

**“I’ve heard it told that once upon a time”  
The mysterious photograph of a chess game that never happened<sup>1</sup>**

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The English occultist Aleister Crowley, known in Portugal especially for his relationship with Fernando Pessoa and the affair of the Boca do Inferno in September 1930, was an excellent chess player. He had a passion for the game since his early youth and never missed a chance to play whenever he met an equally keen opponent. Pessoa, on the other hand, was less passionate about the game, and I don’t recall any testimony about him actually playing it. He might, however, use chess as an inspiration for his poetry, as is the case in a famous poem by Ricardo Reis (“Ouvi contar que outrora”).

One could still imagine Crowley asking Pessoa to play a game with him during his stay in Portugal. If this ever happened, no trace has remained in Crowley’s diary (who *did* play chess in Portugal, but with other opponents<sup>2</sup>). So how fantastic would it be to have a photograph showing Crowley and Pessoa together, sitting behind a chessboard in a café, reflecting on their next move? Can a photograph exist of a game that never happened?

Some time ago, the international press followed with interest the affair of the auction sale of the documents related to Crowley’s trip to Portugal and his relationship with Pessoa. As anybody knows, the documents were eventually acquired by the Portuguese state and are now safely stored with the Espólio at the Biblioteca Nacional. One of the interesting aspects of the coverage of this story is that some newspapers, at least in their online editions, used a photograph supposedly depicting this very scene: Crowley and Pessoa playing chess together. This was the case, for instance, of an article in the British newspaper *The Independent*.<sup>3</sup> Such a picture would be a fascinating testimony of how the two spent time together when they met. More than that, it would be the only known image of the two together. Even a simple Google image search with the terms “Pessoa - Crowley” will show that the image is now being widely used to illustrate their meeting. Unfortunately, however, things stand otherwise. Whereas one of the two persons depicted in the photograph certainly *is* Aleister Crowley, there can be little doubt that the other person is *not* Fernando Pessoa.

Since I believe I have some responsibility in the way in which this photograph has been not only discovered, but also (mistakenly) interpreted, I think the time has come to explain how this has happened, and also to offer some information clarifying the matter.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank here the friends and/or colleagues who, at one moment or another, have generously offered information indispensable to solve the mysteries related to this picture: Will F. Ryan, Chris P. Ravilious, William Breeze, R.A. Gilbert, Clive Harper, and Ben Fernee.

<sup>2</sup> According to his diary, Crowley played chess in Sintra on 20 and 21 September with Eduardo M. Pellen, an engineer who was particularly active in the local chess scene. In 1936 Pellen even became the President of the Portuguese Chess Federation (see Fernando Castro, *Historia do Xadrez de competição em Portugal*, online at <http://historiadoxadrez.net/1931-1940.pdf>, retrieved on 28 June 2009). It is unknown how the two had met, or who had introduced them to each other.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/portugal-angry-over-sale-of-papers-vital-to-nations-literary-heritage-846950.html>.

I discovered the picture in December 1994, when I was doing research on the Yorke Collection at the Warburg Institute in London. The Yorke Collection is the most important collection of documents (including rare first editions of books and unpublished documents) related to Aleister Crowley, and was put together by Gerald Yorke, an ex-disciple of Crowley's.

At that time I had already defended my dissertation on Aleister Crowley at the University of Milan (in June 1994), but I had decided to do some more research in London in view of a possible publication of the dissertation. This would eventually happen in 1999, when it was published by the Milanese publisher FrancoAngeli with the title *Aleister Crowley e la tentazione della politica*.<sup>4</sup>

The picture was in a folder with many other pictures of Crowley and other persons related to him. Most of the Crowley pictures were already known to me and had already been published, but (I thought at the time) not this one. It immediately attracted my attention, because it showed Crowley playing chess with another person, who looked very familiar. I couldn't believe my eyes. The person with whom Crowley was playing looked amazingly like Fernando Pessoa. At that time Pessoa's image was well known to me, because I possessed the Italian edition of Maria José de Lancastre's famous "photobiography" and several other illustrated books related to Pessoa. A whole chapter of my dissertation had been devoted to him, and for quite some time I had been collecting any material and information about his relationship with Crowley. In 1993 I had also been to Lisbon in order to do research on the Espólio at the Biblioteca Nacional. Thus, when I saw the picture I became very excited; I thought it was an important discovery! I didn't know of anybody who had made a reference to this picture before or who had published it. The reason for me was not so difficult to see. Relatively few persons had had access to this material at the Warburg Institute before, and most of them were not likely to be familiar with Pessoa, whose literary fame was in those times in England and in the United States still relatively small. Therefore, the average person doing research on Crowley in those times would have seen in that picture just Crowley playing with an unknown man. But for me the picture immediately had a very different meaning. No pictures were known of the meeting in September 1930 between Crowley and Pessoa, and there were so many mysteries about this affair that such a document would have had a very important historical value.

I mentioned my discovery to the staff of the library and asked for a reproduction of the picture. My intention was of course to publish the picture as soon as I had an opportunity for it. I hoped that I could do it when my dissertation would be published as a book.<sup>5</sup>

In 2000 I was invited to participate in the conference on Crowley and Pessoa that took place in that year in Cascais. I thought this would be a good opportunity to present the picture for the first time to a public of specialists and interested persons. There was no doubt that the discovery was raising some interest, even in the Portuguese media. One of the major national newspapers, the *Público*, asked me whether it could publish the picture, and I accepted. It appeared on the last page of the journal on the same day in which the conference began (3 June).<sup>6</sup> At that

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<sup>4</sup> A German translation of the book (where the chapter on Pessoa is revised and expanded) has been published in 2006, with the title *Aleister Crowley und die Versuchung der Politik*, by Ares Verlag, Graz. An English edition is now in preparation and should be out in Spring 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Eventually, when the dissertation was published in Italy in 1999, I did not have the possibility to include images in it.

<sup>6</sup> The picture was published with an article by António Melo, "O encontro de Crowley com Pessoa", *Público*, 3 June 2000, p. 48.

moment I thought this was the very first publication of the photograph.<sup>7</sup> The image was published again after the conference in the *Notícias Magazine*, a supplement of another major Portuguese newspaper, the *Diário de Notícias*.<sup>8</sup> I assume that one or the other have become the source for all subsequent reproductions of the photograph, which are now so easily available on the Internet.

Obviously, on the second day of the conference, I also presented the picture to the public.<sup>9</sup> I should add here that, before going to Lisbon, I had had the opportunity of showing the photograph to a couple of renowned Pessoa specialists. They were Maria José de Lancastre (whose photobiography I have already mentioned) and Teresa Rita Lopes. Both expressed doubts. One of the problems seemed to be that two women appear in the background in the picture, whereas women apparently did not work as waitresses in Portuguese cafés in those times. More generally, there seemed to be problems with the physical features of the man supposed to be Pessoa, such as the shape of the ears or of the moustache. Thus, because of this tepid response, I decided to present the picture during the conference in the most prudent way, emphasising the fact that important specialists had expressed doubts about it, and carefully discussing all the available evidence both in favour and against the identification.

What happened next, with hindsight, turns out to be a bit ironic. In fact, at the end of 2000 I spent another period at the Warburg Institute, this time doing research for the PhD dissertation I was preparing at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. There, I discovered that somebody else had published the picture before me, with a caption clearly identifying the two chess players as Crowley and Pessoa.<sup>10</sup> This was Chris P. Ravilious, an English chess historian and connoisseur. He had been doing some research on Crowley and chess, and in 1997 he published an article on this subject in the specialised magazine *Chess Monthly*.<sup>11</sup> Even if I was not so sure anymore that Pessoa was the man in the picture, I was a bit disappointed that someone had published the picture before me. I got in touch with Mr Ravilious and inquired about the matter, and I discovered that originally he had no idea who the man was. It turned out that someone from the staff of the Warburg Institute – who had heard it from me and had surely forgotten it was confidential information – had told him it was Fernando Pessoa!<sup>12</sup> The situation is even a bit embarrassing now, because it is clear that Mr Ravilious, far from preceding me in an exciting discovery, was actually (though indirectly) misled by my mistake.

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<sup>7</sup> I was wrong. See below.

<sup>8</sup> Teresa Rebelo, “O Mistério da Boca do Inferno. Fernando Pessoa, o Mago Negro e a Mulher Escarlate”, *Notícias Magazine*, 6 August 2000, pp. 48-54. The picture is on p. 48. The article also includes an interview with me by T. Rebelo: “Crowley, segundo Pasi”, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> However, as it is clear from the accounts of the press (see for instance the article by António Melo, “Esotérico satânico ou apenas fingidor?”, in *O Público*, 5 June 2000, p. 21), in my paper I also touched on other aspects of the relationship between Crowley and Pessoa. Sadly, the proceedings of the conference were never published.

<sup>10</sup> Later on, I learned that the picture had already been published even earlier (presumably for the first time), but in this case there was no mention of Pessoa. The picture appeared in the magazine *Spectrum*, n. 6 (July-August 1975), p. 13. The caption read “Aleister Crowley and friend, playing chess in a London Coffee House - February 1930. (Photograph reproduced by courtesy of Peter Rowe)”. I will return to Peter Rowe’s role below.

<sup>11</sup> “Aleister Crowley: A Life in Chess”, *Chess Monthly*, December 1997, 24-29. The picture is on p. 27, but is not referred to in the text of the article. Being published in such a specialised magazine, the article was more likely to reach persons interested in the history of chess rather than in Crowley’s (not to mention Pessoa’s) biography. Yet, as we will see, it has had some influence.

<sup>12</sup> Mr Ravilious kindly informed me of this in a letter dated 24 January 2001.

There were some interesting aspects in the way the picture was presented. Obviously, Ravilious did not know much about Pessoa's biography. In fact, this is what the caption said: "Crowley in play against the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa at the Gambit Chess Rooms in London, probably 1930". Now, this would already make the scene impossible, because Pessoa never left Portugal again after his return from South Africa, in August 1905. If the picture really showed Crowley and Pessoa together, it had to be in the only place and in the only moment in which the two had met. That is, it had to be Portugal, September 1930. Indeed, Ravilious had originally thought this was the case. But there was another problem with that idea. When he submitted the article to the magazine, the editor (who had an expert eye) saw the picture and immediately recognised the venue. As the caption says, this was the Gambit Chess Rooms, one of the historical haunts of chess lovers in London<sup>13</sup>. The publication of the picture by Ravilious has not gone unnoticed and has contributed in creating (or supporting) the legend of a trip Pessoa would have made to London in order to pay a visit to Crowley. After all, Pessoa had mentioned this possibility in his correspondence to Crowley.<sup>14</sup> In an interesting book on Crowley and the literary scene contemporary to him, Paul Newman devotes a small section to Pessoa and mentions the picture:

[Pessoa] promoted Crowley's work, conducted magical experiments with him and visited him in London. They played chess at the Gambit Chess Rooms where a photograph shows them together. Pessoa is soberly and neatly dressed in hat, overcoat and spectacles. With small moustache and patient manner, he looks mild and appealing. Crowley's profile is blurred and flabby, his bald head eerily round, like a cherry or plum. As he smokes a cigar and studies his pieces, one gets the impression of a wily, debauched financier.<sup>15</sup>

Newman does not mention his source, but there can be little doubt that it must be (directly or indirectly) Ravilious' article. It is always fascinating to observe the mechanism of legends: how they can originate and spread.

Ravilious could not realise it when he published his article, but at that moment the mystery was already partly solved. If the place had to be London, the man could not be Pessoa. But if it was not Pessoa, then who was the man?

It took me some time to solve this last part of the mystery, and I was able to do it only through the help of some friends and colleagues who had access to documents unavailable to me. In any case, after the Cascais conference and the brief correspondence with Mr Ravilious, I realised that there were too many doubts about my identification of Pessoa, and that it would not make sense to use the picture for my scholarly publications. Therefore, when I prepared the German edition of my book on Crowley and politics, I did not include it among the illustrations.<sup>16</sup>

Around 2006, I received the information that it was possible to identify Crowley's opponent in the picture. In fact, I was told by William Breeze, renowned Crowley expert, that this person was beyond reasonable doubt a certain R.A. Starr, an acquaintance of Crowley's in the early 1930s.<sup>17</sup> According to Breeze, the evidence for this was an important fact that I could not know before. Starr's name was written on

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<sup>13</sup> I gather this information from a letter Mr. Ravilious wrote to Prof. Will Ryan, then Librarian of the Warburg Institute, when he sent him a copy of his article. The letter is dated 13 December 1997 and I thank Prof. Ryan for showing it to me.

<sup>14</sup> See his letter dated 6 January 1930, in: M. Pasi, *Aleister Crowley e la tentazione della politica*, p. 194.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Newman, *Aleister Crowley and the Cult of Pan*, London, Greenwich Exchange, 2004, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> See above, n. 3.

<sup>17</sup> There is some uncertainty as to the right spelling of his name. Other sources mention him as "Storr".

the back of another print of the picture preserved in the archives of the Ordo Templi Orientis. This was the occult Order lead by Crowley between 1923 and his death in 1947.<sup>18</sup> Later I learned from Ben Fernee, a bookseller specialising in occult literature, that yet another print existed, which bore on the back a note in Starr's own hand. This print was included in a list of items for sale that Mr Fernee sent to his customers around 2002.<sup>19</sup> Many of these items were clearly part of a single collection belonging originally to R.A. Starr himself and they contain useful information concerning his relationship with Crowley. Fernee acquired this collection not directly from Starr, but from a certain Peter Rowe, an acquaintance of Starr's.<sup>20</sup> Apparently, Starr had bequeathed the collection to Rowe on his death. The collections probably remained in Rowe's possession for more than twenty years, until he decided to sell it to Fernee.<sup>21</sup> I think it is important here to quote in full the description of the picture made by Mr Fernee for his list. This description makes it clear that we are really dealing with the same image, and it solves the remaining part of the mystery: the man in the picture really is R.A. Starr:

Aleister Crowley, Contemporary Photographic Print, Feb 1930, 8ins x 6ins. Black and White photograph of Crowley playing chess with R.A. Starr in a chess club or café devoted to chess. Crowley is smoking a pipe, and is engrossed in the game. On reverse is stamp bearing address and details of a Fleet Street photographic agency, and the date in Starr's hand. He said a press photographer happened upon them, recognising Crowley he took the picture and offered Starr a copy. Whether it was the act of photographing, or Crowley, one can see quite a few of the people in the background are not paying attention to their games! The image is very sharp and clear indeed. A nice item.

One of the most important details in the description is of course the date: February 1930. This I take as partial justification for my blunder. I was at least right in thinking that the picture had been taken in 1930, the year when Crowley went to Portugal. When I first saw the picture Crowley looked to me exactly as he should have looked in 1930. How could I possibly know that, in the same period, he was also spending time playing chess in London with an almost exact double of Pessoa's? During the Boca do Inferno's affair, journals were asking if it was Crowley or his double that had crossed the Portuguese border, since he was supposed to be dead.<sup>22</sup> But Pessoa had a double too, and nobody had noticed it!

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<sup>18</sup> The print had very probably been Israel Regardie's copy. It came to the O.T.O. from his archive.

<sup>19</sup> Mr Fernee has been kind enough to send me the full list in which this item was included for sale. Unfortunately, in his email dated 2 May 2009, Mr Fernee told me he could not be more precise about when the list was sent to his customers, because he had lost this information after changing computers some time ago.

<sup>20</sup> According to Clive Harper (in his email dated 30 April 2009), he might be the same Rowe mentioned by John Symonds as being present at the moment of Crowley's death (see John Symonds, *The King of the Shadow Realm. Aleister Crowley: His Life and Magic*, London, Duckworth, 1989, p. 578).

<sup>21</sup> According to Peter Rowe, Starr died in 1977 (see below, n. 26), but the picture was published in the magazine *Spectrum* in 1975. Rowe's role in its publication was made clear in the caption, as we have noted above, n. 10. I would therefore assume that by then he had already got in possession of the picture, while he may have received the rest of the papers only after Starr's death.

<sup>22</sup> The reference is to an article published in the British journal *The Empire News*, titled "Famous Mystic or his Double?" Quoted in J. Symonds, *The King of the Shadow Realm*, p. 455. See the full text online: <http://www.lashtal.com/nuke/module-subjects-printpage-pageid-41-scope-all.phtml>.

There is at least one more detail that can be said about the photograph. The editor of *Chess Monthly* was right in seeing the Gambit Chess Rooms as the venue. In fact, we know that Crowley and Starr used to meet there for their games. This can be evinced from an undated letter from Crowley to Starr, also included in the collection sold by Mr Fernee.<sup>23</sup> The letter was bought and soon put on sale again through the website Lashtal, the most famous platform for persons interested in any aspect of Crowley's life and work.<sup>24</sup> The seller (using the pseudonym "The Real Simon Iff") included a scan of the letter, which we read as follows: "die ♂ [Tuesday] Dear Starr I hope you got my message at the Gambit. I was much too ill to come. Ring me here at 11 o'clock to-morrow, & we'll see about j [Thursday]. Yours Aleister Crowley". Gambit of course can only be the Gambit Chess Rooms. The letter, incidentally, also confirms that the two were regular chess partners, and gives further confirmation to the identification of Starr as the man in the photograph.

There remains now only one question. Who on earth was this R.A. Starr? And what was the nature of his relationship with Crowley? A satisfying answer to this question lies outside the scope of this article, and this for two reasons. First of all, only scanty information about his biography is available at the moment. Secondly, the main purpose of the present foray was mainly to clarify Pessoa's position (or, rather, non-position) in this story. However, I think it will be interesting to present the little information I have been able to gather.

I don't know anything about Starr's origins or occupation.<sup>25</sup> He died in January 1977, when he was in his eighties.<sup>26</sup> This means he should have been born sometimes between 1888 and 1897. Considering his aspect in the picture, I would say rather earlier than later. His first name was Robert.<sup>27</sup> What is clear is that his relationship with Crowley did not turn only around chess, but had also a more esoteric dimension. Interestingly enough, he seems to have been a IXth degree of the Ordo Templi Orientis, which means a very high-ranking member.<sup>28</sup> However, it must be said that in the 1930s the Order was practically non-existent in England, at least as an organized structure, and Crowley was inclined to bestow high degrees more easily than it would have been the case otherwise. In any case, his involvement with Crowley and the O.T.O. was a long time affair, as some documents from his papers date back to 1923, and he was still in contact with Crowley as late as 1938.<sup>29</sup> Israel Regardie, who was very close to Crowley in that period as his personal secretary, offers a vivid account of Starr's relationship with Crowley in *The Eye in the Triangle*. In this book, an essay on Crowley's life and ideas filled with interesting personal reminiscences, Starr is given the pseudonym Aloysius Comet:

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<sup>23</sup> This was listed as item n. 51014. The description does not include a transcription of the text.

<sup>24</sup> See the post at <http://www.lashtal.com/nuke/PNphpBB2-viewtopic-t-1094-highlight-lashtal.phtml> (retrieved on 26 June 2009).

<sup>25</sup> He was no relation to Meredith Starr (another disciple of Crowley's before the First World War) whose real name was Herbert Close (Meredith Starr was just a pseudonym). See J. Symonds, *The King of the Shadow Realm*, p. 125-126.

<sup>26</sup> I find this information in a letter of Peter Rowe to Israel Regardie, dated 6 May 1977. The letter is preserved in a private collection and was originally part of Israel Regardie's papers.

<sup>27</sup> Clive Harper, in his email dated 30 April 2009, suggests that his full name was Raymond Aloysius Starr, but Robert is the name given to him by Peter Rowe in his letter to Israel Regardie mentioned above, n. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Apparently, he had received the degree from Crowley in April 1929. His name in the Order was Frater Maha-Linga. The source is Ben Fernee's list mentioned above, n. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Email from William Breeze, 30 May 2009. From the letter of Peter Rowe mentioned above, n. 26, it is clear that in the 1920s Starr had also been an intimate friend of Allan Bennett, an old friend and colleague of Crowley's in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

There was a curious chap named Aloysius Comet who used to come down from London to visit Crowley, when we were living in Kent. Crowley found him interesting for a while. Comet could play chess moderately well, which Crowley appreciated tremendously at the time, for he was undergoing one of his recurrent attacks of phlebitis which kept him confined to the house. Comet was also a fairly good raconteur, and loved to talk about a prominent symptom of his masochistic neurosis, flagellation. Crowley thought him altogether amusing, though rather pathetic.<sup>30</sup>

Regardie then goes on telling how Starr made the terrible mistake of letting Crowley know he had contracted a venereal disease. This made him feel guilty and dirty all the time. Crowley had no better ideas for relieving his disciple's anguish than giving him the name of a character from a novel he had just read: "Badcock":

It was always "Badcock, this!" and "Badcock, that!" He was given this nickname both when alone or whenever there were other people visiting Crowley. The master thought it was enormously funny. He delighted in embarrassing and humiliating Comet in front of friends, first by using the fictional name, and then by referring facetiously to the malady which Comet had contracted.<sup>31</sup>

According to Regardie, eventually Starr felt so miserable about the situation that he disappeared. "Crowley had thought it all a great joke!"<sup>32</sup>

Regardie's account presents Starr as a mere victim of Crowley's nasty pranks. But Starr's papers offer a more nuanced picture, which may also explain the rather unsympathetic, or at least condescending, tone used by Regardie in telling his story. It is there that we find the only, however indirect, connection with Pessoa. In some letters Regardie wrote to Starr around September 1930 Crowley's Portuguese fake suicide comes up.<sup>33</sup> Apparently, Crowley had not informed his disciples and collaborators back in England of his plans. Therefore, at the beginning they were not aware that the whole Boca do Inferno affair was just a publicity stunt, and they thought that the master might really be dead. This opened up the problem of the succession in Crowley's magical organizations, the O.T.O. and the A.:A.:. At that moment, the relationship between Starr and Regardie seems to have gone sour because of the authority they were both claiming after Crowley's supposed death. This episode shows that, if Starr was perhaps a meteor (or a "comet") in Crowley's life, his figure may deserve further attention, considering also that, to my knowledge, he is not even mentioned in any of the numerous biographies devoted to Crowley.

There is always some satisfaction in solving a problem that has pestered us for quite some time. In this case, the satisfaction goes hand in hand with disappointment, for the price to pay has been the killing of a darling. Considering the characters at play in this story, it was only fitting to have a photograph of the man who never was, playing a chess game that never happened with the man who was too much.

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<sup>30</sup> Israel Regardie, *The Eye in the Triangle. An Interpretation of Aleister Crowley*, Phoenix, New Falcon Publications, 1993, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22-23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Once again, the source is Ben Fernee's list.