Marco Pasi


Pasi’s thorough thematic study is a scholarly cicerone that wades through the mass of contradictory evidence in search of what can be said of Aleister Crowley and his “elective affinities” for political thought and action.

An inherent problem with studies of Crowley is the lack of consistency one readily finds in the source materials, a difficulty Pasi squarely faces. It is possible to construct many Crowley orthonyms—Crowley the World Teacher—Crowley the Rosicrucian Sage—Crowley the Poet—Crowley the Adventurer—Crowley the Antinomian Libertine—out of the numerous masks this protean figure donned. His extensive literary remains and those of his contemporaries, who frequently made note of Crowley’s passing through their lives, reveal Crowley espousing a bewildering and seemingly irreconcilable array of religious, philosophical and political positions. His critique of his much-despised mother Emily he extended to all of humanity and thus himself: ‘In a way, my mother was insane, in the sense that all people are who have watertight compartments to the brain, and hold with equal passion incompatible ideas, and hold them apart lest their meeting should destroy both. One might say that we are all insane in this sense; for, ultimately, any two ideas are incompatible. Nay, more, any one idea is incompatible with itself, for it contains in itself its own contradiction’ (Aleister Crowley, The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography [New York: Hill and Wang, 1969], p. 387). Consistency in thought is not a desideratum, it is an impossibility to be discarded at the outset, making it a Sisyphean task to thread a needle with the twisted skein of yarn of Crowley’s ideas. One suspects that were Crowley to have been asked, “are you a Platonist or an Aristotelian?”, his response would have been “yes”. Was he a Dualist, Monist or Nihilist? He believed his mystical philosophy successfully reconciled them all.

There exists a small stack of biographies, each attempting to weave a coherent narrative from what so often reads as a series of disconnected episodes, each trying to have the last word at what Pasi has termed “the neverendingly told story” of Crowley (Marco Pasi, “The Neverendingly Told Story: Recent Biographies of Aleister Crowley”, Aries 3:2 [2003]). In his opening chapter, Pasi assesses their relative worth as well as disarming a portion of the fictional notions of Crowley that have lives of their own. The majority of the posthumous studies of Crowley have appeared since the publication of the Italian first edition, Aleister Crowley e la Tentazione della Politica (1999), and significant archival sources were made available to Pasi in the interim, to which the author has made ample reference.
Pasi relates Crowley’s interest in politics to the two phases of his life, the first being a “romantic” one, where he fell willingly into espousal of extreme reactionary Neo-Jacobite and Spanish Carlist movements. Crowley claimed to have been knighted for his service to the latter cause, leading him to style himself “Sir Aleister Crowley,” and to declare all Victorian knighthoods invalid, as Queen Victoria was considered to be a usurper. Crowley’s love-and-hate game of his British identity led him to claim to be a native supporter of Irish Nationalism (he was not Irish and never set foot there), which then effortlessly switched to be a pro-German propagandist in the USA in the period prior to the USA’s involvement in World War I. Pasi rightly leaves unanswered the question of the sincerity of Crowley’s political postures, but there is no question how his pro-German writings were viewed in the United Kingdom, where sales of them led to jail terms. It is clear that at least part of his motivation for writing propaganda was financial; it was the only paying job he held in his life. Being safely removed from the theatre of combat allowed him to fight with the pen against all the forces of British bourgeois Christian society that he had felt were his oppressors since his childhood. His connection to his first serious critic, J.F.C. Fuller, is in the period before his mystical goal of personal liberation from the bonds of conventional society was transformed to be the liberator of all mankind and the prophet of a new age of freedom. Fuller was a close collaborator for the majority of Crowley’s occult activities in England prior to 1911, when he broke decisively with Crowley. Fuller’s later associations with Hitler and the British Fascist movement would have made him a “dangerous liaison” for Crowley, had Fuller not spurned any further contact with him. In part due to his prior engagements as a propagandist, Crowley’s attempts to ingratiate himself with British Intelligence in World War II, through the mediacy of Maxwell Knight and Ian Fleming, for the purpose of obtaining permission to leave the UK as an undischarged bankrupt left British officialdom unmoved.

The second phase of Crowley’s life is termed by Pasi as the “pragmatic” one where his political drives are subordinated to his mission of being accepted as a world teacher with a message of global importance, co-equal with those of Buddha, Christ and Mohammed. These two phases can also surmise his esoteric affiliations, starting with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Freemasonry and the Ordo Templi Orientis, all of which initiated by means of group rituals of a masonic type. His reception of the text of The Book of the Law (1904) and his eventual acceptance of the role prophesized for him in it altered his occult mission. His reformulation of the Golden Dawn as the Order of A.’. A.’. as well as his “reconstruction” of Freemasonry in his OTO system eventually led him to subsume their functions of individual and group