

RELIGIOUS TRENDS IN ENGLISH POETRY

VOLUME V: 1880 - 1920

By

HOXIE NEALE FAIRCHILD

[John] Davidson seems to have been a savagely honest man. With the pseudo-mystic Aleister Crowley the situation is more complicated.¹ He deranged his mind and body on systematically perverted principles. Fundamentally this loathsome creature was a charlatan who exploited the occult to gratify his lusts, to wield power over his dupes, and to make money. And yet, especially at the beginning of his career, there were moments when, like Browning's Sludge, he deluded not only his disciples but himself. He was not more than four-fifths insincere in justifying his beastliness by the familiar argument that a man must descend into the lowest depths of degradation in order to rise into communion with God. On the other hand I suspect that the name of Aiwass the Holy Guardian Angel who dictated to him *The Book of the Law*, means simply "eyewash."

A magnetic, amusing, far from stupid scoundrel, he was tolerated—briefly, in most instances—by a surprisingly large number of literary and artistic people.² Although his importance for the history of literature is minimal he wrote copiously in verse and prose throughout his life. In the late nineties at Trinity College, Cambridge (he was sent down after two years), his ambition was to be a poet. By this time he had outgrown his boyhood zeal for the faith of his parents, who were devout and active Plymouth Brethren. (Again the figure in the carpet.) Then as later, the versatile youth was ardently heterosexual, homosexual, and autosexual. The privately printed Cambridge poems range from a labored decadence much like George Moore's to more explicit sadomasochism.

Since this rubbish won him no fame, soon after his expulsion from Cambridge he turned to magic as a quicker, easier means of obtaining Faust-like power. He became adept in every technique of occultism from the Black Mass to numerology but found his most congenial specialty in sex magic. As the universe was created by sexual activity, there could be no more efficacious way of penetrating its mysteries and of attracting the discipleship of unsatisfied women. "Any sexual act," Symonds explains, "was, in his eyes, a sacred, magical deed; he likened it to the blessed sacrament Sometimes during the climax he came face to face with his God." To judge from the

following lines, however, in coming face to face with his God he came face to face with himself:

I am that I am, the flame
Hidden in the sacred ark.
I am the unspoken name,
I am the unbegotten spark.

. . . .
I am the creating Word,
I the author of the aeon;
None but I have ever heard
Echo in the empyrean
Plectron of the primal paean!
I am the eternal one
Winged and white, the flowering rod,
I the fountain of the sun,
Very God of very God!

The self-deification of Davidson consciously manipulated by a quack. Regarding his excreta as sacred, he sometimes honored his friends by defecating on their drawing-room carpets.³

Just at the close of our period Crowley established "The Sacred Abbey of Thelema" at Cephalu in Sicily. It was precisely what you would expect if not a little more so. Rabelais, though a pioneer in the tradition which it grossly perverted, would have been disgusted by its pretentious priapism. The basic precept of the community, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," was revealed to Crowley by the angel Aiwass, who must have read *Gargantua*. Crowley edifyingly explained that "wilt" did not mean "likest" or "pleases": one must transcendently *will*, and only with one's *true* will. But what one's true will invariably demanded was sexual indulgence, the more and the more variegated the better. Another guiding precept sounds more like Blake, Nietzsche, or garbled Freud than like Rabelais: "The only sin is restriction." Needless to say, Crowley firmly believed in the Superman; in fact, he *was* the Superman. In the whole community only he was allowed to speak or write the pronoun "I."⁴

Occasionally the Ipsissimus addressed personal valentines to promising disciples. A fair sample:

Ah God! I am exhaust
In the red moon's holocaust!
God I God I The chasms secret and profound

Suck down the porphyry flood
Of your maniacal, ensorcelled blood
That maddens and bewitches.
My life is suffocated—now I swoon—
I die! I am in hell, red hell, red hell,
And all the immortal in me itches
To grip the immortal.

Most of the post-Cambridge verse, however, was written for didactic or liturgical purposes. Of course the apostle of the immortal itch had posed as high priest of one blasphemous cult or another long before he founded the Abbey in 1920. The god Pan was one favorite symbol of cosmic eroticism. Here is a poem of 1910 used in Crowley's "Rites of Eleusis":

I lift the mask of matter;
I open the heart of man;
For I am of force to shatter
The cast that hideth—Pan!

I bring ye laughter and tears,
The kisses that foam and bleed,
The joys of a million years,
The flowers that bear no seed.

I life my wand and wave you
Through hill to hill of delight;
My rosy rivers lave you
In innermost lustrallight.⁵

The second stanza is loyal to his adolescent admiration for Swinburne.

The goat god is further honored in *Hymn to Pan* (1919). Mr. Symonds thinks it "Crowley's most effective poem This is the Dionysian aspect of life rediscovered by Nietzsche. Pan is the Antichrist, symbol of lust and magic." I quote the absurd but clinically revealing close:

Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! I am awake
In the grip of the snake.
The eagle clashes with beak and claw;
The gods withdraw:
The great beasts come, Io Pan! I am borne
To death on the horn

Of the Unicorn.
I am Pan! Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! 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 hoops 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! Pan! Io Pan!

This poem was read by a disciple at Crowley's cremation—much to the distress of the manager of the crematorium, who declared, "We shall take all necessary steps to prevent such an incident occurring again."⁶ Somehow it *is* a queer poem for a cremation.

1—John Symonds, in *The Great Beast: the life of Aleister Crowley*, gives a full account of his character, career, and doctrines. I depend on Symonds for my quotations from Crowley's poems.

2—For the clearest account of Crowley's relations with Yeats, who soon came to detest him, see John Senior, *The Way Down and Out*, pp. 155-156.

3—Symonds, *The Great Beast*, pp. 123, 135, 211.

4—*Ibid.*, pp. 61, 62.

5—*Ibid.*, pp. 91, 107.

6—*Ibid.*, pp. 141, 142, 297.