

There is a secret ingredient in the work **Kenneth Grant** puts before us, though it is something we're initially all familiar with: dreams and dreaming. It is by no means the only ingredient of course, but it plays a key-role. And it's how he worked them into his books which is both unusual and of great interest.

Today I'm going to concentrate on his novel *Against the Light* and highlight some of its themes. It was published 1997 but written earlier – we are told it was begun in the early Eighties, and internal details reference the year 1986 and the writing of Grant's *Outer Gateways*.

Grant, we can be sure, wrote his dreams down, he was a great believer in keeping a magical journal, and they provided rich food for his ideas. Naturally he wanted to imbue them with power and validity and he found a way to do so, initially with the help of these three sources:

George du Maurier, (he was father to Gerald, the actor and manager, who had three daughters, one of whom was Daphne du Maurier), author of the 19th century best seller *Trilby*. He wrote a book, his debut novel, *Peter Ibbetson*, in which his

hero articulates the notion of ‘dreaming true’ – that by learning the process of intensely imagining a dream or fantasy your desires will become a kind of reality – they will come to you. In *Peter Ibbetson*, two lovers who have known each other since childhood and later are unjustly separated, find a way – through ‘dreaming true’ – to be together, to dream themselves into each other’s lives.

In the novels of **Dion Fortune**, the protagonists ‘imagine’ themselves into certain characters, god-forms and even settings. In *The Goat-Foot God* Fortune has her character Hugh explain his intended method:

“. . . what I mean is this – what Loyola called a composition of place in your imagination, and to see yourself there – and by gum, you jolly soon begin to feel as you would feel if you were there.”

It is an enactment of **Ignatius Loyola**’s premise that if you put yourself in a posture of prayer, you will feel like praying. And Fortune’s famous protagonist, alter-ego Viviane Le Fay Morgan, takes it further as she describes how she built up her magical personality:

“A magical image does not exist upon this plane at all,” she said. “It is another dimension, and we make it with the imagination. And for that,” said she, “I need help, for I cannot do it alone. If I could I would have done it long ago . . . For me to make a magical image by myself is auto-suggestion, and begins and ends subjectively. But when two or three get to work together, and you picture me as I picture myself, then things begin to happen.”

Elsewhere, Fortune describes the detailed process of visualisation by which Morgan and a colleague ‘build up’ their temple on the astral plane, effectively superimposing it over the room in front of them.

Grant and his fellow initiates of the New-Isis Lodge would significantly build on this, weaving a shared dream-world from the materials they drew from the pulp fictions and weird tales they so much enjoyed together. As he says in the introduction to *The Ninth Arch*:

“. . . when a lodge comprising skilled magicians dreams – that is, invokes – identical images in concentrated collectivity, the ensuing phenomena become a shared and vivid experience.”

In *Against the Light* Grant creates a magical world, often quite a dark world. It is not for nothing that it is subtitled “*A Nightside Narrative.*” We are introduced to the character of an alleged uncle, Phineas Black; in fact he dedicates the book to him. Phineas Marsh Black, MD, is primarily interested in diseases of the mind rather than the body (publishing his findings in a book entitled ‘*Clinical Studies in Senescence and Diseases of Memory.*’)

Yet, as Grant has said himself, all the characters in the book have an auto-biographical basis, except for Uncle Phin, as he usually calls him, who is a composite.

Aleister Crowley was definitely part of it, as was quite possibly David Curwen the alchemist, and one Uncle Henry who was married to Grant’s mother’s sister, Susan, whose adopted daughter Kathleen committed suicide.

All of these and other members of his family appear as characters, sometimes in quite startling aspects. Is it significant that it was Uncle Phin who helped with the adoption of Kathleen, which strikes a somewhat sinister note if you consider her sad end?

“There was an intensity to Uncle Henry’s presence that alerted the narrator to the possibility that he might be a man of magick.”

We are close here to Grant’s notion of ‘dreaming true’ and how he would weave events and memories and people he had known and which had made a strong impression on him into the engine of his story.

Baudelaire maintained that genius is simply *“childhood rediscovered by an act of will.”* And Grant the narrator writes:

“I had to become old before I understood the magical implications of this truth. On intently merging again with the time-stream peculiar to my Uncle Henry, I was able to re-live - not merely to remember but actually to experience again - the total ambience and atmosphere of those far-off days.”

And he almost makes it explicit when he says:

“I had perhaps assisted Uncle Phin's evocations by bringing to them a life-time’s experience of visualizations connected with occult pursuits.”

Grant the narrator even has a vision of Uncle Phin as the Marquis de Sade, as imagined by the Surrealist, Man Ray. He

grows to monstrous proportions and then crumbles like masonry might crumble. Uncle Phineas might have mass, but we are told “*he weighed little more than a ghost.*” Other elements that feed into the mix are more nebulous: Spare’s Spirit-Guide Black Eagle, Bram Stoker’s Dracula, Sax Rohmer’s dubious and sinister Orientals . . .

Whoever Grant draws on, the presiding idea behind Uncle Phin is that of the Psycho-pomp. He opens the portals that make it possible for Grant, his apprentice, to step through – sometimes with trepidation – from reality into dream and back again, from dream into imagination, reverie into hallucination, thus arresting the unconscious, or as Grant still called it, “*the subconsciousness.*” What Uncle Phin is teaching him, leading his apprentice through one initiation after another is “*to be able to dance happily with nightmares.*” But first, he says, “*one must have transcended all dreams.*” As I have said, this is distinctly a narrative of the night side! There are a number of nightmares Grant the narrator has to face and transcend, before reaching to a deeper knowledge. One day Uncle Phin brings him a particularly devastating revelation. By way of the “*Nightside of the Busche Emporium*” and an imaginary Auguste Busche, “*that dealer in strange gods, surrounded by*

the bones of virgins picked dry by the vultures of the Qliphoth in the Tank of the Crocodile,” he transports them to a location beneath Cairo where he shows him a vision of Black Isis, a truly devastating series of images of the chthonian Mother bringing forth and devouring her brood.

What Lovecraft, Machen, and Richard Marsh in his 1897 horror story, *The Beetle* (which initially outsold Stoker’s *Dracula!*) were only hinting at, Grant spells out in great and unflinching detail, and then takes further still. You’ll never think of beetles in the same way again!

Yet the scarab-beetle was of course sacred in ancient Egypt. They were worshipped as ‘Khephera’ – which means “*He Who Has Come Forth.*” This aspect of the scarab was associated with one of the creator gods, Atum. The scarab was a glyph of the Risen Sun, come forth from between the thighs of the Sky-Goddess, Nuit, each new morning.

There are passages in the book where several of the different elements of what makes Uncle Phineas Black the narrator’s Psycho-pomp par excellence, lie close together. For instance, Chancery Lane occurs a couple of times as the locus where the sinister Black takes the narrator for yet another revelation.

Busche's Emporium had stood within yards of the flat in Chancery Lane once occupied by Crowley, where he and Allan Bennett performed Ceremonial Magic, around the turn of the century. It was the time when Crowley presented as 'Count Vladimir Svareff' and would dress himself in costly yet bohemian mode. There are lurid descriptions of his practices and quarters, with the two temples, one devoted to white magic, the other to black.

Speaking of 'black magic', there's a story that goes with the picture of the devilish figure of Mephistopheles included in *Against the Light's* cover-art, and it offers another clue to the figure of Uncle Phin, as well as presenting a mystery: young Kenneth Grant would visit Auguste Busche's Emporium on Chancery Lane, which opened just prior to WW II, but has long since disappeared. It specialized in plaster cast *objet d'art*, mostly Buddhas and Gods and Goddesses. He would browse the objects looking for pieces he thought would lend atmosphere to his recently rented rooms which were nearby. On one occasion, having made a small selection, Grant was admiring a figure of Mephistopheles when his reverie was interrupted by the cashier wanting to close up. After paying for his three items, Grant returned to his rooms where he

found an urgent note calling him straight out again, so he deposited his parcel unopened. On returning much later, he was finally able to unpack his goods and discovered there was a fourth item. Unwrapping it, he discovered the Mephisto statuette. How did it get there? Grant, so far as I know, didn't know – and certainly doesn't tell!

Crowley is mentioned repeatedly throughout. Grant had discovered The Master Therion's *Magick In Theory & Practice* in the Charing Cross Road bookshop Zwemmer's when he was all of fifteen, which led to his eventual meeting with Crowley, and no doubt set him on the path to occult knowledge and insights. In a rare interview with *Skoob Occult Review* in 1990, Grant would say that he thought:

“Crowley's mind was lucid and highly developed. Had his will been equal to it, the doctrine which he received may have gone far towards preparing man to deal with the new forms of consciousness that are now beginning to manifest.”

Crowley had certainly changed his life, but Grant's awareness and appreciation of the Beast in the end was distinctly ambiguous. He had known Crowley at the end of his life, in decidedly ill health as a consequence of his lifetime of excess.

Against the Light is not short of Female Presences and two figures in particular play major roles, even though, in spite of living some four hundred years apart, they are really one. Like many bookish imaginative children and teenagers Grant had his favourite authors from early on and he would effortlessly home in on certain writers most of us here are familiar with, and particularly the characters they had created. The character called into life by Arthur Machen, Helen Vaughan, or Mrs Beaumont, made a particular impression on him. He re-creates her, you might say, in Margaret Wyard, an ancestor who had to undergo the trauma of her ‘initiation’ in the woods, to become the Witch, Margaret Awryd. Arthur Machen, in *The Great God Pan*, hints at ‘unspeakable things’ that happen after the girl Mary is operated on by his two male protagonists, Dr Raymond and his friend Clarke, as an ‘experiment’ to expand her consciousness so she would “*see the All,*” typified as the Great God Pan. Afterwards, she’s a wreck of a human being, and stark-raving mad. Her offspring Helen Vaughan becomes the appalling *femme fatal* that preys upon members of the male population in London before meeting her inevitable destruction. Grant sees through Machen’s fear and disgust and tells the new ‘real’ story of

Margaret Wyard, later Awryd. Margaret had been executed for Witchcraft in the Sixteenth Century. Our narrator is excited by the information, because it would seem that his *“lifelong interest in the occult was shared by at least one other member of his mother’s family.”* He investigates, and finds out that Margaret herself *“had claimed carnal knowledge of the devil in the shape of a beast.”* The couplings had taken place in Rendlesham Forest, later a noted UFO ‘hotspot’ – the *“British Roswell”* apparently – and also the locus for Satanic Rituals.

Grant’s witches are not Gerald Gardner’s wiccans – they are more like the witches from Goya or Macbeth, or the creatures you find in Austin Spare’s work, more of the Mrs. Patterson (or ‘Yeld’ Patterson, as Grant calls her) variety. Spare once said to Grant that he didn’t think *“Dr Gardner had ever met a ‘pukka’ witch or attended a real Witches’ Sabbath.”* And the Grants answered *“I doubt he’s ever met anybody to come up to the Witch who taught you when young.”* But just what is a REAL Witches’ Sabbath? That’s a very complex question that cannot be answered here. But Phil Baker (Spare’s biographer) makes the credible suggestion, that the *“Sabbath can take place in a mind-space, even a solo-mind-space, like*

an event on the astral plane.” Maybe that is the TRUE Witches Sabbath.

Speaking of Austin Spare and his witches, he painted a picture which features significantly in *Against the Light*. The image is divided by this rainbow line, the female figure is accompanied by strange forms and lines and sigils. The winged entity with the improbably tiny sigilized waist is based on a woman most of you will probably have heard of or read about, Clanda, the infamous ‘water-witch’ who was at the centre of one of the New-Isis Lodge horror stories in which she is almost carried off by a monstrous bird during a lodge session. Gerald Gardner was convinced Grant had stolen her from his coven and commissioned Spare to create a talisman for him without telling him what it was for, namely to get her back. (The truth was that Clanda felt she wasn’t making much progress under Gardner’s tutelage.) Both Crowley and David Curwen were infatuated with her, we are told, and she clearly made an impression on Grant: as well as appearing here she is the basis for the tragic Qliphoth-infested Vilma in his *Gamaliel, Diary of a Vampire*.

Margaret Wyard's counterpart in the narrator's life is Margaret Leasing, who puts him in touch with the ancestral Margaret through her scrying talents. She is also a dancer, a clairvoyant and trance medium, who would occasionally make her gifts available to the New-Isis Lodge. The narrator is in thrall to her, as he confesses. She was a personal friend with whom he had shared one of the most vital experiences in the novel. Right at the beginning we are introduced to the idea of a Grand Grimoire, or – with a play on words – the GRANT Grimoire, or *Il Grimorio Grantiano*, as this strangest of family heirlooms is sometimes called, like their very own family *Necronomicon*! It materializes and de-materializes, it is found and then lost again, before being re-discovered, but it's always hovering. The first time the narrator finds the Grimoire he's with Margaret Leasing and they're at the ruined church at Merthyr Mawr (MURDER MOOR), near Candleston in Wales. Margaret has her crystal ball with her and she insists they use it there and then, even though it's night-time. She guides them to the crypt, where they find a bundle out of which tumble two satyr-headed candlesticks, and in which they find the Grimoire.

The Grant Grimoire weaves in and out and gradually you realize that the novel itself *is* the Grimoire, a feat Grant pulls off by a dazzling sleight of hand, weaving into it his own dream material.

What to make of all the ophidian and insectoid imagery?

If you look at the Moon card of the Tarot you see two creatures that are canids and a creature like a cross between a crab and a beetle. It indicates the double-way of the Nightside – the Lunar influence, to which Grant I think was more devoted than the Solar, Dayside. Living things with shells – like the snake also, which sheds its skin – are suggestive of chrysalids and the potential of evolution, and new stages of development and growth in a way other creatures do not suggest. They tend to feed on blood and carrion, and even excrement. It's the life-force in some of its most alien and repellent aspects, but that also has always been a way of keeping something safe or guarded. Perhaps Kenneth Grant had a kind of intuition of this, and sensed these creatures were a kind of apotropaion?

But even for Grant, the Nightside occasionally became too much. If all the nightmares and Qliphotic entities threatened

to overwhelm, he could always take refuge in his beloved *Advaita Vedanta* – but that, perhaps, is the subject for another talk . . .

There's no doubt that Kenneth Grant was a visionary, and like many such he makes a strong case for the origin of that vision beginning in childhood's wondrous apprehension of the numinous. As the quote from W. B. Yeats that is at the beginning of the book puts it:

“There is some one myth for every man, which if we but knew it, would make us understand all that he did and thought.”

This puts us in mind of course of Proust, and I was interested to learn from a comment by Michael Staley that the novel's original intended title was *“Madeleine”* – apparently an alternative name for the character of Margaret, but might it not also have been a subtle reference to the trigger of Proust's epic *Remembrance of Things Past*?

In Book II Part 4, Uncle Phin tells the narrator:

“If you hold it against the light, an altogether different picture will emerge”. Startled, I raised my eyes from the object upon the table before me. In the place once occupied by the mirror

I saw a spidery form. A gigantic head upon an undersized body forced its way into the room, arms flailing against a background of criss-crossed light. I touched gingerly the flimsy material spread upon the table. It had on it a curious pattern of wavy lines interspersed with hieroglyphics which I had vainly been attempting to decipher. I followed the creature's suggestion and pressed the fabric against the window-pane. As the sun's dying rays seeped through it I noticed a movement in the design, a massing of colour and, finally, a precisely delineated portrait of a girl's head. The hair rippled like waves of light which illumined the eyes as if from within. Even before the lips curled backwards from the over-long teeth, I recognized Awryd."

As well as explaining the novel's title, this passage introduces the kind of sleight-of-hand – or perhaps eye – that is central to Grant's magic. By use of techniques that relate to Dali's paranoia-critical method, and even Da Vinci's mantic stain, it is finally revealed that the 'Primal Grimoire' that was the source for all of this fascination with magic tales of exotic, far-off lands, and witches and wizards, was a children's book with a picture of the Sphinx on the cover, much beloved of the young Kenneth Grant.

I'll share with you the closing passage of *Against the Light*:

“And yet, when my mother came down the stairs that Summer’s day – as reflected in the Leasing globe – I could not help wondering why Uncle Phin had not told me that the Sphinx contained all the secrets that ever were. But the book that my mother carried downstairs was tattered, faded, grubby with childish touchings. She was not about to while away the hours as had I, years past, in bright safe sunshine; the book was on its way to the dustbin, to the qliphoth below Malkuth! But then, Uncle Phin was a great story-teller and a maker of immortal dreams; and, when he read to me on summer afternoons, vague phantom figures would coil and weave above the shadowed swamp at The Mallows, the very weird weir at the bottom of his garden. Yet everything he read to me was right because he was reading from the Grimoire, and it was not Margaret Leasing alone who vanished at the last - into the shining globe.”

Thank You.

Emma Doeve, January 2016.