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REVIEW OF *THE MOTHER'S TRAGEDY*

It is not long since we reviewed a book by Mr. Aleister Crowley, and mingled blame with praise, like "Crusty Christopher." So we must still do; for *The Mother's Tragedy* treads too hard on the heels of his previous volume for any modification of the qualities we then noted. There is the old vigour and boldness, the sinewy phrase that takes you by the throat (as it were) and throttles the praise out of you; but also is it incompact, wild, shattering of form, unskilful in coherent expression, profuse in awkward and misleading constructions as of old. For many of these poems there is no word but powerful; yet it is (we might almost say) the power of insanity, so little is it under the author's own control, so contorted and spasmodic is it, proceeding by vehement leaps and rushes of speech, abruptly checked by thick and struggling utterance. Often admirable in forceful felicity, it is equally often exasperating by its choked and imperfect expression. Withal there is thought; it is turbid with meaning, only too turbid at many times. Yet this is a fault on the right side. We would rather wrestle with Mr. Crowley's obscurity (and he is often densely, faultily obscure, through trying to say more in a line than he has the gift to say) than wade through the tepid vacuity of most minor verse. The worst of all obscurity is the obscurity of utter nothingness and voluble, brainless platitude. All Mr. Crowley's qualities, for good and evil, are quintessentialised in the opening ode, called "Sin." It deals with the spirit of the heathen and mythological hell—the place of intense cold and negation of life, the source of lust and death. The poem only too manifestly reveals its own effort; it is often turgid with effort, clumsy with unshapely compression; it is obscure in substance, and frequently still more obscure from broken and disconnected utterance, want of logical grammar—all the faults of those who seek pregnancy without adequate artistic gift. Yet its sheer power constantly makes way through the dead weight of its defects; while it is throughout grave and dignified. The poet always knows what he is saying, though the reader may often desperately wish that *he* did. It is too to quote entire; but, at the risk of utter unintelligibility, we venture to cite some stanzas from it:

Ye rivers, and ye elemental caves,  
Above the fountains of the broken ice,  
Know ye what dragon lurks within your waves?  
Know ye the secret of the cockatrice?  
The basilisk whose shapeless brood  
Take blood and muck for food?  
The sexless passion, the foul scorpion spawn?  
The witches and the evil-chanting ones  
Who strangle stars and suns,  
Eclipse the moon, and curse against the dawn?  
Know ye the haunts of death?  
The hole that harboreth  
The sickening breath,  
Whence all disease is bred and all corruption drawn?

. . . . .

Central, supreme, most formidable Night,  
Gathered its garments, drew itself apart,  
Gaunt limbs appear against the coprolite  
Veil of deep agony, display the heart;  
Even as a gloomy sea  
Wherein dead fishes be,  
Poisonous things, nameless, the eightfold Fear,  
Misshapen crab and worm,  
The intolerable sperm,  
Lewd dragons slime-built, stagnant; the foul mere  
Crawled, moved, gave tongue,  
The essential soul of dung  
That lived and stun,  
That spoke—no word that living head may hear.

. . . . .

Yet, in the terror of that Beast, abides  
So sweet and deadly a device, a lure  
Deep in the blood and poison of her sides,  
Swart, lean, and leprous, that her stings endure.  
Even the soul of grace  
Abideth not her face  
Without vague longing, infinite desire,  
Stronger because suppressed,  
Unto the wide black breast,  
The lips incarnate of blood, flesh, and fire

Mr. Crowley, we may add, frequently expresses things with all his uncompromising completeness, which poetry (to our mind) had better leave unexpressed.