

Marco Pasi. *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*. Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013. xiii + 238 pp. ISBN: 1844656969. £17.99.

Within the colorful panorama of esoteric spiritual teachers scattered across modern European history, the deeply enigmatic figure of Aleister Crowley stands out for his mercurial character, simultaneously impulsive and intransigent, stubbornly uncompromising yet completely unpredictable. In the course of his often flamboyant life (1875–1947), Crowley ranged over a wide spectrum of spiritual, political, and cultural perspectives, shifting continually between seemingly opposite poles. Marco Pasi’s nuanced study offers a masterful guide to Crowley’s ceaseless ideological peregrinations.

Originally published in Italian in 1999, with a revised German translation appearing in 2006, Pasi’s work is now available in English. This is the most comprehensive of the three editions of the book. It is thoroughly and creatively researched, in constant critical dialogue with the existing secondary literature, and has been substantially updated. Building on James Webb’s pioneering insights into the entanglement of occultism and politics, Pasi fully succeeds in his stated goal; this work makes a substantial contribution toward normalizing Crowley as a subject of scholarly research. Though Crowley liked to invent grandiose designations for himself, Pasi reveals a more ordinary side of his life and shows that much of his interest in and association with strikingly contrary political currents stemmed from a mundane search for followers and influence. As prophet of an antinomian esotericism, Crowley moved restlessly between left and right. One of the book’s paradoxical findings is that Crowley’s radical individualism went hand in hand with an abiding attraction to totalitarianism.

Pasi provides a fresh perspective on Crowley by focusing not on the scandalous aspects of his persona but on his political inclinations and involvements, while recognizing that for Crowley spiritual concerns were paramount. From his stormy sojourn in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, beginning in 1898, and his world travels and experiences with different varieties of magic and initiation, Crowley developed a new religion he called Thelema, under the motto “do what thou wilt.”

In addition to the obvious Nietzschean elements in his outlook, Pasi also discerns a “strong component of social Darwinism” in Crowley’s works (48) and traces the influence of Spencer and Haeckel on his thought. The book includes perceptive remarks on Crowley’s “organicism vision” of social life (49). In 1923 Crowley described his ideal social order as “a Patriarchal-Feudal system run by initiated Kings.” (152) A patrician disdain for democracy, along with contempt

for bourgeois values, animated much of his storied libertinage and emphatic rejection of conventionality, whether sexual or aesthetic or societal. This often as not put him in unusual company, from Celtic revivalism to pro-German pro-paganda during WWI. Pasi reflects thoughtfully on the connections between Crowley's dispensationalist upbringing and his adult enthrallment with the idea of a secret circle of adepts: the trope of a brotherhood of the elect transposed from fundamentalist Protestantism to Western esotericism.

Some of the material here will be familiar for readers acquainted with other streams of modern esoteric thought, such as Crowley's "contempt for the masses" (67) and his preoccupation with claiming a "scientific" mantle for his own teachings, or the role of Blavatskian Theosophy as a lingua franca allowing esotericists from different traditions to converse with one another. Other facets may be more surprising, such as Crowley's occasionally positive views of Bolshevism. Pasi reports that "after the First World War and especially in the 1930s, Crowley was increasingly perceived by the police and the secret services of various countries as being involved in left-wing radical movements." (125) In his own words, however, Crowley was "absolutely opposed to any ideas of social revolution." (66)

The book presents a detailed analysis of Crowley's fascination with both Nazism and Stalinism, as well as an insightful assessment of his affinities with advocates of the Conservative Revolution, and quotes Crowley referring to his "reactionary conservatism." (34) Pasi gives full weight to the "anti-democratic and elitist implications" of Crowley's spiritual message (47) while reminding readers of the ambiguities involved. Despite the fundamental elitism of the Golden Dawn, and of Crowley's own conception of esoteric leadership and of a spiritual aristocracy, he contributed to a kind of democratization of esoteric doctrine by divulging secret Golden Dawn teachings after the collapse of the Order. Pasi refers to this as Crowley's "democratization of magic." (61)

Crowley's far-flung political dalliances were not as ephemeral as they may seem. Pasi devotes extensive attention to their twists and turns, on the basis of archival and secondary sources, minutely reconstructing the nature of Crowley's relationship with various political figures, some of whom eventually became quite prominent. It isn't always clear what sort of influence Crowley might have had on these figures, if any, but these episodes do provide illuminating perspective on the range of politically engaged individuals who were at some point drawn to occultism. Crowley's ambition seems to have been to project his religious message as a counterpart to various political programs in an effort to unsettle any established order, and in this quest his prospective partners (real

or imaginary) oscillated between apparent polar opposites, from Mussolini to Trotsky to Stalin to Hitler. Crowley nurtured initial sympathies for Italian Fascism but eventually turned against the Duce, in part because of Crowley's expulsion from Italy – an Italian police report decried “obscene and perverse sexual practices” overseen by Crowley at his “Abbey of Thelema” in Sicily (127) – and in part because of Mussolini's rapprochement with the church; adamant opposition to Christianity was one of the mainstays of Crowley's worldview.

His attitudes toward Nazism were just as convoluted. Crowley remained convinced to the end of his life that he had “influenced Hitler.” (54) He nonetheless came to conclude, in Pasi's words, that Hitler “was not a true initiate.” (58) Pasi sees Crowley's eventual rejection of Nazism as due principally to its statist and collectivist character; an alternative way of framing the same point is that Crowley considered Nazism too plebeian, not aristocratic enough. Through the *Ordo Templi Orientis* or OTO, Crowley played a significant role as “spiritual guide to various personalities in German occultism.” (72) Like virtually everything else in Crowley's life, this has given rise to a wild profusion of conspiracist claims and counter-claims about his supposed deeds. Pasi is resolutely critical of the “Nazi occultism” genre, which portrays Crowley as a secret inspiration for Hitler. While Crowley did sometimes harbor aspirations along these lines, nothing came of them. But speculation was rampant in esoteric circles. After Crowley faked his own suicide in Portugal in 1930 with the assistance of Fernando Pessoa, René Guénon claimed that Crowley staged the event in order to go to Berlin to serve as Hitler's “secret adviser” (110). Other rumors circulating at the time claimed that Crowley had been assassinated by agents of the Catholic church.

Such notions, so prevalent in the esoteric milieu, serve as the basis for the most incisive sections in the book. Pasi's extended analysis of the intense interest in Crowley among conspiracy theorists and in Traditionalist circles notes the “strong link between conspiracy theories and Western esotericism.” (118) By sober and patient examination of the evidence, Pasi works his way painstakingly through the competing claims about Crowley's various political activities. His account of the Hess episode in particular is admirably cautious and restrained. According to the more fantastic tales, Rudolf Hess's unexpected flight to Britain in 1941 was the result of occult machinations (followers of Rudolf Steiner feature prominently in some versions of this legend); less fanciful variants center on the alleged efforts by British intelligence operatives to lure the Nazi luminary to Britain and sow confusion within the German leadership. Pasi concludes that even these latter plans did not include Crowley;

proponents of the idea “decided that Crowley could not be used for an operation of this type.” (91) His marginal part in the affair consisted in an offer of assistance to British officers once Hess had been taken into custody. In this as in other cases, Pasi gently but pointedly rebuts the perennially popular beliefs about Crowley’s ostensible involvement in an occult conspiracy.

There are a few details that have been overlooked in this superb study which may be worth pursuing further. Apart from a brief reference to Kerry Bolton in a footnote, there is no mention of current representatives of far-right enthusiasm for Crowley, such as Keith Preston or Troy Southgate. The parallels to Julius Evola – who took a notably sympathetic view of Crowley – could be examined more thoroughly; along with thinkers like Evola and Ernst Jünger, Crowley’s “absolute individualism” (48) aligns him with the so-called *anarchici di destra* or anarchists of the right, an under-studied factor in the history of modern esotericism. While Pasi does note the widespread antisemitism in interwar occult circles (70), and examines Pessoa’s antisemitism, there are only passing references to Crowley’s own racial and ethnic views, such as his invocation of Gobineau (179). This is a missed opportunity; racial and ethnic sentiments provide an instructive vantage point from which to assess the political dimensions of occult thought.

Like his racial politics, Crowley’s sexual politics get relatively little substantive attention here. Presumably that is a response to the excessive concentration on sex in other treatments; Pasi’s aim may be to counter the usual obsession with Crowley’s putative transgressions. But the topic warrants more sustained analysis, not least in light of the importance of sex magic to the OTO. Crowley’s bisexuality and his homosexual relationships inevitably took on a political character in the constricted Victorian cultural context of his youth. Pasi does regard Crowley’s “attack on bourgeois values” (47) and his anti-Christian emphasis as closely connected to his conception of sexual liberty. But Crowley’s championing of a Dionysian occultism could be a fine opportunity for a careful feminist critique, for example, a chance to explore the political implications of a spirituality built around the dictum “do what thou wilt.”

Beyond considerations like these, several of Pasi’s provocative and thoughtful conclusions deserve further discussion. It is easy to agree with his eminently sensible rejection of the claim that there was an intrinsic connection between Crowley’s Thelemic teachings and Nazism or the extreme right (136); the connections were episodic, inconsistent, and historically contingent, not inherent to Crowley’s ideology. But several strands in Pasi’s argument miss the mark. For one thing, “universalism” won’t help distinguish Thelema from Nazism

or Fascism, as both National Socialism and Italian Fascism had pronounced universalist pretensions themselves. Second, a more thoroughgoing appraisal of Crowley's racial views would be needed to determine whether there were racist components to his religious teachings.

But Pasi's larger case is important: it is pointless to reduce the complexity and breadth of Crowley's ideas and influence to their political dimension, and even more pointless to flatten out that political dimension to a simple matter of far-right affinities. Both the historical record and the contemporary profile of Crowley-inspired currents are much more multifaceted. Crowley's own politics were, in the end, too confused to be easily categorized as simply right-wing. The same is true, of course, for many other esoteric figures.

Finally, why see politics as a "temptation"? Why not see political engagement and political judgement as legitimate expectations for any person who feels called to present a public set of spiritual teachings, especially when those teachings make concrete claims about the state of the world and the condition of society? Perhaps those who see themselves as prophets have an obligation to partake in political discernment and dialogue. The underlying problem is that this conception of political participation and social consciousness is sharply at odds with the self-image of so many esoteric teachers and occult provocateurs.

These are exactly the kind of reflections and disputes that a historically grounded study like this is meant to generate. Pasi reasons that Crowley's "messianic convictions" (139) led him to pursue potential adherents and converts wherever possible, regardless of political camps. A more fundamental factor may have to do with disinterest in and scorn for the supposedly petty world of political distinctions and debates. That sort of credulous condescension is a common enough feature of esoteric thinking, one that merits historically informed scrutiny. Crowley's contemporary influence extends across a remarkably wide spectrum, from individualist anarchism to the authoritarian far right; his version of spirituality appears compatible with both libertarianism and totalitarianism. The history Pasi recounts bears considerable relevance not just for those interested in Crowley himself but for those studying related tendencies, from Wicca to Theosophy to Rosicrucianism and beyond. Whether those drawn to esotericism acknowledge it or not, the politics of the occult are an increasingly significant subject for scholarship. This book marks a critical step in that promising direction.

Peter Staudenmaier