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## Figuring Frames: Painting as Inspiration for a New Literary Aesthetic in Two Novels by J.-K. Huysmans

Juliana Starr

Recently, critics such as Mary Ann Caws and Françoise Meltzer have shown an acute interest in the notions of framing and portraiture in literary texts. In her book *Salome and the Dance of Writing*, Meltzer studies various examples of ecphrasis in literature in order to gain insights into how literature manipulates visual presence in the text so as to recast, in verbal form, something both visual and fundamentally non-verbal. "The portrait," she writes, "because it is 'other' in the verbal economy of the text, functions as a good barometer for literature's views on itself, on representation, on the power of writing" (1). For Caws, who echoes some of Meltzer's ideas in *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, the "otherness" of the framed narrative lies largely in its decelerative aspect—it constitutes a "pause," "delay" or "static arrest" which causes it to stand out from the rest of the text, giving it a privileged status: ". . . in the most widely read and enduring narratives, certain passages stand out in relief from the flow of the prose and create, in so standing . . . a privileged space and a remarkable moment . . . which remains in the mind thereafter" (xi). It is just this type of delay and privileging of the framed narrative that I would like to examine in two of Huysmans' novels. I have found that his descriptions of paintings, in particular, provide especially meaningful and memorable moments. It seems to me that they not only delineate a privileged textual space, but also offer a particularly subversive and powerful aspect of Huysmans' writing. By studying Huysmans' encounters with paintings, I propose to examine why he came to insert their descriptions into his novels, and how these descriptions came to embody an over-all literary ideal or theory of writing.

The three years between Huysmans' last naturalist novel *En Ménage* (1881) and the publication of *A rebours* (1884)—three years which he spent intensely gazing upon thousands of paintings—were of primary importance for his literary writings, for I believe they were instrumental in enabling him to emerge from the impasse of

naturalism. In the 1903 preface to his novel *A rebours*, the member of Zola's naturalist group expressed his determination to "faire du neuf à tout prix" in order to break away from Zola's influence (AR 71). For Huysmans, naturalism had made important contributions to literature, but had passed its prime, and was now spinning in place, obligated to produce the same formulaic works. His despair so strongly felt in the years before *A rebours*' publication was nowhere more evident than in his bleak novel *A vau l'eau* (1882), in which his schopenhauerian pessimism reached an apex. Perhaps the only thing that could arouse Huysmans' enthusiasm at this time and make him oblivious to the misery of life was the cause of modern art. For several years he had been an important art critic, had associated with the Impressionists, and had identified himself with their cause to a unique degree. He had enthusiastically singled out artists of exceptional promise—artists such as Caillebotte, Cassat, Forain, Manet, Pissaro, Raffaëli, Renoir, Sisley and especially Degas—had explained their aims to the public, and defended them against the bitter attacks of traditional critics. Indeed, art criticism was not only a great source of pleasure to Huysmans, but, as Annette Kahn points out, he approached it with more confidence than he did his literary writings (121). Before *A rebours*' publication, Huysmans took time off from fiction writing and devoted the major amount of his time writing mainly art criticism on the Salons and the Impressionists' exhibitions. Thus, he seemed to have needed time to reevaluate his ideas on the visual arts before embarking on another novel (Borowitz 158).<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Zola, an important art critic himself, saw the visual arts largely as a way of championing naturalism, Huysmans took the inspiration of certain modern painters as a way out of naturalism. (*Emile Zola and the Arts* xii). To him, certain painters' vision and techniques suggested new ideas for the novel—ideas that concerned philosophy and structure, as well as style. An important difference between Zola's and Huysmans' appreciation of art became evident in 1883, one year before the publication of *A rebours*. At this time, Huysmans published his most famous piece of art criticism *L'art moderne*, in which he lauded many Impressionists and painters of modern life, such as Manet and Caillebotte. However, two painters whom Huysmans praised in this collection of articles seemed strangely out of place: Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon. Instead of painting contemporary life, these two artists retreated into the imaginative and spiritual worlds of mystical past ages and hallucinatory dreams. In-

deed, Moreau's ornate palaces and Redon's strange insects were worlds away from the streets of Paris. Huysmans understood them as mystics who deliberately shut themselves off from contemporary society. He described Moreau as a cloistered monk haunted by strange visions: "C'est un mystique enfermé, en plein Paris, dans une cellule où ne pénètre même plus le bruit de la vie contemporaine qui bat furieusement pourtant les portes du cloître" (*L'art moderne* 152). Likewise, he was fascinated by Redon's "visions hallucinées inconcevables" (299). Not surprisingly, Zola's reception of *L'art moderne* was quite lukewarm.<sup>2</sup> This difference of opinion on art would continue in Zola's letter to Huysmans after the publication of *A rebours*: "Personnellement, je n'ai que de la curiosité pour Gustave Moreau," he wrote (letter of May 20, 1884 [Zola 5:107-11]). The two writers' very different evaluations of Moreau was significant, for in *A rebours*, Huysmans would break with the naturalist concept of writing, while offering Moreau's portraits of Salome as icons of the new, decadent novel.<sup>3</sup>

In *A rebours*, the protagonist Des Esseintes is a wealthy esthete who, bored and disgusted with the materialism and hypocrisy of modern Paris, decides to withdraw into an isolated house which he turns into his private shrine to art. In a novel imbued with the tastes and ideas Huysmans presented in his art criticism, almost an entire chapter is devoted to describing the various paintings and engravings which adorn the walls of Des Esseintes' home—works by Moreau, Redon, Bresdin, the Dutchman Jan Luyken, and others. As part of his collection of little-known paintings, the Moreau portraits of Salome are clearly Des Esseintes' favorite works of art: "Entre tous," he says, "un artiste existait dont le talent le ravissait en de longs transports, Gustave Moreau. Il avait acquis ses deux chefs-d'oeuvre . . ." (145-46). The first work, entitled *Salome*, is an oil painting which portrays her dancing before Herod. The second, *L'apparition*, is a watercolor in which she contemplates John the Baptist's severed head which has risen up into the air to look down at her. Des Esseintes' installation into his new home corresponds to his conscious decision to end all contact with other people, so as to create a monk-like retreat from contemporary society. His affinity for Moreau's art is thus not surprising, since in the artist's paintings he sees the same desire to escape the workings of time. Salome, as Des Esseintes describes her, dances in an other-worldly palace which eludes any clear placement in time or history. Characterized by a strange mixture of "muslim and

byzantine" architectural styles, her palace appeals to Des Esseintes because of its timeless quality (146). Even Salome herself is barely recognizable as a biblical or historical figure. Indeed, the "real" Salome preceded both muslim and byzantine history. Moreau has so transformed her, so altered the biblical account to please his own imagination, that she is no longer traceable to her biblical origins: "... elle ne relevait plus des traditions bibliques . . ." (149). In Moreau, Des Esseintes sees a spiritual brother who shares his own contempt for modern times: "Le peintre semblait d'ailleurs avoir voulu affirmer sa volonté de rester hors des siècles, de ne point préciser d'origine, de pays, d'époque . . ." (149). Moreau's paintings thus give visual expression to Des Esseintes' retreat. Indeed, Salome's elaborate, overheated, perfume-filled palace is a visual double of Des Esseintes' own luxuriously opulent home (Meltzer 21). The paintings, in their other-worldly yearnings, also lend visual expression to Des Esseintes' favorite poem, which he has had engraved on his mantelpiece: "Any Where out of the World," by his literary hero, Baudelaire.

In *Certains* (1889), another work of art criticism, Huysmans clearly reveals his affinity for visual artists such as Moreau, Redon, Rops and Bresdin, who seek to escape contemporary society through their art. In so doing, he writes, they achieve a veritable revolution of Hippolyte Taine's theory of "milieu": "La théorie du milieu, adaptée par M. Taine à l'art est juste—mais juste à rebours, alors qu'il s'agit de grands artistes, car le milieu agit sur eux alors par la révolte, par la haine qu'il leur inspire . . . il crée . . . des êtres d'exception, qui retournent sur les pas des siècles et se jettent . . . dans les gouffres des âges révolus, dans les tumultueux espaces des cauchemars et des rêves" (21-22; my italics). In criticizing Taine's theory—a theory very influential for Zola, Huysmans enters into direct conflict with the master of Médan. By privileging inner life, fantasy and imagination over exterior "reality," Moreau creates visual icons which mirror what Huysmans wishes to do with the novel—that is, free art from the realist and time-bound biases of Zola's aesthetic.

Indeed, Zola's criticism of *A rebours* centered largely around questions of temporality and structure. In a letter he wrote to Huysmans after the novel's publication, he criticized three times its "confusion"—confusion of both structural and stylistic types. Perhaps this confusion can be partially explained by the different visual sense of the two authors. One of Zola's comments in his letter is particularly telling, for it shows that he did indeed understand what Huysmans

was trying to do, although he did not approve. Referring to Huysmans' lack of logical, temporal structure in his novel, he wrote: "... il me déplaît que . . . vous nous montriez enfin un peu *la lanterne magique, au hasard des verres*" (emphasis mine—letter of May 20, 1884). This image of Huysmans' novel as the individual glass pieces of a kaleidoscope offers an astute understanding of Huysmans' novelistic project. For Huysmans did not want the novel to be defined by its framework as a whole, but by its individual pieces, shown "au hasard" and associated visually in the mind of the reader. As Huysmans wrote in the preface to *A rebours*, he did not want the novel to be defined by its overall structure, but by its various disparate subjects: "... d'y faire entrer [into the novel] l'art, la science, l'histoire, de ne plus servir de cette forme que comme d'un cadre pour y insérer de plus sérieux travaux" (71). (Thus, Huysmans' concept of his novel is "only" a frame into which he inserts "more serious" work). Zola's comment is typical of traditional criticisms of decadent literature, Matei Calinescu tells us. He points out that French critic Désiré Nisard, as early as 1834, criticized the "style décadent" in a similar manner. Nisard's arguments, (in *Etudes de mœurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence*, published in Brussels in 1834) that decadent art places so much emphasis on detail that the normal relationship of a work's parts to its whole is destroyed, the work disintegrating into a multitude of overwrought fragments—have been quite influential even though the name of their originator has sunk into oblivion (158). Léon Bloy also compared *A rebours* to a kaleidoscope, although in a more positive fashion, in his review of it in the journal *Le chat noir*. Bloy wrote that the novel created a "... défilé kaléidoscopique de tout ce qui peut intéresser à un degré quelconque la pensée moderne" (June 14, 1884). For Baudelaire, the kaleidoscope, invented in 1815 by Sir David Brewster (Crary 113), coincided with modernity itself; to become a "kaleidoscope doué de conscience" was the goal of the dandy, the lover of universal life, he wrote in his essay "Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne." For Baudelaire, the kaleidoscope became a modern symbol for "la vie multiple et la grâce mouvante de tous les éléments de la vie" (*Oeuvres* 333).

In his article "L'art philosophique" (1859), Baudelaire established a direct connection between "decadence" and "modernity," by stating that the main characteristic of decadence was its systematic and very modern attempt to break down the conventional boundaries between the diverse arts in order to include, in a kaleidoscopic man-

ner, all elements of life.<sup>4</sup> Critics such as Charles Bernheimer and Matei Calinescu have supported Baudelaire's claims by underlining the hyper-intertextual, conglomerative nature of decadent literature, which favors overt borrowing of disparate elements, mixing of genres and collage methods of composition over writing methods which posit a seeming "natural" or "organic" development (Calinescu 164). And for Caws, "... the art of framing is itself a will to the mixing of genres" in the sense that the framed moments of narration often allow for the insertion of a play, poem, portrait or musical pause in the flux and flow of story (4). *A rebours* displays a keen interest in manipulating frames in an effort to blur the boundaries between the arts. Indeed, in few novels is the symbiotic relationship of writing and painting more evident. Des Esseintes' placement of the Salome portraits in the privileged spot between his bookshelves, provides a clear juxtaposition of writing and painting. Both Moreau and Redon are compared to poets: Moreau's work is like "certains poèmes de Baudelaire" and it borrows from "l'art d'écrire ses plus subtiles évocations" (154). Redon's art resembles that of Edgar Poe "... [qu'il] semblait avoir transposé, dans un art différent" (159). In keeping with Bernheimer's remarks about the hyper-intertextual nature of decadent literature, I would like to suggest Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a possible gothic subtext of the paintings. Later in the novel, Des Esseintes cites from Mallarmé's poem "Hérodiade," another version of Salome, while gazing at the paintings. Huysmans' different framed narratives demonstrate literature and paintings' essential symbiotic relationship, for Moreau's paintings grew out of written, Biblical inspiration, and are in turn rendered in prose (Meltzer 19).<sup>5</sup>

Caws points out that framed narratives are sometimes set off from the rest of the text through stylistic difference (10). Huysmans' descriptions of the paintings maintain a high degree of stylistic privilege and alterity, for they are perhaps the most explosive moments in the novel. The intricacy of Moreau's paintings is evoked in prose by a barrage of synonyms and overloaded syntax which, by their accumulation and repetition, evoke in the reader the overheated atmosphere of Moreau's painted basilica. Within the description of the paintings, Huysmans inserts yet another framed narrative, that of the Biblical account of Salome, characterized by "de naïves et brèves phrases" (148). Moreau's ornamental painting, largely inspired by Flaubert's detailed description of the princess in his novel *Salammbô*, provides a stark contrast to the simple, straightforward Biblical story.

In this sense, the portraits enframe a textual space of rewriting and subversion, for the paratactical prose of the New Testament is replaced by a hypotactical style of remarkable magnitude. Thanks to Moreau's inspiration, Huysmans rewrites the Bible and recreates the myth of Salome. His lengthy depiction of Salome is rife with conjunctions, causal connections, catalogs of detail, and elaborate modifying clauses (Meltzer 41). The passage emphasizes the sensual and visual, making Salome's dancing body the focus of attention while emphasizing color words such as "argent," "or," "bleu d'acier," "vert paon," "carmin" and "jaune aurore":

... ses seins ondulent et, au frottement de ses colliers qui tourbillonnent, leurs bouts se dressent; sur la moiteur de sa peau les diamants attachés, scintillent; ses bracelets, ses ceintures, ses bagues, crachent des étincelles; sur sa robe triomphale, couturée de perles, ramagée d'argent, lamée d'or, la cuirasse des orfèvreries dont chaque maille est une pierre, entre en combustion, croise des serpenteaux de feu, grouille sur la chair mate, sur la peau rose thé, ainsi que des insectes splendides aux élytres éblouissants, marbrés de carmin, ponctués de jaune aurore, diaprés de bleu acier, tigrés de vert paon. (147)

Hence, unlike the rest of the novel, which is written almost entirely in the past tense, the Salome paintings, in perhaps the longest example of ecphrasis in French literature, are written in the present tense. This fact, together with Huysmans' extensive use of verbs of motion, emphasize the immediacy of Salome's dancing. The author's detailed writing suggests that he was probably familiar with the etymology of "ecphrasis": the Greek *ekphrazein* means "to tell in full" (Meltzer 21).

Huysmans' generous use of rare words and his lists of stones, metals, and exotic proper names create a fetishized and studded textual surface rife with elements alien to biological life—elements which find visual expression in the paintings. Indeed, the Salome portraits break the limits of traditional painting by borrowing not only from literature, but from other arts such as jewelry-making and ceramics. As Des Esseintes states: "cet art . . . franchissait les limites de la peinture, empruntait à . . . l'art du Limousin ses plus merveilleux éclats, à l'art du lapidaire et du graveur ses finesses les plus exquises" (154). In this sense, therefore, the portraits convey visually what Huysmans wants to do with the novel—make it an encyclopedic,

kaleidoscopic conglomeration of all of the arts. Huysmans' "essayism," his organization of the chapters in such a way that each chapter treats a different artistic specialty (such as decadent latin literature, music, perfumes, flowers, painting, and precious stones) conveys his desire to create a novel which borrows from all the arts, while refusing the temporal plot of the naturalist novel. And again, the Salome portraits demonstrate this visually. For *Des Esseintes*, who echoes Huysmans' observations in *L'Art moderne* ("... ses toiles ne semblent plus appartenir à la peinture proprement dite..." [153]) the paintings are not even painting as we know it anymore, but a strange yet beautiful, encrusted hodgepodge of painting, engraving, literature, jewelry-making and ceramics.

With the publication of *Là-bas* (1892) two novels later, Huysmans is still in search of new ways of writing which will transcend naturalism. And again, his encounters with painting are at the heart of his inspiration. Just as a book of art criticism anticipated and influenced *A rebours*, so *Certains* (1889), his second book of art criticism, precedes *Là-bas*. The artists discussed in *Certains*—Moreau, Whistler, Redon, Rops—are seen almost without exception either in terms of a medieval world view or spiritual occultism. One year before the publication of the work, Huysmans made a trip to Germany, where he visited several art museums, and was stunned by the beauty and power of German medieval painting. This artistic pilgrimage had a profound influence on him, as evidenced by the acute interest in medieval art that virtually all of his subsequent literary works display. In *Là-bas*, Huysmans makes his differences with Zola more explicit than in *A rebours*, for his mouthpiece and protagonist, Durtal, is also a writer in search of a new literary aesthetic. Durtal himself is writing a book (a historical novel on the medieval figure Gilles de Rais) and at the same time is ruminating over the possibility of going beyond both naturalism and decadence. Durtal wants to find a way to preserve Zola's precision of detail, and documentary methods, yet also address higher matters, such as the workings of the soul, and the forces of good and evil in the universe: "Il faudrait... suivre la grande voie si profondément creusée par Zola, mais il serait nécessaire aussi de tracer en l'air un chemin parallèle, une autre route... de faire, en un mot, un naturalisme spiritualiste..." Durtal thus manages to formulate his aesthetic, and even names it: "naturalisme spiritualiste" or "supranaturalisme" (19). Unable to think of a literary equivalent for his new vision, Durtal calls painting to the rescue,

hoping to find more inspiration in the visual arts. At last, he is delighted to find his vision perfectly embodied in a painting of the crucifixion by the late-medieval German "Primitive" Mathaeus Grünewald—a painting he saw one year earlier during a visit to the Cassel museum in Germany. This work portrays something not yet expressed in literature, Durtal affirms: "... cela n'avait d'équivalent en aucune langue" (25).

For Durtal, the Grünewald painting perfectly captures his dual aesthetic of body and soul, realism and spirituality. He is overwhelmed by the power of Grünewald's entirely original, personal vision of Christ, expressed in distorted, tortured forms and marvelously strange coloring. The work presents a terrifying yet beautiful vision of organic decomposition, which corresponds to Huysmans' desire to shatter the naturalist novel's developing body: Christ is horribly bloated, cracked and blistered, streaked with blood and sweat, covered with bruises and lice. His shoulders seem to be ripped out of their sockets, his enormous head is strangely angled and out of proportion, his legs and feet are hideously twisted and turning green. The vision is so terrifying, even Christ's henchmen cannot stand to face it, and have fled, leaving only Mary and Saint John:

Démachés, presque arrachés des épaules, les bras du Christ paraissaient garrottés dans toute leur longueur par les courroies enroulées des muscles. L'aisselle éclamée craquait; les mains grandes ouvertes brandissaient des doigts hagards qui bénissaient quand même... les pectoraux tremblaient beurrés par les sueurs; le torse était rayé de cercles de douves par la cage divulguée des côtes; les chairs gonflaient, salpêtrées et bleuies, persillées de morsures de puce... Le supplice avait été épouvantable, l'agonie avait terrifié l'allégresse des bourreaux en fuite. (21-22)

Bernheimer has eloquently commented on the painting: "This is the corpse of naturalism in its most extreme state, straining the possibilities of language, cracking open semantic usage, yet also offering itself as a model for writing that would cure the text's decomposition in the very process of its literary creation" (241). As was the case with the Salome portraits, the Grünewald work demonstrates writing and painting's essential symbiotic relationship, for the work is a visual rewriting of the Biblical account and is in turn rendered in prose. Like the Moreau portraits, the Grünewald painting is set apart as denser in stylistic effect than most of the rest of the text. Hence,

Huysmans again replaces the paratactical New Testament narrative with a stunning hypotactical word-painting that emphasizes Christ's decaying body through color words such as "les chairs . . . bleues," "des sérosités rosâtres," "les jambes et pieds verdissaient," "la corne bleue des ongles": For Durtal, as for Huysmans, Grünewald's work is amazing because it has joined two extremes: the most realistic and horrible decay of the body and the most sublime and holy expression of transcendence: ". . . cela restait unique, car c'était tout à la fois hors de portée et ras de terre" (24-25). Delighted to find this visual representation of his ideal aesthetic, Durtal sets out to write the novel of the Grünewald painting.

Although Durtal states that he can find no novelistic equivalent of the painting, at least a couple of poets come to mind who have offered a similar vision of the sublimity of decay. François Villon, for instance, with his strong religious faith and preoccupation with the naturalistic ravages of time upon the body, created a similar horrific vision of the late-medieval world.<sup>6</sup> I would like to suggest Villon's "Ballade des pendus" as a possible subtext of the painting. One of Huysmans' contemporary heroes, Baudelaire, also comes to mind. His poems "Voyage à Cythère" and especially "Une charogne," which describes the potential beauty of a rotting carcass, present a similar vision. Critics have well understood Baudelaire's influence on *A rebours*, but have been less attuned to his significant presence in *Là-bas*. Durtal's dual aesthetic, presented in the double aspect of the Grünewald painting, brings to mind Baudelaire's notion of the dual nature of modern beauty. In his famous essay, "Le peintre de la vie moderne," Baudelaire wrote "La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable" (*Oeuvres* 335). Hence, even though it is a deeply religious, fifteenth-century work, one may see a Baudelairean vision of modern beauty in the Grünewald painting: one half of it represents the ravages of time, the contingent, the ephemeral, while the other half embodies the eternal aspect of the soul, which outlives the body, and the possibility of eternal life through Christ. Therefore, while *Là-bas* conveys Huysmans' strong admiration and nostalgia for the Middle Ages, aesthetically it strives to be modern, in the Baudelairean sense of the term.<sup>7</sup>

Huysmans, in attempting to write the novelistic equivalent of the painting, applies its dual nature to the themes and structures of his novel. In fact, the entire work is organized around a series of unified

extremes or dichotomies. The novel is structured around a dual narrative—the main narrative of modern Paris, dominated by commerce and positivistic modern sciences—a world Durtal deplures, and the framed story of the idealized medieval past, steeped in mysticism, alchemy and the occult—a world Durtal loves and admires. In opposition against what Huysmans considers the mediocrity of naturalism's literary characters, he creates a series of singular, extraordinary figures who embody the extremes of good or evil. Indeed, the characters tend to be either diabolical, such as the Satan worshipers Hyacinthe Chantelouve and the Chanoine Docre, or saintly such as the bellringer Carhaix and his wife. The strict good or evil nature of the characters reflects the manichean moral outlook of the work, but is disturbed and rendered more complex by the duality of Durtal himself.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the clearest unity of opposites is to be found in the figure of Gilles de Rais, the abominable medieval criminal who converts to Christianity. Like the Grünewald painting, Gilles embodies a striking Baudelairean mixture of the cruel and the sublime. Huysmans' aesthetic in *Là-bas* therefore seems quite similar to Baudelaire's. For both authors, modernity appears as a spiritual adventure: the task of the writer is akin to the alchemical one of extracting gold from mud—that is, to reveal the beauty and poetry hidden behind the most horrifying visions—to reveal the beauty in a rotting carcass.

At the time when Huysmans' loyalty to Zola was waning, his encounters with painting seem to have been crucial to his defining himself as an important writer in his own right. Just as the innovative painters he describes tried to break the limits of painting, by bringing together disparate elements so as to create new hybrid mixtures, so Huysmans tried to use painting's inspiration as a subversive force to break what he considered the constraining frames of the naturalist novel. In Moreau's *Salome* he saw the pictorial equivalent of decadence in all its ornateness and atemporal, other-worldly aspirations. In Grünewald's art he saw the visual representation of the artistic method he was searching for: it was naturalism invested and shot through with the highest form of mysticism, and Huysmans was overpowered.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, Huysmans found inspiration in Baudelaire, whose binary spiritualism and preoccupation with breaking the boundaries between the arts corresponded to his own desire to include spiritual elements in a multi-media novel.<sup>10</sup> Although Huysmans was certainly not the only writer to oppose realist models of the novel, his encounters with painting were, perhaps more than any other French

novelist of the time, at the heart of this opposition. Indeed, in both *A rebours* and *Là-bas* portraits constitute a memorable and privileged delay in the narrative, by providing a stylistically rich, idealist space where myth is recreated through language.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Helen Borowitz points out that this turning aside from the writing of fiction in order to formulate his ideas on art parallels a similar undertaking on the part of Marcel Proust. In 1898, after having paid a visit to Gustave Moreau's house-turned-museum, Proust had begun to write his essay on the art of Moreau. This essay was one of five that Proust worked on during the decade from 1895 to 1905 when he decided to put aside his unfinished *Jean Santeuil* and immerse himself in the study of art (158).

<sup>2</sup>In a letter in response to *L'art moderne*, Zola quarreled with Huysmans' high opinion of Degas, whom he dismissed as "un constipé du plus joli talent" (letter of May 10, 1883; 4:387-88).

<sup>3</sup>The very title of *A rebours* gives an indication of Huysmans' attempt to create a new way of writing. Critics have generally understood the title as an embodiment of Huysmans' decadent standpoint—that is, his philosophical desire to go against nature by lauding the artificial. This is obviously true. But etymologically, the word "text" comes from the latin "textus," meaning "entrelacement" or "tissu," with its corresponding verb "textum," meaning "tresser" or "tisser." Thus, "text" is etymologically related to words having to do with weaving and fabric. Huysmans' title, a term used in sewing to mean "against the grain" of fabric, implies a desire to run counter to current trends of writing. The term also brings to mind the painter's canvas, another type of fabric of high interest to Huysmans.

<sup>4</sup>After centuries during which the history of art had tended toward an increasingly marked "separation of powers" and specialization, Baudelaire observed in "L'art philosophique" (1859) the dominance in contemporary art of a directly opposite principle: "Est-ce par une fatalité des décadences qu'aujourd'hui chaque art manifeste l'envie d'empiéter sur l'art voisin, et que les peintres introduisent des gammes musicales dans la peinture, les sculpteurs, de la couleur dans la sculpture, les littérateurs, des moyens plastiques dans la littérature, et d'autres artistes, ce dont nous avons à nous occuper aujourd'hui, une sorte de philosophie encyclopédique dans l'art plastique lui-même?" (*Oeuvres* 368).

<sup>5</sup>Françoise Meltzer stresses that Moreau was probably more influenced by Flaubert's description of the Carthaginian princess in his novel *Salammbô* than by the Biblical account of Salome: "It was one of Moreau's favorite books, for he loved the ornate prose Flaubert used to detail the exquisite

attire of the princess. Indeed, Flaubert's description of Salammbô is almost identical to Moreau's vision of Salome" (17-18).

<sup>6</sup>Interestingly, Villon is one of the rare French poets who is included in Des Esseintes' library in *A rebours*. Brian Banks has pointed out Villon's influence on Huysmans' poetry. Several poems in *Le drageoir à épices* (1874), according to Banks, have a "Villonesque flavor" (83), while *Croquis parisiens* (1880) "is like a book of etchings with Villonesque refrains" (87).

<sup>7</sup>Brian Banks, perceiving this paradox in Huysmans of a modernist profoundly preoccupied with former ages, has referred to the author as an "anarchist traditionalist" or an "anarchist of the right." Huysmans is a traditionalist in that he is deeply discontented with contemporary times, but through his belief in originality at all costs, he is naturally an insurgent (207-08).

<sup>8</sup>This dualism brings to mind Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Les diaboliques*, a work Huysmans knew and admired, the famous preface to which paints a manichean world view. Des Hermies expresses his affinity for manichean beliefs: "Le fait est que si j'étais certain de quelque chose, je pencherais assez volontiers vers le manichéisme . . . c'est une des plus anciennes et c'est la plus simple des religions . . ." (77-78). Likewise, Durtal sees the medieval world as one which achieves a perfect unity of extremes: ". . . ce fut une singulière époque que ce Moyen Age. . . . Pour les uns, il était entièrement blanc et pour les autres, absolument noir; aucune nuance intermédiaire; époque d'ignorance et de ténèbres . . ." (142).

<sup>9</sup>The significant influence of Odilon Redon's art on Huysmans' novel *En Rade* (1887) is also worth investigation, but was unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>10</sup>Brian Banks underlines Huysmans' affinity for Baudelaire versus Zola. He writes "Certainly, it was Baudelaire's poetry and poetical prose that touched Huysmans more than any work of the Realists; his favorite Zola work was the atypical *La faute de L'abbé mouret*" (89).

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## Anneliese and the Poison Mushroom: the Popularization of the Sublime and the Hideous in Nazi-Fascist Propaganda

Verbena Volpi-Pastor

Credere, Obbedire, Combattere  
To Believe, to Obey, to Fight.

The masses love strong men. The masses are female.

People today don't have time to think. Modern man's disposition towards believing is incredible.

Benito Mussolini

The psyche of the masses is not receptive to anything that is weak.  
... The masses need something that will give them a thrill of horror.

Propaganda consists in attracting the masses, and not in educating those who are already educated.

In the area of aesthetics the Jews . . . played the role of decomposing fungi of humankind.

Adolf Hitler

A survey of propaganda art under fascism and National Socialism is impossible without keeping in mind the quotations listed above. All are ominously indicative of the relation between ideology and art, art and racism, and art and suspension of judgment. Suspension of judgment and *apatheia* (understood as positive numbing of the intellect) have been long recognized as markers in the borderland between the appreciation of art and beauty, and the province of the sublime.

How does art relate to propaganda, and what role do the ideas of sublime and hideous play in the aesthetics of fascism and National Socialism? Hypotheses and questions can only be advanced thanks to a legion of distinguished thinkers, from the Pseudo-Longinus to Jean Luc Nancy.