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SELF PORTRAIT, 1936.

# AUSTIN OSMAN SPARE

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**In The Viktor Wynd  
Museum of Curiosities,  
Fine Art & Natural History**

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**May 2017 - September 2017**

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PG 103 — INTRODUCTION BY VIKTOR WYND

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PG 105 — AUSTIN OSMAN SPARE BY PHIL BAKER

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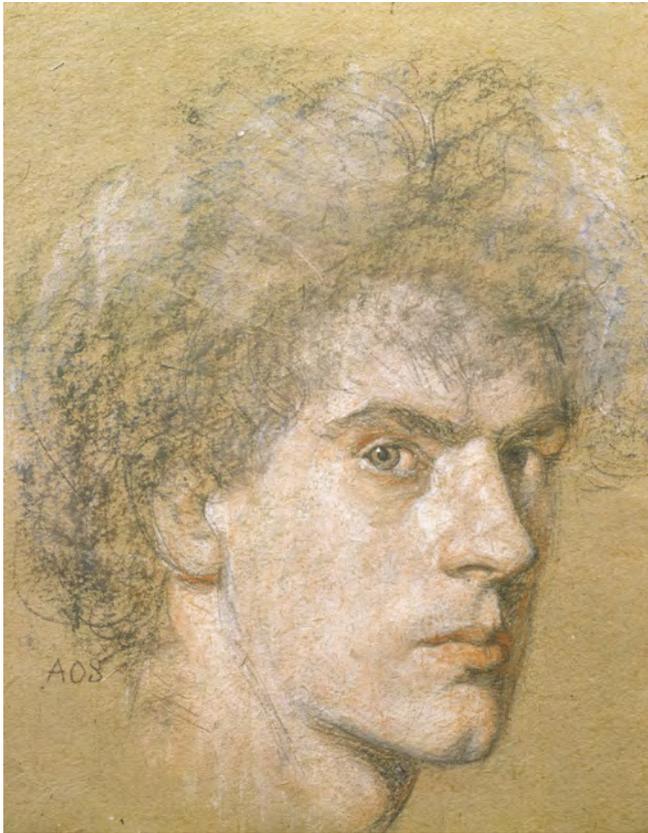
PG 121 — AOS & EILY BY DR. WILLIAM WALLACE

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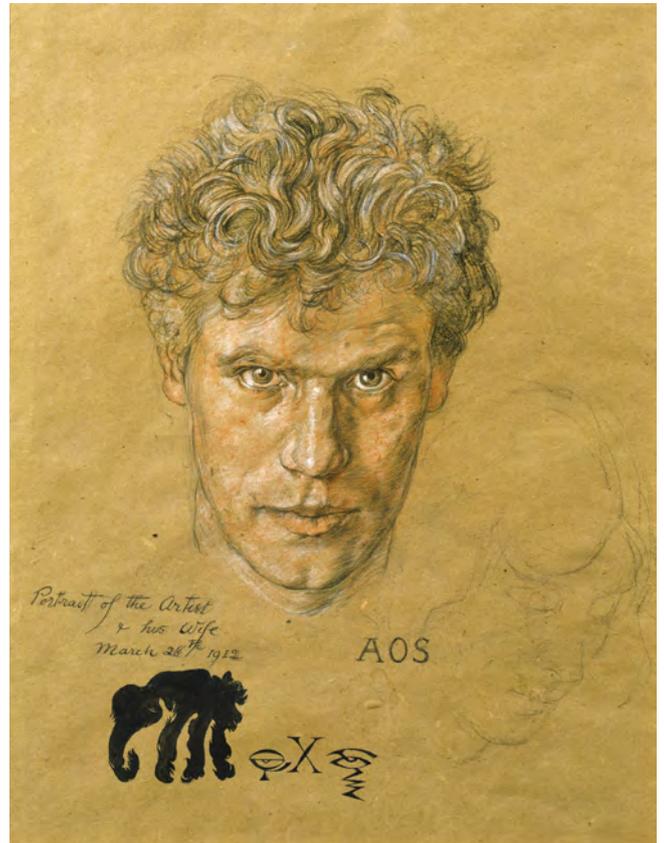
PG 131 — BETTE DAVIS EYES BY STEPHEN POCHIN

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PG 141 — A LETTER FROM FRANK LETCHFORD



SELF PORTRAIT, c.1910 (COLOURED CHALK ON PAPER).



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST & HIS WIFE, MARCH 26TH 1912 (COLOURED CHALKS & INK ON PAPER).



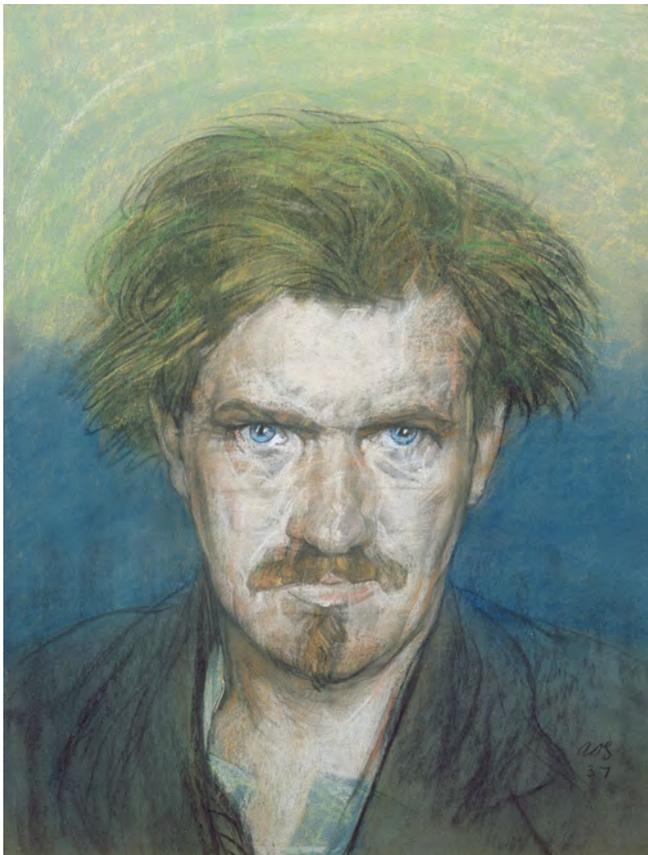
THE SPARE ROOM - THE ONLY PERMANENT COLLECTION OF WORK BY AUSTIN OSMAN SPARE ON PUBLIC VIEW IN THE WORLD.

# INTRODUCTION

*"Everything said from the angle of a real collector is whimsical"*  
– Walter Benjamin

Few artists have captured my imagination so strongly or held it so long as Austin Osman Spare. I first saw his work in James Birch's & Alastair Brotchie's homes over a decade ago & owe them a huge debt of gratitude for the introduction. I started buying & selling them shortly afterwards, building up my own collection as I could. I share my life with his work & can not imagine a day without with out one – indeed it would be an unbearable penalty for me - as I sit at my desk & write this I look up & am entranced by The Flower Girl, then to W.B. Smith, then to a sublime Self-Portrait from 1923 & I have just got of the phone from unsuccessfully bidding on another – I am glad I didn't buy it because I would have struggled to pay what I did bid, but there again I am feeling slightly nauseous with a sense of an unfulfilled longing & what is obtained without pain does not always bring great pleasure. When I opened my eponymous gallery in the mid noughties I had planned to launch it with an exhibition of Spare but failed to get the material. & have longed to do so ever since – indeed when I opened my museum in 2014 I wanted to open with Spare, & integral to the museum is The Spare Room which to my amazement remains the only permanent display of his work anywhere in the world. The current exhibition is drawn both from my own holdings & significant loans from a distinguished private collection. I am grateful for the help & support of many people in putting together this exhibition & hope that you get a thrill of pleasure similar to mine from the work & the accompanying essays.

VIKTOR WYND



SELF PORTRAIT, 1937 (PASTEL ON PAPER).

# AUSTIN OSMAN SPARE

by **Phil Baker**

“There must be few people in London interested in art,” the Art Journal told Edwardian readers back in 1907, “who do not know the name Austin Osman Spare.” Before long they might have done better to ask if there was anyone out there who did know the name, weirdly memorable though it is, because Spare had his career upside down: he began as a controversial West End celebrity & went on to underground obscurity in a South London basement. Hard to categorise, impossible to pin down, he remains one of England’s strangest & most enigmatic artists. In the words of an obituary, ‘Strange & Gentle Genius Dies’ in the London Evening News, “You have probably never heard of Austin Osman Spare. But his should have been a famous name.”

Spare was born near Smithfield Market in 1886, the son of a policeman, & spent his later childhood & youth in Kennington. Feted as a prodigy, he became the enfant terrible of the Edwardian art scene, where he was hailed as the next Aubrey Beardsley. He experimented with automatic drawing some years before the surrealists, & went on to work as an illustrator & War Artist, but for complex reasons – which would have to include changing fashion, his refusal to embrace modernism, & a lack of the social skills needed to get on in the metropolitan art world – his career foundered

in the early Twenties. Having been “the darling of Mayfair” he began to fall back into working-class life south of the river, moving to a Borough tenement block & living, as he put it, as a “swine with swine.”

Increasingly reclusive & living outside of consensus reality, Spare spent the Twenties voyaging into automatic & “psychic” drawing, only to find a new identity thrust on him in the Thirties as the first surrealist (“FATHER OF SURREALISM – HE’S A COCKNEY” said a newspaper headline in 1936). This sensational & more than slightly tongue-in-cheek claim was based on his experiments with automatism, but unfortunately it didn’t mean he was hanging out with Salvador Dali & Andre Breton, dispensing avuncular advice. Instead he was trying to sell his Surrealist Racing Forecast Cards through a small ad in the Exchange & Mart.

Now based in a studio above the Elephant & Castle Woolworth’s, Spare was developing a particularly strong line in pastel portraits of local Cockneys, like his picture of a flower-seller. She is more conventionally attractive than many of the Cockney portraits, which often featured working men & in particular elderly women, with whom Spare had a particular sympathy; he had a lifelong principle that what he looked for in portrait subjects was “character & not beauty”. He also had a deep & heartfelt line in self-portraits, & was said to have done as many as Rembrandt. His own face had as much character as anyone’s, manifest in the ambitious & somewhat wary, hunted-looking young man from around 1919, still unsure of his place in the world; the unfazed stoic in the white scarf, characteristic of Spare in later life; & the warmer & more charismatic study from 1936, looking thoughtful & a little put-upon.

One of the stranger & more hyped stories about Spare’s career involves a request from Hitler for a portrait, possibly through a member of the German embassy staff; Spare seems to have refused on principle, & briefly became a hero in the local papers. When his studio was bombed during the worst night of the blitz, 10th May 1941 – the night the Elephant & Castle area was completely devastated, with record casualties – he referred to it as “Hitler’s revenge”. Spare suffered a great loss of work in the blast, with perhaps a couple of hundred pictures & particularly his local portraits. In some cases portraits & their subjects probably perished together in the same night.

Mutating beyond straight portraiture, Spare was also producing exquisite stylizations of film stars such as Mary Pickford & Jean Harlow, using an anamorphic technique of altered perspective that he called “siderealism”, along with Pan-like “satyrizations” of male faces, often modelled on real-life locals. One of the extraordinary things about Spare’s art is the chameleonic range of styles & modes, including automatic drawing – which itself ranges from fertile scribble, with vague faces materialising, to the more developed characters of Spare’s early Twenties albums *A Book of Automatic Drawing* & *The Book of Ugly Ecstasy*. At the same time Spare’s more traditional draughtsmanship led to comparisons with Old Masters such as Michelangelo & Durer, often by people outside the art world who were surprised to find “real art” was still being made. The difficulty of getting to grips with Spare’s work on its own terms has led to similarly excitable comparisons pointing forwards: not only was he credited as Britain’s proto-surrealist in the Thirties, but in the Sixties art critic Mario Amaya (a pop-art specialist, shot & wounded alongside Andy Warhol when Valerie Solanas tried to assassinate him) saw him as Britain’s first pop artist.



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Bob, 1930's.



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WINGED NUDE, 1921 (PENCIL ON PAPER).

Spare's output also includes overtly occult work, & his involvement with the occult has kept his memory alive in some quarters & yet marginalized him. At the core of his innovative approach to magic was an attempt to manipulate his own unconscious, giving his wishes the demonic power of complexes & neuroses & nurturing them into psychic entities, like the older idea of familiar spirits. In order to talk to his unconscious in a language he thought might get through to it, Spare developed the experimental scripts that can be seen at the foot of his magnificent study of a woman holding a crystal ball, with a line of "sigils" (a condensation of words, based on the principle of the artist's monogram, & intended to bypass the conscious mind) & then four more elegant lines of the "alphabet of desire."

Part of mankind's long history of trying to control reality with writing, Spare's experiments with script also make him a precursor of the "hypergraphics" movement of the Fifties, associated with the Lettrists in France. They are no less part of the long fascination, particularly in magic, with arcane lettering as the writing of otherness, both external & internal. In the words of Marlowe's Dr Faustus,

These metaphysics of magicians  
And necromantic books are heavenly.  
Lines, circles, scenes, letters, & characters:  
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.

Three centuries later the Surrealist heroine Helene Smith produced supposedly Martian script in mediumistic trances, while more recently Susan Hiller's *Midnight, Baker Street* (1983) scrawls cryptically over a photo-booth self portrait with something that looks midway between Arabic & shorthand, suggestive of unconscious & nocturnal realms.

And when the American writer William Seabrook – alcoholic, sado-masochist, cannibal, & sensationalistic explorer of voodoo & witchcraft – taught himself even plain Pitman shorthand as a teenager in the first decade of the twentieth century, he felt himself escaping (as if to "war, to jungles, to deserts, & ultimately to drink") into its "mysterious, beautiful, secret, hieratic" script.

There is a less encoded occult engagement in the extraordinary 1910 drawing featuring an idealised self-portrait of a handsome youth with ram's horns, beside a hermaphroditic devil figure with an austere, hieratic dignity. Aligned with his very organic-looking horns, the devil is stretching oddly-shaped wings upwards, their shape perhaps making more sense if they are represented both as unfurling – with a sideways, elbow-type movement suggestive to modern viewers of a bygone disco monstrosity, 'the funky chicken' – & at full vertical stretch, anticipating the simultaneous depictions-in-time of the Futurists, like Giacomo Balla's dynamic dog with its moving legs in multiple positions at once. The spontaneous energy & intensity of the pencil inspires a further dancing squiggle to continue over one of the ram's horns, as the local energy of the hand rises up like whorls of smoke from a joss stick, or the ornamental flourishes of be-bop taking off from the overall controlling melodies of earlier swing. & at the bottom of the picture is a cloudy density of 'automatic' line, with vague animal heads taking shape; the whole thing should stretch our idea of what was going on in British drawing in 1910.

Spare's occultism was rooted in the place & period of his early life, with spiritualism, theosophy, & the late nineteenth-century occult revival, along with a rising excitement about the unconscious. It is a biographical commonplace to say that

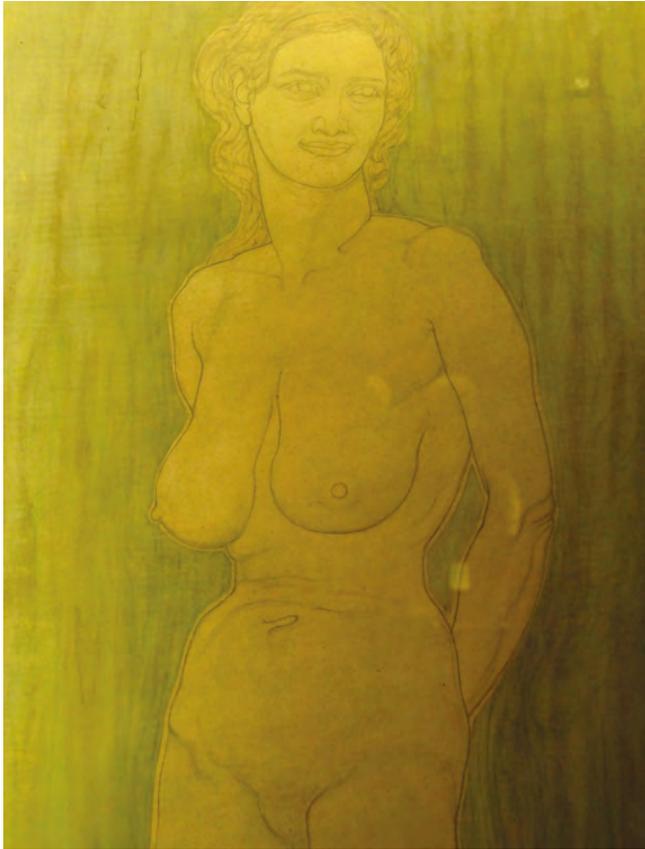


SELF PORTRAIT, 1902.

such-and-such a figure lived from the era of the horse & cart to the first jet planes, or some similar span, conveniently forgetting the same is true of millions of people from the same generation, but Spare really did inhabit his times in a particularly distinctive way. He lived from the dog-end of the Aubrey Beardsley era, stayed loyal to the Edwardian cult of Pan in his satyr pictures, & embraced the heyday of Hollywood Babylon & the social changes beyond, with his post-war portraits of spivs. Post-war London was a ravaged but atmospheric landscape, with stray cats proliferating in the ruins, wild plants springing up on bomb sites, & live pianists in public houses, where Spare could often be found. The Harry Lime Theme, from the 1949 film *The Third Man*, was popular on pub pianos at the time & a friend remembered it as “almost Spare’s signature tune”.

Moving to a dank Brixton basement after being bombed, where he looked after a horde of cats, Spare was now in poverty but he never gave up. Needing to survive outside the gallery system, shortly after the war he hit on the idea of holding reasonably priced shows in South London pubs, & mounted three with varying degrees of success. & when a popular magazine of the Forties, *The Leader*, ran a human-interest photo feature about Spare as a starving artist, members of the public posted him tins of food.

It was this same article that brought Spare to the attention of a young couple named Steffi & Kenneth Grant, & it was in the occult writing of Kenneth Grant that Spare was to be recreated as a dark sorcerer, seduced & initiated in childhood by an elderly witch. Grant’s mythologised version of Spare was influenced by Arthur Machen, H.P. Lovecraft, & Fu Manchu creator Sax Rohmer, & his Spare seems to live in a parallel London: a city with an alchemist in Islington, a



mysterious Chinese dream-control cult down in Stockwell, & a deceptively small shop with a labyrinthine basement, supposedly decorated by Spare, where a magical lodge held their meetings. This shop, near Baker Street – then a furrier, now an Islamic bookshop<sup>1</sup> – really existed, & part of the fascination of this confabulated life is its misty overlap with a real London. Whether Spare ever went near any of these places is another question.

Famous & obscure in his lifetime, since his death in 1956 Spare has been simultaneously forgotten & celebrated: a shadowy cult figure, collected by rock stars (notably Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin), championed by graphic novelist Alan Moore, & taken up by the British music underground centred around Throbbing Gristle & Coil. He even made an arcane appearance on late Sixties vinyl when a little-known band called Bulldog Breed (psychedelia with a touch of Kinks-style nostalgia, not to be confused with any later bands of the same name) recorded a track about him on their 1969 LP *Made in England*. & now, at last, it looks as if he is finally reaching a wider audience outside the occult ghetto, & gaining the serious recognition that largely eluded him in life.

At best, particularly seen in the flesh, Spare's work has a remarkable presence. He is, par excellence, the artist of the aura, that almost magical quality of 'is-ness' in a work of art that seems able to face the audience on equal terms, as if it could return the viewer's gaze. Not everyone likes this intensity, & in the Thirties an unknown ginger-haired man was seen to rush out of one of Spare's shows shouting "Horrible, horrible! Go to Hell!" But at best his work also has

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly David Curwen furs, 7a Melcombe Street. Enquiries about the basement are not welcomed.



CHARLOTTE NEWMAN, 1937.

an extraordinary, enigmatic beauty, & a compulsive pleasure. The French writer Georges Bataille, eroticist & thinker of extremes on the fringes of the surrealist movement, once asked if any man could love a painting the way a fetishist loves a shoe. If we ever find that man, he may well turn out be a Spare collector.

Phil Baker,  
Valentine's Day, 2017

### **Phil Baker**

Phil Baker is a writer in London. His books include *The Devil is a Gentleman: The Life & Times of Dennis Wheatley* (Dedalus, 2009) & *Austin Osman Spare: The Life & Legend of London's Lost Artist* (Strange Attractor, 2011). He has also published on Samuel Beckett, absinthe, & William S Burroughs, & more recently co-edited *Lord of Strange Deaths: The Fiendish World of Sax Rohmer*.

*"Darken your room, shut the door, empty your mind. Yet you are still in great company - the Numen & your Genius with all their media, & your ghost of elementals & ghosts of your dead loves — are there! They need no light by which to see, no words to speak, no motive to enact except through your own purely formed desire."*  
Austin Osman Spare, *The Logomachy of Zos*



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SELF STUDIES, 1912 (PENCIL WITH RED CHALK ON PAPER).

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NUDE BACK, (PENCIL & RED CHALK ON PAPER).



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CHARLOTTE NEWMAN, 1936.

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MASK.





PORTRAIT OF HIS FUTURE WIFE AMID SELF PORTRAITS, 1910.

# AOS & EILY

by Dr William Wallace

The portrait of Eily Gertrude Shaw (1888–1938) owned by Viktor Wynd esq. is a complex image. Dated 1910, it was formerly & firstly in the collection of the eminent doctor, Prof. Thomas Lumsden M.D., who also came into possession of another likeness of Eily in the form of the ink drawing 'Dwellers at the gates of Silent Memory' (1912), which was reproduced in Spare's occult magnum opus, *The Book of Pleasure* (1913, p.46). It will be seen that both images have much in common conceptually, as well as echoing the arcane concerns of that book. At first glance, the drawing seems to comprise of Eily's face centrally placed with smaller heads of the artist hovering around & beneath it. Eily's eyes are downcast like a Renaissance Madonna, whilst Spare's features swarm around, grimacing, varying from comedic to sinister, mobile caricatures surrounding a serene female face. The Spare faces evince various emotions from whimsical jest to a typically melancholic posture, to another which verges on the demonic, & expressions which contrast melancholia with raving madness. These reflect preoccupations within *The Book of Pleasure*: between distinctions of insanity, with magical obsession & induced genius.

There are eight Spare portrait heads, a significant number. By 1910 Spare was in full communication with the poet, mountaineer, magician & enfant terrible, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) & deeply immersed in occult pursuits. Although Crowley's *Sepher Sephiroth* was not published until 1912 in *The Equinox* (1,8) it is highly likely that Spare was fully aware of the Kabbalist practice of Gematria in which differing words

compute to the same numerical total possessed discreet magical association. In fact, the Kabbalist dictionary which became Sepher Sephiroth was largely received by Crowley in 1899 when Allan Bennett left for Ceylon, giving Crowley his magical writings. The number eight can thus render various vital terms in Hebrew: 'To will, to Intend', 'Desired, Beloved', & 'The Entrance, The Threshold'. Within The Book of Pleasure, Spare makes clear that the supernal Kiä (Will) can be signified by the hand. At the foot of the drawing is the phallic symbol of a hand with thumb raised, whilst fulgurations proceed from the clenched palm. The erect thumb is directed towards a double skull. In The Book of Pleasure (p.35) within the drawing 'The Thumb Concentration' there occurs this phrase: 'Of entering the store-house of memory & slaying the gods' (i.e. inessential belief). The means to achieve this through union with his muse, Eily, the 'Desired' or 'Beloved', whilst as the 'The Entrance, The Threshold', she is depicted in the book as at the gates of silent memory; the threshold through which the muse can guide, just as the three Boetian muses were Mneme (Memory), Melete, who empowers practice & Aiode, the songstress (Eily's profession). The nine Olympian muses were daughters of Zeus & Mnemosyne (Memory). Zeus, with his thunderbolt is expressed in the lightning-flashes of the Eily portrait, whilst silent, archaic (pre-human) memory is conducted through Eily as a living embodiment & focus of reification into consciousness. Spare may well have been conversant with Hesiod's Theogony (25ff) by this period, Eily being both actress & dancer.

There are deeper mathematical & alchemical ramifications at work. Spare's self-portrait heads occupy two distinct groupings. Above, four form a square around Eily's head, whilst four below form an arc (implying a circle) around the double skull. In which case, the skull at the 'hub' may well represent the heart of the Kabbalistic formulation

of Sephiroth as Tiphereth, the 'Lesser Countenance' of Microprosopus with the Macroprosopus of Kether peeping over it as if seen from a distance; both skulls on the central axis of the Tree of Life. As with the jesting facial expressions there is a concealed joke, in that; squaring the circle' implied a difficult or impossible task. Spare's interest in the squared circle is borne out in later work, when at his 1938 Walworth Road home show he exhibited 'Cubit Rotundity' (no.76) & 'The Square Circle' (no.223), a study for no.76 closer still, the frontispiece of his book The Focus of Life (1922). Alludes (amongst other things) to Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, potential in both physical & spiritual worlds.

This mathematical problem has an ancient lineage. It was known to Babylonian mathematicians & it also occurs in the Egyptian Rhind Papyrus (c.1800 BC). This treatise was acquired by the British Museum in 1865 & contains various arithmetical & geometrical propositions. Curiously, problem 47 (geometry) comprises a table with fractional equalities, the quotients being expressed in terms of fractions of the Horus Eye, a motif which occurs frequently in The Book of Pleasure, as well as the Eye motif in the Eily portrait, below & to the right of her face. In real terms, the 'squaring of the circle' was proven impossible in 1882 by Ferdinand von Lindemann (1852–1939) utilizing the mathematics of Karl Weierstrass (1815–1897), whose transcendental number theory was applied to prove that Pi is transcendental. That is, constituting a square with the same area as a given circle using a finite number of steps. It cannot be calculated as the root of a polynomial equation with rational coefficients.

The Greek Anaxagoras (c.510–438 BC) was the first to tackle the problem, so, hardly surprising that Spare exhibited a drawing 'Anaxagoras' at the Mansion House show of

1952 (no.6), as Spare had strong affinities with Pre-Socratic philosophy. In addition, Anaxagoras was the first to posit Nous as Cosmic Mind ordering all things. The problem was even mentioned by the writer of comedies Aristophanes (446–c.386 BC) in *The Birds*, a point which chimes well with the almost caricature heads of the artist, & the emphasis on laughter as a praxis in *The Book of Pleasure*. Even Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) interested himself in debunking illogical circle-squaring theories: a point which he makes alongside his importance to Spare in *A New Theory of Parallels*, which Spare later used (Euclid) in formulating his sidereal (anamorphic) portraits.

To return, for a moment, to Spare's eight self-portrait heads in the Eily drawing. These appear (in keeping with the comedy) to constitute a pun, as the number eight signifies the value of the Hebrew letter Cheth (Ch), which, with Spare's initials, forms 'ChAOS'. As early as 1907 at the Bruton Galleries the artist had exhibited several worked entitled 'Chaos' (nos. 17, 87, 106, 112), as well as at the St George's Gallery in 1927 (no.55), & at the 1936 Walworth Road show (no.53). Unsurprisingly, the squared circle was the symbol of the opus alchymicum. Which breaks down the original chaotic unity of the prima material into four elements & recombines them in a higher unity.

This represents Spare's expectations of Eily at this stage. Spare may even have glimpsed a work by the alchemist Michael Maier (1568–1622), *Atalanta Fugiens* (1618) in which an isosceles triangle contains a squared circle & within a smaller circle a male & a female figure can be seen, the polarities reconciled by alchemy. In Crowley's terms, this process was sexual & it is apparent that Spare is presenting himself & Eily in precisely these terms.

The double skull beneath Eily has already been interpreted as a conflation of the Macroprosopus shedding its light in the Microprosopus, it also alludes to the Death Posture elaborated in *The Book of Pleasure*. The double skull may also refer to a passage in the Kabbalist Zohar which also arguably influenced Spare's later anamorphic ('sidereal' portraits). Spare knew Macgregor Mathers' *Kabbalah Unveiled* well, & in chapter V of the Zoharic *The Greater Holy Assembly* (pp. 52–57) which concerns the skull of Macroprosopus it is described as shining in 13 curved sides & in four sides to one portions. The Brightness arises from the skull which it conceals (in Spare's drawing, the smaller skull), hence, Arikh Aphim, Vastness of Countenance (i.e. extended). The thirteen parts are Tetragrammatic forms, the number 13 representing 'unity', &  $1+3=$  the fourfold Tetragrammaton, IHVH. The skull of Macroprosopus sheds his light down the Tree to the skull of the Lesser Countenance, Microprosopus. The term 'His Countenance is extended' (*The Kabbalah Unveiled*, p. 118) thus contributes to the perpendicularly extended sidereal portraits, which also indicate spiritual potential within humanity.

The changes of experience of Spare's heads indicates the time-bound ego, the 'quick-change artist'; a nod to the low comedy of the Edwardian music-hall. One is also reminded of Spare's predecessors in caricature; of Da Vinci's grotesque heads (housed at Windsor castle), Hogarth's 'Caricatures' of 1743, which is in fact a subscription ticket for the series *Marriage à la Mode*. Also Isaac Cruickshank, Rowlandson, Thomas Patch, James Gillray, George Cruickshank & even Gustave Doré.

There may also be some influence of Spare's interest in insanity & genius, as for some time he had been studying Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, & could conceivably

have encountered the 'Character Heads' of Franz Xavier Messerschmidt (1736–1783), whom even contemporaries considered as suffering from psychiatric disorders & hallucinations. Of course, facial expression of both Man & animals had been a concern of Spare's since encountering Guillaume Duchenne's photographs of palsied patients being electrically stimulated to produce various expressions & utilized by Darwin in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man & Animals* (1872), as both Darwin (a naturalist) & Eily (daughter of a naturalist) had been born in Shrewsbury.

Concerning the sigils & magical devices appearing in the Eily portrait, the example to the left, which bears a lunar crescent beneath it & a horizontal trident above surmounted by sacred letters, can be found repeated in the drawing on page 45 of *The Book of Pleasure*. This is inscribed 'The Dwellers at the Threshold ... giving birth to the magical wish'. To the right of this is another symbol of a horizontal line with letters looped about it with a small solar symbol. This image, without the 'sun' motif, appears in the Eily portrait. In *Eily: Austin Osman Spare's Muse* (p.51) this solar-lunar dyad was related to the allusion in *The Book of Pleasure*. To a 'syllubub [sic] of sun & moon', & to the alchemical albedo process which produces the white philosophical mercury, the substances that flow from the centre of the soul. Again, of course, the purport is sexual, a physical expression of the conjuration occurring at the Chymical Wedding, or an alternative depiction of the male-female polarities of the alchemist's appropriation of the squared circle.

The portrait of Eily surrounded by portrait heads was produced when the artist was still enraptured by the potential that Eily represented. It is replete with nuanced suggestion, & it is fortunate that it can be viewed once more in this exhibition.

## **Dr William Wallace**

Born in Yorkshire & educated in the Midlands & Canterbury, the author's life journey has borne him upon an irresistible southerly trajectory & into London's mythic four-fold benthos; culminating in an enduring exegetical embrace with its modern Blake. Writer & artist, the author, like Austin Spare, has evolved an art that is at once captivating & troubling. From an early age, he developed an unwavering fascination for life's macabre undercurrents and, making pilgrimages to medical museums, embarked upon anatomical study. He has written two books on Spare *Catalpa Monographs*, & *Eily – Spare's Muse* (Jerusalem Press, 2015 & 2016).

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*"MAGICAL obsession is that state when the mind is illuminated by sub-conscious activity evoked voluntarily by formula at our own time, etc., for inspiration. It is the condition of Genius. Other obsession is the "blind leading the blind," caused by quietism, known as mediumism, an opening out of the Ego to (what is called) any external influence, elementals, or disembodied energy. A transmuted consciousness that is a resistance to "true" sub-conscious activity, it being a voluntary insanity, a somnambulation of the Ego with "no form" or control to guide it: hence its emanations are stupid in suggestion, or memories of childhood. "*

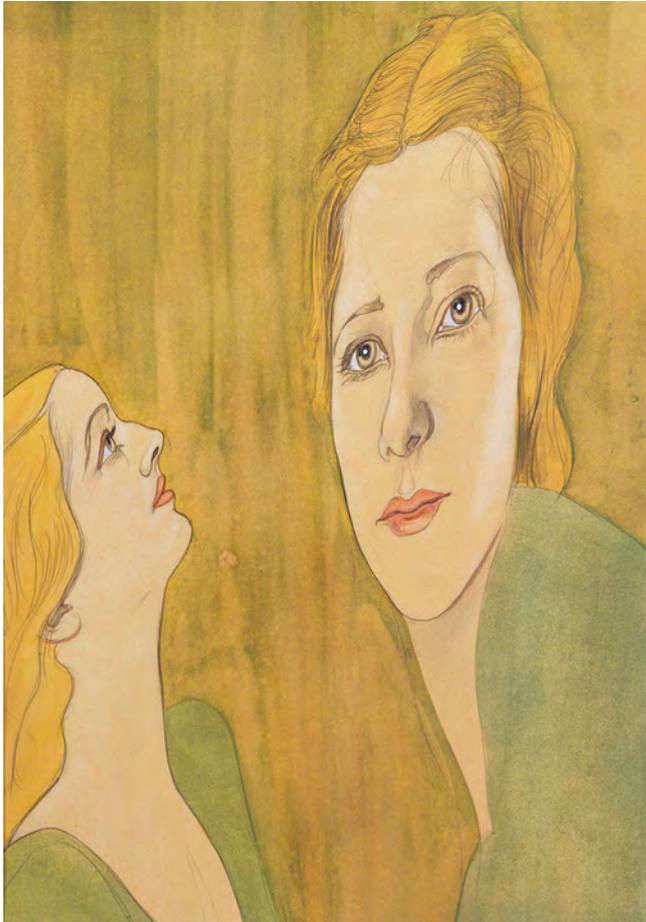
*Austin Osman Spare, The Book of Pleasure (Self-Love):  
The Psychology of Ecstasy*



NUDE HOLDING A CRYSTAL BALL, 1914-20 (PENCIL, PEN & INK ON PAPER).



VAGUE FAMILIARS, 1910.



BETTE DAVIS, 1933 (WATERCOLOUR & PENCIL ON PAPER).

# BETTE DAVIS EYES

by **Stephen Pochin**

I think Bette Davis would probably have been burned as a witch if she had lived two or three hundred years ago. She gives the curious feeling of being charged with power which can find no ordinary outlet. – Eileen Arnot Robertson<sup>1</sup>

A useful method for approaching Austin Osman Spare's seemingly heterogeneous output is through scrutiny of his portrayal of Woman. It is salient to consider that he was drawing from Edwardian theatre postcards as early as 1904, & his second book; *A Book of Satyrs* (1907) clearly attests to this practice.<sup>2</sup> He married Eily Shaw, a music-theatre actress in 1911, producing many portraits & nude studies, some of which are reproduced in his magical magnum opus, *The Book of Pleasure* (1913). But the marriage was short-lived & there is evidence of intimacy with another musical-hall actress, May 'Pink Pyjama Girl' Etheridge, images of which appear in the art journal *The Golden Hind* (1922). The Muse sometimes proves herself to fickle, & just as Edwardian theatres were converted into 'electric cinemas', so, inevitably, this receptive artist turned his attention to the silver screen for source material & life models. In this manner we may chart a consistent obsession over five decades of art production with the portrayal of Woman in her myriad guises from

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<sup>1</sup> Eileen Arnot Robertson (1903–1961), review of *Dangerous* for the *Picture Post* (1935).

<sup>2</sup> The source material is reproduced in my Afterword to *Eily – Spare's Muse*, Wallace, Jerusalem Press, 2016, p.143.

mythic goddess; domestic goddess (even), to modern screen icons of the Hollywood pantheon.

Ruth Elizabeth Davis (1908–1989) was born on 5 April in Lowell, Massachusetts (USA). Known from early childhood as 'Betty', upon her parents separation & her move to New York City in 1921 she changed the spelling of her name as a reference to Honoré de Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* (1846), about a woman who plots the demise of her entire family. Once in Hollywood, Bette Davis was famed for her willingness to portray sardonic & unsympathetic characters. Graham Greene said of Davis:

Even the most inconsiderable film ... seemed temporarily better than they were because of that precise, nervy voice, the pale ash-blond hair, the popping, neurotic eyes, a kind of corrupt & phosphorescent prettiness .... I would rather watch Miss Davis than any number of competent pictures.<sup>3</sup>

We cannot be sure as to whether Spare ever saw a film featuring Bette Davis. Although he had every opportunity to; his Walworth Road Studio (1934–1941) was situated in the so-called 'Piccadilly of the south' in Elephant & Castle's theatre & cinema hub, it is more likely that he initially responded to a still image of the star.

Therefore, it would be a mistake to assume the artist was responding to any thematic content or character trait conveyed by Davis on screen. Instead, her photographic semblance presented the opportunity for a formalist transcription into line & wash – whereby the artist could

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3 Graham Greene (1904–1991), *The Spectator*, Cinema review, 19 June 1936, p.1131. Review of *Dangerous, Big Brown Eyes & Letzte Rose*.

enact his subtle distortions upon photographic appearances, part of his *sidereal* series. By walking a fine line in a rendition that is at once beautiful & uncanny, Spare was able to conjoin two extremes in this transmogrification.

There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion. – Francis Bacon<sup>4</sup>

Such works belie a skilful economy of line & adroit deployment of atmospheric washes of colour. The series presents captivating semblances mainly of cinema-stars with a suggestion – in their uncanny skewing – of elusive & beguiling depths.

I've gone in for a bit of mild distortion in my portraits. They're picturesque types – more emotional.– Austin Osman Spare<sup>5</sup>

It has been described in previous studies of how Spare relied upon the collection of *Filmgoer* magazines collected by his sister Nellie.<sup>6</sup> The palette & format of *Catharsis I* (Bette Davis) also aligns the work with cigarette cards of the period produced by John Player & Wills cigarettes. Indeed, it is more likely Spare encountered the star's visage in this context on the surface of a bar in his local public house rather than on a front-of-house poster at the picture-house foyer. Duly selected, Davis was perhaps considered an atypical exemplar of the modern screen beauty & therefore deserving of a *sidereal* study. It is even conceivable that she resembled

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4 Francis Bacon (1561–1626), *Essays, Civil & Moral, XLIII: Of Beauty*.

5 News-cutting (unattributed), see: *Exhibition Catalogues of AOS*, ed.: Ansell, Fulgur Ltd., 2012, p.156.

6 *Friends & Influences*, Sargeant, Jerusalem Press, 2013, p.139, pp.152-3. & *Catalpa Monographs*, Wallace, Jerusalem Press, 2014, p.143-4.



BARBARA STANWYK.

locals known to Spare who would misrecognise her as a local doppelgänger during the tavern exhibition. The doubling up of the subject in the picture is echoed by the floating mask of 'Aura Radiant' (1947, no.30, Temple Bar, 1949)<sup>7</sup> & through the word association of the work entitled: Betty ('Gladstone', Boro'), (no.97, 5 guineas).

He shows us the living eyes, glittering between the lids of even the most basilisk countenance which he draws. A Basilisk whose neighbouring pictures are of hypnotically beautiful faces, delicately distorted, as upon the heavy walls of a dream. – H.Q.<sup>8</sup>

Hung in the 1949 Temple Bar exhibition as no.63 (6 guineas), one of three 'Catharsis' in the series; beside 'Catharsis 2 (Actress)' (no.64, 6 guineas) & 'Catharsis 3 (Dolores Del Rio)', (no.65, 6 guineas) & locals such as: Tough, Spiv, News Boy, Docker with National Teeth, & Flower Girl (evidently a local beauty), the overall effect may have suggested an array of likenesses spanning the whole spectrum of modern experience; from work-worn faces through to the giddy heights of modern glamour. With this in mind, the exhibition catalogue's subtitle: 'studies in psycho-physiognomy by realism, dual-perspective, automatism & other diverse means of rhythm & reorientation – relating to Southwark Types & other subjects'; might have been more succinctly been summed up as 'from the gutter to the stars'

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<sup>7</sup> Exhibited in 'Fallen Visionary', Cuming Museum, 2010; no.44. See *Refractions*, ed.: Pochin, Jerusalem Press, 2012, p.179.

<sup>8</sup> Appreciation, Temple Bar catalogue, 1949). See: *Exhibition Catalogues of AOS*, ed.: Ansell, Fulgur Ltd., 2012, p.143.



JUDY GARLAND.

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars. – Oscar Wilde<sup>9</sup>

Which brings us to the central metaphor of the *sidereal* series; relating as it does to the stars, 'star-time' independent of the earthly orbit around the sun.<sup>10</sup> The lurid greens & yellow washes synonymous with the series evoke the luminescent paint applied to bedside clocks.<sup>11</sup> One wonders whether the artist produced these works in the evening hours while similar images were being projected to the delight of the cockney throng in the picture-houses along the Walworth Road. Perhaps he added an enlivening finishing-touch – a glint of white gouache cross the iris & pupil – just as daybreak was cutting through the window; a chance view of the morning star hastening him to bed as the locals were setting off to work.

Art is that beauty which may be born of anything; but not by a formula of balance or proportion, beauty itself. – Austin Osman Spare<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Lady Windermere's Fan*, said by Lord Darlington, Act III (pub. 1893).

<sup>10</sup> *Sidereal* time is a time scale based on Earth's rate of rotation measured relative to the fixed stars rather than the Sun. A mean sidereal day is 23 hours, 56 minutes, 4.0916 seconds.

<sup>11</sup> Invented in 1908, radioluminescent paint was radium-based & used in watches & aircraft instruments. By the 1930s its toxicity & harmful effects had become apparent.

<sup>12</sup> Automatic Drawing as Means to Art, *The Book of Pleasure*, 1913, p.55.



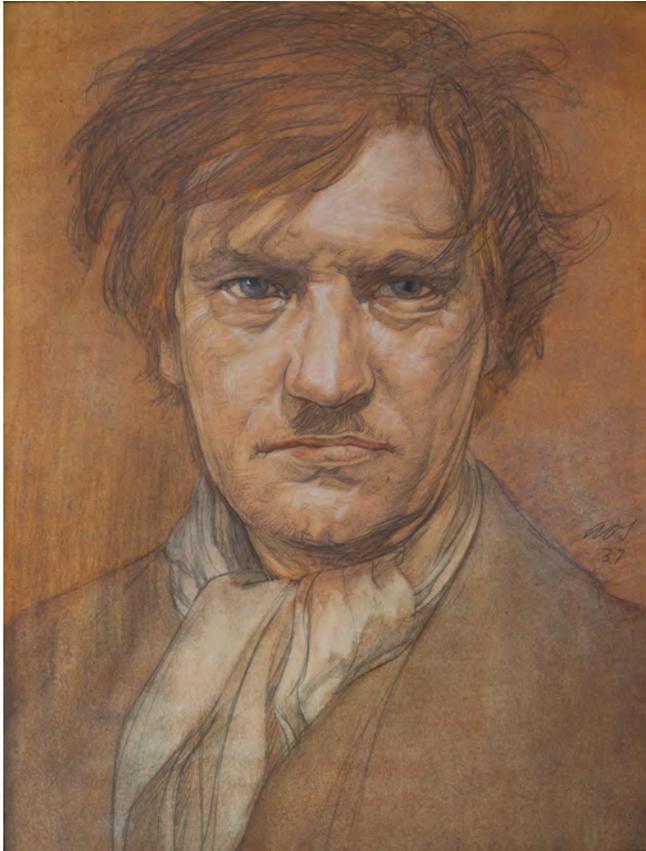
FLOWER GIRL, 1951.

### **Stephen Pochin**

Director of Jerusalem Press Ltd., curator of the Austin Osman Spare retrospective *Fallen Visionary* at the Cuming Museum in 2010. The catalogue for this exhibition, *Cockney Visionary*, became the inaugural publication of Jerusalem Press, which he also edited & designed. *Refractions* (2012) followed, wherein he wrote three short essays.

Then came *Friends & Influences* by Gary Sargeant, with an Afterword by Pochin. He also contributed to *Two Grimoires* (2011) by Starfire Publishing, & authored two books on Spare's wider context in Edwardian culture: *Evolution 1 – From Influx to Automatic Drawing* (2008); *Evolution 2 – A Fiery Asymmetry* (2012), both published by Mandrake Press. He has written Afterwords to Dr William Wallace's books: *Catalpa Monographs*, & *Eily – Spare's Muse* (Jerusalem Press, 2015 & 2016). He is currently preparing a new exhibition of Spare for 2018. He lives in London with his wife & son. AOS continues to keep him on the jog.

*"The soul is the ancestral animals. The body is their knowledge."  
Austin Osman Spare, The Focus of Life*



SELF PORTRAIT, 1937.

BOHEMIA BOOKSHOP  
F.W. LETCHFORD  
116 BOHEMIA ROAD  
ST. LEONARDS-ON-SEA  
SUSSEX,  
ENGLAND  
SEPT 5

Dear Mr. Bardens:

I did not get anywhere with the mss on Austin Spare: I do realise now that the object of the exercise was to rid myself of the obsession with Spare – but has it? & need I?

I was born in the locality of “The Elephant” & so have a strong feeling for Southwark, Kennington etc., & therefore have a stronger feeling than most for Spare since he & I are “blood brothers!” I became bogged down I drafted an mss after the artist’s death. Then started another lately, hoping to marry the two but it became hopeless. Anyway – the results were these, that I helped to keep alive the small flame. I am still in touch with the family. Mr Curtis-Bramwell & Ian Law (the latter has also been writing something on Spare for many years!) & myself are all obsessed so we have something in common to keep us out of mischief for some kind of obsession is essential in life to my mind – unless one wishes to vegetate & become a stupid.

Who wants a book on Spare – none of the big publishers – they have tons of mss on their shelves & can pick the current nonentity of little worth – when I approached W.H. Allen they were too busy on Lady Docker’s memoirs at the time! Publishers want biographies of men in the news not unknowns out of the news by unknown pseudo “writers”. Spare was his own best publicist, in his own day with the help of Mr. Swaffer, yourself & other journalistic friends. However, I was happy to see him have a splash in “Man Myth & Magic”



REPRESSIONS, 1928 (PENCIL ON PAPER).

– due to the efforts of Kenneth Grant the mystic.

I will now let you into the “secret” of my findings! I have been selling pictures back to the family & will ask the nephew if he wishes to purchase my mss & notes for say £30. This will recompense me for time – & indeed for 30 years of thoughts & note-taking on Spare. After all, the nephew knows very little about his uncle but is now collecting his pictures. Prices of the works have not risen dramatically. £10 or £15 or even £20 for a good one is about the mark to-day.

All one wishes to know about Spare is in his art provided one can get hold of his illustrated books & see a body of his work over the years – it is not necessary to ask Alan Odle or yourself or anyone else provided that one can “read” pictures. His work falls into groups.

His automatics (writing & art) were his release for pent-up emotion & his tortured mind – his conflicts of the soul, his biting conscience, sense of shame, the call of the flesh which he endeavoured to resist, conflict of idealism – one cannot write it in a few words as there is so much conflict on many counts to be analysed. Greece was his ideal because artists & philosophers were revered & consulted (not insulted) & sculptors took an active part in the building & decorating of cities on equal terms. Also – homosexuality was not frowned upon but accepted. Spare lived in the great eras of the past because the present confused & disgusted him as it fell too short of his “ideals”. His automatic drawings are very interesting indeed & represent some of his best works.

The Satyr which recurs throughout his work – is himself (his hidden desires) lustful, embracing all forms of sex & perversion with joy.



THE NEW EDEN

Lithograph by AUSTIN O. SPARE

THE NEW EDEN, 1923 (LITHOGRAPH).

His genre portraits of the locals represent the people he really loved – hard workers, people who suffered like himself with no hope of redemption. He looked for suffering & portrayed it. He had always suffered & sought it out in others. His deep inferiority feelings also made him sympathetic towards the down trodden & suppressed & those who had “fallen by the wayside”. He was the Good Samaritan.

His Sidereal portraits are a slant on ordinary faces or upon faces which one may look at twice but require the knowledge of people to divine. Homosexuals & Lesbians are the predominant types but there are subtle shades off & degrees which Spare looked for. He was homosexual strongly but had suppressed it since the 1920's. Before WWI in the company of Raffalovich & Father Gray he had been “one of them” – for at the Salon was a congress of young poets, writers, artists etc., seeking patrons – & patronage then as now goes a little deeper than a man just buying another's pictures – emotion enters into it. To-day to get known in the world of entertainment, or for an artist to be accepted, often he has to play along with the homosexual element just as in Spare's day – at the end of last century this was all too strong & it backwashed over into the new century. Raffalovich & Co. escaped to Edinburgh to start a new life. Spare dived into the tenements of Southwark in the 1920's for the same reason. But he never escaped his own knowledge of his desires but – as I say – suppressed them. For he never approached me all the time I knew him. All of us have elements of male & female in degrees – one way & the other – & the large element (or the small element) can be touched but our Will resists if we are not deeply interested. Sir Frank Brangwyn averred that Spare was a flagrant homosexual – but this could only have been pre-1914.

There are many tortured figures in his drawings – half male-female types – the women are shown in a bad light often, & yet like the Greeks (but copying the Greeks) he does show a good marriage – a beautiful type of male-female – take away the breasts & the figure could be male or female. He “played” with all this to amuse himself & confuse the beholder. A picture which he described to me once as his “finest work” & which I have seen & it was in fact reproduced in a newspaper – is a flagrant homosexual study – a satyr type bending over with his ass straight in the face of the viewer & ectoplasm floating above & a God-like head – he called the picture “God the father, God the Son & God the Holy Ghost”.

Another aspect of his torture was that he loved his family but had to break clear – he found it extremely difficult to break away because by nature he was possessive of friendships having a deep love. Again his struggle against the (Catholic or High Church) bonds of the Church in which he [was] brought up was prolonged & tormented for here again he had associated Church & Family – & being a very sensitive impressionable boy – he had learnt the hard way that to defy God & the Church led to eternal damnation. Thus his lifelong struggle was with the Church. Being pagan by inclination his real leanings were towards the Pagan & he was forever trying to establish his own religion-philosophy to supplant that [overleaf page 2:] religion which had so deeply impressed him as a boy – the incense, the candles, the Nuns in their dark habits, the cold awe of the Church – all this sort of thing appears in his early drawings (even as a boy) & right on through till his death. The ghosts & other “occult” phenomena stem from this in my view. He played to the Gallery on ghosts & the spiritual side – rather it was tied up with his sales talk – he had to sell & keep selling & always had a ghost story up his sleeve for newspapermen. Well yes he may have seen ghosts inside his own head – we all have fear.



ENTHOSYHNASIE, 1920's.

Fear can produce imaginative ghosts. I have been mortally afraid of the dark – a rose-twig caught my collar from behind & believe me I was scared stiff!

But when I saw a dirty white linen sheet tossed over his lay figure standing beside a big picture of a “ghost” I knew that Spare could manufacture a ghost on the odd occasion. But he made some bloody good ghosts & some real devils from his powerful imagination upon which he could work – whip it up – create the aura around himself. He was a mystic.

I could run on for hours.

Since then I have encountered other artists & become obsessed lately with another – this helps to erase Spare partly. They are an interesting social phenomena! I must say that the company of artists does appeal to me. But the finest book on an artist still remains “The Horses Mouth” by Joyce Carey & I wrote the author just before his death to ask if he had met Spare “No – Gully Jimson was drawn from a composite of artists I knew” was his reply – & it fits Spare as it fits many others of an independent streak – types who are their own worst enemies.

Well in the 1937/8 catalogue you stated that one day the facts about Spare would be dug out, or nosed out – & you deprecated this. It seemed to me that you wished the mystery to lie there dormant or fallow. In a sense it does & will. There may be no concrete answer to Spare’s mysteries but my curiosity got the better of me. What I have said is rather superficial but I think I am on the right track.

My Best Truly,  
Frank Letchford



PORTRAIT OF WALTER WARREN.

**Frank Letchford, 1916-1998.  
A biographical note by  
Dr. William Wallace**

Thankfully, Frank Letchford never did rid himself of his obsession with Austin Osman Spare; it is highly likely that their friendship was the most meaningful of Frank's life. They met on a regular basis to talk, walk around historic London, & as teacher & pupil in Art, punctuated only by Frank's war service in India & Burma with the R.A.F.

Dennis Bardens, to whom this letter of the early 70's is addressed, knew Spare from the early '30's, though not with the same closeness or acquired knowledge; but, along with the 'Pope of Fleet Street', Hannen Swaffer offered support; Bardens through exhibition catalogue introductions, & Swaffer in his articles. Frank Letchford became Spare's Boswell, forever note-taking, after reading H.V. Morton's account of Spare in The Daily Herald for Oct 13th 1937 & "taking a road every night from the Elephant" until he bearded the Magus of Southwark in his Walworth Road studio.

It was the beginning of a lifelong odyssey, resulting in the publication of the first biography in 1995, when Frank was 79 years of age - the fruit of his many years of friendship with the artist & subsequent research. Frank Letchford died on 30th of December 1998, strangely appropriate, as it was the birthday of his old mentor & friend Austin Osman Spare

# PRINTS & ARTWORKS

## Available & Wanted

To Raise funds to pay for this exhibition & help support the museum's activities we are publishing various pictures from this exhibition in limited editions of 100 giclee prints using archival inks on Hahnemuhl Photograg 308gsm paper for £50 - £100 please email [info@thelasttuesdaysociety.org](mailto:info@thelasttuesdaysociety.org) for more details.

For examples of print quality please look at the following items in the exhibition which are currently available Entosyhnasie & the 1910 Self Portrait with Ghosts are both prints as the originals are on loan to The Irish Museum of Modern Art & The New Eden Lithograph as the original is in the museum's copy of The Golden Hinde & it would seem a shame to tear it out.

None of the pictures in this exhibition are for sale & whilst in general I have retired from dealing since the transformation of my shop & gallery having bought & sold some 46 works by Spare in the last decade or so sometimes works do become available & if you catch me in funds I can often be tempted to buy new works to add to the museums collection.

Please email [info@thelasttuesdaysociety.org](mailto:info@thelasttuesdaysociety.org)

