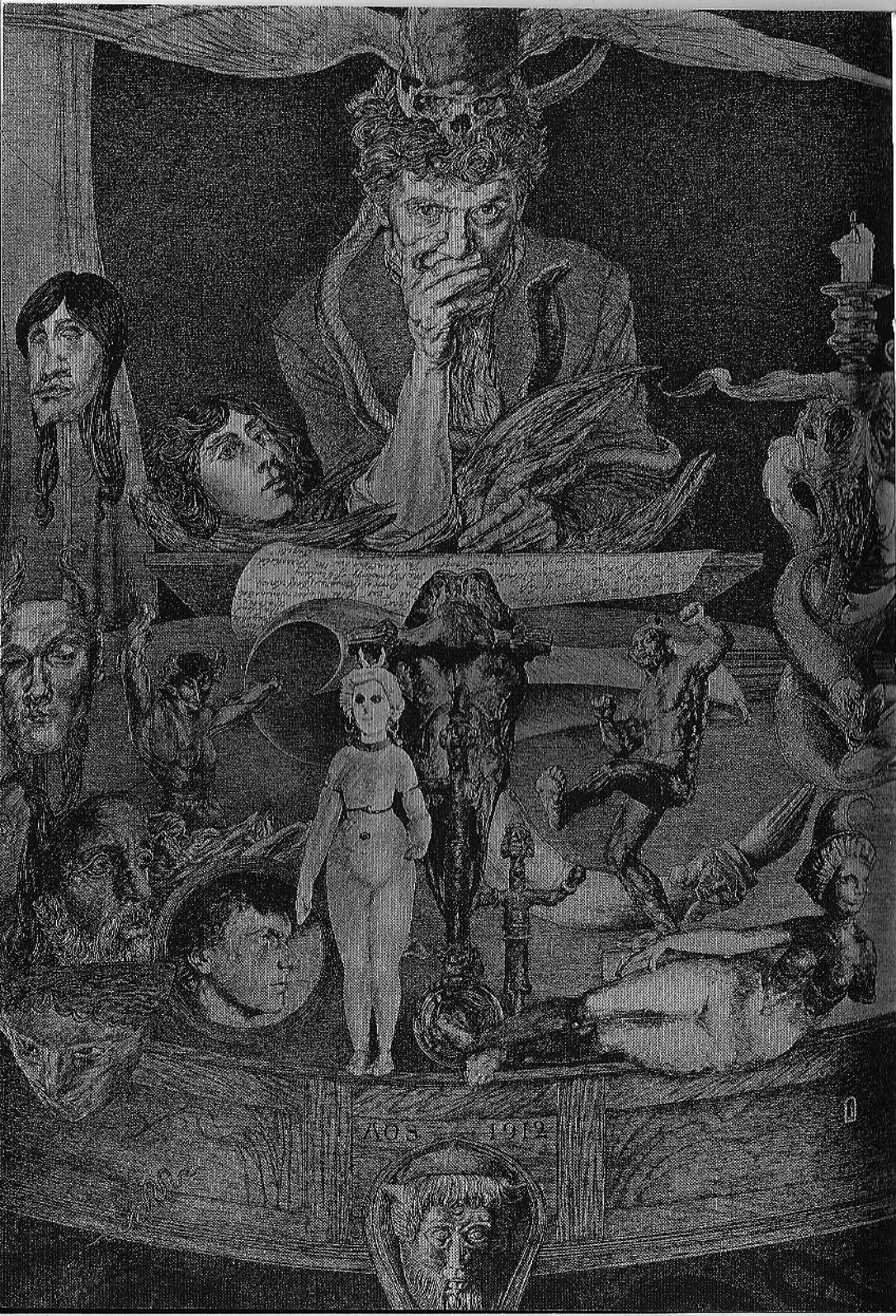


Some perspectives on the philosophy of

THE
BOOK OF PLEASURE

GAVIN W. SEMPLE



Who ever thought thus?

Some perspectives towards understanding the philosophy
of *The Book of Pleasure* by Austin Osman Spare

by *Gavin W. Semple*

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Who ever thought thus?

First published in 1913, *The Book of Pleasure* is one of three critical works that are landmarks in the evolution of modern magic, the others being of course Aleister Crowley's *Liber Al* or *The Book of the Law*, and Gerald Gardner's *The Book of Shadows* - yet in relation to these Spare's book remains quite unique and apart. *Liber Al* was dictated to Crowley over the course of three days in April 1904 by an entity that Crowley came to identify and accept not only as his personal Holy Guardian Angel, but as also the archon of the present Aeon - this according to *Liber Al* was inaugurated with the reception of the book. Gardner's *The Book of Shadows* was constructed by its author on a framework of Masonic ritual and ceremonial magic, borrowing heavily from the works of other writers, and was later revised by Doreen Valiente to reach the form in which it would be transmitted, ensuring conformity of practice between the separate covens of the modern witchcraft religion that Gardner set in motion. Both these books stand as touchstone texts of neo-religious cults that were conceived and established by their writers - the one of Thelema, the other of Wicca and its offshoots. Both books claim a provenance and authority which supports their status as 'sacred texts' - *Liber Al* through its reception from a higher spiritual intelligence, *The Book of Shadows* through its purported antiquity, said to have been handed down over centuries, thus constituting a link with the religion of the earliest peoples of Europe.

The Book of Pleasure is quite distinct from those books of Crowley and Gardner. It represents itself as what it is, the work of an artist living and working in England at the beginning of the modern era; it was not written as part of the founding of a cult or religious order, but instead encourages its readers to think for themselves, to investigate and value their own beliefs, doctrines and methods - freely confessing that it offers no solutions or easy answers, and insisting that these can only be discovered by each person within her or himself. It claims no provenance except the

Fig. 1. The Death Posture, *The Book of Pleasure*, frontispiece.

imagination and creative brilliance of the author, and stands as a demonstration of the insight that can be achieved by an individual working alone by, for and with him or herself to reclaim the mind's visionary potential and manifest this through creative effort. For a book that discourages would-be followers at every turn, it has gained an astonishing number of devotees in the last thirty years and its influence continues to spread far and wide.

Within the philosophy presented in *The Book of Pleasure* there are five main components that we can identify as Spare's unique formulations and contributions to the magical art, in each case he drew upon earlier sources within the occult traditions of Europe and the Orient in order to isolate and refine the principle function of those earlier ideas and create a system which is entirely his own. These elements are the mysticism of the Kia, the magical practice of the Death Posture, the art of Sigils, the Psychology of Belief and the concept of Self-love.

Firstly, there is the doctrine of the Kia, which is the over-arching theme of his book. This is Spare's expression of a concept that is very rarely found in Western occultism although it is the foundation of several Oriental disciplines including the Taoism and Cha'an Buddhism of China, and the latter's recension as Zen in Japan, and also Tibetan Vajrayana Tantric Buddhism where it is known as *Sunyata* or the Doctrine of the Voidness. Spare's inspiration seems to have come from the Taoism of the legendary master Lao Tzu, writing to his friend Frank Letchford in the 1950s Spare named Lao Tzu and Plato as his greatest influences in philosophy, and there are a number of passages in *The Book of Pleasure* which mirror closely the text of Lao Tzu's book of succinctly illuminating epigrams known as the *Tao Teh Ching*. Like the Tao, Spare's Kia is the ultimate reality whose nature is emptiness - the non-existent source of all manifest phenomena. According to the Eastern schools, the goal of attainment is to realise this emptiness and thereafter permit the mind to rest in a state of non-attachment, enrapt in the bliss of perpetual *samadhi*. Yet how is it possible for us to perceive this astonishing nothingness which is the origin and aspiration of all reality, all time, space and things? Spare acknowledges that the nature of the Kia is such that it can

never be grasped by the human mind, for whether it is imagined as a place, a state of being, a deity or a power, it remains always 'upstream' of the very thoughts that we are sending to find it. I expect that you are not a religious person with childish ideas about Heaven and Hell, so I wonder, can you truly imagine what it will be like to be dead? And can you remember what existence was like before you were conceived inside your mother? How do you perceive yourself when you are asleep and not dreaming? In these states is there really anyone or anything there at all?

Spare suggest two methods of becoming aware of the primordial Kia-state, firstly by a ritual practice which he calls the Death Posture, explained in the chapter of that title where he gives a method that involves staring at one's image in a mirror, hyper-ventilating and then voluntarily collapsing into the vortex of mental confusion that is produced. This seems to have been a procedure that worked well for Spare, a type of astral projection into the void of no-thought - he may have developed the idea from yoga practice, in particular the so-called 'corpse posture' or *Shavasana*. He spent a lot of time looking into the mirror during his life in order to draw self-portraits, and he certainly used mirror-gazing in connection with automatic drawing; it is a useful way to extend the way we perceive ourselves, and consequently to shift the limits of the ego. In case you haven't, you might like to try staring into a mirror in a darkened room, lit dimly by one or two candles, and focussing your gaze on a point ten centimetres behind the eyes of your double. Then becoming aware of your peripheral vision, who or what will you see forming beside, behind and around you? This is the sort of pastime that conventional parents warn their children against, insisting that it is dangerous - for the devil himself may appear! But for magicians, anything labelled 'dangerous' has a magnetic attraction - they know that where the conventional mind refuses to go, there are hidden possibilities of new and different knowledge. The actual Death Posture yoga as used by Spare has been tested by many practitioners over the years, it certainly works as Spare claimed, though it is a fairly stressful way to work with the body and mind. Some experimenters have concluded that 'Death Posture' ultimately signifies the mental state produced rather than the exercise

itself - an imposture of Death in which the ego or personality is temporarily obliterated - and so they have moved on to develop more subtle and effective ways to accomplish this. One advantage of Spare's practice is that it encourages a physically active approach to magic, a perfect antidote to too much book reading and thinking.

The second method suggested by Spare is a type of mystical speculation in which opposing concepts are imagined in turn - love and hate, black and white, life and death, you and me, waking and sleeping, and so on. In between these polarities there must be a point in the spectrum which is neither one nor the other; Spare's suggestion is to imagine this conceptual 'neither' point, and then apply the 'neither' to that 'neither'. By this manoeuvre the Kia is apperceived directly, for it is this 'Neither-Neither' point. It's a difficult thing to explain, but very easy to do, a type of mental somersault that is characteristic of Spare's method; in later writings he talked of the concept of 'Inbetweenness' which similarly reflects the nature of the ineffable Kia. We can see by now that this type of sorcery involves breaking the limits of thought by making thought do things that in fact it cannot do. Many practitioners have found that the Neither-Neither contemplation occurs by itself at the point of waking up, or of falling into sleep - when one is neither asleep nor awake there are a few moments of complete mental equilibrium when we are simply able to be, free in the current of pure consciousness without identification. This is something we all accomplish twice a day, though most people do not even notice - for the magician all these obscure corners of awareness are resources to be explored and exploited, in order to continually extend the map of the Self.

The third unique element of Spare's method involves the use of graphic designs composed of conjoined Roman letters which he calls 'Sigils' as a means to effect magical transference. Spare evidently studied the old traditional grimoires of sorcery, with their badly-drawn seals of spirits and magical talismans, and realised that beneath their accumulations of stereotyped designs, distorted by repeated copying over time there lay concealed an effective method of communication with powers latent in the subconscious. The conjurations of these old books were addressed to

a multitude of spiritual powers - the Christian god and his hierarchies of angels, demons, saints - which belonged to a cultural belief system that had long since perished; these beliefs may have made good sense to a magician of the 18th or 17th century, but how can a person of the modern post-industrial age call upon them for aid with any sincerity? Instead, having understood that the driving forces of magical power lie within the deep realms of the mind, your own mind, is it not far more useful to call out to - your self?

Spare believed in the Self - a term which he appears to have acquired from Theosophy - as the ultimate spiritual potency, or god, and it was to communicate with it that he invented his system of Sigils, whose function is to translate a consciously-held idea, wish or desire from the language of ordinary awareness into a form that speaks directly to, and is understood by, the sub- or unconscious mind. Spare's technique replaces the elaborate spiritual hierarchies of the traditional systems with a series of dissociative steps that allow the stated desire to drift away from the all-too-solid, everyday reality and into the realm of plastic and infinitely mutable form that is the deep mind. The first dissociation is made by writing down the wish in a clear and simple form; for instance: 'I desire to be fascinated and to learn much from the magnificent new ideas in The Book of Pleasure'. Thus the basic formula of the spell or evocation is set out. A second dissociation is then made by removing all the repeated letters (possibly some vowels as well), and reducing the sentence to an apparently meaningless line of letters; the one I have suggested is rather elaborate and over-long - we could reduce it for convenience to: 'I desire learn Book Pleasure' - which reduces down to IDSRLRN BKPLSR. These letters are then combined into an aesthetically pleasing shape - the main object is to translate meaning into pure form, and nothing should remain that suggests the original wish to the conscious mind. This is the difference between a Sigil and a Symbol, as Spare explains - the Sigil has no meaning for the conscious mind, while a Symbol can be read immediately by it, like the stick-figures of men and women on signs that show you where to find a toilet, or an arrow on a road-sign that tells you to 'Go this Way'! The Sigil should also be simple



in form and easy to remember; Spare suggests that it is visualised at a time of worry, anxiety, fear, doubt, hunger, tiredness, disappointment, sorrow, and similar states of mind, at which times the subconscious mind is extremely sensitive and will easily accept the Sigil as a communication. In this way the detritus of our mental economy, all those feelings and thoughts that are obstacles to getting what we want, doing what we really want to do, are recycled, re-fashioned and re-aligned through the medium of the Sigil towards a definite goal. Spare's system of Sigils is so simple yet so efficient that it has become a standard of magical practice. In the last few years it has been included in books which have no connection at all with Spare, and whose authors seem never to have heard of him; or, at least, they choose not to mention him. With practice and experiment everyone can alter and add to this basic method to create a process which is entirely their own; Spare was a draughtsman, so it was natural for him to choose visually-oriented Sigils as tools of his sorcery, but all creative arts can be exploited to render visible the Sacred Alphabet of the mysteries that each one of us contains, a grammar of communication between our self and our hidden Self that asks to be explored in fantasy and deep imagining, and to be manifested in the world of humans. What, for instance, would be the sounds of your Sigils? What postures could they represent in a dance? How would you mould them as sculptures? What colours and tones could combine to express the spectrum of their sentience? Sigils are unlimited in their potential - the deep mind can and will accomplish anything if the wish is congruent with its own needs, its own agenda, or as Crowley would say, 'in accord with the True Will' - though it might sometimes take another incarnation or two for appropriate circumstances to occur in which the desire can come to be. Very often the sigillised wish manifests in dreaming - this is a skill at which Spare seems to have excelled - but there definitely seems to one simple rule that governs Sigil magic: You never get your wish in the way that you expect! This is a logical outcome, given that the conscious mind is making requests of the vastly more intelligent and powerful subconsciousness, but it also means that casting Sigils involves a substantial commitment and responsibility to yourself: what would you do if you knew your desire

Fig 2. The Dwellers at the Gates of Silent Memory, *The Book of Pleasure*, p.46

would manifest in twenty or thirty years' time? Or even in another life? Would you still want it? For this reason most intelligent practitioners of the art work their Sigils for something more useful and transcendental than simply to make someone fall in love with them, to get money or to bewitch their neighbours' cattle. Spare has been so generous as to allow us a great deal of room for personal experimentation; we do not need to consider his work finished, and we can develop and elaborate all aspects of it within our own mythology, according to our own direction and path.

The fourth significant component of *The Book of Pleasure* is the 'psychology of belief' - this is a key element of Spare's philosophy and one that seems to be rarely understood or utilised in contemporary magical practice. There is a very good reason for it to be left well alone: virtually all magical and religious doctrines demand that their followers believe in a specific truth as The Truth, and to believe that all other doctrines are wrong, or at least misguided. This has proved to be the fate of occult groups in the twentieth century, just like the mainstream religions - disagreements and schisms seem to be the normal state of affairs, and there are plenty of highly vocal magicians waging Jihad against their former colleagues and friends through the pages of magazines and Internet forums. Spare found himself falling into the same trap with Crowley, and when the friendship ended he retained some deep resentments which surface in *The Book of Pleasure*; it may well have been his difficulties with Crowley which led to his highly original speculations on the nature of belief - whatever the stimulus, the observations he makes are almost unique in magical literature. Spare carefully distinguishes between the two elements involved in making beliefs true; he points out that there is always the 'belief' or thing that is believed, and there is also the process of believing in it. 'How do you believe?' he asks us, and the answer is quite simple - by processes of representation carried out in the mind. Spare's brilliant assertion is that beliefs are fairly arbitrary things - we can believe this or believe that; lose faith in what we believe is 'true' and then believe something different; we can think that our parents' beliefs are warped and deliberately choose to believe things that they

will totally disagree with - later we might come around to thinking that they were perhaps right after all. Yet in all these changes the way that we represent belief does not necessarily alter - belief can prove to be a totally fluid substance that is held together only by the cup of believing, in any place, at any time. As with everything in *The Book of Pleasure*, it is essential for each individual to experiment and explore their own patterns of representations - in fact AOS reserves his harshest scorn for those who follow without questioning; therefore I make the following suggestion that might assist you in identifying your own modes of internal representations. You know what your name is - you've had it all your life, written it countless times, responded to it being spoken by others. This name is a type of truth for you and a firmly fixed belief. So imagine, if you will, a photograph of you with your name written underneath it - make a good clear mental picture of your image, read your name and hear it being said. Ask yourself if that 'feels right'. Next, take that picture of yourself - but put someone else's name underneath; again, read this wrong name, hear it being said. Ask yourself again if it 'feels right'. Now I would ask you to compare the two imaginings: what were the differences when you visualised the second one? Was the photo of you as clear, colourful, brightly lit, contrasted as the first? When you saw the wrong name underneath, was it printed in the same way - the same size or smaller? Bold or blurred? And how did the voice that said the wrong name for you sound? Was it quieter, less distinct, further away - absent? When you asked yourself if the name and picture together 'felt right' each time - were the sensations different? - a feeling of tension or of relaxation? In what parts of your body did you feel them? I don't know what the differences were - but there will certainly be some, and these are unique to you and to the way in which you have learned to order your reality through representation. Our beliefs structure our reality for us - they constantly objectivise, projecting unconsciousness as our environment which we then perceive as 'outside' us and 'other' to us. In so doing they fix the limits of what is and what is not possible for us, therefore the ability to change belief at will must be a primary tool of the sorcerer. The ability to make swift and permanent changes to the fabric of reality (so-

called) - both internal and external - depends solely upon one's ability to manipulate and re-align belief according to will. The differentiation between the content and the process of believing is rarely found in magical literature; Crowley utilised it in works such as *Liber Astarte* but failed to make explicit the underlying formula. In recent times these processes were thoroughly explored in a therapeutic context by John Grinder and Richard Bandler who applied them in their system of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and I recommend their books as supplementary reading for any serious student of Spare, as their ideas greatly extend his theory. The brilliant contemporary mage Jan Fries has applied principles from both AOS and NLP within a specific magical context in his books *Visual Magick*, *Seidways*, and others.

Finally, what is the 'Self-love' that Spare has added to his title? In Spare's psychology the Self, which is the essential being of each person, is regarded as identical in nature with voidness or Kia (the 'God' of Spare's philosophy). The Kia endlessly projects itself into manifestation - elaborating, mutating, creating every possibility of form and phenomenon, becoming separate it encounters self-awareness and perceives itself as environment, other beings, forms, thoughts and so on. This is the formation of the dualistic universe. Within Spare's system this process can be viewed as happening at the beginning of the universe's creation, yet occurring at every moment - it is a cosmogony as well as a psychology. This implies that the individual is continually engaged - though unconsciously until becoming aware of the fact - in the process of creating, reshaping and destroying the perceptible world they inhabit. Awareness of this process offers the possibility of liberation - to leap out of the endless cycle of becoming, if even for a fraction of a second, in order to realise that 'Thou art That', both perceiver and perceived, self and other, both inside the game and outside looking on - and also neither of these. To experience in full consciousness these polarised states of awareness and to reconcile them within the self and its field of action is the aim of the magician upon this path. To recognise the perpetual rapturous union of the finite with the Absolute, and to re-member this reality as the primordial and eternal foundation of our being - that is the nature of Spare's 'Self-love', and the essence of his psychology of Pleasure.

It is ninety years since *The Book of Pleasure* first manifested in the world, and more than ever before the true value of his ideas is being understood. Because his books were mostly self-published in small editions during his life, Austin Osman Spare's work was little known and little regarded in occult circles until the 1970s, when Kenneth Grant began to promulgate and elaborate the Zos-Kia doctrine and Sigil system in the volumes of his Typhonian Trilogies, beginning with *The Magical Revival* in 1972. Kenneth and Steffi Grant and Austin Spare were close friends and magical collaborators during the 1950s, and 'Zos Kia Cultus' was founded in 1952 as a cell of the Nu-Isis Lodge; this became a vehicle for the development of the doctrines and aims which Spare had originally set out in *The Book of Pleasure*. By the late 1970s the Chaos Magick movement had appropriated Spare's system of sentient sigils as one of its principal methods, along with the concept of Kia-voidness, and created a system of training which effectively synthesised Spare's metaphysics and Crowley's ceremonial magic. The original Chaos school could perhaps be criticised for almost completely ignoring the element of creativity through magical aesthesis that was the founding principle of Spare's own work, focussing instead on 'results magic' which tended to trivialise Sigil sorcery in pursuit of purely material, sometimes banal, ends. In more recent years the focus of interest in Spare's work has changed again, so that now he occupies a very special area of culture which is not only accessible to individuals who are actively working in magic, but also radical theorists, writers, musicians, artists of all kinds engaged in the counter-culture. Thus Spare's legacy is bearing fruit as he originally intended, for his aim was not to win followers or establish a religion, but to open the way for a new liberty of thought, imagination, sexuality and action in defiance of authority, political and social conventions and the morality of 'the normal.' In this effort *The Book of Pleasure* stands as his manifesto of individual genius and freedom - a powerful call to arms in the invisible revolution of the spirit.