

THE AESTHETIC VISION:
SPIRITUAL NATURALISM AND ART
IN JORIS-KARL HUYSMANS'
À REBOURS (1884) AND *LÀ-BAS* (1891)

French Senior Seminar 2020

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Introduction:

- In France, during the nineteenth century, the fin de siècle marked a moment and movement of change. Artists from all mediums began to illustrate experiences of their inward, self-inflicted “maladie” on a psychological and physical scale. Joris-Karl Huysmans demonstrates the manifestation of individuals' creation and consumption of their individual suffering through his nineteenth-century works: *À Rebours* (1884) and *Là-bas* (1891).
- Huysmans uses the visual power of religious art to mirror his protagonists' inner turmoil and individual "torn-ness." I examine this through two of Huysmans' novels, where art becomes a symbol of escape and exposure for protagonists in their awareness and “maladie” from society. Huysmans offers a narrative of individual transcendence for one's suffering through Christian practices, through “Spiritual Naturalism.” Huysmans accepts life's turmoil and prescribes an imitation of religious sacrifice to absolve oneself at the end of the fin de siècle.

Chapter 1: *À Rebours*

- The first text of Huysmans I discuss is *À Rebours* published in 1884. At the beginning of the novel, Des Esseintes becomes infatuated with Jan Luyken's paintings of religious persecutions, which he states illustrate the "madness of religions." Des Esseintes describes Luyken's subject of religious sacrifices: « les ongles des doigts lentement extraits avec des pinces, les yeux creusés, les membres disloqués et délibérément cassés » (Huysmans, 50). The visual impact of Luyken's art awakens the other senses in Des Esseintes.
- By the end of the novel, Huysmans evokes great sensory images of Des Esseintes' physical decline like a sacrifice in Luyken's paintings--like a religious martyr, even like Christ. Des Esseintes describes his reflection in the mirror as « qui brûlaient d'un éclat fébrile dans cette tête de squelette, hérissée de poils » (Huysmans, 168-169). His "head covered with bristline hair" is a visual reference to Christ's "thorn crown" during his Crucifixion. Huysmans uses religious art to provoke his literary style of "Spiritual Naturalism" to emphasize his protagonist's turmoil. Through his text *À Rebours* Huysmans prescribes an imitation of religious sacrifice to absolve oneself.



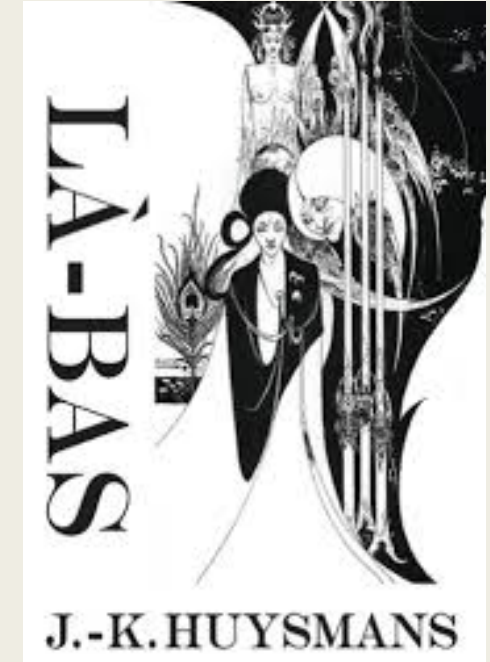
Chapter 1: *À Rebours*

- In *À Rebours*, Huysmans emphasizes his presentation of suffering through art. Huysmans uses religious art as a symbol for Des Esseintes' own decline and self-sacrifice.
- Figure 1.1: left, (Incendie d'Anneken Hendriks, Amsterdam, 1571)
Figure 1.2: right, (Torture d'Origène, Alexandrie, AD 234)



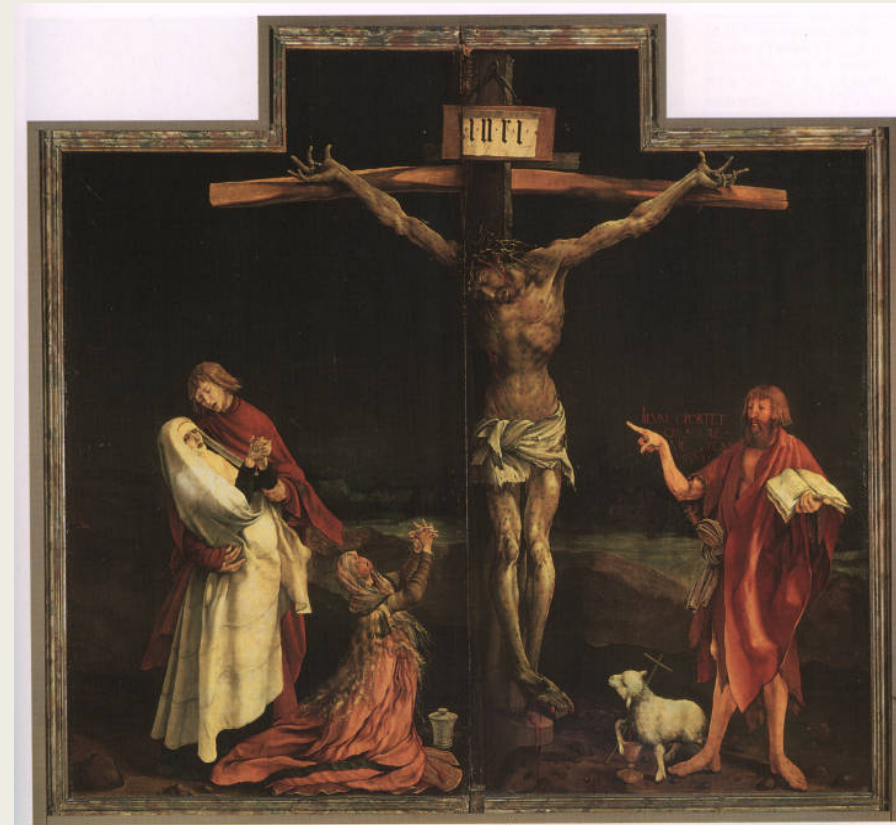
Chapter 2: *Là-bas*

- The following text of Huysmans I explore is *Là-bas* published in 1891. In *Là-Bas* Huysmans explores the subject of Satanism in contemporary France. At the beginning of *Là-bas*, Huysmans uses religious art to express the individual suffering and pain of Durtal's soul. Durtal adores Matthias Grünewald's work and his crucifixions of Christ.
- Grunewald's paintings create a physical expression of Durtal's fear and fascination with human decline and mortality. The spiritual painting achieves « un art ordonné pour rendre l'invisible et le tangible, pour le manifester. L'impureté lamentable de la chair » (Huysmans, 10). Even more, the power of religious art to achieve the "sublime" evolves further in *Là-bas* to create the experience of "Spiritual Naturalism" in literature. Huysmans manifests the power of spiritual art in his text to transcend Durtal's journey of pain and suffering.
- Durtal stands in front of Grunewald's work and experiences art's ability to « sublimer la détresse infinie de l'âme » (Huysmans, 10). At the end of *Là-bas*, Durtal concludes: « La foi est le brise-lames de l'âme. Il fournit le seul refuge dans lequel un homme sans gouvernail peut trouver la paix » (Huysmans, 257). Therefore, art recognizes the "infinite distress of the soul," and Huysmans concludes religion, faith "is the breakwater of the soul."



Chapter 2: *Là-bas*

- In the end, Durtal concludes that the visual power of religious art illustrates the distress of the soul, and concludes religion provides the cure for human suffering. He finds refuge in religion, transcending from his doubt and despair in the fin de siècle.
- Figure 3.1 : left, (Matthias Grünewald, *La crucifixion de Karlsruhe*, 1523-1524).
Figure 3.2 : right, (Matthias Grünewald, *Le retable d'Isenheim: La crucifixion*, 1523-154).



Conclusion

- In *À Rebours*, Huysmans emphasizes his presentation of suffering through art. Des Esseintes symbolizes a doomed generation of noblemen, the last aristocrats from an "old world." Huysmans uses religious art as a symbol for Des Esseintes' own decline and self-sacrifice. Huysmans prescribes an imitation of religious sacrifice to absolve oneself.
- In *Là-bas*, Huysmans uses religious art to express the individual suffering and pain of Durtal's soul. Durtal studies the past and lives in the present, a time of tension and sin. Through Durtal's biography of Gilles de Rais, he begins his journey in the depths of Satanism. In the end, Durtal concludes that the visual power of religious art illustrates the distress of the soul, and concludes religion provides the cure for human suffering. He finds refuge in religion, transcending from his doubt and despair in the fin de siècle.
- By reading *À Rebours* and *Là-bas* together, I argue Huysmans offers a narrative of individual transcendence for one's suffering through Christian practices. Huysmans accepts Rousseau's conjecture that "the fate of all men is to suffer." While in *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes may not escape his fate and find hope in an afterlife. In *Là-bas*, Huysmans prescribes religion for immunity when one must "bear the blows of fate." Through visual arts ability to capture suffering, Huysmans creates "Spiritual Naturalism" in his text to battle the fear of the unknown at the end of the fin de siècle.



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