
THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Entrenched in Victorian England and raised in a puritanical Christian family, Aleister Crowley delved into Western Esotericism and the study of ritual magic as a means to subvert the stifling environment into which he was born. Among his chief acts of subversion were his many displays of a very fluid and malleable identity. He played with “selves” like they were merely wardrobes for a day and found himself developing more fully for the breadth of experience that he achieved from such practices. In the wake of Friedrich Nietszche, Crowley looked to the strength of each individual will to deny being identified by traditional systems such as Christianity or “Modernity,” pushing instead for a chaotic presentation of the self that is both wholly opposed to external authority and wholly enthusiastic about play, contradiction and experimentation. Through the lens of Michel Foucault’s “Technologies of the Self” and Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, one can come to see Crowley’s performances (through dress, pseudonyms, literary license and more) as operations that he performs on himself to knowingly affect a change in his identity.

What is most interesting about this property of Crowley is the way it survives into Neo-Paganism from the 1950s through today. Both the influence of Nietzsche and Crowley are clear in Wicca, the Discordians, the Church of Satan and Peter Carroll’s lineage of Chaos magicians, and such a survival suggests the usefulness of
Crowley's practices not only in the "modern" world of Victorian England, but even, and perhaps more fully, in the "post-modernity" of the late 21st century.
Dedicated to Mike E.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION:

CHAOS AND THE "TRANSVALUATION OF ALL VALUES"

When I first began to think about Aleister Crowley, I thought of Loki, the trickster of the Norse pantheon. A confusing amalgamation of differing personas, Loki inspired as much laughter and perhaps even pity as he did fear and disgust. In most of the Norse cosmological tales, Loki created as many problems as he fixed. In fact, it could be argued that he created them to fix them. He stirred up Asgard when it was dull and unmoving, and he made it quiet only after enough action to inspire self-defining moments, brotherhood and cooperation among the gods had taken place. Like a glint of gold in a messy rock, there is a wisdom in his madness that is inseparable from the unseemly grit that it is surrounded by. It is unclear what sort of beastly (gritty) qualities were given to Loki by his Norse creators and which were imposed upon him by the Christian writers who introduced him to the modern world (and similarly, what sort of beastly qualities of Crowley are his or the imagined evils his critics dreamed up), but we know him as fallible, inconsistent, contradictory, and so, unlike the rest of the gods, quite like humanity:

He has become the mischief maker, the instigator of wrongs in many tales...He is, however, the constant companion of the gods...and is also
the agent for solving the problems that arise from his own doings. So acts the mind of man;²

Often appearing in different guises, sometimes male, sometimes female, and sometimes bestial, manipulating himself in order to affect a kind of motion among those he interacted with, Loki seems to represent the power within humans to continuously choose and redefine their identity. Most importantly, Loki is responsible for Ragnarok, the end of all things that, in turn, leads to a new beginning of things.

In many ways, Aleister Crowley is a modern Loki. Like Loki, he was a kind of trickster, occupying the godlike positions of teacher, prophet, and guru, maintaining a variety of physical statures to represent each role. He was a most chaotic combination of selves, I would argue a deliberate and necessary one though, as he was the sort of prolific creator of things—books, poems, organizations, rituals, art, mountain adventures—that only chaos could bring to life. Where Loki’s actions (and offspring, actually) inspired the complete destruction and reconstruction of the world, Crowley’s actions (and surviving influence) call for a destruction and reconstruction of the individual through a process of constantly contradicting one’s self, a sort of microcosmic version of Ragnarok.

According to Richard Metzger³, “contradiction for [Crowley] was not a problem but a sign of higher mystical synthesis transcending the rational.” In The Book of Lies, Crowley says that “Samadhi”, or a state of intense concentration, could be achieved through piling “contradiction upon contradiction, and thus a higher degree of rapture, with every sentence” to reach the “supreme state.”⁴ So, unlike most typical notions of deep meditative states being the result of intense concentration on one object, or even a
complete lack of concentration on anything, Crowley valued the dissolution of the self through the practice of, simply put, many selves.

In his most successful novel, *Moonchild*, he called for a kind of child-like curiosity with the self in order to bring humor to the serious, and an earnest importance to the humorous:

It seems as if, in order to grasp anything, I were obliged to take its extremes. I see both the sublime and the ridiculous at once, and I can’t imagine one existing apart from the other, any more than you can have a stick with only one end. So I use one point of view to overbalance the other, like a child starting to swing itself. I am never happy until I have identified an idea with its opposite.\(^5\)

This playfulness, this inability to stop laughing at what is most dire and most cosmically consequential, stems directly out of Crowley’s acceptance of many different identities. To allow such a freedom with the self is ultimately to come to know one’s self in a myriad of different forms and from many perspectives, and thus is to come to know all those things that one interacts with from that same variety of angles. Obliged to “see both the sublime and ridiculous at once,” Crowley drew out extreme perspectives of everything in order to really get a sense of what each thing (e.g. experience, object, pleasure, pain, etc.) was at its core. So this playfulness leads to a complete picture of the self and those things around the self. Along with the increasing notion that disorder can be valued over order, this decentered, rather bi-polar (if not multi-angled) approach to identity that Crowley practiced so loudly was perhaps a full half-century ahead of both the theoretical shift to “post-modernity” as well as the Neo-Pagan groups that practice it popularly today.
Surely, it can be and has been argued that Crowley was merely a hypocrite or a sort of schizophrenic; that his method of contradiction was simply an elaborate way to state his unsettled and duplicitous nature:

There was more than one Crowley, for in him existed a number of different and conflicting personalities. There was Crowley the god, and Crowley the clown, and Crowley the English gentleman... there is nothing gentlemanly about a demoniac genius.6

John Symonds, author of the scathing Crowley biography The Great Beast, echoes an often-cited confusion that many had concerning Crowley. Namely, that he seemed to always regret not having been born in a more noble family, to be able to rightly call himself an “English gentleman”, but yet his practices—involvement in unpopular, public magical rituals, sexual magic, controversial (and deadly) climbing expeditions—would have him labeled a social outcaste for most of his life.

His ambivalence towards his social status as an Englishman was perhaps the least violent of his irregularities. He has been labeled a “complete chauvinist”7 and orientalist, in some cases rightly so, though he has also written that “a woman is Herself, absolute, original, independent, free, self-justified, exactly as a man is,”8 and has been quite explicit in his disgust with what he clearly identified as the “Orientalism” of his time. While he despised his Christian upbringing for many of the same reasons that Nietszche did, he never really lost fascination with the Christian elements in his rituals, and found his occult roots in groups like the Golden Dawn that based much of their practice around Christian imagery. Even Crowley’s radically liberal ideas about sexuality, sexual ritual, and his openly homosexual preferences appear utterly puzzling after reading his harsh and prudish criticisms of others, including Oscar Wilde, for their own homosexuality.9
In response to calls that Crowley was schizophrenic, psychoanalyst, Crowley student and biographer Israel Regardie responded strongly, saying that no “schizophrenic” could be “capable of the tremendous self-discipline and mental training that Crowley embarked upon.” He spoke of the “long hours devoted to meditative exercises, the hard grind of pranayama, intellectual study” and Crowley’s other work as a mountain climber, hunter and traveler, noting that such “self-probing” could not have “left untouched many levels of his unconscious psychic functioning.” And Regardie was no romanticizer of Crowley as he had been the brunt of scathing letter Crowley had circulated about him after a falling out.

In *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, which both documents his uplifting optimism regarding drug addiction and his rather sad failure at overcoming it, Crowley writes that “sanity consists in the proper equilibrium of ideas in general” and that “that is the only sense in which it is true that genius is connected with insanity.” Though he rebukes the schizophrenia accusations, Regardie argues that Crowley, for a time, did engage in a kind of willing insanity, pointing to the period after his failed attempt to climb K2. After a number of his fellow climbers died in the attempt, Crowley wandered China and was perhaps for the only time in his life truly unsure of himself. Regardie says that he entered into a “deliberately induced” insanity for the “deliberate and foreseeable end” of ego-destruction. Rather like a Zen monk with a koan, he says, Crowley accepted a riddle with no answer to drive his ego away. Looking back to his words in *Drug Fiend*, we might see this as an effort at balance after having pushed his ego so strongly on the mountain and seeing the damaging effects.
So rather than argue the truth, or even the sincerity of each element of Crowley, or point out his inconsistencies as faults, I will leave the old criticisms to the many published witch hunts that have been released since his death. I will instead argue that Crowley's constructive use of multiple selves can be and has been used as a model through which New Religious Movements, specifically the varied forms of Neopagans—who find themselves increasingly having to adapt to, and create themselves within a chaotic, technologically saturated world—can organize their selves. Lawrence Sutin, the biographer who perhaps has dealt with Crowley the most fairly, argues that Crowley achieved many things worthy of scholarship, summed up in a nine point list including his contribution to the Western knowledge of Hinduism and Buddhism; his "rare sophistication and originality" as a mystic; his skill and success as a poet and novelist; his accomplishments as a mountain climber; and his "viscerally compelling" if "technically unsophisticated" painting, among others. I would add to this list his efforts in self-construction.

For Crowley, the "Law of Identity is but a lie...there is no subject, and there is no predicate; nor is there the contradictory of either of these things." In a sense, I see him calling for the organization of the self through a flagrant disorganization, or a dismissal of traditional ideas of the self as a single whole, a soul that retains one identity. Rather, in a form much influenced by the Buddhist concept of anatta, or the ever-changing, interconnected processes that make up a human identity, Crowley's self is organic, adaptable, and perhaps most importantly, humorous, a kind of self-parody. These are precisely the kind of qualities needed to survive in a quickly globalizing world where
identity (and often religious identity) takes place in venues of endless possibility, like cyber-space.

In order to accomplish a self-hood unbound by traditional interpretations, Crowley argues that the self (or selves) must develop its own characteristics, its own values and its own philosophies, rather than appropriating the suggested value norms of its given society. This edict of Crowley's is summed up in his proclamation, often found as a greeting and note of departure in his own writings and letters: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law. Love is the law, love under will." This strain of Crowleyian thought remains potent throughout Neo-Paganism (and much of post-modern thought, as it is), and to get a better sense of its historical applicability, I will trace it back to two specific authors, one of whom will recur quite steadily throughout the rest of this discussion.

Stemming from Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, "Do what thou wilt" is a call to supreme indulgence and trust in the basic nature of humanity, unburdened by historical morality. A closer look at Rabelais' mid-sixteenth century work reveals much of the inspiration, if not simply the symbolic referent for Crowley's "Abbey of Thelema" in Sicily, and his "Law of Thelema" (do what thou wilt). In "Chapter 1.LVII" of *Gargantua*, Rabelais describes the government and manner of living of the "Thelemites":

> All their life was spent not in laws, statutes, or rules, but according to their own free will and pleasure. They rose out of their beds when they thought good; they did eat, drink, labour, sleep, when they had a mind to it and were disposed for it. None did awake them, none did offer to constrain them to eat, drink, nor to do any other thing; for so had Gargantua established it. In all their rule and strictest tie of their order there was but this one clause to be observed, Do What Thou Wilt;"
To be sure, Crowley sees himself as Gargantua, literally the leader of his own Thelema in the hills of Cefalu, Sicily, leading a group of eager students towards the discovery of the unbridled identity. The most interesting aspect of this lifestyle is that, for Crowley, the voluntary anarchy that may have at first stemmed out of a destruction of thought-patterns, worldviews and fears, led not to violence, but instead to love: “Love is the Law, Love under Will.” The will, in an open and chaotic state (a natural state), looks to love.

Rabelais continues:

...because men that are free, well-born, well-bred, and conversant in honest companies, have naturally an instinct and spur that prompteth them unto virtuous actions, and withdraws them from vice, which is called honour. Those same men, when by base subjection and constraint they are brought under and kept down, turn aside from that noble disposition by which they formerly were inclined to virtue, to shake off and break that bond of servitude wherein they are so tyrannously enslaved; for it is agreeable with the nature of man to long after things forbidden and to desire what is denied us. 17

So here Rabelais is already introducing issues of repressed desires associated with subjection to authority.

Rabelais provided the classical literary foundation for Crowley’s philosophies, but to fully understand the literary environment within which Crowley thought himself to be, one must look to the work of arguably the most long-enduring late 19th century theorist, Friedrich Nietzsche. How much of Nietzsche’s work was available to Crowley in English at certain periods is unsure, but Crowley knew and thought highly enough of him to call him “almost an avatar of Thoth, the god of wisdom.” 18 This is an interesting comparison as Thoth was not only the scribe of the gods and the people, but he also participated with Anubis in guiding the recently deceased from the living world to the dead world. While the notion that Nietzsche is somehow a judge of men, in the way that
Thoth weighed the souls of the dead, is quite interesting, what is more directly important is that Thoth was a liminal character. He existed in two worlds at once. Nietzsche, in his increasing solitude and what later was deemed madness can certainly be thought of as a marginal creature, somewhere between the rule of man’s authority and the will of his own “transvaluation of values.” Somewhere between the Protestant world he arrived in, and the harshly anti-Christian mindset that he died in. Crowley saw him as someone who was able to exist between worlds, and thus, perhaps, between identities.

While Crowley rarely directly cited him, it is not hard to see that he looked to Nietzsche for support in his radical effort against submission to a righteous authority, calling instead for “each individual to be the centre of the universe,” “unique, sovereign and responsible only to himself.”\textsuperscript{19} Perhaps it was in Nietzsche’s call for a “will to power” that Crowley heard the echo of Rabelais’ “do what thou will.” Nietzsche believed that the only way a person could conquer the feelings of ressentiment, the “slave morality” of those submitted to external authority, was by adhering to his or her own unique will and unique virtues; these virtues are “too high for the familiarity of names,” not desired as law of God, law of humans or human need, but virtues desired because they stem from the individual’s unique passion. By doing so, one would embody what Nietzsche called a “transvaluation of all values”, becoming “a visualized declaration of war and victory against all the old concepts of ‘true’ and ‘not true.’”\textsuperscript{20} So, Nietzsche troubled the idea of not only absolute values, those stemming from religion, but the very idea of truth itself. Over a decade after Nietzsche’s death, Crowley cried, “Holy, Holy, Holy are these Truths that I utter, knowing them to be but falsehoods, broken mirrors,
troubled waters...”21 seeing his very role as teacher and poet as one that must obey the subjectivity and inconsistency of truth.

It was not until 1904, according to Sutin, that Crowley first read Nietzsche. This is significant, for during that same year Crowley wrote his Book of the Law, or rather, the book was dictated to him by his guardian angel, a story I will come back to at length later. What is important here is that The Book of the Law became the cornerstone of Crowley’s teachings and survived unchanged throughout his highly inconsistent life. It was in this work that he pushes most powerfully for what I come to understand as infinite self, a uniting of limited self and all space. That is, by pushing the limits of one’s own identity, by determining one’s own system of values, one can become unlimited as an individual.

Along with his call for each individual to pursue his or her own will and unique value system, Nietzsche affirmed that “one must still have chaos in one to give birth to a dancing star,”22 essentially reminding us that self-empowering movement does not lead to an easy life or “good sleep,” but rather an existence as what he called the “drowsy,” those who willfully refuse the ease of “sheep” mentality. This kind of existence is chaotic as it is naturally without external foundation and must be experimented with tirelessly, leading to this drowsiness. As was made clear towards the end of Nietzsche’s own life, this chaos is often a kind of madness as well. It is also a kind of confusion or ambivalence towards a set identity. In Thus Spake Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s protagonist, the traveling speaker Zarathustra, encounters a young boy who struggles with his search for identity. The boy laments the difficult life from the height to which he has managed to rise:
I change too quickly: my to-day refuteth my yesterday. I often overleap the steps when I clamber; for so doing, none of the steps pardon me. When aloft, I find myself always alone. No one speaketh unto me; the frost of solitude maketh me tremble. What do I seek on the height? My contempt and my longing increase together; the higher I clamber, the more do I despise him who clambereth. What doth he seek on the height? How ashamed I am of my clambering and stumbling! How I mock at my violent panting! How I hate him who flieth! How tired I am on the height!23

So, many instances of ambivalence, though strong and unsettling, are required for any person to reach what Crowley would come to call the “True Will”; it seems more than coincidence that Crowley spent such an energy on climbing mountains, reaching peaks, nearly sacrificing his own life and watching others die in the process, only to remain frustrated with the disconcerting nature of such heights (rocky heights and personal). For Nietzsche, it is those struggling at the heights, the “Destroyer[s]... despisers of good and evil” who are the “reapers and rejoicers,” the “creators.” It is they whom the “good and just” hate the most: “Whom do they hate most? Him who breaketh up their tables of values, the breaker, the law-breaker:--he, however, is the creator.”24 So clearly, Nietzsche sees a correlation between the discovery of the self as one who refuses the traditional values of “good men,” and the act of creation itself, a correlation that inherently calls those followers of “good men” dormant or sterile human beings. The difficulty is the path to such self-discovery, which is laden with anxiety, self-doubt, “clambering and stumbling.” To find one sleeping well, unquestioning and complacent, is to find one willingly oppressed by the values of others.

Nietzsche wrote his first major work, The Birth of Tragedy, during the Franco-Prussian war, but from deep within the safety of the Alps. The combination of the shaky political situation and his serene writing atmosphere left him “simultaneously very
distressed and carefree,\textsuperscript{25} again a kind of liminality. In it, he opposes two Greek gods of art, Apollo and his visual ("plastic") arts, and Dionysus and his music. The Apollonian art of the Greeks is like a dream, illusory. It is the illusion of the \textit{principium individuationis} (the principle of individuality), whereby an individual trusts in his solitude, in his conscious ability to interpret his illusion soberly, alone. Dionysian art, on the other hand, represents a breakdown in the individual's ability to interpret his or her reality. It is the collapse of the \textit{principium individuationis}, presented through the analogy of "intoxication." Nietzsche says that as "that Dionysian excitement arises...the subjective fades into complete forgetfulness of the self." The individual becomes one with others, and even one with the earth itself, coming to find him or herself feeling "like a god." In musical terms, the Apollonian would reflect the steady and cautious consistency of waves, where the Dionysian music turns into "emotionally disturbing tonal power" that forces man to "the highest intensity of all his symbolic capabilities."

Nietzsche continues that for one to grasp this intensity, he or she must have "attained that high level of freedom from the self."\textsuperscript{26}

Nietzsche likens Pan to the symbol of the Dionysian gatherings, rather \textit{carnivalesque} in their power to disrupt the dominant, individualist paradigm, blending self into other as a boundless expression of identity. Crowley, too, looked to Pan as that symbol of nature that one blended with as one blended with the earth. In vulgar language, he shouts: "And I rave; and I rape and I rip and I rend Everlasting, world without end, Mannikin, maiden, maenad, man, In the might of Pan. Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! Pan! Io Pan!"\textsuperscript{27} Sutin understands this violent language as a call to "the union of humankind and the fertility god,"\textsuperscript{28} taking Nietzsche's Dionysian union between human and earth/human
and other to its most sexual end, blatantly envisioning this union as that of two bodies. And sexual union would come to be perhaps Crowley's most prolific (while controversial and stigmatizing) outlet for manipulation of the self.

It is also interesting to note the similarities between the personal lives of Nietzsche and Crowley. Each was born the son of a Christian preacher, only to see his father die before adolescence. They both went on to be sickly schoolboys, often missing class for extended periods of time due to illness, staying home at households run by overbearing women (perhaps a necessity in the absence of a father) that left poor impressions on both boys. Perhaps it is a kind of resentment for the fathers passed that both Nietzsche and Crowley grew to despise the values that their fathers preached with such conviction. As Nietzsche translator Thomas Common put it: "Nietzsche believed that far more important than having the courage of one's convictions, one should have the courage to attack one's convictions." What sets Crowley apart from Nietzsche here is that his "convictions" seemed to take on personalities of their own, working to attack each other within the very person of Crowley. This is not only the process of self-discovery, but for a more immediate purpose, it is the process of self-performance in the here and now. What better way to attack one's own convictions than by personifying each conviction.

So, it is with the aid of people like Rabelais and Nietzsche that Crowley found the courage to move beyond his traditional upbringing into a philosophy that embraced the power within a human being to guide him or herself. As explained through Nietzsche's Zarathustra, to be one of the "drowsy" who attempts such a task is to be "clambering and stumbling," aware of self-contradictions and constant change within. For Crowley, this path away from customary morality led not only to a stumbling but to a proliferation of
identities within the same man. It is precisely this process, this multiplicity of the self through a practice of creating value and purpose according to one’s own will, that has become such a defining characteristic of many important Neo-Pagan movements today.

Along with Crowley and his wake of Neo-Pagan movements, an extensive list of post-modern theorists draw their lineage from Nietzsche. While Nietzsche pushed individuals towards theological transformation with his talk of the superman, he also proposed the genealogical method, a precise and specific, often etymological approach to researching individual histories (his most powerful contribution to what can be called the history of ideas). Through his *Genealogy of Morality*, he began both a movement to not only rethink an entire history of religion, but also the concept of “history” in general. In both manners, he was perhaps less of a “modernist” than a “post-modernist,” if it was not for his lack of respect for women and those disabled. Perhaps it is Foucault, Butler, DeLeuze and others today who have most famously continued Nietzsche’s disassembling of history theoretically. I would argue that Crowley represents a lineage that did and does not only theorize, but also physically practices ritual and philosophical traditions that have a space in the wake of Nietzsche. Essentially, what I look to do in this essay is utilize a couple of those post-Nietzschean theorists to rethink Crowley (and his many selves) as a most important figurehead of four Neo-Pagan movements that are also indebted to Nietzsche. All the while, Aleister Crowley sits in the middle as philosopher and practitioner alike, with one foot in either side. He is perhaps the necessary link in bringing what may have only remained a theoretical lineage into a realm where people actually do what they theorize. Namely, they create their own value systems and live by them.
In the following three chapters, I hope to elucidate more clearly exactly how I see Crowley to be such an embodiment of chaos and multiplicity, all the while remembering that it is first through the denial of external authority that either can take place. I draw from a wide variety of sources about Crowley, as he is neither simply the man depicted in his own writings nor the man of the numerous biographies. It would have been a failure on my part to limit this study to a certain kind of text—diary, ritual writing, biography, novel, letters, etc.—as the object of this study is to document the many versions of Crowley that appear in such disparate sources. In chapter two I will draw out specific moments of Crowley’s life that may have led to his selves identification, focusing around the idea that any biography of Crowley will inherently be incomplete, as his shifting personalities do not lend themselves to being easily gathered into a whole. In chapter three, I will analyze Crowley’s multiple personalities using Michel Foucault’s notion of Technologies of the Self, adapting it slightly to better fit Crowley: Technologies of the Selves. Building on this theoretical model, I will look to Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble, and Bodies that Matter and her idea of gender as a performance that changes with its setting. Together, Foucault and Butler should help to shed light on what exactly Crowley is doing contradicting himself over and over again, and also lend some insight as to what problems arise in Crowley’s performances. I will then, in chapter four, trace a line through various modern pagan groups that embody, consciously or unconsciously, Crowley’s chaotic and often silly identity, highlighting Wicca, Discordianism, the Church of Satan and Chaos Magic. What becomes apparent is, in many ways, how surprisingly ahead of his time Aleister Crowley was.
CHAPTER 2

THE BEAST

"Man is capable of being, and using, anything which he perceives; for everything that he perceives is in a certain sense a part of his being. He may thus subjugate the whole Universe of which he is conscious to his individual Will."

-Crowley, Magick Without Tears

While there is a wide range of biographical source material for Crowley, no one source is capable of telling his complete story. He existed in too many different capacities, morphing in ideology and temperament from student to teacher and back, "charlatan" to "a poet-mystic...to be reckoned with," and all the while relishing in his obvious contradictory nature. Perhaps, just as he saw the only way to discover the "True Will" of any individual was to swing as a pendulum from extreme to extreme, he too can only be recognized by perusing such a wide range of contradictory sources. In coming to know Crowley, one must come to know the magus at Cefalu, the "drug fiend," the mountaineer, the poet, the sex magician, the Orientalist and plenty more.

Of the sources available, many are autobiographical, many are biographical, some are scholarly and most are heated with some passionate agenda, both for and against Crowley. Concerning his own sources, he kept ceaseless diaries, documenting his everyday practices, achievements and failures, often in a dry form that indicates their personal, rather than public nature. Confessions, his massive autobiography, tackles
much of his life in retrospect, and was not actually penned by Crowley, but by his
“Scarlet Woman” of the time. Two of his novels, Moonchild and Diary of a Drug Fiend
appear largely autobiographical, but also poly-autobiographical, or rather a biographical
history of many of his identities as played by various characters in the stories.

John Symonds’ early biography, *The Great Beast*, was among the first complete
accounts of Crowley’s life from an outside source, but is laden with the author’s anti-
Crowley bias. Others, like Francis King’s 1971 *Sexuality, Magic and Perversion* betray
their stance right at the title. Israel Regardie, a student of Crowley who suffered an unfair
and untrue attack at the hand of his teacher, returned in 1970 to counter the arguments of
people like Symonds, publishing a well-balanced *The Eye in the Triangle*. But his close
personal connections to his teacher and the Western Esoteric traditions he came from are
perhaps too much to overlook when seeking objectivity. It is Lawrence Sutin’s *Do What
Thou Wilt* (2001) that has become the most thorough and balanced approach to Crowley.
Academic in authority and careful to be neither overly romantic nor blindly critical, Sutin
instead argues why Crowley is in fact a most important figure in the study of religions.

Even with—perhaps especially with—such a variety of biographical attempts, it is
clear that Crowley’s life is not one that can be understood through a simple compiling of
events. Perhaps it is this very nature of him that has both attracted me to this study, and
will keep me from attempting anything that tries to be encompassing. Because of the
excess of Crowley biographies in existence, and the variety of approaches already taken
by their authors, I am not looking to present new evidence or break new ground
concerning the life of Crowley. Without direct involvement with those he worked with
(and they are mostly dead now), the only way to produce novel details of his life would
perhaps be through esoteric interpretations of his own diaries. So instead of shocking the reader with unseen details of the Great Beast, I will instead attempt to produce a short biography that focuses on moments that may have contributed to his self-identification as selves-identification. Even such an abbreviated account is choosy and incomplete, but might be a convenient collection of moments that highlight a controversial and exciting characteristic of Crowley, a source along side the many others, working to open a small door into his complexity.

Youth.

He was born in 1875 in Warwickshire, England as Edward Alexander Crowley (at Cambridge he would change his name to Aleister, the Gaelic form of Alexander). According to his masterwork, *Confessions*, as the astrological sign Leo was rising in the sky, he was born with auspicious marks on his body, like the story of the Buddha.\(^{32}\) So, in one moment he is defined as king of animals, full of pride but wary of vanity, and also a natural conqueror of the human condition. Here, Crowley seems to be playing with the idea that many “occult” systems find (or maybe, invent) their origins with earlier magic or spiritual traditions to provide an accountable lineage. He is then applying this idea to his own origin with more than a slight sense of humor.\(^{33}\) Crowley, like the Buddha, he seems to say, was destined to solve the problems of man. He also seems, at least to some degree, to recognize in the sign Leo a Nietzschian “will to power,” remembering that Nietzsche gave the lion the power to say “I will” where the dragon is called “Thou-shalt” (where the rest follow orders).

Crowley’s propitious entrance was harshly counteracted by the environment within which he was born. Late 19th century England was still very much in the lasting
clutches of the sexually repressive "Victorian regime," as Foucault called it, where speaking of sex was reserved for scientific studies and brothels. On top of this, Crowley was the son of a very active preacher in the puritanical Plymouth Brethren, who were, incidentally, led by the same John Darby who pioneered the pre-millennial rapture theory that is still common in today's Christianity. Crowley's mother was less confident in her faith and had, according to Crowley, a difficult relationship with the religion of her husband. In Confessions, Crowley recalls how his mother's "powerful natural instincts were suppressed by religion," and that she was "distressed, almost daily, at finding herself obliged by her religion to perform acts of the most senseless atrocity." Through her own fearful respect of religion, she gave her son the nickname "The Beast," referring to his will away from Christian morality and equating him with the great Opposer in Revelations. Indeed, this must have left quite an impression on Crowley as he adopted the name with all of its controversy and added after it, "666," clearly at least one reason he was later called "The Wickedest Man in the World." So, at a young age, Aleister Crowley was subverting external dominance and finding within himself the authority to be as he pleased.

Cambridge.

Crowley fought throughout the rest of his life to be free of the guilt of his Christian childhood, never quite coming to peace. During his college years at Cambridge, he turned to poetry and mountaineering—two passions that would warrant much of his early notoriety, good or ill—and soon after, to the exotic allures of "Magick." In 1898, Crowley published his first collections of poetry, including White
Stains, which contained celebratory poems about forms of sexuality considered deviant, including homosexuality, bisexuality, sadism, and necrophilia, among others. The collection appears as an obvious critique of the prudish Victorian sexuality, and Sutin claims that it “deserved a place in any wide-ranging anthology of gay poetry.”

Crowley’s concentration on sex as both a powerful form of rebellion and as a means to gnosis had its origin in these early writings and came to flourish as one of his most important spiritual practices throughout his later life.

In a form that Crowley would bring to the fore of much of his later work, he often wrote pseudonymously and quite sarcastically, approaching the most serious of topics with a wry sense of humor to create a space for a previously unspoken conversation about sex, magic and the transportation of Eastern philosophies to the West. Crowley seemed to revel in this light approach to heavy topics, naming some of his most important works White Stains, Yoga for Yahoos, and Diary of Drug Fiend, and even going so far as insisting his autobiography be called an “autohagiography”, a reference to the study of saints and a parody of St. Augustine.

Training.

Much of Crowley’s initial instruction in ritual magic came from his brief stint in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn from 1898 to 1900. This influence provided a lasting resource for Crowley, and it has been said that “all his [Crowley’s] work, in one way or another, is predicated on the curriculum of the Golden Dawn.” It was here that he established two key relationships. The first is with Samuel Liddell (MacGregor) Mathers from whom he further developed his interest in ritual dress and ceremony and
also received instruction in a deeply ascetic practice that he would turn to time and time again, called the \textit{Abra-Melin} \textsuperscript{40} working. The second relationship is with Allan Bennett (later called Metteyya or Maitreya), with whom Crowley first experimented with drugs and meditation. When Bennett moved to Ceylon to practice in a Buddhist monastery, Crowley spent time visiting him, learning different forms of Hindu and Buddhist Yoga (his surprisingly solid understanding is apparent in his \textit{Eight Lectures on Yoga} and \textit{Book 4}). In 1912, after becoming frustrated with an organization of his own upstart (Argentum Astrum), Crowley joined the Ordo Templi Orientis under Theodor Reuss, and later assumed a governing position (though controversially) as the head of its Irish branch. Both societies were heavily influenced by the Knights Templar (the O.T.O. actually claiming its roots with the ancient Templars), Rosicrucianism, and Jewish Kabbalah, among other things, and Reuss already prescribed to the power of sexual intercourse in magic ritual. The interplay between the required asceticism of the \textit{Abra-Melin} working and the transgressive sexual practices that developed from Crowley's encounters with these two men is fascinating, and I will discuss it further below. Crowley adopted a sort of pendulous motion between the two for much of his later life.

In the past, Crowley's focus on Buddhism and related meditational techniques have been overshadowed by his sex magic, but he proved to have a deep and personal understanding of Buddhism and also a drive to educate the West about it. It is by no accident or simple New Age amalgamation of Crowleyian work that Buddhism has become associated in its specifically meditational form with Neo-Paganism. While Helena Petrova Blavatsky worked to incorporate her Himalayan mediums as sources of spiritual enlightenment for Theosophists, Crowley carried techniques much more
grounded in established institution and efficacy to the West, explicitly stating that he and Allan Bennett, while practicing meditation in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), worked on plans to “extend” Buddhism to Europe.⁴¹

He begins his Book 4, a treatise on both meditation and magic ritual (a combination that indeed survives fully today in Neo-Paganism), by asking the reader to “begin by doubting every statement” regarding the religious and philosophical attempts to explain life.⁴² He then examines the truth of various religious claims, concluding, much as Nietzsche did in his Anti-Christ⁴³, that the Buddha is the only religious leader that explained his system thoroughly and avoided being dogmatic.⁴⁴ His is simply a practice that can be documented and verified by further attempts at the practice. What Crowley came to realize through the techniques that “Metteyya” showed him was that through a continued occurrence of a quiet mind or a single object of thought, “this consciousness of the Ego and the non-Ego, the seer and the thing seen, the knower and the thing known, is blotted out.”⁴⁵ As his experiences reflected basic Buddhist teachings (Heart Sutra, most simply), Crowley came to see himself dissolving into whatever it is he put his energy into. Should he focus on a flame, he would become that flame, making self-identification a very slippery and perhaps even droll experience.

Thelema.

Arguably, the defining moment of Crowley’s life occurred in Egypt in 1904. After spending his honeymoon with his first wife, Rose, in the King’s Chamber of the Great Pyramid, he moved into a flat in Cairo under the name Prince Chioa Khan.⁴⁶ Here, Crowley accomplished the goal of the Abra-Melin working, receiving contact from his Holy Guardian Angel “Aiwaz,” who dictated to him (through the mouth of Rose) the
Book of the Law. The Book states that the whole of the law is “Do What Thou Wilt... Love is the law, love under will.” It calls people to “Let there be no difference made among you between any one thing & any other thing,” thereby calling for a radical sort of monism where all things are equal, even those things traditionally considered unpleasant or evil. It continues that “reason is a lie,” and there is a “feast for life and a greater feast for death.” In the 1938 introduction, Crowley writes that “every event is a uniting of some one monad with one of the experiences possible to it. ‘Every man and woman is a star,’ that is, an aggregate of such experiences, constantly changing with each fresh event...”.

The Book is the beginning of a new Aeon. There was an Aeon of Nuit, infinite space, goddess of the skies; a time of Hadit, the central point of each individual self; and now it is the Aeon of Ra-Hoor-Khuit, the “Crowned and Conquering Child,” the self spread throughout all space, disregarding reason, knowing all, from life to death.

Crowley, here, if he can be called “author” in this case, advocated an understanding of self that developed from the inside out and he laid the groundwork for later teachings regarding the transgressing of boundaries normally considered taboo. Nearly everything in Crowley’s life that follows this revelation is reactionary. He becomes an active prophet of Thelema, the law as dictated by Aiwaz, a guru, a practitioner and instructor of ritual sexual magic, and an endlessly fruitful writer.

Cefalu and Beyond.

In April of 1920, Crowley, Leah Hirsig, his long-time partner, “Sister Cypris,” his new partner, and his three children (shared between the two women) moved to what came
to be known as the Abbey of Thelema (after Rabelais' story mentioned earlier). It was here that Crowley worked particularly diligently at using sexual union as a means of magic, and he had students come from all over Europe and the U.S. to receive their schooling in his ways. The peaceful, rural atmosphere proved a welcomed retreat from the constant social criticism he was receiving, and the Abbey became a kind of paradise for Crowley:

I care nothing for public opinion. I care nothing for fame or success. I am perfectly happy in my retirement. The full leisure to work, the freedom from all interruption, the absence of temptation to distraction: Cefalu realizes my idea of heaven.49

Perhaps the most interesting element of the villa was the uniquely painted bedroom that Crowley named “Le Chambre des Cauchemars,” or The Room of Nightmares. Crowley painted the walls himself in the forms of what Sutin calls “an astonishing montage...of unbridled sexuality, blasphemy, poetry, and magical prophecy.”50 He wanted all who stepped into the room to come face-to-face with their own fears, disgusts and compulsions, realizing that the images depicted were nothing “good” or “evil,” but only natural. As Sutin notes, in Crowley’s brochure to visitors of the Abbey, Crowley writes:

The general idea is to present a variety of natural objects in such form and colour as is most antipathetic to their qualities. All we see depends on our senses: suppose they lie to us? Remember that as soon as you perceive the actual conditions of consciousness, there is no such thing as TRUTH...What we call ‘God’ may be only our diseased delirium-phantom, and His reality the one-eyed rotten-toothed petrifaction of Malice shewn in the picture.51
Even one's conception of God, Crowley seems to say, is muddled with ideas of grandeur and safe images of light and airy things. He, instead, reminds the visitor that even the most horrifying things are of God, in fact are God.

After being expelled from Italy by Mussolini in reaction to the rumors of his practices at the Abbey, Crowley spent much of the 1920s searching for students and benefactors with equal successes and failures. In 1929 Crowley published his most important direct contribution to later ritual magic, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, his autobiography *Confessions*, and his second novel, *Moonchild*, though these are by no means an exhaustive list of his publications of the time. As an aging man in the late thirties he worked to get his *Book of the Law* adopted by state governments in Europe, but his disrepute from years of libel and sensational storytelling left him without much support and oddly in the middle of WWII conspiracy theories. It was Crowley's contradictory past that kept him from winning a 1934 libel case that might have worked to save some of his reputation. In 1944 he engaged in a series of letters with various long-distance students and these letters were compiled to form *Magick Without Tears*, an encyclopedia of sorts of Crowley's ideas of magic in his latest years.

Three years later, and shortly after a most interesting brief relationship with the infamous L. Ron Hubbard and Jack Parsons, Crowley left what he called “a good world to leave.” His caretaker recalled “something of a pathos about him” that actually made him “lovable as I had not known him to be before.” He continued that Crowley “knew then that he had not done what he wanted to do, that he had done only a part of it” and had even, perhaps jokingly, thought back upon his life as “worthless.” Mirroring Crowley's auspicious birth, Gerald Suster claims that Crowley “is alleged to have passed
from Samadhi to Super-Samadhi to Nirvana to Super Nirvana, expiring in the boundless bliss of the Infinite.” More probably, though, he died quietly in the company of his son, his son’s mother, and his doctor, ambivalent about his life in retrospect, concerned with making a gentleman out of his only male heir. 
In a step away from conceptualizing the self as constituted by others, Foucault offers a method useful here that he calls Technologies of the Self whereby those selves in the ever-changing web of social relations are able to produce knowledge about themselves. This seems in stark contrast to his earlier idea that the soul of a person is produced permanently by an external power, and it is this idea of agency that remains more of an unanswered question than a clarified Foucaultian stance. Technologies was written late in his career after he had done much to rethink his earlier discussion of agency, and in nice accord with the general theme of contradiction that has run throughout Crowley’s and to some extent Nietzsche’s writings, Foucault has offered a playful response to his critics. He offers his works as “a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area...”, and so I use his Technologies, as it is, not in conversation with his other work. Judith Butler, who also works to tackle the element of agency in moments of identification, furthers this idea with her notion of performativity, opening up a space for a person to literally perform him/herself rather than being constituted by another, and in
the wake of Bakhtin, to *subvert* the dominant forces that surround him/her. Again, though, the individual can only perform within the discourse available, and must always, at least to some degree, be constituted by that discourse.

**Technologies of the Selves.**

In his essay “Technologies of the Self,” Foucault offers an “evolution of the hermeneutics of the self” in Greco-Roman philosophy in the first two centuries A.D. and in Christian monastic practice of the 4th and 5th century A.D. He notes how the Delphic principle “know thyself” stemmed from the earlier “take care of the self;” revealing a kind of moral imperative to be concerned selfishly as an unselfish gesture. If all people did so, says Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*, 29E, then by extension they would also be concerned with the entire town and each other. As Foucault puts it, “one had to occupy oneself with oneself before the Delphic principle was brought into action,” or rather, before one could know oneself. The Stoics kept diaries (Crowley’s most fruitful method of self-analysis). Plutarch, in his *On the Daemon of Socrates*, calls for one to give himself over to hard athletics (Crowley was actually quite a successful mountain climber) or to be surrounded by elaborate foods and still renounce them. Seneca endured “great feast days” where he undertook “acts of mortification of the flesh in order to convince himself that poverty is not an evil, and that he [could] endure it” (besides literally consuming feces, semen and menstrual blood, Crowley painted his walls in the images of terrifying creatures and tortured people all in an effort to overcome the taboo of “evil”).
What this analysis opens up is room in the Western imagination for a necessary self-occupation that was later (Christian times) made to appear immoral and in fact was completely reversed, becoming “care of others.” What it offers for thinking about Crowley is a creative way to think of the ultimate goal of all of Crowley’s work: To know his True Will (not necessarily a stable or stagnant will, but his will purged of all external injunction). So, where “in theoretical philosophy from Descartes to Husserl, knowledge of the self (the thinking subject) takes on an ever-increasing importance as the first step in the theory of knowledge,” Crowley moves to return to the words of Socrates, who saw that knowledge of self as something that came after a diligent occupation of the self with the self. In other words, he had to explore himself thoroughly before he could claim to know himself; before he could claim to know his will.

Foucault came to see the diaries, physical tests and ascetic practices as “technologies” whereby human beings come to understand themselves. There are four: (1) technologies of production; (2) technologies of sign systems; (3) technologies of dominance; and (4) technologies of the self (Section I). He saw each implying “certain modes of training and modification of individuals” both in the sense of acquiring “skills” and also “attitudes.” While all four technologies are interdependent, Foucault focused on the latter two, seeing instances of domination as directly related to self-identification. He defined Technologies of the Self as methods:

which permit individuals to effect by their own means [my italics] or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Section I).
So, people can affect desired personal ends by a series of surgeries upon their “self,” both externally (bodies/conduct) and internally (souls/thoughts/way of being). In this sense, self-discovery and self-production can be seen as the same process.

Through the lens of Foucault’s model, Crowley’s apparently disordered self-portrayal might even appear quite logical. He is willing a complete self-awareness in order to manipulate his self to his desired end. Crowley’s case is particular in that he doesn’t simply operate on one “self,” but rather on his “selves,” a plurality that is a natural effect of his law of contradictions. Each self is dealt with wholly in the moment of its existence, a separate star, “constantly changing with each fresh event.” For Crowley, each personality was a tool through which he could achieve some end. “Perdurabo” (he will endure until the end) was his magic(k)al name, used in the most serious of rituals and the name attached to his rank as a practitioner; “The Great Beast 666,” his notorious public persona, was used to maintain his mystique and social power; “Master Therion” was his persona as instructor; and “Cyril Grey,” “King Lamus,” “Pendragon,” and others feature as selves existing in his novels, working to explain differing roles a self can take within the same story; essentially, different perspectives on each moment. Each separate self that Crowley entertains is like a small surgery, an exploration of an option of being. In Thelemic terminology, each of these surgeries is a moment where Hadit is sent to wander Nuit, an individual self in all of space, becoming all of space, and returning as Horus, the child of self and infinity: infinite self.

Working directly from Foucault’s definition of Technologies of the Self, Crowley operated on his body, his thoughts, and his conduct, almost like a guinea pig in his own experiments. From the great number of images taken of Crowley, it is most obvious how
he operated on his body. Symonds illustrates this well in *The Great Beast*, speaking of Crowley’s time in Egypt:

> In Cairo, Count Svareff, or Aleister MacGregor as he sometimes called himself, was subtly metamorphosed into Prince Chioa Khan: he wore a turban with a diamond aigrette, a robe of silk, and a coat of cloth of gold. With Princess Chioa Khan, formerly Mrs. Rose Crowley, he was driven about the streets, ‘a jeweled talwar by my side, and two gorgeous runners to clear the way for my carriage’. In case anyone should doubt him, Crowley had a notice printed to the effect that some Eastern Potentate had raised him to this rank. He sent a copy...to Rose’s parents. 58

Like a good stage actor, Crowley seems to have fully embodied “Prince Chioa” in order to actually assume the personality of the prince. He surrounded himself with those things a prince would have, commanded others to recognize his new identity, and developed a pseudo-accountable history to support the entire project.

One can easily find images of Crowley and Mathers dressed as Egyptian pharaohs and Crowley was known to do public appearances dressed generically as an “Eastern sage.” 59 One of his silliest costumes was in the likeness of Winston Churchill, for whom Crowley claims to have invented the “V for Victory” hand sign. 60 Interestingly, his image as a Persian Prince has been adopted by the modern role-playing-game company *White Wolf* as an available character. Most likely unintentionally, *White Wolf* is giving players the opportunity to use one of Crowley’s personas for their own game in much the same way that Crowley used it himself.

*Crowley operated on his thoughts*, which is actually a nice way of describing meditation. During his travels to Ceylon to study with his friend Allan Bennett, he kept accurate logs of all of his meditation practices, including lengths of sessions and the physical and mental results. 61 Both from instruction from the Golden Dawn and by
studying Yoga with Bennett, Crowley came to understand Yoga and Magick in much the same fashion and he became one of the earliest Western writers to deal extensively with Eastern philosophy. Just a few years before his death, he gave a series of lectures on Yoga called Eight Lectures on Yoga, and it was subsequently printed under Crowley’s persona, “Mahatma Guru-Sri Paramahansa Shivaji.” In it, he defines yoga first as the “uniting of subject and object,” the thinker and the object of thought, and thus is “the union of self-consciousness with the universe.” In other words, Yoga is the union of Hadit and Nuit, in accordance with the Book of the Law. This unity has been misinterpreted by “pious” people, Crowley says, to mean “the union with the gaseous vertebrate whom he has invented and called God,” and these people will make no progress but towards “Lunatic Asylums and Churches.” Instead, the mind must experiment to find the “object of its hunger” in an unruly process where opposites attract and chaos sparks creation. To illustrate, he looks to chemistry and biology, emphasizing the naturalness of such a process:

In biology the cell divides endlessly, but never becomes anything different; but if we unite cells of opposite qualities, male and female, we lay the foundations of a structure whose summit is unattainably fixed in the heavens of imagination. Similar facts occur in chemistry. The atom by itself has few constant qualities, none of them particularly significant; but as soon as an element combines with the object of its hunger we get not only the ecstatic production of light, heat, and so forth, but a more complex structure having few or none of the qualities of its elements, but capable of further combination into complexities of astonishing sublimity. All these combinations, these unions, are Yoga.

*Will* can be substituted here for *hunger*. The problem for humans, Crowley says, is that our bodies are made up of hundreds of different things that all have “objects of hunger,” and so we are naturally divided endlessly by our own self, fighting through the mess to
understand what it is that the whole seeks.

During his time with Bennett and for much of his life thereafter, Crowley kept specific journals of his successes and failures with various meditation techniques. They are sometimes quite succinct and emotionless like notes in a lab manual, and sometimes quite excited, depending on the success or failure of the practice. He noted details of his breathing, including the time it took to inhale and exhale, and how many breaths he could take consecutively before losing his train of thought.63

Lastly, Crowley operated on his conduct. According to Alex Owen, “By 1900 he was experimenting with the conscious movement between two separate selves”64: the magician Perdurabo, and Aleister. He was certainly not unconscious of his divided selves. In fact, he practiced being so. Perhaps the best example of his intentionally chaotic behavior is through the contrast between his tendency towards extreme ascetic practices65, and his great focus on the power of socially unacceptable sexual practices. Hugh Urban, in his Magia Sexualis, highlights this contrast using Georges Batailles theory of transgression, which Urban recounts as “not a simple hedonism or unrestrained sexual license” but rather “its power lies in the dialectic, or ‘play’ (le jeu), between taboo and transgression, through which one systematically constructs and then oversteps all laws.”66 Where Urban is pointing more directly to the elaborate and well-ordered ritual procedure that surrounds the actual sexual practice of Crowley, this idea of transgression can be used to shed light on Crowley’s life as a whole. The attempted six months of isolated meditation of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage67, the focused attention on yoga, and Crowley’s diligence in writing daily for nearly his entire life, all seem in stark contrast to the vows he required of his Scarlet Women (which mirror his persona
when with them):

...I will be loud and adulterous
I will be covered with jewels and rich garments.
I will be shameless before all men
I will...freely prostitute my body to the lusts of each and every living creature that shall desire it...68

According to Urban, Crowley, who “would take this urge to transgression even further than Reuss or any Indian Tantrikas would have dared,” saw in sexual magick “the most powerful means to shattering the limited rational mind and finite human ego,” leading to a state that Crowley called ‘eroto-comatose lucidity.’69 This “eroto-comatose lucidity” is a perfect example of the “Crowned and Conquering Child,” a moment of “union” (yoga), where the pendulum swings far in one direction (extreme purity/asceticism) and then violently back to the other (transgressive sexual practices) leading to a new state of being. Again echoing the stories of Loki, Crowley is the antagonist to his own protagonist, affecting a creation, a moment of lucidity, through an endless series of operations on his self.

Performativity.

It could also be said, stepping away from Foucault now, that Crowley operated on his gender. His magickal practices reveal a consistent theme of gender reversal. At times he describes a feeling like “the trembling of a maiden before the bridegroom”70 and he recognized in his physical structure a “sort of hermaphroditism” that allowed him to “formulate a view of existence which combines the positive and the negative, the active and the passive, in a single identical equation.”71 Owen comments that this “dual structure” gave Crowley the “privileged insight of a ‘complete human being’.”72
Crowley even adopted a feminized version of his own name—he called himself “Alys”—for when he adopted the “female role” in a sexual ritual. Again showing a resemblance to Hindu and Buddhist traditions, in this case the non-duality of the Tantric systems, Crowley proclaims that both male and female are present in each individual and must be recognized in order to understand one’s True Will. Now clearly he is essentializing gender roles, feminizing females and just the opposite for males (which is problematic if used directly in today’s context), but for a man of Late Victorian England, such malleability with gender, especially in a prolific and influential writer, was a bold move. One of Crowley’s most important students, Victor Neuberg, would take Crowley’s lead and go on to write poetry that contained what Owen calls “two inversions at once,” where he positions himself as woman desiring woman and man desiring man,” taking Crowley’s influence in an even more radical, and even possibly bolder move than is often taken today.

To try to understand Crowley through this avenue of gender performance and then as a performer of identities altogether, I want to consider the work of Judith Butler, who like Crowley believes that “laughter in the face of serious issues is indispensable” and has found plenty of room within feminist thought for a sort of “serious play.”73 In Gender Trouble, Butler calls gender a kind of performative act that “ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow,” but rather is “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.”74 It is somehow a specific combination of the available discourse, the physical space and the very moment in time in which the act occurs that constitutes the very act. While the actor isn’t fully agent, s/he is also not a “stable identity” that is
constituted by an other. Butler continues that such a formulation of performed gender removes gender as a “substantial model of identity” and replaces it with an idea of “gender as a constituted social temporality” (my emphasis) that both the performers and viewers believe fully while it is being performed.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, if gender is so closely associated as performance in a specific temporal location, in other words, time, then gender is bendable, wholly changeable, and renewable in different temporal spaces. If gender is simply performative, she says, then “there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.”\textsuperscript{76}

Butler clarifies that the agency of the performer here is still constrained by the boundaries of a consistently “cited” discourse, a “stylized repetition of acts.” She furthers this idea in \textit{Bodies that Matter}, the follow up to \textit{Gender Trouble}, calling performativity a “reiterative and citational practice,” rather than “one deliberate ‘act’.”\textsuperscript{77} By making this distinction, she is taking much, if not all, of the will away from the actor. Perhaps, says Butler, the subject is in no sense bringing “into being what he/she names,” but instead the “reiterative power of the discourse” is producing the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.\textsuperscript{78} If performativity is always “derivative,” and not the function of an originating will, then it is always an external force that is constituting the performance and the individual. However, I tend to think of Crowley as both the willful subject of his own performance \textit{and} the constituted subject of the discursive environment in which he performs, and thus have found it useful to think of \textit{performativity} as a willed act \textit{and} as a constituted act.
Thinking of Crowley’s gender reversals as willed performances highlights the dramatic tendency that Crowley had in nearly all of his work, where much of his ritual performance has been thought of as “a sort of play” (in a theatrical sense) \(^\text{79}\), and it also opens up new ways of thinking about his multiple selves in general. Instead of a kind of static being who possessed contradictory (hypocritical) properties, or even that used various technologies to add to or subtract from that being, Crowley was an actor, performing a variety of characters based on his social and temporal situation. For Crowley, Truth in any sense was an hallucination,\(^\text{80}\) and the leeway that Butler’s performative model lends to an actor like Crowley allows for multiple truths, each determined as gender is, in accord with a specific moment.

To think of Crowley’s subversive practices in light of the small role that Butler allows agency, as reiterations and “reidealizations” of the dominant discourse, also brings to light some of the greater problems of Crowley’s practices. To begin, all of his travels throughout India, China and Egypt, all of his free explorations, were only made possible by the colonial ventures of his mother country, England. He has been said to embody the end of the Victorian era, an era that was both obsessed with understanding sexuality scientifically and repulsed by the scientific findings. Crowley’s emphasis on sexual freedom as a means to allay sexual obsessions only further obsessed those Englishman that harshly criticized him, reinforcing the efforts to categorize what might really be sexual liberation as sexual deviancy. Beyond sex, Crowley never shed the guilt and fear of his Christian upbringing in Victorian England and seemed, in his role as teacher at Cefalu, to dominate his pupils in the way that he would have been dominated by the strict authority of his Christian childhood. While he practiced homosexuality openly, he was
never able to fully break out of a homophobic culture, publicly criticizing others,
including Oscar Wilde, in often childish manners for their own homosexuality. Even
after he wrote in *Diary of a Drug Fiend* how Peter Pendragon, a loosely disguised
Crowley, triumphantly overcame his cocaine and heroine addiction with love and will,
Crowley died a heroin addict. So in many ways, even while Crowley was acting
subversively, he was reessentializing the basic categories that he fought to destroy.

Most interestingly, as he performed his identity as an Eastern Sage or Prince
Chiao Khan, he identified himself as what Julia Kristeva and then Butler call “abject,”
existing outside of the traditional subject of early 20th century England. Perhaps part of
this was a reaction against the general lack of acceptance in England of him as a
“gentleman” of nobility. In order for him to “abject” himself, he was simply “abjecting”
those whose dress he mimicked, never stepping out of the discourse that he criticized, but
only reiterating it on another level. Crowley performed as the orientalized, abject eastern
yogi to trouble the typical English conceptions, but only ended up orientalizing and
abjecting the *real* “orient” in the process.

On the other hand, Butler offers a different way to think about such a
reidealization. She calls “drag” performances “ambivalent,” speaking to the fact that
while a drag performance may be a subtle subversive act, it may also reinforce the
heterosexual gender binary. She recalls bell hooks’ frustration with drag for this very
reason, but then offers that perhaps simply by appropriating the offensive categories and
terminologies imposed upon us, we are acting subversively. In a sense, here, I see some
degree of agency allowed. The subject must come to understand how s/he is constituted
by the environment in which s/he acts, and choose to *be constituted* in a certain way by
that specific environment. Surely s/he is still bound by the discourse and space, etc, but there must be a sense of using the available tools to ones advantage. Butler cites the movement of the term “queer” from being harmfully offensive to being appropriated as a proud political affiliation. Here, there is a conscious choice by a working agent to work within the available discourse to change an idea of “queer.” I can not help but think of the story Crowley tells of the nickname his mother gave him: “The Beast.” He accepted it, even adding to it: “The Great Beast 666.” Surely such a title could only work to reinforce the common Christian binary, the use categories of “good” and “evil” that Crowley was trying to dismantle. The media calling him the “wickedest man in the world” could even be seen as a further evidence of him drawing public attention to these categories. However, as will be discussed later with the Church of Satan, Crowley may have actually parodied the essential category of “evil” so well that he drew attention to the very absurdity of the idea, thus working to dismantle it after all. If Crowley, the silly, strangely dressed poet is “evil”, than “evil” perhaps is not so evil, one might say.

Together, Foucault’s *Technologies of the Self* and Butler’s discussion of *performativity* allow for a curious rethinking of Crowley. Inherent in the conversation are questions of agency and what I continue to call “willfull” acts. While there is obvious tension between the clear sense of agency that Foucault allows the actor in *Technologies* and the clear hesitancy to allow any agency on the part of Butler, I see both of them offering productive avenues into the mystery of Crowley. His selves can be thought of as a series of *operations* that he undergoes in order to “transform” himself. They can be thought of as *performances* that were determined by the space, available language and time within which he operated. Perhaps like Butler’s drag queen and kings, it’s best to
think of him as an ambivalent performer, both reidealizing and redefining. Either way, through any of these lenses, it is difficult to simply think of him as a "poseur" or a "charlatan."
Crowley is clearly an integral part of the history of Western Esotericism, the transference of Buddhism and Hinduism to the West, and 20th century sexuality studies. However, I would argue that the most compelling reason to include him as an important figure in the History of Religions is that a whole slew of new religious movements directly acknowledge him as either inspiration or as playing a major role in their movements’ histories. In the middle of the twentieth century, stemming partly out of the magic revival organizations like the Golden Dawn and the O.T.O. and partly from a returning interest in pre-Christian European practices, “Neo-Pagan” movements arose quickly and often controversially. They have expanded widely across Europe and the United States, becoming officially recognized by many governments. Most pagans are surprisingly well-educated, as many of the movements find their histories and proper sources in scholarly/anthropological works, and successful navigation of modern technologies like the internet are a prerequisite for many pagan groups that meet in cyberspace due to the lack of density of participants in certain areas. All of these factors combine to make Neo-Pagan movements major contributors to the modern religious landscape.
I will analyze four movements specifically—Wicca, Discordianism, the Church of Satan, and Chaos Magic—to show how each owes an ideological and often directly textual debt to Crowley. Because Wiccans have been documented more comprehensively than the other three groups, I will briefly look to their own practices as drawn out in ethnographic studies; concerning the latter three, I will focus more completely on foundational texts. In each case, I will again highlight those moments of chaos and identity play that allow the practitioner the freedom to, essentially, acquire knowledge about him or her self. Often homage to Nietzsche, openly or not, will arise in the work of the different groups, showing that Crowley has also helped to carry a philosophical tradition across time in religious movements, not just theoretical discourse.

**Wicca.**

Gerald Gardner is widely considered to be the “father” of modern witchcraft (often called Wicca), and is the author of such important texts as *Witchcraft Today*, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, and the text that would come to form the foundation for nearly all later Wiccan practice, *The Book of Shadows*. Gerald Gardner claimed to have met a woman called “Old Dorothy” Clutterbuck in 1937 that he had been introduced to through a group at a Rosicrucian Theater in Hampshire, England, where he and his wife had taken their retirement. After spending years on a rubber plantation in Malaya, Gardner was searching for a spiritual outlet and “Old Dorothy” allegedly initiated him into a coven that represented an unbroken, ancient lineage of practitioners.82 Surprisingly, Ronald Hutton in his *Triumph of the Moon* has confirmed “Old Dorothy’s” existence as a “pillar of the community,” of Hampshire, but no evidence, even after an examination of her
diaries, has been shown directly connecting her to a witch coven. Regardless of the verity of the story, Gardner did begin a practice around this time that led him to explore Crowley’s writings. Between 1954 and 1957, Gardner worked on three separate drafts of his Book of Shadows, editing his final draft in conjunction with Doreen Valiente who found the influence of Crowley to be too prevalent. According to Nevill Drury’s The History of Magic in the Modern Age, Valiente found Crowley to be too “modern” or too “inappropriate”, and though Gardner had incorporated quotes from Crowley’s writings in his ceremonial rites thus far, he edited much of them out by the last draft.

According to Hutton, there is evidence suggesting that Gardner in fact paid Crowley to write his early rituals, and early drafts of Gardner’s writing resembles closely Crowley’s Magic in Theory and Practice. In his article “The Secret History of Modern Witchcraft,” Tau Allen Greenfield notes that though associations with Crowley among Wiccans “seem to evoke nervousness, if not hostility,” it is still clear that “it is only after Crowley and Gardner meet that we begin to see anything resembling the modern spiritual communion that has become known as Wicca.”

Margot Adler, in Drawing Down the Moon, supports this argument with the testimony of one of her informants from a Gardnerian sect of Wicca who claimed that “fifty percent of modern Wicca is an invention bought and paid for by Gerald B. Gardner from Aleister Crowley.”

According to Crowley’s diaries, Gardner had visited him a few times towards the end of his life, but he noted nothing special about him. It would not be hard to believe the claim, though, that Crowley initiated Gardner into the O.T.O., hoping for him to reignite its faltering English branch. Crowley must have been looking for a way to keep his life’s work alive, perhaps, passing on the torch so haphazardly out of fear of having it
extinguished completely. But more important than providing direct proof of Gardner’s reliance upon Crowley for his seminal text—save for some poorly accountable statements by a supposed illegitimate son of Crowley named Amado— it is clear that such a story exists in the imaginations of many Wiccans, and thus impacts any self-identification as Wiccan.

From the 1950s on, many modern practitioners of witchcraft have turned to Crowley’s definition of magic—causing change in conformity with one’s will—adopting it slightly to “An it harm none, do what ye will.” Many have also used some form of his prescribed method of achieving that end; namely, meditation. Ronald Hutton points to Dion Fortune’s focus on meditation which represents the vast influence of Theosophy, certainly responsible for much of the interest in “Eastern” methods and theories. It is Crowley, however, whose clearly outlined meditation methodology (*Book 4, Eight Lectures on Yoga, Magick in Theory and Practice, Magick Without Tears*) had the most direct influence on Gardner, A. O. Spare and Anton LaVey (the latter two to be dealt with shortly). For Crowley, it was explicit that meditation and magick were directly related, and that the path to discovering one’s True Will—the necessary prerequisite to the highest goals of magick—is traversed through the settling and exploration of the mind. *Book 4* is separated into two parts, “Meditation” and “Magick”, ordered in such a way to show that control of one’s mind must come before, or at least is part of the same practice as, magick. According to T.M. Luhrmann, author of *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, meditation and visualization make up a full quarter of the experiences of witchcraft and she even includes a section of her book on the history of meditation, calling it a “technology” of magic. The other three quarters of experience are magician’s language,
constructing rituals, and symbolism, all three of which owe a heavy to debt to Crowley, whom she calls “a brilliant man with a peculiar spiritual bent and a certain literary talent” whose “works have influenced much of modern magic.”

Luhrmann goes on to say that many practitioners are “probably more concerned to repeat and to make sense of moving experience than to prove any ‘theory’ true,” and in fact, many practitioners never come to any definite immovable doctrinal end. With such a focus on inner experience through visualization and meditation, there must exist some tendency toward understand “truth” or “reality” as subjective, or at least situational. She calls this process of suspending rationality in order to focus on experience, “cognitive dissonance,” but rather, it might be thought of through Butler’s idea of performativity, where within certain social situations, witches perform truths that may work to subtly subvert the dominant social discourse in much the same way that Crowley did.

One indirect connection between Crowley and Wicca (witchcraft) is the playful approach to identity play, adopting pseudonyms (famously, Starhawk, Z. Budapest) and often dressing as imagined ancient predecessors would have. Isaac Bonewits, Arch-Druid of the New Reformed Druids of North America, can often be seen wildly bearded in long blue robes, much in the imagined style of the ancient Druids of Ireland.

Discordianism.

The Discordian Society, begun sometime between 1957 and 1958 by Greg Hill (Malaclypse the Younger) and Kerry Thornley (Omar Ravenhurst), is perhaps the most direct example of play and humor in America’s New Religious Movements. Often called a “religion disguised as a joke disguised as a religion (or a joke disguised as a religion
Discordianism is often thought of as a “mock” religion or a “parody” religion, but has been a major and quite serious influence on much fiction writing and later Neo-Pagan movements. In fact, according to Margot Adler, it was Kerry Thomley who “was perhaps the first person, at least in the United States, to use the word *Pagan* to describe past and present nature religions.” She goes on to recall how some have even attributed the entire Neo-Pagan movement to a Discordian conspiracy, and so it is no less important to the history of American religion for being curiously playful.

Discordians focus on Eris, the Greek goddess of chaos and confusion, who according to Hill and Thomley, “is not hateful or malicious…but…mischievous, and does get a little bitchy at times.” According to the “Myth of the Apple of Discord,” Zeus threw a party but did not invite Eris (called “The Doctrine of the Original Snub” according to Hill and Thomley). She grew angry and tossed a golden apple into the party with the world “Kallisti,” or “to the prettiest one,” written on it. Athena, Hera and Aphrodite fought over the title, not surprisingly, until an arbitrator—in this case Paris—accepted Aphrodite’s offer of the most beautiful woman on earth, and declared Aphrodite the winner. That “most beautiful woman” was Helen, and thus ensued the Trojan War. Chaos, then, is in the very beginnings of the Discordian mythology, and the Golden apple remains a foremost symbol of the movement.

The principle text of Discordianism is the *Principia Discordia: Or How I Found The Goddess And What I Did To Her When I Found Her*. Credited as the “Magnum Opiate of Malaclypse the Younger” with additional material by “Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst,” the *Principia* is an assortment of quotes, tales, poems, illustrations, official
release forms and other random sorts of information packets that combine to create a massively stimulating visual effect where each page is a sort of artwork, often complete in and of itself. Quotations are scrawled upwards, downwards and in circles around images, other lists and stamped seals, formatted in what looks to be either the style of a small child with no sense of "coloring between the lines" or an author looking to seriously dissuade the reader from finding any proper form or structure in the whole. The result is a very liberating reading experience outside of a traditional linear or chronological order.

The various sorts of texts inside are almost entirely attributed to pseudonyms—Ravenhurst, Malaclypse, Omnibenevolent Polyfather, Josh the Dill, General Pandaemonium and others—and the text is filled with quotations from either non-existent sources, or hidden and unpublished sources. Much in the way that Crowley played with his names, his official statuses and his overall personas, Hill and Thomley use their artistic license fully in the *Principia*, playing multiple characters in the same work.

The anarchic style of the *Principia* is often thought of as Zen-like, and incorporates references to Zen in the text itself. The constant barrage of images and words works to shock the reader out of an ordinary way of thinking, even incorporating its own kind of *koans*, or traditional riddle-like questions used by Zen teachers (Roshis). Page 00013 holds a stand-alone quote with no explanation: "It is my firm belief that it is a mistake to hold firm beliefs." Without commentary or context, the short passage works to confuse the rest of the page, or at least loosen up the readers confidence in the text. In the same vein and even more directly, the fifth of "The Five Commandments" (the "Pentabarf") states that a "Discordian is Prohibited of Believing What he Reads," again,
making sure that the text cannot take itself too seriously. Again on 00013, “The Purple Sage” writes: “Wipe thine ass with What Is Written and grin like a ninny at What is Spoken. Take thine refuge with thine wine in the Nothing behind Everything, as you hurry along the Path,” contradicting the traditional Buddhist precepts of taking the refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, three forces of order. Instead, the Principia says, take order in “Nothing.” What these short, confusing quotations offer is an opportunity to be both stumped philosophically and delightfully amused. They offer no solace in a socially motivated group identity or doctrine, but force the reader to dive inward, creating his or her own realities based upon the unique interaction with the Principia.

Israel Regardie refers to a period in Crowley’s life during travels through China where he became involved in a “voluntary insanity” towards “deliberate and foreseeable ends.” It was not going “out of one’s mind”, he stresses, but it was a “crossing of the Abyss” that was very much like Zen Buddhism. Crowley intentionally became “wholly obsessed by...[an]...insoluble intellectual problem,” indeed becoming “insane” and finding no respite in his insanity, eventually either becoming “stark raving mad” or “something else happens: a transcendental process comes into operation. He is flung over the mental conflict which he has deliberately induced, thrown through the Abyss into a transcendental spiritual noumenal State where the intellect and the phenomenal world are perceived in their right places.” 98 Crowley remarks on this Zen-like experience in his aptly –titled AHA!, a reference to the spontaneous enlightenment achieved through Zen practice: “…destroy the mind! O bestial, bottomless, and blind Black pit of all insanity! The adept must make his way to thee! This is the end of all our pain, The dissolution of the brain!” The Principia Discordia encourages this same kind of
voluntary “dissolution of the brain,” quoting the Flemish poet Jan van Stijevoort: “That man lives best who’s fain to live half mad, half sane.”

More directly reflecting Crowley’s focus on the willful experimentation with many ritual traditions and general avoidance of capital “T” Truth, the Principia authors note that “we look at the world through windows on which have been drawn grids (concepts)...some grids can be more useful than others, some more beautiful than others, some more pleasant than others, etc., but none can be more True than any other.” On 00040, in much the same way that Crowley saw his own writing contradicting itself with false-truths, etc., the Principia explains that:

All statements are true in some sense, false in some sense, meaningless in some sense, true and false in some sense, true and meaningless in some sense, false and meaningless in some sense, and true and false and meaningless in some sense.

Not surprisingly, for Discordians the two most important pairs of opposites are “ORDER/DISORDER and SERIOUS/HUMOROUS.” Naturally, with this penchant for recognizing the inevitability of contradiction within the tradition as within all people, Hill reminds fellow magicians to approach magic as a “malleable art” and to “learn to appreciate the absurdity of man’s endeavors.”

Perhaps it is the quote from Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra in the beginning (00003) that strikes the reader most powerfully and echoes throughout the rest of the text: “I tell you: one must still have chaos in one to give birth to a dancing star!”

Remembering Crowley’s declaration that “every man and woman is a star,” the Discordians play on this theme and take it further, issuing that “every man, woman and child on this Earth is a genuine and authorized Pope”; they even go so far as to include an
official “POPE” card for all to copy and sign. If Nietzsche and Crowley were calling for a subversion of the dominant Christian paradigm by empowering individuals to become “dancing stars,” ushering in a “transvaluation of values” — essentially ridding oneself of the imposing values of the dominant paradigm — then to be a Discordian Pope is a drastic and humorous step further. Hill and Thornley offer up the very power of God, the infallible Church-head, as a natural state of being for all people. We should not only feel so empowered as to step outside the boundaries of the dominant paradigm, but we should take up the role of supreme leader within it, and in a way, play the game knowing full well that it is just that: a game. As a Discordian “pope” is “someone who is not under the authority of the authorities,” it again echoes Nietzsche’s call to develop one’s own values, and hence, one’s own sense of authority.

**Church of Satan.**

Around the same time that Hill and Thornley were playing with the title of one of the most powerful icons in the religious world, another American was matching their play and taking it a few steps further. In 1969, Anton Szandor LaVey — usually presented as an ex-circus lion trainer, nightclub organist, police photographer and supposed one-time lover of Marilyn Monroe — published a book called *The Satanic Bible* that would lay the formal groundwork for his newly formed Church of Satan. In it, LaVey advocated a direct reversal of Christian law, denouncing the weak, feeble, righteously humble, poor in spirit, and “god-adorers,” instead praising the strong, powerful, bold, iron-handed and “destroyers of false hope.” Similar to Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morality*, he opposed any sense of a clearly defined good/evil binary, seeing it as the greedy work of a
few authoritative figures to interpret morality. Though like the Discordians and their “popes,” he embraced the absurd and comical idea of personal identification with Satan as an effective subversive technique:

The pulpit-pounders of the past have been free to define “good” and “evil” as they see fit, and have gladly smashed into oblivion any who disagree with their lies—both verbally and, at times, physically. Their talk of “charity,” when applied to His Infernal Majesty, becomes an empty sham—and most unfairly, too, considering the obvious fact that without their Satanic foe their very religions would collapse. How sad, that the allegorical personage most responsible for the success of spiritual religions is shown the least amount of charity and the most consistent abuse—and by those who most unctuously preach the rules of fair play...the Devil...has remained the gentleman at all times...He has decided it is finally time to receive his due.103

Influenced by “Ayn Rand, Nietzsche, and Mencken, the base wisdom of the carnival folk, the observations of P.T. Barnum, and finally the imagery of the archfiend found in Twain, Milton, Byron, and other romantics,” LaVey established a religion—one that has attracted celebrities, writers, filmmakers and others—that might be the boldest and maybe even the smartest development in the wake of Crowley.

According to Blanche Barton’s “authorized biography” of LaVey, The Secret Life of a Satanist, he visited a branch of Crowley’s Order of Thelema in Berkeley in 1951, hoping to verify the “wickedness” of the Great Beast’s legacy. Years before, LaVey had ordered a healthy supply of Crowley’s works—including Diary of Drug Fiend, The Book of Lies, and Magic Without Tears—from Jack Parsons, a one-time financier and fellow practitioner of Crowley. Barton seems to say that from those readings, LaVey had anticipated Crowley and his followers to be “in touch with the darker elements” of the world. He was, however, quite disappointed with the “mystically-minded card readers”
that continued Crowley’s lineage, and even more disappointed with Crowley himself after reading John Symonds’ *The Great Beast* in 1952 (now the least even-keeled of the Crowley biographies), coming to think of him (so says Barton) as a “druggy poseur whose greatest achievements were as a poet and mountain climber.”

What is clear is that La Vey had spent a great portion of his education on Crowley and his works, and so much of his presuppositions about magic and the subversive occult were formed from this education. Besides numerous ritual similarities to Crowley, the Church of Satan reflects the same Nietzschean theoretical framework that much of Crowley’s work does, exposing the categories of “Good” and “Evil” as historically situated terms owing much of their current meaning to the discourse of Christianity. As the “Book of Satan” opens in *The Satanic Bible*, La Vey remembers the dragon from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (who, as noted above, commanded to the world: “Thou Shalt”) declaring that “he who saith ‘thou shalt’ to me is my mortal foe!”

He calls out to the corners of the earth, repreating Crowley’s frustrated call (“I want...anything, bad or good, but strong”) and Nietzsche’s simple insights regarding humanity (“What is good?...the will to power, power itself...What is evil?—Whatever springs from weakness”), making his own pronouncement of the strength of human will: “In this arid wilderness of steel and stone I raise up my voice that you may hear...Death to the weakling, wealth to the strong!”

La Vey’s new Bible calls for the end of “compulsion” and dangerous habitual actions that can become unconsciously unavoidable, and instead prescribes “indulgence,” which implies individual “choice.” Indulgence, if practiced consistently “without fear of embarrassment or reproach” would lead to “unfrustrated lives in the everyday world.”
LaVey believed that if people have no proper releases for desires, they would “build up and become compulsions” like sexual addictions and psychosomatic illnesses. He argues that “sin” is simply a category developed by the Christian Church that has led to endless compulsive and guilt-ridden behavior and opts instead to flip the ‘seven deadly sins’ and those proclamations that have come to be known as the “beatitudes,” calling, quite literally, for the practice of their direct opposites. Instead, he advises people to learn to embrace desires as natural to “vital existence” and existing outside of the categories of “Good” and “Evil” or “God’s Will.” In this sense, every man and woman can come to the conclusion that s/he is “the highest embodiment of human life” (think, “every man and woman is a star”).

Concerning sex, Satanism explicitly “does advocate sexual freedom, but only in the true sense of the word.” LaVey valued adultery, masochism, homo/hetero and abstinence all on the same level; as long as the practitioner truly desires one form (“so long as it hurts no one else”), than it is an appropriate sexual vehicle to the benefits of complete indulgence. And though, as Hugh Urban argues, sexual freedom in the Church of Satan must be understood in the context of the late 1960’s counterculture, LaVey is clear in his disappointment with “the so-called sexual revolutionists” who “miss the whole point of sexual freedom.” If sexual freedom cannot be expressed on an individual basis, he argued, than group involvement is useless. If the individual truly does not gain from “orgiastic” behavior, than s/he should not participate in it.109

It is precisely this emphasis on the fulfillment of the individual that made the Church of Satan so unique, championing what Urban calls “the reverence and worship of the individual ego, which openly acknowledges that it is, like all religions, not a divine
revelation but a human invention." It is the symbol of Satan that LaVey equates with the individual "self." And why not choose the most controversial, provocative character, representing the dark side of the ultimate paradigmatic binary of the last two-thousand years? If the Church stands for the unwilling repression of the "self" in the name of an absent God, then Satan stands for "the opposition to all religions which serve to frustrate and condemn man for his natural instincts." LaVey's list of Satans stretches to encompass nearly eighty other gods from various traditions that have all been demonized to some extent by the Christian Church and can be looked to in order to find freedom from the dominant, binding value system. Among them are the Indian god Shiva who represents the ability of humans to reach within themselves for transformation; the Egyptian cat-headed Bast, who represents joy and pleasure; and not surprisingly, Loki, who reminds us of the chaotic and creative, though certainly not regulated and tamed, tendencies of nature.

What will probably survive as the most unforgettable component in LaVey's playful appropriation of the Adversary, is his hilariously, and even terrifyingly, eccentric Satan costume. With his shaved head, "Fu Manchu" style goatee, red horns and red cape, LaVey seemed nostalgic for the tongue-in-cheek performances of Crowley and Mathers, and has perhaps, in the shocked public eye, even succeeded Crowley's reputation of "wickedest man in the world."

Chaos Magic.

The last tradition I want to cover (albeit briefly), but by no means the last to show clear evidence of Crowley's continued influence, is Chaos Magic. More specifically, I
want to analyze the theory and practice found in Peter J. Carroll’s *Liber Null and Psychonaut*, two separate texts that are now published as one, serving as primers into the chaos magic tradition of Carroll. But to get to Carroll from Crowley, one must first look to the painter, “erotic-magical diabolist,” and “black brother” of Crowley, Austin Osman Spare (1886-1956).

Spare caught Crowley’s attention during the late 1910s when he displayed his drawings in London art-galleries. His unique and challenging style, what Urban calls “a striking combination of Aubrey Beardsley’s form, grotesquely sexualized figures, and magical symbols,” reflects a greater fascination that Spare had with tapping into the subconscious mind through the use of images, particularly what he called “sigils.” A sigil is a kind of pictograph that represents the will, or desire, of the magician, and when focused upon, can work as a powerful device towards the accomplishment of the magician’s goals. As Nevill Drury in his essay “Austin Osman Spare: Divine Draughtman” explains it:

In *The Book of Pleasure* Spare explored methods of concentrating the will. Since the degree of effectiveness of any action is related to a thorough understanding of the command behind the action, Spare developed a way of condensing his will so that it was more readily grasped as a totality. He did this by writing his “will” (=desire) in sentence form and by combining the basic letters, without repetition, into a pattern shape, or sigil. This could then be simplified and impressed upon the subconscious mind.112

Where LaVey focused on the satisfaction of the individual but advocated group ritual, Spare shook up the world of ritual magic with his emphasis on simplifying ritual from its complicated and structured form with a regulated history (of grimoires, ritual implements, etc.) to his system of magical sigils which could be studied and practiced individually. Drury continues that this sigil system “showed how an effort of will, when
focused on the subconscious mind, could unleash the most extraordinary psychic material,\textsuperscript{113} and it is precisely this sort of concentrated self-exploration that Crowley sought in his efforts in the North Africa desert with Neuberg. Crowley dove deep into his subconscious, pulling to the surface not only hidden desires but hidden personalities in the form of a demon, Choronzon, and even a female form. This focus on the subtle knowledge of the subconscious in both Crowley and Spare also reflects the influence of Buddhist and Hindu meditative practices that called for a quiet mind as a prerequisite to further meditation. Here Spare and Crowley are calling for a mind with no locked doors as a prerequisite to even knowing one's own will or desires.

Also called the Illuminates of Thanateros, or the IOT, Chaos magicians under Peter Carroll consider themselves to be "magical heirs" to both Crowley's Argentinum Astrum (Silver Star) and Spare's Zos Kia Cultus. In Peter Carroll's \textit{Liber Null}, sigil magic is described at length and in the direct method of Spare,\textsuperscript{114} and Carroll explains his understanding of meditation as a means to gnosis in an interesting and productive move forward from both Crowley and Spare while still maintaining Buddhist undertones. He speaks of "inhibitory" and "excitatory" modes that reflect the dual approaches of Crowley: sexual/sensual and isolated/sensory deprivation (as in the Abra-Melin project):

"Altered states of consciousness are the key to magical powers. The particular state of mind required has a name in every tradition: No-mind...Methods of achieving gnosis can be divided into two types. In the inhibitory mode, the mind is progressively silenced until only a single object of concentration remains. In the excitatory mode, the mind is raised to a very high pitch of excitement while concentration on the objective is maintained. Strong stimulation eventually elicits a reflex inhibition and paralyzes all but the most central function – the object of concentration. Thus strong inhibition and strong excitation end up creating the same effect – the one-pointed consciousness, or gnosis."\textsuperscript{115}
In the same work, it is easy to see how the goals and magical worldview of Chaos magicians according to *Liber Null* resemble clearly other goals and methods of Crowley. I’ve separated six of the most significant practices indebted to Crowley:

1. Altered states of consciousness are the key to unlocking one’s magical abilities.\(^{116}\)

2. Focusing on sex (Eros) and death (Thanatos) are the means to do so.\(^{117}\)

3. The use of a Magical Diary is the magician’s most essential and powerful tool.\(^{118}\)

4. Metamorphoses of the self, or a “willed restructuring of the mind” (also here called the Great Work) lead to the “discovery of one’s True Will.”\(^{119}\)

5. Our contradictory nature makes us “mighty”.\(^{120}\)

6. The universe is “a joke played upon itself,” and thus, laughter is the “only tenable attitude” with which to approach it.\(^{121}\)

In comparison: (1) Crowley found meditation, sex, drugs and the transgression of taboos and repulsions to be effective methods of reaching non-ordinary states, and thus effective methods of magic. (2) In his poem *The Smoking Dog*, he called the two hounds of God “Love and Death,” saying that they must be confronted by each individual as they will simply continue to attack otherwise. (3) He relied heavily upon a magical diary as a means of keeping track of progress and tracking an individual’s identity over time, encouraging his student to do the same. (4) In the wake of Nietzsche, he most certainly called for something of a “willed restructuring of the mind,” and (5) contradiction and (6) humor should be clearly shown by now to be of the highest of Crowley’s priorities.
What is quite clear at this point is that Crowley traveled from the early 20th century into the 21st century, bringing with him all sorts of notions about the dissolution of the self through subversive, conflicting, non-traditional ritual and psychological practices. He did this intentionally, looking to begin a revolution of consciousness, a "new paganism." Some say that interest in him has undergone a revival in the late 20th century, though it should be clear now that through Gardner and Wicca, the Discordians, LaVey and his Church of Satan, and through Spare and Carroll's own "chaotic lineage" that Crowley's ideas never sank into disuse. It is perhaps only in light of such theorists as Foucault, Butler and DeLeuze that Crowley's ideas are now getting the public attention equal to the attention they've always received in the world of Neo-Paganism.
The rejection of external authority by an individual, which leads to a chaotic state of searching, or fluctuating, towards the development of one’s own values and goals, is a pervading theme of this essay. Essentially, it is the process that begins with Rabelais, moves through Nietzsche on to Crowley and finally to Neo-Paganism. If successful, this process is a testament to the human will, the ability of any person to create the reality in which they live. Each person experiments, testing new theories, accepting only after skeptical experimentation.

What I’ve failed to address in this essay, however, is the obvious elitist overtones of this entire process. Perhaps the reason why Neo-Paganism has caught on so well in upper-middle class suburban homes is because of the security that most practitioners feel. One could argue that they do not have to rely on a religious practice for security, as they are generally educated and affluent. One could say that they do not really need it, as opposed, perhaps, to those who fight daily for food and shelter and find their only consistent hope in a particular description of the divine. Is it only because Crowley was born with money that he was able to deny his upbringing and instead travel and play until satisfied? Maybe the degree of agency that is involved with the “will to power” shifts
according the to socio-economic status of the agent. Surely, the confidence one must have to believe that he or she has the whole world at his or her fingertips is directly related to experience, and if one's life experience is to be oppressed, than the whole world might seem much too large to fit in one hand. So can Nietzsche's call and Crowley's reiteration be adopted by all? Perhaps in small ways they can, and I hope to work further to understand the roles of race, gender and socio-economic status in Crowley's work. Though he never denied a student that wished to practice, he was not always accessible to all.

Beyond this aspect, the most difficult facet of this project has been deciding how to address the issue of agency in Crowley's work. Foucault's "Technologies of the Self" seems almost an anomaly in series of works that declare that there is no "subject" before the contextual hailing of the subject. That he allows so much direct agency to the subject in "Technologies" is directly counter-balanced by Butler's oft-criticized negation of human agency in her performativity. Though I arrived at her work too late to incorporate it fully into this essay, Saba Mahmood, in her Politics of Piety, can perhaps offer a new approach to thinking of agency and subversion. She works to find a balance between the understanding that the self is determined by its socio-political context and the understanding of the self as an inherent agent that can affect a willful changed upon itself. Mahmood reminds us that Butler has had to defend her work against criticisms that it "has the effect of undermining any agenda of progressive political and social reform by deconstructing the very notions of subject and power that enable it,"122 and in turn works herself to understand that there is in fact more to a subversive act than the subtle shift between reified binaries (like male/female in drag) during a performative act. Mahmood
explains her "exploration of the multiple forms of agency" as "not simply a hermeneutical exercise," but "one that is indifferent to feminism’s interest in theorizing about the possibility of transforming relations of gender subordination." She argues, rather:

that any discussion of the issue of transformation must begin with an analysis of the specific practices of subjectivation that make the subjects of a particular social imaginary possible. In the context of the mosque movement [the context of her study], this means closely analyzing the scaffolding of practice—both argumentative and embodied—that secured the mosque participants’ attachment to patriarchal forms of life that, in turn, provided the necessary conditions for both their subordination and their agency. 123

Here she is calling for a close analysis of the many forces that are acting around and through the performing subject. By coming to understand more fully the environment within which the forces are at play, one can come to understand exactly how the subject is moving within that environment. Though the subject will inevitably be left “iterating” within the given terms of the specific performance, he or she is still being creative through a unique and “willed” interaction.

She uses the example of Muslim women who are concerned with women’s rights but still wear “hijab,” often considered a symbol of patriarchal authority. She argues that the veils do not serve simply as “manipulable masks in a game of public presentation, detachable from an essential interiorized self,” but rather they serve as “critical markers of piety as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious." 124

Veiling, here, can be essentially associated with an individual’s motivations and identity, acting as a “technology,” perhaps, through which the agent can work to further certain characteristics of herself. In other words, the hijab, the very physical manifestation of
patriarchal rule, is used strategically as a tool by those who wish to rid of that rule (think LaVey’s use of “Satan” and Hill and Thornley’s use of the “pope”). While they are clearly bound within the terms and objects that their society has already created, they are still creatively manipulating them to a productive end. In this sense, Crowley might have recognized the discursive, economic, and social restraints within which he operated, but he still could choose how he would interact with them, how he would use them to act subversively, and even how, perhaps, he could completely destroy the categories.

Bound up in this conversation about agency have been references to the Buddhist (and Hindu) concept of the non-duality of the nature of reality, whereby the subject comes to realize that he or she is no different than the object he or she interacts with. This stems out of experience in meditation where it becomes clear to the sitter that he or she somehow merges with an object of focus, or a thought itself. The insight spread to include ideas of the non-duality of gender, or the maleness and femaleness in all things. In *Eight Lectures on Yoga* and *Book 4*, primarily, Crowley elucidated clearly his experiences with the Buddhist practices that he picked up in Ceylon. While its not explicit exactly which texts he was introduced to, its clear that this principle of non-duality pervaded nearly all of his magic(k)al practices. This is most clearly seen in his efforts in sexual rituals that closely resemble Indian Tantric practices that he may have also been exposed to. A further discussion of this topic would be a fantastic study, drawing out both the direct influences of Buddhism in Crowley’s writing and then tracing exactly where those writings resurface in modern Neo-Pagan texts. What could become clear is that many of the progressive ideas about identity and agency that are prevalent in Neo-Pagan movements stem from Western appropriations of Buddhist practices.
Lastly, it is interesting to note that Crowley, like Nietzsche, existed in a time when the “modern” enlightenment project was colonizing much of the world, often enforcing an ideology of a proper “Truth.” Christianity, Hitler’s Nazi agenda, and technological progress can all be considered pushes for unifying “meta-narratives,” theories that explain the goals of the entire world. However, I would argue that Crowley’s survival and his surprisingly comfortable fit with theorists like Foucault and Butler point to his very “post-modern” nature. Working off of James Beckford’s definition of post-modernism, I would argue that Crowley indeed celebrated spontaneity, fragmentation (of gender, identity as a whole), superficiality, irony and, most completely, playfulness. There is clearly no room for meta-narratives in Crowley’s world of dozens and dozens of narratives, and mirroring Paul Heelas’ Post-Modern qualities, Crowley reclaims authority (ala Nietzsche) for the individual, who can “reflexively construct [his or her] identity.”

Concerning Crowley’s later followers, Hugh Urban likens the attitudes of Spare and Carroll to the post-modern theorists Lyotard, Derrida, Baudrillard and others, recalling that even Jean Francois Lyotard referred to postmodern thought as a kind of “paganism.” Urban writes:

It is no accident, I will argue, that the rise of various forms of Chaos Magic occurred at roughly the same time as the birth of the intellectual movements of postmodernism and deconstruction. The works of Spare and chaos magicians like Carroll share many of the same basic attitudes as postmodern theorists like Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and others: namely, a rejection of all “metanarratives” or grand theories of reality and history; an emphasis on spontaneity, play, and shock; an attitude of irony and parody; and an aesthetic of radical eclecticism, picking and choosing freely from a wide array of philosophical views, recombining them in ever new ways, yet without becoming attached to any of them.

Why is this a good thing? Technology and globalization have produced a variety
of formats through which modern people have to both create and maintain identities. There are now countless internet meeting sites (MySpace, Facebook, Friendster, etc.) that children and adults alike use to develop their identities instead of traditional physical social interaction. On each forum, the person can choose and manipulate his or her identity to invent, or perhaps discover, really, the person that they choose to be at that given moment. Maybe a liberating performative identity, ever operating upon its own body, thoughts and conduct (even if only creating subtle motion within its context), is exactly the kind of productive model that could be both useful and inspiring for people today. Perhaps Crowley, the great “poseur,” is a more appropriate guide in the globalized 21st century, than he was in his own, and perhaps it is exactly this that so many Neo-Pagans have realized and taken advantage of.
NOTES

1 Home of the Aesir, recognized in Old Norse literature as gods.

2 Titchenell, The Masks of Odin, p.65.

3 Author of Book of Lies: The Disinformation Guide to Magick and the Occult

4 Crowley, The Book of Lies. p.33.

5 Crowley, Moonchild. p.134.


12 Regardie, Israel. The Eye in the Triangle. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1970. p.292. “So he was, in truth, insane. The whole world, within and without, had fallen like a pack of cards. And there was nothing, absolutely nothing, to cling to.”

13 Regardie, 293.

14 Do What Thou Wilt. p.4-5.


19 Confessions, 934.


23 Zarathustra, 9

24 Zarathustra, 11.


26 Tragedy, Section 2.


28 Sutin, 234.


33 Ronald Hutton discusses at length in his *Triumph of the Moon,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) how in 19th and 20th century esoteric organizations lineage plays an important role. Eliphas Levi is an early example of an “occult” leader who validated his work in ancient magics. pp. 70-71.


36 Spelled with a k to separate it from the magic of cheap parlor tricks, etc.

37 Sutin, 46.

38 Sutin, 50.

The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage, translated by Mathers, claims a 15th century origin (though scholars have never found the original Hebrew), and according to Sutin, aims to “produce—after six months of seclusion devoted to an ever-heightening discipline of meditation, prayer, and study—the combined mystical and magical result of ‘attainment of the Knowledge and Conversation of the Holy Guardian Angel’.”


Anti-Christ. p.35. Though he calls it a “decadence religion,” Nietzsche calls Buddhism “a hundred times as realistic as Christianity” and praises it for being “able to face problems objectively and coolly.” He goes on to say that Buddhism is “the only positive religion to be encountered in history.”

Book 4, p.10.

Book 4, p.13.

According to Symonds in The Great Beast, Crowley went so far as to print notices validating his princely position to ward off any doubters. p.56.


Confessions, p.835.

Do What Thou Wilt, pp.280-1.

Quoted in Do What Thou Wilt, p.281.


Mountain climbing is often thought of as a physical parallel to the act of self-discovery.


The Great Beast, p.56.

60 Do What Thou Wilt. pp.280-1.


64 The Place of Enchantment. p.206.

65 Foucault found asceticism, or the “theme of self-renunciation” to be an integral part of the “disclosure of the self.”


67 Crowley never did accomplish a full six months, though he often accomplished shorter terms.

68 Quoted in Magia Sexualis. p.131.

69 Magia Sexualis. p.129.

70 Confessions. p.619.

71 Confessions. p.45.

72 The Place of Enchantment. p.214.


74 Gender Trouble. p.140.

75 Gender Trouble. p.140-1.

76 Gender Trouble. p.141.


78 Bodies That Matter. p.3.


81 Adler, Margot. Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today. New York: Penguin Compass, 1986. p.37. This is an interesting and unique trait, starkly contrasting the frustration that most groups suffer at the hands of anthropologists that seem to discover different truths about the traditions than the actual practitioners do.
Though, I would argue, too much weight is often rested on Crowley's diaries as ultimate sources of information. His entries were often quite brief, highlighting only a moment or two from certain days, and based on his identity performances elsewhere, it's impossible to know which "self" of Crowley was present in each entry.


"Those who self-righteously value their own contradictions are mighty on this earth. Our dual nature is all morality; it is foolish to be other than we are. Acceptance and living without constraint I will call the highest value."


Magia Sexualis. p.223.


