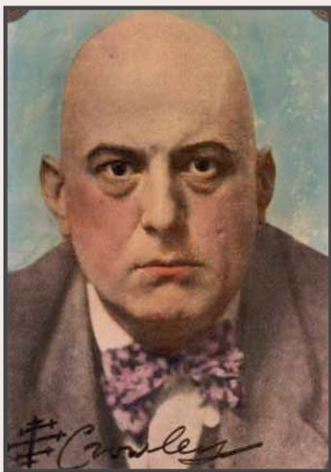


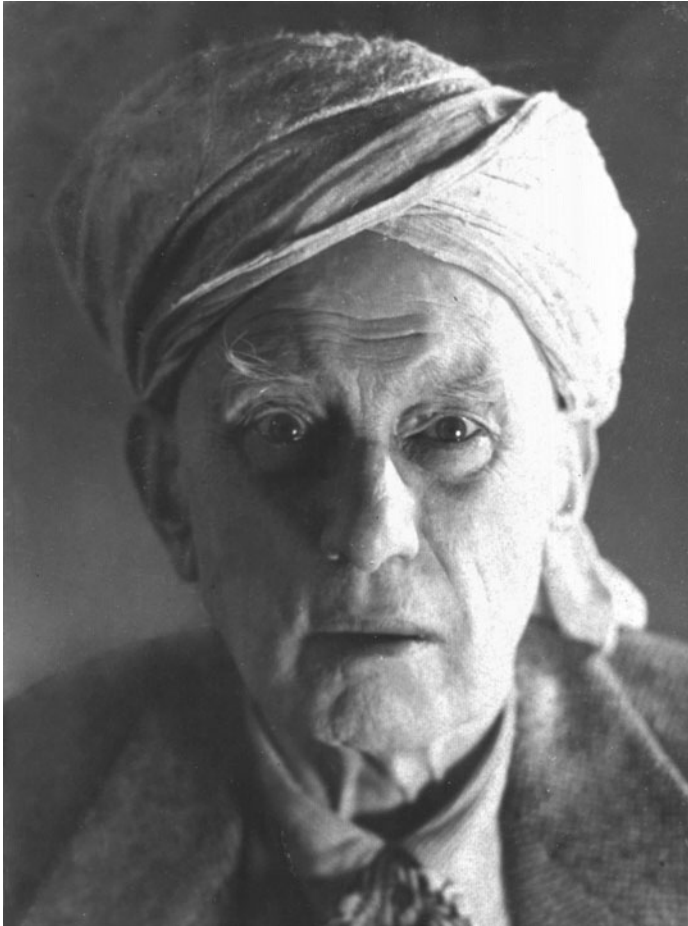
Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism



Edited & introduced by

HENRIK BOGDAN & MARTIN P. STARR

*Aleister Crowley and Western
Esotericism*



Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).

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MARTIN P. STARR

Foreword by

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

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Contents

<i>Foreword: Bringing Light to the Underground</i>	vii
WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF	
<i>Contributors</i>	xi
1. Introduction	3
HENRIK BOGDAN AND MARTIN P. STARR	
2. The Sorcerer and His Apprentice: Aleister Crowley and the Magical Exploration of Edwardian Subjectivity	15
ALEX OWEN	
3. Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice	53
MARCO PASI	
4. Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon: Dispensationalism and Millenarianism in the Thelemic Tradition	89
HENRIK BOGDAN	
5. The Great Beast as a Tantric Hero: The Role of Yoga and Tantra in Aleister Crowley's Magick	107
GORDAN DJURDJEVIC	
6. Continuing Knowledge from Generation unto Generation: The Social and Literary Background of Aleister Crowley's Magick	141
RICHARD KACZYNSKI	
7. Aleister Crowley and the Yezidis	181
TOBIAS CHURTON	
8. Frenzies of the Beast: The Phaedran <i>Furores</i> in the Rites and Writings of Aleister Crowley	209
MATTHEW D. ROGERS	

9. Aleister Crowley—Freemason?!	227
MARTIN P. STARR	
10. “The One Thought That Was Not Untrue”: Aleister Crowley and A. E. Waite	243
ROBERT A. GILBERT	
11. The Beast and the Prophet: Aleister Crowley’s Fascination with Joseph Smith	255
MASSIMO INTROVIGNE	
12. Crowley and Wicca	285
RONALD HUTTON	
13. Through the Witch’s Looking Glass: The Magick of Aleister Crowley and the Witchcraft of Rosaleen Norton	307
KEITH RICHMOND	
14. The Occult Roots of Scientology? L. Ron Hubbard, Aleister Crowley, and the Origins of a Controversial New Religion	335
HUGH B. URBAN	
15. Satan and the Beast: The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Modern Satanism	369
ASBJØRN DYRENDAL	
<i>Index</i>	395

Foreword

BRINGING LIGHT TO THE UNDERGROUND

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

STUDYING WESTERN ESOTERICISM is much like applying psychotherapy to the history of thought. Its first requirement is not to be satisfied with surface appearances and not to take for granted what the official narratives tell us, but to be curious about what they prefer *not* to talk about: the presence of subterranean archives, or memory vaults, where we store away everything we do not want to accept because it differs too much from our ideal image of ourselves and our cherished values. The German language has found a beautiful expression for this, in speaking of the occult as the *Untergrund des Abendlandes*.¹ These archives of suppressed memories do not exist just metaphorically but quite literally as well. Scholars of Western esotericism spend much of their time—or so one hopes!—reading and analyzing the primary sources of rejected knowledge: volumes that have been gathering dust on library shelves because nobody reads them anymore, books and manuscripts of authors who never made it into the canon of acceptable and respectable academic literature, or dropped out of it at some point in time, and so on. Such research may resemble a hunt for forgotten treasure, and it is true that, buried underneath lots of stuff that has not withstood the test of time, genuine gems wait to be found; with luck, one will come across profound thinkers and texts of high quality that should never have been forgotten and deserve to be recovered for their intrinsic merits alone. This hope for exciting discoveries is familiar to all working historians, but in the case of Western esotericism, more is at stake. There is a structural logic to the *Untergrund des Abendlandes*: far from being just a random collection of things that have happened to fall by the wayside, it is a reservoir that represents the shadow side of our own official identity, and we need to learn more about it if we wish to understand ourselves.

The basic identity of modern Western culture rests upon two pillars: a religious tradition of monotheism that defines itself with reference to Jewish

and Christian scripture, and a tradition of rationality and science that sees itself as hailing back to the Greeks and culminating in modern science and Enlightenment. Summarized very briefly, the former is defined as standing against “paganism,” the latter as standing against unreason and superstition. But if one tries to look beyond this official image, one discovers a historical reality that is much more complex and messy. Christianity did not simply triumph over paganism during the first centuries of the Common Era; on the contrary, ever since Platonism was accepted into Christian theology by a range of early church fathers, theologians and philosophers had to deal with a continuous presence of paganism *inside* Christianity, not as some kind of alien entity but as an integral part of its intellectual fabric. Only the more radical representatives of the Reformation were more or less successful in exorcizing pagan speculation from Christianity, but at the high price of setting in motion a process of rationalization that ultimately caused Enlightenment thinkers to throw out the Christian baby along with the pagan bathwater. The so-called Age of Reason was also an age of illuminism, theosophy, and other forms of esotericism, and the new scientists and rationalist philosophers were perfectly aware of the fact. The Enlightenment defined its very identity against this contemporary esoteric culture, by means of rejecting what now came to be known by generic labels such as *magic* and *the occult*: terms referring to a wastebasket category that contained everything associated with pagan superstitions and now successfully demonized or ridiculed as “irrational” nonsense. In this process of identity formation by means of polemical exclusion, “pagan” traditions were tacitly divested of their traditional status as players in the field of history and transformed into nonhistorical universals of human thinking and behavior: instead of discussing intellectual or religious traditions such as “Platonism” or “Hermeticism,” one could now simply speak of “irrationality,” “prejudice,” or “stupidity.”²

As the outcome of these developments, Western esotericism still functions in the academic imagination as the structural “other” of our collective modern identity, with its Christian roots and its commitment to rationality and science. It is like a dark canvas that allows us to draw the contours of our own identity in shining colors of light and truth. It is for this reason we have a vested interest in keeping it dark: if esoteric or occult currents and ideas are seen as integral parts of Christian culture, if their representatives appear to be capable of rational thinking, if they have contributed to genuine science, or their worldviews are reflective of modern and progressive tendencies—and all these things are in fact abundantly demonstrated by modern research—then the canvas begins to brighten up and it becomes more difficult to decipher

what “we” are supposed to be all about. To preserve our identity, we would prefer “the occult” to stay in its own place: dark must be dark, light must be light, and never the twain should meet.

Few personalities seem to represent the dark side of the occult more extremely than the English magus and enfant terrible Aleister Crowley. There is no doubt that during his life, he did everything he could to set himself up as the perfect opposite of mainstream Western society and all its traditional values. Crowley was the self-proclaimed Beast from the Abyss who preached an anti-Christian religion revealed by a pagan deity or demon; he was the paragon of sexual perversion who experimented with every conceivable form of immorality; and, in an age of science and rational progress, he was the prophet of “magick” who was apparently bent on reviving all the “superstitions” of the past. It might seem hard to find clearer evidence for the allegedly anti-Christian, antirational, and antimodern nature of the occult: if mainstream society and its representatives have a vested interest in keeping the occult as dark as possible, one might say that Crowley was more than willing to oblige.

By playing the role of the demonic “other” to perfection, then, Crowley confirmed and strengthened the established canon and gave Christians and rationalists every argument they needed to keep seeing themselves as good and the occult as evil. Ironically, the present collection of scholarly essays might be much more profoundly subversive in its implications than Crowley’s own strategies of provocation, because it does not accept the black-and-white stereotypes at face value but brings color and depth to the dark canvas by going into intricate detail, exploring a whole range of historical contexts, and asking uncomfortable questions. In his very criticism of modernity and his deliberate return to archaic traditions, Crowley turns out to have been a modernist. In his explorations of “magick” and altered states of consciousness, he turns out to have been a rationalist. And it could even be claimed—consider, for example, the profoundly biblical language of his experiential narratives in *The Vision and the Voice*—that in his very rejection of established Christianity he was a heretical Christian. In short: rather than representing their radical opposite, the Crowley phenomenon—including not only the Beast himself but also a vibrant contemporary subculture of Crowleyites, with multiple ramifications in literature, art, music, and film—provides us with a window on the complex *dialectics* of Christianity, rationalism, and modernity. As such, it is among the most extreme illustrations of a point that can be made about the domain of Western esotericism in its entirety. There is a world of difference between how this field, its representatives, and their

ideas exist in the academic and the popular *imagination* and how they exist in the much more complex fabric of historical and social *reality*. If we do not make that distinction, not only will we misunderstand the occult on a very basic level, but we will also remain blind to crucial dimensions of modern culture and society.

Let the reader be warned, then: this collection of critical studies has much to teach him, but it is not for the fainthearted or the frivolous. It will introduce him to a strange, often grotesque, and profoundly disturbing world in which travelers are invited to question some of their most familiar assumptions, a world where nothing is quite what it might seem to be at first sight, and where established boundaries and distinctions seem to exist only in order to be transgressed. This field trip into the underground is supposed to affect the traveler and change his perspective: if his familiar world still looks the same at his return home, then he has been no more than a tourist watching “the primitives” from the air-conditioned safety of his touring bus. The intelligent reader will know better: he will realize that in looking at the shadow side of Western culture, we are ultimately looking at ourselves.

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Notes

1. Helmut Möller and Ellic Howe, *Merlin Peregrinus: Vom Untergrund des Abendlandes* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1986). The formulation hints at the title of Oswald Spengler’s famous *Untergang des Abendlandes*. The expression *Abendland* (literally, evening-land—that is, the land of the setting sun) has no direct equivalent in English.
2. For a detailed analysis of the process summarized here in a few lines, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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Century Esotericism: From the Anthroposophical Society to the Thoth Tarot” (2011), and the forthcoming historical study *Forgotten Templars: The Untold Origins of Ordo Templi Orientis*.

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Marco Pasi is assistant professor in history of Hermetic philosophy and related currents at the University of Amsterdam. He has written extensively on the history of occultism, on the concept of magic, and on methodological issues concerning the study of Western esotericism. He is the author of *Aleister Crowley e la tentazione della politica* (1999), translated into several languages. He has edited *Peintures inconnues d’Aleister Crowley: La collection de Palerme* (2008) and coedited *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations* (2010). He is the chief editor of the Aries Book Series.

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*Aleister Crowley and Western
Esotericism*

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I

Introduction

Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr

THE FIRST COLLECTION devoted to critical studies of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) requires some justification for its publication. The image of Crowley, so far as one exists in the dominant culture, is one of a stock figure of transgression and evil, the godfather of contemporary Satanism and the advocate of every kind of excess, from sex to drugs and, with some posthumous assistance from pop musicians, rock and roll. What claim does a countercultural life more fit for tabloid coverage possess for contemporary academic attention?

These collected essays reveal a developing notion of Crowley's legacy and influence. He was an influential twentieth-century religious synthesist. His esotericism was not a reversion to a medieval worldview; instead, in its questing for a vision of the self, it was a harbinger of modernity. Crowley acknowledged that his negative reputation served as a useful filter for the credulous and a near-complete bar to acceptance of his philosophy by his peers. He stood apart and claimed for his intellectual isolation a cosmic purpose. His mission was that of a charismatic prophet of a new dispensation for humankind that proclaimed the absolute liberty of the individual to self-actualize without regard for the moral codes and religious strictures of prior ages. The individual means to this end was through the practices of his occult bricolage, which he termed "magick," a thoroughly eclectic and highly personal combination of spiritual exercises drawn from Western European magical traditions and primarily Indic sources for meditation and Yoga disciplines. To this journey of self-liberation Crowley added the power of sexuality as a magical discipline. Crowley saw sexual magic as a simple and direct method of achieving the talismanic ends of the operator without the material trappings of ceremonial magic; the power is in the mind of the practitioner.

Yet Crowley as a proponent of a new religious movement does not fit neatly into a generalized construct of a charismatic revelator. Rather, it was a position into which he grew without seemingly abandoning his prior worldview. Before he assumed the role of prophet of a new age and promulgator of a scripture, *The Book of the Law* (1904), that could not be changed “so much as the style of a letter,” as a university student he sought to understand philosophy and empirical science. His reaction against the fundamentalist faith of his childhood predicated on biblical inerrancy led him to seek for religious truths that could be justified in terms of the science and philosophy to which he was first exposed while at Cambridge. Crowley’s signal contribution to Western esotericism was his attempt to legitimate his essentially religious approach to reality through appeals to elements of philosophical and empirical skepticism.¹ His first critical interpreter, J. F. C. Fuller, described Crowley’s philosophical position as “Crowleyanity: or in other words, according to the mind of the reader;—Pyrrhonic-Zoroastrianism, Pyrrhonic-Mysticism, Sceptical Transcendentalism, Sceptical-Theurgy, Sceptical-Energy, Scientific-Illuminism, or what you will; for in short it is the conscious communion with God on the part of an Atheist, a transcending of reason by scepticism of the instrument, and the limitation of scepticism by direct consciousness of the Absolute.”² In Crowley’s view, contemporary science and revealed religion had failed to answer their own questions because of their inherent methodological limitations; the ultimate truths were to be found only in a union of their epistemological strengths. Crowley chose as the motto of his occult journal, *The Equinox*, “The Method of Science; the Aim of Religion.” Magick was the third way.

Crowley’s individualist personality is tightly bound with the development of his theory and praxis. Although he has been the subject of several full-length biographies,³ the abundant details of his chronicled life tend to obscure the dominant trends in the development of his intellectual and spiritual topoi. Crowley was born in 1875 into a normative British upper-middle-class Victorian family. What set them apart from the mainstream of society was their commitment to the totalizing religious culture of the Exclusive Brethren sect of the Plymouth Brethren, an evangelical Christian restorationist movement. The high-demand religious practices combined with the rigid moralism (and apparent hypocrisy) of the Plymouth Brethren nurtured in the adolescent Crowley a sense of anomie. He rebelled, and in the process of the separation from his family he defined himself oppositionally to their God, taking as his model the “Great Beast” of Revelation, a primary text in the Plymouth Brethren’s historical-grammatical method of scriptural interpretation. John Nelson

Darby, a central figure in the movement, developed a premillennial dispensational theology whose constructs shaped Crowley's worldview. Dispensationalism understood biblical history as a series of ages marked by covenants between God and his people. Premillennialism points to a blissful future in which God's rule will be established on earth by the return of Jesus. For Crowley there was little doubt that the comfortable world into which he was born was destined to be overthrown by a messiah.

Crowley attended Cambridge but did not receive a degree, having had a revelation that he should devote his life to religion. The form his devotion took was twofold from the start: sex and esotericism. He needed no schooling in the former, but by 1898 he found the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (GD), which appeared to offer authentic instruction in Western esotericism and an initiatic gateway to the true invisible Rosicrucian order. His involvement with the GD was short-lived, as the London body broke apart over disputes regarding the legitimacy of its historical claims and the derived authority of one of its founders, S. L. Mathers. The lasting influences on Crowley were the GD's hierarchical structure of initiation based on the structure of the kabbalistic Tree of Life and its synthesis of Western esotericism.

With the seeming failure to find the "Hidden Church of the Holy Grail" incarnate in the GD, Crowley turned to the East and explored Yoga and Buddhism in India and Burma. Mysticism as such had not been a part of the curriculum of the GD. Crowley found that the training of concentration through yogic exercises formed a useful adjunct to the ceremonial methods of Western esotericism.

What Crowley described as a break from his past took place in Cairo in April of 1904. He was practicing ceremonial magical invocations with his wife, who (as Crowley relates the story) suddenly began to state that the Egyptian god Horus was waiting for him. Following her ritual instructions, Crowley claims to have received a text via direct voice, *The Book of the Law*, a revelation of a new age of which Crowley, in his persona of the "Great Beast," was the prophet. The past Aeon of Osiris, manifested as patriarchal religion and society, was to be replaced by the coming Aeon of Horus, the divine child, an eidolon of individual freedom. The Greek word *thelema* (will) was the "word" of the "law" of the Aeon of Horus, encapsulated in its seemingly antinomian dictum "Do what thou wilt."

Crowley was not quick to accept in its totality the charismatic authority granted him by *The Book of the Law*. His sense that its revelation put him at the head of the spiritual hierarchy vacated by S. L. Mathers first led him to form the A.∴A.∴ in 1909; this order combined the ceremonial magic of the

GD with the Eastern practices he had learned, structured as a teacher–student chain of authority. He published the teachings of the order in a semiannual journal, *The Equinox* (1909–1913). Mathers sued Crowley over his publication in *The Equinox* of the “Rosicrucian” inner-order ritual of the GD; the publicity led to Crowley’s taking a leadership role in another neo-Rosicrucian group, the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), a mixed masonic group that had at its center a closely guarded secret: the theory and practice of sexual magic. By the close of 1913 and Crowley’s departure for the United States, he had two interconnected esoteric movements under his direction that he turned gradually into vehicles for the promotion of his revelation of Thelema and the Aeon of Horus. Like the GD, both groups had small memberships. Unlike Mathers, who could count W. B. Yeats among his colleagues, Crowley attracted mainly followers of marginal cultural or social influence.

World War I kept Crowley in the United States, from which he led the small groups of his followers in Canada, Britain, South Africa, and Australia. The movements did not flourish, and Crowley, unable to find a market for his books, wandered Europe and North Africa in an obscurity only briefly broken by the furor over the publication of his roman à clef *The Diary of a Drug Fiend* (1922). His textbook *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1930) had little distribution; he published other occult texts privately in small editions principally for his disciples. His last major work, *The Book of Thoth* (1944), was his exposition of the tarot, with the cards designed under his direction. When Crowley died in Hastings, England, in 1947, his life was framed by accounts in American newsmagazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* as that of a fringe religious eccentric; this view was to dominate for several decades.

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a revival of interest in Crowley, and many works by Crowley that had been out of print for decades were reissued. Instrumental in these publishing ventures were two of Crowley’s former secretaries, Israel Regardie in the United States and Kenneth Grant in England. Regardie, who had been Crowley’s secretary from 1928 to 1932, was a prolific author and central to the reemergence of the GD. Apart from his biography of Crowley, *The Eye in the Triangle* (1970), Regardie edited and introduced Crowley’s *AHA* (1969), *The Vision and the Voice* (1972), *The Holy Books of Thelema* (1972), *Book Four* (1972), *Magick without Tears* (1973), *The Qabalah of Aleister Crowley* (1973), *The Law Is for All* (1975), and *Gems from “The Equinox”* (1974), a massive volume that included the bulk of the magical and mystical writings from the first volume of *The Equinox*. Grant, who had acted as Crowley’s secretary for a period in 1944, collaborated with Crowley’s literary executor, John Symonds, in introducing and editing a number of

Crowley's books, including *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* (1969), *The Magical Record of the Beast 666* (1972), *The Diary of a Drug Fiend* (1972), *Moonchild* (1972), *Magick* (1973), *Magical and Philosophical Commentaries on "The Book of the Law"* (1974), and *The Complete Astrological Writings* (1974), and by writing an introduction to *The Heart of the Master* (1973). It was also during this period that Grant began to publish his three so-called Typhonian Trilogies, commencing with *The Magical Revival* in 1972, which were completed thirty years later with *The Ninth Arch* (2002).

Crowley's writings on magick, mysticism, sexuality, and drugs appealed to tastes of the time, and Crowley quickly became something of an antinomian icon for the counterculture movement and the flower-power generation. In fact, the Beatles included his image on the cover of their album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), where he is the second person from the left in the back row, and Led Zeppelin inscribed the vinyl of their album *Led Zeppelin III* (1970) with Crowley's central motto, "Do what thou wilt," while David Bowie sang, "I'm closer to the Golden Dawn / Immersed in Crowley's uniform / Of imagery" in the song "Quicksand," included on his album *Hunky Dory* (1971). The increasing number of books in print by Crowley coincided with a resurgence of activity within Thelemic organizations. Some of these groups were quite small and were active for only a few years, such as the Solar Lodge, which was active in the United States during the late 1960s, while others established themselves quite firmly on the esoteric scene. The largest of these latter groups is the Ordo Templi Orientis, which was reactivated around 1969 in California by a number of old-time members of the OTO under the leadership of Grady Louis McMurtry, who assumed the title of caliph. McMurtry's authority was challenged, however, by the Brazilian Thelemite Marcelo Motta and his Society Ordo Templi Orientis. In 1985 a court in California ruled in favor of McMurtry, and the OTO has since established itself as an international organization with a few thousand members worldwide. The early 1970s also saw the commencement of what is usually referred to as the Typhonian OTO (now called the Typhonian Order) under the leadership of Kenneth Grant, with its first official announcement published around 1973.

However, the importance of Crowley as a field of study lies not so much in his reception by the counterculture movement and popular culture, or in the various Thelemic new religious movements, as in the fact that Crowley can be used as an example of religious change in Western culture. Not only can Crowley's esoteric writings be seen as a prime example of what Wouter Hanegraaff has described as "secularized esotericism," but also, and perhaps

more important, the study of Crowley reveals that he in many ways encapsulates central discourses of modernity and contemporary spirituality. In fact, Crowley is a harbinger of what Paul Heelas has termed the “sacralization of the self.” This theme is discussed by Alex Owen in chapter 2, “The Sorcerer and His Apprentice: Aleister Crowley and the Magical Exploration of Edwardian Subjectivity,” in which she places Crowley’s magical work in the context of fin de siècle occultism with the argument that Crowley’s magic articulates a modern sense of the self. Owen interprets the magical exploration of John Dee’s “Aethyrs” that Crowley conducted together with his disciple Victor Neuburg in 1909 in Algiers as an attempt to understand the full implications of subjectivity. Although Crowley can be seen as a renovator of magical practice, his ideas on magic did not develop in a hermetically sealed environment; rather, they are reflective of the context in which he lived. Crowley was to all intents and purposes a *bricoleur*, a synthesist of diverse magical, mystical, spiritual, and philosophical ideas and practices. Marco Pasi focuses on two aspects in Crowley’s esoteric work—magic and Yoga—in chapter 3, “Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley’s Views on Occult Practice,” and discusses how Crowley transformed the understanding and the epistemological interpretation of occult practice. Pasi argues that there is an inherent paradox in Crowley’s views on magic on one hand and on Thelema on the other. In his attempt to modernize magic by psychologizing and naturalizing it, he came to understand gods, demons, and other entities as part of the psyche (often implying the unconscious). Crowley interpreted the idea of “Knowledge of and Conversation with the Holy Guardian Angel,” which was a central mystical experience for both the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Crowley’s A.:A.:, as a union with the unconscious part of the mind. The problem for Crowley was that he claimed to be the prophet of a new religion, Thelema, as revealed by a “praeter-human intelligence” called Aiwass in 1904—later identified as his own Holy Guardian Angel. As a revealer of a new religion and dispensation for humankind, Aiwass belongs to the realm of spiritual reality, as opposed to being merely an aspect of Crowley’s unconscious.

In chapter 4, “Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon: Dispensationalism and Millenarianism in the Thelemic Tradition,” Henrik Bogdan discusses the apocalyptic and millenarian understanding of history in the Thelemic tradition, as described in the writings of Crowley, primarily in his own commentaries on *The Book of the Law*. Bogdan argues that despite the fierce anti-Christian nature of Thelema, the Thelemic millenarian view of history is in fact deeply rooted in a Western esoteric understanding of biblical

apocalypticism, as well as in the dispensationalism of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882).

The role of Yoga—and Tantra—is explored by Gordan Djurdjevic in chapter 5, “The Great Beast as a Tantric Hero.” Djurdjevic argues that Crowley’s practice of magick becomes clearer if one understands aspects of it against the background of Yoga and Tantra, especially the hidden aspects and powers of the human body as understood in tantric theory (i.e., *cakras* and the *kundalini*) and the tantric spiritual techniques of “decadence” and “transgression.” One can use the latter techniques to understand the spiritual crisis—or initiation, depending on one’s point of view—that Crowley underwent at the Abbey of Thelema in Cefalù in the period 1920–1923.

Crowley’s understanding of sex as a means to spiritual liberation and enlightenment was not restricted, however, to tantric theories and practices. In chapter 6, “Continuing Knowledge from Generation unto Generation: The Social and Literary Background of Aleister Crowley’s Magick,” Richard Kaczynski traces the various Western sources out of which Crowley synthesized his magical system. Chief among these sources was the vast contemporary literature on sex worship, phallicism, and the worship of the sun. Authors such as Richard Payne Knight and Hargrave Jennings saw solar-phallicism as the true origin of all world religions, and, according to Kaczynski, Crowley picked up these ideas and infused them in his magical and religious worldview, as exemplified by certain passages in the Gnostic Mass he wrote in 1913. Crowley acknowledged freely that he was influenced by various religious traditions, and he often drew on his considerable knowledge of comparative religion in order to elucidate and explain practices and ideas from his magical and religious worldview. One such curious example is his statement that Thelema is related to the Sumerian tradition and that the “author” of *The Book of the Law*, Aiwass, bore the most ancient name of the Yezidis. These statements form the basis for Tobias Churton’s discussion in chapter 7, “Aleister Crowley and the Yezidis,” which compares *The Book of the Law* with Yezidism and, further, assesses the relationship between Aiwass and the God of the Yezidis. Crowley’s apparent fascination with pagan pre-Christian religious traditions was not restricted to the literature on phallicism; it also spanned a wide range of classical authors to whom he made references throughout his writings. Matthew D. Rogers focuses on a particular case of classical literature in chapter 8, “Frenzies of the Beast: The Phaedian *Furores* in the Rites and Writings of Aleister Crowley.” According to Rogers, the classification of the *furores*, or “frenzies,” from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, along with its elaborations by later Platonists and Neoplatonists such as Marsilio Ficino,

can be traced in Crowley's work—especially in his article “Energized Enthusiasm,” which is an important source for our understanding of Crowley's notion of sexual magic.

Crowley's formal initiation into the mysteries of sexual magic occurred in 1912 when he joined the German mixed masonic organization Ordo Templi Orientis. The early history of the OTO still lacks a thorough study, but the bare facts point to the order's being an invention of the German mason, occultist, and former Theosophist Theodor Reuss. Although Reuss claimed that the OTO was founded in 1905 by Karl Kellner, it seems more likely that the order came into existence gradually, perhaps as late as 1912, out of a charter issued by John Yarker to Reuss in 1902 for the Antient and Primitive Rite of Freemasonry. This rite, a short-lived competitor to the English Ancient and Accepted Rite, was promoted by Yarker and his colleagues in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Crowley, who affiliated to the Antient and Primitive Rite in 1910, was clearly ambivalent toward Freemasonry: while continually criticizing and ridiculing conservative (or “regular”) Freemasonry, he sought to be admitted into conservative Freemasonry. In fact, while living for a number of years in the United States during World War I, he even tried to assume control over Freemasonry. In chapter 9, “Aleister Crowley—Freemason?!” Martin P. Starr examines Crowley's masonic contacts, separating the many myths surrounding Crowley and Freemasonry from the facts. To a certain extent, Crowley's ambivalent relationship with Freemasonry parallels his conflicting views of himself as the great magician and prophet, the Great Wild Beast 666, on one hand and a respectable British gentleman on the other.

The elusiveness of respectability was something that haunted Crowley throughout his adult life, and it appears that one of the reasons he sought to be admitted by “regular” Freemasonry was that it would allow him to become part of the respected establishment of British society. The combination of occultism, secret societies, Freemasonry, and respectability was not so far-fetched at the beginning of the twentieth century as it might seem. In fact, one of Crowley's contemporaries, the prolific author Arthur Edward Waite, seemingly managed to achieve just such a combination, and perhaps this was one of the reasons that Crowley took such a dislike to him. In chapter 10, “‘The One Thought That Was Not Untrue’: Aleister Crowley and A. E. Waite,” Robert A. Gilbert discusses how Crowley wrote to Waite in 1898, requesting information about an existing “Hidden Church” that Waite had mentioned in his *The Book of Black Magic and of Pacts* (1898)—but for some reason Crowley later turned hostile toward Waite and

published numerous attacks on him, often ridiculing the “pompous” style and arcane grammar of Waite’s writings. The perhaps most humorous attack on Waite is to be found in Crowley’s novel *Moonchild* (1929), in which Waite appears thinly disguised as a villain called Arthwaite. *Moonchild* was originally written in 1917 and contains references not only to a number of contemporary occultists and acquaintances but also—as Massimo Introvigne points out in chapter 11, “The Beast and the Prophet”—to such surprising persons as Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism. The reference to Joseph Smith was, however, not a mere accident; it actually reveals Crowley’s deep-seated fascination with Smith, which stemmed from Crowley’s reading of Sir Richard Francis Burton, in particular his book *The City of the Saints, and across the Rocky Mountains to California* (1896). Introvigne attempts to explain this fascination and discusses several extrinsic similarities between Crowley and Smith; furthermore, he analyzes how his findings are confirmed by the attitude of contemporary new magical movements toward Joseph Smith.

As a leading figure in twentieth-century magic and occultism, Crowley has influenced—directly or indirectly—the majority of all contemporary “new magical movements” (to borrow a label from Introvigne’s chapter). While the Thelemic movement—and the various Thelemic organizations—today might count a total of a few thousand members, Crowley’s influence on contemporary esotericism far outreaches the Thelemic organizations. The largest of these, perhaps, is modern pagan witchcraft, or Wicca, which Ronald Hutton addresses in chapter 12, “Crowley and Wicca.” Although it is frequently stated that Gerald Gardner, generally credited as the founder of modern witchcraft, knew Crowley personally and was an initiated member of the OTO, the precise part that Crowley played in the origins of Wicca remains, according to Hutton, both uncertain and deeply controversial. Hutton goes to the heart of the matter and critically examines the relationship of Crowley and Gardner and the early history of the Wicca movement; he shows how Wicca at first drew heavily on Crowley’s writings but how this influence was later downplayed. Furthermore, Hutton argues that Crowley was the “most important single identifiable influence” on the witchcraft movement in the early 1950s, next to Gardner himself. The influence of Crowley on Wicca can be seen as direct in the sense that Gardner knew Crowley personally and was involved with the small Thelemic movement in England for a short period after Crowley’s death. The influence of Crowley can also be found, however, indirectly in the witchcraft of the Australian artist Rosaleen Norton. Norton not only stands out as Australia’s most

persecuted and prosecuted female artist, but, as Keith Richmond presents in chapter 13, “Through the Witch’s Looking Glass: The Magick of Aleister Crowley and the Witchcraft of Rosaleen Norton,” she was also the founder of a peculiar esoteric system that she herself described as witchcraft. Although Norton corresponded with Gardner, she came to create an idiosyncratic form of witchcraft into which she initiated only a very small group of persons. Norton never was a Thelemite or follower of Crowley, but Richmond shows that the references to Crowley in Norton’s writings far outnumber those to any other individual occultist and that Crowley was a major influence on her.

In chapter 14, “The Occult Roots of Scientology?,” Hugh B. Urban examines to what extent one of the most controversial of all contemporary new religious movements is influenced by the works of Aleister Crowley. The link between Crowley and the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, is John W. Parsons, the lodge master of the only functioning OTO lodge during World War II. Parsons and Hubbard cooperated in a series of magical rites called the Babalon Working in 1946, but the magical partnership ended later in the same year when Parsons accused Hubbard of having stolen his money and his girlfriend. Despite the relatively short period that Hubbard was involved with Parsons, Urban argues, the links to Crowley shed important light not only on the origins of Scientology but also on the American spirituality of the 1950s, which was characterized by a “complex *mélange* of occultism, magic, science fiction, and the yearning for something radically new.” Perhaps not as surprising as the case with Scientology, Crowley’s influence is also to be found in modern Satanism. Even though Crowley identified himself as the Great Beast 666, and he was branded as a Satanist in his lifetime, there is actually little in his writings that can be considered as “satanic,” much less as “Satanism,” as Asbjørn Dyrendal points out in chapter 15, “Satan and the Beast: The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Modern Satanism.” Focusing on Anton LaVey and Michael A. Aquino, Dyrendal discusses how modern Satanism has adopted aspects of Crowley’s esotericism, albeit in a critical way. In short, the examples of modern witchcraft, Scientology, and Satanism show that Crowley has continued to have an influence on Western spirituality, perhaps accounting for the fact that he appears to be more popular than ever as we have entered the twenty-first century. The importance of Crowley in Western culture was made evident in the BBC’s 2002 “100 Greatest Britons” poll, in which, with more than 300,000 votes, Crowley ranked at number seventy-three, before authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer (eighty-one) and J. R. R. Tolkien (ninety-two).

Notes

1. Discussions concerning the definition of Western esotericism are ongoing. For the most significant recent works on the subject, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). The use of the term *Western esotericism* throughout this anthology is grounded in the field of research to which these two works are related.
2. J. F. C. Fuller, *The Star in the West: A Critical Essay upon the Works of Aleister Crowley* (London: Walter Scott Publishing, 1907), 212.
3. Several biographies have been published on Aleister Crowley, including the following: John Symonds, *The Great Beast* (London: Rider, 1951); Charles Richard Cammell, *Aleister Crowley: The Man, the Mage, the Poet* (London: Richards Press, 1951); John Symonds, *The Magic of Aleister Crowley* (London: Frederick Muller, 1958); Daniel P. Mannix, *The Beast* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1959); Israel Regardie, *The Eye in the Triangle: An Interpretation of Aleister Crowley* (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn, 1970); John Symonds, *The Great Beast: The Life and Magic of Aleister Crowley* (London: Macdonald, 1971); Francis X. King, *The Magical World of Aleister Crowley* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977); Susan Roberts, *The Magician of the Golden Dawn: The Story of Aleister Crowley* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1978); Colin Wilson, *The Nature of the Beast* (London: Aquarian Press, 1987); Gerald Suster, *The Legacy of the Beast: The Life, Work, and Influence of Aleister Crowley* (London: W. H. Allen, 1988); John Symonds, *The King of the Shadow Realm: Aleister Crowley, His Life and Magic* (London: Duckworth, 1989); John Symonds, *The Beast 666* (London: Pindar Press, 1997); Roger Hutchinson, *Aleister Crowley: The Beast Demystified* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1998); Martin Booth, *A Magick Life: The Biography of Aleister Crowley* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000); Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 2010); Tobias Churton, *Aleister Crowley: The Biography* (London: Watkins, 2011). For specific studies, see Richard B. Spence, *Secret Agent 666: Aleister Crowley, British Intelligence, and the Occult* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Feral House, 2008); and Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2013). See also Marco Pasi's critical discussion of a few Crowley biographies, "The Neverendingly Told Story: Recent Biographies of Aleister Crowley," *Aries* 3, no. 2: 224–45.

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The Sorcerer and His Apprentice

ALEISTER CROWLEY AND THE MAGICAL EXPLORATION
OF EDWARDIAN SUBJECTIVITY

Alex Owen

IN LATE 1909, two Englishmen, scions of the comfortable middle classes, undertook a journey to Algiers. Aleister Crowley, later to be dubbed “the wickedest man in the world,” was in his early thirties; his companion, Victor Neuburg, had only recently graduated from Cambridge. The stated purpose of the trip was pleasure. Crowley, widely traveled and an experienced mountaineer and big-game hunter, loved North Africa and had personal reasons for wanting to be out of England. Neuburg probably had little say in the matter. Junior in years, dreamy and mystical by nature, and in awe of a man whom he both loved and admired, Neuburg was inclined to acquiesce without demur in Crowley’s various projects. There was, however, another highly significant factor in Neuburg’s quiescence. He was Crowley’s chela, a novice initiate of the magical Order of the Silver Star, which Crowley had founded two years earlier. As such, Neuburg had taken a vow of obedience to Crowley as his Master and affectionately dubbed “holy guru,” and he had already learned that in much that related to his life Crowley’s word was now law. It was at Crowley’s instigation that the two men began to make their way, first by tram and then by foot, into the North African desert to the southwest of Algiers, and it was Crowley’s decision to perform there a series of magical ceremonies that prefigured his elaboration of the techniques of sex magic. In this case, the ceremonies combined the performance of advanced ritual magic with homosexual acts. It is this episode—sublime and terrifying as an experience, profound in its effects, and critical to the argument I seek to make for magical practice as a self-conscious exploration of subjectivity—that constitutes the focus of this chapter.

Magic, or, more specifically, ritual or ceremonial magic, has a long and august history in Western Europe. Associated strongly with the medieval and early modern periods, ritual magic has traditionally been associated with learned elites. Loosely understood to be the theory and practice of accessing and communicating with powerful but unseen natural or universal forces, ritual magic was invariably an occult or secret undertaking. Its procedures were confided in grimoires, textbooks of ritual magic, and these became the jealously guarded jewels of the magical tradition. This tradition, often assumed to be an archaic vestige with little purchase or relevance for the modern period, survived intact into the nineteenth century, when it began to emerge as a more accessible subject of study with the publication of classical grimoires in English translation. Francis Barrett's *The Magus* (London, 1801) was a landmark text, and by midcentury several formal groups had been established with the express purpose of studying the magical arts. Far from disappearing in the modern period, ritual magic became a central but hidden component of the nineteenth-century occult revival.¹

A general fascination with the occult was a marked, if until relatively recently little understood, aspect of Victorian society and culture.² The middle to late decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the appearance of Spiritualism and Theosophy, which together accounted for many thousands of adherents, and the emergence of various small groups dedicated to different forms of Western and Eastern arcane teachings. The occult exerted a broad appeal, perhaps best exemplified by the huge success of "occult" fiction such as Rider Haggard's *She* (London, 1887) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (Westminster, 1897), that operated in tandem with the Victorian craze for orientalism and "the mysterious East." Serious students of the occult, however, were drawn less by the glamour of exoticism than by the promise of privileged access to secret knowledge and a hidden realm of alternative spiritual wisdom. In suggesting the possibility of spiritual revelation, the occult played upon a Victorian triumphalist notion of progress while allaying fears that advances in knowledge and understanding might result in the desecration of a mysterious and wonderful universe. Occultism's founding impulse, the elaboration of human destiny as a quest for the key that would unlock the secrets of creation, promised revelation as a prelude to spiritual growth and enlightenment.

Ritual magic was certainly suggestive of this promise. It emerged most strongly in the nineteenth century in its Rosicrucian form—that is, as a particular configuration of seventeenth-century occult learning.³ The Rosicrucian tradition, with its roots in Jewish mysticism, Hebrew-Christian sources of ancient wisdom, and the powerful "Egyptian" writings of Hermes

Trismegistus, was marked by the elaborate interplay of the philosophical or spiritual with the practical and magical.⁴ This combination of the philosophical and the magical found its way directly into the foremost Victorian magical order, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and constituted one of its main attractions. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, established in the late 1880s, represented itself, in some respects correctly, as a direct link with the arcane traditions of the past. Although its founding documents were probably spurious, and its major rituals undoubtedly the work of Victorian scholars and magicians, its teachings were based upon an imaginative reworking of Hermetic writings further informed by nineteenth-century scholarship in Egyptology and anthropology. The order's name spoke to the realization of a Rosicrucian rebirth, the regeneration of the old, corrupt world and the dawning of a new spiritually enlightened age—timely notions for many at the *fin de siècle*.

The Golden Dawn is now chiefly remembered as a formative influence on the literary imagination of the poet and playwright W. B. Yeats, but its largely middle-class adherents numbered in the hundreds and included gifted men and women from the world of arts and letters. In contrast to Freemasonry, with which the Golden Dawn had certain links, women were welcomed as members and rose to positions of prominence. The order was structured around the symbolism of the kabbalah and organized into temples that were run on strictly hierarchical lines.⁵ Authority was vested in leading individuals, and initiates were given a rigorous and systematic training in the “rejected” knowledge of Western esotericism. They studied the symbolism of astrology, alchemy, and kabbalah; were instructed in geomantic and tarot divination; and learned the underpinnings of basic magical techniques. A student progressed through the grades of the order by means of a series of examinations, but admission to the advanced Second (or Inner) Order was selective, a privilege rather than a right.⁶ It was in the Second Order that adherents began to access the secrets of practical or operational magic, that is, magic as a unique undertaking through which invisible forces could be influenced and controlled in order to bring about specific change. The order's leaders took this practical magical Work extremely seriously, and senior adepts carefully assessed each student's suitability for such an undertaking. Unlike its French occult counterparts, British Rosicrucianism, at least at the organizational level, was ever concerned with standards and respectability.⁷

When Aleister Crowley was initiated into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1898 as *Frater Perdurabo* (“I will endure”), he assumed, along with the other adherents, that he was entering a magical society with an

unbroken magical pedigree. Convinced that he had found the secret mystical brotherhood referred to in Councillor Karl von Eckartshausen's occult classic *The Cloud upon the Sanctuary* (London, 1896), he threw himself into his magical studies with enthusiasm. Crowley, Cambridge educated, highly intelligent, and capable of great powers of concentration, advanced quickly through the grades of the Outer Order of the Golden Dawn. He was contemptuous of the bourgeois mundanity of many of his fellow initiates, impatient with the slow, pedantic methods of the order, and eager to access the secrets of the cherished Second Order. His advancement, however, was blocked by senior officers, W. B. Yeats foremost among them, who were scandalized by Crowley's wild, unpredictable behavior and questionable morals. Crowley subsequently became involved in a bitter power struggle within the Golden Dawn, abandoned it in 1900, went on to study with other teachers, and finally established his own Order of the Silver Star. By 1909 he considered himself to be a master magician: wise in the ways of the ancient wisdom and skilled in the advanced techniques of operational magic. It was as a self-styled "Master" that he recruited Victor Neuburg and began to experiment with the sex magic that was later to help make him notorious.

The experiment in the desert in 1909, however, was not straightforwardly self-serving, as much of Crowley's magical Work was to become. Nor did it represent simply the indulgence of an exoticized and outlawed sexuality. What happened in the desert was the result of a serious, if misguided, attempt to access and explore a centuries-old magical system, and it represented an intense personal investment in the pursuit of magical knowledge. This chapter will seek to examine the meaning and significance of this magical Work both in its own terms and in terms of the wider cultural context. In particular, it will locate a revitalized magical tradition in relation to the fin de siècle formulation of new sexual identities and a contemporary preoccupation with the riddle of human identity and consciousness as manifested in competing ideas of the self. In situating the discussion within the conceptual framework implied by the term *subjectivity*, I am relying in my analysis on a particular theoretical formulation of selfhood that underscores its contingency. The poststructuralist concept of subjectivity is suggestive of a self that is both stable and unstable, knowable and unknowable, constructed and unique. My central argument in this chapter, however, is directed toward understanding fin de siècle advanced magical practice as a particular and self-conscious engagement with selfhood, an engagement that exposed the limitations of a unified sense of self upon which experiential gendered identity depends.

North Africa

When Aleister Crowley arrived in Algiers with Victor Neuburg in November 1909, he undoubtedly evinced the unmistakable, subtly superior, air of the English gentleman abroad. His attitude toward resident French officialdom was one of polite disdain, and he chose to ignore warnings that an unaccompanied trip through the desert could be dangerous. Crowley, confident and at ease, immediately set about buying the necessary provisions for the journey. He had a basic grasp of Arabic and understood a fair amount about Muslim culture, but was concerned that Neuburg, with his “hangdog look” and “lunatic laugh,” threatened to undermine his credibility. According to Crowley, therefore, Neuburg’s head was shaved, leaving only two tufts at the temples, which were “twisted up into horns.” Crowley laughingly, but tellingly, comments that his chela was thus transformed into “a demon that I had tamed and trained to serve me as a familiar spirit. This greatly enhanced my eminence.”⁸ A concern with eminence was ever uppermost in Crowley’s mind, and he would justify it here as giving him the necessary status to travel unmolested through isolated desert terrain. The reference to demons and spirits, however, although joking, is an indication of how intimately Crowley lived with the magical realities that were his concern in his capacity as the magician Perdurabo.

It was after spending only two nights sleeping under the desert stars that Crowley had the sudden insight that he must renew a magical undertaking begun in Mexico nine years earlier. This involved using a complex magical system developed by John Dee, the eminent Elizabethan mathematician and astrologer, and his clairvoyant, Edward Kelley. Dee and Kelley were well versed in practical kabbalah and experimented with the angel magic of the Renaissance magician Henry Cornelius Agrippa. Agrippa had elaborated a system of numerical and alphabetical tables for the summoning of angels, and it was within this framework that the two Elizabethans worked. John Dee used Kelley’s gifts as an expert scryer, one who could “travel” in the many realms of spirit existence, to enter vicariously into conversation with the angels in order to tempt from them the secrets of the universe. During their lengthy séances, Kelley would “scry in the spirit vision” using a “shew-stone” in much the same way as a seer might use a crystal ball. Dee asked his questions through Kelley and duly recorded the results. In this way, Dee slowly built up an entire cosmology of angels and demons, and sketched out thirty Aethyrs (or Aires)—realms of otherworldly existence.⁹

Crowley was familiar with Dee's researches because they had been integrated into the teachings of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Although he had been denied entry to the Second Order, Crowley had studied with other Golden Dawn adepts—most notably Allan Bennett, considered second only to the highest-ranking member of the order. But whereas Golden Dawn initiates were set to study Dee's so-called Enochian system as a scholarly exercise, Crowley was prepared to test its efficacy. He was already skilled in exploring what the Golden Dawn referred to as the Astral Light, understood to be separate planes or orders of existence that interpenetrate the world of earthly perceptions.¹⁰ He considered himself a master of astral travel and was in the process of teaching its necessary techniques and procedures to Neuburg. These included total familiarity with the language of occult symbolism so vital to safe travel in astral realms. Indeed, although at one level an interior journey made from within the confines of the stationary physical body, astral travel was acknowledged by magicians to be potentially dangerous. Novices such as Victor Neuburg returned exhausted from their forays, but Crowley was no novice. Knowledgeable and expert in astral travel, familiar with the means of astral defense and attack, and cognizant of the spirit world, Crowley considered that he was ready to undertake a journey through John Dee's Aethyrs.

Crowley's technique was simple. He would select a secluded spot and recite the appropriate Call—the ritual incantation that would give him access to the relevant Aethyr. After satisfying himself that the invoked forces were present, Crowley would take up his magical shew-stone, a large golden topaz, and “scry in the spirit vision” much as Kelley had done centuries before. He made “the topaz play a part not unlike that of the looking-glass in the case of *Alice*.”¹¹ By making the relevant Call and concentrating on the topaz, Crowley could enter the Aethyr. He was clear about what this meant: “When I say I was in any Aethyr, I simply mean in the state characteristic of, and peculiar to, its nature.”¹² In other words, Crowley recognized that this was an experience similar to that of astral travel: it was conducted within his own mind. Having accessed the Aethyr, he would describe his experiences to Neuburg, who would write them down. It is noteworthy that, typically, Crowley adapted the procedure to suit himself. Unlike Dee, he, the master magician, would be his own scryer. Neuburg, whom Crowley recognized to be a gifted clairvoyant, was the scribe.

As the two men made their way through the desert, Crowley increasingly fell under the spell of his experiences in John Dee's Aethyrs. He encountered celestial beings, both terrible and beautiful, who divulged in richly symbolic

language something of the realms in which they dwelt. Crowley understood much of the symbolism and began to realize that the Calls did indeed give the scryer access to an intricate but cogent and coherent universal system of other worlds and beings. But as the Calls proceeded, Crowley began increasingly to feel something very akin to fear. It was as though, he says, a hand was holding his heart while a whispering breath enveloped him in words both awful and enchanting. In a gender reversal that was to typify much of this magical experience, Crowley reveals that he “began to feel—well, not exactly frightened; it was the subtle trembling of a maiden before the bridegroom.”¹³ In order to fortify himself against growing feelings of awe and dread, he began to recite the Koran as he marched across the desert. The great stretches of empty landscape, hot by day and icy at night, and continuous intoning of magical and religious formulas combined to effect a state of almost overwhelming spiritual intensity.

A little more than two weeks after they had arrived in Algiers, Crowley and Neuburg reached Bou Saada. This isolated haven in the desert, with its palm trees, gardens, and orchards, was where the desert road ran out. Bou Saada gave the impression of a last link with civilization. Some distance from the town was a mountain, Mount Da’leh Addin. It was here that Crowley, acting on instructions from previous angelic interlocutors, made Dee’s Call and attempted to enter the fourteenth Aethyr. His attempt, however, was thwarted. He was met by “an all-glorious Angel,” surrounded with blackness “and the crying of beasts.” The angel issued a warning and instructed the magician to withdraw. Shaken, Crowley prepared to return to Bou Saada. As he did so, “suddenly came the command to perform a magical ceremony on the summit” of the mountain. Whatever form the “command” took, Crowley experienced it as absolute. He and Neuburg responded by building a great circle with loose rocks. They inscribed the circle with magical words of power, “erected an alter” in its midst, and there, in Crowley’s words: “I sacrificed myself. The fire of the all-seeing sun smote down upon the alter, consuming every particle of my personality.”¹⁴

What happened in prosaic terms was that Crowley was sodomized by Neuburg in a homosexual rite offered to the god Pan. Pan, the man-goat, had a particular significance for the two men. Crowley revered him as the diabolic god of lust and magic, and Neuburg literally had what acquaintances described as an elfin and “faun-like” appearance.¹⁵ It is likely that what happened on Mount Da’leh Addin was a classic invocation; the young chela, in accordance with accepted magical technique, probably “called down” or invoked the god Pan. A successful invocation would result in the neophyte becoming

“inflamed” by the power of the god. If this is what happened during the ceremony on the mountain, Neuburg, in his magical capacity, would momentarily identify with all that the man-goat god represented. Put simply, Neuburg with his tufted “horns” would become Pan—the “faun-like” yet savage lover of Crowley’s psychosexual world. Although Crowley and Neuburg were involved in a homosexual relationship, this may well have been the first time that the two men performed a magical homosexual act. Crowley quickly came to believe that sex magic was an unrivaled means to great magical power, and he became one of its most innovative practitioners. The image of Pan was to haunt Neuburg for the rest of his life. It inspired some of his best early poetry but later filled him with dread. The experience was overwhelming for both men, but it temporarily devastated Crowley. His summation is brief: “There was an animal in the wilderness,” he writes, “but it was not I.”¹⁶

Crowley remembered nothing of his return to Bou Saada. As he slowly came to himself, however, he knew that he was changed.

I knew who I was and all the events of my life; but I no longer made myself the centre of their sphere. . . . I did not exist. . . . All things were alike as shadows sweeping across the still surface of a lake—their images had no meaning for the water, no power to stir its silence.¹⁷

Crowley felt that he had ceremonially crossed the Abyss—a term reminiscent of Nietzsche (whom Crowley greatly admired) but denoting the last terrible journey that a magician must make before he could justifiably lay claim to the highest levels of adeptship. Master of the Temple, a grade of enlightened initiation achieved in Crowley’s own magical order only by those who had crossed the Abyss, meant renunciation of all that life meant. The Order of the Golden Dawn taught that such awareness could not be accessed this side of death, and Crowley affirmed this in his own way. He taught that becoming a Master of the Temple implied not simply symbolic death and rebirth, a concept familiar to all magical initiates, but the annihilation of the personal self. The Abyss, then, was closely associated with the death of the individual—although not necessarily on the physical level.

A few days later, Crowley, who in the aftermath of the “sacrifice” on Mount Da’leh Addin had already acknowledged that at one level “I did not exist,” prepared formally to undergo the Abyss ordeal. He understood that he would do so when he entered John Dee’s tenth Aethyr. He knew that in the tenth Aethyr he must meet and defeat the terrible “Choronzon, the mighty devil that inhabiteth the outermost Abyss.”¹⁸ He also knew that he could do so only

as Perdurabo, a magical adept, and that his success depended on his ability to master Choronzon through the dominating power of the magical Will. The complex techniques, rituals, and paraphernalia of magical practice are the means by which a magician develops and “inflames” his Will, the single most important attribute of a magician. Crowley understood that Choronzon’s power could be bound and brought under control only through the silent but relentless application of the magical Will, and that this was critical for a successful crossing of the Abyss. Failure to force Choronzon into submission would enslave the magician to him, bringing disaster in its wake. Given this, and the warnings he had received in the previous Aethyrs, Crowley changed his magical procedure.

On December 6, 1909, Crowley and Neuburg left Bou Saada and went far out into the desert until they found a suitable valley in the dunes. There they traced a circle in the sand, inscribing it with the various sacred names of God. They then traced a triangle in close proximity, its perimeters likewise inscribed with divine names and also with that of Choronzon. This was correct magical practice. The magic circle provided protection for the magician; the Triangle of Art was intended to contain any visible manifestation of the forces “called up” or evoked by Perdurabo. The process of evocation was designed to produce a physical materialization of, in this case, the demonic inhabitant of the Abyss. Three pigeons were sacrificed and their blood placed at the three corners, Crowley taking particular care that it remained within the confines of the figure. The blood was to facilitate and help sustain any physical manifestation, and it was essential that this remain within the triangle. At this point Neuburg entered the circle. He was armed with a magic dagger and had strict instructions to use it if anything—even anything that looked like Crowley—attempted to break into the circle. At Crowley’s instigation, Neuburg swore an oath to defend the circle’s inviolability with his life. Crowley, dressed in his ceremonial black robe, then made an astonishing departure from accepted ritual practice. Instead of joining his chela in the relative safety of the circle, he entered the Triangle of Art. While Neuburg performed the Banishing Rituals of the Pentagram and Hexagram, a procedure designed to protect him, Crowley made the Call of the tenth Aethyr.¹⁹

The mighty Choronzon announced himself from within the shew-stone with a great cry, “Zazas, Zazas, Nasatanada Zazas”:

I am I . . . From me come leprosy and pox and plague and cancer and cholera and the falling sickness. Ah! I will reach up to the knees of the Most High, and tear his phallus with my teeth, and I will bray his testicles in a mortar, and make poison thereof, to slay the sons of men.²⁰

Crowley probably uttered these words. Thereafter, however, as far as Neuburg could tell, Crowley fell silent; he remained seated in the triangle in the sand, robed and hooded, deeply withdrawn, and “did not move or speak during the ceremony.”²¹ It was Neuburg who both heard and saw. Unlike the previous Calls, when he had acted merely as scribe, Neuburg now beheld—not Crowley seated within the triangle but all that Crowley conjured. Before him appeared Choronzon in the guise of a beautiful woman whom he had known and loved in Paris, and she tried to lure him from the circle. She was followed by a holy man and a serpent.

Slowly the demon in his various manifestations managed to engage the inexperienced Neuburg in discussion and then proceeded to mock him. Had he not, “O talkative One,” been instructed to hold no converse with the mighty Choronzon? Undoubtedly Neuburg had been so instructed by Crowley, but in the heat of the moment he forgot himself. During the intense debate that ensued, with Neuburg scribbling furiously so as to record every detail, Choronzon began stealthily to erase the protective edges of the circle in the sand. Suddenly, Choronzon sprang from the triangle into the circle and wrestled Neuburg to the ground. The scribe found himself struggling with a demon in the shape of “a naked savage,” a strong man who tried to tear out his throat with “froth-covered fangs.” Neuburg, invoking the magical names of God, struck out with his dagger and finally forced the writhing figure back into the triangle. The chela repaired the circle, and Choronzon resumed his different manifestations and ravings. Cajoling, tempting, decrying, pleading, he continued to debate and attempt to undermine the scribe. Finally, the manifestations began to fade. The triangle emptied.²²

Neuburg now became aware of Crowley, who was sitting alone in the triangle. He watched as Crowley wrote the name BABALON, signifying the defeat of Choronzon, in the sand with his Holy Ring.²³ The ceremony was concluded. It had lasted more than two hours. The two men lit a great fire of purification and obliterated the circle and the triangle. They had undergone a terrible ordeal. Crowley states that he had “astrally identified” himself with Choronzon throughout and had “experienced each anguish, each rage, each despair, each insane outburst.”²⁴ Neuburg, however, had held forbidden converse with the Dweller of the Abyss. Both men now felt that they understood the nature of the Abyss. It represented Dispersion: a terrifying chaos in which there was no center and no controlling consciousness. Its fearsome Dweller was not an individual but the personification of a magnitude of malignant forces made manifest through the massed energy of the evoking magician. To experience these forces at the most immediate and profoundly

personal level, and to believe, as Victor did, that he been involved in a fight to the death with them, was shattering. As Crowley says, "I hardly know how we ever got back to Bou Saada."²⁵

Over the next two weeks Crowley and Neuburg continued the Calls as they made their way toward Biskra, a desert journey of more than one hundred miles. Some of Crowley's experiences in the Aethyrs were lyrical hymns of beauty and ecstasy, but others seemed full of foreboding—suggesting that he had stumbled into a world for which he was not yet prepared. By the time they reached Biskra on December 16, Crowley knew that he was perilously close to the absolute limit of his powers. Four days later he concluded the final Call. The magical Work was finished. The two men were utterly exhausted, but not by the hardships of the physical journey, which Crowley, at least, found delightful. It was the magical experience that had taken its toll. Those who knew them said that Neuburg "bore the marks of this magical adventure to the grave" and that Crowley, shattered psychologically, never recovered from the ordeal.²⁶ The two men recuperated in Biskra before returning to Algiers. They sailed for England on the last day of December 1909.

"I, Too, Am the Soul of the Desert"

Although Crowley was casual about the mise-en-scène of the Calls, it is unlikely that the setting for this magical undertaking was mere accident.²⁷ "Arabia" and the desert held a special significance for him. Crowley reveled in Arab, or, more specifically, Bedouin, culture. After a long day's tramp, he claimed to enjoy nothing more than to join the men of a remote village to while away the night drinking coffee and smoking tobacco or "kif" (hashish). He was already familiar with the effects of a "huqqa . . . laden with maddening cannabis" and felt emancipated by the desert and its society.²⁸ Crowley acknowledged that, while his spiritual self was at home in China, his "heart and hand are pledged to the Arab."²⁹ When he spoke of "the Arab," however, his abiding identification was with what he took to be the spirit of desert culture—the strong ties that bound man to man and an existence pared down to the aestheticized essentials. A romanticized ethos of masculinity was one of the aspects of "Arabia" that had particular resonance for him.

A great deal has been written about the European fascination with the desert, the romanticization of the Bedouin, and the creation in travel literature and elsewhere of a particular mythic "Orient."³⁰ Crowley was not immune to these fictions. Although his firsthand experience of the desert was

powerful and direct, his affinity with “the Arab” had a different basis. When he assumed that he had intuitively penetrated the heart of the desert Arab, that he understood at an unspoken level the profound effect on the human spirit of living in unmediated dialogue with what he called the eight genii of the desert, it was because he had read so avidly in the “Arabia Deserta” literature.³¹ And if there is a subtext for Crowley’s North African adventure—indeed, for all his travels—it is found in the life and work of the Victorian adventurer and explorer Richard Burton.

Burton represented the kind of man Crowley most wished to be—strong, courageous, intrepid, but also a learned scholar-poet and a man who chafed against conventional restraints. His dark, scarred face and satanic aura seemed to suggest knowledge and powers beyond the accepted and acceptable, his exploits in Africa and the Near East were legendary, and his translations of Italian, Latin, Arabic, and Sanskrit texts had introduced a Victorian readership to European and “oriental” folklore and erotica.³² A man of astonishing breadth and capabilities, Burton was without doubt a model for Crowley. When he undertook his lengthy travels in remote places, Crowley felt that he was “treading, though reverently and afar off, in the footsteps of my boyhood’s hero, Richard Francis Burton.”³³ He was one of three men to whom Crowley dedicated his *Confessions*: “the perfect pioneer of spiritual and physical adventure.”

Crowley aspired to the kind of cultural mastery exhibited in Burton’s famous 1853 “pilgrimage” to Mecca, when the explorer, perfectly disguised as a Muslim, had penetrated to the heart of a holy city denied to Europeans. Crowley’s flamboyant use of a star sapphire ring during his North African travels with Neuburg was based on Burton’s information that the stone was venerated by Muslims. According to Crowley, he put a stop to a coffee-shop brawl by calmly walking into the scrimmage and inscribing magical figures in the air with the ring while intoning a chapter from the Koran: “The fuss stopped instantly, and a few minutes later the original parties to the dispute came to me and begged me to decide between them, for they saw that I was a saint.”³⁴ Although Crowley’s account is self-parodying, he was, like Burton, implicated in the imperialist project. Both men rejected the stifling restrictions of Victorian society and, in different ways, sought to dissociate themselves from bourgeois notions of sober, restrained, industrious manhood. Nevertheless, while genuinely revering Arab culture and its peoples, they equally epitomized that unreflective assumption of superiority and desire for mastery that was integral to imperialist endeavors.³⁵ These issues, however, are complex. In the case of Burton and Crowley, neither a sense of superiority nor

the drive for mastery was necessarily equated with the ruthless repression of the feminine that (following Freud) is often associated with accounts of modern masculine subjectivity. If the two men conformed in certain respects to the classic profile of the imperialist, they were also drawn to a culture that could apparently accommodate the expression of the feminine as an intrinsic part of virile masculinity. Imperialism invariably implies a degree of feminization, but Crowley, influenced by Burton, viewed Arab culture as a positive and irresistible blend of the masculine and the feminine.

“El Islam,” Richard Burton had noted, “seems purposely to have loosened the ties between the sexes in order to strengthen the bonds which connect man and man.”³⁶ This is suggestive of both the profoundly masculinist society of Crowley’s imagination and its mirror image, and Burton was in part responsible for this particular characterization of the East. He had long been fascinated by “oriental” erotica when, late in life, he committed his considerable erudition to paper with the publication of his studies of Eastern pederasty. Through these and other writings, “Arabia” had become synonymous in the European imagination with homosexuality.³⁷ It is not insignificant that in the year in which Crowley and Neuburg tramped across the desert, T. E. Lawrence—later to be immortalized as Lawrence of Arabia—was undertaking a walking tour in the Middle East, and that rumors concerning Lawrence’s homosexuality were linked with his early close relationship with an Arab assistant. It is also relevant that Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas had anticipated Crowley’s discovery of Algeria and enjoyed all that Algiers had to offer. Indeed, Wilde had arranged for a tremulous André Gide to spend the night with a young male Arab in that city, so confirming for Gide his own sexual identity.³⁸ For these European men, an apparent acceptance of *le vice contra nature* was part of the lure of the Arab world. Although it went far deeper than that for Crowley, as for Lawrence, the desert signified the expression—often the honorable expression—of a heterodox male sexuality.

Crowley’s love of the desert, however, and its relationship to expressive sexuality, was more complex than this. In “The Soul of the Desert,” published in 1914, Crowley writes a lyrical paean to the mystical power of this “wilderness of sand.”³⁹ The desert, he says, has the power to strip a man of everything that he has and is, until he must finally stand naked in the face of the elements. So, he writes, “at last the Ego is found alone, unmasked, conscious of itself and of no other thing.”⁴⁰ There is simply the unreflective consciousness of one who tramps through the dunes. It is this, an uncomplicated acknowledgment of what *is*, that makes it possible to love in the desert “as it is utterly impossible to do in any other conditions.”⁴¹ Here, a shared glance, a chosen place in the

sand, and “life thrills in sleepy unison; all, all in silence, not names or vows exchanged, but with clean will an act accomplished.” “Love itself becomes simple as the rest of life.”⁴²

This simple love, an effect of the crystallized intensity of desert existence, is a prelude to

the bodily ecstasy of dissolution, the pang of bodily death, wherein the Ego for a moment that is an aeon loses the fatal consciousness of itself, and becoming one with that of another, foreshadows to itself that greater sacrament of death, when “the spirit returns to God that gave it.”⁴³

But Crowley goes further. In “The Soul of the Desert,” “the wilderness of sand” becomes the figurative realization of an eroticized spirituality. It is equated with an ecstatic experience that far outstrips an orgasmic loss of sense of self—the “little death” of sexual climax. The desert, with its wastes of endless sand, inescapable solitude, and implacable indifference to the miserable struggles of humanity, is parent to the quintessential mystical experience: the dissolution of “the soul . . . into the abounding bliss of God.” And, for Crowley, this “dissolution” is synonymous with what he calls here “the annihilation of the Self in Pan.” The coded reference to Crowley’s relationship with Neuburg, and the sacrificial ceremony undertaken with him on the summit of Da’leh Addin in 1909, is clear. In a marked eroticization of the supremely spiritual, Crowley writes: “Such must be the climax of any [magical] retirement to the desert.”⁴⁴

“It Was Like Jekyll and Hyde . . .”

Crowley used *self*, *ego*, and *soul* as interrelated, if not synonymous, terms. Speaking of the “sacrifice” on Mount Da’leh Addin, he could say that every particle of his “personality” was consumed; elsewhere, he talks of “the annihilation of the Self in Pan.” Similarly, he writes of that moment of crisis in the desert “when it becomes necessary to penetrate beneath the shadow-show to the secret sanctuary of the soul” and, of that same moment, that “at last the Ego is found alone, unmasked, conscious of itself and of no other thing.”⁴⁵ It was never Crowley’s concern to provide a precise ontology of human identity, and he drew on an eclectic metaphysics when he alluded to the nature of being. Crowley’s commentaries, however, suggest that he predicated his experiential sense of self on both an esoteric and a liberal-humanist understanding of a