

Crowley's The Translator (SPOILERS)

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 31 Mar 2002

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Adam Stephanides — 31 Mar 2002, 15:22

Big spoilers, so don't read this if you haven't finished the book.

on 3/29/02 10:11 AM, Russell Wodell at hse at telus.net wrote:

Notes from a first reading:

1. The source seems to be Auden's famous quote that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of reality. Here, this seems to be interpreted as poet=saint or poet=angel.

The quote is alluded to on p. 294.

2. Crowley seems to be saying that the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis was a literal miracle. Exactly how an exiled Russian poet could prevent nuclear war is left as teasingly unclear as the actions of the fairies in "Little, Big."

This is what I originally thought was going on, too. But thinking it over, I'm skeptical. It doesn't account for the intrigue surrounding Kit. Jackie suggests that Bluhdorn "recruited her" to show Falin "that they asked about him. That they can get to people he knows and ask them" (205), but this doesn't hold water: of course they can "get to" Falin's acquaintances--they're the U.S. government; and Falin, with his background in a police state, undoubtedly assumes they are doing so anyway. Nor does it account for Falin warning Kit away for her own good: if he's decided to sacrifice himself, why should this endanger Kit? And it doesn't account for the hints, which don't come only from Bluhdorn and are never refuted, that Falin has worked, or is working, for the KGB.

On a literal level, this is what I believe happened: Falin is working for the KGB, just as the U.S. government suspects. In the passage "'Hardest thing,' he said, not to her. 'Is not suffering. Much harder is to remember what you did to avoid suffering. What you were willing to do. This cannot be erased.'" (252), this is what Falin's talking about: he's remembering what he has done, not posing a hypothetical situation. Bluhdorn harasses Kit to squeeze Falin. And it works: to save Kit, Falin agrees to cooperate with the U.S. government. But the KGB learns this, intercepts him on his way, kills him and takes his poems (which Falin may have expected).

Falin does hint to Kit that he is sacrificing himself to prevent nuclear war. The question then is, is he just saying this to Kit to comfort her? Or does he believe that on some level he is indeed doing this (in addition to sacrificing himself to save Kit). And if the latter, is it true? I don't know. The final possibility would be the most "Crowleyesque," but the book as a whole is not Crowleyesque, and in his LOCUS interview Crowley says he knows that the world really isn't the way he presents it in LITTLE, BIG and the AEGYPT books. His remarks about THE TRANSLATOR itself do seem to hint that the final possibility is true, but I don't think they're definitive (and if it wasn't true, I don't think Crowley would say so openly: it would be something for readers to figure out).

3. The poetic concept that each nation has two opposing angels seems to be meant literally as well -- but Crowley is a recovering Catholic and is

deeply ambiguous about this.

On a mundane level, the "lesser angels" are simply poets: "he shivers and sings/And there is no reproach so stinging as his smile." (137)

There are several candidates for America's dark angel.

I think that America's "greater angel" is a dark angel, if not so dark as Russia's. Certainly the portrayal of the U.S. government is unflattering; and it almost brought about nuclear war.

4. The hostile NY Times review complained that Crowley's invented Russian poetry was awful. I strongly disagree: I found it moving and much more authentic than, say D.M. Thomas's similar efforts in his novels (though his translations of actual poetry are sometime marvellous).

I haven't seen this review yet (was it in the NYTBR, or in the daily paper?) but I agree with you (though I haven't read any D.M. Thomas).

--Adam