

## Austin Osman Spare : a Note on his Work

BY

RALPH STRAUS

ONE must never forget that in the best days of art there were no art critics, and I sometimes wonder whether a time will come when art-criticism will be included amongst the grosser crimes. It is so easy, and so monotonous, to speak dreary platitudes about the inexplicability of beauty with the firm intention of following them by a fairly minute exposition of its qualities. It is so easy to be fulsomely adulatory or impertinent, or merely contemptuous, and no one has yet convinced me that interpretation is a necessary complement to an art. One may talk of the conquest of intelligence over imagination in modern work; one may speak of this school or that, and one may express a good-humoured, if slightly superior, astonishment at a particular work of art which does not seem to have been built up on what are known, rather curiously, as regular lines; but I honestly doubt whether the juxtaposition of modern artist and modern critic is adding very much to the art save from the standpoint of history. I may admire the composition and disparage the technique, or I may enjoy the colouring and fall foul of the subject; as critic, in fact, I have enormous powers—but the powers are probably uniquely immoral. 'A critic,' wrote Hazlitt, 'does nothing nowadays who does not try to torture the most obvious expression into a thousand meanings, and enter into a circuitous explanation of all that can be urged for or against its being in the best or worst style possible'—which is the last goal at which I should wish to aim. 'To elevate and surprise,' continues the same author, 'is the great rule for producing a dramatic or critical effect.' Here again it is necessary to say

that I have no thoughts of causing either surprise or elevation. Probably, however, I am not a critic at all. . . .

At the beginning of this year there was an exhibition of drawings in the Bruton Gallery by a hitherto unknown artist, and the critics thereupon made many curious and contradictory discoveries. That the artist had 'undeniable power' was very generally allowed. That he had accumulated horrors was as certain as that his ambition was of the 'wrong' kind. To one writer his work suggested a 'jeering, loose-limbed image of life,' whilst another informed the world that the exhibitor had learned more than a little from Japan. The artist, according to the last-mentioned, 'might become an impressive and penetrating realist, but we are not yet convinced that he has the gift of imagination even in those regions—neither of earth or hell, and certainly not of heaven—in which he loves to dwell—we might have said to wallow.' To others his work was a weird imitation of Beardsley and Goya and Rops and Hokusai and Greiner of Munich. To one he was brutal beyond measure, or even decency; to another he was merely fantastic and immature. To one he was in deadly earnest, to another he was a rather morbid poseur. 'His gaze,' wrote a critic in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'has assuredly not been upwards; . . . we hope that his fall may not be fatal. Falling let him embrace his mother Earth, and from her derive true strength and a measure of sanity.' The exhibition was described as a 'strange, uncomfortable show.'

I did not see that 'strange, uncomfortable show,' but it led incidentally to the penning of

a sentence which I wish to quote. 'Nobody,' wrote Miss Sketchley in the *Art Journal*, 'who saw the drawings in the Bruton Gallery can have been indifferent to them.' In view of what I have seen I can well believe those words. Whatever opinion might have been entertained of their merits or demerits, the drawings of this unknown artist could not be ignored. Who,

who had exhibited at the Royal Academy two years before, the South Kensington art-scholar and silver medallist—recommended to the school there by Sir William Richmond and Mr. Jackson, R.A.—a former designer of posters for Causton's at the lordly salary of five shillings a week, and the juvenile author of one, and the illustrator of two, books which had attracted the attention



FROM BEHIND THE VEIL.

then, was this man who, with a small collection of curiously baffling pictures, had suddenly sprung himself upon the mercies of artistic, or inartistic, London? He turned out to be a boy of nineteen, the son of a retired member of the Police Force, and certain of the newspapers claimed to have already discovered him. In point of fact, he had been interviewed some time before in the *Daily Chronicle*, and his name was Austin Osman Spare. He was the boy-artist

of more than a single connoisseur. I saw those two books, confessed to a bewilderment, recalled incidentally certain works of such widely different artists as Michael Angelo and William Blake, and set out to meet the artist. And when he came to my house I was irresistibly reminded of the Angel in Mr. Wells's *Wonderful Visit*. It needed no more than five minutes' conversation to make me understand that he possessed what, for want of a better description, I must call the



QUACKERY.

'odd' point of view; he looked on life, and on the components of life, not as men usually look



FROM A BOOK OF SATYRS.

on them, but from a standpoint peculiarly his own. He was obviously one of those rare creatures possessed, like Socrates, of a *dæmon*. Now a man with a *dæmon* is a phenomenon very much to my liking, particularly when he happens to be an artist, because in that case he will draw not so much what he sees as what he thinks; and my visitor with the wonderful hair and the face of a Watts' Knight—he has caricatured it hundreds of times in his work, sometimes, I suspect, for want of a model—had elected to entertain thoughts of the weirdest nature. I was not surprised to learn that he had long been enthusiastic over the mysteries of the East—Buddhism and its legends, Theosophy and its Mahatmas, Magic and its bevy of Enchanters, such as have fascinated the children of all generations and will fascinate them to the end of all time. He had, indeed, explored the strait passages which lead away from the Things of Men towards the Far Unknown. He had read and dreamed of the occult and the diabolic, and, looking into his deep eyes, I wondered whether I would cast out my commonplace philosophy and begin to believe in reincarnation. We talked, I remember, of tortures and fairies, of tapestries and blood and were-wolfs, of magic and book-plates and religion, and after that I followed him

round London for a 'sight of such works as he had sold.

The result of that journey was to assure me that the work was no less interesting than the boy. Both, to my mind, were startlingly new, and the suggestion of immaturity was by no means pronounced. I saw exactly what I had expected to see—a medley of Gargantuan figures in marvellously intricate compositions, wolf-men and devils, monstrous bird-men and soul-haunting trolls, fairies and magic and mist. There were headless bodies and bodiless heads, and over all the suggestion of such power as is rare in this age of correct and conventional work. For we are correct and conventional, even the most original of us, and a generation or two will have to pass before we have freed ourselves from the chain of superstition which is bound close about us from infancy. The work of this boy, however, seemed at first to be breaking most of the recognised canons, wherefore I rejoiced.



FROM A BOOK OF SATYRS.

My personal inclination for the grotesque received full measure of satisfaction, yet I did not somehow gather that these black and white

# THE SHADOW OF THE RAGGEDSTONE



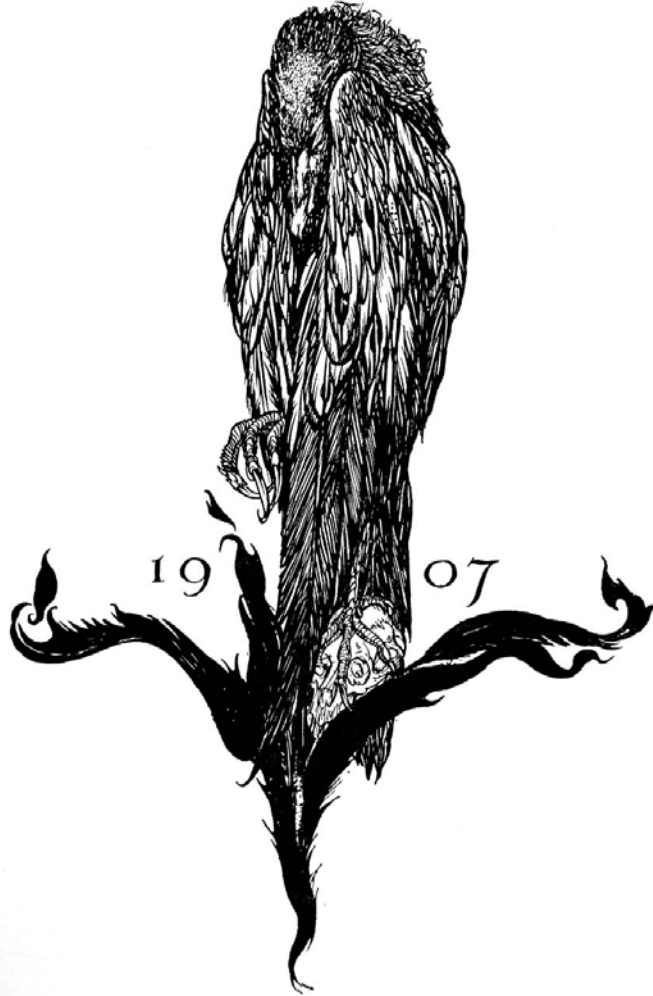
CHARLES · F · GRINDROD

COVER DESIGN.

drawings and water-colour sketches altogether suggested the grotesque. I saw

' . . . deerskin-vested satyrs, crowned with ivy-twist,  
advance,  
And put strange pity in their horned countenance,'

work. Some of it provided me with a series of horrible reflections which were only dispelled at sight of a caricature of Mr. Crooks, M.P.—a delightful sketch well worthy of publication—in Mr. Pickford Waller's collection, yet I was



FROM A BOOK OF SATYRS.

but a satyr need not be merely grotesque. The work, however, explained the artist, which was exactly its purpose, and as I did not pretend to understand the artist, I was not in the least disappointed to find that I understood little of his

never reminded of Wiertz. Some of it was uncouth, some almost gross, but I was never repulsed; I only enjoyed—and wondered.

Miss Sketchley in her article has truly said that the form of Austin Spare's art is a process,

not a conclusion, and that he has been occupied in reproducing the figures of his imagination

morbid shapes' to which the critic I have quoted draws attention. On the other hand, I do not



THE SPHINX.

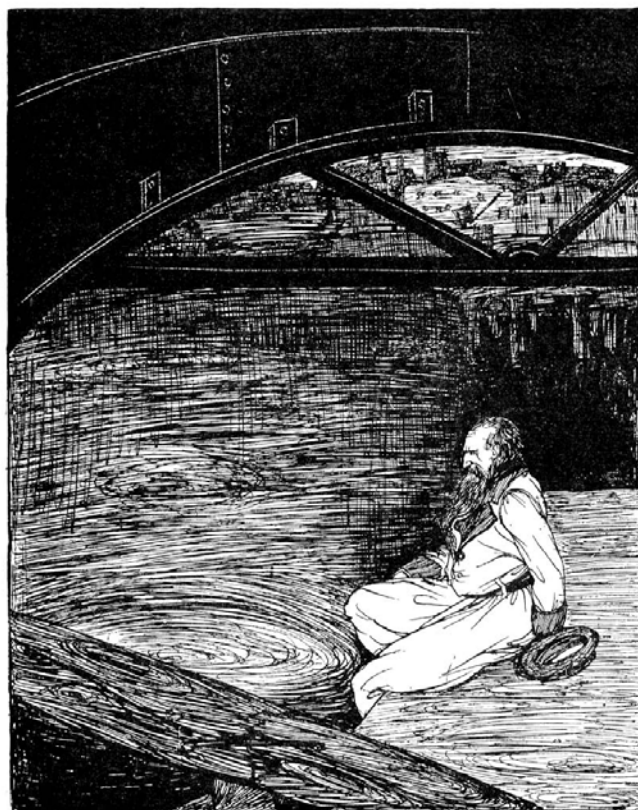
'almost without question or reason' seems patent. By consequence, his drawings for the most part are filled with the 'monstrous and

know that I am prepared to admit with Miss Sketchley the 'essential healthiness' of the boy's imaginative faculties. I do not say that



they are unhealthy—I merely cavil at the critic's choice of word. Here, indeed, one touches upon a question which has worried the critic for a century or more, and worried him, so far as I can see, to no purpose whatsoever. At all times health is difficult of explanation, but surely the healthy in art is altogether beyond definition. I dislike definitions at all times, perhaps because I

of a torturing disposition. Austin Spare's work is natural because it is himself, but why it should be dubbed either healthy or the reverse, I do not know. Personally—were I wishful to speak vaguely—I should call it 'unhealthy' merely because it produces no purely normal reflections, but in that case I should have to define normal, and that in its turn would lead to a wordy para-



FROM *BEHIND THE VEIL*.

am grossly unmathematical ; but when it comes to the question of health—or the other thing—in art, I am cold to the most impassioned reply. I am certain that the work is himself, which is all I demand of him, and if, as I think, it occasionally suggests a superabundance of cruelty, I, who hate cruelty, may be wroth, not with the work or the worker, but only with the Providence which has elected to produce minds

graph which might satisfy a good many unscientific people, but would probably mean very little indeed. Art and health, however, are not, or should not be, in the least inter-dependent. Wherefore it will be superfluous to say more than that this strange boy's work must be taken to be the expression of an unusual personality gifted with a talent not yet wholly in proportion to its inventive powers—one can hardly wonder at this



in view of the fact that he has had no more than a rudimentary and occasional training—but striving for no more than a faithful representation of its innermost self.

Here, perhaps, whilst on the question of health,



FROM A BOOK OF SATYRS.

it may be permissible to quote from Austin Spare's own published words:—

'Alas!' he writes, 'I am morbid,  
And have put a purple colour about my brow.  
All men seem eating and drinking the  
"Joy of the Round Feast," while I am  
Melancholy and silent, as though in a  
Gloomy wood, astray.  
Strange images of myself did I create,  
As I gazed into the seeming pit of others,  
Losing myself in the thoughtfulness  
Of my unreal self, as humanity saw me.  
But alas! on entering to the consciousness  
Of my real being, to find fostering  
"The all-prevailing woman,"  
And I strayed with her, into the path direct.  
"Hail! the Jewel in the Lotus."'

They are pregnant words for a boy of seventeen.

The two books please me least of all his work, but they might have been far better reproduced. Speaking of the first, *The Earth Inferno*, Mr. James Guthrie calls it 'an elemental and chaotic thing, full of significant art, and of still more significant conception.' These words bear out my own opinion. He has suffered, and he has seen, and his sufferings have strangely matured his mind. He is seer as well as artist, just as the great poets are also the great prophets.

There is an interesting preface, written by Mr. Guthrie, to the second of Austin Spare's publications, *A Book of Satyrs*. 'With the unflinching assurance of the optimist as to the ultimate,' he writes, '[Spare] treads with reforming energy where the effeminate and parsonic would whimper and weep helplessly. His is no gently advancing theory, but his satires (or satyrs, as he loves to call them) arrive as full-fledged and assertive dogma.' Indeed he sees the sores and the humbugs and the pettinesses of life with a looming, fearless eye, and this perhaps is what Miss Sketchley had in mind when she wrote that the boy's art was healthy. In this book he has attempted in some measure to do with his pencil that which Zola did with his pen, with the difference that for the Frenchman's reality he has substituted a mystical realism—to use a rather awkward oxymoron—and he has crowded into some dozen cartoons the basis of a surprisingly mature philosophy. I do not know that I have ever seen so fierce an exposition of the sores of life crowded into so small a space. There is mysticism, but there is also stark truth. No one could possibly look upon the drawings without a shock or a shudder. 'In his art,' continues Mr. Guthrie, 'Spare continually achieves the unexpected; his pattern is always original, his characteristic line is of fine nervous quality, his types are powerfully visualised. The very subtle irony of his temper is apparent in a hundred whimsical ways—in attitudes, gestures, expressions too delicate to be more than contributory to the whole impression. This appropriate irony especially fits Spare for satire, and it is here [in *The Book of Satyrs*] to be seen and felt, for it can neither be disregarded nor forgotten—which words it is well to be able to write of one satirist in our day of curbed enthusiasm and polite art.' For my own part, I could at once recognise a draw-

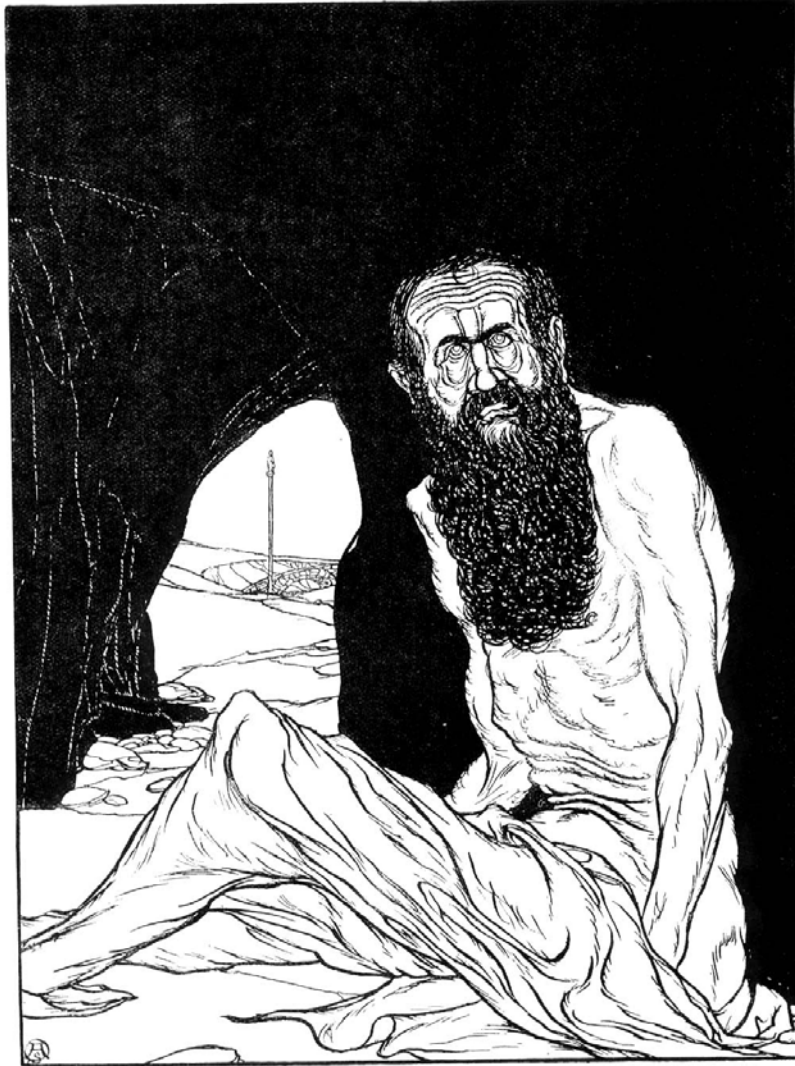


BOOK-PLATE.

ing of Spare's, and that in its way is a test of a personality.

I have seen many hundreds of studies which

ship is often weak. My friend Desmond Coke possesses a water-colour study entitled *The Sacrifice*, painted at the age of fifteen—it called forth no



TITHONUS.

this boy has made, and I can say with truth that I have never seen such magnificent composition. Even his earliest work shows the same brilliant invention although the actual workman-

small eulogy from Watts himself—which to my mind is almost a marvel of artistic arrangement. The draughtsmanship is poor and halting, but there is in it the groundwork for a great picture,

and great pictures are surprisingly few in number.

His best work is undoubtedly that in the



FROM A BOOK OF SATYRS.

Chinese black and white which were Beardsley's most successful media, yet in the few water-colours which I saw in Mr. Pickford Waller's collection there is a wealth of colour, harsh, flaring colour, as might frighten the more timid and amaze the student, but which, like the drawings, cannot be ignored. In particular there are three unnamed pictures presumably relating to Eastern Magic which, in point alike of composition and colour, compare favourably with the far more highly finished work of some of the recognised masters. There is indeed a suggestion of that feast of colour which Brangwyn—himself, by the way, to be numbered amongst Spare's admirers—almost alone amongst our native painters can so successfully provide. Nor

indeed has there been the smallest sign of a waning imagination. I do not think that in the years to come Austin Spare will be numbered amongst those who have degenerated into the correct painters beloved by the average philistine, nor do I suppose that he will ever feel inclined to paint that which the many might call beautiful. He will never become popular, unless circumstances impel him to undertake hackwork wherein his soul does not make its impression, but if his progress be unretarded, he will have to be numbered amongst the elect. It were useless to say that he has still much to learn, and it were as useless to point out that his knowledge of anatomy, while much more than rudimentary, might scandalise the professors of that science, and I should be harking back to my trade of fiction were I to suggest that he had yet to become immured to that modicum of discipline which is necessary in every branch of art. There is indeed the germ of a discipline already apparent in his more finished work.

At the moment he is illustrating a book of



FROM A BOOK OF SATYRS.

poems by C. F. Grindrod and a work of his own, steadfastly experimenting in tempora, and he is ambitious to paint a few portraits which shall be 'symbols of the persons,' in which connection I

may mention that he has done a caricature of myself, which, whilst a 'speaking' likeness, is undoubtedly the ugliest thing on God's earth.

[NOTE.—The drawings from *A Book of Satyrs*, and likewise that entitled 'Quackery,' are reproduced by courtesy of

Mr. Spare himself. 'The Sphinx,' 'Tithonus,' and also the illustrations from *Behind the Veil*, are printed by permission of Mr. David Nutt; while the right to include the cover-design of *The Shadow of the Raggedstone* has been kindly granted by Mr. Elkin Mathews, publisher of the said work. The book-plate is given by courtesy of its owner, Mr. Pickford Waller.]



BOOK-PLATE.