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The Diseased Corpse

Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of the aesthetic ideas and affiliations of novelist and art critic Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907). In particular, this paper focuses on his early engagement with Naturalism and his rejection of it in favour of Symbolism, and the subsequent impact of Matthaeus Grünewald's (Mathis Gothardt Neithardt b.1480-1490, d. 1558) painting *The Crucifixion* which was pivotal in Huysmans subsequent re-evaluation of Naturalism and shift to embrace a 'mystical realism.'

Huysmans came to prominence as a writer with the publication of *Against Nature* in 1884. Arguably the most significant Symbolist text, *Against Nature* was instrumental in articulating Symbolist ideas, defining the idiosyncrasies of the decadent aesthetic, and encouraging their recognition and proliferation. It was described by Arthur Symons as a 'breviary of decadence', and referred to by Oscar Wilde's protagonist, Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as the strangest book that he had ever read.

Biography

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The Diseased Corpse

Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) came to prominence as a writer with the publication of his novel *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*) in 1884. Arguably the most significant Symbolist text, *A Rebours* was instrumental in encouraging the proliferation of Symbolist ideas and describing the idiosyncrasies of the decadent aesthetic. In this paper I explore the evolution of Huysmans' aesthetic ideas and affiliations. In particular, I focus on his early engagement with, and then rejection of Naturalism, in favour of Symbolism, and the subsequent impact of Matthaeus Grünewald's (Mathis Gothardt Neithardt b.1480-1490, d.1558) painting *The Crucifixion*, which was pivotal in Huysmans' re-evaluation of Naturalism and his subsequent shift to embrace a 'mystical realism.'

Zola's Disciple

Huysmans first visited Émile Zola (1840-1902) at the Rue Saint-Georges in 1876, encouraged by his friend Henry Céard. He brought with him a copy of *Le Drageoir aux épices*, an early book of his derivative prose poems inspired by Charles Baudelaire and Aloysius Bertrand, and his novel *Marthe, histoire d'une fille*.¹

The gritty realism of *Marthe* was inspired by Huysmans' relationship with a red-haired actress with whom he had fallen in love when, as a university student, he saw her on stage at the Bobino (Théâtre du Luxembourg). He courted her by writing an enthusiastic review of the tawdry production she was playing in, and they enjoyed a brief period of happiness before the theatre closed and the company was disbanded, reducing their income to his civil servant wages from the Ministry of the Interior. Huysmans then discovered to his dismay that she was pregnant from a previous liaison. A baby girl was born at the end of winter in their unheated flat in Rue de Sévres, with the assistance of a midwife who, noting their poverty, did not charge for her services. (Apparently, the relationship did not last long and nothing is known of the fate of mother or child.)

Zola's response to Huysmans' novel *Marthe* was encouraging. Huysmans, along with Henry Céard, Léon Hennique, Guy de Maupassant and Paul Alexis were soon regular visitors on Thursday evenings at Zola's home and later met regularly at Zola's villa in Médan.

Baldick notes that Zola

... had craved the satisfaction to be derived from a literary 'school', and he already regarded his young friends as disciples, committed for life to the Naturalist cult. In this he was mistaken. With the exception of Alexis they would all eventually rebel against his tutelage, and Huysmans was to deal Naturalism a blow from which it has never fully recovered.²

The Naturalist movement developed in reaction against both Romanticism and Classicism and was an outcome of the shifting social and philosophical ideas of the age. In Paris at the end of the 19th century there was a sense of optimism fuelled by a belief in the possibilities of human achievement and progress. Positivism, advocated by the philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), held that all true knowledge was scientific. It was applied to art and literature by the critic Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), and gained currency. Karl Marx had insisted that it was sociological and material forces that shaped man's destiny within society. Charles Darwin's theories on evolution, genetic inheritance and the survival of the fittest had contributed to a materialistic ideology, a weakened faith in God and the authority of the Church. Industrialisation and democracy had emerged with the burgeoning wealth and expectations of the middle classes.

Consistent with Hippolyte Taine's determinism, Zola insisted that a novelist should observe and describe human behaviours and that these were the result of race, social class and physiological variations within a historical context. Zola's commitment to this idea is evident in the cycle of twenty novels titled *Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire* written between 1871 and 1893, in which he explored the effects of hereditary and environment on the members of the large extended family *Les Rougon-Macquart*.

In Zola's preface for *Thérèse Raquin*, his first significant novel, he commented that his object in writing this novel had been 'first and foremost a scientific one,'³ and that the two characters, Thérèse and Laurent, were

... human animals, nothing more...I had only one desire: given a highly-sexed man and an unsatisfied woman...to uncover the animal side of them and see that alone, then throw them together in a violent drama and note down with scrupulous care the sensations and actions of these creatures. I simply applied to two living bodies the analytical method that surgeons apply to corpses.⁴

Alan Krell notes in his essay *Fearful Desires: 'Embodiments' in Late Nineteenth-Century French Painting* that at times, Zola's writing goes well beyond scientific observation. He cites a salacious passage in which the character Laurent visits a morgue to see the body of Thérèse's husband, who he had drowned. Laurent lingers, 'lost in a sort of fearful desire'⁵, over the body of a girl who had hung herself because of unrequited love. The passage hints at a repressed morbid fascination with the purulent and perverse.

Initially, Naturalism gained momentum as a literary movement with writers such as Gustave Flaubert, Edmond de Goncourt, Zola and the Médan group. There was a strong engagement and exchange of ideas between painters, writers and critics in the late 19th century. Many painters quickly embraced Naturalism, including Gustave Courbet, Jean-Francois Millet and Edouard Manet. In an essay published in 1867, Zola enthusiastically appraised the work of Manet, and took the opportunity to elaborate on his aesthetic theory and how it applied to painting:

Every great artist who comes to the fore gives us a new and personal vision of Nature. Here 'reality' is the fixed element, and it is the differences in outlook of the artists which has given to works of art their individual characteristics. For me, it is the different outlooks, the constantly changing view-points, that give works of art their tremendous human interest.⁶

Zola comments further:

And here I take the opportunity to deny the existence of any relationship between the paintings of Edouard Manet and the verses of Charles Baudelaire. I know that a lively sympathy has brought painter and poet together, but I believe that the former has never had the stupidity, like so many others, to put 'ideas' into his painting.⁷

Huysmans publicly aligned himself with Naturalism in a pamphlet entitled *Émile Zola et L'Assommoir* published in 1877. Written in response to criticism of Zola's novel, Huysmans defended Zola's literary theories and detailed description of human degradation, with the following declaration:

Green pustules and pink flesh are all one to us; we depict both because both exist, because the criminal deserves to be studied as much as the most perfect of men, and because our towns are

swarming with prostitutes who have the same droit de cité as prudes. Society has two faces; we show those two faces, we use every colour on the palette, the black as well as the blue ...Whatever some may say, we do not prefer vice to virtue, corruption to modesty; we applaud both the coarse, spicy novel and the tender, sugary novel - provided each is well founded, well written, and true to life.⁸

As well as exploring aesthetic issues and discussing works of art and literature in most of his novels, Huysmans wrote two volumes of art criticism *L'Art moderne* (1883) and *Certains* (1889), collections of essays and reviews of the Salon and exhibitions of the Independents, many of which had previously been published in journals. Huysmans is insightful, articulate and forthright in his critical appraisals, which are unashamedly subjective and reflect his evolving philosophical and religious positions.

In his article *L'Exposition des Independants en 1881* Huysmans applauds the realistic depiction of contemporary and naturalistic female figures, citing Edgar Degas' (1834-1917) *Little Dancer of Fourteen* the wax sculpture with skirts, ribbons and real human hair, and Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) *Nude Study*. While aligned with the Naturalists he was more than willing to condemn Courbet for not adhering to Naturalist principles strongly enough.

The Courbet is painted roughly with a palette knife dating from the times of Louis Philippe, whereas the flesh of the more modern nudes wobbles like half-eaten blancmange; this is moreover the only difference to be observed between any of these painters. Had Courbet not placed a modern crinoline at the foot of the bed, his woman could perfectly well have taken the title of Naiad or Nymph; it is through this simple trick that this woman comes to be as a modern woman.⁹

The Betrayal

A Rebours (1884) marked a significant shift in Huysmans' philosophical and aesthetic position and definitively marked his break from Naturalism and his close affiliation with Zola and the Médan Group. In a preface to *A Rebours*, written twenty years after it was first published, Huysmans summed up the limitations of Naturalism:

Naturalism was getting more and more out of breath by dint of turning the mill forever in the same round. The stock of observations that each writer had stored up by self-scrutiny or study of his neighbours was getting exhausted. Zola, who was a first-rate scene-painter, got out of the difficulty by designing big, bold canvases more or less true to life; he suggested fairly well the illusion of movement and action; his heroes were devoid of soul, governed simply and solely by impulses and instincts, which greatly simplified the work of analysis...The rest of us, less robust and concerned about a more substantial method and a truer art, were constrained to ask ourselves the question whether Naturalism was not marching up a blind alley and if we were not bound soon to knock up against an impassable wall.¹⁰

A Rebours is a series of themed chapters in which the musings of the one significant character, the Duc Jean Des Esseintes, illuminate themes that fascinated the Symbolists such as the nature of evil; the possibility of an ideal realm; nature versus culture and the artificial, and Baudelaire's theory of correspondences. Des Esseintes epitomised a decadent aesthete. Anaemic and suffering from a severe nervous illness, he was the last surviving member of an atrophied and degenerated aristocratic family. His vigour was exhausted from an indulgent life as a Parisian dandy. Bored and exasperated by the triviality of life; his fortune squandered, Des Esseintes cosseted himself in domestic solitude at Fontenay, on the outskirts of Paris.

There, in a room with nasturtium red walls, amid Florentine silks, tiger skins, and blue fox furs, he separated himself from everything that he considered to be vulgar and banal. He maintained a quasi-religious dedication to the pursuit of Beauty, and meticulously attended to aesthetic details. He chose the colour of the walls according to the effect achieved by candlelight, and had his pet tortoise gilded and encrusted with jewels, when he realised that the raw sienna hue of its shell dimmed rather than enriched the colours of the carpet. To tempt his jaded palate and in search of novel and complex sensual experience, Des Esseintes released exquisite perfumes, mingling droplets of sweet violet, ambergris, calamus, heady musk and patchouli in the fetid air; or orchestrated 'sensations analogous to those which music dispenses to the ear'¹¹ by sipping liqueurs, each of which corresponded in taste to the sound of a particular instrument.

Des Esseintes denied the body and nature – which he considered to be merely material, imperfect, temporal and corrupt, and aspired to exist on a higher intellectual and spiritual plane to become closer to an ideal. He cultivated a heightened sensibility and a sense of indifference to the world, and used art and artifice to deny the natural and enable him to transcend the mundane. In the end, his heightened sensitivity was so refined that he was unable to digest food, so he imbibed his nutrition via an enema.

Mario Praz notes in his book *The Romantic Agony*, that *A Rebours* marked a pivotal shift not only of Huysmans' work, but also of the Decadent writers who followed him, saying 'all the prose works of the Decadents, from Lorrain to Gourmont, Wilde and D'Annunzio, are contained in embryo in *A Rebours*'.¹² In his 'Preface Written Twenty Years After', Huysmans muses on how Zola clearly recognised his shift and the danger that it presented to Naturalism as a movement.

I remember how, after the first appearance of *A Rebours*, I went to spend a few days at Médan. One afternoon when we were out walking, the two of us, in the country, he stopped suddenly, and his face grown dark, reproached me for having written the book, declaring I was dealing a terrible blow at Naturalism, that I was leading the school astray, that, into the bargain, I was burning my ships with such a book, inasmuch as no class of literature was possible of this sort, where a single volume exhausted the subject; finally, as a friend - he was the best of good fellows - he urged me to return to the beaten track, to put myself in harness and write a study of manners.¹³

The Crucifixion

Huysmans first saw Grünewald's *The Crucifixion*, part of the *Tauberbischofsheim Altarpiece* (c. 1525, painting on pinewood panel 195.5 x 152.5 cm, Kunsthalle at Karlsruhe, Germany) in the Cassel Museum in 1888 during a brief tour in Germany with writer Arij Prins.¹⁴ Baldick notes that the experience of seeing the image had 'a profound influence on Huysmans' aesthetic and psychological development'.¹⁵

Huysmans' initial encounter with Grünewald's powerful depiction of the crucifixion of Christ is vividly evoked in the first chapter of his novel *La-Bas* (1891). Just as Huysmans had been overwhelmed by the experience, his protagonist Durtal, troubled by an argument on the relative merits and flaws of Naturalism, sinks into a reverie in which he relives the moment he stood before Grünewald's painting.

Purulence was at hand. The fluvial wound in the side dripped thickly, inundating the thigh with blood that was like congealing mulberry juice. Milky pus, which yet was somewhat reddish, something like the colour of grey Moselle, oozed from the chest and ran down over the abdomen and the loin cloth. The knees had been forced together and the rotulae touched, but the lower legs were held wide apart, though the feet were placed one on top of the other. These, beginning to putrefy, were turning green beneath a river of blood. Spongy and blistered, they were horrible, the flesh tumefied, swollen over the head of the spike, and the gripping toes, with the horny blue nails, contracting the imploring gesture of the hands, turning the benediction into a curse; and as the hands pointed heavenward, so the feet seemed to cling to earth, to that ochre ground, ferruginous like the purple soil of Thringia.

Above this eruptive cadaver, the head, tumultuous enormous, encircled by a disordered crown of thorns, hung down lifeless. One lacklustre eye half opened as a shudder of terror or of sorrow traversed the expiring figure. The face was furrowed, the brow seamed, the cheeks blanched; all the drooping features wept, while the mouth, unnerved, its under jaw racked by tetanic contractions, laughing atrociously.¹⁶

Grünewald

The Crucifixion from the *Tauberbischofsheim Altarpiece* (c. 1525) described in *La-Bas* is a simplified repetition of the Calvary that Grünewald had depicted in the central panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512 -1516).¹⁷ *The Isenheim Altarpiece* is arguably the most harrowing crucifixion painted in history. Grünewald has presented an almost nihilistic vision of spiritual desolation. We bear witness to a doomed man's spiritual crisis: betrayed, humiliated, condemned and tortured, abandoned and forsaken by God, dying in the depths of despair. Despite the symbolic references to the resurrection of St John and the Pascal Lamb - the painting seems to evoke the cry 'My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?'¹⁸ and intimate a man's realisation that he is mortal and falling over the brink into a Void, Nothingness.

The Isenheim monastery chapel was used by patients suffering from diseases of the blood, skin and nervous system, including St Anthony's fire, epilepsy and syphilis. (An epidemic of syphilis, often attributed to the return of Columbus from the Americas in 1493, had swept through Europe in the late fifteenth century.) In *Trois Primitifs* (1908) in which Huysmans critiques the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and compares it with *The Crucifixion* he notes that Grünewald modelled his Christ-figures on corpses from the hospital mortuary. Such is the attention to detail, Huysmans notes, that accurate diagnosis of the diseases that the corpses and patients suffered from could be made:

It is also easy to understand the terrifying realism and meticulous accuracy of Grünewald's Christ-figures, which he obviously modelled on the corpses in the hospital mortuary; the proof is that Dr. Richet, examining his Crucifixions from the medical point of view, states that 'attention to detail is carried to the point of indicating the inflammatory halo which develops around minor wounds'.¹⁹

Despite the realism and almost nihilistic vision, Huysmans insisted that Grünewald's figures were powerfully evocative.

From these heads, common enough, many of them, and these physiognomies, often ugly but powerfully evocative, emanated celestial joy or acute anguish, spiritual calm or turmoil. The effect was of matter transformed, by being distended or compressed, to afford an escape from the senses into remote infinity.²⁰

Mystical Realism

In his novel *La-Bas*, in which the protagonist investigates the life of sadist, murderer and necromancer Gilles de Rais and the thriving occult in contemporary Paris, Huysmans critiques Naturalism and explores the nature of evil and suffering as a possible route to redemption. The novel opens with a lively debate between the protagonist Durtal and Des Hermies on the virtues and deficiencies of Naturalism.

Railing against Naturalism, Des Hermies insists that it is base and focused on instincts and appetites; makes literature 'the incarnation of materialism';²¹ is representative of bourgeois thought and glorifies the democratisation of art; 'defers to the nauseating taste of the mob';²² and, is unable to delve into life's mysteries: it repudiates style, it rejects every ideal, every aspiration towards the supernatural and the beyond. It is so perfectly representative of bourgeois thought that it might be sired by Homais and damned by Lisa, the butcher girl in *Ventre de Paris*.²³

Durtal, while indicating his disgust toward materialism, notes that Naturalism had depicted plausible individuals in real surroundings and had dismissed the implausible characters of Romantic writing. Mulling over the relative flaws and merits of Naturalism, Durtal seems to find a way through the impasse which reflects the impact of Grünewald's painting *The Crucifixion* on Huysmans and his aesthetic shift from Naturalism to a 'mystical realism.'

'We must', he thought, 'retain the documentary veracity, the precision of detail, the compact and sinewy language of realism, but we must also dig down into the soul and cease trying to explain mystery in terms of our sick senses. If possible the novel ought to be compounded of two elements, that of the soul and that of the body, and these ought to be inextricably bound together as in life. Their interactions, their conflicts, their reconciliation, ought to furnish the dramatic interest. In a word, we must follow the road laid out once and for all by Zola, but at the same time we must trace a parallel route in the air by which we may go above and beyond...A spiritual naturalism!' ²⁴

To conclude, while initially aligned with Zola and the Médan writers, Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848 - 1907) made a definitive break with Naturalism in favour of Symbolism in 1884 with the publication of his novel *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*). Arguably the most significant Symbolist text, *Against Nature* was instrumental in articulating Symbolist ideas, defining the idiosyncrasies of the decadent aesthetic, and encouraging their recognition and proliferation. Profoundly influenced by Mattheus Grünewald's (Mathis Gothardt Neithardt. 1480-1490, d.1558) painting *The Crucifixion*, which he first saw in Colmar in 1888, Huysmans subsequently re-evaluated the attributes of Naturalism advocated by Zola and shifted his stance to embrace a 'mystical realism.'

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- ¹ Baldick, Robert, *The Life of J.K. Huysmans*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1955, p.36.
- ² Ibid p.37.
- ³ Zola, Émile, *Thérèse Raquin*, quoted by Alan Krell, 'Fearful Desires: "Embodiments" in Late Nineteenth-Century French Painting', Anthony Bond (ed.) *Body*, Sydney: Gallery of NSW: 1997, p.119
- ⁴ Ibid p.119.
- ⁵ Ibid p.119.
- ⁶ Zola, Émile, 'The Man and the Artist', Charles Harrison and Paul Wood with Jason Gaiger (eds), *Art in Theory 1815–1900*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p.558.
- ⁷ Ibid p.559.
- ⁸ Huysmans, Joris-Karl, 'Émile Zola et L'Assommoir', quoted in Barbara Beaumont's [introduction to](#) (ed), *The Road from Decadence: Selected Letters of J.K. Huysmans*, London: The Athlone Press: 1989, p. 6
- ⁹ Huysmans, Joris-Karl, 'L'Exposition des Independants en 1881', *Art in Theory 1815 – 1900*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p. 892
- ¹⁰ Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *A Rebours*, 'Preface Written Twenty Years After the Novel', New York: Dover, 1969. p. xxxv
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 58
- ¹² Praz, Mario, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford University Press: 1970, p. 322
- ¹³ Huysmans Joris-Karl, *A Rebours*, 'Preface Written Twenty Years After the Novel', New York: Dover, 1969. p. xiv
- ¹⁴ Baldick, Robert, op cit p. 121
- ¹⁵ Ibid p. 123
- ¹⁶ Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *La-Bas*, New York: Dover, 1972, p. 12
- ¹⁷ Subsequent to writing *La-Bas* Huysmans saw the Isenheim Altarpiece when he visited the Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar in 1903.
- ¹⁸ The King James Bible, The Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 27:46
- ¹⁹ Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *Trois Primitifs*, translated by Robert Baldick, Phaidon Press Ltd: 1958
- ²⁰ Huysmans, Joris-Karl, *La-Bas*, Cambis: Dedalus/Hippocrene, 1992, p. 11
- ²¹ Ibid, p. 1
- ²² Ibid p. 8
- ²³ Ibid p. 8
- ²⁴ Ibid p. 10

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