

# Introduction to *The Book of Pleasure*

By Kenneth Grant

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Austin Osman Spare was born at Snowhill, London, in 1886. Apart from William Blake, John Martin, Aubrey Beardsley, Sidney Sime, and a mere handful of others, England has produced no artist to equal Spare for sheer ability and imaginative fecundity.

Spare was not only a graphic artist; he wrote four books on what he described as symbolic sorcery - *The Book of Pleasure* (1909-1913), *The Focus of Life* (1918-1921), *Anathema of Zos* (1924) and *The Book of the Living Word of Zos* (1951-1956), a collection of aphorisms and magical formulae which remains unpublished to this day.[\(note 1\)](#)



Spare published some of his drawings in books such as *Earth Inferno* (1905), *A Book of Satyrs* (1907), and in periodicals; he also illustrated a few books by other writers, but the four works mentioned above are all that survives of his extensive occult researches. They trace the evolution and development of the curious system of sorcery with which he was preoccupied until his death in 1956. They were, however, mere punctuation marks, pauses, between the steady outflow of graphic work which he produced almost continuously during an obscure, outwardly uneventful and impoverished existence.

Although Spare had no specific teacher where his art was concerned, [\(note 2\)](#) he did have a teacher - or perhaps guru would be a more appropriate term - in a 'magical' sense. During his most impressionable years circumstances led him into the company of a self-confessed witch, a mysterious Mrs. Paterson who befriended him and initiated him into the mysteries of her craft. He was extremely reticent about Mrs Paterson. All that I was able to elicit from him during the eight years of friendship was that she was very old when he met her and that she claimed descent from a line of Salem (New England) witches that Cotton Mather had failed to eradicate.

Spare did not get on with his mother and he looked upon Mrs Paterson as a 'second mother'. What little he said about her explains much of his work and his life-long devotion to the occult. She was able to transform herself on certain occasions into a woman of alluring loveliness: this she had done in his presence as a proof of her magical powers.[\(note 3\)](#) Furthermore, she gave him the keys whereby he gained access to the Witches' Sabbath, the genuine extra-terrestrial event of which the popular version is but a debased and grotesque parody. It was during his exultation to the dimension where this event occurs that he was taught how to explore the subconscious with the use of sentient symbols and the alphabet of desire described in [*The Book of Pleasure*]. These methods, once demonstrated, had to be brought down and 'earthed', and it took several years for Spare to integrate them with his own creative techniques.

*The Book of Pleasure* embodies the first vague searchings into the subconscious regions that he was to explore more fully in later books, for it should be understood that there was no creed of the Zos and the Kia - the Imagination and the Will - in the teachings he received at the Sabbath; they were of a purely practical and magical nature. It was Spare who wedded the practices of witchcraft to the doctrines of the Neither-Neither and the Atmospheric 'I', which he interpreted with fantastic manual dexterity. These doctrines were inspired by his early studies, for Spare was an omnivorous reader, and some of his more obvious influences - from Lao-tze to Aleister Crowley - are readily

apparent.

Spare was drawn to Crowley in 1910 when he became a member of the Argenteum Astrum, ([note 4](#)) shortly after contributing some of his drawings to Crowley's periodical, The Equinox. ([note 5](#))



Spare claimed to be one of the first surrealists. He had visualized the irrational and transcribed his vision directly from subconscious strata of the psyche; he was also able to galvanise primal centres of awareness by a formula of atavistic resurgence that few artists - and fewer occultists - have succeeded in re-activating with impunity to their work or to themselves.

The Book of Pleasure contains a unique method of obtaining control of the subconscious energies latent in the human mind in the form of primal atavisms. It is evident that if such energy can be tapped and channelled, it can be directed to creative or destructive ends on a scale infinitely beyond anything achievable by the mind in the more limited state that characterizes 'waking' consciousness. But the subconscious does not yield to conscious suggestion for it is founded on sensation, not upon thought, hence a tactual and visual means must be employed if it is to be penetrated and permeated with the vitalizing current of will or desire. The process must be symbolically enacted, and its intent not consciously formulated, for "unless desire is subconscious, it is not fulfilled....". A method had to be found of by-passing the conscious mind and planting the desire directly in the soil of the subconsciousness. To this end Spare evolved his own system of sentient symbols which took on a secret meaning and which constituted a 'sacred' alphabet of desire of which "each letter in its pictorial aspect relates to a Sex principle...". From this alphabet it is possible to construct the words of a mysterious language of sensation that reifies the imagery of appetite.

Spare believed that the hieroglyphics of ancient peoples such as the Egyptian and Amerindian are the remains of an occult language. That the Egyptians practised a form of sorcery involving a process similar to that of Spare's formula of atavistic resurgence is suggested by the fact that the hieroglyphics are usually in zoomorphic form.

It is known that the priests of antiquity assumed animal-headed masks when performing rituals designed to produce magical effects; also, that when dormant forces were awakened, the magician was shaken to the very depths of his being as he manifested the atavisms that his spells had invoked. The convulsions of Tibetan 'oracles'; the strange phenomena of spirit possession common to most peoples of antiquity are proof of Spare's theory; proof also that some cosmic forces then possesses the human vehicle and enables the magician to perform superhuman feats.

The mainspring of the formula of atavistic resurgence is - as one might suppose - a form of sexual sorcery. The Adepts of old concealed the process from the eyes of the profane (i.e. those whose ineptitude would destroy them), for once these atavisms are unleashed, magical obsession occurs and there is no reversing the course of events any more than one can reverse the flow of semen on

the point of its leaping forth. If the magician is unable to control the power he has invoked, or if he is unable to permit its unhindered movement as it wells into consciousness, then he is literally blasted into death or insanity.



The secret of this sorcery is analogous to that taught by Crowley in his Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.) where it was - and still is - the fulcrum of magical power and the means of gaining access to trans-human dimensions and of communicating with the denizens of other worlds.

Spare maintained that he was in communication with extra-terrestrial Intelligences and conscious forces possessed of superhuman power and knowledge. He referred frequently to Black Eagle, [\(note 6\)](#) who inspired many of his 'magical' drawings. Black Eagle seems to have been a concentration of sinister trans-cosmic current which, according to H.P. Lovecraft [\(note 7\)](#), had been tapped in its primordial phase by the witch cults of New England. Perhaps Black Eagle was the alter ego of Mrs Paterson, for it was not long after her death that this current began to manifest in Spare's work.

Whatever the identity of Spare's genius - Mrs Paterson, Black Eagle, or one of the 'host of familiars' by which he was habitually surrounded - the fact remains that Spare produced a large amount of work during abnormal states of consciousness or self-induced trance. He was not mediumistic in the usual sense of the term, nor did he produce automatic drawings in the way that spirit mediums produce automatic texts. Rather, Spare transmitted his work in much the same way that The Book of the Law and other magical writings were transmitted by Aleister Crowley, [\(note 8\)](#) i.e. he entered consciously and magically into communication with superhuman Intelligences.

Towards the end of his life, when Spare lived more or less reclusively in a Dickensian South London slum, he was asked whether he regretted his lonely existence. "Lonely!" he exclaimed, and with a sweep of his arm he indicated the host of unseen elementals and familiar spirits that were his constant companions; he had but to turn his head to catch a fleeting glimpse of their subtle presences.

I have described some of Spare's transactions with his 'host of familiars' in The Magical Revival, but the reader of The Book of Pleasure will have little difficulty in imagining what these creatures were like. Imagination is the operative word, for Spare's sorcery is a form of veritable imagination or image-making; of 'dreaming true'. He exalted the imagination above every other faculty and claimed that "dreams shall flesh" if the requisite ability to reify them has been absolutely mastered. Herein lies the key to his sorcery; the ability to 'visualise sensation' and to convey a world of imaginative reality to the observer.

Augustus John regarded Spare as one of the great graphic artists of his time, and many years earlier John Singer Sargent, G.F. Watts, George Bernard Shaw, and others praised him in similar terms.

Spare sent a copy of The Book of Pleasure to Sigmund Freud who described it as one of the most significant revelations of subconscious mechanisms that had appeared in modern times.

Whatever the value of Spare's contribution to art and psychology, his contribution to experimental occultism is supreme, for he discovered a method of reifying the dream world under the controlling aegis of the fully conscious will.

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## NOTES

1. Subtitled *The Zoetic Grimoire of Zos*. Zos was Spare's 'magical' name. A selection of these aphorisms, together with an introduction to Spare and his work is to be published shortly by Frederick Muller Ltd., London, under the title *Images and Oracles of Austin Osman Spare*, by Kenneth Grant.
2. He was a student at the Royal College of Art in Kensington, London.
3. A similar phenomenon occurred in the presence of Aleister Crowley when an ageing sorceress transformed herself into a "young woman of bewitching beauty", for purposes of vampirism. See *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* (ed. Symonds and Grant), chapter 42, Jonathan Cape, London, 1969.
4. The Order of the Silver Star.
5. *The Equinox*, "The Encyclopaedia of Initiation", appeared in eleven numbers, ten of which were published between the years 1909 and 1913. Two only of Spare's drawings were reproduced. See *The Equinox*, vol. 1, number 2, pages 140 and 161.
6. See *The Magical Revival* (Frederick Muller Ltd. 1972), plate facing page 149, for a reproduction of Spare's impression of Black Eagle, painted in 1946.
7. Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937). The New England writer whose tales of terror involve traffic with extra-terrestrial entities.
8. See Crowley's *Confessions*.