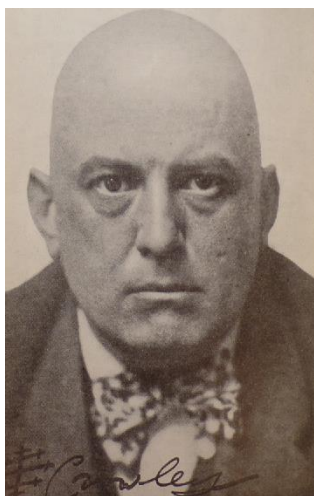


ENQUIRY

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The Mind and Mask of Aleister Crowley

by John Symonds



You might have seen him walking about the streets of London before the war, until the air raids drove him out of the country, where, in December 1947, he died. He was tall, broad-shouldered and stout; although towards the end he visibly shrank. His face, for those who find the soul of a man in his face, was strange and disturbing. He had the habit of trying to hypnotise people by staring at them; and through a large consumption of drugs, particularly heroin and cocaine, his eyes retained a fixed concentration. In his youth he had tried to fascinate people by dressing up in leopards' skins, a heavily jeweled red waistcoat, velvet coats with ermine collars, enormous rings on his fingers and a kind of dress with a hood through two slits of which his eyes gleamed. He had also a peculiar odour which was sweet, nauseous. This was due to the "sex-appeal ointment" which he rubbed into the hair of his body, otherwise called Ruthah, the Perfume of Immortality. It was made up of one part ambergris, two parts musk and three parts civet; it probably contributed to his attraction for women.

Since a photograph of Crowley at the age of about thirty-seven accompanies this sketch of him, I shan't attempt to describe further his physical appearance, but merely recommend you to look to the left of this page.

He was, as you might guess, a poet, and he had many volumes of verse to his credit, beautifully printed and bound and published at his own expense. As a young man he earned a reputation as a mountaineer. In 1902 he formed part of the first expedition to climb Chogo Ri, marked K2 on the Indian survey map, the second highest mountain in the world, which is unscaled to this day. And three years later, when he was thirty, he led the first organized expedition up the sloped of that other giant of the Himalayas, Kinchinjunga, also still unconquered. Unhappily, four native porters and one Italian climber were killed. The fault was not Crowley's, although a Swiss doctor, one of the five Europeans of the party, blamed him, and Crowley foolishly gave out to the press that he was so bored with the unfortunate Italian that he was glad to see the end of him.

Crowley soon began to gather his peculiar reputation. He was considered not quite nice to know. Stories were told about him which he jokingly denied, or confirmed and exaggerated still further. He had the habit of shocking his friends and annoying tradesmen by not paying their bills.

A man who is different from the common run of men and who sets out to make himself as noticeable as possible, soon gets written about in the papers: at first with slight irony; then, if he continues to *épater le bourgeois*, and attacks their religion, politics and sexual morality, he will be openly condemned. Crowley so overshot the limit that he was called by a paper which took pains to expose him "The Wickedest Man in the World", "The King of Depravity", "A Human Beast", and so on.

The reputation which he earned for himself culminated in 1934 in a statement from the late Mr. Justice Swift when he concluded a libel action unsuccessfully brought by Crowley against an artist friend of his. "I have been over forty years engaged in the administration of the law in one capacity of another. I thought that I knew of every conceivable form of wickedness. I thought that everything which was vicious and bad had been produced at one time or another before me. I have learnt in this case that we can always learn something more if we live long enough. I have never heard such dreadful, horrible, blasphemous and abominable stuff as that which has been

produced by the man who describes himself as the greatest living poet.”

But, unlike Wilde, Crowley was not afterwards arrested, tried and sentenced to imprisonment. In fact he was never indicted for any serious criminal offence. He was only a wicked man who had done, as far as was known, no legal wrong. It was his opinions and personal habits that shocked the run of common humanity.

His was a peculiar occupation, that of a magician, and by a magician I don't mean a conjuror, but a Magus. Upon leaving Cambridge he had studied magic and been initiated as an adept just as you might study architecture and become an L.R.I.B.A. After all, there is a wide range of professional occupations for a young man, especially one who has a small fortune, to choose from. Only magic, Crowley decided, would give him the lasting fame he thought his talents deserved. At Cambridge there was no faculty for the secret arts, but in those days there was a school of arcane instruction off Tottenham Court Road, run by a strange gentleman called MacGregor Mathers, assisted by the Irish poet, W. B. Yeats. Its name was The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and in 1898 Crowley became a member, swore to keep its secrets and spend his time seeking the light of Occult Knowledge



But magicians, like anyone else, have a habit of quarreling. Crowley speedily fell out with Mathers, and also with Yeats, and was soon setting up in opposition to them. On the whole, I think he did better because a spirit called Aiwass, who was a messenger from those Secret Chiefs who rule the Universe (Madame Blavatsky called them Hidden Masters), appeared to him one day in Cairo and dictated certain stirring words of wisdom, power and mystery. This was more than a system of magic: it was the bible of a new religion for mankind.

Now this new religion is not only different from Christianity, but it is the exact opposite. It is an orgiastic kind of creed, proclaiming a life of joy.

Come forth, O children, under the stars, and take your fill of love.

Like the teaching of Nietzsche, it tears down the charity and renunciation of Christianity.

Be strong, O man! lust, enjoy all things of sense and rapture: fear not that any God shall deny thee for this.

The most important tenet of the *Book of the Law*, as Aiwass' dictation is called, is contained in the phrase "There is no law beyond do what thou wilt".

This is a creed that can easily be misunderstood even by those who have taken pains to follow it. What Crowley meant was each man's life has meaning, or a true will, and it is his job to discover this true will and do it. That is his highest duty. And in order to assist his followers Crowley devised a technique of sexual magic and of drug-eating which would bring about the desired states of mind. It was more than a self-analysis, it was an act of worship. "To worship me take wine and strange drugs. . . . It is lawful to do this, for to worship Him is to make Him manifest, and so to fill the world with truth and beauty."

Crowley was, really, a much misunderstood man. He was only trying to do his best for humanity. It is true that his personal life would not stand much scrutiny, but we must disentangle the man from the religion, as a poet is separated from his vices when we critically examine his work. Poe is not a worse writer because he drank himself to death.

One day during 1912, Crowley received a visit at his headquarters in Victoria Street from a German Rosicrucian called Theodor Reuss, who accused him of giving away the secret teachings of an Order of which he, Reuss, was head. Crowley denied the charge, whereupon Reuss went to the bookshelf and pulled out *The Book of Lies*, written and published by Crowley. He opened it and laid his finger on a particular passage, which Crowley had written in unusual circumstances: it was, in fact, a piece of automatic writing produced during a trance.

The two adepts talked long into the night. "Since," argued Reuss, "you know our hidden teachings, you had better come into our Order."

Thus Crowley became the head in Britain of the secret society called the Order of the Oriental Templars, "the Supreme and Holy King of Ireland, Iona, and all the Britains that are in the Sanctuary of the Gnosis," and he took the title of Baphomet.

The Order of the Oriental Templars was a monastic military organization in France during the 12th century by Crusaders to

preserve Christendom and protect pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Within a hundred years it had become one of the richest and most powerful Orders in Europe, and was suppressed in a mighty and tragic scandal. Authorities have decided that the Knights Templars, who drew their members from the ranks of the nobility and who enjoyed special privileges from the Popes, were rapidly contaminated by their ties with the East. They were really Gnostic heretics.

Upon admission to the Order, members had to spit, and sometimes trample, upon the Cross; they practiced unnatural vice together and worshipped an idol, which had the characteristics of both sexes, called *Baphomet*. They were also said to have worshipped a cat.

At the end of the 19th century a group of mystically-minded Germans revived this Order and in 1905 Theodor Reuss took over the leadership.



During the first World War Crowley was in America doing his best for Britain by making propaganda for the Germans. With the entry of America into the war, he returned to magic. But he could make no headway with Americans who had their minds too closely set on making money to trouble themselves about the life of the spirit, and he wrote off his five years in the States as a magical failure. He returned at the end of 1919 to Europe, spent Christmas in London and then set off, at the age of forty-five to start a school of arcane wisdom in Sicily. Here in the spring of 1920, upon the hillside near Cefalù, he founded with two Concubines, or Whores of the Stars as he called them, and three children, his celebrated Abbey of Thelema. And Rabelais's motto for his Abbey of Thelema, DO WHAT THOU WILT, was inscribed over the doorway.

Here Crowley performed those Orgia which astonished the world. A new religion is, of course, strongly opposed by the old. Some renegade Crowleians fled to the offices of the *Sunday Express* and told all.

But what, you may ask, did Crowley, in fact, do? He did many things. He experimented upon himself and his followers in order to discover the secrets of the mind. (He called himself the world's greatest psychologist). *The Diary of a Drug Fiend*,

written in 1922, is not a very good novel, but it is based on first-hand experiences of drugs and magic. He attracted pupils from both hemispheres (but not more than a few), Crowleyized them and, if they survived, sent them out to preach the word, i.e., *thelema*.

He, his High Priest, and his Whores (the word whore must be considered in this connection as a term of high esteem), performed those powerful sex-magic invocations which enabled them, as one body, to ascend to the astral plane and thereby get in touch with the Secret Chiefs.

Ancient mysteries, some of the darker rites of the Greeks and Romans, and of those early Christian sects called Gnostics, were rediscovered and enacted.

Upon a throne in a temple lit by six candles from the altar sat the Horned One who is known of old as the Anti-Christ, or the Beast, whose number is the number of a man, six hundred and sixty and six. He has branded his witches with his mark. Now they dance naked before him and chant words of power.

Thou spiritual Sun! Satan, Thou
Eye, Thou Lust! Cry aloud!
Cry aloud! Whirl the wheel,
O my Father, O Satan, O Sun!

Crowley was, *au fond*, the Grand Master of the Sabbat. The word sabbat, or Sabbath, in this connection, probably comes from *s'esbattre*, to frolic. His magical rituals were accompanied with ceremonial dances and prayers which aroused the deeper feelings and the darker (and more interesting) levels of the mind. Consciousness was overcome: a kind of free-for-all psychoanalysis took place, without an analyst to keep charge and interpret, for Satan is not disinterested. Those who were strong enough to stand it, went away feeling better and wiser, to Crowley's eternal glory. Those who weren't, soon departed for the lunatic asylum. In their case it could be said that the evil which had been released had not been transmuted into good, but had turned round and poisoned them. Crowley, anyhow, was strong enough to survive his own magic and died sane, although a little sad, at the age of seventy-two.

