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**An Exploration of Aleister Crowley's  
Autobiographical Portrayal of His  
Relationship with Nature**

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## Introduction

Lambasted by the *Daily Mail* as 'the worst man in the world', a reputation it claims he carried 'for nearly half a century', Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) remains a controversial figure.<sup>1</sup> He was an English occultist, a self-proclaimed devotee to the study and practice of what he termed 'Magick', 'the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in Conformity with Will'.<sup>2</sup> Born amidst the 'occult revival', a late nineteenth-century renewal of interest in 'rejected knowledge', Crowley found sincere resonance with the spiritual alternatives of the day, rejecting the so-called 'nightmare world' of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Thus, after a brief membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an organisation centred around the practice of ceremonial magic, he thrust himself into a 'career' of the 'spirit life', one that would consume his attention for the remainder of his life.<sup>4</sup> However, his heroin addiction, the self-imposed title of 'the Beast whose number is 666', and his 'immoral' sexual transgressions based on 'sex magick' all led to acrimonious public criticism, engendering a notorious reputation that still reverberates today.<sup>5</sup>

In recent decades Crowley has aroused the interest of distinguished historians, moving beyond the condemnatory views found in the *Daily Mail* or other tabloids of the day. Identified as an influence in the formation of neo-paganism, Satanism, and modern magic, he is often introduced as 'one of the main figures in the history of English occultism', a consistent feature in historical studies revolving around Western esotericism.<sup>6</sup> A recent collaboration of well-respected academics even created an anthology titled *Aleister Crowley and Western*

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Ramsey, 'Worst man in the world', *Daily Mail*, 2 December 1947. Daily Mail Historical Archive.

<sup>2</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Book Four: Liber Aba: Part III: Magick in Theory and Practice*, 2nd rev. ed. (ed. Hymenaeus Beta; San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC, 1997 [1913]), 126.

<sup>3</sup> James Webb, *The Occult Underground* (La Salle: Open Court, 1974), 191; Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography* (eds. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant; London: Arkana Penguin Books, 1989 [1969]), 75.

<sup>4</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 469.

<sup>5</sup> Crowley, *Book*, 125; Henrik Bogdan, 'Challenging the Morals of Western Society: The Use of Ritualized Sex in Contemporary Occultism', *The Pomegranate*, 8 (2006), 215; Roger Hutchinson, *Aleister Crowley: The Beast Demystified* (London: Mainstream Publishing Company Ltd, 1998), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 1. See also Henrik Bogdan, 'The Influence of Aleister Crowley on Gerald Gardner and the Early Witchcraft Movement' in Murphy Pizza and James Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 82; Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 14; Asbjørn Dyrendal, 'Satan and the Beast' in Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (eds.), *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 371.

*Esotericism*, denoting his involvement and impact within categories ranging from tantra to Freemasonry.<sup>7</sup> Beyond metaphysical concerns, biographers have especially toiled to uncover Crowley's diverse activities, mostly framing him as a 'mountaineer, poet, lover, and hunter'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, his mountaineering feats – including expeditions to K2 and Kanchenjunga – have stimulated notice outside of the mentioned field. For instance, in *Ghosts of K2*, a compilation of past efforts to scale the second highest mountain in the world, Mick Conefrey dedicates a chapter to Crowley's efforts, testifying to the impressive (albeit unsuccessful) strides made with scant and primitive equipment.<sup>9</sup> In a movement towards his 'demystification', to borrow Roger Hutchinson's phrase, such works boost an understanding of this multifaceted figure, finding him worthy of attention for reasons that transcend vitriolic headlines.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the traction made, having uncovered distinct details of Crowley's life work and personality, as Marco Pasi notes, 'a considerable amount of research remains to be done'.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the topics specified, a minimal amount of energy has been devoted to a particular aspect of his life: his relationship with nature. To avoid conceptual difficulties, it must be stressed that 'nature' is employed here to denote 'the environment and its various non-human forms of life', or more specifically 'places and geographical features [...], environmental conditions [...]; and flora and fauna'.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding Crowley's statements that the natural world formed some of the 'deepest impressions of [his] life', having 'loved nature as a refuge from mankind', this relationship has been brushed to the wayside.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, although scholars have offered commentary on his mountaineering quests, they largely fail to observe Crowley's regard of the mountains in question, let alone the meaning of the interaction. This dissertation strives to fill this gap, a subtle but important lacuna in the

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<sup>7</sup> Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (eds.), *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Israel Regardie, *The Eye in the Triangle: An Interpretation of Aleister Crowley* (Las Vegas: Falcon Press, 1989), 275; Tobias Churton, *Aleister Crowley: The Biography: Spiritual Revolutionary, Romantic Explorer, Occult Master — and Spy* (London: Watkins Publishing, 2011), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Mick Conefrey, *Ghosts of K2: The Race for the Summit of the World's Most Deadly Mountain* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2016), 1-20.

<sup>10</sup> Hutchinson, *Aleister*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Marco Pasi, 'The Neverendingly Told Story: Recent Biographies of Aleister Crowley', *Aries*, 3 (2003), 226.

<sup>12</sup> Katie Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), 2; Irwin Altman and Martin M. Chemers, *Culture and Environment* (Monterey: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1980), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 262, 75.

documentation of Crowley's life and character. In short, it is a micro-study of Crowley's public relationship with nature; an investigation into its description through one of his most cited works, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography* (hereafter *Confessions*). The word 'relationship' is ubiquitous, yet not always clearly defined; thus, in this context, it is used to express Crowley's presented regard and behaviour towards the natural world; his connection.<sup>14</sup>

### *Historiography*

It is first necessary to substantiate the claim that the existing historiography has fallen short in an exploration of Crowley's relationship with nature. Of the literature reviewed, any of the few observations made appear vague and simplistic, merely serving as a background to the broader narrative at hand. This is true of some of the most prominent biographies. Crowley's literary executioner and first noted biographer, John Symonds, solely mentions that he tried to kill a cat in 'nine barbaric ways', that he pursued dishonourable hunting tactics, and was left unfazed by the 'African heaven', '[having] been beneath this sky before'.<sup>15</sup> Though a confrontational portrait when combined, Symonds poses no clear judgement on Crowley's interaction with nature. Rather, the remarks seem to further what some scholars regard as an inherently 'hostile and sensational' account, a compelling but disproportionate focus on Crowley's 'negative traits'.<sup>16</sup> Though diverting from this view, Tobias Churton is likewise fleeting, proposing that '[s]taggering at the awesome Baltoro Glacier on 9 June, Crowley's spiritual nature asserted itself'.<sup>17</sup> Richard Kaczynski gives a cursory mention to the idea that he 'greeted the Baltoro Glacier with awe', while Israel Regardie, Crowley's former secretary, casually reports that he had an 'undying love of the sand and desert'.<sup>18</sup> Gerald Suster and Lawrence Sutin's respective studies exclude any conspicuous details altogether.<sup>19</sup> In essence,

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<sup>14</sup> This definition is informed by the assessment of 'relationship' in Donald C. Lee, 'On the Marxian View of the Relationship between Man and Nature', *Environmental Ethics*, 2 (1980), 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> John Symonds, *The Great Beast: The Life and Magick of Aleister Crowley* (London: MacDonald, 1971), 11, 60, 101.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 180; Pasi, *Aleister*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Churton, *Aleister*, 82

<sup>18</sup> Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Revised and Expanded Edition) (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010 [2002]), 103; Regardie, *The Eye*, 277.

<sup>19</sup> Gerald Suster, *The Legacy of the Beast: The Life, Work and Influence of Aleister Crowley* (London: W. H. Allen, 1988); Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002).

this leaves two caricatures: Crowley displayed a sadistic desire to subjugate nature; or, he was stunned. Neither angles show nuance in their account; nor do they provide a sustained analysis. As such, it is almost misleading to handle such statements as though they were representative of a formed judgement.

If taking the genre 'biography' as 'a chronicle of social as well as personal events and circumstances', this strain of scholarship might be explained.<sup>20</sup> When seen as a 'chronicle', a critical evaluation does not necessarily fall within the biographers' scope, driven by narrative rather than assessment, thus making it unjust to critique Symonds, Churton, Kaczynski or Regardie on these grounds. Nevertheless, owing to Robert Lanning's view that biographers 'frame' and 'elucidate' historical figures, their selection and omission of material prove essential, influencing the final projection of the subject.<sup>21</sup> Selecting some details over others, biographers have the power to dictate what minor and consequential technicalities come to light, shaping the perceptions of academics and enthusiasts alike.

Perhaps because of this, the remaining historiography does not fare much better. As stated earlier, the general focus revolves around Crowley's engagement with esotericism, diverting away from peripheral matters. Even scholars concerning his contributions to neo-paganism, a religion with nature at its essence, grant almost no comment.<sup>22</sup> More than some, Ronald Hutton flirts with the idea that Crowley aspired to 'restore paganism in a purer form', but then moves swiftly on, prioritising a comprehensive survey of his effect on modern developments of paganism instead.<sup>23</sup> A perpetuation of themes thus seems to have been established, ones that run at the expense of contemplating Crowley's relationship with nature; a pattern that this study sets to suspend.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Lanning, *The National Album: Collective Biography and the Formation of the Canadian Middle Class* (Toronto: Carleton University Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Lanning, *The National*, 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Charlotte Hardman and Graham Harvey, *Paganism Today* (London: Thorsons, 1995); Ronald Hutton, 'Crowley and Wicca' in Bogdan and Starr (eds.), *Aleister*, 286.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph*, 178.



## Methodology

To inquire into Crowley's depicted relationship with nature, this dissertation conducts a close textual analysis on Crowley's eminent autobiography: *Confessions*, a personal account of his life up until May 1923 (the time of its writing). It awards a repository of commentaries concerning his interaction with the natural environment, predominantly interweaved amongst descriptions of his travels to Mexico, India, Burma and China (1900-1905) and his mountaineering exploits. Forming much of the backbone of current scholarship, the text lends itself as a fruitful source for deconstruction. It does not offer historical fact, especially due to Crowley's renowned inclination to 'self-aggrandizement'.<sup>24</sup> Yet, it provides the opportunity to interpret his autobiographical persona, informed by the view that the 'meaning of an autobiography [...] does not depend on its factual veracity', but rather its insight into self-representation.<sup>25</sup> Effectively, the use of his autobiography performs a dual function: the possibility to delve into his presented relationship with nature, but also how this portrayal mediates his projection of self, an issue taken up in the first chapter. For this reason, it proves of merit to treat *Confessions* in isolation; to immerse into his autobiographical personality, adopting a related inquiry into how, as Paul Ricoeur puts forth, narrative links to the 'constitution of self', in this case, the public self.<sup>26</sup> Owing to this, it is precisely the traditionally limiting feature of autobiographies, the infiltration of subjectivity, that is rewarding here.

An integration of his essays, novels, poetry collections, landscape paintings and archival documents would, no doubt, enrich the conversation, exposing the modulations, shift in persona, and ultimately securing more definitive answers about his connection with nature. Indeed, this dissertation is inherently limited. It is symptomatic of F. Ankersmit's critique of 'postmodernist historiography', the supposed inquiry into isolated 'scraps' of history instead

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<sup>24</sup> Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 165; See also Hutchinson, *Aleister*, 106; Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Elbaz, *The Changing Nature of the Self: A Critical Study of the Autobiographical Discourse* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 6. See also John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*, 6th ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 77; Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (trans. Kathleen Blamey; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 114.

of, to borrow his metaphor, carrying an awareness of the entire 'tree or [...] the branches'.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it fails to incorporate the whole. This research is a secluded fragment, lacking enough perspective to truly ascertain wider trends, or to promote a fulfilling rendition of Crowley's relationship with the natural environment; it is reduced to deductions about his public, autobiographical portrayal. Thus, the discussion is solely reflective of the time of writing; it is bound to Crowley's lens, given that, as he communicates, 'through the glasses of memory, one can analyse oneself beyond one's protestations'.<sup>28</sup> In this, its horizon is finite, a mere twig or leaf on Ankersmit's tree of history.

To counteract its specificity, this study aspires to maintain sight of the broader contours of the social and cultural landscape, to amalgamate the 'scraps', the 'tree' and the 'branches' into one. Though upholding respect for Ankersmit's reflection, it intends to display the profit of the 'scraps' of history: if biographies defend the 'belief in the singularity and significance of an individual's life and his contribution to history', whilst microhistory accentuates the importance of 'exemplariness', it merges the two.<sup>29</sup> It embraces a cautious approach, for as Carlo Ginzburg rightly contends, 'the results obtained in a microscopic sphere cannot be automatically transferred to a macroscopic sphere', lacking representativeness.<sup>30</sup> It can, however, unearth illuminating revelations, ones that further a diminutive, but no less weighty historical understanding.

### *Dissertation Plot*

Having stated these caveats, this dissertation adopts a tripartite structure, the content of which is steered by three major themes. Though other areas of Crowley's public relationship with nature could certainly be dealt with, these have been selected in response to the content of *Confessions*, arguably being the rudimentary features that arise. The first section dissects the importance of aesthetic considerations to Crowley's portrayed engagement with nature,

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<sup>27</sup> F. R. Ankersmit, 'Historiography and Postmodernism', *History and Theory* 28 (1989), 149.

<sup>28</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 308.

<sup>29</sup> Jill Lepore, 'Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography', *The Journal of American History*, 88 (2001), 133.

<sup>30</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (trans.), 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It', *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1993), 33.

investigating the imprint of its discussion on his autobiographical self-portrait. The second contemplates how, when analysing his discourse and behaviour, mastery surfaces as being a chief component, drawing upon potential resemblances with his cultural context. The third judges the importance of enchantment to his public connection with the natural environment, specifically looking at nature as an enchanted force. Considering the section's focus on 'enchantment', it proves pertinent to interrogate the postulation that, the 'program of the Enlightenment' – the rationalisation that penetrated the heart of Europe during the eighteenth century – resulted in nature's 'disenchantment'.<sup>31</sup> Namely, it triggered the elimination of fanciful thinking, a perspective that the content of *Confessions* can be used to undermine. The concerns of this dissertation are thus three-fold. It strives to examine some of the fundamental components of Crowley's depicted relationship with nature, accounting for an understated facet of his autobiographical description; the significance of its analysis in making discoveries, principally regarding his public character; and, in the final section, its value in challenging existing scholarship.

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<sup>31</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. John Cumming; London: Verso, 1997 [1944]), 3.

## Chapter One: 'Aesthetic Considerations'

In the earlier part of *Confessions*, Crowley mentions '[i]t was for purely aesthetic considerations that I climbed the gullies of Tryfan and Twell Du' in Wales, forging a discernible link between 'aesthetic considerations' and his engagement with nature.<sup>32</sup> This chapter evaluates the significance of 'aesthetic considerations' — narrowed down to the contemplation of beauty — in Crowley's portrayed relationship with the natural world. Likewise, it questions the merits of such an analysis; guided by ecocritic Peter Perreten's perception of a 'symbiotic relationship of self-portrait/place portrait', it assesses how Crowley's presentation of the given 'place portrait' informs his 'self-portrait'.<sup>33</sup> Though speaking in the context of an 'eco-autobiography', an account of a person's life in relation to the ecological context, Perreten's concept is illuminating in this context. It provides a glimpse into how investigating an autobiographical portrayal of a subject's connection with nature might unveil valuable processes of self-representation.

A 'dialogic analysis' (the assessment of content and structure of a narrative) highlights the prominence of 'aesthetic considerations' to Crowley's portrayed relationship with nature.<sup>34</sup> As cited above, he claims that it was for 'purely aesthetic considerations' that he pursued an interaction on one occasion, stressing some of 'my happiest moments were [...] on the mountains', being partly due to '[t]he beauty of form and colour'.<sup>35</sup> Nature's 'beauty' is emphasised as being a central theme to his regard of the natural environment, emphasised in the statement 'I always yearned for the beauty of nature', almost implying that this feature partially dictated his connection.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, his observations seem to revolve around appreciating nature's appearance: he touches on the 'magnificent spectacle of the cliffs of Scaffel' (Scotland), the splendid 'flowers and trees in Kashmir' (then India), whilst noting that '[t]he valley [of Kangchenjunga] was gorgeously wild' (India).<sup>37</sup> Hundreds of pages separate each remark, relating to distinct geographical locations; thus, they can be viewed as being

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<sup>32</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Peter F. Perreten, 'Eco-Autobiography: Portrait of Place/Self Portrait', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 18 (2003), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Catharine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 213.

<sup>35</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 100; 287; 431. For more examples see 201, 290, 299, 311, 423, 627, 719.

more than a singular offhanded observation, an expression of repeated reflections. Combined, the content and structure imply that the appraisal of aesthetics was a hallmark of his relationship with nature, testifying to its centrality in his represented connection.

The above descriptions seem to relay a sense of admiration, fairly permeated by a respect for the landscape's beauty. In some ways, it aligns with the second camp of historiography discussed in the Introduction, namely the scholars that position him as having been stunned by the natural world. Yet, this dissertation contends that it would be reductive to minimise Crowley's portrayed relationship with nature to an awe-inspired connection. He declares emphatically 'I could never tolerate smooth, insipid beauty', having 'despised the tame scenery of the Swiss lakes'.<sup>38</sup> This takes the form of an opinionated evaluation, rather than unconditional praise. Likewise, he complains that marches to Skardu (a valley in what was then India) '[were] made detestable by the utter monotony and ugliness of the landscape', later criticising the Rocky Mountains as 'shapeless' and 'unpleasing'.<sup>39</sup> Instead of being struck by awe, he surfaces as a nature critic of sorts, analysing its appearance and evaluating its effect. Therefore, it proves inadequate to treat his represented relationship with nature fleetingly, as has previously been executed, for it renders an incomplete picture. Crowley's tone of repulsion insinuates that it is 'considerations' of aesthetics that is important to his public connection with nature, not merely reverence. 'Aesthetic considerations' are presented as having altered his regard of the natural world. Thus, this element appears crucial, transforming the portrayed relationship as a consequence.

Crowley even establishes conditions to observe nature's full beauty, further promoting that 'aesthetic considerations' was fundamental to his depicted connection. Asserting that '[t]he fantastic beauty of the cliffs can never be understood by anyone who has not grappled with them', he advertises immersion as being prerequisite to comprehending its 'fantastic beauty'.<sup>40</sup> Such a statement suggests previous rumination and a systematic contemplation of aesthetics. By putting forward this requirement, therefore, the importance of beauty is

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<sup>38</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 292, 502.

<sup>40</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 95.

brought to the fore, but also 'aesthetic considerations' to his projected regard of nature. When blending this feature with his reviews of the pleasing and displeasing landscapes, 'aesthetic considerations' seem integral to his characterisation of his relationship with the natural environment.

It is here that Perreten's model of a 'symbiotic relationship of self-portrait/place portrait' can be applied, providing rewarding glances into threads of Crowley's self-representation. Advocating that 'mountain scenery of any kind [...] depends largely on [the] foreground' experienced through mountaineering, Crowley reduces the common person's ability to fathom 'mountain scenery', especially in light of the idea that '[t]he sport of chalk-cliff climbing is esoteric'.<sup>41</sup> Such an activity requires leisure time and skill, both of which are confined to the elite. Hence, according to Crowley's criteria, 'few men know what a view can be'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, perhaps symbolic of his zeal for esoteric knowledge, he haughtily proposes that '[t]he ordinary man looking at a mountain is like an illiterate person confronted with a Greek manuscript', whilst he was supposedly endowed with the 'intimate knowledge of [its] meaning'.<sup>43</sup> Thus, it is implied that he was part of the enlightened 'few', obtaining a unique capacity to appreciate nature's beauty accordingly. That being so, his commentary on the 'aesthetic considerations' of nature, or 'place portrait', correspondingly alters his 'self-portrait'. The 'ordinary man' is drawn as a dilettante, Crowley an expert, insinuating a level of superiority and distinctiveness. In turn, this testifies to the importance of exploring his representation of his connection with the natural world. It offers an insight into the subtle personalities that come across in his self-description, in this case being that of the master, an insight into the nuances incorporated into his projected persona.

To build on this, an interaction between his 'self-portrait' and 'place-portrait' is further exemplified when noticing how his portrayed regard of nature facilitates the exhibition of literary skill, or rather, desirable traits. For example, through denoting lightning as a 'kaleidoscopic network of flame', he displays mellifluous eloquence; speaking of '[t]he

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<sup>41</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 95; Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 33-4.

<sup>42</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 331.

<sup>43</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 95.

magnificent mountain air, the splendour of the sun, a flamboyant beauty of the flowers', he shows apt handling of a simile; and ultimately, his rendition of the 'berry purple of the cloud' demonstrates an inventive metaphor.<sup>44</sup> Such descriptions reify his claims to a 'poetical gift', conveying how a 'place-portrait' might foster a flattering 'self-portrait'.<sup>45</sup> Further, it insinuates a degree of heightened sensitivity, both to language and his surroundings. The belief that '[a]utobiographers seek to persuade readers that they possess desirable characteristics' could imply that this was a deliberate process, the intentional use of nature's aesthetics to flaunt prowess.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, it would be a tenuous conclusion. This dissertation does not seek to advance that Crowley consciously capitalised on nature in this manner, but rather that the latter lends itself as a stage on which the artist can perform. In essence, it upholds Mark Allister's development that 'writing self and writing nature are intertwined', or at least they can be.<sup>47</sup> Therefore evaluating Crowley's autobiographical description of his relationship with nature, as guided by 'aesthetic considerations', surfaces as being notable for two reasons. It elucidates nature's organic role in contributing to identity construction; but critically, it reveals a new aspect of Crowley's autobiographical self-description, his public image as defined by his interaction with nature. Though a fraction, this supplements existing knowledge regarding his multifarious character. It provides an avenue to explore the alternative and subtle aspects, a process that seems necessary when considering Tobias Churton's contention that 'Crowley's reputation has distorted his history'.<sup>48</sup>

To recognise the importance of this particular fragment of Crowley's autobiographical self-portrait, it is essential to appreciate further his contemporary characterisation, one that impressed itself onto the popular imagination. According to Marco Pasi, Crowley 'came to be the most hated and vilified man in his own country', subject to the furore of the press on several occasions.<sup>49</sup> Though it would be difficult to prove that he was the 'most', the

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<sup>44</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 100, 211, 812.

<sup>45</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 273.

<sup>46</sup> Diane Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>47</sup> Mark Christopher Allister, *Refiguring the Map of Sorrow: Nature Writing and Autobiography* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 28. Though Crowley does not adhere to 'writing nature' in the strictest sense, the essence of this statement can still be applied.

<sup>48</sup> Churton, *Aleister*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Pasi, 'The Neverendingly Told Story', 224.

newspaper *John Bull* certainly launched a vitriolic attack on his person and activities just preceding *Confessions*' writing (May 1923). It dubbed him 'The King of Depravity' (10th March 1923), 'A Wizard of Wickedness' (17th March 1923), 'The Wickedest Man in the World' (24th March 1923), and 'A Cannibal at Large' (7th April 1923).<sup>50</sup> In other words, he was the embodiment of evil, a caricature that scholars note as having had an enduring effect on his contemporary public reception, and continues to do so.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, nearly eighty years later, Crowley featured as 'The Wickedest Man in the World' in the BBC 4's *Masters of the Darkness*.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the power of one news outlet's headlines is manifest, engraving its mark on his classification, a mark that Hugh Urban claims he 'seemed to delight in'.<sup>53</sup>

The personal attributes that emerge from Crowley's 'aesthetic considerations' seem far removed from this nefarious figure, hinting at the importance of the former's discussion. His descriptions of 'noble and beautiful' landscapes, a supposed heightened reception of nature's beauty, and displays of poetic prowess all support the interpretation that he was 'a poet, and very sensitive', not the epitome of moral degradation.<sup>54</sup> Although being a fractional portion of his autobiographical self-portrait, it proves an interesting variant, a departure from his contemporary and enduring characterisation. Indeed, when guided by the view that 'autobiographical acts involve narrators "identifying" themselves to the reader', these nuances become part of his self-description, a description that deviates from the sensationalist-driven perception of his public façade.<sup>55</sup> Thus, an exploration of his presented relationship with nature – and indeed the synergy between his 'self-portrait/place portrait' – proves significant. It provides the tools to inquire into the intricate, and perhaps contradictory, elements of his projected personality, features that might otherwise be eclipsed. Though by no means representative of his public persona in general, its investigation

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<sup>50</sup> Taken from the manuscripts of *John Bull* articles in Anon, 'Aleister Crowley in the Public's Eye', *Red Flame: A Thelemic Research Journal*, 9 (2001), 58, 61, 64, 67.

<sup>51</sup> Hutchinson, *Aleister*, 183; Suster, *The Legacy*, 84; Owen, *The Place*, 186.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Wickedest Man in the World', *Masters of the Darkness*. Channel4, 19 February 2002, online video recording <<https://archive.org/details/AleisterCrowley-MastersOfDarkness>> [accessed 15 March 2019].

<sup>53</sup> Hugh Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 199.

<sup>54</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 201; Regardie, *The Eye*, 183.

<sup>55</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 38.



seems valuable, for it contributes to an understanding of Crowley's nuanced autobiographical self.

This evaluation partially substantiates Umberto Eco's hypothesis that, upon undertaking close textual analysis, scholars 'have to respect the text, not the author as person so-and-so'.<sup>56</sup> By removing the common preconceptions and prejudices that are bound to Crowley's character, it becomes possible to read *Confessions* as a new text; the obscuring nimbus that surrounds him dissipates temporarily. Indeed, when strictly looking at his depicted relationship with nature, a distinct figure emerges: a nature enthusiast and critic, an individual aplomb in the appraisal of nature's aesthetics, and a skilled writer. Thus, fresh perspectives can be taken. Nonetheless, it appears more beneficial to respect the text and the author, instead of creating a dichotomy between the two. If removing the author entirely, interpretations thus have no meaning. Whilst this nature-induced strand of his autobiographical personality is no doubt a fragment, it is previous knowledge of the author's reputation that imbues it with worth, for it thus sharply juts out from what has previously been the master narrative.

Thus, the prominence of 'aesthetic considerations' in Crowley's portrayed connection with nature reveals itself, together with the worth of its analysis. His numerous references to the visual impact of landscapes, in addition to the requirement he establishes to grasping its beauty, give the impression that the appraisal of nature's attraction was influential to his engagement with the natural world, being central to be his represented connection. In this, *Confessions* can be used to corroborate Perreten's 'self-portrait/place portrait' model, as his self-representation alters in parallel with his commentary concerning his relationship with nature. Although the elements that come to light are by no means archetypal of Crowley's public persona, they deliver a glimpse of part of his self-portrayal, outside the cacophony of sensationalist headlines that framed much of his public reception. Whilst Lawrence Sutin avows that '[t]here is no sense in trying to whitewash Crowley's reputation', as he 'spent most of his life systematically blackening it', reducing Crowley to his defamation would negate the

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<sup>56</sup> Umberto Eco, 'Overinterpreting Texts', in Stefan Collini (ed.), *Interpretation and Overtinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1992]), 66.

subtle irregularities in his self-description; abnormalities that still deserve a place in his reconstruction.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the exploration of Crowley's presented connection with nature shows promise. Although, in this case, it cannot be deduced that the natural world was consciously commanded to display the features discussed, this prompts the next theme of this dissertation: mastery.

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<sup>57</sup> Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life*, 2.

## Chapter Two: 'Mastery'

Reflecting on his early twenties, Crowley retrieves an explicit objective: 'I longed for perfect purity of life, for mastery of the secret forces of nature'.<sup>58</sup> Such a desire is representative of the Western esoteric tradition, incorporating 'the study of nature and its hidden or secret laws and dynamics', ultimately intending to have control over them.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, his yearning seems to be a part of his spiritual quest. Recalling his venture to incite a 'protection against mosquitoes' through 'magick', however, Crowley uncovers the wish to master the hidden, but also physical forces of nature, exposing a concomitant link between two.<sup>60</sup> This chapter reviews Alex Owen's speculation that his 'desire for "mastery" of the forces' extended beyond that of the 'secret', the idea being that his mountaineering pursuits were symbolic of dominating nature.<sup>61</sup> Albeit a potent perspective, Owen makes no effort to expand or provide evidence, conforming to the aforementioned trend of analysing his magical studies instead. The following section probes this idea, deconstructing *Confessions* to evaluate the prominence of 'mastery' — specifically domination — in his presented relationship with the physical environment. After this discussion, it surveys the merits of investigating this particular dimension.

Owen's surmise that Crowley sought to subdue nature, specifically mountains, has direct implications for how his connection with the natural world might be interpreted, given that this desire would presumably translate through his behaviour. To inquire into this, it is first interesting to note that Crowley establishes mountaineering as a 'recognized sport', introducing a competitive quality as a 'sport' conventionally denotes an individual or team challenging one another.<sup>62</sup> Beyond being solely against fellow climbers, however, the mountain is identified as a contender, a force to overcome. Crowley insists that he was 'up against [the mountain]', further employing verbs such as 'grappled', 'master' and 'attack' to

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<sup>58</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 146.

<sup>59</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013), 21. See also Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 218-9; Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (trans. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke; London: Routledge, 2014), 62.

<sup>60</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 838.

<sup>61</sup> Owen, *The Place*, 191.

<sup>62</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 88.

mark his struggle.<sup>63</sup> The language implies a specific goal: that of the mountain's domination, the necessity of defeating its obstructions. Thus, his discourse chimes with Owen's expectation, transforming his represented relationship by consequence. Under mountaineering, his regard and behaviour towards the natural world is portrayed as having been saturated by antagonism and, ultimately, the desire to gain triumph over the mountain in question.

Even when alluding to human competition, nature is administered as the ultimate opposition: Jean Maître, 'who was supposed to be the best guide in the valley', and 'other distinguished members of the Alpine Club', were 'stopped [...] by the final obstacle, an overhanging ice wall guarded by a wide crevasse'.<sup>64</sup> Nature's barriers are entrenched as having been 'the final obstacle', the decisive factor in determining results and, thus, a force to surmount. In contrast to the tone of appreciation accompanying the 'aesthetic considerations' of nature, Crowley presents the natural world as an uncooperative entity, one that inspired a conflictual relationship. Thus, his overt wish for 'the mastery of the secret forces' is projected as having found resonance in the physical. Whilst not so explicitly expressed, his presented interaction with the natural world — as governed by mountaineering — gives the impression that his public connection with nature rested on a longing for its domination. Therefore, when dissecting *Confessions*, 'mastery' is subtly outlined as having been an instrumental feature of his depicted relationship with mountains, almost steering the dynamic.

Splitting from Owen's focal point, Crowley's description of his hunting exploits further suggests that his public connection hinged on control. Whilst the discourse used is less obvious, when employing the conviction that hunting is a 'symbol of force and power', his delineated behaviour can be perceived as an expression of subjugation.<sup>65</sup> For instance, his proclaimed 'intention of killing a big paddy bird', due to it being 'valuable on account of the aigrette', takes on a new light; the bird becomes an object to be utilised and controlled,

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<sup>63</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 88, 88, 95, 103.

<sup>64</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 128-129.

<sup>65</sup> Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), 247-8.

comparable to the mountains subject to his climbs.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, he refers to it as an 'impudent beast', criticising its lack of respect.<sup>67</sup> In this, the text insinuates that his represented relationship leans on a somewhat clichéd dynamic: the ascendancy of man over nature.

This drive for supremacy is further evident when retelling '[the crocodile's] struggles were gradually ceasing', 'nothing we could do was any good', for he follows this defeat with a triumph, reasserting his power through stating that he shot at another until 'the beast did not move'.<sup>68</sup> Thus, as with mountaineering, the natural world is not presented as passive, but instead a power to master. In this way, *Confessions* projects the two sports as bringing man and nature into confrontation, stimulating a connection based on oppression. Thus, Crowley's discussion spurs the belief that his public relationship with the natural environment was partially characterised by dominion, mirroring his avowed determination to understand and overcome the hidden forces of nature.

Critics might dismiss the preceding judgements, undermining them as exemplars of '[r]eading language [as] shaped by expectation and assumption', an exposition of the reader's preconceptions.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Catherine Riessman warns that narrative analysis is pierced by 'a process of interaction' between the text and the analyst, a process that is conducive to the reshaping of the source, and thus the '[m]eaning is fluid and contextual'.<sup>70</sup> It would be unwise to deny these perspectives, for they are no doubt accurate. There lies an inherent risk of being misled by prejudices or desired outcomes, but also the manipulation of the source at hand; hence the post-structuralist development that 'truth is relative to the different standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks of the judging subject'.<sup>71</sup> Due to this, it must be maintained that this is but one interpretation; one that has benefits nonetheless.

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<sup>66</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 267.

<sup>67</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 267.

<sup>68</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 267, 277.

<sup>69</sup> Julie-Marie Strange, 'Reading Language as a Historical Source' in Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (eds.), *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 202.

<sup>70</sup> Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (London: Sage, 1993), 15.

<sup>71</sup> Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 16.

Although subjective, the notion that 'mastery' informed Crowley's portrayed connection with nature finds valuable associations with the contemporary imperial mindset. Born amidst the British Empire's zenith, in 1875, his discourse and depicted behaviour correspond to what is held as one of the principal objectives of the British 'imperialising mission': 'the conquest of nature'.<sup>72</sup> In *Confessions*, Crowley insinuates that the secret forces of nature were to be mastered, mountains required subjugation for success, and hunting dominated animals. All fall under 'the conquest of nature', whether 'secret forces' or otherwise, thus echoing the imperialist spirit.

Of course, it might be responded that humans have 'always sought to dominate nature', meaning that Crowley's description should be regarded as mimicking a perennial phenomenon, not cultural conditions per se.<sup>73</sup> However, whilst perhaps accurate, Donald Worster is more informative in his suggestion that 'ideas are socially constructed, and, therefore, reflect the organization of those societies, their techno-environments and hierarchies of power'.<sup>74</sup> Rather than reducing the subjugation of nature to an innate human drive, he brings contextual factors into the conversation. Indeed, Crowley's articulation that he was 'very fond of big game hunting' can be deemed as having been 'socially constructed', given that the activity itself was a social development.<sup>75</sup> To expand, big game hunting was an outgrowth of the British Empire, capturing the enthusiasm of colonialists from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards; ultimately, it is largely heralded as having been 'central to British imperialism in Africa and India', a crucial emblem of the 'dominance of the environment'.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, Crowley's described action bears the mark of imperialism, having been a product of territorial expansion, and arguably underpinned by the ideology that nature was subordinate. Though reduced to an abstraction, this aerial view of the cultural milieu

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<sup>72</sup> Ritvo, *The Animal*, 334. See also William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005 [1980]), 107; William Beinart and Peter Coates, *Environment and History: The Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.

<sup>73</sup> Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2011), 2.

<sup>74</sup> Donald Worster, 'Doing Environmental History' in Donald Worster (ed.), *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 303.

<sup>75</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 375.

<sup>76</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 375.

proposes that Crowley's portrayed regard and behaviour towards the natural world, as influenced by at least hunting, reproduced this feature of Empire.

The significance of the link between Crowley and imperialism is two-fold. First, it feeds the opinion that 'ideas of nature [...] are the products of the cultures in which they live', evidencing the potential influence of guiding cultural ideologies.<sup>77</sup> Notwithstanding being a glimpse, it demonstrates how this specific ideology of Empire, the covert for control over nature, had the potential to be interwoven into the thought-fabric of the individual, correspondingly altering their relationship with the natural environment. Crowley's public relationship with nature thus might be taken as a profitable exemplar, a case that contributes to an understanding of the possible effects of the Empire.

Second, it attests to the idea that Crowley was not immune to cultural influences. According to Hugh Urban, he is routinely portrayed as 'a great outcast and enemy of mainstream modern society', a contention that almost propels him outside of his contemporary context.<sup>78</sup> This discussion, however, reinserts him back into his cultural background. It must be emphasised that, in general, Crowley did not adhere to cultural norms: his aforementioned sexual transgressions, drug use, affiliation with Satanism, and perhaps more subtly, expressed 'profound aversion to, and contempt for, Queen Victoria', were all subversive to Victorian and Edwardian cultural norms.<sup>79</sup> Nonetheless, exploring his represented relationship with nature, as guided by 'mastery', indicates that he too – like anyone else – was pervious to contemporary influences and cultural conditioning. Thus, to unearth nuances in Crowley's projected character, nuances that might be masked by prevailing stereotypes, the adoption of distinct centres of analysis proves crucial. Arguably, therefore, an investigation of his public relationship with nature can play a constructive part in his demystification, evidencing the value of its consideration.

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<sup>77</sup> Donald Worster, 'Path Across the Levee' in Donald Worster (ed.), *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>78</sup> Hugh B. Urban, 'The Beast with Two Backs: Aleister Crowley, Sex Magic and the Exhaustion of Modernity', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 7 (2004), 8.

<sup>79</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 58.

Ultimately, in *Confessions*, the discourse and presented behaviour suggest that the longing for 'mastery' saturated Crowley's engagement with mountaineering and hunting. In turn, his public relationship with nature — that of mountains and the animal kingdom — is projected as having upheld this feature. Notwithstanding the prominence of 'aesthetic considerations', it might be interpreted that *Confessions* insinuates 'mastery' was more of a driving force, given that mountaineering and hunting often brought him into contact with such landscapes. Yet, in contrast with the two existing camps of historiography, being restricted to one perspective and not accounting for subtle distinctions, this dissertation argues that *Confessions* hints that his public connection with nature was an amalgamation of the two. Further, it challenges the implication of the shortage of literature on this subject, namely the idea that it is not worth studying. In unearthing the resemblances between his represented relationship with nature and imperialistic ideology, it becomes viable to explore how this so-called anomaly inherited at least one of his culture's characteristics, tackling his enigmatic stereotype. On a wider scale, it adds to a dialogue on how the British Empire's guiding philosophies might have festered on the idiosyncratic level.

Under the foil of his participation in mountaineering and hunting, therefore, Crowley's overt yearning for the 'mastery' of the secret forces of nature' seemingly found its parallel in his public relationship with the physical forces, as presented by *Confessions*. His spiritual motivation is thus portrayed as having rooted itself in the material, a theme that is further taken up in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.



### Chapter Three: 'Enchantment'

Thus far, compared with the existing historiography, this dissertation has virtually brushed aside one of Crowley's principal concerns: his self-avowed 'spiritual preoccupation'.<sup>80</sup> To overlook it would be a distortion for, as Richard Kaczynski persuasively highlights, 'Magick and mysticism [...] are often inseparable from [Crowley's] poetry and other activities'.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, its presence is evident in Crowley's representation of an enchanted outlook towards nature, one that seems to transcend motifs of 'strange landscapes and dreamlike enchantment'.<sup>82</sup> This final chapter assesses the importance of 'enchantment' in Crowley's depicted relationship with the natural world, closing in alignment with his chief interests, namely 'Magick', 'mysticism' and 'metaphysical elements'.<sup>83</sup> The term 'enchantment' is guided by Wouter Hanegraaff's definition of an 'enchanted concept of nature': a comprehension of nature as 'a kind of organism animated by a spiritual force'.<sup>84</sup> After the stated evaluation, this section appeals to the broader value of the inquiry of his relationship with nature through 'enchantment', using Crowley as a case study to question assumptions that the alleged 'disenchantment of the world' resulted in the 'disenchantment' of nature.

By adopting an 'enchanted concept of nature', Crowley's portrayed relationship with nature correspondingly transforms, displaying what can be perceived as a heightened closeness. Recounting his time in Burma (which he assigns to 1901), he claims that he 'found [himself] in the embraces of the Nat or elemental spirit of [a] tree', a so-called 'woman vigorous and intense, of passion and purity so marvellous'.<sup>85</sup> On the pretence that the 'spirit' took the female form, he inflects his account with eroticism, claiming that he 'passed a sleepless night in a continuous sublimity of love', having been seduced by the 'deep-breathing amorous bosom of forests'.<sup>86</sup> References to a 'sleepless night', 'deep-breathing' and an 'amorous bosom' summon strong sexual themes, the insinuation being that Crowley and this 'spirit' of

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<sup>80</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 34.

<sup>81</sup> Richard Kaczynski, *Aleister Crowley* (introd. and ed. James Wasserman; San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weister, LLC, 2009), 12.

<sup>82</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 222. See also 287, 490, 493, 718.

<sup>83</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 174.

<sup>84</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 156.

<sup>85</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 268.

<sup>86</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 268-9.

the tree performed the ultimate act of intimacy. Thus, his described relationship with nature surfaces as the equivalent of a spiritual and sexual union, hinting at the importance that 'enchantment' had in facilitating a connection. In this way, 'enchantment' surfaces as a central component to his represented relationship, a feature that is painted as having fostered a sincere bond.

The other main modes of his depicted engagement with nature, 'aesthetic considerations' and 'mastery', are arguably not presented as having had the same personal significance as 'enchantment'. Even though, as previously examined, Crowley maintains that direct contact is required to fully appreciate mountain scenery, an aspect that is carried out through mountaineering, this does not point towards a reciprocal relationship, much less a sexual connection. On the other hand, when adopting an 'enchanted concept of nature', Crowley constructs a sexual partnership with the tree's alleged 'spirit', delineating an unparalleled closeness with his interior projection of the natural world. Thus, reinforced by the reflection that 'she [the memory of the tree's 'spirit'] abides with me after these many years', 'enchantment' seems to take precedence in his depicted connection with nature, acquiring a central position in *Confessions*.<sup>87</sup>

Considering Crowley's prioritisation of metaphysics, the role of 'enchantment' in his represented relationship with nature further seems significant. Stating that '[s]piritual facts are the only things worth while', whereas 'matter is in nature secondary and symbolic', he affirms an explicit preference for the 'spiritual'.<sup>88</sup> With this line of logic, it would appear that physical nature assumed a 'secondary and symbolic status', whilst its spiritualisation caused it to become more valuable. It is therefore noteworthy that '[t]he jungle spoke to [him] of the world which lies behind material manifestation', or that nature 'speaks to the soul', for it would arguably thus be considered more 'worth while'.<sup>89</sup> Through 'enchantment', Crowley presents the natural world as a force that offered the potential to widen and deepen his spiritual experiences, a catalyst for communication — or indeed reconciliation — between

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<sup>87</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 268.

<sup>88</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 125.

<sup>89</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 268, 718. See also 627.

the spiritual and the material. When embracing the common interpretation that he was 'first and foremost a magus', or that he was in search for 'spiritual ecstasy', it is this feature that seems most crucial in his portrayed relationship with nature.<sup>90</sup> Through 'enchantment', Crowley presents the natural world as though it were a springboard for transcendental encounters, satisfying his spiritual and sexual appetites and ambitions, implying that it was a prime feature of his public connection in turn.

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke observes that occult personalities of the late Victorian period were captivated by the 'ongoing effort to bridge the worlds of spirit and physical matter', a view that is corroborated by the discussion above.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Crowley insinuates that nature was the optimum 'bridge', a unifying entity that could negotiate contradiction and fulfil spiritual needs. Thus, as a consequence of his professed 'magical point of view', 'enchantment' might be interpreted as having been the most important facet in his presented relationship with nature, embodying his metaphysical concerns.<sup>92</sup> In this, the discussion at hand provides a glimpse into how Crowley presents his endeavour to incorporate the spiritual into the material; to integrate what Hanegraaff refers to as a 'separate-but-connected magical plane' into mundane existence.<sup>93</sup> In other words, how he strives to show his integration of metaphysics into the everyday.

Beyond contributions on a micro-level, the study of Crowley's described relationship with nature, as guided by 'enchantment', serves broader importance. It provides a working example to contest the conception that 'the disenchantment of the world [...] simultaneously disenchanted nature'.<sup>94</sup> However, before proceeding, it is necessary to introduce the essence of Max Weber's (1864-1920) 'theory of disenchantment' (1918), the foundation of the conclusion that nature became 'disenchanted'.

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<sup>90</sup> Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life*, 6; Richard Kaczynski, 'Continuing Knowledge from Generation unto Generation: The Social and Literary Background of Aleister Crowley's Magick' in Bogdan and Starr (eds.), *Aleister*, 148.

<sup>91</sup> Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Tradition*, 235.

<sup>92</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 812.

<sup>93</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World', *Religion*, 33 (2003), 370.

<sup>94</sup> Alison Stone, 'Adorno and the Disenchantment of Nature', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 32 (2006), 235.

Weber's thesis heralds that scientific rationalism, driven by the intellectual developments of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, meant that 'there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play', and thus 'the world is disenchanted'; it is stripped of its magical capacity.<sup>95</sup> Scholars have since heralded the 'disenchantment' thesis as a 'myth' in itself, deemed to be falsified by the continuance of occultism and the practice of magic.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, capturing elements of the modern zeitgeist, namely the shift towards secularisation, Michael Saler affirms that the thesis has had a 'long-standing purchase on the historical imagination'; a prospect that rings true when recognising some of its adherents.<sup>97</sup> It has mobilised the view that people came to 'experience natural things as less and less mysterious, more and more fully intelligible', rendering nature 'disenchanted'.<sup>98</sup> Further, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer calculate that 'the disenchantment of the world is the extirpation of animism', animism being the '[attribution of] life, a living soul, to even the nonliving', eliminating the prospect that nature had a 'living soul'.<sup>99</sup> Echoing this, J. M. Bernstein construes that it is '*living* nature which is disenchanted'.<sup>100</sup> In brief, the scholars deduce that perceptions of nature transformed: it was no longer a spiritualised force; that is to say, Western society forsook an 'enchanted concept of nature'.

The specified scholars evade any acknowledgement of potential variances. Hence, though perhaps inadvertent, they give the impression that nature was universally 'disenchanted'. In fact, according to Jason Josephson-Storm, anomalies to the 'disenchantment' thesis are ignored on the basis and use of the word 'disenchanted', due to the suffix 'ed' implying completion; a conclusion that can be applied to its developments, namely the

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<sup>95</sup> Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation' in Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds. and trans.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991), 139.

<sup>96</sup> Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 304; Hanegraaff, 'How Magic', 358. For an overview of the historiographical debates around the 'theory of disenchantment' see Michael Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review', *The American Historical Review*, 111 (2006), 692-716.

<sup>97</sup> Saler, 'Modernity', 695

<sup>98</sup> Stone, 'Adorno', 235.

<sup>99</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic*, 5; J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 191-2.

<sup>100</sup> Bernstein, *Adorno*, 37.

'disenchantment' of nature.<sup>101</sup> In negating irregularities, this strain of scholarship thus treats 'enchantment' as though it were a marvel that ceased to exist; an element that no longer played a part in post-Enlightenment man's relationship with nature. However, Crowley's description of his regard and behaviour towards nature complicates this judgement, surfacing as a profitable model to reveal its shortfalls.

Although written five years after the 'theory of disenchantment' was first articulated, falling under the scope of a 'disenchanted' perception, Crowley subscribes to the polar: an 'enchanted concept of nature'. As aforementioned, he spiritualises a Burmese tree, referring to the 'spirits of earth' as though a living force infiltrated it.<sup>102</sup> However, he also recalls previous attempts to invoke 'Fire angels' and 'Undines' (water nymphs or spirits), and charges the 'pure dry air in Mexico' with a 'spiritual energy'.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, his narrative asserts the reality of animating forces and spiritual elements, imbuing nature with a living soul; it lends itself as an example of how nature might still be conceived of as 'enchanted', in spite of living in a supposedly 'disenchanted' culture. Accordingly, Egil Asprem's abstraction that nature was rendered 'dead and inherently meaningless' by the 'disenchantment of the world' proves problematic, along with the scholarship in which it is embedded.<sup>104</sup>

Perhaps more strikingly, *Confessions* is rooted in firm praise of 'scientific methods of study', contradicting the inference that scientific understanding resulted in the 'disenchantment' of nature.<sup>105</sup> Upon recalling the Braldu River (in what was then India), Crowley rationalises that an 'exquisitely white' 'curtain had been formed from a hot spring (38.3° centigrade)', one that had an 'exquisitely geometrical [...] detail'.<sup>106</sup> Its scientific explanation does not detract from its aesthetic appreciation; nor does it interfere with his aforementioned represented belief in an 'enchanted concept of nature'. Instead, its therapeutic quality is portrayed: 'the burden of

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<sup>101</sup> Josephson-Storm, *The Myth*, 305.

<sup>102</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 268.

<sup>103</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 192, 174, 212.

<sup>104</sup> Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2014), 2.

<sup>105</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 764.

<sup>106</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 299.

the cynicism of my six and twenty years fell from me like a dream'.<sup>107</sup> Ergo, his discourse implies that nature could be regarded through the lens of science, becoming more 'fully intelligible', without becoming any 'less mysterious', being incongruous with the related scholarship's logic.<sup>108</sup>

Further, Crowley contradicts the central argument of the actual 'disenchantment' thesis: the principle that scientific rationalism axiomatically caused a 'disenchanted' conception of the world. Paradoxically, at least under the verdict of the 'theory of disenchantment', Crowley maintains that his 'success in mysticism and Magick' was 'almost entirely due to [his] scientific training'.<sup>109</sup> Scholars likewise widely contend that he strove to establish 'Magick on a sound scientific basis', maintaining fastidious reports to validate his practice.<sup>110</sup> Thus, he is projected as a figure that used a scientific mindset — the cited cause of the 'disenchantment of the world' — to enhance and justify his magical practice; that is, to sustain his 'enchanted' perspective.<sup>111</sup> Ultimately, besides having straddled 'enchanted' and 'disenchanted' categories simultaneously, he surfaces as an individual that sought to reconcile them. It would be jejune to posit that he was unique in this respect, or at least under Hanegraaff's observation that the 'modern occult' was characterised by 'a deeply felt resistance against the "disenchantment of the world"', but 'an equally strong attraction to modern scientific methods'.<sup>112</sup> Nonetheless, he serves as a fruitful case study, one that directly undermines the core tenet of Weber's thesis and, ultimately, its subsequent adherents.

Therefore, Crowley's autobiographical description of his relationship with nature, in concert with his faith in aspects of the scientific method, exposes the inadequacy of treating the 'disenchantment' of nature as though it was a homogenous process. Expressing an 'enchanted concept of nature' in a so-called 'disenchanted' culture, he surfaces as a figure out of step

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<sup>107</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 299.

<sup>108</sup> Stone, 'Adorno', 235.

<sup>109</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 239.

<sup>110</sup> Kenneth Grant, *Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God* (London: Skoob Books Publishing Ltd, 1992), 5. See also Mark Morrison, *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46; Hugh B. Urban, 'The Beast', 15.

<sup>111</sup> Weber, 'Science', 139.

<sup>112</sup> Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 36.

from the cultural paradigm put forward by the proponents of the 'disenchantment' thesis. Thus, although representative of the idiosyncratic experience, he can be used as a model to challenge the view that nature became invariably 'disenchanted'; to exemplify the issues of dealing with cultural trends as though they were ubiquitous.

Ultimately, through bringing Crowley into the conversation, the risk of accepting what Josephson-Storm describes as the 'most familiar story in the history of science', the narrative of 'disenchantment', reveals itself.<sup>113</sup> It exposes the issues of '[assuming] that we accept a scientific conception of nature', the defects of a narrative that engenders a strict dichotomy between 'disenchantment' and 'enchantment' because of the view that man triumphed over superstition.<sup>114</sup> Such a perspective limits a historical understanding of the developments of 'enchantment' in Western society, whilst concealing the possibility that post-Enlightenment man retained an 'enchanted' relationship with nature. Ergo, exploring Crowley's represented connection with nature – or indeed any irregularities to the imposed trend of 'disenchantment' – proves significant. In effect, his discussion further attests to the 'blurred [...] distinctions between [the] "rational" and "irrational"', and thus the complexities and ambiguities of the historical development of 'modernity'.<sup>115</sup>

In view of the above, 'enchantment' arguably looms as the most notable part of Crowley's portrayed connection with nature. Upon being instilled with a spiritual force, nature is presented as facilitating an erotic encounter, in addition to transcendental experiences. Thus, his described relationship takes on a heightened level of intimacy, but is correspondingly elevated in value, at least under the veneer that 'only spiritual affairs count for anything'.<sup>116</sup> Likewise, it is this subject that is weighty on the macro-level. Expressing repudiation of aspects of post-Enlightenment rationalisation and integrating others, he makes for a rewarding micro-study to help counter the conception that nature, or indeed the world, became wholly 'disenchanted'. In fact, in response to the material discussed, it appears more appropriate to

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<sup>113</sup> Josephson-Storm, *The Myth*, 3.

<sup>114</sup> Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 73.

<sup>115</sup> Owen, 'The Enchantment', 239.

<sup>116</sup> Crowley, *Confessions*, 125.

incorporate Mark Schneider's view, the notion that 'Enchantment [...] is part of our normal condition', stemming from states of awe and admiration; states that might, according to Crowley's description, be induced by nature.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, whilst Asprem concludes that Crowley 'naturalized magic', *Confessions* presents its counterpart: the spiritualisation of nature.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Mark A. Schneider, *Culture and Enchantment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), x.

<sup>118</sup> Egil Asprem, 'Magic Naturalized? Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Aleister Crowley's Scientific Illuminism', *Aries*, 8 (2008), 140.



## Conclusion

This thesis, in essence, has been an investigation into Aleister Crowley's relationship with nature as described by his autobiographical work, *Confessions*. It has been an assessment of the prominent facets that underpin his portrayal, but also a review of how its discussion can reveal a new approach to understanding this complex historical character, an individual whose influences are increasingly recognised. Departing from the main historiographical focus – and in some cases the narrative – it has sought to fill a gap that fails to accommodate for a notable part of Crowley's self-description: his connection to the natural world.

Through examining *Confessions*, the key thematic areas of 'aesthetic considerations' and 'mastery' can both be discerned as noteworthy to Crowley's portrayed relationship with nature. However, it is the approach of 'enchantment' that seems to take precedence in his description. This can be argued based on his representation of the heightened sense of intimacy he experienced through nature's spiritual form, but chiefly due to the depiction that nature spoke to his utmost spiritual desires. Nonetheless, all the areas outlined deserve attention. A so-called 'protean figure', he depicts his bond as having been a vital and dynamic connection, perhaps representing the extremes within himself.<sup>119</sup>

The overarching argument has been that, contrary to the neglect within existing scholarship, Crowley's connection with the natural world is worth examining. Scrutiny of his autobiographical description offers illuminating insights into his character, its construction, and plausible cultural influences. Truthfully, no definitive conclusions can be made, for as Kaczynski detects, 'it is impossible for any individual to capture [Crowley's] essence'.<sup>120</sup> Notwithstanding this, it can help those trying to decipher the complexities of his character, to acknowledge the modulations of his projected persona, and to provide nuance to the prevailing stereotypes. Beyond being informative at an idiosyncratic level, his autobiography proves to be fertile ground to challenge assumptions that, after the Enlightenment, nature

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<sup>119</sup> Martin P. Starr, review of Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics* (London: Acumen, 2014), *Aries*, 16 (2016), 258.

<sup>120</sup> Kaczynski, *Aleister*, 9.

became wholly 'disenchanted', a stance that arguably suppresses a deeper historical understanding of perceptions concerning the natural world.

There is, no doubt, scope to deepen this enquiry. In attesting to the value of discussing Crowley's autobiographical description of nature, this study has hoped to inspire and induce scholars to develop some of the conclusions drawn. As Crowley's legacy continues to gain recognition, especially in the field of Western esotericism, the appetite for his comprehension correspondingly augments; the need to introduce distinct lenses and approaches to his understanding has perhaps never been so pertinent. Thus, in view of his historical influence, this dissertation has striven to contribute to a growing field of scholarship. That is, to illuminate nature's place in the 'Neverendingly Told Story' of Aleister Crowley, but ultimately its power to help demystify 'the wickedest man in the world'.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Pasi, 'The Neverendingly Told Story'.

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