A Dark Muse: A History of the Occult
by Gary Lachman

A Tour-De-Force Of Occultism's Impact On Literature

The occult was a crucial influence on the Renaissance, and it obsessed the popular thinkers of the day. But with the Age of Reason, occultism was sidelined; only charlatans found any use for it. Occult ideas did not disappear, however, but rather went underground. It developed into a fruitful source of inspiration for many important artists. Works of brilliance, sometimes even of genius, were produced under its influence. In A Dark Muse, Lachman discusses the Enlightenment obsession with occult politics, the Romantic explosion, the futuristic occultism of the fin de siècle, and the deep occult roots of the modernist movement. Some of the writers and thinkers featured in this hidden history of western thought and sensibility are Emanuel Swedenborg, Charles Baudelaire, J. K. Huysmans, August Strindberg, William Blake, Goethe, Madame Blavatsky, H. G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, and Malcolm Lowry.

My Personal Review:
A Dark Muse: A History of the Occult, published by Thunder''s Mouth Press, by musician and author Gary Lachman is a fascinating history of the central figures who make up the occult movement beginning from the time of the Enlightenment to the modern day. The book especially focuses on artists, poets, and writers who played a significant part in the development of occult ideas or who were otherwise influenced by the occult and occult notions. However, the book also features figures who could be described as belonging to the occult proper. Gary Lachman was a musician who is perhaps best known as one of the founders of the group Blondie. More recently, Lachman has written extensively on occult and esoteric topics, including Ouspensky, consciousness, and the Sixties from a mystical perspective - the fruit of years of occult research. In many respects, Lachman''s writings are similar to those of Colin Wilson, who wrote extensively on existentialism and the occult from an anti-materialist perspective.
In the introduction to this book, Lachman begins by defining the occult as meaning "hidden, secret, esoteric, and unknown". He notes that in the popular mind the occult is frequently associated with such strange things as Satanism, witchcraft, tabloid horoscopes, and UFOs. While it is true that these can all be considered as part of the occult, the occult itself is more elusive. Lachman also relates the occult to various ancient beliefs, mystery cults, the Kabbalah, and the Gnostic heresy. In terms of Satanism, Lachman provides evidence of ritual murder in an event which occurred in England. Lachman also notes how the occult has arisen largely in opposition to various aspects of the Enlightenment, including an excessive emphasis on "Reason", a fundamentalist form of materialism, and the idolatry of science in "scientism". Lachman emphasizes that the occult is today understood largely as "rejected knowledge".

Following this, Lachman turns to the role of the occult during the Enlightenment period. He begins by noting the paradox of defining this period as "The Occult Enlightenment", but maintains the prevalence of occult ideas throughout the Enlightenment. Many of these ideas and movements grew in opposition to both the churches and orthodoxy as well as the kind of rationalist materialism found in other Enlightenment thinkers. Lachman then turns to the occultists themselves. He devotes separate sections to the following individuals: Emanuel Swedenborg (the Swedish seer who maintained that he could communicate with the dead and the angels), Mesmer (a Viennese doctor who devised a theory of "mesmerism" and "animal magnetism" and was influential in the discovery on the unconscious), Cagliostro (an Italian Rasputin who was involved in Masonic movements and largely considered to be a political subversive and revolutionary), Le Comte de Saint-Germain (a mysterious figure who recurs in the history of freemasonry, believed to have lived for centuries, though regarded by his enemies as a huckster), Louis Claude de Saint-Martin ("The Unknown Philosopher"; an influential mystic involved in freemason and Christian mysticism, influenced heavily by the mysticism of Jacob Boehme ("The Teutonic Theosopher") and the Kabbalah), Karl von Eckharthausen (a fellow mystic influenced by Saint-Martin, perhaps most famous for writing _The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary_ in which he maintained the reality of a "hidden church", an idea which influenced both Madame Blavatsky and Crowley), William Beckford (an occultist and writer of the _Vathek_ novels), Jacques Cazotte (a famed occultist influenced by Saint-Martin), Jan Potocki (a Polish occultist and writer of _The Sargasso Manuscript_), The Illuminati (the dreaded Masonic organization bent on overturning throne and altar and believed to still be operating behind the scenes), and William Blake (the famed poet influenced heavily by Swedenborg).

The Enlightenment was followed by the Romantic period, in which Enlightenment belief in the rights of the individual was succeeded by individuality itself. Many Romantics were appalled by the excesses of the French Revolution and thus embraced a reactionary quietism with a frequent hankering for nature and a nostalgia for the medieval. Lachman
discusses the following figures who represented the occult during the Romantic period: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (the beloved German writer who wrote on suicide and the Faust legend with an interest in Rosicrucianism), Novalis (the pen-name of German Romantic who praised Europe and Christendom and had an infatuation with a young girl), E. T. A. Hoffmann (a German Romantic who wrote ghost stories and weird tales), Edgar Allan Poe (the famous poet, an alcoholic who sought to understand the unconscious, a writer of ghost stories, and an occultist), Honore de Balzac (the famous writer, an agnostic influenced by the occult, Mesmer, and Swedenborg), Gerard de Nerval (an eccentric Bohemian who among other things walked a lobster down the street tied to a ribbon; an extremely mentally unstable individual who was heavily influenced by the occult), Edward Bulwer-Lytton (the Victorian novelist, most famous for his writings on Pompei, ghosts, Rosicrucianism, and as creator of the "Vril"), Eliphas Levi (the famous occultist, writer on magic, socialism, and the French Revolution who praised Catholicism and the Kabbalah), Charles Baudelaire (the blasphemous Satanic poet who was later to convert to Catholicism), Villiers de l"Isle Adam (the Symbolist writer and aristocrat, most famous for his writing _Axel_, heavily influenced by Catholicism, and who led an otherwise miserable life).

Lachman next turns his attention to Satanic occultism, noting the role of Satan in comparative religion, Gnosticism, and the "Black Mass", as well as the role of various instances of poisonings and murders. Lachman describes the Satanic occult activities of the following individuals: Charles Baudelaire (the poet again, a strong believer in the reality of Satan who dabbled in Satanism for a time but eventually converted to Catholicism), Arthur Rimbaud (a disturbed poet who dabbled in homosexuality with Paul Verlaine and frequently wrote of the Devil), J. K. Huysmans (an occultist writer perhaps best known for his description of the "Black Mass" in his novel _La-Bas_, supposedly based on fact), and Valery Briusov (a Russian decadent who dabbled in Satanism).

Following this, Lachman turns his attention to "fin de siecle occultism", noting the influence of Nietzschean ideas, Bergsonianism and "creative evolution", William James, Proust, and Theosophy and the Order of the Golden Dawn. Lachman mentions the following figures who played some role in the fin de siecle occult: Madame Blavatsky (the Russian medium and occultist, as well as the founder of the Theosophical Society), Villiers de l"Isle Adam (again), H. G. Wells (the famous writer and one of the fathers of science fiction as well as an ardent socialist), Algernon Blackwood (the writer of weird tales), Lord Dunsany (the famous writer of weird tales, Nietzschean, and ardent aristocrat), R. M. Bucke (the alienist who developed the idea of the "cosmic consciousness" and an influence on James and Ouspensky), P. D. Ouspensky (the Russian mathematician, occultist, and philosopher known for his researches into the "fourth dimension" and as a promoter of Gurdjieff), Aleister Crowley ("the Great Beast 666", a drug addled madman who dabbled in Satanism and magic), Arthur Machen (writer of the weird tale, perhaps most famous for his novel
_The Great God Pan_), Guy de Maupassant (writer of horror stories who became obsessed with his "doppelganger"), August Strindberg (the schizophrenic Swedish playwright who was also influenced by the occult), Gustav Meyrink (the Jewish occultist influenced by the Kabbalah and the legend of the golem), and Andrei Bely (the pen name of

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