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The Scientific Aeon:

Magic, Science and Psychology in Crowley's Scientific Illuminism¹

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Introduction: Secularisation of esotericism/psychologisation of magic

It is commonly contended that "occultist magic" and the broader Victorian occult revival of the nineteenth century represented a distinctly post-Enlightenment reception of esoteric thought. In this view, the revival of magic and occult teachings in the wake of the Enlightenment facilitated significant *transformations* of those teachings. In short, occultists have sought to negotiate esoteric belief systems with the common tenets of a "disenchanted" modernity. Esoteric and magical beliefs had to be negotiated with those of the new science and psychology.

However, it is not all that easy to distinguish one single trend in the way this negotiation has taken place. According to Wouter Hanegraaff it has brought about a "disenchanted magic", characterised primarily by "psychologisation".² Others, such as Christopher Partridge, argue that modern magicians live in a world as enchanted as ever, seeing *re-enchantment* rather than the emergence of a radically different form of secular magic.³ The confusion in this debate seems to a significant extent to depend on where the commentators place their emphasis. Clearly, there exist a long-standing will within occultism to synthesise esoteric and scientific *concepts*; we find karma and evolution, the ether and the *anima mundi*, magnetism, frequencies and the astral light, and hosts of similar correlations and interpretations.

But there are also significant differences between modern esotericists. Blavatsky was fond of terminology from physics and the life sciences, Israel Regardie, being trained in psychiatry, would embrace psychological terms, while an anti-modernist magician such as Julius Evola would largely avoid either. In short, there seems to be not one trend, but many, and the relation between secular modernity and magic remains ambiguous.

In this respect, Aleister Crowley stands out as a particularly interesting case. Through his vast literary production, of books, essays, and letters, he made several interesting comments on science and psychology, their relation to occultism, religion, and society at large. In this paper I will explore some of Crowley's main ideas where magic, science and psychology interconnect. Special emphasis will be given here to some important possible

¹ The bulk of the research for this paper was done for a more substantial forthcoming article, to which I refer the interested reader: Egil Asprem, "Magic 'Naturalized'? Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Crowley's Scientific Illuminism", *ARIES*, 8:2 (2008).

² Hanegraaff, "How magic survived".

³ Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol I, esp. 38-46.

influences on Crowley's ideas and conceptions of science, with brief comments on how he sought to integrate them in his approach to magic.

Trinity College, Cambridge: A rendezvous

I will start by recalling that Crowley spent his college years at Trinity College, Cambridge. Furthermore, one should recall the kind of milieu he was likely to meet there. Crowley attended Trinity from 1895-1898. Thirteen years earlier, in 1882, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) had been established there, and the Society still had their headquarters at Trinity. In addition, its central founding figure, Henry Sidgwick, still was a fellow at the college when Crowley attended. Crowley would quite clearly have been exposed to the SPR's "psychical research", and their attempted aim to bridge the perceived gap of scientific naturalism and religion by a scientifically rigorous study of occult and paranormal phenomena. Arguably, this had an impact on Crowley, as we will explore in greater detail in a minute.

First I want to mention another towering figure at Trinity: the anthropologist James George Frazer. Frazer's hugely influential *Golden Bough* had been published only five years before Crowley attended Trinity, and the man himself was a fellow at the college. His book would have a lasting influence on Crowley, and although we have no evidence for it, it is tempting to imagine him attending lectures with Frazer.

Already here we have established a connection with two of the perhaps most significant influences on Crowley's thought regarding the relationship between science and magic. Psychical research provided the idea of an approach based on testing and experiment of occult phenomena which we will later find very central to Crowley's own take on magic. In Frazer we find especially the famous evolutionist framework of magic-religion-science, which Crowley later would adopt and adapt to fit his own agendas. What is interesting to note is that Crowley to a great extent accepted the intellectualist stance of Frazer's views on magic: i.e., that magic is in some way analogous to modern science. But in Crowley's scheme, the cultural evolutionism would be somehow modified. In his thought, science did not necessarily *supersede* magic; rather it called for a *reformation* of magic. Thus when he many years later wrote his "Magick in Theory and Practice", Crowley could present himself as someone who had come to destroy "that unscientific ... MAGICK (of tradition)",⁴ and rather replace it with the modernised approach of "Scientific Illuminism".

The Brothers of the A.:A.:

Before he got there, Crowley was of course properly introduced and trained in occultist ritual magic through the Golden Dawn, and such figures as George Cecil Jones, Allan Bennett, and MacGregor Mathers. I will not spend much time on this period and influence here, but rather focus on Crowley's development after the schism of the G.D.. After the events in Cairo in 1904, with the reception of *The Book of the Law*, Crowley felt that not only had the "Old Aeon" come to an end, but also Mathers had been dethroned from the G.D. by the Secret Chiefs, and Crowley had been given the task to build and head a new and proper organisation. This led to the foundation of the A.:A.: between 1906 and 1909. Although based on the systems of the G.D., the A.:A.: proposed to teach and practice magic after the core principles of the new Aeon, which for Crowley entailed the adoption of a more scientific approach. When the order was officially launched in the Editorial of *The Equinox* in 1909, its new magical paradigm was proclaimed as "Scientific Illuminism". The famous motto was "The Method of Science – the Aim of Religion". At the same time, the Editorial promised to wage war on the prevailing "obscurantism" and "charlatanism" in the occult world.

⁴ Crowley, "Magick", 135.

Now, appeals to “science” were of course nothing new in the world of the occult. It is well known that spiritualists had attempted to ally themselves with science since the mid 19th century. When H. P. Blavatsky founded the doctrines of Theosophy through her main books, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), it was with a prolific, but liberal use of scientific terminology. However, as for instance Olav Hammer has shown,⁵ the attempts by spiritualists and Theosophists to re-embed scientific nomenclature in their esoteric discourses should mainly be viewed as a rhetorical or discursive strategy. In the case of these currents, and even of some of the psychical researchers of the SPR, the real aim was quite clearly to *combat* Victorian naturalism, and what was perceived as its threatening materialistic and mechanistic worldview. This “terminological scientism” should not be confused with a profound knowledge of science, or sincere use of its tenets and fundamental principles. Especially, the tendency was to ignore the scientific *method*, while selectively embracing and modifying particular discoveries.

In other words, we are justified in being sceptical at first when we see an occultist as Crowley introducing “science” as a fundamental concept for his discourse on magic. However, a closer analysis shows that Crowley’s appeal to science has a quite different flavour and function than it had in earlier occultisms. As Crowley put it in his *Confessions*:

The Equinox was the first serious attempt to put before the public the facts of occult science, so-called, since Blavatsky's unscholarly hotch-potch of fact and fable, *Isis Unveiled*. It was the first attempt in history to treat the subject with scholarship and from the standpoint of science.⁶

Furthermore we find in the editorial of *Equinox* 2.1, here talking about the aims and approach of the brothers of the A.:A.: :

We require the employment of a strictly scientific method. The mind of the seeker must be unbiased: all prejudice and other sources of error must be perceived as such and extirpated. We have therefore devised a Syncretic-Eclectic Method ... to attack the Problem, through exact experiments and not by guesses.

What we see here is an emphasis on the ideals of scientific *methodology*; the scientific-illuminist magician should retain an unbiased mind, free of prejudice as far as it is possible, and an awareness of possible sources of errors for the data s/he collects. But we also see that the appeal to science is employed as a device against other forms of occultism, here represented by Blavatsky’s “unscholarly hotch-potch of fact and fable”. Nevertheless, this stricter, and I would hold, more sincere idea of science and the scientific enterprise was at the time quite unique to Crowley in occultism. That is, if we can show that he actually placed his money where his mouth was.

To a considerable extent, I think, we can. One aspect which I find indicative of a real will to “naturalise” magic, is the tone of the magical instructions Crowley wrote for the A.:A.:. If we take for instance the important manual “Liber Exercitiorum” (“Book of Exercises”) as an example, we immediately see that the emphasis is on precision, experiment, and avoiding self-deceit.⁷ This is primarily attempted through the use of the magic diary, which should become more than a collection of anecdotes, and rather resemble a scientific record. It should be possible to test the results, check their validity, and replicate the experiments.

Sometimes statistical figures were also to be employed, such as in the training of “physical clairvoyance” through the use of the Tarot. Here Crowley explains that one has to

⁵ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*.

⁶ Crowley, *Confessions*, 604.

⁷ See Crowley, “Liber Exercitiorum”, in *Equinox* 1,1(1909).

be able to make predictions that can statistically be verified as more than chance. Other places we find that Crowley attempts to devise a specific methodology based on the occultist reception of the Kabbalah for testing the validity of magical visions and the entities conversed with in rituals and astral travels. Although slightly more on the esoteric side of things, the focus is still clearly on expelling errors and considering only “real” spiritual phenomena that can somehow be verified and tested by systematic methods.

Crowley and psychical research: the Palladino case

This adoption of an alleged scientific approach to occult phenomena brings us back to the interesting relationship between Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism and the psychical research of the SPR. I believe there is a common focus between the two, although, of course, the expressed agendas were different. The agenda of the A.:A.: was to train adepts through a scientific reformation of magic, while the SPR aimed to inquire into the reality of paranormal phenomena through scientific methods. But there are links, not only in interest in the same subject matter, but also historically and biographically. Crowley was friends with two rather prolific psychical researchers, Hereward Carrington and Everard Feilding. Carrington is perhaps best known for co-authoring *The Projection of the Astral Body* together with Sylvan Muldoon. Feilding on the other hand was the secretary of the SPR between 1903 and 1920, and is also proved to have been one of the early members of the A.:A.:⁸ Thus Feilding makes for an interesting and definite link between the two movements.

There exists an intriguing story about Crowley and a specific piece of psychical research carried out by Carrington and Feilding.⁹ In 1908 the council of the SPR decided to reopen the case of the Italian spiritualist medium Eusapia Palladino. Her case had been closed after a series of experiments thirteen years earlier, where she had been exposed as a fraud. During the first decade of the new century she had nevertheless enjoyed a renaissance, with extensive touring and renewed popularity. Now Carrington and Feilding were set to investigate her again, to see if there was after all something genuine in Eusapia’s table-rapping and ectoplasmic extravaganza.

After attending sittings with Palladino in Naples in 1908, Feilding wrote a semi-famous report which went far in the direction of suggesting that the Italian medium was “the real thing”. Unfortunately for Feilding, Palladino soon after set out on a new tour of the US, where she was once again caught red-handed cheating. This was a devastating blow to the credibility of the SPR.

Crowley knew the case of Palladino pretty well. Not only did he read Feilding’s report with great interest, but he had also enrolled to Trinity at the very moment when Palladino was being tested there by the SPR, in 1895. Knowing Feilding and Carrington personally as well, Crowley could assert that: “Feilding and the rest are clever, wary, experienced and critical, but even so, can I be sure that when they describe what occurs they are dependable witnesses?”¹⁰ In 1912 he decided to go to Naples to attend sittings with Palladino himself, to make a more qualified judgement.

It is intriguing to see how Crowley deals with his experience of the sitting with Palladino. He ends up criticising the credibility of his own immediate perceptions during the event. Crowley notes that at one point he became aware that Palladino’s wrist had escaped the grip he originally had of it, without noticing when it happened, or how. Reflecting on this for a while, Crowley remarks how easy it is for even the most perceptible person to be tricked in such settings. This is where he finds the probable source of error in the work of the other psychical researchers; they had probably been trapped in a circle of delusion and *self-*

⁸ Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 149-51.

⁹ See ⁹ Crowley, *Confessions*, chapter 70; J. Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 151-152.

¹⁰ Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, 682.

delusion.¹¹ What puzzles Crowley the most in the end, then, is not the phenomena studied by psychical research, but rather the credulity of the psychical researchers themselves; or, in Crowley's own words, "the adhesion of so many prominent men of science to spiritism"¹²

This little anecdote points to something important about Crowley's self-understanding and self-fashioning. Crowley conceives his own scepticism and methodological naturalism with regard to occult phenomena as going *further* than that of the SPR, who in this case had ended up as mere advocates for spiritualism. It also signifies once again the true meaning of "science" in Crowley's thinking. It is not merely a set of concepts, propositions, ontological theories, and fancy-sounding concepts, but a *method* built upon *critical thinking*.

Psychology and the scientific ideal

While moving towards the end of this paper, I will give attention as well to Crowley's attitudes to the at that time quite young, and far from unified, science of psychology. As I mentioned in the introduction, it has been common among scholars to assert that magic has become psychologised in the modern age. Now, this can mean a series of things. In the weakest sense, psychologisation may refer to the adoption of terminology from psychology, parallel to the "terminological scientism" mentioned earlier. Gradually stronger versions of psychologisation would imply interpreting esoteric concepts and entities in light of psychological theories, or even to "interiorise" the ontology of for instance ritual magic. But there are still several different options. For instance, when "reducing" demons or angels to psychology it certainly makes a difference whether one does it from the standpoint of a Jungian theory of archetypes, or from a more materialistic perspective where the mind is identical with physical conditions of cerebral neurology.

Although I think that psychologisation is not really the main framework for Crowley's interpretation of magic, it is still relevant to look briefly at his relation to it. One of the interesting things to notice is the way Crowley's evaluation of psychological interpretations seems to be determined not primarily by esoteric conceptions, but by standards of what constitutes "the scientific". In addition, he seemed to favour the latter of the two psychological theories mentioned above. In this respect one should note Crowley's evaluation in the essay "The initiated Interpretation of Ceremonial Magic", published 1904. The point of the essay is that magical experience, and ultimately all sense experience, is reducible to cerebral neurology. This seems to be a clear example of the influence that the strict naturalistic British psychologist Henry Maudsley had on Crowley. Crowley mentions Maudsley with admiration several places in his autobiographical sketches, one time in the company with David Hume, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Henry Huxley, and John Tyndall; all of whom are mentioned as intellectual influences on Crowley.¹³

In 1904 Crowley by chance also met with Maudsley, and had the opportunity to discuss some of his ideas on mysticism with him. In Crowley's opinion, the meditative states of yoga relied on certain "physico- and chemico-physiological conditions", and he held that they could hypothetically be induced solely by pharmaceutical stimuli.¹⁴ According to Crowley himself, Maudsley had agreed. When he wrote an essay on the "Psychology of Hashish" a few years later, the emphasis was still clearly on the experimental and scientific method, which could chart out its effects on the brain and possibility of inducing spiritually profound states.¹⁵ Experiment and testability was paramount.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 685.

¹³ "Temple of Solomon the King", *Equinox*, vol. 1, 7(1912), 360.

¹⁴ Crowley, *Confessions*, 386.

¹⁵ Crowley, "The Psychology of Hashish", *Equinox* Vol 1, 2 (1910).

Attitudes to psychoanalysis

But even so, there are other instances where Crowley relates his own magical philosophy to the theories of *psychoanalysis*. In these cases, it is more a question of ontology than of method. For instance, in his perhaps most final exegesis of the law of Thelema, the “New Commentary” to *The Book of the Law* written mostly between 1919 and 1922, we find the following passage:

We have to thank Freud – and especially Jung – for stating this part of the Magical Doctrine so plainly, ... for their development of the connection of the Will ... with the True or Unconscious Will, and so for clarifying our doctrine of the “Silent Self” or “Holy Guardian Angel”. They [i.e. Freud and Jung] are of course totally ignorant of magical phenomena, and could hardly explain even such terms as “Augoaedes”; and they are seriously to blame for not stating more openly that this True Will is not to be daunted or suppressed; but within their limits they have done excellent work.¹⁶

Crowley seems to have found a relevant parallel to his doctrine of the True Will in psychoanalytic models of the unconscious. But still, there is clearly some ambiguity. Freud and Jung did not possess the key to higher truths, as it were; rather they had more or less accidentally stumbled upon some aspects which had been known to the magician for ages, and was fully understood and expressed only in Thelema.

In December 1916 an intriguing essay was published in *Vanity Fair* where Crowley compared Freud and Jung and made some further judgements about psychoanalysis.¹⁷ The rationale for the essay was the publication of Jung’s *Psychology of the Unconscious*, which is seen by Crowley as “an improvement upon psychoanalysis” – the title of the essay. The main improvement, in Crowley’s opinion, seems to have been Jung’s downplaying of the importance of the sexual instinct. Crowley expressed, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, that the centrality of sex in Freud’s theory was both “tedious and stupid”.¹⁸ Jung, as Crowley understood him, was more to his liking: “Instead of relating will to sex, he related sex to will.” This reversal of emphasis was for Crowley a confirmation of the basic tenets of Thelema. In addition he noted somewhat triumphantly: “Thus, all unconsciously, [Jung] has paved the way for a revival of the old magical idea of the will as the dynamic aspect of the self. ... So, once more, we see Science gracefully bowing her maiden brows before her old father, Magic”.¹⁹

But Jung deserved some criticism himself. Once again I would like to emphasise that the problems Crowley sees relate to the apparently *unscientific* nature of some of the theories. This concerns especially Jung’s studies in mythology. The symbolic readings of mythologies as representing expressions of “the unconscious longings of humanity” did not particularly impress Crowley, who wrote that Jung was still

obsessed by the method and also by the main ideas of Freud. Much of his analysis is startling, and at first sight ridiculous. Can we close our eyes to the perpetual contradictions in his alleged symbolism? Jung regards a serpent on a monument as desire, or the obstacle to desire, or the presence of desire, or the absence of desire, just as suits his purpose. There is no consistency in the argument ...²⁰

Again, this may readily be seen as a complaint about lacking scientific rigour.

Conclusion

¹⁶ Crowley, *The Law is for All*, 163.

¹⁷ Crowley, “An Improvement on Psychoanalysis: The Psychology of the Unconscious (for Dinner-Table Consumption)”.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

In concluding, I think we should note that Crowley's appeal to scientific methodology seems a surprisingly sincere one. Instead of eclectically adopting a scientising language, Crowley is able to refer to the great Victorian naturalists, such as Huxley, Spencer and Maudsley, and concede points from them. The methodological naturalism gleaned from these thinkers (especially Huxley, one suspects) became a lasting underlying framework for Crowley, and shows up again and again whenever the veracity of some claim, whether magical or otherwise, is being judged. With the adoption of this framework, I believe we see Crowley taking on a battle against both competing occultisms, such as Theosophy, spiritualism, and other Golden Dawn derivations, but also psychical research and Jungian psychology – intellectual trends that most occultists would defend simply for the possible legitimising effect it could lend to occult systems.