

## Crowley's Poetry

Among the traditional postulates of sf the best loved, and most overused, may well be the regression of civilization into barbarism as a result of the Bomb. Indeed, the theme predates the splitting of the atom; in 1885 Richard Jefferies wrote *After London*, an account of Britain transformed into a gothic folly. In modern sf the avatars are John Wyndham's *Re-Birth* (in the U.K. *The Chrysalids*) and Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. The seductions of the theme are manifold, not least the possibilities for set decoration as the woodbine pulls down the skyscrapers and every scrapheap becomes a riddle book of misunderstood technologies. It allows the sf writer to revert to the idyllic imagery of Arcadia and put by the expository demands of the high-tech style. It provides a playground for daydreams of Brute Power, one that is more plausible (and intellectually respectable) than alien planets concocted for such suspect pastimes. Finally, it can offer, as in *Canticle*, laboratory conditions for testing (or confirming) historical theories: Is civilization cyclical? Is the feudal three-tiered stratification of lord (power), priest (knowledge), and serf (forced labor) the inevitable solution to Hobbesian anarchy—or is it a false paradigm and therefore part of the problem? Will we, as predators doomed to aggress, finally drop our bombs? Good, solid, unanswerable questions guaranteed to lend dignity to even the most trivial fiction.

In 1976 St. Martin's published Steve Wilson's *The Lost Traveller*, which was recently reprinted by Ace with the irresistible blurb "A Science Fiction Western and Motorcycle Quest Epic" and an even more irresistible endorsement from Norman Spinrad, who promises that this is "unquestionably the best, most mature, most honest, fairest and most wise piece of fiction ever written about the Hell's Angels" and, what's more, "true science fiction in the highest sense—alien sensibilities rendered with conviction in their own terms, thereby expanding the reader's sense of the humanly possible." I mention this novel so much after the fact of its publication for two reasons: to second Norman's recommendation and by way of contrasting the much greater merits of another post-holocaust fantasy, John Crowley's *Engine Summer*, a novel that manages to use the

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Review of *Engine Summer*, by John Crowley.

theme of post-atomic regression in so novel (and novelistic) a manner as to amount to a complete recension of that theme.

*The Lost Traveller* covers great tracts of familiar territory at high speed, moving from one familiar trope to the next with the quick editing, high color, and careful moral equivocation that allow one's own barbaric id a vicarious romp through an entire Disneyworld of macho high jinks, as the hero, a Hell's Angel with prophetic powers, kills rival motorcyclists with gun, crossbow, and knife (his own father among them, as they discover too late; an affecting moment); is initiated into an Indian tribe (a tip of the hat, here, to the ancient wisdom of Carlos Castaneda); rescues Professor Sangreal (White Science) from the evil clutches of East Coast totalitarians (Black Science); has exemplary sex with a barmaid who is a noble savage in disguise; and, with his buddy Milt, holds out against and defeats a small armada of villains. And even that isn't the topper. Revealing these elements of the story will not, I think, detract from any reader's pleasure in it, for Wilson's craft lies in deploying his archetypes in yes-of-course order, so that we know the moment a character enters exactly what role he must play. *The Lost Traveller* is predestined for Hollywood, and I hope Zelazny's slovenly and unpersuasive *Damnation Alley* hasn't spoiled its chance for the big screen. Meanwhile, all literate, would-be barbarians can enjoy this paperback.

To inventory the high points of *Engine Summer* similarly would be to perform an injustice to its future readers, for it's a novel full of genuine surprises, trapdoors that spring open under the feet of the mind at regular intervals all the way to the last chapter. Therefore, as much as possible I'll try to praise the book without betraying its secrets, though these, of course, are integral to its success sheerly as science fiction. Indeed, without a developed knack for the kind of decoding and riddle-guessing demanded by the more cerebral forms of sf, few readers are likely to get beyond the first two or three twists of the labyrinth. As Crowley explains, with customary indirection: "There is no way through Little Belaire to the outside except Path, and no one who wasn't born in Little Belaire, probably, could ever find his way to the center. Path looks no different from what is not Path: it's drawn on your feet."

Though full of surprises, *Engine Summer* eschews drama. There's not a single villain, not a fight, scarcely a line of dialogue that isn't redolent of goodwill. Is it then a kind of love story? No: though the narrator forms a rather forlorn attachment to a girl (who resembles Dickens's Estella a little too closely), is rebuffed, pursues her, and achieves a bittersweet and fleeting rapprochement, this, the largest dramatic action of the book, constitutes at most a subplot. Passion requires nutrients not to be found

in the soil of *Engine Summer*. The best the hero can hope for, and what he finally achieves, is the stoic acceptance of an awareness almost congruent with despair.

What the book is poignantly, strenuously, and beautifully about is truth—how it is known and how spoken. The narrator is born into a society whose central value is introspection and plain-speaking, a kind of Quaker monastery populated by illiterate but exquisitely articulate aborigines, timid as rabbits, who support themselves by foraging for nuts and berries and dealing dope to other tribes who lack their horticultural resources. At an early age the narrator, Rush, forms the ambition of becoming a saint: that is, someone who in telling the story of his life evokes a universal truth, whose life, in its narrative form, is a paradigm for all human lives. *Engine Summer* is precisely the oral narrative by which we are to judge if Rush (and/or Crowley) has attained this so-novelistic ideal of sainthood. What the book is also about, by inference, is the art of the novel, the art of this novel. One can't read far without being reminded of Crowley's presence behind his narrator's persona: a modest, melancholy, quiet-spoken young man who occasionally reveals, as though inadvertently, an unshakable conviction in his own genius. The book's epigraph is from Kafka, but even without that hint it is of Kafka one is constantly made to think. Not the expressionist, shrill trance-medium of *Metamorphosis*, but the later, sedated Kafka who wrote such masterpieces of precision allegory as "Investigations of a Dog," the blandly lethal ironist, the master of dropped pins.

Most readers will have already leaped to the conclusion that I am urging them to read that anomalous and always suspect hybrid, a poetic novel. I confess it, but would add that Crowley's "poetry" is not what is ordinarily accounted poetic prose, a rhetorical commodity reserved for moments of maximum claptrap, as when Steve Wilson's hero has spent the *de rigueur* weekend fasting on a mountaintop so as to get in tune with the eternal rhythms:

The sun's warmth was a smile on him, but an Indian smile, after nothing for itself, inscrutable—a mystery which was echoed in the mauve and violet shadows beneath the trees, the shifting blackness in the seas of evergreens, the cobalt of the sky above like a single abrupt syllable, a clapped hand.

That is fustian, cut from a long bolt of the same Nebula Award quality but sturdy enough to clothe a moment of naked ignorance. With the lighting

right some readers may even mistake it for French gabardine; it's fustian, even so.

Crowley's "poetry" is of another ilk, descending from the scrubbed-bare, no-nonsense vein of modern mid-American poetry (represented by such poets as Williams, Creeley, Bly, and Simic), which has for its conservative aim the restoration of full emotional force to plain words grown slack with overuse. Such poetry, depending as it does on the running current for its luster, is not easily excerpted, but here, anyhow, is a passage from an early chapter in which Rush is explaining the totemic groupings of his people:

Cords. Your cord is you more surely than your name or the face that looks out at you from mirrors, though both of those, face and name, belong to the cord you belong to. There are many cords in Little Belaire. Nobody knows exactly how many because there is a dispute among the gossips about cords which some say aren't cords but only parts of other cords. You grow into being in your cord; the more you become yourself, the more you become the cord you are. Until—if you aren't ordinary—you reach a time when your own cord expands and begins to swallow up others, and you grow out of being in a single cord at all. I said Painted Red had been Water cord, and her name was Wind; now she was larger than that and she had no cord that could be named, though in her way of speaking, in the motions of her hands, the matter of her life, in small things, she was still Water.

Water and Buckle and Leaf; Palm and Bones and Ice; St. Gene's tiny Thread cord, and Brink's cord if it exists. And the rest. And Whisper. And was it because of her secrets that I loved Once a Day, or because of Once a Day that I came to love secrets?

The way the narrator struggles with his subject, his hedges and qualifications, and his final surrender to the wisdom of tautology have an almost anthropological ring of truth. There is the pleasure, as well, of being inducted into a private language (as in *A Clockwork Orange*), which becomes more complex and interconnected with each page; a pleasure that is heightened by the chemical purity of the vocabulary. There are glints of mystery (one never hears of the problematic Brink's cord again), as well as many minor, and ingenious, solutions to etymological riddles along the way. Nor are all the riddles minor: one of the story's most inspired ironies concerns the naming of the tribe known as Dr. Boot's List.

*Engine Summer* is exceptional in science fiction for being, first and foremost, a work of art. Its scale is small and the range of human possibility it encompasses is correspondingly narrow, but one doesn't fault Cézanne's *Card Players* for lacking *terribilità*. Within its carefully determined bounds *Engine Summer* succeeds at the first, and still the most difficult, task of art: it achieves formal beauty.