

Crowley Thoughts from the Web

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Marty Light — 27 May 2000, 10:50

Turned this up on the web and thought the interview piece with Crowley would be interesting to the discussion group:

Rubrics and Tendrils of Richard Gehr

by Richard Gehr

11 July 1994

Three Novels (Bantam paper, \$12.95)

Little, Big (Bantam paper, \$12.95)

Ægypt (Bantam paper, \$12.95)

Novelty (Doubleday, out of print?).

Antiquities: Seven Stories (Incunabula, \$25).

Love and Sleep (Bantam, \$22.95).

Until last year, John Crowley and Cormac McCarthy seemed virtual equals in terms of great dazzling craft, critical respect, and popular obscurity--yet only McCarthy has broken onto the best-seller list. Hi-fat Celestine prophesies aside, I suspect McCarthy's ferocious violence and miseries will always be more familiar to us participants in American mythology than Crowley's Gnostic play in the ghettoized fields of the fantastic. Moreover, where McCarthy eventually

broke out of the literary shadows by litening (cq) up stylistically, Crowley remains immersed in a complex and ambitious tetralogy, Ægypt, whose first volume appeared under that title in 1987 while the second, Love & Sleep, descended onto shelves last month. Crowley's earliest books--The Deep, Beasts, and Engine Summer (collected as

Three Novels)--visit imaginary planets and the far future. In them he comes across as an ambitious author who'd merely overheard rumors about science fiction, then decided to put theory into practice. "That's exactly what it is," affirmed Crowley when I tried this theory out on him recently over Thai food in New Haven. "I'm not deeply inside the genre." His short stories and novella

"Great Work of Time" (collected in Novelty and Antiquities) suggest an overly delicate intellect. These stories, clever and precious, read like gauzy pencil sketches for his immensely more densely painted large canvases. Crowley's early novels sold modestly, but the 1981 release of his Sufi/fairy-tale masterpiece Little, Big earned him fans as diverse as Harold Bloom, Peter Straub, and Terence McKenna, more general acclaim, and steady sales. Like his later books, Crowley's first major work describes a dissatisfaction for the world as it is and a quest not necessarily for something better, but for something utterly different. A complex, sprawling family history influenced stylistically by Dickens and philosophically by Attar's Sufi fable, "Parliament of the Birds," Little, Big uses fairies as humorous and complicated switchmen guiding the narrative among intersecting universes and a house of infinite rooms. Here, Crowley says, the problem he set himself was, "Can I make Arthur Rackham fairies convincingly wonderful, strange, and fully featured enough so they don't seem trivial?" The novel manifests a weblike connection to its literary legacy as well as to Rackham's grotesque illustrations,

reworking a rich vein of Western esoterica and fairy lore to

speculate metaphysically on connections with our spiritual legacy that have been lost to the past. (It is also, not coincidentally, one of the more oozingly

psychedelic novels you could ever experience.)

"One of the things I tend to write about is the solving of mysteries, or of

mysterious things coming to be and people trying to understand them." The characters in *Little, Big* participate in a private sort of Gnostic religion

passed on from generation to generation. Crowley, however, claims the novel's fantasy foil was more an artistic choice than a reflection of his own fantasias. "The idea of an Arthur Rackham fairy world as the novel's reality," he confesses, "was almost a completely objective choice." Although *Little, Big* has remained in print since publication, Crowley has never paid the rent simply on his fiction. After a morning's literary endeavor, Crowley hunkers down to a more lucrative chore, his "bizarre niche" writing

narration mainly for TV sports documentaries. And while we agreed to meet in New Haven as a compromise rendezvous between his home in the Barringtons and mine in Manhattan, Crowley has also recently taught courses on utopian literature and fiction writing at Yale. Midpoints, intersections, and doublings arise often in Crowley's books and conversation. The author, in person by turns owlish and garrulous, is halfway into *Ægypt*, a novel about parallel eras in history. He is the father of twin girls born on Valentine's Day, the same day he received copies of his quartet's first volume. As a child he says his life was organized in an important sense around a secret world hidden behind a polite surface. "My father," Crowley recalls, "kept up this Irish jive to mask any kind of engagement with me or with

feelings in general--which I can still do also. From my mother, a WASP of the deepest die, I got this sense of a double life, that I am one thing on the outside and another on the inside, and I can communicate that fact to others." In *Ægypt* Crowley tells two stories at once. The older, which may or may not be

recounted by a popular historian named Fellowes Kraft, concerns the magical

doings of Italian heretic Giordano Bruno and English mystic John Dee between the Wars of Religion, which ended in the 1590s, and the beginning of the Thirty

Years War in 1620. Meanwhile, in the 1970s, academic dropout and '60s casualty Pierce Moffett has moved to a small town in the fictitious town of Blackbury Jambs in the Faraway Hills of upstate New York, where he researches a book much like the one we are reading and becomes involved with a pair of women named

Rose.

Crowley proposes the fictive thesis (reminiscent of Kuntz's paradigmatic shifts and Foucault's epistemological breaks) that gateways exist in time such that the world on one side of the gateway is utterly yet perhaps imperceptibly different than that found on the other side: He told her Kraft's story, the core of it, how twice in the last two thousand years a slip or seam, a rumple in the ground of being, had allowed observers around the world to perceive that the net of space and time is not quite stable, but like the shifting plates and molten core of Mother Earth, can move beneath the feet of diurnality; can move, was moving, had moved before and would again. (L&S, 164-5) Hidden in this transformation is a secret history of the world Moffett

hopes to uncover for what his agent hopes will be a New Age bestseller. *Love & Sleep*

begins in Kentucky's Cumberland mountains, where Crowley spent a few early years inventing secret societies of his own. There Moffett acquires an inkling of the

magic, a "secret gospel . . . [[a]]bout the end of the world" (500) that will follow him into the Faraways, where, by the end of the book, all hell literally threatens to break loose, complete with werewolves, witches, an angelic battle, and a double alchemical wedding. "One of the jobs I set myself," Crowley explains, "is to make it convincing that

realistic and ordinary people are inhabiting fictional worlds where the miraculous and the unreal and the bizarre and the awful don't happen--then project them into a world where such things can happen. The basic idea of the book, beside the idea of time passing through a gateway, is the Gnostic mythology that we are really the gods, that human beings are final, and that the gods who come between us and the unknown, fore-existing God are really lesser than us and not our masters, although we have let them become our masters. The gods create the world by language, by imposing rules upon us; we discreate the world by language in the same way and create our own in its stead." Through the angelic communications transcribed by John Dee, and the Brunist

art

of memory (Francis Yates's works on the Hermetic tradition are seminal here), Crowley attempts to tap into a divine "world of innumerable and endless processes producing an infinite number of things" (L&S 416). The trick is to link the processes of Renaissance magic with the fairly quotidian lives of his Blackbury Jambs gang. These include an astrologer, a hardcore Gnostic, and devotees of the pseudoscience of Climacterics, which straddles biorhythms and Scientology to explain how personal growth interpenetrates with history and the

feeling that the world grows older as we do.

With the late Blackbury Jambs historian Fellowes Kraft mediating between the Elizabethan and more contemporary plot lines, the two *Ægypt* volumes suggest

numerous alternative readings and points of view as they dip into Moffett's past

(his lovers have included a cocaine dealer and his literary agent), a mother's sorrow when her child unexpectedly begins undergoing epileptic seizures, the mystery surrounding Kraft's relationship to the patriarch of the family institution employing Moffett, and the numerous theosophical digressions his studies inspire. The books brim with questions (does the world have a plot?

What

is the relation of Hermes Trismegistus to Thoth, the Egyptian god of writing? Why are gypsies commonly believed able to foretell the future?) that inspire further mysteries, mining a rich philosophical plenitude that always evades

closure.

Writing and imagination serve the same function for Crowley as the alchemical Philosopher's Stone of Hermetic lore. Science fiction and fantasies are literature's most powerful tools of transcending everyday physical reality and creating entirely new worlds whose infinite details are supplied by readers' imaginations through reading's mysteries. But does Crowley himself buy into the mystic jive? "Maybe because I'm a Sagittarian, sad with an air of assurance, I am basically immune to mystic apprehensions," he admits with a barely noticeable sigh when I inquire as to his own spiritual proclivities. With a certain amount of embarrassment, Crowley privileges the '60s as his personal watershed. But any era will do, really, in the great Hegelian spiral *Ægypt* suggests. "One of the values of magic, the humanist-magical option, is to say that

man is really here to learn, to understand everything, and to gain powers from nature because God has provided nature to give powers to man. In the sixteenth century that option transcended narrow Protestant or Catholic ideology. For people like John Dee, it was a way to transcend trivial sectarian differences." Moffett, historian of the esoteric, shimmies constantly between the different strata of the historical past and a present in which the past's vestiges persist. One of Ægypt 's overriding questions is whether history exists as a continuum or as a series of paradigm shifts, memory museums, or Brunist tableaux poised for revival, but never with values equal to their original incarnation. "What was it Barr said," thinks Moffett, " . . . that in the religious history of the West old gods are always turning into devils, cast from their thrones into dark undergrounds to be lords over the dead and the wicked?" [[501]] Moffett comes to realize that history is malleable and flexible. Magic used to exist; now it doesn't, and from contemporary science's point of view, never

could have.

But what if a magical touchstone exists that has survived history's gateways and stratifications? Without spoiling one of Love & Sleep 's major surprises, the answer turns out to be the single manifestation of magical influence nearly

everyone experiences at some point in life, "the alchemical power of Eros" [[501]]. Moffett's erotic past, it turns out, is extracting a toll he finds

difficult to pay, a return and inversion of a repressed childhood memory that takes root in his dreams before extending to a cracked reality. In this, Moffett mirrors a world struggling to repress its own dæmons and titans--"But it turns out that the past is harder to get rid of than that,"

Crowley emphasizes with a jab of forked shrimp in my direction, "and that's part

of the four-volume novel I'm telling, how obdurate the past really is. It persists and goes on having effects. Even its old revolutions go on having effects, being incorporated into the adventure one after another, each one the same as all the others. You know the chestnut about those who don't know history being condemned to repeat it? Well, those who do know history are condemned to

recognize it when it comes around again."

As Crowley finishes his scotch and our conversation winds down, I wonder if he's

familiar with *Voyage to Arcturus* , David Lindsay's seminal 1920 fantasy. Indeed he is, but it's the secondary lit that moves him more deeply than Lindsay's

seminal spiritual voyage into the unknown. "One of the most wonderful explanations of heroic fantasy," he says, "is Harold Bloom's essay, "Clinamen : Towards a Theory of Fantasy" [[in *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*]],

which is all about *Voyage to Arcturus* . Bloom's terrific argument moved me very much as a writer of the stuff. His basic question is: If you've got this form where anything can happen, in which anything is possible, why do the same things always happen and why are the stories all so alike? Bloom of course tends toward a Freudian explanation about fear of breaking out and obsessions and such, which is reasonable enough. But it also sets the writer a task: How do I make it not come out the same as it always does, yet make it satisfactory as a story? "That's my quest. You can come to the same old conclusions. What's important is the effort you make and risks you take as a writer, what it costs you to affirm the same old conclusions."