

Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907)

The work of Joris-Karl Huysmans, novelist, essayist, and art critic, provides one of the clearest examples of the transformation of popular philosophy and literary art that took place near the turn of the century. He is one of those rare prose writers who have situated themselves and their work squarely on the cusp of a moment of literary change, when ways of looking at and representing the world are being transformed, in life as in art. And so one can follow in his writing a startling evolution, bridging the apparent gap between the social realism of late-nineteenth-century French naturalism and the highly subjective fiction of the early twentieth century, in the works of novelists such as André Gide and Marcel Proust. In no other writer can be seen so clearly the path French fiction took to get from Emile Zola to Proust. The change involves both a transformation of perception, from the objectivist pretensions of Zola and the other naturalists to a more self-centered fiction, and a change in the very function of language--as Pierre Cogy said, "de l'écriture à l'écriture" (from writing to Writing)--from writing to scripture. Huysmans's literary subjects evolved from naturalistic portrayals of the economically deprived to decadent and horrifyingly satanic topics, and finally to the treatment of Christian themes. His life itself paralleled this extraordinary development.

Born just about a month before the revolution that finally deposed the monarchy in France and raised shock waves across Europe, Huysmans was the son of Elisabeth-Malvina Badin, a French schoolteacher, and Victor-Godfried-Jan Huysmans, a painter, printer, and lithographer from Breda in the Netherlands, who had settled in Paris, painting and preparing miniature illustrations for prayer books. Godfried and Malvina had been married in 1845, when he was thirty and she, nineteen. Their son was born at their home in the rue Suger and was baptized Charles-Marie-Georges the next day, in the Saint-Séverin church in the Latin Quarter. Indeed, much

of Huysmans's life was spent within walking distance of Saint-Séverin; growing up, he lived in the rue Saint-Sulpice and the rue de Sèvres.

His childhood seems to have been on the whole rather dreary. Although he enjoyed occasional romping in the Luxembourg Gardens with other children, he appears to have been somewhat sickly, spending a great deal of time at home. He did visit some of his father's relatives who lived in Dutch and Belgian convents, a lugubrious and impressive atmosphere that cannot have failed to affect the boy's sensibilities.

But other events were to impress him still more. In June 1856 Godfried died, leaving the eight-year-old and his mother to grieve. Deeply affected, Huysmans carefully kept three of his father's paintings: a self-portrait, a portrait of Malvina, and a copy of *The Monk* by Francisco de Zurbarán. The latter was in his bedroom when he died in 1907.

Malvina hastened to stabilize her financial situation. First she and her son moved in with her parents, who occupied rather somber quarters in the rue de Sèvres. The building that housed them had once been a monastery, and the monks' high-ceilinged cells had been connected by doorways to form cavernous apartments along wide corridors. Huysmans recalled in *De tout* (On Anything and Everything, 1902) how cold the tile floors of the second-story apartment became in winter, and how the family huddled around the fireplace, with a screen behind them, to keep warm. Malvina found work in a department store and packed her son off to a boarding school in the rue du Bac known as the Institution Hortus. Thus, within about four months' time, Huysmans lost his father and was separated from his mother. His sense of abandonment must have grown as he was obliged, at age eight, to live away from home, eat foul school food, and suffer the bullying of the discipline monitors, with no recourse to parental comforting, except on Sundays.

What finally intensified his sense of separation, however, was his mother's rapid remarriage. Early in 1857, less than a year after Godfried's death, Malvina wed Jules Og, whose money assured her financial security. He invested in a book-bindery on the ground floor of the rue de Sèvres apartment block where Malvina's parents lived, a business that provided not only a regular income but furnished Huysmans with memories that he would use in his naturalist novel *Les Sœurs Vatard* (1879; translated as *The Vatard Sisters*, 1983). Malvina's marriage to Og lasted until his death in 1867 and produced two daughters, whom she apparently preferred to her son. If Huysmans felt some bitterness about this, it was reflected only in a general silence with respect to his mother in all his publications, and perhaps in a certain degree of misogyny that critics have discovered in his work. He seems indeed to have felt a stronger affinity for his father. His adopted name, "Joris-Karl," is surely intended as a Dutch version of his French given names "Georges" and "Charles," recalling his father's origins. And it was more than a pen name: his intimates in adult life all knew him as "J.-K."

He made a few friendships at the Institution Hortus, but when he entered secondary school in 1862 at the lycée Saint-Louis, he remained quite alone, largely because he was a scholarship student; his government grant marked him as a poor boy, a target for teasing and class discrimination. But despite mistreatment by classmates and monitors, he maintained an above-average academic record. And he was learning other things, too: at age sixteen he sought out and received sexual initiation from a prostitute, who apparently took not only his virginity and her pay, but also his precious bottle of cologne.

By the time he was seventeen, Huysmans had had enough of high school, and he had gained sufficient self-confidence to refuse to go back to class. Thenceforth one of the teachers from Saint-Louis was hired to tutor him at home, and with these private lessons he earned his *baccalauréat* (diploma) by passing the requisite examinations

in 1866. In April of the same year, the young man took a job that was to help support him for many years, a civil-service position in the Ministry of the Interior, looking after welfare cases. Ostensibly the income was intended to see him through law school, and he did enroll that fall, although the law was not his primary interest. Instead he was to be found in the Latin Quarter cafés, talking literature into the wee hours of the night. Still, he passed his first-level law examination in 1867.

But another interest marked the end of his studies: he had fallen in love with an actress from the show at the old Bobino nightclub. Like a typical stage-door Johnny, he left her flowers and (ironic) poems. Using the name of a contact in the magazine business, he posed as a journalist and thus actually got past the door to meet and interview the one he had worshiped from afar. His blandishments were effective. Having moved out of the family apartment in the rue de Sèvres, he set up housekeeping with the actress, who surrounded him with something resembling a stable, homelike atmosphere. According to Robert Baldick, his primary biographer, he sought from her refined lovemaking techniques, complete with eye shadow and black corsets. This fascination with camouflage of the natural flesh is echoed in Huysmans's fiction by a pronounced preference for things artificial and an apparent fear of nature, which can dominate orderly reason through instinct, and which decrees that all things organic must at last decay and die. But the nightclub soubrette was apparently less than refined; indeed, she was downright slovenly, leaving the ironing board up in the living room and the laundry strewn about. And his dreams of an artificial paradise were soon utterly shattered by the voice of nature: the actress became pregnant--and not by Huysmans. The baby was born and brought home to the tiny flat, where its very puking, piddling naturalness, together with all the disorder that a baby in cramped quarters implies, revolted the young civil servant to the depths of his being. Fortunately, perhaps, for

Huysmans, the actress soon disappeared from his life, taking the baby with her.

In July 1870 Huysmans was called to the colors (sixth battalion of the Mobile Guard) to face the invading Prussians. Wild drinking in Paris, departure by cattle car to the staging point in Châlons-sur-Marne, where nothing was ready to receive them, and a week with no straw for the tents and unsanitary food and water all left Huysmans weakened and a prey for dysentery. When his unit set off for the front, he found himself left behind in the infirmary. Indeed, he spent the entire war in military hospitals rather than on the so-called field of honor. Before the Prussian onslaught he was evacuated to Rheims, then Paris, Arras, Rouen, and finally Evreux. There he enjoyed the company of a patient named Anselme, and of Sister Angèle, who nursed (and spoiled) him. He also participated in an illicit escapade outside the hospital grounds. But to put any distance between himself and the clinic, he needed legal intervention; with the help of a barrister friend, he finally succeeded in obtaining sick leave beginning 8 September 1870. And home he went to Paris, just in time for the Prussian siege of the city. There, amid the intermittent shellings and bombardments, the food shortages, and the crime that flourished in the darkened streets, Huysmans's life began to merge with his fiction.

A nearly impenetrable barrier stands between real life and linguistic accounts thereof. Biographical yarns can state the facts of a life; however, lives are not made up of facts but of wordless personal perceptions and interactions. Transforming these to words is an act of translation--and thus inevitably a betrayal--of the real stuff of living. Furthermore, biographies and autobiographies must be read; since readers understand words only on the basis of their own sensory knowledge, how can uniquely personal experience be transmitted to others? Still, bound by denotation and grammar, words do provide a governed realm, with relatively stable and quite artificial rules. Perhaps language was then for Joris-Karl, partly through its betrayal of the "real," the very

substance of an artificial paradise, a haven from the unpredictable bombardment of nature, which is life.

In the chaos of Paris under siege, Huysmans began to take notes, to keep a running account of his experience for a novel to be entitled "La Faim" (Hunger). Although it was never published (and the manuscript was destroyed shortly before his death), it directed his mind toward the relationship between life and language, an activity that would soon bear fruit.

Having been mustered out of the army, he returned to his modest job at the Interior Ministry, only to flee to Versailles with the government as the popular uprising of the Commune engulfed Paris. Then, after the brutal military repression of the rebellion, he returned to the city with the ministry. He spent hours in the Louvre, engrossed in the painting of the Dutch masters. He also spent time writing, beginning the first draft of a never-completed war memoir called "Chant du départ" (Departure Song) and the manuscript of a romantic play in verse, grandly titled "La Comédie humaine" (The Human Comedy).

But Huysmans's first publication was to be a collection of vignettes, which have been compared with some justification to Charles Baudelaire's prose poems. The venture began inauspiciously. After receiving more than a few rejections, he turned to his mother for help, for Mme Og had inherited the bookbindery in the rue de Sèvres and had contacts in the publishing world. She directed her son to an editor of children's books, P.-J. Hetzel, who provided Huysmans with his most stinging rejection: he told him that he was totally lacking in talent and promise, that his style was atrocious, and that he was attempting an insurgency in literature akin to the political uprising of the Commune. After that, Huysmans saw no way out but to publish the vignettes at his own expense, under the title *Le Drageoir à épices* (1874; translated as *Dish of Spices*, 1927). After favorable reviews it was soon republished by a paying editor, with the virtually identical title *Le*

Drageoir aux épices (1875). This collection of prose poems and astutely observed little scenes is not the fictionalized autobiography that was to become Huysmans's stock-in-trade, but rather a mirror held up to the writer. Huysmans called them "un choix de bric-à-brac" (a selection of bric-à-brac), yet in the choice of subjects and the clever play of erudite language, one can discover (or invent) the mind behind it all, as if in a mirror.

While he continued to work on his abortive novel about the siege of Paris, Huysmans carried on a brief affair with a working girl in the dress-making industry, doubtless Anna Meunier, who would later become his steady partner. On 4 May 1876 his mother died, leaving him the bindery in the rue de Sèvres and his two half sisters to support. He had moved back into an apartment over the bindery, and he now began taking a more than casual hand in management. He seems to have had little difficulty providing for the misses Og until they were able to provide for themselves.

Apparently still fighting the temptation to fictionalize his own life, he laid his siege novel aside and undertook a story in the naturalist vein, a real slice of (someone else's) life, which would show, through an ostensibly scientific study of the "facts," the workings of determinism. This interest in so-called objective fiction seems to have had two sources. First, he admired Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, whose *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864; translated, 1922) depicted the inevitable downward slide of a nymphomaniac servant girl. Then too, Henry Cèard, a fellow writer and close friend, was also in contact with Zola, who would soon draw J.-K. into the inner circle of naturalist writers. Huysmans chose the subject for his fictional sociology carefully: his text would document the life of a prostitute. He called it *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* (1876; translated as *Marthe*, 1927), a title bound to arouse interest, despite the absence of seriously erotic material. The novel was well under way when Huysmans learned that Edmond de Goncourt had undertaken a virtually identical project, a novel

called *La Fille Elisa* (Elisa the Whore, 1877). From then on it was a race to see who would publish the first fictitious "prostitute's life" in French letters. Huysmans finished his first draft in July 1876 and had his book in press a month later in Brussels, thus avoiding potential hassles with censorship in France. *Marthe* was in the stores by 1 October 1876; Goncourt's novel did not appear until March 1877, although it did so in Paris, and with a section on the brutalizing effects of Elisa's time in prison. (*Marthe* was not published in France until 1879.) Despite Huysmans's "objective" presentation, his story obviously draws upon his experience with the actress from the club Bobino: fictionalized reality remains at work, subverting Huysmans's "real" fiction.

Nonetheless, with the help of Cèard's introduction, J.-K. was moving into the little group of naturalists of which Zola was the patriarch and theorist. His primary disciples, in addition to Cèard and Huysmans, were Paul Alexis, Léon Henique, and Guy de Maupassant. This group of five met regularly in Zola's apartment in the rue Saint-Georges, and they became known as the Médan group, after the location of Zola's country home, where they spent an occasional summer Sunday together. They defended Zola's work in the press, and their credo, as laid down by Zola, was depiction of reality; if one wished, in a novel, to describe a wholesale food market at 5:00 A.M., one must go to such a market at that hour and take notes. And reality was determined, according to the master, by the inexorable laws of cause and effect, heredity and environment directing the outcome of all human events. The novelist's stance was to be, above all, scientific and objective; on this score *Marthe* came in for some criticism, since its language mingled poetic and erudite terms with street slang in a most idiosyncratic manner.

Although he was seldom able to live up to the credo, Huysmans had great intellectual respect for it and undertook two additional "objective" texts. First he reworked his old army memoirs as a story called *Sac au dos* (1878; translated, 1907), a

nostalgic reference to the military knapsack, which might be translated "Your Old Kit Bag." Here it is virtually impossible to tell whether one is reading autobiography or fiction, so completely is the autobiography masked; yet one cannot help but envision a live and imaginative author lurking behind the narrator's *I*. Huysmans had this text published serially in France in 1879, and he reworked it for publication under the same title in a famous collection of naturalist, war-related stories published by Zola and his group, *Les Soirées de Médan* (Evenings in Médan, 1880). That he was able to get personal memoirs into this "official" naturalist publication headed by Zola's "L'Attaque du moulin" ("The Attack on the Mill") was a mark of his success in concealing the subjectivity of his account.

Secondly, exploiting his personal experience with bookbinding, he wrote *Les Sours Vatar*, describing the effects of poverty and hard manual labor on two sisters from the Parisian underclass, Désirée and Céline. This seemingly objective account nonetheless lets very subjective sexual undertones shine through, and one oddly perverse or perverted character named Cyprien Tibaille represents the degenerate artist in the novel. There was enough of Huysmans's subjectivity in this portrait for the character to resurface in *En ménage* (1881; translated as *Living Together*, 1969); he even shares characteristics with the decadent des Esseintes of *A rebours* (1884; translated as *Against the Grain*, 1922). *Les Sours Vatar* is still not the ideal naturalist text.

Around 1877 Huysmans developed a long-lasting arrangement with Anna Meunier. By this time she had her own dress shop and was a single parent to two daughters. J.-K. and Anna lived apart, but she often spent weekends and vacations with him. As usual, important events in Huysmans's life kept appearing in his fiction. When he consorted with the dressmaker in 1872, she appeared destined to be the heroine of "La Faim"; when she disappeared, the projected novel did too. Now Meunier became the prototype for another character, Jeanne, the second mistress of André

Jayant in *En ménage*: Baldick even turned up a copy of the novel dedicated to "Jeanne--Anna Meunier."

Jayant is a young writer who marries to provide himself with the comforts of life--someone to cook, sew, and handle other menial tasks about the house. His bride provides flawless service in these areas, but she has a flaw in another that Jayant did not expect: she is sexually unfaithful. So he then tries living alone, but he cannot find a restaurant to make his favorite sauce just right, nor can he cope with lost buttons and the other petty annoyances of life. He tries living with one woman and then another, but each has proclivities he finds disturbing. This jaded treatment of the old "can't-live-with-'em-can't-live-without-'em" theme provides through Jayant a glimpse of Huysmans's view of his own material self, including his severe chronic dyspepsia; Cyprien Tibaille, here Jayant's friend and confidant, represents the artist's original, creative psyche.

In 1882 Huysmans published a similar life-into-fiction story originally entitled "Jean Folantin." It recounts the misadventures of a dyspeptic, lonely, unmarried civil servant (Huysmans was still working daily from 11:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. at the Interior Ministry) as he struggles with the everyday hassles of living. His satisfaction with life seems to go inevitably downhill, and at Zola's suggestion the title *A vau-l'eau* (translated as *Down Stream*, 1927) was chosen for the text at the last moment. This expression, which Huysmans had used to describe the destiny of his imaginary prostitute Marthe, well represents his entropic view of the material world: everything physical degenerates, disintegrates, or decays, including human bodies. Nature's universal prescription is a one-way trip to the tomb, marked by small annoyances and painful surprises. Zola read Folantin as a kind of Everyman, a modern antihero in whom humanity in general (or rather the male half thereof) can find itself. To Huysmans, however, this was assuredly one more pathetic self-portrait, one more cry for help in a

life that was becoming increasingly painful to him.

A major element of Huysmans's hatred of nature was obviously his fear of women, for whom he felt both violent attraction and sickening repulsion, the sexual act often forming but a brief respite between lust and disgust. These feelings surely disturbed him. He did establish with Meunier an almost conjugal life (her children called him Papa Georges), but even that was soon turned to pain with the onset of Anna's mortal malady; headaches and weakness were her early symptoms, followed by shooting pains: she was gradually dying of a degenerative brain disease, possibly general paresis. This must have contributed as well to Huysmans's vision of women as corrupt and decaying beings--all too natural in mind and body. The misogyny apparent in his works thus doubtless reflects a personal horror, based on the fear of his own condition, of which women reminded him. Not surprisingly he began to experience frightening periods of impotency. With Théodore Hannon, his Belgian editor and fellow writer (Huysmans had come to know him well while putting the finishing touches on *Marthe* in Brussels, when they had together visited museums in the daytime and brothels by night), he maintained a sometimes sexy (and sexist) correspondence; to him he wrote in February 1878, "Quant aux délices culières, je baisse de plus en plus. Je tourne au ramolissement des aines le plus complet. Je rêve à revêtir ma déesse de costumes étranges pour me pimenter un brin" (As for the vaginal delights, I'm going from bad to worse. I'm developing a total softening of the crotch. I dream of dressing my goddess in bizarre costumes, to stimulate myself a mite). At this point for Huysmans, even (or especially) sex demanded the odd, the unnatural.

Despite these problems, during this period Huysmans was writing highly subjective art criticism, covering the 1879 Salon for the newspaper *Voltaire* and the Salon of 1880 for the *Réforme*. His review of the independents' own

exhibition, held in 1880, is an important analysis of impressionism, and his warm appreciation of this burgeoning movement has of course been validated by history. His admiration for the work of Gustave Moreau and of Odilon Redon (whom he later came to know quite well) bespeaks his appreciation of highly original painting with antinatural themes. His art criticism of this period was collected in a volume, *L'Art moderne* (Modern Art, 1883). In 1880 he published a new set of prose poems and vignettes reminiscent of *Le Drageoir*, entitled *Croquis parisiens* (translated as *Parisian Sketches*, 1962).

Huysmans's writings were by then bringing him fame. He was recognized in literary circles; he met Gustave Flaubert, whom he had admired from afar, and he was in correspondence with Stéphane Mallarmé, the intellectual leader of the symbolist poets. He came to the aid of Paul Verlaine when the lyric poet consumed too much of his liquid assets in the form of absinthe. He helped as well the impoverished decadent novelist and dramatist Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and, at times, the less grateful, flamboyantly bitter Catholic writer Léon Bloy. While he remained in contact with Zola, he was enjoying it less. The master still believed in documenting the scenes in his novels, but he felt less and less inclined to do the legwork himself. The disciples were often dispatched to the four corners of Paris to note the details of whatever it was that Zola planned to describe. With his writing and his job at the ministry, Huysmans had little time for such labors, and he prepared to break with the naturalist group.

But there were obviously more deep-seated differences between Huysmans and Zola. For Joris-Karl, Zola's naturalism was too exclusively materialistic to be true. For there was much more to life than material nature, than the body as the plaything of environment and heredity. Huysmans perceived a spiritual side to life, human yet "artificial" and antinatural. He therefore set about to write a study of this spirit at work, a psychological novel about an individual in crisis, rather than the pseudosociology

Huysmans perceived as constituting naturalist writing. He hoped this new direction might revitalize naturalism, which in his opinion was otherwise condemned to repeat itself in an endless materialistic formula, always mingling hereditary "flaws" and environmental factors (usually including sex) to produce an inevitable decline in the characters.

The product of Huysmans's effort was *A rebours*, his masterwork and the standard defining example of French decadent fiction. It is the tale of an effete nobleman, Jean des Esseintes, the ultimate scion of an inbred and degenerating family. Driven to raw-nerved distraction by human foibles and the material imperfections of life in Paris, he goes into seclusion in a suburban retreat, where he builds an antinatural life for himself. He lives by night and sees no one; the servants slip in during the daytime, while he sleeps, to clean and to leave him prepared meals.

The novel is essentially a series of disconnected chapters, each devoted to a phase of the elegant depravity of des Esseintes's existence: the interior decoration of his refuge (for example, his dining room is a fake ship's cabin; his bedroom, a paradoxically luxurious monk's cell), his favorite readings (his appreciation of the dark side of symbolist poetry, from Baudelaire to Mallarmé, aroused the interest of the general public in those poets), his taste in nineteenth-century painting (similar to Huysmans's own), his preference for locomotives over women (at least as aesthetic objects), his selection of houseplants (species chosen because of special inbreeding that makes them appear artificial), his nightmares (one is so fully described and so lifelike that it is hard to believe Huysmans did not dream it himself), his aborted trip to London (loitering near the Saint-Lazare station, waiting for his train, he experiences enough British atmosphere--fog, Englishmen, English food--to make further travel unnecessary), and so on.

The story line itself is simple: driven to seclusion by hypersensitivity and neurotic fears, des

Esseintes concocts an antinatural life to eliminate his neuroses, but instead it worsens his condition, with psychosomatic side effects--notably severe chronic dyspepsia (nature's revenge!). His doctor then orders him back to Paris and a more normal life; he leaves his refined retreat with a startling prayer on his lips: "Seigneur, prenez pitié du chrétien qui doute" (Lord, have pity on the Christian who doubts). A human mind, with its love of the order and predictability to be found only in the artificial, is here set up in opposition to the random chaos of physical nature. But where order is imposed upon it, nature dies, destroying the function of the order, if not killing the mind that created it. Des Esseintes had, for example, gilded and bejeweled the shell of a tortoise he had bought to enliven the tones of the carpets on which it crawled; transformed thus to a decorative object, the tortoise promptly died. Leading a rigidly antinatural life in his seclusion, des Esseintes is similarly on his way to death there.

The essence of decadence here lies in the advocacy as inevitable of a perverse mental paradox: that human beings are bound to admire what they hate and destroy what they love. For example, one must cherish nature, which is life itself, although it defines everyone as frail and mortal; likewise, one cannot be sincerely blasphemous or sacrilegious unless one believes in the religion one would strive to subvert. Huysmans and des Esseintes obviously share the same dialectic in their lust/disgust relationship to women (although it must be noted that des Esseintes, doubtless in Huysmans's name, advocates full rights for women to abortion, as an artificial control over one natural process). The novel shows des Esseintes to have had some homosexual experience, and Baldick presents reasons for believing that Huysmans, perhaps horrified at himself, had tested those waters as well.

But the struggle between nature and artifice is more than thematic. In *A rebours*, Huysmans deploys in full strength his enormous and precise

vocabulary--poetic, lyrical, technical, biological--with extraordinary refinement and acumen. For not only is he painting des Esseintes's retreat, but he is forging an artificial lexical domain for the mind of the reader (and his own) to inhabit. In the nineteenth century the meanings of words, which had previously seemed divinely decreed, were, like the existence of God, being called into question. What had seemed absolute began to appear quite relative--to content, to syntax, to the reader's own experience. Through such changing perceptions the apparent chaos of material entropy was invading language itself, and referentiality was becoming unhinged. Like Edgar Allan Poe, Mallarmé was struggling in poetry to give a purer sense to "les mots de la tribu" (the words of the tribe), and Huysmans's startling language in *A rebours* seeks, if not pure poetry, at least a purely artificial prose, in which for a time one can escape the fluctuations of the natural lexicon and daily syntax. For avoidance of the natural is not really a matter of physical but of mental flight, and language is the steed. Huysmans was among the first to explore the ways in which this new perception of language could be managed for the purpose of creating a linguistic artificial paradise.

While some critics were scandalized by the psychotic morbidity of des Esseintes's preoccupations, the text seems to have pleased many others and reached a relatively wide audience. Zola was predictably displeased, however, and he criticized Huysmans for leading the naturalist movement astray. But from then on, Huysmans was to follow his own path: his "naturalist" years were effectively over.

He published a little autobiographical text (under the pseudonym A. Meunier!) in *Les Hommes d'Aujourd'hui* series in 1885. It declared, with insight and a little false mockery, that Tibaille, Jayant, Folantin, and des Esseintes were all avatars of Huysmans himself, only set in different situations. He was to attempt one more fictional self before settling on his permanent artificial identity. The name of this new self-projection was

Jacques Marles, and he appeared as the hero of *En rade* (1887); the title may be considered an example of a kind of linguistic artificiality, for it implies both security (it means "in the harbor") and abandonment (as a slang expression, it means "in the lurch"). In 1885 and 1886 J.-K. and Anna had spent the summers at Jutigny, in a dilapidated castle called the Château de Lourps, which Huysmans had used as des Esseintes's birthplace. Jacques Marles spends a summer vacation in the same place, fleeing the trauma of Parisian existence for the supposed joys of a secluded country life. Of course there is no joy; the tumbledown château is a perfect torture chamber of discomfort, country life is one sickening natural event after another (for example, the birth of a calf), and the humble farm folk are stupid bumpkins. Once again physical flight is not the answer to the decadent dilemma. The only flight that works in this situation is psychological: the narrative occasionally escapes into dream sequences, which can lead nowhere (except to other fictions--in these dreams one finds a bell tower that readers of *Là-bas* will also visit).

At this juncture of his career Huysmans, perhaps repressively, published a more objective novelette, *Un Dilemme* (A Dilemma, 1887), a mordant satire of bourgeois greed, in which a father, whose son has just died, succeeds in depriving the son's poor, pregnant girlfriend of any inheritance--thus driving her to a pauper's grave. In *Certains* (Certain [Artists], 1889), Huysmans grouped much of his art criticism written since *L'Art moderne*. It contains studies on Moreau (much admired by des Esseintes), Edgar Degas, and James Whistler; there is also a major description and analysis of Félicien Rops's salacious and sadistic prints. Beneath the surface the strain of his neurotic fears was obviously beginning to take its toll on the writer's mental equilibrium.

Early in 1890 he wrote to Arij Prins, a young Dutch novelist and friend, "Je suis plongé dans des courses, à la recherche d'un prêtre

démoniaque et sodomite qui dit la messe noire. J'en ai besoin pour mon livre. J'ai dû pénétrer dans le monde des occultistes pour tout cela--quels jobards et quels fripons!" (I'm running hither and yon looking for a demoniac, sodomite priest who performs black masses. I need him for my book. I've had to insinuate myself into the occultists' world for all this--what dupes, what scoundrels!). This book, *Là-bas* (1891; translated as *Down There*, 1924), was to bring old preoccupations to the surface in a remarkable way. Inspiration for the novel ostensibly began in 1888, when Huysmans took a summer trip to Germany, largely to visit museums for a piece on German art that he never published. While there, he was particularly struck by one painting, Matthias Grünewald's *Crucifixion*, in the museum at Kassel. It depicted in naturalistic detail the ugly face of death--Christ's brutally torn body, his oozing wounds, upon the Cross. Yet precisely through the realistic suffering the miraculous spirituality of the Victim was made manifest, with that of the Virgin and the disciples grouped around to mourn. The very excessiveness of Christ's pain seemed to Huysmans to transfigure him, without halos or other symbols: the author had his first glimpse of what he was to call, in *Là-bas*, "supranaturalism" or "spiritualistic naturalism." It now seemed possible to him, through the naturalists' techniques of documentation and realistic detail that he still respected, to go beyond the natural and the material: to show the human soul.

Huysmans's life at the same time was a confrontation with gruesome reality. Meunier's painful illness was a constant reminder of nature's cruelty. His friends were dying: among them Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly, who died of old age and an internal hemorrhage in 1889, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, who slowly expired the same year of stomach cancer (J.-K. was involved in Villiers's grotesque marriage in extremis to his housekeeper, arranged to legitimize his son).

In his personal torment Huysmans set about to document the manifestations of spiritual forces in

the real world. *Là-bas* may well have begun as a documented study of a medieval figure, Gilles de Rais (or "de Retz"), one model for Bluebeard, who fought piously and nobly with Joan of Arc, then became a kidnapper, torturer, and slaughterer of children in his castle at Tiffauges; he was tried and executed in 1440. This historical character's child killings are described in intimate, gory detail in the text. But the novel really became the story of the research Huysmans undertook in order to write it, with the central character, Durtal, at last a mere transparent stand-in for Huysmans himself: if autobiography and fiction had merged before, they were thenceforth inextricably blended in his work.

In order to understand the horrible deeds of Gilles de Rais, Durtal (and Huysmans) studied the occult, the black arts, the Black Mass. Huysmans was already in contact with "Berthe" de Courrière, through the writer Remy de Gourmont, who seems to have played the role of her agent and lover. She believed in black magic and beguiled the decadent novelist with tales of her paranormal experiences. He met as well Henriette Maillat, who had previously seduced Bloy, it appears, and now had a brief, bizarre affair with Huysmans; she is one of the models for Hyacinthe Chantelouve in *Là-bas*. J.-K. also contacted Stanislas de Guaita, a founding member of the modern French Order of the Rosy Cross (Rosicrucians); Sâr Joséphin Péladan, a onetime bank teller who claimed to be descended from the Chaldean Magi; Michel de Lézinier, an expert on alchemy; and many others. His research may also have included attendance at a Black Mass (an orgiastic ritual narrated in nauseating and erotic detail in *Là-bas*), where he claimed to have spied a Belgian priest, the abbé Louis Van Haecke, who became the prototype of Canon Docre in the novel. And he was in direct contact with the "abbé" Joseph-Antoine Boullan, who provided reams of documentation on the black arts in nineteenth-century France. Boullan was apparently an exquisitely evil ex-cleric, no stranger to prisons, who advocated all forms of sexual intercourse as acts of worship, and who,

according to Baldick, confessed to having slain his own illegitimate child, born of a complicitous nun, on the altar after Mass. The novel describes Durtal's research, parallel to Huysmans's, and his findings. They both discover that Satanism is alive and flourishing in nineteenth-century France, just as it was in the times of Gilles de Rais: a durable spiritual force observable and documentable in real phenomena.

Huysmans created in this work another artificial realm by the power of words. For *Là-bas*, whose subject matter is often abhorrent, as art is nonetheless highly original, since the categories of imagination and reality, of fiction and nonfiction, are called into question by its very form. It is a major milestone in the evolution of French prose fiction.

While the novel received good press, it had three unpleasant consequences for its author. First, Bloy, from whom Huysmans had apparently been gradually separating himself, launched violently vituperative attacks on the work, calling into question its originality. Thenceforth, Bloy was as venomously hateful to J.-K. as he was to many others. When he questioned the originality of *Là-bas*, however, he was putting his finger on a central point: it was of course not "original," since Huysmans had previously "lived" its plot. The second consequence is a case in point. Maillat and a friend of hers recognized in the letters of Hyacinthe Chantelouve (the character in the book who has Durtal admitted to a Black Mass) mere copies of actual letters Maillat had written to Huysmans; J.-K.'s realism was of a dangerous sort, and blackmail appears to have reared its ugly head. Fortunately for him, Huysmans had been connected at the ministry with the Sûreté (French secret police) since 1876; when Maillat and her friend discovered that detectives were asking probing questions about them, they disappeared from Huysmans's life. Finally, the Rosicrucians were predictably disturbed at Huysmans's close contacts with Boullan, whose housekeeper and right-hand woman, Julie Thibault, was later to perform these functions for

Joris-Karl. And so for years afterward Huysmans felt that spells were being cast upon him, that he was a victim of evil magic because of his perilous research, and he could be found, from time to time, pathetically huddled inside a chalk circle scrawled upon his floor, presumably to ward off the Rosicrucians' hellish vibrations.

And so began a strange and literary conversion. From the occult horror of *Là-bas* arose a vision of a new field of research: the beauty and grandeur of the Christian religion, its mysteries and rites, and the ancient majesty of its art, architecture, and music. Could there be a more powerful force in the combat against nature than Christianity, with its moral discipline, its miraculous conquest of natural laws, its aesthetic domination of time and space in its monasteries, churches, and cathedrals? Huysmans immediately sent Durtal (and himself) off on this new voyage of discovery and undertook, with equal intellectual curiosity, a "white book" called "Là-haut" (Up There) to mirror the "black" *Là-bas*.

He started by going to the identical sources. It was "Berthe" de Courrière who sent him to Abbé Arthur Mugnier, who was to become his spiritual guide and friend. And in July 1891, as he visited Boullan in Lyons, the ex-priest encouraged him to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of La Salette, above the timberline in the nearby mountains, an experience that touched him deeply. He was also admitted to the Grande Chartreuse monastery, where he stayed over briefly, sleeping in a monk's cell, before returning to Lyons. The light was dawning: might not a monastery be the superior refuge, far better than those he had depicted in *A rebours* and *En rade*?

But his sexual desire continued unabated, and, with Anna now gravely ill, he returned to houses of prostitution, where a certain Fernande caught his fancy for a time. He also explored some of the poorer sections of Paris, on which he wrote descriptive pieces: *La Bièvre* (The Bièvre, 1890) and *Saint-Séverin* (published with *La Bièvre* in 1898). The Bièvre is an ugly stream, flowing into Paris

from the south, winding through the town in culverts, and, thoroughly polluted, ending in the city sewers. Huysmans gaily followed its course through unpleasant neighborhoods, describing as he went. He made a stop in a little chapel in the rue d'Ebre (Christmas 1890), but his life was still guided by a murky underground current.

His "white book," now called *Là-haut ou Notre-Dame de la Salette* (1965), remained in manuscript form. It included an account of the pilgrimage to La Salette and the text of the apocalyptic vision called "le secret de Mélanie" (Melanie's secret), and it expressed interest in the Blessed Lydwine of medieval Holland. It also recounted Durtal's conversations on faith with sage ecclesiastics and others, his discoveries, his meditations, and the remarkable beginnings of his conversion. But Huysmans never published it, for his life itself was changing: as he had become Durtal to investigate Satanism, now Durtal, converted to Christianity, became Huysmans. Durtal's life in the verbal world of *Là-bas* had created living fears in a real Huysmans; likewise, Durtal's discovery of the Christian mysteries gave birth to actual belief in the flesh-and-blood author. After all, belief in the devil and in the Good Lord are both expressions of the supernatural: either could express rebellion against nature.

It has always been difficult to make good literature from good sentiments, and the novelist-autobiographer withheld his first attempt at it from publication. On his deathbed, he ordered the manuscripts of *Là-haut ou Notre-Dame de la Salette* burned, along with his early, unpublished novel on the siege of Paris. A secretary, however, apparently with an eye to personal profit, spared *Là-haut* from the flames. It was at last published in 1965, together with the so-called "Journal of *En route*," consisting of extracts from his correspondence of the period and notes from his "carnet vert" (green notebook), a sort of diary of the early 1890s--excellent documentation of Durtal-Huysmans's conversion. A second, "critical" edition of *Là-haut*, based on two manuscripts, appeared in 1988.

Obediently, Huysmans followed Durtal to the altar. On 12 July 1892 he entered upon a retreat in the Trappist monastery at Igny. In these most austere of monastic surroundings, where monks live under a vow of silence, Huysmans made his confession and communed: he had entered the household of faith. Shortly after leaving the monastery, he returned (on 25 July) to Lyons for a visit with Boullan. It was to be his last; the thaumaturge died in January 1893, in Huysmans's thinking as the result of Rosicrucian spells. Afterward Julie Thibault came to serve as Huysmans's housekeeper--performing her strange rituals still--in the rue de Sèvres apartment. Meunier became so seriously ill that she was a danger to herself; when she knocked over a lamp and nearly set her apartment ablaze, Huysmans reluctantly had her interned in a home for the insane, where he visited her faithfully each week until she died in 1895.

On 3 September 1893 Huysmans was dubbed Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, an honor granted, however, for his twenty-seven years of devoted service at the Ministry of the Interior rather than for his writing. Undaunted, the author was at work on a new version of Durtal's conversion, *En route* (1895; translated, 1896). Copying out extensive passages from the text of *Là-haut*, Huysmans cast them in a new framework, to form an essentially actionless, plotless "novel," in which Durtal, through conversation and mediation, enters upon the Christian life. Characters from *Là-haut*, such as the abbé Gévresin (perhaps inspired as much by Boullan as by Mugnier) and Madame Bavoil (who seems to resemble Thibault), reappear. As he had fictionalized his life in *Là-bas*, with *En route* he realized the fiction, leading both character and author to the foot of the Cross.

Because of the originality of its relatively actionless structure, Paul Valéry was to express great admiration for *En route*, and a more recent scholarly committee was to name it among the best novels of the nineteenth century. The work was a popular success as well and quickly sold

out several editions. But the clergy was less pleased; some members of the secular arm, unfavorably compared with monks in the text, cast doubt on Huysmans's conversion and seemed to suspect him of crass, commercial publicity-seeking. The author's colorful language, which he never abandoned, surely did little to endear *En route* to the clergy; he described Charles Gounod's church music, for example, as "ces fonts à l'eau de bidet" (fonts of bidet water), and as "onanisme musical" (musical onanism).

Still, Huysmans was convinced that his own conversion could serve as a model for others, and there is some evidence that it did. He therefore began a second religious novel, structured around Chartres cathedral, that would reveal the beauty and deeper meaning of Christian art and architecture. Although he never moved to Chartres while he was studying the cathedral for the novel (Durtal, this time separating himself a bit from his author, takes up residence there), he spent much time in the edifice researching his subject. Baldick relates that on 25 December 1896, as he was leaving after prayers in the cathedral, a letter was handed to him from Catharina Alberdingk Thijm, a Dutch writer who had given her fortune to charity upon reading *En route*. She had addressed the missive to Huysmans in care of Chartres cathedral, to be delivered Christmas morning, although she had no earthly reason to believe he would be there; its "miraculous" delivery revived her faith.

Research for the book on Chartres continued over several years; still, like *En route*, the final version contained lengthy passages salvaged directly from the *Là-haut* manuscripts. When Huysmans published it in 1898, *La Cathédrale* (translated as *The Cathedral*, 1898) was an even greater success than its predecessor; indeed, despite its less-than-sensational subject (it has served as a tourist guide to Chartres), its initial sale was the best of all of Huysmans's works. Continuing debates in the press over the sincerity of his conversion doubtless boosted sales. Some members of the clergy even asked that the work be placed on the

Index Prohibitorum, but that action was never taken.

The fact was that Huysmans was fighting the good fight to lead a Christian life, although the demon of lust was exceptionally difficult for him to conquer throughout most of the rest of his life. Temptations remained, the primary ones being, apparently, the Spanish countess de Galoez, who came to him because of her interest in the occult and who allegedly sought to seduce him so as to rescue him from the monks, and Henriette du Fresnel, the attractive young daughter of a nobleman. Baldick writes that Henriette, who shared his faith, sat at J.-K.'s feet declaring her love, and that she refused to give up her suit despite the author's entreaties. He encouraged her to enter a convent, which she finally did after an abortive first attempt, which ended when she returned to the writer's doorstep.

After *La Cathédrale*, Huysmans turned to hagiography, relating what to many was an exemplary Christian life in *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* (1901; translated as *St. Lydwine of Schiedam*, 1923). Lydwine, born in 1380 in Huysmans's ancestral homeland, was not canonically a saint, but only "blessed." Huysmans's biography tells the story of a girl who made a vow of perpetual virginity. Pursued by suitors, she resisted temptation; but to avoid further distress, she prayed to be ugly. Her prayers were amply answered, as she was granted all sorts of hideous diseases and afflictions, over which Huysmans's naturalistic pen lingers. She is said to have achieved the capacity to perform miracles; at any rate, her biographer apparently believed in the redemptive efficacy of suffering: by the doctrine of substitution, saintly persons can suffer to redeem others, and Lydwine was, for Huysmans, saintly in this sense.

He too was beginning to know physical suffering. In the spring of 1900 his dental problems began, adding serious pain to the discomforts of his long-standing rheumatism and dyspepsia. He had teeth extracted, but to no avail: the pain grew

constantly worse. This was doubtless the onset of the cancer of the jaw from which he would die seven years later.

His attempts to flee the petty annoyances of Parisian society, like his characters des Esseintes and Jacques Marles, continued. But then he had a grandiose idea: it would be nice to take refuge in a monastery, nicer still to found a monastery where Christian writers and artists could live in community. He investigated several possibilities for the creation of such a religious retreat, but all fell through for lack of a suitable site, or for lack of committed volunteers. But he made personal retreats to monasteries. One of these was to the Benedictine house at Ligugé, where he came closest to realizing his dream.

He had already severed ties to Paris, retiring from his job at the ministry in 1898 with the honorary title of bureau chief. And he had promised the public a third Christian novel, to complete *En route* and *La Cathédrale*. *L'Oblat* (1903; translated as *The Oblate*, 1924) describes the life of an oblate, a member of a Catholic religious community living under somewhat flexible rules. With fiction again dictating life, he undertook to become an oblate himself at Ligugé, and he had a home, Notre-Dame House, built on the monastery grounds. He moved in about July 1899 and underwent the first ceremony of oblation in March 1900. Notre-Dame House was large enough for others, although no fellow writers joined him there. Instead his fast friends M. and Mme Léon Leclaire, a middle-class couple with whom he had been on intimate terms since 1896 and who had helped him financially to build it, moved in with him for a time.

There he composed *Sainte Lydwine*, and there he edited a collection of his journalistic pieces from over the years under the title *De tout*. Its subjects are as heterogeneous as its title suggests; it contains writings on "everything" his life touched, from his mother's rue de Sèvres flat to Notre-Dame House. He also researched *L'Oblat* while at Ligugé. But like all of his other real and imagined retreats, the idyll was not to last: the French laws

on the separation of church and state took effect in 1901, and many "jointly owned" properties reverted to the state, not the church--Ligugé among them. The monks were forced to leave, and a desolate Huysmans returned alone, shortly after taking his final vows as an oblate, to face the unpleasantness of apartment life in Paris. His second hagiographic work, *Esquisse biographique sur Don Bosco* (Don Bosco, A Biographical Sketch, 1902), was perhaps the least successful of his writings.

L'Oblat, finally published in 1903, told of Durtal's stay at Val des Saints (Ligugé). It details the meaning and beauties of the Catholic liturgy, evoking the Virgin's redemptive suffering. Huysmans also prepared his famous "Préface écrite vingt ans après le roman" (Preface written twenty years after the novel) for the 1903 edition of *A rebours*. This tells of his desire to escape the constraints of the materialistic naturalist novel, and of Zola's somber disapproval of his revolutionary approach to fiction. He also quoted from Barbey d'Aureville's original review of *A rebours*: "Après un tel livre, il ne reste plus à l'auteur qu'à choisir entre la bouche d'un pistolet ou les pieds de la croix" (After a book like this, the author has nothing left but to choose between the mouth of a pistol and the foot of the cross). And Huysmans added, "C'est fait" (The choice is made).

He presided at the first official banquet of the Académie Goncourt on 26 February 1903. Then he was off to visit the Leclaires, who had taken up residence in Lourdes. It was the first of two visits he made there. Huysmans was apparently fascinated by the grotto of "miracles," but he was appalled by the tawdry, circuslike atmosphere of the town and the sanctuary.

After further tooth extractions, he took another museum trip, this time to Strasbourg, Colmar, Basel, Freiburg, Frankfurt am Main, Cologne, Brussels, and Antwerp. His explorations led to the composition of *Trois primitifs* (Three Primitives, 1905), containing some forceful passages on the

Grünewald paintings in the Colmar museum and notes on the collections in Frankfurt.

By the summer of 1905 his neck was swollen by cancer, and the tumor had closed one of his eyes. An operation on the eye improved his sight but did nothing to ease the pain. The cigarettes he had smoked all his life, in brothels and in monasteries, were still with him. His cancerous jaw and neck made eating a painful task, and he grew rapidly weaker, often confined to bed. Even treatments with the new X-ray technology failed to halt his tumor's atrocious progress. In these conditions, working with a secretary, he composed *Les Foules de Lourdes* (1906; translated as *Crowds of Lourdes*, 1906). Writing in the first person--Durtal had at last disappeared--he described therein the horrid afflictions of those who came to pray, and he recounted the rites of the grotto. He affirmed that he had seen no cures there, but that he had observed great faith. And so he claimed to believe in miracles, although he could authenticate none.

In January 1907 Huysmans was named Officier de la Légion d'Honneur for his literary achievements. A final operation on his neck prolonged his life and his agony. Extraction of most of his remaining teeth was exceptionally painful, as the anesthetic wore off before the end of the surgery. His excruciating death had begun.

He ordered destruction of his unpublished manuscripts. He composed the invitations to his own funeral. He received Communion almost daily. When he died at age fifty-nine on 12 May 1907, a requiem was sung for him at Notre-Dame des Champs in Paris, his final parish church, and he was entombed in Montparnasse Cemetery, near Meunier's grave. The last of his works that he intended for publication, *Trois églises* (Three Churches), treating the symbolism of Notre-Dame de Paris, the medieval art and spirit of Saint-Germain de l'Auxerrois, and the history of Saint Merry, appeared in 1908, together with a reedition of *Trois primitifs*.

All of his attempts at flight had failed, except for his escape into words. Huysmans's writings, virtually all of them lexical transmogrifications of his own mental states, evolved as the literary life of his period did, revealing how the crisis of referentiality undermined the pseudorealism of the naturalist school. Still, he sought to transpose the truth values of naturalistic detachment into the realms of psychological aestheticism, where he "discovered" Freudian dreams along with Sigmund Freud and involuntary memory well before Proust (*A rebours*). He attempted to plumb the psychological depths of evil, where Baudelaire had preceded him, and moved easily, symmetrically, from there into the new Catholic renaissance, the rebirth of faith that marked turn-of-the-century France. There he forms the link between Bloy and Verlaine of his own generation and Francis Jammes, Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy, Jacques Maritain, and others of the next. His personal revolution, spiritual and literary, mirrors that of his age.

Papers: Huysmans's papers are at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris; at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; and in private collections.

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