

**THE OBSERVER  
LONDON, ENGLAND  
13 APRIL 1958**

**Beastly Silly**

**THE MAGIC OF ALEISTER CROWLEY.  
By John Symonds. (Muller. 21s.)**

**By Stevie Smith**

Mr. Symonds seems to have been fond of Aleister Crowley (known as The Great Beast No. 666). This was clear in his biography and is clear in this study of the Beast's magical practices. To the author Crowley was an eccentric old gentleman, more comical than horrible, shrewd enough off the record, and well worth visiting and cossetting. Yet Mr. Symonds could see the basic emptiness of his companion, trace his Satanism to a Plymouth-Brethren upbringing in dread of hell fire, and see, through the Beast's magic nonsense, a poor shadow fumbling for substance.

Of course the book is comical. The modern practice of magic, with its dowdy commitments . . . the seedy rooms, the absurd clothes smelling of mothballs, the dotty disciples, the shopping excursions to buy ingredients for hell brews—with an eye on some old cook-book for warlocks—all this can seem comical. But how wretched it really is and with what horrid echoes from past centuries it dins on the mind.

In his retreat at Hastings, in the boarding-house called Netherwood, Crowley was a great attraction. His eyes stared, his ears stood out, he took drugs, swigged black market brandy and was long and spectral—in fact just what one wants in an English seaside boarding-house. He founded an order of Satanism called The Temple of Thelema. ("Do what thou wilt is the Law.") The ritual was the usual hotch-potch of old mixed-sorceries with animal sacrifices, dogged copulations helped by drugs, Christian magic said backwards, and flat feelings coming afterwards with headaches. What puts one off so much is the feeling of disorder, of second-rate minds stretching for grandeur, of staleness and unrest. And of course the echoes. . . .

Crowley was not an accepted Satanist, the American satanists thought he was a charlatan tainted with good, and when he

died rejoiced and dismembered his body in effigy. The Brighton Corporation, in whose jurisdiction his real body lay, confined themselves to passing a resolution that the burial of a warlock in consecrated ground was something "that must never be allowed to happen again." The famous Sahara experiment in which Victor Neuburg ("Brother Omnia Vincam") was supposed to be turned into a camel is described. Crowley and Neuburg took a train into the desert and set up their spells. The great devil Choronzon was raised from hell but did little except grumble. (Crowley's portrait of Choronzon shows that the Beast drew about as badly as he wrote poetry.) What is rather seducing is the tram-ride.

Mr. Symonds thinks the Beast was deluded, but his disciples, and there are some very odd familiar names among them, did not all think so, and one at least—poor Frank Bennett in his photograph—looks quite wonderfully bedeviled by a silly Beast, and with a warning in the look, too, as if he were quoting the poem:—

The people think that Spiritism is a joke and a swizz,  
The Church that it is dangerous. Not half it is.

But as a matter of fact this book seems dangerous only when it is quoting from ancient mages, as for instance Casaubon's description of Dr Dee in magic conclave with his scribe Edward Kelley "and some Spirits" (published 1659). This has quite a different tone.