

The Further In You Go, the Bigger It Gets

*The fantastic modernism of
John Crowley*

Anthony Domestico

Yes, the whole world colored, as though it were made of candy—no, like it was made of a rainbow. A whole colored world as soft as light all around as far as you can see. You want to run and explore it. But you don't dare take a step, because it might be the wrong step—so you only look, and look. And you think: Here I am at last.

—John Crowley, *Little, Big*

On September 25, 2008, the 92nd Street Y in New York City hosted a joint reading by Marilynne Robinson and John Crowley. At first blush, this seemed an odd pairing. Robinson, particularly in her two most recent novels, *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008), has hewn close to the everyday, exploring the recent past of the American Midwest and the complex relations between history, religion, and race. Her novels, while poetic in their imagery and startling in their compacted riches, are written primarily in the realist mode and are rife with narrative description and character development. Crowley's main works, including his recently completed *Ægypt Cycle* and his 1981 masterpiece, *Little, Big*, are works of fantasy, located in liminal worlds and sweeping across broad swaths of time. They contain not just the secret histories of the alchemist John Dee and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, but entire magical worlds inhabited by werewolves, fairies, sprites, and genii. While Robinson's novels have been slow to germinate, Crowley, like a snake sloughing its skin, seems to publish a new novel every year; while Robinson locates herself theologically in a Calvinist framework and aesthetically in a Transcendental one, Crowley traces his lineage to Gnosticism and to Renaissance mystics, such as Giordano Bruno.

But the pairing of Robinson and Crowley, however peculiar, achieved two goals. First, it brought into stark relief the shared project of these apparently disparate writers. Both Robinson and

Crowley, despite differences in style, tone, and subject matter, are concerned above all else with the reenchantment of the everyday, the discovery of the mystery at the heart of the ordinary and humdrum. For Robinson, God's grace sanctifies every part of creation, from the smallest mote of dust to the grandest of natural phenomena. In *Gilead*, the human face becomes a fingerprint of God's presence; the bending of light through soap bubbles—"fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst"—signals the sacramental nature of all life. Similarly, Crowley's novels are concerned with traces of a departed magic, the residue of a time filled with angels and alchemy. Discarded objects, arcane symbols, and forgotten events become replete with mystery. The spirits that inhabit the Wild Wood and flit through the corridors of the Edgewood estate in *Little, Big*; the showstone containing ranks of angels, all beginning with the letter A, that opens the *Ægypt Cycle*; the presence of alchemy and maps that contain endless worlds within them: All are devices Crowley uses to give a world seemingly drained of significance not meaning but Meaning—grand, magical, even mystical significance.

Beyond elucidating this common goal of reenchantment, Robinson and Crowley's joint reading accomplished something else. Without apology or the need for explanation, it posited an equivalence between Robinson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and the subject of much academic work, and the far less recognized, occasionally out-of-print Crowley. Crowley's fans have long accepted that he is the most neglected literary figure of the age. He is a visionary, like Melville and others before him, whose genius goes unrecognized by contemporaries because of his aesthetic and imaginative boldness. The main explanation for this neglect has to do with genre. No professional arbiter of taste could possibly appreciate a writer of fantasy, the argument goes; fantasy works are considered too lowbrow to be classed with the likes of Marilynne Robinson, Philip Roth, or Toni Morrison. A secondary argument, working somewhat

at cross purposes with the first, suggests that Crowley is neglected because he mixes too many genres; his books are simply too unclassifiable to be appreciated. *The Solitudes* (1987), the first novel in the *Ægypt Cycle*, contains an imagined historical novel about the young William Shakespeare, descriptions of angels that rival those of Rilke in their beauty and terror, long stretches of abstruse philosophy coupled with long stretches of realistic detail, brilliant evocations of childhood in rural Kentucky, and a bizarre scene in which characters engage in a filmed, simulated orgy while wearing Kabuki masks. Crowley's novels are just too weird, his fans say, to attain popular and critical acclaim.

However, the 92nd Street Y reading, especially when coupled with the rerelease of the entire *Ægypt Cycle* in beautiful paperback editions by Overlook Press and a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Little, Big* that is as much art object as fantasy novel, shows that Crowley is really doing just fine. Any lover of Crowley will want to continue to spread the word, to proselytize on his behalf, convincing fellow readers that they are neglecting that rarest of gifts—a brilliant stylist who writes compellingly plotted novels—and this is how it should be. It is one of the joys of reading contemporary fiction to champion an author, to feel that you can help determine what will be read and loved in the present and the future. But it is encouraging that Crowley can be mentioned in the same breath as Robinson without hedging. Crowley teaches creative writing at Yale and has a coterie of rabid admirers. Michael Dirda has described him as "one of our finest living writers, period," while Crowley's friend and Yale colleague Harold Bloom has claimed that, among American writers, "only Philip Roth consistently writes on Crowley's level." Crowley is not going anywhere. The diehards can rest easy.

The further in you go, the bigger it gets.

—*Little, Big*

Any reckoning of Crowley's achievement must begin with *Little, Big*. This World Fantasy Award–winning book, described both as “the best fantasy yet written by an American” and as “an Important American Novel that bears comparison to such works as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading*,” made Crowley's name and will stand, with the entire *Ægypt Cycle*, as his enduring contribution to American literature. Challengingly allusive yet compulsively readable, it contains passages of limpid beauty and sublime terror.

As *Little, Big* opens, we see Smoky Barnable walking from the City to a place called Edgewood. On his way to marry Daily Alice Drinkwater, a tall, quiet girl from a very strange family, Smoky is walking, we are told, because “the fact that he walked and didn't ride was one of the conditions placed on his coming there at all.” He is unwittingly about to become a part of a sprawling, seemingly endless tale that centers around the Drinkwater family. The Drinkwaters have for generations maintained relations with a land of spirits that remains obscured from most human vision but is glimpsed occasionally and mysteriously by the family at Edgewood. Edgewood is, in fact, a door between the world of humans and the spirit world, between mundane reality and magic.

The spirit world's inhabitants, from the maternal Mrs. Underhill to the prophetic kingfisher to the grouchy Grandfather Trout, allude to the importance of the Drinkwaters to the survival of their race, but their cryptic portents are rarely fleshed out. Throughout most of *Little, Big*, we are in the same position as Smoky: We recognize that we are reading a tale, but we don't really know how things began and we don't have any idea how they will end. We understand that each death, each marital infidelity, each vicissitude of fortune, may have some integral part in an overarching story, but we aren't

privy to its general import. Similarly, the Drinkwaters realize that they occupy a central role in the tale of the interactions between the spirits and humanity, but even they are not sure what exactly this role entails.

The novel gradually and obliquely reveals the tale and its significance. Dr. Bramble, a batty visionary whose daughter, Violet, is the first character able to see the spirits and who marries into the Drinkwater family, describes the relation between our world and the other one:

The explanation is that the world inhabited by these beings is not the world we inhabit. It is another world entirely, and it is enclosed within this one; it is in a sense a universal retreating mirror image of this one, with a peculiar geography I can only describe as infundibular ... I mean by this that the outer world is composed of a series of concentric rings, which, as one penetrates deeper into the other world, grow larger. The further in you go, the bigger it gets. Each perimeter of this series of concentricities encloses a larger world within, until, at the center point, it is infinite. Or at least very very large.

In the end, we learn that the tale is really a story of migration. Humans have impinged too far on the next circle in, and the spirits that inhabit this circle must move into the next, smaller (but really larger) circle. The Drinkwaters, in turn, will move into the recently departed circle, leaving Edgewood behind and becoming magical figures themselves. Edgewood, which had been a door between worlds, will become just another queer-looking old house. To the rest of the human race, which does not even know about the existence of these infinitely receding yet expanding spheres of existence, things are exactly as they have always been.

The movement inward by both the fairies and the Drinkwaters leads to a startling realization: If the Drinkwaters move inward to replace the departing fairies, then presumably the fairies move inward to replace the beings in the next inner circle. These undescribed

beings could have their own novel, their own series of adventures and tragedies. Each circle contains its own tale, perhaps even more rambling and magical than the one we have finished; after all, the further in you go, the bigger it gets. Crowley leaves us with the sense that there are entire worlds within our own that we don't know about, and never can.

This infundibular concept of reality plays an important role in all of Crowley's fiction. In *Little, Big*, the microcosm—the small object or symbol that contains an entire world within it—appears not just in the circles within circles, but in a tiny, bedless chamber in a farm in the City that, when the wardrobe is folded out, transforms into a capacious room; in maps that unroll endlessly; in orneries that concentrate the cosmos into a single room.

The house at Edgewood itself is a kind of microcosm. As Daily Alice explains to Smoky upon his first visit to the estate, John Drinkwater, Alice's great-grandfather, "built this house to be a sample, so people could come and look at it, from any side, and choose which kind of house they wanted; that's why the inside is so crazy. It's so many houses, sort of put inside each other or across each other, with their fronts sticking out." Smoky, befuddled, walks around the house and realizes that Alice is right: One side of the house appears neo-classical, but a few steps later, the house seems "to fold like scenery" and appears Gothic and melancholy. To borrow one of the novel's central metaphors, Edgewood is like a series of Chinese boxes, containing multitudes.

Despite the length of his novels—*Little, Big* checks in at over 500 pages, while the *Ægypt Cycle* in total approaches 1,700 pages—Crowley is a novelist of compactness and layering. In both *Little, Big* and the *Ægypt Cycle*, characters construct memory palaces, a technique of memorization popular in the Renaissance and practiced by one of the *Ægypt Cycle*'s main characters, Giordano Bruno; it was an attempt to enclose the world within one's own consciousness. To build a memory palace, you choose a place, such as a church. Then, you memorize every detail of the place, from the smallest nook and

cranny to the most beautiful stained-glass window. Then, you create a vivid image for the thing you want to remember, placing the image—and thus the datum to be remembered—in a specific spot within the church. From then on, whenever the church is remembered, the image and its referent also will be recalled. Build a large and detailed enough palace, it was believed, and everything in the world could be contained within it. In a favorite formulation of Crowley's, the inside becomes the outside; the isolated, interior mind becomes populated by persons, places, and things until it rivals the universe.

In building a memory palace and in Crowley's fiction generally, there is an interest in the ways in which time can become spatialized, in which days and years and centuries can be imagined as physical objects and then folded in upon themselves to the utmost point of concentration. In *Little, Big*, Sophie, Daily Alice's sister, talks of a dream she has had:

I dreamt that I had learned a way of saving time I didn't want to spend, and having it to spend when I needed it. Like the time you spend waiting in a doctor's office, or coming back from someplace you didn't enjoy going to, or waiting for a bus—all the little useless spaces. Well, it was a matter of taking them and folding them up, like broken boxes, so that they took up less room. It was really an easy trick, once you knew you could do it.

It is not just useless time that becomes imagined as space that can then be compacted in Crowley's novels; it is entire societies, even epochs. This resonates with Crowley's fascination with the Renaissance in the *Ægypt Cycle*: Writing of this time enables him not only to explore thinkers such as Bruno, who were interested precisely in spatializing time; it allows Crowley to engage in this alchemic practice himself, collapsing the present into the past and vice versa. Crowley's mission seems to hearken back to modernist writers who were interested in compressing history and all its myths into single works of art. When writing of the City in *Little, Big* or Meaning in the

Ægypt Cycle, Crowley displays his affinities with James Joyce: They are interested in the archetypal, the ability of a figure to stand in for limitless instantiations across time. When, in Crowley's *Endless Things*, Pierce Moffett searches for the scrap in which past worlds remain immanent, one cannot help but think of Proust and his entire childhood springing from the taste of a madeleine. Although he also shares interests with postmodernists such as Pynchon—his affinity for secret societies that may determine the world's fate, for instance—his novels are far more in tenor with the work of the 1920s than with the work of the 1980s or 1990s. Crowley's lack of popular success might have as much to do with the anachronistic feel of his interests as with his categorization as a fantasy writer.

III

In after years he would sometimes wonder if at that moment he did not pass out through a sort of side door of existence, abandoning forever the main course his life would otherwise have taken; but it didn't matter, for there was to be no going back through to find out, no going back along the unrolling path that soon came to be beneath their feet. Not seemed-to-come-to-be: it was no metaphor, or if it was a metaphor it was one that was so intensely so that the tenor and vehicle of it, not identical, might just as well have been. In fact it became evident sometime during that endless morning that truth itself was a metaphor, no not even a metaphor, only a direction, a direction toward the most revelatory metaphor of all, never going to be reached.

—*The Solitudes*

Where *Little, Big* is the most intense concentration of Crowley's genius, the four novels that comprise the *Ægypt Cycle*—*The Solitudes* (1987), *Love & Sleep* (1994), *Dæmonomania* (2000), and *Endless Things* (2007)—amplify and expand the ideas Crowley explored in his earlier work. Throughout these novels, Pierce Moffett, a historian and the cycle's protagonist, is unceasingly bothered by one question:

"Is there more than one history of the world?" Moffett takes as his departing point the simple fact that people believe that Gypsies can predict the future. Why is this so? After much research into many esoteric texts, Moffett determines that it is because people believe the Gypsies are exiles of *Ægypt*, a land like but not quite the historical Egypt. Faith in this land inspired Renaissance Hermeticism, the Freemasons, and others—a long line in what Moffett calls the Invisible College, seekers who believed they were part of a brotherhood that knew of secrets revealing that, once upon a time and perhaps in the future, magic was possible, alchemy was real, and angels and sprites skittered and scampered in the air.

This land of *Ægypt* no longer exists; it is the premise of Moffett's proposed book that the world goes through transitional moments, times when not only reality and its laws, but also the entire history of the world, change. At these moments, any different number of worlds is possible, as nature is permeable, not yet hardened into law. Once a new reality is ushered in, it is as if the previous ones never existed: The present, past, and future all conform to the new reality. Alchemy was once possible, but now is not only impossible, but seems to have been so for all time; telling the future was once a divine gift, but now appears always to have been a ridiculous proposition.

For much of the *Ægypt Cycle*, Pierce believes that the 1960s ushered in another such rift in the fabric of time, in which possibility abounded and the world could be fundamentally changed. Almost twenty years later in the late 1970s, in the fictional, Berkshires-like Faraway Hills, numerous characters try to exploit this fact, grasping at the powers that may be attainable only in such moments. The Powerhouse International, a mind-controlling Christian sect, claims to exorcise devils and traumatic memories. Beau Brachman, an enigmatic and kindly man, quietly preaches a mystical Gnosticism. Boney Rasmussen, an old bachelor about town, employs Pierce to find a mystical object that can stave off his death. Pierce himself practices dark magic over his lover, Rose Ryder, through the use

of erotic talismans. Power beckons and the world appears as pure potentiality.

As the tetralogy moves on, however, the sense of possibility slowly passes away. The window in which the world can change slams shut, magic becomes impossible once again, and Pierce settles down to a calm domestic life with a wife and children. Pierce's mission in the final *Endless Things* is not to practice magic himself, but to find "some fragments that retain something of the power they used to have, back when things were different ... there might be something. Hidden, you see; or not hidden, just overlooked; hidden in plain sight. A stone. A powder. An elixir of life." But this talismanic object is never found; the final half of the final novel consists mainly in Pierce's visiting places that once seemed enchanted, but now seem all too literal, all too real.

This movement from enchantment to disenchantment is the underlying structure of all Crowley's work, and it often frustrates even his most ardent supporters. Both *Little, Big* and the *Ægypt Cycle* depict a world of magic and possibility that completely draws the reader in. In *Little, Big*, August Drinkwater can be turned into Grandfather Trout because he reneged on a deal with the fairies; spirits so surround us that, at the simplest lifting of a finger, we displace thousands of living beings. In the *Ægypt Cycle*, werewolves battle with witches and Giordano Bruno can hold the entire world in his memory and recite it backward and forward. Magic is not a numinous force, but a concrete reality.

Crowley was raised Roman Catholic but is not a believer, and this provides a fascinating lens into his imaginative world. For Catholics, the fallen world is still sacramental: Despite man's disobedience, the world remains touched by God's presence, particularly in the Eucharist, but in everyday reality as well. In a way, Catholicism is allegory made literal: Christ becomes human yet remains fully divine; the bread of the Eucharist does not only represent Christ's sacrifice, but becomes it, replenishing his flock in his apparent absence.

In a recent interview, Crowley discussed his relationship to Catholicism:

I was raised a Catholic, which is a little different from being a Catholic. I was pretty unmoved in general by thoughts of God, heaven and hell, and generally unconflicted about moral imperatives ... I have very little imaginative access to the religious impulse in life, though I find I can use it in fiction.

Crowley's fiction often reads like the work of someone simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by this religious impulse. He is drawn to the vision of a reality saturated with Meaning, but ultimately finds it to be incompatible with his mature sense of the world. In Crowley's novels, allegory is made literal, only to be abandoned.

For the Catholic, the Incarnation of Christ—God's becoming flesh—reveals that we are participants in a drama soaked in divinity; for Crowley's characters, the incarnation of magic in the world reveals that every action can partake of intense, even cosmic, significance. As Alice Drinkwater thinks, if there is a tale and her family is part of it, then "no gesture she or any of them could make was not a part of it, no rising up to dance or sitting down to eat and drink, no blessing or curse, no joy, no longing, no error; if they fled the Tale or struggled against it, well, that too was part of the Tale." But for Crowley, the tale ultimately ends, and harsh reality gains ascendance once again. In *Endless Things*, Crowley describes the disappointment felt by Protestant soldiers when Frederick V, the Winter King, is defeated by Catholic forces at the Battle of White Mountain. The Winter King's army expected supernatural aid, but this faith is proven unfounded: "All those powers were gone, were nothing—for they had all along really been nothing, less than nothing, mere *signs*, mere *phantasmata*, and no help now to the human soldiers."

This is the situation in which all of Crowley's characters eventually find themselves. It is no accident that Crowley alludes to

Prospero and *The Tempest* throughout the *Ægypt Cycle's* final novel: We all must break our staffs and bury our books. In a reversal of the formulation of *Little, Big*, toward the conclusion of *Endless Things*, Pierce thinks that “everything had grown smaller.” He becomes a father, and character, reader, and writer move into a maturity that, while acknowledging the delights of magic, resides primarily if not wholly in the land of the everyday. Crowley’s fictions have, in their own way, a built-in disappointment. We cannot, he seems to claim, live in the spirit world forever.

IV

She felt certain that never again would she spy, with that special flush of sensibility, a clue to their presence, a message meant only for her; wouldn't feel again, when she slept in the sun, the brush of garments against her cheek, the garments of those who observed her, who, when she woke, had fled, and left only the leaves astir around her.

—*Little, Big*

Given Crowley’s interest in ruthlessly showing us that growing up is a growing away from magic, what are we left with? For one thing, we are left with his prose, a style that is alternatively lapidary and rugged. Each reader of Crowley has his or her own favorite passages. I am continually struck by his ability, in a seemingly throwaway sentence or clause, to precisely capture sensual experience. When describing Frank Walker Barr, Pierce’s genial former professor, Crowley writes, “He made in his throat the famous Barr chuckle, plummy, chocolaty.” When introducing Boney Rasmussen (and what a name for an elderly bachelor!), he writes that “his hands seemed to be within wrinkled loose gloves of the same material, yellow-nailed”; in representing his gingerly walking style, Crowley describes Boney as “patient with a world that has thickened into something molasses-like and continually difficult.” In *Little, Big*, we see the young

Auberon taking a bath as his aunt Sophie gives him a soap duck to play with:

With reluctance he abandoned the duck. Already its sharply-incised features had begun to soften; in future baths it would grow eyeless, then featureless; its broad beak would dwindle to a sparrow’s, then gone; then headless (he would be careful not to break its increasingly skinny neck, not wanting to interfere in its dissolution); at last shapeless, not a duck any more, a duck’s heart only, still pure, still floating.

In each instance, Crowley describes something we’ve experienced but never articulated so exactly: a throaty chuckle, the leathery skin of an elderly man’s hand, the body’s movement impeded by age, the gradual dissolution of a bar of soap. In a fictional world that is so often strange and fantastical, these descriptions show us how strange and fantastical everyday perception can be.

Beyond the style, Crowley offers his readers convincing and humane characterizations. His attention to the imaginative workings of children is remarkably perceptive. In *Love & Sleep*, he talks of “the effort of children making believe, the conscious effort to erase the conscious decision to pretend ... and then the constant pruning and tending of the products of the imagination—cancel the contradictions without a thought, discard the used adventures, roll the ball ever into the undiscovered.” In the same volume, Crowley illustrates his awareness of how adult religious belief often betrays a falling away from this inventive capacity, a self-satisfied sense of experience and wisdom trumping innocence and ignorance: “Living far from institutional checks, Sam Oliphant had grown heterodox, Pelagian; unwittingly he fell into the heretical doctrine of two churches, one for children and the ignorant, another for the smart, who knew better ... Like fraternity secrets or team mascots, the absurdities of faith didn’t bother Sam, because this was his side, they were his absurdities.”

Despite the attention Crowley gives to supernatural forces, his sensitivity to small acts of heroism and dishonesty, both conscious and unconscious, runs throughout his entire body of work.

Above all, though, Crowley complicates and greatly enriches our conception of what is real and what is magic. Crowley closes *Little, Big* with a passage that is heartrending and also exhilarating:

One by one the bulbs turned out, like long lives come to their expected ends. Then there was a dark house made once of time, made now of weather, and harder to find; impossible to find and not even as easy to dream of as when it was alight. Stories last longer: but only by becoming only stories. It was anyway all a long time ago; the world, we know now, is as it is and not different; if there was ever a time when there were passages, doors, the borders open and many crossing, that time is not now. The world is older than it was. Even the weather isn't as we remember it clearly being; never lately does there come a summer day such as we remember, never clouds as white as that, never grass as odorous or shade as deep and full of promise as we remember they can be, as once upon a time they were.

There is the relentless drive towards realism; yet balancing and challenging this realism is the remembrance that there was once magic in that house, the hope that in the future perhaps another door can be found. The last sentence indicates that fantasy is on the one hand just a memory, but on the other the highest and most important of our realities. In *Little, Big* and the *Ægypt Cycle*, those characters who are most in touch with fantasy seem to understand the world in a way that is deeper, more meaningful, more real, than those who do not. When their worlds seem to be drained of magic, when these characters appear to lose touch with the spirit world or with alchemy, the magic really does not depart. Rather, it remains a part of their own memory, the stories they tell each other, and that Crowley tells us.

Crowley's novels, then, are dialectical, moving beyond the tension between fantasy and reality to show us that the two are really facets of the same thing: the endless process of infusing our world and our stories with, to use Crowley's term, Meaning. In Crowley's novels, it is not so much that magic is proven false; instead, it is just one stage in the process by which meaning gets created and circulated, how magic moves from the events around us to the stories we tell about them. Pierce moves away from his obsessions with Gypsies and talismans, but his sense of magic remains within his consciousness and within the tale he is placed in. *Little, Big*, in the end, is not only a tale of magic disavowed: The Drinkwaters leave Edgewood barren, but give life to the next circle in; each circle contains its own potential cycle of enchantment and disenchantment in the stories that could be told about them.

To place Crowley within a modernist framework again, we can see his affinities with the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, a thinker of great importance for Joyce and Yeats. Vico believed that history unfolded in a series of recurring cycles, what he called *corso* and *ricorso*. The barbaric age of gods leads to the aristocratic age of heroes, which leads to the democratic age of humans, which dissolves into chaos and brings us back to the age of gods again. History, in this conception, is a continual unfolding and a shuttling between poles. Crowley's vision of the world is similar: *Little, Big* shows that the world is an unceasing series of migrations from one circle to the next, an endless play of enchantment and disenchantment; the *Ægypt Cycle*, as the title implies, offers a cyclical view of history, an eternal progression of magic leading to reality leading to magic again. Chastened fantasies, Crowley's novels show us that the fictions we read and tell are both unyielding real and utterly magical.