On the Brink of the Abyss

by

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Declaration

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15 June 2010
Symbolism, which initially emerged in Paris as an avant-garde literary movement, became prominent in major cultural centres across Europe in the late 1880s and 1890s. In their art and writing the Symbolists articulated their affinity to Idealist concerns and aspirations to express the eternal, immutable and intangible. Influenced by Baudelaire's theory of correspondences, that implies that the material world is linked to the spiritual and that the curious and sensitive artist could perceive a glimmer of the Ideal through fleeting sensations, the Symbolists developed new visual and poetic languages and adopted strategies such as the fragmentation of text, idiosyncratic use of symbolic, hyper-sensual and synaesthetic imagery, ambiguity and obscurity.

While the Symbolist's nihilistic tendencies were recognised by peers and critics in relation to the poets, they have not been adequately acknowledged in regard to the visual artists. In this thesis, focusing on the art critic and novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), I consider the Symbolists' claims of Idealism. I argue that Huysmans' powerful critical insights, while aligned with the Symbolist movement, stemmed not from Idealist convictions but from metaphysical questioning and anxiety as he wavered on the brink of an intellectual and spiritual abyss. Having outlined the evolution of Huysmans' aesthetic and metaphysical position, I consider how the complexity of his ideas - often articulated through references to disease and mortality, and juxtaposition of these against Symbolist tropes alluding to the immutable and eternal - informed his critical approach and elucidate nihilistic tendencies in the work of artist Mathias Grünewald (1475-1528), and Symbolist artists Gustave Moreau (1836-1898), Odilon Redon (1840-1916) and Félicien Rops (1833-1898).
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## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement of Authority</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frontispiece</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction – Premise, Methodology &amp; Synopsis</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Exhausted and Degenerate Literature Review</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The Sceptic Who Would Fain Believe</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joris-Karl Huysmans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Stirring the Nervous System by Erudite Phantasies</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Huysmans’ Idiosyncratic Criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Bleeding Suns and Haemorrhages of Stars</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gustave Moreau</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Work of Mad and Morbid Genius</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odilon Redon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Taste of Rotten-Ripeness</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Félicien Rops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>His Pestiferous Christ</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathias Grünewald</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Enfeebled by the Decay of Ideas</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vi
List of Illustrations

1. Paul Cardon dit Domac, 1903
   J.-K. Huysmans, 60 rue Babylone, 14 April 1903
   b/w photograph
   Archives Larousse, Paris, France

2. Henri Rivière, c.1887-89
   The Eiffel Tower: three workers on the scaffolding of a curving girder of the 'Campanile'
   Albumin print, 12 x 9cm
   Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France

3. Eugène Atget, 1899 or 1900
   Impasse Salembrière, rue Saint-Séverin
   Albumin print, 21.4 x 7.6cm
   Musée d'Orsay, Paris

4. Eugène Atget, 1899 or 1900
   Rue des Prêtres-Saint-Séverin, toward the Church, 1899
   Albumin print, 21.3 x 17cm
   Musée d'Orsay, Paris

5. Giovanni Boldini c. 1897
   Le Comte Robert de Montesquiou (1855-1921)
   Oil on canvas, 160 x 82.5cm
   Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France

6. Gustave Moreau, c. 1876
   Salomé (detail)
   Oil on canvas, 144 x 103.5cm
   Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Centre, Los Angeles

7. Odilon Redon, 1881
   Nightmare (detail)
   Charcoal and black chalk on paper, 46 x 36.5cm
   Collection State Museum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands

8. Félicien Rops, date unknown
   Satan Creates the Monsters (detail)
   Héliogravure, retouched, 18.8 x 23.9cm

9. Mathias Grünewald, c.1510-1516
   Isenheim Altarpiece. Crucifixion (detail)
   Oil on wood, 240 x 300 cm
   Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar

10. Mary Knights, 2004
    Hôpital St Louis
    Digital photograph
    Private collection, Adelaide

11. Félicien Rops, c. 1878-1881
    Les Cent Légers Croquis sans prétexte pour réjouir les honnêtes gens
    Black lead, crayon and watercolour on paper, 22 x 14.5 cm

12. Mary Knights, 2004
    Huysmans' grave, Montparnasse Cemetery, Paris
    Digital photograph
    Private collection, Adelaide

vii
13. Gustave Moreau, c. 1876
_Salomé_
Oil on canvas, 144 x 103.5cm
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Centre, Los Angeles

14. Gustave Moreau, c. 1876
_L'Apparition_
Watercolour on paper, 106 x 72.2cm
Musée du Louvre/Musée d'Orsay, Paris

15. Gustave Moreau, c. 1876
_Salomé, dite Salomé tatouée_
Oil on canvas, 92 x 60cm
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris

_Jupiter and Sémélé_
Oil on canvas, 212 x 118cm
Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris

17. Odilon Redon, 1877
_Head of a Martyr_
Charcoal, black & white chalk, cream paper, 37 x 36cm
Collection State Museum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands

18. Odilon Redon, 1878
_The Metal Ball_
Charcoal on paper, 41 x 36cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

19. Odilon Redon, 1881
_The Crying Spider_
Charcoal & black chalk on paper, 49.5 x 37.5 cm, 49.5 x 37.5cm
Private Collection, The Netherlands

20. Odilon Redon, 1881
_Nightmare_
Charcoal and black chalk on paper, 46 x 36.5cm
Collection State Museum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands

21. Odilon Redon, 1883
_Tadpole_
Charcoal on paper, 48 x 34cm
Collection State Museum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands

22. Odilon Redon, 1882
_The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Moves Towards Infinity_
Lithograph, 25.9 x 19.6cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York

23. Odilon Redon, 1878
_Eye-Balloon_
Charcoal on paper, 42.2 x 32.2cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York

24. Odilon Redon, 1883
_There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower_
Lithograph, 22.5 x 17.7cm
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

25. Odilon Redon, 1883
_The Misshapen Polyp Floated on the Shores, a Sort of Smiling and Hideous Cyclops_
Lithograph, 21.3 x 20cm
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
26. Rodolphe Bresdin, 1861

*The Good Samaritan*

Lithograph, 63.5 x 47cm

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

27. Odilon Redon, 1876

*Melancholy*

Charcoal, gouache, pastel and black chalk on paper, 36.8 x 35.7cm

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

28. Odilon Redon, 1870

*Holy Family*

Graphite on paper, 30.6 x 23.5cm

Private Collection, Winterthur, Switzerland

29. Félicien Rops, 1884

*Le Vice suprême* (frontispiece for Joséphin Péladan's novel)

Lead, gouache and crayon on paper, 22.8 x 15.5cm

30. Félicien Rops, date unknown

*Frontispice des oeuvres inutiles et nuisibles*

Héliogravure, also in the margin *La Sirène*, black lead. 46.5 x 32.5cm

31. Félicien Rops, c. 1887

*La Tour Eiffel typhallique*

Crayon, black lead, watercolour on paper, 47.2 x 31cm

32. Félicien Rops, c. 1882

*Les Sataniques. Le Calvaire*

Crayons on paper, 21 x 14.5cm

33. Félicien Rops, date unknown

*Satan Creates the Monsters*

Héliogravure, retouched, 18.8 x 23.9cm

34. Félicien Rops, 1882

*Les Sataniques. Satan semant l'ivraie (Satan Sowing Seeds)*

Héliogravure, retouched, 27.8 x 20.9cm

35. Félicien Rops, c. 1882

*Les Sataniques. The Idol*

Héliogravure, 28.2 x 20.9cm

36. Félicien Rops, c. 1882

*Les Sataniques. L'Enlèvement (The Abduction)*

Watercolour on paper, 26 x 18cm

37. Félicien Rops, c. 1882

*Les Sataniques. The Sacrifice*

Watercolour, crayons and gouache on paper, 28.5 x 18cm

38. Félicien Rops, c. 1884

*Les Diaboliques. A Dinner of Atheists*

Black lead, Conté crayon on paper, 24.6 x 17cm

39. Félicien Rops, 1878

*The Temptation of St Anthony*

Crayons and gouache on paper, 73.8 x 54.3cm

40. Félicien Rops, 1878

*Pornokrates*

Watercolour, pastel and gouache on paper, 78 x 48cm

41. Félicien Rops, date unknown

*Darwinique #1 or Transformisme #1*

Héliogravure, retouched, 12.7 x 16.5cm
42. Félicien Rops, date unknown
   *Darwinique #2 or Transformsme #2*
   Héliogravure, retouched, 12.7 x 16.5 cm

43. Mathias Grünewald, c.1510-1516
   *Isenheim Altarpiece, Crucifixion*
   Oil on wood, 240 x 300 cm
   Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar

44. Mathias Grünewald, c.1510-1516
   *Isenheim Altarpiece, Crucifixion (central panel)*
   Oil on wood
   Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar

45. Mathias Grünewald, c.1510-1516
   *Isenheim Altarpiece, The Meeting of St Anthony and St Paul*
   Oil on wood
   Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar

46. Mathias Grünewald, c.1510-1516
   *Isenheim Altarpiece, The Temptation of St Anthony*
   Oil on wood
   Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar

47. Mathias Grünewald, c.1510-1516
   *Isenheim Altarpiece, The Temptation of St Anthony (detail)*
   Oil on wood
   Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar

48. Mathias Grünewald, c.1510-1516
   *Isenheim Altarpiece, The Temptation of St Anthony (detail)*
   Oil on wood
   Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar

49. Mathias Grünewald, c.1510-1516
   *Isenheim Altarpiece, Crucifixion (detail)*
   Oil on wood
   Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar

50. Mary Knights, 2004
    *Hôpital St Louis, Paris*
    Digital photograph
    Private collection, Adelaide

51. Mary Knights, 2004
    *Hôpital St Louis, Paris*
    Digital photograph
    Private collection, Adelaide

52. André Taponier et Fred Boissonas, undated
    *J.-K. Huysmans*
    Photograph
    Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris
The face is grey, wearily alert, with a look of benevolent malice. At first sight it is commonplace, the features are ordinary, one seems to have seen it at the Bourse or the Stock Exchange. But gradually that strange, unvarying expression, that look of benevolent malice, grows upon you, as the influence of the man makes itself felt. I have seen Huysmans in his office: he was formerly an employee; I have seen him in a café, in various houses but I always see him in memory as I used to see him at the house of the bizarre Madame X. He leans back on the sofa, rolling a cigarette between his thin, expressive fingers, looking at no one and at nothing, while Madame X. moves about with solid vivacity in the midst of her extraordinary menagerie of bric-à-brac. The spoils of all the world are there, in that incredibly tiny salon; they lie underfoot, they climb up walls, they cling to screens, brackets, and tables; one of your elbows menaces a Japanese toy, the other a Dresden china shepherdess; all the colours of the rainbow clash in a barbaric discord of notes. And in a corner of this fantastic room, Huysmans lies back indifferently on the sofa, with the air of one perfectly resigned to the boredom of life. Something is said by my learned friend who is to write for the new periodical, or perhaps it is the young editor of the new periodical who speaks, or (if that were not impossible) the taciturn Englishman who accompanies me; and Huysmans, without looking up, and without taking the trouble to speak very distinctly, picks up the phrase, transforms it, more likely transpierces it, in a perfectly turned sentence, a phrase of impromptu elaboration. Perhaps it is only a stupid book that someone has mentioned, or a stupid woman; as he speaks, the book looms up before one, becomes monstrous in its dullness, a masterpiece and miracle of imbecility; the unimportant little woman grows into a slow horror before your eyes. It is always the unpleasant aspect of things that he seizes, but the intensity of his revolt from that unpleasantness bring a touch of the sublime into the very expression of his disgust. Every sentence is an epigram, and every epigram slaughters a reputation of an idea. He speaks with an accent as of pained surprise, an amused look of contempt, so profound that it becomes almost pity, for human imbecility.¹ —Arthur Symons, 1899

Introduction

Research Premise

Often considered to be merely the sickly and atrophied remnants of a degenerated Romantic movement, the Symbolists came into prominence in Paris in the late 1880s and 1890s. Initially Symbolism was an avant-garde literary movement influenced by the work of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)² that embraced writers working across a range of genres including Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898)³ and Paul Verlaine (1844-1896). In the visual arts Gustave Moreau (1836-1898) and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) were early proponents of Symbolism, a movement that was to include French artists as diverse as Odilon Redon (1840-1916), Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), Armand Point (1861-1932) and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Although marginalised by official academic Salons and the Expositions Universelles, in the 1890s a strong network of Symbolist writers and artists working across a wide range of artforms, including music, theatre and dance, was established in Paris, Pont-Aven, Brussels, Vienna, Berlin, Glasgow and London, and survey exhibitions were regularly held in major cultural centres of Europe.

While the Symbolists never had a ‘common programme to which every Symbolist subscribed’, in their art and writing the Symbolists articulated their affinity with Idealist concerns. It was, as Andrew Mangravite stated, a ‘romantic and visionary movement drawing freely from several varieties of idealist philosophy and was interested in fixing the finer shades of things unseen.’⁴

In developing new visual and poetic languages, the Symbolists were inspired by Charles Baudelaire’s Romantic poetics and theory of correspondences. Baudelaire

³ Mallarmé, who explored the limits of poetic form and language became identified as the leader of the Symbolist school and, along with Verlaine, had been closely aligned with the Parnassian poets. (Remy de Gourmont, ed., & Andrew Mangravite, ed. & trans., The Book of Masks: An Anthology of French Symbolist & Decadent Writing (London: Atlas Press, 1994), 216.)
⁴ de Gourmont & Mangravite, The Book of Masks, 7.
maintained that the tangible world was a reflection of the intangible and that Beauty was comprised of an ‘eternal, invariable element’ and a ‘relative, circumstantial element.’\(^5\) For Baudelaire a curious and sensitive artist could gain a glimmer of the Ideal through intense synaesthetic and hyper-sensual experiences. Rather than harking back to earlier standards of beauty or depicting a bucolic nature, Baudelaire encouraged artists to look to life in order to produce work that expressed the essence and morality of the modern age, a strange beauty\(^6\) which could be found in the bizarre and abject: a rotting corpse, the caught glance of a young widow, light refracted by shattering glass. Nature itself was for Baudelaire merely a confusion of symbols that could be used to articulate beauty.\(^7\) In their texts and images the Symbolists adopted strategies such as the fragmentation of text, idiosyncratic use of multi-valent symbols, synaesthetic and hyper-sensual imagery, along with ambiguity and obscurity.

Although claiming in their manifestos to be Idealists yearning to allude to aspects of an eternal and intangible reality in their work, many of the Symbolists teetered on the brink of nihilistic despair. In moments of disillusion they confronted the bleak realisation that the world is material and godless and existence a sheer, pointless, matter-of-fact without intrinsic meaning. Unwilling to adopt a position of pessimistic resignation about the nature of reality, as advocated by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), the Symbolists strove harder to embrace the sublime. In the face of nothingness they grasped for meaning, hurled themselves with reckless vigour into life and worldly pursuits, explored new sensual experiences, engaged with anarchic practices and dabbled in occult and bizarre spiritual cults. For some Symbolists, who adopted the values of Aestheticism and espoused ideas similar to those of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the meaninglessness of life could be redeemed by Art.

While the Symbolist’s nihilistic tendencies were recognised by peers and critics in relation to the poets, they have not been adequately acknowledged in regard to the visual artists. In this thesis, focusing on the art critic and novelist Joris-Karl

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Huysmans (1848-1907), I consider the Symbolists’ claims of Idealism. I argue that the power of Huysmans’ critical insights, while aligned with the Symbolist movement, stemmed not from Idealist convictions but from metaphysical questioning and anxiety as he wavered on the brink of an intellectual and spiritual abyss. Having outlined the evolution of Huysmans’ aesthetic and metaphysical position I consider how the complexity of his ideas – often articulated through references to disease and mortality juxtaposed against Symbolist tropes alluding to the immutable and eternal – informed his critical approach and elucidated nihilistic tendencies in the work of artist Mathias Grünwald, and Symbolist artists Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon and Félicien Rops.

Research Methodology

I am taking an intertextual and hermeneutic approach to my research which is primarily located within the discipline of Art Theory. For the purposes of this thesis, I have adopted the position that images are ‘textual’ and that an intertextual interpretation acknowledges that a text does not exist in isolation from other texts, or function as a closed system. Images and writing are not oppositional; rather there is an entangled relationship between the processes of seeing, reading, writing, production and interpretation of both images and text. This approach, outlined in Peter Wagner’s Reading Iconotexts: From Swift to the French Revolution (1995), has been influenced by the interdisciplinary and intertextual models of analysis applied to texts and images pioneered by Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and Julia Kristeva (b.1941). As Barthes noted, the recognition of the integrated relationship of texts is embedded in its etymology:

...the word text is derived from the Latin textus, meaning tissue or texture (that which is woven). One may therefore compare the implicit (unmarked) and explicit (marked) allusions in any given text to the knots in a textile fabric or mat: such knots ‘make a point’ by introducing new threads into the fabric being woven.\(^8\)

My methodology has also been influenced by the interdisciplinary approach of contemporary cultural theorists and writers such as Barbara Maria Stafford who in

Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine (1993) investigates visual strategies used in the eighteenth century to articulate and interpret ideas and things not visible across the disciplines of visual art and medicine. This thesis is also influenced by a series of essays compiled by Mieke Bal in The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation (1999) that focus on cultural analysis and the engagement with a subject from more than one disciplinary perspective.

In considering how to approach and analyse Huysmans' art critical position I have been influenced by a number of key writers. Firstly, Robert Baldick's (1927-1972) brilliant biography on Huysmans titled The Life of J.-K. Huysmans (1955) convincingly argues that the works are to a great extent autobiographical and reflect Huysmans' personal metaphysical and aesthetic position. Also Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) who, in Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930 (1969) identified defining aspects of Symbolist writing in key texts and traced the influence of these in the work of later writers such as James Joyce (1882-1941), Paul Valéry (1871-1945), Marcel Proust (1871-1922) and William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). I found Gaston Bachelard's (1884-1962) psychoanalytical approach in Lautréamont (1939) invaluable. Although he considered the importance of the relationship between biography and literature negligible, I found his critical engagement with the text insightful. Bachelard identified subliminal psychological complexes, such as impulsive bestial cruelty, and explored how these were articulated through animal references and tropes. Linda Marie Walker's discussion of Hélène Cixous' (b. 1937) engagement with reading and writing, and observation that Cixous entered into texts to explore resonances and open up potential for interpretation, rather than attacking them in a dialectical, destructive, oppositional manner has been influential.9 I have also read texts by Georges Bataille (1897-1962), including 'Coincidences', which gives insight into the writing of the Story of the Eye (1928).10 In 'Coincidences' Bataille reflected on memories of his father, a blind syphilitic invalid, whose eyes would roll revealing only the whites as he pissed uninhibited, with pleasure or relief, into a container kept under his armchair. This

9 Linda Marie Walker on Hélène Cixous, C3@CW seminars, SASA, UniSA, April/May 2007.
text insists on the important capacity of the writer to freely engage with ideas, to
disregard repressive boundaries, to bridge gaps of experience and imagination in
order to confront the extremities of human experience.

In my research, I read a wide range of texts including letters, exhibition catalogues,
novels, manifestoes and criticism. Almost all of Huysmans’ published works, along
with book reviews, interviews, criticism and obituaries written by his
contemporaries, are listed in the bibliography compiled by Dr Brendan King on the
website www.huysmans.org which he established in 1997 as an academic research
resource focusing on J.-K. Huysmans. Access to this material has been facilitated by
the accumulated wealth of texts that have been translated and published, and are held
in libraries or available on-line.

Most of Huysmans’ fiction and many key critical texts and letters have been
translated and published in English.11 In King’s bibliography, which lists a number
of English, Spanish, German, Italian and Dutch translations of Huysmans’ texts, nine
English translations of A Rebours including the first version abridged and translated
by John Howard (Leiber & Lewis, 1922) are listed, as well as eleven English
translations of Lâ-Bas, including Down There translated by Keene Wallis (A & C
Boni, 1924). Today at least four English translations of A Rebours are available. I
have used Against Nature translated by Robert Baldick (Penguin Books, 1959), and
Against the Grain: A Rebours, an unabridged republication of the 1931 Three Sisters
Press translation (Dover Publications, 1969), which has an important preface written
by Huysmans twenty years after the book was first released. Invaluable to my
research is a collection of Huysmans’ letters which give insight into key professional
and personal relationships that were translated into English and compiled by Barbara
Beaumont in her book The Road From Decadence: From Brothel to Cloister.

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11 English translations of most of Huysmans’ novels and short stories are readily available. In the
last twelve years Dedalus Books have published full-text translations of: Lâ Bas (1891), Marthe,
histoire d’une fille (1876), and Croquis parisiens (1880) translated by Brendan King; La
Cathédrale (1898) translated by Clara Bell; L’Oblate (1903) translated by Terry Hale and En
route (1895), translated by W. Fleming. Les Soeurs Vatard (1879) translated by James Babcock,
was published as The Vatard Sisters by The University of Kentucky Press, in 1983; En rade
I visited the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris, in order to access the extensive collection of Huysmans’ documents, photographs and ephemera accumulated by Pierre Lambert, which includes youthful letters to Arij Prins, hand-written pages from his manuscript of Saint Lydwine, notes on Gustave Moreau’s artwork, funeral cards and black-edged notices of his death.

Collections of correspondences by Huysmans’ contemporaries such as Mallarmé’s letters selected and translated by Rosemary Lloyd have been valuable in giving insight into the milieu Huysmans was working within while aligned with the Symbolist movement. Also important have been anthologies and critical texts that reveal the development of the aesthetic theories of the Symbolist movement. Henri Dorra’s Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology (1994) includes over sixty texts by English, American, French, Russian and German artists, writers and critics. Also useful have been Remy de Gourmont’s Book of Mask: Symbolist & Decadent Writing in the 1890s (1994) an annotated anthology of Symbolist and Decadent writing, edited and translated by Andrew Mangravite; and Asti Hustvedt’s anthology of fiction The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy and Perversion From Fin-de-siècle France (1997). Contextualising the Symbolists within the history of Western art and culture, Art in Theory 1815-1900 (1998) and Art in Theory 1900-1990 (1993), edited by Charles Harrison & Paul Wood with Jason Gaiger, have given access to key texts written on Western art spanning one hundred and seventy five years.

To study relevant artwork I have accessed images reproduced in books, exhibition catalogues and websites. Wide and at times eclectic surveys of the field are available in art books such as Robert Delevoy’s Symbolists and Symbolism (1978) and catalogues and websites published by collection-based museums. More critical and focused monographs and exhibition catalogues such as Félicien Rops (1998), and Odilon Redon 1840-1916 (1994) edited by Douglas Druick have been important to my research.

While vast numbers of images are accessible in catalogues, books and via the internet, seeing the artwork first-hand was invaluable. As well as accessing artwork held in Australian collections and temporary exhibitions touring Australia, I visited exhibitions and collections in galleries, museums and libraries in Paris, Colmar,
London, Brussels and Vienna in order to study particular works of art by Symbolist artists including Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, Fernand Khnopff, Félicien Rops and Gustave Klimt; along with key historical works that were pivotal to Huysmans’ critical engagement while aligned with the Symbolists, such as Mathius Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece.

**Synopsis of Chapters**

1. **Exhausted and Degenerate – Literature Review**
   Symbolism emerged in Paris as an avant-garde literary movement and became prominent in major cultural centres across Europe in the late 1880s and 1890s before falling out of favour and into relative oblivion. In this chapter the relative marginalisation of Huysmans’ oeuvre and the Symbolist movement by art critics and historians for much of the twentieth century is discussed and the literature is reviewed. In particular I focus on the Symbolists’ Idealism which many of their contemporaries and subsequent art critics accepted as a given, a simplistic position that has dominated primary discourses – despite recognition of the complex metaphysical uncertainty and nihilistic tendencies alluded to in the work of many Symbolist writers.

2. **The Sceptic Who Would Fain Believe – Joris-Karl Huysmans**
   Huysmans’ articulated his shifting aesthetic position and metaphysical questioning in his novels, art criticism and letters. In this chapter I trace his rejection of Émile Zola (1840-1902) and Naturalism, which was definitively marked by the publication of his novel *Against Nature (A Rebours)* in 1884. I explore the complexity of his Idealism while aligned with the Symbolist movement, which paradoxically, was undermined by anxiety and shadowed by nihilistic despair. In the late 1880s disillusioned and disgusted by the banality of daily life and loathing the age he lived in, Huysmans dabbled in spiritualism and immersed himself in the occult. As revealed in *Là-Bas* (1891), fascinated by the intense suffering and mortality revealed in Grünewald’s religious paintings of the crucifixion, and driven by a desire to express the supernatural in art, Huysmans reappraised both Symbolism and Naturalism and devised the idea of a mystical realism in art. Subsequently Huysmans converted to Catholicism with as much fervour as he had embraced the occult.
3. Stirring the Nervous System by Erudite Phantasies

As well as writing critical reviews, articles and essays in conventional prose form, Huysmans melded art and literary criticism with fiction, integrating it as a major thread through his novels. The overarching themes articulated in Huysmans’ criticism while a Symbolist were his metaphysical search, his very particular and fastidious aesthetic sensibility that pivoted on decadence and perversity, and intertextual relationships between artworks and literature. In this chapter I argue that one of the most distinctive aspects of his critical writing is his frequent allusion to sickness, mortality and decay, which undermine hypersensual and synesthetic allusions to the Ideal. Huysmans juxtaposed and intertwined these two sets of references or tropes to elucidate a tension between Idealism and nihilism. To explicate this aspect of Huysmans’ work, I consider Gaston Bachelard’s discussion in Lautréamont in which he analyses the use of animal references to explore bestial aggression in Les Chants de Maldoror (1869) by Comte de Lautréamont (the nom de plume of Isidore Ducasse, 1846-1870).

In the following chapters I consider Huysmans’ critical analysis of the work of Symbolist artists Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon and Félicien Rops, and the paintings of crucifixions by Mathias Grünewald.

4. Bleeding Suns and Haemorrhages of Stars – Gustave Moreau

In Against Nature Huysmans dedicated several pages to the appraisal of two related images by Gustave Moreau: Salomé an oil painting on canvas, and L’Apparition a watercolour on paper. Undermining the artists’ Idealist intentions, Huysmans juxtaposed Moreau’s images with Mallarmé’s poem Hérodiate, effectively emphasising the pathological characteristics of the characters and reveals nihilistic tendencies.

12 Gustave Moreau, 1876, Salomé, oil on canvas, 144 x 103.5cm, Armand Hammer Collection, UCLA, Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Centre, Los Angeles.
13 Gustave Moreau, 1876, L’Apparition, watercolour on paper, 106 x 72.2cm, Musée du Louvre/Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
5. *Work of a Mad and Morbid Genius – Odilon Redon*

Huysmans wrote about Redon’s work in a range of contexts including in *Against Nature*; a brief review in *L’Art moderne* (1882); and an extensive critique titled ‘The Monster’ published in *Certains* (1889).\(^\text{15}\) Huysmans perceived scepticism and nihilism in Redon’s visions of microbes, parasites, monsters and deformed demons. As well as articulating the tension he perceived in Redon’s work between Idealism and nihilism Huysmans drew out connections and very specific threads of meaning associated with evil and sadism. He did this by considering Redon’s work in relation to Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874); religious bestiaries; images depicting religious tortures by Jan Luyken (1649-1712); bizarre etchings by Rodolphe Bresdin (1822-1885); and the nightmare visions of Francisco Goya (1746-1828) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), and Comte de Lautréamont’s unrelentingly sadistic passages.

6. *Taste of Rotten-Ripeness – Félicien Rops*

For Huysmans, Félicien Rops’ erotic and anti-clerical drawings illuminated a sheer satanic evil. Huysmans insisted that Rops’ images were of a different order to merely lewd images of cavorting soldiers and frisky peasants. Rather, Rops’ images revealed an evil akin to the sadistic nihilism that was articulated through the callous and ferocious cruelty of tales by Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly (1808-1889), or that which was celebrated at Black Sabbaths by Huysmans’ colleagues who were involved in the occult.

7. *His Pestiferous Christ – Mathias Grünewald*

Mathias Grünewald’s paintings of the crucifixion are arguably the most harrowing in western art history. In these gruelling religious images Huysmans sensed anxiety, doubt and nihilistic despair. Huysmans’ critical engagement with Grünewald’s images influenced, and was informed by, his shifting metaphysical and religious positions. Reappraising both Naturalism and Symbolism he advocated ‘mystical realism’. Huysmans’ questioning and doubt gave way to the certainties of faith after he converted to Catholicism. By the time of his death the meaning that he ascribed to disease shifted to a belief that suffering and mortality were God-given and a blessed

opportunity to transcend the flesh, focus the will and spirit, expunge sins and reduce
time in purgatory. 16

8. Enfeebled by the Decay of Ideas – Conclusion
While the Symbolist’s nihilistic tendencies have been recognised by peers and critics
in relation to the poets, they have not been adequately acknowledged in regard to the
visual artists. Huysmans’ criticism offers fascinating insights into the work of
Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, Félicien Rops and Mathias Grünewald. In
particular, Huysmans’ critical approach elucidates nihilistic tendencies in the work of
Symbolist artists that have been relatively overlooked.

16 J.-K. Huysmans, ‘Letter to Leon Leclaire, 11 March 1907’, The Road From Decadence, From
I am convinced that, like a lightning rod that attracts the lightning, the Eiffel Tower causes all the storms that formerly passed safely overhead to fall on Paris now...and that some day they will have to tear the building down. This is in a sense a revenge of nature against science, which annoys it, worries it, and tries to penetrate its impenetrable secrets.\textsuperscript{17} —Edmond de Goncourt, Saturday 15 May 1883

His tower looks like a chimney stack under construction, a carcass waiting to be filled up with cut stone or brick. One cannot imagine that this funnel-shaped grillwork has been completed and...will remain the way it is...[with] no decorative ornament, timid as it might be, no fantasy, no artistic vestige of any kind. When entering the tower, one is faced with a chaos of interpenetrating beams riveted with bolts, hammered through with nails. One can only think of buttresses erected to support an invisible collapsing building... The tower could be the steeple of Our Lady Of the Used Goods Trade, a steeple deprived of its bells but armed with a cannon that announces the opening and closing of services and calls the faithful to the liturgical celebration of the capital.\textsuperscript{18}
—Joris-Karl Huysmans, 1889


between Huysmans' life, his shifting aesthetic and religious positions, and his oeuvre. He also recognised the consistency of Huysmans’ decadent aesthetic.

Baldick’s biography of Huysmans was preceded by less than a year by the first, often inaccurate and much less illuminating biography, *The First Decadent: Being the Strange Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (1954) by James Laver (1899-1975), written without access to the primary sources available to Baldick. Laver noted, as did Baldick, that there was a close autobiographical relationship between Huysmans and the main characters in his novels and discerned that they revealed aspects of the author’s personality. He also suggested that before *Against Nature* the protagonists had been ‘diminutions of himself.’ In *Against Nature* Huysmans placed his own character in a world with more opportunities and an income much higher than he received from the Ministry of the Interior. In presenting the details of Huysmans’ life Laver at times slipped without discrimination between the author and literary characters, liberties that, along with factual discrepancies picked up by Baldick, were the subject of much criticism.22

On his death in 1969 Lambert bequeathed forty-seven folio volumes of Huysmans’ letters and documents to the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Paris, finally giving the public access to the material. In 1989 two hundred letters from the Lambert collection and the archives of the Abbey St Martin in Ligugè were selected and translated into English for the first time by Barbara Beaumont and published in *From Brothel to Cloister: Selected Letters of J.-K. Huysmans.*23 According to Dr Brendan King, while collections of Huysmans’ letters addressed to individuals have been published, a volume of his complete correspondence has yet to be published in French or English, although an edition is planned.24

The letters reveal different facets of the author as he corresponded with priests and occultists, along with artists and writers such as Zola, Mallarmé, Edmond de Goncourt, Verlaine and Redon. Intimate details of Huysmans’ daily activities, sexual proclivities, illnesses, thoughts and ideas on art and literature are discussed. He

frankly articulated his opinions on the work of his peers, reflected on political and social issues of his time, such as the Dreyfus affair, modernity and democracy, and outlined his aesthetic positions, shifting religious stance and the complexities of his metaphysical ideas.

While Huysmans’ correspondence leaves little doubt that he drew on personal experience in his novels, there has been ongoing curiosity and debate about who des Esseintes, the key character in Against Nature, and Huysmans’ other protagonists were modelled on, the extent to which they are autobiographical, and the relevance of this to interpretation of his oeuvre. Baldick noted that to develop the character of des Esseintes Huysmans drew on several eccentric public figures and personal acquaintances including Ludwig II of Bavaria, Edmond de Goncourt, Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly and Francis Poictevin. Another model for des Esseintes character was the aesthete Count Robert de Montesquiou (1855-1921) ‘the perfect type of exhausted and degenerate aristocrat’ who was also the model for Proust’s Charlus. Within weeks of Against Nature being published Edmond de Goncourt (1822-1896) recorded in his journal that:

Montesquiou-Fezensac came in, the man who is the model for the novel A Rebours [by Huysmans]. Looking at him and listening to him today with a certain deliberate curiosity, I found that he has far more human quality than des Esseintes, who is merely a caricature of him, only an overdrawn portrait. There is no denying that he is a highly mannered individual, but a very distinguished one, who may well have genuine literary talent.

Christopher Lloyd, who along with Wallace Fowlie (1919-1998), considered Huysmans’ work in relation to the development of the French novel, reflected on different interpretative approaches to Huysmans’ work. Comparing frank autobiographical readings to textual analysis disregarding the authors’ intention or life experience, Lloyd argued that both approaches were flawed. He insisted that those critics who refer to Huysmans and Durtal – the protagonist of four of Huysmans’ novels – interchangeably and without discrimination, are ‘making a somewhat facile and ingenuous identification between biographical and fictional,’

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blurring facts and gaining less insight and clarity. 28 He also frowned on the ‘rigorous textual analysis of some modern criticism’ which refused any reference to biographical data or historical context, using instead linguistic or philosophical models. These, he suggested – presumably alluding to work such as Julia Kristeva’s The Revolution in Poetic Language (1974) – are then presented ‘in a technical vocabulary largely unintelligible to the layman’ and limited the study of literature to ‘the specialised concern of a handful of “professional” readers.’ 29

While taking heed of Lloyd’s concerns, for the purposes of this thesis I will follow Baldick’s suggestion that while drawing on the foibles of a range of figures, the characters are substantially autobiographical, voicing Huysmans’ thoughts and shifting philosophical ideas. This position is supported by the first-hand account of critic Félix Fénéon (1861-1944), an acquaintance of Huysmans and close friend of Mallarmé, who stated in 1886 after the publication of Against Nature and Là-Bas, that in his novels Huysmans:

always uses his protagonists as mouthpieces for his likes and dislikes: sudden changes in the weather, alcoholic strength, the pungency of tobacco, the noise of the trams, the stupidity of the girls, the toughness of the beef. 30

It is also supported by a letter dated November 1891 in which Huysmans reflected on his changing metaphysical position and artistic direction: ‘an evolution has slowly and imperceptibly taken place in me, but I believe that it can be traced in my books.’ 31

Today Huysmans’ oeuvre remains largely unknown in the English-speaking world. Referring to Against Nature Simon Callow notes in the introduction to his English translation of Huysmans’ book of essays and vignettes With the Flow (A vau l’eau, 1882) that ‘...for the English novel-reading public, Joris-Karl Huysmans is to all intents and purposes a one-novel author, and even that novel is more celebrated by notorious association than actually read.’ 32

29 Ibid.
While today he is best known for his Symbolist novel *Against Nature*, Huysmans was a prolific writer. He published eleven novels, as well as art and literary criticism, wrote short stories and essays and regularly corresponded with a wide circle of artists, writers, priests, acolytes and occultists. For thirty-two years as an official in the Ministry of the Interior, Huysmans also churned out bureaucratic memos and letters dealing with issues of the state, though Baldick suspected that he spent ‘six hours, copying out official letters, adding up columns of figures, and – like so many other young authors employed in various French ministries – working on his own books and articles.’

As well as reflecting Huysmans’ shifting religious and metaphysical stance, his oeuvre reveals his intense scrutiny of the world around him, a decadent sensibility and a sophisticated engagement with art and literature. His early works in the eight years that he was aligned with Zola and the Médan group included vignettes and sketches of the harsh material reality of Parisian life, art criticism supporting the

34 Huysmans’ published work includes:

- *Le Drageoir à épices* (Paris: Dentu, 1874)
- *Marthe, histoire d’une fille* (Brussels: Gay, 1876)
- *Croquis Parisiens* (Paris: Vaton, 1880)
- *En Ménage* (Paris: Charpentier, 1881)
- *A Vau l’Eau* (Brussels: Kistemaeckers, 1882)
- *L’Art moderne* (Paris: Charpentier, 1883)
- *A Rebours* (Paris: Charpentier, 1884)
- *En Rade* (Paris: Tresse et Stock, 1887)
- *Un Dilemme* (Paris: Tresse et Stock, 1887)
- *Certains* (Paris: Tresse et Stock, 1889)
- *La Bièvre* (Paris: Genonceaux, 1890)
- *Là-Bas* (Paris: Tresse et Stock, 1891)
- *En Route* (Paris: Tresse et Stock, 1895)
- *La Cathédrale* (Paris: Stock, 1898)
- *La Bièvre et Saint-Séverin* (Paris: Stock, 1898)
- *La Magie en Poitou: Gilles de Raïs* (Ligugé, 1899)
- *La Bièvre* (Paris: Genonceaux, 1890)
- *La Bièvre; Les Gobelins; Saint-Séverin* (Paris: Société de Propagation des Livres d’Art, 1901)
- *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* (Paris: Stock, 1901)
- *De Tout* (Paris: Stock, 1902)
- *Esquisse biographique sur Don Bosco* (Paris, 1902)
- *L’Oblat* (Paris: Stock, 1903)
- *Le Quartier Notre-Dame* (Paris: Librairie de la Collection des Dix, 1905)
- Also, with Léon Hennique, *Pierrot sceptique* (Paris: Rouveyre, 1881)
Impressionists, and naturalistic novels. *Sac au dos* (1880) (*Knapsacks at the ready*), first self-published in 1874 as *Le Drageoir à épices* (*A Dish of Spices*), is an unromanticised account of Huysmans’ time as a conscripted soldier in the 6th Battalion of the Garde Mobile in the lead up to the defeat of the French army at Sedan in 1870, the overarching themes being dysentery and boredom; and *Marthe, histoire d’une fille* (1876) (*Marthe: the story of a whore*), to a great extent documents the tawdry and impoverished aspects of Huysmans’ first, youthful and short-lived, domestic relationship with a mistress.

The publication of *Against Nature* in 1884 definitively marked Huysmans’ break from Naturalism, engagement with Idealism, and affiliation with the Symbolists. In his Symbolist phase, as well as art criticism, Huysmans wrote a strange and critically unsuccessful novel titled *En Rade* (1887) set in the dilapidated Château de Lourps in which he and his mistress Anna Meunier along with her two daughters stayed in 1886. Rather than the idyll and escape that the bored husband and ailing wife Jacques and Louise Maries hoped for, the protagonists find instead discomfort, disillusionment and despair. Passages of brutal realism – including descriptions of the birthing of a calf and escalating symptoms of a neurological disease and death of a cat which pre-empt and foretell the manner of Louise’s own physical degeneration – were contrasted with vivid dream passages in which subconscious thoughts, nightmares and supernatural phenomena are made tangible.

Huysmans’ increasing interest in spiritualism, Satanism and exploration of the occult scene in Paris in the late 1880s, culminated in the publication of *Là-Bas* (1891) (*Down There*). On the pretext of researching the murderer Gilles de Rais, the protagonist Durtal immersed himself in the occult world of late nineteenth-century Paris. As well as documenting the contemporary occult milieu and exploring the nature of evil, in *Là-Bas* Huysmans reappraises Naturalism and Symbolism. Driven by his desire to articulate the reality of the supernatural and inspired by Grünewald’s paintings of crucifixion, he advocates the idea of mystical realism in art and literature.

In his lifetime Huysmans’ most commercially successful novel was *La Cathédrale* (1898) which explained the medieval Catholic symbology embedded in the architecture of Chartres Cathedral. Over 18,000 copies of *La Cathédrale* were sold in the first month it was off the press. Along with *En Route* (1895), in which the protagonist Durtal shifts from satanism towards religion and undertakes a retreat in a Trappist monastery; and *L'Oblate* (1903) in which Durtal becomes an oblate or lay member of a Benedictine monastery, *La Cathédrale* reveals Huysmans’ immersion in Catholicism, search for a sanctuary and the strength of his new conviction.

While Huysmans’ oeuvre remains largely unknown in the English-speaking world there have been a number of important studies undertaken in recent years from various and at times conflicting perspectives, each of which bring valuable insights.

Interestingly, Ruth Antosh in *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J.-K. Huysmans* (1986) argued that the notion that Huysmans was a ‘staunch Naturalist who later broke suddenly with Naturalism and went on to become a decadent and a mystic’ was simplistic. Rather she argued convincingly that a ‘latent spiritualism’ was evident in Huysmans’ early novels. Antosh carefully considered Huysmans’ engagement with the inner life of his protagonists who invariably felt ‘threatened by a hostile world’ and wanted to ‘withdraw and escape into an ideal, personal world of tranquillity and order.’ Antosh recognised that successive novels reveal the evolution of a singular personality. Each of the protagonists sought refuge from the ‘ugliness and depravity’ of reality in illusionary worlds represented by ‘an ideal room’, which she suggests is at once a material architectural structure and a representation of the protagonist’s psyche, fears, desires and hidden obsessions. Antosh also considered that the effect of Huysmans’ frequent evocation of memories, reveries and dreams have the effect of ‘blending inner and outer perception...blurring of distinctions between illusion and reality.’ Interpreting the protagonists’ anxiety as psychological rather than philosophical, Antosh suggests

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38 Ibid., 106.
39 Ibid., 81.
40 Ibid.,106.
41 Ibid., 9.
that as well as being distressed by the world around them, they are not at peace with themselves, and that Huysmans’ protagonists sought ‘freedom from the self’ and a ‘mystical annihilation’ but remained ‘fettered by reality’. 42

In contrast to Antosh’s position, which downplays the impact of Naturalism, Charles Maingon in *La Médecine dans l’Oeuvre de J.K. Huysmans* (1994) emphasised the enduring impact of the Naturalist movement on Huysmans’ oeuvre. While noting Huysmans’ interest in charting the psychology of his protagonists, Maingon recognised the accuracy of Huysmans’ graphic descriptions of ailments and symptoms and the currency of his research into disease processes and medical treatments, which reveal the legacy of Naturalists. Maingon noted that in France at the end of the nineteenth century the interest in progress, scientific and medical advances and the theories of Darwin, Pasteur and Charcot, was reflected in the work of many novelists including Flaubert, Zola and Proust. Of particular interest, Maingon systematically scrutinised Huysmans’ texts and identified clusters of diseases most frequently referred to in each work. Maingon noted that in *Against Nature*, as well as references to hereditary traits and degeneration, the most prevalent pathologies are gastrointestinal problems, sadism and syphilis. 43

Maingon also recognised Huysmans’ Baudelairian sensibility, the way disease impacts on the characters in his novels, and the obsessive intensity of Huysmans’ descriptions that are voyeuristic and often include gratuitous detail – for instance Huysmans’ outlining des Esseintes use of ‘santonine’ for urinary incontinence. 44 These characteristics reveal that the text, is not just providing descriptive and realistic detail, but is heavily laden with complex layers of meaning. 45

Medical historian Peter Koehler, also recognised Huysmans’ interest in the psychology of his protagonists, in his exploration of the relationship between medicine and literature in ‘About Medicine and the Arts: Charcot and French Literature at the fin-de-siècle’ (2001). He discerns a transition in *Against Nature* and

42 Ibid., 81.
44 Ibid., 50.
Là-Bas from a positivist to a metaphysical attitude to medicine. Huysmans’ shift is evident, Koehler suggests, by the evolution from ‘decadence in the first and to the exploration of spiritism in the latter novel.’

Daniel Grojnowski in his study titled *Le Sujet d’A rebours* (1996) recognises the intertextual nature of *Against Nature* and Huysmans’ use of literary references. Citing Barthes, Grojnowski notes that the novel is made up of a tissue of texts. In discreet fragmented sections Grojnowski explores various aspects of the novel including: the semiotic references in name of the protagonist; literary references; the novel’s history; Huysmans’ engagement with the Salome myth; Huysmans’ use of humour; and similarities between Huysmans’ ideas and those of Nietzsche and Schopenhaur.

In 2004 Robert Ziegler published a chronological overview of much of Huysmans’ oeuvre titled *The Mirror of Divinity: The World and Creation in J.-K. Huysmans*. By focusing on Huysmans’ novels and other works including *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* (1901) (Saint Lydwine of Schiedam) and *Les Foules de Lourdes* (1906) (The Crowds of Lourdes) Ziegler traced the course of Huysmans’ shift from Naturalism to Catholicism and linked the successive protagonists with the author.

Of *Against Nature* Ziegler mused that it ‘remained a singularly unapproachable work that, by its structure, tone, vocabulary, and meaning, discourages reader access.’ He also called it a ‘maddening and mysterious encapsulation of the Decadent worldview’ and noted that ‘whether facetious or sincere, it embodied the unique literary project to destroy reality and turn it into art.’ Ziegler insisted that of paramount importance for Huysmans was art and suggested that ‘in the beginning’ the Image preceded the Word, and that in Huysmans’ writing, ‘[b]efore the

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48 Ibid., 17-20.
49 Ibid., 33.
50 Ibid., 97.
world...there was the museum.’ For Ziegler: ‘Ultimately, the implications of the Decadent aesthetic formulated in A rebours are nihilistic.’

Ziegler adopted a psychoanalytical approach to Huysmans’ oeuvre and suggested that the protagonists, particularly des Esseintes and Folantin, suffered from ‘defective mothering’ and that for Huysmans’ ‘badly mothered’ characters ‘art cannot substitute for union with the one who has been lost’ compelling them to resume the quest for a ‘rarer, purer, more spiritualised nutrient that will slake the thirst for mother’s milk’. While drawing attention to nihilistic tendencies Ziegler’s heavy-handed psychoanalytical approach diminished the opportunity for a more nuanced engagement with Huysmans’ metaphysical quandaries. For Ziegler des Esseintes and Folantin’s ‘embrace of Schopenhaurian nihilism’ had ‘an anorexic, penitential quality’ caused by being exposed to ‘the world’s repellent cuisine’ and abandoned by a wholesome, nurturing mother. Ziegler also recognised the emphasis on sickness in Huysmans narratives, which he attributed to maternal neglect – ‘a response to loneliness, a lament over a loss’ – that could only be alleviated by ‘maternal succour or the miraculous intercession of the Virgin’.

The Symbolists Overlooked

The general amnesia by art historians and theorists in the first half of the twentieth century was not limited to Huysmans alone but extended to most of those associated with the Symbolist movement. In light of the significant amount of widely documented cultural activity across Europe and beyond, it is surprising how little attention they received.

Symbolism was initially a movement of avant-garde poets. Writers working across a range of genres soon became involved, among whom can be counted Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), Jules Laforgue (1860-1887), Gustave Kahn (1859-1936), Édouard Dujardin (1861-1949), Jean Moréas (1856-1910), Maurice Materlinck (1862-1949), Paul Bourget (1852-1935) Téodor de

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52 Ibid., 339.
53 Ibid., 139-140.
54 Ibid., 339.
55 Ibid., 140.
56 Notable exceptions being Paul Gauguin, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé.
Wyzewa (1863-1917) and Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam (1838-1889). Gustave Moreau and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) were early proponents of Symbolism in the visual arts that included French artists as diverse as Odilon Redon, Joséphin Péladan, Armand Point (1861-1932) and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903).

The Symbolists emerged into prominence in Paris in the 1880s and 1890s. Although marginalised by official academic Salons and the *Expositions Universelles* the movement quickly spread across Europe, disseminating through networks of avant-garde artists and writers, via exhibitions, photographic reproductions and journals. In the 1890s exhibitions of Symbolist work were regularly held in major European cultural centres. The most effective in promoting the movement were: in Paris the *Salon des Indépendants, Salons de la Rose+Croix* and *Les Artistes de l’Âme*; in Brussels *Les XX*; and in Austria and Germany, the Viennese Secession and the Munich Secession. Symbolist artists and writers clustered in cosmopolitan centres, established links across Europe and travelled relatively frequently. Viennese artist Josef Engelhart (1864-1941) for instance journeyed to Germany, France, Belgium and England to invite artists to exhibit in the Secession. Of the trip he recorded that he met with ‘sculptors Rodin, Bartholomé, Lagae, the painters Besnard, Boldini, Brangwan, Carrière, Dagnan-Bouveret, Dill, Herterich, Khnopff, Klinger, Lavery, Meunier, Puvis de Chavannes, Raffaëlli, Roll, Rops, Sargent, Swan, Uhde, Whistler and others.’

A proliferation of petites revues and journals that engaged specifically with art and culture crossed national boundaries and often included translated texts, contributing substantially to the internationalisation of the Symbolist movement by distributing reproductions of artwork, poetry, theoretical manifestoes, essays, serialised novels and critical reviews through avant-garde networks. Frequently artists and writers identified with the Symbolist movement rather than with local culture and, when reflecting on the development of the movement, referred to periodicals and manifestoes published in them. The Symbolist movement was covered by a number of international publications such as the Viennese Secession journal *Ver Sacrum*.

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(1898-1903); in Germany *Jugend* (1896-1918), *Blätter für die Kunst* (1892-1919) and *Pan* (1895-1920s); and in England *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897), *The Studio: an illustrated magazine of fine and applied art* (1893-1964), *The Savoy* (Jan-Dec 1896), and *Cosmopolis* (1896-1898) which was published in New York and London between 1896-1898, included French and German sections, and was the first to publish Mallarmé’s poem *Un Coup de Dés* in May 1897.59

The relatively small amount of research undertaken on the Symbolist movement compared to other movements of the late 1880-90s, such as the Impressionists and Naturalists, has meant that their contribution to art history has been undervalued and misrepresentations have not been challenged. For instance a significant biography of Mallarmé, *The Life of Mallarmé* (1941) by Henri Mondor (1885-1962),60 was not written until a century after the poet was born.61 The first biography on Odilon Redon, titled *Odilon Redon, peintre, dessinateur, et graveur*, was published in 1923.62 The author, André Mellerio, who is often cited as the first historian of Symbolism, drew from Redon’s autobiographical notes (1867-1915), titled *À Soi-Même (To Myself)* – or translated more precisely “to oneself” – which were published posthumously in 1922.63 However, according to Mellerio’s scholarly papers that have recently come to light, the text seriously misrepresented the artist as it was revised, structured and edited by Redon’s widow prior to publication: ‘the work that, for over seventy years, has passed as the direct expression of the artist’s innermost thoughts turns out in fact to be a highly, and often willfully, inaccurate document.’64

Similarly, in a biography of Arthur Rimbaud written soon after his death in 1897, the intention of the author Paterné Berrichon – the husband of Rimbaud’s sister Isabelle – was to clear the family name. As well as recasting Rimbaud’s life in a laudatory light, by insisting that the poet had repudiated the indiscretions of his youth and that

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in Africa the ‘natives called him the Saint because of his miraculous charity,’ he
doctored letters to make it appear that Rimbaud had accumulated wealth.\textsuperscript{65} Thirty
years after Berrichon, René Étiemble (1909-2002) wrote \textit{Le Myth de Rimbaud}
(1952)\textsuperscript{66} – a biography as derisory as Berrichon’s was laudatory according to Graham
Robb (b. 1958) author of the most recent biography, \textit{Rimbaud} (2000).\textsuperscript{67}

As late as 1970, Robert Pincus-Witten in his review ‘The Iconography of Symbolist
Painting’ (1970) on the exhibition \textit{The Sacred and Profane in Symbolist Art} (Ontario,
1969) noted that there had never been a successful overview of Symbolist visual
art.\textsuperscript{68}

Various propositions have been made as to why Symbolism has been overlooked in
twentieth-century art history. Pincus-Witten noted that having been displaced by art
and ideas more attuned with progress and modernism, Symbolism fell out of favour
and into relative oblivion. He suggested that this could be attributed to the movement
being made up of a network of clusters of artists across Europe making equally
important smaller works that resonated and referenced each other, rather than
individual heroic artists making iconic singular pieces of work. He wrote:

\textit{There never has been a successful direct overview of Symbolist painting and
sculpture. It seems to be impossible since each of its requisite elements is
locked into a network of cross-references and apparently evanescent data. This
results from at least two reasons. The first is apparent. When Symbolism is
treated in a straightforward, horizontal way it is made to appear superficial,
which it is not. The second reason is not so apparent. There is no dross in
Symbolism, no grain and chaff. Everything is equally important (and therefore,
possibly, equally minor). Symbolism lacks monolithic figures (with the possible
exceptions of Gauguin and Klimt). There is no great man in Symbolism – at
least not in the way that Rembrandt is great, or Goya, or Michelangelo, or
even Ingres. This owes partly to the fact that Symbolism is a style which has
not lent itself to monumental art. It emphasizes easel painting and cabinet
curios...} \textsuperscript{69}

Andrew Mangravite, in the preface to an anthology of French Symbolist and
decadent writing published in 1994 based on Gourmont’s (1858-1915) original \textit{The

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[65]{Graham Robb, \textit{Rimbaud} (London: Picador Press, 2000), 444.}
\footnotetext[66]{René Étiemble, \textit{Le Myth de Rimbaud} (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).}
\footnotetext[67]{Robb, \textit{Rimbaud}, 444.}
\footnotetext[68]{\textit{The Sacred and the Profane in Symbolist Art}, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1968 & 1969.}
\footnotetext[69]{Robert Pincus-Witten, ‘The Iconography of Symbolist Painting’, \textit{Eye to Eye: Twenty Years of
Art Criticism} (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984), 15.}
\end{footnotes}
Book of Masks (1896-1898), suggests that reasons Symbolism had been relatively neglected in relation to Naturalism and Impressionism included: that the movement opposed the rational agenda of modernism; its proponents ‘actively feuded with the Naturalists’, and were ‘easily dismissed as “fantasists”’; and it was tainted by association with decadence, scandals and the revolutionaries of the Anarchist Movement, who in 1892 ‘shifted from agitation to bomb-throwing’.  

Symbolism, whose “essential character consists in never going straight to the conception of the idea itself” by contrast has been relatively neglected, perhaps because it often opposed the entire rational basis of Naturalism, or because it was too closely identified with the scandalous young men of “The Yellow Nineties” who actively, though briefly, championed its goals on English shores.

Undoubtedly a major contributing factor to the Symbolist movement being overlooked was its unapologetic engagement with content, narrative and literary themes at the brink of the twentieth century when art history and criticism gave prominence to those modern art movements which focused on form, colour, texture, composition, materiality, the aesthetic and visual. Not only were subject and content deemed irrelevant and ‘literary art’ frowned upon, to the point that the term itself was considered derogatory, but the Symbolists’ subject matter was out of step with the optimism of the times, opposed to the rationalist agenda, democracy and progress. Though rarely illustrative they often referenced literary themes including myths such as Salomé, Judith, Delilah and Orpheus; and metaphorically used imagery which alluded to narrative or inferred meaning such as the white swan, a single feather, disembodied heads, stars and the void. The displeasure this engagement with literary meanings caused contemporary critics is evident in the following quote by Félix Fénéon, writer, anarchist and strong advocate for the Impressionists, when referring to work in one of the Salons de la Rose+Croix:

Nobody will ever be able to make Monsieur Fernand Khnopff or many of the other Rosicrucian exhibitors understand that a picture must first of all attract us with its rhythms, that a painter is really showing excessive humility when he chooses subjects already rich in literary meanings, that three pears depicted on a tablecloth by Paul Cézanne are moving and sometimes mystical, and that the

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71 Ibid.
whole Wagnerian Valhalla, when they paint it, is as uninteresting as the Chamber of Deputies."^

Another factor in the Symbolists being overlooked was their disparate imagery and styles. While artists and writers shared aspirations, themes, and an aesthetic sensibility, there was no single coherent Symbolist style. Rather individuals and small clusters of artists and writers found their own idiosyncratic ways of articulating and visualising their ideas. The stylistic approach of Symbolist writers and artists spanned the evocative hyper-realism of Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921); the gaudy figurative imagery of Gustave Moreau; the sadistic, blasphemous and sexually explicit imagery of Félicien Rops; Huysmans' detailed descriptions and purple prose; the obscure, evocative and sparse poetry of Mallarmé; and the fantastical dream-imagery of Odilon Redon. Stylistic tendencies that did diffuse through parts of the movement include hyper-realism and the particular idealised female beauty of Moreau, notable in the work of Fernand Khnopff and Armand Point; and the use of flat planes of colour and Cloisonnism developed by Émile Bernard (1868-1941) and Paul Gauguin. Notably, the Symbolists eschewed naturalistic representation and academic techniques such as perspective, chiaroscuro and illusionism.

The Symbolists fell from favour rapidly. In 1898 three pivotal Symbolist figures died – Mallarmé, Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes. Marcel Proust (1871-1922), writing for the *Revue Blanche* in 1900, likened the remaining Symbolist artists to ‘sea shells, empty and resonant, which have been washed up onto the sea-shore and lie there at the mercy of the first passer-by.'^

They were seen to be aloof dreamers with melancholy temperaments, disengaged from reality, disenchanted with life, pedantic about sensibility, and myopic in their intense engagement with aesthetics, art and poetry. André Gide (1869-1951) who abandoned Symbolism after a journey to Tunisia in 1895 wrote:

*One’s great objection to the Symbolist school...is its lack of curiosity about life. With perhaps the single exception of Vielé-Griffin (and it is this that gives his verse so special a savour), all were pessimists, renunciants... 'tired of the

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74 Andrew Mangravite, *The Book of Masks, Atlas Archive Two*, de Gourmont & Mangravite, 44.
sad hospital' which earth seemed to them 'our monotonous and unmerited fatherland,' as Laforgue called it. Poetry had become for them a refuge, the only escape from the hideous realities; they threw themselves into it with a desperate fervour...  

Philippe Jullian in *Dreamers of Decadence* (1971) suggested that art, like fashion, goes out of style and is forgotten, often to be reappraised and regain favour at a later date. In the case of Symbolism, he suggested, the Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) scandal and the Dreyfus Affair contributed to the movement becoming unfashionable. Wilde's fall from public favour took the other aesthetes and decadents down with him and they were accused of 'turning the 'Palace of Art' into a place of ill-repute' and 'reproductions of Pre-Raphaelite paintings ceased to be seen anywhere except Florentine boarding-houses.'

The 1894 Dreyfus Affair involved a Jewish artillery captain accused of passing French military documents to Germany. He was court marshaled, wrongly found guilty, publicly humiliated, stripped of his military rank and imprisoned on Devil Island for treason. Opinion on the affair was polarised. Jullian noted that when the 'affair exploded, nearly all the artists supported Dreyfus, admirers of Wagner were accused of working for Germany, and L'Action Française invoked the purifying virtues of war.' Zola took a public stance in defence of Dreyfus with his famous article *J'Accuse* published on the front page of the *L'Aurora* on 13 January 1898. Anti-Semitic sentiment, already entrenched in military and political circles, gained momentum. Jews were associated with the Symbolist movement as artists, critics and high profile patrons. Critic Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917) asserted that the followers of the Symbolist movement were 'snobs, Jews and pederasts.'

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78 Interestingly while Zola was prosecuted and convicted for libel, appealed and was retried, and fled to England until June 1899, his involvement does not seem to have reflected on public perception of Naturalism. Ironically, according to Brendan King, Huysmans along with other Catholic writers adopted an anti-Dreyfusard position and held that 'Jews, atheists, socialists and Freemasons were in league to destroy the ancient traditions and values of France.' Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 2006, 532. On the publication of *The Cathedral* in January 1898, Huysmans' main concern about the Dreyfus Affair was that the political fallout would overshadow the publicity on his new book. Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 2006, 357.
Max Nordau (1849-1923) linked the idea of genetic inferiority with avant-garde art and literature in his virulent and very influential book *Entartung* (1892) (*Degeneration*). Nordau, who believed a genetically sound and rational poet would call a cat a cat, claimed to discern evidence of physical and mental degeneration in the work and physiognomy of many European artists, writers and philosophers – including Huysmans and other French Symbolists, along with the British aesthetes, Baudelaire, Nietzsche and Zola – whose reputations he scurrilously besmirched.

**Reappraisal of the Symbolists**

Distortions in the official art history that suppressed recognition of the Symbolist movement were recognised and reviewed towards the second half of the twentieth century. The first attempt to undertake a comprehensive overview of the Symbolist movement was Guy Michaud's *Message poétique de symbolisme* (1947). Michaud defined three parallel tendencies ‘symbolisme’, ‘poésie affective’ encompassing Verlaine and the decadents; and ‘poésie intellectuelle’ including Mallarmé. These he identified as being derived from Baudelaire and continuing strands of Romanticism. H.R. Rookmaaker later added a fourth category, ‘Synthesism’, centred around the painter Gauguin rather than a literary figure, and included Emile Bernard, Maurice Denis and the Pont Aven painters.  

Edward Lucie-Smith (b. 1933) argued in his book *Symbolist Art* (1972) that Symbolism was the thread by which art in the second half of the nineteenth century could be understood. He noted that aberrations in art history which have been ‘sanctified by much repetition’ had placed Symbolism as secondary to Impressionism and that ‘the determination shown by many art historians to ignore it as a kind of feeble rival of Impressionism has been, to put it mildly, unfortunate.’

Jullian noted that the reappraisal of the Symbolist visual artists began relatively recently with exhibitions such as *Allégorie et Symbole* (1968) that asserted the importance of Symbolist painting to the history of western art, and *The Sacred and  

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Profane in Symbolist Art (1968-69)\textsuperscript{84} which showed work by ‘literary artists’ and those that inspired them.

This new style, like Mannerism, was generally regarded as an affectation in France; it was rapidly denounced, then forgotten for more than fifty years. Indeed it has only been in the last five or six years that the Symbolists have succeeded in claiming the attention of art historians, the speculative interest of art dealers and the admiration of the young.\textsuperscript{85}

Rosalind Krauss (b. 1941), expressed reservations about Clement Greenberg’s (1909-1994) version of modernism – of which she had previously been a major advocate – making a glancing reference to Huysmans’ Against Nature in her reappraisal of art history in ‘A View of Modernism’ (1972). She reflected that the influential art history of twentieth century art that Greenberg had constructed was narrow, progressive and linear and that as well as measuring and gauging art history it actively constructed, controlled and censured it.

The Syllogism we took up was historical in character, which meant that it read in one direction; it was progressive. No à rebours was possible, no going backward against the grain. The history we saw from Manet to the Impressionists to Cézanne and then to Picasso was like a series of rooms en filade.\textsuperscript{86}

Thirty-six years after Pincus-Witten wrote that there had never been a successful overview of Symbolist art, and just over a century after the movement ended, Rodolphe Rapetti published Symbolism (2005). Head Curator and Deputy Director of the Musées de France and former Curator of the Musée d’Orsay and the Musées de Strasbourg and a former Professor at the École du Louvre, Rapetti has authored numerous books on nineteenth century art. Symbolism, which is the outcome of over a decade of research, is an extensive and enlightening overview of the Symbolist movement. Rapetti reiterates a ‘retrospective underestimation’ of the Symbolists’ ‘intellectual courage’ in persevering with their ‘religious and poetic concept of the world’ in the face of the prevailing rational and positivist ideas of the time.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{85} Jullian, The Symbolists, 8.
\textsuperscript{87} Rapetti, Symbolism, 300.
He also notes that art historians’ aversion towards the Symbolists began in the 1890s with criticism of the Symbolists for their individualism, elitism, concern for tradition, and obsession with the irrational. He suggests that art historians recognised the Symbolists’ refusal to produce an aesthetic in touch with modern society and their unwillingness to focus on social and political issues. Also, that they suspected that Symbolism was superficial and passé and refused to recognise the multitude of Symbolist utopian and fantastical visions and anarchic ideas. Formalist criticism disregarded the spiritual in art, which ‘often served as a basis for dismissing any debt to Symbolism.’ Rapetti suggests that in drafting an evolutionary lineage from Édouard Manet (1832-1883) forward to the abstract expressionists, the focus was narrowed to a restricted field of painting which explored pictorial issues. 

The international reach of Symbolism was not acknowledged until the publication of Hans Hofstatter’s book Symbolismus und die Kunst der Jahrhundertwende (1965) and exhibitions Symbolism in Europe (1976), Lost Paradise: Europe’s Symbolism (1995). Even key reference works such as Charles Chassé’s Le Mouvement symboliste dans l’art XIXe siècle (1947) and the exhibition Visionaries and Dreamers (1956), Rapetti notes, included only French artists who had been cited by twentieth century avant-garde artists. In contrast he suggests that the stylistic diversity within the Symbolist movement ‘implies that its Idealist wellsprings fed multiple streams that, far from converging on a single issue, would irrigate various landscapes.’

Despite having been marginalised in art history, Symbolism is the source to which many ideas evident in twentieth century art and literature art can be traced. As well as being the immediate precursor of Dada, Surrealism and abstraction, in literature their influence is evident in the sensibility of work by European writers James Joyce (1882-1941), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), Paul Valéry (1871-1945), T.S. Eliot

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88 Rapetti, Symbolism, 300-304.
89 Hans Hofstatter, Symbolismus und die Kunst der Jahrhundertwende (Cologne: Du Mont, 1965).
93 Dreamers and Visionaries, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1956.
94 Rapetti, Symbolism, 145.
95 Rapetti, Symbolism, 303.
(1888-1965), Proust and Gertrude Stein (1874-1946); and in theatre, in the
development of absurdist works and productions such as Alfred Jarry’s (1873-1907)
_Ubu Roi_ (1896). More recently their influence is evident in postmodern thought and
contemporary art.

Significant milestones in the development of abstraction, shifting from the more
metaphysical and literary concerns of Symbolism, include: Gauguin’s
experimentation with non-representational images made up of flat patches of colour;
_The Talisman, the Aven River at the Bois d’Amour_ 96 by Paul Sérusier (1864-1927);
and Maurice Denis’ (1870-1943) influential text ‘Definitions of Neo-Traditionalism’
(1890) in which he insisted that:

_We should remember that a picture – before being a war-horse, a nude woman,
or telling some other story – is essentially a flat surface covered with colours
arranged in a particular pattern._ 97

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) acknowledged the influence of Symbolist ideas in
_Concerning the Spiritual in Art_ (1911). 98 In ‘The Ten O’clock Lecture’ (1885) James
McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), a friend of Mallarmé, shifted abstraction from the
Symbolists’ Idealist agenda by condemning the literary interpretation of artwork and
advocated the appreciation of the formal attributes of painting – harmony, colour,
composition and texture. 99 Critics Roger Fry (1866-1934) 100 and Clive Bell (1881-
1964) 101 extended this argument, distancing abstract art further from its Symbolist
origins by calling for the stripping of literary and metaphysical attributes from
painting.

Although leading to different outcomes from those espoused by Fry and Bell,
Symbolist ideas disseminated by Moreau and Puvis de Chavannes also influenced
generations of avant-garde artists through their teaching. As Professor at the École
Nationale des Beaux-Arts, Moreau encouraged Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and

96 Paul Sérusier, c.1888, _The Talisman, the Aven River at the Bois d’Amour_, oil on wood,
27 x 21 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
97 Maurice Denis, ‘Definition of Neo-Traditionalism’, _Art in Theory 1815-1900_, Harrison & Wood,
863.
98 Wassily Kandinsky, ‘Concerning the Spiritual in Art’, _Art in Theory 1900-1990_, Harrison & Wood,
86.
Georges Rouault (1871-1958) in experiments and innovations which led to the beginnings of Fauvism and Expressionism.

The Surrealists, who were also marginalised by the modernist agenda, recognised a synergy between their own work and the ‘literary’ paintings of the Symbolists. They were fascinated with the Symbolists’ exploration of anxiety and dreams, and engagement with the erotic, supernatural, perverse and bizarre. André Breton recognised that the Symbolists attempted to reveal their inner yearnings, thoughts and desires and rejected the Impressionists and Realists because of the limited vision of those movements. Revealing his own contempt of realism, Breton wrote ‘in absolute opposition to this realistic art, with its futile depiction of externals’ and continued —with obvious admiration and enthusiasm — that there existed an art that ‘represents a reaction against the world’ and gave priority not to sensation ‘but to the deepest desires of heart and mind.’ 102 Breton dismissed the negative connotations of the epithet ‘literary’ when applied to work that aspired to be more than realistic or merely decorative. Derisively he insisted that it revealed superficial concerns and reflected poorly on those who used it rather than on the artists to whom it was it applied.

*If there exists a cliché which is capable, by itself, of giving the full measure of those who use it, it must be the application of the epithet literary to any painting whose ambition goes further than offering us a picture of the external world or, failing that, seeking its final justification in the pleasure of the eyes...* 103

Breton first saw Moreau’s work in the Musée Moreau when he was sixteen. For twenty years he was frequently the only visitor. He remained enthralled by the Symbolists throughout his life and in 1958 organised an exhibition of Symbolist drawings at Bateau-Lavoir Gallery in Paris — one of the first exhibitions that attempted to reposition the Symbolists. He was powerfully influenced by Huysmans’ risky breaking of conventions and the ruthless way that the author exposed his own thoughts, flaws, doubts and struggles in his writing.

102 André Breton, quoted in Jullian, *Dreamers of Decadence*, 16.
103 Ibid.
...the days of psychological literature, with all its fictitious plots, are numbered. And there is no doubt that the mortal blow was delivered by Huysmans. I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call...  

Symbolist ideas of disorder, eccentricity, revolt, nihilism and anarchy, overtly expressed by writers such as Rimbaud and Jarry, and implicit in the writing of Huysmans, had a significant impact on the developments of Dada as well as Surrealism. Rimbaud articulated his disgust of poetic and social conventions and a determination to overthrow them and become a seer through a reasoned disordering of the senses. Jarry’s writing directly links Symbolist ideas expressed in his earlier work and the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, most notably through his anarchic and anti-realist play *Ubu Roi* (1896).

The repressive dominance of modernity and the era of progress provoked ‘a counter-culture in the form of the anarchic avant-garde (one thinks of Dadaism and Surrealism especially).’  

Postmodernist philosophers and writers recognised that the modernist project, which had marginalised the Symbolist movement and had been disparaging of the literary and the metaphysical in art, was in the ascendency but in crisis: ‘dominant but dead.’ In the 1970s there was an ideological shift that began the reappraisal of trends in art and literature undervalued by modernity. The ‘surrealist revolt’ and its critique of representation were affirmed in postmodernist thought. Influential thinkers such as Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) and postmodern theorists including Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), Julia Kristeva (b.1941), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Barthes were inspired by the Symbolists, especially writers Mallarmé, Lautréamont and Rimbaud along with their radical contemporaries such as philologist and philosopher Nietzsche and linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913).

Over the last thirty-five years, contemporary artists, writers, designers and filmmakers have responded to postmodern thought – such as Derrida’s concept of deconstruction and the disconnection of the signifier from the signified; Barthes’ concept ‘death of the author’; and Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra in which the

106 Jürgen Habermas, quoted in Hal Foster, *Postmodern Culture*, ix.
image is a copy for which there is no original, and is a substitute for reality – and embraced strategies which were used by the Symbolists in the 1890s. These strategies include the fragmentation of text; the use of dissimulation, ambiguity and obscurity; the multivalence of words and symbols; and overt engagement of the reader in the construction of meaning.

In the second half of the twentieth century, as the repercussions of the intellectual revolution on contemporary culture and thought increased in impact and the Symbolists’ influence in western art practice began to be recognised, exhibitions and major public and private collections of their work were developed. Until the 1960s

107 Landmark and substantial exhibitions of Symbolist work shown in the last fifty years include:

- Symbolist drawings, Bateau-Lavoir Gallery, Paris, 1958; curated by the Surrealist writer and artist André Breton.
- *Gustave Moreau*, Louvre, Paris, 1961; a large retrospective exhibition that revived interest in Moreau’s work, which apart from André Breton and the Surrealists had been seen to be outmoded, and repositioned the artist as a significant precursor of abstraction.
- *Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, Rodolphe Bresdin* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961); major exhibition, that repositioned these artists as forgotten precursors of Surrealism.
- *The Group of Twenty and their Time*, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels & Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, 1962; a survey exhibition that recognised the art historical significance of *Les XX*. The exhibition was accompanied by well-researched catalogue by F-C Legrand.
- *Gauguin and the School of Pont-Aven*, Tate Gallery, London, 1966; an important exhibition of Gauguin and peers within the Symbolist context.
- *The Sacred and the Profane in Symbolist Art*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1968 & 1969; an exhibition that included Symbolist artists and others such as William Blake and J.M.W. Turner, whose work alluded to the mysterious.
- *Fernand Khnopff and the Belgian Avant-Garde*, David & Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Chicago; Barry Friedman, New York; Delaware Art Museum, Delaware, 1984; an exhibition of five Belgian artists including Fernand Khnopff and Félicien Rops.
there were relatively few exhibitions focusing on the Symbolist movement as a whole or the individual artists within it. Subsequent exhibitions, such as the comprehensive _Symbolism in Europe_ (1976)\(^{108}\) are often substantial survey exhibitions of the movement, giving an overview of the diverse visual styles. Others such as _Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, Rodolphe Bresdin_ (1961),\(^{109}\) _The Group of

- _Odilon Redon: The Enchanted Stone_, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1990; a major scholarly exhibition of Redon's graphic works.
- _Lost Paradise: Europe’s Symbolism_, Montreal Museum, Montreal, 1995; survey exhibition including over 600 works created between 1886-1905 by Symbolist artists from across Europe. The exhibition positioned the movement in the pan-European context suggesting that the focus of the movement was in Belgium rather than Paris. Connections were made between the work of artists working in different countries and a number of themes were developed including the Symbolists' rejection of modernity and their influence on contemporary art.
- _Félicien Rops, Maison de la culture de la province de Namur_, Namur, 1998; a major retrospective of the artist.
- _Stéphane Mallarmé_, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, 1999; a major scholarly retrospective, including original documents, photographs, letters and artwork by peers.
- _Kingdom of the Soul: German Symbolist Art Exhibition_ (1870-1920), Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; Birmingham Museums & Gallery, Birmingham; Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, Stockholm; 2000; an exhibition including 180 artworks by German Symbolist artists, establishing the significance of their contribution to the broader European movement.
- _Fernand Khnopff: Work Known and Unknown_, Royal Museums of Belgium, Brussels, 2004; a major scholarly retrospective with substantial catalogue.
- _Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), Un Saison en Enfer_, Centre for Fine Arts, Brussels, 2004; a major exhibition that included a series of immersive spaces that engaged with the poet's work, as well as original documents and biographical information pertaining to Rimbaud and Verlaine.
- _Maurice Denis_, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, 2006; a major retrospective.
- _Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon_, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006; a major exhibition developed around MOMA's exceptional collections of Redon's artwork, including the Ian Woodner Family collection.
- _Symbolism: From Moreau, to Gauguin, to Klimt_, Pallazzo dei Diamanti & Gallery, Ferrara & Museum of Modern Art in Rome, 2007; a major retrospective including over 100 works by Symbolist artists from across Europe.
- _Huysmans-Moreau: Féériques visions_, Musée Gustave-Moreau; accompanied by a catalogue and marking the centenary of the death of Huysmans, this exhibition included the original manuscript of _A Rebours_, other texts, letters by Huysmans, and drawings and paintings created by Moreau and discussed by Huysmans in his writing.
- _L’Enfer de la Bibliothèque: Eros au Secret_, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, 2008; while not focusing exclusively on the Symbolists, it is notable that they were well represented in this major exhibition of banned erotic art and literature consigned to l’enfer section of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which included prints and books illustrated by Rops, annotated editions by Baudelaire, Sade, Bataille, Verlaine and texts by Loïys.

Twenty and Their Time (1962); and Kingdom of the Soul: German Symbolist Art Exhibition, 1870-1920 (2000), focused on repositioning a particular group of artists, either within the broader art historical context, as precursors of the Surrealists or forebears of abstraction for instance; or on their contribution to the Symbolist movement itself. Many are retrospectives of individual artists and writers, often marking the centenary of a death, which position them within their biographical, historical and cultural context. Since 2000 the number of exhibitions engaging with Symbolist art has burgeoned. Most have taken the Idealist aspirations of the Symbolists as a given and many acknowledge their decadence and pessimism. Apart from exhibitions such as Stéphane Mallarmé (1999) and Arthur Rimbaud, 1854-1891: Une Saison en Enfer (2004), minimal consideration has been given to the nihilism undermining the Symbolists’ Idealism. Although references to Huysmans and his critical writing are made in some of the exhibition catalogues, including Odilon Redon 1840-1916 and Odilon Redon: The Enchanted Stone, both of which I refer to in this thesis, none of the exhibitions have focused primarily on the nihilistic tendencies of the Symbolists that are illuminated by Huysmans in his art criticism.

The most recent exhibition to engage with Huysmans’ art criticism was Huysmans-Moreau Féeriques Visions organised by the Société J.-K. Huysmans to mark the centenary of writer’s death. Held in the Musée Gustave Moreau, it was the first temporary exhibition to be held in this space dedicated to showing its permanent collection of Moreau’s work. Rather than interpreting Huysmans’ writing or the artwork, it took a factual approach and juxtaposed texts – including the original handwritten manuscript of Against Nature – letters and documents, with paintings and drawings referred to by Huysmans.

110 The Group of Twenty and Their Time, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels & Rismuseum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, 1962.
114 Druick, Odilon Redon 1840-1916.
These exhibitions, along with major private and public collections such as the Musée d’Orsay, Paris; Leopold Museum, Vienna; Secession, Vienna; Belvedere Palace, Vienna; and the Royal Museums of Belgium, Brussels, have been extremely important in facilitating research and repositioning the Symbolists, and have made a significant contribution to on-going critical engagement. As well as giving access to a wealth of factual information about the artwork such as materials and techniques, context in which they were created, and documentation of images and provenance, they contain curatorial essays that address the work of the Symbolists from a range of positions. Robert Rosenblum noted that prior to the Gare d’Orsay being transformed into the Musée d’Orsay in 1978 what had taken place between ‘Impressionism and those of Modern Art – the Post-Impressionism of the Pont-Aven school, Neo Impressionism, Nabis, Symbolism, the traditionalists, foreign painting, et cetera – was not, or was very poorly represented.’

The Symbolists’ Critical Texts

Although marginalised in art historical accounts and exhibitions in the first half of the twentieth century there was a significant volume of critical texts written by Symbolist writers, artists and critics published in journals and petites revues. Despite being, ‘subjective and temperamental’, ‘unpredicatable and impassioned’, ‘self-interested, biased diatribes based on faulty logic and shaky justifications’, ‘[f]requently defensive, even vengeful’ and tending to ‘respond to personal enemies and air private rivalries’ these texts reveal the development of the Symbolist movement and the spectrum of positions held. Pamela Genova notes the hostile criticism of critics such as Ferdinand Brunetière, Anatole France and Jules Lemaître towards the Symbolists, and their limited access to publish their work in the more conventional journals such as Le Journal des Dèbats, Le Figaro, La Justice and Le Temps, galvanised them to develop their ideas into a coherent system, respond to attacks, and engage with dialogue and debate in their own journals.

119 Ibid., xii.
The importance of Symbolist journals in the critical period of 1880 to 1895 is summed up by Genova who wrote *Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence*. She notes that the journals were the ‘culmination of decades of activity’ and a ‘storehouse for the thematic and methodological developments of this influential literary school, as well as for rivalry, pastiche and polemical debate’.\(^{120}\)

The most important journals for the Symbolist movement were *Le Mercure de France* (1890-current) founded by Alfred Valette; *La Plume* (1889-1913) founded by Leon Deschamps; *La Revue Blanche* (1891-1905) founded by Alexandre Natanson and *L’Ermitage* (1890-1895) founded by Henri Mazel; *La Revue Indépendante* (1884-1885), and *Entretiens Politiques et Littéraires* (1890-93).

Writers including Huysmans, Mallarmé, Gustave Kahn, Jean Moréas, Jules Laforgue, Teodor de Wyzewa, Édouard Dujardin, Maurice Denis, Joséphin Péladan and Paul Bourget regularly published art and literary criticism and many were actively involved in the production and editorial direction of journals. Gourmont wrote important theoretical texts on symbolism; was the literary critic for the *Le Mercure de France*, and with Alfred Jarry edited *L’Ymagier*. G. Albert Aurier (1865-1892) was the art critic for the Symbolist periodical *Le Mercure de France*. Journalist Fénéon, anarchist writer and critic was senior editor of the *La Revue Blanche*, assisted with the management of *La Revue Indépendante de Littérature et d’Art*, (1884-1895) and was involved with *La Vogue*. Kahn, with Leo d’Orfer established *La Vogue* (1886-1887). Dujardin was involved with *La Revue Indépendante de Littérature et d’Art*.

As well as publishing in journals Symbolist writers, poets and critics produced a number of important books written with the intention of explaining the aspirations and poetics of the Symbolist movement. One of the most revealing is a series of sixty-four interviews undertaken by Jules Huret (1863-1915) in 1891. Huret asked writers of various literary persuasions about the new Symbolist movement, and published them firstly in *L’Echo de Paris* and then as *Enquête sur l’Evolution Littéraire*. Other key books written by Symbolist’s to clarify the intentions of the

\(^{120}\) Ibid., xi.
movement include ‘L’Idealisme’ (1893) and *Le Livre des masques* (1896) by Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915); *Traité du verbe* (1885) by René Ghil (1862-1925); *Les Premières Armes du Symbolisme* (1889) by Jean Moréau (1856-1910); *La Littérature de tout a l’heure* (1889) by Charles Morice (1860-1919); *Symbolistes et décadents* (1902) by Gustave Kahn (1859-1936); and *Le Symbolisme* (1903) by Adolphe Rettelé (1863-1930). 121

Many of the Symbolists essays, critiques, manifestoes and interviews grappled with defining ‘Symbolism’ and ‘Idealism.’ The claim of Idealism was frequently reiterated by the Symbolists though what they meant when using the term varied and while their manifestos are often didactic in tone, many of their more personal texts, such as letters, are not so intense or assured.

Symbolist artists and writers drew, to different degrees, on various philosophical versions of Idealism. Whereas materialism denies the possibility of the mind being a reality distinct from the physical, Idealism denies that the physical exists except as an aspect of mind. In considering the principles of Idealism espoused by philosophers including George Berkeley (1685-1753), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), F.H. Bradley (1845-1924) and George Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel (1797-1831), the British Idealist philosopher T.L.S Sprigge (1932-2007) in *Theories of Existence* identified three main categories of thought – empirical Idealism, transcendental Idealism and absolute Idealism. Empirical Idealism embraces the idea that the physical world either definitely does not or may not exist. Absolute Idealism insists that what is not sentient does not exist. There is nothing other than psychical phenomena such as feeling, thought and volition. Transcendental Idealism, such as that advocated by Kant, is based on the idea that the world exists only as appearances. For Kant, what we understand to be the characteristics of the world are more a reflection of our experience and perception of the world than its inherent nature. For Kant it was moral consciousness and religious intimations that gave rise to the awareness or a hope of a reality behind the material world. 122

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121 Ibid., 12.
Despite the diverse sources from which the Symbolists drew their ideas, their aspirations and aesthetic sensibilities are impressively consistent throughout the 1890s and across Europe. They were out of step with the optimism of the times; opposed to naturalism, realism, impressionism, materialism; and pessimistic about progress, egalitarianism and democracy – all of which they believed heralded the prosaic, pragmatic and mediocre in all aspects of life. As well as being influenced by Neo-Platonic and Platonic thought, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Kant, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) and Friedrich Nietzsche;\textsuperscript{123} the Symbolists were influenced by Catholicism and the occult; Eastern religions; Baudelaire;\textsuperscript{124} the Parmassian poets; Romantic notions of the sublime; psychology and quasi-scientific ideas such as hypnotism; and phenomena such as synaesthesia, hallucinations, visions, dreams and nightmares.

In *The Higher Self in Christopher Brennan’s Poems*, Katherine Barnes considers the work of the Australian poet who recognised the influence of Western esotericism (including alchemy, Roscrucianism, the Kabala and theosophy) and ancient esotericism (including Neoplatonism and Gnosticism) on the ideas of the Symbolists.\textsuperscript{125} Brennan understood Symbolism to be ‘a kind of poetry which gives expression to a transcendent self by using natural objects as symbols, and which therefore has a religious dimension.’\textsuperscript{126} Barnes gives insight into the tension between scepticism and the desire for faith prevalent at the turn of the eighteenth century and the intensity of these tensions which saw the emergence of agnosticism and publication of Spencer’s *First Principles* (1862) ‘often interpreted as one of pure materialism in the face of irrelevant, if existing, Absolute.’\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{123} Dorra states that ‘the further probing of the self that had obsessed the romantics and, with the diffusion of the subjectivist theses of Fichte, Schopenhauer, and eventually Nietzsche, would assert itself ever more intensely during the symbolist years.’ Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 6.

\textsuperscript{124} In *Against Nature* Huysmans wrote that the more that des Esseintes read Baudelaire the more he recognised that ‘in days when verse had ceased to serve any purpose save to depict the external aspect of men and things, [he] had succeeded in expressing the inexpressible, thanks to a sinewy and firm-bodied diction which more than any other, possessed the wondrous power of defining with a strange sanity of phrase the most fleeting, the most evanescent of the morbid conditions of broken spirits and disheartened souls.’ J.-K. Huysmans, *Against the Grain: A Rebours*, trans., Three Sirens Press (New York: Dover, 1969), 135.


\textsuperscript{126} Katherine Barnes, *The Higher Self in Christopher Brennan’s Poems*, 9.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 18.
Citing Brennan’s sixth lecture on Symbolism, Barnes suggests that influenced by secular thought and humanism, Symbolism found ‘the divine within the self or not at all’. 128 She coins the term ‘higher self’ to refer to the artistic union of the human mind and Nature which correlates with Brennan’s idea that poetry is means of communication with the transcendent – a transcendence that is located within. 129

One of the most well-known Symbolist texts is the manifesto by poet and critic Moréas (1856-1910) titled ‘Le Symbolisme’ and published on 18 September 1886 in the Supplément littéraire du Figaro. The frequently cited manifesto was written at the request of the editor to explain the Symbolist movement to the public. Moréas insisted that the idea is primary, and material aspects of the artwork are secondary though playing an essential role, alluding to, though not explicitly enunciating, the idea.

The enemy of teaching, of declamation, of false sensibility, of objective description, Symbolist poetry seeks to clothe the Idea with a sensible form which, nevertheless, would not be a goal in itself, but which, at the same time as expressing the Idea, would remain subject to it. The Idea, in its turn, must not be seen to be deprived of the sumptuous trappings of exterior analogies; for the essential character of Symbolist art consists in never going as far as the conception of the Idea itself. Thus, in this art, the scenes of nature, the actions of human beings, all concrete phenomena cannot manifest themselves as such: they are sensible appearances destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial Ideas... 130

Over one hundred years later Moréas’ essay remains a key text. Fredrick Leen analysed the text in his essay ‘Femand Khnopff and Symbolism’ published in the exhibition catalogue for a major retrospective of Khnopff in 2004. Leen considered Moréas statement that ‘symbolist poetry seeks to clothe the Idea with a sensible form 131 which, nevertheless, would not be a goal in itself, but which, at the same time as expressing the Idea, would remain subject to it’. 132 Leen suggests that Moréas referred simultaneously to absolute Platonic ideas and subjective abstract thoughts.

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128 Ibid., 11.
129 Ibid.
131 A form that can be apprehended by the senses.
By Idea, written with a capital letter, Moréas in the first place means the absolute Platonic Idea, because he argues that the essential character of symbolist art consists in never reaching the Idea, which nicely corresponds to Plato’s point of departure that Ideas are absolute and hence not reachable. Moréas’ further elucidation lets it be understood that his notion of Idea is more closely related to the elementary opposition between the abstract concept of the world and concrete phenomena. Of perceptible phenomena it is expected that – according to Moréas – they represent their esoteric affinities with primordial ideas. 133

Remy de Gourmont was initially antagonistic towards Moréas’ manifesto and to the Symbolist movement. He was surprised that Moréas, a minor poet, was being hailed in the press as the leader of the Symbolist movement and noted that the use of metaphor was not an innovation.

In Symbolist Art Theories: a Critical Anthology (1994) Henri Dorra noted that Gourmont wrote the ‘most penetrating criticism’ and that he ‘rarely and reluctantly, acknowledged being a symbolist and by far preferred to call the new trends Idealism.’ 134 According to Edmund Wilson (1895-1972), the first time Gourmont read Symbolist poetry he stated: ‘I experienced the little aesthetic thrill and that exquisite sense of novelty which has so much charm for youth. I seem to myself to be dreaming rather than reading.’ 135 In 1893 Gourmont published a series of important articles titled ‘L’Idéalisme’ which explored the influence of Kant, Schopenhauer and Hegel and Fitche on Symbolism. After Moréas abandoned Symbolism to return to a more simple classicism and establish his École romane, Gourmont took on the mantle of leader of the movement. He was a prolific writer producing Symbolist poetry, drama, novels, short stories and essays, and he edited the influential The Book of Masks (1896-1898) an anthology of French Symbolist writing which showcased most of the Symbolist writers working in Paris at the end of the century. In Gourmont’s introduction to The Book of Masks, in which he defined Symbolism, he emphasised: the importance of expressing an idea through art; breaking away from formulaic style; perceiving the essence of a thing; and the freedom of developing new individualistic means of expression.

133 Ibid.
134 Dorra, Symbolist Art Theories, 151.
135 Remy de Gourmont, quoted in Wilson, Axel’s Castle, 22.
What does Symbolism mean? If we take it in a narrow and etymological sense, hardly anything; if we go beyond that, it can mean individualism in art, the abandonment of handed-down formulas, tendencies towards that which is new, strange and even bizarre; it can also mean idealism, disdain for social anecdotes, anti-naturalism, a tendency to snatch from life only its most characteristic details, to pay attention only to the acts by which a man distinguishes himself from other men, to wish to realise only results, only the essentials; in short, symbolism, for poets, seems bound up with free, that is to say unswaddled, verse, whose youthful limbs can caper comfortably, freed from the impediments of swaddling clothes and bonds. All of which has only a casual bearing upon the syllables of the word-for it ought not to be insinuated that this symbolism is nothing more than a transformation of the old allegorism or the art of merely personifying an idea in a human being, a landscape or a story. Such an art is total art, primordial and eternal art, and a literature released from this concern would be unspeakable; it would be null and void, its aesthetic significance suited to the clucking of guinea hens and the braying of a wild ass.

Literature in fact is nothing less that the artistic development of an idea, the symbolising of the idea by means of the imaginary hero. Aurier, art critic for the Symbolist periodical *Mercure de France* and main theorist of the Symbolist movement, declared the death of Naturalism in literature and the visual arts in ‘Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin’ published in the *Mercure de France*, 2 March 1891. Naming Gauguin as the leader of pictorial symbolism, he observed an Idealist reaction and cited *Vision of the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)* (1888) as evidence that the newly emerged literary movement was having an impact on the visual arts.

...we are witnessing the agony of Naturalism in literature and simultaneously, the preparation of an Idealist, even mystical, reaction, we should wonder whether the plastic arts are revealing a similar evolution. The Struggle of Jacob and the Angel...is sufficient proof that this tendency exists, and one must understand why painters treading this new path reject this absurd label of impressionist, which implies a program diametrically opposed to theirs...

In drawing a distinction between the Impressionists and the new movement, Aurier recognised the tendency by those artists, who could be called synthesists, ideists or symbolists, to aspire to create a more elevated and pure art than realism which dealt

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137 Paul Gauguin, 1888, *Vision of the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, oil on canvas, 73 x 92cm, National Gallery of Scotland.
with ideas not matter. He clearly declared the goal of painting was not the representation of things but ideas translated through special language:

*The goal of painting, as of all of the arts, as already pointed out, cannot be the direct representation of objects. Its end purpose is to express ideas as it translates them into a special language.*

Another very significant Symbolist text is ‘Essai de psychologie contemporaine: Charles Baudelaire’ by Paul Bourget (1852-1935), poet, novelist and critic with Symbolist leanings and Member of the French Academy. Henri Dorra suggests that this text, which was published in *La Nouvelle Revue* 13 in 1881, amounted to the first manifesto of decadence. In it Bourget insisted that Baudelaire was ‘one of the seminal educators of the emerging generation’ and emphasised the influence of Baudelaire’s Romanticism and his theory of correspondences on the Symbolists. Bourget also argued that civilisations in decline, such as France at the fin-de-siècle, produced a greater number of individuals who, while ineffectual in public endeavours, were endowed with an enhanced aesthetic sensibility as ‘the abundance of their refined sensations and exquisite feelings has turned them into sterile yet refined virtuosi of voluptuousness and suffering.’

Émile Verhaeren (1855-1916), Belgian poet and art critic, published ‘Le symbolisme’ and ‘Les symbolistes’ in *L’Art Moderne* in 1886. Outlining the aims of Symbolism, Verhaeren again stated it was oppositional to Naturalism which led to the ‘fragmentation of the object through merciless description [and] painstaking microscopic analysis’ and considered minutiae in isolation and did not generalise, or concentrate. He noted that Naturalism encouraged objectivity, was aligned with science and the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Just as ‘naturalism made room for objectivity in art’ Verhaeren insisted ‘symbolism, equally and to even a greater degree, reinstates subjectivity.’ Symbolism, he insisted, would do the opposite, and was aligned with the German philosophy of Kant and Fichte; furthermore Symbolism saw no value for facts of the visible world except as ‘mere

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140 Ibid., 199.
141 Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 128.
143 Ibid., 129.
pretexts for ideas...they are handled as appearances, ceaselessly variable, and ultimately manifest themselves only as the dreams of our brains....'\textsuperscript{145}

Less philosophical or literary, and more superstitious, Săr Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), an eccentric self-styled magus, enthusiastically promoted his version of Idealism through numerous reviews, novels and manifestos, and the \textit{Salons de la Rose+Croix}. Drawing ideas from Catholicism and the occult, he developed a ritualistic and didactic approach to Idealism and was proscriptive about who could participate. While he enthusiastically discussed the work of Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, Rops and Khnopff, his big annual exhibitions were frequently full of mediocre artwork. Nevertheless, he increased the popularity and awareness of Symbolism with the general public. The bizarre rules from '\textit{Rules of the Salons de la Rose+Croix, Règle et Monitoire}' (1891) give insight into his vision, as well as his prejudices and idiosyncrasies.

\begin{quote}
The Order of the Rose+Croix du Temple is now enlarged to encompass the Rose+Croix esthétique in order to restore cult of the IDEAL in all its splendour, with TRADITION as its base and BEAUTY as its means...
I. The Salons de la Rose+Croix wants to ruin realism, reform Latin taste and create a school of Idealist art...
V. The Order favours first the Catholic Ideal and mysticism. After Legend, Myth, Allegory, the Dream, the Paraphrase of great poetry and finally all Lyricism, the Order prefers work which has a mural-like character, as being of superior essence...\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

Stéphane Mallarmé was one of the most intelligent and articulate writers associated with the Symbolist movement. Unlike the didactic manifestoes of many of the Symbolists, his writing reveals an understanding of the inevitable failure of Idealist aspirations and that the hope to find the Ideal embodied in the realm of Art could not be attained. In his article ‘Richard Wagner: A French Poet’s Reverie’ (1891) he wrote:

'...the servant of an eternal logic, o Wagner, I am filled with suffering and self-reproaches, in those minutes marked by lassitude, because I cannot count myself among those who, wearying of everything in their search for definitive

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
Mallarmé observed that Wagner’s music ‘exalts some fervent devotees to the point of certainty’, and that they consider it, not ‘the greatest distance toward the goal ever ordained by a human gesture...but the completion of Humanity’s voyage towards an Ideal.’ For himself he wistfully asks only for ‘a share of ecstasy’ and ‘a moment of rest’ in the ‘Temple half way up the holy Mountain’ where, he suggests one could be ‘sheltered from the too lucid obsession with that menacing pinnacle of the absolute...’ Recognising that it is impossible to attain an Ideal or the absolute he wrote that it ‘looms above and beyond and which, it seems, no one is to scale. No one!’

In contradiction to most writers associated with the Symbolist movement, poet and theorist René Ghil (1862-1925) in *Traité du verbe* (1886) maintained that there was a measurable scientific basis for equivalences between the tone of a musical instrument, colours, and language, and rejected notions of obscurity, subjectivity and chance. Ghil pragmatically attempted to develop an objective and predictable system of correspondences from which he intended to create his life’s work. He broke with the Symbolists in 1888.

*The Symbolists’ Critics*

Although the Symbolists sought the sublime and articulated Idealist perspectives in their art and writing some of their peers and subsequent critics accused them of being hedonists. A few recognised that they teetered on the brink of nihilistic despair. Although denying the reality of the material realm and yearning to engage with the immaterial, in moments of disillusion, or clarity, some of the Symbolists confronted the bleak realisation that there is nothing else, existence is a pointless and meaningless matter of fact, and the world is godless.

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148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
150 Louis Marvick, ‘René Ghil and the Contradictions of Synesthesia’, *Comparative Literature* (Fall 1999), vol. 51, no. 4.
The critical debate about the intentions and strategies of the Symbolists was intense. According to Leen a literary dispute simmered between *L'Art moderne* and *La Jeune Belgique*. Edmond Picard (1836-1924) ‘wrote of his contempt’ of symbolism in two articles, *Les symbolistes* and *Les verbolâtres* published in 1885 in *L'Art moderne*. Apparently Picard was so incensed by the art-for-art’s sake position that on the publication of a notice in its favour he and Albert Giraud (1860-1929), defender of *l'art pour l'art*, threw punches. The fight was followed by a duel, but no one was injured.  

Writers who engaged in the debate about the Symbolists’ art and ideas influenced public opinion at the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century included Max Nordau, André Mellerio, Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917), Arthur Symons (1865-1945), Henry Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), Walter Pater (1839-1894) & Edouard Schuré (1841-1929).

Symons and Havelock Ellis were the first to bring Symbolism to the attention of the English public after travelling to France together in 1890 and meeting Huysmans, Mallarmé and other French writers. Havelock Ellis wrote many enthusiastic accounts and essays about the Symbolists and their commitment to Idealism, including *Affirmations* (1898), and he translated *A Rebours* into English (1931). Both Symons and Ellis were closely aligned with the Symbolists, so much so that Symons was the model for Max Beerbohm’s (1872-1956) character Enoch Soames, the anti-establishment English Decadent. Symons edited the periodical *The Savoy*, wrote studies on Baudelaire, Pater and Wilde. Symons’ influential book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) is a sophisticated and laudatory overview of the Symbolists’ literature and includes brief first-hand accounts of his meeting with such writers as Huysmans. In the introduction, enthusing over their Symbolist intentions, Symons wrote:

\[ \ldots \text{after the world has starved its soul long enough in the contemplation and the rearrangement of material things, comes the turn of the soul; and with it comes } \]

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the literature of which I write in this volume, a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream.154

Revealing a keen understanding of the Symbolists’ use of obscurity and ambiguity in language in order to express the absolute, Symons quotes Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881):

*In a symbol there is concealment and yet revelation: hence therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance...In the Symbol proper, what we can call a Symbol, there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there.*155

Individuals such as Mellerio and William Ritter (1867-1955) wrote early accounts of the lives of Symbolist artists and considered the development and membership of the movement. Like Aurier, Mellerio suggested that the movement, for which he preferred the term ‘Idéalisme’ to Symbolism, began in 1889 with the exhibition of Gauguin and his peers at the Café Volpini.156 Whereas Péladan believed the most influential Symbolists were Puvis de Chavannes and Moreau, Mellerio in *Le Mouvement idéaliste en peinture*157 insisted that Gauguin and Redon were equally important. Mellerio identified as Symbolists, Gauguin and the ‘Synaesthetes’, Denis, Bernard, Charles Filiger (1863-1928) and Jan Verkade (1868-1946). He also identified as Symbolists many of the artists aligned with the *Salons de la Rose+Croix* including Alexandre Séon (1855-1917), Armand Point, Albert Trachsel (1863-1929), Charles Maurin (1856-1914), Carlos Schwabe (1866-1926) and Alphonse Osbert (1857-1939).158

In contrast, Octave Mirbeau (1850-1917), a journalist and novelist who maintained a Positivist position and was influential in discrediting the Symbolist movement, dismissed the Symbolists as decadents and hedonists. In virulent articles Mirbeau ridiculed them and inferred that their aspiration to allude to the infinite and eternal was a sham. The following example of his spiteful and witty critique is both derisive suggests that the Symbolists are hypocrites.

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155 Ibid., 4.
158 Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France*, 182.
Ah their mistresses who walk without legs and who see without eyes, who love without genitals, and who, under mechanically-cut foliage, hold up hands broken at the wrist by the same external flexion! ... Ah, their heroes who stink of sodomy, neurosis and syphilis!159

Jullian suspected that it was an article published by Mirbeau in Critique in May 1895, soon after Wilde had been convicted, that ‘toll the knell of these aesthetic affectations.’160 While scathing, Mirbeau’s writing is insightful. He was among the first to recognise that the work of the Symbolists touched the ‘depths of nothingness,’ and listed it as one of the harmful attributes of their practice.

Oh, what a lot of harm they did, those wretched aesthetes, when, in their honeyed voices they preached a horror of nature and life, proclaimed the futility of draughtsmanship, and advocated the return of art to Papuan concepts, embryonic forms, a spectral existence; the extremes of ugliness, the depths of nothingness.161

Interestingly, Edouard Schuré (1841-1929), an influential critic in his own time but now relatively forgotten, recognised that the decadent poets inability to believe in a spiritual realm. A year after the Theosophist Mme. Helena Blavatsky’s (1831-1891) Secret Doctrine (1888) he published Les Grands Initiés (1889) which reflected the increased interest in the esoteric and occult. In the preface, he succinctly articulated the writers’ uncertainty and despair:

Never has the aspiration to the spiritual life or to the invisible world – an aspiration opposed by the materialistic theories of the scientists and by fashionable opinion – been more serious and more genuine. That aspiration can be found in the regrets and doubts, the black despair and even the blasphemies of our Naturalist novelists and our Decadent poets. Never has the human spirit had a more profound awareness of the inadequacy, the poverty, the unreality of this life. Never has it aspired more ardently to an invisible Beyond without managing to believe in it.162

Max Nordau (1849-1923) also recognised that the Symbolists’ Idealism was riven by disillusion.163 Degeneration, published in German in 1892 and French in 1895,
includes a derisive critique of degenerate art. Nordau’s analysis is comprehensive, lucid, insightful and twisted. Pincus-Witten wrote that *Degeneration* gives ‘one of the fullest pictures of the neurotic underside of the Symbolist movement.’

Baudelaire, Nordau argued, was not only a mystic and erotomaniac, but these tendencies were symptomatic of degeneracy and madness. He ‘showed all the mental stigmata of degeneration during the whole of his life’ and was attracted to other ‘degenerate minds, mad or depraved, and appreciated, for example, above all authors, the gifted but mentally deranged Edgar Poe.’ In one sentence Nordau gave a concise definition of the Symbolist agenda, while insisting that the Symbolists were incoherent and that psychological intervention was required to understand them.

*The explanations which the Symbolists themselves give of their cognomen appear nonsensical; but the psychologist gathers clearly from their babbling and stammering that under the name ‘symbol’ they understand a word (or series of words) expressing, not a fact of the external world, or of conscious thought, but an ambiguous glimmer of an idea, which does not force the reader to think, but allows him to dream, and hence brings about no intellectual processes, but only moods.*

Max Nordau included a substantial chapter in his book on Nietzsche, of whose ideas he recognised a European ‘current of thought’ also evident in ‘Oscar Wilde, Huysmans, and other Diabolists and Decadents.’ He suggested that they shared an antagonism towards nature, interest in the artificial, a questioning of the nature of truth and reality, and nihilistic leanings. As an example Nordau quoted Nietzsche: ‘Since Copernicus, man seems to have fallen upon an inclined plane; he is now rolling ever faster away from the central point – whither? – into the nothing? Into the piercing feeling of nothingness?’ Nordau also noted that Nietzsche and these writers frequently used similarly cynical aphorisms on art, nature, and morality.

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164 Robert Pincus-Witten, ‘The Iconography of Symbolist Painting’, *Eye to Eye: Twenty Years of Art Criticism*, 25.
166 Ibid.
167 Ibid., 119.
Recognising the parallels in thought between these writers he asks: 'This is more than a resemblance, is it not? To avoid being too diffuse, I abstain from citing passages exactly resembling these from Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, and from Ibsen.'\textsuperscript{168}

The basis for this similarity, Nordau suggests:

...is not explained by plagiarism; it is explained by the identity of mental qualities in Nietzsche and the other egomaniacal degenerates.\textsuperscript{169}

**Twentieth Century Criticism of the Symbolists**

During the twentieth century, critics who engaged with the work of Symbolist artists and writers acknowledged a disdain of academic art and Naturalism, the influence of Romanticism, an antagonism towards progress and pessimism about the future. However, while nihilistic tendencies were recognised in the work of Symbolist writers, especially the poets such as Mallarmé and Rimbaud, it was insufficiently recognised in interpretations of Symbolist art where the predominant view was that the Symbolist artists adhered to a relatively uncomplicated Idealism. For instance in *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, published just after the turn of the century in 2002, Stephen Eisenman, editor and co-author, wrote that Symbolism could be recognised by its rhetoric and that their agenda had been distilled by artists and critics to a ‘simple formula’:

*Symbolism was that theory of art which ascribed the greatest value to the representation of dreams, visions, or other subjective states by means of a restrictive and non-naturalistic vocabulary of line, tone, and colour.*\textsuperscript{170}

In light of the close interaction and reciprocity between the artists and writers in developing Symbolist ideas, the discrepancy between the insightful critical engagement brought to bear on literature as opposed to the visual arts for much of the twentieth century is an anomaly. Factors that have contributed to this discrepancy include the tendency of academics and art critics in the twentieth century to work within clearly defined disciplinary areas rather than engage in cross-disciplinary research; the shift of critical debate on the visual arts after World War II from Paris and European cultural centres to America, and its more narrow focus on modernism

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 444.  
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.  
and abstraction. Also, although the Symbolist movement was marginalised, and the focus of the debate on the visual arts shifted, in France where literature and writers were held in high regard and its literary heritage valued, the poetry and ideas of Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud, continued to influence and be analysed by writers and thinkers from Valéry onwards.\footnote{171}

In the next section of this chapter, I consider key texts written in the twentieth century that explore the complexities of Symbolist literature and, because of the close engagement between Symbolists working in different artforms, give insight into the ideas of the Symbolist visual artists, including their nihilistic tendencies.

Nihilism is the position that life has no intrinsic meaning, and that reality is not an allusive Ideal realm but nothingness, a void. Nihilism implies a profound scepticism, an awareness that there is no other external being or thing to bestow meaning or values, and rejects religious beliefs and moral principles.

For Nietzsche, nihilism meant utter despair caused by lack of meaning due to life being ephemeral; religious mores being based on a fallacy; the realisation of the finality of death and that God is dead.\footnote{172} Nietzsche was closely aligned with

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\footnote{171}{The high regard and respect accorded to French writers in France was such that it could excuse the infringement of moral norms or flagrant disregard of the law. In 1943 a statement by Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) was read out in court in defense of Jean Genet (1910-1986), author of Our Lady of Flowers (New York: Grove Press, 1991), convicted repeatedly for theft, and as a recidivist, facing life imprisonment. Cocteau insisted that to send Genet back to prison would be judged by history as an act of philistinism and insisted: 'He is Rimbaud, one cannot condemn Rimbaud.' Genet was released. Edmund White, The Flâneur (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001), 5.}

\footnote{172}{Nietzsche was an influential and controversial German intellectual. He was appointed Professor of classical philology at the University of Basel in 1869 when only twenty-four years of age and his ideas provoked critical debate in the public arena. He was a prolific writer publishing four essays titled Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen (The Untimely Meditations) which included 'Schopenhauer als Erzieher' (1874) and 'Richard Wagner à Bayreuth' (1876) and fourteen books between 1872 and 1888. Nihilism was an important concept for Nietzsche, as evident in his influential books The Birth of Tragedy (1872), The Gay Science (1882), Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883-1885) and the notes that he wrote between 1883-1888, compiled by his sister and published posthumously as The Will to Power (1901).

In Paris Nietzsche's work was readily available in German and progressively being made available through French translations. His article 'Richard Wagner à Bayreuth' was translated into French by Marie Baumgartner (née Koechlin) in 1877, his Aphorisms were translated and published in French in 1880, and from 1895 Henri Albert worked on a Mercure de France project to publish Nietzsche's texts in French. Nietzsche's work was also the subject of critical reviews. Polish Symbolist writer Téodor de Wyzewa (1862-1914) wrote numerous critical articles on Nietzsche and Wagner including 'Frédéric Nietzsche, le dernier métaphysicien', published in La Revue bleue on 7 November 1891, and 'Wagnerian Art: Painting in the Salon of...'}
Schopenhauer on the nature of reality. In *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) Schopenhauer like Kant, suggested that there must be some other reality which we can never truly know that corresponds with the reality we perceive. The only thing that we can know with certainty, Schopenhauer insisted, is our own 'will to live.' This will to live is the cause of endless struggle. It drives the body and moves one from dissatisfaction towards satisfaction. It is the cause of endless desires and suffering, as when satiety is reached the yearning is directed towards something else. In a brief synopsis of Schopenhauer's ideas Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) summarised: 'There is no such thing as happiness, for an unfulfilled wish causes pain, and attainment brings only satiety.'\(^{173}\) Schopenhauer insisted that human life is wretched. To reduce the suffering of existence, he advocated recognition and acceptance of inevitable disappointment: 'we blow out a soap-bubble as long and as large as possible, although we know perfectly well that it will burst'.\(^{174}\)

Sprigge summed up the different understandings of the nature of will as seen by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche suggesting that both agreed the essence of man and the cosmos was will. Schopenhauer regarded will as 'essentially loathsome' and that the only thing that could improve matters was if the fundamental essence of man and the world, the will, was different, which is impossible. Nietzsche, on the other hand, saw 'salvation' in the acceptance that 'one is essentially a will' and a will 'seeking to assert itself'. Rather than deny this one should revel in 'whatever fullness one can achieve in such self-assertion.'\(^{175}\) In his view the cosmos was seething with competing wills and there was no absolute will or a God. For Nietzsche the will was not 'will to live' but 'will to power.' One does not desire merely to survive, but to dominate, control and influence. In Sprigge's anaysis Nietzsche despised the weak and was interested only in those who were strong, who acknowledged the

\(^{172}\) Wyzewa's collection of articles on Nietzsche were published by Perrin as *Ecrivains étrangers* in 1898.

Jacques Le Rider in *Nietzsche in France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999) charted the dissemination and influence of Nietzsche's ideas in late-nineteenth century France. Notably, Nietzsche's ideas were exchanged and discussed in anarchic circles, and Jewish and Left wing intellectuals who defended Dreyfus were called 'Nietzscheans' by members of the Right.


temporality of existence and that the meaning of life was not bestowed by an external being but constructed by the individual.

Sprigge noted that when Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead, he was not just stating an agnostic position. Nietzsche also insisted that God as a mythological or symbolic figure, with the potential to be mobilised to construct meaning, to make sense of life and existence, was no longer possible. Nietzsche acknowledged that God, as an idea, had played an important role and now that role had lost its power, the idea of God lingered only as an excuse to refuse to face up to the meaning of our lives in a universe that has no gods.\(^{176}\)

Nietzsche suggested that humans despair because, rather than taking responsibility for creating meaning and values, they believe that significance and values need to be constructed by an external authority. He believed Christianity glorified humility and was a salve for the weak. Sprigge summed up Nietzsche’s position as follows: ‘We can only save ourselves from despair, from what Nietzsche calls nihilism, by some radically new approach to the whole question of values and morality.’\(^{177}\)

Nietzsche’s philosophical view of the world related closely to Idealism. For instance, by using material gleaned by the senses, the will constructs and shapes its world in response to other wills it jostles against. Sprigge noted that Nietzsche rejected the label Idealism because Idealists prioritise the mind over other things. But Nietzsche, like Schopenhauer, believed that human consciousness is profoundly affected by the bodily drives and needs of which we know little.

For both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, while providing a metaphysical interpretation of the body as a ‘system of processes of will,’ minds are ‘by-products’ of the material body and its functions over which we have little control. Sprigge noted, anticipating Freud, that Nietzsche emphasised that our ideas, even after reasoned and abstract thinking, are often just sophisticated ways of satisfying the instinctual drives of the body.\(^{178}\)

\(^{176}\) Ibid., 101.
\(^{177}\) Ibid.
\(^{178}\) Ibid., 100.
Nietzsche believed that to save ourselves from despair in an age where belief in God lacked plausibility, a new system of values and morality, and a radical new approach to life were needed to give it meaning. Some responded to a nihilistic worldview with anarchy, civil disorder, disruption and violence. Nietzsche believed that the one approach that could transcend nihilism and give meaning to life was art. He noted:

For why has the advent of nihilism become necessary? Because the values we have had hitherto thus draw their final consequence; because nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals – because we must experience nihilism before we can find out what values these 'values' really had. – We require, sometime, new values. 179

Schopenhauer saw engagement with art and aesthetic experience as a temporary relief from suffering – a brief suspension of the will. In contrast, Nietzsche maintained that art was ‘the great stimulant to life’ and suggested it was ‘the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life.’ 180 Nietzsche, in a preface to The Birth of Tragedy (1872) explained that in this book ‘pessimism, or to speak more clearly, nihilism, counts as “truth.”’ However, while it is the truth, for Nietzsche truth does not count as the ‘supreme value, even less as the supreme power.’ 181 He explained:

In this way, this book is even anti-pessimistic: that is, in the sense that it teaches something that is stronger than pessimism, 'more divine' than truth: art. Nobody, it seems, would more seriously propose a radical negation of life, a really active negation even more than merely saying No to life, than the author of this book. Except that he knows – he has experience of it, perhaps he has experience of nothing else! – that art is worth more than truth. 182

Two seminal books that elucidate the ideas and complexities of Symbolist literature are Axel’s Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930 (1931) by Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) and The Romantic Agony (1933) by Mario Praz (1896-1982). In Axel’s Castle Wilson explored the development of Symbolism in French literature and its influence on subsequent European writers. He recognised the Symbolists’ use of ambiguity and wilful confusion of the senses, their debt to


181 Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘excerpt from The Will to Power’, Art in Theory 1815-1900, Harrison & Wood, 783.

182 Ibid.
Romanticism, Poe’s supernatural themes and Gérard de Nerval’s (1808-1855) merging of reality and the imaginary. Wilson convincingly analysed the texts of Joyce, Yeats, Valery, Eliot, Proust and Stein revealing their Symbolist heritage, though Wilson puts more emphasis on the writers’ attempt to find unique ways to express their own perception of things rather than the Symbolist’s engagement with Idealism. Wilson recognised and drew attention to the aesthetic and spiritual desolation and a ‘tender-pathos’ in the poetry of Elliot, a sentiment that he traced back to Laforgue and Tristan Corbière (1845-1875). Corbière’s poetry was described by Huysmans as ‘a cry of sharp pain like a breaking of a ‘cello string.’ Wilson noted that in Eliot, as in Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), there is a sense that human life is now ignoble, sordid or tame, and he was tormented by intimations that it could have been otherwise.

The terrible dreariness of the great modern cities is the atmosphere in which ‘The Waste Land’ takes place – amidst the dreariness, brief, vivid images emerge, brief pure moments of feeling are distilled; but all about us we are aware of the nameless millions performing barren office routines, wearing down their souls in interminable labours of which the products never bring them profit – people whose pleasures are so sordid and so feeble that they seem almost sadder than their pains. And this Waste Land has another aspect: it is a place not merely of desolation, but of anarchy and doubt.

The Romantic Agony by Mario Praz, first published in 1933, was revised and republished in 1951 and 1970. It is a brilliant analysis of Romantic literature with a particular focus on its decadent, erotic and satanic characteristics. Praz recognised the significance of Huysmans’ novel Against Nature and described it as pivotal to Huysmans’ oeuvre and the whole Decadent movement in literature.

Along with many French academics and writers, Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), Georges Poulet and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), the existential author of Being and Nothingness (1943), were fascinated by the nihilistic despair subliminated in Mallarmé’s poetry. In their analysis they discern the metaphysical anguish and nihilistic tendencies in Mallarmé’s work. Blanchot discussed texts by Mallarmé, Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1929) and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) in his collection of essays The Space of Literature (1955) in which he

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183 Edmund Wilson, Axel’s Castle, 94.
184 Ibid, 106.
explored the nature of writing and metaphysical ideas such as absence and nothingness.

Poulet recognised that Mallarmé was torn by personal and metaphysical anxiety and was cornered between a material reality governed by chance and an Ideal that he recognised to be false. Needing to escape or find oblivion, Poulet suggested that his only option was an abstract idea of suicide which he sublimated into the content of his writing. Poulet wrote:

_Death is the only act possible. Cornered as we are between a true material world whose chance combinations take place in us regardless of us, and a false ideal world whose lie paralyzes and bewitches us, we have only one means of no longer being at the mercy either of nothingness or chance. This unique means, this unique act, is death. Voluntary death. Through it we abolish ourselves, but through it we also found ourselves...It is this act of voluntary death that Mallarmé committed. He committed it in Igitur._

Sartre wrote a biographical study in which he identified Mallarmé as the ‘poet of nothingness’ and recognised his sense of loss, exile and failure. The manuscript was partially destroyed in a bombing of Sartre’s apartment by the Secret Army Organisation (OAS) in the 1960s. The remaining fragments were published after Sartre’s death along with a previously published article (1953) on the poet.186

_In a word, he possesses being only for it to be negated, in the same way that, for example, we lend being to the Void or to Nothingness by the simple fact of giving them a name. This fixed and drab shimmering is the non-Being of Being passing into the being of non-Being to become again non-Being of Nothingness._187

Sartre surmised that Mallarmé actively chose to transform ‘the Failure of Poetry’ into ‘The Poetry of Failure.’ Sartre also recognised in Mallarmé’s writing a subversive anarchy and stated that Mallarmé’s poetry ‘represents an apotheosis of the vengeful nihilism advocated by the post-1860s generation of French writers.’188

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185 George Poulet, quoted in Maurice Blanchot, _The Space of Literature_ (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 44.
Postmodernism opened up a range of different approaches to the work of the Symbolists and demolished notions of truth and universal meaning. Several of the postmodern writers cited the Symbolists, especially Mallarmé and Lautréamont as they revolutionised engagement with texts, ideas, history, institutions and knowledge. In Revolution in Poetic Language, based on her PhD thesis, Julia Kristeva identified Mallarmé and Lautréamont’s work as prototypes of contemporary post-modern practice that had opened up the possibility of a dynamic and liberated engagement with texts. Taking a very different position from Sartre or Poulet, she denied the content and subject matter. Rather, Kristeva suggested that the unconventional language structure itself was anarchic and revolutionary, and revealed a lack of meaning.189

The prioritising of the significance of Mallarmé’s engagement with construction of his poetic language, above interpreting content or consideration of subject and themes within political, religious, philosophical and aesthetic contexts, is a position increasingly assumed by contemporary researchers. Heath Lees in Mallarmé and Wagner: Music and Poetic Language (2007) offers an insightful account of the development of Mallarmé’s ‘musicalized’ poetic language, and the powerful influence of Baudelaire and Wagner. Lees notes: ‘For Hérodias, Mallarmé’s primary aim was to develop new ways of composing language so that words in performance might come together like musical notes, naturally forming themselves into fluid areas of gesturally meaningful sound.’190 Lees recognises the impact of Mallarmé’s disillusionment with religion, loss of faith and spiritual crisis and summarised the poet’s evolution:

‘...to replace the inherited belief in a divine background of meaning and connection for his language and experience, Mallarmé cast around for another method of deepening and authenticating his poetic expression. This led him, in his earliest work, to explore the animating and shaping dimension of music as a substitute for the traditionally inferred coherence that flowed from a belief in divine creation. As he moved into his twenties, he found himself repossessing the old, religiously interpreted connections and effects, in order to transpose them into the new spirituality of music-poetic language, but one freed from the encircling grasp of the Church – a mystical or orphic interpretation of Nature

rather than an ecclesiastical one. Twenty years later, Mallarmé described this 'seul devoir du poète et le jeu littéraire par excellence' [the poet's only duty and the literary game par excellence] as 'L'explication orphique de la Terre' [the orphic explanation of the Earth].

In the 1960s and 70s some attention was brought to the Symbolist writers from perspectives that focused on their decadence, homosexual inclinations, hedonism, misogyny, and experimentation with psychedelic drugs. While offering interesting and important insights, they tended to overlook or minimise the Symbolists' own agendas. One of the more useful texts, for the purpose of this thesis, is Jennifer Birkett’s in The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870-1914 (1973) in which she critiqued from a feminist perspective the texts of seven significant French decadent writers, who were writing between 1870-1914, including Huysmans. Birkett considered their work in the context of the emergence of the decadent movement, their depiction of women, and their fascination with the erotic and perverse, religion and mysticism. Apart from their provocative and revolutionary decadence, Birkett maintained that they were essentially traditional and conservative in their ideas. While overlooking the intensity of his anxiety, like Baldick she did acknowledge Huysmans' metaphysical search and the consistency of his aesthetic decadence. ‘Huysmans’ restless explorations from Naturalism to Catholicism are all part of a single struggle, testing, modifying but never moving beyond the decadent pose.

While much of the research into the Symbolists until the 1960s and 1970s focused primarily on their contribution to literature, subsequently more attention has been given to the impact of the movement in the visual arts. Most of these publications however, have not given due weight to the nihilistic tendencies in the work of the Symbolist artists.

Important research which opened up the field and brought to light information about groups within the Symbolist movement was undertaken by George Mauner (b. 1931) and Robert Pincus-Witten (b. 1935). Mauner in The Nabi: Their History and Their Art, 1888-1896 (1978) chronologically traced the activity of the Nabis and

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distinguished between them and the Pont-Aven painters who were also painting in Brittany and influenced by Gauguin. He classified the Intimists Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940) and Xavier Roussel (1867-1944) as part of the Nabis. Mauner reflected on their Catholicism and mysticism, their cohesion as a group, collaborative practices, and the development of their styles which at times involved the use of stultifying prescriptive formulas derived from mystical tracts. Interesting relationships between the Nabis, Symbolist theatre and anarchy are revealed. However, the Symbolists’ desire to articulate the spiritual and Ideal is not contested.

Pincus-Witten’s *Occult Symbolism in France*, submitted as a doctoral thesis in 1968 and published in 1976, recognised the impact of the eccentric Peladan and the *Salons de la Rose+Croix*. Pincus-Witten presented an overview of Peladan’s life and his vast literary and artistic output that while mediocre and didactic was for a short period well known. Pincus-Witten outlined the connections between the artistic and occult milieu in Paris in the 1890s and revealed their Idealist aspirations, rejection of eastern philosophies, belief in redemption through art, and the tension between their identification with Catholicism, occult practices and the Church.

Pincus-Witten also provided a critique of the broad ranging survey exhibition *The Sacred and Profane in Symbolist Art*¹⁹³ (1968-69) which embraced work as diverse as the Nabis, Pont-Aven and Rosicrucian groups, Italian Symbolists, German artists Max Klinger (1857-1920), late Pre-Raphaelite work by Albert Moore (1841-1893) and Lord Frederic Leighton (1830-1896); and Belgian artists Khnopff and Jean Delville (1867-1953). His critique, ‘The Iconography of Symbolist Painting’, was published as one of a collection of essays in *Eye-to-eye, Twenty Years of Art Criticism* (1984). In it he traced the influence of the Symbolists on abstraction and American artists. Pincus-Witten noted that while the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists provided the Symbolists with painting techniques, for instance Gauguin from Camille Pissaro (1830-1903) and Alphonse Osbert (1857-1939) and Giovanni Segantini (1858-1899) from Georges-Pierre Seurat (1859-1891), ‘from a Symbolist viewpoint there can be few paintings dumber than Monet’s haystacks

except perhaps Cézanne’s apples." Pincus-Witten noted that the Symbolists engaged with literary narratives, particularly those with religious, spiritual, occultist, erotic and perverse themes, such as Judith and Salomé and the poet-hero Orpheus, that could express a rarefied, virtuous dandyism, sexually charged femme fatale, or the virgin bride.

Philippe Jullian (b. 1919), inspired by Moreau’s great unfinished work *Chimeras*, in *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* (1971), explored themes represented by the artist’s chimera: legends, pessimism, mysticism, the macabre and erotic. Jullian noted that artists disappointed by Impressionism and academic art and weighed down with fin-de-siècle pessimism escaped into an Ideal realm by looking to their imagination and dreams, as articulated in the imagery of Moreau.

In response to the increased interest in the Symbolists over the last thirty years a number of anthologies have been compiled. Henri Dorra (b.1924), Professor of Art History, Santa Barbara, and editor of the influential *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology* (1994), explored the aspirations of the Symbolists in his analytical introductions to the texts, which includes statements by Symbolist artists and writers, critical writings, and excerpts from interviews. Dorra noted the Symbolists’ debt to Baudelaire’s poem *Correspondences* (c.1852-56) and posits that it can be ‘regarded as the preliminary manifesto of the French Symbolist movement.’

* Baudelaire postulates in it a universal harmony that accounts for relationships between the intangible and the tangible; he implies that the gifted poet perceives these through bare hints provided by nature. And he stresses the evocative and expressive power of such stimulants as perfumes, colours, and sounds on the senses as well as his belief in the equivalence of their aesthetic impact.

An important contribution to an understanding of the development of the Symbolist movement is Pamela Genova’s study *Symbolist Journals: A Culture of*
Correspondence. Genova notes that an ongoing problem for academics and critics is that of definition and that the repeated attempts to define the movement ‘reveals a deeply rooted sense of ambivalence at the heart of the Symbolist movement.’ Genova contextualises her discussion within the context of the literary and artistic ferment of the Impressionists, Naturalists and Symbolists and notes that frequently writers and artists were ambivalent about being pigeon-holed as Symbolist and/or shifted allegiances.

Offering accessible overviews of art in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Robert Rosenblum, (b.1927) art historian and author of numerous books, gave some attention to the Symbolists in *Paintings in the Musée d’Orsay* (1989). Rosenblum contextualised the Symbolists in relation to the Realists, Impressionists, and Post-Impressionists. He recognised the breadth of the movement in Europe; and the rejection of realism and the materiality of the world; the development of a diverse range of visual languages to express ideas; interest in transforming the natural into the unnatural; mystical religious leanings and ‘opiate fantasies’, but does not refer to any nihilistic tendencies undermining Idealism. For Rosenblum, the Symbolists’ Idealism was uncomplicated: ‘few can rival Jean Delville in his ability to breathe into life a dream world of such rarefied voluptuousness that we feel it might evaporate into the twilight zone.’

In *Symbolists and Symbolism* (1990) Robert Delevoy considered the complexity of the Symbolist movement. He recognised that the artists were dispersed across Europe and had disparate styles with few unifying features except they ‘adopted a deliberately Idealist approach’, reacted against Naturalism, used mimesis, and attempted to ‘revive a syntax worn out by more than four centuries of use by investing the dreamed image with iconic substance’. Delevoy noted that Huysmans had said that *Against Nature* was based on nothing, and suggested that this was merely a figure of speech and the novel did not reflect ‘the nihilism of outworn ideologies, or the helplessness of a solitary and disorientated writer’ and

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‘intuition that truth and the source of creativity lay in unknown and possibly unknowable recesses of the mind.’

*The Symbolist Generation: 1870-1910* (1990) by Pierre-Louis Mathieu is a comprehensive, clear and well-researched overview of the Symbolist artists working in Europe. Pierre-Louis Mathieu, who has written extensively on Gustave Moreau and organised exhibitions in Switzerland and Japan, focused on the visual arts and makes minimal references to Symbolist writers. Mathieu is one of the few commentators on Symbolist artists who recognised the depths of the Symbolist’s anxiety and despair and described a dark Schopenhaurian pessimism. He does go on to suggest that they allayed their ‘existential angst’ with spiritualism, occultism and mysticism.

...there is no denying the fact that for the Symbolists the crucial question, one they posed repeatedly in and through their art concerned the meaning of life. Life is pain, happiness and love unattainable, and death is the only certainty – this was the disenchanted message they wanted to communicate to the viewer. Some would devote years to expressing their pessimism in elaborate, large scale works, polyptychs and series of related canvases.

Like Edward-Lucie Smith, Rodolphe Rapetti, in *Symbolism* (2005), argued that while largely overlooked by art history, the Symbolist movement was pivotal to the development of art in the second half of the nineteenth century and would provide contemporary art with a source for reinvigoration into the future. In developing his argument, he notes that the Symbolist attitude converged with the moment when ‘positivism began to crumble and determinism gave way to relativity and uncertainty.’ He considered the international development of the movement, the stylistic diversity and the various strands of Symbolist thought and trends which have come to fruition in different European centres. Like Delevoy, he noted the complexity of the movement and individualism of the various approaches. Rapetti recognised the Symbolists’ engagement with myth, archaeology and folklore and that rather than infusing them with nationalistic or historical meanings they imbued them with non-rational and spiritual ideas. Rapetti noted a ‘return to the sacred and

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201 Ibid., 51.
recognition of the spiritual,' and that religious themes including the satanic as well as conflict between good and evil were frequently explored by the Symbolists. In his analysis he recognised their fantastic utopian and anarchic visions, alienation and pessimism in the face of modernity and progress; and suggested that the Symbolists were solitary or melancholy and ‘confined to silence and memories [and] conveyed the dereliction of modern humanity in the face of a world that was overwhelming it.’ Rapetti, like Mathieu, recognised a pessimism and bitterness caused by the gulf between the Symbolists’ Ideal and the empty reality of their vision. He discerned that the Symbolists oscillated between ‘pessimism and commitment to an initiatory quest for a visual poetic expression that would incarnate the totality of the cosmos.’ This oscillation caused them to fluctuate ‘between bitterness and a sense of wonder, between dismay and enchantment, between hatred of the contemporary world and a dream of Arcadia.’

Many of the most interesting recent texts touching on the Symbolists’ Idealism and their nihilistic tendencies have been published as short articles, reviews and exhibition catalogue essays. For instance, the artists’ interest in cryptography and language and their links with anarchy are explored by Professor Natasha Staller in ‘Babel: Hermetic Languages, Universal Languages, and Anti-Languages in fin-de-siècle Parisian Culture.’ Connections are also made between anarchy, nihilistic thought and the occult in art of the nineteenth century in Paris in ‘The Spirit of Revolt’ by Ted Gott and Kathryn Weir.

Although the nihilistic tendencies in the work of writers aligned with the Symbolist movement has been acknowledged, they have not been given sufficient recognition in relation to the work of the visual artists. This can be attributed to a range of factors including the movement falling out of favour and into relative oblivion at the end of the 1890s; the marginalisation of the Symbolist movement by art historians and critics in the first half of the twentieth century, and the adoption at face value the Symbolists’ claims of Idealism by many of their peers and subsequent writers. In the

203 Rapetti, Symbolists, 7-11.
next chapter, focusing primarily on Huysmans' Symbolist phase, I will consider his
metaphysical questioning, and shifting aesthetic position and artistic allegiances
Oh yes, the Bièvre is nothing but a moving rubbish dump, but nevertheless it waters the last remaining poplars in the city. Yes, it exhales the fetid odours of a stagnant pond and the rude stench of the tomb, but throw in a barrel-organ at the foot of one of its trees, spitting out in long gobs the melodies of which its belly is full, conjure up in this vale of tears the voice of a pauper-woman at the water’s edge plaintively singing one of those laments picked up by chance at the music hall, a sentimental ballad extolling their darling one and begging for love, and tell me that this wailing doesn’t grip you by the entrails, that this sobbing voice isn’t the desolate howl of the poor suburbs themselves.

The works have begun. The embankment of the Rue de Tolbiac already bars the horizon; soon limewash will mask the mottled sores of this ailing quartier with its uniform whiteness, and the silhouettes of the skinners’ and chamois-makers’ open-air driers against the great grey skies will be obscured. Soon that eternal and delightful promenade so beloved by intimists, across a plain furrowed by the industrious and miserable Bièvre as it toils on its way, will be lost forever.

In all this hurly-burly, a single writer alone saw clear, Barbey d’Aurévilly, who, be it said, had no personal acquaintance with me. In an article in the Constitutionnel, bearing date July 28th, 1884, and which has been reprinted in his Le Roman Contemporain published in 1902, he wrote: ‘After such a book, it only remains for the author to chose between the muzzle of a pistol or the foot of the cross.’

The choice has been made.

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207 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, xlix.
2. *The Sceptic Who Would Fain Believe* 208

Throughout his life, Huysmans' metaphysical position evolved and aesthetic affiliations shifted. His move away from Naturalism to Symbolism was definitively marked by the publication of *Against Nature* in 1884. While a Symbolist, Huysmans' Idealism was complex and undermined by anxiety and metaphysical uncertainty which led him to vacillate between a Shopenhauerian pessimism, nihilistic despair and belief in the redemptive power of art similar to that suggested by Nietzsche. Huysmans adopted the position that to transcend bleak reality, the individual needed to devise a new system of morals and values and to create their own purpose for life and meaning for existence. Like Nietzsche, Huysmans held that art was 'the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life.' 209

Huysmans first gained significant public recognition in 1876 as a Naturalist writer and critic closely affiliated with Émile Zola (1840-1902) and the Médan group after the publication of *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* (1876). On the publication of this novel Huysmans sent a copy to Edmond de Goncourt (1822-1896) to whom he wrote several years later: 'The urge to write came to me from reading your books. Your novels were the first to attract me, and they appealed to me more profoundly than any others...' 210 As well as the Goncourt Brothers, Edmond and Jules (1830-1870), the young Huysmans admired the work of Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Zola.

Huysmans first visited Zola at his home on the Rue Saint-Georges in 1876, encouraged by his friend Henry Céard (1851-1924). 211 He brought with him his new novel *Marthe* and a copy of *Le Drageoir aux épices* (1874), an early book of derivative prose poems inspired by Charles Baudelaire and Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841). The gritty realism of *Marthe* was inspired by the life of a red-haired actress with whom he had fallen in love when, as a part-time university student, he saw her

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208 Ibid, 206.
on stage at the Bobino (Théâtre du Luxembourg). He had courted her by writing an enthusiastic review of the tawdry production she was playing in. 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. Soon after this Huysmans discovered to his dismay that she was pregnant from a previous liaison. The baby girl was born at the end of winter in their flat in Rue de Sèvres with the assistance of a midwife who, noting the poverty and that there was no coal to heat the room, did not charge for her services. Apparently, the relationship did not last long and nothing is known of the mother or child. 212

Writing a novel about a prostitute and describing in harsh realistic detail her life working in a Parisian brothel was provocative, and because publishing such a book in France would put both the author and publisher at risk of prosecution, Huysmans travelled to Brussels where it was published by Jean Gay whose main business was reprinting eighteenth-century erotica. Zola's response to Huysmans' novel *Marthe* was encouraging. 213 Huysmans, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique (1851-1935), Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) and Paul Alexis (1847-1901) were soon regular visitors on Thursday evenings at Zola's home and later met regularly at Zola's villa in Médan. 214 Baldick noted that Zola had 'craved the satisfaction to be derived from a literary "school"' and he regarded the Médan group of emerging writers as 'disciples committed for life to the Naturalist cult.' 215 Edmond de Goncourt noted the literary intentions and their influences in a journal entry dated 28 May 1879:

*At a very lively and cordial dinner this evening Huysmans, Céard, Hennique, Paul Alexis, Octave Mirbeau, Guy de Maupassant, the young people of realist-naturalist literature, officially consecrated Flaubert, Zola, and me as the three masters of modern literature. The new army is in process of formation.* 216

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212 Ibid., 36.
213 Ibid., 62.
214 'Zola has a tribe of young faithful, whose admiration, enthusiasm, and ardor that sly writer maintains and indeed feeds by handing out corresponding editorships abroad, by getting well-paid articles into the papers where he reigns as master, in short, by purely material services.' Edmond de Goncourt, 'Journal entry, Wednesday 28 May 1879', *Paris and the Arts*, Becker & Philips.
Eventually all of the young writers, except Alexis, rebelled against Naturalism and ‘Huysmans was to deal Naturalism a blow from which it has never fully recovered.’ 217

Naturalism is the philosophical position that ‘nature is all there is and all basic truths are truths of nature.’ 218 The pre-eminent and primary advocate of Naturalism in literature and art was Zola. He maintained that novelists should adopt a scientific approach and observe and describe human behaviours whose actions were determined by their inherited racial attributes and physiological variations, family circumstance and social class within the historical context. 219

In *Le Roman experimental*, adopting Claude Bernard’s ideas outlined in *Introduction à la médecine expérimentale*, in which the physiologist advocated scientific methods, Zola asserted that novelists could reveal the phenomena that determine people’s lives, in order ‘to one day control and dominate these phenomena.’ 220

Zola distanced himself from ‘idealistic’ writers ‘who cast aside observation and experiment, and base their works on the supernatural and irrational’ and admit ‘the power of mysterious forces.’ 221 Whereas experimental novelists strove to ‘go from the known to the unknown, to make ourselves masters of nature’, Zola insisted that:

...idealistic novelists deliberately remain in the unknown, through all sorts of religious and philosophical prejudices, under the astounding pretence that the unknown is nobler and more beautiful than the known. 222

For Zola, experimental novelists were working towards ‘the conquest of nature and the increase in man’s power a hundredfold’ and possessed ‘strength and morality.’ In

219 For example, in *Nana* a character in a play is described as: ‘...a tart, the offspring of four of five generations of alcoholics, her blood tainted by a long heredity of deep poverty and drink, which in her case had taken the form of unhinging the nervous balance of her sexuality...’ Émile Zola, *Nana*. trans., Douglas Parmée (London: Oxford University Press, 1992), 190.
221 Ibid., 26.
222 Ibid.
contrast 'idealistic writers' relied on the 'irrational and the supernatural' and their 'every flight upward is followed by a deeper fall into metaphysical chaos.'

Influenced by Realism and the writing of Honoré de Balzac (1799-1860) Zola meticulously researched scenes and characters and described them in great detail. Modernisation, industrialisation and expansion of the French colonial empire were rapidly changing the demographics of the population of Paris. Zola was attentive to the diversity of people and described the social and economic disadvantage endured by the working class and bourgeoisie with a view to analysing them objectively in order to expose structural injustice in society. Like other writers in the nineteenth century, he was influenced by advances in science such as Darwinian theory with the inference of superior and inferior species and races, and positivistic medicine and psychiatry including the idea that ancestry and social and physical environment determined the outcomes of a human life. Journals and daily papers included articles categorising and describing various types of people from Parisian laundresses to foreigners from far-flung countries colonised by the French. They also contained articles voicing popular concerns about the 'physical and mental degeneracy of the French, the falling birth-rate, the growing number of draft rejects, alcoholism and drug use, the rise in crime, and the spread of syphilis.' Hustvedt notes that in the popular press the notion of degeneration was seen to be the cause of almost everything, including 'France’s humiliating military defeats, the increase in mental illness and suicide (the 1880s saw the highest suicide rate of any decade in nineteenth-century France), homosexuality, hysteria, and prostitution.'

Zola’s fascination with these ideas is evident in his first significant novel Therese Raquin (1867). In his preface for this book he emphasised the self-conscious objectivity of his approach, commenting that in writing the novel his 'objective was first and foremost a scientific one' and that the two characters Thérèse and Laurent were 'human animals, nothing more.'

223 Ibid., 31.
225 Ibid.
...I had only one aim, which was: given a powerful man and an unsatisfied woman, to seek within them only the animal side, to plunge them together into a violent drama and take scrupulous note of their care the sensations and their actions. I simply carried out on two living bodies the same analytical examination that surgeons perform on corpses.\textsuperscript{227}

In a cycle of twenty novels titled \textit{Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'\'une famille sous le Second Empire} written between 1871 and 1893, Zola explored the effects of hereditary and environment on the members of the large extended Rougon-Macquart family. According to C\'eard, in 1875 Huysmans used his profits from \textit{Le Drageoir \`a épices} (1874) to buy the early volumes of \textit{Rougon-Macquart} cycle.\textsuperscript{228}

Zola believed that artists as well as writers should adhere to naturalist principles and in his essay ‘The Man and the Artist’ published in 1867, while enthusiastically appraising the work of Manet, Zola was at pains to distance the artist from Baudelaire. Although acknowledging that ‘lively sympathy has brought painter and poet together,’ he insisted that there was no ‘relationship between the paintings of Edouard Manet and the verses of Charles Baudelaire.’ He elaborated that Manet had never had the ‘stupidity, like so many others, to put “ideas” into his painting.’\textsuperscript{229} Zola used the review as a platform to espouse his aesthetic theory. In particular Zola denounced as nonsense the notion of an absolute beauty, and insisted that the role of the painter was to reveal an accurately observed reality, expressed through the painter’s particular subjective vision. In considering the role of the artist, Zola insisted that he:

\begin{quote}
should be judged simply as a painter... Don’t expect anything of him except a truthful and literal interpretation. He neither sings nor philosophises. He knows how to paint and that is all... I see him as an analyst painter. All problems have been re-examined; science requires solid foundations and this has been achieved by accurate observation of facts. This approach is not confined to the works of science alone. In all branches of knowledge and in all the works of mankind, man has tended to find basic and definitive principles in reality... This artist is an interpreter of things as they are, and for me, his works have the great merit of being accurate descriptions, rendered in an original and human language.\textsuperscript{230}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{227} Ibid, 2.  
\textsuperscript{228} Baldick, \textit{The Life of J.-K. Huysmans}, 1955, 35.  
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 560.
While aligned with Zola and the Médan group, Huysmans wrote a number of short texts compiled and published in *Parisian Sketches* (1880) that described 'types' such as washerwomen, bus conductors, barbers and chestnut sellers or sketched ancient quarters that were about to be demolished. The texts are detailed and evocative, incisive and callous. Even while aligned with the Naturalists, rather than being motivated by a spirit of scientific enquiry, empathy for ordinary people or a concern for social justice, Huysmans' writing reveals a curiosity and vision more in keeping with Baudelaire than Zola. Baudelaire embraced the notion of *dédoublément*\(^\text{231}\) and looked to modernity and the urban streets of Paris for a particular type of beauty that could be found in the sullied and corrupt, physical and spiritual suffering, his own and others. Like the photographer Eugène Atget (see plates 3 & 4), Huysmans mourned the destruction of old Paris, with its slums, squalid alleys and poverty, and was appalled by democracy and the increasing influence of the middle classes which he felt would result in the domination of petty and material bourgeois values and cultural mediocrity. In a letter to Guy de Maupassant dated March 1882 he wrote with scathing humour: 'I fear that just like potassium iodide, democracy will bring out the spots of human folly.'\(^\text{232}\)

Huysmans' decadent sensibility and aesthetic are apparent in passages of his early writing even when publicly advocating for the Naturalist movement. In 1877 he staunchly defended Zola in four articles titled *Émile Zola et 'L'Assommoir'* published in *L'Actualité*, Brussels, and in a brochure published by Charpentier in Paris. Written in response to criticism of Zola's novel, Huysmans supported Zola's literary theories and his detailed descriptions of human degradation and degeneracy. He declared his allegiance with realism, while writing in a lurid decadent style, more in keeping with his later Symbolist work:

*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*

\(^{231}\) Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories*, 7.

applaud both the coarse, spicy novel and the tender, sugary novel – provided each is well founded, well written, and true to life.²³³

The same year that The Vatard Sisters (1879) was published, Huysmans wrote ‘I portray what I see, what I feel, what I have experienced, writing the best I can, and that’s all.’²³⁴ With keen intuition and attention to detail, in this novel Huysmans explored the love affairs of two sisters who worked as book-stitchers in a bindery, Céline and Désirée Vatard. Céline, who has a mass of straw-coloured hair and is brazen, vulgar and fast, has an affair with Cyprien Tibaille, a self-interested, pretentious and anaemic artist, whom she considers high-faluting and finally leaves in favour of her previous lover Anatole, a womanising lout who was often drunk and frequently violent. Désirée, the younger of the two sisters, was ‘an urchin of fifteen, a brunette with large pale eyes that were somewhat crossed, plump without being fat’ who dreams of the modest comforts that marriage could bring, such as a room with white curtains, a walnut bed set, wine in the cupboard, a roast on Sundays, a pantry with a green curtain, and perhaps enough money to keep a dog.²³⁵ Désirée becomes infatuated with Auguste, a youth who also worked in the bindery. As he is impoverished with no prospects, her father refuses to give his daughter’s hand in marriage, and after an initial period of intense commitment to marrying and unfulfilled desire, their unconsummated love for each other peters out in favour of more suitable and accessible suitors.

By closely observing activity in the bindery that was situated on the ground floor – Number 11 Rue de Sèvres below his apartment, and which he part-owned – Huysmans was able to realistically depict the day-to-day activity in the workshop. The routines and general commotion, the sound of the presses and trimmers, the smell of the glue, the appearance, clothing, gestures, interactions and behaviour of the workers are all described with convincing veracity.

As well as descriptive passages, Huysmans analysed and explored the psychological complexity of the sisters, their desires and shifting emotional states. Their aspirations

²³⁵ Huysmans, The Vatard Sisters, Babcock, 6.
and expectations, the actual and perceived limitations imposed by their class, financial status and education are evident. The impact of adolescence and sexual drives on choice, behaviour and emotional state are played out. While harsh and unromanticised, not recognising Huysmans’ insightful dissection, exaggerated attributes of the characters and intensified colouring of the detailed descriptions, the critic Albert Woolf accurately complained in *Le Figaro* that the novel showed ‘no sign of imagination, no whisper of poetry, no hint of illusion, nothing but life in the raw – bleak, hateful and infinitely sad...’

Although very closely observed, with much realistic detail, Babcock noted that Huysmans’ Naturalist approach in *The Vatard Sisters* was different to that of Zola and that concerns such as adoption of an objective ‘scientific’ perspective, interest in the impact of genetics, heredity and environment on physical and mental characteristics and traits, and a deterministic approach to life, are not evident.

Babcock noted that Cyprien is clearly identified with Naturalism and that his aspirations are similar to those of the painter Jean-François Raffaëlli (1850-1924) who painted peasants and workers, landscapes and urban scenes in a realist style. Huysmans wrote of Raffaëlli in *Certains* (1889) that he was a ‘painter of suburban passages who alone rendered their plaintive barrenness and doleful joys;’ and in his *L’Exposition des Indépendants en 1880* that he was the artist who had:

...rendered the melancholy grandeur of anaemic sites lying beneath the infinity of the sky; here is finally expressed that poignant note of the passages of gloom and of the plaintive delights of our suburbs.

Cyprien rejected academic art, cared ‘little about the cast-off clothing of old periods’ and asserted that a ‘painter ought to render only that which he was able to visit and see.’ Although Cyprien painted from reality, Huysmans’ decadent sensibility and

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aesthetic position are expressed through the character’s attitude and choices. Cyprien, who is frail, excessively nervous and debauched, depicted with the verisimilitude subjects that were derelict, unhealthy, impoverished and sordid. He had few friends and ‘since prostitutes made up the bulk of his acquaintances, they were the sole subjects of his paintings.’ He also chose to paint ‘railroad crossings, gardens along the Rue de la Chine, the Gobelin plains, vice-haunted beer gardens, all the sickly, shabby locales that appealed to him.’ Reputable galleries refused to consider his work when he declared that ‘the pitiful spectacle of gilly flowers drying in a pot seemed more interesting to him than the sun-drenched laughter of roses blossoming in an open field.’

Flaubert critiqued The Vatard Sisters and in a letter dated 7 March 1879 advised Huysmans that it was not just the subject that was important, but how one depicted it.

*Neither wallflowers nor roses are interesting in themselves: what is interesting is the manner in which they are depicted. The Ganges is not more poetic than the Bièvre, but neither is the Bièvre more poetic than the Ganges...It pains me to see a writer of your originality spoiling this work with such childish absurdities. Have a little pride, nom de Dieu, and beware of formulas.*

Huysmans’ manner of depicting his subjects reveal his Symbolist leanings, as does his decision to include the fetishistic imaginings of Cyprien. Robert Ziegler noted Huysmans’ shift from the position espoused by Zola – that the author be objective, impartial, describe the ‘polyphonic richness of the people’ and disappear behind the action – was evident in The Vatard Sisters. Dream-like imagery is described in richly sensual detail. Luxury is juxtaposed with the abject and the senses of hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell are appealed to through music, exotic fabrics, jarring colours, wintery skies, a bizarre sexual encounter, and reference to extreme hunger.

*Basically, only the aristocratic and plebeian vices appealed to him...He would have liked to make love to a woman dressed like a rich clown beneath a grey and yellow winter sky about to let fall its snow, in a bedroom hung with Japanese fabrics, to the music of sad waltzes being churned out from a music-box by some half-starved organ grinder...*

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240 Huysmans, The Vatard Sisters, 79.
243 Huysmans, The Vatard Sisters, 78.
While still aligned with the Naturalists, in his article *L'Exposition des Indépendants en 1881*, Huysmans applauded Impressionist Edgar Degas (1834-1917) for the realism of *Little Dancer of Fourteen* (1880)\(^{244}\) and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) for his *Nude Study* (1880).\(^{245}\) Valuing veracity, he declared that of all of the artists represented none had depicted the figure with such realism. Huysmans provocatively dismissed the painting of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), who had been the most prominent Realist painter, and suggested that his unrealistic composition and texture in *Woman with a Parrot* (1866)\(^{246}\) was 'as far from reality in its composition and texture as Lefebvre’s *Femme couchée* and Cabanel’s\(^{247}\) peaches-and-cream *Vénus.*\(^{248}\)

The Courbet is painted roughly with a palette knife dating from the times of Louis Philippe, whereas the flesh of the more modern nudes wobble like half-eaten blancmange... 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.\(^{249}\)

The publication of *Against Nature* (1884) blatantly exposed the shifts in Huysmans' metaphysical and aesthetic position and definitively marked his break from Naturalism and the close affiliation with Zola and the Médan Group that had spanned eight years. In the preface to *Against Nature*, written twenty years after it was first published, Huysmans summed up the limitations of Naturalism.

> Naturalism was then at full tide; but that school, which was destined to perform the never-to-be-forgotten good service of showing real personages in accurate surroundings, was condemned to go on repeating itself, marking time for ever on the same spot.\(^{250}\)

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\(^{244}\) Edgar Degas, c. 1921-1931 *Little Dancer of Fourteen*, 95.2cm, bronze, tulle, satin, wooden base, Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Note: wax model c.1865-1881.

\(^{245}\) Paul Gauguin, 1880, *Nude Study*, oil on canvas, 111.4 x 79.5cm, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

\(^{246}\) Gustave Courbet, 1866, *Woman with a Parrot*, oil on canvas, 129.5 x 196.6cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York.

\(^{247}\) Alexandre Cabanel, 1863, *The Birth of Venus*, oil on canvas, 130 x 225cm, Musée d'Orsay


\(^{249}\) Ibid.

Huysmans noted that he had recognised that the masterpiece of Naturalism had already been written — namely with *L’Education sentimentale* (1869) by Flaubert which had surpassed even Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1877). For the young Médan writers Zola’s novel had been a ‘veritable bible’ but in its wake they were only able to follow and imitate, creating minor works.\textsuperscript{251}

Reflecting back on his shift away from Naturalism, Huysmans reminisced in his ‘Preface Twenty Years After’ that the Naturalist novel was dependant on the description of scenes and recognisable characters driven by base urges who were engaged in action rather than analysis of the characters. Their motivations lacked depth and soul. Huysmans also expressed his concern that Naturalism was ‘getting more and more out of breath by dint of turning the mill for ever 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.’ The problem of running out of original scenarios to describe, Huysmans mused, was not such a problem for Zola who was a ‘first-rate scene painter’ that designed ‘big, bold canvases more or less true to life.’ Huysmans noted that in his epic dramas Zola’s created the ‘illusion of action and movement’ but his characters lacked soul, and were ‘governed simply and solely by impulses and instincts, which greatly simplified the work of analysis.’\textsuperscript{252}

Huysmans in this same preface reflected on his shift from Naturalism, the publication of *Against Nature*, and how Zola had recognised the danger that it presented to Naturalism as a movement.

...Zola saw this clearly. 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.\textsuperscript{253}

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., xxxv.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., xliv.
When it became apparent that the general consensus was that Naturalism was dead, Edmond de Goncourt claimed credit as the first to develop the ‘formula for naturalism’ which he accused Zola of copying, and the first to shift in the direction of symbolism. In his journal he outlined comments made to journalist Huret who was compiling writers’ statements for publication. Goncourt’s comments reveal the level of personal investment, intensity of the rivalry between writers, and the seriousness with which shifts in ideological position and literary approach were taken.

_Yes, I was the first to move out of it by using the new materials with which the young of today wish to replace it – by dreams, symbolism, satanism, etc., etc. – by writing Les Frères Zemganno and La Faustin. I, the inventor of naturalism, sought to dematerialise it before anyone else thought of doing so._

Nordau\(^{255}\) referring to Huysmans’ shift from Naturalism to Symbolism pathologised the writer as a ‘classical type of the hysterical mind without originality, who is the predestined victim of every suggestion.’ He noted that Huysmans, initially a ‘fanatical imitator of Zola,’ began his literary career as a Naturalist and ‘then surpassed Zola in obscenity in romances and novels such as _Marthe._’ Insightful and clearly identifying Huysmans’ literary influences, while unnecessarily derisive and unfairly inferring a lack of originality, Nordau attributed the shift in direction towards Symbolism to Huysmans ‘aping’ the Diabolists, especially Baudelaire. Nordau insisted that the only thread that united Huysmans’ two oppositional literary approaches was his lubricity: ‘[t]hat has remained the same. He is, as a languishing “Decadent,” quite as vulgarly obscene as when he was a bestial “Naturalist.”’\(^{256}\)

Nordau had studied under the Italian Caesar Lombroso (1835-1909), Professor of Psychiatry and Forensic Medicine at the University of Turin, who applied Benedict-

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\(^{255}\) Max Nordau wrote: _The filth of Zola’s art and of his disciples in literary canal-dredging has been got over, and nothing remains for it but to turn to submerged peoples and social strata. The vanguard of civilization holds its nose at the pit of undiluted naturalism, and can only be brought to bend over it with sympathy and curiosity when, by cunning engineering, a drain from the boudoir and the sacristy has been turned into it. Mere sensuality passes as commonplace, and only finds admission when disguised as something unnatural and degenerate. Books treating of the relations between the sexes, with no matter how little reserve, seem too dully moral. Elegant titillation only begins where normal sexual relations leave off. Priapus has become a symbol of virtue. Vice looks to Sodom and Lesbos, to Bluebeard’s castle and the servant’s hall of the ‘divine’ Marquis de Sade’s Justine, for its embodiments._ Max Nordau, _Degeneration_, 13.

\(^{256}\) Ibid., 302.
Augustin Morel’s (1809-1873) theory of degeneration to criminal law, politics and sociology. Morel posited that degeneration occurred across progressive generations and was caused by a combination of hereditary transmission, traits fixed in ‘germ plasm’ and toxicity from substances such as alcohol. Starting with neurosis, the degeneration progressed in each successive generation to mental alienation, imbecility, then sterility. Nordau influentially applied these ideas to art and literature. Based on close analysis of their work and consideration of their physical attributes, Nordau pathologised many artists, writers and philosophers as degenerate, including Zola, Baudelaire and Huysmans.

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and for the most part the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of an assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil.

While many dismissed Nordau’s book as scurrilous, Zola protested ‘not against Nordau’s basic argument, but rather against the fact that he had been categorised as a degenerate. He went so far as to undergo medical examinations to show that he had been misdiagnosed.’

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. At the time of publication in 1884, it was received with contempt from the Naturalists and disdain from many critics. Twenty years after Against Nature was first released Huysmans recalled that the novel had been received with ‘mingled amazement and indignation.’ The reviews he described as ‘an outburst of incoherent ravings.’ In their attacks Huysmans reminisced that they had called him a ‘misanthropic impressionist’, stated that he should be ‘confined in a hydroponic establishment and suffer the discipline of cold douches’, and had described des Esseintes as a ‘maniac and lunatic of a complex sort.’ He was also criticised by schoolmasters who were upset that he had not

258 Nordau, Degeneration, v.
259 Hustvedt, ed. The Decadent Reader, 12.
eulogised Virgil, and in a public lecture at the Salle des Capucines, a speaker named Sarcon publicly declared: ‘I am quite ready to be hanged if I understand one blessed word of the book.’ Delighted at having been misunderstood, Huysmans noted that even ‘serious reviews such as the Revue des Deux Mondes, deputed their fugleman, M. Brunetière, to liken the novel to the vaudevilles of Wafflard (sic) and Fulgence.’

Interestingly and with insight, critic and writer Iwan Gilkin (1858-1924) considered that Against Nature was more significant as criticism, elucidating art and decadence, than as fictional prose. He wrote in ‘Chronique Littéraire’, La Jeune Belgique, 1884:

_The true value of A Rebour is critical rather than literary. This book explains many others. Like a torch falling into a pit, it throws a sombre light on the increasing depravity of art, on the growing perversions of artistic minds and sensibilities. For some years now critics have compared our current decadence with that of the old Roman Empire. Reading A Rebour makes this comparison irrefutable. In literature, above all, the process of decomposition is awesome, terrifying, tragic._

Against Nature was described by Symons as a ‘breviary of decadence’ and referred to by Oscar Wilde’s character Lord Henry Wotton in The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) as ‘the strangest book that he had ever read.’ According to Baldick, Wilde when cross-examined during his trial in 1895, identified Against Nature as being the French novel bound in a yellow jacket lent by Lord Wotton to the protagonist in The Picture of Dorian Gray. Baldick surmised that as a result the English probably assumed that the author ‘of the notorious “yellow book” must be a wealthy hedonist, a monster of depravity, a nineteenth-century Elagabalus.’ Whereas in fact ‘he was a minor civil servant of modest means, living what was as yet a very humdrum life.’ Wilde described Wotton’s experience of reading the novel in terms of hyper-sensual dream imagery and aesthetic sensibility shared by the English Aesthetes and Symbolists:

_It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he

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260 Reference to Joseph Désiré Fulgence de Bury and Alexis-Jacques-Marie Wafflard who specialised in comedy and vaudeville, and collaborated on *Un moment d’imprudence* (1819), *Le Voyage à Dieppe* (1821) and *Le Célibataire et l’homme marié* (1824).
had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed.265

Historian Charles Sowerwine reflects in France Since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society that, while conservative commentators were ‘terrified’ of the implications of such a book, a new generation of writers were delighted and ‘saw in the duke’s perverted tastes a way out of the dead end of realism.’ 266

Subsequently, over the century various writers have written positive criticism or declared enthusiasm for the novel. Remy de Gourmont, introducing Huysmans in The Book of Masks, an anthology of French Symbolist and Decadent writing first published in 1896, wrote: ‘A Rebours…was, not the point of departure, but the consecration of a new literature.’ 267 Havelock Ellis, who translated Against Nature into English, noted the ongoing influence and wrote of the novel:

*Certain aesthetic ideals of the latter half of the nineteenth century are more quintessentially expressed in A Rebours than in any other book. Intensely personal, audaciously independent, it yet sums up a movement which has scarcely now worked itself out.* 268

Three writers familiar with Huysmans and his work discerned the tension between Huysmans’ Idealism and nihilistic despair: Mallarmé, Léon Bloy (1846-1917) and Barbey d’Aurevilly. Mallarmé, who clearly articulated his own metaphysical crisis and nihilism in 1866, recognised the immensity of Huysmans’ despair. 269 On receiving a copy of the novel from the author, Mallarmé wrote a letter to Huysmans, dated 18 May 1884, revealing his impressions. Of the novel’s ending he perceptively noted that:

*...to conclude with the explosion of the departure from Fontenay, more tragic than a disappearance caused by Death, this return of des Esseintes into the vast world where he alone has no place. There is nothing for him, nothing, beyond that carefully studied phase of his youth, worse than nothing: one stops and lets the book fall; one doesn’t want to know, so greatly does one fear that one won’t find sufficient pity for the misfortune of the poignant and artificial man.* 270

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270 Ibid, 136.
Bloy and Barbey d'Aurevilly were Catholic writers interested in Satanism. In a review of *Against Nature* published in *Le Chat Noir*, Bloy wrote that Huysmans was ‘formerly a Naturalist, but now an Idealist capable of the most exulted mysticism’, and mused that the author had to consider ‘whether to guzzle like the beasts of the field or to look upon the face of God.’  

Barbey d'Aurevilly, acknowledged by Huysmans in his ‘Preface Twenty Years After’, as the one writer who understood the novel, wrote in an article published in the *Constitutionnel* on 28 July 1884:

‘After Les Fleurs du mal,’ I told Baudelaire, ‘it only remains for you to choose between the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the Cross. ’ But will the author of *A Rebours* make the same choice?

While he was writing *Against Nature* in the spring of 1883, Huysmans outlined the novel in a letter to Théodore Hannon (1851-1916):

*I am working, immersed in the depths of a very strange novel, vaguely clerical, a bit homosexual, the story of the end of a family devoured by memories of a religious childhood and nervous illness. A novel with only one character! I think it will be curious – all the more so, as it contains the ultimate refinement of everything: literature, Art, flowers, perfumes, furnishings, gem stones, etc.*

*Against Nature* reveals in intimate detail the single significant character in the novel, Jean duc Floressas des Esseintes. While using many techniques refined by the Naturalists – such as extensive research and myriads of descriptive detail – rather than having a cast of interacting realistic characters, a plot or action, complex aesthetic and metaphysical themes are explored through a narrow and intense focus on the thoughts, ideas, sensibility, passions, health, psychological depths and nuances of the one singularly eccentric character. So little actually happens in the novel – all the journeys, incidents and pleasures are figments of the imagination: memories, reveries, day-dreams, nightmares and hallucinations – that Jullian suggested that it could be considered as an anti-novel. The novel is divided into themed chapters, each of which focuses obsessively on a particular subject including perfume, colours, sin and perversity, gemstones, profane music and plainsong, religious and lay

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literature. The protagonist's every decision is informed by his aesthetic sensibility and Idealism.

Throughout *Against Nature*, and prominent in much of his oeuvre, are Huysmans' descriptive and evocative references to pathological states in order to elucidate and intensify the tension between materiality and mortality and symbolist notions of the Ideal. Des Esseintes like the feeble Roderick Usher who suffered pangs of dread in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) is described as thirty years old, frail, anaemic, nervous and the sole surviving descendant of an atrophied ancient family. Alluding to the reduced position of the aristocracy and the idea of genetic degeneration, exacerbated by intermarriage, ancestral portraits reveal the increased effeminacy, anaemic exhaustion and lack of vigour over successive generations of des Esseintes' forebears.

As a child, des Esseintes had suffered scrofulous infections, persistent fevers 'languors and depressions of chlorosis.' His mother, a chronic invalid, died of general debility and his father died of a 'vague and mysterious malady.' Emphasising that he is a fastidious, hypersensitive aesthete at odds with conventional social mores, Huysmans writes that at seventeen des Esseintes' nerves were already on edge. Ill at ease, he found the conversation of men of letters nauseating, and was 'chafed almost beyond endurance' by the triumphing of social and patriotic opinions lacking ideas or style that he read about each morning in the papers. He had unsuccessfully sought like-minded peers in society: amongst the descendants of feudal houses whom he described as 'mummies buried in rococo catafalques'; in the company of pleasure-seeking graduates of State Colleges or Lycées; graduates from the religious seminaries whom he considered pious, obedient and dull; and among men of letters whom he found petty and spiteful. Even as a young man he considered becoming a recluse, having 'tasted the sweets of the flesh with the appetite of a sick man, an invalid debilitated and full of whimsies, whose palate quickly loses savour.' He plunged into amorous adventures in an attempt to revive his 'flagging passions' but he was soon overwhelmed by ennui. His nerves were shattered, 'the back of the
neck began to prick and the hands were tremulous' and 'worn out with weariness; his senses fell into a lethargy, impotence was not far off.'

His health compromised, his vigour exhausted, pessimistic about Positivism and the future, disgusted by the rise of materiality, disillusioned with Parisian society and the mediocrity of the bourgeoisie, bored and exasperated by the triviality of life, disgusted by the vile hordes and his inherited fortune squandered, he decided to leave the city. He planned to rupture family tradition and sell Château de Lourps, the ancestral home in which he had been born and in which generations of the Floressas des Esseintes had aspired to secure their descendants a proud and productive future. Instead, like an solitary invalid he would invest in Government annuities which would provide an income that was comfortable enough, buy and refurbish an isolated house at Fontenay on the outskirts of Paris, a retreat in which he imagined 'burying himself in a hermit’s cell, deadening, as they do the noise of the traffic for sick people by laying straw in the streets, the inexorable turmoil of life.'

There, surrounded by exotic and esoteric art, books and artefacts, he separated himself from everything that he considered to be tawdry or vulgar. Meticulously, des Esseintes attended to aesthetic details. He chose the colour nasturtium orange to cover the walls in one room in order to enhance the evocative effect achieved by candlelight. He had his turtle gilded and encrusted with jewels after realising that the raw sienna hue of the shell dimmed rather than enriched the plum violet, silvery glints, and opaque yellow colours woven into his oriental carpet. Bored with artificial flowers that looked organic he acquired a collection of exotic hothouse orchids, caladium and carnivorous plants whose blooms looked diseased or artificial. He reminisced and savoured past debaucheries. In order to tempt his jaded palate, in search of new and complex sensual synesthetic experiences, and glimpse the Ideal, des Esseintes released exquisite perfumes and odours, mingling violet, ambergris, calamus, musk and patchouli into the fetid air; or orchestrated tastes like music sipping by liqueurs and spirits.

276 Ibid., 7.
Emphasising his mortality and a nihilistic despair undermining his aspirations to Idealism, des Esseintes was beset with ill-defined maladies and plagued by progressively worsening neurological symptoms suggestive of syphilis, with occasional short interim periods of relief. Descriptions of his complaints and attempts to alleviate them integrated throughout Against Nature included neuralgia, pain, shaking hands, impotence, nausea, dyspepsia, jaundice, wasting, constipation, insomnia, hysteria, rotting teeth and toothache, fever, headaches, fainting, and auditory and olfactory hallucinations.

Although wallowing in sensual experiences and obsessed by physical and psychological symptoms of disease, des Esseintes was more than a hedonist merely in search of self-gratification and pleasure or a self-indulgent invalid. Underlying all of his actions and his hyper-sensual aestheticism, was a metaphysical search. Overtly, the protagonist des Esseintes declared that he was an Idealist and even when undertaking actions as prosaic as selecting colours to paint a room he ostentatiously chose colours that would satisfy the ‘eye of that man amongst them who has visions of the ideal’ and which would ‘hide the nakedness of reality’. He selected from the spectrum of the colour blue noting that ‘its cognate tints such as mauve, lilac, pearl-grey’ were desirable, provided that the variations remained ‘tender and do not pass the border where they lose their individuality and change into pure violets and unmixed greys.’ The tension between Huysmans’ Symbolist aspirations towards Idealism and his nihilistic despair underlies all of the thoughts and actions of the protagonist. It determines the genres of literature that the decadent aesthete enjoys; the writers that he admires; his fascination with real flowers that look inorganic, diseased and corrupted; and the artwork that he collects.

While indulging his senses, des Esseintes denied the body and nature which he considered to be merely material, imperfect, temporal and corrupted, and aspired to exist on a higher intellectual and spiritual plane in order 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 transcend the mediocre and banal. In the end, his heightened sensitivity was so refined and determination to deny the material body so unnatural

277 Ibid., 14.
that he was rendered unable to eat and digest food and was forced to take his nutrition via an enema. The novel culminates in a spiritual and physical crisis, and the protagonist is compelled by his doctor to return from his isolation at Fontenay to Paris.

Des Esseintes dropped into a chair, in despair. ‘In two days more I shall be in Paris,’ he exclaimed; ‘well, all is over; like a flowing tide, the waves of human mediocrity rise to heavens and they will engulf my last refuge; I am opening the sluice-gates myself, in spite of myself. Ah! – Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the sceptic who would fain believe, on the galley-slave of life who puts out to sea alone, in the darkness of night, beneath a firmament illuminated no longer by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope.'

Huysmans shared his philosophical and religious quandaries with his peers. In a letter to Zola, written while he was proofing Against Nature, he criticised Zola’s novel Le Ventre de Paris (1873). Huysmans acknowledged that Zola ‘did not believe in pessimism’ and that claims had been made that the ‘philosopher was afraid of death’, regardless of which, Huysmans insisted that Zola had got Schopenhauer’s philosophy wrong and had missed the point of it in his novel. Equating Schopenhauer with the Catholic Church, as he had in Against Nature, Huysmans stated that the philosopher advocated ‘the theory of resignation’ and maintained that there was no ‘future panacea’. Rather, the notion of a panacea was ‘replaced by a spirit of patience, the decision to accept everything without complaint, by the consolation of waiting for death, which is considered as in religion as deliverance and not as fear.’ In his letter to Zola Huysmans also indicated that ‘given the impossibility for intelligent people to believe in Catholicism,’ he was personally drawn to Schopenhauer’s philosophy. The only other alternative was anarchy.

...these ideas are certainly the most comforting, the most logical, the most obvious there are. Basically, if one is not a pessimist, there remains only to be either a Christian or an anarchist; one of the three, if only you think about it.

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278 Ibid., 206.
279 While Huysmans was influenced by Schopenhaur and frequently mentions the philosopher by name, Brendan King notes that his understanding of the work of Schopenhaur was probably limited as ‘Huysmans’ references to him and his ideas are essentially based on his reading of one book of maxims and extracts.’ Email from Brendan King addressed to Mary Knights, 11 February 2008.
281 Ibid.
Through the figure of des Esseintes, Huysmans revealed his disdain for the narrow
minded, and the petty moralising of the pious.\textsuperscript{282} While recognising an affinity and
certain points of intersection with his metaphysical search and desire for faith, he
rejected organised religion. Des Esseintes yearned for ‘an unknown universe,
towards a far-off beatitude, just as ardently to be desired as that promised to believers
by the Scriptures’ and mused that his carefully honed eccentricities, highly refined
aesthetic sensibility, various eccentric tendencies and metaphysical leanings might
amount to the ‘same thing as religious enthusiasms.’\textsuperscript{283}

Des Esseintes recognised that the Jesuits, from whom he received his education, had
had considerable influence in developing his modes of thought although his own
stubborn, carping and critical temperament had ‘prevented his being modelled by
their discipline or ruled by what they taught him.’ After leaving college he
recognised ‘his scepticism had grown more acute.’ He pondered how discussions
with ‘puzzle-headed church officials and half educated priests whose blunders tore
away the veil so cleverly contrived by the Jesuits’ had resulted in independent
thinking and ‘increased his distrust in any and every form of belief.’\textsuperscript{284}

Des Esseintes noted that his health deteriorated when he was tormented by bouts of
spiritual unease, or was drawn ‘towards religious convictions, these fears and doubts
of uncertain faith’. He observed that periods of spiritual questioning ‘coincided with
certain nervous disturbances that had lately arisen’ and that ‘new complications had
begun to show themselves in his health.’\textsuperscript{285} Despite his scepticism, des Esseintes
feared that even pondering these themes was risky and could lead to conversion to
Catholicism. Des Esseintes chastised himself. ‘Why, I am going crazy… the dread of
the disease will end by bringing on the disease itself, if this goes on.’\textsuperscript{286} Unable to
stop himself, he continued to reflect on the influence and teachings of the Church,
considered Church schisms, heresies and contradictory interpretations of dogma, and

\textsuperscript{282} Huysmans characters are to a great extent autobiographical, as discussed, \textit{On the Brink of the
Abyss}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{283} J.-K. Huysmans, \textit{Against the Grain: A Rebours}, 1969, 76.
\textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{286} Ibid., 76.
had a fleeting sense of satisfaction that he might be committing blasphemy by collecting religious artefacts.

Des Esseintes reminisced on his immersion in the poetic sensibility and philosophy of the Catholic Church as a boy. Huysmans saw the Church as an institution ‘solitary and impressive’; an eloquent but impassive ‘mother to the unfortunate, a pitiful father to the oppressed, a stern judge to oppressors and tyrants.’ The Church murmured offers of salvation and hope while proclaiming ‘mankind the horror of life, the inclemency of fate’ and encouraging the masses to find ‘patience, contrition [and] the spirit of sacrifice’. Huysmans saw that ‘she’ deferred to ‘exhibiting the bleeding wounds of Christ’ to heal ‘men’s wounds’ while exhorting the ‘human creature to suffer’ and passively offer up to God his ‘tribulations and his offences, his vicissitudes and his sorrows’ with the promise of entrance to paradise. 287

Determined to maintain his atheist position, des Esseintes compared Catholicism and Schopenhauer. While they had many aspects in common, he decided that it was Schopenhauer’s pessimism that was capable of liberating him from yearning, disillusionment and despair, and was more consoling, precisely because, unlike Catholicism, it did not offer any fake hope of salvation or happiness. As Huysmans expressed it, through the words of des Esseintes:

Schopenhauer had seen the truth!... He made no professions of healing, offered the sick no compensation, no hope; but his theory of Pessimism was, after all, the great consoler of chosen intellects, of lofty souls; it revealed society as it was, insisted on the innate foolishness of women, pointed you out the beaten tracks, saved you from disillusions by teaching you to restrict, so far as is possible, your expectations; never, if you felt yourself strong enough to check the impulse, to let yourself come to the state of mind of believing yourself happy at last if only, when you least expect it, heaven did not send crashing in your head some murderous tile from the housetops.288

In 1904, twenty years after Against Nature was published and after his conversion to Catholicism Huysmans reflected on Schopenhauer’s pessimism:

His Pessimism is no different from that of the Scriptures from which he borrowed it. He has said no more than Solomon or than Job, no more than

287 Ibid., 79.
288 Ibid., 80.
even the Imitation, which long before his day summed up his whole philosophy in a sentence:—'Verily it is a wretched thing to be alive on the earth!' 289

In Against Nature, associating nihilism with nightmares and fever-induced insomnia, Huysmans described des Esseintes pitching out of control into nihilistic despair:

He would lie stretched on his bed, sometimes the victim of obstinate fits of insomnia and feverish restlessness, at others of abominable dreams only interrupted by the spasmodic awakening of a man losing foothold, pitching from top to bottom of a staircase, plunging into the depths of an abyss, without power to stop himself. 290

At the end of Against Nature, des Esseintes was incapable of adopting an attitude of pessimistic acceptance to the misery of existence as advocated by Schopenhauer, and cried out in prayer with no expectation of being heard: ‘Take pity, O Lord, on the Christian who doubts, on the sceptic who desires to believe, on the convict of life who embarks alone, in the night, beneath a sky no longer lit by the consoling beacons of ancient faith.’ 291

While aligned with the Symbolist movement, Huysmans vacillated from a Schopenhauerian pessimism to a position, not dissimilar to Nietzsche, of believing that nihilism, the nothingness of existence, could be redeemed by art. Similar to some of the ideas Nietzsche explored, Huysmans held that art was the ‘great stimulant of life’ and ‘the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life.’ 292 In the introduction to the collection of Huysmans’ letters that she compiled and translated Beaumont asks:

By what stages and by what means did he progress from a nihilistic pessimism à la Schopenhauer, via occultism and Satanism, to a confident faith in a merciful God which enabled him to accept, and even transcend, the suffering and intense pain of the cancer that carried him off at the age of fifty-nine? 293

289 Ibid., xxxvii.
290 Ibid., 94.
291 Ibid., 206.
292 Harrison & Wood, Art in Theory 1815-1900, 782.
Despite his religious and metaphysical shifts through his life, Beaumont concludes that Huysmans' 'commitment to art and literature was the major driving force in his life, and his letters leave us in little doubt on this point.'

While still a Symbolist, in the late 1880s Huysmans' Idealistic position evolved into an interest in spiritualism and occultism. Disgusted by the material reality and banality of existence he hoped to find 'some compensation for the horror of daily life, the squalor of existence, the excremental filthiness of the loathsome age we live in.' Unimpressed by 'cheap swindlers with their shady tricks, the mediums with their buffoonery, and the doddering old ladies with their table-turning antics' he declared that he wanted to access 'genuine occultism — not above but beneath or beside reality! Failing the faith of the Primitive or the first communicant, which I would dearly love to possess, there's a mystery there which appeals to me...'

Huysmans' engagement in spiritualism and the occult was in keeping with the growing curiosity about the supernatural in France. Gott and Weir note that the 'nihilism and moral despair that fuelled sporadic anarchic outbursts of violence throughout the 1890s also led to a widespread revival of interest in occult thought, black magic and satanic practices.' This general interest was reflected in newspapers. Huysmans' archives, held in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris, include clippings of 'vampirism, psychic emanations, celebrations of the Black Mass and the theft and defilement of the Eucharist at numerous Parisian churches.'

Huysmans' involvement was more intense than that of the merely curious. He adopted the belief that Evil was an absolute and powerful force, Satan was omnipresent and all-powerful, and God impotent. He quickly familiarised himself with the major figures of the factionalised occult scene in France including Joseph-Antoine Boullan, alias Dr. Johannès (1824-1893), Eugène Vintras (1807-1875), Marquis Stanislas de Guaita (1861-1897) and Sâr Joséphin Péladan.

294 Ibid., 3.
297 Beaumont, The Road from Decadence, 63.
Boullan was a charismatic ex-priest who had obtained a doctorate in Rome and a well-established Satanist with a criminal history by the time Huysmans sought him out. They engaged in regular correspondence and developed a friendship that endured until Boullan’s death. In Huysmans’ second letter to Boullan, written in 1890, seeking support for his next novel, he explained that he wanted to show Zola and Charcot that mysteries had not been explained by positivism or scientific experiments and declared: ‘the Devil exists, that the Devil reigns supreme, that the power he enjoyed in the middle ages has not been taken from him, for today he is master of the world, the Omniarch…’ Interestingly, in the same letter in which he requested information about occult practices to use in his writing, Huysmans revealed that he wanted to ‘create a work of supernatural realism, a spiritual naturalism.’ In the resulting novel, _La-Bas_ (1891), which explores the late nineteenth century occult movement in France, Huysmans reappraised the value of Naturalism and Symbolism. After an intense discussion pivoting on Grünewald’s paintings, the protagonist Durtal asserts that Naturalism had expired but a mystical realism combining ‘flights of the soul’ and realism was feasible.

It is possible that Huysmans was not fully aware of the extent of Boullan’s activities until after gaining access, after the Satanist’s death, to his confession written while imprisoned in 1893. The _cahier rose_ is now held in the Vatican library. In his confession Boullan attributed ‘miraculous powers to consecrated hosts mixed with human excrement’ and admitted to sacrificing the new-born baby of his lover Adele Chevalier, an ex-nun, at a black mass in 1860.

Boullan had also published the _Annales de la Sainteté au XIXe siècle_ (1870-1875) which included instructions on how to consummate a relationship with Satan. After being excommunicated in 1875, he moved from Paris to Lyons, and became involved with the Vintrasian cult, which preached ideas such as redemption through

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298 Boullan was to respond with documents in order that Huysmans would be able to prove that Satanism was active and enable him to write ‘a monumental history of Satanism in the nineteenth century.’ (J. Boullan quoted in Baldick, _The Life of J.K. Huysmans_, 2006, 227.)
301 Pincus-Witten, _Occult Symbolism in France_, 61.
302 Ibid.
religious sexual ritual. When Vintras – the leader of the cult who claimed to be a reincarnation of Elijah – died, Boullan declared himself the new leader.

When Boullan died in 1893, Huysmans paid for a fifteen-year grant for a grave-site in Lyons. The tombstone had engraved on it: ‘J.-A. Boullan (Docteur Johannis), Noble victime’.\textsuperscript{303} Shortly before Boullan’s death Stanislas de Guaita, another significant occult figure, wrote to Péladan ‘[t]he other night I was fluidically attacked with enormous violence and I sent the poisonous current back to its centre or pole of transmission, with the result that the magician himself became the victim.’ The ‘magician’, according to Pincus-Witten, was Boullan. After his death the Rosicrucian group was accused of murdering him from a distance.\textsuperscript{304}

The depth of Huysmans’ immersion and the strength of his convictions are evident from the company he kept and accounts – his own and those of his peers – which document his anxiety about being vulnerable to supernatural attacks as well as his adoption of superstitious practices and rituals. In the lead up to the publication of \textit{La-Bas}, warned by Boullan that he might incur the wrath of the Rosicrucians for the novel.\textsuperscript{305} Huysmans took precautions such as burning exorcist paste that included the ingredients camphor, myrrh, incense and cloves that had been ‘blessed’ in unconventional ways. Huysmans also suffered from peculiar sensations. Edmond de Goncourt recorded that Jean Lorrain had been told by Huysmans that he was having bizarre experiences like ‘something cold moving across his face’ and that he was alarmed and concerned that he might be surrounded by an invisible source.’ Huysmans had initially attributed the ‘strange attacks’ that felt like static electricity to a nervous disease, but after realising that his cat was suffering a similar phenomenon, attributed the symptoms to the ‘hatred of Stanislas de Guaita’.\textsuperscript{306}

In 1891, the same year that \textit{La-Bas} was published, Huysmans became increasingly concerned about the state of his soul and sought out Abbé Mugnier, in the sacristy of Saint-Thomas-d’Aquin. He explained that he had written a satanic book and now

\textsuperscript{304} Pincus-Witten, \textit{Occult Symbolism in France}, 70.
\textsuperscript{305} Baldick, \textit{The Life of J.-K. Huysmans}, 2006, 238
\textsuperscript{306} Ibid., 238-239.
wanted to write a ‘white’ book, but needed first to ‘whiten himself’.\textsuperscript{307} Huysmans later declared that ‘it was through a glimpse of the supernatural of evil that I first obtained insight into the supernatural of good. The one derived from the other. With his hooked paw the Devil drew me towards God.’\textsuperscript{308}

Huysmans’ occult beliefs shifted into a more orthodox Catholicism, although after he converted, he still maintained his links with the Occult world. He also remained superstitious and wary of satanic spells, black magic and evil spirits. From time to time he found it necessary to fend off supernatural attacks of ‘fluidic fisticuffs’ with prayers and medallions of saints. While he elucidates Catholic symbolism in art, architecture and music with a proselytising intent, and his critical approach is more didactic, Huysmans maintained his decadent aesthetic – he could not bear to pray in an ugly church.

In a letter to novelist Louis de Robert and Émile Lapoix dated November 1891, Huysmans reflected back over his changing metaphysical position and artistic direction to address the disappointment that they expressed about the shift in his work away from his earlier affinity with Naturalism.

\textit{Formerly I loved Schopenhauer – today I am disillusioned with him. I still appreciate the accuracy of his analysis, but the nihilism of his conclusions makes me uneasy. In the incomprehensive abomination that is our life, there cannot be nothing there at all.}\textsuperscript{309}

Huysmans reiterated that he believed that Naturalism was ‘dead and buried’ and that he had attempted to express something else. ‘I believe that the question that needs to be answered is above all a question of the soul.’\textsuperscript{310} At the time of writing the letter, he was involved in Satanism, explored mysticism and was moving towards Catholicism. He articulated that he had grown increasingly disappointed with the philosophy of Schopenhauer and discussed the shift in his ideas and artistic

\begin{footnotes}
\item[307] Ibid., 256.
\item[308] Ibid., 428.
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affiliations which had led him to a position in which he now believed that there must be something more than nothing.

*En Route* (1895), *The Cathedral* (1898) and *The Oblate* (1903) reveal Huysmans' immersion in Catholicism; struggles with his own faith; the advantages and disadvantages of becoming a monk or an oblate; and his vain hope of finding a sanctuary in a monastery where he could pursue his writing surrounded by studious and literary monks, while participating in lavish ecclesiastical celebrations in ornate chapels and regularly hearing choirs singing plainchant. In his search Huysmans undertook a number of retreats in convents and monasteries including with Benedictine monks at the Abbey of Ligugé; the Abbey of Saint-Wandrille, Notre-Dame d'Igny, an austere Trappist monastery; the Abbey of Saint-Pierre de Solesmes; and a convent at Fiancey. Here Huysmans thought he could set up an artists retreat but the Mother Superior intended it to become a centre of hydro-therapy for which he would write brochures. In searing detail the various religious houses, the frugality and poor food, hours dedicated to prayer along with the petty political strife, indiscretions and idiosyncrasies of monks and nuns were documented and integrated into three novels along with his own experiences. In *En Route* and *Sainte Lydwine* Huysmans elaborated on the doctrine of mystical substitution – the idea that some individuals are chosen to suffer considerably in order to exonerate the sins of others, the precedent being in Christ’s suffering for humanity.311 Baldick notes that the significance of *The Oblate* lay not in its liturgical content or barely veiled polemic but ‘what was to Huysmans the central problem of human existence: the question of suffering.’312 However, having lost the metaphysical tension and anxiety, Huysmans’ writing in these texts is often didactic and tedious.

In the next chapter, focusing primarily on Huysmans while aligned with the Symbolist movement, I will consider his criticism. Huysmans’ break from Émile Zola and the Naturalists and identification with the Symbolists was definitively marked by the publication of *Against Nature* in 1884. As a Symbolist, Huysmans’

311 Interestingly, while the idea of mystical substitution was to be a major aspect of Huysmans’ mystical Catholicism, Baldick notes that a version of the idea was probably introduced to Huysmans before he became a Catholic by the Satanist Boullan. (Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 2006, 299.)

Idealism was complex. He fluctuated between between a Schopenhaurian pessimism and resignation in the face of nothingness, to nihilistic despair, and the more sanguine position that to transcend the bleakness of reality the individual needed to devise a new system of morals and values and create their own meaning. In the late 1880s, Huysmans’ metaphysical questioning led him to engage with spiritualism and the occult, before finding resolution to his uncertainty by converting to Catholicism. While Huysmans’ very particular aesthetic sensibility, decadence and lubricity remained constant, his metaphysical position and artistic allegiances shifted throughout his life informing his critical approach.
Huysmans, Joris-Karl. Spare appearance, piercing deep-set eyes, ogee-shaped nose...In the street, encased in a close-fitting dark-brown jacket, he walks quickly, sensitive and snug. At his home in the rue de Sèvres, walls hung with etchings, charcoal drawings, impressionist watercolours. A fat yellow, moulting cat sheds fur around your legs. In his novels, he always uses his protagonists as mouthpieces for his likes and dislikes: sudden changes in the weather, alcoholic strength, the pungency of tobacco, the noise of the trams, the stupidity of the girls, the toughness of the beef. Has invented a certain phraseology – direct, virulent, denunciatory, fiercely metaphorical, a literary tattoo, nauseating, suggesting a thick atmosphere of tumultuous venom. —Félix Fénéon, 1886

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313 Félix Fénéon, in Delevoy, Symbolists and Symbolism, 50.
3. **Stirring the Nervous System by Erudite Phantasies**

*Huysmans’ idiosyncratic criticism*

In *The Art of Persuasion: Australian Art Criticism 1950-2001* (2002) Benjamin Genocchio asserts that while there are many who write well about art, that in itself is not enough to be a great critic. Rather, he insists: ‘[w]hat distinguishes a fine writer on art from a great critic is the ability to recognise major artists and interpret epochal trends which come to reshape our understanding of art and history.’

Although the impact of Huysmans’ early criticism of the Impressionists and later discussions of ecclesiastical architecture and plainchant in *La Cathédrale* and *L’Oblate* were influential at the time they were published, it is his texts on the Symbolist artists—including the criticism integrated into *Against Nature* on Redon and Moreau—that has had the most enduring impact over time. In light of Huysmans’ astute judgement, recognition of the significance of the ideas and work of the Symbolists, his power of persuasion, and the pivotal role he played in bringing the movement to prominence in the 1890s, it is evident that Huysmans is entitled to recognition as a great critic.

Huysmans came to public attention as a critic in 1879. Previously he had written ‘croquis et eaux-fortes’ (‘sketches and etchings’) on Flemish art published in *Le Musée des Deux-Mondes* in 1875 and 1876; a couple of reviews in 1867 in the short-lived journal titled *La Revue Mensuelle* (including a very brief note on *La Vogue Parisienne* showing at the Théâtre du Luxembourg); and a few relatively insignificant critical essays on art in 1876 in *La République des Lettres* that Baldick described as ‘entertaining and inoffensive’.

In 1879 Zola recommended Huysmans as a critic to Jules Leffitte, a major stakeholder of *Le Voltaire* who had secured from Zola serial rights to publish the

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316 Genoa, *Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence*, 150.
318 Ibid., 36.
319 Ibid., 75.
novel *Nana*. Huysmans shocked the journal’s readership by his lack of respect, disregard for the high esteem in which many of the academic painters were held, and by insisting that few of the approximately three-thousand paintings in the annual Salon were of any consequence. While aligned with the Naturalists, Huysmans continued an attack on the official exhibitions and championed the Impressionists. His criticism of the official Salons from 1879 to 1882 and *Expositions des Indépendants* in 1880, 1881 and 1882 were written in a style similar to that of Zola and the Goncourt Brothers. Huysmans flouted critical conventions and brought fascinating insights to the work he critiqued. Amid the violent attack on established academic artists he praised the little known artists Edouard Manet, Armand Guillaumin and Jean-François Raffaëlli.320

Throughout his literary career, Huysmans regularly contributed provocative and challenging critical reviews, articles and essays to a range of Parisian journals and *feuilletons* including *La Revue Indépendante, La Revue Littéraire et Artistique* and *La Réforme*, some of which were compiled into three books and are still pertinent today.321

As well as writing criticism in conventional prose form, Huysmans melded art and literary criticism with fiction, integrating it as a major thread through his novels.322 The overarching themes evident in Huysmans’ criticism, while aligned with the Symbolist movement, are his metaphysical questioning and very particular, refined and fastidious aesthetic sensibility that pivoted on decadence and perversity. Of note is his use of intertextual references to contextualise work and place emphasis on particular threads of meaning.

321 Many of Huysmans’ critical essays on art were collected into three books: *L’Art moderne* (1883) which included his writing on the Impressionists; *Certains* (1889) and *Trois Églises et Trois Primitifs* (1905).
322 Many nineteenth-century writers integrated their ideas on art, aesthetics and metaphysics, into their fiction, plays and poetry but only a few, including Huysmans, Baudelaire, Balzac, Tolstoy, Poe, Flaubert, Wilde, the Goncourt brothers, Zola and Rimbaud, have made a lasting impact on art history and theory through their art criticism written in these genres.
Baudelaire was the best of the early critics. Baudelaire in his account of the Salon of 1846 declared that criticism should be ‘partial, passionate and political’. He also insisted that the best criticism was written from a particular point of view by intelligent and sensitive writers who revealed their temperament, loves and hatred; were amusing and poetic rather than cold and calculated; and, that ‘the best account of a picture may well be a sonnet or an elegy.’ For Baudelaire the purpose of art criticism was much more significant than judging quality or determining value, analysis of technique, identifying influences or determining provenance. Rather, like art, criticism could express the ‘individual’s feelings, passion and dreams, in short variety in unity, or the multiple facets of the absolute, criticism verges on metaphysics.’ These qualities are apparent in Huysmans’ work.

Arguably the most distinguishing characteristics and traits of Huysmans’ critical writing are his sharp wit, acute perception, virulent style, and evocative allusions to disease states to convey materiality and corruption of the flesh which undermine the Symbolists’ synaesthetic and hyper-sensual imagery that allude to the Ideal. In order to gain insight into Huysmans’ use of references to sickness and putrefaction, I will consider Bachelard’s study of Comte de Lautréamont’s Les Chants de Maldoror. A harrowing narrative that engages with nihilism, violence and evil unfolds, like a series of linked nightmares, through Lautréamont’s cycle of chants. The protagonist Maldoror, who is on a quest in search of meaning and a like-minded companion, plunges into the depths of despair. His thoughts and actions are vicious and reveal a callous disregard for others and the extreme possibilities of human cruelty. Lautréamont’s vivid and descriptive imagery, frequently refers to animals or evoke bestial behaviour, and are disturbing and unrelenting. Bachelard investigated Lautréamont’s poetic imagination and frequent allusion to animals. He recognised the charged and visceral qualities of Lautréamont’s references to animals and animal aggression, and how these resonated beyond description of physical attributes or metaphor to offer profound insights into human nature.

323 Charles Baudelaire, ‘Salon of 1846’, Art in Paris, 1845-1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions, Mayne, 44.
324 Ibid.
325 Ibid., 4.
Astute and intense, Huysmans’ criticism was informed by his very particular taste, decadent sensibility and perspectives on art and the nature of reality. In judging what was worthy of critical attention, and discerning if it was of merit, he did not kowtow to accepted and established aesthetic or academic positions. He was unabashed about changing his opinion and rarely deferred from stating his derision or enthusiasm outright. He was scathing of those critics who were indecisive or egalitarian in their appraisal. In ‘Du Dilettantisme’, Certains (1889), he wrote:

*For one cannot have talent unless one loves passionately and hates passionately; enthusiasm and contempt are indispensable to anyone wishing to create a work of art; talent belongs to those who are sincere and fanatical, not to those who are indifferent and afraid.*

Huysmans’ critical writing reveals his perspicacious and callous vision. Remy de Gourmont (1858-1915) wrote of Huysmans’ acute perception that he saw as no one else had: ‘nobody has ever been granted a gaze so sharp, so penetrating, so perspicacious, so adroit at insinuating into the inmost recesses of faces, of rose-windows, and of masks. Huysmans is an eye.’

The ferocious clarity of Huysmans’ vision is evident in a letter to Prins written on 28 March 1887 in which he succinctly summarised and dismissed the Pointillists in a sharp two-word sentence as: ‘Coloured Fleas.’ Evidently undaunted by the reception of his writing, he noted that he would be reviewing the Indépendante exhibition for La Revue indépendante and that it was ‘Not brilliant: Seurat, Signac, Dubois Pillet, young Pissarro, some curious things, but spoilt by this pointillist mania’, he candidly revealed that he would ‘make no bones about it’ and give them a poor review.

A self-conscious aesthete, Huysmans cultivated his persona earnestly and pursued esoteric enthusiasms with serious intent. Like other Symbolists and Romantic writers and artists, such as Baudelaire and the Goncourt brothers, Huysmans put forward his own personality, sensibility, will and emotions as subject. Introspectively, he

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327 de Gourmont, The Book of Masks, Atlas Archive Two, de Gourmont & Mangravite, 150.
328 Correspondence between Huysmans and Prins, and other writers, artists and critics, played an important role enabling Huysmans to openly discuss, hone and disseminate critical and aesthetic ideas with a network of engaged and sympathetic colleagues. For an informed analysis on the significance of Mallarmé’s letters see Rosemary Lloyd, ed. & trans., Mallarmé: The Poet and His Circle (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1999.)
reflected on his own nature; he engaged with the conflict and confusions in his own soul and contemplated his relationships with those around him. Inevitably, he was in rebellion against society, the academy and the church. While subjective and selective in his approach to art and literature, he was conversant with art history, literature, philosophy and criticism and, being immersed in the artistic and literary milieu of his time, he was recognised as a figure to be reckoned with by his peers. In a letter to Huysmans dated 18 May 1884, Mallarmé exclaimed in reference to Against Nature: ‘So, here it is, this unique book! It had to be written – and you’ve written it so well! – and it couldn’t have been written at any other literary moment than the present.’ Seven years later in a letter dated 18 April 1891, Mallarmé wrote to Huysmans of Là-Bas: ‘An unparalleled book...for the richness of its insights, for its fury and for its art.’ He also wrote: ‘I don’t believe, as far as the style is concerned, that I have ever read words as swift and devouring.’

Although bringing into focus his own experiences, preferences, taste and sensibility, Huysmans adopted an intertextual approach, recognising that art and texts were enmeshed within a web of references, both contemporary and historical. He interpreted images and texts in a similar manner, against the same idiosyncratic criteria, and as equivalent. His intertextual approach was further informed by the close alignment between Symbolist artists, critics and writers, who shared many of his literary ideas, references and sources – from the overt, such Salomé, to the more hermeneutic and idiosyncratic, such as the symbolic resonance of jewels or whiteness. Huysmans’ intertextual approach is evident in Against Nature, in which he weaves together references from a multiplicity of sources such as Poe, Mallarmé, Baudelaire, decadent Latin literature, Moreau and Redon, to draw an evocative, multi-layered and highly referential text.

Huysmans was not impervious to the influence of artists and writers. His writing was an engagement, a dialogue. His criticism and ideas were informed by artwork and

texts as is evident in his critical engagement with Moreau, Redon and Grünwald. Huysmans imposed, galvanised and responded to ideas.

Of note is the close correlation he made between the activity of the painter and writer. Huysmans revealed in a letter to Arij Prins (1860-1922) written in March 1886 that he came to know himself as a writer by looking at pictures of the Dutch school at the Louvre. He wanted to be able to express intangible and complex ideas and evoke a rich palette of colours through words as painters could through imagery. He admitted that his ideas on art had barely changed since he was a youth, except that he gained an understanding of the underbelly of Realism and his philosophical position was now oppositional to Naturalism and materialism.

In her research on Symbolist journals, Genova suggests that Huysmans’ interdisciplinary approach to his art criticism was influenced by Goncourt’s notion of ‘l’écriture artiste’ and, like Goncourt and Zola, Huysmans adopted the idea of the critic being an artist who translated painting into words and expressed the ‘same sensation in a new medium.’ She also notes that Huysmans followed the ‘lead of the Goncourts and Zola, in which the question of individual temperament, both of the artist and of the critic, is vital to the theoretical systems to be analysed.’

Huysmans praised work that was intense, dramatic, sensual, bizarre, esoteric and obscure. Echoing his preferences, amongst the works that des Esseintes held in his collection were engravings by Dutch artists Rodolphe Bresdin (1822-1885) and Jan Luyken (1649-1712); a drawing of Christ by El Greco; prints by Goya (1746-1828); lithographs and drawings by Redon; Salomé (1876) and a watercolour version of L’Apparition (1876) by Moreau; and texts by Baudelaire, Corbière, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and Poe. In his critical approach, while Huysmans was concerned with biographical details and the intentions of artists and writers, their

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334 Genova, Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence, 150-151.
335 Ibid.
336 Gustave Moreau, c.1876, Salomé, oil on canvas, 144 x 103.5cm, Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Centre, Los Angeles.
337 Gustave Moreau, c.1876, L’Apparition, watercolour on paper, 106 x 72.2cm, Musée du Louvre/ Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
aesthetic allegiances and stylistic influences, and the historical and cultural context, rather than systematically analyse or impartially summarise this information, he would hone in on salacious snippets that suggested eccentricities and perversities and revealed particular insights. In regard to a series of engravings by Luyken that des Esseintes called Religious Persecutions, Huysmans narrates in Against Nature that des Esseintes was interested in the life of the artist as it explained 'the wildness of his work.' Huysmans disclosed that Luyken was a fervent Dutch Calvinist excited by the terror of the Reformations who, apparently, became a 'mad savage' towards the end of his life, gave his possessions away, ate almost nothing, and, with an adoring old maid-servant, took to sea in a boat and preached the Gospel wherever they came to land.

Huysmans pleasure in detailing morsels of biographical gossip and scandal about artists and writers is evident in his private letters and well as published writing. Above and beyond the insights that these tidbits bring, they add a colourful element to his writing and reveal a wry sense of humour and cruel wit. In a letter to Destée dated 27 September 1885 Huysmans noted that Luyken had made many licentious engravings ‘when mysticism hit him like a truncheon blow on the head, he went round the publishers and had them destroyed, but the more he tried to get rid of them, the more the publishers had them run off…’

While interested in formal and stylistic qualities of writing and artwork, verisimilitude and perfect technique were of little consequence to Huysmans and of secondary importance when critiquing the calibre of a work. In his art criticism, he rarely dwelt on technical aspects of production; the media used, quality of paint, pigments or source of materials, despite being well versed in these. In Against Nature, Huysmans described the technical qualities of a sketch (unnamed) by the Spanish artist Domenico Théocopuli (El Greco) (b. 1545-1550) as ‘a Christ with livid flesh tints, the drawing of which was exaggerated, the colouring crude, the vigour

338 Jan Luyken, Religious Persecutions. Huysmans is probably referring to 104 engravings by Luyken that illustrated Tieleman Jansz van Braght’s The Bloody Theatre or Martys Mirror of the Defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year AD 1660.

339 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 58.

340 Huysmans, The Road from Decadence, Beaumont, 71.

341 Ibid., 4-5.
excessive and undisciplined, an example of that painter’s second manner, when he was tormented with the one haunting idea of avoiding any resemblance to Titian at all costs.\textsuperscript{342} Although the comments could be read as derisory, the esteem with which Huysmans held the work is evident as, along with works by Redon, the drawing was hung in des Esseintes ‘monastic’ bedroom.\textsuperscript{343}

Huysmans was interested in content and meaning, and engaged primarily with art and literature that explored issues relating to metaphysics and religion, evil and perversity, eroticism, disease and mortality, ecstasy, beauty, mortality, weakness of human flesh and the frailty of the spirit. He despised Neo-Classical and academic art and was scathing about work that was sentimental or prosaic. For instance, in considering Latin literature – the subject dominates Chapter Three of Against Nature – des Esseintes expresses savage disdain for the highly regarded classical Roman poet Virgil (b. 70 BC) whose work was widely taught in France at the time, describing him as: ‘one of the most terrible of pedants, one of the most dismal twaddlers Antiquity ever produced; his shepherd swains, all washed and beribboned, taking turn and turn about to empty over the unfortunate reader’s heads their slops of sententious, chilly verses…’\textsuperscript{344} Much more than an idiosyncratic rant, des Esseintes’ dismissal of Virgil engaged with contemporary critical debate on the weaknesses of Parnassian poetry and Naturalism. As well as decrying the sentimental and bucolic content of Virgil’s work, he sharply analysed the poetic form revealing the limitations and strictures of formal verse, ‘those hexameters, with their tinny tinkle like the rattle of a cracked pot, with their longs and shorts weighed out by the pound according to the unalterable laws of a pedantic, barren prosody.’\textsuperscript{345}

Rather than being egalitarian and surveying the field, Huysmans focused on those works that enabled him to expound his ideas. Often work he denigrated was used as a foil and contrasted with works that he valued. Huysmans admired artwork and texts that alluded to other realities, evoked the sensation of a dream or hallucination, referenced other imagery and texts and engaged with metaphysical and religious ideas. Huysmans writes that des Esseintes only possessed artwork:

\textsuperscript{342} Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 63.
\textsuperscript{343} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{344} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{345} Ibid., 27.
of a subtle, exquisite refinement, instinct with dreams of Antiquity, reminiscent it may be of antique corruption, but at any rate remote from our modern times and modern manners... works of suggestive charms, introducing him to an unfamiliar world, revealing to him traces of new possibilities, stirring the nervous system by erudite phantasies, complicated dreams of horror, visions of careless wickedness and cruelty.  

Unashamedly elitist, opinionated and arrogant, Huysmans was ruthlessly disparaging of works of art, literature and individuals that he despised. More than just vindictive personal attacks that characterised much debate and artistic rivalry common at the time, Huysmans combined a vitriolic style with an astute and searing critical analysis. At times he condescendingly dismissed an artist or writer’s oeuvre in a single word or colourful and clichéd personal insults. Religious authors initially ‘scourged’ in Against Nature he again dismissed in his ‘Preface Twenty Years After’ insisting that ‘the criticism of the late lamented Nettement is idiotic and... Mme. Augustin Craven and Mlle. Eugénie de Guérin are blue-stockings of a very lymphatic sort and pious pedants of a very barren kind.’

While exposing himself as intense, malicious, arrogant, salacious and sadistic, Huysmans’ novels and critical essays also reveal his vulnerabilities through his writing. Huysmans disclosed his idiosyncrasies, doubts, foibles and philosophical quandaries. He also divulged physical failings, weaknesses and the imperfections of his body. The tone is frequently intimate and candid. An assumption of the readers’ empathy, a shared aesthetic and similar moral values is evident in passages as diverse as his discussion of Rops’ artwork in which he openly refers to aspects of his own sexuality, or when having converted to Catholicism he reflects on the faults and merits of ideas expressed in Against Nature. Andrée Breton was impressed by the intense and revelatory qualities of Huysmans’ writing, so much so, that he declared that it heralded a shift in the field of literature: ‘the days of psychological literature, with all its fictitious plots, are numbered. And there is no doubt that the mortal blow was delivered by Huysmans.’ Breton’s writing was influenced by the ruthless way that Huysmans exposed his personal thoughts, flaws, doubts and struggles and

346 Ibid., 50.
declared that ‘I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call...’

Huysmans’ writing is courageous and transgressive. Just as he was undaunted about causing offence to those whose work he critiqued, equally, he was undaunted by subjects considered taboo and frequently plunged into areas as diverse as paedophilia, blasphemy, sadism, masturbation, torture and prostitution. The importance of such daring in literature is discussed from an intertextual perspective by Hélène Cixous in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, which is based on a series of lectures given in 1990. Although she does not engage directly with Huysmans’ work, Cixous, a postmodern feminist writer meditating on powerful and transgressive literature by past and contemporary writers, urges writers to say everything that they have to say – the forbidden, the cruel, the transgressive – that indifferent writers balk at out of love or cowardice. Encouraging unrepressed, uncensored engagement with ideas, in discussion of the work of Clarice Lispector, she notes that ‘the book brings us to the frontier of the forbidden and helps us trespass it.’

While Huysmans’ writing is reflective of his own thoughts and experience, integral to this is the assumption of a freedom to explore ideas, articulate unformulated thoughts, desires, whims and to write without restraint, to disregard repressive boundaries, bridge gaps of experience and imagination, to confront the extremities of human experience and to reveal aspects of the human condition that are rarely discussed. He craved ‘escap[ing] a hateful world of degrading restrictions and pruderies,’ and he peered at things most would choose not to see. He had no time for petty bourgeois values, respectability, morality or piety, and he openly, at times gratuitously, flouted the conventions and mores of his time.

Huysmans warmly praised Petronius (c. 27-66) for the fresh, frank observations of Romans in baths, brothels, palaces and hovels in *Satyricon* written ‘without a word

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350 Breton, *Nadja*, Howard, 17.
of comment, without one phrase of appropriation or disapproval of his characters' deeds and thoughts' while closely observing the 'vices of a decrepit civilisation'.

In this carefully detailed work that had similar traits to the three or four French novels that he 'could stomach' Huysmans noted that the author had revealed the amorous adventures of male prostitutes and refrained from passing judgement or moralising. Huysmans, as if relishing the opportunity, gave a rich description of scenes to be encountered in the book:

...it is a brothel where men are prowling round naked women standing beside placards giving name and price, while through the half-open door of the rooms the couples can be seen at work; elsewhere again, now in country houses full of insolent luxury, amid a mad display of wealth and ostentation, now in poverty-stricken taverns with their broken down pallet-beds swarming with fleas, the society of the period runs its race, – debauched cut-purses like Ascylos and Eumolpus on the look-out for a piece of luck; old wantons of the male sex with their tucked-up gowns and cheeks plastered with ceruse and acacia red; minions of sixteen, plump and curly headed; women frantic with hysteria; legacy hunters offering their girls and boys to gratify the lustful caprices of rich men...  

There are parallels between Huysmans' writing and that of Baudelaire, Sade, Wilde, Lautréamont, Bataille and Genet whose work is transgressive, knowingly defying social norms, religious mores and academic expectations, and simultaneously is underpinned by the author's engagement with art and literature and philosophical and moral quandaries.

Not all of Huysmans' contemporaries appreciated his subjectivity and his unconventional un-academic perspective and style. An unidentified journalist writing in The Saturday Review, 7 July 1883, when Huysmans was still publicly aligned with Zola and the Médan writers, wrote:

A volume of salons by one of M. Zola's 'young men' may amuse some readers. M. Huysmans' criticism in art, like his master's in literature, is a curious mixture of native shrewdness, ludicrous prejudice, and the misappreciation which the absence of wide and patient reading and cultivation naturally cause. It would be difficult to find a better example, except Zola himself, of the rather intelligent Philistine who thinks he despises Philistines. The style is of course entirely beneath contempt.

354 Ibid, 30.
355 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 29.
Far from being a philistine, Huysmans' work was informed by his critical engagement with the cultural and intellectual pursuits contemporary to his age. As Huysmans' own existence and ideas were central to his writing and he led an intense and dissolute life, many of the ideas and perspectives that coloured his work were derived from his experiences as a part of the literary and artistic milieu in the late nineteenth century in Paris. While not conventional academic research, his work was informed by meeting with artists and writers in soirees, bars, theatres and cafés; indulging in absinthe, opium and hashish; visiting churches, occult gatherings, bordellos, libraries, art galleries and museums; and walking the streets of Paris. Huysmans was described by Havelock Ellis as an ‘Idealist and a seeker, by no means an ascetic.’ Ellis recognised that Huysmans had integrated his ideas, life and writing, and that his curiosity was driven by a restless search and whose ‘inquisitive senses and restless imagination had led him to taste of every forbidden fruit, but never one to whom the vulgar pleasures of life could offer any abiding satisfaction.’

While partial, even self-indulgent, Huysmans insisted that criticism written by writers without strong opinion inevitably resulted in mediocre, ‘wishy-washy’ prose noting: ‘...in these excesses of pusillanimity, these debauches of prudence, language inevitably grows feeble and fluid, reverts to the dreary, murky style of the Institutes, liquidifies into the damp diction of M. Renan...’

Huysmans' voice and subjective approach are readily distinguishable from the writing of other critics who wrote on the Symbolists, such as Remy de Gourmont, Édouard Dujardin and Albert Aurier whose writing is measured and intelligently argued; Max Nordau's incisive and damning condemnation from a positivist perspective; or the Goncourt Brothers gossipy and off-hand accounts recorded in their published journals.

Huysmans' language is emotive and disturbing. Rather than assuming a position of dispassionate objective third person with rational arguments and analysis presented in a clear prose, he articulated his ideas to engage the reader through their imagination, emotions and the senses. For instance in Against Nature des Esseintes recalling images by the English painter George Watts (1817-1904) declared that the

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artists' personality was 'at once complex and essentially simple', and his 'strange' painting 'speckled with gamboge and indigo' looked like 'a weird and mysterious amalgamation' of three master painters and seemed to have been 'sketched by a Gustave Moreau fallen sick, painted in by a Michael Angelo [sic] gone anaemic, and retouched by a Raphael lost in a sea of blue.' Fénéon noted the idiosyncrasies of Huysmans' style and noted that he had 'invented a certain phraseology – direct, virulent, denunciatory, fiercely metaphorical, a literary tattoo, nauseating, suggesting a thick atmosphere of tumultuous venom.'

Huysmans' prose is deliberately dense, 'purple' and suffocatingly sensual. At times the lavish writing, rich with visual imagery, cloying details and poetic resonances, is overwhelming. For example Huysmans described a 'funerary feast' held to mourn des Esseintes' temporary impotence set in a dining-room draped with black curtains that overlooked a garden with pathways strewn with charcoal, and planted with cypresses and pines, on a table lit by a candelabra and decorated with black cloth violets and scabiosae, while an orchestra played funerary marches. On plates with black borders guests were served 'turtle soup, Russian black bread, ripe olives from Turkey, caviar, mule steaks, Frankfurt smoked sausages, game dished up in sauces coloured to resemble liquorice water and boot-blacking, truffles in jelly, chocolate-tinted creams, nectarines' by 'naked negresses wearing shoes and stockings of cloth of silver besprinkled with tears.'

Complex, nuanced and often jarring medleys of colours, smells, sounds, tastes and textures are embedded into passages. A hallucination that transported des Esseintes back to Paris revealed a scene in which 'gutter-pipes vomit their drippings onto the pavements', 'horse-dung lies fermenting', house walls 'drip black sweat and the cellar-openings stink'. Gemstones selected by des Esseintes include: 'hyacinth of Compostella, mahogany red; the aquamarine, sea green; the balass ruby, vinegar rose; the Sudermania ruby, pale slate-colour.' Rather than merely titillating the senses, Huysmans use of sensual imagery elucidate a decadent aesthetic sensibility.

360 Félix Fénéon, quoted in Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism*, 50.
362 Ibid., 114.
363 Ibid., 42.
and an ongoing engagement with his underlying questioning of the nature of reality, duality and correspondences. For instance amid a discussion on the comparative merits of various colours, des Esseintes muses that:

...the eye of the man amongst them who has visions of the ideal, who demands illusions to satisfy his aspirations, who craves veils to hide the nakedness of reality, is generally satisfied by blue and its cognate tints, such as mauve, lilac, pearl-grey, provided always they remain tender and do not overpass the border where they lose their individuality and change into pure violets and unmixed greys.364

While not as lurid as Huysmans, Bachelard used a similar literary strategy. Editor and writer, Joanne Stroud insightfully wrote of Bachelard in a 1986 edition of Lautréamont:

As his analysis of the deepest human experience becomes more acute, his language simultaneously becomes that of a poet. He begins to develop his thoughts indirectly, like a poet. He summons images which persuade. He uses sonorous language to captivate.365

In Against Nature complex tropes of disease states and pestilence – in contrast to the hyper-sensual and synaesthetic – are integrated into the spectrum of experience of the single protagonist. Des Esseintes’ vivid experiences and reflections as both an invalid and a sensualist exemplify the tension of Huysmans’ metaphysical position and critical approach to art and literature while aligned with the Symbolists. Striving to engage with the unknowable, divine, immaterial and immutable through indulgence in hyper-sensual experiences and reveries, he is chronically ill, lethargic and impotent, with progressively worsening symptoms. He has time to dwell on the most trivial and base of symptoms such as dyspepsia and constipation.

Throughout Against Nature references to illness, death and decay are juxtaposed with hyper-sensual and synaesthetic imagery undermining des Esseintes’ Idealist illusions to time and again bring him back to a sense of the merely material and existential nothingness.

364 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 14.
Possibly the only moment in the novel when des Esseintes ‘felt perfectly happy’ occurred while gazing at the dazzling splendour of the heavy burden of jewels embedded in the turtle’s shell. This rare moment, in which he discovered that he has developed an appetite and decides to eat toast fingers dipped in Chinese tea, coincided with the moment the turtle, huddled immobile in a corner, dies. Similarly, the transporting synaesthetic experiences of a nip of whisky, at first mesmerising, soon resonates with an acrid and carbolic after-taste which evokes graphic memories of toothache, horrific experiences with untrained dentists and bloody gobs of sputum spat in a stairwell.

Whereas Baudelaire suggested that the sensitive individual could discern in surprising hyper-sensual experiences occasional momentary ruptures that could shatter the everyday and reveal a glimmer of the Ideal, in Against Nature Huysmans gave insight into the intensity and sense of desperation invested by the Symbolists in their quest to gain access to the Ideal and deny nature and the material. Their quest usually ended in despondency. For instance, trying to escape an olfactory hallucination of frangipani, des Esseintes, using a vaporiser, injects into the air an array of exquisite floral perfumes, followed by more sophisticated scents, mixing them in a medley of odours in which he is entranced. However, as the scent dissipates he is overwhelmed once again by the sickly earthly smell of frangipani. He is rendered ill and falls ‘into a swoon half dying across the window sill’ from which it takes a day or two for him to recover.

Most of the references to disease reinforce a sense of lethargy and dragging time. As if in palliative care, des Esseintes is waiting for the inevitable, incapable of doing anything about his escalating symptoms and time is drawn out like a dull ache. He worries that his weakness might ‘force him to take to his bed’, and tries to check his anaemia, the wasting of his body and ‘what was left of vigour’ from dissipating with a few futile spoonfuls of broth. After spending a few minutes rearranging his library he ‘found himself bathed in perspiration; the effort was too much for his strength; he

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366 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 43.  
367 Ibid., 46.  
368 Ibid., 116.
lay down exhausted on his couch and rang for his servant. Hampered by his feeble body, weighed down by nature and the material, days are uninterrupted and monotonous. Des Esseintes has hours to reflect on the slow worsening of his condition, to contemplate the colour of paint, to ponder and reminisce. Moments are lingered over, memories savoured.

Emphasising his disdain for the Naturalists’ sentimental and bucolic realism, diseased nature in the process of rotting is abundant in Huysmans’ *Against Nature*. For instance a collection of fresh hot-house flowers newly delivered are described in relation to skin diseases such as syphilis, leprosy, measles, wounds, such as burns and ‘the bright pink of a half-closed wound or the red brown of the crusts that form over a scar’; and skin undergoing medical treatment, ‘plastered with black mercury dressing, smeared with green belladonna ointment, dusted over with yellow grains of iodoform powder.’

As well as the external immaterial realm, in *Against Nature* the interior realm of dreams and lofty ideas was also corrupted by illness and decay, resulting in madness, evil, perversity, paranoia and cruelty. While most of the references to disease suggest sluggish activity such as being slowly subsumed by nature and a sinking back into the earth, notable exceptions exist where nature and the imagination, as if a breach in the material realm and creating a conduit to the Ideal, overlap, are disturbed and meld. Febrile convulsions, delusions, opium-induced hallucinations and nightmares bring forth terrifying visions and warp time.

In one of the few intensely active passages in the novel, des Esseintes in the grip of a frightening fever-induced nightmare, is chased by syphilis personified as a strangely androgenous green figure on horseback from whom he cannot escape. In the realm of the unconscious, in the face of nightmares and fantastical phenomena, time spins, the

369 Ibid., 165-166.
370 Ibid., 85.
371 Ibid.
372 Ibid.
rational is scrambled, and des Esseintes is out of control. While energised, it is not a life-affirming directed passion, will-to-live, or will-to-power. 373

Sheer evil, which Huysmans considered an Ideal, and moments of perversity and sadistic cruelty, which Huysmans held were the result accessed by those with a ‘morbid psychology of the mind,’ are also intense and energised. With lack of constraint and acting on compulsion, des Esseintes engaged in and derived malicious pleasure from small, callous, perverse and sadistic acts. For instance des Esseintes unsuccessfully attempted to corrupt a minor and turn him into a murderer, by introducing him to a brothel that he knew the youth would not be able to afford, in the hope he would rob and kill to get the money. Huysmans made a distinction between the normal human spectrum of good and evil and morbid depravations of the mind which he noted Baudelaire had explored before him and that, he suggested, emanated from:

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\text{districts of the soul where monstrous vegetations of the sick mind flourish...There, near the confines where aberrations of the intellect and diseases of the will sojourn, – the mystic tetanus, the burning fever of wantonness, the typhoids and yellow fevers of crime, he had found, hatching in the gloomy forcing-house of Ennui, the appalling reaction of age on the feelings and ideas.} \tag{374}
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One of the most distinctive aspects of Huysmans’ writing is his frequent allusion to sickness, death and decay. As Maignan discussed in La médecine dans l’œuvre de J.K. Huysmans, the precise and detailed descriptions of disease processes and medical treatments reflects the influence of Huysmans’ affiliations with the Naturalists and the interest in science and progress of the time. However, Huysmans’ use of disease in his work is complex and nuanced, and not limited to this.

Like many artists and writers of the time, Huysmans’ life was constantly shadowed by disease. Throughout his life it impacts on his engagement with metaphysical and religious questions, such as the nature of man, of reality, and the meaning of suffering. Huysmans frequently integrated words and phrases relating to illness to

\footnote{Curiously, influenced by psycholanalytic ideas and noting that in dreams incestuous impulses are frequently represented as syphilis, Ziegler interprets this passage as des Esseintes having internalized paternal taboos to incest ‘desire to move from the floral aesthetics to animal erotics is blocked by the nightmare vision the Flower Woman, the castrating lamia symbolizing “la Grade Verole” [the pox] and “le virus” [the virus].’ Ziegler, The Mirror of Divinity, 208.}

\footnote{Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 134.}
give colour to his language as well as using disease states metaphorically to elucidate his perspective or clarify and nuance his ideas. In his discussion on Latin writers, Huysmans eloquently summarised authors’ complete oeuvres in phrases such as ‘constipation of phrase’, ‘turgid and jejune’, ‘lymphatic and horrifying.’

Considering Latin of the fourth and later centuries when it was changing under the influence of other European languages, he wrote:

*the odour of Christianity will give to the pagan tongue, as it decomposes little by little, acquiring a stronger and stronger aroma of decay, dropping bit by bit to pieces pari passu with the crumbling of the civilisation of the Ancient World, with the collapse, before the advance of the Barbarian hordes, of the Empires rotted by the putrescence of the ages.*

Writing on contemporary Latin, Huysmans was more interested in the poetic effect and reflecting des Esseintes’ sensibility than instruction or imparting knowledge. He wrote that the:

*language remained as strong as ever even now when, rotten through and through, it hung a decaying carcass, losing its limbs, distilling its pus, barely keeping, in the utter corruption of its body, a few sound parts which the Christians abstracted to preserve them in the salt pickle of their new dialect.*

Huysmans drew heavily on the way Baudelaire used disease and corruption in his poetry. Whereas Baudelaire’s Romantic use of imagery, such as maggots as a metaphor for remorse, was brutal and passionate, and evoked utter disgust, grand lusts, madness and the intensely abject, Huysmans’ engagement with a spectrum of disease states often summoned up a petty and squalid litany of irritations and miseries, suggestive of pathos and physical ineptitude. Unpleasant symptoms, that merely rankle but cannot be ignored, such as dysentery, slow wasting of the flesh, itchy rashes, dyspepsia, toothache and blistered gums frequently bother des Esseintes. Emphasising a pandering and fussing to respond to these small inconveniences and the human incapacity to ignore or transcend the frailties of the body, Huysmans dwells on remedies such as smelling salts, enemas, ointments and douches.

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375 Ibid., 28.
376 Ibid., 32.
377 Ibid., 33.
Huysmans also described situations that impinged on his freedom, such as his office job, in terms of disease. In a letter to Verlaine he confided that he was ‘riveted to the spot by ignoble bonds – my nauseating office which slaughters time, and on the other hand I am scarcely any better than you, worn down by nervous pain, devoured by neuralgia, and still so ill at ease.’

Epitomised in Against Nature, Là-Bas (1891), Becalmed (1887) and his hagiography Saint Lydwine of Schiedam (1901), Huysmans’ allusions to pathological states and decay offer a varied and nuanced vocabulary and rich source of imagery and metaphors. But they are more potent than this. As mentioned earlier in Lautréamont Bachelard identified a deep psychological complex in the very particular way that Lautréamont used animal references (including birds and fish) ‘with astonishing unity and overwhelming energy.’ He also demonstrated that Lautréamont’s use of references and allusions to animals to explore bestial aggression and the immediacy of violent action in Les Chants de Maldoror, resonated more profoundly than metaphor and visual form. Similarly, Huysmans’ references and allusions both elicit, and refer beyond visual imagery, literary and intellectual analysis, to provoke psychological, imaginative and corporeal responses.

Evil, cruelty and sadism are intrinsic to the work of Comte de Lautréamont – the nom de plume of Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870) – who wrote until his early death at twenty-four of a fever in Montmartre during the Commune and siege of Paris. Little is known of his life other than that he was the son of a consulate employee and was sent from France to Montevideo as a child to complete his education. At twenty-three he paid four hundred francs in advance to Lacroix, to publish the Les Chants de Maldoror (1869). Lacroix subsequently refused to distribute it. In a letter Ducasse claimed that Lacroix ‘refused to have the book appear because it depicted life in such bitter colours that he was afraid of the public prosecutor.’ It was eventually distributed by Poulet-Malassis who had experience distributing banned and offensive books, with a gloss in his advertising brochure suggesting that ‘like Baudelaire, like

379 Bachelard, Lautréamont, 1.
Flaubert, he believes that the aesthetic expression of evil implies the keenest appetite for the good, the highest possible morality. Max Waller (1860-1889), the Belgian poet and critic who founded La Jeune Belgique, came across Les Chants de Maldoror in 1885. He passed it on, initially to friends Gilkin, Jules Destrée (1863-1936), Verhaeren and Albert Mockel (1866-1945), who then forwarded it to peers in Paris and Belgium, including Huysmans, Bloy and Péladan. French art historian, Gilles Genty notes that it was well received in Symbolist circles and was one of those affinities that linked ‘painters of ideas’ in different periods. Huysmans wrote in a letter to Destrée dated 27 September 1885:

...the Comte de Lautréamont is talented with a fine madness. That singular book with its comic lyricism, a bloody rage reminiscent of the Marquis de Sade, and amidst a load of sentences put together like four pennyworth, a few that burst with magnificent sonority!... I await an article on this book with impatience, I hope you will have found some information concerning the life of this strange fellow, who has created his hymn of homosexuality with such fine phrases.

Remy de Gourmont was an early admirer of Lautréamont, and rediscovered his Poesies in 1891, the last copy of which had been deposited in the Bibliothèque nationale France. The Surrealists were profoundly influenced by Lautréamont’s Poesies (1870) and Les Chants de Maldoror, a long prose poem comprising six songs. They admired his ‘moral ferocity, fantastic metaphors and sudden flashes of dark humour.’ Breton coined the famous phrase: ‘As beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissection table of a sewing machine and an umbrella’ in response to the savage musings of Lautréamont’s protagonist Maldoror.

Italian publisher and writer Roberto Calasso (b. 1941), who studied under Mario Praz, suggests that Lautréamont recognised that romanticism had a weakness – ‘it was squeamish.’ For Calasso Lautréamont amalgamated the romantic Satanism of

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383 Ibid.
387 Calasso, Literature and the Gods, 81.
Baudelaire and Byron with social realism and the ‘inanities and sentimental flourishes that appeared in genre novels for ladies and their maids.' Calasso suggests that the content, style and quality of Lautréamont’s writing dislocates meaning and disrupts reality. Rather than using distancing adjectives such as ‘monstrous’, ‘perverse’ and ‘terrifying’ that give the gist without causing distress, Lautréamont brutally described sadistic episodes in graphic detail. He also repeated sentences and phrases, which initially appears as a rhetorical strategy but takes on the delirium quality of nightmare as hyper-real moments and incidents reoccur. Calasso notes, that in Lautréamont’s writing, pre-empting Nietzsche, ‘everything is already a quotation the moment it appears.’

Lautréamont emptied everything of meaning and truth. Beliefs and givens are unceremoniously undermined. Calasso considers the quip by Novalis ‘Where there are no Gods, the phantoms reign’, but suggests that in Lautréamont, neither god nor phantoms reign, and there is no authoritative power to put things right. God and the phantoms hold equally negligible positions and are brought together by the author for ‘pure pleasure and play of the gesture.’

The second song of Maldoror includes a lyrical and introspective passage about his desire for intimacy and a love: ‘I sought a soul resembling my own and could not find one. I ransacked all the corners of the earth, but to no avail. Yet I could not remain alone. I needed someone to commend my nature, someone whose ideas resembled mine.’ This ruse evokes empathy and draws the reader into Maldoror’s world. As the sky assumed ‘a blackness almost as black as the human heart’ he sat alone on a rocky cliff and dispassionately gazed at a ship sinking in a violent storm. Caught in the waves, most of the passengers struggle and drown. One young man was courageously swimming towards the shore. However, to ensure that all shipwreck victims died, just when the lad reached a point where it seemed that he could survive, Maldoror shot him. With dispassionate reserve he watched as six ravenous sharks circled in the red foaming sea, mechanically tore bodies apart, then

388 Ibid., 82
389 Ibid., 84.
390 Nom de plume for George Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772-1801).
attacked each other in a frenzied fight. A large dominating female shark approached and viciously attacked the pack, mortally wounding three. Recognising a kindred spirit, he shot and wounded one of the remaining sharks that she was fighting with and plunged into the sea clenching a knife between his teeth. He slit open the belly of another fish while she dispatched her remaining opponent. Looking each other in the eye they circled each other. The poem culminates with Maldoror in a cold embrace with the shark... ‘rolling over each other towards the depths of the abyss, they united in a long, chaste and hideous coupling...’

While animals as characters, imagery, metaphor and figure of speech are used extensively – Bachelard notes that there are four hundred and thirty-five different references to animals in *Les Chants de Maldoror* – it is the integration of cruel and violent animal traits into the text that reveal the Lautréamont complex which is a pure ‘phenomenology of aggression.’ Bachelard suggested that for Ducasse, the animals are not used just as forms but their aggressive functions are evoked.

Ducasse used these traits to elucidate and articulate instinctual behaviour and a surging, energetic will-to-attack. These aggressive functions are also expressed through the intensity of action in time, which Bachelard suggested is articulated as quick, direct and unreflective response, like a sudden unpremeditated vicious attack or opportunistic lunge and bite.

Similarly, though engaging with a different spectrum of human experience and philosophical ideas, Huysmans referenced illness and corruption of the flesh. In contrast to the urgency of instinctual behaviour and a surging energetic will-to-attack with fast unreflective actions, Huysmans elucidated traits in *Against Nature* of a more slow and futile nature. Rather than an empowered individual who creates meaning for himself and is energised with a will-to-attack, and desire to dominate and control, for des Esseintes, even will-to-live is exhausted. There is instead yearning, disillusionment, hopelessness and nihilistic despair. The spiritual has been denied by reason, the flesh is weak, and will is subject to chance and mortality. Time

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393 Ibid., 194.
is slow, actions are ponderous and, as a result of procrastination and prevarication, often rendered futile and aborted.

As well as emphasising the inevitability of mortality, the materiality of the flesh, the weakness of an individual’s will, and the incapacity of the individual to determine their own future in the face of chance and fate, des Esseintes’ failing health and libido underline Huysmans’ doubts of humanity’s capability to control its own destiny, despite scientific achievement and the optimism of the Positivists.

In identifying the ‘Lautréamont complex’ Bachelard revealed two main signifiers, the claw and sucker, corresponding to flesh and blood and unified in that they both reveal aspects of intense animalistic aggression. While a great diversity of disease states and a myriad of symptoms and indispositions are referred to by Huysmans in Against Nature – leprosy, apoplexy, nervous disturbances, nausea, trembling – the two main diseases he uses as unifying imaginative signifiers are ennui and syphilis. Both of which slowly and progressively impact on des Esseintes’ mind, body and imagination (and that of Huysmans), disfiguring the skin, eating away at internal organs, eroding the nervous system and contaminating his dreams.

However, while Lautréamont used animal references to elucidate the deeply embedded aggressive and violent unreflective traits as the one driving unifying imaginative theme in Les Chants de Maldoror, Huysmans used two sets of interweaving complex tropes or references. Reflecting the tension between Idealism and nihilistic despair, Huysmans used disease states and corruption on the one hand, and on the other, the more widely used Symbolist references to Idealism – exquisite sensual experiences, synaesthesia, obscurity and vagueness.

To articulate their ideas in their art and writing, the Symbolists rendered fleeting ideas and vague sensations through idiosyncratic associations, symbolic imagery and a medley of metaphors. They adopted obscurity, vagueness, indefiniteness,
musicality and allusion to the sensual as visual and literary strategies to evoke rather than state a position, describe an object, or name a thing. To intimate rather than clearly explicate ensured a multiplicity of open-ended meanings. It intrigued, conjured up the unknown and unknowable, sparked the imagination and actively engaged the reader and viewers in the process of interpretation. As Mallarmé wrote: ‘To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which derives from the pleasure of step-by-step discovery; to suggest, that is the dream. It is the perfect use of this mystery that constitutes the symbol: to evoke an object little by little, so as to bring out of it a state of the soul or, inversely, to choose an object and bring out of it a state of the soul through a series of unravellings.’

In developing his writing style Huysmans juxtaposed and integrated the Naturalists’ preoccupation with exhaustive research, presentation of vast quantities of minutiae, and aggressively realistic description – with devastating impact when emphasising the materiality of the flesh – with Symbolist ideas of obscurity, vagueness and experimentation with visual and poetic languages.

Bachelard noted of Lautréamont that as well as using animal functionality, animals are active, engaged protagonists, though not sentimentally anthropomorphised, and physically present in Les Chants de Maldoror. Bachelard suggested that Lautréamont’s refusal to tone down gesture or veil desire made the readers uncomfortable and reticent. The reader, he suggested:

\[ \text{would allow remorse to be piercing or vulture-like, but for a real, red, purebred vulture no longer mythological – to drink blood from the heart and feed on flesh is too much. The reader would understand a velvety, fascinating gaze or the arms of an evil temptation; but an octopus with velvety eyes, ring-encircled arms, and a mouth everywhere is false because it is revolting.} \]

Similarly, Huysmans’ virulent descriptions of florid disease states shock and insist on the validity of phenomenological knowledge and engagement and the corporeal nature of the body. Often his descriptions evoke disgust and physical discomfort,

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396 Stephane Mallarmé, Jules Huret, 'Interview with Stéphane Mallarmé', Symbolist Art Theories, Dorra, 141.
397 Bachelard, Lautréamont, 32.
398 Ibid.
repulsion or nausea, with a similar direct intensity to the uncontrollable sensation of one’s teeth being on edge when hearing fingernails being scraped across a chalkboard. The most obvious examples are his descriptions of St Lydwine’s gangrenous and infested ulcers, and of Grünewald’s images of Christ at the moment of death, whose purulent flesh is ‘greasy with sweat’, ‘mottled with flea-bites’ and pierced by wounds that exude ‘milky pus...the colour of grey Mozelle’ and ‘blood that was congealing like mulberry juice.’

Huysmans was fascinated by transgressive and cruel behaviours that involved pain, suffering and damage to the flesh such as executions, murder, suicide and torture. Provocatively, Huysmans’ texts dwell gratuitously on welts and scars. Insisting on the human capacity to inflict suffering, and the mortality of the flesh, deformity and mutilation are frequently referred to in *Against Nature*, even when describing flowers. The *Amorphophallus*, he stated, is ‘a plant from Cochin China, with long black stalks seamed with scars, like a negro’s limbs after a thrashing’ and the *Echinopsis* was endowed with a ‘pink blossom like the stump of an amputated limb rising out of a compress of cotton-wool.’

Huysmans’ critical writing reveals a chilling fascination and lack of empathy for the suffering and emotions of others. His most pronounced prejudices are based on class and aesthetics. Even more than his misogyny and religious and racial antipathies, he despised the mercantile middle classes and the Realists. Des Esseintes had no sympathy for his servants, whom he had trained to be as submissive as ‘sick-nurses’ and he revealed contempt for middle-class people who aspired to breed and be respectable and comfortable. Despite, or perhaps because of his intensely held prejudices, lack of tact, callous disregard for others, sincerity and arrogance, Huysmans’ writing reveals powerful insights into human thought and behaviour.

Huysmans despised the idea of domesticity or sharing a marital bed, and had no desire to have children or to continue his family name. Despite his interest in diverse

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401 Bachelard, *Lautréamont*, 86.
sexual experiences, Huysmans reveals a distaste of the fecundity of women. While his perspective is gendered and he is very much a man of his time, from his adopted posture as an effeminate dandy Huysmans subverted traditional male roles, and undermined a distinct binary of genders and conventional power relations.

Through des Esseintes, Huysmans explored a broad range of sexual relationships, most of which were secured through economic transactions, from carousing with prostitutes, a liaison of several months with a young boy, brief affairs with actresses, and even a ventriloquist. Open to exploring what he considered to be his feminine nature, he pursued a muscular and libidinous gymnast, whom he considered androgynous and with whom he aspired to take a submissive sexual role. Frustrated by his poor performance, she went off with a more virile man.

Huysmans’ writing exposes murkier and often repressed aspects of human nature. Like Bachelard ‘he penetrates placid surfaces to expose the heart of darkness in the human psyche.’ Unlike Nordau who condemned Symbolist artists and writers as degenerate, and likened them to criminals, Hélène Cixous carefully distinguishes between authors who explore ‘violent potential’ through their writing and those individuals responsible for a particular murder or horrific crimes. It is the exploration of the potential for violence and what it reveals about traits common to all humans that is compelling, rather than the isolated actions of a thug. Lautréamont’s Les Chants de Maldoror and Huysmans’ Against Nature are fascinating. They go beyond particular transgressive behaviours and the inanity of random acts to delve into aspects of human psyche that struggle with the nature of reality, yearning and despair, and are capable of feeding into the desperate, the bizarre, the barbaric and the cruel.

Huysmans was a substantial critic. As well as writing critical reviews, articles and essays in conventional prose form, Huysmans melded art and literary criticism with fiction, integrating it as a major thread through his novels. The overarching themes

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402 Until months prior to his death, he complained to friends about being pestered by women. However, in an intimate conversation, he was to muse on his loneliness and pondered whether he should have married and pursued a simpler happiness. Baldick, The Life of J.K. Huysmans, 2006, 441.

403 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 103.

articulated in Huysmans’ criticism are his metaphysical questioning, and his very particular, refined and fastidious aesthetic sensibility that pivoted on decadence and perversity. In elucidating these he recognised that the work was enmeshed in a web of intertextual references and considered it within biographical, historical and cultural contexts.

In common with other Symbolists, Huysmans referenced sensual and synesthetic imagery to allude to the Ideal. One of the most distinctive aspects of his critical writing is his frequent references to sickness, corruption and the abject to articulate the tension between the Idealism and nihilism. Huysmans juxtaposed and intertwined two sets of references or tropes – the diseased and mortal in contrast with the hypersensual and synesthetic – to articulate the tension between his Idealism and nihilism. His use of these references have qualities in common with Lautréamont’s use of animal references in *Les Chants de Maldoror* which were recognised as having a visceral quality that was more powerful than metaphors or descriptive detail by Bachelard.

In the next chapters I will analyze Huysmans’ criticism of the work of Symbolist artists Gustave Moreau (1836-1898), Odilon Redon (1840-1916) and Félicien Rops (1833-1898); and the work of Mathias Grünewald (1475-1528).
In fact, the decadence of a literature, attacked by an incurable organic disease, enfeebled by the decay of ideas, exhausted by the excess of grammatical subtlety, sensitive only to the whims of curiosity that torment a fever patient, and yet eager in its expiring hours to express every thought and fancy, frantic to make good all the omissions of the past, tortured on its deathbed by the craving to leave a record of the most subtle pangs of suffering, was incarnate in Mallarmé in the most consummate and exquisite perfection.

Here was to be found, pushed to its completest expression, the quintessence of Baudelaire and Poe; here was the same powerful and refined basis yet further distilled and giving off new savours, new intoxications. —J.-K. Huysmans, 1884

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405 Huysmans, *Against the Grain: A Rebours*, 186.
4. **Bleeding Suns and Haemorrhages of Stars**

Gustave Moreau

For des Esseintes of ‘all others there was one artist who most ravished him with unceasing transports of pleasure – Gustave Moreau.’

In *Against Nature* Huysmans wrote a passionate critical appraisal of Gustave Moreau’s work. Several pages are dedicated to the analysis of two related images *Salomé (1876)* (plate 13) an oil painting on canvas, and *L’Apparition (1876)* (plate 14) a watercolour on paper. Huysmans compared these two paintings and explored their relationship to other images and texts. He considered their historical and religious references and pondered the meaning of the effusive, sensually evocative detail and obscure symbols.

Four years before he published *Against Nature* Huysmans favourably reviewed Moreau’s *Helen* and *Galatea*, when they were hung in the Salon of 1880. Even when Huysmans was aligned with the Naturalists he admired, along with Degas and the Impressionists, the work of Moreau and Redon. Huysmans became the most influential critic of both artists, celebrating and promoting their work in *Against Nature* as well as critical reviews and essays. Both Moreau and Redon observed and drew directly from nature but then extended the familiar and prosaic into imaginary otherworldly realms. Redon often incorporated accurate and minutely observed anatomical and zoological details which he transformed into bizarre hallucinations. Moreau sketched human and natural forms from life and represented them in dream-like images heavily loaded with symbolic and literary references.

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408 Gustave Moreau, 1876, *Salomé*, oil on canvas, 144 x 103.5 cm, Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Centre, Los Angeles.
409 Gustave Moreau, 1876, *L’Apparition*, watercolour on paper, 106 x 72.2 cm, Musée du Louvre / Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
411 Gustave Moreau, c.1880, *Galatea*, oil on wood, 85.5 x 66 cm.
Moreau and Redon’s artwork influenced Huysmans’ ideas, and influenced his shift from Naturalism to Symbolism. In *Certains* Huysmans described the experience of leaving an exhibition of Moreau’s watercolours at Goupil’s, a well established gallery and publishing house in rue Chaptal, and how the images lingered in his mind as he walked in the street, intoxicating him with ‘supershriII’ colours and fragments of strange details. He contrasted the prosaic streetscapes and ‘hideous crowd’ with Moreau’s work which ‘stands outside of time, escapes into distant dreams, glides over dreams, away from the excremental ideas oozing from a whole populace.’

In his unpublished artist’s notes Moreau articulated his Symbolist intentions and outlined his desire to express, more than just human emotion, rather glimpses of the divine.

*One thing is dominant in me, the ardent attraction of the abstract. The expression of human feelings, of the passions, interests me no doubt, but I am less inclined to express these movements of the soul than to make visible, so to speak, the inner flashes of illumination which we cannot explain, which have something divine about them, and which, translated by the marvellous effects of pure plastic art, open up magical perspectives.*

Moreau declared his ambivalence towards the material realm, insisting as Baudelaire had done, that nature was merely a raw material that artists could use symbolically to express the idea through art: ‘What does Nature matter in itself? For the artist it is only an opportunity to express himself... Art is the strenuous attempt to express inner feeling in plastic form.’ Moreau also outlined how the sensual components of a painting, colour, texture and composition illuminate and express an idea.

*Just as a dream is situated in a suitably coloured atmosphere, so a concept, when it becomes a composition, needs to move in a fittingly coloured setting. There is obviously one particular colour attributed to some part of the picture which becomes a key and governs the other parts... All the figures, their arrangement in relation to one another, the landscape or interior which serves them as a background or horizon, their clothes, everything about them must serve to illuminate the general idea and wear its original colour, its livery so to speak.*

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413 Ibid., 47.
415 Ibid.
416 Ibid.
Moreau adopted Baudelaire’s theory of correspondences which correlated to the poet’s dualistic theory of Beauty. Baudelaire insisted that Beauty was made up of two parts; a material temporal element and an Ideal element which was eternal and perfect. Like Swedenborg, Baudelaire maintained that tangible things are symbols for the intangible world of the spirit, and suggested that there was a synaesthetic resonance and equivalence between the sensual, the symbolic and the Ideal. He insisted that it would be surprising:

...if sound could not suggest colour, that colours could not evoke the idea of a melody, and that sound and colour were unsuitable for the translation of ideas, seeing that things have always found their expression through a system of reciprocal analogy ever since the day when God uttered the world like a complex and indivisible statement.  

To articulate these ideas in his work Moreau incorporated a cacophony of colours and imagery evoking the sensual to allude to the Ideal in his images. The effusive excess of colours, textures and decorative details in Moreau’s imagery was evident in a major retrospective held in the Grand Palais, Paris, 1998 which brought together major artworks by Moreau on the anniversary of his death. Moreau frequently incorporated into the one painting tightly drafted linear elements, thin translucent glazes of oil paint, with details such as jewels in raised impasto. This is evident in *Salomé, dite Salomé tatouée*, (plate 15). Pre-empting Surrealism, in his images, figures and objects are juxtaposed regardless of scale or expected context. In *Jupiter and Sémélé* (1894-5) (plate 16) dozens of unrelated religious and mythical figures, some with haloes and others half beast, winged or with faun’s legs, are integrated into a chaotic melée of vegetation, along with and sensual and decorative detail that envelope grandiose ruins. The eclectic nature of the details depicted and intensity of the jewel-like colours is suggestive of a drug-induced hallucination.

Referring at once to the Symbolists’ engagement with the physical objects and their displacement, Mallarmé suggested that artists and poets should: ‘evoke an object little by little, so as to bring to light a state of the soul or, inversely, to choose an

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418 Gustave Moreau, c.1894-5, *Jupiter and Sémélé*, oil on canvas, 212 x 118cm, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris.
object and bring out of it a state of the soul through a series of unravellings." Like Mallarmé, Moreau held that if the 'precious stones with which one adorns oneself do not convey a state of the soul, one has no right to wear them.' Moreau’s attempt to express a correspondence between the temporal and eternal, and a synaesthetic equivalence between the music, poetry and imagery, by depicting so much material detail, was not always recognised. Jules-Antoine Castagnary dismissed _Oedipus and the Sphinx_ when it was exhibited in the 1864 Salon as a 'poetic hallucination' and insisted that the excessive materiality of the piled-up details exposed a flaw in Moreau’s stated intention to express immaterial ideas. Even Odilon Redon, who admired the work of Moreau noted: 'we know nothing of his inner life. It remain[es] veiled by an art which is essentially worldly, and the beings evoked have laid aside instinctive sincerity.'

The images by Moreau depict two pivotal moments in the Salomé narrative. In the painting Salomé is performing the dance of the seven veils. As yet, she is draped and her hair is veiled. Enraptured, eyes closed, a lotus blossom held to her face, jewellery shimmering, she seems to barely touch the floor as she pirouettes. High on a dais, Herod Antipas leans forward in his throne. Below him, cradling a royal sceptre, sits Herodias, his Queen, Salomé’s mother and his dead brother’s wife. Incensed by Saint John the Baptist’s public tirade condemning their incestuous marriage, she has plotted the saint’s death. A masked guard rests the sharp unsheathed blade of his sword on his shoulder and clutches the key to the prophet’s cell. Except for the musician crouched on the floor strumming a zither, entranced by the music, all of the figures are watching the woman. The suspense is almost palpable.

The nave-like throne room, darkened by smoke and incense and cluttered with decorative detail, evokes the decadent sensuality of an imaginary exotic east. Diffuse light penetrates the shadows in the upper reaches of the space illuminating oriental arches and a profusion of religious and pagan sculptures. A chained black panther sits, sphinx-like, in the foreground. Savage and ruthless, it tenses its muscles and

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419 Jules Huret, ‘Interview with Stéphane Mallarmé’, _Symbolist Art Theories_, Dorra, 141.
420 Ibid., 142.
421 Gustave Moreau, c. 1864, _Oedipus and the Sphinx_, oil on canvas, 206.4 x 104.4cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York.
422 Jules-Antoine Castagnary, quoted in _Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology_, Dorra, 44.
423 Odilon Redon, quoted in Lucie-Smith, _Symbolist Art_, 66.
bares sharp white teeth, anticipating a kill. Under Salomé’s feet pink roses are strewn over an ominous red stain on the floor.

In *L’Apparition* the head of the Precursor hovers, surrounded by aureole which shed an unnatural light on the dancer. He peers at her, impassive and wise. Blood drips from the neck. Having asked for the head of Saint John the Baptist, she appears to be unaware of the enormity of her actions and holds her arm out to touch him. Behind her the king cowers as if wishing to dissolve from guilt into the shadows. Instead of silencing an eccentric by ending his life, Herod is confronted with a saint’s immortality and his own damnation. The musician has stopped playing. Salomé’s mother’s visage remains strangely impassive, her horror revealed in her clenched hands. The dishevelled guard blanches and recoils, the golden platter at his feet.

Huysmans recognised Moreau’s use of the sensual to articulate unworldly and immaterial states through synaesthetic and hyper-sensual experience. In conveying Moreau’s synaesthetic confusion of colours, odours, textures and sounds, Huysmans was effusive. Adopting the Symbolist use of obscurity and poetic evocation, Huysmans suggested the effect of overwhelming sensuality rather than imparting a clear description of the object being described. For instance, the following descriptive but visually incoherent passage evokes the decadence, lasciviousness and sensuality of Salomé’s jewellery:

...on the moist skin of her body glitter clustered diamonds, from bracelets, belts, broidered with silver, studded with gold, a corselet of chased goldsmith’s work, each mesh of which is a precious stone, seems ablaze with coiling fiery serpents, crawling and creeping over the pink flesh like gleaming insects with dazzling wings of brilliant colours, scarlet with bands of yellow like the dawn, with patterned diapering like the blue of steel, with stripe of peacock green.424

However, at the same time, although Moreau claimed to be alluding to Idealism in his work, Huysmans discerned in the fantastic imagery and chaotic profusion of details that evoke a cacophony of sensual experiences and reveal a bewildering array of gods and idols, a tension between the declared Idealism and a desperate attempt to escape from the world into an imaginary place of dreams and nightmares. In his critique of the Salon of 1889 he wrote of Moreau’s work that it revealed a:

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spiritual onanism...a soul exhausted by secret thoughts...Insidious appeals to sacrilege and debauchery... Goddesses riding hippocyphs and streaking with their lapis-lazuli wings the death-agony of the clouds... The crushed globes, bleeding suns and haemorrhages of stars flowing in crimson cataracts... Contrary to Taine’s theory, environment stimulates revolt: exceptional individuals retrace their steps down the century, and, out of disgust for the promiscuities they have to suffer, hurl themselves into the abysses of bygone ages, into the tumultuous spaces of dreams and nightmares.425

In interpreting Moreau’s paintings of Salomé, Huysmans emphasised the tension that undermined the hyper-sensual and synaesthetic imagery by alluding to the Ideal and emphasising references to sickness and decay.

Flesh is mortal, the individual’s will is weak, and the individual has no capacity to determine his or her own fate in the face of chance and fate. Apart from the Tetrarch’s tremor of lust and the Queen’s narrow and vicious hatred, will-to-live is exhausted. Huysmans emphasised the sickly and pathological characteristics of Moreau’s figures. Herod’s face was ‘yellow, like parchment, furrowed with wrinkles, worn with years’, he sits stiff and ‘motionless as a statue, fixed in some hieratic pose like some Hindu God,’ his passions are dormant though susceptible to ‘alluring perversities of debauch.’ The palace guard is a ‘hermaphrodite or eunuch...the sexless dugs of the creature hanging like twin gourds under his tunic.’ Time has paused, except for the dancer and the minimal gestures of the musician; all the figures are frozen. Salomé is a ‘callous and pitiless statue...innocent and deadly idol,’ she ‘glides slowly’ with the ‘fixed eyes of a sleepwalker.’426

In contrast, Huysmans described Salomé’s dance of the seven veils as ‘the delirious frenzy of the wanton.’427 Moments of evil, perversity and sadistic cruelty which Huysmans insisted were the result of a ‘morbid psychology of the mind’ are also intense and energised. Huysmans suggested that with his images Moreau was ‘stirring the nervous system by erudite phantasies, complicated dreams of horror, visions of careless wickedness and cruelty.’428

426 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 51.
427 Ibid., 52.
428 Ibid., 50.
Huysmans equated evil, such as Salomé’s naïve compulsive cruelty and lack of constraint and her mother’s cold-blooded murderous intent motivated by revenge, with sickness of the mind.

Symbolic incarnation of world-old Vice, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, the Curse of Beauty supreme above all beauties by the cataleptic spasm that stirs her flesh and steels her muscles, — a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like Helen of Troy of the old Classic fables, all who come near her, all who see her, all who touch her.\(^{429}\)

Salomé and L’Apparition delineate the moments before and after John the Baptist’s beheading. Huysmans, in selecting these two images, explicitly engaged with questions of mortality and immortality, the material and Ideal. At once the fragility of life is underlined — the saint’s life was cut short on account of the premeditated machinations of the Queen and the Tetrarch’s whim. While the saint’s resurrection defies materialism and suggests the possibility of immortality, Huysmans described the severed head in gory and fleshy physical detail.

...the eyes were gazing out from the livid face with its discoloured lips and open mouth; the neck all crimson, dripping tears of gore...the glassy eyeballs, that seemed fixed, glued to the figure of the dancing wanton.\(^{430}\)

Huysmans also explicitly contrasted the Ideal and material, the mortal and immortal, in his descriptions of Salomé who is at once an idealised ‘enigmatic goddess’ and a mere mortal.

...in arming the enigmatic goddess with the revered lotus-flower, the painter had thought of the dancing harlot of all times, the mortal woman the temple of whose body is defiled...\(^{431}\)

In a strange passage which prefigures Salomé’s death and suggests the defilement of her corpse, Huysmans ponders the possible interpretations of the lotus flower that Salomé holds. He described with gratuitous detail and the ardour of a necrophiliac, the ritualised penetration of a body and the embalming process which, while an

\(^{429}\) Ibid., 53.
\(^{430}\) Ibid., 54.
\(^{431}\) Ibid.
attempt to ensure immortality, in his description of the physical detail reduces Salomé to disparate material body parts. Huysmans mused that:

*perhaps he had remembered the sepulchral rites of ancient Egypt, the ritual ceremonies of the embalmment, when surgeons and priests stretch the dead woman’s body on a slab of jasper, then with curved needles extract her brains through the nostrils, her entrails through an incision opened in the left side; finally, before gilding the nails and teeth, before coating the corpse with bitumen and precious essences, insert into her sexual parts, to purify them, the chaste petals of the divine flower.*

In positing interpretations for the lotus flower and other impenetrable symbols used by Moreau, Huysmans revealed the ambiguity and rich diversity of possibilities, informed as much by the perspective and imagination of the viewer as by the image itself. Considering the diadem worn by Salomé in the dance, des Esseintes mused that it could be phallic, or a proclamation of blood exchange – the sacrifice of virginity, ‘through incestuous embrace’ for murder. Alternatively, it could be an allegory of fertility, or the Hindu myth of Life, or even suggest ‘an existence held betwixt the fingers of woman, snatched away and defiled by the lustful hands of man, who is seized by a sudden madness, bewildered by the cry of the flesh?’

Even religious references such as the biblical story of Salomé and Hindu gods lose their integrity and more conventional meanings to become obscure, ambiguous and multivalent in the context of Moreau’s paintings. For Huysmans she was a symbol, representing more than an individual, a gender, gods, or a narrative. Like a conduit for an ‘irresistible force’, she signified the power of evil and:

*belonged to the ancient Theogenies of the Far East; no longer she drew her origin from Biblical tradition; could not even be likened to the living image of Babylonish Whoredom, of the Scarlet Woman, the Royal Harlot of Revelations, bedecked like her with precious stones and purple, tired and painted like her; for she was not driven by a fateful power, by a supreme, irresistible force, into the alluring perversities of debauch.*

The sheer number and diversity of gods, and demi-gods, mythological creatures and heroes in Moreau’s images render all of them as decorative fragments of narratives. Beyond the particular, through the mixture of architectural references, time or religions, they are no longer contained by their narrative context. No longer

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432 Ibid.
433 Ibid.
434 Ibid., 53.
suggestive of the Ideal but emptied of meaning, they could reveal everything or nothing and are completely dependent on the interpretation of the reader/viewer. Huysmans noted that Moreau’s Salomé was simultaneously a mythical figure, a symbolic representation and a metaphor:

*No longer was she merely the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and concupiscence from an old man by the lascivious contortions of the body... she was revealed as the symbolic incarnation of world-old Vice, the goddess of immortal hysteria, the Curse of Beauty supreme...*

In *Against Nature* Huysmans considered the paintings in relation to each other as well as in relation to other texts and images, including the gospels of St Matthew, St Mark and St Luke, and compared them with images by ‘fleshy painters such as Rubens’ who, Huysmans insisted, depicted Salomé like a Flemish butcher’s wife. Huysmans mused on the flaws and inadequacies of these representations and wondered if only visionary minds shaken and sharpened by hysteria could realise the ‘the subtle grandeur of the murderess.’

Huysmans recognised that Moreau’s work was implicitly and explicitly enmeshed within a web of Symbolist references and ideas. Huysmans’ intertextual reading of the images which culminate in the juxtaposition of the images with Mallarmé’s poetry in chapter fourteen complicates Moreau’s stated intention of an Idealist reading and suggests a more complex nihilistic reading of the work.

In interpreting Moreau’s work, Huysmans made reference to Mallarmé’s poem *Hérodiade* (c. 1865-1898). In order to write the critique of Moreau’s *Salomé* and *L’Apparition*, Huysmans approached Mallarmé, requesting a copy of his poem. In letters to the poet in 1882 Huysmans gave a brief overview of the novel and explained: ‘I will quote from your Hérodiade whilst trying to describe Moreau’s magic.’ With almost palpable enthusiasm Huysmans revealed to Mallarmé how he had searched all over Paris for copies of these particular two paintings by Moreau and effusively described the quality of the images with words like ‘stupefying’, ‘adorable’ and ‘radiant’.

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435 Ibid.
Ah! I chased all over Paris for the Moreaus. And now I have found them: i) at Baschet’s on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, amongst a consignment of masterpieces from the 1878 exhibition, I found a very fine and very large photo-engraving by Goupil of Salomé at three francs; it is worth noting; ii) at Art, in the avenue de l’Opera, a very agreeable etching, a proof on China paper of ‘The Apparition’, that stupefying and adorable watercolour where Salomé stands before the radiant head of St John the Baptist. Cost: ten francs. There are still some at five francs on Holland paper from the final run, but they convey less well the exquisite nature of this strange art. 438

Emphasising the relationship between the images and text in Against Nature, Huysmans’ protagonist, des Esseintes, treasured among his possessions Salomé and L’Apparition which were hung amid his collection of esoteric books.

These two images of Salomé, for which des Esseinte’s admiration was boundless, were living things before his eyes where they hung on the walls on special panels reserved for them among the shelves of his books. 439

Des Esseintes’ favourite poet was Mallarmé. When apathetic and weary, he lay exhausted on his couch and had his old servant bring his books to him one by one in order to sort the collection, only two hand-bound volumes containing poetry by Mallarmé were set aside for special attention. One was an anthology devoted to Baudelaire and those poets who followed in his footsteps. The other was a thin volume of only nine pages titled Quelques vers de Mallarmé which included a fragment of Hérodiade, Les fenêtres, l’Epilogue and Azur. 440

Just as Huysmans had discerned a multi-valency in Moreau’s representations of Salomé, in Mallarmé’s Hérodiade the dancer was intended to be not just a woman, but a symbol, a vehicle of expression and a complex metaphor. 441 In his essay ‘Ballets’, first published in 1886, Mallarmé elaborated on the notion of ‘dancer’ as a symbolic element of language, a generalised idea, rather than an individual:

439 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 57.
440 Ibid., 182.
441 Stéphane Mallarmé explained why he replaced Salomé’s name with Hérodiade in a letter to Eugène Lefèbure: What inspiration I’ve had I owe to this name, and I believe that if my heroine had been called Salomé, I would have invented this dark word, as red as an open pomegranate, Hérodiade. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Letter to Eugène Lefèbure, February 1865’, Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé, Lloyd, 47.
That is, that the dancer is not a woman dancing, for the juxtaposed motives that she is not a woman, but a metaphor epitomising one of the elementary aspects of our form...and that she is not dancing, suggesting, through the prodigy of short cuts and leaps, with a corporal writing what it would take paragraphs of dialogue and descriptive prose to express, if written out: a poem freed from all scribal apparatus.442

In Against Nature des Esseintes fingered the pages of a thin volume of poetry which had been bound in ‘wild ass’s skin, first glazed under a hydraulic press, dappled in water-colour with silver clouds and provided with “end-papers” of old China silk, the pattern of which, now rather dim with age’.443 While holding the book, he sat silently mouthing the words that Mallarmé had given Hérodiade (Salomé) and looked up at his painting of Salomé in the dim evening light. It was as if ‘the white figure of the woman emerging from her sheath of jewels and accentuating her nakedness’ was present, speaking in the shadows.444

"O mirror! chill water-pool frozen by ennui within thy frame, how many times, and for hours long, tortured by dreams and searching my memories that are like dead leaves under the glassy surface that covers thy depths profound, have I seen myself in these like a far-off shadow! But, horror! of evenings, in thy cruel fountain, have I known the bare nudity of my broken vision!"445

In this fragment of Hérodiade quoted by Huysmans in Against Nature, despondent Salomé wistfully gazes at her reflection in the mirror. She peers into the cold surface of the glass, the vision clouded by her own ennui, which she cannot penetrate. As if she is disassociated from herself, her memories seem distant. Despairing, her dreams are troubled, her life shadowed, and she is horrified to have to confront the broken reality revealed by her disillusion.

Mallarmé confided to his friend Henri Cazalis (1840-1909) that he felt terror while writing Hérodiade, as he was attempting to develop a new form of language.446 In a letter to Eugène Lefébure (1838-1908) dated February 1865, Mallarmé explained that

443 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 182.
444 Ibid., 183.
445 Ibid., 183.
he called the main protagonist of the Biblical story Hérodiade rather than Salomé because he loved the word that for him evoked the red flesh of a pomegranate.\textsuperscript{447} While invoking the fecund fruit, Mallarmé so exaggerated the cold murderous qualities of the mythic beauty that her character is inaccessible. Her frigidity echoes Mallarmé's own impotence to write the poem, which he started in 1864 and returned to often, but it remained incomplete at his death. For Mallarmé the Hérodiade figure was an element in language, ambiguous and ambivalent. In a passage equating the abstracted idea of the dancer with poetry Mallarmé wrote:

\textit{...if you but sit at the feet of this unconscious reveller, submissively – like the roses lifted and tossed into the visibility of the upper regions by a flounce of her dizzying pale satin slippers–the Flower at first of your poetic instinct, expecting nothing but the evidencing and in the true light of a thousand latent imaginations: then, through a commerce whose secret her smile appears to pour out, without delay she delivers up to you, through the ultimate veil that always remains, the nudity of your concepts, and silently begins to write your vision in the manner of a Sign, which she is.}\textsuperscript{448}

Reflecting Huysmans' ideas on Symbolist poetry and art, in \textit{Against Nature} des Esseintes mused that the prose poem, adopted by Baudelaire and the Symbolists, was his favourite form of writing because it captured succinctly the essence of a novel but avoided superfluous detail. He considered how the selection and crafting of such a poem was particular and required selection of words that opened up 'wide perspectives as would set the reader dreaming for weeks together of its meaning, at once precise and manifold.' The poem required the reader to engage in the creation of meaning and participate in a 'communion, an interchange of thought...'.\textsuperscript{449}

In contextualising Moreau's paintings with the words of Mallarmé's most highly wrought poem, Huysmans emphasised the nihilistic tendencies that undermined Moreau's stated Idealism. Des Esseintes, equating nihilistic despair and disillusionment with disease, mused about Mallarmé's work:

\textit{...the decadence of literature, attacked by incurable organic disease, enfeebled by the decay of ideas, exhausted by the excess of grammatical subtlety, sensitive only to the whims of curiosity that torment a fever patient, and yet eager in its expiring hours to express every thought and fancy, frantic to make


\textsuperscript{448} Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Barbara Johnson, 'Les Fleurs du mal armé: Some Reflections on Intertextuality', \textit{Stéphane Mallarmé}, Bloom, 223.

\textsuperscript{449} Huysmans, \textit{Against the Grain: A Rebours}, 1969, 186.
good all the omissions of the past, tortured on its death-bed by the craving to leave a record of the most subtle pangs of suffering, was incarnate in Mallarmé in the most consummate and exquisite perfection.\footnote{450}

In letters to Cazalis sent in 1866 and 1867 Mallarmé wrote with extraordinary clarity about his spiritual anguish and metaphysical crisis as he questioned all the things he believed in – Idealism, faith in the Absolute, poetry and religion. In April 1866, as he struggled to write Hérodiade, he confided that he had found two voids which had made him distraught. One was nothingness. A realisation that there was nothing else shifted his understanding of reality. He questioned the meaning of life and his work. The confrontation rendered him unable to write poetry, as he could no longer believe in it.

\emph{Unfortunately, in the course of quarrying out the lines to this extent, I've come across two abysses, which fill me with despair. One is the Void, which I've reached without any knowledge of Buddhism, and I'm still too distraught to be able to believe even in my poetry and get back to work, which this crushing awareness has made me abandon.} \footnote{451}

The other ‘void’ regarded his personal mortality. Mallarmé had respiratory problems and was often ill, he could not breath deeply, and although only twenty-four years old he no longer had a youthful sense of well-being. He was aware of the frailty of his body and that he might die young. In discussing his infirmities, he insisted to Cazalis that it was not the likely brevity of his life that distressed him, but having to spend so much time teaching and undertaking banal and meaningless tasks rather than writing poetry. Mortality could be redeemed by art. He mused that if he lived long enough to compose his perfect book he would call the volume \emph{The Glory of the Lie} or \emph{The Glorious Lie}, proclaiming the Ideal in the face of nihilistic despair.

\begin{quote}
...the other void I've discovered is that of my chest...The only thing that saddens me is the thought that, if it's my destiny to live for only a few years, I have to waste so much time in earning a living, and so many hours, which I no longer have, ought to be devoted to art!\footnote{452}
\end{quote}

\footnotetext[450]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[451]{Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Letter to Henry Cazalis, April 1866’, \textit{Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé}, Lloyd, 60.}
\footnotetext[452]{Ibid.}
Mallarmé then concluded that while he had come to the realisation that there was nothing else, no absolute, no Ideal, the very desire for the divine and the proclamation of the dream – despite it having no existence or substance – was in itself a sublime thing.

Yes, I know, we are merely empty forms of matter, but we are indeed sublime in having invented God and our soul. So sublime, my friend, that I want to gaze upon matter, fully conscious that it exists, and yet laughing itself madly into Dream, despite its knowledge that Dream has no existence, extolling the Soul and all the divine impressions of that kind which have collected within us from the beginning of time and proclaiming, in the face of the Void which is truth, these glorious lies! 

Almost a year later, in a letter addressed to Cazalis dated Friday 14 May 1867, Mallarmé revealed that after a ‘terrifying year’ in which he had suffered his metaphysical crisis, he had come to terms with profound disillusionment.

I have made a long enough descent into the void to speak with certainty. There is nothing but Beauty – and Beauty has only one perfect expression, Poetry. All the rest is a lie.

Mallarmé’s conclusion in the face of nihilism is similar to that articulated by Nietzsche. Even though Mallarmé loses his faith, poetry was sacred. Henry Weinfield, who translated Mallarmé’s poems into English and wrote an insightful interpretation of each one, suggests that Mallarmé is a religious poet, even though he lost his faith. For Mallarmé, he writes, poetry is both the way to access the sacred and ‘the locus of the sacred.’ However, Weinfield circumscribes this by insisting that Mallarmé’s poetry is sacred ‘only insofar as it can be experienced phenomenologically; it exists only as an experience, through the concrete medium of language, or as Beauty.

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453 Ibid.
456 Ibid.
This place of poetry as sacred despite loss of faith, is echoed in Blanchot’s discussions on the meaning and value of literature in the twentieth century. In *The Space of Literature* Blanchot mused:

> It seems that art was once the language of the gods; it seems, the gods having disappeared, that art remains the language in which their absence speaks – their lack, the hesitancy which has not yet decided their fate. It seems, as this absence grows deeper – becomes its own absence and forgetfulness of itself – that art seeks to become its own absence and forgetful of itself – that art seeks to become the presence of art, but that it does so initially by offering to man a means of self-recognition, of self-fulfilment.\(^{457}\)

Mallarmé was delighted by Huysmans’ incorporation of his poem in *Against Nature*. In an overtly intertextual and cross referential gesture, a year after the novel was published Mallarmé wrote *Prose for des Esseintes*,\(^ {458}\) which playfully suggests that the aim of the artist should be to please des Esseintes.\(^ {459}\)

Moreau cosseted himself against the world, like des Esseintes. In his home and studio he created and controlled a fantasy world in which he surrounded himself with ‘an endless procession of treacherous queens, excessively beautiful martyrs and gilded gods.’\(^ {460}\) Huysmans described Moreau as a ‘a mystic, shut away in the centre of Paris in a cell where not the slightest sound of contemporary life can penetrate… Lost in ecstasy, he sees in all their splendour the fairy-like visions, the bloody apotheoses of another age.’\(^ {461}\)

Moreau exhibited his work in the public arena less and less. Rather than showing his work in exhibitions, and having to deal with the often virulent criticism, he decided to bring together a collection for posterity. In an article titled ‘Gustave Moreau’ in *L’Ermitage*, Péladan, who was always a vocal admirer of Moreau despite the fact that the artist never participated in his *Salons de la Rose+Croix*, publicly criticised Moreau for being reclusive and unwilling to exhibit his work while having a prestigious teaching position in the official Academy. Péladan recorded from an interview with Moreau that the artist was ‘small, worried, nervous, dressed with the

\(^{457}\) Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 217.


\(^{459}\) Sowerwine, *France Since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society*, 97.


meticulous propriety of Hoffman’s magistrate, he appeared to me to be exclusively preoccupied with getting rid of me politely.' 462

Moreau, like Mallarmé, believed in the sacred nature of art. Just as Mallarmé especially wanted, but failed, to complete the perfect finished poem, Moreau wished to reveal the entirety of his oeuvre to be revealed at once in his museum immediately after his death.

*I wish to accumulate evocative ideas in my paintings so that the owner of a single one may find a source of renewed ferment; and my dream would be to make iconoclastases rather than paintings in the strict sense of the word. From year to year I add fresh details to my two hundred posthumous works as the ideas come to me, for immediately after I die I want my art to appear at once in its entirety.* 463

The Musée Gustave Moreau located in the rue de la Rochefoucauld, Paris, is in the artist’s original house and studios which he decided to transform into a museum in his own lifetime. 464 Today, the studio holds dozens of preparatory drawings of Salomé, paintings, many mediocre, and incomplete canvases which are sketchy and evocative. Moreau, along with the other Symbolists were marginalised. Apart from André Breton, who was a regular visitor, the museum was rarely visited in the first fifty years after Moreau’s death. Breton wrote that it ‘could be the temple it should be, and is a place of evil. I have always thought of taking a lantern, and breaking in one night...’ 465

Huysmans recognised that Moreau used Symbolist strategies such as hyper-sensual imagery and synesthesia in order to articulate notions of the Ideal. In *Against Nature* des Esseintes mused that Moreau’s images were the result of ‘the restless

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463 Ibid.
464 The Musee Gustave Moreau consists of the living quarters including the artist’s cluttered bedroom, restored and preserved like a mausoleum and two large light-filled studios on the first and second floor linked by a spiral staircase. The collection is fascinating and along with the incomplete canvases there are hundreds of watercolours and graphite and chalk drawings on paper. Fascinated by the Salomé story Moreau depicted aspects of the story many times and around two hundred preparatory sketches are in the collection.
apperceptions of a nervous system altogether modern in its morbid sensitiveness. Recognising despair and hopelessness Huysmans wrote:

...his work was always painful, haunted by the symbols of superhuman loves and superhuman vices, divine abominations committed without enthusiasm and without hope... There breathed from his pictures, so despairing and so erudite, a strange magic, a sorcery that moved you to the bottom of the soul, like that of certain of Baudelaire’s poems, and you were left amazed, pensive, disconcerted by this art that crossed the last frontier-lines of painting, borrowing from literature its most subtle suggestions, from the art of the enameller its most marvellous effects of brilliancy, from the art of the lapidary and engraver its most exquisite delicacies of touch.

Huysmans recognised that Moreau’s artwork was entangled in a web of intertextual references. In order to illuminate the metaphysical tension and nihilistic ideas that he discerned in Moreau’s work, as well as using sickness, pain, vice, abominations, death and decay metaphorically and as a trope in contrast to the Symbolist imagery, Huysmans juxtaposed Moreau’s paintings with other images and texts including Mallarmé’s unfinished poem *Hérodiade*. Huysmans’ insightful critical engagement with the artwork undermines Moreau’s stated intention of an Idealist interpretation and reveals nihilistic tendencies.

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467 Ibid.
How did I meet Huysmans? It happened like this. I had held a little exhibition of my charcoal sketches at the offices of either Le Gaulois or Le Figaro. He had written to ask if he could buy one particular sketch. Unfortunately I hadn’t any more copies, or that was the only one left, so I replied regretfully that it was not possible. At that time he had already published his Croquis parisiens, Marthe and Les Soeurs Vatard, and these works had earned him the reputation of being one of the best pupils of Zola’s Naturalist school. One day – we were then living in the Rue de Rennes – the doorbell rang. I opened the door, and saw a tall, thin silhouette: ‘Huysmans’. I asked him in, and he was extremely charming. For me he was always charming... My house, our house, was, I believe, one of the few which he entered with pleasure, his ‘refuge’...

He used to say of my wife: ‘It’s a woman like her, if only I could find one, that I should marry. She’s the ideal companion for an artist.’ One dish she cooked especially for him sent him into raptures of delight. He always felt at home with us, in our rather old-fashioned surroundings. We were poor then, but not uncomfortable. There were some old pieces of furniture in the studio, including an old arm-chair of which he grew very fond. When we moved house and Huysmans found that we had left that old arm-chair behind, he stayed away for several days to ‘punish’ us... The dear old man had a kind heart. Though he claimed to detest children, he sat up with my wife and myself all through one night until morning, with the child we lost. And he used to say, as if to excuse himself: ‘It’s because your children aren’t like those of other people...’

— Odilon Redon

Odilon Redon deserves as much praise as Baudelaire for having created a new thrill [frisson nouveau].

—Émile Hennequin, 1882

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5. Work of a Mad and Morbid Genius

Odilon Redon

In this chapter I will consider Huysmans' critical engagement with the artwork of Odilon Redon (1840-1916) and the particular insights that his approach reveals. As in his analysis of Moreau, Huysmans recognised that Redon's images were integrated into a web of intertextual references. In order to draw out connections and very specific threads of meaning associated with evil and sadism, Huysmans considered Redon's work in relation to contemporary and historical art and texts including: Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874); religious bestiaries; the beautifully rendered paintings of horrific religious tortures depicted by Jan Luyken (1649-1712); bizarre etchings by Rodolphe Bresdin (1822-1885); and the disturbing nightmare visions of Francisco Goya, Edgar Allan Poe and the Comte de Lautréamont.

Huysmans critiqued Redon's work in a range of formats and contexts, including an overview of the artist's earlier series of lithographs and drawings integrated into his novel *Against Nature*; a brief review of Redon's first exhibition held in 1882 in *L'Art moderne*; an insightful critique of his work within an art historical context of bestiaries and Christian symbolic systems in a chapter titled 'The Monster' in *Certains* (1889); as well as comments about the artist, his work and its reception in letters to friends and peers.

Along with the work of Moreau, Redon's art had a significant impact on Huysmans' sensibility and aesthetic direction. Baldick noted that Huysmans' enthusiasm for Redon's 'exotic or macabre dream-like pictures foreshadowed his own future development.' In turn, Huysmans had a significant impact on Redon's artistic reputation. From his correspondence and critical writing, including the overview of Redon's work in *Against Nature*, it is clear that Huysmans had a very comprehensive awareness of the breadth of the artist's œuvre. Although many of the images referred

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to by Huysmans in *Against Nature* are not individually named, many are identifiable from his vivid descriptions, for instance:

...a head in a Merovingian style, placed upon a cup; a bearded man, having something about him recalling at one and the same time a Buddhist priest and an orator at a public meeting, touching with the tip of his finger a colossal cannonball; a horrible spider, with a human face lodged in the middle of its body...an enormous die that winked a mournful eye...landscapes, – burnt, parched, burnt-up plains, riven by earthquakes, rising in volcanic heights wreathed with wild clouds under a livid, stagnant sky...\(^473\)

Several of these works were shown at Redon’s second exhibition, held in the offices of the publishing house *Le Gaulois* in 1882. Among the twenty-three images exhibited in the offices of *Le Gaulois* there were: *Head of a Martyr* (1877),\(^474\) (plate 17); *The Metal Ball* (1878),\(^475\) (plate 18); *The Crying Spider* (1881),\(^476\) (plate 19) and six lithographs from the album titled *To Edgar Poe*. In a letter to Mallarmé, Huysmans wrote that as well as watercolours by Moreau in his home, des Esseintes would have ‘the stupefying dream creations of Odilon Redon, whose exhibition of superb drawings you must have seen in *Le Gaulois*.\(^477\)

Huysmans’ critical interest in Redon’s work prompted him to seek out the artist who lived in the same street and they established a professional relationship and a friendship that was productive and tender.\(^478\) Comments by Redon, such as those recounted by Léon Deffoux in the *Mercure de France* in 1942, suggest that Huysmans revealed to him aspects of his nature that were not seen by most of his colleagues.\(^479\) The inclusion of Redon in *Against Nature* brought the artist’s work to the attention of a wider audience. Huysmans actively supported Redon’s career and promoted the sale and distribution of his work. In a letter to Destée dated 17

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\(^473\) Huysmans, *Against the Grain: A Rebours*, 1969, 60.
\(^474\) Odilon Redon, 1877, *Head of a Martyr*, charcoal, black & white chalk, cream paper, 37 x 36cm, Collection State Museum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, The Netherlands.
\(^475\) Odilon Redon, 1878, *The Metal Ball*, charcoal, 41 x 36cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
\(^476\) Odilon Redon, 1881, *The Crying Spider*, charcoal, black chalk, cream paper, 49.5 x 37.5 cm, private collection, The Netherlands.
\(^478\) ‘...He is a big lad, very gentle, very shy, very well behaved – you wouldn’t take him for a painter at first. In short he has the face of a monk with black, penetrating eyes. He has been married for years, he lives as well as he can, but mostly not too well, at 76 rue de Rennes, a stone’s throw from me.’ J.-K. Huysmans, ‘Letter to Jules Destée, 17 December 1885’, *The Road from Decadence*, Beaumont, 73.
December 1885 Huysmans enthused that since the publication of *Against Nature* 'a movement in his favour has emerged amongst the young. Happily people took notice of me.'\(^{480}\) As well as his own critical writing, Huysmans encouraged his colleagues to write reviews of the artist’s albums; introduced Redon and his work to key artists, writers and critics, including Mallarmé, and advised Redon who it would be judicious to send copies of his lithographs to.\(^{481}\) Although Huysmans continued to be concerned for Redon’s welfare and relatively frugal income, he was delighted by the impact his writing had had on the artist’s profile and recounted with pride how he had met the Italian collector Count Primoli Bonaparte who travelled to Paris to purchase *Melancholy*\(^{482}\) from the artist, as a consequence of reading his critique of Redon’s work in *Against Nature* and *L’Art moderne*.\(^{483}\)

Huysmans’ writing on Redon is intense, effusive, visual and highly evocative. Many passages of Huysmans’ critique form a literary correspondence of the sensations evoked by the artist’s imagery. Douglas Druick and Peter Zegers, in the substantial exhibition catalogue *Odilon Redon: 1840-1916*, suggest that Huysmans’ revelatory writing, particularly his 1885 review of ‘Homage to Goya’ ‘had a paralysing effect on critical discourse.’ They noted that in the critic Gustave Geoffroy (1855-1926) insisted in 1885 that the only one who could describe Redon’s ‘obscure symbolism’ was Huysmans.\(^{484}\)

Most critics writing on Redon’s work in 1885-86 used terms such as ‘bizarre’ and ‘literary’, noted that it was influenced by Poe’s stories and even if positive, did not engage with much insight or depth with the artist’s ideas. Exceptions were Charles Morice (1861-1919), writing in 1885, who recognised that Redon was a thinker, dreamer and visionary\(^{485}\) and Émile Hennequin (1858-1888), a young friend of Huysmans who later accidentally drowned while swimming with the artist.\(^{486}\) In 1882 Hennequin published a review of Redon’s work in *Le Gaulois* in which he

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\(^{480}\) Huysmans, *Against the Grain: A Rebours*, 1969, 73.


\(^{482}\) Odilon Redon, 1846, *Melancholia*, charcoal, gouache, pastel and black chalk, 36.8 x 35.7cm, Institute of Chicago.

\(^{483}\) Huysmans, *Against the Grain: A Rebours*, 1969, 73.


\(^{485}\) Ibid.

considered the work in terms of metaphysical ideas that closely paralleled Huysmans’ position.\textsuperscript{487}

Derisive criticism also failed to engage with the complexity of Redon’s ideas and primarily focused on the artist’s relationship with texts – claiming that he merely illustrated and could not ‘go beyond the literary texts he uses for inspiration.’\textsuperscript{488} Other negative remarks were aimed at formal and technical aspects of Redon’s drawings. Disturbed by the ambiguity of the subject, one critic declared that they were like ‘schoolboy doodles and compositions which resemble nothing at all.’\textsuperscript{489}

In a review of Redon’s work for \textit{La Revue Indépendante} in April 1887, Huysmans compared Redon’s work favourably against the Impressionists, noting that his images were ‘vehicles charged up for voyages to the Otherworld!’\textsuperscript{490} Huysmans acknowledged the influence of Baudelaire on Redon and described the artist as one of the poet’s offspring\textsuperscript{491} with whom ‘we delight in loosing our earthly bonds and floating away into the world of dream, a hundred thoughts and leagues away from all schools of painting, ancient or modern.’\textsuperscript{492} Along with the other Symbolists, Redon was influenced by Baudelaire’s theory of correspondences and the idea that a glimpse of the divine could be discerned by the perceptive artist in the material realm.

In \textit{À Soi-même: Journal (1867-1915)}, first published in France in 1979, Redon clarified the distinction between the Ideal and absolute values and the merely material with the statement ‘Beauty and goodness are in the heavens. Science is on the earth; it creeps.’\textsuperscript{493} Huysmans also perceived an affiliation between Redon’s Idealism and Poe’s insistence that ‘all truth lies in dreams.’\textsuperscript{494} For Redon, dream and


\textsuperscript{491} Soon after voicing these thoughts, according to Baldick, Huysmans was drawn to Baudelaire and sought ‘to escape from his “earthly bonds”, and to turn from the study of contemporary life to an exploration of the world of dreams.’ Baldick, \textit{The Life of J.-K. Huysmans}, 1955, 74.

\textsuperscript{492} Baldick, \textit{The Life of J.-K. Huysmans}, 1955, 74.


\textsuperscript{494} Huysmans, ‘Le Monstre’, \textit{Certains}, van Niele, unpaginated notes.
the Ideal were equivalent. In the draft of his 1878 essay Millet, Redon substituted the word *réve* for ‘ideal’.\(^{495}\)

Huysmans recognised the artist’s intentional use of Symbolist strategies to articulate notions of the Ideal. Strategies such as the use of visual imagery with indefinite and multivalent meanings, exploitation of the hyper-sensual references, synesthetic and hallucinogenic potential of colour, tones and texture of materials, vagueness and obscurity. Redon intended that his drawings evoke rather than define: ‘My drawings inspire and do not define themselves. They determine nothing. They place us just as music does in the ambiguous world of the indeterminate.’\(^{496}\)

In one passage in *Against Nature*, evoking a psychotic vision of bizarre manifestations, Huysmans described dislocated fragments of Redon’s images in quick, tumbling succession – leaving no time to reflect, or fully comprehend an image before the next strange manifestation was presented. Huysmans referred to the effects of illness and fever causing disorientation, delusions and perceptual distortions. He explicitly made connections between Redon’s imagery and des Esseintes’ recollections of childhood illnesses ‘of typhoid fever, remembrances that had struck persistently in his head of hot nights of misery and horrid childish nightmares.’ Huysmans described Redon’s images as if they were drug-induced hallucinations: ‘faces, staring out with great, wild, insane eyes’ and ‘shapes exaggerated out of all measure or distorted as if seen refracted through water.’\(^{497}\)

*(See plate 20)*

The qualities of hallucination and a synaesthetic confusion of the senses that Redon’s images and Huysmans’ descriptions of them evoke are similar to Gautier’s experience of being intoxicated with absinthe. ‘I heard the noises of the colours; green, red, blue, yellow sounds came to me in perfect and distinct waves.’\(^{498}\)


\(^{496}\) Redon, *To Myself*, 22.

\(^{497}\) Huysmans, *Against the Grain: A Rebours*, 1969, 60.

Similarly, an anonymous doctor who experimented with absinthe recorded that he perceived all the senses at the same time and that taste, smell, touch and sight were conflated: ‘I am breathing sounds and hearing colours...scents produce a sensation of lightness or of weight, roughness or smoothness, as if I were touching them with my fingers.”

More restrained than Moreau’s effusive images cluttered with garish detail, Redon’s drawings and prints were frequently executed in black and white. These he imbued with the same expressive qualities as when he used a broader spectrum of iridescent colour in his vibrant pastels. Redon stated that ‘the material reveals secrets, it has genius; it is through it that the oracle will speak.’ Redon’s subtle use of blacks was achieved using a range of lithographic inks; pencils, pastels and charcoal of varying degrees of hardness; different marks and textures, and a variety of papers. There is a correspondence between the relative restraint of Redon, Poe and some of Rimbaud’s poetry. Bachelard, considering Rimbaud’s phrase: ‘he listened to mangy trellises crawling’ from *Les poètes de sept ans*, noted that through the expressive use of words the poet could amplify and distort the miniscule noise of creaking or an object twisting, to express extreme intensity and could confuse perceptual experience. Bachelard suggested that Rimbaud’s poetry transported him to a place ‘that lies between mental disorder and reason’ and that in the nuances of poetry ‘the slightest sound prepares a catastrophe, while mad winds prepare general chaos. Murmur and clangour go hand in hand.’ Similarly, in Poe’s writing, descriptions of slight changes in muted sound and a limited colour palette have great dramatic intensity. In one of his poems Poe described the approach of darkness and onset of death:

*Night arrived; and with its shadows a heavy discomfort. It oppressed my limbs with the oppression of some dull weight, and was palpable. There was also a moaning sound, not unlike the distant reverberation of surf, but more continuous, which beginning with the first twilight, had grown in strength with the darkness. Suddenly lights were brought into the room...and issuing from the flame of each lamp, there flowed unbrokenly into my ears a strain of melodious monotone.*

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499 Anon, quoted in Robb, *Rimbaud*, 135.
Huysmans recognised in Redon’s images a philosophical complexity and sceptical line of questioning which undermined the artist’s Idealism. In a letter to Destrée dated 17 December 1885 Huysmans revealed how one evening ‘Mallarmé and I, leafing through his folders, were left gaping at strange primitives that he was reworking in a nightmarish manner.’

In Against Nature, des Esseintes treasured a large collection of Redon’s lithographs and drawings, which he hung in his bedroom, covering ‘nearly all the panels of the vestibule.’ Huysmans noted that the subject of many of these images appeared to depict prehistoric times ‘borrowed from the dreams of science’ when the earth was disordered with ‘erratic blocks...glacial mud streams...monstrous flora’ and human beings were ‘ape-like.’ Huysmans described one of Redon’s figures as having:

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\text{heavy jaws, the projected arches of the brows, the receding forehead, the flattened top of the skull, recalled the ancestral head, the head of the earliest quaternary period, when man was still a fruit-eater and speechless, a contemporary of the mammoth, the woolly-haired rhinoceros and the giant bear.}
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Redon’s images allude to the disturbing implications of Darwin’s evolutionary theory – that there was no authoritative God or divine plan, humans were descending from apes, and life was a matter of survival of the fittest, mutations and chance. At a time when physical and intellectual attributes were being measured; racial groups were being categorised as more or less evolved; genetic and congenital abnormalities engendered shame and there was concern about the possibility of regressive mutations and degeneration, Redon depicted human characteristics from which many Parisians were keen to distance themselves. Hustvedt notes that in France in the late nineteenth century writers and researchers across medicine, philosophy, science and the arts, were fascinated by people who were ‘supposedly botched by nature, who were not fully evolved, or who had once been evolved and had now degenerated to a lower order on the evolutionary ladder.’

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504 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 60-61.
505 Ibid.
506 Hustvedt, The Decadent Reader, 10.
In his essay ‘The Monster’ published in *Certains* (1889) Huysmans suggested that by hybridising man with worms and grubs and thus creating monsters, Redon was working within the art historical context of religious imagery and fantastic bestiaries. Huysmans mused that the complex science of religious symbolic systems that had communicated truths and alluded to the divine and otherworldly realms no longer existed. He observed that in the realm of dream only art remained. With ironic disdain Huysmans suggested that those who hungered for meaning had to be appeased by the materialist theories of natural scientist Moritz Wagner (1813-1887) and Charles Darwin (1809-1882). 507

Huysmans noted that Redon’s vast menagerie of appalling, deformed and corrupted animals, parasitic infestations and swarms of insects had been inspired by vivid passages in Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874). 508 Redon created three albums of lithographs that were inspired by this text. Many of the images correspond closely to passages in Flaubert’s text and include references to evil overcoming good. They include Satanic iconography such as the devil, fallen and chained angels, serpents, skulls and bones. In Redon’s images, microbes, body parts and insects seethe and mutate in the murky, fecund primordial swamp from which life emerged, undesigned to evolve into human form ‘suggestive of anatomical and entomological nightmares’. 509 Huysmans further exaggerated the sick, diseased, swarming and corrupt aspects of Redon’s imagery and, like Flaubert, equated the emerging beasts and the natural state of man with evil. The world was godless, and overrun by monsters that came into existence by happenchance.

Written across a number of turbulent years in French history, including the Prussian siege of Paris, Flaubert’s novel expresses the author’s own disillusionment with the nature of man. In a letter to George Sand (1804-1876) dated 28 September 1870, Flaubert wrote: ‘Yesterday resumed work on my Saint Antoine. So be it. We have to

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508 St Anthony (c.251-356) the founder of monasticism lived in the desert in Egypt. He is most frequently depicted as an old man wearing a hooded black garment with a hood, carrying a Tau cross and a small bell, accompanied by a pig in the desert, tempted by evil in the form of the devil, demons or a woman, or visiting the hermit Saint Paul.
face facts. We have to get used to the natural state of man, which is a state of evil.\textsuperscript{510} Almost a year and a half later in another letter to Sand dated 26 February 1872, Flaubert explained that in order to write the \textit{Temptation of Saint Anthony} he leafed through medieval bestiaries and went to the Museum to ‘meditate upon a few real monsters.’\textsuperscript{511} (See plate 21)

For Huysmans, Redon’s imagery was the work of ‘a mad and morbid genius.’\textsuperscript{512} Huysmans’ response to the ‘stupefying dream creations of Odilon Redon’\textsuperscript{513} was overwhelmingly enthusiastic despite, or perhaps because, he considered that they were ‘productions of inconceivable eccentricity’ created by a diseased and perverse mind. Although recognising the influence of bestiaries and monstrous imagery passed down from the middle ages, along with work by Luyken, Bresdin, Poe and the affiliation of Redon’s work to that of Lautréamont and Goya, Huysmans repeatedly insisted that the images were revolutionary, ‘passed all bounds’, and ‘transgress[ed] in a thousand ways the established laws of pictorial art.’\textsuperscript{514}

Gazing at Redon’s work, des Esseintes was ‘overcome by an indefinable sense of distress.’\textsuperscript{515} His response was the same as that experienced from the ‘mirages of hallucination and effects of terror’\textsuperscript{516} induced by Goya’s \textit{Proverbs}\textsuperscript{517} and Poe’s stories. Huysmans noted that in his images Redon seemed to ‘transfer’ literature ‘into a sister art.’\textsuperscript{518} While Redon was strongly influenced by writers such as Poe and Flaubert, he did not merely illustrate texts. He firmly believed in the importance of the visual image to impart more and stated that ‘every time a painting lacks plastic invention, it is nothing but a literary idea.’\textsuperscript{519} As well as being familiar with Poe’s work, first translated into French by Baudelaire, a project that was continued after his

\textsuperscript{512} Huysmans, \textit{Against the Grain: A Reboirs}, 1969, 60.
\textsuperscript{514} Huysmans, \textit{Against the Grain: A Reboirs}, 1969, 60.
\textsuperscript{515} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{516} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{517} Francisco Goya, \textit{Proverbs}, c.1819, series of etchings, Museo Nacional del Prado
\textsuperscript{518} Huysmans, \textit{Against the Grain: A Reboirs}, 1969, 61.
\textsuperscript{519} Jullian, \textit{The Symbolists}, 42.
death, by Mallarmé, Redon illustrated a volume of Poe’s work translated by Hennequin. Perhaps because of the barrage of criticism accusing him of being too literal in his interpretations of texts, Redon unconvincingly attempted to dissociate himself from Poe in comments made to his biographer Mellerio.

The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Moves Towards Infinity (1878) (plate 22) is one of Redon’s lithographs in the album titled To Edgar Poe. Based on an earlier charcoal drawing titled Eye-balloon (1878) (plate 23) the print depicts a monstrous hybrid machine, at once fleshy and mechanical, hovering in the sky above a flat and indeterminate dark expanse of marshland, bog or stagnant water. The upward gaze of the eye embedded in its ocular sphere has the intense heavenward gaze of anticipation and adoration that signified immanent transcendence in Baroque paintings of martyrs.

The capacity of eyes to transcend the physicality of the body and perceive not just the material realm but also the spiritual was an idea that had currency in the late nineteenth century. In 1869 Auguste Langel insisted that vision was the pre-eminent sense and wrote that the eye ‘untethers us from this earth – to which all the other organs bind us, leading us through space to the most distant worlds and giving us a sense of the infinite.’ Similarly, Redon stated that while ‘all sensation makes one think’, the eyes were ‘indispensable for the absorption of the elements that nourish our soul.’ Those who had not developed the faculty of sight, the capacity to truly see, Redon insisted, would ‘possess only an incomplete intellect. To be able to see was more than just visualising the surface of things, but a way of understanding: ‘To see is to grasp the relationship of things spontaneously.’ The idea of vision being beyond the sensation of sight is expressed in many of Redon’s images, which include motifs such as floating heads and tranquil faces with closed eyes suggesting

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520 Lloyd, Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé, 30.
522 Odilon Redon, 1882, The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Moves Towards Infinity, lithograph, 25.9 x 19.6cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
523 Odilon Redon, 1878, The Eye-Balloon, charcoal, 42.2 x 33.2cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
introspection and insight. Commenting on Redon’s imagery, Pincus-Witten noted
that the ‘inward glances speak of insight rather than sight, clairvoyance rather than
sensation; with eyes closed of lips sealed with hushed gestures (finger to the lips),
Redon’s heads infer a blocking of sensory input that heightens a supposed second
sight.’\textsuperscript{527}

Emphasising the relationship of eyes as a nexus between the mind and the body in
\textit{The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Moves Towards Infinity} (1882), a severed head is
suspended below the balloon on a platter tethered by the eyelashes. While the intense
upward gaze suggests desire for transcendence, like ballast, the remnant of flesh
keeps it suspended low just above the physical morass of decay and primordial
sludge. A similar sentiment – of the soul being constrained by the flesh – is
expressed by Lautréamont’s protagonist Maldoror:

\begin{quote}
...I feel that my soul is padlocked in my body and cannot free itself to flee far
from coasts beaten by the human sea and be no longer witness to the livid pack
of sorrows that pursues the human...without respite across morasses and the
abyss of vast despondency...
\end{quote}\textsuperscript{528}

The tension between the aspiration to the Ideal and the downward pull of materiality
is almost visceral. The knotted eyelashes pull the eyelid open and the surface of the
disembodied eyeball is exposed to wind and dust. Sensitive to even the slightest shift
or movement the pain and squeamish discomfort is intentional, as later exploited by
the Surrealists with the slashing of the eye in Salvador Dali (1904-1989) and Luis
Buñuel’s (1900-1983) \textit{Un Chien andelou} (1929),\textsuperscript{529} and the eyeballs toyed with in
Georges Bataille’s \textit{Story of the Eye} (1928).\textsuperscript{530}

The severed head on the platter hanging below the eye-balloon has been sliced
through the face, across the cheekbones and the bridge of the nose, leaving only
wide-open eyes and the cap of the skull. Although unable to move or to scream but
conscious and alert, it has an expression of aghast trepidation and terror. Redon was
fascinated by disembodied heads. They appear in many of his images, lolling heavily

\textsuperscript{527} Robert Pincus-Witten, ‘On Target: Symbolist Roots of American Abstraction’, \textit{Eye to Eye:}
\textit{Twenty Years of Art Criticism}, 30.
\textsuperscript{528} Lautréamont, \textit{Les Chants de Maldodôr}, 133.
\textsuperscript{529} Salvador Dali & Luis Buñuel, \textit{Un Chien andelou}, 1929.
\textsuperscript{530} Bataille, \textit{Story of the Eye}, 82-83.
on the ground or in a bowl; hovering above in the air; or winged and soaring. They allude to numerous references including the death of St John the Baptist; the guillotining that occurred during the French Revolution of 1789; and the winged head of Hypnos, the ancient Greek god of sleep who was the father of Morpheas, god of dreams, and the brother of Thanatos, god of death. Disembodied heads also evoked questions that fascinated artists and writers in the nineteenth century.\(^{531}\) They signified sudden and arbitrary death, and the transience of life. They raised ethical and moral questions about crime and punishment; metaphysical questions of duality of the body and soul, mortality and immortality; the Ideal and material, along with medical questions such as: when is life extinguished? Is a head conscious during and in the moments after guillotining? Can it feel pain?

Redon’s eye-balloon is drifting. While tension on the eyelashes is palpable, actual movement in the image has almost stalled and its direction is indeterminate. There is no breeze. The long thin leaves drawn loosely in the foreground are still. The gondola is not swaying. The eye-balloon meanders across a dark passage carrying the conscious mind/soul to some unknown destination. The stretch of bog or stagnant water suggests an ominous crossing like the River Styx; once traversed it is impossible to return. As in many of Redon’s other images, objects are suspended or drifting without any sense of propulsion. There is a vague sense that the eye-balloon might slowly cross the marshy abyss only to become snagged in the mountain range in the distance. Rather than Nietzsche’s power of will, determination, or hope and desire of Idealism, chance alone will determine where these bodily remnants will land. While drifting suggests movement through time and space, levels of consciousness, or life and death, Pincus-Witten suggests that for Redon the motif of

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\(^{531}\) 'Solange' (1849) by Alexandre Dumas exemplifies the Romantic curiosity about decapitation which influenced the Symbolists. In Solange the narrator Dr Ledru relayed how he conducted experiments on disembodied heads in a churchyard chapel... 'In the very spot where the tabernacle – that is to say God and life – had been, lay a fleshless, hairless skull – that is to say death and nothingness. Using an electric machine and three ‘stimulators’ he attempted to establish that pain could be felt by heads after decapitation. On the wet and windy night following the beheading of Marie Antoinette, a sack of heads was delivered as usual. He was visibly shaken as he told how from inside the wet sack Solange, an aristocratic woman who he had recently met and was infatuated with, called out his name, and when he retrieved her head and pleaded with her she opened her eyes, looked at him, let two tears fall and kissed him on the lips. Alexandre Dumas, 'Solange', The Dedalus Book of French Horror, Hale.
drifting symbolises activities of the mind and draws parallels between the artist's heads that float and John the Baptist's hovering head in Moreau's Salomé images.  

Two images from Redon's *Origins* album that are related to the image titled *The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Moves Towards Infinity* emphasise the tension between aspirations towards Idealism and being embodied in material existence. In both of these images, like weird mutations, a single eye is hybridised into low non-sentient life form and yet, as in *The Eye, Like a Strange Balloon, Moves Towards Infinity*, the eyes are peering upwards with the same heavenward gaze that in traditional religious iconography signified the aspiration to reach heaven.

Although Redon declared that his images did 'not depend, as Huysmans insinuated, upon the aid of the microscope before the frightful world of the infinitely small. No. In making them, my greatest concern was to organise their structures.' Redon emphasises his use of the imagination and giving dream-like forms realistic structure and visual logic, but his disavowal is not totally convincing. Redon himself acknowledged the influence of Armand Clavaud (1828-1890), a close friend and botanist, on the development of his art and ideas and wrote of Clavaud that he: 'worked ... at the edge of the imperceptible world, that life which lies between animal and plant, this flower or this being, this mysterious element which is animal during a few hours of the day and only under the effects of light.' Suggestive of nascent consciousness or spiritual awakening, Redon's image *There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower* (1883) (plate 24) depicts an eyeball embedded in a weed-like plant, firmly rooted into the ground. In *The Misshapen Polyp Floated on the Shores, a Sort of Smiling and Hideous Cyclops* (1883) (plate 25) an eyeball is amalgamated into an odd, dumb and muscular sea-anemone.

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533 Redon, *To Myself*, 23.
534 Ibid.
535 Ibid., 14-15.
536 Odilon Redon, 1883, *There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower*, lithograph, 22.5 x 17.7cm, Art Institute of Chicago.
537 Odilon Redon, 1883, *The Misshapen Polyp Floated on the Shores, a Sort of Smiling and Hideous Cyclops*, 21.3 x 20cm, Art Institute of Chicago.
By positioning Redon’s lithographs and drawings in relationship to the prints of Jan Luyken, Rodolphe Bresdin and Francisco Goya, and Lautréamont’s Les Chants de Maldoror, Huysmans emphasised the wrought and nightmarish aspects of Redon’s work and exposed the scepticism, sadism and nihilism to be found in it.

In Against Nature Huysmans discussed Redon’s prints within the art historical and cultural context of Luyken and Bresdin. While Huysmans acknowledged the excellent draughtsmanship and technical capacity evident in Luyken’s work, it was the content rather than the formal or technical aspects of Religious Persecutions, a series of ‘vigorous and brutal’ engravings depicting tortures, on which he dwelt and contextualised the work of Redon. The images reveal the ‘savagery of religious intolerance.’ The sheer number and diversity of these tortures, some crude others finessed, is extraordinary. Premeditated and cruel, condoned and institutionalised, they included ‘men roasted over braziers, skulls laid open by sword cuts, pierced with nails, riven asunder with saws, bowels drawn out of the belly, and twisted round rollers, finger-nails torn out one by one with pincers, eyes put out, eyelids turned back and transfixed with pins...’ Huysmans was fascinated by the mystical and religious ideals overwhelmed by puritanical obsession, hatred and cruelty. Flesh was mortified and torn to expunge the doubt of sceptics and to terrorise the disbelievers.

Huysmans graphically described his synaesthetic, visceral and emotional responses to Luyken’s images. Rather than merely stating the fact that the images evoked a phenomenological response, Huysmans endeavoured to elicit a similar, or even more intense, response through his writing. Some of his passages provoke the reader’s imagination to conjure up scenes of horror without the constraints of proscriptive details. For instance the phrases ‘replete with abominable imaginations, stinking of the stake, reeking with blood, echoing with curses and screams of agony, made des Esseintes flesh creep as he stood stifled with horror’ are open to interpretation and provoke the reader’s imagination.

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539 Ibid.
540 Ibid.

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Huysmans cited two of Bresdin's images in *Against Nature*—the *Comedy of Death* (1854)\(^{541}\) and *The Good Samaritan* (1861)\(^{542}\) (*plate 26*). Redon studied with Bresdin in Bordeaux after returning from Paris in 1865 where he had been a drawing student in the atelier of the Realist painter Jean-Leon Gérôme (1824-1904). The sensibility of Bresdin, along with Delacroix and Moreau, and his passion for etching and lithography, powerfully influenced the artist's aesthetic development. In discussing Bresdin's work, Huysmans exaggerated the vivid nightmare visions revealing the disorder of the world: deformity and corruption, the mysterious, weird and bizarre seethe and fungate. For Huysmans, in Bresdin's *Comedy of Death* thickets 'take the shape of demons and phantoms;' birds have 'rats' heads and tails of vegetables;' the soil is 'littered with human bones, vertebrae, ribs and skulls.' All hope is lost, 'a hermit sits pondering, his head between his hands, in the recesses of a grotto.' God is absent and Christ is ridiculous as he 'flies in the sky dabbled with little clouds' above willow trees 'knotted and gnarled, surmounted by skeletons tossing their arms in unison and chanting a hymn of victory.'\(^{543}\)

The *Good Samaritan* depicts a moment from the Biblical narrative. Whereas in the original story, the destitute man is saved from evil and starvation by a stranger, in Huysmans' interpretation there is no salvation. Rather, desperation, fear, abandonment and terror are apparent. The corpse of a beggar lies unburied, having been 'worn out with privations, exhausted with hunger...his feet extended towards a stagnant pond.'\(^{544}\) Crossing the original narrative for his own purposes, Huysmans draws attention to issues of mortality, the fragility and the futility of life and lack of redemption. Des Esseintes likened Bresdin's image of the *Good Samaritan* to 'the early work of an Early Italian master or a half-developed Albert Dürer, composed under the influence of opium.'\(^{545}\)

In his enthusiastic review of Redon's album of lithographs titled *Homage to Goya*, published in February 1885 in *La Revue Indépendante* Huysmans pronounced Redon

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\(^{541}\) Rodolphe Bresdin, 1854, *Comedy of Death*, lithograph, 21.8 x 15cm, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

\(^{542}\) Rodolphe Bresdin, 1861, *Good Samaritan*, lithograph, 63.5 x 47cm, Art Institute of Chicago.


\(^{544}\) Ibid.

\(^{545}\) Ibid.
the Prince of mysterious dreams. Huysmans contextualised Redon’s images with references to Goya’s *Proverbs*. This, his last series of etchings, which originally were intended to be titled *The Follies*, reveal a bleak vision and are brutally poignant. Using fantastic and enigmatic imagery including men flying with harnessed wings, a monstrous giant and imaginary creatures, they are less preoccupied with politics and more engaged with the imaginary than his earlier work that focused on themes of human folly, weakness, cruelty, ageing, suffering and death, the absurdity of life and forces of evil.

By linking Redon with Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* Huysmans goes even further. Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* is bitter, with a nihilism, callous despair and lack of empathy that is unrelenting throughout the six songs in the cycle. Huysmans recognised that there was an affinity between the dark, sinister, sadistic and callous aspects of human behaviour in Redon’s work and certain perverse incidents in Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror*. In a letter to Destré dated 27 September 1885 Huysmans wrote:

...*It is also true that it contains some nightmares à la Redon. The screwing of the female shark by the man is stupefying, and there is a disembowelling, liver and heart, through a vagina that is quite appetizing. Thank you for sending me these songs. They are in fact worth reading – what the devil could a man who has written such terrible dreams do for a living?*

In Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* bizarre scenarios like hallucinations, unfold with relentless horror. While fascinating, acts of depravity shock, disgust and disturb. A large black tarantula spider climbs from a nest in the corner of a bedroom, onto the bed, seizes the writer and wraps its legs around the throat and sucks out blood with its belly; a hair from the head of God, left behind in a brothel, is distressed and complains of being deserted, a child defiled by a dog is mutilated and left unburied.

Even worse than nihilism, with no God and only nothingness, as if in a state of never ending rotting decay, Lautréamont’s God is inert, stagnating, apathetic, weighed

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down with ennui, with no will-to-live, no sense of responsibility or urgency. God muses that he has not moved his hand or foot for four centuries. More confronting than God not existing, he is reduced to a corrupt, diseased and infested materiality. In *Les Chants de Maldoror*, God whines:

> I am filthy. Lice gnaw me. Swine, when they gaze upon me, vomit. Scabs and scars of leprosy have scaled off my skin, which exudes a yellowish pus. I know not the waters of rivers nor the dew from the clouds. From my nape, as from a dunghill, an enormous toadstool with umbelliferous peduncles is growing.

In positioning Redon’s lithographs and drawings in relationship to Luyken, Bresdin, Goya and Lautréamont Huysmans emphasised the metaphysical questioning, nihilistic despair and scepticism he perceived in Redon’s images.

Redon’s despair, like that of Mallarmé, was both personal and philosophical. Redon admitted to Ernestine Cavaroc after the death of his father: ‘I have suffered terribly; I have seen the abyss.’ In his autobiography Redon revealed that the ship carrying his parents across the Atlantic had been blown off course just prior to his birth. Born in the southern United States, the first son of a fourteen-year-old Creole girl and a Frenchman, Redon wished that he had been born lost at sea: ‘a place without a homeland above an abyss.’ As a child he was miserable and lonely. Redon had a crossed or wandering eye and suffered epilepsy. As a child he was sent away to live on the family’s country estate at Peyrelebade, near Listrac in the Médoc. The countryside, known as the landes, Redon described as ‘wild spaces’ where the ‘ocean which once covered those wild spaces left in the aridity of their sands a breadth of abandonment, of abstraction.’ Here he became familiar with the local peasants’ superstitions and legends, and bizarre scenes such as shepherds balanced on high stilts, wearing sheepskins, knitting while watching their flocks, who ‘trace their strange outlines on the sky.’ At a time when illnesses such as epilepsy and physical imperfections were feared, Redon’s childhood isolation may have influenced his recurrent use of disembodied heads and floating eyes and

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550 Ibid.
555 Ibid.
understanding of himself as an outsider. He explained ‘I see myself in those days as sad and weak. I see myself as a watcher taking pleasure in silence. As a child I sought out shadows.’

In the midst of all of the ‘frenzied’ images by Redon in des Esseintes’ collection, Huysmans suggested that there was one, *Melancholy* (1846) that stood out from the bizarre menagerie of monsters and hybrid beings. Huysmans’ protagonsist des Esseintes ‘...would rub his eyes and gaze at a radiant figure that...rose calm and serene, a figure of Melancholia, seated before a round sun’s disk, on rocks, in an attitude of despondency.’

Initially, it appears that Redon used this figure in a surprisingly conventional allegorical way to represent melancholy or depression. She appears vulnerable, partially draped, and sits with her head bowed on a rocky outcrop jutting into the sea. While young, her posture, stillness and empty gaze have the poignant intensity of disillusionment. The image is haunting. Everything is still and brooding; the sea is calm, the air hot and oppressive. The figure is immobilised and she seems to have been partially transformed into stone; her legs have melded together and her feet have dissolved into the darkness of the rock. Rather than transcendence, there is an impending sense of doom and oblivion as she sinks into the earth. Behind her, the sun is low in the sky and blazing, reminiscent of a halo, but throwing heavy shadows. A fissure between the rocky outcrops gapes and yawns open like an entry to the underworld. The ledge on which she sits is exposed to tides, wind and waves. Behind her the rock-face is sharp and steep. There is no vegetation to cling to, no rope and no boat. No way out. The somnambulant colours are the warm yellows and burnt ochres of a late Summer afternoon. The drawing, rendered in charcoal, gouache, pastel and black chalk, is heavily worked and layered, emphasising a material solidity and stasis.

Redon’s *Melancholy* resonates with intertextual references that extend its meaning, giving it more metaphysical intensity. It was influenced by Albrecht Dürer’s (1471-
1528) engraving *Melencolia I* (1514),\(^{559}\) a copy of which the artist had pinned to his studio wall.\(^{560}\) Melancholy, one of the human temperaments, was regarded in 15\(^{th}\) and 16\(^{th}\) century Europe as an affliction of genius. In Dürer’s engraving the despairing saint is surrounded by objects that signify learning and Dürer’s *Melencolia I* is paired thematically to his engraving titled *St Jerome in his study* (1514).\(^{561}\) Together they suggest the futility of human knowledge in contrast with the enlightenment of sacred learning.\(^{562}\)

Redon’s *Melancholy* is also related compositionally to his *Angel in Chains* (1875),\(^{563}\) in which solitary, fleshy angels sit despondently on a rock, unable to take flight, and to his graphite drawing *Holy Family* (c.1870)\(^{564}\) (plate 28). As opposed to joy and hope expressed in this image in which the Virgin Mary, cradling the infant Jesus and supported by Joseph, is framed by a halo which is also the sun, in *Melancolia* woman is in the same posture but stranded alone in the material world.

In a text titled ‘Questions’, Redon wrote on *Melancholia*, suggesting that it referred to the lone artist in the face of unanswerable questions. Druick and Zegers suggested that the artist characterised himself ‘as alone, but for “his dream”, in a “mute universe” he could not comprehend.’ Nonetheless, they suggest he found ‘solace in his intuition and that its driving ‘instinct’ was ‘divine.’\(^{565}\)

Redon wrote ‘one must suffer, and art consoles; it is a balm\(^{566}\) that ‘art is the supreme range, high, salutary and sacred; it blossoms. In the dilettante it produces only delight, but in the artist with anguish, it provides grains for new seeds.’\(^{567}\) He also suggested that art enabled one to dream and aspire: ‘If we realised our

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559 Albrecht Dürer, 1514, *Melencolia I*, engraving, 24 x 18.5cm, Art Institute of Chicago.
561 Albrecht Dürer, 1514, *St Jerome in his Study*, etching, 25.9 x 20.1cm, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.
563 Odilon Redon, 1875, *Angel in Chains*, oil on paper, 22.4 x 27cm, Woodner Family Collection, New York.
564 Odilon Redon, c.1870, *Holy Family*, graphite, 30.6 x 23.5cm, private collection, Winterthur, Switzerland.
567 Ibid., 7.
dreams...we would no longer dream... It is for this reason that man invented this fictitious dream that is art.\textsuperscript{568}

Like Nietzsche, for Redon nihilism could be redeemed by art, which he equated with immortality and beauty, and had meaning in and of itself. As Redon explained in an essay in which he negatively critiques Ingres’ painting:

\textit{Immortality is nothing but the rare bloom of the rare flower whose seed is at the heart of all beauty; it is praise, admiration, the springing up of the divine seeds contained in a little bit of matter. People, through the flow of time, make the flowering more or less beautiful. The issue is only to leave to them works which they see, which they love, consult, scrutinize with anxiety at the hours of love and research. Supreme strength which attracts and uplifts them and which they develop afterwards, drawing out of it new life, which they will put into new works.}\textsuperscript{569}

Not all of the Symbolists were to take this stance and escape nihilistic despair. For instance, in stark contrast, Rimbaud rejected art in his early twenties, giving up poetry to take up a range of base mercantile pursuits such as slavery and gun running. Paul Schmidt, who translated a recent edition of Rimbaud’s \textit{A Season in Hell}, suggests that rather than a regretful farewell to a life of debauch and rebellion, this cycle of poems was a rejection of revolution, mysticism and the notion that the disorder of the mind was sacred. Schmidt convincingly argues that Rimbaud understood that there was ‘nothing more to life – nothing at the back of the mind, at the bottom of the pit, at the end of the orgy, at the end of the world. Nothing. Nothing at all.\textsuperscript{570}

Huysmans recognised the artist’s intentional use of Symbolist strategies to articulate notions of the Ideal. Like other Symbolist poets and painters, Redon used hypersensual imagery, synaesthesia, ambiguity and obscurity, references to mythological figures, as well as iconography such as severed heads and disembodied wings. Huysmans also discerned a strong sense of anxiety, scepticism and nihilism in Redon’s nightmare visions of microbes, parasites, monsters and deformed demons. In order to draw these ideas out he critiqued Redon’s work in reference to art and texts by Flaubert, Luyken, Bresdin, Goya, Poe and Lautréamont. Bringing into sharp

\textsuperscript{569} Redon, \textit{To Myself}, 122.
relief the metaphysical tension he perceived in Redon’s work, in his critique, Huysmans used references to illness and corruption metaphorically and as a trope to represent materialism, mortality and evil undermining allusions to the Ideal.

In the next chapter I will consider Huysmans’ engagement with the work of Félicien Rops. Although still aligned with the Symbolists, as Huysmans becomes increasingly immersed in the occult, his metaphysical questioning and religious beliefs impact on his critical interpretation. More than the despair in the face of nothingness, materialism, evolution and chance evident in his discussion of Redon’s work, for Huysmans, Rops images alluded to an aggressive sadistic nihilism, a consciously malicious Devil and a palpable Evil.
I’d cheated, and, for the first time, perhaps, used the newspaper rather than wait for you to send me a copy. An unparalleled book, it seemed to me in fragmented form, and now I grant it that description yet again! For the richness of its insights, for its fury and for its art.

This blatant and dual page of history confounds the reader: and how everything still leaps beyond the recounted facts toward the absolute assertion that God today transforms himself into a Devil and reigns, gold and garbage, thus.

And, how strange it is, how solitary and contemptuous! I don’t believe, as far as the style is concerned, that I’ve ever read words as swift and devouring. Let’s meet soon. To see each other and chat about it, dear friend.571 —Stéphane Mallarmé, 1891

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Huysmans’ critical appraisal of the work of Félicien Rops (1833-1898) is idiosyncratic and intense. Although he did not mention the artist’s work in Against Nature, Huysmans wrote an extraordinary and extensive critique titled ‘Félicien Rops’ in Certains (1889) in which he focused on two key bodies of work Les Sataniques (c.1882) and Les Diaboliques (c.1884). This text explicitly reveals the depth of Huysmans’ immersion in Satanism at the time of writing. Huysmans had also discussed Rops’ work in his correspondence with friends and peers from very early in his career as a critic while still advocating for the Impressionists. In a letter to Hannon dated 24 April 1877 Huysmans revealed that he was familiar with Rops’ oeuvre and expressed his enthusiasm for the artist’s work: ‘I have admired him for a long time! I know most of his work, including the erotic ones; there are some splendid things!’ Huysmans noted that Rops’ work was technically excellent and that he drew from nature: ‘This valiant engraver is a naturalist of immense talent!’

In a letter to Camille Lemonnier (1844-1913) dated July 1877 Huysmans again makes reference to Rops and his admiration for the artist’s work, along with that of Post-Impressionist, Degas, the only other artist he considered to be of worth ‘in the current deluge of mediocrity’. While he encouraged Lemonnier to give the Impressionists some support, as they were the ‘only ones who are trying to do something’, Huysmans flatly dismissed the rest, declaring that ‘for the most part, contemporary French painters are so unliterary and such nullities.’ Huysmans recognised that Degas had significant talent and ‘along with Rops, he is the only one to have understood that the Parisian woman is so complex and so charming. Let us plait for him garlands of lovage and lemon verbena!’

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573 Félicien Rops, c.1882, Les Diaboliques, Félicien Rops, Bonnier et al., 158-159.
575 Ibid., 26.
While clearly salacious in intent, Rops’ work drew from the French tradition of erotic imagery and pornographic literature, which combined obscenity with slander and satire, agnosticism, disdain for the Church and libertinage. Influenced by the development of novels and closely engaged with literature Rops’ interest in creating images that responded obliquely to, or were suggestive of, narrative is evident. In his research on books banned in the eighteenth-century Robert Darnton noted that the intention of French pornographic literature was not limited to the sexual arousal of the reader, nor ‘did [it] distinguish a genre of “pure” pornography from erotic fiction, anti-clerical tracts, and other varieties of “philosophical books.”’

As a young man studying in Brussels, Rops honed his sarcastic wit and skills in illustration and caricature in *Uylenspiegel*, a satirical art and literary journal that he founded in 1856, that continued to be published until 1863. It was named after a national hero with a reputation as a mischievous adventurer who advocated for justice and freedom. Rops’ savage and lewd drawings, influenced by Honoré Daumier (1808-1879), were important precursors to the direction and form that his later work would take. Although Rops was also a landscape painter of mainly derivative and dull-coloured bucolic scenes in oils, Huysmans and subsequent critics have taken an interest in his etchings and lithographs. While not widely recognised, Rops’ work was celebrated in his own time by his peers – artists and writers with a decadent sensibility – in Paris and Brussels. He exhibited as a member of the Brussels based group of artists *Les XX* and was an active member of the visual art and literature art communities. In 1868 he was Vice-President of Société Libre des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, and founded the Society of Etchers in 1870 before moving to Paris in 1874 where he illustrated texts by Baudelaire, Barbey d’Aurevilly, Péladan, Verlaine and Mallarmé amongst others. Delevoy noted that ‘his etchings for Barbey d’Aurevilly are regarded as some of the best illustrative work ever done.’ (plates 29 & 30) Others considered Rops’ prints, including frontispieces in books, obscene. In early 2008, Rops was well represented in ‘L’Enfer de la Bibliothèque: Éros au

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576 Although erotic images have existed since before antiquity the word pornography was coined by Restif de la Bretonne in 1769 in a text in which he dryly argued in favour of legal prostitution. Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York & London: Norton, 1996), 86.


In Rops’ work, notions of the Enlightenment, rationalism and libertinage collide with Catholicism, the sanctity of the church, and conservative social mores. As well as his lascivious nature, Rops’ work reflected flash points and fissures in society and the catastrophic changes of the time. Unrestrained by fear of causing offence he flagrantly disregarded contemporary mores and pushed beyond acceptable boundaries to make his point. While provocative and at times ludicrous, his images are a sharp form of commentary, mocking and critiquing established values and unveiling hypocrisy. They taunt with Satanism, blasphemy, anti-clericism, lewd imagery and allusions to evil. Although challenging, they were however, not intended to be taken too seriously. Rather there is humorous intent, which elicits a range of responses from smutty sniggers through to a callous and derisory laughter. *(plate 31)*

Apart from the forgettable landscapes, Rops’ oeuvre includes three bodies of work. He is best known for his complex and intricate Symbolist images and illustrations, commissioned for texts by French poets and novelists, which allude to but do not explicitly illustrate the text they accompany.

Rops’ oeuvre also includes a number of images depicting Parisian women in various stages of *deshabillé*. There is a sense of familiarity, and the poses, gestures and the demeanour of the women is flirtatious. Rops devised an extraordinary number of images that depict explicit and consensual sexual encounters of astonishing diversity between men, women and hermaphrodites with skeletons, witches, satyrs, Satan in various guises, hybrid beasts, an octopus, disembodied penises and well-endowed sculpted figures. While Rops introduced a voyeuristic element into many of the images, the couples seem to be distracted and ignorant of being observed.

Huysmans perceived in Rops’ unrelentingly explicit work something more than titillation, or the prevailing concerns of the Naturalists and materialism. Huysmans

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suggested that Rops’ images, as well as rendering the ‘ignited flesh’ had elicited ‘the pains of feverish souls and the joys of contorted spirits.’

Huysmans perceived blasphemy and a desperate and frenzied evil in the images and suggested that Rops had ‘painted diabolic ecstasy as others have painted spiritual flights.’ Also, Huysmans noticed that he had depicted the ‘unleashing of passions contained and constrained, not just in physical reality but strictures of repression in the mind.’

For Huysmans, moments of evil, perversity and sadistic cruelty that are absolute and Ideal evil, accessed via compressed thoughts and a morbid psychology are intense and energised.

In his article, ‘Félicien Rops’ Huysmans discussed a number of Rops’ images including *Les Sataniques* and *Les Diaboliques*. Arguably Huysmans’ most provocative, self-indulgent and confronting text, the critic positioned Rops’ artwork in the darkest realms of absolute or pure evil, and linked Idealism with lust, sadism, Satanism, evil and disease. As with the Sade’s novels and Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* there is a nasty pleasure evident in Huysmans’ discussion of gratuitous cruelty and debauchery, which is gruelling as well as revelatory.

Huysmans insisted that Rops did not depict contemporary Parisian woman with ‘mincing charms and dubious finery’ but as ‘essential, timeless’. They were not from his own time when materialist interpretation reduced them to ‘hysterics devoured by their ovaries or nymphomaniacs whose brains beat in the regions of their belly.’ Like Moreau’s *Salomé* and Maldoror’s female shark, Huysmans recognised in Rops’ images of women the satanic, ‘the naked malignant Beast, the warrior of Darkness, the absolute slave of the Devil.’

In *Certains* Huysmans conceptualised Rops’ work in relation to erotic and pornographic imagery and pondered the impulses that induced an artist to produce such work. Huysmans made a distinction between naughty images depicting naked bottomed hussars whipping the air and romping fat-cheeked farmer’s wives with hitched-up skirts by English artist Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827), and images that

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581 Ibid.
583 Huysmans, ‘Félicien Rops’, *Certains*, van Niele, unpagedinated.
reveal suffering and torment, such as certain graphic etchings by unnamed Japanese artists.\textsuperscript{584} Huysmans insisted that Rops' work was akin to the latter. Exaggerating violence, mutilation, unnatural deathliness and disease, Huysmans described the highly stylised Japanese prints as if they depicted scenes of appalling carnage.

*Their women, with their indolent flesh, as white as that of emphysemiacs, die, lying upside down, eyes closed, teeth gritted in the blood from their lips; the belly, horribly slit, gaps open under a little powder puff, looking like a wound with wattles. Their men gasp prostrate, sprouting inconceivable phalluses, topped with parasols, with swollen tubes and striped with veins. Intermingled in impossible poses they all lie there like corpses whose bones have been broken as a result of terrible punishments.*\textsuperscript{585}

Huysmans confided that the "finest engraving of this sort I know is terrifying."\textsuperscript{586} It is an image of a transgressive bestial copulation between a corpse-like woman and an octopus.\textsuperscript{587}

*...with his tentacles the horrible beast pumps her nipples and pries into her mouth, while the head itself drinks the lower parts. The almost superhuman expression of anguish and pain that convulses that long Pierrot face with its hooked nose, and the hysterical joy that simultaneously filters from the brow and from the closed eyes of that dead woman, are quite admirable.*\textsuperscript{588}

Huysmans insisted that the torment represented in the Japanese engravings was an abstracted principle, essence or absolute of the same order as "that Licentiousness we find in the Bible, a licentiousness that arises from its very first pages under the Tree of Eden, and surfaces again at the end of the Book..."\textsuperscript{589} A pure evil incarnated and revealed in forms such as: Satan, the serpent, incubi and succubi and the 'angel with its seven phials...clad in metal and purple, the sovereign whore seen by Saint John."\textsuperscript{590}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[585] Ibid.
\item[586] Ibid.
\item[587] Ibid.
\item[588] Ibid.
\item[589] Ibid.
\item[590] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
In a surprisingly earnest tone, and in contrast to the playful irreverence discernable in much of Rops' work, Huysmans also linked his own lust, and by extension others' as well, with much darker than Catholic ideas of mortal sin - a Satanic Ideal, the notion of absolute evil. Paradoxically, this was raised by Huysmans to a level of heightened awareness and considered a form of spirituality giving access to an Ideal realm.

His discussion of lust, onanism and absolute 'evil' reveals as much about his own idiosyncrasies, prejudices and propensities as giving insight into Rops' art. It is not a naïve revelation, but an exposure made with calculated intent. Huysmans' musings coincided with Jean-Matin Charcot's (1825-1893) research at the Salpêtrière Asylum into mental hysteria, which preceded his student Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) research into sexuality and repression, that was being published and discussed in the public arena.

From Huysmans' reflections, which have the authenticity of being a first-person account, he extrapolated, made sweeping generalisations and posited outlandish conclusions. Some of his personal revelations read like confidences written to his intimate friends Prins or Hannon, which include explicit accounts of his sexual exploits.\(^{591}\) Huysmans' frankness and sincerity was inspiring to Breton who recognised the bravado. Breton stated that Huysmans had delivered a 'mortal blow' to psychological literature with fictitious plots and that he would write, like Huysmans, as if 'where I sleep nights in a glass bed, under glass sheets, where who I am will sooner or later appear etched by a diamond.'\(^{592}\)

Huysmans revealed that for him the 'dream scene is nearly always identical: images arise, nudeness stretches tight, but, in one leap, the natural act fades as if stripped of interest, as if too brief, as if only causing an expected shock, a trivial cry.' Huysmans described how his onanistic sexual experience culminated simultaneously in a moment of 'unnatural vulgarity', or ejaculation, and with an orgasmic communion with an Ideal or pure evil. He insisted that the 'soul's infamy grows worse...but it

\(^{591}\) Huysmans addressed a letter to 'My fine Phosphorous Eater, Well, that is the diet to which the abuse of coitus and the arts leads!' J.-K. Huysmans, 'Letter to Théodore Hannon, 5 November 1878', The Road from Decadence, Beaumont, 33.

\(^{592}\) Breton, Nadja, 17.
also becomes more refined, ennobled by the thought that is mingled with all this, the thought of an ideal of superhuman vices, sins that one would like to be new.'

Extrapolating from his own experience to the general, Huysmans concluded that masturbation was preferable to an encounter with another person as it was closer to an Ideal and superhuman evil and was unnatural – meaning alone, he could transcend the physical. Articulating his rejection of the physical realm in favour of this Ideal evil glimpsed for a moment, and revealing his misogyny and personal discomfort, he elaborated, that if ‘it should happen that reality becomes mingled with these heated visions of the senses, that a woman, a flesh and blood woman, arrives on the scene, then the man, overtaxed by dream, becomes almost frigid, experiences, in all cases, after a real pollution, atrocious disillusionment and sorrow.'

Obsession with lustful thoughts, he elaborated, caused erethism of the brain that, if it persisted or worsened, gave rise to ‘certain disorders in the organism, science speaks of “mental hysteria,” recommends counter-irritants, lupuline and camphor, bromide of potassium, and cold showers.' Huysmans noted that the cause of these disorders was a mystery to science and materialists who had no plausible way of explaining them, but suspected a disease or deterioration of the nervous system. Catholics, he noted, were able to explain the cause of this ‘mental hysteria’ and recognised it as a mortal sin named ‘morose delight’. A sin over which one had no control as the thoughts caused by temptation and evil arose unbidden, even if one did not desire to have them. As with nervous disorders medicine was only able to monitor the progress of disease episodes. The Church offered supplications, prayers, relics and exorcism or most commonly, according to Huysmans, Holy Communion. The Church’s power was limited and symptoms invariably persisted.

Huysmans reflected that whether celibate, sated or disinterested one can be overcome with lewd visions, orgiastic deliriums and lascivious thoughts and noted that ‘artists whose nerves are taut to the point of snapping have, more than anyone else, constantly suffered from the unbearable torment of Lewdness.’ Huysmans goes to...

\[594\] Ibid.
\[595\] Ibid.
\[596\] Ibid.
pains to explain that he was not discussing physical sexual activity. Rather, this was an idealised ‘Spirit of Lewdness’ in the form of erotic thought isolated from reality ‘with no material correspondence’ and without need of ‘an animal outcome’ or physical consummation.\textsuperscript{597}

It was this ‘morose delight’ or mental hysteria – of being pursued by the devil and led into temptation, not just sinning in the flesh, but evil bursting forth as thoughts in the mind despite attempts to repress them – Huysmans explained, that had been translated into artwork by Rops, and accounted for artwork and literature secreted in the \textit{enfer} section of libraries ‘in hidden boxes and closed files.’\textsuperscript{598} (plate 33)

\textit{Les Sataniques}

Of the satanic and bizarre in Rops’ \textit{Les Sataniques} Huysmans insisted that they were not merely erotic, anti-clerical fantasies but representations of the real forces of evil at work in the world. In \textit{Satan semant l’ivraie (Satan Sowing Weeds)} (1882).\textsuperscript{599} (plate 34) Satan, like a monstrous skeletal and bony-faced peasant strides across Paris in the middle of the night, hurling embryos, ‘seeds of evil’ from his smock pocket ‘swarming with larvae women’, as if sowing grain.\textsuperscript{600} Life and death are in his control. With blasphemous disregard he uses cathedrals as stepping-stones. Lunging across the Seine, his heavily clogged foot crashes down on Notre Dame. Huysmans suggested that he was dressed like a farmer from Brettony or a Quaker from America, and was confident that the crop of evil sown in Paris would germinate easily and ripen there. Edith Hoffman notes that Rops drew from Jean-François Millet’s (1814-1875) \textit{Le semeur} (1850)\textsuperscript{601} for the composition and pose of the figure. The similarity between the posture and gesture of Millet’s surly peasant farmer sowing grain and Rop’s Satan is evident. Hoffman suggests that Rops was also inspired by a lithograph by Isidore Grandville \textit{Je séparerai l’ivraie du bon} published

\textsuperscript{597} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{598} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{599} Félicien Rops, \textit{Satan semant l’ivraie}, heliogravure retouched, 27.8 x 20.9cm, Félicien Rops, Bonnier et al., 209.
\textsuperscript{600} Huysmans, ‘Félicien Rops’, \textit{Certains}, van Niele, unpaginated.
\textsuperscript{601} Jean-François Millet, 1850, \textit{Le semeur}, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 82.6cm, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
in *La Caricature* on 14 October 1831. The Granville image shows a draped muscular figure of Liberty wearing a Phrygian cap, one foot heavily resting on the rock of France, resolutely winnowing with a shallow basket from which men are scattered like chaff or weevils.

In Rops’ *L’Idol* (1882), a woman copulates with a smug and lecherous stone bust of a Hermes crowned with laurels. *(plate 35)* For Huysmans she is not a woman but a ‘Devilish Theresa…a saint, satanised while praying’ Huysmans suggests that this ‘fornicating creature’ will be disappointed as the:

> supreme instant will transform itself into an unforgettable disappointment since all the documents confirm that women who make pacts with the devil suffer at the final moment the indescribable horror of an icy spray and fall immediately into an inexpressible fatigue…an intense exhaustion.

In *L’Enlevement* (1882), in which it is unclear who has abducted whom, two witches engage in wild and abandoned sexual play above the clouds with the aid of a broom. *(plates 36 & 37)* Drawing on esoteric texts and his research into occultism, and with disturbingly intense detail that evokes taste, smell, sight and touch, Huysmans noted that the philtres on which the witches got intoxicated combined ‘menstrual fluids, sperm, cats’ brains, donkeys’ brains, hyena’s belly, wolves’ genitals, and hippomane, which flows from the genitals of mares in heat.’ Huysmans described that after the ‘ride through the skies’ they land in a clearing where ‘the Devil, in the form of a sex maniac or a goat on heat, sticks out his black and hairy arse to be kissed.’ He then, in a reverie continues:

> ...the black mass is celebrated on top of the naked backside of a woman; they feast, they stuff themselves with human soup, with a child’s flesh of which they suck out the blood through the navel and the nape of the neck; they chew the bones which having been cooked for a year with special herbs, have become as soft as turnips.
Les Diaboliques

Rops’ *Les Diaboliques* were commissioned for Barbey d’Aurevilly’s volume of six novellas of the same title, which was published in 1874. Each novella has a central female character who is, in one way or another, diabolical. The tales are obsessed with sexuality, passion, calculated cruelty and crime. They explore the extremities of human nature, question religious beliefs and atheism, and are vehemently anticlerical. The enigmatic and melodramatic tales are recounted by a narrator to an audience that interrupts and introduces anecdotal information, ethical and metaphysical questions or background details.

Barbey d’Aurevilly employed Symbolist strategies of obscurity and ambiguity. The stories are not didactic in regard to issues of atheism, religion or questions of morality and often the narrator and those commenting on the narrative are uncertain of key elements of the story so aspects of the drama remain a mystery. However they reveal the hypocrisies below the surface of polite and aristocratic society. The main protagonists are agents sharp and self-interested with limited capacity for empathy and none for guilt. Barbey d’Aurevilly’s flawed characters, while engaged in extreme behaviours, remain plausible and recognisable.

Rops’ images remain ambiguous despite referring obliquely to one of the narratives. Not just ‘passionate looks of the body’ but, Huysmans insists, Rops has captured in these images that ‘kind of spiritual quality of Lust that is called Satanism…the supernatural of perversity, the beyond of Evil.’

In Rops’ image *A Dinner of Atheists* a woman, young and fecund, lies self-absorbed, abandoned and breathless across a table. (plate 38) Provocatively, she has been depicted with her skirts pulled up and in disarray, her back arched and twisted, revealing well-shaped buttocks and legs. Her head is thrown back and tresses of hair tumble with the drapery to the floor. The pose of the figure is very similar to Auguste

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609 Ibid.
610 Félicien Rops, 1884, *A Dinner of Atheists, Les Diaboliques*, black lead, Conté crayon on paper, 24.6 x 17cm, Félicien Rops, Bonnier et al., 111.
Césinger’s life-size sculpture *Woman Bitten by a Snake* (1847),\(^{611}\) modelled on the curvaceous naked body of Apollonie Sabatier, which was considered indecent and caused a scandal.\(^{612}\) As with Césinger’s sculpture, it is unclear as to whether the figure is in the throes of death or sexual passion. She is lying on a hard wooden table rather than a bed, suggesting that it could be a depiction of the aftermath of a rape or a woman suffering the pangs of childbirth. The room is gloomy and the light from a single candle placed on the table near the woman’s shins illuminates her but barely penetrates the shadows. Under the table a man lies prone, only his boots and shins visible. Behind her a darkened doorway gapes open where a door has been pulled asunder. Like a premonition of the birth of a baby and its untimely death, candlelight reflected on the askew door evokes the shaft of light, suggestive of those alluding to the moment of conception in paintings of the Annunciation.

The Rops image was published alongside Barbey d’Aurevilly’s sadistic tale titled ‘A Dinner of Atheists.’ The story, like the image, is brilliantly crafted. Meaning is elusive and the narrative includes interweaving threads and diversions. Mesnil, at dinner with committed atheists, is accused and derided by one of the dinner guests on account of being seen in a Church speaking to a priest. In response, he recounted a story from his youth of when he met Rosalba, the strong-willed and callous mistress of a major in his regiment who, while blushing red frequently as if chaste, was extravagantly promiscuous. He recalled how some time after they had a liaison, Rosalba had given birth to a child of which the major assumed he was the father. The officers in the regiment knew this was unlikely. The child died in its first year and its heart was kept in a crystal vitrine on the mantelpiece. Their passion now cold, Mesnil nevertheless happened to find himself in Rosalba’s apartment one evening as she was sealing an unaddressed letter to one of her lovers with candle wax. Hearing the major’s footsteps on the stairs he secreted himself into a cupboard and was privy to a horrific argument as the major demanded to know for whom the letter was intended. During the argument Rosalba taunted the major with the fact that the dead child, of which he had been proud and believed to be his own, was none other than Mesnil’s, at which point the vitrine was smashed. Amid angry accusations and cold, bitter

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\(^{611}\) Auguste Clesinger, 1847, *Woman Bitten by a Snake*, marble, 56.5 x 180 x 70cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

mockery, the child’s heart was vindictively and repeatedly hurled by both the major and Rosalba at each other and to the floor. The episode culminated with the major in a jealous rage brutally ‘sealing’ Rosalba with hot wax from the burning candle so that she could never betray him again. At this point Mesnil broke out of his hiding place, killed the major and left, uncertain whether Rosalba had survived. He carried the child’s heart in his belt for many years until the recent evening when he visited a priest and asked him to lay it to rest.\textsuperscript{613}

It is not until Barbey d’Aurevilly’s tales are read that the relationships to the narrative ambiguously embedded in the Rops’ series of images \textit{Les Diaboliques} are revealed. Rather than explicitly illustrate the texts, both images and the stories stand alone, and simultaneously, contribute to and are enriched by the reader/viewers engagement with them.

\textit{Les Diaboliques} scandalised Paris and Barbey d’Aurevilly narrowly escaped being prosecuted for immorality as Flaubert, for \textit{Madame Bovary} (1857), and Baudelaire, for \textit{Les Fleurs du Mal} (1857), had been. After the public prosecutors office seized 480 copies of the 2200 printed from the publishers, Barbey d’Aurevilly agreed not to republish the work. Alphonse Lemerre published the book nine years later, regardless, and it was subsequently reissued in 1886 with Rops’ nine plates, which created a new scandal.

Through Barbey d’Aurevilly, Huysmans met Péladan, a Satanic Catholic, self styled Sâr and founder of the \textit{Salons de la Rose+Croix}. Barbey d’Aurevilly was forty years older than Huysmans, a dandy and friend of Baudelaire, who held one of the most important literary salons in Paris in his apartment in the rue de Rome.\textsuperscript{614} Interestingly, like Huysmans, Péladan recognised the integration of the Satanic with the erotic in Rops’ work and enthusiastically wrote to the artist: ‘I have seen some of your masterly etchings and find them so perverse that I, who am preparing a Treatise on Perversity, am overwhelmed by your exceptional talent.’\textsuperscript{615} In his essay ‘In Search of the Holy Grail’ Péladan insisted that outside of the church, art was ‘no

\textsuperscript{614} Joséphin Péladan, quoted in Pincus-Witten, \textit{Occult Symbolism in France}, 39.
\textsuperscript{615} Delevoy, \textit{Symbolists and Symbolism}, 243.
more than a hermetic tradition" and that Rops' *Les Sataniques*, along with artwork by Symbolists Puvis de Chavannes and Moreau, could be understood only by the initiated.

Huysmans recognised Barbey d'Aurevilly as a great Catholic writer – despite having been rejected by the Church as 'plague-stricken and unclean.' In *Against Nature* des Esseintes was 'genuinely interested only in sickly books with health undermined and exasperated by fever.' Huysmans critiqued two of Barbey d'Aurevilly's books, *Les Diaboliques* and *Married Priest* (1864). He noted that rather than good conquering evil two equal forces, Satan and Christ, vied and fought for the soul and were each in turn 'victorious and vanquished.' In the callous disregard, cruelty and evil explored in *Les Diaboliques* Huysmans discerned 'the apparition of Sadism, that bastard birth of Catholicism, which Faith has for centuries, under all its shapes, pursued with its exorcisms and its fires.'

In his analysis of sadism Maurice Blanchot recognised that the key characteristics of a sadist included a perception of being singular and alone and a denial of personal feelings and obliteration of empathy towards others. Rather than being hedonists interested in pleasure, 'great libertines,' he suggested, had 'annihilated all capacity for pleasure within themselves.' Not satisfied by 'ordinary sensuality' they 'carry out such frightful abominations', they are ferocious, and have crushed all sensitivity. Passion has been compressed, and is expressed in intense moments of insensibility through calculated and cold-blooded crime. These characteristics are readily recognisable in Lautréamont's protagonist Maldoror. Blanchot states:

*Cruelty is merely the negation of the self, carried so far that it is transformed into a destructive explosion. Insensibility causes a quivering through the whole being, says Sade: the soul ascends to a type of apathy which is soon*

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617 Ibid.
618 It was Barbey d’Aurevilly who recognised Huysmans’ religious struggle in *Against Nature*. In a letter to Friar Jules Pacheu dated 26 December 1896 Huysmans noted: ‘Strange! But that man was the only one who saw things clearly in my case, after he had read A Rebours... He wrote an article which contained these last prophetic words “There remains only for you to commit suicide or become a Catholic.”’ J.-K. Huysmans, ‘Letter to Fr. Jules Pachue, 26 December 1896’, *The Road from Decadence*, Beaumont, 166.
metamorphosed into pleasures a thousand times more divine than those that
their weakness procures for them.\textsuperscript{621}

The Sadean position is closely aligned with nihilism. Both involve scepticism, the
rejection of religious beliefs and moral principles, intense despair and a belief that
life is devoid of meaning. A sense of nothingness and empty meaningless despair is
also closely aligned with nihilism. The divine is exquisite sensual pleasure for its
own sake, rather than otherworldly, abstract ideas or an Ideal.

For Huysmans blasphemy was integral to sadism. He declared that sadism was
sacrilegious and Christian and could not ‘arise in the soul of an unbeliever.’ It did not
exist only in the excesses of the flesh, piqued by acts of cruelty rather ‘it consists
primarily and particularly in a course of sacrilegious acts, in a moral revolt, in a
spiritual debauch, in an aberration purely ideal, purely Christian.’ Revealing his
move towards Catholicism at the height of his engagement with Satanism, Huysmans
elaborated that the attraction of sadism included transferring to Satan the ‘homages
and prayers’ owed to God. One could blaspheme by not observing Catholic precepts
and committing ‘in order the more scornfully to mock the Christ, the sins he had
most expressly banned – pollution of holy things and carnal orgies.’\textsuperscript{622}

More so than for Sade, who essentially was a sensual materialist delighting in
antagonising the bourgeoisie and Church while claiming his rights to his own
physical pleasures, blasphemy for Huysmans was a potent insult and direct challenge
to good and evil powers in the world.

Whereas Huysmans insisted that Rops’ images revealed a satanic Evil (an absolute
and Ideal), Léon Bloy (1846-1917) \textsuperscript{623} – a Catholic writer, vicious critic, and friend
turned bitter enemy of Huysmans – recognised in Barbey d’Aurevilly’s illustrated
book a critique of modern society, ‘a denunciation of the hell of the flesh into which

\textsuperscript{621} Ibid, 205.
\textsuperscript{622} Huysmans, \textit{Against the Grain: A Rebours}, 1969, 148-149.
\textsuperscript{623} Remy de Gourmont wrote of Bloy in 1898 that he was a flayer of skins who ‘after a circular
slash, tears away the entire hide, like a tight dress. Many of his victims, still alive, still cry out as
loudly as at the moment when the tender robe of flesh was ripped from them; the man is perfectly
naked and, through the double cloaca of a putrefied heart. Deprived of their hypocrisy, men
peeled in this way truly appear as over-ripe fruits...’ Remy de Gourmont, \textit{The Book of Masks,
Atlas Archive Two}, de Gourmont, & Mangravite, 38.
modern society had sunk’, and a depiction ‘of the hollowness of a world that refused
to be regenerated by the Catholic ideal.’624 In his critique of Les Diaboliques Bloy
recognised a metaphysical search and asked whether sadism was ‘anything else but
the starved craving for the Absolute, transferred to the order of the passions, and
seeking in the practices of cruelty spice for the practices of debauch?’625 Bloy was
interested in the nature of sadism and explored it in his fiction, religious polemic and
critical writing, stripping fictional characters and peers of hypocrisy to reveal the
motivations of their actions. Jullian wrote that he ‘shuddered with horror while
reading Lautréamont.’626 He was described by Andrew Mangravite as a devout and
stiff-necked Catholic whose stories verge on the Luciferian.627

The Temptation of Saint Anthony

In Rops’ The Temptation of Saint Anthony (1878),628 far from a playful or naughty
erotic façade, Huysmans recognised the blasphemy depicted as a powerful insult and
provocative act that had visceral impact and was capable of producing real grief. For
Huysmans, the Saint is at the fulcrum of a battle in which good and evil are being
played out. Sexual, psychological and spiritual pain and suffering are sadistically
inflicted on the Saint. (plate 39) Saint Anthony is the victim of obsessive thoughts
that Huysmans equated with pure evil.629 His will-power has been annihilated, and
his mind is controlled by Satan. Sadistically, the horned devil, dressed as a jester,
imbues lascivious thoughts into Saint Anthony’s mind. The Saint is aware that he is
being tempted, maliciously taunted and toyed with. Despite this, he is wracked with
horror, self-hate and guilt at his own complicity.

624 Birkett, The Sins of the Fathers, 27.
625 Léon Bloy, quoted in Birkett, The Sins of the Fathers, 27.
628 Félicien Rops, 1878, The Temptation of Saint Anthony
629 Sigmund Freud was interested in the image and interpreted it as psychologically insightful
revealing the eruption of repressed thoughts, modeled on celibate saints and penitents. ‘From the
temptations of the world, an aesthetic monk has sought refuge in the image of the crucified
Saviour. Then, phantom-like, this cross sinks and, in its stead, there rises shining, the image of a
volutuous, unclad woman, in the same position of the crucifixion. Other painters of less
psychological insight have, in such representations of temptation, depicted sin as bold and
triumphant, near the Saviour on the cross. Rops, alone, has allowed it to take the place of the
Saviour on the cross; he seems to have known that the thing repressed proceeds, at its
recurrence, from the agency of repression itself.’ (Dr Sigmund Freud, Delusion and Dream, trans., Helen Downey (London: Allen & Unwin: 1921), 144).
In comparison to the Saint’s suffering, the tortures suffered by Christ – who is dead, feels nothing and is unresponsive – are irrelevant. Far from being the divine incarnation of God in the flesh, Christ is depicted as a hollow-eyed, shrivelled grey corpse, used by the devil as a prop or plaything. The desiccated remains are mockingly pushed to one side and held in a cavalier fashion by the devil.

Blasphemously, the mortal remains of Christ are replaced by the absolute of Eros, the Ideal of erotic love, incarnated in the naked body of a strong, healthy and beautiful woman. The symbolism of the figure is made explicit by the sign above her head which proclaims Eros rather than King of the Jews. Flowers and ribbons barely constrain her long red hair which echo the Saint’s sensual red beard. Lightly bound to the cross by white bows, Eros is revelling in her mock crucifixion and her role in the devil and this saint’s sadomasochistic game. Her seductive allure is complicated by the dead hand of Christ, punctured by a nail, caught in her hair; and two blushing cupids that frolic and throw garlands of flowers, who like macabre premonitions of love, death and decay are skeletal above the waist. As futile as the Saint’s desire and his failed attempts to commune with God through prayer, as an Ideal, Eros remains tantalising but unattainable.

Mortified by his vision, St Anthony holds his hands to his head as if struggling to dispel his thoughts from his mind. In Rops’ image there is a slippage between hallucination, imagination and reality. The female figure, although a vision, and the symbolic pig that St Anthony is traditionally depicted to represent those he bred to feed the sick, appear more tangible and have a stronger physical presence than the other figures in the image. Correlations are evident between the solid rude health of Saint Anthony’s pig and the woman’s body. Rops has also implied a relationship between the pig’s instinctual sensuality and the woman’s sexual desire.630 The Saint’s ragged gown is falling away and he appears to be bursting through the cords tightly bound around his loins. Like the pig who stands on holy books to sniff at Eros, he is thrown back into the material realm of the flesh and the body – unable to transcend to the spiritual realm of the immaterial to which he aspires. More than a

630 Correlation with Félicien Rops, 1878, Pornokrates, watercolour, pastel on paper, 78 x 48cm, Félicien Rops, Bonnier et al., 139. (see plate 40)
personal struggle with repressed lust, the saint is having a metaphysical crisis. For Huysmans, St Anthony’s vision revealed that the Devil is in control, evil transcends good, Christ is dead, God is impotent, man is weak and his will-power is easily overwhelmed.

Insisting that God was a myth, Rops proclaimed that in *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, he wanted Satan to tell Saint Anthony that the Christian gods, saints and ‘incorporeal Virgins’ were mere symbolic abstractions that no longer had relevance: ‘Your Gods have followed those of Olympus.’ He also enthusiastically declared that ‘Jupiter and Jesus did not carry off eternal Wisdom, nor Venus and Mary eternal Beauty!’ For Rops, they were accessible here on earth. In a letter to François Taelemans (1851-1931) written in 1878, Rops stated that the subject of the painting was easy to understand. On the one hand it was about temptation, unwanted lustful visions and evil. Rops suggested that the saint:

> pursued by lustful visions, hastens to his prie-dieu, but at the same time, Satan—a peculiar red monk—plays a trick on him; he removes Christ from the cross and replaces Him with a beautiful girl, any self-respecting devil always has one handy.

On the other hand, more hedonistic than Idealistic, Rops suggested that the painting was a ruse inspired by a hearty lust and the subject a:

> pretext to paint a beautiful girl as nature intended her to be. A year ago she gave us eggs cooked with tripe to eat, according to the recipe of Touraine. Finally, after much insisting, she agreed to pose for her old Fély, in the same way as the Princess Borghèse posed for Canova. I changed only the hair...

For Huysmans, but not necessarily for Rops, the artist’s erotic images elucidated sheer evil akin to the sadism and nihilism of Lautréamont’s *The Chants of Maldoror* and in the novels of Sade. This evil was compressed into an intense moment and made lucid. Evil energised and activated, evident in actions that display a callous disregard, lack of empathy and ferocious cruelty erupting through ennui, beyond the capacity of will power to repress.

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632 Ibid.
633 Ibid.
Nihilistic in their brutal reductivism, two drawings by Rops explore the Darwinian possibilities of chance mutation, the drive to reproduce and struggles to survive in the wake of the death of god. In *Darwinique No. 1* or *Tranformisme No. 1* (date unknown) a frenzied woman with a screaming bird’s head, propels herself through the air with long sinuous appendages that end not in feet but wide brush-tails with which she also entwines a fish-like beast in a bizarre symbiotic embrace. (*plate 41*) In *Darwinique No. 2* (date unknown) a strange monster has evolved, presumably through the course of selection of attributes which favour reproduction, to a compact amalgamation of buttocks, vagina, breasts, penis, eyeballs and a shock of pubic hair. (*plate 42*)

Huysmans saw in Rops’ work an engagement with human nature much more intense and profound than that to which the artist had flippantly confessed to Taelemans in the letter written in 1878, cited above. Huysmans’ criticism of Rops’ erotic images bring insight into undercurrents of intense, sadistic evil and his engagement with religious and metaphysical questions. Huysmans surmised that Rops had adopted the medieval concept of man being between good and evil, between God and Licentiousness ‘which is the Devil himself’ and that in his etchings he had ‘penetrated Satanism and summed it up in admirable etchings which are like inventions, or symbols, or an incisive and sinewy art, an art which is ferocious and distraught.’

Verhaeren referred to Rops in an article in *L’Art Moderne* published on 12 September 1886, in which he wrote of the symbolic nature of art after the death of the Gods. Verhaeren suggested that art had lost its surety and grandeur, and, considering the work of Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes and Félicien Rops, insisted that they had ‘none of the serenity of the antique masters.’ As they did not believe in the gods and devils they depicted, their work, Verhaeren suggested, revealed tortured passions, melancholies and anxious uncertainty:

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634 Félicien Rops, date unknown, *Darwinique No. 1* or *Tranformisme No. 1*, heliogravure retouched, 12.7 x 16.5cm, *Félicien Rops*, Bonnier et al., 184.

635 Félicien Rops, date unknown, *Darwinique No. 2*, heliogravure retouched, 12.7 x 16.5cm, *Félicien Rops*, Bonnier et al., 184.


Look at what love is like in Rops’ Venuses...instead of making it the recipient of our faith and beliefs, we put into it our doubts, our dreads, our troubles, our vices, our despairs, and probably our dying agonies.638

After Rops died, Englehart who had spoken to the artist when he exhibited his work in the third Secession exhibition in Vienna in 1899, reflected that the artist’s explanations of his images were ‘witty, intelligent, and filled with humorous charm,’ but could not be published ‘on account of their excessively erotic character.’639

Englehart reminisced:

His eyes glowed as he told of his journeys and his experiences. He spoke simply, and with disarming good nature. The sarcasm which distinguishes his erotic compositions, the cynicism which they express became, in personal conversation, a high-spirited, superior understanding of human frailty.640

Human frailty, aspects of the extremities of human nature and behaviour were recognised and revealed by Huysmans, in his critical interpretation of Rops’ art. Surprisingly, while otherwise insightful, Huysmans completely overlooked Rops’ humour.

In his critical appraisal of Rops’ work, Huysmans fearlessly transgressed taboos and while interpreting Rops’ images he simultaneously revealed much about his own sensibility, sexual proclivities and ideas. For Huysmans, Satan was a real force and Rops’ erotic anti-clerical prints were the outpourings of unbidden lewd deliriums caused by a diseased mind obsessed with irrepressible lustful thoughts. These revealed, not the artist’s lasciviousness, but a refined, abstracted and absolute evil. Through his intertextual interpretation Huysmans revealed resonances between the artist’s imagery and the sadism, nihilism and agnosticism evident in certain unnamed Japanese etchings,641 the novels of the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), and the tales of Barbey d’Aurevilly that profoundly influence the reading of the images and expand our understanding of the work. In the next chapter I will consider Huysmans’ engagement with the work of Mathias Grünewald.

638 Ibid.
639 J. Englehart, quoted in Peter Vergo, Art in Vienna 1898-1918, 45.
640 Ibid.
641 Huysmans describes, but does not name, the Japanese artists or prints.
He shuddered in his armchair and closed his eyes as if in pain. With extraordinary lucidity he revisualized the picture, and the cry of admiration wrung from him when he had entered the little room of the Cassel museum was reechoing in his mind as here, in his study, the Christ rose before him, formidable, on a rude cross of bary wood, the arm an untrimmed branch bending like a bow under the weight of the body.

This branch seemed about to spring back and mercifully hurl afar from our cruel, sinful world the suffering flesh held to earth by the enormous spike piercing the feet. Dislocated, almost ripped out of their sockets, the arms of the Christ seemed trammelled by the knotty cords of the straining muscles. The laboured tendons of the armpits seemed ready to snap. The fingers, wide apart, were contorted in an arrested gesture in which were supplication and reproach but also benediction. The trembling thighs were greasy with sweat. The ribs were like staves, or like the bars of a cage, the flesh swollen, blue, mottled with flea-bites, specked as with pin-pricks by spines broken off from the rods of the scourging and now festering beneath the skin where they had penetrated.642 —J.-K. Huysmans, 1891

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642 Huysmans, Lâ-Bas, 1992, 12.
7. **His Pestiferous Christ**  
*Mathias Grünewald*

Huysmans’ writing on the work of Mathias Grünewald’s (c.1470-1528) informed, and was informed by, his shifting metaphysical and religious positions and influenced his shift away from Symbolism and reappraisal of Naturalism. Huysmans was fascinated and impressed by Grünewald’s ruthless depiction of corrupted flesh and described the painter’s depiction of Christ’s death with a vicious intensity that amplified the material degradation and nihilistic implications of Christ’s transformation into an abject, abandoned, faithless, rotting corpse.

...like a thief, like a dog, basely, vilely, physically, *He had sunk himself to the deepest depth of fallen humanity and had not spared Himself the last ignominy of putrefaction.*

*Never before had a painter so charnally envisaged divinity nor so brutally dipped his brush into the wounds and running sores and bleeding nail holes of the Saviour.*

Huysmans wrote about Mathias Grünewald in a range of contexts including: in correspondence with friends and colleagues; a lurid and evocative appraisal of *The Crucifixion* in his novel *La-Bas* (1891); and a critical essay in *Trois Primitifs* (1908) in which he compared *The Crucifixion* with the Isenheim Altarpiece written after he converted to Catholicism.

In his engagement with Grünewald the scholarly depth and seriousness with which Huysmans undertook his criticism and art historical research is evident. In critiquing the work, Huysmans considered it in relation to the history of art and Christianity; the cultural context of its production; his own and the artist’s doubts and faith; and the debate as to the relative values of Naturalism and Symbolism in art and literature. Huysmans’ writing on Grünewald’s paintings are insightful and, just over a century after they were written, remain relevant, key texts.

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643 Ibid., 14.  
According to Huysmans, they were modelled on corpses and diseased patients from the Isenheim monastery.\textsuperscript{645} Huysmans sensed an anxiety, scepticism and nihilism articulated by Grünewald through the paintings, but also, informed by his engagement with the occult, in the hyper-realistic representations of death he perceived a supernatural and mystic intensity. In \textit{Là-Bas} (1891), Huysmans followed his appraisal of Grünewald’s work with an analysis of Naturalism and devised a new aesthetic approach that would meld the oppositional ideas of the Naturalists and Symbolists. He advocated a ‘spiritual naturalism’ or ‘mystical realism’ in art, an idea mooted earlier in a letter he wrote to Boullan in 1890.

Huysmans’ modified his use of disease and morbidity as metaphor and trope in response to his shifting aesthetic and metaphysical positions linked to his evolving faith in the occult, and then Catholicism. By the time he died as a Catholic in 1907, Huysmans considered suffering and corrupted flesh not as signifiers of materiality and mortality, agnosticism and nothingness, but as God-given, to be endured with joy, signifying redemption and the release from the body of the immortal soul. They were opportunities to transcend the material, focus the will and spirit, expunge and redeem sins, and would reduce time in purgatory.\textsuperscript{646} This is clearly evident in Huysmans’ personal letters, written near the time of his death, when he saw his own disease as God-given and suffering as redemptive, and his hagiography of St Lydwine. After being struck down with a new pain St Lydwine:

\smalltext{repeated to those whose pity took the form of complaints that she would very willingly submit to such sufferings for forty years and more, if she knew she would obtain in exchange the conversion of one sinner or the deliverance of one soul from Purgatory.}\textsuperscript{647}

Huysmans first saw Grünewald’s \textit{The Crucifixion}, part of the \textit{Tauberbischofsheim Altarpiece} (c.1525), in the Cassel Museum in 1888 during a brief tour in Germany with writer Arij Prins four years after \textit{Against Nature} was published.\textsuperscript{648} It is a simplified copy of the Calvary scene that Grünewald had depicted in the Isenheim Altarpiece (1512-1516) for the Antonite monastery. Baldick noted that the

\textsuperscript{647} Huysmans, \textit{Saint Lydwine of Schiedam}, Hastings, 74.
\textsuperscript{648} Baldick, \textit{The Life of J.-K. Huysmans}, 1955, 121.
experience of seeing Grünewald’s painting had ‘a profound influence on Huysmans’ aesthetic and psychological development.’ Huysmans, already open to the possibility of the supernatural through his engagement with spiritualism and the occult, recognised that Grünewald had presented a nihilistic vision of suffering and spiritual desolation that was nevertheless transfigured.

In *La-Bas*, Huysmans’ protagonist Durtal was overwhelmed by an extraordinary and lucid vision of Grünewald’s *The Crucifixion*. In his study, troubled by an argument on the relative merits and flaws of Naturalism, Durtal sank into his armchair as ‘the Christ rose before him, formidable, on a rude cross of barky wood, the arm an untrimmed branch bending like a bow under the weight of the body.’ Huysmans recognised that Grünewald’s Christ, depicted at the brink of death, alluded to the resurrection. The cross in Durtal’s vision is about to ‘spring back and mercifully hurl afar from our cruel sinful world the suffering flesh.’ Yet simultaneously, while alluding to the resurrection, the body of Christ is rendered with such appalling veracity, that any hope that the corpse could be revived is annihilated.

Huysmans discerned in Grünewald’s painting a tension between the aspirations to immortality, and the rank mortality of the decaying flesh. The body of Christ is literally torn between the spring of the crossbar, about to hurl it into eternity, and, the nail pinning his feet to earth. Huysmans noted that his arms are dislocated, almost ripped out of their sockets and the tendons in his armpits are ready to snap. The body is ‘held to earth by the enormous spike piercing the feet.’ Although Christ’s ‘hands pointed heavenward,’ his feet ‘seemed to cling to the earth, to the ochre ground, ferruginous like the purple soils of Thuringia.’ When sodden, Huysmans notes, the dark soils of Thuringia are like the ‘mud of a slaughter-house, a swamp of blood.’

Huysmans noted that Grünewald brutally insisted on the materiality of the body. Christ is grimy, emaciated, diseased and infested. Huysmans described the abject qualities with repulsive detail. His ‘trembling thighs were greasy with sweat’ his skin

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649 Ibid., 123.
651 Ibid.
652 Ibid.
653 Ibid.
and flesh ‘swollen, blue, mottled with flea-bites’ and his ribs were like the ‘bars of a
cage.’\textsuperscript{654} Tortured, crowned with thorns and flayed, splinters from birch whips have
pierced his flesh. His mortified skin is covered in festering welts, seeping chancre
and livid scars.

At the moment of death the Saviour is not at peace, secure in faith, beatific or
ecstatic like the Christ of so many crucifixion images. A mere man treated with
contempt, betrayed, condemned, humiliated, he is suffering and dying in the depths
of despair. Abandoned and forsaken, he questions the existence of God. He is
terrified and racked with doubt. A man’s realisation that he is mortal and falling over
the brink into a void and nothingness, is emphasised by the biblical cry ‘My God, My
God, Why hast thou forsaken me?’\textsuperscript{655}

A nihilistic despair similar to that Mallarmé articulated in his letter to Cazalis, dated
April 1866, referred to earlier, is evoked. In Grünewald’s paintings, we bear witness
to this doomed man’s spiritual crisis. At the moment of death ‘[o]ne lacklustre eye
half opened as a shudder of terror or of sorrow traversed the expiring figure.’\textsuperscript{656}

This is a difficult, undignified and agonising human death. Christ is ‘dying like a
thief, like a dog, basely, vilely.’\textsuperscript{657} His lips are blue, his flesh is torn, and his fingers
are clenched in a spasm. Far from glorified or God-like, Christ has lost control, his
‘drooping features wept’ his mouth ‘unnerved, its under jaw racked by tetanic
contractions, laughed atrociously.’\textsuperscript{658} Although depicting the moment of death,
Huysmans recognised that in these images post-mortem putrefaction was already
well underway. Huysmans synaesthetically confused taste, smell and textures, and
his description is sensually evocative, detailed and nauseating:

\textit{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.}

\textsuperscript{655} Matthew, The Gospel According to Matthew, 27:46, Bible King James Version (Miami: PSI &
\textsuperscript{656} Huysmans, \textit{La-Bas}, 1992, 12.
\textsuperscript{657} Ibid, 14.
\textsuperscript{658} Ibid. 13.
though the feet were placed one on top of the other. These, beginning to putrefy, were turning green beneath a river of blood. Spongey 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.  

Huysmans’ protagonist Durtal mused, as he approached the idea of a mystical realism, that his ideas had some resonance with those of Dostoyevsky’s: ‘Perhaps as approaching my concept I may cite Dostoyevsky. Yet the exorable Russian is less an elevated realist than an evangelical socialist.’

Like Grünewald, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543) in his painting The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb (1521) was also fascinated by the mortality of Christ and the relentlessness of nature and decay. Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s (1821-1881) character Myshkin in the novel The Idiot (1869) on seeing the Holbein painting recognised the suffering and sorrow evident in the human face of a corpse that was still warm and in which rigor mortis has just begun to set in. He questioned the impact and disturbance it would cause to viewers’ faith and pondered the implacability of nature and death:

...if death is so horrible and if the laws of nature are so powerful, then how can they be overcome? ...Looking at that picture, you get the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast, or, to put it more correctly, much more correctly though it may seem strange, as some huge engine of the latest design, which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces, and swallowed up — impassively and unfeelingly — a great and priceless Being, a Being worth the whole of nature and its laws, worth the entire earth, which was perhaps created solely for the coming of that Being.

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659 Ibid.
660 Huysmans, Lá-Bas, 1992, 10.
661 Hans Holbein the Younger, 1521, The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb, oil on wood, Offentliche Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland.
In "La-Bas" Huysmans' discussion of the Grünewald crucifixions was embedded in an analysis of the contemporary debate between Naturalism and Symbolism. In an argument between his protagonists Durtal and des Hermies in "La-Bas", Huysmans articulated many of the positive and negative opinions about Naturalism current at the time. Railing against Naturalism and referencing Zola and Flaubert's novels, des Hermies insisted that it was base and focused on instincts and appetites, made literature 'the incarnation of materialism,' glorified the democratisation of art, deferred to the 'nauseating taste of the mob,' and, was 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 Le Ventre de Paris.

Durtal, noted that while 'revolted' by materialism, Naturalism had 'rescued our literature from the clutches of booby idealists and sex-starved old maids'; created real characters in plausible surroundings and had continued the Romantics' development of language.

Unrelenting, Des Hermies continued, Naturalism was superficial and merely reiterated 'murder, suicide, and accident stories' straight out of the newspaper, and that these were written in a 'colourless style and contained not the faintest hint of an outlook on life nor an appreciation of human nature.' Also, he insisted, after 'wading through' a novel by a naturalist, with its 'insipid descriptions and interminable harangues' he forgets it as soon as he has read it, and is left with only 'surprise that a man can write three or four hundred pages when he has absolutely nothing to reveal to us – nothing to say!'
Troubled after des Hermies leaves, Durtal stokes his fire and mulls over the argument ‘trying to reassemble the fragments of a shattered literary theory which had once seemed inexpugnable.’ Musing again on the relative flaws and merits of Naturalism and looking for a way out of the impasse Durtal concluded that it was essential to:

*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.*

Huysmans suggested that Grünewald conflated the opposing aesthetic positions of realism and Idealism in his paintings, writing of Grünewald:

*He was the most uncompromising of realists, but his morgue redeemer, his sewer Deity, let the observer know that realism could be truly transcendent... Grünewald was the most uncompromising of Idealists... In this canvas was revealed the masterpiece of an art obeying the unopposable urge to render the tangible and the invisible, to make manifest the crying impurity of the flesh and to make the sublime the infinite distress of the soul.*

The critic articulated a similar sentiment in a letter to Destréé dated 12 December 1890, around the time he was finishing *La-Bas*. Destréé had indicated that he was considering writing a book on the Primitives to which Huysmans responded enthusiastically.

*They contain the whole of art, supernaturalism, which is the only true and great art. The only true formula, sought after by Rogier van der Weyden, Metsys. Grünewald, absolute realism combined with flights of the soul, which is what materialistic naturalism has failed to understand – and has expired on account of it despite all its useful service.*

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668 Ibid.
669 Ibid.
670 Ibid.
**Isenheim Altarpiece**

In *Trois Primitifs*, written after Huysmans had converted to Catholicism, he noted that it was not *The Crucifixion* that he had seen at Cassel Museum and written about in *Là-Bas* that one should visit to see work by Grünewald, but the Isenheim Crucifixion held at the Colmar Museum. The Isenheim Altarpiece⁶⁷² is arguably the most harrowing crucifixion painted in western art. *(plates 43-49)*

It consists of a polyptych of nine painted lime wood panels which once flanked and enclosed the corpus, a sculpted centrepiece comprising of a gilt lime wood figures of St Anthony enthroned between the standing St Augustine and St Jerome, and below, Christ presiding over the twelve Apostles. These and three smaller figures, perhaps sponsors and Guido Guersi himself, are held within an intricately carved structure, carved from lime wood by Nikolas von Haguenau of Strasbourg (c.1505).

The panels by Grünewald, approximately 170 x 250cm each were originally hung on hinges, concealing and revealing the layers of religious imagery. When closed the painting of the Crucifixion dominated, flanked on either side by two smaller panels depicting St Anthony and St Sebastian. The panels were opened according to feast days and liturgical celebrations. The first set revealed scenes from the Annunciation, Nativity and Resurrection. The second set revealed images of the Temptation of St Anthony, and St Anthony meeting with St Paul in the desert. Below the hinged panels, the painted predella depicted the entombment.

In *Trois Primitifs* Huysmans mused that he had been fascinated by the details of the painter’s life for a long time, and observed that Grünewald was commissioned to paint the Isenheim Altarpiece by Guido Guersi,⁶⁷³ the Abbot of the Antonite Order of Isenheim, in Alsace.⁶⁷⁴ Considering the work within the context in which it was

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⁶⁷⁴ The Isenheim Altarpiece was dismantled and moved to its current location in the Musée d’Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, in February 1793 after the monastery was closed and liturgical objects were destroyed or confiscated by the revolutionary government. An unsigned letter from Convent of Isenheim, addressed to Madam dated 22 March 1997 explains that the Church had been richly endowed and that the ‘chronicle says that the church had 14 altars and was enriched with sculptures, paintings, sacred vases and precious ornaments’ The original church that housed the Isenheim Altar burnt down in 1827. Since 1884 the Sisters of the Divine Providence of Ribeauvillé have owned the monastery that is now called the Convent of Isenheim. Today, behind the arched wooden doors and thick rendered pink walls, live frail elderly nuns. Grünewald used two small antechambers in the monastery as a studio space to paint the
created, Huysmans noted that the normal procedure for major commission such as the Isenheim Altarpiece would have been for a collaborative process between the commissioner and the artist to determine many details of the composition, often with bishops or monks drawing a plan of the work indicating exactly which figures were to be included and their symbolic significance. Huysmans suggested that this process explained the inclusion of the Precursor, St John the Baptist, which unconvincingly signified the resurrection in the Isenheim Calvary, 'more the idea of a theologian and a mystic than an artist.' 675 Andree Hayum, in *Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision*, considered that the hospital context 'provided a principal component in the iconographic fabric of the work, and...shaped a crucial aspect of the altarpiece's overall function.' 676

The Isenheim Monastery run by the Antonite Order, incorporated a hospital for those suffering from diseases of the blood, skin and nervous system, including 'Ignis Sacre' or 'St Anthony's fire', a disease caused by the ergot in rye, 677 and for epilepsy and syphilis. Huysmans gave an overview of the history of the St Antonite order and the monastery in *Trois Primitifs*, noting that the order was founded by Gaston, a nobleman whose son had been cured of burning sickness through the intercession of St Anthony, in the Dauphiné in 1093. The aim of the Order, which was placed under the Rule of St Augustine, was to care for those suffering specific illnesses of the skin and neurological system. According to Huysmans, the order spread across Europe and in 1502, during Grünewald’s lifetime, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian (1459-1519) granted the Antonite monks the right to bear the Imperial arms on its escutcheon, and the blue tau, a T-shaped cross) which the monks wore on their habits, as a reference to St Anthony. 678

Huysmans observed that such was the ‘terrifying realism and meticulous accuracy’ of Grünewald’s paintings of Christ that ‘he obviously modelled [them] on the corpses in the hospital mortuary.’ As proof, Huysmans cited a Dr Richet who...
examined the paintings and stated that ‘attention to detail is carried to the point of indicating the inflammatory halo which develops around minor wounds.’ The emaciated figure with inflamed skin erupting with pustulant boils and twisted in agony in the panel depicting the temptation of St Anthony was, Huysmans insisted, depicted a sick inmate. 679

Grünewald’s preparatory chalk sketches for the Isenheim Altarpiece reveal a commitment to close observation from real-life. His use of models who are unsophisticated country people from around Isenheim, and whose features appear to be ravaged by a hard life reflect his engagement with Lutheran ideas. A peasant woman with heavy jowls and coarse-features clasps her plump hands and gazes heavenward; scraggly men with unkempt moustaches, thinning hair and weathered faces are bent in prayer or pose as saints. While Huysmans was charmed by the Virgin in the Isenheim Altarpiece who, he suggested, could be mistaken for a dead nun, he was derogatory about most of the figures, describing the Virgin in the Annunciation panel as ‘a disagreeable slut with a smirk on her swollen lips, all rigged up in her Sunday best’; the Isenheim Christ as ‘nothing but a common thief who has met his end on the gallows’; Mary Magdalene as ‘ugly and ungainly, but so obviously inconsolable that she grips your heart and moves it to compassion’; and St John the Baptist as a ‘tough old soldier from Franconia.’ 680

While Grünewald meticulously detailed the physical features of his models, he did not reveal their personalities nor, apart from the Christ figures, provide much insight into the emotional or psychological depths of individuals. Rather, understanding of the figures is conveyed by the traditional postures, gestures and clothing that signify their place within the well-known biblical narratives.

In contrast to the veracity with which Grünewald painted the individuals, the drapery is idealised. Elaborately pleated and layered gowns, cloaks and smocks are highly stylised and elegant. Even the tattered rags that swathe Christ’s hips are intricately knotted and have sensual beauty. The perfection of the drapery simultaneously emphasises the symbolic nature of the figures, and their very human imperfections.

679 Ibid., 9.
680 Ibid., 4.
When the Isenheim Altarpiece was painted, an epidemic of syphilis ravaged Europe in the sixteenth century. Thomas Hoving (b. 1931) wrote in 2003:

*What few know is that Grünewald painted the altar for the chapel of a 15th-century hospital for incurable syphilis and Christ was shown ravaged by the disease and on his resurrection cleansed of it.*

It was not until 1800, when Jean-Louis Alibert (1766-1837) who specialised in skin disease was appointed as the Director of Hôpital Saint-Louis in Paris, that various maladies began to be categorised through careful observation and comparison of symptoms using as a model botanical classification systems. Prior to this there was confusion about the identity of diseases. Syphilitic symptoms progressed from an itchy rash, disfiguring tumours and ulcers, corrosion of the bones, disruption of the nervous system and madness. Syphilis was often confused with smallpox, leprosy and gonorrhoea. Revolutionising dermatology, Alibert employed artists to create hundreds of anatomical drawings and engravings which documented disease states: ulcerating tumours, extensive rashes, massive cysts, necrotic ulcers, fungal erosion, smallpox scars, leprosy, tuberculosis, syphilis and impetigo.

Syphilis was rampant in France in the late nineteenth century and while there were many treatments, there was no cure. With its association with decadence, sexual activity, death, mortality, sin and madness, syphilis impacted on the psychology and

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681 The origin of the disease is uncertain. It may have originated in the West Indies, brought to Europe by Columbus in 1493 when he returned from the Americas and spread through Europe by the movement of soldiers. Or it may have been endemic in the European population. Stafford notes that there are descriptions of symptoms that could be syphilitic in Biblical and ancient Chinese texts and no references had been found linking the symptoms with early contact American Indians. Early usage of the name syphilis has been traced back to a poem written by Fracastoro in 1530 about a shepherd named Syphilis who was afflicted with the disease. Stafford cites Fallopis (1523-1562) who suggested that the name syphilis may have been derived from syn philos (companion in love) or the Homeric sys philos (swine lover). W. Dingel, ‘Syphilis’, Department of Bacteriology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, www.bact.wisc.edu/Bact330/lecturesyphilis (accessed May 2003).

682 Thomas Hoving was former Director, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.


685 Hearing of his friend’s gonorrhoea, Huysmans recommended the treatment ‘without injections, and without relapse’ currently used in Paris: ‘[d]rink as much as you can of a herbal tea made from pine buds. You simply pour boiling water on to the buds and let it cool. This increases the flow, and then when you have had a really good flow, buckets of it, you take sandalwood capsules for a few days, and that’s an end to it. The essential is to pee for all you are worth beforehand, let it run like a river. That’s the secret. Then the pus is no longer green, like gamboge. It’s all over very quickly and is a real cure.’ Huysmans J.-K., ‘Letter to Arij Prins, 24 July 1890’, *The Road from Decadence*, Beaumont, 102.
the imagination of artists and writers. The walls of the ground floor and mezzanine floor of the Hôpital Saint-Louis’s museum are lined with built-in glass cabinets that contain around four thousand casts, of which approximately five hundred were made by the Belgian artisan Jules Barretta (1834-1923) between 1867 and 1914. Barretta, who had specialised in sculpting realistic papier-maché fruit, in his new role cast and modelled every conceivable piece of the human body – lips, knees, breasts, buttocks, faces, chests, feet, hands, genitalia, tongues, ears, chins – afflicted with a vast array of diseases. The veracity and realistic detail of the full-colour wax casts is deeply disturbing. The specimens resemble pieces of flesh, the colour of the skin around the blemish or growth is pink, moist and plump. They appear more realistic than the discoloured specimens kept in vitrines of alcohol or ether that blanch and gradually disintegrate. Each part, edged with white muslin and neatly tacked onto a small black board, is numbered and labeled. The old hand-typed paper labels have yellowed with age. The wax models are displayed in crowded wooden and glass cabinets devoted to particular diseases or symptoms. Several are dedicated to various manifestations of syphilis and are marked with painted wooden signs such as: ‘130. Syphilis Héréditaire Maladies Diverses’, ‘123. Syphilides Tertiaires’, and ‘116. Chanres Syphilitiques.’

While it is not certain that Huysmans visited the Hôpital Saint-Louis it is within walking distance of where he lived in Paris, and there are references to visiting clinics in his letters. His descriptions in Against Nature of diseased hot-house flowers suggest that it is likely. Des Esseintes, who complained of symptoms which could be syphilis, noted that the ‘strange blossoms’ appeared to him ‘more monstrous’ than when he had seen them ‘ranged side by side with others, like patients in a hospital ward, down the long conservatories.’ He noticed that:

...[m]ost of them, as if disfigured by syphilis or leprosy, displayed livid patches of flesh, reddened by measles, roughened by eruptions; others showed the bright pink of a half-closed wound or the red brown of the crusts that form over a scar; others were as if scorched with cauteries blistered by burns; others again offered hairy surfaces eaten into by holes by ulcers and excavated by chancres.

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687 Huysmans, Against the Grain: A Rebours, 1969, 86.
688 Ibid., 85.
Others, des Esseintes noted, looked as if they ‘had just come from the doctor’s hands…plastered with black mercury dressing, smeared with green belladonna ointment, dusted over with the yellow grains of iodoform powder.’ Surrounded by hideous blooms that imitated rotting and gangrenous flesh, he reflected, ‘[i]t is all a matter of syphilis.’ Falling asleep soon after taking delivery of the flowers des Esseintes found himself in a nightmare in his hothouse amid the blooms with a woman whom he suspected he knew but could not recall, and desired, despite her florid display of disease. A monstrous androgenous figure, the Pox, appeared before them on horseback. Green with pale blue eyes under purple eyelids, the figure was extremely thin and skeletal and shaking with fever. He ran but knew that he could never escape.

The raised rim of red chancres depicted by Grünewald could well be syphilitic. The implications of depicting Christ as diseased, possibly syphilitic, are astonishing. In Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art & Medicine, Stafford notes that after the enlightenment skin disease was feared, highly contagious, often untreatable and equated with sin and impurity. Diseased and spotted skin as opposed to white purity and cleanliness signified corruption and sin. In Grünewald’s paintings Christ had not mastered, but had succumbed to disease and evil.

Both St Anthony and St Sebastian were believed to have the power to intercede and heal those afflicted with plague and skin disease. A prayer to St Sebastian from 1516 includes the line: ‘Let us be released from this epidemic’s pestilence and from every tribulation of the flesh and the spirit!’ Hugh Honour and John Fleming suggested that the Isenheim Altarpiece was where patients prepared spiritually before being treated for ‘diseases of the blood and skin, including syphilis.’ While intervention was requested from St Sebastian and St Anthony, they suggest that ‘Grünewald’s Crucifixion scene…transcends the popular cult of miracle-working saints and reflects profounder beliefs about the meaning of physical suffering.”

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689 Ibid.
690 Ibid., 90.
691 Stafford, Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art & Medicine, 283.
The intense metaphysical questioning and brutal confrontation with nihilism, evident in Huysmans' description and analysis of the Grünewald crucifixion in *Là-Bas* is replaced, in *Trois Primitifs*, with certitudes reflecting his Catholic faith and convictions, such as:

*What is certain is that not a single remedy proved successful in checking the disease, and that often it was cured only by the intercession of the Virgin and the saints.*

In contrast to the scepticism evident in his analysis of *The Crucifixion* in *Là-Bas*, of Grünewald's gaudy image of the resurrection, in seven effusive paragraphs in *Trois Primitifs*, Huysmans described the 'strong and handsome' risen Christ, as 'a Godhead ablaze with life' with 'rays emanating' from the body, and robes that change colour from yellow to purple surrounded by a 'halo of melting gold' and 'apotheosis of flames.'

*The triumphant nature of this ascension is admirably conveyed. For once the apparently meaningless phrase 'the contemplative life of painting' takes on meaning, for with Grünewald we enter into the domain of the most exalted mysticism and glimpse, through the simulacra of colour and line, the well-nigh tangible emergence of the Godhead from its physical shell...It is here, rather than in his horrific Calvaries, that the undeniable originality of this prodigious artist is to be seen.*

**Grünewald's Temptation of St Anthony**

In the panel depicting the temptation of St Anthony, Grünewald symbolised temptation and evil as a hoard of jeering hybridised monsters. In *Trois Primitifs* Huysmans suggested that the painting of this panel must have given Grünewald 'enormous pleasure.' Huysmans described it as an image of a 'demons' Sabbath waging war on the good monk and commented on the 'utter confusion' of the demons who had clustered around the fallen saint and were pulling at his robe and dragging him by the hair. Most of the demons he noted were 'escapees from an infernal aviary' but included demons' heads amalgamated with parts of a shark, stags and walrus. Huysmans noted that the artist used 'the most convulsive attitudes, the most extravagant forms and the most vehement colours.'

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695 Ibid., 6.
696 Ibid., 8
Huysmans drew attention to two details. One a piece of paper on which is written “Ubi eras Jhesu bone, ubi eras, quare non affuisti ut sanares vulnera mea? – ‘Where were you, good Jesus, where were you? And why did you not come and dress my wounds?’ The other, a figure in the left-hand corner, that Huysmans described as a monster, or a creature that could be a larva or a man. Huysmans insisted that:

no painter has ever gone so far in the representation of putrefaction, nor does any medical textbook contain a more frightening illustration of skin disease. The bloated figure, moulded in greasy white soap mottled with blue, and mamillated with boils and carbuncles, is the hosanna of gangrene, the song of triumph of decay.

Huysmans suggested that the pitiful call to God, which revealed a doubting faith, and was a cry for healing and deliverance from evil, was applicable equally to both the saint and the ‘decomposing, suffering human being.’

Above all, it is easy to understand the picture – painted from life in the hospital ward – of that hideous, agonized figure in the Temptation, which is neither a larva nor a demon, but simply a poor wretch suffering from the burning sickness.

Huysmans insisted that the plaintive cry was answered, and draws the readers’ attention to the right hand corner of the image where a barely discernable ‘legion of angels’ are descending in order to ‘release the captive and overpower the demons.’

In Trois Primitifs rather than using pathological states and suffering to undermine notions of the Ideal, Huysmans takes a different position in which suffering was redemptive, death and decay evidence of the souls escape from the material confines of the flesh, and the depiction of this suffering bringing not fear of nothingness and a void but consolation. Even more than the turmoil of the Reformation, Huysmans stated that the diseased Christ personified the ‘religious piety of the sick and the poor’ and that the:

awful Christ who hung dying over the altar of the Isenheim hospital would seem to have been made in the image of the ergotics who prayed to him; they must surely have found consolation in the thought that this God they invoked had suffered the same torments as themselves, and had become flesh in a form

697 Ibid., 8.
698 Ibid., 9.
699 Ibid.
700 Ibid.
701 Ibid.
as repulsive as their own; and they must have felt less forsaken, less contemptible.\(^{702}\)

_Grünewald & the Reformation_

Huysmans noted that the painter had fascinated him for about six years. ‘Whence did he come, what was his life, where and how did he die? Nobody knows for certain; his very name has been disputed.’\(^{703}\)

Huysmans described Grünewald as ‘naturalistic and mystical, savage and sophisticated, ingenuous and deceitful’ and suggested that he ‘personifies the fierce and pettifogging spirit of the Germany of his time, a Germany excited by the ideas of the Reformation.’ Huysmans mused that Grünewald’s work reflected the ‘harsh fervour and vulgar faith which characterised the illusory springtide of the early sixteenth century’ and wondered if Grünewald was involved, along with Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer, in the ‘emotional religious movement which was to end in the most austere coldness of the heart, once the Protestant swamp had frozen over?’\(^{704}\)

As Huysmans suspected, Grünewald was embroiled in the reformation. By 1509 Grünewald was working as court painter and supervisor of works to the elector of Mainz, the archbishop Uriel von Gemmingen; and from 1514 Albrecht von Brandenburg elector and archbishop of Madgeburg and Mainz. The papal dispensation allowing Albrecht to hold two archbishoprics was extremely expensive and he borrowed heavily to do so. The Pope, burdened by the costs of building St Peters, dispensed the ‘accumulated indulgence of 1517 in central Germany’ the profits of which were to be divided between the Vatican and the archbishop of Madgeburg and Mainz.\(^{705}\) Indulgences had been dispensed by the Pope since the crusades, and in Mainz, the first documents to be printed with movable type in Europe were letters of indulgence printed by Johannes Gutenberg in 1445 who soon

\(^{702}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^{703}\) Ibid., 3.
\(^{704}\) Ibid., 12
after printed copies of the Bible. The advent of mass-printing in Mainz also enabled the ideas of the Reformation to gain momentum.  

Grünewald left Albrecht’s service in 1526 and spent the next two years in Frankfurt and Halle where there was sympathy for Lutheran ideas. Grünewald’s artistic output dwindled after completing the Isenheim Altarpiece. Huysmans surmised that the reason that Grünewald’s name did not appear in the account-books of emperors and princes, unlike his peers, Holbein, Cranach, and Dürer was because ‘his pestiferous Christ would have offended the taste of the courts; he could only be understood by the sick, the unhappy and the monks, by the suffering members of Christ.’ It is likely that it was because of his affinity with Lutheran ideas and involvement in the Peasant Revolt of 1525, that Grünewald along with other German artists, including Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543) suffered a decline in patronage from the

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706 The Reformation questioned the teachings and practices of the Church. Martin Luther (1483-1546), an Augustinian monk and professor of biblical studies at Wittenberg concluded that it was not by merit but through the mercy of God and by faith alone that one could be redeemed. Luther advocated the translation of the Bible from Latin, praying directly to God and the reading of the scriptures by members of the public, not just the clergy. He insisted that salvation could not be bought through indulgences, was furious that they were used to fund the building of St Peters and believed that the Holy See was corrupt. Of the Pope, Luther declared: ‘in him who calls himself most holy and most spiritual, there is more worldliness than in the world itself.’ (Moynahan, The Faith: A History of Christianity, 344).

In 1517 Johann Tetzel (1465-1519) a German Dominican who had worked as an inquisitor and fund-raiser was called upon to assist increase the sales of indulgences. He wrote sermons for the parish priests that declared that each mortal sin ‘required seven years of penance even after confession and contrition.’ The priests were expected to sell indulgences to parishioners in order to secure for themselves, and their relatives languishing and tormented in purgatory, ‘a divine and immortal soul, whole and secure in the Kingdom of Heaven.’ Famously on 31 October 1517, Luther posted 95 theses on the church doors in Wittenburg attacking the Tetzel indulgences. Refuting the idea that penance could be granted through the sale of papal indulgence he stated that ‘the Pope cannot remit any guilt, except by stating and confirming that it has been remitted by God’ (Moynahan, The Faith: A History of Christianity, 346-350).

Luther’s ideas split Christendom. He was supported by the secular powers in Germany and enjoyed the protection of the elector Fredrick, but was declared by the diet a ‘limb cut off from the Church of God. In a letter to the artist Cranach, Luther recalled of the interview, which had preceded his ousting that ‘all they said was: “Are these books yours?” “Yes.” “Will you recant?” “No.” “Then get out!” (Moynahan, The Faith: A History of Christianity, 352).


While Luther advocated intellectual liberty and the right of individuals to directly engage in their faith, he was conservative in his support of secular authority. When the great rebellion of peasants began in 1524 Luther supported the incumbent power structure not the peasants. He went so far as to write as encouraging the defenders of authority to: ‘fight confidently and use the sword in good conscience as long as there is a fibre of resistance. For the advantage is that the peasants have a bad conscience, fighting for an unrighteous cause, and every peasant who is killed for it loses body and soul to the devil for all eternity.... These are peculiar times, so peculiar that a prince who sheds blood earns heaven much more than many a man who prays.’ (Craig, The Germans, 84).
When he died in August 1528 he was in possession of Lutheran pamphlets and documents.710

**Huysmans’ Deathbed**

Huysmans was profoundly affected by Mathias Grünewald’s vision of the crucifixion. On his deathbed in a fifth floor flat at No. 31 rue Saint-Placide, Paris, Joris-Karl Huysmans, terribly disfigured and no longer able to eat except with a tube, died in agony. In *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* his biographer Baldick noted that the fatal disease was diagnosed as cancer of the jaw. However the references to syphilis in the substantially autobiographical *Against Nature*, and the graphic descriptions of his symptoms throughout his life and at the time of death suggest that he may have died as a result of tertiary syphilis.711 While speculative, the possibility of Huysmans having contracted syphilis has plausibility in light of the lifestyle he led, the high infection rate among Parisian prostitutes, and a note found by Pierre Lambert written in Huysmans’ hand in 1886 which refers to his having contracted venereal disease and displaying symptoms after coming into contact with young women. André Denier notes in ‘Les Maladies de J.-K. Huysmans’:

*Cette lettre nous rappelle qu’un blennorragie avait touché Huysmans vers sa trentième année au moment où il courait les filles, mais peut-être fut-il touché par la syphilis, car Pierre Lambert a trouvé une note de la main de Huysmans sur la page d’un carnet en 1886: “Prendre 3 semaines de pilules d’hydrargyre et 2g d’iodure de potassium. 3 semaines de repos et reprendre.” Il s’agit sans doute des pilules de Puche qui associaient le biodure de mercure à l’iodure de potassium. C’était un traitement habituel de la vérole d’associer le mercure et l’iode.*712

Describing Huysmans’ deteriorating condition, Jean de Caldain (Jean Marchand), Huysmans’ secretary and companion, wrote on 24 April 1907, eighteen days before he died:

*Five days ago the roof of the mouth was perforated, and in a few more days all the lower part of the jaw will collapse, and then he will have to be fed through a hideous tube. Oh, dear Madame, what a terrible, slow agony in the midst of frightening lucidity! Scrap by scrap, I have to pull away pieces of putrefying*
flesh – and the stench is appalling!!! Our poor master has that frightful smell in his nostrils night and day! 'Don’t pray for my recovery,' the master said yesterday, ‘but for a prompt and resigned death!' Oh, may God have pity on his servant? 713

Towards the end of his life, Huysmans believed that, rather than evidence of evil, his illness was a God-given affliction and suffering was a means to expiate his own sins and those of others. Strangely, Huysmans’ slow and painful death bore some resemblance to that of St Lydwine of Schiedam of whom he wrote a hagiographic account, published in 1901, the same year that he converted to Catholicism. After a skating accident Lydwine, a young unmarried Flemish woman was afflicted with horrific diseases and escalating corruption and decay of her flesh until her death in 1433 at the age of fifty-three. Insisting on the materiality of the body Huysmans described the deterioration of Lydwine’s diseased body in graphic detail, for instance:

The wound under her rib, which had never healed, swelled up and gangrene declared itself. The putrefaction bred worms, which moved under the skin of the stomach and spread over three ulcers, large and round as the bottom of a bowl. They multiplied in the most alarming manner... 714

Huysmans implied that Lydwine’s abject physical state and intense suffering were a blessing enabling her to swoon in spiritual ecstasy. In an odd twist, on the departure of Lydwine’s soul during the night after her death, rather than decay, the corpse regained a youthful beauty and a sweet perfume with miraculous properties emanated from it. According to Richard Sieburth, Huysmans’ Lydwine acquired:

virtually every malady known to the Middle Ages – with the exception of leprosy (which, considered incurable, “would have counteracted the Saviour’s design and rendered the development of Lydwine’s holiness impossible”). 715

For Huysmans, suffering was no longer callously inflicted by the sadist but was redemptive. Professor Louis Massignon (1883-1962) interviewed by Baldick some years after Huysmans’ death recalled that in:

moments of great pain he would fix his eyes upon one of the various symbols of suffering and substantiation which surrounded him in his bedroom: a simple

crucifix, a reproduction of a Grünewald crucifixion,\(^\text{716}\) and a photograph of St Catherine Emmerich, showing her stigmatised hands and bandaged brow.\(^\text{717}\)

Just prior to Easter, on 11 March 1907, Huysmans wrote in a letter, possibly his last, addressed to Leon Leclaire:

*I'm not sleeping or eating, but just manufacturing abscesses to the accompaniment of never-ending toothache. Anyone who hadn't the faith and a ha'porth of courage would have blown his brains out long ago. Well, I am not unhappy. The day I said fiat, God gave me incredible strength of will and wonderful peace of mind. I am not unhappy. I do not wish to be cured, but to continue to be purified so that Our Lady may take me above. My dream would be for God to take me with Him like the good thief at Easter, but alas, I am unworthy of that.*\(^\text{718}\)

In this chapter I have considered Huysmans' appraisal of Grünewald's paintings of the crucifixion. Huysmans was impressed by the horrific intensity of Grünewald's images of the corpse and sensed scepticism and nihilism. His interpretation, informed by his 'spiritual awakening' through his interest in the occult led him to perceive in Grünewald's realistic representations of death, a mystical element. In *Là-Bas* Huysmans reappraised Naturalism and articulated the idea of a 'mystical realism', an aesthetic approach that melded the oppositional ideas of Symbolism and Naturalism.

Huysmans' shifting metaphysical and religious position influenced his use of disease, death and corruption as metaphor and trope. Rather than using allusions to mortality to undermine the Symbolist hyper-sensual and synaesthetic allusions to the Ideal and reveal nihilism, by the time he died as a Catholic, Huysmans considered disease and suffering not as proof of materiality, agnosticism and nothingness, but as God given, to be endured with joy, offering redemption. Death, he believed, would bring release from the flesh for the immortal soul.

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\(^{716}\) A copy of Francisco de Zurbaran's *The Monk* which had been painted by his father was also in his bedroom. Baldick notes *'He never mentioned his parents in his correspondence or in his works, but all his life he treasured three oil-paintings by his father: a self-portrait, a portrait of Malvina, and a copy of Francisco de Zurbaran's *The Monk*. And in his last illness he had the Zurbaran hung in his bedroom, where *The Monk* watched him die, as it had watched his father'* (Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 1955, 4).


Art, in effect, is a particular gift that man uses as he sees fit, either well or badly, but no matter how profane its purpose, it nonetheless retains the divine character of a gift. Touching the soul and affecting the senses, it is, in the various forms that it takes, a reproduction of Beauty that is multiform and unique, like the divinity itself that it represents a little in its feeble mirror. For infinite Beauty, inaccessible to a fallen being, is identical to God himself. —J.-K. Huysmans, 1906

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While the Symbolist’s nihilistic tendencies were recognised by peers and critics in relation to the poets, they have not been adequately acknowledged in regard to the visual artists. Focusing on the art critic and novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, in this thesis I considered the Symbolists’ claims of Idealism and argued that Huysmans’ powerful critical insights, while aligned with the Symbolist movement, arose not from Idealist convictions, but from metaphysical questioning and anxiety as he wavered on the edge of an intellectual and spiritual abyss. After considering Huysmans’ aesthetic and metaphysical position, I argued that the complexity of his ideas informed his criticism and elucidate nihilistic tendencies in the work of Symbolist artists Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon and Félicien Rops. I also considered how Huysmans’ shift from Symbolism and the occult towards Catholicism influenced, and was informed by, his critical appraisal of Mathias Grünewald’s paintings of the crucifixion.

Symbolism initially emerged in Paris as an avant-garde literary movement and became prominent in major European cultural centres in the late 1880s and 1890s. The Symbolists, influenced by Baudelaire’s theory of correspondences – with the implication that the material world is linked to the spiritual and glimmers of the Ideal can be perceived through fleeting sensations – articulated their affinity to Idealist concerns and aspired to evoke them in their art and writing. To do so the Symbolists developed new visual and poetic languages and adopted strategies such as the fragmentation of text, idiosyncratic use of symbolic, hyper-sensual and synaesthetic imagery, ambiguity and obscurity.

Huysmans and the Symbolist movement fell out of favour and into relative obscurity at the end of the nineteenth century. Contributing factors included the Symbolists’ antagonism towards Positivism, progress and modernity, along with their affinity with decadence, and association with scandals, such as the Dreyfus

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affair and Oscar Wilde’s fall from grace. Further contributing to the Symbolist artists being overlooked was that while they had common aspirations, there was not a unifying easily recognisable visual art style. Also, they worked as a loose network of artists producing a myriad of significant smaller esoteric and ‘literary’ artworks, rather than one or two singular ‘heroic’ artists creating iconic artworks emulated by others. Like the Surrealists, they were marginalised for much of the first half of twentieth century in art history and theory, which tended to favour artists and modern art movements that valued formalism and abstraction. In the second half of the twentieth century the Symbolist artists began to be reappraised with a number of major international exhibitions and impact on trends in literature and visual art including the beginnings of abstraction, Surrealism, Dada and postmodernism were recognised. Despite which, nihilistic tendencies, although recognised in the work of Symbolist writers, were not adequately acknowledged in regard to the visual artists.

During Huysmans’ Symbolist phase, definitively marked by the publication of Against Nature in 1884, his Idealism was in a constant state of tension as he vacillated between Schopenhauерian pessimism and nihilistic despair. Unable to resign himself to the disappointment of life as advocated by Schopenhauer, he flirted with the idea that nothingness could be transcended through art and literature. Subsequently, his yearning for the Ideal led him to dabble with spiritualism and immerse himself in the occult, engaging to the extent that he adopted the belief that the Devil was omnipresent and Evil a potent force in the world. From the occult he converted to Catholicism and explored religious and ascetic life with a number of monastic orders.

Transgressive and courageous, Huysmans’ critical approach reflects his decadent sensibility and perversity, the perspicacity of his vision and callous wit, his despair, frailties and anxieties. Influential in his own time, Huysmans’ criticism was integrated into his fiction and he regularly published reviews and essays in journals. He eschewed accepted academic ideas and popular opinion, referenced art and writing and considered work within intertextual frameworks, and offered idiosyncratic and distinctive insights.
The complexity of Huysmans' ideas – often articulated through his preoccupation with disease and mortality, and juxtaposition of these references to undermine Symbolist references alluding to the eternal and immutable – informed his criticism and elucidate nihilistic tendencies in the work of Symbolist artists Moreau, Redon and Rops. To explicate this aspect of Huysmans’ work, I considered Bachelard’s analysis of Lautréamont’s use of animal references to explore bestial aggression in *Les Chants de Maldoror*. Like Lautréamont, as well as providing a varied and nuanced vocabulary and rich source of imagery and metaphors, Huysmans elicits psychological, imaginative, emotional and corporeal responses that are visceral and beyond literary and intellectual analysis.

Huysmans perceived scepticism, sadism and nihilism in Moreau’s images of Salomé. As well as lauding the sensual and synaesthetic allusions – the jewel encrusted costumes, colours, music and incense – Huysmans emphasised the salacious and depraved aspects of the Biblical narrative and characters. He lingered on the gratuitous cruelty, unbridled lust, incest, betrayal, murder and pathological details. The enchanting young dancer, a femme fatale, is at once a ‘goddess of immortal hysteria’, an abstract symbol, and a pitiless and deadly beauty whose rank mortality is exposed by illusions to the ritualised defilement of her corpse. Poignantly, in *Against Nature* as des Esseintes gazes at Moreau’s Salomé, he mouths the words from Mallarmé’s poem *Hérodiade*, a reference that resonate with ennui and nihilistic despair.

In Redon’s dream-like visions of seething primordial life-forms, parasites and demons Huysmans identified scepticism and nihilism. By considering Redon’s work in relation to Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*; medieval bestiaries; religious tortures catalogued by Luyken; bizarre etchings by Bresdin; and the nightmare visions of Goya, Poe and Lautréamont, Huysmans drew out very specific threads of meaning alluding to a chaotic and a disordered nature riddled with deformity and monsters, subject to chance, lacking reason, and overwhelmed by evil and sadism.
For Huysmans, Rops’ erotic and anti-clerical drawings illuminated a sheer satanic evil. Huysmans insisted that Rops’ images were of a different order to merely lewd images. Rather, Rops’ images revealed an evil akin to the sadistic nihilism that was articulated through the callous and ferocious cruelty of tales by Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, or that which was celebrated at Black Sabbaths by associates who were involved in the occult.

Marking the shift away from his affiliation with Symbolism, Huysmans’ critical engagement with Grünewald’s paintings both influenced, and was informed by, his changing aesthetic, metaphysical and religious positions. Grünewald’s paintings of the crucifixion, which show the abject body of Christ, racked with suffering and doubt, already in an advanced state of decay at the moment of death, are arguably the most harrowing in western art history. In these gruelling religious images Huysmans sensed anxiety, doubt and nihilistic despair, but also a supernatural intensity. In *La-Bas* Huysmans integrated a reappraisal of Naturalism and Symbolism into a powerful critique of Grünewald’s corpse-like figures of Christ. Reflecting Huysmans ideas, his protagonist Durtal asserts that Naturalism had expired but a mystical realism combining ‘flights of the soul’ and realism was feasible.  

After Huysmans converted to Catholicism his metaphysical questioning and doubt gave way to the certainties of his faith. Rather than a futile attempt to attain the Ideal, undermined by the materiality of the flesh and mortality, he interpreted illness, pain and corruption as an opportunity to transcend the flesh, focus the will and spirit, expunge and redeem sins, and reduce time in purgatory.  

Huysmans’ criticism offers significant insights into the work of Grünewald and the Symbolist artists Moreau, Redon and Rops. Importantly, Huysmans’ critical approach elucidates nihilistic tendencies that complicate the Idealism articulated by Symbolist artists in their work that have been relatively overlooked.


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