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Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic, and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France*. Basingstoke (UK) and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. vi + 229 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-230-29038-3.

Review by David Harvey, New College of Florida.

The first point to be made regarding this book, the fifth by the author on the literature of late nineteenth-century France, is that its title is rather more expansive than its actual contents. In this book, Ziegler surveys the literary and philosophical journey of the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans over the final two decades of his life and career, with an occasional excursus on other French *littérateurs* who have dealt with related themes, such as the aspiring magician Joséphin Péladan and the integralist Catholic Léon Bloy. Ziegler announces the purpose of the work in his introduction, writing, “Following J.-K. Huysmans in his migration through the rarefied, sometimes infernal precincts of fin de siècle supernaturalism, this volume begins by touring the devil’s lair, then visits the austere chamber of the Magus, and finally climbs to the celestial plane of miracles and mysticism” (p. 12). Consequently, Ziegler passes quickly over the novelist’s earlier, Naturalist-inspired works, *A rebours* (1884) and *En rade* (1887), and devotes the bulk of his text to Huysmans’s journey from black magic and the occult (*Là-bas*, 1891), through his conversion to an uncompromisingly antimodern form of Catholicism (*Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* [1901]; and *Les foules de Lourdes* [1906]).

The book is divided into five chapters of uneven length. Three of these are centered upon discussions of one of Huysmans’s novels (*Là-bas*, *Sainte Lydwine*, and *Les foules de Lourdes*), while the other two are focused upon Léo Taxil’s Palladium hoax (about which more will be said below) and Joséphin Péladan’s writings on magic. From the perspective of the historian, the book is refreshingly free from the jargon of literary theory and instead takes a historical approach, seeking to contextualize these works within the broader cultural milieu in which they were produced.

Ziegler is at his strongest and most convincing when he hews most closely to Huysmans’s texts. He persuasively argues that Huysmans’s rejection of modern society and of Positivist materialism led him first to seek evidence of the supernatural in the lively occult subculture of the fin de siècle, and subsequently to embrace forms of Catholicism which found meaning in the sufferings of everyday existence, portraying these as forming penitence for the sins of humanity and hastening the second coming of Christ and the dawn of a new golden age, that of the Holy Spirit or Paraclete. Ziegler connects this spiritual quest to Huysmans’s ever growing disenchantment with modernity and his experience of personal tragedy (the descent of his mistress, Anna Meunier, into madness, and the advance of the cancer that would claim the author’s life in 1907). He has interesting observations to make regarding the contradictory views of Huysmans and other integralist Catholics regarding gender and the role and status of women, who appear alternately as corrupting influences, suffering victims, and mediums for communication with the divine and the supernatural. In Huysmans’s final act, Ziegler deduces a shift in the sensibilities of the mystical brotherhood of fin-de-siècle Catholicism, away from apocalyptic fantasies, meditations upon decadence, and longing for transcendence, toward Catholic social action in this world, with the aims of healing the sick and regenerating a deeply divided society.

While Huysmans's spiritual quest remains the leitmotiv of the book, Ziegler also introduces the reader to a number of other colorful characters who populated the esoteric literary subculture of fin-de-siècle France. These figures include the journalist turned hoaxer Léo Taxil (Gabriel Jogand-Pagès), the would-be Rosicrucian magus and prophet without a flock Joséphin Péladan, the Catholic hagiographer Ernest Hello, and, perhaps most importantly, the heretical preachers Eugène Vintras and Joseph Boullan, the latter of whom served as the model for Dr. Johannes in *Là-bas* and as Huysmans's primary informant on black magic. For the most part, these figures are examined primarily as influences on Huysmans, rather than studied in their own right, and the chronological flow of Ziegler's book follows the itinerary of Huysmans's intellectual quest, so that Vintras and Hello, who wrote earlier in the century, appear toward the end of the text.

As a study of the themes of black magic and religious mysticism in the novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans, Ziegler's book has considerable merits. As a broader examination of the themes of "Satanism, magic, and mysticism in fin de siècle France," as announced by its title, however, the book has serious flaws. First and foremost among these is the book's narrow evidentiary base. There is now a substantial body of secondary scholarly literature on various strands of esotericism in nineteenth-century France, including John Warne Monroe's *Laboratories of Faith*, Lynn Sharp's *Secular Spirituality*, M. Brady Brower's *Unruly Spirits*, and my own *Beyond Enlightenment*.^[1] The late nineteenth-century revival of popular Catholicism and Marian devotional cults has also been extensively studied, notably in two recent works on the shrine at Lourdes, the subject of Huysmans's final novel: Ruth Harris's *Lourdes* and Suzanne Kaufmann's *Consuming Visions*.^[2] Ziegler appears entirely unaware of the existence of this recent secondary literature, and the few secondary sources he cites are rather dated and of questionable reliability. Even classic works on the topic, such as Thomas Kselman's *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* are absent from his bibliography.^[3]

In a few cases, this neglect even extends to relevant primary sources. Although Ziegler devotes an entire chapter to Léo Taxil's "Palladium hoax," an alleged global Satanic-Masonic conspiracy supposedly based out of Charleston, South Carolina, which fooled much of the French Catholic hierarchy during the 1890s, it is not clear whether he actually read Taxil's magnum opus, *Le diable au XIXe siècle*, which does not appear in the notes or bibliography.^[4] Instead, his account of Taxil's hoax is based on dated secondary sources, such as Arthur Waite's *Devil Worship in France* (1896) and Eugen Weber's *Satan Franc-Maçon* (1964), and on one shorter work by Taxil, *Les soeurs maçonnes* (1895).^[5] This is not to say that Ziegler's portrait of Taxil and Palladism is false—on the contrary, it is generally correct—but rather that it is largely derivative and lacking the nuance of his discussions of Huysmans's novels.

Ziegler's focus throughout on Huysmans's oeuvre and intellectual and spiritual development provides a connecting thread to his study, but also limits the book's ability to shed light on its broader topic. I would argue that this is because Huysmans is a poor guide to the occult subcultures of the fin de siècle. The novelist neither belonged to nor had any significant contact with any of the many esoteric societies of the age, and drew his information on these topics from unreliable sources. For example, historians have found no examples of the actual practice of "black masses" of the sort that provided the most memorable scene from *Là-bas*, and while charges of Satanism were freely hurled by rival esoteric groups at one another (and even more widely cast about by the Catholic hierarchy against occultists of all stripes, as well as against Freemasons, Jews, and other bugbears), there were few, if any, avowed Satanists in turn-of-the-century France.

Huysmans seems to have been entirely taken in by the abbé Boullan, an apostate priest who had been charged with fraud, infanticide, and sexual misconduct, and by Boullan's wild tales of occult feuds and evil spells capable of committing murder at several hundred miles' distance. Consequently, the leaders of the Martinist Order, Stanislas de Guaita and Gérard Encausse (alias Papus), appear primarily through the hostile prism of Boullan, whom Huysmans believed they were guilty of executing by magic

bewitchment. On the contrary, Spiritism and Theosophy, the two largest and most influential esoteric movements of the later nineteenth century, do not appear at all in Ziegler's work. Because Huysmans is anything but representative of fin-de-siècle French esotericism, Ziegler's conclusions—for example, his statement that “fin de siècle supernaturalism rejected an art of hypersubjectivity, abandoning the Decadent *culte du moi* in favor of cooperative effort and self-sacrifice” (p. 207)—are not easily generalizable beyond the scope of his study.

The book also contains a number of perplexing minor errors. The prominent English occultist Arthur Edward Waite (a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the designer of a popular Tarot deck) is misidentified as “Alfred Waite” (pp. 15-16, 55-58, and throughout). Ziegler mixes up his Tarot trumps (his discussion of “The Fool”—to which he attributes sufficient importance to devote a section to it—is actually a description of an entirely different card, “The Magician”) and lists their number as twenty-four, rather than twenty-two (pp. 83-84, 199). He suggests a rather closer affiliation between the mid-century occultist writers Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Eliphas Levi and the subsequent foundation of esoteric orders (the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Ordre Martiniste, respectively) than was in fact the case (p. 80). On several occasions, Ziegler presents General Georges Boulanger as strongly anti-monarchist (pp. 75, 147). While such may have been Boulanger's public persona, William Irvine has demonstrated that much of the financial support for Boulangism came from the monarchist right.^[6] While one could argue that these criticisms are nit-picking and are not germane to Ziegler's main arguments, such inattention to detail hardly inspires confidence in the reader.

As was noted above, Robert Ziegler is a prolific scholar of fin-de-siècle French literature, having published five books in just over a decade. He demonstrates a deep knowledge of the life and work of Joris-Karl Huysmans and of the Decadent movement of which he formed a part, and scholars interested in these topics will find much of value in this book. In the opinion of this reviewer, however, he would have been better advised to proceed more deliberately, to read more widely, and to check his facts more scrupulously.

NOTES

[1] John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008); Lynn L. Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006); M. Brady Brower, *Unruly Spirits: The Science of Psychic Phenomena in Modern France* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005).

[2] Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin, 2000); Suzanne K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[3] Thomas A. Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies in Modern France* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

[4] “Docteur Bataille”(pseudonym of Léo Taxil), *Le diable au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Delhomme et Briguet, 1895). For a summary of the Palladium affair, see David Allen Harvey, “Lucifer in the City of Light: The Palladium Hoax and ‘Diabolical Causality’ in Fin de Siècle France,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1/2(Winter 2006): 177-206.

[5] Arthur Waite, *Devil Worship in France* (London: G. Redway, 1896); Eugen Weber, *Satan Franc-Maçon: La Mystification de Léo Taxil* (Paris: Collection Archives, 1964); and Léo Taxil, *Les soeurs maçonnes* (Paris: Letouzy et Ane, 1895).

[6] William D. Irvine, *The Boulanger Affair Reconsidered: Royalism, Boulangism, and the Origins of the Radical Right in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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