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Aleister Crowley, the Guardian Angel and Aiwass: The nature of spiritual beings in the philosophies of the great Beast 666

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Abstract

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century occultists saw themselves, more than ever before, confronted with the intrusion of science on their traditional turfs. While occult phenomena were more and more explained by scientific discovery, the new science, psychology, took a stab at the workings of occult ritual. Under influence of these new challenges many occultists moved towards a more psychological interpretation of their rituals. In this paper I will demonstrate how “the great beast 666”, Aleister Crowley, dealt with these challenges and how they effected both his ideas and the development of his final philosophy.

Key words

Occult, Aleister Crowley, psychology, Aiwass, Guardian Angel, Abraham Melin, Magick

1. Introduction

There is a single main definition of the object of all magical Ritual. It is the uniting of the Microcosm with the Macrocosm. The Supreme and Complete Ritual is therefore the Invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel [...].

Aleister Crowley in *Magic in Theory and Practice* (1992: 18)¹

In 1899 the British occultist Aleister Crowley bought a two-story villa, known as Boleskine house, on the south-east bank of Loch Ness for the sole purpose of conducting a six months long ritual aimed at invoking one's guardian angel.²

¹ Aleister Crowley, also known as the Beast 666, was a British occultist and the founder and prophet of Thelema, the religion which was revealed to him in the Egypt. Crowley became famous for his loose sexual moral and bizarre rituals. For more information see: (Sutin, 2000; Symonds, 1953; Hutchinson, 2006).

² Late nineteenth and early twentieth century occultism was an attempt to revive the occult sciences, traditionally magic, astrology and alchemy, within a contemporary framework. It should be noted that the late nineteenth and early twentieth reinterpretation looked distinctly different from its medieval and early modern predecessor. Where the latter comprised of a body of knowledge, which was both spiritual and material in content, the former was a predominantly spiritual interpretation of the same sources. One reasons for this discrepancy, and the one which is of interest for the present discussion, is found in the relationship between religion and science. The scientific revolution had brought about an all inclusive model of nature in which everything could eventually be explained. This model differed

Crowley never finished the ritual, to his own account due to problems within the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an occultist fraternity in *fin de siècle* London, which he had joined the year previous.³ Nevertheless, the events surrounding the ritual would give rise to enough stories about the house and its past for Ronald MacGillivray, who bought the estate in 1989, to commission an exorcist to cleanse the property of any psychic reminiscences of Crowley's ritual.⁴

In 1893 the head of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a man who called himself MacGregor Mathers, started working on a translation of a late medieval manuscript, titled *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Malin the Mage*. This Manuscript described a set of rituals aimed at invoking one's guardian angel. (Dehn et al., 2006: XIV) Since there is, at least to my knowledge, no mention of the guardian angel in Crowley's work prior to his involvement with the Golden Dawn and the ritual at Boleskine it is reasonable to assume that he first got acquainted with the subject at the Golden Dawn and that he used MacGregor Mathers' translation (the only available one at the time) as a guide.⁵

The Concept of the Holy Guardian Angel would come to play a central role in Crowley's philosophy. However, it also proved to be a most problematic concept. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century occultists saw themselves, more than ever before, confronted with an intrusion of science on their traditional turfs. Not only did scientific discovery gradually explain more and more of the effects they achieved, it now, under in influence of the newly emerging science psychology, made an attempt at explaining the workings of occult ritual as well. Many occultists, Crowley amongst them, reacted by attempting to square their beliefs with scientific developments. As a result, occult ritual came to stand for an inner search for spirituality. Many of the entities which were all too real to the medieval and early modern practitioner became representations of the magician's unconscious. Albeit hesitant, Mathers already hinted on a more psychological interpretation of the Holy Guardian Angel in the introduction to his translation of *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Malin the Mage*, which was published in 1898 (1948: XXVI). In this paper I will demonstrate that Crowley, who is seen by many as an innovator, was not willing to follow in Mathers' footsteps. Although Crowley was occasionally willing to grant, that some spiritual beings were in reality figments of the magician's unconscious, the Holy Guardian Angel remained, with a few sporadic exceptions, a distinct and separate entity.

Although, throughout the history of occultism, the idea of the Holy Guardian Angel keeps popping up, I will stick to the interpretations Crowley and later scholars on Crowley give. A broader discussion would simply go beyond the scope of this paper. Another reason for focussing exclusively on Crowley is that

strongly from the previous, in which the supernatural had a large stake in earthly affairs. For further reading on different models of interpretation of the occult sciences see: (Hanegraaff, 2012)

³ The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was a magical secret society in Victorian England. For further reading on the Golden Dawn see: (Howe, 1984).

⁴ Ronald MacGillivray was a distant relative and a good friend of my father. The first time I heard of Crowley, at the age or 13, was in connection to the story of the exorcism at the estate.

⁵ This is further emphasized by the fact that most surviving copies mention 13 months or more for the ritual. MacGregor-Mathers version only calls for 6 and Crowley sticks to that number. See Abraham von Worms, 2006).

Crowley and his contemporary occultists struggled, more than ever before, with the demystifying tendencies of modern science. In order to validate their magic, they had to interpret and explain what they were doing in ways that would, as much as possible, coincide with the state of science as it was. The physical space for a manifestation of the super-natural was declining and age old rituals and magical ideas needed redefining. Crowley and his contemporaries can therefore be seen as working in a transitional period in the history of the occult.⁶

The sacred magic and its translator

That man, therefore, is the middle nature, and natural controller of the middle nature between the Angels and the Demons, and that therefore to each man is attached naturally both a Guardian Angel and a Malevolent Demon, and also certain Spirits that may become Familiars, so that with him it rests to give the victory unto the which he will.

MacGregor-Mathers in the introduction
to the *Book of the Sacred Magic*
of *Abra-Malin the Mage* (1948: XXVI)

Since it is almost certain that MacGregor-Mathers' translation of *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abra-Malin the Mage* was Crowley's introduction to the idea of the holy guardian angel in *magick*.⁷ I judge it wise to start out by discussing the ideas put forth in this work and in its introduction by Mathers.

The book MacGregor-Mathers translated was not the original, but a French copy, which was produced, according to his own estimates, in the late 17th or early 18th century. In turn this French manuscript, so Mathers believed, was a translation of the original Hebrew text, written by a man called Abraham the Jew in the early 15th century (MacGregor-Mathers, 1948: XVI) It has since been shown that Mathers' French text was in fact incomplete and that Abraham the Jew, who was also known as Abraham of Worms, wrote in German and not, as Mathers claimed, in Hebrew (Dehn, 2006: XXIII–XXV). For the purposes of this paper however, I will use the translation made by Mathers for it was the work on which Crowley based the Boleskine ritual.

The Book of the sacred magic of Abra-Malin the Mage is believed to have been written by a Jewish mystic, Abraham of Worms (1359–1458)⁸, in the aftermath of the plague pandemics of the second half of the fourteenth century and the subsequent pogroms. Abraham travelled the then known world in search of an enlightened master to initiate him into true magic, who he eventually found in the Egyptian Abra-Melin. The book is addressed to his youngest son Lamech and seems

⁶ It should be noted that this was by no means the first time the occultists were faced with a direct and immediate threat from scientific development. Two centuries earlier the scientific revolution effectively put an end to occultism as a respected intellectual endeavour. Especially alchemy suffered a strong blow as chemistry emerged as the accepted scientific study of matter. A century before that Astrology lost ground under due to the gradual acceptance of heliocentrism over geocentrism. It can in fact be argued that the occult revival of the 19th century was a reaction to the demystification of the world, which was set in motion by the scientific revolution.

⁷ Crowley preferred to use the spelling “magick” over the usual “magic” to differentiate between true occult practices and that which attracted “dilettanti and eccentrics” (Sutin, 2000: 6).

⁸ These dates are estimates based on the information found in the first chapter of the book of *Abra-Melin*.

to be a thoroughly Jewish mystical work. It is, in Mathers' French version, divided into three chapters. The first describes Abraham's travels, the second the magical ritual, and the third the uses for this magic. Above all Abraham emphasizes the importance of belief, most of all in God. However, earlier German versions have four chapters, the third chapter, which deals with preparations for the ritual, is missing in Mathers' source.

Who Abraham was is not clear. George Dehn, the author of the latest English translation (2006), argues that Abraham of Worms was in fact a pseudonym used by Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moelin (+/-1350–1427), who was also known by the title *MaHaRil* and who lived and died in Worms. Although there are indeed some similarities between the life of the MaHaRil and the autobiographical account Abraham gives in the *Book I*, the evidence for this claim is, at this point, still circumstantial at best and further research is required.

Dehn does however point to a more general indication of Abraham's identity, which places him and his work in a conceptual time frame: the aftermath of the great plague pandemic of 1347–1351. All over Europe Jewish populations were accused of, and prosecuted for, poisoning the wells and thus causing the 1348 pandemic and its aftershocks in 1361, 1369 and 1400–1402 (Blockmans & Hoppenbrouwers, 2008: 362). To make matters worse, the Jewish people were faced with expulsion from many European cities and lands over the following century and a half (Edwards, 1995: 3–5). In this light it becomes likely that Abraham of Worms wrote his book, first and foremost, for a people under siege. As Dehn points out, Abraham was probably trying to preserve a body of knowledge that his people had built up over the centuries (2006:224). However, it could also be read as an attempt to provide his people with a magical weapon with which they could defend themselves in desperate times. Similar to, for instance, the idea of the Golem, which was developed roughly during the same time period.⁹

From MacGregor-Mathers' introduction to *The Book of the sacred magic of Abra-Malin the Mage* it becomes clear that he read the work as a grimoire which holds eternal truths and not as a product of history which should be seen within a certain context. Mathers places special emphasis on Abraham's position within the 14th and 15th century occult circles likening him to the magicians John Dee and Cornelius Agrippa, the famous French alchemist Nicolas Flamel, who reportedly gained his alchemical knowledge from a manuscript which was written by an earlier Abraham the Jew, and the mythical Christian Rosenkreutz (1948: XX)¹⁰

⁹ Although the idea of the Golem can be traced back to antiquity, the development of this concept as we know it today should be dated from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards. (Idel 1990: XXIII)

¹⁰ Mathers' choice of occult authors is interesting. John Dee was a renaissance magician and mathematician who was involved in angelic magic. Together with his collaborator, Edward Kelly, he produced several works in the language of the angels, *Enochian*. For further reading on Dee see French, 1972. Cornelius Agrippa, another famous renaissance magician, worked with Kabbalah which formed an important part of the fin de siècle magical arsenal. For further reading on Agrippa see van der Poel, 1997. Nicolas Flamel was a French alchemist who reportedly created the philosophers' stone by following the instructions from a book written by an earlier Abraham the Jew. For further reading on Flamel see Greiner, 2006. Christian Rosenkreutz is regarded as the mythical founder of Rosicrucianism, an early magical fraternity, like the Golden Dawn nearly three centuries later (see Edighoffer, 2006).

The circumstances under which Abraham wrote are however absent from Mathers' introduction. Instead he seems to make an inverse move by linking Abraham's presence to the social upheaval of the time. Mathers states that "Adepts of his [Abraham's] type appear and always have appeared upon the theatre of history in great crises of nations" (1948: XX). Abraham, for Mathers, is thus not a product of his time but rather a medication sent to heal the ills of this violent epoch in human history.

Mathers places a special emphasis on the act of will. In so far so that, when the original author writes about faith (mainly in God) and the importance of remaining with the faith in which one grew up, his translator states that "For of all the hindrances to Magical action, the very greatest and most fatal is unbelief, for it checks and stops the action of the will" (MacGregor-Mathers, 1948: XXIV). For those familiar with the writings of Crowley this emphasis should strike a familiar chord with his emblematic saying: "Do what thy wilt, Shall be the whole of the law" (Crowley, 1976:9).

Equally striking is the fact that Crowley chose to preform this ritual even though Abraham insisted that one should remain with the faith in which one was brought up. For Crowley, who identified himself with the Beast from revelations, which would mean remaining faithful to Christianity, the very religion of which he had opted to become its anti-hero, the Beast 666.¹¹

For this research, however, the most interesting statement MacGregor-Mathers makes in his introduction is about the identity of the guardian angel. For Abraham the spirits with which the magician interacts during these rituals are real and spiritual entities. The guardian angel is connected to man, but he is in no way a part of him. About this relationship he remarks that the guardian angel "knoweth better than you your nature and constitution, and who understandeth the forms which can terrify you, and those of which you can support the sight" (1948: 90). However well informed the angel might be, Abraham keeps emphasizing that this he is appointed by God and therefore a separate and autonomous being (Abraham the Jew, 1948:26) In his introduction, Mathers asserts, quite contradictory, that "in order to control and make service of the Lower and Evil, the knowledge of the Higher and the Good is requisite (i.e., in the language of the Theosophy of the present day, the knowledge of the Higher Self)"¹² (1948: XXVI). Mathers does not directly equate the guardian angel with the higher self, something which, on occasion, Crowley would come to do, but he does identify the higher and the good with the higher self, which makes for two possibilities. Either Mathers does not regard the guardian angel as the higher and the good or he is in disagreement with Abraham the Jew. The latter seems to be the most likely and, as we shall see later, Crowley struggled with this opposition throughout his magical career.

¹¹ From a young age Crowley identified himself with the Beast from Revelations. In his *Confessions* he recalls that his mother believed him to be the Anti-Christ (Crowley, 1989: 232).

¹² Theosophy is a hermetical movement which was started by Madam Blavatsky and which was in many ways a predecessor of the Hermetic order of the Golden Dawn. For further reading on Theosophy and the Theosophical society see Lavoje, 2012.

Aiwass, the higher self and the guardian angel

MacGregor-Mathers and Crowley lived in a time quite different from that of Abraham the Jew. Science was actively intruding on the realms, which were traditionally assigned to religion and spirituality, and, as more and more phenomena found natural explanations, many occultists attempted to synthesize their thoughts with modern science. Psychological terms and explanations became used to describe the experiences derived from age-old magical rituals and as a result magical experience became a happening within the magician's mind. Mathers, before Crowley, seemed to have already hinted on an equation of the holy guardian angel, which the magic of Abra-Melin sought to invoke, and the higher-self. Crowley would, to some extent, follow Mathers' lead. He was familiar with the works of William James and at least some of Sigmund Freud's and borrowed terms from both (Pasi, 2011:107). In addition Crowley seems to, at least in some cases and involving minor spiritual beings, have identified communications as happening within the mind of the magician (Pasi, 2011:107). However, to take this line of reasoning to its ultimate step proved to have been a bridge too far.

In an article, published in 2011, Marco Pasi argues, amongst other things, that Crowley deployed a naturalistic interpretation of magic early on in his spiritual career but did not do so consistently and would let go of the idea all together later on (Pasi, 2011: 151). If this is correct, this development should be closely linked to Crowley's experiences in Egypt and later in Algiers. During these two instances Crowley had his most intense mystical experiences. The latter leading some to claim that he in effect lost his mind afterwards (Owen, 2004: 221).

In 1904, while in Egypt with his wife Rose, Crowley claimed to have received the *Book of the Law* from a spiritual being named Aiwass, who functioned as a messenger for the Gods and who he would later equate with his guardian angel (Symonds, 1953: 58–62). The work would function as the basis for a new religion *Thelema* of which Crowley would be the prophet and which was supposed to destroy many of the conventions held up till his age. Crowley remarks of its implications in his *Confessions* published in 1929:

Thelema implies not merely a new religion, but a new cosmology, a new philosophy, a new ethics. It co-ordinates the disconnected discoveries of science, from physics to psychology, into a coherent and consistent system (1989: 389).

Although Crowley seeks a synthesis between science and *magick* it is science which has to be brought into a magical system, not the other way around. A typical example is found in the attitude Crowley holds towards psychoanalysis. Alex Owen describes in her book *The place of enchantment* that:

Crowley made it plain that he approved of Freud's theorizing of the relationship between the conscious and unconscious, but emphasized that Freud had arrived at his conclusions somewhat late in the day (2004: 209).

Science and magic are still compatible but, in Crowley's later view, it is science which has become subordinate to *magick*, not the other way around.

Marco Pasi raises another interesting point. For *Thelema* to maintain its universal claims as a new world religion, the spiritual being who revealed it to Crowley, Aiwass, must be, by necessity, an independent being. If he were to

be a mere figment of Crowley's psyche then it follows that all universal claims of Thelema would be effectively nullified. Pasi therefore states that: "From the moment in which Crowley became convinced that his personal mission on this planet was to spread the new religious truth he had found, the tension with his naturalizing interpretations of magic was destined to surface sooner or later" (2011:161). If this were to be the case, this moment should be identifiable as the moment of his acceptance of the *Book of the law* as the holy book for the new aeon. Crowley did not accept the *Book of the Law* as authoritative right away and it did not see publication until as late as 1925, twenty-one years after the event. In these twenty-one years he also drifted away from any naturalistic explanations he had in his early career.

A notable alternative interpretation of the identity of Aiwass is provided in a non-scholarly work by Tobias Churton. He presents, as far as I am aware, the most complete reconstruction of the ritual Crowley and Rose conducted in Egypt. Churton draws our attention to the possibility that the whole ritual is explained by a few Arabic letters which Crowley scribed in his notes. The letters spell *ajiha* which actually is not a word or a name at all. The letters do hold a striking resemblance to a combination of the Hebrew words *ChIVA*, meaning beast, and *AHIIH*, which means "I AM". The Kabbalistic manipulation Crowley made of these two words is *AChIHA*, "I AM-beast", which happened to be a metathesis of his own name (Churton, 2011). In other words, Churton proposes that Crowley might have meant all along that what he saw was himself, his higher self. This interpretation seems, at first glance, somewhat far fetched, but there might be something to it. As late as 1913, with the publication of *Book 4*, Crowley still seems to have believed that a naturalistic explanation for magic could suffice. He makes very clear, in the preliminary remarks that:

We do not believe in any super natural explanations, but insist this source [genius] might be reached by the following out of definite rules, the degree of success depending upon the capacity of the seeker, and not upon the favour of any divine being (1980: 15).

It is interesting to note here that Crowley dismisses a super natural explanation, however, he seems to do so with a certain intent. His emphasis seems to lie on the fact that this source is to be reached through the skill and determination of the seeker. He effectively diminishes the share of the supernatural in favour of the will of the seeker. It might therefore be argued that Crowley is not so much dismissing the idea of the supernatural but rather pushing the idea of willpower.

The other major turning point in Crowley's magical career came in 1909 in the Algerian desert, where he performed a ritual with his disciple Victor Neuburg. The ritual cumulated in the latter sodomising Crowley and the supposed obliteration of Crowley's "I", which he loosely equated with the "Ich" in Freudian theory (Owen, 2004: 209). Owen makes the point that this ritual marked a turning point in Crowley's life (2004: 209). He lost all fear and moved more and more towards the extremes which eventually would make him notorious. In fact, the destruction of the "I", became one of his main objectives in his later philosophy. It is interesting that the "I" needed to be obliterated in order for the abyss between the conscious and the subconscious to be crossed and one could argue that this, on

its own, indicates that the magical endeavour indeed takes place in the mind of the magician. However, this is a point of view that Crowley never explicitly took.

A final revision of his ideas on the nature of Aiwass and his guardian angel came when Crowley published *Magick in theory and practice* in 1929. In this work Aiwass is identified as his guardian angel and so the two merge together answering the question of the identity of the guardian angel at last. By doing so, and the way in which he makes this identification he raises yet new questions:

This [confusion as to the identity of the devil] has led to so much confusion of thought that THE BEAST 666 has preferred to let names stand as they are, and to proclaim simply that AIWAZ – the solar-phallic-hermetic “Lucifer” is His own Holy Guardian Angel, and “The Devil” SATAN or HADIT of our particular unit of the Starry Universe (Crowley 1992: 131).

Not only does Crowley here identify Aiwass with his Guardian angel but he also elevates the spiritual being up to a new level. No longer does Aiwass function as a messenger for the gods, he now becomes the devil himself and so it would be interesting to see what Crowley has to say about the devil in this respect. The confusion which Crowley sought to remedy by using the moniker “devil” is that: “The Devil does not exist. [...] A Devil who had unity would be a God. “*The Devil*” is, historically, the God of any people that one personally dislikes” (Crowley, 1992: 131). Crowley places, by this action, his guardian angel, and thus himself, in opposition to mainstream (religious) thought. He, in a sense, acknowledges that he belongs to those people who are disliked.

Interesting for this paper are the implications of the identification of Aiwass as Crowley’s guardian angel. As argued by Marco Pasi, Aiwass had to be, in order for Thelema to retain its universal claims, an independent and autonomous being. So, if Aiwass were to become Crowley’s holy guardian angel, that would mean that the holy guardian angel has to be of an independent nature from the magician. It is however striking that Aiwass has undergone an astonishing transformation by this time. He became a potent and powerful being in his own right instead of a messenger for those in power.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated Crowley struggled with the explanatory power of science and was never really able to reconcile his magical system with it. During his career he moved from a system in which *magick* and science were complementary to a philosophy in which science was subordinate to *magick*. This movement is beautifully exemplified by the development of the two concepts: the holy guardian angel and Aiwass. It took Crowley more than 20 years to eventually merge the two into one being and state full heartedly that this being was distinctly separate from himself. In doing so, Crowley effectively let go of any serious attempt to square science with *magick*.

I would like to assert though that by and large Crowley’s ideas have not shifted as much as one might think. Even in the early days of his career he would not consequently identify the guardian angel as the higher self. Rather, he seemed to provide the interpretation which suited him best at a given moment, sometimes opting for a more internal, sometimes for a distinctly separate guardian angel. At

the end of the day though, he appears to have been rather conservative in regard to *magick*. In a way he is following the same hard-core line in magick as his parents before him followed with the Plymouth Bretheren.¹³ Crowley was not willing to innovative all too much when it came to synthesizing *magick* with modern science.

An example, I think is worth mentioning, is the age of the world. According to Crowley in his introduction to the 'Book of the Law' the history of the world can be divided into separate blocks of approximately 2000 years. Every such block is ruled by a certain *vast star* and the change over is called the equinox of the Gods, with these "stars" described as Gods (Crowley, 1976). With the reception of the *Book of the Law* the earth moved into a new age, the age of Horus which Crowley believed to be the third age. The previous one, that of Osiris started around 500 B.C. which was preceded in turn by the first age, that of Isis. It thus follows that, give or take a few hundred years, the world in Crowley's conception is no older then 5000 years. By 1904 it was well established within the scientific community that the earth's age was to be calculated in millions not thousands of years. In fact, the estimation Crowley gives lies closer to traditional calculations based on the bible. Even if Crowley meant the history of the human race he was still off by several tens of thousands of years.

It seems that, like many things, Crowley followed his own path using anything that could be of use to him for as long as it could. Just like he left part of a climbing expedition to die after an accident during an assault on the Kangchenjunga, which resulted in several deaths, he used science and philosophy just as long as they served him (Hutchinson, 2006: 110). To call Crowley a conservative would be a step too far. He did stretch the limits of sexual freedom and drug-use further then many have done before or after. However, I assert that Crowley, as was typical of him, had little interest in labels such as progressive or conservative and so he used ideas and people when and how it suited him.

Although Crowley was more active in enacting rituals then most of his contemporary occultists, he was somewhat conservative in his philosophies. MacGregor-Mathers had already hinted on the idea of the guardian angel as the higher self. But, as the relationship between Crowley and Mathers grew cold and eventually ended in a law suit over Crowley's publication of the rites of the Golden Dawn, Crowley gravitated more and more towards a literal interpretation of the texts with which he was working.¹⁴ In addition, I have to agree with Marco Pasi that the conception of his new religion Thelema effectively closed the door to all psychological explanations. For Thelema to maintain it's universal claims, Aiwass had to be a separate spiritual being and could not be a manifestation of Crowley's own mind. The new age freed Crowley to exploit his sexual fantasies and indulge in drug use but at heart, Crowley was struggling with the challenges of modernity. He turned to magical tradition for answers and what he found there would at once open and close his mind.

¹³ The Plymouth Brethren formed a puritan protestant sect in which Crowley grew up.

¹⁴ For a description of the trial see Hutchinson, 2006: 129-131.

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