The Beast with Two Backs

Aleister Crowley, Sex Magic and the Exhaustion of Modernity

Hugh B. Urban

ABSTRACT: Infamous for his drug use and extreme sexual practices, and proclaiming himself the "Great Beast 666," Aleister Crowley remains to this day one of the most influential and yet most often misunderstood figures in the history of Western new religious movements. This article offers a fresh approach to Crowley, by placing him within contemporary debates about modernism and postmodernism. By no means the outcast enemy of modern Western society so often depicted in the media, Crowley was, I argue, a stunning reflection of some of the most acute cultural contradictions at the heart of modern Western civilization in the early twentieth century. A uniquely Janus-faced character, he reflects both the "Faustian" will of modernism as well as its tragic failure and exhaustion at mid-century in the aftermath of the two World Wars.

> Where does our modern world belong—to exhaustion or ascent?—Its manifoldness and unrest conditioned by the attainment of the highest level of consciousness.
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*[1]

> The point about Crowley is that he seems to contain all these sorts of ideas and identities—indeed most of the vices of the Twentieth Century—and he was dead at the end of 1947.
>
> —Snoo Wilson, author of the play "The Beast" (1974)[2]

Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, Volume 7, Issue 3, pages 7–25, ISSN 1092-6690 (print), 1541-8480 (electronic). © 2004 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to: Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center Street, Suite 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.

Surely few figures in the history of Western new religious movements are so colorful, so notorious, or the subject of so many scandalous exposés as the self-proclaimed "Great Beast 666," Aleister Crowley. Infamous for his drug use and sexual habits, chased out of several countries and finally dying in poverty, Crowley is today one of the most influential figures in the modern revival of magic and Neopagan witchcraft. While there are many popular and journalistic works on Crowley, he has seldom been taken seriously by modern scholarship, however, and never examined critically for his key role in the history of religions.[3]

In this article I argue that Crowley is not only an important and neglected figure in the history of new religions, but that he also opens an illuminating window onto the social, political and religious history of the twentieth century. In most previous literature, Crowley has been portrayed as the great outcast and enemy of mainstream modern society. In his own writings, he depicts himself as a solitary voice of freedom crying in the wilderness of modernity, a champion of the individual will against the dull conformity of the modern state. What I hope to show is that Crowley is by no means the arch-enemy of modern Western civilization; on the contrary, he is in many respects the *epitome* of Western modernity in the 1920s and 1930s before the exhaustion, disillusionment and disaster of World War II. As Paul Heelas has argued, many new religious movements do not represent so much a rejection of modernity; rather, they are often better described as powerful *affirmations* of certain basic modern ideals, such as progress, individualism and free will, and thus represent a kind of "celebration of the self and sacralization of modernity."[4] Crowley is one of the clearest examples of this trend. Indeed, he is perhaps the embodiment of what Marshall Berman calls "the Faustian individual," who expresses the grand aspirations and tragic failings of modernity as a whole.[5]

Crowley also reflects the modern preoccupation with sexuality in the early twentieth century. As Michel Foucault has argued, the Victorian era has often been mistakenly characterized as a period of prudish repression and suppression of sexuality. In fact, it was anything but a time of repression, and instead was an era of intense proliferation of discourse about sex, which was now categorized, classified and theorized as never before. With his central emphasis on sexual magic (or Magick, to use Crowley's spelling)[6] as the most powerful ritual secret, Crowley epitomizes this modern fascination with sex as the innermost essence of the human self. To use the terms of Georges Bataille, Crowley's ultimate goal was one of *transgression* on every level—to explode the boundaries of all morality and conventional models of sexuality in order to achieve an intense experience of superhuman liberation.

At the same time, Crowley also reveals the first signs of the collapse of Western modernity in the middle of the twentieth century. Having explored

every limit of sexual excess and transgression, Crowley died in 1947, mired in drug addiction and failed ideals of world transformation. He embodied the most grandiose ideals of Western modernity—the ideals of infinite progress toward a utopian social order—and its tragic breakdown at mid-century, with the Holocaust and devastation of World War II.

After a brief account of Crowley's life and historical context, I examine his writings on sexuality and sex magic. Finally, I locate Crowley within recent debates about modernity and postmodernity, suggesting that Crowley exemplifies both high modernism and its failure—and thus also exemplifies the trend known as "postmodernism." The Great Beast here is perhaps also the beast or juggernaut of modernity itself, with faces turned both forward and backward.

UNLEASHING THE BEAST: CROWLEY'S LIFE AND CONTEXT

Born in 1875, the son of a preacher in the highly puritanical Plymouth Brethren sect, Edward Alexander Crowley might be said to illustrate the British Victorian era as a whole. As a child he was raised in strict Christian morality. Educated at King's College in London and Trinity College in Cambridge, Crowley was from an early age fascinated with poetry and pagan religion and was a prolific author of both verse and prose. Having inherited a large amount of money while still young, he was financially independent for many years and spent much of his time pursuing his passions of writing and mountain climbing. During his Cambridge years, he would also adopt the name "Aleister," a Gaelic form of his middle name and an homage to the hero of Shelley's poem "Alastor, the spirit of solitude."

His first real initiation into the world of esotericism and magic occurred in 1898, when he was introduced to the group known as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Founded by William Westcott and MacGregor Mathers in 1887, the Golden Dawn was an eclectic blending of a number of Western esoteric traditions, including Hermeticism, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism and Kabbalah. Eventually, Crowley and Mathers would part ways and become mired in a lawsuit when Crowley published a full description of the secret rites of the Golden Dawn in his journal *Equinox*.[7]

Beginning in 1899, Crowley also began to explore a variety of Eastern spiritual traditions. During his travels in India and Ceylon in 1901–2, he studied a variety of Buddhist and Hindu practices. It seems likely that he also learned something of the esoteric techniques of Indian Tantra, and soon began to engage in sexual magic with his partner, Rose Kelly, who became his wife and "scarlet woman" in 1902.[8]

It was in 1904, however, that Crowley would receive his first great revelation and the knowledge that he was to be the herald of a new era in human history. According to Crowley's own account, his guardian angel

Aiwass appeared to him and dictated the *Book of the Law* (*Liber Legis*). His most famous work, the *Book of the Law* announces the dawn of a third aeon of mankind: the first aeon was that of the Goddess Isis, centered around matriarchy and the worship of the Great Mother; the second aeon was that of Osiris, during which the patriarchal religions of suffering and death—i.e., Judaism and Christianity—rose to power. Finally, with the revelation of the *Book of the Law*, a new aeon of the son, Horus, was born. "In this aeon the emphasis is on the self or will, not on anything external such as gods or priests."[9]

The peak of his magical career—and also of his infamy as the wickedest man alive—was in the period from 1920–22, when he founded his own spiritual community called the Abbey of Thelema in Cefalu, Sicily. The original inspiration came from Rabelais' classic work, *Gargantua,* which describes an ideal spiritual community that transcends the hypocritical corruption of the Christian monasteries. Called "Theleme" (from the Greek, meaning "will"), the government of the community was "do what you will," in a joyous blending of Stoic virtues with Christian spirituality. Crowley took Rabelais' ideal a good deal further, however, by creating a utopian community in which every desire could be gratified and every impulse expressed through free experimentation in drugs, sex and physical excess.

Perhaps the most infamous product of this period was Crowley's semi-autobiographical novel, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, published in 1922. Written at top speed to fund his growing drug habit, the *Diary* is one of Crowley's most outrageous works, but also the one that provides the most insight into his character and historical context. A thinly disguised image of Crowley himself, the central character Peter Pendragon describes his rapid descent into cocaine and heroin addiction, as he careens through the affluent, excessive life of the Roaring Twenties, exploring every possible sensual pleasure and moral vice. As Leslie Shepherd comments, the book is a striking reflection of this age of violent contrasts: "It was the world of censorship of taste and also the Jazz Age of petting parties, wild automobile rides [and] speak-easies . . . . Puritanism and interwar permissiveness lived side by side and made faces at each other."[10] Ironically, Pendragon is finally redeemed by a mysterious figure named King Lamus, who runs a spiritual center called the Abbey of Thelema in the far-off town of "Telepylus." In other words, the drug-addicted Crowley has portrayed himself as the character's own final savior and redemption.

By the 1940s, however, Crowley had run through both his money and his once infinite will to power. Though he continued to believe that his *Book of the Law* might have a decisive role in the unfolding of global events during World War II, most people who saw him in those years described him more often as "a bored old man who found the lonely evenings frightening."[11] He would spend his last years in a small guest

house in London, increasingly addicted to heroin until his death in 1947. There are many conflicting accounts of his final days. According to some more hagiographic accounts, he slipped blissfully into the Buddhist state of final liberation, passing from "Nirvana to super Nirvana, expiring in the boundless bliss of the Infinite."[12] According to more cynical accounts, he died alone in pathetic misery, uttering the final words, "sometimes I hate myself."[13]

In sum, Crowley is a remarkable reflection of the era in which he was born. On the one hand, he deliberately set out to overthrow all established values; on the other, he merely expressed the darker underside or "secret life" of the Victorian world in which he was raised. "Crowley was a contemporary of Freud," writes Shepherd.

> [H]e grew out of the matrix of Victorianism . . . . He was one of many who helped tear down the false, hypocritical, self-righteous attitudes of the time. What is peculiar about Crowley's case is . . . that in his revolt against his parents and God he set himself up in God's place.[14]

Perhaps nowhere was Crowley's reflection of and revolt against the world in which he lived more apparent than in his volatile sexual life.

SEX IS A SACRAMENT: SEX MAGIC AND THE MODERN PREOCCUPATION WITH SEXUALITY

The primary reason for the shocking and deliciously scandalous reputation that followed Crowley was his practice of sexual magic. Rejecting the morality of his Christian youth, Crowley set out to overturn what he saw as the oppressive, hypocritical attitudes of Victorian England, by identifying sex as the most central aspect of the human being and the most profound source of magical power. The popular press, of course, took no end of delight in sensationalizing Crowley's promiscuity, which was described in elaborate, often hilarious detail throughout the newspapers of the day. He and his degenerate band of followers were described in the most scandalous terms as "a blasphemous sect whose proceedings lend themselves to immorality of the most revolting character," whose main goal was "to fill their moneybags by encouraging others to gratify their depraved tastes."[15]

Crowley did little to deny this popular image. As he wrote in his *Confessions*, the main reason for the violent turmoil of the modern world lies in the repression of the sexual instinct. Conversely, the surest way to solve our contemporary problems lies in its liberation:

> The feeling that [sex] is shameful and the sense of sin cause concealment, which . . . creates distortion, neurosis and ends in explosion. We deliberately produce an abscess and wonder why it is full of pus . . . why

> it bursts in stench and corruption. The *Book of the Law* solves the sexual problem completely. Each individual has an absolute right to satisfy his sexual instinct. . . . The one injunction is to treat all such acts as sacraments.[16]

Thus, Crowley lived what Foucault calls the "repressive hypothesis"—that is, the belief that modern Western society has denied sexuality and what is most needed is the full liberation of the sexual instinct. "Love was a challenge to Christianity," Crowley writes, "it was a degradation and damnation."[17] Yet as Foucault points out, it is inaccurate to say that the Victorian era was one of repression and silence about sex. On the contrary, since the late nineteenth century, with the publication of scientific and medical manuals like Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and continuing with Freud's preoccupation with libido in all its disguises, Western culture was saturated with a kind of "hyper-development of discourse about sexuality,"[18] which was now classified and categorized in endless detail. Crowley was a key part of this larger obsession with sex, particularly in its most deviant and transgressive forms.

Crowley's sexual-magical practices generally blend both Eastern and Western traditions, melding Indian techniques like Tantra with European magical arts. It is possible that Crowley was first introduced to the more radical left-hand (*vamachara*) form of Tantra in Ceylon as early as 1901. Infamous for its use of normally forbidden substances, such as meat, wine and sexual intercourse, *vamachara* Tantra is considered the most rapid and dangerous path to liberation. By crossing the boundary between purity and impurity, the Tantrika seeks a superhuman source of power that oversteps all conventional social and moral structures.[19] Although Crowley initially seems to have been rather repulsed by the "follies of Vamacharya [sic] (debauchery)," he would eventually begin to experiment in sexual rituals of his own. Already in 1902, Crowley and his partner Rose had begun to engage in a series of "secret rites of a sexual nature (related to Tantric practices, such as the emulation of the passive Shiva in a cosmic coupling with the mounted energetic Shakti)."[20]

In addition to Indian traditions, however, Crowley also drew a good deal of inspiration from a variety of Western sexual practices. Much of this derives from the well-known American spiritualist Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–75), who developed the most influential system of sexual magic in modern times.[21] A number of European secret societies and esoteric brotherhoods adopted Randolph's teachings on sex magic, the most important of which was the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), founded by Karl Kellner and Theodor Reuss in the late nineteenth century. According to the O.T.O., the secret of sexual magic is in fact "the key to all Masonic and Hermetic secrets, which explains all the riddles of nature and the symbolism of all religious systems."[22] The highest of

the O.T.O.'s nine grades of initiation focused on sex magic and the techniques of autoerotic and heterosexual magic.

Crowley became involved with the O.T.O. in 1910 and quickly became its most prominent leader. According to Crowley's account, he was approached by Reuss, who had read a cryptic chapter of his *Book of Lies* and accused him of revealing the innermost secret of the O.T.O: the secret of sexual magic. After the two discussed the matter, Reuss believed that Crowley had stumbled upon the secret on his own. Thus Reuss recommended that Crowley be named the sovereign Grand Master General of Ireland, Iona and the Britains. As Crowley later commented, this secret of sex magic is "of such tremendous importance" that it cannot be used indiscriminately or revealed to the unworthy:

> [I]f this secret [of sexual magic], which is a scientific secret, were perfectly understood . . . there would be nothing which the human imagination can conceive that could not be realized in practice . . . .[23]

One could even produce new atomic elements with this power, according to Crowley!

Crowley's most infamous sexual rite was the full-scale "Gnostic Mass." An elaborate, highly choreographed ceremony, the Mass was designed to provide the O.T.O. with a central ritual analogous to the Catholic Mass. In place of bread and wine, Crowley substituted semen and menstrual fluid as the "Cake of Light and Cup of Wine" to be consumed by the Priest and Priestess. In the course of the ceremony, the Priest "parts a sacred veil with his Lance and embraces the knees of the Priestess," who has removed her robes to embody the "sacred nakedness of the Goddess."[24]

Crowley's most explicitly transgressive practices occurred in the years between 1920 and 1922 at his Abbey of Thelema in Sicily. According to diaries from this period, Crowley believed that he had transcended all moral boundaries and material distinctions, such that even the most defiling substances became for him divine. He describes one performance of his Gnostic Mass in which the sacred Host was replaced with the excrement of his consort, Leah Hirsig, which she then forced him to eat as the Body of God: "My mouth burned," he recounts, "my throat choked, my belly wretched . . . . My teeth grew rotten, my tongue ulcered, raw was my throat; but to her tongue it was ambrosia, in her belly the One God."[25]

I would suggest that Crowley's sexual magic is a striking illustration of what Georges Bataille calls the power of transgression, which is a central aspect of eroticism, religious ritual and mystical experience alike. As Bataille suggests, transgression is not a matter of simple hedonism or unrestrained sexual license. Rather, its power lies in the dialectic or play between taboo and transgression, sanctity and sacrilege,

through which one systematically constructs and then oversteps all laws. In ecstatic mystical experience or religious rites, one must first create an aura of purity before one can defile it with violence and the overturning of law. The prohibition is there to be violated. This experience of violation and expenditure links eroticism to the ultimate experience of infinite continuity, that of death. "Eroticism," writes Bataille, "is assenting to life up to the point of death."[26]

Nowhere is this fundamental dialectic between taboo and transgression more apparent than in the case of Crowley. Deliberately overthrowing the sexual restraints of the British world around him, Crowley made it his mission to burst the boundaries of conventional Christian morality in order to liberate the supreme freedom of the individual self: "The sense of shame is cowardly and servile. It is based on the ignorance that one is a star."[27] He seems to have exulted in his own depravity and debasement, going to great lengths to describe his descent into licentious behavior. As he described his relations with his partner Ronnie Minor, "I now do all those things which voluptuaries do . . . but always for an Ulterior End. In this matter I am reproached by that whore of niggers and dogs, with whom I am now living in much worse than adultery."[28]

Crowley found in sexual transgression the most powerful means to shattering the limited rational mind and finite ego. "Mind is a disease of semen," he wrote. "All that a man is or may be is hidden therein . . . man only rises to a glimmer of universal consciousness, while, in orgasm, the mind is blotted out."[29] As Julius Evola suggests, Crowley saw in orgasm (as in drug experience) a means to create "breakages of consciousness," by pushing the mind to a point of *extreme exhaustion* and opening it to the "supersensual."[30] Ultimately, in this moment of excess, the mind dissolves in the abyss of the Infinite, beyond all the structures that confine ordinary mortals. "In love the individuality is slain," Crowley writes, "Love destroyeth self. . . . Love breedeth All and None in One."[31]

At the same time, the magus who dares to break the boundaries between pure and impure, rational and irrational, can also unleash the ultimate magical energy and subdue all creation to his will. "A Sorcerer by the power of his magick has subdued all things to himself. . . . He could fly through space more swiftly than the stars. . . . There was none that did not obey his bidding. In the whole system of ten million times ten million spheres . . . he has his desire."[32]

In sum, Crowley exemplifies the modern Western preoccupation with sex as a whole. He is a stunning exemplar of the "repressive hypothesis," or the idea that modern society is prudishly repressed and that what is most needed now is the radical liberation of sexual desire as the essence of human nature. As Foucault argues, this alleged "liberation" of sex is less some radical freedom than it is the increasing preoccupation

with and discourse about sex, which now defines and determines our very existence. "We have not in the least liberated sexuality, though we have . . . carried it to its limits: the limit of the law, since it seems the sole substance of our universal taboos."[33]

THE FAUSTIAN SELF: CROWLEY AND THE MODERN WILL TO POWER

In his life, writings and sexual practices, Crowley is a figure far more interesting than the hedonistic drug fiend attacked by the media. Indeed, he reflects some of the central concerns of the twentieth century, embodying the most grandiose aspirations of modern Western culture and foreshadowing its crisis at mid-century. We might say that he manifests the inner contradictions at the heart of modernity itself, its desire for power and transformation, along with the growing terror and disorientation of a world falling apart. "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, joy, growth, transformation . . . and at the same time threatens to destroy everything. . . . It pours us into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal."[34] Crowley seems to have thrown himself into this maelstrom headlong.

While there are many ways of defining modernity, Jürgen Habermas suggests that it is essentially rooted in currents going back to the eighteenth century and the project of the Enlightenment. Among other things, this project was an attempt to develop an objective science, a universal morality and law with the goal of human emancipation and "liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion and superstition."[35] Above all, the project of modernity rested in a fundamental belief in the value of the individual self and the possibility of progress—moving forward toward a truly free but well-ordered society.

These ideals of progress and the celebration of the self also bore with them certain internal tensions, however. By the late nineteenth century, the remarkable new productive and technological tools generated by modernity had unleashed a tremendous force of change, transformation and seeming constant revolution. The speed of development had made the modern world itself seem shifting and ephemeral, shattering any sense of stability, a world "capable of spectacular growth, capable of appalling waste and devastation, capable of everything except solidity and stability."[36] A sense of the fragmentation and impermanence of modern life appears in a wide array of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors, from poets like Charles Baudelaire to sociologists like Emile Durkheim. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, believed that this terrifying change could be heroically embraced by the individual—the *Übermensch*—who affirms the will to power as the "monster of energy," without beginning, without

end. "The modern was nothing more than a vital energy, the will to live and to power, swimming in a sea of disorder, anarchy, destruction, alienation and despair."[37]

According to Marshall Berman, the literary incarnation of the modern spirit is Goethe's Faust. Driven by the ideals of progress and utopian perfection, Faust ends by destroying everything that stands in the way of his vision.

> An epic hero prepared to destroy religious myths . . . and customary ways of life in order to build a brave new world. . . . Faust is a tragic figure. . . . Faust forces himself and everyone else to extremes of . . . pain and exhaustion in order to master nature and create a new landscape."[38]

In response to this growing sense of transformation and collapse of a once stable world, many intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century began to see a need for a wholly new social order. For some like Durkheim, the solution was a new national state and a kind of secular religion to provide the social cohesion once provided by traditional religions. For others like Marx, it was the hope of an egalitarian, classless society based on the recognition of human dignity and the value of labor. And for still others of the 1930s and 1940s it would be the fascist vision of a supremely powerful totalitarian state. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue, "the Enlightenment project was doomed to turn against itself and transform the quest for emancipation into a system of universal oppression."[39] Fascism, in other words, was perhaps the inevitable outcome of the "hubristic aggressive ego of the Faustian individual."[40]

Crowley is one of the clearest examples of these contradictory, conflicting forces that characterize the late modern period: the affirmation of the individual self and progress, as well as the complete liberation of the forces of transformation and destruction. With his central belief that "every man and woman is a star" and his motto of "do what thou wilt," Crowley took the modern sanctification of the Self to its furthest conclusion. Indeed, he would set up his own religion of the Self in place of the religion of the "Dying God," Christ: "The Law of Thelema avows and justifies selfishness; it confirms the inmost conviction of each one of us that he is the centre of the cosmos."[41]

At the same time, Crowley also clearly reflected the destructive side of the late modern era, the sense of accelerating change and the violently creative power of the human will. Nowhere is the dizzying, electrifying and yet terrifying sense of change more apparent than in his *Diary of a Drug Fiend*. According to the recurring *mantra* of the book. "Every day in every way it gets better and better." As Pendragon and Lou careen wildly on heroin and cocaine, whirling "from pleasure to pleasure in an inexhaustible rush," the entire world becomes a bewildering

blur of transformation. Even amidst this frantic blur of modern life, however, they see a glimmer of the eternal:

> Lou and I were living minute by minute, second by second. A tick of the clock marked for us an interval of eternity. . . . We were living according to the instruction of the Savior: "Take no thought for the morrow.". . . Limitations were abhorrent.[42]

Through the intensity of cocaine and heroin bliss, they experience the ultimate sense of self-deification, an expansive, all-consuming feeling of power. "The feeling of mastery increases to a point that nothing matters at all."[43]

As Crowley himself observed, his wildly unrestrained characters are not unlike the whole state of the modern West—"like Europe after the war," driven relentlessly on by the need for wealth and the endless consumption of resources. He goes on to observe that it was precisely this unrestrained will to power that enabled the British to conquer huge portions of the world and build one of the largest empires ever known: "When one is on cocaine's honeymoon, one really is . . . superior to one's fellows. One attacks every problem with perfect confidence. . . . The British Empire is due to this spirit."[44] British soldiers, much like drug users, functioned with the confidence inspired by ignorance of their true situation.

Like other intellectuals of his day, Crowley too had his own vision of a new social order that would heal the ills of his generation. In certain respects, he seems to have taken the modern ideal of progress and its utopian vision to the furthest extreme, by proclaiming a whole new era of human history—the aeon of Horus, which would succeed both the matriarchal age of Isis and the patriarchal age of Osiris by freeing the power of the individual will. In Crowley's vision, the Law of Thelema would provide the basis for a wholly new kind of society, one that transcends both the servile superstition of Christianity and the vain ideologies of contemporary politics.

> Already we see . . . that communism is utterly unable to put its principles into practice. . . . We see the paralysis of parliamentary government. . . . The only hope of saving mankind from a catastrophe so complete that the very name of civilization will perish is the appearance of a new religion. The law of Thelema . . . does not deny human nature. . . . It offers every individual the fullest satisfaction of his true aspirations.[45]

For Crowley, the Law of Thelema provides the only solution to all the many competing political systems. It transcends not only the bankrupt ideals of communism and fascism, but also the "disillusioned and effete" dream of democracy, which is only "the political ideal of Christianity in its dying phase."[46] In one of his last and most explicitly political works,

The Scientific Solution to the Problem of Government (1937), Crowley argued that the Law of Thelema provides a "scientific" solution to the false ideologies of other systems, for it is the only system that weds the absolute rule of the state to the absolute liberty of each individual.

> The Scientific solution to all this rampant chaos is the formula, Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law. Let this formula be accepted by every government. . . . The absolute rule of the state shall be a function of the absolute liberty of each individual will.[47]

Crowley had high hopes that his law of Thelema would be adopted by the major political figures of his day and so become the foundation for a new social order. According to his own notes, he clearly believed that the nation that first accepted the *Book of the Law* would become the leading power in the world. Indeed, he initially saw Hitler and the rising power of fascism as a possible vehicle for spreading his new law. He read and made copious marginal notes on Hitler's writings, in which he found much agreement with his law of Thelema. Crowley tried several times to have copies of his work placed in Hitler's hands, suggesting that it would provide "a philosophical basis for Nazism." Quite remarkably, however, when his attempts to sway the Führer failed, he would just as eagerly try to sell his law of Thelema to the British government, as the most necessary way to counter the growing German threat.[48]

THE BEAST WITH TWO BACKS: THE LAST GREAT MODERNIST OR THE FIRST "POSTMODERN"?

Like so many of the utopian dreams of the late modern era, Crowley's dream of a new aeon of Thelema ended in failure. Crowley's own last years might be said to be an allegory for the weariness of Europe itself in the 1930s and 1940s; hence, he expresses the deepest contradictions of the modern West at mid-century and foreshadows many of the contradictions of postmodernism as well. The Great Beast seems to have had two backs, as it were, turned both backward and forward, reflecting the aspirations of a past era and the darkest fears of a new one.

As Habermas observes, the once boundless optimism of the modern era, with its ideal of a perfectly ordered rational society, appears to have dissolved with the events of the two World Wars: "The twentieth century—with its death camps and death squads . . . its threat of nuclear annihilation and its experience of Hiroshima—has certainly shattered this optimism."[49] The dream of human perfection through rapid transformation—that is, Berman's Faustian narrative—could only end in tragic disintegration and violence. "The figure of Faust now appeared in a new symbolic role, as the demon who had wrenched mankind free of its unity with nature and propelled us along the road to catastrophe."[50]

It was in large part out of this sense of the disillusionment, failure, and catastrophe of the modernist project that the concept of postmodernism was born. David Harvey suggests that postmodernism is best understood not as some radical new phenomenon or decisive break with modernism; rather it is merely the expression of certain internal tensions and crises within modernism itself.[51] Most commonly, postmodernism has been defined using Jean-François Lyotard's formulation that it is simply the skepticism toward all metanarratives. It represents the loss of faith in any grand narrative about the history of humankind or civilization, whether it be the Christian narrative of redemption, the Enlightenment narrative of progress toward a rational society, or the scientific narrative of technological advance. In place of any grand narrative about human history, the postmodern tends to celebrate the fragmented, destabilized nature of existence. Whereas modernist authors like Baudelaire sought to discern the eternal within the transience of modern life, the postmodern affirms the sheer play of fragmentation as an exhilarating, terrifying bliss.

Ironically, the modern emphasis on the fragmentary and the ephemeral would lead not just to the dissolution of a traditional social order. It would ultimately lead to the postmodern declaration of the "death of man," as well. The modern celebration of the individual would finally collapse upon itself as the autonomous Cartesian *cogito* was deconstructed and replaced by a fragmented, even schizophrenic cacophony of conflicting identities. In place of the autonomous rational subject or sovereign self, postmodernism emphasizes the sheer intensity of momentary sensual experiences, the polymorphous play of pleasures and desires. According to Daniel Bell, "Postmodernism substitutes instinctual and erotic justifications for humanistic ones. . . . It announced not only the deconstruction of Man and the end of the humanist credo, but also . . . the dissolution of focused sexuality into the polymorph perversity of oral and anal pleasures."[52] In place of the modern autonomous ego, we find what Eugene Halton calls "the postmodern Faustian person, driven by the irrational march of images and fantasies instead of the Grand March of history. . . ."[53]

Virtually all of these seemingly radical new trends in postmodernism were visible over half a century ago in the work of Crowley. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a figure who better expresses this mixed sense of grandiose aspiration and ultimate disillusionment. In his *Book of the Law*, he had made it clear that the transition to the new age of Thelema would involve a violent destruction and devastation of the old familiar world—a devastation perhaps not unlike the one that actually took place with the onset of the two World Wars. "The transformation from the Old Aeon to the New must be total. Fire, blood, and blasphemy are the birth pangs."[54]

Unfortunately, Crowley appears to have been unable to survive his own descent into chaos or to realize the transformative rebirth. Instead, his dream of a new aeon seems to have smashed in final disillusion and drug addiction. As Shepherd comments, "the record is a depressing one

of broken promises, confidence tricks, decadence . . . bodies and minds worn out by sex obsessions, faith destroyed by visions that would not survive the harsh realism of dirt, vulgarity, boredom, lust for life, ego and ultimate obscurity."[55] Already by the 1920s Crowley's various addictions seem to have spun increasingly out of control. As we see in the *Diary of a Drug Fiend*—written rapidly to fund his own growing pharmaceutical needs—Crowley was in many ways the embodiment of the Roaring Twenties and Western capitalism in the decades just before World War II. Pendragon and Lou whirl through life in a blur of sex, drugs and ecstasy, in "an ever-changing phantasmagoria of rapturous sounds and sights." Yet already Pendragon, like Crowley himself, was beginning to reach the point of collapse, and like England itself, Pendragon/Crowley had spent all his capital and had fallen into depression.

E. M. Butler, Cambridge historian and author of the *Myth of the Magus*, visited Crowley in 1946, the last year of his life. According to Butler's account, Crowley looked far older than his 72 years, "not so much wrinkling but decomposing," dying alone but still dreaming of world power. "There he sat, a wreck among ruins . . . dying in penury on the charity of friends, speaking of himself in all seriousness as an 'instrument of Higher Beings who control human destiny'."[56] Like the awesome will to progress that drove so much of modern Europe and then led to its violent ruin at mid-century, Crowley's own magical will appears to have burned out by the end of World War II.

It is in this sense that Crowley can be seen as anticipating the growing sense of fragmentation that characterizes postmodern thought. Long before Lyotard, Crowley had proclaimed the death of all metanarratives and the loss of faith in any grand design to the universe or human history. "The theories of Divine right, aristocratic superiority, the moral order of nature are all today exploded bluffs."[57] Often bitterly ironic throughout his work, he frequently parodied himself as a shameless fraud, even as he proclaimed himself the herald of a new aeon. This becomes particularly apparent in works like *The Book of Lies*, in which Crowley seems to contradict all the grand claims he had made in earlier works like the *Book of the Law*. Here the Master pulls the curtain away from the magic show, declaring all of his own sacred truths to be ridiculous deceptions.

> Holy, Holy, Holy are these Truths that I utter, knowing them to be but falsehoods, broken mirrors. . . . In this utterance of falsehood upon falsehood, whose contradictories are also false, it seems as if that which is uttered were not true. Blessed . . . is this last of the illusions.[58]

Indeed, he even seems to unmask his own motives, by pointing ironically to the profit-driven desires behind the Master's teachings:

> "Teach us Your real secret, Master! . . . beyond all, how to make gold." "But how much gold will you give me for the Secret of Infinite Riches?" Then said the foremost and most foolish: "Master, it is nothing; but here is an hundred thousand pounds." This did I deign to accept, and whispered in his ear this secret: A SUCKER IS BORN EVERY MINUTE.[59]

Ultimately, even Crowley's ideal of the divine Self and the affirmation of the individual will would seem to have fallen into a chaotic play of passions and conflicting drives. As Symonds suggests, Crowley followed a path that went in the opposite direction of the Hindu and Buddhist sages whom he had studied in India. Whereas the Indian disciple rises from the false sense of ego to a state of detached egolessness, Crowley seems to have begun with a lack of a stable ego and lived his life as a shifting legion of desires.

> Crowley made a religion out of his weakness, out of being egoless. . . . Egolessness is a condition which Indian philosophy regards as the supreme state and toward which the *sadhaka* strives, but in Crowley's case, it is the point from which he begins, not the goal of his endeavors.[60]

As such, Crowley serves as a kind of allegory of twentieth-century civilization and foreshadows what would follow in the decades after his death. Shepherd notes that Crowley's attacks on established institutions, his will to transgress all laws, and his dream of a utopian new world personified many of the excesses and contradictions of our own contemporary American culture.

> There is something . . . more than a little American about the story of Aleister Crowley and his drug world—the vanity of the sophisticated, the desperate addiction, the bitter attacks on the fuddy-duddy old Establishment, and the impatience to tear down an old world and hope a new one springs from the ruins.[61]

Thus it is not surprising that there has been a renewal of interest in Crowley during the last two decades. Not only has he been an extremely influential figure in the revival of Paganism and witchcraft, but he has also been a seminal figure in growing interest in sexual magic and Tantra in contemporary America. Today, one need only browse the shelves of any book store to find a range of magazines, videos and texts bearing titles like *Tantra without Tears*; *Sex, Magic, Tantra and Tarot;* and *Secrets of Western Tantra,* most of which are based on a mixture of (often somewhat deformed) Indian Tantra and Crowleyian sex Magick.

CONCLUSIONS: AFTER THE ORGY

Figures like Crowley are important, not only for our understanding of Western occultism and magic, but also for the comparative study of religion and modern culture as a whole. Far from being a deviant rebel

or enemy of the modern world, Crowley is better understood as a kind of crystallization or "dialectical image" of the many cultural contradictions at the heart of the twentieth century itself. Historians of religions ought to look closely at Faustian figures and "holy madmen" like Crowley. We need to take seriously scandalous Eastern Gurus like Osho-Rajneesh or Chogyam Trungpa, as well as controversial American religious leaders like L. Ron Hubbard and Marshall Applewhite.[62] They may well give us some surprising insights into the cultural contradictions in our own complex era of global religion and transnational capitalism at the start of a new millennium.

For Crowley is surely no less relevant for our own generation. Perhaps most importantly, he provides some telling insights into the contemporary preoccupation with sexuality, which now saturates society through media, television and advertising. As Angus McLaren observes, "Today's media, while claiming to be shocked by the subversiveness of carnal desires, deluge the public with explicit sexual imagery to sell everything from Calvin Klein jeans to Black and Decker power drills."[63] In keeping with Foucault, it is probably *not* true that Westerners have liberated sex in any radical way; rather what we *have* done is to intensify our discourse about sex, arguing and fantasizing about it as an endless source of titillation. At the same time, we have also taken sex to the furthest possible extremes—to extremes of transgression and excess, not resting until we have violated every taboo.

One might well argue, as Baudrillard has, that we are now living in a kind of "post-orgy world."[64] After all, the great social and sexual revolutions have broken every imaginable taboo. Yet this has left us in a strange "undefined state," in which we are left questioning our very being, just as Crowley did. The sex magician, drug addict, philosopher and entrepreneur seems to have asked himself in the end, what is there left to do after every forbidden desire has been indulged and every taboo transgressed? We might well ask ourselves the same question.

ENDNOTES

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans.Walter Kauffmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 48.

[2] Quoted in Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 422.

[3] In addition to Crowley's own autobiography (*The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, ed. John Symonds [New York: Hill and Wang, 1969]), there are many popular biographies; see John Symonds, *The Great Beast: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: Roy, 1952); and *The Magic of Aleister Crowley* (London: Frederick Muller, 1958); Francis King, *The Magical World of Aleister Crowley* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977);

Gerald Suster, *The Legacy of the Beast: the Life, Work and Influence of Aleister Crowley* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1989); and most recently, Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000). On Crowley's role in literature, see Martin Booth, *Aleister Crowley: Selected Poems* (London: Crucible, 1986); and Stoddard Martin, *Orthodox Heresy: The Rise of "Magic" as Religion and its Relation to Literature* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989).

[4] Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 169.

[5] Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 15.

[6] Crowley uses the spelling "Magick" to distinguish his art—the art of changing nature in accordance with one's Will—from most vulgar understandings of the term. See *The Law is for All: The Authorized Popular Commentary on Liber AL sub figura CCXX, The Book of the Law* (Tempe, AZ: New Falcon Publications, 1996), 39.

[7] Colin Wilson, *The Occult* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 362.

[8] "Scarlet Woman" is Crowley's term for Rose Kelly.

[9] Symonds, Introduction to Crowley, *Confessions*, xxii. See Crowley, *The Law is for All*, 47ff.

[10] Leslie Shepherd, Foreword to Aleister Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (Hyde Park: University Books, 1970), i–ii.

[11] Wilson, *The Occult*, 373.

[12] Suster, *The Legacy of the Beast*, 75.

[13] John Symonds, *The Beast 666* (London: Pindar, 1997), 585.

[14] Symonds, Introduction to *Confessions*, xiii. On Crowley as "Zeitgeist," see Martin, *Orthodox Heresy*, 188.

[15] "An Amazing Sect," *The Looking Glass* (October 29, 1910): 9–10.

[16] Crowley, *Confessions*, 874–75.

[17] Crowley, *Confessions*, 350. On the "repressive hypothesis" see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

[18] Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: the Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981), 6–7. See also Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), 117.

[19] On sexual ritual and transgression in Tantra, see Hugh B. Urban "The Path of Power: Impurity, Kingship and Sacrifice in Assamese Tantra," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 4 (2001): 597–637. On Crowley's possible Tantric influences, see idem, "The Omnipotent Oom: Tantra and its Impact on Modern Western Esotericism," *Esoterica: The Journal of Esoteric Studies* 3 (2001): 218–59.

[20] Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 141

[21] John Patrick Deveney, *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian and Sex Magician* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 317. According to Randolph, the moment of orgasm is the most intense and powerful experience in human life, for it is the moment when the soul is suddenly opened to the divine realm and the breath of God infuses life into this world. In Randolph's words, "True sex power is God power."

[22] *Oriflamme* (1904): 18, in R. Swinburne Clymer, *The Rosicrucian Fraternity in America: Authentic and Spurious Organizations* (Quakertown: The Rosicrucian Foundation, n.d.), v.II, 541. On the O.T.O., see Peter-Robert Koenig, "The OTO Phenomenon," *Theosophical History* 4, no. 3 (1992): 92–8.

[23] Crowley, *Confessions*, 767. Most of the sexual magic rites were revealed in the VIII, IX and XI of the O.T.O. degrees are divided as follows: "VIII = autoerotic practice; IX = heteroerotic practice; XI = homoerotic practice," in U. D. Frater, *Secrets of Western Sex Magic* (St. Paul: Llewellyn, 2001), 138.

[24] Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 234.

[25] John Symonds and Kenneth Grant, eds. *The Diaries of Aleister Crowley: The Magical Record of the Beast 666* (London: Duck Editions, 2001), 235.

[26] Geroges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 11.

[27] Crowley, *Confessions*, 955.

[28] Crowley, 1918 Diary (O.T.O Archives), cited in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 265. The expression "whore of niggers and dogs" was what Crowley called his partner, Ronnie Minor.

[29] Crowley, *Book of Lies*, 25, 26.

[30] Julius Evola, *The Metaphysics of Sex* (New York: Inner Traditions, 1983), 264, 266.

[31] Crowley, *Book of Lies*, 65.

[32] Crowley, *Book of Lies*, 63.

[33] Foucault, *Religion and Culture*, 57.

[34] Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 15.

[35] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (London: Blackwell, 1989), 12. See Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 9.

[36] Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 15–16.

[37] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 15.

[38] Berman, quoted in Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 16.

[39] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 15. See also Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).

[40] Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson, *Global Modernities* (London: Sage, 1995), 20–1.

[41] Crowley, *Confessions*, 873, 939.

[42] Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, 45, 47.

[43] Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, 60–1.

[44] Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, 43–4.

[45] Crowley, *Confessions*, 936.

[46] Symonds, *The Magic of Aleister Crowley*, 25.

[47] Aleister Crowley, *The Scientific Solution to the Problem of Government* (London: O.T.O., 1947), quoted in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 383.

[48] Crowley, "Propositions for consideration of H.M. [His Majesty's] Government," written October 1936 (O.T.O. Archives), quoted in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 380.

[49] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 13. See also Habermas, "Modernity."

[50] Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, 82; and Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity*, 6–7.

[51] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 116. In my discussion of "postmodernism," I rely primarily on more critical authors like Harvey, Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Terry Eagleton, "Awakening from Modernity," *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1987. The term has been definedin different ways in different fields. Alex Callinicos, for example, defines three trends in postmodernism: 1) a philosophical trend, characterized by poststructuralism (Foucault, Derrida, etc.); 2) a social trend, especially theories of postindustrial capitalism; and 3) a cultural trend, originating in reactions against modernist abstraction in painting and architecture. "Reactionary Postmodernism?" in *Postmodernism and Society*, ed. Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

[52] Waters, *Daniel Bell*, 139.

[53] Eugene Halton, "The Modern Error: Or, the Unbearable Enlightenment of Being," in *Global Modernities*, ed. M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 27.

[54] Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 130.

[55] Shepherd, Introduction to Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, v.

[56] E. M. Butler, *Paper Boats: An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1959), 167–68, 173.

[57] Crowley, *The Scientific Solution to the Problem of Government*, quoted in Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, 383.

[58] Crowley, *Book of Lies*, 31.

[59] Crowley, *Book of Lies*, 185.

[60] Symonds, Introduction to Crowley, *Confessions*, xxi. See also Martin, *Orthodox Heresy*, 171.

[61] Shepherd, Introduction to Crowley, *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, vii–viii.

[62] See Hugh B. Urban, "Zorba the Buddha: Capitalism, Charisma and the Cult of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh," *Religion* 26 (1996): 161–82; and idem, "The Devil at Heaven's Gate: Rethinking the Study of Religion in the Age of Cyber-Space," *Nova Religio* 3, no. 2 (2000): 268–302.

[63] Angus McLaren, *Twentieth Century Sexuality: A History* (London: Blackwell, 1999), 1.

[64] Jean Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso, 1988), 46.