

A Different Different World

Imagine another literary world, like the one we know in almost every way but different in one crucial respect. A world in which (for instance) Borges had written not the spare, idea-packed vignettes he's best known by but blockbuster novels on the scale of *Dr. Zhivago*. Or a world in which John Irving's first books were science fiction and fantasy novels, so that even when he wrote *Garp* he remained unknown beyond the confines of the genre ghetto. Or a world in which the Romantic novel in the grand manner of Hugo and Dumas was to be re-invented in our era of minimalist ambitions among "literary" writers and reduced expectations among their readers. Imagine such a world, and then read John Crowley's *Ægypt* and you will have begun to inhabit it.

The *Ægypt* of Crowley's title is also a world unlike the one we are familiar with: "It once worked in a different way than it does now; it had a different history and a different future. Its very flesh and bones, the physical laws that governed it, were other than the ones we know." There are literally thousands of fantasy novels that have such a premise, novels that recycle for the *n*th generation of readers the tropes of medieval romance: dragons, wizards, enchanted castles. There is almost as large a legion of contemporary occult novels that are modern-dress reenactments of traditional supernatural beliefs (*Rosemary's Baby*) or that exploit paranormal lore of more recent vintage (*King's Carrie* or *The Dead Zone*). Crowley's book is nothing like that. His world of *Ægypt* is different in an altogether different way; its strangeness is of that rare variety you feel on certain special days of your life when the sun seems to shine brighter on the ordinary sights of the world, making them extraordinary. There are no overtly supernatural events in his novel (or none that can't be accounted for by tricks of perspective), and yet the book is drenched in a sense of impending supernatural cataclysm. If the occult world had earthquakes, *Ægypt* would be found right on its San Andreas Fault.

The double plot-line is complex without ever becoming hard to follow. The contemporary half of the story concerns Pierce Moffett, a man coming of age in the sixties who has been born "with a talent for history, as

Review of *Ægypt*, by John Crowley.

you could be born with musical or mathematical talent.” As a child, inspired partly by the work of the historical novelist Fellowes Kraft, Pierce invents his own fantasy realm of Ægypt, a world that he later comes to realize was not his unique invention but a myth with its roots in the Italian Renaissance, his area of specialty as a grown-up historian. Pierce, however, is also a child of the sixties and dissipates his talents, getting through grad school with a glib tongue, and ending up teaching at Barnabas College in New York, an academy that has so well adapted to the Age of Aquarius that it offers courses in judicial astrology. Its students come there “not to be disabused of their superstition, but to find new and different ones,” and the central, seductive fascination of Pierce’s story is to see how he comes to be enlisted, body and soul, in that most quixotic of all searches, the quest for some proof that the Ægypt of the imagination really did exist and still can be found hidden in the mists of history.

The other half of the plot, embedded in the first, takes place in the Italy of Giordano Bruno (burnt by the Inquisition for his refusal to recant the “heresy” of Copernicus) and in Shakespeare’s England, and features these figures as characters in excerpts from the novels of Fellowes Kraft. As a historical novelist, Kraft is on a par with Renault or Yourcenar, and his account of the moment, at dawn in the Alps, when Bruno first comprehends the new Copernican universe is a set-piece that Berlioz would have wanted to set to music.

Crowley, writing of our own narrower-seeming times, not only is able to hold his own against the imaginary Kraft but even surpasses him, because Crowley—as in his earlier (and equally impressive) fantasy novel, *Little, Big*—is finally writing about something larger. Kraft is concerned with the conflict between faith and reason, between a mechanistic and a magical worldview. Crowley is concerned with these things, too, but only as they impinge on the eternal verities of love and lust, family life and solitude, death and re-birth, and in his depiction of these things Crowley writes with so much art and feeling that I won’t embarrass myself by trying to make further and even more high-flown comparisons.

One caveat must be added: I am a friend of Crowley’s (albeit a distant friend, since he lives like his protagonist in a rural fastness); a skeptic might, for that reason, ascribe some of my hyperbole to a personal partiality. However, my admiration for Crowley’s books pre-dates our friendship, and I must say, in all candor, that it is on a different scale. I like Crowley, but I am in awe of his books. Nor am I alone in my enthusiasm. Crowley has yet to win his proper share of fame, but those who have read *Little, Big* (which is being re-issued in paperback in conjunction with

Ægypt) tend toward a similar missionary zeal. (Among those quoted on the book jacket are Ursula LeGuin and Russell Hoban.)

Another caveat: *Ægypt* is the first volume of a projected tetralogy, and it makes no pretense of bringing its plot to even a temporary resolution. Its cast of characters—both those in the present and those in the past—still have long lives ahead of them, hard choices, and (I'm sure) amazing destinies. Yet such is Crowley's artistry that the novel yields a satisfying sense of completeness if not of closure.

And what a pleasure to think that this story will continue! No first novel of a projected series has held such rich promise of good things to come since *Justine*, the first volume of Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. To defer reading until the tetralogy is complete would be as foolish as refusing to visit Venice on your vacation because you mean to live there when you retire.