

Review: The Dark Lord

Written by Ethan Doyle White

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Review: Levenda, Peter. *The Dark Lord: H.P. Lovecraft, Kenneth Grant, and the Typhonian Tradition in Magic*. Ibis Press, 2013. \$38.31 (CAD)

In recent decades, tome after tome has appeared discussing, often in great detail, various aspects pertaining to the life and thought of the infamous English occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). Less attention has been given to the new religious movement that he founded, Thelema, and to the ways in which the Thelemite community has grown and diverged in the years following Crowley’s death. In particular, little research has been undertaken on the life and work of Kenneth Grant (1924–2011), who briefly served as Crowley’s personal assistant and later went on to found his own occult order, the Typhonian Ordo Templi Orientis. Through this and his many publications, Grant propagated Typhonianism, a denomination of Thelema through which he introduced new, unorthodox concepts, often borrowed from other religious traditions as well as from the fictional writings of American horror writer H.P. Lovecraft (1890–1937), into Thelema. Lovecraft’s oeuvre, which has been posthumously termed the “Cthulhu Mythos,” asserts that there is a series of powerful extraterrestrial entities in the universe, termed the “Old Ones,” one of which is the eponymous Cthulhu. In this fictional universe, knowledge of these dark entities has been passed down through an ancient tome, the *Necronomicon*, written by the “Mad Arab,” Abdul Alhazred.

While various occultists—most notably the famed comic book writer Alan Moore—have publicly discussed Grant and his Typhonian current, only two academics have published research on it: Henrik Bogdan, who put together a bibliography of his publications, and the late Dave Evans, who communicated with Grant as part of his doctoral thesis on British magic post-1947. While it must be stressed that the work under review here, Peter Levenda’s *The Dark Lord*, is not a work of academic scholarship, it is the first book-length study of this enigmatic figure. In it, Levenda tries “to understand how the *Necronomicon Gnosis* fits in with the Thelemic Current, and how both of these together inform Grant’s Typhonian hypothesis” (Levenda 2013, 22).

Levenda is an American author who has written prolifically on the subject of Western esotericism and the occult. He is known largely for his alleged involvement in the Simon Necron

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omicon

(1977) and for his advocacy of a range of fringe conspiracy theories regarding the relationship between Nazism and the occult. Although

The Dark World

is a work that is clearly aimed at an audience of practising occultists, rather than scholars of Pagan studies or the study of Western esotericism, I must admit that, as an etic scholar of occult new religious movements, I inevitably perceive this work through an academic lens. It must therefore be borne in mind that I am not a member of the book's intended audience.

Although not a member of the Typhonian Order, Levenda fundamentally believes that Grant was correct in many of his assertions about the nature of the universe. He agrees with Grant that both Crowley and Lovecraft had been in contact with the same "spiritual material" (Levenda 2013, 129) that inspired their writings. As evidence, he highlights similarities between one of Crowley's Holy Books of Thelema, *Liber Liberi vel Lapidus Lazuli*, which Crowley claimed to have received from a preternatural source in 1907, and Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulhu," which was written in 1926 but which was partly set in 1907 (97–98). As Levenda puts it, "Either Lovecraft was in some kind of telepathic communication with Crowley, or both were in telepathic communication with ... Something Else" (103). Aside from the fact that this conclusion relies entirely on the genuine existence of the unproven power of telepathy, it also neglects a far more obvious and plausible explanation: that both works drew on older, common themes in literature, to which both Crowley and Lovecraft would no doubt have been exposed. However, although Levenda is clearly very sympathetic to Grant's beliefs, it would be wrong to see this book as simply a Typhonian apologetic, for on at least one occasion the author does see fit to express his disagreement with Grant (i.e., p. 148).

Levenda's first chapter muses on the idea of aeons, which play a central role in the Thelemite religious cosmology. In it, Levenda analyzes Crowley's own thoughts on the subject alongside those of other Thelemites. Then he turns further afield, taking a comparative mythological approach and examining the idea of aeons within Gnosticism, Ancient Egyptian religion, and Hinduism. In the second chapter, Levenda examines the relationship between magic and organised cult, Crowley's own conception of deity, and the theme of death and rebirth in Sumerian mythology, Egyptian mythology, and Siberian shamanism, placing a particular focus on the Egyptian deity Set. In chapter three, Levenda discusses Grant's interest in non-Western magico-religious movements such as Yezidism, Afro-Caribbean cults, and Tantra, while in the ensuing chapter he looks more closely at Lovecraft's influence on Grant and discusses the theology of the Cthulhu Mythos. The fifth chapter delves into Grant's views on sexuality in magic, looking not only at Grant's understandings of Tantra but also at Gnostic understandings of sexuality. The sixth then discusses Grant's ideas regarding the Mauve Zone, an invisible, secret world in which he believed that preternatural entities could be contacted, as well as his belief that through the use of tantra and Kabbalism, occultists could reach this realm. In the final

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chapter, Levenda emphasizes the importance of Set, the titular “Dark Lord,” whom he describes as a rapaciously sexual, stellar entity whom Lovecraft understood to be Cthulhu. He sees this figure as being behind not only Grant’s Typhonian tradition, but also humanity at large.

As should be apparent from this brief synopsis, there is much meandering and musing throughout *The Dark Lord*, making it difficult to decipher precisely what Levenda is arguing in any given chapter. In particular, it is not always clear when Levenda is describing one of Grant’s theories and when he is expounding one of his own, something that would have been helped if Levenda had given over more space to direct quotations from Grant’s own publications. Similarly, the referencing is fairly sparse, with some pages being well-referenced and others not being referenced at all, in what seems a somewhat haphazard manner.

From an academic perspective, there are many statements that I find deeply problematic; to take one example, Levenda asserts that “religion is nothing more than the refuge of failed magicians” (Levenda 2013, 15). While I may be missing the point of this statement (perhaps it is meant to be entirely tongue-in-cheek), from the perspective of the academic field of religious studies, it is simply erroneous. Shortly after this comment comes the assertion that demonic possession is “a fact” and that exorcism really works (15–16). Demonic possession may indeed be part of Levenda’s own personal beliefs regarding the preternatural, just as it is an element in many different magico-religious traditions across the world, but that does not make the genuine existence of demonic possession an objective fact. Later, Levenda makes the claim that “the position of post-modernism [is] that each culture is unique and owes nothing to other cultures” (142), something that greatly misinterprets the complex and multivocal phenomenon that is post-modernism.

Levenda includes a brief appendix on the magical associations of the kalas, or vaginal secretions, as well as a handy glossary for those who may be unfamiliar with many of the terms that appear in this tome. His work is accompanied by a preface authored by Levenda’s friend, the Thelemite writer James Wasserman, who lauds the author as “one of the best researchers into the world’s religions on the literary scene today” (Levenda 2013, 10). Ibis Press has done a laudable job in putting the book together, appropriately emblazoning the dust jacket with a painting by the famed Australian occult artist Rosaleen Norton, entitled

The Master

. Although I do take issue with many of Levenda’s assertions,

The Dark Lord

is entertainingly written, and its author is clearly a talented writer who has a way with words. It will clearly be of interest to Thelemites and other practising occultists and will undoubtedly be of

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value to scholars as a primary source on the reception of Grant's oeuvre within the occult community. Most importantly for this reviewer, however, I hope that it will encourage further academically-oriented scholarship on the subject of Grant and Typhonian Thelema.