

Chaos Magic:  
Postmodern Shamanism and the Legacy of Austin Osman Spare

By Siobhán Houston

*So welcome to the Kali Yuga of the pandemonaeon, wherein nothing is true and everything is permissible . . . the secret is out that there is no secret of the universe . . . All is Chaos and evolution is going nowhere in particular.*

—Peter J. Carroll, *Liber Null and Psychonaut*

Navigating through the labyrinth of the magical subculture these days, one can hardly fail to encounter practitioners of Chaos Magic, a form of occultism is attracting considerable attention within the American and European magical communities at present. Who makes up this mysterious coterie, which gathers under the banner of an eight-rayed star and proclaims, “Everything is permitted and nothing is true”?

As it turns out, Chaos Magic encompasses a heterogeneous conglomeration of people and philosophies, and there is no one definition that will be accepted by all or even most Chaos practitioners. One useful way to regard Chaos Magic is as postmodern shamanism. Peter J. Carroll, the British occultist who was Chaos Magic’s original popularizer, notes: “Shamanism once guided all human societies and kept them in equilibrium for thousands of years. All occultism is an attempt to win back that lost wisdom.”<sup>1</sup> A prominent motif connecting Chaos magicians is a philosophy that says all systems of knowledge are socially constructed and culturally biased (a view known as deconstructive postmodernism). It naturally follows from this idea that no one belief is more true than any other.

Deconstructive postmodernism also asserts that humans possess no permanent or core self but rather consist of a diverse, ever-changing parade of character postures that are ephemeral and essentially meaningless.<sup>2</sup> These assumptions have much in common with the Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* or “no-self” but fly in the face of most traditional Western esoteric philosophy and practice, which generally presuppose the existence of an eternal personal self that is capable of evolution and is subject to karma and reincarnation.

Western esotericism also teaches that the visible and invisible worlds are linked by a set of correspondences, or, as Paracelsus termed them, “the signatures of nature.” These “signatures” can be divined by contemplating the natural world as well as being revealed by adepts. A magician may use this system to manipulate planetary energies, gems, plants, and entities such as elementals and demons in order to attain his or her desired goals.

Chaos magicians scoff at these claims. They conclude that will and imagination – not the maneuvering of elements within a table of correspondences – are the operative forces in magic. Not only do these practitioners deride suppositions of “the signatures of nature” and other traditional tenets, they often deliberately parody practices of the more conventional magical orders, such as the use of the Latin motto or magical name. Chaos magicians might adopt monikers like “Frater Non Sequitur” or “Soror Impropriety” as a way of thumbing their noses at traditionalists and indicating the absurdity of taking oneself too seriously.

Nevertheless Chaos magicians are perfectly willing to use traditional beliefs and rituals. They avoid attaching any ultimate truth or meaning to these devices, however, and are willing to discard them as soon as they prove ineffectual. In other words, beliefs are seen as tools that may be employed or forsaken at the whim of the magician (a practice they often call “paradigm shifting”). Austin Osman Spare, the English occultist and artist whose work has heavily influenced Chaos Magic, wrote that a magician’s belief should never become stagnant or locked into a specific god-form: “The familiar is always sterile . . . the familiar induces fatigue; fatigue induces indifference; let nothing be seen in such a manner; let seeing be as vision – every sight a revelation.”<sup>3</sup>

Peter J. Carroll has traced the origins of Chaos Magic to four major matrices: Spare, Aleister Crowley, and the traditions of shamanism and sorcery. An understanding of Spare’s work, although perhaps the most mysterious and the least accessible of these sources, is crucial to comprehending the impulse behind Chaos Magic because he is considered its grandfather.

Austin Osman Spare (c.1886-1956), also known by his magical name, Zos, was born in Snowhill, London, to middle-class parents. At an early age he exhibited great skill as an artist, and at sixteen he received a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Art. He worked as a book illustrator, and his surrealist, visionary work drew praise from men like George Bernard Shaw and John Singer Sargent. He also wrote a number of books, including *Earth Inferno*, *Focus of Life*, and *A Book of Satyrs*. Aside from art, occultism was the passion of Spare’s life, and his most influential work was *The Book of Pleasure*, a beautifully illustrated volume that spelled out his arcane philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

From all accounts Spare was gifted with remarkable psychic abilities. As a young man, he met and studied with an indigent elderly woman whom he called in his writings “Mrs. Paterson.” She was an accomplished soothsayer who could induce thought-forms to manifest visually during her divinatory consultations; Spare could also achieve this effect, although not with the consistency of his teacher. Moreover Mrs. Paterson, who claimed to be an initiated witch, passed much of her secret knowledge on to her young pupil.<sup>5</sup>

Using techniques gleaned from Mrs. Paterson, Spare sought to delve into his unconscious through the mediums of sex and art while using his forays into the unseen domains as an inspiration for his creative work. He frequently contacted the inhabitants of the invisible worlds, especially a spirit guide named Black Eagle. Later

Spare became an initiate in Crowley's magical order, the Ordo Templi Orientis, but he left after about a year, preferring to work on his own.<sup>6</sup>

*The Book of Pleasure* contains one of Spare's most important projects: the "Alphabet of Desire" (also called the "Atavistic Alphabet"), a magical tool he devised to expedite contact with psychic realms. This alphabet of "sigils" (stylized anagrams) was an instrumental part of his technique of "atavistic resurgence," a practice used to develop consciousness of previous incarnations, including animal lives. Nevill Drury, the author of numerous books on magic and shamanism, writes that Spare thought "he could retrace his earlier existences and, after locating his first personality, could transcend it and merge with the Void, which he called Kia."<sup>7</sup>

Spare held that each magician should construct an individual alphabet of sigils from the material of his or her unconscious mind. Each sigil would represent an instruction to the unconscious, and meditation on a particular sigil would cause the corresponding energy latent in this part of the mind to well up, now free to be used by the magician's will. Spare also made use of trance-inducing practices, including "the Death Posture" (staring fixedly into a mirror at close range), to induce a state of emptiness, allowing the sigil to bypass the conscious mind and come in direct contact with the unconscious.

While most occultists would probably agree that atavistic resurgence is a potent psychological device, they differ on the advisability of its use. While Drury affirms that Spare's work pioneered new vistas in occultism, he nevertheless believes that Spare's magic was counter-evolutionary in the sense that Spare exposed himself to primordial aspects of consciousness which are better left undisturbed. According to Drury, Spare was overwhelmed by the reactivation of atavistic energies that he was unable or unwilling to control, and his artistic work suffered as a result.<sup>8</sup> Damien Anderson, however, a Chaos magician and author, maintains that Spare, an extremely powerful magician, consciously and fearlessly offered himself up as a medium of the Void in order to facilitate his artwork, and that through his magical work he reaped exactly the kinds of artistic results he was seeking.<sup>9</sup>

The philosophy undergirding the practice of atavistic resurgence is grounded in Spare's conception of "Kia," a term he used to denote the space between the worlds, the "Neither-Neither" realm. He postulated that liberating oneself from traditional dogmas and social conventions, as well as employing the tool of atavistic resurgence, would release energy from the psyche. These practices in turn would facilitate the magician's communion with Kia (variously known in other traditions as Self, God, or the Tao). His goal was to sojourn beyond the states of subjectivity and objectivity and enter into what poet Rainer Maria Rilke calls the *Weltinneraum*, "the world-inner-space." Spare's rejection of conventional morality and religion is another stance that Chaos magicians have generally adopted.

Current practitioners are no less individualistic than Spare, as I learned from my casting my questions about Chaos Magic upon the Internet. Responding to my inquiries, one practitioner, J.B. Bell, explained, "I think Chaos Magick is a scientific

way of doing magick. It is totally empirical, in the sense that its techniques are concerned purely with getting results. It is not concerned with the metaphysics of why magickal techniques do what they do.”<sup>10</sup>

Tzimon Yliaster, another magician, wrote, “Like all flavors of ‘magick,’ it is a means of causing change more or less in conformity with one’s desires. Unlike most other flavors, however, it relies on individual experience and discovery to determine the validity of techniques . . . What is valid for one magician may well be useless to another.” Zazas, from Oakland, California, added, “Chaos Magick . . . seeks to update theory in terms of modern science, particularly quantum physics, and rejects dogma, particularly the metaphysical baggage which the magical tradition has handed down for centuries as sacred ‘truth’.”

While the word “chaos” usually conjures up visions of turmoil and disorder, Peter Carroll uses the term in a specific sense: he understands Chaos to be the force that animates all events in the cosmos. He notes that other traditions refer to this “thing” as God or Tao, but he prefers to call it “Chaos” because this term is “virtually meaningless, and free from the childish, anthropomorphic ideas about religion.”<sup>11</sup>

In Carroll’s terminology, consciousness is “Kia,” a part of the greater Chaos. The magician seeks to increase the manifestation of Kia through concentration exercises as well as through altered states of consciousness; techniques employed include drumming, chanting, psychotropic drugs, sexual excitation, and emotional arousal brought about by the contemplation of horrific or grotesque imagery. According to Carroll, “To the extent that the Kia can become one with Chaos it can extend its will and perception into the universe and accomplish magic.”<sup>12</sup>

Not surprisingly, certain aspects of this philosophy have met with considerable criticism. Author Jan Fries, for example, disparagingly claims that Chaos Magic is simply the most recent fad in occult circles and is actually “just a pretty name for organized nonconformism.”<sup>13</sup> He criticizes Chaos magicians who lust for “more power, better results, less effort, stronger magic,” saying that many do not understand that the desire for all these things is just another diversion of the ego.

But something more provocative than a simple desire for nonconformity unites practitioners of Chaos magic. Along with a general acceptance of deconstructionism, they seem to be fascinated with the shadow self, the dark spheres of reality, and phantasmagoric, macabre imagery. Not coincidentally, many Chaos magicians cut their teeth on fantasy games like Dungeons and Dragons, and many are also devotees of H.P. Lovecraft and other writers of the horror and fantasy genres. These magicians commonly incorporate elements of fantasy fiction (Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos, for example) into their rituals.

This enchantment with the dark side of existence is explained by author Mishlen Linden, who observes that Western occultism has emphasized the “gods of light,” and in the process has repressed the shadow forces of the psyche. Linden declares that a balance of both light and dark images are necessary, and notes that

“when both light and dark . . . have been integrated, then may we all be truly free.”<sup>14</sup>

There are others who see the value of integrating both Gothic and ethereal symbolism in one’s magical practice. In his article “The Dualistic Principles of Magical Power,” Damien Anderson says the occultist should choose the symbolic system that causes the most tumult within the psyche; the resultant turmoil will help dissolve belief structures that restrict psychic energy – a theory that harks back to the philosophy of Spare. For some, ethereal images of light and love will produce the best result, while for others, shocking and horrific symbolism will be most efficacious.

Anderson goes on to define a “Magickian” as one “who desires to wield Power and create change by will. Magick is designed to manipulate the forces that lie deep in the voids of No-Mind.” The mutual derision that both “black” and “white” magicians often feel for each others’ traditions is a result of misunderstanding the nature of power. Ultimately “power is pure and devoid of colour. . . . Whether a Magickian uses the symbolism of Darkness or Light, the Power manifesting will be pure in form if the Magickian is a clear channel.”<sup>15</sup>

Carroll also addresses the issue of white and black magic in *Liber Null and Psychonaut*: “White Magic leans more toward the acquisition of wisdom and a general feeling of faith in the universe. The Black form is concerned more with the acquisition of power and is reflective of a basic faith in oneself. The end results are likely to be not dissimilar, for the paths meet in a way impossible to describe.”<sup>16</sup>

The white-magic community has been known to demonize the practice of Chaos Magic, fearful that its preoccupation with the darker realms, coupled with the axiom “Everything is permitted and nothing is true,” might be a mandate for mayhem and disorder. Clearly the danger is there: some aficionados of Chaos magic seem to have become overly fixated on power and control, exhibiting an arrogance like that of rebellious adolescents.<sup>17</sup>

Most practitioners, however, regard the slogan “Everything is permitted and nothing is true” as simply a catalyst for critical thinking. Marik, a magician from New Orleans, says his aim as a practitioner of Chaos magic is to “deconstruct belief structures to allow the free energy that results from that deconstruction to bring about magical effects.” Far from advocating a degenerate antinomianism, Marik maintains that developing a personal morality is paramount for the magician, and is important in order to achieve a successful, compassionate life. He emphasizes, however, that one must construct a morality from life experience and not adopt an ethical code secondhand; his own moral perspective closely resonates with Buddhist ethical principles.<sup>18</sup>

Such complexity of beliefs is not surprising in view of the diverse sources from which adherents come to Chaos Magic. Some practitioners had no previous experience with occultism but became intrigued with this particular form as a result of their interest in Lovecraft, quantum physics, or scientific chaos theory. Others were

previously involved with Paganism and shamanism, Voodoo, Eastern spiritual disciplines, or other Western magical orders. A number of Chaos magicians still retain their affiliations with other groups, including Wiccan covens and the Ordo Templi Orientis.

Much of the attraction of Chaos Magic lies in its individualism and its lack of dogma. Chaos rituals, for example, tend to be diverse and idiosyncratic. Ashton, a practitioner from Santa Cruz, California, described his magical schedule thus: "The house gods are Legba, Shub-Niggureth, Eris, and various servitors. They get cared for and fed daily, and I do a fair amount of 'kitchen witch' type work. . . . I am an active Thelemite and perform Resh (all 4), Will, and a Eucharist daily as well. I have two divergent 'Yog-SoThoth Cycle of Myth' currents that I practice, I keep up Golden Dawn workings, and I continue work on an Alphabet of Desire and various servitor/egregore workings. Currently I work solo in the Flesh and on-line with a number of Virtual Adepts."

A Chaos practitioner based in San Luis Obispo, California, says, "I've done anything from Egyptian ceremonial to African bone divination to using the playing of an instrument to induce a magical effect. I like pathworkings and summoning demons from the *Necronomicon*." Another occultist wrote: "I generally work solo. . . ###I do some basic devotional stuff to my deity at the moment (lately Aztec death goddesses) and blood and pain are good tools, as well as calmness and chanting."

Besides individual practices, there are also a number of Chaos organizations, the best-known of which is the Illuminates of Thanateros (IOT), an order started by Peter Carroll. According to one Internet communiqué, the first public notice of the IOT was published in *New Equinox* magazine in 1978 and stated, "The IOT represents a fusion of Thelemic Magick, Tantra, The Sorceries of Zos, and Tao. The non-mysteries of symbolic systems have been discarded in favor of mastery of technique."

The IOT has undergone a number of institutional upheavals since its inception, and Carroll eventually disassociated himself from the group. The German-Austrian branch of the IOT seceded from the international organization sometime ago and by all reports is expanding rapidly. In contrast, the British and American sections seem to be experiencing some disorganization and attenuation at present. The American chapter of the IOT has encountered mass defections over the years, with members protesting the order's hierarchical organization, and now only a handful of active constituents remain.

The American IOT, although not originally a highly stratified magical order, seems to have evolved into a hierarchical operation with a strict grade system. This type of bureaucracy is anathema to the vast majority of Chaos magicians; consequently most former American IOT members still remain unaffiliated or work within loosely organized Chaos guilds like the San Francisco-based Autonomatrix. In addition, much of the communication and group ritual work among American acolytes of Chaos Magic these days takes place in the realm of cyberspace, on the Internet's alt.magick.chaos newsgroup.

One group, the Covenant of the Ancient Ones, headed by Damien and Susan Anderson and Michael Callahan, is involved in activating chemical compounds within the brain by magical means, with the aim of altering certain elements of the human genetic structure. One of their methods is to use goetic evocation meditations to “restructure” existing “complexes” or programs with the psyche as well as to build new psychological complexes. Although they believe this work can eventually lead to great psychological clarity and power for the magician, Damien Anderson explains that it is a slow process without quick results. The group is not accepting initiates at present, but the Andersons say they are open to corresponding with those interested in their work and plan to offer a correspondence course in the near future.

One of the most innovative Chaos groups is the TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone) in New Orleans. The idea for TAZ originated from the work of Hakim Bey, a brilliant poet-anarchist whose compositions have appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including *City Lights Review* and *GNOSIS*. While Bey is reluctant to precisely define the concept of TAZ, he does say that the “TAZ is ‘utopian’ in the sense that it envisions an intensification of everyday life, or as the Surrealists might have said, life’s penetration by the Marvelous. . . . The patterns of force which bring the TAZ into being have something in common with those chaotic ‘Strange Attractors’ which exist, so to speak, between the dimensions.”<sup>19</sup>

The New Orleans TAZ is composed of about fifteen active Chaos magicians. A nonhierarchical band with no designated leader, TAZ conceives itself as an association of friends dedicated to magical work rather than as a formal order. Its bimonthly meetings include discussions of Chaos Magic as well as actual magical work. The group performs private, public, and on-line rituals, and looks forward to publishing a digital magazine dedicated to creating “magickal niches within informational structures” in the near future.

What does the future hold for the complex and kaleidoscopic world of Chaos Magic? Peter Carroll and other Chaos practitioners, including British magician Phil Hine and German occultist Frater U.D., are among the most creative figures in Western magic today and are actively working to revitalize the tradition. Critics may feel that Chaos Magic is fated simply to be the latest transient impulse within the occult community. It seems more likely, however, given the burgeoning number of books and journals appearing on the subject, as well as the intense level of cyberspace activity it has generated, that Chaos Magic will exert a rejuvenating force upon the Western tradition for many years to come.

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#### NOTES

1. Peter J. Carroll, *Liber Null and Psychonaut: An Introduction to Chaos Magic* (York Beach, Me.: Samuel Weiser, 1987, 1991), p. 169.

2. For an excellent discussion and critique of deconstructive postmodernism, see Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
3. Austin Osman Spare, *The Grimoire of Zos*, cited in Kenneth Grant, *The Magical Revival* (Letchworth, U.K.: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1972), p. 206.
4. Nevill Drury, *Vision Quest: A Personal Journey through Magic and Shamanism* (Bridport, Dorset, U.K.: Prism Press, 1984), pp. 7-8. Some of these works have been republished in *From the Inferno to Zos: The Writings and Images of Austin Osman Spare* (Thame, U.K.: Mandrake Press, 1993).
5. Grant, pp. 181-82.
6. Letter from F.W. Letchford, author of the forthcoming *Magician of Southwark* (a biography of Spare), to the author, April 4, 1994.
7. Drury, p. 10.
8. Ibid., p. 70.
9. Telephone conversation with the author, January 28, 1995.
10. Chaos practitioners often use the spelling "magick" to distinguish occult practices from sleight-of-hand magic, a distinction popularized by Aleister Crowley.
11. Peter J. Carroll, *Liber Null and Psychonaut*, p. 28.
12. Ibid., p. 29.
13. Jan Fries, *Visual Magick: A Guide to Freestyle Shamanism* (Oxford: Mandrake, 1992). p. 33. Fries's opprobrium notwithstanding, this is a popular book among Chaos practitioners.
14. Mishlen Linden, *Typhonian Terotomas: The Shadows of the Abyss* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Black Moon Publishing, 1993), pp. 9-10.
15. Damien Gregory Anderson, "The Dualistic Principles of Magickal Power," in *The Philosophy of a Magickian* (Sacramento, Calif.: privately printed, 1992), pp. 24-41.
16. Peter J. Carroll, cited in Anderson, p. 23.
17. I believe it is these practitioners to whom Jan Fries directs his criticism.
18. Telephone conversation with the author, January 26, 1995.
19. Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1985, 1991), p. 111. See also his article "The Immediatist Manifesto" in GNOSIS #27.

#### OTHER RESOURCES

Carroll, Peter J. *Liber Kaos*. York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1992. (Reviewed in GNOSIS #27.)

Frater U.D. *Practical Sigil Magic*. Translated by Ingrid Fischer. St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 1991.

Hine, Phil. *Primal Chaos*. London: Chaos International, 1993.

Mindell, Arnold. *The Shaman's Body*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

Zweig, Connie and Jeremiah Abrams, eds. *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1991.