

Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013), 238 pp., \$99.95 (cloth), \$27.95 (paper).

A lot has changed since Marco Pasi wrote his monograph on Aleister Crowley in 1993. The so-called “wickedest man in the world” has ceased to be controversial subject of marginal scholarly value and is now considered essential for understanding the history of modern occultism and contemporary Paganism. This shift is seen in the works produced in the last decade or so. Gone are the days of speculative and sensational biographies which rehash the same key facts—or fictions—of Crowley’s life. Popular works such as Richard Kaczynski’s *Perdurabo*, now seek to provide factually thorough accounts of Crowley’s life. Meanwhile, new scholarly editions, such as the essays collected by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, probe key events and historical contexts to better understand this complex figure and his legacy.

We can no doubt add Pasi’s work, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, to the list of literature that seeks to normalize Crowley as an academic subject. An expanded and revised English edition of his 1993 monograph, this book seeks to engage with one particular aspect of Crowley’s life, that of politics. Through a careful presentation of personal correspondence, Crowley’s own writings, and a wealth of literary sources, Pasi reveals the Great Beast’s more mundane entanglements. What emerges is a complicated portrait of a spiritual seeker turned guru who influenced some of the most well-connected thinkers of his time.

Pasi first examines Crowley’s biographical details with a particular emphasis on his intellectual leanings and magical career. Two key experiences come to the forefront: his reception of the *Book of the Law* in 1904, and his crossing of the Abyss in the Algerian desert in 1909. Both these events liberated Crowley from his earlier spiritual training in the Golden Dawn and placed him at the head of a new religious system, that of Thelema. His further attainment of the Magus degree in 1916 serves as the demarcation point for two distinct phases in Crowley’s life, a romantic period, where Crowley is a mystical seeker, and a pragmatic period, which sees Crowley as a spiritual teacher fully identified with his religious message.

This transition from spiritual seeker to guru serves as a backdrop to Crowley's political involvements in later chapters. The romantic era is characterized by rebellion—against bourgeois values, British society, and his Puritan upbringing. Pasi does a wonderful job contextualizing Crowley's activities during this time (a fascination with Legitimism, identification with Irish nationalism, and involvement with the Golden Dawn) within the wider historical milieu of a post-Victorian England in crisis. As Crowley matures spiritually, his interest in politics acquires a purely pragmatic function. Later chapters illustrate his efforts to disseminate a new religion—efforts which put him in contact with important figures, aligned him with controversial movements, and made him a target for conspiracy theorists and authoritarian governments.

Throughout *Temptation*, the reader meets a cadre of well-connected media figures, political agitators and bonafide spies with whom Crowley cavorted during his pragmatic period. These “illuminated politicians,” such as J. F. C. Fuller, Thomas Driberg, and Gerald Hamilton, sought Crowley out as a spiritual guru, and Crowley in turn sought their connections to bring his new religion to the masses. Crowley's lobbying in this regard has led to much speculation about his relationship to totalitarian regimes (Fascism, Nazism, Communism). Crowley emerges, however, as an ideological chameleon who appealed indiscriminately to large-scale movements which could serve his missionary purposes.

Pasi devotes an entire chapter to investigating the nature of Crowley's relationship with Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa, another “illuminated” thinker whose brand of esotericism was tied to the political aspiration of a spiritually-renewed Portugal (elaborated in apocalyptic currents such as the myth of the “Fifth Empire”). In this relationship, politics takes a backseat to spiritual concerns. Correspondence between Crowley and Pessoa, further verified by Crowley's diary entries, suggest that the Pessoa was groomed to lead a Portuguese branch of the *Ordo Templi Orientis*. This is no doubt ground-breaking research into a little-studied aspect of a great modern thinker, and the material in this chapter also sheds light on Crowley's fake suicide stunt of 1930.

The final chapter looks at Crowley from the outside in. Here we meet a network of conspiracy theorists and Traditionalists who were interested in Crowley, not as a force of spiritual enlightenment, but as an agent of social destruction or counter-initiation. This discussion illustrates how claims about Crowley became entangled and

confused in the hands of these circles. Two appendices follow the book, the first of which is an essay by Hans Thomas Hakl which provides more detail on the relationship between Crowley and Traditionalist thinker Julius Evola, the second provides the correspondence between Pessoa and Crowley as well Crowley's file at the Italian police headquarters.

While Pasi carefully avoids overstepping the evidence in *Temptation*, he demurs on the more sensitive subjects. No doubt this is complicated by Crowley's own conflicting views, which makes exactitude impossible. Nevertheless, the reader may be frustrated by Pasi's distinction between Crowley the man (a figure devoid of political content) and Crowley the prophet (who fervently courts totalitarian regimes), especially given Crowley's complete identification with the *Book of the Law*. Similarly, much more can be said about Crowley's relationship with Pessoa. It would be interesting to hear Pasi's views on how Crowley, as a religious prophet, reconciled his beliefs with Pessoa's faith in a Portuguese messiah; or how Crowley sought to use Pessoa politically despite the latter's lack of engagement with political movements. One can only hope that these issues will be taken up in the future by Pasi as he continues to explore this most interesting figure. Minor criticisms aside, the book is filled with a remarkable amount shoe-leather research, especially as regards to the identity of "M" (responsible for the Italian police file on Crowley), the coverage of Crowley in conspiracist periodicals, and the depth of detail provided on Crowley's relationships, often from sources that have remained hitherto hidden.

Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics is certainly an important book for the field of Western Esotericism and those who study Crowley. It highlights the many ways his legacy can contribute to our understanding of the strange relationship between politics and occultism. Crowley may not have been tempted by politics. But the political movers and shakers of his milieu were certainly tempted by him.

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