

Trafficking with Elementals: Kenneth Grant and Arthur Machen

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Kenneth Grant, born in 1924, is widely regarded as the ‘grand old man’ of British post-war occult scene. Grant is unique in that he is almost certainly the only person still alive to have known all three of the most influential figures in the twentieth century occult world, having had close personal relationships with both Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, and also having worked with Gerald Gardner, godfather of the modern Wiccan movement.

It has long been acknowledged by students of the occult that Grant has made extensive use of the work of H.P. Lovecraft in his numerous writings and in his magical practices. It is perhaps less well-known that many elements from Arthur Machen’s fiction also features heavily in Grant’s work; in particular, *The Novel of the Black Seal*, *The Hill of Dreams*, and *The White People*.

In 1944 Grant contacted Crowley with the intention of becoming his pupil; during these last three years of Crowley’s life Grant was also his secretary and personal assistant. The latter role included the supply of appropriate reading matter; in his fascinating and touching Crowley memoir, *Remembering Aleister Crowley*ⁱ, Grant quotes a letter from Crowley in which the aged Beast writes: “Very many thanks for Secret Glory {Arthur Machen}; best of his I’ve read. Criticism when I’m strong enough.” (16 Jan 1945)ⁱⁱ. And later that year, at Crowley’s final home, the Hastings guest house Netherwood, they both experienced a vision of Pan, as Grant recounts:

The Great God Pan: one morning at ‘Netherwood’, when Crowley accompanied me from the guest-house to the cottage, we experienced a joint ‘vision’ of a satyr-like form in the early spring sunshine. This could have been the result of an invocation Crowley & I performed in the grounds of the cottage where I was staying. I had left the front door ajar whilst going to fetch Crowley from the guest house. He would often come over to the cottage – weather permitting – and dictate a few letters or chat about magick.

On that particular morning I could see that he had other intentions. In a tremulous falsetto voice he began intoning the chorus to his “Hymn to Pan”, and I joined in. By the time we reached the cottage, the chant had acquired an hypnotic intensity. Inside, I opened a window which flashed a shaft of sunlight onto a dense bed of ivy leaves. A thin haze hung over the ground. The brilliant, glancing light revealed an almost human countenance wreathed in foliage. It was not entirely a figment of my imagination, for Crowley also saw it. The incident loses in the telling –such experiences are virtually incommunicable – but the impression remains today as vivid as it was forty-five years ago. (1 June 1945)ⁱⁱⁱ

After Crowley’s death, Grant was authorized by the then head of the Ordo Templi Orientis, Karl Germer, to be the head of the organization in the UK. The Ordo Templi Orientis (or OTO)

was a magical/masonic order, which has its origins in 1890s Germany. Crowley became its worldwide head in 1925. After his death in 1947, various OTO groups – including Grant’s own - arose, each staking their claim to be Crowley’s legitimate heirs^{iv}. Thus, in the early 1950s, Grant established a new magical organization, the New Isis Lodge, and drafted a manifesto which announced the discovery of the ‘Sirius-Set current’. Grant was perceived to have moved so far from the original tenets of the OTO that Germer expelled him in 1955. As a result, Grant founded the rival Typhonian OTO.

The term ‘Typhonian’ indicated the influence of the nineteenth century poet and Egyptologist, Gerald Massey^v (now seemingly a forgotten figure, but in his time, a popular and controversial public speaker whose lectures caused great uproar due to his arguments for Judeo-Christianity being highly derivative of earlier religious systems of thought, such as those of the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians). According to Massey, the earlier religion of ancient Egypt was a goddess-oriented one, which coalesced into the cult of Typhon or Set-Typhon (Typhon being the goddess and Set being her son). Subsequently, when the lunar, matriarchal religion was challenged by a newer, solar and patriarchal one, Set and Typhon were demonized. In opposition to the Isis-Osiris-Horus cult of fertility and resurrection, Set represents the dry, hostile desert, inimical to life - eventually being identified with Satan, the Adversary. The star Sirius is also a component of Grant’s system, and he has claimed to have received communications from transmudane or extraterrestrial beings originating from Sirius.

At the risk of gross over-simplification, Grant argues that from the earliest stages of humanity, humans (and their predecessors) have been in communication (or, as he puts it, have been ‘trafficking’) with transmudane intelligences. Most recently, in the twentieth century, such contact had been re-established by Crowley (the channelled ‘Book of the Law’ transmitted by the discarnate entity Aiwass, whom Crowley believed to have originated in Sumer) and, later, by Grant himself. Related to this, he regards the fiction of Lovecraft and Machen – especially those stories which allude to the existence on Earth of prehuman or suprahuman beings – as having an underlying truth. Thus, in *Outside the Circles of Time*:^{vi}

In modern fictional fantasies designed ostensibly to while away a few hours, certain adepts have approached more closely the real secret of magick and of creative consciousness...some of which Western science has but recently re-discovered. One such adept was the writer, Arthur Machen.

In his *Cults of the Shadow*, Grant writes:

Machen, Blackwood, Crowley, Lovecraft, Fortune and others, frequently used as a theme for their writings the influx of extra-terrestrial powers which have been moulding the history of our planet since time began; that is, since time began for us, for we are only too prone to suppose that we were here first and that we alone are here now, whereas the most ancient occult traditions affirm that we were neither the first
nor are we the only ones to people the earth; the Great Old Ones and the Elder Gods find echoes in the myths and legends of all peoples.

Austin Spare claimed to have had direct experience of the existence of extra-terrestrial intelligences, and Crowley – as his autobiography makes abundantly clear – devoted a lifetime to proving that extra-terrestrial and superhuman consciousness can and does exist independently of the human organism^{vii}

Lovecraft protested (in correspondence with friends) that his fictions were just that, and he espoused a rationalist, atheist world view which had little room for the supernatural. Despite this scepticism on the part of Lovecraft's conscious mind, Grant and others argued, Lovecraft's regular dreams and nightmares of alien races and landscapes (which were in many cases inspirations for his tales) were a result of his unconscious granting him access to an otherwise inaccessible, alien reality. Lovecraft's dread Cthulhu, the many-tentacled Great Old One who dwells sleeping beneath the sea, not dead, but dreaming, has been described by Grant as a metaphor for the unconscious mind itself.^{viii}

The same could be said of Machen's fiction, and this appears to be the line that Grant takes in his repeated references to Machen's *Ixaxar* or Sixtystone (spelling altered by Grant to *Ixaxaar* for qabalistic/gematria reasons). This mysterious stone, of great age (and, perhaps, of extraterrestrial origin), appears in *The Novel of the Black Seal*. Here, Machen skilfully parodies the classical geographer Solinus, writing of a savage and pre-human race:

...they hate the sun. They hiss rather than speak; their voices are harsh, and not to be heard without fear. They boast of a certain stone, which they call Sixtystone; for they say that it displays sixty characters. And this stone has a secret unspeakable name; which is Ixaxar.^{ix}

It transpires, in *The Novel of the Black Seal*, that this ancient and malevolent people still inhabit certain lonely regions of South Wales.

Grant, on numerous occasions, appears to refer to the Solinus pastiche as being genuine. A few examples will suffice:

It is a fact that Liber AL [Crowley's Book of the Law]...adumbrates a future aeon which is wordless, being typified by the "speech of the serpent", or the non-human hisses to which Solinus alludes in his description of Ixaxaar.^x

It will be noted that the 'hisses' are not mentioned in Solinus' original, but are taken from Machen's pastiche. And similarly, whilst Solinus does refer to the Sixtystone, the name Ixaxaar is Machen's invention. Arguably, were Grant aware of Machen's invention, it would by no means deter him from making use of this material - the logic being that Machen had somehow perceived or intuited a hidden undercurrent to the original text. Thus his Latin translation, whilst ostensibly fiction, represents a magical reality.^{xi}

Again,

The hissings associated with their [the Dropas; non-human beings who purportedly

came to earth somewhere in China 11-12,000 years ago] non-human rites are reminiscent of the Cult of the Black Stone, Ixaxaar, to which Machen alludes in connection with the formula of Protoplasmic Reversion. Such cults are of incalculable antiquity...The rites involved (and still involve) the disc, wheel or chakra, and the black stone...associated with the cult of Ixaxaar mentioned by Solinus.^{xii}

The aforementioned notion of Protoplasmic Reversion appears in the final chapter of *The Great God Pan*, when Helen Vaughan meets her horrible death:

...when the house of life is thus thrown open, there may enter in that for which we have no name, and human flesh may become the veil of a horror one dare not express...The blackened face, the hideous form upon the bed, changing and melting before your eyes from woman to man, from man to beast, and from beast to worse than beast...^{xiii}

and also in *The Novel of the White Powder*, where Francis Leicester's experiments with a certain medicine leads him to an equally ghastly end:

There upon the floor was a dark and putrid mass, seething with corruption and hideous rottenness, neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before our eyes, and bubbling with unctuous oily bubbles like boiling pitch. And out of the midst of it shone two burning points like eyes, and I saw a writhing and stirring as of limbs, and something moved and lifted up what might have been an arm. The doctor took a step forward, raised the iron bar and struck the burning points; he drove in the weapon, and struck again and again in the fury of loathing.^{xiv}

Clearly, this is no mere decay or decomposition; rather, it is a reversion or reduction to 'first matter'. Very likely the name of Helen Vaughan was suggested by that of the alchemist Thomas Vaughan, whose *Lumen de Lumine* (held in high regard by Machen^{xv}) speaks of this first matter as being slime, a "horrible, inexpressible darkness"^{xvi}. Vaughan claimed that he had seen this first matter, but that it is indescribable.

Grant drew a comparison between Machen's Protoplasmic Reversion and Austin Osman Spare's Atavistic Resurgence. It was Spare's belief that an individual could make contact with past incarnations or evolutionary forms - which were essentially one's ancestors - going all the way back to the earliest forms of life. Gavin Semple, in his admirable exposition of Spare's philosophy, *Zos-Kia*, expresses it thus:

As human animals, our physical and neural structures retain vestiges of our evolution; the layered structure of the brain is comprised of fish, reptile, amphibian, bird, and so on through mammalian, primate to human; this is the physiological basis of genetic memory. Moreover, each one of us recapitulates the entire order of evolution on Earth, from protozoa to human, during the nine months of our incubation within the womb; indeed, throughout our lives we carry our ancestors and their wisdom with us - our atavisms swim as chromosomes in the ocean of our cell nuclei, their voices echo in the caverns of our bones.

Spare's conviction was that all knowledge of past, present and future entity resides within us, and certain conditions may be drawn upon and returned into consciousness as power and knowledge. In his later writings he termed this process 'Atavistic Resurgence'; and the faculty of recall which summons such memory 'Atavistic Nostalgia' – literally the 'homesickness of ancestry'^{xvii}

However, although there are similarities between the two concepts, there is also a profound contrast which Grant appears to gloss over. The victims of Machen's Protoplasmic Reversion (and I use the term 'victims' advisedly) suffer a dreadful fate, as they revert to a horrible primordial slime. In contrast, Spare's process of Atavistic Resurgence may lead ultimately to an encounter with what he terms the 'Almighty Simplicity':

Know the subconsciousness to be an epitome of all experience and wisdom, past incarnations as men, animals, birds, vegetable life, etc., etc., everything that exists, has and ever will exist. Each being a stratum in the order of evolution. Naturally, then, the lower we probe into these strata, the earlier will be the forms of life we arrive at; the last is the Almighty Simplicity.^{xviii}

So, unlike Machen and Thomas Vaughan's primeval slime (which, it will be recalled, is the ultimate or origin of the material world, being the 'first matter'), Spare's Almighty Simplicity transcends materiality; instead, it is something more akin to the Godhead, the Tao, or the Ain Soph (that which is without limit) of the Kabbalists. Elsewhere^{xix}, Grant takes a sentence from a work by the renegade rocket scientist, alchemist and sex magician, Jack Parsons (*The Book of Babalon*; aka *Liber 49*):

...the going down of the ego between the adamant or malefic backside of the gods. To go deep you must reject each phenomenon, each illumination, each ecstasy, going ever downward until you reach the last avatars of the symbols that are also the racial archetypes.

and makes a link between this, the Atavistic Resurgence of Spare, and the Protoplasmic Reversion of Machen.

Grant does have a tendency to build upon incidental fragments taken from Machen's tales, going on to make connections which are perhaps not always warranted. For example, in *Outside the Circles of Time*, he cites Machen's use of the word 'Alala' in *The White People* which, Grant explains, was considered by Crowley's disciple Charles Stansfeld Jones (aka Frater Achad) to be the Word of the Aeon.^{xx} However, upon closer inspection, it may be seen that the word, in the context of the passage in *The White People* where it appears, refers to an entity or being, rather than to a concept: "...and then I shut my eyes, and put my hands over them and whisper the word, and the Alala comes. I only do this at night in my room or in certain woods that I know..."^{xxi} It might also be the case that Machen was alluding to Alala, the Greek goddess who haunted battlefields, and who was the personification of the war cry.

Grant also cites *The White People* in connection with Lovecraft's fabled *Necronomicon*. Referring to the hoax 'Hay' *Necronomicon* originally published in 1978,^{xxii} Grant seems to read some significance in the fact of *The White People* and the Hay *Necronomicon* both mention the 'Voorish sign' and the 'Dols':

In *The Necronomicon* there is mention of the Voorish sign. Arthur Machen's story, *The White People*, contains references to a "wicked voorish dome". There are references to the "Dholes", in both writings. Does this mean that, like Chambers, Bierce, and Lovecraft, Arthur Machen also glimpsed the *akashic Necronomicon*, or would the recent editors of the latter have us believe that Machen also saw – and understood – the undeciphered *Liber Logaeth* of Dr Dee?

Surely, it would seem far more likely that in some previous existence Lovecraft was well acquainted with the *Necronomicon* and...the nightmares from which he suffered came, as he himself suspected, as a result of crimes perpetrated in a former incarnation in which he practised black and abysmal sorceries.^{xxiii}

This is incoherent. How would Lovecraft's acquaintance with a genuine *Necronomicon* result in Machen's consciousness also having access to it? And is it not more likely that the references to the voorish sign and the dholes in the Hay *Necronomicon* indicate that its modern authors have drawn upon Machen from inspiration? Oddly, for one seemingly credulous in this matter, Grant goes on to pour scorn on the *Necronomicon* and its editors:

If Lovecraft had chanced to see the fragments referred to above, fragments purportedly "deciphered from a unique Elizabethan cryptogram" – and such a sight of them remains a highly dubious proposition for all the writhings and wrestlings of the cryptographer and the commentator – Lovecraft would not, I think, have found in them any practical methods of calling in through the Gateways of Space the monstrous entities that people his tales.^{xxiv}

But I would not wish to end on such a negative or critical note, regarding someone whose writings have been so influential in the development of post-war magic. I can still recall the thrill – as a teenager in the drab 1970s – of reading Grant's descriptions of fantastic magical goings-on behind the curtains of London houses. His seemingly eye-witness accounts of rituals, possessions and manifestations portrayed magic as a living practice, rather than being a purely historical phenomenon.

Perhaps the preceding examples have illustrated the way in which Grant uses fictional source material as evidence or inspiration for his ideas and beliefs. I would argue that it would be a mistake to judge his writing according to the standards of conventional scholarship – he does not appear to be interested in being regarded as such (and is certainly quite cavalier with regard to citations and references!). Machen's remarks on the reality of fictional characters (in his introduction to *A Handy Dickens* were seized upon with enthusiasm by Grant:

Arthur Machen drew attention to a profound magical fact when he observed that an

entity such as Mrs. Gamp – the inimitable creation of Dickens – is known to almost all literate inhabitants of this planet, whereas Mrs. X, Y or Z – our next-door neighbour – is only known to the few that constitute her immediate circle of acquaintances. Yet Mrs. X is ‘real’, and Mrs. Gamp ‘unreal’, the figment of a human mind. But that mind, being truly creative, was potent to imbue its images with some of its vital and enduring energy so that the images came alive and haunted the minds of countless individuals.^{xxv}

Other commentators have, whilst being appreciative, at the same time made trenchant comments regarding the more wayward aspects of Grant’s work. For example, Richard Kaczynski wrote in his Crowley biography^{xxvi} that “while he [Grant] gets high marks for originality, his manner of exegesis is difficult for the beginner, and his later books are progressively bizarre.”^{xxvii} Similarly, graphic novelist and occultist Alan Moore, writes, in a review of one of Grant’s fictional works, *Against the Light*^{xxviii}, that:

Kenneth Grant’s books, despite or possibly because of their forays into dementia, have more genuine occult power than works produced by more conventionally coherent authors, and are certainly a more engrossing read.^{xxix}

Together with the nine purportedly non-fiction works which comprise the three Typhonian trilogies^{xxx}, Grant is also the author of several novels and short stories. Dave Evans, in his article for *Wormwood*^{xxxi}, drew attention to the fictive quality of *all* Grant’s work, not just that which is explicitly designated as fiction, and the value of this very fictiveness. Grant, in his writings, could be said to be weaving a spell. Numerous references or themes (such as that of Machen’s *Ixaxaar*) recur, both in a single work and across the entire corpus of his work, somewhat like musical leitmotifs. One is drawn into a fantastical world, inducing in the reader “a consciousness-jerking shift”^{xxxii}. In an interview, when asked about the purpose of his books, Grant replied: “The main purpose is to prepare people for encounters with unfamiliar states of consciousness.”^{xxxiii} The process of reading Grant is in itself a magical experience.

Footnotes

i *Remembering Aleister Crowley*. Kenneth Grant. London: Skoob, 1991

ii Ibid (p.14)

iii Ibid (p.62)

iv The largest and most powerful of these is the US-based ‘Caliphate’ OTO. Use of the acronym ‘OTO’ may in future be restricted to the Caliphate, owing to a recent (June 2008) UK legal judgement which found ‘OTO’ to be a “trademark”.

v 1828-1907

vi *Outside the Circles of Time*. Kenneth Grant. London: Starfire, 2008 (pps.24-25)

- vii *Cults of the Shadow*. Kenneth Grant. London: Frederick Muller, 1975 (p.196)
- viii *The History of British Magick after Crowley*. Dave Evans. UK: Hidden Publishing, 2007 (p.339)
- ix *The Three Imposters*. Arthur Machen. London: Dent, 1995 (p.58)
- x *Hecate's Fountain*. Kenneth Grant. London: Skoob, 1992 (p.232)
- xi See my article in *Faunus* no.18, Summer 2008 (pps.32-37)
- xii *Outer Gateways*. Kenneth Grant. London: Skoob, 1994 (p.125)
- xiii *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural*. Arthur Machen. Horam, E Sussex: Tartarus Press, 1997 (p.111)
- xiv Ibid (pps.52-53)
- xv See biographies: *Arthur Machen*. Aidan Reynolds & William Charlton. London: The Richards Press, 1963 (p.46), and *Arthur Machen*. Mark Valentine. Bridgend: Seren (imprint of Poetry Wales Press Ltd), 1995 (p.28)
- xvi "Seriously consider the system or fabric of this world; it is a certain series a non gradu ad non gradum, from that which is beneath all apprehension to that which is above all apprehension. That which is beneath all degrees of sense is a certain horrible, inexpressible darkness. The magicians call it tenebrae activae, and the effect of it in nature is cold etc. For darkness is vultus frigoris, the complexion, body and matrix of cold, as light is the face, principle and fountain of heat."
- From: *The Rosie Crucian Secrets attributed to John Dee*
http://altreligion.about.com/library/texts/bl_rosiecrucian5.htm [Accessed 28/09/2008]
- xvii *Zos-Kia*. Gavin Semple. London: Fulgur, 1995. (pps.39-40)
- xviii *The Book of Pleasure (Self-Love): The Psychology of Ecstasy*. Austin Osman Spare. London: published privately by Spare, 1913 (p.47)
- xix *Hecate's Fountain*. Kenneth Grant. London: Skoob, 1992 (pps.24-25)
- xx In this case, AL = God, and LA = not; as per Semitic languages such as Hebrew
- xxi *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural*. Arthur Machen. Horam, E Sussex: Tartarus Press, 1997 (p.122)
- xxii *Necronomicon*. George Hay. (editor). Jersey: Neville Spearman, 1978
- xxiii *Outside the Circles of Time*. Kenneth Grant. London: Starfire, 2008 (p.167)
- xxiv Ibid (pps.167-168)
- xxv Ibid (p.232)
- xxvi *Perdurabo: the life of Aleister Crowley*. Richard Kaczynski. Tempe, Arizona: New Falcon, 2002
- xxvii Ibid (p.461)
- xxviii *Against the Light: a Nightside Narrative*. Kenneth Grant. London: Starfire, 1997

^{xxx} Alan Moore. 'Beyond our Ken'. *Kaos*. (pps.155-162) <http://www.biroco.com/kaos/kaos.pdf> [Accessed 05/09/2008]

^{xxx} *The Magical Revival, Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God, Cults of the Shadow, Nightside of Eden, Outside the Circles of Time, Hecate's Fountain, Outer Gateways, Beyond the Mauve Zone, The Ninth Arch*

^{xxxi} *Wormwood* 10. April 2008

^{xxxii} Phil Hine. Review of Hecate's Fountain, *The Occult Observer* II (3), Winter 1992 (pps. 56-7)

^{xxxiii} Kenneth Grant talks to Skoob. *Occult Review*. 3, Autumn 1990. (pps.5-7)