

Online Reviews

Ziegler, Robert. *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. 240. ISBN: 978-0-230-29308-3

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One of the most notable characteristics of late nineteenth-century French culture was its preoccupation with religious matters, both orthodox and heterodox. This preoccupation often took a polarized form, manifesting itself as equally militant strains of materialism and spiritualism; exponents of both saw themselves as participants in a pitched battle on which the very fate of civilization depended. Among historians, the tendency was long to take the secular side more seriously, writing off the proponents of religion as either fanatical reactionaries or—particularly when their belief took a heterodox form—hapless “fashion victims.” Over the last two decades, in contrast, historians such as Alex Owen, Corinna Treitel, and David Allen Harvey have redressed the balance. This now quite considerable body of scholarly work has revealed that careful study of the fin-de-siècle’s complex religious landscape can provide us with a key to understanding the profound ways in which conceptions of subjectivity transformed in the face of the myriad social, cultural, technological, and political developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While it does not make reference to recent historical literature on the topic—a shortcoming to which I will return at the end of the review—Robert Ziegler’s *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France* nevertheless contributes to this larger scholarly project. Ziegler’s approach is founded in literary criticism rather than cultural history, and centers on the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans, with some additional discussion of texts by writers who shared the fin-de-siècle novelist’s preoccupations. Ziegler justifies this strategy by asserting that Huysmans’s career not only “followed the trajectory of fin-de-siècle occultism,” but did so “more than any other public figure” (2). In his conclusion, Ziegler lays out that trajectory in the following terms: “if only gradually, fin-de-siècle literature of the mystical and occult moved from the private experience of the subject to the shared ventures of a community” (207). In Huysmans’s case, which Ziegler charts across close readings of several key texts, the evolution was from a self-regarding interest in magic and Satanism to a more open-hearted embrace of the spiritual power of suffering and compassion.

Ziegler develops his argument in five chapters that take as their points of departure five stages in Huysmans’s spiritual journey. The first, “The Satanist,” investigates the trope of Devil worship as it appeared in a number of fin-de-siècle texts, including Huysmans’s famous novel *Là Bas* and lesser-known works by Jules Bois and Stanislas de Guaita. The second, “The Hoaxer,” moves from ideas to practice—or, at least, the illusion of practice—by providing a capsule account of Palladism, a fictional Satano-Masonic cult imagined by the anti-clerical writer Léo Taxil, who succeeded in persuading many ecclesiastical authorities, and for a time Huysmans himself, of its reality. Chapter three, “The Magus,” turns to Joséphin Péladan, whose shift from radical inwardness to engagement with the world mirrors the journey Huysmans made in roughly the same period. Moving a bit closer to the Catholic tradition, the very long fourth chapter investigates the ideas and influence of the visionary defrocked priest Eugène Vintras and his successor, Joseph-Antoine Boullan, Huysmans’s friend and primary informant about the mysteries and practices of Satanism. While many accused Vintras and Boullan of Devil worship, Ziegler chooses to leave such questions aside, instead concentrating his attention on the

Vintrasian principle of “Mystic Substitution,” which viewed individual suffering as a means of redeeming all humanity from sin. Through several close readings, Ziegler describes the important role this mystical conception of suffering played in the work of Huysmans—especially in *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam*—and in that of such writers as Léon Bloy and Ernest Hello. The fifth chapter is an extended reading of the novel *Les Foules de Lourdes*, in which “Huysmans illustrates the reconciliation of supernaturalism and social action” (194), thus completing his evolution from self-absorbed diabolist to compassionate believer deeply concerned with the plight of others.

The account of the broader development of “fin-de-siècle supernaturalism” that Ziegler derives from Huysmans’s example has the potential to be useful. By making heterodoxy and orthodoxy points on a continuum, he shows how figures like Huysmans can help us see the underlying connections between such practices as ritual magic on the one hand, and Marian devotion on the other. Unfortunately, this insight carries less weight than it could, because Ziegler pays such limited attention to material beyond the specific texts he has chosen for close reading. The bibliography is short, and Ziegler does not address the vast scholarly literature that has emerged on this topic over the last twenty years. In the chapter on Taxil and Palladism, for example, it is surprising to see no mention of Michel Jarrige’s important study of fin-de-siècle anti-Masonry, which would have helped Ziegler a great deal in fleshing out his rather schematic analysis of the political and religious context of Taxil’s hoax. In the first and third chapters, Ziegler would have benefited considerably from Christophe Beaufiles’s magisterial *Joséphin Péladan, essai sur une maladie du lyrisme*, to say nothing of the numerous, scrupulously documented articles on related topics published in the journal *Politica Hermetica*. These sources, like the studies mentioned at the beginning of the review, could have helped Ziegler make a better case for the general applicability of the move from interiority to exteriority he sees in his chosen texts. As it stands, however, his equation of Huysmans in particular to “the trajectory of fin-de-siècle occultism” in general—and therefore to the broad ambit of this book’s title—rests more on unsubstantiated assertion than on the evidence itself.

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