

Mr. Crowley, what went on in your head?

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 03 Jun 2000

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akt — 03 Jun 2000, 11:23

Had a short, unprepared interview with JC. Have not yet played the tape back, but at one point I asked questions from the group and scribbled notes, so this is from my notes. William, I forgot to ask about Edward Gorey. But my guess is that you are right--will ask next time. I will also amplify these answers, if need be, when I listen to the tape.

Adam:

1) Is the "other country" to which the Drinkwaters have gone in any sense death? Yes. But it is not an ending; it is the start of something new.

2) Does JC see this final destiny as positive, negative or ambiguous? Ambiguous. You go farther in, and there is no answer to how far you can go. The 52 humans have become the 52 fairies who control them; the fairies have gone farther in.

(I did not ask the children's book question as I did not think he would have a top-of-the-head answer; we've covered that area pretty thoroughly. But I will get to it when I'm better prepared.)

3) What is the purpose of the Eigenblick subplot in LB? An exploration of power. Power has no power; love has power. Also wanted to play with a woman acting in ways that men do in the usual thriller plots. Also (sheepishly) admitted that much of it came from a draft he had made for another book entirely. (This does not surprise me at all!!)

4) Why in both TD and LB do the Tarot decks have 52 cards aside from the trumps, unlike historical decks? Older deck have 52 cards including trumps, in 4 suits. Tarot cards are the extra cards added to that pack. (I can't read my notes here, but iirc he found the device useful enough to use twice and pointed out that the packs were actually quite different.)

5) In GWoT, why is the introductory chapter about Casper given such prominence? Two answers: 1) Because he's responsible for all that occurred; 2) it was written long before the rest and was shoehorned in.

6) In GWoT why does old Dennis at the end think that meeting oneself is impossible, and that the Otherhood claimed otherwise to protect itself? It's not impossible, but forbidden. Leads to foreknowledge which might be the end of hope. (I think that's what my note says.)

7) In ES, was the Long League of Women originally the League of Women Voters? Yes, and other prominent women's clubs or societies.

8) Soap operas? Turns out it's not true; he has not written soap operas.

Here are some questions from mantis; I have already sent them to him, but will edit my

pasted-in e-mail since some of them refer mainly to -Daemonomania-, which he and I have read but most of you haven't:

1) No on David Bowie. No gleam of connection. I get the impression that JC doesn't relate to music, even the music "of his generation," all that viscerally.

2) Philip K. Dick. Read -Eye in the Sky- in highschool and was much impressed: a world that is not your own, not real, but inescapable.

3) The Fourth Tower of Inverness. Never heard of it.

4) -The Crying of Lot 49- Oh yes, big influence. One of the books he'd "most like to have written." Though Pierce and Mucho do not come directly from that book, he is aware of the name coincidence since an early review pointed it out. Stamp collections.

5) -The Alexandria Quartet- No influence, but loved it.

6) -The Magus- No influence, but hated it. (He did explain a little, but that will have to wait till I listen to the tape.)

7) Le Guin. Big influence, especially the early books. Prob read LHoD first, then went back to the others (Rocannon's World, City of Illusions, Planet of Exile). These, with parts of Disch's -334-, are probably the biggest SF influences on his work. Aware of parallel between TD and Col (alien traveler with strange eyes, damaged mind, an unknown purpose) but says the idea came to him before he read it. Says un-self-consciously that his is a much better-constructed book, that hers is something of a mess. Says he finds her later work dry, somewhat priggish and hard going.

Moving on, ideas of humans as next to God, other critters as less than human: You're on the right track. Conscious gnosticism here (can't quite decipher my writing). Humans remain part of God, while fairies, angels, demons, gods have been forgotten (by us, I think, not God) (when I listen to the tape, I'll send a less garbled answer to this one).

You: "People who mimic the other critters are debasing themselves and moving away from God and toward the less-than-human." Him: "Right, but not in an orthodox way, it is gnostic."

Next point about the LB family devolving (Nutria's horror). He says [a spoiler snip] his thoughts were "more handmade" in LB; the family is moving to a new condition which is not necessarily either higher or lower. He says he is not a "moral writer," that he can explore the dilemmas of characters who are creations in a book, a Tale. This is pretty explicit in LB, but also true of the AE series.

He says you may be thinking a little too hard. It is important to remember that this is a Tale and they are in it. In the series, characters realize this more as the books move along.

He was a bit amused at your reaction to the "dreamboy," [L&S] and explained that what Pierce has done is to wish for love, and then when Cupid/Eros shows up he makes the fumbling human mistake of actually trying to make love to the ideal rather than asking it to grant his wish. Cupid permits this out of somewhat malicious amusement; it is in two ways a perversion of Pierce's natural yearning.

[rest snipped]

Ratty, we talked quite a bit about religion. As I suspected, he has completely fallen away from

his RC upbringing, to the point of some hostility. His wife is Jewish, and has made some attempt to impress "heritage" on their daughters, but he can't bring himself even to do that, though (like me, btw) he believes that knowledge of the Bible, like that of Greek mythology, is important to a humanistic education. He has become extremely interested in gnosticism, however (for those who want to follow him, you can get everything you need out of Hans Jonas's -The Gnostic Religion-, one of the older and simpler texts). Harold Bloom is something of a mentor to him, as he is to me. I don't know whether you have read, or plan to read, the AEgypt series, but this interest is somewhat spelled out in it. In fact, knowing this makes the series easier to read.

So I hope the above is of some interest to at least part of the list.

-alga

William Ansley — 08 Jun 2000, 00:29 · follows akt

Had a short, unprepared interview with JC. Have not yet played the tape back, but at one point I asked questions from the group and scribbled notes, so this is from my notes. William, I forgot to ask about Edward Gorey. But my guess is that you are right--will ask next time. I will also amplify these answers, if need be, when I listen to the tape.

I have finally finished re-reading LB, much more slowly and carefully than the last time(s) I read it. I even took notes, but I can't say I feel like I have achieved a much greater insight into the book than before.

There is another likely reference to Edward Gorey's _The Unstrung Harp_ in Book 6, Ch. 1, section "Carrying a Torch":

[...] he was not any longer someone to whom things happened.

(This is Auberon, thinking of himself.)

Compare this to:

Though he is a person to whom things do not happen, perhaps they may when he is on the other side.

at the end of Gorey's book.

[...]

So I hope the above is of some interest to at least part of the list.

I was greatly interested in your list of questions and answers and thank you for posting it. I have a few more questions I would like answers to. I will give one trivial and one perhaps not so trivial below. I have one more that I still need to work on, but I will send it to you later.

1. When Smoky comes to Edgewood for the first time, to marry Daily Alice, he meets her great-aunt, Nora Cloud, and her mother, Mrs. Drinkwater. There is an exchange between the two women. (This is in Book 1, Ch. 2, section "Lead Astray" on p. 31 of the Quality Paperback Book Club edition, which includes _Beasts_ and _Engine Summer_.)

"Cloud," said Mrs. Drinkwater darkly, scratching her ankle above a slip-on sneaker frayed about the big toe, "Cloud, I was lead astray."

Mrs. Drinkwater had asked Nora Cloud for advice about berrying and had collected a full bucket of berries, but says that she had been lead astray. This is never explained further that I could see.

This section contains a great deal of foreshadowing, but this particular part of it seems to lead nowhere, although it seems quite significant at the time it occurs.

I would like to know if it was intended to be significant and, if so, of what?

2. In Book 6, Ch. 2, section "What a Surprise", p. 533 Sophie's long lost daughter Lilac has come back and is trying to tell her mother how she got back to Edgewood, describing her route. Lilac mentions passing the Summer House where Auberon the elder lived in his last days.

"Auberon," Sophie said.
"No," Lilac said. "Not *Au*beron."

(The "Au" are in italics, but not the rest of the name.)

What does Lilac mean here, that the correct version of the name is Oberon?

If you want to (and can) pose these question to Crowley, wonderful. If not, I understand completely.

William (picky, picky, picky) Ansley

Adam Stephanides — 11 Jun 2000, 12:34 · follows William Ansley

A big, belated thank you to alga for posting this. Another thank you for asking nearly all the questions I suggested, in what sounds like nearly my wording, which I hadn't expected. Of course, now I'm kicking myself for questions I forgot to suggest. I'll mention some in my comments below; possibly, alga, you can ask some of them in your follow-up, if you're so inclined.

akt at attglobal.net wrote:

Adam:

1) Is the "other country" to which the Drinkwaters have gone in any sense death? Yes. But it is not an ending; it is the start of something new.

As I had told alga, I felt (and feel) the ending was deliberately ambiguous, and I didn't want to seem crass by asking too directly for clarification. Hence the weaselly wording. Now I wish I'd bluntly asked "Are the Drinkwaters dead?" While JC might have regarded this as crass, he also might have given a more specific answer. As it is, I'm tantalized: the Drinkwaters are dead "in some sense," but we don't know in what.

The 52 humans have become the 52 fairies who control them; the fairies have gone farther in.

It's not conclusive, but from JC's wording here it does appear that the Drinkwaters are not fairies to start with, but become fairies only after they've crossed over. That's a question I wish I'd thought to suggest.

And I also should have suggested asking "Is it cyclical? Will another group of humans eventually replace the Drinkwaters as fairies?"

[Referring to the Eigenblick subplot]: Also (sheepishly) admitted that much of it came from a draft he had made for another book entirely. (This does not surprise me at all!!)

It surprises me, not because I don't find aspects of the Eigenblick subplot intrusive (though I'm not bothered by it as much as alga), but because it goes against my mental picture of Crowley as a meticulous craftsman concerned that every word be just right. JC makes a similar admission concerning GWOt later. A general question concerning his composition methods might be interesting.

4) Why in both TD and LB do the Tarot decks have 52 cards aside from the trumps, unlike historical decks? Older deck have 52 cards including trumps, in 4 suits. Tarot cards are the extra cards added to that pack.

Okay, so Crowley didn't deliberately change the number of "suit cards" to 52, as I had thought. There's a more general lesson here, one that applies to Wolfe too. I'm no expert on the history of cards, playing or Tarot, but the books I have consulted give a history that differs from Crowley's. We shouldn't assume that the information we find in reference books--even standard ones--was necessarily what the author had in mind when he or she was writing.

This leads to another question I wish I'd suggested. In GWOt, the Denis who narrates the final chapters (and, as it turns out, the entire work) mentions having heard from his father that a dirigible had crashed. As mantis has pointed out, the date given for this crash in GWOt is not the date it crashed in reality (at least according to the reference work he consulted). Did JC deliberately change the date to indicate that the world at the end of the story is not quite the Original Situation, despite appearances, as mantis argued? Or did JC, or mantis's reference, simply get the date wrong?

6) In GWOt why does old Dennis at the end think that meeting oneself is impossible, and that the Otherhood claimed otherwise to protect itself? It's not impossible, but forbidden. Leads to foreknowledge which might be the end of hope. (I think that's what my note says.)

Again, I wish I'd suggested asking "What happened on Denis's mission in Rhodesia? Did he in fact meet his older self who warned him against creating the Otherhood, and confabulate the story of the lion later?" That's what I think happened, but not everyone agrees.

JC didn't exactly answer my question here, but I don't want to beat a dead horse.

1) No on David Bowie. No gleam of connection. I get the impression that JC doesn't relate to music, even the music "of his generation," all that viscerally.

Now that I think about it, there is very little music in LB or Aegypt for works with such a countercultural feel.

2) Philip K. Dick. Read -Eye in the Sky- in highschool and was much impressed: a world that is not your own, not real, but inescapable.

mantis, could you elaborate on why you asked this? The only connection I can see offhand is that Smoky is sucked into the Drinkwaters' reality; but in LB the Drinkwaters' reality is

objectively real.

3) The Fourth Tower of Inverness. Never heard of it.

Me neither. Should I have?

4) -The Crying of Lot 49- Oh yes, big influence. One of the books he'd "most like to have written." Though Pierce and Mucho do not come directly from that book, he is aware of the name coincidence since an early review pointed it out. Stamp collections.

Again, mantis, please elaborate. This sounds fascinating. I just finished TCoL49, and must confess I don't see much connection between it and Aegypt, except for a general sense of epistemological suspension between two realms of being (though it seems the "conflict of worlds" in the series is going to be definitely resolved in favor of magic). I see a bit more of a similarity with LB: in a sense, the fairies and their allies, like Tristero, are a subversive conspiracy originating in Europe centuries ago and imported to America. And again there's that epistemological suspension, although in LB not shared by the reader, just by some of the Smoky and some of the other males.

He was a bit amused at your reaction to the "dreamboy," [L&S] and explained that what Pierce has done is to wish for love, and then when Cupid/Eros shows up he makes the fumbling human mistake of actually trying to make love to the ideal rather than asking it to grant his wish. Cupid permits this out of somewhat malicious amusement; it is in two ways a perversion of Pierce's natural yearning.
[rest snipped]

I'd like more of an explanation of this, especially since I've seen it suggested that Crowley's works display a certain animus against homosexuality. It might be interesting asking JC about this, of course in a way that doesn't put him on the spot.

--Adam

Jim Jordan — 12 Jun 2000, 08:32 · follows Adam Stephanides

At 12:34 PM 6/11/2000 -0700, you wrote:
A big, belated thank you to alga for posting this.

Ditto from Nutria. Settles most things I was interested in.

Nutricious