Aleister Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis*

by J. F. Brown

In September, 1910, the following notice appeared in the English journal, *The Occult Review*:

THE RITES OF ELEUSIS

will be celebrated at Caxton Hall, Westminister, S.W., as follows:—
The Rite of Saturn.....9 p.m. Wednesday, October 19.
The Rite of Jupiter.....9 p.m. Wednesday, October 26.
The Rite of Mars.....9 p.m. Wednesday, November 2.
The Rite of Sol.....9 p.m. Wednesday, November 9.
The Rite of Venus.....9 p.m. Wednesday, November 16.
The Rite of Mercury.....9 p.m. Wednesday, November 23.
The Rite of Luna.....9 p.m. Wednesday, November 30.

Tickets will not be sold separately; the rent for the series is Five Guineas. Tickets are however transferable. The number of seats is strictly limited to one hundred. Early application is most necessary. Doors will be open at 8:30; they will be closed and locked at Nine o'clock precisely. The ceremonies occupy from 1½ to 2½ hours.

Note.

For the Rite of Saturn you are requested, if convenient, to wear black or very dark blue, for Jupiter violet, for Mars scarlet or russet brown, for Sol, orange or white, for Venus green or sky-blue, for Mercury shot silk and mixed colours, for Luna white, silver, or pale blue. It is not necessary to confine yourself to the colour mentioned, but it should form the keynote of the scheme.

The etiquette to be observed is that of the most solemn religious ceremonies. It should be particularly borne in mind that silence itself is used as a means of obtaining effects.

It had been placed there by Aleister Crowley, occult magician, poet, and author of the advertised ceremonies. It was located directly at the end of an article that rapturously praised a preview of the *Rites* held during the past summer. The article was signed "P."—certainly not the most inventive of Crowley's numerous pseudonyms, which included "Lord Boleskine," "Oliver Haddo," "Count Vladimir Svareff," and his favorite, "The Beast."

Crowley's predilection for fictive names was matched by his fascination with costume, whether it was the leopard-skin robe he wore as a Magician of the Golden Dawn, the black gown of the alchemist, the Headdress of Horus with the eye in the triangle, or, as "Baphomet," full Masonic regalia. The theatrical urge in Crowley becomes apparent from whatever direction he is viewed. His early interest in the occult and its secret systems of knowledge was quickly focused on ritual magic. His poetry was soon elaborated into dense mystery plays. He even dramatized the personality conflicts between himself and others—William Butler Yeats, for one—by engaging them in "magical combat."

The *Rites of Eleusis* occurred in Aleister Crowley's life at a point midway between a series of visions he had in North Africa in 1909, which revealed to him his true nature as a Magus, and his involvement with a secret society called the O.T.O. in 1912, from whom he learned the rudiments of the sex-magic that obsessed him for years. He was 35 years old at the time of the performances. The persecution by the press, which was to last until he died in 1947, had not yet begun. He saw himself as the prophet of a new religion—Crowleyanity—and the *Rites* were to be his first great evangelization.

The individual rites that make up the seven *Rites of Eleusis* can be viewed as acts or scenes in a single drama which, as it moves from one plane of consciousness to the next, presents the play's central idea in a manner appropriate to that plane. The main point of interest in Crowley's production was the technique he used to transport his audience to those planes and to induce in them—through a bizarre marriage of kabbalistic ritual and performing arts—specific ecstasies.

Preliminary Entertainments

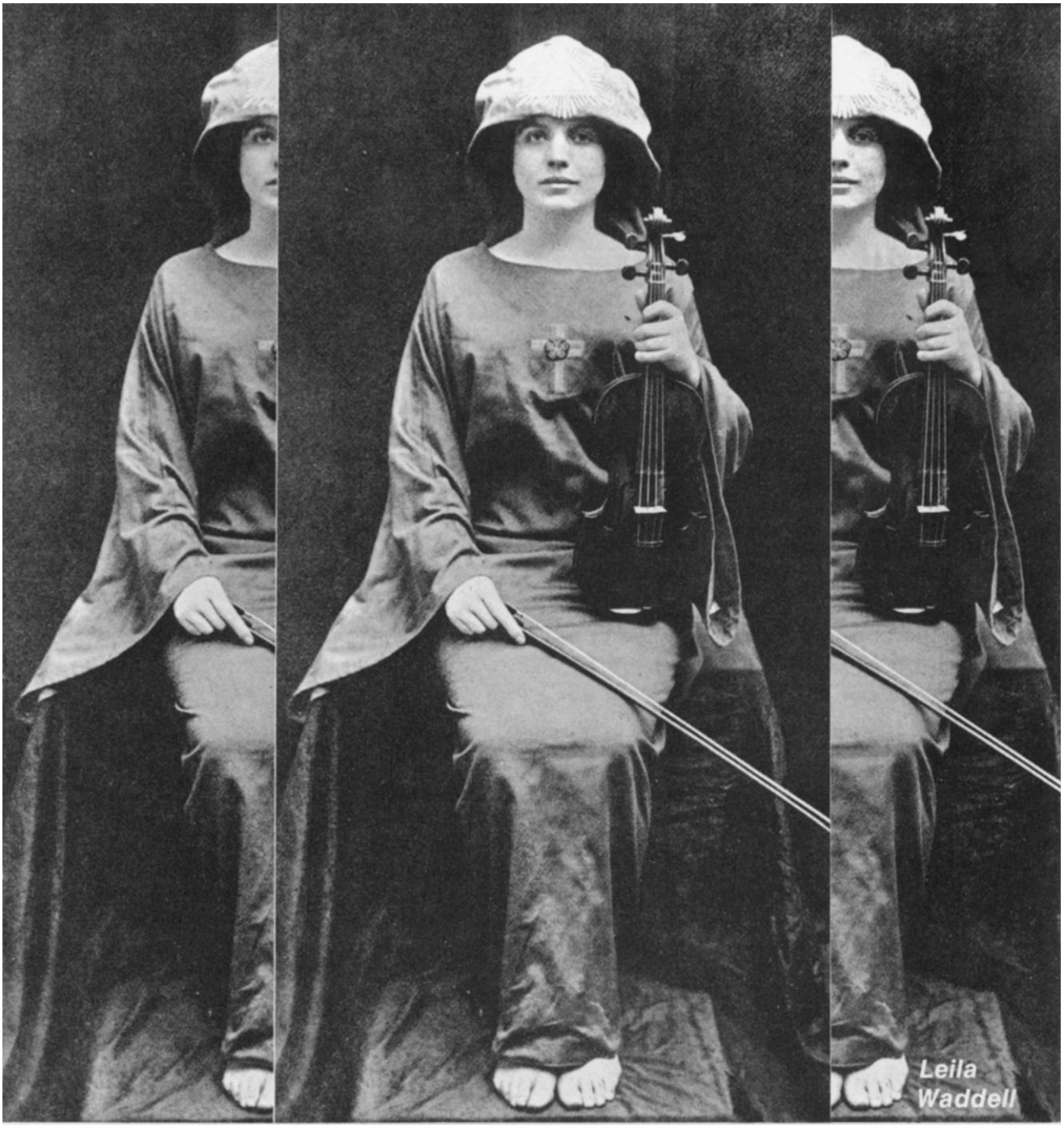
On the evening of May 9, 1910, a rite to evoke Bartzabel ("the spirit of Mars") was performed at the Dorset home of G. M. Marston, an officer in the British Navy and student of ritual magic whose special interest was the effects of the tom-tom on the psychology of the married Englishwoman. The guests, all of whom shared at least a vague curiosity concerning the workings of magic, were no doubt familiar with occult entertainments, particularly in the form of seances and fortune-telling, which had become a popular feature at the house parties of the English upper class. Among the guests was Aleister Crowley, accompanied by one of his mistresses, an Australian (half-Maori) violinist named Leila Waddell, and a young poet and disciple of Crowley's, Victor Neuburg, who a year before had accompanied his master on a vision quest through North Africa. Crowley had recently been experimenting with a new type of ritual that employed Waddell's violin-playing to "work up the magical enthusiasm" and which centered on Neuburg's power to "dance down" the gods. Asked by Marston to give a demonstration, Crowley outlined the magic Triangle and, reciting the appropriate kabbalistic phrases to Waddell's musical accompaniment, placed Neuburg within the Triangle "to serve as a material basis through which the spirit might manifest." Neuburg moved rhythmically through a series of symbolic postures associated with the god Mars and, in a short time, was declared by Crowley to be possessed. The guests were then invited to put questions to the god through the medium of Neuburg. According to Crowley, several of the oracles spoken in reply accurately predicted the Balkan War of 1912 and the World War of 1914-18. After the ceremony, Marston suggested to Crowley the theatrical possibilities of ritual magic so entertainingly performed. Crowley, who had written a number of mystery plays, none of which had ever been staged, was not difficult to persuade.

Shortly afterwards, the idea of the *Rites of Eleusis* began to take shape. In an explanatory article that Crowley was invited to write during the controversial performances, he recalled the event that inspired a major feature of their design.

> *I happened to have a few friends in my room in the evening, among them . . . Leila Waddell. It struck me that we might pass the time by a sort of artistic dialogue; I read a piece of poetry from one of the great classics, and she replied with a piece of music suggested by my reading. I retorted with another poem; and the evening developed into a regular controversy. The others were intensely interested in this strange conflict, and in the silence of the room spiritual enthusiasm took hold of us; so acutely that we were all intensely uplifted, to the point in some cases of actual ecstasy, an intoxication of the same kind as that experienced by an assistant of the celebration of the Mass or the performance of Parsifal, but stronger because of its naturalness and primitiveness.*
>
> ***The Bystander***
> November 23, 1910

It is probable that the "intoxication" felt by the group was as much the result of chemical as spiritual changes. At the time, Crowley and his associates made frequent use of anhalonium, a drug derived from the peyote plant. Crowley nevertheless felt that he had found an important esthetic form, one which combined his powers as poet and magus. "All Art is Magick, all Magick is Art" he later proclaimed, and the art in which that magic could best be worked was the theatre of dramatic ritual.

In August, Crowley, Waddell, Neuberg, and several friends performed a "ceremony to honor the moon" for an invited audience at the offices of *The Equinox* in London. The



purpose of this "Rite of Artemis" was to effect a "definite, prearranged emotion"—a specific ecstasy—in both participants and spectators. Raymond Radclyffe, a writer who attended the ceremony, described what he saw upon entering:

> *The room was dark; only a dull red light shone upon an altar. Various young men, picturesquely clad in robes of white, red, or black, stood at different points round the room. Some held swords. The incense made a haze, through which I saw a small white statue, illumined by a tiny lamp hung high on the cornice.*
>
> ***The Sketch***
> August 24, 1910

The audience was seated on floor cushions placed along the wall. Preliminary rituals were performed, after which Neuburg carried a "Cup of Libation" filled with a brownish liquid around the room, offering it to each of the spectators. Radclyffe described it as a "pleasant-smelling drink." Another member of the audience, a young poet named Ethel Archer, described it as "tasting like rotten apples," and both she and her husband were warned by Neuburg not to drink much of it because "It's got alkaloids of opium in it." The drink in fact was a mixture of fruit juices, alcohol, an infusion of mescal buttons, and either morphine or heroin. The cup was passed twice more while poems and proclamations were read and the "greater ritual of the Hexagram" was performed. Then, Radclyffe records,

> *the brothers led into the room a draped figure, masked in that curious blue tint we mentally associate with Hecate. The lady, for it was a lady, was enthroned on a seat high above Crowley himself. By this time the ceremony had grown weird and impressive, and its influence was increased when the poet recited in solemn and reverent voice Swinburne's glorious first chorus from "Atalanta," that begins, "When the hounds of spring." Again a Libation; again an invocation to Artemis. After further ceremonies, Frater Omnia Vincam (Victor Neuburg) was commanded to dance "the dance of Syrinx and Pan in honour of our lady Artemis." (He) astonished me by a graceful and beautiful dance, which he continued until he fell exhausted in the middle of the room, where, by the way, he lay until the end. Crowley then made supplication to the goddess in a beautiful and unpublished poem. A dead silence ensued. After a long pause, the figure enthroned (Leila Waddell) took a violin and played—played with passion and feeling, like a master. We were thrilled to our very bones. Once again the figure took the violin, and played an Abend Lied so beautifully, so gracefully, and with such intense feeling that in very deed most of us experienced that Ecstasy which Crowley so earnestly seeks.*

At the end of his review, Radclyffe disclaimed any knowledge of magic ritual and suggested that it was the "artistic" element that caused his ecstatic feelings. In trying to describe just what those feelings were, he quoted a passage from one of Crowley's poems: "So shalt thou conquer space, and lastly climb/ The walls of Time;/ And by the golden path the great have trod/ Reach up to God!" Fifty years later, Ethel Archer recalled having felt extraordinarily pepped-up and lively after the performance, a feeling which continued, she said, for at least a week following it.

Crowley was pleased with the reaction. He had found the basic formula that he would use for each of the seven rites: the use of kabbalistic names and traditional rituals he had learned as a member of the Golden Dawn, the recitation of selected passages of poetry to present the story and comment on the action, the playing of selected movements on the violin by Leila Waddell, Neuburg's "dancing down" the gods, creation of an "atmospheric" environment conducive to religious feeling, and the administration of drugs to the audience. He immediately began making the necessary arrangements for renting a room at Caxton Hall.

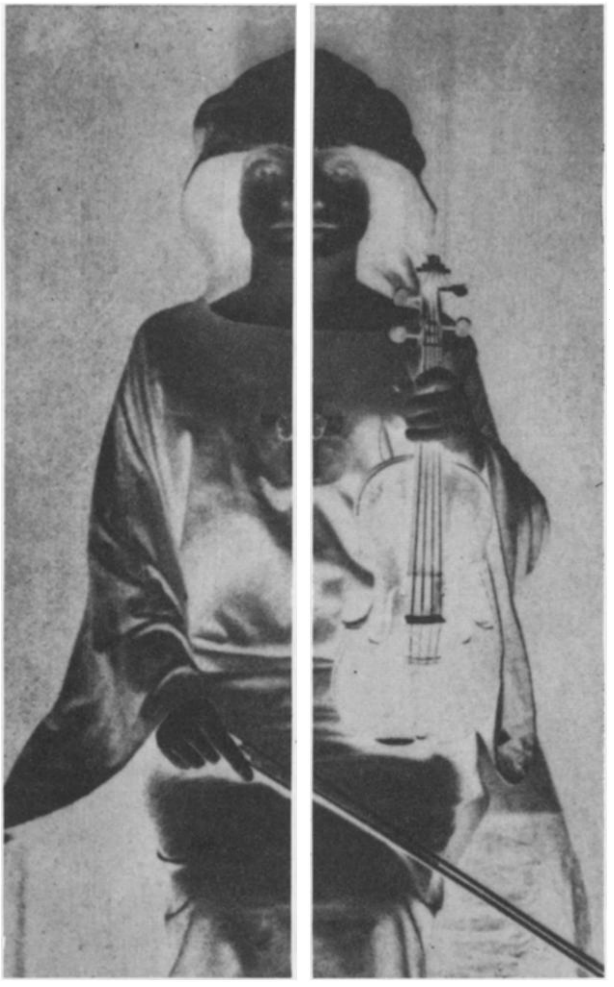
Dramatic Ritual

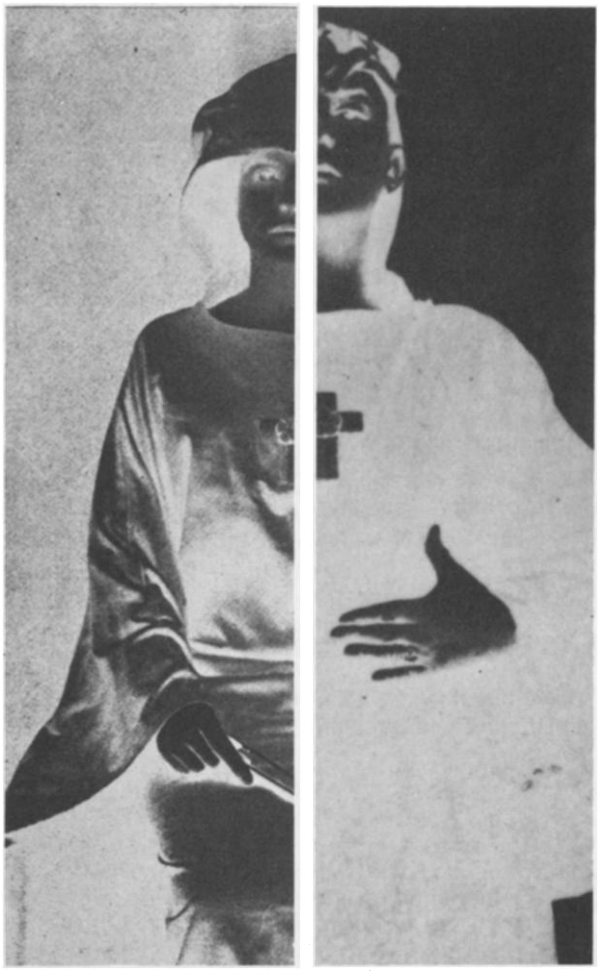
The title Crowley chose for his series of dramas refers to the Eleusinian Mysteries of pre-Hellenic Greece and to the Sacred Drama of Eleusis in which these cosmological and psychic mysteries received theatrical expression. The ancient drama is a blending

Rites of Eleusis: photos staged for publicity

of two myths—the story of Dionysus and the legend of the abduction of Persephone, daughter of Demeter, by Pluto. Crowley's *Rites* made occasional reference to these myths, but the action of the *Rites* has almost nothing in common with the story told by the Sacred Drama. Rather, Crowley put together bits and pieces from any number of knowledge systems and directed all of it toward a single end—the exaltation of anarchic lust, personified in the god Pan. Each *Rite* served to dramatize the single idea that the gods are dead, and therefore every person should do whatever pleases him. (The fact that he left Pan still living does not seem to have bothered Crowley.)

The plot of the *Rites of Eleusis* is difficult to summarize, not because of its narrative complexity but rather because of its abundance of contradictions and its purposeful obscurity. Briefly, however, it can be said to begin with Man attempting to solve the Riddle of Existence. Frustrated by his inability to find an answer, he turns to the gods. Saturn (extreme old age) answers with the single word "Despair." Jupiter (dignity and wisdom) turns out to be impotent. And so it goes through the next five, each proving to be wanting in one way or another. Finally at the end of the seventh rite, Pan ("the spirit of the Infinite All") appears and tears away the veil (of illusion) to reveal the hope of humanity, the Crowned Child of the Future (i.e., the man who needs no gods and whose only law is "Do what you will.").





The sequence of events within each rite varies somewhat, but generally begins with a so-called "Banishing Ritual" by the temple attendants, moves through passages of cryptic dialog regarding the omens of sacrifices ("The black lamb has no heart"), presents the discovery of a traitor, false priest, or demon within the temple and his ritual murder, enacts the evocation of the particular god, and ends with either a suicide or a transformation.

In his *Confessions,* Crowley admonishes himself for diminishing the importance of the dramatic elements. He says that, as it turned out, "the dialog and action were little more than a setting for the soloists," meaning himself, Neuburg, and Waddell. It seems probable that members of the audience knew little of what was going on (the room was almost always in near-total darkness) and, had they known, would not have understood it. In his masterwork, *Magick in Theory and Practise,* Crowley makes it a point to warn those who wish to engage in dramatic ritual to be sure that the participant-spectators "all be initiates of the same mysteries, bound by the same oaths, and filled with the same aspirations."

Through the use of dramatic ritual, Crowley felt he could restore to the drama "its historical importance as a means of arousing the highest religious enthusiasm." He was not alone in this desire. More than ten years before, in March of 1899, Crowley's first guru, MacGregor Mathers, had staged what he called a *Rite of Isis* at the Theâtre

Bodiniere in Paris. The stage was dominated by a huge colored plaster figure of the Egyptian goddess Isis. An altar with a Tibetan green stone lamp faced her. Mather, as Rameses, emerged from the shadows carrying a rattle and a spray of lotus. He proceeded to recite prayers from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead.* His wife, Moina, as the High Priestess Anari, then invoked the goddess in a passionate voice. Finally, a young Parisian woman danced "the dance of the four elements." The reviewers wrote that the audience brought flowers and grains of wheat, which they tossed onto the stage as offerings. The performance lasted two hours. One critic called it "artistic in the extreme."

In attempting to give his *Rites* a dramatic structure, Crowley the playwright came into conflict with Crowley the magician. His purpose, stated over and over again, was to produce religious ecstasies in the audience, to initiate them, as it were, into the mysteries of Crowleyanity. It is here that this model, the Sacred Drama of Eleusis, becomes important. Crowley felt his drama also must have a myth, to serve as the vehicle of initiation. He thought he could create one, perhaps comparable to that of Dionysus and the abduction of Persephone. What he came up with appeared as nothing so much as a group of secret society initiates dressed in magical robes knocking persistently on heaven's door and being told to go away.

Ceremonial Staging

In his explanatory article in *The Bystander,* Crowley recounted how he set about constructing the *Rites of Eleusis.*

> *Let us put ourselves in the position of the dramatist. Working on tradition . . . we find Saturn as a black, melancholy God, the devourer of his children. Ideas of Night, Death, Black hellebore, Lead, Cypress, Tombs, Deadly Nightshade. All these things have a necessary connection with Saturn. . . . The first condition of this rite is, then, to make the temple a kind of symbolic representation of the sphere of Saturn. So the representative of Saturn wears the Black Robe. The time is declared to be midnight. If the brethren are fed, it is "on the corpses of their children". . . . If they drink, it is "Poppyheads infused with blood"—symbols of sleep and death. . . . It is then the primitive darkness of humanity that is represented in this ritual.*

One of Crowley's main reasons for choosing the deities associated with the days of the week for his drama was that the kabbalistic correspondences of color, form, idea, aroma, etc., for them were already so well worked out. It is this system of correspondences—set forth in the esoteric Hebraic tradition of secret knowledge and used in the rituals of occult societies such as the Golden Dawn—that determined such features of the drama's staging as the colors of costumes and lights, the props employed, the perfumes used, the sacred names intoned, and the placement of the performers in the acting space.

In a number of ways, Crowley's ceremonial stage is reminiscent of the performances of Symbolist works at the Théâtre d'Art in Paris twenty years earlier [T71]. Crowley was evidently aware of the Symbolist style of staging. He once remarked, regarding the production of the *Rite of Saturn:* "Nothing of Maeterlinck's ever produced so overpowering an oppression as this invocation of the dark spirit of Time." The kabbalistic correspondences are based on a numerical system of relationships that—like Symbolist poetics—propose a series of metaphysical links between various aspects of human life and universal principles. Although the further correspondence suggested by Symbolist poetics—that between the percepts of different senses—is not stated as

such in the kabbalistic system, it is implied as a concomitant phenomenon of rising on the planes of consciousness. Whether Crowley sought to induce synesthesia in his audience is impossible to say. In his *Confessions,* however, he recorded numerous occasions on which he himself experienced it.

Other elements in the productions derived from the tradition of ceremonial magic—and also utilized in Symbolist staging—were the use of successive layers of veils between the action and the audience, and the semiobscurity—sometimes total darkness—within which the drama was performed. Both of these elements were also used to accentuate action, the veils being lifted or ripped and the room being flooded with light at significant points in the ritual.

System of Correspondences Used in *Rites of Eleusis*

RITE	NATURE OF ECSTASY	COLOR	SYMBOL (MAGICAL PROP)	FOCUS OF ENERGY	PLANT/ DRUG	PERFUME
Saturn	Austere	Black	Cup	Face (right side)	Cypress/ Opium (heroin)	Civet
Jupiter	Obedient	Blue (Violet)	Wand	Arm (left)	Olive/Lotus Lotus (a narcotic)	Cedar Mars
Mars	Conquering	Red (Scarlet)	Sword/ Spear	Arm (right)	Oak/ Nux Vomica (strychnine)	Tobacco
Sol	Devotional	Whitegold (Leopard skin)	Rosy Cross	Breast	Acacia/Vine	Olibanum (alcohol)
Venus	Spontaneous (Loving)	Green	Lamp + Girdle	Hips	Rose	Rose
Mercury	Truth-seeking	Iridescent violet (mixed colors)	Names + Versicles +	Loins/Legs Apron	Moly (mythical Anhaltonium (peyote)	Storax (a balsam) magic plant)/
Luna	Freedom (Sexual Release)	Silver	Perfumes	Reproductive organs	Mandrake as drug to induce conception)/ Yohimbine (an alkaloid aphrodisiac)	Jasmine/ Ginseng

One of Crowley's intentions in the *Rites* was to dramatize the forces represented in the two-dimensional diagrams and magical designs of occult systems by presenting them in three-dimensional space. For example, in the *Rite of Saturn* the starting positions of the principal characters are given as "Chokmah, Binah, Chesed, and Geburah." These are four of the ten spheres, or "sephiroth," that comprise the kabbalistic Tree of Life. The spheres—which can be seen as different stages of manifestation of the "Infinite Light"—are connected by paths. These paths, in turn, represent the states of consciousness by which the soul is made aware of the "Infinite All." The performers in Crowley's drama were therefore set in a type of spiritual force-field (actually more elaborate and complex than described here) and each of their movements through space was, theoretically, a change in their subjective consciousness.

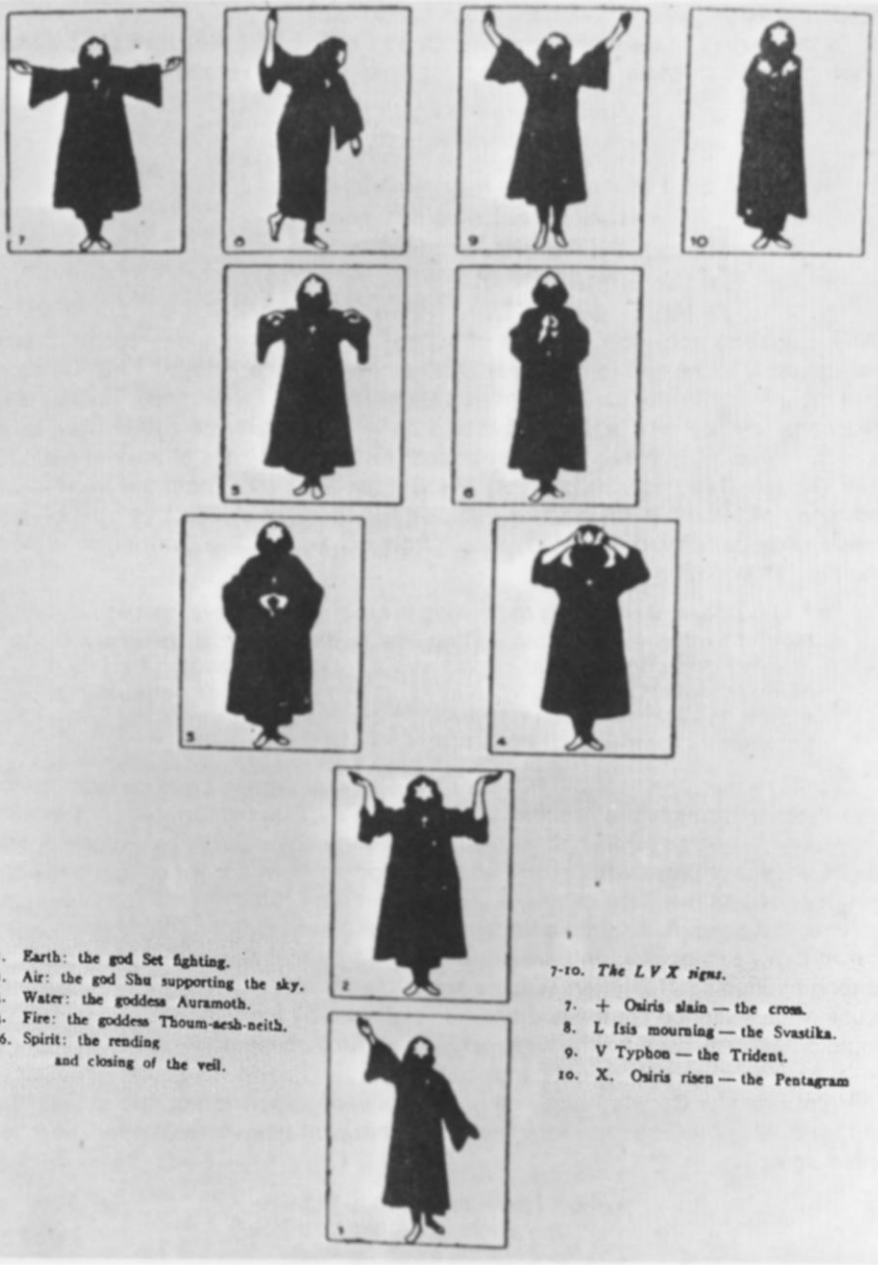
Each *Rite* had its associated design. For *Jupiter,* the temple represented the Wheel of Fortune of the tarot. For *Mars* and *Mercury,* it represented an astrological chart. In the *Rite of Luna,* it was the Magic Triangle; in *Sol,* The Rosy Cross; and in *Venus,* the temple was converted into a "tableau vivant" based on Botticelli's famous painting of the goddess. It is somewhat difficult to understand—particularly in regard to the rites of *Sol* and *Venus*—how Crowley managed consistently to dramatize the symbolic energies of these diagrams and images while working out the stories of each drama. Judging from his own remarks, he rarely succeeded. The requirements of ceremonial magic conflicted with the demands of dramatic development. Only in the actual rituals he had learned from the Golden Dawn and transferred intact into his drama was he able to "energize" the magical space. Once these were accomplished and the narrative action begun, the troupe performed their parts more with the frenzy of amateur actors, which they were, than with the precision of magical adepts, which they aspired to be. It is certain that during the rehearsals for the *Rites,* Crowley attempted to educate his actors in the magical postures and gestures. According to the theory of ceremonial magic, the body assumes a certain position or forms a particular configuration in order to become a focus of psychic energy, a conductor of magical power. The extent to which Crowley's troupe actually succeeded in performing these is unknown. This remark by Crowley may serve as an indication: "The histrionic incompetence of the officers was mercifully concealed from [the audience] by the gloom."

It is evident that many of these elements of Crowley's staging of his *Rites* were either poorly realized or lost on an audience incapable of interpreting obscure symbolism—probably both. As it was, the three most significant elements of the productions to emerge were Crowley's recitations of poetry, Neuburg's dancing, and Waddell's violin playing.

Hypnotic Poetry

In 1899 Crowley, then 24 years old, published at his own expense his play *Jephthah* to which was appended a number of lyrics entitled "Mysteries, Lyrical and Dramatic." The entire volume begins with a passionate, almost worshipful, dedication to the poet Swinburne, and the poems are, in fact, obvious imitations of that poet's style. Crowley showed the page proofs one evening to W. B. Yeats who, Crowley tells us, after glancing through them "forced himself to utter a few polite conventionalities." Crowley recognized the Irish poet's response as an attempt to conceal the bitter jealousy he felt for Crowley's superior poetic talent.

Crowley used a number of Swinburne's poems in the *Rites of Eleusis.* It is significant that the ones he chose ("Atalanta," "Ilicit," "The Garden of Proserpine") are among the best illustrations of Swinburne's belief in the state of trance as a special poetic



1. Earth: the god Set fighting.
2. Air: the god Shu supporting the sky.
3. Water: the goddess Auramoth.
4. Fire: the goddess Thoum-aesh-neith.
5-6. Spirit: the rending and closing of the veil.

7-10. *The L V X signs.*

7. + Osiris slain — the cross.
8. L Isis mourning — the Svastika.
9. V Typhon — the Trident.
10. X. Osiris risen — the Pentagram

concept and in the power of verse to induce in the reader a visionary state that opens the mind to the realms of symbolist mystery. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through hypnotic rhythms, as in the opening lines of "The Garden of Proserpine:"

Here, where the world is quiet;
Here, where all trouble seems
Dead winds' and spent waves' riot
In doubtful dreams of dreams;
I watch the green field growing
For reaping folk and sowing,
For harvest-time and mowing,
A sleepy world of streams.

Crowley hoped to apply the methods of Swinburne's sleep-trance poetics to the traditional ritualistic oaths and formulaic speeches of ceremonial magic. "There is no more potent means than Art of calling forth true Gods to visible appearance," he wrote in his instructional manual of *Magick.* But it was not a particularly new idea. Twelve years before the *Rites,* W. B. Yeats had "poeticized" the sacred rituals of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn for its founder, MacGregor Mathers. Yeats' awareness of the importance of inductive rhythms as vehicles for complex systems of poetic—and by extension, kabbalistic—relations is evident from his essay, "The Symbolism of Poetry," written in 1903. In it he observes:

> *The purpose of rhythm is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.*

Crowley's own poetry in the *Rites* is an obvious attempt to create a hypnoidal state in the listener through the techniques identified by Edward Snyder in his study of "spellweaving" poems published in 1930. Among the characteristics of such poems he lists: an unusually perfect pattern of sound; freedom from abrupt changes in content; vagueness of imagery; use of frequent repetition; and the presentation of suggestive problems that have no solution and easily fatigue the mind. All of these characteristics occur in Crowley's poetry, and are supplemented by the insertion of magical phrases and lengthy litanies. It is interesting to note that Crowley placed great importance on "focusing the attention" of the audience on the lyrics by throwing the room into almost complete darkness save for the flickering of a flame. Focusing the attention is the initial step of any technique of hypnotic induction.

Unfortunately, Crowley had neither the poetic discipline nor the sensibilities of Swinburne. His poetry seems more capable of inducing sleep than trance. The following is a fair sample:

Weave the human dance together
With the lives of rocks and trees!
Let the blue delicious weather
Bid all spirits in one tether,
Overwhelming ecstasies!

At least one critic found the poetry effective. Austin Harrison, editor of *The English Review,* described Crowley as the greatest metrical poet since Swinburne. If, indeed, altered states of consciousness cause a shift in esthetic perception, and such a shift occurred in the listener during the *Rites,* perhaps Crowley's poetry can be fairly evaluated only under such circumstances. It would seem, however, that the reviewer from

The Looking Glass was, for one, apparently immune to the hypnotic effects. He called Crowley's poetry "gibberish."

Trance Dance

The following lines by Ethel Archer appear in a poem that she wrote and dedicated to Victor Neuburg after seeing him perform in the *Rites of Eleusis:*

> *What shadow stirs the sentient air?*
> *Like some dim whirling flame-thrower from the loom*
> *Of darkness; swifter circling mid the gloom*
> *Of incense laden shadows to the air*
> *Of softly chanted mantras; till the prayer*
> *So oft repeated fills the sombre room*
> *With magic. . . .*

Neuburg's dancing was an important feature in each of the *Rites.* Whether he danced to Waddell's violin, to the beat of the tom-tom, to the chanting and feet-stomping of the Officers, or—on one occasion, as Vulcan in the *Rite of Mars*—to "anvil music," his magical purpose was to "make manifest" the presence of the pure forces being invoked. In other words, he was to enter a state of possession trance.

Neuburg's ability to alter his consciousness and produce eidetic imagery is evident from the journals he kept in 1909 when he was undergoing a crash course in magic at Crowley's country estate. A characteristic entry, referring to the occult activity known as astral projection, reads: "Early I met my Angel. I slew him. I then rose through many planes; eventually I was detained by my Mother, a huge brown woman, my Father, a little green man, a voluptuous woman, and an hermaphrodite. They sought one by one to detain me. I passed them all."

Later in the same year, on the vision-quest with Crowley through North Africa, Neuburg demonstrated his ability to function physically in trance states and to take on the characteristic gestures and postures of possessing demons. It is also evident from the records of that journey that he was highly susceptible to suggestions from Crowley, and that his trances were the result of hypnotic induction. Jean Overton Fuller, Neuburg's biographer, stated that years after the *Rites of Eleusis* were performed, Neuburg told a friend that Crowley failed to speak the ritual words that would have released him from the possession before the end of the *Rite of Luna.* He "dismissed" the deity himself as best he could but said that for years afterwards he seemed to suffer from a greater than usual possession by the moon.

Fuller also recorded in her book a conversation she had with Ethel Archer in 1961 concerning the type of dancing done by Neuburg in the *Rites.*

> *"Where had he learned to dance?" I asked.*
> *"I don't know. It was just something he made up."*
> *"What sort of dancing was it?"*
> *She raised her arms above her head, as though trying to recapture a gesture he had made and said, "He kept turning round and round."*

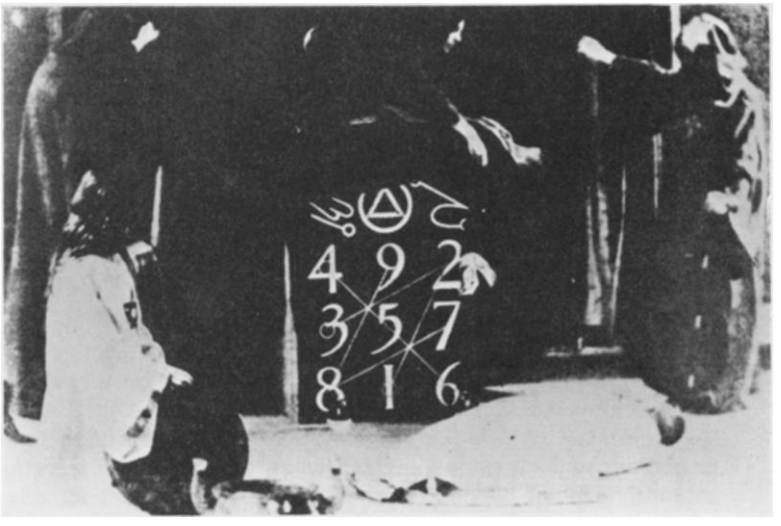
While in North Africa, both Neuburg and Crowley had seen dervish dancing and were impressed by the states of ecstasy the participants seemed to reach. That Neuburg's dances were not simply an imitation of the actions but were, in fact, a trance activity is indicated by the fact that his dances often ended in a state of unconsciousness. Regarding this, Crowley later wrote: "Sometimes he failed to lose himself, in which case, of course, nothing happened; but when he succeeded the effect was superb. It was astounding to see his body suddenly collapse and shoot across the polished floor like a

curling-stone." One further aspect of Neuburg's dancing should be mentioned. Neuburg had a curvature of the spine which set his shoulders at a slant. Furthermore, he walked with an uneven gait and was said—perhaps because of this—to be particularly clumsy. Yet, when he danced in the *Rites,* no mention is made of any manifestation of these physical defects by spectators. Rather, he is recorded as having been extraordinarily graceful.

Several years after the *Rites of Eleusis,* Crowley and Neuburg engaged in a homosexual-magical relationship known ever since by occultists as "The Paris Working." It constituted a type of Western Tantrism, in which certain otherwise unavailable powers are released through the sexual act. It ended their association, which a year or two before this had begun to disintegrate. One incident that led to this break—the death of a dancer named Joan Hayes—is worth noting. She had appeared in the *Rites of Eleusis* under her stage name "Ilone de Forest" after having answered an advertisement in the magazine *Stage.* The author Rebecca West, who had attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art with her, described her as having "a beautiful face . . . oval with beautifully defined eyebrows; her hair was very black and her skin white. . . . she had the body of a child of twelve." She played a number of roles in the *Rites,* dancing in one as Luna, the moon-goddess. Two years after her performances, she became Victor Neuburg's mistress. Less than two months later, she committed suicide. Crowley, who disliked her, told Neuburg he had killed her through black magic. That Neuburg believed him is indicative both of Neuburg's absolute belief in the power of magic and the influence Crowley had over him.

Strangely enough, it is from Crowley—who in later years was to refer to Neuburg as a "deformed and filthy abortion without moral character"—that Neuburg received his highest praise for his performance in the *Rites.* Comparing the contributions of the three principals—himself, Waddell, and Neuburg—Crowley wrote: "I sometimes suspect he was the best of the three. He possessed extraordinary powers. He gave the impression that he did not touch the ground at all. . . . I feel quite sure in my own mind that he was generating energies of a very curious kind."

Photos taken surreptitiously during performance: Rite of Saturn



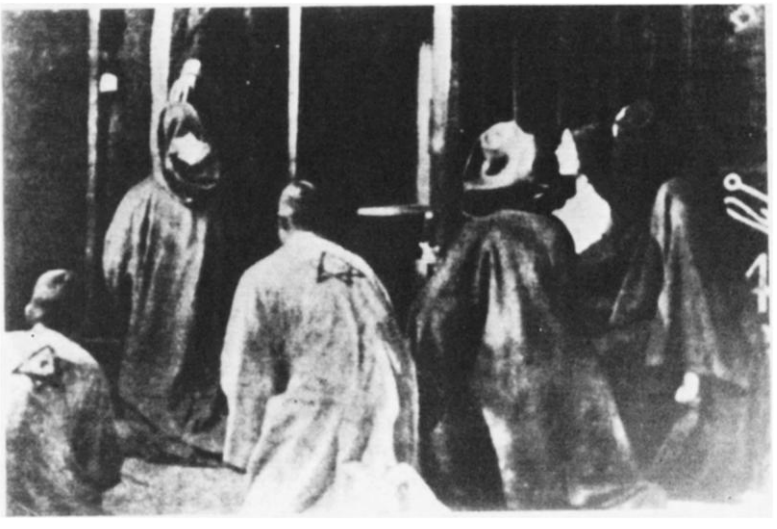
Inductive Music

In the summer of 1910, during the rehearsals for the *Rites,* Crowley wrote a story for Leila Waddell called "The Violinist," in which a young woman by means of her music invokes a demon whose mistress she becomes. In the seven *Rites,* invocation of supernaturals turned out to be just one of the functions her music was called upon to perform. Crowley saw her producing in the audience "the exhilaration induced by music" and, through a careful selection of movements, guiding them to the specific ecstasy of each *Rite.* Her dramatic function was to act as the representative of one goddess or another whose influence was "invoked into her" by the lyrics. She, in turn, was to reply by "expressing the divine nature through her art."

Almost all the pieces selected and used in the *Rites*—such as Wieniakswki's *Legende* and Vieuxtemps' *Ballade et polonaise*—could be found in the repertoire of every violin student of the day. As no system of correspondences had been worked out in the musical sphere, Waddell and Crowley chose "appropriate" pieces from her repertoire. For the *Rites of Saturn,* for example, whose associated ecstasy was described as "austere and melancholic," she performed, among other pieces, a Bach *Aria* (to which Swinburne's *Ilicet* was recited), a Schumann *Abendlied,* or evening song, (described in the text as a "petition"), a Hauser *Wiegenlied,* or lullaby (called "a Paeon of despair"), and a funeral march of her own composition (called "the final hopeless dirge"). Waddell, in fact, composed several of the pieces used in the *Rites.* She called one of her compositions a *Samadhilied,* creating a new musical term by combining the Sanskrit word for "ecstasy" and the German word for "song." It is described in the text as "exalted . . . passionless because beyond passion."

The music of the violin also served as a kind of interpretive device for the ineffable within various characters. In the *Rite of Jupiter,* for example, the music "declares" the will, mind, and heart of a Petitioner.

Neuburg frequently danced to the violin, but he apparently preferred the rhythmic insistence of the tom-tom. It has already been mentioned that Crowley's friend, Com-



Controversial photo of Leila Waddell kneeling on Crowley's chest.

mander Marston, had a somewhat eccentric interest in that instrument, which he believed had the power—when played correctly—to force certain primitive urges to rise up uncontrollably. He claimed to have conducted "classical and conclusive" experiments in this regard. His subjects were married Englishwomen, who supposedly responded to the tom-tom's beat with what was at first a vague unrest, then a sexual

uneasiness, and finally a surrender to "shameless masturbation and indecent advances." Although Crowley made extensive use of the tom-tom to induce sexual excitement during his rites of sex-magic a few years later, its use in the *Rites of Eleusis* was confined to use in solo and group dances ("Aquarius and all present dance wildly for joy to the sound of the tom-tom") and as a device used to syncopate sounds made by the performers ("The Leader of the Chorus beats the tom-tom, and the other brethren clap and stamp their feet").

Leila Waddell's violin-playing seems to have been the most favorably received aspect of the *Rites.* Even the extremely hostile critic from *The Looking Glass* said she played "not unskillfully." She received a number of theatre engagements as a result of her performance but proved to be a somewhat average musician outside the dimly lit room at Caxton Hall. Crowley wrote a play for her called *Snowstorm,* in which her part

was written as a series of violin solos because "she was incapable of speaking on the stage." It was never produced. In 1913 she went with Crowley to Moscow as one of his "Ragged Rag-Time Girls," a fiddle group composed largely of chorus girls. A few years later, Crowley suggested to her that she combine fiddling and dancing. He was giving her the opportunity, he said, to create "a new art form." Of the woman who had invoked Artemis with her music and induced ecstasies in audiences for seven consecutive weeks, he wrote, "She was incapable of understanding my idea."

Criticism

Although both *The Bystander* and *The Sketch,* two London illustrated weeklies, published photographs of the *Rites* and gave capsule descriptions of them, critical reviews appeared only in two scandal sheets, *John Bull* and *The Looking Glass.* The reviews in both papers are, in fact, personal attacks on Crowley and his beliefs thinly disguised as theatrical criticism. For example, *The Looking Glass* referred to Crowley's occult society, the *A A,* which had sponsored the performances, as "a blasphemous sect whose proceedings conceivably lend themselves to immorality of the most revolting character." The general bent of *The Looking Glass* reviews can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *After depositing our hat and coat with an attendant we were conducted by our guide to a door, at which stood a rather dirty looking person attired in a sort of imitation Eastern robe, with a drawn sword in his hand, who, after inspecting our cards, admitted us to a dimly lighted room heavy with incense. Across this room low stools were placed in rows, and when we arrived a good many of these were already occupied by various men and women, for the most part in evening dress. . . .*
>
> *When we had all but admitted the doors were shut, and the light, which had always been exceedingly dim, was completely extinguished except for a slight flicker on the 'altar'. Then after a while more ghostly figures appeared on the stage, and a person in a red hood, supported on each side by a blue-chinned gentleman in a sort of Turkish bath costume, commenced to read some gibberish to which the attendants made response at intervals. . . .*
>
> *More Turkish bath attendants then appeared, and executed a kind of Morris dance around the stage. The gentleman in the red cloak, supported by brothers Aquarius and Capricornus—the aforesaid blue-chinned gentleman—made fervent appeals to the Mother of Heaven to hear them, and after a little while a not unprepossessing lady appeared, informed them that she was the Mother of Heaven, and asked if she could do anything for them. . . .*

The reviews suggested that sexual activities were taking place in the darkness, and, as "proof" of this, a photograph of Lelia Waddell kneeling on Crowley's chest during one of the *Rites* was published.

The theme of sexual misconduct was picked up by the reviewer from *John Bull,* who claimed that when "the misty, smoky blue light" was extinguished, he was "embraced" by one of the performers. "All of a sudden," he wrote, "an arm was placed around my neck, and a moustache pressed to my cheek—someone had kissed me!" He characterized the whole performance as an unholy mixture of "barbaric dances, sensational interludes of melodrama, blasphemy, and erotic suggestion. . . ."

One of the reviews in *The Looking Glass* contained an implication that a friend of Crowley's named G. C. Jones—who was married and had seven children—had engaged in homosexual acts with Crowley and Allen Bennett, a former member of the Golden Dawn who had since gone to Burma to become a Buddhist monk. Jones sued for libel, and the trial turned into a public examination of Crowley's morals, despite the fact that he was not formally involved in the case and was never called as a witness. Crowley had made a great number of enemies in his life, and each in turn came to testify concerning his depravity. His morals were found wanting, and Jones lost the case.

As a result of the notoriety he received during the trial, Crowley was contacted by numerous occult societies from all over Europe. One of those societies was the O.T.O. (Order of Oriental Templars). Through them Crowley would begin his experiments with sexual magic and the "sacrament of semen," which would make him, in the eyes of the public, more than worthy of the vilifications falsely applied to him during the trial. Up until his death in 1947, and for some time afterwards, he would be known in the popular press as "the wickedest man in the world."

Thirty years after the *Rites,* Crowley gave his own evaluation of the productions. In retrospect, he found only the first two, the *Rites of Saturn* and *Jupiter,* at all successful—particularly *Saturn,* which he called "a stupendous idea, carried out in what was a simple, dignified, sublime, and impressive manner." He blamed the failure of the later rites on a number of factors: too hasty preparation of the texts, not enough rehearsal, and his misguided belief that "the public were gifted with reverence, intelligence, imagination, and [the ability to interpret] the most obscure symbolism." Most of all, however, Crowley blamed the fact that at the time of the productions he had "no available spare money, no knowledge of the tricks of stagecraft, no means of supplying the proper atmosphere." His final words on the *Rites of Eleusis,* set down in his *Confessions* (subtitled "An Autohagiography," meaning self-told life of a saint), repeat a classic lament of the theatrical director, and hint at Crowley's great ambition to become the Master Poet of the occult. He wrote: "If I had had the most ordinary common sense, I should have got a proper impresario to have it presented in proper surroundings by officers trained in the necessary techniques. Had I done so, I might have made an epoch in the drama. . . ."

Last Rites

Shortly after the *Rites of Eleusis,* lurid tales of Crowley's debaucheries—public and private—became a regularly featured popular entertainment in print. One such tale, written by a journalist named Harry Kemp, appeared in *The New York World Magazine* in August, 1914, two months before Crowley's arrival in America on the Lusitania. In an article on devil-worship in London, Kemp described an occult performance he had attended at Crowley's studio on Fulham Road. The innermost room of the studio had been transformed—by means of a tall canopy, a black altar-pedestal, a golden serpent, and kabbalistic markings on the floor—into a satanic chapel for the celebration of the black mass. The performance began with "a weird, Chinese-like air" played on an oriental stringed instrument by a musician obscured by a black curtain.

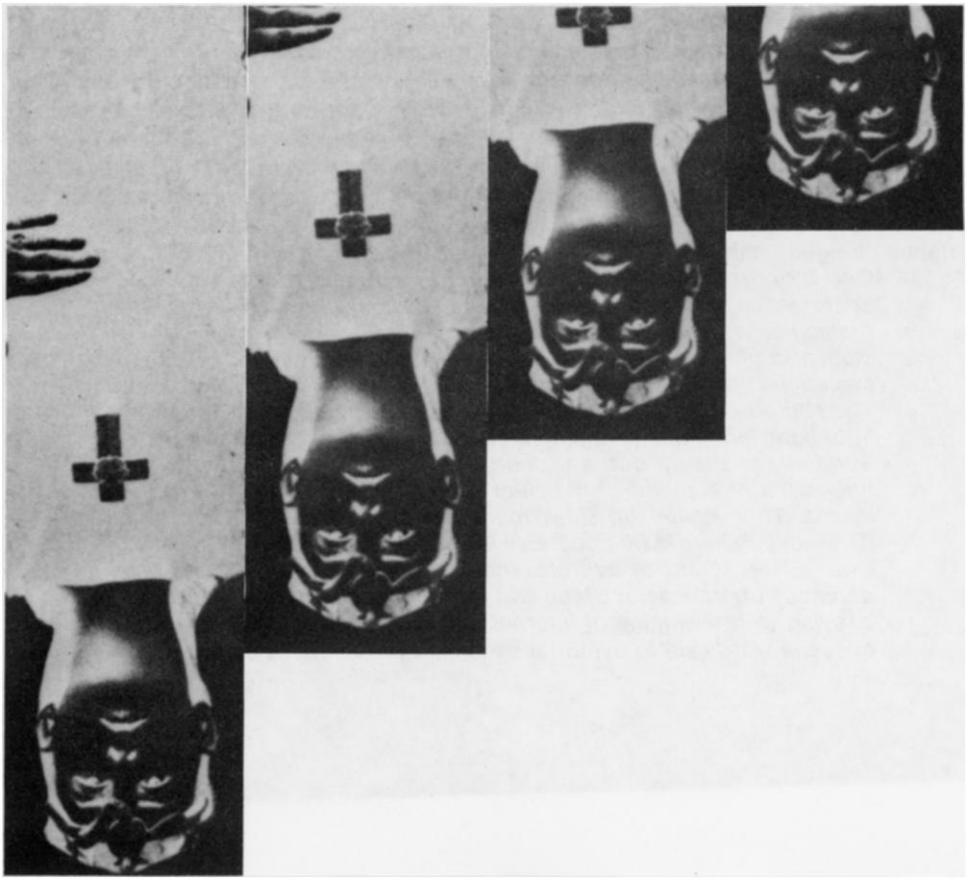
> *One by one the worshippers entered. They were mostly women of aristocratic type. Their delicate fingers adorned with costly rings, their rustling silks, the indefinable elegance of their carriage attested their station in life. . . . Everybody wore a little black domino which concealed the upper part of the face, making identification impossible. . . . The complexions of the women seemed as white as wax. There was a fitful light furnished by a single candlestick having seven branches. Suddenly this went out, and the place was filled with subterranean noises like the sound of a violent wind moving among innumerable leaves. Then came the slow, monotonous chant of the high priest [Crowley]: "There is no good. Evil is good. Blessed be the Principle of Evil. . . ." A sound of evil bleating filled the pauses of these blasphemous utterances. . . . Men and women danced about, leaping and swaying to the whining of infernal and discordant music. They sang obscene words set to hymn tunes and gibbered unintelligible jargon.*

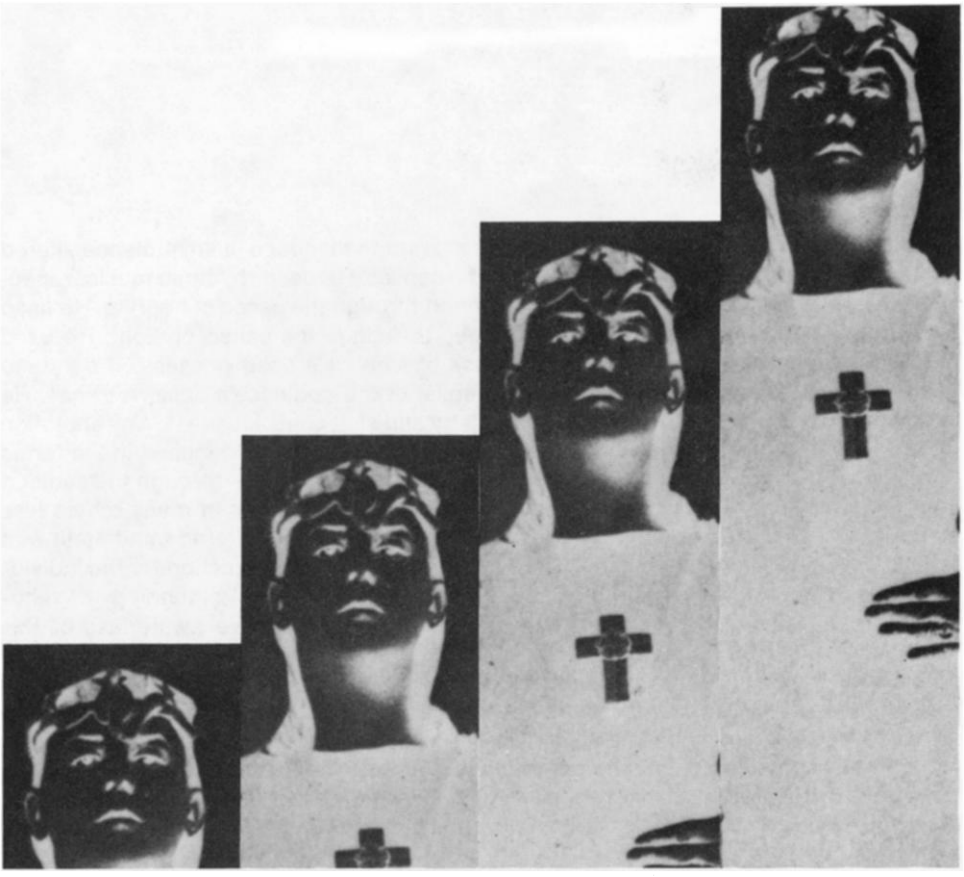
> *Women tore their bodices; some partially disrobed. One fair worshipper, seizing upon the high priest's dagger, wounded herself in the breasts. At this all seemed to go madder than ever. . . .*

Four months after this description appeared, *World Magazine* published an interview with Crowley. Asked about the accuracy of Kemp's account of the events at the Fulham Road studio, Crowley commented: "Kemp honestly believes he was present at the things he describes, but he wasn't. I merely made him dream a scene of black magic, and he thought it was actually happening and that I was participating. I don't practice black magic."

No doubt Kemp's description of the performance was at least somewhat influenced by his own imagination and by the need to titillate his audience. Nevertheless, it is true that Crowley, greatly in need of money at the time, was providing occult entertainments for the upper classes at high prices and permitting society women to enact dark fantasies in a theatre of black magic. During this time, Crowley apparently offered a number of different performances in repertory at the studio, trying to appeal to a variety of occult tastes. The ceremony described in Eliot O'Donnell's *Rooms of Mystery,* published in 1931, was less ritualistic than the orgiastic event of Kemp's account and closer to the music-hall acts of stage magicians and exotic performers. The studio was outfitted with chairs arranged in a semicircle, behind which were busts representing Pan, Lucifer, and other supernaturals of ill-repute. At the center of the room was an altar, and behind it were three high wooden boxes. Out of these boxes emerged, one after another, women in filmy robes playing tunes on harps, each returning to her respective box at the conclusion of her act.

> *Then, when the room was almost ominously dark, Mr. Aleister Crowley strode out from behind a curtain, and advancing in approved theatrical fashion to the altar, invoked certain gods of a none-too-respectable order. Having done this, he raised his voice to a shrill scream, exclaiming: "Now I will cut my chest."*





Almost simultaneously with this announcement, something bright flashed through the air and a short, sharp, crinkly sound was heard, a sound which was followed immediately by horrified murmurs from most ot the ladies present, and by a whisper from one of my friends, consisting if I heard aright, of some vague allusion to isinglass, parchment, and potato chips.

After a dramatic pause . . . Mr. Crowley said, "I will now dip a burning wafer in my blood." He passed something, I could not see what, through the flame of a candle, and then held it close to his bare chest, thereby eliciting more cries of horror from the ladies.

It is interesting to compare Crowley's performance here with an ecstatic self-infliction rite he had witnessed years before in Morocco. In his *Confessions,* Crowley described a scene of dancing and yelling, during which men armed with small axes designed specifically for the ceremony "cut themselves on the head until the blood was streaming from their scalps on every side. They were, of course, quite unconscious of any pain, and those of them who were actually blinded by the blood were yet able to see." Observing this event, Crowley said he felt himself "vibrating with the energy of the universe."

In the rites on Fulham Road, Crowley had substituted stage tricks for the legitimate physical phenomena of trance activity as demonstrated in his *Rites of Eleusis* by Victor Neuburg's whirling dances and, to the extent to which she surpassed her own talent, by Leila Waddell's violin solos. Where before Crowley had sought to induce transcendent ecstasies in his audiences, he was now treating them to the mundane horrors of Gothic melodrama. These occult entertainments marked the end of Crowley's attempts to transfer the private rituals of secret societies to the semi-public sphere of subscription performances in halls and rented rooms. Although the sex-magic rituals of the following years made extensive use of the ceremonial and esthetic forms explored in the *Rites of Eleusis,* they were performed by and for Crowley's small group of initiates, who were there by invitation only.

In the *Rites of Eleusis,* Aleister Crowley attempted to induce in an audience altered mind states through an esthetic assault on the senses. He used rhythmic music, repetitive prayers, and hypnotic poetry to lull the mind through the sense of hearing. He used dim light, veiled action, and flickering flames to fatigue the sense of sight. He used incense and perfumes to overload the sense of smell. He used possession dance to enact in physical space the kinesthetic potential of the audience's passive trance. He used psychoactive drugs to alter body chemistry and shift consciousness. Any alteration of normal consciousness has associated dangers, which can be identified in the terms of religions, psychologies, physiologies, or—as in Crowley's case—through the codified knowledge system of an occult philosophy. In such a system, as in many others less esoteric, the dangers are seen as deriving from contact in the altered mind state with forces more powerful than oneself. Ritual performs a protective function for the individual in his contact with such forces. Crowley, familiar with the phenomenology of xenophrenic states (he used the term "unsanity"), had an instinctive awareness of this function, and set his techniques of ecstasy induction into the ritual framework of a ceremonial magic based on the kabbala.

The *Rites of Eleusis* represent an approach toward a theatre of altered consciousness whose audience and actors alike "rise on the astral planes" toward ecstasies induced through shifting esthetic perceptions. Perhaps the failure of Crowley's experiment lies in the fact that he had a visionary sense of the potentialities of human consciousness combined with the esthetic sensibilities of a bad 19th-century romantic poet. Despite its failure, however, Crowley's basic concept remains a fascinating one, possibly now made feasible through the clinical and artistic researches into human consciousness of the past ten years.

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