The Shock of the Old: Empire and Myth-making

Whatever secular rationalists say, magic and the occult, like their big-brother religion, refuse to go away. Histories of the occult, best defined as irregular/heterodox knowledge, a one-time bedfellow of religion and reason, fight shy of its transnational/transcultural dimensions. These were pronounced in post-classical antiquity, during the Crusades, in the Renaissance, Baroque and Romanticism, and under European high empires – where the older, Muslim-Christian-Jewish esotericism began to cede to enthusiasms for India and the Far East. ‘Syncretism’, the pluralistic and accommodatory opposite of fundamentalism, is the name given to the products of religio-magical confluence between different cultures. Syncretism is most observable in those laboratories of the ‘religion-making imagination’, borderlands, backwaters and ‘contact zones’. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s words, ‘The most intensive and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries’. Occultists and explorers like Richard Burton spent their life in such places.

This study’s aim is to foreground European high empire, for the indelible transcultural mark it left on the ‘Western occult’. The last pops in and out of histories, when their authors choose to see it, usually on a nation-by-nation basis. This is unsatisfactory, in that magic and occultism respect neither national boundaries nor ‘orthodox’ prohibitions. At journey’s end, travelling magics and gods could be said to fall to three main constituencies: first, interested parties in the populace at large, second, occultist professionals
or magi, and third, the literary and artistic worlds of the day. The last two constituencies were important for religio-cultural mixing in the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman world and the other periods mentioned above. They are equally important for modernism, which, coinciding as it did with high empire, was open to syncretism–especially East–West syncretism.

Rivalry between Eastern and Western forms of esotericism is found in the 1890s ‘occult revival’. Paying more attention to the new, interloper form of the occult, with its Hindu-Buddhist emphases, I propose to trace the history of modernist resort to East–West syncretism (the high-imperial occult) as a tool for exploring the sometimes threatening, sometimes captivating condition of modernity. Modernity’s strangeness partook of the ‘marvellous’, an occultist staple which covered both the unnerving and seductive faces of the wondrous. (Significantly, Decadent Paris had a Librairie du Merveilleux.) The same wonder and awe surrounded high empire, the factor which transformed Western occultism. Both faces of the marvellous, the uncanny and the alluring, at home and abroad, will figure in this study, which also develops arguments made by Roger Griffin relating to modernity’s loss of transcendental coordinates.

In opting for deus absconditus (a ‘withdrawn god’) as the patron saint of modernism, Griffin comes close to my concerns. Like nihilism, modernist syncretism, a way of pursuing this ‘occulted’, hide-and-seek god, baulks at systematic definition. Born in an age of creative chaos from a union between pre-existent Western occultism, newly expanded imperial horizons, a ‘second oriental renaissance’ and new/old ways of construing ‘religion’ (those of the ‘history of religions school’, with it roots in the ‘ancient theology’ and ‘perennial philosophy’), this syncretism was a sophisticated, fluctuating composite, hastily put together and rife with assumptions. Like myth, the occult/syncretic was ‘good to think with’, and those modernists who enlisted it to rethink, dismantle or recreate modernity were usually more talented than the era’s practising occultists. The role of occult sects in modernism was largely subsidiary, contributing to magical common-stock, to a mystico-occult koine, which eventuated, inter alia, in the modernist idea of a ‘new Myth’ (a ‘new nomos’, in Griffin’s terminology).

After Baudelaire’s distinction between artistic ‘imaginatives’ and ‘realists’, one of the occult conglomerate’s functions in modernism was to take the imagination to new heights – and depths. Another