

ALEISTER CROWLEY AND THE BLACK MAGIC STORY

Timothy Jones

University of Stirling

Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), the wickedest man in the world, the Great Beast 666, was the foremost magician of the twentieth century. Exactly what that means, however, is not immediately clear, for it depends on a complicated set of beliefs and disbeliefs that vary widely between individuals within Western cultures. Magic no longer holds the official or legal weight it once did, but there remain substantial numbers of readers who believe in any number of unofficial ideas, including various occult powers. The issue is particularly vexed in relation to Crowley, who sought publicity while making any number of contrary, obfuscating moves, that there is a sense that he did not want to be seen, at least not straight on. He certainly spent enough time mastering the art of invisibility. In his 'autohagiography', he writes of his success in this endeavour.

I reached a point when my physical reflection in a mirror became faint and flickering. It gave very much the effect of the interrupted images of the cinematograph in its early days. But the real secret of invisibility is not concerned with the laws of optics at all; the trick is to prevent people noticing you when they would normally do so. In this I was quite successful. For example, I was able to take a walk in the street in a golden crown and a scarlet robe without attracting attention.¹

This account is quite different from an account of Crowley's experiments with invisibility noted by Phil Baker in his biography of Austin Osman Spare. Baker claims 'there are several stories of him parading around the Café Royal in full regalia, not catching anyone's eye, until a visitor or tourist asked a waiter who he was. Don't worry, said the waiter; that's just Mr Crowley being invisible.'²

It is easy to read the Baker story as comically undercutting Crowley's seemingly preposterous claim that he could vanish from sight. Yet the tension

between the two accounts remains, and although one must be the fact, the other fiction, it seems likely that different readers would support one or the other. Others will find themselves somewhere in between, half-believing in the power of the occult while half-disbelieving. As of March 2016, around 10% of British people said they definitely believed in magic and around 25% believed in the Devil. In fact, more people apparently believe in ghosts than believe in a creator.³ Hundreds of years since the Enlightenment, and despite the increasing secularisation of British culture, various spiritual and esoteric beliefs persist. The point, in relation to Crowley's vanishing act, is that it is received differently, depending on one's point of view. Sceptics read aware that others are credulous, and vice versa. It manages to be both fact and fiction at the same time. This is an uncertain state. Wouter Hanegraaff, considering Western esotericism more widely, describes it as the 'discredited waste-basket category of rejected knowledge.'⁴ This uncertainty is an important element of the black magic story, a subgenre of Gothic tale that refers to the figure of Crowley with some frequency. The black magic story is a lurid assemblage of fact and fiction that works in the space between contrary beliefs and claims, uncertainties and possibilities.

This chapter will point to a handful of key novels in the subgenre, indicating how Crowley became a persistent trope and suggesting that his presence in the stories was a marker that allowed authors to offer their readers the suggestion of occult legitimacy. Like Crowley himself, the black magic story developed into a space where occult ideas and materials were negotiated, reimagined and misread as they were transmitted to a wider public; yet this does not necessarily completely discredit the black magic story as an esoteric document.

Crowley was an accomplished mountaineer, having scaled Kanchenjunga, a poet, a pornographer, a theatre producer, a teacher, a traveller, possibly a German propagandist during the Great War, a drug addict, the founder of a commune in Cefalù, a painter, a pioneer of sex magic, and, eventually, after his prime, would become a purveyor of 'Elixir of Life' pills to try and make a little money. Somerset Maugham, who was acquainted with Crowley in his Paris days, thought him 'a fake, but not entirely a fake... He was a liar and unbecomingly boastful, but the odd thing was that he had actually done some of the things he boasted of.'⁵ The magician specialised in the unlikely. Hanegraaff suggests that Western esotericism has always been 'imagined as a strange country, whose inhabitants think differently to us, and

live by different laws.⁶ Crowley himself would probably agree. While simultaneously adopting various scientised rhetorics – his magick, with a ‘k’, was a science as well as an art – he refused to be subject to the ‘laws of intellect’, preferring a vision of the world that would be ‘madness in the ordinary man’.⁷ Crowley, became thoroughly incorporated into popular and pulp literary culture, an emissary from that strange country.

The black magic story imagines this other country as adjacent to and hidden within the more familiar nations of Britain and Europe. It was a substantial subgenre of Gothic narrative that was widely popular through the twentieth century, although it has faded from view since its heyday in the 1960s and 70s. The black magic story emerged against the backdrop of the modern occult revival in Britain, which ran through the last third of the nineteenth century and onwards, into the twentieth. Nick Freeman describes the black magic story as emerging in the first third of the twentieth century, a product of lurid newspaper descriptions of occult practices. For Freeman, the stories present a wholly inaccurate representation of the occult revival, interested primarily in producing ‘a spicy puree of rumour and invention’ for a ‘sensation-hungry public’, the product of Gothic conventions rather than occult traditions.⁸ This is of course true to an extent. However, as much as the black magic story is meant to thrill and titillate, this chapter will argue that it is also a place where specifically occult ideas and practices meet wider cultural currents, and, indeed, a place where Gothic narratives begin to acquire occult significance. Distortion, and the muddling of fact and fiction, are part of this imaginative encounter and negotiation between the esoteric and the popular.

It is useful to distinguish between what Colin Campbell called the ‘cultic milieu’ – that is, the immediate contexts and groups that participate in an esoteric ‘underground’⁹ – and what Christopher Partridge describes as ‘occulture’. Occulture is the environment and process by which supernatural, esoteric and conspiratorial ideas emerge and circulate. It is unremarkable; Partridge recalls Raymond Williams’ work on culture when he describes occulture as ordinary. It is everywhere and everyday. Popular culture, for Partridge, ‘disseminates and remixes occultural ideas’;¹⁰ the black magic story is another instance of this dissemination and remixing. It was authored by practitioners, including Crowley and his contemporary, Dion Fortune, but also by the uninitiated, who, nevertheless emphasized the quality

of their arcane researches. Dennis Wheatley, the most prominent of them, assured his readers that he had

... spared no pains to secure accuracy of detail from existing accounts when describing magical rites or formulas for protection against evil, and these have been verified in conversation with certain persons, sought out for that purpose, who are actual practitioners of the art... I feel that it is only right to urge [readers] most strongly to refrain from being drawn into the practice of the Secret Art in any way. My own observations have led me to an absolute conviction that to do so would bring them into dangers of a very real and concrete nature.¹¹

Wheatley may well have felt that he had secured 'accuracy of detail', but, as discussed above, this is a slippery claim in a field where most knowledge is already discredited. He tends to wilfully misunderstand non-Christian religious traditions as basically Satanic; but he also authored a reference book on the occult, and edited an extensive book series in the field. Boundaries are blurred; the question of authority becomes uncertain. If the black magic story misrepresented genuine occult practice perhaps, it did so encouraged by the writings and persona of Crowley himself, who sought to outrage as well as to illuminate. Indeed, Crowley has had a curiously generative relationship with the black magic story, with his public persona as the wickedest man in the world offered other writers material that would shape their narratives. Crowley's practice of sex magick, in particular, became a fixation for the black magic story and Crowley himself became an essential trope.

Crowley, or figures that seem to emerge from him, appear in numerous texts. This chapter will focus on representations of Crowley in Somerset Maugham's 1908 novel, *The Magician*, in Dennis Wheatley's black magic stories, particularly *The Devil Rides Out* (1934) and *To the Devil a Daughter* (1953), and in his own effort, *Moonchild* (1929). But Crowley exceeds fiction. Reportage, biography, autobiography and Crowley's writing on the occult, all contribute to the legend and lore that surround him. John Symonds wrote the first biography of the magician, *The Great Beast* (1951), which, although in many respects a hostile reading of Crowley, was a popular success, and perhaps continues to do more to inform popular understandings of the him than later, cooler biographies. Again, the boundaries of

fact and fiction blur, and Crowley is remixed as he is disseminated. His reception is as important as the facts of his life and writing.

Most editions of Somerset Maugham's *The Magician* are prefaced by a short autobiographical piece that recounts Maugham's association with Crowley in turn-of-the-century Paris, and notes that the wicked magician of his novel, Oliver Haddo is modelled on Crowley without quite being a portrait of him.¹² Much of the action is set in the Parisian milieu in which Maugham met Crowley, and he describes the magician as a Satanic dabbler, noting that there was 'something of a vogue in Paris for that sort of thing'. While Crowley was a fantastic storyteller, 'it was hard to say if he was telling the truth or merely pulling your leg'.¹³ This account establishes the authority of Maugham's modelling of Crowley, but it also emphasises the uncertainty associated with Crowley's stories about himself and his claims. This uncertainty sits at the heart of the novel's plot. At first, the novel's romantic hero, Arthur Burdon, 'would have no trifling with credibility. Either Haddo believed things that none but a lunatic could, or else he was a charlatan who sought to attract attention by his extravagances. In any case he was contemptible.'¹⁴ But Haddo begins his seduction of Burdon's fiancée, Margaret, through challenging her view of him as a charlatan while insisting he is, in fact, 'striving... to a very great end.'¹⁵ Margaret is seduced not just by a man but by an esoteric worldview; she is enchanted by him, seemingly in more than one sense. A newfound credence for the occult seems to have a romantic or even sexual dimension. The novel goes on to describe Arthur's efforts to rescue her from the villain. There is uncertainty about the credibility of Haddo's claims for much of the novel, until finally his occult power is confirmed: Haddo kills Margaret for ritual, magical purposes, using her blood to create a homunculus, an artificial form of life.

The Magician's descriptions of Haddo, established a set of ideas about Crowley that persisted in most depictions of him. Haddo is an outsider, but an outsider who has troubling access to privileged, establishment social circles. We learn of his unpopularity at Oxford:

He sneered at the popular enthusiasm for games, and was used to say that cricket was all very well for boys but not fit for the pastime of men... He... like[d] football, but he played it with a brutal savagery which the other persons concerned naturally resented. It became current opinion in other pursuits that he did not play the game. He... was capable of taking advantages which most people would have thought mean.¹⁶

This sporting rhetoric highlights Haddo's unclubbable character. He participates in shared play, but refuses to respect the terms of play and the other players. His preparedness to take improper advantage extends to social milieu, where he is a rakish danger to women who fall under his spell. Maugham seems to suggest that there is something grotesque in Haddo's appeal through frequent reference to his obesity. Yet despite Margaret's desire for Haddo, together with her loveliness, good nature, common sense, grace and 'exceeding beauty' it emerges that their marriage remains unconsummated six months later, with Haddo instead participating in occult orgies in Monte Carlo or seeking out prostitutes.¹⁷ Margaret's seduction and her subsequent frustration disrupt normative Edwardian heterosexual arrangements. Indeed, Haddo sometimes takes on queer characteristics, displaying basically heterosexual appetites while being consistently accorded characteristics that suggest homosexuality. In his younger days, he resembled a statue of 'Apollo in which the god is represented with a feminine roundness and delicacy'; in the novel's present, he has a 'red voluptuous mouth' and sometimes resembles a 'a very wicked, sensual priest'.¹⁸ In place of the anticipated marital relations, he seeks out extramarital sexual experience which is forbidden or beneath him, being possessed of a 'devouring lust for the gutter'.¹⁹ Moreover, Haddo is possessed of queer *feelings*; that is, he shares nothing of the emotions, desires or aesthetics of Arthur and other conventional characters. He prefers filthiness to the more conventional appeal of Margaret, and is 'attracted by all that was unusual, deformed, and monstrous'.²⁰

The novel does not explicitly label Haddo as a Satanist, and even glancingly engages with elements of Crowley's thought – his interest in will, love and imagination is noted.²¹ However, Maugham is basically disinterested in understanding the occult, and while the novel discusses various occult operations in some detail, particularly relating to the manufacture of homunculi, it is just as happy

to present rumours of 'blasphemous ceremonies of the Black Mass... celebrated in the house of a Polish Prince' and Haddo's practice of 'satanism and... necromancy.'²²

Crowley reviewed *The Magician* in a 1908 edition of *Vanity Fair*.²³ The review does little more than accuse Maugham of plagiarism and quote passages from the novel alongside sources it supposedly lifts from. There can be little doubt that Maugham quotes a couple of occult texts closely, although some of Crowley's complaints are more of a stretch. The odd effect of Crowley's complaint, is to underline the legitimacy of the occult sources in the novel; if anything, it makes it seem as if Maugham is writing about the real thing. But ultimately, the specifics of the complaint are of little interest; it's larger theme is more compelling. It is Crowley himself who is plagiarised in the novel – his behaviour, his conversation, his ideas, his vexed relationship with well-to-do English society. He signed his review Oliver Haddo. It's a good joke, perhaps in the manner of Haddo himself; when the patrons of the *Chien Noir* encounter Haddo in the novel, they are irritated because they cannot tell if 'while you were laughing at him, he was not really enjoying an elaborate joke at your expense.'²⁴ But it achieves more than a simple a joke might. It seems to take back the self that Maugham has taken from Crowley. Haddo returns to his source. At the same time, it plays with the fictionality and factuality of Maugham's text. If Maugham is a plagiarist, and one of his characters is written by someone else, then who is the author? If the text is modelled on real things, where are the limits of the real in the novel?

Crowley, seemingly always between jest and earnest, was also between fiction and reportage. His activities made entertaining copy, while offering newspaper and magazine readers the pleasures of disapproval. The popular weekly *John Bull* often thundered about Crowley. A May 1923 issue was dismayed that despite a police raid, the Abbey of Thelema on Cefalù continued to hold séances featuring 'every circumstance of blasphemous indecency'. There was only one thing to do. 'This creature is an enemy of mankind, and should be dealt with accordingly' opined the writer under the title 'A Man We'd Like to Hang'.²⁵ On the other side of the Atlantic, *The Helena Daily Independent*, adopted a somewhat more measured tone, if not more careful reporting, suggesting that Crowley's O.T.O. was a black magic love cult.²⁶ Both are instances of popular reportage that is little different in content and tone to the black magic story. *The Times*, only slightly more circumspect,

covered Crowley's unsuccessful libel case against a publisher – he claimed to have been defamed – quoting from the defence's lawyer to say that Crowley

had put himself before the public with challenge after challenge to all those standards of decency, conduct, and morality to which ordinary people subscribed in their daily lives, reserving to himself, presumably, a freedom which might be described as unbridled licence. Having put himself before the world in that light, could he complain if the world regarded him in the light of that reputation which he had so proclaimed?²⁷

If Crowley had a small genius for gathering public attention, he was considerably less adept at controlling the nature of that attention. Throughout his career, he became a character authored by others as much as himself. Moreover, he consistently produced material that helped others frame him as a diabolist rather than a less malign magician.

In his introductory handbook to occultism, *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929), Crowley cheerfully advocates both animal and human sacrifice, especially that of a 'male child of perfect innocence and high intelligence', claiming to have performed this sacrifice thousands of times himself (*Magick* 95-6, 95n). The suggestion about child sacrifice is apparently meant as a joke or as a metaphor for masturbation, but this is probably unclear to the beginner. Even in his own esoteric writings, Crowley continues to tease and provoke, to joke, to play at wickedness. Even when Crowley is writing more-or-less in earnest, his work is not that far from the stuff of the black magic story. Indeed, Dennis Wheatley, the foremost writer of black magic stories, might be one of Crowley's greatest promoters.

Wheatley was a very successful thriller writer, with a career spanning from the middle thirties through until the middle seventies. He shifted books in numbers that few authors could manage, even today. By the end of the sixties, he had sold 27 million books worldwide, with around 70 percent of those within the British market. A new Wheatley hardcover would sell around 30,000 copies, and paperback sales of his back catalogue stood at more than a million books a year. Although Wheatley wrote across a number of thriller genres, he became increasingly associated with the black magic story as his career developed, and, by the sixties, these outsold his

other works.²⁸ Especially towards the end of his career, Wheatley became closely associated with the occult thriller.

Where Maugham and Crowley sometimes have their tongues in their cheeks, Wheatley's depiction of Satanism is always deadly serious, its adherents a genuine threat to Western civilisations, both within and without his novels. 'The fact is that, although unrealised by most Europeans, in every great city, in the jungles of Africa, the villages of Asia, the plantations of the West Indies, and even in some remote hamlets of our own countryside, Satanism is still practiced.'²⁹ Wheatley draws on xenophobic and whiggish rhetorics to help describe Satanism as anathema to civilisation, and particularly to English notions of civility. Where Haddo was unique or eccentric in Maugham, the basic proposition of Wheatley's black magic stories is that twentieth century Britain was in the grips of a Satanic epidemic. How else to explain all the undesirable social changes? The Satanists were everywhere and had a political agenda, looking to wrest control of Britain and Europe from the nicer classes. Their influence could be subtle or catastrophic. On the one hand, eligible young women start involving themselves with the wrong sorts of people, while on the other, black magicians had already caused the Great War and were busily plotting its sequel.³⁰ Wheatley's later, postwar occult thrillers tend to associate Satanism with socialism and communism. In *Gateway to Hell* (1970) international black rights movements are described as a front for global Satanism.

The first of Wheatley's black magic thrillers was *The Devil Rides Out*. It narrates the desperate struggle of a heroic group of friends against an evil occultist, based on Crowley. Originally published in 1934, by the early seventies, helped by the Hammer film of 1967, it had sold more than one and a half million copies, making it the most successful of Wheatley's occult novels.³¹ Freeman notes *the Devil Rides Out* was first published in the aftermath of litigation taken by Crowley, where he attempted to sue various figures for libelling him by suggesting he was a black magician. The litigation was mainly unsuccessful, but engendered a wave of accompanying press that had recalled Crowley to the public, a decade after the various scandalous reports that emerged from his Abbey in Cefalù; Wheatley was capitalising on an existing popular interest, and the success of the book only expanded upon that interest. *The Devil Rides Out* was serialised in *The Daily Mail*, beginning on Halloween in the year of its original publication.³² This is a subliterate

venue, but it also suggests a wide reception for the novel, the general appeal that its material – that is, Crowley – was thought to have.

In the novel, Crowley becomes the occultist Mocata, 'a pot-bellied, bald headed person of about sixty, with large, protuberant, fishy eyes, limp hands, and a most unattractive lisp'.³³ Mocata is represented as an outsider who can turn otherwise suitable people to his cult. He is popular with women although, like Haddo, he gives off queer sparks which seem intended to repel his readers, if not the characters that come into his circle. Like Haddo, he is not quite right, and this wrongness centres particularly on his performance of masculinity and on his sexual preferences. The dangerous Satanist 'does the most lovely needlework, petit point... he will smother himself in expensive perfumes and is as greedy as a schoolboy about sweets...'; but just as Haddo does, he disappears into the East End for days on alcoholic benders, indulging in various debaucheries.³⁴

Wheatley seems to have understood Crowley's commitment to sex magic as a sophisticated description of the Satanic mass or sabbat. He extends on the kinds of newspaper and magazine reportage noted above, describing the black mass in extended detail that is usually only ever inferred in reportage. Wheatley imagines that wild, grotesque and potentially abusive group sex is central to the celebration. When the heroes of *The Devil Rides Out* encounter the sabbat, they fear that they could be watching 'some heathen ceremony in an African jungle!'³⁵ The heroes watch, hidden, as a cross is destroyed and upturned, uncomely figures dance naked, the Christian host is profaned, and the Satanists eat 'a stillborn baby or perhaps some unfortunate child that they have stolen and murdered' while a human skull rattles around in their cauldron.³⁶ In the middle of all this, as the Satanists feast, with no 'knives, forks, spoons or glasses', instead drinking straight out of bottles and eating with their hands.³⁷ This, perhaps, is just as much of a clue to the horror that lies at the heart of Wheatley's sabbat as all the rest of the material included. Satanism is understood to represent the collapse of civilization, specifically, of a conservative Englishness that brings with it a knot of assumptions about gender, class, race and table manners.

In *The Devil Rides Out*, the black sabbat is stretched out over four chapters, horror piling on horror. This is not uncommon in Wheatley – much of his black magic writing features descriptions of occult ritual and practice in instructional detail. This is not limited to the representation of the black mass; readers could probably attempt

some operations in numerology and tarot after reading the novel. Wheatley once claimed that ‘I always write two books. First I write a straightforward thriller. Then I write information. People know when they read one of my books that they’re going to learn something.’³⁸ Yet, whatever is learned from reading Wheatley (tarot, numerology, how best to worship demons), this is knowledge that has been twice rejected. If, as Hannegraff suggests, occult knowledge is rejected or discredited, then Wheatley’s occultural work is doubly so, for few practising occultists would endorse it as an authoritative account of occult practice. Then again, this slippery relationship with authoritative ‘fact’ is a vexed issue in occultural fiction. What counts as an esoteric fact? One man’s call to the god Pan is another’s invocation of the devil; Crowley’s sexual rites in Italy shade into the stuff of black magic, even for some of the people who were present.³⁹

Under the pressure of these uncertainties, the categories of fiction and non-fiction become curiously inappropriate. This is reflected not just in the black magic story, but in various texts that surround it. The seventies saw Wheatley editing and introducing *The Dennis Wheatley Library of the Occult*, a 45-volume series in paperback. The library cheerfully brought together novels and short story anthologies with occult histories and textbooks, with little attention paid to the distinction. If esoteric writing has already been discredited, then it follows that fiction – writing we know not to be ‘true’ in any uncomplicated sense – can sit alongside books that, while theoretical and instructional, do not properly qualify as non-fiction.

Wheatley’s blurring of these categories – his presentation of occult ‘information’ alongside thriller narrative – in some ways follows Crowley’s own approach to the magical syllabus. Alongside various grimoires, Crowley recommended various works of fiction to the aspiring occultist, such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *A Strange Story*, the works of Arthur Machen (‘of great magical interest’) and Stoker’s *Dracula*. Even Maugham’s *The Magician* is recommended, although with the understanding it is ‘an amusing hotch-potch of stolen goods’.⁴⁰ Crowley’s magazine, *The Equinox* (1909-19) published esoteric instruction alongside tales, plays and poems which often had Gothic elements – Edith Archer’s ‘The Vampire’, Edward Storer’s ‘The Three Worms’, or Crowley’s own adaptation of Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ for the stage. These literary works are distinct from Crowley’s theoretical and practical writing on magic, but Crowley presents literature as contiguous with his magical writings; the categories begin to fold into one another. If

occultists like Crowley are useful to the black magic story, spurring and authenticating the imaginative experience it offers, then literary works are, in turn, useful to the occult imagination. The lines between supposed fact and apparent fiction blur, regardless of whether one is seeking initiation, or only weird thrills.

This slipperiness carries forward even into biographical accounts of Crowley. John Symonds was Crowley's first biographer, and unlike some that have followed, seemingly never really fell under Crowley's spell. His *The Great Beast* (1951) often describes its subject as appalling. While Symonds was more careful with Crowley's ideas than Wheatley, it would be very easy to read *The Great Beast* and mistake Crowley for exactly the kind of Satanist that Wheatley describes. Symonds clarifies what is only ever suggested in distorted forms in Maugham and Wheatley, and, indeed, can be difficult to glean even from some of Crowley's introductory writings – that the heart of his practice was sex magic. To replace churchgoing with ritualised sex is not, of course, Satanic in itself – but sexual rites have long been associated with the sabbat.⁴¹ Symonds usually attempts to treat some of the ideas of Thelema or 'Crowleyanity' – that is, Crowley's esoteric thought and his early adherents – but on occasion, the biography suggests that Crowley was indeed a Satanist. Crowley is referred to as a black magician and Symonds has him speaking of 'Master Satan'.⁴² Ritual practices involving parodies of the Eucharist wafer made, ideally, from menstrual blood, or perhaps the blood of children, are described. A toad is mocked, scourged and then crucified upside down in an effort to defeat Christ, prior to the inauguration of a new age. There's the bungled ritual killing of a cat, after which its blood is drunk. A goat is sacrificed so that its blood falls over the naked body of Leah Hirsig, one of Crowley's Scarlet Women, his priestesses.⁴³ Symonds' descriptions match Wheatley's for the grotesque and Goyaesque details of sinister magic.

Symonds' Crowley is, however, more than simply a Mocata with a real history. There are flashes of a self-satisfied, limited and playful man beneath the growing legend. Symonds describes how Crowley danced on receiving news of Queen Victoria's death, saying that 'the spirit of her age had killed everything we cared for. Smug, sleek, superficial, servile, snobbish, sentimental shopkeeping had spread everywhere.'⁴⁴ Sometimes, *The Great Beast's* Crowley reads as an illicit modernist whose achievement was not in the poetry and paintings he produced, but in an art less studied in the academy. At other times, Crowley is presented as simply repellent, without the queer charisma of Haddo. Symonds pays fastidious attention to

Crowley's uncharismatic behaviours – his assaults on his partners, his tendency to shit on the carpet in friends' houses.⁴⁵ Like Mocata, he disappears on benders where he drinks and drugs and visits prostitutes. Crowley becomes pathetic in his last years, a befuddled addict in a Hastings retirement home. Better and more sympathetic biographies were to follow, but few if any of them would run to seven printings in their first five years on the market, including a mass market Panther edition.

Wheatley's *To the Devil a Daughter* was published in 1953, in the midst of the Symonds' biography's publishing success, and features an extended depiction of Crowley himself. Wheatley's novel seems to follow Symonds in revising Crowley, so that he is no longer the able and dangerous figure suggested by Haddo and Mocata. *To the Devil a Daughter* instead agrees with Symonds that Crowley was a spent force in his later years, although it also suggests that he was indeed the real thing earlier in his life. One of the novel's heroes, Colonel 'C.B.' Verney, must convince the Satanist magician Canon Copley-Syle that he too is committed to the Left Hand Path. He achieves this, at least for a short period, by describing his acquaintance with Crowley and even claiming to have been initiated into Crowley's order at the 'Abbaye de Thelema'.⁴⁶ In truth, he has garnered this knowledge from his intelligence work where he has encountered numerous 'tough customers', including one of 'Crowley's young men'.⁴⁷ It is C.B.'s ability to describe Crowley's life and practice to Copley-Syle that allows him to pass as an occultist. Personal acquaintance with Crowley becomes a marker of legitimacy and authority in the cultic milieu.

This episode allows Crowley's career to be discussed in detail over two chapters. The Great Beast is retrospectively distinguished from Mocata, becoming instead only one of many black magicians who threaten Britain and Europe. Crowley's thought and incidents from his life are described, although these are purposefully construed as Satanic rather than within any other kind of esoteric tradition; for Wheatley, there is little difference. Attention is paid to the details of Crowley's life, but these facts are used as props in service of a different performance. C.B. basically describes the practise of sex magic, but the only imaginable spirit it could call forth is demonic, for 'certain types of Satanic entity feed upon the emanations given out by humans engaged in the baser forms of eroticism. As far as Crowley was concerned the orgies were simply the bait that lured such

entities to the Abbaye and enabled him to gain power over them.⁴⁸ If this is not quite what Crowley understood himself to be doing, it is, in some ways, still near enough as a description; sex magic, in Crowley's thought is ritual practice where sexual activity is used as 'the most profound source of magical power'.⁴⁹

C.B. goes on to narrate various episodes drawn from Crowley's life. He discusses the 'Paris working', an occult ceremony that he claims ended in death for Crowley's assistant and psychic collapse for Crowley; C.B. understands the magician never recovered, becoming the pathetic figure that closes Symonds' biography. C.B.'s version is considerably more exciting – and more like a Gothic story – than the account given by Victor Neuberg, who actually performed the working with Crowley, and certainly lived to tell the tale.⁵⁰ Again, the untruthfulness of Wheatley's version of the story might be of interest to scholars of Crowley, but it's less consequential for readers who are looking for black magic thrills and an imaginative engagement with occultural materials. At the same time, there's an (I think) unintentional irony laced through the scene. C.B. knows he's extemporising, making up a lurid story to try to establish his credentials, grasping hold of what he knows of the occult without having quite the depth of expertise he is claiming. The Canon is enthralled, at least at first. For a moment, it seems that a genuine esoteric history is being shared. Another version of Crowley, both factual and fictional, is talked into existence. It is as if Wheatley were describing his own methods in the scene.

Crowley, like his near contemporary, the Count in *Dracula* (who, we should remember, was not merely a vampire, but also a student of the occult Scholomance), or various other legendary or folkloric figures, dissolves into popular narrative so that variations of the man proliferate. He contains multitudes; he is legion. He is endlessly revised in narrative, but also in scholarly cultures. Even in his own accounts of himself, various versions of the man emerge. In Hugh B. Urban's view, Crowley tends to frame himself as a voice leading his followers to freedom through the wasteland of modernity. Where Wheatley, on the other hand, presents Crowley as working towards the collapse all that is decent and civil, Urban argues that Crowley is in many ways the very embodiment of Western modernity in the twenties and thirties.⁵¹ But if Crowley sought progress and growth, he nevertheless referred to ideas of Satanism to describe his own rebellion. In his autobiography he wrote that the 'forces of good were those which had constantly oppressed me. I saw them daily

destroying the happiness of my fellow-men. Since, therefore, it was my business to explore the spiritual world, my first step must be to get into personal communication with the devil' – although the particular devil he sought was the one 'hymned by Milton and Huysmans.'⁵² At times like this, Crowley sounds like a late decadent. At others, he sits closer to various modernist provocateurs – and indeed there are substantial connections that can be drawn between him and a figure like D.H. Lawrence. They shared a publisher (Mandrake), and Crowley dedicated his collection of stories *Golden Twigs* to Lawrence. Like Lawrence, he was a poet and a painter, although his poetry seldom shows any affinity with the formal shocks of modernism. Both were calling for various forms of liberation, and saw a wider sense of human liberation as being intimately connected to sexual liberation.

This is a call that Crowley extended into his attempt at an occult thriller, *Moonchild*. The book was very loosely autobiographical, and Crowley stressed the authenticity of his work, noting that *Moonchild* gives 'an elaborate description of modern magical theories and practices' and that most 'of the characters are real people whom I have known and many of the incidents taken from experience.'⁵³ At the same time, the novel borrows significantly from *The Magician*; Crowley plagiarises the writer he accuses of plagiarism. Perhaps it can be read as another piece of taking-back, in the same manner that his review of Maugham's book might be. Crowley authored his book in 1917, although it was not published until 1929, and then, only in a small edition.⁵⁴ The book was brought back into print by Weiser in 1970, and to the mass market by Sphere in 1972. This delay means that Crowley's own writing probably did not contribute as much as it might have to the boom in the British black magic story that more-or-less coincided with Wheatley's career. It was, however, included in Wheatley's Library of the Occult in 1974, an inclusion which seems to complete the folding of the fictive, the factual, and the instructional presentation of rejected knowledge into one another.

If Crowley is the figure who sits at the heart of the black magic thriller, multiplying upon the genre's pages, then it seems oddly appropriate that *Moonchild* should feature two characters who are Crowley. Both Cyril Grey and Simon Iff, *Moonchild's* heroes, are representations of him. This is of a piece with his writing elsewhere,⁵⁵ and Crowley sometime seems to struggle writing about characters other than himself. This leads to a curious lack of outside perspectives in his fiction; there can only be Crowley's view of things. Those who oppose Grey and Iff in

Moonchild are simply wicked and their wickedness must be put down. This moral flatness shares much with Wheatley's approach, where there are only goodies and baddies, and characters tend to quickly grow to recognise the legitimacy and expertise of the heroes as the narrative progresses.

Moonchild follows much the same plot that Wheatley and Maugham do; Cyril Grey struggles against a lodge of black magicians who are working towards a nefarious end. In Maugham and Wheatley, the company of heroes always include a man who has experience of the occult arts, but uses his knowledge against the occultists – the Duke de Richleau in *The Devil Rides Out* or Dr Porhoët in *The Magician*. This follows in *Moonchild* too, for both Cyril and Simon are powerful white magicians, dedicated to the struggle against the evil wizards. The book reiterates *The Magician's* plot about the role of the heroine in the creation of a homunculus. *Moonchild*, however reconfigures or remixes Maugham's story, so that the creation of the homunculus is not the sinister aim of a black magician, but a heroic magical labour undertaken by Cyril Grey, which has a liberatory, even messianic potential for humankind.

Nevertheless, the black magic thriller element is retained, so that Crowley's former associates in the occult order of the Golden Dawn – barely disguised behind pseudonyms and, in fact, identified by the footnotes that accompanied the mass market Sphere edition of the seventies – have become a Black Lodge, fulfilling the same narrative function that Maugham and Wheatley's occultists do. Gruesome and gleeful descriptions of black magic, with little to distinguish them from anything in Wheatley, are offered. At one point, the refrigerated corpse of the Golden Dawn notable, W.B. Yeats (barely disguised as 'Gates') is used as an altar of sacrifice for a goat which has been involved in an act of bestiality, amidst a circle made of assorted tortured cats.⁵⁶ Yet Cyril Grey's own, beneficent magical rites are just as likely to titillate or shock readers. His newly discovered magical help-meet, Lisa La Giuffria, is initiated into Cyril and Simon's occult order. As part of her initiation, she must witness Cyril, who she has fallen for, enjoying sexual relations with another female initiate. Their double act features unimagined manners of coupling so that all Lisa 'had ever conceived of sensuality, of bestiality' is surpassed, and she finds that 'the bacchanal obscenity of it was overwhelming'.⁵⁷ Soon afterward, she is approached by another female initiate who complains that she has been violently and probably sexually abused by Cyril and the order, showing various injuries that have been done

to her. This, however, is a test, and Lisa passes it by offering to help the girl escape, but maintaining her loyalty to Cyril throughout. The episode reads as an involved form of sadomasochistic play involving ideas of humiliation and mastery. The outré sexuality of the order, and the expectation that despite potential abuse, initiates ought to remain basically loyal, will probably blur the lines between the practice of white and black lodges for many readers. Wheatley felt that, when a magician summoned any kind of spirit, it was always the Devil called by another name.⁵⁸ Crowley would argue differently, but *Moonchild* perhaps struggles to make his point clear. The novel is stranger than Maugham and Wheatley's work, but remains very much like them, despite being authored by a noted practitioner.

The black magic story's popularity has waned. It chimed especially with other contemporaneous modes of the British Gothic during its heyday – Hammer horrors, the Jamesian ghost story, what would eventually become known as folk horror and perhaps du Maurier at her most windswept and ghostly. It has less in common with the kinds of narratives that emerged in the wake of the American horror boom of the 1970s. The output of Wheatley and others began to seem antique. At the same time, the shock potential of occult practice has begun to dissolve, as various esoteric traditions found legitimation as new religious movements. Curiously, the eighties and the early nineties were the time of the Satanic panics, which seemed to take up Wheatley's ideas of a hidden but pervasive Satanic threat;⁵⁹ but perhaps the black magic story, populated by well-to-do heroes circulating around various international locations, did not jibe with all the confusion about reclaimed memories and the ritual abuse of women and children that played out at the domestic level, within families and communities. The imperatives of the Gothic have changed too. As Fred Botting notes, Gothic texts since the seventies often reassess material that was once taboo, so that the Gothic's various transgressive elements have become reassessed as an acceptable and even attractive commodities.⁶⁰ The occult thriller has not yet really been reassessed and reimagined in these terms. Aside from anything else, the black magic story, with its panting sexuality, esoteric worldview and basically conservative politics does not sit well with what Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall take to be the

aim of much critical work that treats the Gothic – the discovery of a humane liberalism and political subversion in the texts being considered.⁶¹

Crowley, of course, remains a flexible figure. Colin Wilson, another of Crowley's biographers, concludes his work by noting that 'there was only one Aleister Crowley';⁶² but this is hardly the case. Crowley proliferates. In life, he went by many names, and *noms de plume*. The man born Edward Alexander Crowley called himself Frater Perdurabo, the Master Therion, he was the number 666, he was the Great Beast; he was Laird of Boleskine and Abertaff, Count Svareff, The Reverend C. Verey, Aleister MacGregor, Sir Alastor de Kerval, Edward Kelly, Adam d'As, Cor Scorpionis, Khaled Khan, Prince Choia Khan (complete with turban), Baphomet, Saint Edward Aleister Crowley. Given his multiplicity, it is hardly surprising he claimed the name of Maugham's magician Oliver Haddo for himself too. In his own work he was Simon Iff, Cyril Grey, and a number of others. Crowley, the living man, accumulated a capacious set of selves, some of which were physically performed, while others existed principally as text. He expands. He was Mocata, he was Karswell in M.R. James' 'Casting the Runes', (1911), and again, in Tourneur's *Night of the Demon* (1957); he was Shelley Arabin in John Buchan's *The Dancing Floor* (1926), Hugo Astley in Dion Fortune's *The Winged Bull* (1935). In all these appearances, Crowley himself is the thing plagiarised, replicated, distorted and remixed, but rather than resisting, he seems to have participated in the process himself.

Wheatley offered an introduction to mass market editions of Crowley's *Moonchild*, where he suggested that the book will 'appeal equally to lovers of occult fiction and serious students of the supernatural.'⁶³ In the black magic tale, the difference between the Gothic reader and the 'serious student' is difficult to maintain, as occult practice, theory and history is described at length and in detail, if not with fastidious accuracy. Yet the issue of accuracy is always unclear in occulture, for it brings together expert and inexpert claims relating to already discredited knowledge and modes of thought. Crowley himself, playful one moment, seemingly in earnest the next, both monstrous and queerly appealing, seems to facilitate this slippage and folding between fact and fiction. In the black magic tales he presides over, knowledge will not stay within the confines of its proper category, but perhaps this is typical of occulture more widely; supposedly secret knowledge takes on a public dimension. At the same time, the black magic tale uses sex magic and other magical

practices to stage episodes of the sinister sex and violence that have long been the Gothic's stock in trade. For Symonds, Crowley was, at times, 'the grotesque showman' of a 'diabolist circus'.⁶⁴ When he appears in the black magic story, he is a figure much the same.

¹ Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography*, John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (eds), 1969, (London, Penguin, 1989), 204.

² Phil Baker, *Austin Osman Spare: The Life and Legend of London's Lost Artist*, (London, Strange Attractor, 2012), 69.

³ 'British people more likely to believe in ghosts than a Creator', <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/03/26/o-we-of-little-faith>, accessed 31 January 2019.

⁴ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), 369

⁵ W. Somerset Maugham, *The Magician: A Novel, Together with A Fragment of Autobiography*, 1908, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967), 7.

⁶ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 3.

⁷ Aleister Crowley, *777 Revised*, 1955, (Leeds: Celephaïs Press, 2004), xi.

⁸ Nick Freeman, 'The Black Magic Bogeyman 1908-1935', in Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford (eds), *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1947*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 94-109, 95.

⁹ Colin Campbell, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization', in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5, (1972), pp. 119-36, p. 122.

¹⁰ Christopher Partridge, 'Occulture is Ordinary' in Egil Asperem and Kennet Granholm (eds), *Contemporary Esotericism*, (Oxon, Routledge, 2014), pp. 113-33, 116.

¹¹ Dennis Wheatley, *The Devil Rides Out*, 1934, (London: Mandarin, 1996), np.

¹² Maugham, *The Magician*, 9.

¹³ Maugham, *The Magician*, 8.

¹⁴ Maugham, *The Magician*, 42.

¹⁵ Maugham, *The Magician*, 84-5.

¹⁶ Maugham, *The Magician*, 63-4.

¹⁷ Maugham, *The Magician*, 18, 125, 142.

-
- ¹⁸ Maugham, *The Magician*, 64, 106, 33.
- ¹⁹ Maugham, *The Magician*, 142.
- ²⁰ Maugham, *The Magician*, 87.
- ²¹ Maugham, *The Magician*, 38.
- ²² Maugham, *The Magician*, 125.
- ²³ Aleister Crowley, 'How to Write a Novel! (After W.S. Maugham)' in *Vanity Fair*, December 1908, available at https://www.100thmonkeypress.com/biblio/acrowley/periodicals/write_a_novel/novel.pdf, accessed 31 January 2019.
- ²⁴ Maugham, *The Magician*, 33.
- ²⁵ 'A Man We'd Like to Hang', in *John Bull*, May 19 1923, p. 10, available at <https://www.lashtal.com/2095-old-article/>, accessed 31 January 2019.
- ²⁶ 'Latest "Black Magic" Revelations About Nefarious American "Love Cults"', in *The Helena Daily Independent*, 27 November 1927, n.p., available at <https://www.lashtal.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/1927-Nov-27.pdf>, accessed 31 January 2019.
- ²⁷ 'High Court of Justice', in *The Times*, 13 April 1934, 4.
- ²⁸ 'Pooter', *The Times*, 19 August 1969, 19; Iwan Hedman and Jan Alexandersson, *Four Decades with Dennis Wheatley*, DAST Dossier 1, (Köping, 1973), 20, 73.
- ²⁹ Dennis Wheatley, 'Black Magic' in *Gunmen, Gallants and Ghosts*, 1943, (London, Arrow, 1972) pp. 233-58, 237.
- ³⁰ Wheatley, *The Devil Rides Out*, 157.
- ³¹ Hedman and Alexandersson, *Four Decades with Dennis Wheatley*, 20.
- ³² Freeman, The Black Magic Bogeyman, 105-6.
- ³³ Wheatley, *The Devil Rides Out*, 11.
- ³⁴ Wheatley, *The Devil Rides Out*, 153-4.
- ³⁵ Wheatley, *The Devil Rides Out*, 115.
- ³⁶ Wheatley, *The Devil Rides Out*, 117-20.
- ³⁷ Wheatley, *The Devil Rides Out*, 118.
- ³⁸ 'Obituary: Mr Dennis Wheatley – Novels to Thrill and Inform', in *The Times*, 17 November 1977, p. 16.
- ³⁹ See Betty May, 'The Sacrifice' in Dennis Wheatley (ed), *Satanism and Witches*, (London, Sphere, 1974), pp. 83-5.
- ⁴⁰ Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, 1929, (Secaucus, Castle, 1991), 213-4.
- ⁴¹ See Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), 1.
- ⁴² John Symonds, *The Great Beast: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, 1951 (London, Panther, 1956), 285.

-
- ⁴³ Symonds, *The Great Beast*, 63, 132, 216, 185.
- ⁴⁴ Symonds, *The Great Beast*, 32.
- ⁴⁵ Symonds, *The Great Beast*, 102, 291, 302, 121.
- ⁴⁶ Dennis Wheatley, *To the Devil a Daughter*, 1953, (London, The Book Club, n.d.), 209.
- ⁴⁷ Wheatley, *To the Devil a Daughter*, 208, 212.
- ⁴⁸ Wheatley, *To the Devil a Daughter*, 209-10.
- ⁴⁹ Hugh B. Urban, 'The Beast with Two Backs: Aleister Crowley, Sex Magic and the Exhaustion of Modernity', in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2004, pp. 7-25, 11.
- ⁵⁰ Jean Overton Fuller, *The Magical Dilemma of Victor Neuberg: A Biography*, Revised ed., (Oxford, Mandrake, 1990), 192-206.
- ⁵¹ Hugh B. Urban, 'The Beast with Two Backs', 8.
- ⁵² Crowley, *The Confessions*, 126.
- ⁵³ Crowley, *The Confessions*, 777.
- ⁵⁴ Kenneth Grant, 'Introduction' in Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild*, 1929, (London, Sphere, 1979), pp. 11-17, 11.
- ⁵⁵ See William Breeze, 'Introduction', in Aleister Crowley, *The Simon Iff Stories and Other Works*, William Breeze (ed), (Ware, Wordsworth, 2012), pp. 7-17.
- ⁵⁶ Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild*, 1929, (London, Sphere, 1979), 165-6.
- ⁵⁷ Crowley, *Moonchild*, 95.
- ⁵⁸ Wheatley, 'Black Magic', 235.
- ⁵⁹ See Bill Ellis, *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media*, (Lexington, The UP of Kentucky, 2000); David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumours of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006).
- ⁶⁰ Fred Botting, *Gothic*, Second ed, (Oxon, Routledge 2015), 15.
- ⁶¹ Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall, 'Gothic Criticism', in David Punter (ed), *A Companion to the Gothic*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp.209-28, 209.
- ⁶² Colin Wilson, *Aleister Crowley: The Nature of the Beast*, (London, Aquarian, 1987), 152.
- ⁶³ Dennis Wheatley, 'Introduction', in Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild*, 1929, (London, Sphere, 1979), pp. 9-10, 9.
- ⁶⁴ Symonds, *The Great Beast*, 123.