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Aleister Crowley.

The younger generation has rediscovered Aleister Crowley, the magician who in my youth commanded sensational headlines with what were regarded as sexual outrages and diabolical blasphemies and attempts to steal the towers of Notre Dame!! The importance of Crowley for the young is that they believe his story suggests that it is only in times of poverty that one needs asceticism to get turned on. In our age one can have all the kinky clothes (and Crowley loved dressing up in rich wizard garments) and plenty of money (Crowley spent a fortune publishing his own books) and yet be a "saint" of the "Gnostic" Church and live in a psychedelic dream.

But poor old Crowley doesn't show up well in what he called his autotheography, and which is now published for the first time.¹ He certainly brought some meaning to the childish magic rituals by using them as background for sex experiments; but in this book he makes hardly any reference to such achievement, and even pathetically pretends that everything was suburbanly virtuous in his "monastery" in Cefalu, a farcical community if one leaves out the idea that the lust of the goat is the glory of God. Alas, to get full value out of Crowley's sex magick (as he called it) one has to turn to another book, Jean Overton Fuller's *The Magical Dilemma of Victor Neuburg*.

In lots of other ways too Crowley betrays his legend: the petty fights with other "magicians", the feeble vulgarity of most of his abuse, the fascist taint in his reactionary political opinions, his absurd claims of genius for his indifferent verses ("my work will be automatically cancelled when the globe becomes uninhabitable to man"), his "aristocratic" pretensions and golf playing and shooting of anything that came within range of his sporting gun, his proclamations of titles granted to him on the astral plane by The Hidden Masters, just as missionaries in India used to aver that they must have caught syphilis on the astral plane. No, if one wants to keep one's illusions about Crowley, it's wiser to read John Symonds' biography, *The Great Beast*.

But of course there's plenty of interest for students of religious mania in this enormously self-indulgent outpouring of some nine hundred pages. First there is the superb illustration of the dangers of religious instruction. Beast 666 was brought up with a Plymouth Brethren background; and his first school master seems to have been a religious maniac. The atmosphere was one in which the Demon Kings were smo-king and drinking; and surely William Whitley had several fires at the Almighty's repartee to the merchant's assumption of the title "Universal Provider"? Was it any wonder that the boy should react and pray: "Evil be thou my good"? and that he should dream not only of knowing the Devil but of becoming his chief of staff?

Then, as he grew up, and because he was ashamed that the family money came from a brewery, he bestowed distinctions on himself by claiming magick, in the same way that he himself held that Wilde had been ashamed of his father being a mere knighted doctor and had tried to make himself interesting by becoming an apostle of homosexuality. (Who but Crowley would pretend that Wilde was a perfectly normal square, and fail to see that the argument of Wilde being driven to homosexuality for snobbish reasons applied with force to his own concern with esoteric make-believe?)

The magic charades were a good bit of drag when Crowley was young and had the charisma of a small part actor; but it was pretty ludicrous when he aged and looked like Mr. Pooter dressed for a conjuring act. Yet his power did not fail him? When I knew him, I found him pitifully devoid of any magnetism, although he did his best to win me over, even inventing a drink for me which he called an eagle's tail (I think it had laudanum in it) in his attempt to bind me as a disciple. But, inevitably, even at the end when he had nothing to offer and had spent all his for tune, he could still produce the mumbo-jumbo for the feeble-minded and bamboozle them into giving him what they had. It's the old story of religions and rackets, that there will always be those whose lives are so empty they welcome any diversion and are willing to give "magically"—which means more than you can afford—to priests, adepts, gurus, those who say they have won diabolical VCs.

Frankly, I have little patience with the so-called magickal (but unsexed) passages in this hodge-podge book. If I may be permitted a digression, may I tell a story of another black magician, a rival of Crowley's, who attracted the attention of Father Robert Hugh Benson. Father Benson planned a test. He left

his bedroom slippers at the foot of the stairs, and told the magician to make them walk up to the bedroom by themselves. Then priest and magician sat in the presbytery parlour drinking and willing. The house keeper found the slippers and, having a tidy mind, carried them back to the bedroom. Both priest and magician declared the test was a success—for the Power always uses the most economical channel for manifestation!

What can one think of the “problems” which bedevil the life of a magician? Can one take them seriously? “. . . he knew not whether to direct a hostile current of will against DDCF and VNR, supposing them to be guilty of cherishing within their bodies the spirits of two disincarnated vampires, or perhaps Arab-Melin demons under the assumed forms of SVA and MSR, or to warn DDCF; supposing him to be innocent, as he perhaps was, of so black and evil an offence.” As for Crowley’s claims to be the reincarnation of Cagliostro and Pope Alexander VI—I think such vapours belong to the fortune tellers at the end of piers in those seedy resorts which would have given Crowley the formula of the original curse on creation without magic rigmarole.

No wonder the Beast was driven to periodic frenzies of mountain climbing. He had to do something real for a change every now and then or else collapse into complete mind blowing. But of course there are lucid moments. I appreciate Crowley’s statement that the real secret of Yoga is non-thinking. I think that at times he can put things well: “To declare oneself a follower of Jesus is not only to insult history and reason, but to apologise for the murderers of Arius, Molinos and Cranmer . . .” I find that at times he can put forward a stimulating idea, such as the notion that Jack the Ripper was performing an operation to obtain the Supreme Black Magic Power, the seven women killed so that their bodies would form a “Calvary cross of seven points” with heads to the west. I can admit that, on rare occasions, the man can be witty: a lady “described on the charge sheet as a poetess”. I can grant that some of his short stories which I have not read but which he is always describing in this book, may have had impact: the idea that since thoughts are accompaniments of modifications of cerebral tissue, curious ideas are concomitants of putrefaction. Yet . . . I will not be bowled over by his description of a mystical vision of ultimate initiation: “nothingness with twinkles in it”.

So I dare to say that Crowley lifts the crown off his head with this book. Personally, I did not need the book to tell me that so much of the legend is bogus, for I knew the man and so

many of the people mentioned in these so-called "confessions". But now, I suppose, as I have said as much in print, all sorts of terrible things will start happening to me if I step out of the pentagram the editor is quickly scribbling at this moment on the office floor. Or perhaps I can learn to make myself invisible? I knew a lady who told me that Crowley was teaching her how to make herself invisible. She said it would be very useful on buses to avoid paying the fare, which was then twopence.

1 *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, edited by John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (Cape, 5 gns.).