

A Dark Muse: A History of the Occult, by Gary Lachman. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. 384 pp. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN 1-56025-656-7.

This is a book about the "sensitive minority"—those writers and poets since the time of the Enlightenment who, by their unwillingness or their inability to resonate with a world progressively drained of all non-utilitarian worth and meaning, helped to take ancient spiritual disciplines and beliefs and out of them invent "the occult" in the modern sense of the word. Before the Enlightenment, according to author Gary Lachman, these ideas and practices were widely known and respected, even if their pursuit was demanding and thus largely reserved to the elite. After the Enlightenment, these various ancient disciplines gradually went underground and served as an "alternative narrative to human existence." *A Dark Muse* is a survey of the lives and work of those men—and some women—who, as true magicians, called the occult into being through the power of the written word.

As hinted in the title, one walks away from this book with the feeling that the powers thus summoned were not always very benign. Indeed, that they were rarely so. Poverty, physical and mental illness, unrequited love, public humiliation, violence and assorted other misfortunes seem to be very well represented in the literary lives Lachman chooses to highlight, leaving one with the impression that the adoption of a metaphysical worldview reveals, in the end, a "terrifying terrain." It is unclear whether this terrain is inherent in the nature of the occult itself or whether it is due to the occult worldview being forced to manifest itself in the interstices of a dismissive and sometimes even hostile socio-cultural structure that validates only that which is material and rational (narrowly defined).

Lachman organizes his book into two parts, the first featuring brief biographies of some of the key characters from five different eras in the development of the modern occult. The second part consists of short excerpts from some of their writings. While the division of the material into five eras gives the general impression that the modern occult worldview has grown and developed over the centuries, at least in part thanks to the literary embodiment these authors gave to it, this idea is not very fully developed. In its absence, the book reads like a series of more or less interesting vignettes about some colorful historical figures, the connective tissue tying them all together being left a bit too much to the industry and insight of the reader. For this reader, the "take-away thoughts" are these:

Enlightenment occultists such as the notorious Cagliostro and Adam Weishaupt, says Lachman, had as their chief intent—however imperfectly it was manifested—to harness universal forces in order to create a social revolution in which all people would be free and toleration would be the guiding principle. Their Romantic Era heirs, by contrast, withdrew from the world of politics to pursue human advancement in more interior ways—a move that on the one hand produced the clearest expression of the union of the artist and the magician, but on the other hand was a "failed experiment in the history of [W]estern consciousness," leading as it did to a general rejection of the mundane world in favor of the (search for) magical realms. As Lachman says, "Too much reality and life

becomes dull, pointless and insipid; too much imagination, and we become Brother Serapion, living in a solipsistic dream world. But when the combination is "just right"— . . . then we get 'magic'" (p. 82). As Lachman makes clear, if the Romantics were in any wise successful students of the magical arts, it was in their writings more often than in their actual lives. Satanic occultism, which thrived as an undercurrent of the Romantic era, also turned inward, but with a "fascination with evil as a means of stimulating a flagging consciousness" (p. 131). The evil that was courted, however, was neither political nor personal rebellion so much as an appeal to human weaknesses—anurturing of "man's Satanic weakness" (p. 132) and an exaltation of debauchery and "disordering of the senses" (p. 136) in the name of enlarging the human spirit.

By the turn of the century, the occult quest was being given a more optimistic bent with the influx of ideas from eastern philosophies and religions. While much of the social ferment generated by these new ideas existed in the cultural fringe, there were nevertheless some very intelligent and influential people, such as Henri Bergson and William James, who were drawn to the new esotericism. Probably the single most influential character was Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the mother of theosophy, which left its stamp not only on fin-de-siecle esotericism but on modern-day New Age thought as well. Although starting out as just another expression of popular occultism, theosophy under Blavatsky's direction introduced and fleshed out a number of innovative ideas that continue to resonate with 21st-century spiritual seekers. "Along with ideas of hidden masters, reincarnation and cosmic evolution," writes Lachman, "what theosophy brought to occultism was the belief that it and science were not enemies, but complementary approaches to uncovering the secrets of the universe" (p. 155). The occult, in this worldview, came to be seen not as a system distinct from and opposed to science and not as "hocus-pocus," but as, itself, a true science (p. 159).

For all its promise, however, the theosophically inspired occultism that arose at the turn of the 20th century did not deliver the rose garden of human peace and progress that it promoted. In various times and places, the wedding of the new esotericism with a (at least nominally) scientific approach produced (or justified) a kind of "spiritually correct" racism (p. 160), a marked disinterest in equal rights and other social justice causes (p. 184ff), a growing belief that an apocalyptic end was imminent (p. 215), and the dark assertion that there exists a race of metaphysical beings whose ultimate destiny is to arise and supplant the human race (p. 198ff, 205).

In the 21st century, writes Lachman, the occult is very much alive, having subtly influenced or been forthrightly adopted as a contemporary "mythology" by artists and writers seeking a new way of communicating meaning in the face of the debasement of more traditional forms of communication with the advent of the mass media: radio and television (p. 226–228).

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