

This is an adapted/abridged version of a Chapter in my forthcoming MA dissertation on Crowley and friends; provisionally entitled **“Strange distant Gods that are not dead today”: Aleister Crowley and the 20th Century synthesis of Magick**¹, (apologies for the academic stink of a title) which will hopefully be appearing in full, probably for free download on my own site in very late September 2001.

Many thanks to Occult e-books for this exposure to a larger audience.

My site: <http://msnhomepages.talkcity.com/SpiritSt/achad13/index.html>

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..... From his mid-teens, Crowley was a first rate mountaineer² and almost at Grand Master level as a chess player³. It seems ironic that two separate disciplines needing such planning and foresight were not reflected in some of his behaviour in the larger world. This may be because he had ‘the soul of a poet’; considering himself to be Shelley’s superior⁴. They did have plenty in common:

“Chemistry and magic fused naturally in Shelley’s mind, the bridge being alchemy...(similarly) Crowley took the Special Examination in Chemistry at Cambridge before being led through alchemy to absorption in magic”⁵

Shelley was sent down from Oxford for atheism and being a general nuisance, Crowley too was threatened with expulsion, but that procedure did not have time to unfold. During his latter years at University Crowley finally inherited the financial spoils of the family brewing industry. He chose then not to take his formal studies further, and commenced a period of debauchery, intense study and travel; setting climbing records on several of the world’s most challenging mountains.

On his travels, Crowley had occasionally briefly returned to England, where on one visit he had married Rose Kelly⁶. Their honeymoon was much extended, taking several months to explore the Far East, and ending in Egypt, where they stayed from March 1904 onwards. It was there, in the following month, that Crowley clairvoyantly received *The Book of the Law*, or *Liber AL*⁷ (hereafter referred to as *AL*), which became the undoubted cornerstone of his magickal philosophy. *AL* was, according to Crowley, dictated to him in an altered state

¹ My title is taken from Aleister Crowley’s poem “*Acelanda*”, in Booth, M. *Aleister Crowley: Collected Poems*. Northampton. Thorsons. 1986, p 154

² Crowley, A. *The Confessions*. London. Routledge. 1979. (Symonds, J. & Grant, K., eds.), p 127

³ Symonds, J. *The Great Beast*. St Albans. Mayflower, 1973, p 93

⁴ Crowley, A. *The Confessions*. London. Routledge. 1979. (Symonds, J. & Grant, K., eds.), p 138

⁵ Overton-Fuller, J. *Shelley. A biography*. London. Jonathan Cape. 1968, p 23

⁶ Sister of the painter Gerald Kelly, who was later President of the Royal Academy of Arts.

Crowley, A. *The Confessions*. London. Routledge. 1979. (Symonds, J. & Grant, K., eds.), Part 3

⁷ Crowley, A. *The Book of the Law*. York Beach, Maine. Weiser. 1981. Original 1926.

of consciousness, over three successive days in April 1904, by a **“praeterhuman intelligence”** called *Aiwass*⁸ who introduced a series of God figures to him.

A central concept of *AL* is *Thelema*, the philosophy which has been consistently misunderstood, and misquoted as ‘do what you like’; e.g. as a license for immorality and hedonism, regardless of the consequences. In Crowley’s eyes it was in fact the opposite, and far harder noble moral path, since doing your true will (*‘what thou wilt’*) involved choosing the best spiritual and moral path through each and every life decision with which one was faced, involving a great deal of personal insight, foresight and hard work.

Thus the quote with which I open the full dissertation is explained; *‘Do what thou Wilt shall be the whole of the Law’* means that the pursuance and achievement of one’s true will is the highest, and only meaningful task for the self. Crowley’s corollary statement, with which he ended rituals and letters is *‘Love is the Law, Love under Will’*, which reinforces the first statement, and introduces the mystical Crowleyan concept of Love, in its highest sense, as the terms of reference for any action. Everything in Crowley’s magick after 1904 revolved around this concept: the pursuit of the true Will becoming the ‘Grail quest’ of the modern magickal age.

There is some evidence that Crowley’s confidence in his own infallibility did not go quite so far as it would seem, at least not in 1904. It is likely that *AL* was not dictated on the three days commencing April 8th, but actually a week before. Crowley was presumably privy to the continual ridicule that a new religion based on an *April Fool’s Day* starting point might attract⁹, and so quietly changed the dating.

As a supposed ‘entirely new system’, Thelema certainly has a lot in common with the 16th Century *Rabelaisian* notion of *‘fay que ce voudrais’*¹⁰, which can be translated as *‘do what you wish’*. Thelema is the geographical area in which Rabelais located his fictional abbey¹¹, and Crowley’s called his magickal headquarters on Sicily in the 1920s the Abbey of Thelema. Crowley certainly owned some Rabelais in 1902¹², but decided that these similarities were not plagiarism, but that Rabelais had been an early prophet of the new Aeon, and he (Crowley) was merely fulfilling that prophecy with his emulations¹³. The early modern Calabrian abbot, Joachim of Fiore (1131-1202) viewed world history as a biblical allegory; with a succession of 3 emergent stages, with one aspect of the Holy Trinity presiding over each. The patriarch/father ruled an age of fear and obedience; ended by the coming of Christ, the Son who presided over an age of faith and learning, from 00 AD to that present (12th Century) Joachim believed the beginning of the final age, that of the Holy Spirit, was immanent in 1200, and that fulfillment of spiritual freedom and love was to occur within a few generations. This bears a strikingly close resemblance to the three Aeons and three rulers in *Liber AL*; perhaps Fiore was just out by 700 years?

⁸ *Ibid*, p 5

⁹ Grant, K. *Beyond the mauve zone*. London. Starfire. 1999, p 34

¹⁰ Rabelais, F. *Complete works*. San Francisco. University of California Press. 1999. La Charite, R,C. (ed).

¹¹ Symonds, *Beast*, p 84

¹² Symonds, *Beast*, p 70

¹³ Symonds, *Beast*, p 270

However there are other more detailed areas of *AL* that seem far less original. The *GD* high initiate Florence Farr's Egyptian plays¹⁴ were published before Crowley's reception of *AL*. There are some suspiciously striking similarities between the visual forms, the sentiments and the symbols expressed in both documents. Farr's plays were published late in 1901 or early 1902¹⁵ and it is likely these were available as manuscript copy within the membership of the order prior to publication. Farr also wrote an earlier book for the *GD* about magic and hawk-headed Egyptian gods immediately prior to Crowley entering the order¹⁶.

The copy of Farr's play that I consulted for the comparison table below is a part of the Yorke Collection¹⁷. This does not automatically mean that it belonged to Crowley; since Gerald Yorke was an avid collector of occult literature in his own right. However, both the presence of this book in the collection, and Crowley's membership of the *GD* at the relevant time suggest that there is a high chance he had indeed seen it in some form. In any case, Farr's works themselves were not entirely original, and with his love of the classics and his admiration of Shelley it is likely that Crowley had already read the same Sophocles materials¹⁸ from which Farr had taken some of her motifs.

Crowley seems to have a bad word (or fifty) for almost everyone he associated with amongst the *GD*, and his verbal laceration of Farr¹⁹ is no exception:

“(Farr,) ...for whom I always felt an affectionate respect, tempered by a feeling of compassion that her abilities were so inferior to her aspirations”²⁰

In fairness, it seems she was certainly rather flighty, poor in application and very easily distracted²¹: what may be called an ‘airhead’ in today's slang. This derision may also derive from Crowley's having earlier called Yeats a **“lank, disheveled demonologist”²²** and the fact that Farr and Yeats were once lovers²³. Previously Yeats had remarked (while commenting on Crowley's gluttonous behaviour regarding sex, drugs and alcohol) **“a mystical society... (the GD) is not a moral reformatory”²⁴**. Farr's own promiscuity²⁵ plus Yeats' affair with her and his heavy drink and drug use may have contributed to this ‘*pot calling the kettle black*’ scenario. It seems surprising that an organisation devoted to **“purify and exalt”²⁶** their spiritual natures had descended into little more than the politics of the school playground.

¹⁴ Farr, F. & Shakespear, O. *The beloved of Hathor and The shrine of the Golden Hawk*. Croydon. Farncombe & Son. Dated approx 1902.

¹⁵ Dating uncertain; estimated by Warburg Institute, London.

¹⁶ Farr, F. (S.S.D.D.). *Egyptian Magic*. London. Theosophical Publishing Society. 1896.

¹⁷ Held at the Warburg Institute, London.

¹⁸ In 1822, Shelley, whom Crowley greatly admired, and to whom has been closely compared, was shipwrecked and drowned in the Mediterranean. His body was found with a copy of Sophocles' plays in his pocket. Overton-Fuller, J. *Shelley. A biography*. London. Jonathan Cape. 1968, p 313

¹⁹ At that time she was actually ‘Mrs. Emery’

²⁰ Crowley, A. *The Confessions*. London. Routledge. 1979. (Symonds, J. & Grant, K., eds.), p 177

²¹ d'Arch Smith, T. *The books of the Beast*. Oxford. Mandrake. 1991, p 88

²² Foster, R.F. *W.B Yeats: A life. 1. The apprentice Mage, 1865-1914*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 1997, p 110

²³ *Ibid*, pp 290-291

²⁴ King, F.X. *The Magical World of Aleister Crowley*. London. Arrow, 1977, p 28

²⁵ The playwright George Bernard Shaw claimed Farr had at least 14 lovers before the age of 35. d'Arch Smith, T. *The books of the Beast*. Oxford. Mandrake. 1991, p 88

²⁶ Regardie, F.I. (ed.) *The Golden Dawn*. St Paul, Minnesota. Llewellyn, 1982, p 230

Farr- from <i>Beloved... and Shrine...</i>	Crowley- from <i>Liber AL</i> ²⁷
“ Know yourself to be Lord of Space and Being! ”	“chosen priest ... of infinite space... ” 1.15 “I am Infinite Space ” 1.22 “unto the Queen of Space ” 1.27
“ The fire of Heru will take the form of the golden Hawk ”	“word of Heru-ra-ha ” 3.35 “ Hawk-headed mystical Lord!” 3.34 “With my Hawk's head I peck” 3.51 “I am the Hawk-Headed Lord” 3.70
“ The secret place ... (is) ... made of stones and rare metals ”	“first ordeal.. to him as silver... ” 3.64 “Through the second, gold ” 3.65 “ stones of precious water ” 3.66
“ Heru who rests upon the central pillar of the world ”	“Hail! ye twin warriors about the pillars of the world ! ” 3.71
“ Heru the axletree of flame, the source of the fire of life! ”	“I am the flame that burns in every heart of man...I am Life, and the giver of Life ” 2.6 “I am the axle of the wheel , and the cube in the circle” 2.7
(paraphrased) Considerable emphasis is given to ordeals by fire and allegories of blindness	“follow out the ordeals of my knowledge!” 1.32 “Abrogate are all rituals, all ordeals , all words and signs” 1.49 “there are three ordeals in one, and it may be given in three ways. The gross must pass through fire...” 1.50 “come ye through tribulation of ordeal , which is bliss” 3.62 “and for the winners of the Ordeal x. What is this?” 3.22 “The ordeals thou shalt oversee thyself, save only the blind ones ” 3.42
(paraphrased) The god <i>Heru</i> destroys the other gods, by devouring their mystical rites and symbols	“ the rituals of the old time are black . Let the evil ones be cast away” 2.5 “I am in a secret fourfold word, the blasphemy against all gods ” 3.49 “ With my Hawk's head I peck at the eyes of Jesus as he hangs upon the cross ” 3.51 “ I flap my wings in the face of Mohammed & blind him ” 3.52 “ I tear out the flesh of the Indian and the Buddhist, Mongol and Din ” 3.53 “Bahlasti! Ompehda! I spit on your crapulous creeds ” 3.54

²⁷ References from *Liber AL* are given in this table as chapter. verse; e.g. 1.15 is chapter one, verse fifteen.

Table 1: Comparison of imagery used by Florence Farr in her plays *The Beloved of Hathor* and *The Shrine of the Golden Hawk*; versus that appearing in Crowley's *Liber AL (The Book of the Law)*.

These correspondences between Farr and Crowley's writings may however be due to the authors being psychologically or psychically tuned into the same 'current', or Jungian archetype²⁸, which is likely with people performing similar intense spiritual or scientific exercises; especially so as both Farr and Crowley were thoroughly steeped in Golden Dawn imagery and teachings. In support of this notion, Dukes suggests that the period around 1904 saw several very important publications and events for the world of the occult, including Spare's *Earth's Inferno*²⁹, Einstein's *Special Relativity*³⁰, the germs of the idea that became Jung's concept of the universal archetype, the birth of surrealist artist Salvador Dali and the first book by Dion Fortune, who later became a leading proto-feminist magician and author³¹.

This is not a new phenomenon. Historically, it is most likely that if one is a visionary of any kind, then one will have visions that suit one's pre-existing beliefs, and those of one's fellows. It is more often the case that symbolically appropriate religious prophecy styles emerge, and are performed, in 'friendly' religious areas; be these 'areas' geographical or denominational. For example early modern Catholic Spanish prophets saw visions of Saints and the Virgin Mary; while prophets in Lutheran Protestant areas saw Angelic forms. The nature of the experience tended to change during times of conflict and fluid religious/geographical boundaries; so that when a territory changed hands militarily and religiously, then styles of visions also changed³².

Thus, in similar vein we would expect *GD*-trained mystics to have experience of, and report back to their contemporaries with, Cabbalistic and Egyptian visions, rather than (for example) imagery more suited to the deities of Haitian *Voodoo*, in which they had no training or knowledge.

In addition to this Egyptian terminology, *AL* also has a substantial 'hellfire' apocalyptic preaching flavour, as well as a profoundly anti-Christian tack. This seems simple to ascribe to a mixture of the *GD* instruction mentioned above and both emulation of, and attack against Crowley's own *Plymouth Brethren*-saturated childhood torments. The aggressive preaching style of *AL* is that of Crowley's father, but Aleister's content is against his entire family and their creed. A striking dichotomy, but one that must remain merely a line of

²⁸ Jung, C.G. *Man and His Symbols*. London. Aldus, 1979.

²⁹ Spare, A.O. *Earth's inferno*.

³⁰ Occultists and physicists have always been vague bedfellows; much of quantum physics terminology seeming to apply equally to paranormal or psychic events: e.g. Carroll, P.J. *Psybermagick: advanced ideas in chaos magick*. Tempe, Ariz. New Falcon. 1995, p 14

³¹ Dukes, R. *What I did in my holidays: Essays on black magic, Satanism, devil worship and other niceties*. Oxford. Mandrake. 1998, pp 28-29

³² Beyer, J. A. Lubeck prophets in local and Lutheran context. In Scribner, R., & Johnson, T (eds.). *Popular Religion in Germany and Central Europe, 1400-1800*. Basingstoke. Macmillan. 1996.

speculation here, both due to space constraints and the very real dangers of drawing simplistic psychological conclusions without having all of the data to hand ³³.

On a larger perspective than just *AL*, Crowley's upbringing has been held ³⁴ as the prime cause of his later life and magickal beliefs. Again, such reductionist amateur psychoanalysis would be slightly more credible were there to have been a history of dozens of Brethren-educated adolescents who all claimed to be the Beast of *Revelations*, formed their own magickal religions and spent half a century on a world travel, sex and drugs binge. To my knowledge there are no others. Additional factors must therefore be relevant to the beliefs and actions of the multi-faceted Crowley.

This is an area that begs further study, including a statistical linguistic content analysis approach ³⁵ to compare *AL* with *Revelations*, Farr's plays and other similar significant documents, including the *Plymouth Brethren* version of the *Bible*. As will be discussed in the full dissertation, there are also some similarities of imagery, symbolism and tone between the writings of Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, Crowley and Kenneth Grant, and Crowley and Jack Parsons: but all for different reasons.

In 1909, Crowley formed his own magickal order, the *Argentum Astrum* (AA) or Order of the Silver Star ³⁶, which fused some of the better *GD* techniques with Crowley's own magickal developments (centred on *AL*) plus yoga and Tantra (sexual magick). The official publication of the order was *The Equinox* ³⁷, and in the Spring, 1909 edition Crowley began to publish the rituals of the *GD*, in breach of an oath of secrecy he had taken at his initiation. He cited *AL*:

“the rituals of the old time are black. Let the evil ones be cast away; let the good ones be purged by the prophet” ³⁸

and the *GD* in-fighting as his reasons for believing the oath was no longer valid. The matter went to a rather surreal court case; where the jury was asked to rely on the authority of the *Secret Chiefs*, who not surprisingly did not appear as witnesses for either side. Yeats belatedly tried to create a *GD* copyright over the rituals by publishing them himself to create a superior legal footing for the *GD* over Crowley ³⁹, however he published the texts in a Latin translation, to maintain the inaccessibility of the materials to the majority of society.

³³ Spanos, N.P. Witchcraft in histories of psychiatry: a critical analysis and an alternative conceptualization. *Psychological Bulletin*, 85, 2, 417-439. In Levack, B. (ed.). *Articles on Magic, Witchcraft and Demonology*. Vol 8; 211-233. New York. Garland, 1992.

³⁴ Kemp, A. *Witchcraft and paganism today*. London. Hodder. 1995, p 33.

³⁵ Osgood, C.E., Suci, G.J., & Tannenbaum, P.H. The measurement of meaning.. Urbana. University of Illinois Press. 1957. In *Content analysis; an introduction to its methodology*. Beverley Hills; California. Sage. 1980. Krippendorff, K. (Ed).

³⁶ Regardie, F.I. *The eye in the triangle*. Las Vegas. Falcon. 1989, p 359

³⁷ Crowley, A., (ed.). *The Equinox* (On-Line). <http://www.the-equinox.org/> Periodical.

³⁸ Crowley, A. *The Book of the Law*. York Beach, Maine. Weiser. 1981. Original 1926, Ch 2 Verse 5. 'The prophet' in this instance is Aleister Crowley himself, as prophet of the new Aeon, and the 'purging' being accomplished by the publication.

³⁹ Foster, R.F. *W.B Yeats: A life. 1. The apprentice Mage, 1865-1914*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 1997, p 404.

By 1913 the AA had 88 members⁴⁰, including Captain John FC Fuller, various Cambridge graduates including the mathematician Norman Mudd and the poet Victor Neuberg, George Cecil Jones (ironically, formerly one of Crowley's superiors in the *GD*), and the violinist Leila Waddell. Crowley's acolytes tended to be of a much more artistic bent than the *GD*, although the hard sciences were also well represented. The *Thelemic* community had been born.

Much like the tenets of any other belief systems that become established, and then may be called into question later, *Thelema*, and *AL* upon which it is based is now an object of faith for many magickians, and has, like many other religious texts been translated into many languages⁴¹. It now seems beyond rational challenge from 'objective' outsiders such as academics. This is in much the same way that such disparate items as the *Bible* and Freud's theories of psychoanalysis⁴² have both been found severely wanting⁴³, but there are still queues of both devout Christians and patients for analysts.

Interestingly, Thornton⁴⁴ gives a well-argued case for Freud's unified theories of all of human psychology and history to have been largely constructed on the back of the paranoid and grandiose delusions commonly associated with large-scale Cocaine use. This was a drug that Crowley was also particularly fond of, and he had created a new world religion.

Crowley did not stop there. Later, in around 1912 he was initiated into a sex magickal organisation based in Germany, with branches all over Europe and America, called the *Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO)*, ultimately becoming the absolute head of the order in 1922⁴⁵. He ran the AA and *OTO* in parallel, with some followers being members of both groups. His inheritance of an already established group with a large membership who were a ready-made audience greatly helped him to spread the word of *Thelema* across the world, and to find new consumers for his writings.

Thelema (and Crowley's other works) can be seen as memes, as they encourage practices that may create psychologically and spiritually 'whole' self-directing individuals. These individuals may, through their practice and association with like minds, meet similarly 'whole' individuals of the opposite sex, and have children with them. These children will grow up in a *Thelemic* household, thus giving a better chance that they will also become 'whole', and continue to practice *Thelema*. This may be one reason why Crowley was so despised by some elements of society, as such 'whole' beings would be a poor fit into the generalised 'herd mentality' of the early 20th Century, and the entire notion of self-directing individuals is dangerous to a State structure.

As to what exactly Crowley achieved with regard to the furtherance of the individual and spiritual advancement, a quote from Humphreys, a Buddhist, is a good summary:

⁴⁰ King, F.X. *The Magical World of Aleister Crowley*. London. Arrow, 1977, p 74.

⁴¹ I am indebted to Monsieur Phillippe Pissier for information on Crowley translation websites: <http://www.chez.com/pissier/sommaire.html>

⁴² Freud, S. *The Freud reader* (P. Gay, ed). London. Random House. 1995.

⁴³ E.g. Allegro, J. *The sacred mushroom and the cross*. London. Abacus. 1970, and Thornton, E.N. *Freud and cocaine: the Freudian fallacy*. London. Blond & Biggs. 1983. The Bible has been criticised in many books, Allegro's is just one aspect of this.

⁴⁴ Thornton, *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ Gilbert, R.A. *Baphomet and Son*. Edmonds, WA. Holmes. 1997, p 16

“It has been said that no man understands any one religion until he has studied two. It might be further said that no man understands any one religion until he has reasonably studied all, and compiled from them a ‘common denominator’ of essential principles... (then the student will be) ... enabled to winnow original teaching from historical accretions, the essential from the accidental, the Message from its interpretation. From this point of view religions are the different coloured sets of clothing with which men have endowed the naked Truth”⁴⁶

Humphreys did not know him personally, but knew of him, *via* Crowley’s association with the Buddhist writer Alan Watts, who had previously been a member of an *OTO*-like sex magickal order in the 1930s⁴⁷.

This is of necessity a rather ‘bitty’ essay, being severely edited from a dissertation that is just in excess of 20,000 words. I would be very pleased to receive any feedback from both this piece, and the full work when it is uploaded. Please bear in mind that it is written for academics who are naïve about the subject material, not occultists; and not every opinion expressed is necessarily my own. Contrary to appearances, it is **not** an attack on Crowley.

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Love is the Law

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⁴⁶ Humphreys, C. *Studies in the Middle Way*. London. Allen & Unwin. 1940, p 15

⁴⁷ Wilson, R.A. *Cosmic Trigger*. London. Abacus. 1977, pp 65-66