

# Aleister Crowley Reads *Inferno* Towards an Occult Reception of Strindberg

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## I. A STORY OF KINDRED SOULS

I was awakened to the knowledge that I possessed a magical means of becoming conscious of and satisfying a part of my nature which had up to that moment concealed itself from me. It was an experience of horror and pain, combined with a certain ghostly terror, yet at the same time it was the key to the purest and holiest spiritual ecstasy that exists. (Crowley, *Confessions* 109)

WRITING AN ARTICLE about the relationship between August Strindberg and the British writer and occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) may at times resemble an account of parallel lives. If taken out of context, the excerpt above could fit into Strindberg's *Inferno* just as well as into the book to which it belongs, the autobiography *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*. Crowley's magical experience, which took place in Stockholm on 31 December 1896, was the first in his life and became a turning point in his esoteric development. Meanwhile in Lund—not far removed and at about the same time—Strindberg was beginning his studies of Swedenborg, who profoundly influenced his mystical ideas (Brandell, *Paris* 231–2). More generally, it appears that Crowley, even though he was twenty-six years younger than Strindberg and had never met him, went through similar personal, spiritual, and artistic experiences in the decades between the two centuries. Both were born into religious, middle-class families; both experienced wealth and economic trouble; both turned to intense and heterogeneous writing after troubled university studies; and both experienced bohemian life in Paris and enjoyed contacts with the

artistic avant-garde. Both went through personal crises and eventually found a guardian angel, as they each formulated it: Strindberg turned to Swedenborg (*Inferno* 202) and Crowley to the preternatural entity Aiwass, from which he claimed to have received the *Liber Al Vel Legis* or *Book of the Law* in 1904, the text that became the foundation of his esoteric thought, Thelema (Pasi, "Varieties" 156–60).

The aim of this article is to investigate Crowley's acquaintance with Strindberg's work and to explore its esoteric, scientific, and literary implications. I will concentrate on the review of *Inferno* (and, to a lesser degree, on that of *Son of a Servant*), which Crowley published in his journal *The Equinox* in 1913. These reviews provide important material for understanding the literary and/or esoteric productions of both authors. They offer evidence of the reception of Strindberg's works in occult circles after the *Inferno* period.<sup>1</sup> Such a reception based on his occult association invites a reconsideration of his introduction in Britain as a whole. Accordingly, a significant number of the early Strindberg translations were either done or published by esotericists, a fact that strongly affected the horizon of expectations of his readers, Crowley included. Most importantly, Crowley's review questions *Inferno*'s reliability as an autobiography—an unusual development in Strindberg's early reception in Britain—and invites rather a reading informed by Crowley's "scientific illuminism" and anti-Victorianism, two currents which were deeply rooted in the avant-garde and radical discourses of the age.

## 2. STRINDBERG'S EARLY BRITISH RECEPTION

By 1913, when Crowley reviewed Strindberg, Strindberg's reputation in Britain was based mainly on an isolated translation of *The Father* and a handful of obscure productions of his plays (*The Stronger* in 1906 and 1909, *The Father* in 1911, *Miss Julie* and *Creditors* in 1912). A few articles had followed J. T. Grein's unsuccessful attempt to stage *The Father* in 1893, which presented Strindberg primarily as a pessimist and misogynist (Rem, "Premature" 151). Twenty years later, this was still the predominant

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1. Although the study of Strindberg's reading of esoteric texts and their influence of these on his work has a long and flourishing tradition (see Lamm; Brandell, *Strindbergs Infernokris*; Stockenström; Gavel-Adams, *The Generic Ambiguity*; and Szalczer, only to cite the major ones), the way esotericists looked at his texts is still an underexplored matter.

view when as many as twelve Strindberg translations were issued between 1912 and 1913, possibly capitalizing on the attention surrounding the author's death in 1912. However, the numerous translations must not be equated with success, since Strindberg's reception continued to suffer from hostility and accusations of misogyny (Ewbank 7–25; Robinson 10–9). Arguably, Strindberg's legacy suffered from a lack of committed critics and translators such as William Archer and George Bernard Shaw, who had managed to introduce his colleague Henrik Ibsen on the British stage. A difficult acting style, discontinuity of genre, and generally poor translations might also have discouraged potentially interested actors who would easily turn to Archer's carefully wrought translations and to the structural consistency of Ibsen's bourgeois drama. Ibsen's success in Britain was partly an obstacle for Strindberg, who was received as "simply another Scandinavian writer, someone not quite of Ibsen's stature" (Rem, "Premature" 150–4; Robinson 11–2).

The wave of Strindberg translations in 1912 and 1913 occasioned two peculiar developments. Since about half of the works published were autobiographical, Strindberg was seen primarily in that context, a fact that encouraged the identification of him with his characters (Rem, "Premature" 152, 156).<sup>2</sup> About one third of these translations were either issued by a publisher of esoteric literature (Rider) or were done by a translator who specialized in esoteric matters (Claud Field), a situation that spread the idea of Strindberg as an "esoteric" author. Both aspects influenced the horizon of expectations of British readers and are of crucial importance for understanding Crowley's reading of Strindberg.

### 3. ALEISTER CROWLEY'S REVIEW OF *INFERNO*

Aleister Crowley is arguably one of the most influential figures in modern occultism. His magical practices and esoteric writings, which he cultivated alongside a rich literary production, "have heavily influenced contemporary new religious movements of a magical and neo-pagan bent" (Pasi, "Aleister Crowley" 281). Despite his bad reputation due to the alleged depravity of his rituals, drug abuse, and moral subjugation,

2. These were *Inferno*, *Son of a Servant*, *The Confession of a Fool*, *Zones of the Spirit* (*En blå bok*), and *The Growth of a Soul*, the second part of *Son of a Servant*.

Crowley has been the object of no fewer than ten biographies, which testify that he is a figure who still fascinates the international reading community (Pasi, "Neverendingly" 224–6). A prolific author of poetry, drama, novels, short stories, articles, and essays, as well as a painter, Crowley had the capacity to assimilate and introduce himself in several key literary and artistic currents of his age, and his literary production and position in the European avant-garde are still awaiting proper recognition. He started his literary career with poetry in the vein of British romanticism and decadence while a student at Trinity College, Cambridge (1895–1898) and had the occasion to measure his production against that of William Butler Yeats, whom he met in London in 1899 as a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. A few years later, in 1902–1903, Crowley was part of the literary circle of the Paris restaurant *Le Chat Blanc*, where he met, among others, William Somerset Maugham (Kaczynski 112–5). In 1912–1913—the period during which he wrote his reviews of Strindberg—Crowley was active at the London cabaret *The Cave of the Golden Calf*, which had been founded by Strindberg's ex-wife Frida Uhl and was a catalyst for the English and international avant-garde movement (Buchmayr 269–92). He was a well-connected person in the European avant-garde and very up-to-date with regard to European cultural life.

Crowley's reviews of *Inferno* and *Son of a Servant* were published in the tenth issue of his journal *The Equinox* in September 1913 (Kaczynski 265). Whether Crowley had read Strindberg before 1913 is unknown. In the *Confessions* (104) he mentions Strindberg when speaking of his holidays in Scandinavia in the 1890s, but this reference is of little consequence since the book first came out in 1929. In any case, Strindberg was surely known in the circle of *The Equinox* since a contemporary poem by Crowley's disciple Victor Neuburg mentions Strindberg's plays (Neuburg 251), and Frida Uhl sat on the editorial board of the journal (Crowley, "Waite's Wet" 233–4).<sup>3</sup> What undoubtedly played a role in Crowley's choice to review Strindberg was the publishing house that issued his translations. William Rider & Son

3. The relationship between Crowley and Uhl has not been previously researched. In a note from early 1912, Harry Graf Kessler mentions Crowley as Uhl's "mystisch sexuellen Freund" (786) [mysterious sexual friend]. Uhl's biographer Friedrich Buchmayr (289) mentions a manuscript, probably of a play, that Crowley had submitted for performance at the Golden Calf, and Crowley himself recalls Uhl as a "Danish siren" in his 1922 novel *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (20).

had been founded in 1908, when it took over from occult publisher Philip Welby ("About Rider Books"). Under the direction of Ralph Shirley, Rider developed an impressive catalogue of esoteric books and also published a monthly journal, *The Occult Review*, with which Crowley often collaborated. Crowley was well acquainted with the Rider catalogue, as is evident from the frequent reviews of its books in *The Equinox*.

The paratexts of Rider's edition of *Inferno* offer a significant framework for understanding Crowley's reading of Strindberg. In the catalogue at the back of the book, the novel is not listed under the heading "fiction," but rather "philosophy." *Inferno* is presented as "an autobiographical work by the celebrated Swedish author, similar in character to Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*" (6). The peculiar profile of the publisher and its placement in the catalogue clearly show that the novel was understood and sold as an esoteric work. On the other hand, its presentation confirms the reception of Strindberg as an author of autobiographies. In his introduction, translator Claud Field also insists on the autobiographical and esoteric aspects of the novel. The two peculiar elements of Strindberg's British reception are therefore clearly evident and bias the horizon of expectations of the reader.

At a first sight, Crowley's judgment of the novel seems utterly negative. The review opens with a polemical remark: "I have already had to speak to publishers about cheap production. In this case I must protest emphatically against the employment of a translator who makes a solecism nearly every time he touches Paris" (Crowley, "Inferno" 227). Crowley is reacting against the imprecise "domestication," to borrow a term from translation studies, of Parisian place names, which he also lists in the review.<sup>4</sup> Here he seems to lack a precise reproduction of that fragmentary landscape that makes *Inferno* a "modernist tale of confusion" (Stenport 95), where Paris

is ... not constructed as a bustling metropolis of industrial and cultural production, nor as a spectacle of consumption already mythologized

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4. Crowley does not seem to have read the book carefully, as many of these malapropisms are actually not present in the English translation or derive from Strindberg's French text, which was the source of the translation. The proof that Field translated from French and not Swedish lies in an error—which Crowley rightly points out—in the spelling of a French street. While the French text (and Field's) mentions "rue de Madame" (138/82), the Swedish text correctly reads "rue Madame" (139).

by the end of the nineteenth-century, but as an intriguing formal amalgamation that combines late nineteenth-century transnational and displaced mythologies about urban modernity, occultism, and literary aesthetics with subversive defiance. (98)

In *Inferno* the experience of the city goes hand in hand with the esoteric experience; Crowley, who had lived long in Paris and had led a similar bohemian life to Strindberg, is pointing out and advocating one of the elements that makes *Inferno* one of Strindberg's most avant-garde narratives. The tie between the urban and the esoteric is in fact toned down in the English translation, both with the domestication of place names and extensive cuts and summaries, which—curiously for a publisher like Rider—leave out entire passages focusing on the devil, Swedenborg, astral bodies, gold synthesis, and Satanism.<sup>5</sup> To some extent, therefore, domestication seems to turn into bowdlerization. Then Crowley goes on to attack the author:

The constant chemical absurdities are perhaps Strindberg's own and may have been made intentionally, as the book portrays the ravings of a melancholic with delusions of persecution. What sublime and septuple ass calls this Strindberg's autobiography? Strindberg was too lazy to find his incidents in other people's lives; that is all. (Crowley, "Inferno" 228).

Here Crowley goes into the issues of alchemy and autobiography, which I will discuss in the next sections. Finally, he sums up the plot of what he calls "a perfect clinical picture of a typical case" ("Inferno" 228) by joining and partly anticipating a critical approach that flourished between the 1920s and the 1950s (Gavel Adams, "Kommentarer" 330–2). He concludes with the esoteric interests of the main character: "For refuge he ranges from Papus to Swedenborg, and ultimately, as his mental disease increases on him, he clutches at such straws as Péladan, Annie Besant, and the Church of Rome. In this dementia the book ends" ("Inferno" 228).

The dismissal of the book seems total, but one must read between the lines and interpret Crowley's criticism in the light of his religious, esoteric, and cultural thought at that period. In order to do so, we have to start with an inquiry into the relationship between Strindberg and esotericism.

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5. *Inferno* 40–9, 66–9, 80–3, 116–7, 314–5 and *The Inferno* 27, 37–8, 46, 67, 188.

#### 4. STRINDBERG, ESOTERICISM, OCCULTISM, AND THE FRENCH AVANT-GARDE

The term “esotericism” has a long and complex history, and there is still no complete scholarly agreement on its definition (Pasi, “Il problema”). According to Antoine Faivre’s definition, esotericism is a “form of thought” that originated in the Western world during the Renaissance and is concerned with a body of ancient works essentially focused on three “traditional sciences,” i.e. alchemy, astrology, and magic. Esotericism differs from mysticism as the former is interested in the mediations (such as rituals, symbolic images, and intermediary entities) that creative imagination reveals to the inner eye of the esotericist in order to reach God or a supernatural entity. The latter, on the contrary, is concerned with eliminating these mediations perceived as obstacles to union with the divine (Faivre 4–8). Furthermore, esotericism differs from occultism insofar as the second is a modern variant of the first “referring to the specifically French currents in the wake of Éliphas Lévi, flourishing in the ‘neo-martinist’ context of Papus and related manifestations of fin-de-siècle esotericism” (Hanegraaff 888).

Based on these terms and oppositions, one could infer that Strindberg developed an interest in occultism that lasted from his first contacts with theosophy in 1884 until the end of the *Inferno* period and his turn to mysticism in conjunction with his studies of Swedenborg and the writing of *Till Damaskus*. It would be misleading to consider him a practicing occultist if his relatively short period of active alchemical experiments in Paris in 1894–1896 is excluded. This view is corroborated by a series of other considerations. Strindberg showed little inclination toward the most ritualistic (and Crowley’s favorite) of the three traditional esoteric disciplines (i.e. magic). His interest in the works of Eliphas Lévi focused on *La clef des grands mystères* (1861) and on Lévi’s discussion of the astral body and astral plan (Carlson 199–202), but not on his far more practical *Dogme et rituel de haute magie* (1854–1856). Furthermore, although Strindberg claimed (through the protagonist of *Inferno*) to have studied black magic (*Inferno* 103) and briefly used the adjective “occultist” to describe himself (*Naturvetenskapliga* 456–7), there is good reason to believe that he never took a decisive step into magical practice. When he wrote his alchemical articles in *L’initiation*, he carried on a correspondence with its editor Gérard “Papus” Encausse, who had written extensively on magic. Encausse was also the leader of

*L'Ordre Martiniste*, but Strindberg was never initiated into this order and was harshly criticized for having, more or less openly, claimed to be a member (Gavel-Adams, "Guldmakaren" 140).<sup>6</sup>

Strindberg's interest in occultism and its expression in *Inferno* must, therefore, be put into its proper perspective. It was a personal and spiritual research that yielded him fruitful literary results, but he was not a fully committed occultist. It was also, to some extent, Strindberg's attempt to position himself in the French avant-garde. The rise of French occultism deeply inspired local artists and men of letters and towards the end of the 1800s it permeated a large sector of the French avant-garde, the symbolists *in primis*. The figure of the artist was often compared to that of the alchemist (Moffitt 13–63), and Strindberg's self-presentation as an alchemist in *Inferno* and other works, which culminated in his portrait as alchemist on the back cover of the Swedish edition of *Antibarbarus*, is entirely consistent with this view. For Strindberg, becoming "Ockultismens Zola" (*Brev* 307) [The Zola of occultism] meant being part of the avant-garde, but it was also a short and instrumental infatuation. In one important sense, in fact, *Inferno* was a marketing move, a "position-taking" (Bourdieu 214, 231–4) in the French literary field, an attempt to become part of the trend of novels with occult motives that had been growing in the country (Gavel-Adams, "Strindberg" 125–6). This was crucial for Strindberg in the 1890s when he was trying to present himself as a French, European writer as opposed to a "provincial" Swede.

*Inferno*'s ties to French occultism were surely evident to Crowley as many of the occultists he picks up (and dismisses) from the book were leading representatives of that movement. At the same time, Strindberg's scant knowledge of practical occultism glares through the pages of the book. The protagonist says that he has studied the methods of black magic but does not mention a single ritual he performs. On one occasion, he is even worried about having unwillingly and clumsily cast a spell on his wife's grandmother (*Inferno* 216). He often also refers to his contact with the French occultists but rarely elaborates on his involvement with them. Although Crowley's reading of *Inferno* is far from autobiographical, the fact that Strindberg mainly remained on

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6. According to *Inferno* (198), it was Strindberg who kept them at a distance with his resistance to any subordination to their societies, but this statement is clearly contradicted by the reprimand of the Martinists.

the boundaries of a mild occultism and mysticism affects the book's esoteric capital and explains in part Crowley's delusion. Crowley, who had been a practicing occultist almost since he first cultivated an esoteric interest, had little sympathy for amateurs. But was this the only reason for his dismissal of the occult choices of the protagonist?

## 5. STRINDBERG, CROWLEY, AND EUROPEAN OCCULTISM

As was just mentioned, Crowley's review of *Inferno* includes a list of occultists mentioned in the book, whom he dismisses one by one calling them "straws" at which the protagonist "clutches" when "his mental disease increases on him" (228). The first "straw," Gérard Encausse (Papus), was a physician and occultist who had co-founded, together with another "straw," the writer Joséphin Péladan, the *Ordre kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix* in 1888. Although at times Crowley seemed to have treated Encausse with respect, he later dismissed his and Péladan's Rosicrucian order as "lack[ing] full knowledge and authority" (*Magick* ch. 12, pt. 2). As for Annie Besant, the third "straw" and president of the Theosophical Society, Crowley simply considered her 1907 appointment as an "unscrupulous usurpation" (*Confessions* 847). In June 1913, shortly before writing the *Inferno* review, Crowley had harshly attacked Besant because she attempted to influence the election of the Grand Master of the Masonic Rite of Memphis and Mizraim and move it into the sphere of influence of the Theosophical Society (*Confessions* 760; "In Memoriam"; Kaczynski 262–3). Crowley's excoriation of these occultists from the book is evidently the basis of a personal polemic. This is particularly evident in the case of Péladan and Besant since Strindberg only briefly touches upon them at the end of *Inferno* (301). These two figures also had the disadvantage of being interested in Christian esotericism, a highly unfavorable characteristic in Crowley's eyes.

Strindberg was trapped in a row between British and French occultists as is evident in the publication history of *Inferno*. Rider was the official publisher of the esoteric scholar Arthur Edward Waite, who had been the first to recommend esoteric readings to Crowley as early as 1898 (Kaczynski 40–1). In spite of this early acquaintance, Waite came to be the object of frequent violent criticisms from Crowley, who did not hold his scholarship in great esteem. The main reasons were his Christian faith and his former membership of the Golden Dawn, which

Crowley considered to be full of "*poseurs* and *pretenders* to magical attainment" (Asprem 146, italics original). 1912 and 1913 saw the peak of a campaign Crowley waged against Waite, which included slander, a false obituary, and a slaughtering review of his translation of Lévi's *La clef des grands mystères*. Both articles were published in the same issue of *The Equinox* barely pages apart from the Strindberg reviews. In other words, it would have been difficult for a book published by Rider to win Crowley's favor at this juncture, and the *Inferno* review fitted perfectly into this integrated system of public slander. More generally, Crowley's attitude can be explained by his attempt, especially strong in 1913, to establish his position in the field of British occultism. Through *The Equinox*, he wanted to mark his distance and alleged superiority with respect to other occultists and especially the former members of the Golden Dawn (such as Waite and Encausse). Strindberg and *Inferno* found themselves squeezed in this struggle. If the book showed that Strindberg was just posturing in magical practice, his position in Crowley's eyes worsened as a result of his character's search of occult knowledge from precisely the occultists Crowley disdained and from whom he wanted to distance himself.

Another important point in Crowley's criticism concerns Swedenborg and the Roman Church. It is well known that the reading of Swedenborg, whom Strindberg discovered during his stay at the Uhl's home in Austria and took up again upon his settlement in Lund, was one of the crucial steps of his "rebirth" after the *Inferno* crisis. The last pages of *Inferno* (302–II) also show the main character's interest in Catholicism (filtered through Besant and Péladan), to which Strindberg also returned in the following years although he never converted. This turn to Christian mysticism must have deeply baffled Crowley, who since his years at the university had progressively abandoned the Christian education he had received from the Plymouth Brethren. As for Swedenborg, the fact that Crowley almost never mentions him in his works is indicative of his judgment. The only mention I have been able to trace is in the poem *The Sword of Song* (1904), where he calls Swedenborg an "idea-monger of Christianity," and, addressing him and other mystics, he laconically states: "I wish to unmask these people: I perfectly agree with nearly everything they say, but their claim to be Christians is utterly confusing, and lends a lustre to Christianity which is quite foreign" (III).

In reading the *Inferno* review in the light of *The Sword of Song*, it is tempting to draw a parallel between Crowley's judgment of the protagonist of the novel and the Swedish mystic. They both tried to be esotericists, and they both failed: the reason was their choice of the Christian religion. Christianity is the issue for which Crowley is most critical of Strindberg and *Inferno*. It is on this matter that he expresses his most radical views. This is also the point at which Strindberg and Crowley part ways as esotericists: while the former, already an amateur occultist, chose the way of Christian mysticism, the latter started a process of radicalization of his anti-Christian thought. In addition, one should not underestimate the threat that the Christian undertone of the end of *Inferno* could represent for Crowley in the British occult milieu. As Rider was presenting the book as an esoteric novelty, the process of the Christian redemption of the protagonist was a direct challenge to Crowley's own anti-Christian agenda and his plans for hegemony in the British occult milieu. Such a threat had to be crushed.

## 6. CROWLEY, STRINDBERG, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Crowley's final word on Strindberg seems to be one of dismissal, but a closer look at the review suggests it is more complex, especially if one bears in mind that Crowley's statements should never be taken at face value. He had—not unlike Strindberg—a highly contradictory personality with a strong tendency to “transformism” and to assume positions apparently impossible to reconcile with one another (Pasi, *Aleister Crowley* 49–50). If this tendency makes his writing and statements highly unreliable, it also opens the door to a range of different interpretations. In the following sections, I will address this problem by focusing on three main aspects of Crowley's review of *Inferno*, i.e. its autobiographical, scientific, and radical implications.

The review of *Inferno* openly questions one of two main assumptions of the British reception of Strindberg, i.e. the autobiographical nature of his works. Crowley seems very skeptical about this point and asks in the review “what sublime and septuple ass calls this Strindberg's autobiography? Strindberg was too lazy to find his incidents in other people's lives; that is all.” As he continues, the “chemical absurdities ... may have been made intentionally,” and the protagonist's visionary experiments contribute to the moulding of the character, who is “a melancholic

with delusions of persecution" ("Inferno" 228). Following Crowley's reasoning, one could argue that the character's frequent contradictions, varying moods, and questionable alchemical experiments (be it the product of Strindberg's conscious choice or not) are natural for the kind of weak and ignorant character the protagonist seems to be. Rather interestingly, Crowley's rejection of the autobiographical aspect of the novel seems to anticipate Olof Lagercrantz's reading of *Inferno* as a work of fiction, as the portrait of an "inner Strindberg" and not as a proper autobiography (336–9). According to Lagercrantz, *Inferno* is a sort of *mise en scène* of Strindberg's self that is masked by the illusion that the protagonist is the same person who wrote the scientific essays published in Strindberg's name. The protagonist, whom Lagercrantz calls "en arm stackare, vidskeplig, lättskräm" (337) [a poor weakling, superstitious, easily scared] is the same person suffering from "mental disease" whom Crowley criticizes. Furthermore, Lagercrantz points out that, unlike the protagonist, the narrator "har ett bröst så högt välvt att han förmår springa kapp med hästar och är modig och oförvägen" (337) [is puffing his chest out so much that he could challenge a horse to a race, he is brave and daring]. Crowley makes a similar point about the end of the book: "In this dementia the book ends. But Strindberg did not end. He went his cheerful and polygamous way as a free-thinker" ("Inferno" 228). Crowley, who knew well the psychological pressure and the possibly dangerous consequences of occult practice, does not find continuity between the protagonist's inner journey and Strindberg's post-*Inferno* life, and this fact causes the autobiographical aspect of the novel to collapse.

The same rejection of the work as autobiography is found in Crowley's review of *Son of a Servant*, which is a more conspicuously autobiographical book and was presented as such in the introduction to the Rider edition. In his review, which is little more than a satirical rewriting in dramatic form of two episodes from the book, Crowley criticizes Johan but does not make a single reference to the fact that he might be Strindberg. Instead, he ridicules him in ways similar to his approach to the protagonist of *Inferno*. He has "a soul of a servant" and suffers from victimization: "He is always being 'bullied' and treated with 'injustice,' however kind people are to him" (Crowley, "Son" 231). The choice of reviewing *Son of a Servant* in dramatic form serves to mock the protagonist, which in turn functions as a reprimand of his disciple Victor Neuburg. The dramatic form also fosters the idea of a *mise en*

*scène* of Strindberg's self through literature. As he does with *Inferno*, Crowley looks at *Son of a Servant* as a disguised fictional work.

This fictional aspect is also one of the reasons why Crowley, in the end, reappraises both books. The appreciation of *Inferno*'s narrative—especially of its rhythm—is evident in his summary of the plot in the review, and, as far as *Son of a Servant* is concerned, the review closes with a positive tone: "As the book consists of little else but episodes of this kind [i.e. of self-victimization], it will be seen that the entertained attention of the judicious reader need never flag" (Crowley, "Son" 232). At least, it seems, the book is entertaining.

## 7. *INFERNO* AND "SCIENTIFIC ILLUMINISM"

In the very last sentence of the *Inferno* review, Crowley states that "until Strindberg's life is utterly dissociated from his art, the latter will not be truly valued" (228). He does not directly say of what this "art" needing to be "valued" consists but gives some hints by insisting on the "scientific" qualities of Strindberg's narrative: *Inferno*, as he puts it, "is a perfect clinical picture of a typical case" (228). This opens the door for a reading of *Inferno* in the light of Crowley's occult thought of the period, i.e. his "scientific illuminism."

In late Victorian and Edwardian England, the rise of rationalism and scientific naturalism had not managed to establish a system of values strong enough to replace Christianity, which was undergoing a deep crisis caused by Darwinism and positivism. The result of this impasse left many unsatisfied with both religion and science. Christianity had been dismissed as irrational, but science alone did not manage to satisfy the spiritual exigencies of the individual (Pasi, "L'anticristianesimo" 52). It was in this spiritual gap that psychic research, spiritism, occultism, theosophy, and oriental philosophy gained ground in Europe. Crowley was not immune to this wind of change. As a student in Cambridge, he came into contact with scientific naturalism and agnosticism, and in 1900 during a stay in Ceylon, he started studying Buddhism, which he considered for a period a valid and "rational" alternative to Christianity (49–52). Such a series of events had two consequences: firstly, the exacerbation of his view of Christianity, and, secondly, the assimilation of the scientific method, to which he repeatedly returned in his occult studies and practices, especially those relating to magic (Asprem and Pasi, "Varieties").

This course was not uncommon among occultists at the turn of the century, who were profoundly preoccupied with the scientific aspect of their doctrines, a position not considered incompatible with their esoteric beliefs, but rather a necessary component. As had happened to Christianity, occultism was running the risk of lapsing into the irrational and being crushed by rationalism and scientific naturalism. Occultists tried, therefore, to gain a new legitimacy by insisting on their doctrines as rationally and scientifically acceptable (Pasi, *Aleister Crowley* 96).

The protagonist of *Inferno* also seems to be concerned with this particular aspect of occultism of the *fin de siècle*. This excerpt from the fourth chapter is exemplary:

*Initié dans les sciences naturelles depuis mon enfance, plutôt adhérent de Darwin, j'avais découvert l'insuffisance de cette méthode scientifique qui reconstruit la mécanisation de l'univers sans admettre le mécanicien. La faiblesse du système se révéla par une dégénération générale de la science qui s'était posé une ligne de démarcation au-delà de laquelle on ne devait avancer.... Or, cette année 1895 la découverte de l'Argon confirma mes suppositions préconçues, et donna un nouvel élan à mes recherches interrompues par un mariage étourdi. La science ne banquerouta pas, mais la science surannée, dénaturée fit faillite. (52)*

Dedicated from my childhood to the natural sciences, and later on a disciple of Darwin, I had discovered how unsatisfactory the scientific method is, which accepts the mechanism of the universe without presupposing a Mechanician. The weakness of the system showed itself in the gradual degeneration of science; it had marked off a boundary line over which one was not to step.... Now in this year, 1895, the discovery of argon has confirmed my former hypotheses, and given a fresh impulse to my investigations which had been interrupted by a foolish marriage. It is not Science which is bankrupt, only the antiquated, degenerate science. (28–9)

The excerpt is typical of the approach that brings the protagonist of *Inferno* to discover alchemy: behind his occult interest lies a *scientific* way of thinking. The protagonist seeks to demonstrate scientifically the presence of other elements in sulphur. This is a scientific as well as a spiritual process—a duality which is one of the pillars of alchemy. This aspect of *Inferno* can successfully be read autobiographically. Strindberg also sought a third way to resolve the struggle between science and religion, by using a scientific method to approach occult studies. He explained this in a 1896 letter to the Norwegian painter Frits Thaulow: “ [Jag] slutade ... med att bli ockultist; det vill säga: jag erhöill faktiska

bevis genom naturvetenskaperna, att själen var hufvudsaken, det materiella endast en tillfällig omklädnad, att vi voro odödliga, skapade, styrda efter en viss plan" (Strindberg, *Brev* 285) [(I) decided ... to become an occultist, which means that I, through the natural sciences, obtained factual evidence that the soul is the core, that the material world is barely an occasional covering, that we are immortal, created, controlled according to a given plan].<sup>7</sup>

Occultism was for Strindberg a *scientific* current focused on both spiritual life and humanity's place in the cosmos (*Inferno* 342), a discipline that allowed him to avoid the pitfalls of the "degenerate" science that does not "presuppose a Mechanician" (*The Inferno* 28) and that tried to explain scientifically the matters of the soul. This is the point where Strindberg's thought comes closest to Crowley's, who, while editing *The Equinox* (1909–1913), was as well experiencing a particularly fruitful moment in his scientific study of occultism, which he called "scientific illuminism." Quite programmatically, *The Equinox's* subtitle was "The Review of Scientific Illuminism," and the cover of each issue carried the motto "The Method of Science—the Aim of Religion." As Crowley—not without self-flattery—puts it in the *Confessions*,

*The Equinox* was the first serious attempt to put before the public the facts of occult science.... It was the first attempt in history to treat the subject with scholarship and from the standpoint of science. No previous book of its kind can compare with it for ... the rigidity of its rule never to make any statement which could not be proved as precisely as the mathematician exacts. (655–6)

This excerpt clearly shows that Crowley and Strindberg, in this respect, shared the same view on occultism. They surely differed in their intellectual grasp of the matter and in the outcome of their studies: the former rejected Christianity and devoted his whole life to occultism, the latter abandoned occult practice and embraced Swedenborgianism. They were, however, at the end of the day, fellow thinkers. *Inferno's* Christian threat and its "straws" had to be crushed, but Crowley's choice of reviewing Strindberg is an expression of interest in his work.

The praise of the scientific side of *Inferno* also opens the way for another reading. If *Inferno* is "a perfect clinical picture" of the "mental

7. In the same letter, Strindberg gives a (vague) definition of occultism as "studiet af alla de fenomen som ej kunnat förnekas, men icke heller kunnat förklaras" (*Brev* 285) [the study of all the phenomena which cannot be denied, but nevertheless remain inexplicable].

disease" of the protagonist, his clumsy esoteric studies and search for knowledge from charlatans end up ruinous for both him and his sources of inspiration, i.e. for Crowley's enemies. Here Crowley's rhetoric is perfect in its ambiguity: he dismisses his adversaries while at the same time saving the scientific foundation of Strindberg's esoteric approach, thus bringing grist to his own mill. Crowley's appreciation of Strindberg always goes hand in hand with his personal interests.

## 8. CROWLEY, STRINDBERG, AND RADICALISM

Through his years at Cambridge University and in the Golden Dawn, Crowley was gradually emancipated from his bourgeois background. This led him toward a critical attitude to his country and his society on both religious and political levels; he started developing radical points of view and found his arch enemy in Victorianism. Crowley's dismissal of Christianity went hand in hand with his disdain for Victorian morality, which he often and violently attacked. As he puts it in the *Confessions*, "To us Victoria was sheer suffocation. While she lived it would be impossible to take a single step in any direction. She was a huge and heavy fog; we could not see, we could not breathe" (214). Even in his satirical sketch of Johan in the review of *Son of a Servant*, where the boy pretends to know everything about Gustavus Adolphus and then cannot do other than insult him, Crowley's unseemly refusal of the authority shines brightly.<sup>8</sup>

Crowley's anti-Victorianism is evident in his reception of the works of another Scandinavian writer, Henrik Ibsen. The space of this article does not allow for an account of the frequent references to Ibsen's works in Crowley's writings, but a quick look at Ibsen's reception in Britain offers some good interpretive keys and parallels with Strindberg's. Ibsen's British reception, which reached its peak in the early 1890s,

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8. It would be tempting to elaborate on the parallelism between Crowley's and Johan's refusal of the traditional and patriarchal authority incarnated by the Swedish king and Queen Victoria. On this occasion, it might suffice to mention the episode of Crowley's discovery of Victoria's death. During a trip to Mexico in 1901, he and the mountain climber Oscar Eckenstein "went ... to pay our respects to [a] Jefe Politico.... When he saw us he assumed an air of sympathetic melancholy. We wondered what it could mean. By degrees he brought himself to break to us gently the terrible news. Queen Victoria was dead! To the amazement of the worthy mayor, we broke into shouts of joy and an impromptu war dance" (*Confessions* 214).

was polarized by a struggle between conservatism and radicalism. The "Ibsen controversy" of the early 1890s mainly focused on Ibsen's immoral and decadent—if not explicitly feminist, atheist, and socialist—views, most of which were little more than labels put on him by "Ibsenites" and "Ibsenophobics." On a broader scale, the reception by Ibsen was symptomatic of the struggle against the Victorian system of values, which would mount in Crowley a few years later. The British Ibsen was made an icon of this movement, and his critique of the European bourgeoisie was turned into a critique of Victorianism (Rem, *Henry* 17–38). For Crowley, Ibsen was an ally in his battle against Victorianism (*Confessions* 57, 440), a battle which he often turned into a derision of England and Englishmen—the "natural-born fools in all matters of the soul" (228), as he puts it in his review of *Inferno*. On the contrary, Ibsen "had realised the changed and infinitely more complex conditions of life; our self-appointed spiritual guides notwithstanding, or, rather, withstanding in vain" (Crowley, *Tannhäuser* XII).

Crowley's reception of Ibsen allowed for a positive reading of Strindberg, and the Swedish author had several advantages over Ibsen in the eyes of the English occultist. Strindberg had a clear interest in esotericism, which Ibsen did not share, and this interest was largely informed by science. Crowley's scientific illuminism was but another form of his revolt against the Christian religion and Victorian, bourgeois society: on the one hand, the application of the scientific method to occultism enabled him to overcome the pitfalls and dogmas of Christian transcendence. On the other hand, claiming the primacy of the scientific method in occult practice was a radical standpoint against a petit-bourgeois, amateurish approach to magic that he had experienced among the "muddled middle-class mediocrities" (*Confessions* 169) of the *Golden Dawn* (Asprem 146). In addition, Strindberg was a "freethinker" and had been married several times. For Crowley, freethinking and a libertine attitude were necessary conditions for spiritual and esoteric development. If being a freethinker was the first step in a personal release from the Christian yoke (and here Crowley positively assesses the fact that Strindberg never converted to Catholicism), polygamy was his preferred way of living and a way of magical practice. From 1912 on, in fact, Crowley dedicated almost his entire occult effort to experiments in and the practice of sexual magic with the assistance of a great number of lovers and adepts of both sexes. Rather obviously, such experimental and magical sexual activity went hand in hand with a liberation from

Christian and Victorian morality. Crowley obviously did not view Strindberg's turbulent series of marriages and relationships (on which he had probably received first hand and biased information from Frida Uhl) as practices of sexual magic, but he supported it as a way of living. Crowley's remark on Strindberg's freethinking and multiple marriages also supports his anti-autobiographical reading of *Son of a Servant* and *Inferno*. The protagonist of *Inferno* might well have "converted" to Swedenborgianism, but, judging from Strindberg's later life, Crowley does not seem inclined to believe that this would be the case for the Swedish author as well. This is also evident in the exclamation "There is no God!" ("Son" 232) that Crowley puts in Johan's mouth at the end of his rewriting of a scene from *Son of a Servant*. The exclamation, which is not present in the book, gives the passage a marked atheism. Crowley's skepticism about the authenticity of Strindberg's Christian faith is what, in the end, saves Strindberg's reputation in his eyes: he might have been an amateur occultist, he might have liked Swedenborg, but at least he did not become a fervent Christian like his fictive character in *Inferno*.

Crowley's judgment of Strindberg is ultimately, thus, more positive than what appears in the *Inferno* review. Strindberg's scientific approach to occultism and his free way of thinking were elements that made him a fellow thinker. If the protagonist's weakness and scant knowledge of occultism failed to convince Crowley, this does not diminish the importance of Strindberg for Crowley's esoteric and radical agenda. The harsh criticisms contained in the review must not be misunderstood as signs of dismissal—Crowley's contradictory nature did not distinguish between slander and appreciation—but as reprimands to an ally in the same battle. In 1912 and 1913, while Crowley was busy editing *The Equinox* and quarreling with most of the French and British occultists, a great stir against Strindberg was mounting in the British press. As a result of the posthumous wave of translations Strindberg was constantly being attacked for being a misogynist and for the "brutality," "fury," and "filth" of his books (Ewbank 24). These remarks could not have done other than appeal to Crowley, whom British tabloids would later dub "the wickedest man in the world" (Kaczynski 394). If Christianity brought him away from Crowley, Strindberg's "malaise ... soul-searching, [and] psychological dissatisfaction" (*Confessions* 104) still came from a kindred soul in the spiritual and intellectual development of "a man who sought to be a Prophet for a time that would have none" (Sutin 419).

## APPENDIX

■ Aleister Crowley. Rev. of Claud Field, trans., *The Inferno and The Son of a Servant*, by August Strindberg. *The Equinox* 1.10 (1913): 227–8, 231–2. © 2012 by Ordo Templi Orientis. Reprinted by permission.

*The Inferno. By August Strindberg. Translated by Claud Field.  
William Rider & Son.*

I have already had to speak to publishers about cheap production. In this case I must protest emphatically against the employment of a translator who makes a solecism nearly every time he touches Paris.

E.G. “northern railway station” for “Gare du Nord,” “Lilas brewery” for “Closerie des Lilas,”<sup>10</sup> “St. Martin’s Gate” for “Porte St. Martin,”<sup>11</sup> “Rue de Fleurs” for “Rue des Fleurs,”<sup>12</sup> “racecourse” for some unindicated part of the Jardin du Luxembourg,<sup>13</sup> “churchyard” of Montparnasse for “cemetery,”<sup>14</sup> “exhibition of independent artists” for “Salon des Independents,”<sup>15</sup> “Bullier’s dancing saloon” for “Bal Bullier,”<sup>16</sup> “Lyons Bank” for “Credit Lyonnais,”<sup>17</sup> “St. Germain des Pres” for “St. Germain des Pres,”<sup>18</sup> “Dr. Popus” for “Dr. Papus,”<sup>19</sup> “Rue de Madame” for “Rue Madame,”<sup>20</sup> and so on.

He puts the same place-name — first in translation, then in French, again and again; and as often as not gets both wrong!

The constant chemical absurdities are perhaps Strindberg’s own and may have been made intentionally, as the book portrays the ravings of a melancholic with delusions of persecution.

9. See p. 7 in the English version and p. 8 in the French version of *Inferno* (from now on, separated by a slash).

10. 11/14. The French text actually reads “Brasserie des Lilas.”

11. 19/26.

12. 23/32. Crowley also makes a mistake, as the correct spelling is “rue de Fleurus.”

13. 44/34. Crowley is wrong again, as “racecourse” is a correct translation of “lice.”

14. 26/38.

15. 42/74.

16. 44/78.

17. 65/112.

18. 66/114.

19. 71/122.

20. 82/138. See also section 3 above.

What sublime and septuple ass calls this Strindberg's autobiography? Strindberg was too lazy to find his incidents in other people's lives; that is all.

And yet we find the translator note at the end: "Strindberg never actually entered the Roman Church"!!!

The book is a perfect clinical picture of a typical case. Chapter I describes the irritability, the fantastic dreams. He imagines himself a great author, a great chemist. He has found carbon in sulphur; he will make gold.

In Chapter II he begins to see omens in simple incidents, receives "warnings" from strangers, finds a plot against him at his hotel, notices remarkable resemblances between his neighbours and some of his "persecutors."

Chapter III develops the persecution-delusions. Roaring in the ears, electric shocks, and other physical symptoms develop. The bedstead has knobs like those of a leyden jar, the spring mattress suggests induction coils, and so on—to the end!

For refuge he ranges from Papus to Swedenborg, and ultimately, as his mental disease increases on him, he clutches at such straws as P[é]ladan, Annie Besant, and the Church of Rome.

In this dementia the book ends. But Strindberg did not end. He went his cheerful and polygamous way as a free-thinker. Persons who pretend otherwise are liars, probably hired liars—unless, of course, they are Englishmen, who are such natural-born fools in all matters of the soul that they not only require no bribe to lie, but can hardly be paid to see truth.<sup>21</sup>

Until Strindberg's life is utterly dissociated from his art, the latter will not be truly valued.

A.C.

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21. At this point in the text, the manuscript of the review in Crowley's hand preserved at the Warburg Institute in London contains the following passage, which does not appear in the printed version. "If Strindberg knew all this science, how does it come that he thinks F and S are the chemical symbols of iron and silicium?" Crowley evidently decided to leave out an attack on Strindberg's "chemical absurdities", although he also makes a mistake, which he later crosses out. In fact, while the symbol for iron is Fe and not F, S is the right symbol for sulphur (which Strindberg refers to on p. 38/68) and not of silicium. In this passage, furthermore, the protagonist does not seem to "think" that F is the symbol for iron, but rather suggests a mere analogy between the letter F and its chemical symbol.

*The Son of a Servant. By August Strindberg. [Translated by Claud Field.] William Rider & Son.*

Why not "The Soul of a Servant"? The hero is a sort of Scandinavian Neuburg.<sup>22</sup> He is always being "bullied" and treated with "injustice," however kind people are to him. Here are two cases, accurately taken from the book, but rendered in dialogue.

*I. In class:*

MASTER. What do you know of Gustavus Adolphus?

BOY [*with gloomy pride that he knows all about G.A.*]. R—r—r—gr!

MASTER. Come now, surely you don't mind telling us something about him.

BOY [*stung to madness by this senseless torture*]. I know *all* about Gustavus Adolphus.

MASTER. Well, that's splendid. Let's see now, who was he?

BOY [*beyond himself*]. Tyrant! Monster! Brute! White slaver! Mar—con—ee!<sup>23</sup>

*II. In the family circle:*

JOHN [*to his brother*]. Now, Albert, I should like *you* to take some flowers to Mother for a present.

ALBERT. All right. [*They enter shop.*]

JOHN. Here's the money.

ALBERT. All right. [*They reach home.*]

JOHN. Now you go in all by yourself and say, "Here are some flowers for you, Mother." I will wait outside.

ALBERT. All right. [*Within.*] Here are some flowers for you, Mother!

MOTHER. Oh, thank you, Albert, how beautiful!

FATHER. Very kindly thought of, my son!

22. Crowley refers to his disciple and lover, the poet Victor Neuburg, with whom he had an often tense relationship. In this particular period, Neuburg was trying to recover from the suicide of another lover of his, actress Ione de Forest (pseudonym of Jeanne Heyse), to whom he dedicated the poem with the Strindberg reference (see section 3). Heyse's death caused a temporary break with Crowley, who, knowing well how to be brutal with his disciple, did not miss the opportunity to tease him. Eventually, Neuburg convinced himself that Crowley had "magically" pushed Heyse to commit suicide and broke with his master in 1914 (Kaczynski 256–7, 275–6).

23. See pp. 76–7 in the English version and p. 51 in the Swedish version of *Tjänstekvinnans son*. Strindberg's original text actually mentions Gustav I and not Gustav II Adolf, but this might have originated from an interference from the translation's source text, which was not likely to have been the Swedish original.

JOHN. Oh! the black blind hideous horrible injustice of it all! [*With conviction.*] There is no God!<sup>24</sup>

As the book consists of little else but episodes of this kind, it will be seen that the entertained attention of the judicious reader need never flag.

A.C.

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24. 97-8/64-5.

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