

JOHN CROWLEY/BACKGROUND

Long a Gene Wolfe fan, I was turned on to Crowley by two other Gene Wolfe fans, Michael Andre-Druissi and Alice K. Turner, both literary critics who would eventually compile a book on Crowley.

Crowley completed his first novel (I've forgotten what it was called then) in the late '60s, but put it aside to publish two others: *The Deep* (1975), arguably a Shakespearean history set on a circular chessboard floating in space (Terry Pratchett may have pinched this idea for his *Discworld* series), complete with aliens and androids, and *Beasts* (1976), in which certain 1960s political movements are re-cast in a futuristic New York, where the characters are either a) animal-like, b) part animal or c) animals. Although very different, both works feature highly stylized prose. Part of the fun of these novels is trying to figure out why Crowley tells his stories the way that he does.

Crowley then revised his first novel and published it as *Engine Summer* (1979). Although it touches on many of the same themes (e.g. storytelling), *Engine Summer* is unlike Crowley's other two science fiction novels in that it actually packs some pathos. *Engine Summer* was Crowley's last science-fiction novel. His next project was the sprawling, even more highly stylized, World-Fantasy-Award-winning fairy tale, *Little, Big* (1981). *Little, Big* draws heavily on a symbolic language that was developed in the earlier science fiction novels. It is an amazingly multi-textured work, but the pacing is frequently awkward. It doesn't grab the reader like *Engine Summer*.

Over the next 19 years he began to publish his Aegypt quartet (sic). Crowley's symbology colours these three non-genre novels, but it doesn't completely permeate them. *Aegypt/The Solitudes* (1987) introduces a very realistic hero, who struggles with various (often philosophical) dilemmas. The second book of the series (*Love & Sleep*, 1994) begins with that hero's memories of his youth. It's a stylistic departure for Crowley and unusually engrossing. The third book (*Daemonomania*, 2000) has probably the most harrowing sequence of any Crowley novel, in which a Christian cult seduces the hero's girlfriend. The fourth book is finished, but an argument with the publisher keeps it out of press for now. Hopefully, long gestation (and a promised revision) will serve it as well as it served *Engine Summer*.

In a blatant (and semi-successful) attempt to SELL SOME BOOKS, Crowley published *The Translator* in 2002. It's a quick read. And good too, but contains little of the richness of his earlier novels. All of his pre-2002 short fiction is collected in *Novelties & Antiques*. Some of these stories are essential reading. In particular, the World-Fantasy-Award-winning *The Great Work of Time and Novelty*, which contains a quick run-through of the Aegypt sequence's major themes and is set in the New York of *Little, Big*. Earlier this year, Crowley published Lord Byron's Novel, *The Evening Land* the bulk of which is just what it says on the tin, a semi-Byronesque Novel. Much bigger than *The Translator*, and somewhat richer, but still (IMO) Crowley-lite. Nonetheless, when I saw that Subterranean Press would publish a 2003 novella of his, which I hadn't known existed, as a \$35 chapbook, I ordered it.

And I just finished reading it. And it's wonderful! *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* is written in the faux-autobiographical style of *Love & Sleep*, but it is also rife with Crowleyesque symbology.

GIRLHOOD NOTES

In a recent interview with Nick Gevers, Crowley says, "I guess I think of stories and the telling of them as being in large part the creation of unavailable worlds—lost or never existent. My books have tended to be one step up from this: They have often been about people telling or hearing or pursuing stories, and thus are about the creation or coming-to-be of those unavailable worlds."

Possibly because I have a friend who is a conspiracy nut, one of my favorite passages of *Girlhood* is this one: "I was as interested in these theories as I was in flying saucers, or the guilt of the Rosenbergs, or the miracles at Lourdes. I thought the world was one way, and it was obvious what way that was, and people who struggled to alter it had reasons particular to them, a kind of sublime dissatisfaction that had nothing to do with what is in fact the case." Similar passages appear in many of Crowley's other work. Crowley himself has said that he does not believe in the supernatural. Nonetheless, many of Crowley's (usually female) characters do believe in the supernatural, or actually are somewhat supernatural, and his protagonists (usually storytellers or writers) are drawn to them.

So here is my conjecture: telling a good story requires inspiration from some quasi-supernatural muse. In *Girlhood*, the muse is a free spirit, "someone without much sense of reality." It is interesting that Crowley also describes more scientific approaches. The earliest instance of this that I can remember occurs in *Engine Summer*. *Painted Red* tries to understand her world by memorizing and superimposing the contents of a large collection of things like printed circuit boards. In *Little, Big*, Smoky discovers a series of increasingly impenetrable treatises on architecture. He wonders if, by superimposing all of the drawings, he can come to understand *Edgewood*. And in *Girlhood*, the hero, who claims to be making notes on the "truth," seems to be sickened by reading *Donnelly's* (also impenetrable) systematic approach to decrypting Shakespeare's plays.

Sickness is also a recurrent theme in Crowley's work. In *Little, Big* and the *Aegypt* sequence, narcoleptic and epileptic episodes (respectively) seem to initiate quasi-supernatural experiences. I am not sure how this relates to the hero of *Girlhood's* fever, but the fever does initiate a period of inactivity and it is clear from *Engine Summer* and *Little, Big* that hibernation and sleep (respectively) are required for a good tale. Hey, maybe this simply reflects the fact that *Engine Summer* was mothballed for a couple of years.

Just prior to the onset of his fever, *Girlhood's* hero describes his fear of living in a world of automata. This too, is a recurrent theme. Some of Crowley's heroes find their destinies inescapable; they are merely Engines or pawn's in someone's imagined game or literally

part of a Tale. On the other hand, other characters (e.g. Nod in *The Deep* and Aengus in Lord Byron's *Novel*) clearly try not to be a pawn in someone else's game, often using a random act of violence to assert their free will.

So, why do the pawns literally, purposefully try to escape the Shakespeare game at the end of *Girlhood*? Maybe this assertion of free will is related to the fact that *Girlhood* is primarily a love story? And who is in love? It is the writer and his muse. As in *Little, Big*, their progeny will be some kind of fiction. Why in Crowley's fiction, does the consummation of such love always occur on the other side of a bridge over water? The water is usually described as surrounding the place where the lovers meet (cf. *Girlhood*'s theatre camp that surrounds a lake into which neither the hero nor Harriet dive). In *Girlhood*, Harriet requests the hero bring a bottle of Bridgewater wine.

On the other hand, in *Engine Summer*, it is not the tale teller and his muse who bond over such a bridge; it is the tale teller and his dad. What is up with that, and what is the significance of Crowley's recurrent theme of pederasty? Just about every one of his books has someone who is sexually attracted to children. *Auberon I* clearly seems to have been modelled on Lewis Carroll, but others (e.g. *Casaubon* and *Moffett*) are not. *Auberon* and, to some extent, *Moffett* are also associated with black, the color of ink; their muses are red. I'm not sure this color scheme is consistent throughout Crowley's work, but Harriet's blush certainly brightens when she gets excited. Ever since *The Deep*, color has been a primary symbol in Crowley's work, but one color that is fairly rare is orange. In *Girlhood*, it is associated with the Bacon advocate. In *Beasts*, it is associated with Painter. Both of these characters instil a supernatural calm in women. Again, I'm not exactly sure why.

If *Casaubon* was associated with black, I have forgotten. What I do remember is that he, like *Girlhood*'s Robin, was associated with birds. Robin is described as hawklike. At one point, he even says, "I'm a hawk" and his theatre is *The Swan*. There are also a number of birdlike characters (air fairies) in *Little, Big*, but I never could figure out how they were different from the other elementals. I thought it was funny that Robin's wife was likened to the heroine of *Vertigo*. Is that the only Hitchcock film where birds don't presage danger?

One symbol I'm pretty sure about is the cigarette. Smoke (usually from tobacco) is almost always mentioned in the context of writing. Maybe Crowley has a serious habit. 😊 In *Girlhood*, stories are told by a smoky campfire. The hero smokes, but his muse merely throws the cigarettes in the fire. The chorus also notes that a "muse of fire (must) bring forth (King) Harry." Harry was Shakespeare's muse; Harriet was the muse of *Girlhood*'s hero.

Finally, one recurrent theme that continues to mystify me is the dichotomy between the seasons and the calendar months. This was a big deal in *Little, Big*, but it probably cropped up in Crowley's science fiction novels too. Why did Crowley have to change the month of the pope's shooting from May to June, and is this related to the month-changer (I have forgotten her name) in *Dr. Boots' List*?

FINALLY

I see that both Crowley and Wolfe are recommending a book by Jennifer Stevenson. I'll probably have to check that out.