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Dear Mr. Nolte

Since my exertions with PARADISE LOST I have been working on the completion of scripts for a couple of projects which have grown out of the past two years' research. One of these is a play, more or less traditional in form, which, like PARADISE LOST, incorporates many of the ideas for ceremonies and rituals I've discussed in these newsletters.

The story is held together by a theme I've also touched upon more than once - the fascination exercised by the magus, an archetypal figure who has re-emerged in the last fifty years as a character in real life. In the first quarter of this century people like G.I. Gurdjieff, Rudolph Steiner, Madame Blavatsky cast their spells over many people here and in Europe. In our own day we have seen Oscar Ichazo (of ARICA), the Castaneda/Don Juan duo, the Reverend Moon, and others.

I can't reproduce the entire play here, and quotes are misleading and cumbersome to explain. But in the course of my reading on the background for this script and the other work I've been doing, I came across a book that led into some very strange corners of this world that I was exploring. The book, and its author, also highlight some of the problems we all face, writers or not, in dealing with those who claim to have the secret to all kinds of unusual powers.

The book is called "MAGICK IN THEORY AND PRACTICE", and it was published in the late twenties. Its author was Aleister Crowley, best known as an eccentric Englishman of the middle classes (his father, a brewer, left him a modest fortune) who became interested in the occult in the 1880s, while an undergraduate at Cambridge University.

Kenneth Cavander is an Institute Fellow exploring in theatrical form our past and present mythologies and our capacities for self-transformation.

By the early 1890s Crowley was already initiated into mind-altering drugs, and had established a reputation as a brilliant, dangerous dabbler in all things occult. He wrote and published voluminously, was briefly a member of an esoteric group, called The Golden Dawn, while W.B. Yeats was also a member, and became the subject of a Somerset Maugham novel ("The Magician"). By the early 1920s he had moved to Sicily and established a kind of occult commune there. After a scandal involving bizarre and macabre magico-sexual practices, which earned him the title of "the wickedest man in the world" in the British press, Crowley was expelled from Sicily by Mussolini's government, and after another fifteen years of wandering ended his life in a hotel room in Brighton, Sussex.

Crowley's career is a mixture of farce, horror, grotesquerie, inspired insights and schoolboy extravagances. In the past few years there has been a revival of interest in him (usually for the worst reasons), and he remains an ironically warning figure to all who would flirt with the occult. There is no character in my play modeled exclusively on Crowley, but in working on the script it was impossible to ignore him, because he embodies in a vivid form the 20th century struggle to come to terms with the conflicting impulses we've learned to label as mystical versus materialistic, or reason versus the Dionysiac, pragmatic versus transcendental striving. And there is the book.

It's in the book, Magick in Theory and Practice, (Crowley used the spelling to distinguish his version of magic from that of conjurers and other lesser mortals), that he describes most lucidly the results of his own experiments in this area, and since some of his work overlaps with my own (though from a totally different starting point) I thought you might be interested in some first hand acquaintance with it.

What is the experience Crowley was obsessed with, and why is it so emblematic of the deep feelings stirred up in us even now by contact with, or even mention of, things occult, mystical, and irrational? I want to answer these questions by talking about certain key passages in Magick ... Even Crowley's style is important, as it betrays an inner conflict which I've found in my own work. Here is Crowley on the invocation of spirits ...

"Now in order to invoke any being, it is said by Hermes Trismegistus that the magi employ three methods. The first, for the vulgar, is that of supplication. In this the crude objective theory is assumed to be true. There is a god named A, whom you, B, proceed to petition, in exactly the same

sense as a boy might ask his father for pocket money ..."

Then he goes on to describe the other two methods, concluding:

"(The magician says:) "Behold! I am yesterday, today, and the brother of tomorrow" ... The Magician should imagine that he is hearing this voice, and at the same time that he is echoing it, that it is true also of himself. This thought should so exalt him that he is able at its conclusion to utter the sublime words which open the third part: "Behold! He is in me, and I am in him". At this moment he loses consciousness of his mortal being; he is that mental image which he previously but saw ..."

This is authentic Crowley - a strange and irritating amalgam of overbearing inflated style, snatches of colloquial and humdrum examples, and - buried somewhere in all that - a grain of common sense. For he is talking about a process very familiar to the actor. Whether it is the Greek tragedian putting on the mask of Dionysos or Hera or Agamemnon, or the Balinese villager who to this day assumes the persona of the wicked witch Rangda and transfixes his fellow villagers in a spell, or indeed any contemporary performer who holds an audience "spellbound" - they are all carrying out a magical formula of invocation according to Crowley's definition.

And how does he achieve this feat? Crowley has his own interesting counterpart of the theory of sense memory, as follows:

"He who became the Mater Therion (i.e. Crowley himself) ... decided to teach man The Next Step, the thing which was immediately above him. He might have called this 'God' or 'Higher Self' or 'Adi Buddha', or 61 other things, but he had discovered that these were all one, yet each one contained some theory of the Universe which would ultimately be shattered by criticism - for he had already passed through the realm of Reason, and knew that every statement contained an Absurdity. ... With this understanding we may rehabilitate the Hebrew system of invocations. The mind is the great enemy; so, by invoking enthusiastically a person whom we know not to exist we are rebuking the mind."

Non-sense memory. Is Crowley being perversely paradoxical here, or is he speaking from experience? From the little we know of the ancient mysteries it seems that the central core, the most closely guarded of all the secrets, the key word, phrase, image, or action, was something ordinary and everyday, or a simple sound, with no connotative meaning; these symbols only took on their mystical value in the context of the ceremony and the emotional atmosphere it created, which transformed the everyday into the magical. Crowley

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makes/similar point in his chapter on secrecy:

"It is found by experience (confirming the statement of Zoroaster) that the most potent conjurations are those in an ancient and perhaps forgotten language, or even those couched in a corrupt and possibly always meaningless jargon. The peculiar mental excitement required may even be aroused by the perception of the absurdity of the process, and the persistence in it, as when once Frater Perdurabo (another name Crowley gave to himself) recited "From Greenland's Icy Mountains", and obtained his result."

Crowley acts out here, in his writing and his slightly mocking tone, the experience which I have noticed recurring in many forms as soon as one sets foot in the 'forbidden' territory of mythic images, magical spells, and the dream world of the unconscious. Feeling ridiculous. Exorcising fear by laughter. Withdrawing several steps into a joke. Putting everything on the level of the reassuringly normal. And - the other side of the coin - I have noticed people becoming more comfortable the further away from sense, as they understood it, the exercises, ceremonies, stories, or whatever, took them. Is that uneasiness a tribute to the power of these forces, or an admission of their lack of power?

Crowley, like most people, is divided. He seems to always to want to rephrase his experience in terms that will make it respectable to an audience of sceptics. Here he is, talking in one tone of voice, about talismans:

"To invoke a god, i.e. to raise yourself to that godhead, the process is threefold, PURIFICATION, CONSECRATION, and INITIATION. Therefore every magical weapon, and even the furniture of the Temple, must be passed through this threefold regimen ... To sum this whole matter up in a phrase, every article employed is treated as if it were a candidate for initiation, the attitude of the magician to his weapons should be that of the God to the suppliant who invokes him. It should be the love of the father for his child, the tenderness and care of the bridegroom for his bride, that peculiar feeling which the creator of every work of art feels for his masterpiece."

In one sense, this is no different from the way theatrical props are used in any production - from teacups in a Noel Coward comedy to the net that traps Agamemnon in the Oresteia - objects with a dual reality. But Crowley seems to be trying to get at something else in his thinking about talismans, crediting ^{them} with the power to change the world, depending on the amount of psychic investment we put in them. Consider the following, written in a totally different style from the first passage I quoted:

"Now there are a great many talismans in this world which are being left lying about in a most reprehensibly careless manner. Such are the objects of popular adoration, as ikons or idols. But it is actually true that a great deal of magical force is locked up in such things; consequently, by destroying these sacred symbols, you can overcome magically the people who adore them.... With the most widely spread and most devotedly worshipped talisman of all, money, you can evidently break the magical will of a worshipper of money by taking his money away from him, or destroying its value in some way or other. But in the case of money, general experience tells us that there is very little of it lying about loose ..."

The tongue-in-cheek pose he adopts here masks a real philosophical question - how to change the world? Does the answer lie in programs and policies that affect people on the material level; or will the change come through a revaluation, a shift in emphasis from an attachment to one kind of worldly goods to another kind?

The New Yorker, a couple of weeks ago, brought up a similar point in relation to the Carter campaign. The article began as a comment on the way in which the reporting of the campaigns has begun to concentrate more and more on the public relations efforts of the candidates' staffs, rather than on the candidates themselves, or their ideas. "Accordingly," said the New Yorker, "the public relations experts, who used to lead a semi-covert existence, have come out from hiding. Not only do they put together ads for television but they go on television themselves and announce which images they propose to put forward and which they propose to erase ..." True. And it is through the manipulation of these images that the decision about who is to govern the most powerful country in the world will be made.

Not only the public relations experts and politicians are working to control the magical power of images, incantations ("the party of John F. Kennedy"), and spells ("big spender, big spender"), artists and magicians are after the same prize. Crowley intuitively understood this, and he also understood the danger of letting the genie out of the bottle - i.e. tapping this power at its source. That is why so much of his writing has to do with the control of these forces. Consciously, his concern for control comes out in elaborate directions, like stage directions sometimes, for the use of ritual objects ('props') in a ceremony:

" ... Let it first be laid down that a knock asserts a connection between the magician and the object which he strikes. Thus the use of the bell, or of the hands, means that the magician wishes to impress the atmosphere of

has been or is about to be done. He wishes to formulate his will in sound, and radiate it in every direction; moreover, to influence that which lives by breath in the sense of his purpose, and to summon it to bear witness to his word. The hands are used as symbols of his executive power, the bell to represent his consciousness exalted into music. To strike with the wand is to utter the fiat of creation ..."

and so on. Will. Influence. Summon. Executive power. Fiat. These words reveal the scientist in Crowley. He wanted to treat the material world as an extension of his psyche, available to his emotions, just as other people were. On the other hand, to undertake this task in all seriousness and sincerity leaves the 'magician' vulnerable to all kinds of unforeseeable results - too many explosions in the laboratory. So - unconsciously, I believe - Crowley also resorted to humor, or his version of it. Laughter was literally the best medicine ...

"Every magician should study the Holy Qabalah. Once he has mastered the main principles, he will find his work grow easy. Solvitur ambulando: which does not mean: "Call the ambulance!"

The jokes make you cringe, but they are a necessary antidote to the satanic snakebite.

Crowley was well aware of the psychoanalytic aspect of his work; he was, after all, a contemporary of Freud. One of his most interesting theories, certainly from the point of view of an artist, concerns the idea of a magical record. "Verily" he says, "it is better to fail in the magical ceremony than to fail in writing down an accurate record of it." Then another of his bad jokes. "Even if one is eaten alive by Malkah be-Tarshishim ve-Ruachoth ha-Schehalim, it doesn't matter very much, for it is over so very quickly. But the record of the transaction is otherwise important. Nobody cares about Duncan having been murdered by Macbeth ... But Shakespeares account of the incident is a unique treasure of mankind." There's something wrong with that reasoning, but the instinctive impulse is correct. For what he is saying is that the record of experience, the re-creation of life, is at the same time a transformation and illumination of it. Later in the same passage, he is more pungent:

"From one point of view, magical progress actually consists in deciphering one's own record. If you call in an auditor to investigate a business, and when he asks for the books you tell him that you have not thought it worth while to keep any, you need not be surprised if he thinks you every kind of an ass."

These newsletters are, in a sense, such a record. So is the exploration of a patient's dreams and past in therapy. So is the artist's creative process. Crowley's investigation of magick took him far beyond the dilettantish vaporings of most occultists. He treated it seriously. And in treating it seriously he had to make a joke of it. The psychic world that he sought to mobilize for his world revolution was too volatile and mysterious for his methods, but he confronted it honestly and that's what makes his case interesting for us now.

We are in the middle of a political campaign which has disinspired enormous numbers of people. For the first time since I came to the U.S. I have heard it said that a refusal to vote is a positive moral choice. The image-makers and symbol-weilders have not found any formula (spell, conjuration) to transfix us, and we seem to be immune to the old ones.

Nevertheless, we still seek a magus who will teach his secrets to us, and help us become masters of our world. That's why I was interested in writing a play about one such person and his entourage. If you want to try a Crowley ritual, here is one, which can also be adapted for use as a theatre exercise.

The magical names of the Gods of Egypt, and the images associated with them, should be memorised. Then paint them carefully from memory.

Sit in the position of the God you wish to invoke. Imagine the representation of the God as coinciding with your own body, or as enveloping it. This must be practised until mastery of the image is attained, and an identity with it and with the God experienced.

As a further means of identifying consciousness with that pure portion of itself which man calls by the name of some God, act thus:

Stand with arms outstretched.

Breathe deeply through the nostrils, imagining the name of the God desired entering with the breath.

Let that name descend slowly from the lungs to the heart, the solar plexus, the navel, the generative organs, and so to the feet.

The moment that it appears to touch the feet, quickly advance the left foot about 12 inches, throw forward the body, and let the hands (drawn back to the side of the eyes) shoot out, so that you are standing in the typical position of the God Horus, and at the same time imagine the Name as rushing up and through the body, while you breathe it out through the nostrils with the air which has been till then retained in the lungs. All this must be done with all the force of which you are capable.

Then withdraw the left foot, and place the right forefinger upon the lips, so that you are in the characteristic pose of the God Harpocrates.

If a single "vibration" completely exhausts your physical strength, this is a sign you have performed the above correctly. It should cause the magician to grow hot all over or to perspire violently, or it should so weaken him that he will find it difficult to remain standing.

It is a sign of success, though only by the student himself is it perceived, when he hears the name of the God vehemently roared forth, as if by the concourse of ten thousand thunders. It should appear to him as if that Great Voice proceeded from the Universe itself, and not from him.

In the above practices all consciousness of anything but the God-form should be blotted out. And the longer it takes for normal perception to return, the better.

Good luck.

Sincerely,


Kenneth Cavander