

on the assumption that these orders or states represent ideological paradigms more than properly social groupings. Since her attention is focused on the attitudes of social elites, her work is confined to the narratives of those *oradores* and *defensores* belonging to the ruling elites, without forgetting those reflecting positions halfway between both of these states. Examined texts have included not only those written by the elites, but also those addressed to them.

Apart from its introduction and conclusion, Vivanco's study is structured into three major chapters where she successively deals with the varieties of dying breaths and deaths (pp. 27–98), the views of the afterlife (pp. 99–135), and the diversity of practices and rituals relating to the deceased's burial and remembrance by the bereaved (pp. 136–77). In all the three chapters, *oradores'* and *defensores'* responses have been examined in parallel so as to reveal the similarities and differences between the ideologies of death typical of both states. From the premise that all the members of the elites were baptized as Christians, the dichotomy good *versus* bad death is an essential axis of the study. Certainly, Vivanco has considered the peculiar case of the Jewish *converso* elites, and she has not entirely ruled out the presence of hidden sub-texts in their narratives, but she claims that during the fifteenth century they did not show attitudes which significantly diverged from the rest. However, she does notice—and indeed she emphasizes—substantial differences between *oradores* and *defensores* in their reactions to death, and in the values they inherited, those of the latter often being non-Christian to such an extent that they formed a coherent code or ideology which persisted despite the Church's teachings. Specific attention has also been paid to the relationship between grief and social status as well as to the varying attitudes of women in the face of death, which are examined with concepts and tools from gender studies.

Vivanco successively looks into the narratives concerning deaths both natural and violent (in battle, sudden death by outside agency, death imposed by the judicial system, suicide), with particular attention to premonitory signs or

auguries of an imminent death, last wishes in wills, rituals of extreme unction and the variable symbolism of anointing different parts, the insistence on the soul's salvation over the body's health, the question of miracles, the relevance of the geography of the afterlife (with reference to Le Goff), the variety of punishments according to the deceased's sins, ways and places for burials, the issues of the deceased's clothes and of the ornamentation of the grave, the demonstrations of grief, and the values that were extolled or denigrated on the occasion of *oradores'* and *defensores'* death.

In short, Laura Vivanco's monograph is a valuable contribution to the study of the culture of European elites during the fifteenth century—a period still demanding greater attention by historians. Its main worth lies in the systematic and exhaustive analysis of the relevant Castilian written sources of that century, which the author has carried out with a mastery of textual criticism.

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Corinna Treitel, *A science for the soul: occultism and the genesis of the German Modern*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, pp. x, 366, illus., £33.00 (hardback 0-8018-7812-8).

There is much to be admired in this thoroughly researched work on the history of German occultism between 1877 and 1937. It should, however, be read in combination with and almost as a sequel to Diethard Sawicki's similar, but more wide ranging, seminal study, *Leben mit den Toten: Geisterglauben und die Entstehung des Spiritismus in Deutschland 1770–1900* (Paderborn, 2002). Although presented by the author as a blend of cultural history and the history of science, it might be more precise to see *A science for the soul* as a major contribution to a new and exciting field of research that has increasingly taken shape in recent years—not the least since the establishment of the journal *Aries* in 2001—i.e. the history of western

esotericism, with all its numerous varieties and ramifications.

Starting with the well-known and oft-discussed “knot experiments” performed by the Leipzig astrophysicist Karl Friedrich Zöllner (1834–1882) together with his American medium “Dr” Henry Slade in 1877, Treitel divides her analysis into three distinct parts—‘The occult in context’, ‘The occult in action’ and ‘Policing the occult’—each consisting of three chapters. Analysing a rich body of contemporaneous literature, largely consisting of pamphlets and articles published in remote and quite obscure but often beautifully polemical journals, together with visual sources and archival material, Treitel situates the *fin-de-siècle* German occult movement and its main protagonists—such as Carl du Prel (1839–1899), Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929)—in a variety of historical contexts. These extend from the history of medicine and the early years of psychology and psychoanalysis to art history as exemplified in the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky. Thus, she successfully demonstrates that such intense dealing with the supernatural in various forms of belief and practice actually represented a quite widespread, yet scarcely uncontested activity in the *Kaiserreich* and after, which was not only not limited to the margins of society but also went hand in hand with an emerging consumer culture. Interwoven in her analyses are a number of case studies, for instance on criminal mediumism, and the 1902/3 *cause célèbre* of Anna Rothe. Charged with claiming to materialize physical objects during her séances, Rothe was eventually found guilty of fraud after a long and much-publicized trial, which even attracted the attention of the *New York Times*. Treitel is clearly at her best when close-reading this case and analysing the various players and their strategic moves in what she terms a “battle for epistemological authority” (p. 185) in which questions of evidence, expertise and professional self-interest were at stake.

Yet, there is no light without shade. While very little in this study can be criticized on the

empirical level, some of Treitel’s more general claims seem one-sided and at times overstated. Thus, although confirmed time and again (and quite rightly so), the fundamental connection (as suggested in the title) between the occult and *the* German Modern (whatever that may be) is not as carefully explored in detail as would have been desirable. Is it really so surprising that they were inextricably intertwined and the one actually part of the other? The overlapping, yet hardly congruent terms “occultism” and “spiritualism” are used almost as synonyms. Yet much more irritating is the fact that long-existing scholarship on this very subject is not always treated fairly. Nowhere is Sawicki’s study discussed *in extenso* or at least directly addressed, nor does Treitel make much use of Helmut Zander’s brilliant work on the history of metempsychosis and theosophy, or Christoph Meinel’s detailed account of the Zöllner case. It is not surprising then that such a limited reception of state-of-the-art historiography sometimes leads to rash and, hence, not always convincing judgements. In particular, the oft-repeated argument that “discussion of the German occult movement has focused almost exclusively on the supposedly occult roots of National Socialism” (p. 84) is simply inept. It can only be maintained because the post-1970s, largely non-teleologic literature is not fully taken into account. Last but not least, in the meticulously assembled appendices most detailed data on often quite obscure occult societies, associations, publishers and other institutions can be found (another reason for which this book can literally be called groundbreaking for future research), but Treitel is much less apt in identifying, isolating and discussing specific trains of thought, discursive patterns and sets of arguments in a *longue durée* perspective. Thus, we do indeed learn a lot on the “how, where, and why” (p. 24)—but the “what” is somewhat neglected. However, if it is true that good books should end by posing better questions than those asked at the outset, Treitel’s impressive study, together with Sawicki’s work on the preceding period, will certainly soon establish itself as

an authoritative account of this particular variant of alternative modernities.

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Sharon Ruston, *Shelley and vitality*,
Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan in association
with Arts and Humanities Research Board, 2005,
pp. xiii, 229, £45.00 (hardback 1-4039-1824-4).

The relatively healthy invasion of medical history by English literature scholars continues unabated. Sharon Ruston's placing of Shelley's writings square in the Abernethy/Lawrence debate is an eye-opening contribution to this movement. Keats's association with medicine (unfortunately the victim of some scholarly ill treatment) is well known. It was a revelation to me that Shelley had decided to become a surgeon and that between 1811–14 he moved within the St Bartholomew's medical community. That Shelley had an interest in science has long been recognized. Before 1811, Shelley had been at Oxford (from where he was expelled). In his rooms at the University he had an array of devices including an electrical machine, an air pump and a microscope. Shelley's life-long reading in medical matters has usually been put down to his concerns about his own health. Ruston's achievement is to show how deeply Shelley was interested in vitality questions for poetical and political reasons besides the more mundane one of obtaining a surgical education. Shelley turned to medicine after leaving Oxford. In London, he moved in with his cousin, John Grove, a surgeon, and reported "[I am] firm in my resolve to study surgery" (p. 77). Over a period of about a year Shelley attended John Abernethy's anatomy class where William Lawrence was demonstrator. As is familiar to historians of science, in 1817 an acrimonious debate broke out between Abernethy and Lawrence, ostensibly about the nature of life. It was quite apparent to all, however, that the real issues were deep political and religious questions. Lawrence was soon perceived by the conservative

establishment to be a subversive, Francophile atheist. Not surprisingly, the radical young Shelley warmed to Lawrence's views. The aspiring poet and the surgeon got to know each other partly through William Godwin, whom Shelley met in 1812. Not surprisingly too Shelley immersed himself deeply in Humphry Davy's chemical writings. Although it is not the point of her volume, Ruston's text makes clear how Davy was one of the creators of something, chemistry, whose purpose in his own hands was quite alien to its modern descendent. Chemistry was not a demarcated discipline for Davy (or, perhaps, not for the younger Davy) but one means to investigate life, mind, matter and God (why else did he inhale nitrous oxide?). It is idle but interesting to speculate whether like Lawrence, Coleridge and Davy, Shelley would have become a conservative had he lived to old age.

Ruston's first three chapters use the Abernethy/Lawrence debate as a nucleus on which to build a detailed account of Shelley's shifting views and his musings on life and Life. The secondary literature in the history of science on the debate is very sophisticated and Ruston, thankfully, has used it to full effect showing how controversies about vitality in this period were part of the common context and not confined within disciplinary boundaries. Her following chapters are detailed exegeses of Shelley's poems, notably *Prometheus unbound*. Quite rightly she notes that Shelley's use of words such as "powers" and "excite" are "evocative" of the vitality debate (p. 105). That Shelley's poems are permeated at some level by the vitality issue seems indisputable and that specific references can be identified is also beyond question. But the literary purist will find Ruston destroying her case by embarrassing over-reading. To say that when Shelley writes of "all sustaining air" or the "sweet air that sustained me" he is "responding to the work of scientists" is bathos indeed. Can Shelley's reference to "life-blood" have been written "as though in agreement with Hunter's theory of the blood as the vital principle" (p. 118)? What's Hunter to him (or he to Hunter)? This smacks too much of a mirror image of that genre in which doctors