord Boleskine, just as at other times he took the names of Count Vladimir Svareff, Prince Chioa Khan and various other *noms de guerre*, like Frater Perdurabo, The Master Therion and The Beast 666.

In connexion with this experiment at Boleskine, Mr. Cammell writes:

In the main Abramelin is a work of Theurgy, that is, of Higher Magic. Its precepts are lofty, and its Operation demands Purity and Prayer as prime necessities. . . Purity in any but the vulgarest sense, and very specially in a philosophical or mystical sense, comprises purity of mind and thought as well as of action.

Mr. Cammell goes on to indicate, with obvious truth, that any such purity was infinitely removed from anything that

Crowley did, or said, or thought: a fact more than substantiated by Mr. Symond's work.

So far as can be gathered from the tangle of fact and fiction that Crowley himself supplied, and from material given in Mr. Symond's book regarding other persons and communities concerned, the hierophants of his cult, by the use of hypnotic suggestion—but far more the employment of drugs—induced various subjective states in themselves; which were then presented as "communing with demons" or travelling "on the astral plane." Crowley's own experiences, as here chronicled, seem to confirm this as the only intelligible answer to what would otherwise appear complete rubbish; while *The Book of the Law*, Crowley's oracular Word, "dictated to him" in 1904, seems to have been an instance of the phenomenon of "automatic writing." From the latter work came the two sentences on which his creed was built: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law": to which the answer was: "Lobe is the Law, Love under Will."

A record of discreditable behaviour follows, in Mr. Symonds book, that would make the stoutest admirer quail; but—without going into moral issues—the utter lack of any original thought is an aspect of Crowley and his manifestations that can hardly fail to strike the reader. He represents the dregs of innumerable systems, and a new idea never seems to have crossed his conscious or subconscious mind. He touched rock-bottom of esoteric banality. In saying this, however, the critic is in direct opposition to Mr. Cammell in his view of Crowley as a great poet. It must, of course, be conceded that in such a matter a certain amount must rest on individual taste (G. K. Chesterton wrote "Mr. Crowley is a strong and genuine poet"); and even disagreement might allow to some of Crowley's verse a certain music-hall zest:

I shall find you, my Gitana, my Saliya! as of old
With your hair aflame with roses and your body gay with
gold.
I shall find you, I shall have you, in the summer and the
South
With our passion in your body and our love upon your
mouth—
With our wonder and our worship be the world aflame
anew!
My Gitana, my Saliya! I am coming back to you!

Mr. Cammell, in the first instance, sets out to take the tenable view that he enjoys Crowley's writings, and liked his company.

His attitude towards Religion I detested; his approach to Magic I disliked and disagreed with. I was never even remotely, influenced by his creeds or theories; never even vaguely attracted to his views or methods of life: of his schemes for the regeneration of man I was completely sceptical. His genius I admired, his learning I revered, his conversation was congenial to me.

This is all very well, but as the book progresses its thesis becomes more and more concerned to defend its subject. "Let Diana be portrayed as Diana, and Priapus as Priapus," remarks the author, but, in spite of this resolution, he seems inclined to portray Crowley, not "as Crowley," but as generous, gallant, mistaken perhaps, though on the whole ill-used by an ungrateful world. However, even Mr. Cammell—in whose defence of his friend there is something undeniably engaging—could not stay the complete course.

The rupture came without warning. A lady was concerned and a sum of money was involved. I did my best to arrange matters; to persuade him to act honourably or at least reasonably and courteously. It was useless . . . I saw him only once again—in London after the war. We did not speak.

There were, alas, only too many ladies and sums of money concerned in which Crowley's negotiations were neither honourable, reasonable, nor courteous, but, if this were all, there might even so be material for a book over which laughter were possible. For example Frank Harris, with his usual genius for such matters, borrowed 500 francs from Crowley when the latter was particularly hard up. It would be—indeed has been shown to be—possible to write an amusing book about Frank Harris. With Crowley, on the other hand, death, suicide, misery, stalk through the pages. This was, no doubt, largely owing to the fact that he attracted to him certain persons who had it in their natures to lead wretched lives and come to violent ends, but in spite of the magnetism he undoubtedly exercised, he himself appears to have been without love and without compassion.

He ran through his fortune and seems to have lived for the most part on women, or from the money contributed by his disciples in America and elsewhere. Indeed, further financial items would have been of interest in Mr. Symond's biography, the chief merit of which is in the details it provides. During the First World War Crowley went to America, and made propagan-da for Germany; treason which he attempted to excuse (an excuse accepted by Mr. Cammell) on the grounds that his propa-ganda was so silly that it really discredited the Germans—though so far as can be seen it was written in his normal liter-ary style. The British authorities certainly agreed to consider it too futile to take action, and it is really remarkable that in this, and innumerable other respects, Crowley remained all his life outside prison; for the story that he was gaoled for 60 days in America remains wholly unproved.

Crowley was no doubt a classical case for the psychologist's notebook. That he had gifts of a minor order was probably true. It is even possible that had he been a man of more integ-riety his experiments in occultism might have yielded documen-tary evidence of some conceivable value. But it would be hard for anyone who witnessed his pitiful display before Mr. Justice Swift, during his libel action, to regard him as a man either of wit or strong personality. Such hypnotic attainments as he possessed certainly did not work in court. "What an ass I am!" he wrote in his diary a short time before his life ended, one judgment of his, at least, with which it is possible to agree; as with Mr. Symond's magnificent piece of understatement in *The Great Beast* that Crowley was not "in the narrow, Victorian sense of the word 'a gentleman' . . ."