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Modernism and the Occult. By John Bramble. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. xviii + 178 pages. \$90.00 cloth; ebook available.

The *Modernism and . . .* series, under the editorship of Roger Griffin, offers compact monographs on a particular topic, explored in its relation to Modernism, intended for a graduate student and scholarly audience. In this volume emeritus scholar and classicist John Bramble explores Modernism's interests in magic, vitalism, occultism and New Age, eastern spirituality and Zen, framed by concepts such as empire, imperialism, and exoticism.

The author considers the occult "irregular/heterodox knowledge" and a "one-time bedfellow" of both religion and reason; further, in his conclusion, as "cousin" of science and technology. His aim is to "foreground European high empire" in this study, as it has apparently left an "indelible transcultural mark . . . on the 'Western occult'" (1). Central to this book—indeed to the author's entire view of the Western occult as directly related to high empire—are ideas of Bernard Smith, an Australian art historian. Briefly summarized, Modernism, in developing its critical reaction to modernity, turned to orientalism, exoticism, primitivism, and the occult, and from there appropriated tropes, practices, religions, and worldviews perceived as antithetical or opposed to modernity (10–12; original source is Smith's *Modernism and Post-Modernism, a Neo-Colonial Viewpoint*, 1992). Bramble treats this insight as gospel and dedicates the entire monograph to tracing and elaborating upon it. Locating the exotic-occult in, or deriving from, the exotic East, this study is therefore concerned with the impact on Modernism of selected Eastern religions and philosophies, rather than with occultism.

The first chapter expounds upon Smith's theories and concepts, including myths, Modernism, imperialism and "imperial Gothic," while the second touches upon the development of a modernist unconscious

and ideas of the self, soul, and consciousness. Chapter 3 traces the bipolar theme of destruction and creation, for instance in Decadent movements, Futurism, and Dada. The period around the Second World War and racial theories are for a large part the subject of the fourth chapter; and Zen, particularly in the U.S., of the fifth. Chapter 6 is a brief conclusion.

Acclaimed on its back flap as both brilliant and revelatory, the book is unfortunately neither. While the author raises some interesting questions regarding the relationship between imperialism and occultism, and the modernist attraction to the occult as exotic, the work nevertheless falls short of delivering on its promise. For all that it is nominally about occultism (in relation to Modernism), the author does not quite provide a definition of which kind of occultism is—or which occultisms are—actually meant. Bramble's point that Modernism turned to occultism in confronting the condition of modernity is very true, but the study fails to actually and even correctly locate, describe, and analyze this relation and its nature. Recent scholars who have been much more successful in this regard include Leigh Wilson (*Modernism and Magic*, 2013); Corinna Treitel (*A Science for the Soul*, 2004); or Mark S. Morrisson (*Modern Alchemy*, 2007), to name just a few.

Bramble consistently (and mistakenly) refers to occult "sects" and to "sectarian" orders or behavior; it remains unclear whether occultism as such should then be understood as a sect, or a collection of sects. Indeed, his complete disinterest in his subject shows clearly in that no academic work on the intellectual history of Western esotericism and occultism is even referred to. Bramble's excellence in classicism aside—a discipline only tangentially related to either Modernism or occultism—it is unfortunate that the series editor did not find a scholar better versed in the history of occultism and Western esotericism for this volume.

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