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Aleister Crowley, Poet and Mystic

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For the occultist, some study of the writings of Aleister Crowley is essential. Crowley is perhaps one of the foremost exponents today of a theory of Magick which he has set forth in his books, *Equinox, Book 4, The Book of Lies,* and *Magick in Theory and Practice,* among other volumes. His experiments have lain in these fields and have been carried out as a part of a greater experiment to seek the ultimate truth of the universe. A somewhat unfriendly account is contained in Nina Hamnett's autobiography, *Laughing Torso,* whilst P.R. Stephenson sought to reply to Crowley's many critics and detractors in his essay, *The Legend of Aleister Crowley* (published in 1930), in which he takes up arms against James Douglas, Horatio Bottomley and other high-minded opponents of "the Purple Priest", whether it be in his function as enacting of the Mysteries of Eleusis in Westminster, or as a novelist. Perhaps the closest exploration of Crowley's fundamental thought is to be found in the extremely scarce volume, *The Star in the West,* written by no less an author than Major-General J.F.C. Fuller. But the work of "the Master Therion" does not only lie in occult writings. Crowley's foremost claim to note is that he is fundamentally a poet, with many volumes to his credit. Whatever be the verdict on his claim to be "the greatest living poet", much of his verse reaches a very high standard and shows a definite attempt to bring art and life into common relationship. During a law case, learned counsel referred to Crowley's poems as "that filthy stuff". It is a valid reflection of the bourgeois mind in contact with a great artist. One can picture the reflections of the same learned counsel if he had been free to cross-examine Manet or Van Gogh!

The artist has been described by Henry Miller as one who shows creative individuality. The late Keeper of the Tate Gallery, Dr. D.S. MacColl, goes further and insists that he must also exhibit rhythm. As a poet, Crowley may claim to be an artist in the fullest sense. He certainly possesses a sense of rhythm. His work has been a bringing together of a scientific occultism, poetic creativeness, and a strong individuality. Be-

sides his verse, his prose writings include the long notes to *The Sword of Song*, in which Crowley had his famous duel with G.K. Chesterton over the truth of Christianity. He has also written two novels, *The Diary of a Drug Fiend*, which outraged James Douglas, and *Moonchild*, a novel of the occult, as well as several volumes of short stories, including *The Stratagem* and *Golden Twigs*. There can be no doubt of the extent of Crowley's learning and literary ability, whatever may be thought of the deductions which he draws.

Aleister Crowley was born in 1875 and educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. Brought up by parents who were strict Plymouth Brethren, he revolted early against this narrow creed based upon a stern Biblicism and sought a wider view of human experience. Designate by his mother as "the Beast 666" of the Book of Revelation, Crowley has used the title as a nom-de-plume from time to time! At Cambridge, he read widely and his volumes of verse were his earliest literary productions. Most of which were privately printed and copies are now very scarce. A wide traveler, Crowley visited the East and made a deep study of Buddhism and Hinduism. He became famous as a rock-climber in which pursuit he achieved a notable proficiency. During the last war, he was in America. At the outset, Crowley was strongly on the side of the Allies but, later on, his sympathies were affected by the course of events and he threw away his British passport as a prelude to proclaiming the Irish Republic. As widely known in Paris as in London, Crowley later lived in Italy and in Greece. During recent years, he has been resident in this country.

It is impossible to trace the tendencies and purposes of Crowley's occultism without paying some attention to his poetry and also without realizing that he has more than once acted with his tongue in his cheek. For example, in 1908, Wilfred Meynell, acting as reader for the well-known Catholic publishers Burns & Oates, passed for publication, an anonymous volume of poems in praise of the Virgin Mary, *Amphora*.

The poems are luscious in the extreme, whilst the author makes no specific claim to Catholic faith. They could have been written as well of Isis or any other manifestation of the great mother goddess.

O Happy flower, on whom there fell
The dew of the Ineffable!
O jeweled cup, wherein was poured
The precious liquor of the Lord!

O mother to thy house of death
We fly from life's deceitful breath.
O star of love upon the sea,
We sail to Thee, we sail to Thee!

Or again:

Mother and maiden! On the natal night
Embowered in bliss of roses red and white,
Westward three Magi move to minister
To him with gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Those Pagans gazing on the Heavenly Host
Were blest of Father, Son and Holy Ghost;
And me, though I be an heathen Mage,
Thou wilt accept in this my pious page.

The little volume attracted some attention and was ascribed to a prominent actress. Suddenly, Crowley avowed the authorship openly and, as a well-known pagan, threw the Catholic world into confusion. He has succeeded in illustrating the fundamental connection between the pagan beliefs which surrounded the Great Mother-Goddess and those concerning the Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven, in Catholic theology.

Crowley has always insisted that the rhythm of the artist should illustrate every side of life. For example, as long ago as 1905, he wrote in his volume of poems, *Oracles*, of the death of a drunkard in such a way that he was able to claim for a squalid scene that it had a true place in art. Indeed, however much Crowley may have shocked the prim of 1905, he was making much the same claim as any modern realist, whether his art be of the canvas or of literature.

Terror, and darkness, and horrid despair!
Agony painted upon the once fair
Brow of the man who refused to give up
The love of the wine-filled, the o'er-filling cup.
"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging."
No wine in death is his torrent assuaging.
Just what the parson had told me when young:
Just what the people in the chapel have sung:
"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging."

Desunt cetera

The same volume contains a bitter attack upon Gladstone:

I will not shake thy hand, old man,
I will not shake thy hand!
You bear a traitor's brand, old man,
You bear a traitor's brand.
Thy talents are profound and wide,
Apparent power to win:
It is not everyone has lied
A nation into sin.

The tenor of the poem is such to suggest that Crowley is no friend to the political democracy of modern industrialism.

In the same volume, Crowley commences his attack upon the Plymouth Brethren, which he has never been able to forgive. There is a version of the well-known hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers", adapted to the needs of the Brethren, every phase of which was a quotation from the literature of the sect rather than a parody. The usual objectives of Christian reverence are reduced to the lowest possible terms and the names of prominent members of the Plymouth Brethren are exalted into semi-divinity:

Onward, Plymouth Brethren, marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus trampled on the floor;
Kelly, Lowe or Jewell lead against the foe,
Forward into battle, see their followers go.

Church and chapel perish! Open Plyms to hell!
But Our kind Brethren still in safety dwell.
Raven's lot can never 'gainst the lord prevail,
We are his brave followers, you are Satan's tail.

Crowley's verse not only illustrated his repudiation of orthodox religion. He has many allusions to witchcraft, to magick and to occultism generally, which show the way in which his thought was already tending.

Important among his developing work was the long poem, *Sword of Song*, "called by the Christians the Book of the Beast", which Crowley published in 1904. Under the headings of *Pentecost and Ascension Day*, the poet has written a sustained attack upon orthodox Christianity in favour of a religious universalism which seeks to pierce to the truth underlying all of the greater world faiths. There is a lengthy appendix concerning the relationship between science and Buddhism, but the poem

is the chief vehicle by which Crowley seeks to call forth his main thesis:

Here in the Dusk of Gods I linger:
The world awaits a Word of Truth.
Kindle, O Lyre, beneath my finger!
Evolve the age's awful youth!
To arms against the inveterate wrong!
Awake, awake, O Sword of Song!

Crowley touches upon the various problems of metaphysics. He discusses the free will problem and raises the question that, if there be free will, how can there be pain and damnation, not-self being an illusion? The parable of the Sheep and the Goats leads Crowley to question the extent to which Christ had pity. Crowley goes on to seek the hope that lies beyond human thought and claims that concentration alone, and not reason, makes truth apparent. At this point, it can be seen how Crowley has certain sympathies with the ideas of Yoga. He finally comes to the conclusion of the essential identity of all forms of existence and ends:

Aum! let us meditate aright
On that adorable One Light,
Divine Savitri! So may She
Illume our minds! So mote it be!

The poem contains many a side dig at persons whom Crowley much dislikes, such as Evangelical Christians, whom he hits through a passing attack upon their leader, the late Rev. Dr. F.B. Meyer. The lengthy notes contain his reply to Chesterton, headed by the verse:

Blind Chesterton is sure to err,
And scan my work in vain;
I am my own interpreter,
And I will make it plain.

Crowley sets forth his philosophy of conduct in the notes where he prints a creed that forbids the taking of life in any form, attacks theft and denounces intoxication. But Crowley is here seeking to shock the unsuspecting reader. He has reprinted the code of conduct reached by the Buddha, but insists that it is not meant to be taken literally; its precepts are neither more nor less than a ghastly and satirical joke. The reader is

introduced to many aspects of life, from Zola to Kraft-Ebing. But finally he is brought back to the old question of universal religion and to a consideration of what lies after agnosticism. Once again, Crowley seeks to teach by the method of negation. "The Spiritualists, let us suppose, go mad and talk sense." Miracle proves nothing. If the *Affaire Cana* were proved to me. I should merely record the facts: Water may under certain unknown conditions become wine." Crowley is falling back in his ultimate conclusions upon an occult mysticism derived from a deep knowledge of the training of concentration inherent in both Buddhism and Hinduism.

A similar preoccupation with the mysteries of the East comes out in the poems "Kali", published in 1907 in the volume *Gargoyles*.

There is an idol in my house
By whom the sandal always streams,
Alone, I make a black carouse
With her to dominate my dreams,
With skulls and knives she keeps control
(O Mother Kali!) of my soul.

This jewelled shape of gold and bronze
Is seated on my bosom's throne;
She takes my mused orisons
To her, to her, to her alone.
Oh Kali, Kali, Kali, quell
This hooded hate, O Queen of Hell.

Only by energy and strife
May man attain the eternal rest,
Dissolve the desperate lust of life
By infinite agony and zest.
Thus, O my Kali, I divine
The golden secret of thy shrine!

The same volume contains poems alluding to the Japanese God of War. It is a further following out of Crowley's search for a universal religion.

In 1907, Crowley published the volume *Konx Om Pax*, as essays on the search for light. He dedicates it to all initiates who are seeking the sacred way. At the same time, he repudiates the common run of men as lying beyond salvation:

St. Paul spoke up on the Hill of Mars
To the empty-headed Athenians;
But I would rather talk to the stars
Than to empty-headed Athenians.
It's only too easy to form a cult,
To cry a crusade with "Deus Vult" —
But you won't get much of a good result
From empty-headed Athenians.

The people of London much resemble
Those empty-headed Athenians.
I could very easily make them tremble,
Those empty-headed Athenians.
A pinch of Bible, a gallon of gas,
And I, or any other guest ass,
Could bring to our mystical, moonlight mass
Those empty-headed Athenians.

So (with any lick) I shall bid farewell,
To the empty-headed Athenians.
For me, they may all of them go to hell,
For empty-headed Athenians.
I hate your idiot jolts and jars,
You monkeys grinning behind your bars —
I'm more at home with the winds and the stars
Than with empty-headed Athenians.

The volume contains a series of mystical essays which belong more properly to Crowley's work on magick than to his poems and which require some insight into the occultist approach to understand.

Perhaps one of the greatest of Crowley's poems is that which prefaces *Magick in Theory and Practice*. It is reprinted in the *Oxford Book of Mystical Verse*. "The Hymn to Pan" is an introduction to Crowley's most fundamental and sophisticated ideas:

Thrill with lissome lust of the light,
O man! My man!
Came careering out of the night
Io Pan! Io Pan!
I am thy mate, I am thy man,
Goat of thy flock, I am gold, I am god,
Flesh to thy bone, flower to thy rod.
With hoofs of steel I race on the rocks

Through solstice stubborn to equinox.
And I rave; and I rape and I rip and I rend
Everlasting, world without end,
Mannikin, maiden, maenad, man,
In the might of Pan.
Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! Io Pan!

The hymn brings Crowley into the deepest relation to the great god, Pan, and to all that the nature-worship of Pan has implied through the ages.

It is not always the case that the poems of occultists are essential to an understanding of their work. But Aleister Crowley is fundamentally an artist. He is a creative personality, expressing his individuality in terms of rhythm. His sense of the rhythmic, which ultimately implies the sense of a fundamental beauty, is aptly expressed whether in prose or in verse; his art is a necessary entrance to an understanding of his occultism. In *Eleusis*, published in 1910, Crowley had come to grips with the problem of revitalizing religion. He puts the need in his own characteristic way.

"Better be a Shaker, or a camp-meeting homunculus, or a Chatauqua girl, or a Keswick lunatic, or an Evan Roberts revivalist, or even a common maniac, than a smug Evangelical banker's clerk with a greasy wife and three gifted children==to be bank clerks after him!

"Then will I choose you and test you in the mysteries of Eleusis . . . Thus shall we give back its youth to the world."

This is exactly the task which Crowley has been attempting all of his life. He denies that it can be done through the Wardour Street religions which have afflicted the English temperament. Search must be made for the ancient mysteries and his verse is an important introduction to the prose works on magick in which Crowley follows up this quest.

The crowns of Gods and mortals whither;
Moons fade where constellations shone:
Numberless aeons brought us hither;
Numberless aeons beckon us on.
The world is old and I am strong—
Awake, awake, O Sword of Song.

It is when he has mastered the message for which Crowley has used his verse, the welding of the search for rhythm and harmony within the universe into one coherent quest which includes every aspect of life and thought, that the reader is in a

position to go on and study the involved occultist prose works in which the author sets forth his detailed theories for the initiate and the semi-initiated.