

THE SATANISM OF HUYSMANS.

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ACCORDING to an old Gnostic tradition Solomon was summoned from his tomb and asked, "Who first named the name of God?" "The Devil," he answered.¹ This legend comes to our mind when we think of Joris Karl Huysmans, who, it would seem, came to know the Lord through the Devil. The author of *Là-bas* has a greater right than the author of *Thirteen Diabolic Idyls* to maintain that he has gone *du diable à Dieu*.² Huysmans started on his Road to Damascus from the Valley of Hinnom. He went to Paradise by way of Purgatory. A Pilgrim's Progress reversed—*à rebours*³—it seemed at first to be. Previous to setting out *en route* for *la cathédrale* he paid a visit *là-bas*.³ When he left the earth of the naturalists for the heaven of the mysticists, he put up temporarily at the satanic half-way house of the decadents. Huysmans already backslided in *A rebours*, which is considered the masterpiece of decadent literature. But it is in *Là-bas* that he makes the final break with the naturalists.⁴ This novel marks the turning-point in his esthetic evolution. It is here that he takes the leap across the gulf which separates the world of spirit from the world of matter. *Là-bas* contains its author's profession of a new esthetic faith. This book is, moreover, a literary document as well as a literary manifesto, for it offers the model as well as the precept

¹ Cf. M. D. Conway, *Solomon and Solomonian Literature* (1899), p. 139.

² Adolphe Retté, author of *Thirteen Diabolic Idyls* (1898), tells the story of his conversion in a book with this title, which appeared in 1907.

³ These are all titles of novels by Huysmans. They appeared in the following order: *A rebours* (1884); *Là-bas* (1891); *En route* (1895); *La cathédrale* (1898). Of the Durtal trilogy, *En route* has been translated into English by Mr. Kegan Paul (1896), and *La cathédrale* by Miss Clara Bell (1898). *Là-bas*, which, in the opinion of many critics, is superior to the other two of the trilogy, cannot well be recommended to English readers.

⁴ André Barre, *Le symbolisme* (1911), calls *A rebours* a pistol shot at naturalism. This book started the Symbolistic reaction; cf. *Le Cinquanteième de Charles Baudelaire* (1917), p. 22.

of the new type of literature. Its very first pages contain a definition of the principles of the new genre, of which it is to be an exemplification.

Là-bas opens with a dialogue between Des Hermies and Durtal, the two main characters of the novel. The conversation turns to literature. "What I object to in naturalism," says Des Hermies in the course of this discussion, "is not the dull, heavy, stone-colored effect of its clumsy style, but the filthiness of its ideas; I accuse it of having incarnated materialism in literature and of having glorified democracy in art."⁵ Durtal, although admitting that materialism is equally repugnant to him,⁶ feels obliged to defend naturalism against the attacks of his friend. His defense of the method which he has, until now, constantly pursued is, however, half-hearted; and when Des Hermies leaves him, he admits to himself what he would not, as yet, admit to others. He, too, has now reached a point in his esthetic development where naturalism no longer fully satisfies him. He, too, has begun to find fault with the naturalists, but, as yet, fails to see how it will be possible for him to avoid their blunders without committing the greater errors of their opponents. But just at the moment when he believes he has arrived at an impasse in his thoughts, he is inspired with a new literary ideal, and he attempts to define it to himself in the following words:

"It is essential to preserve the veracity of the document, the precision of detail, the fibrous and nervous strength of language, which realism has supplied; but it is also equally essential to draw water from the wells of the soul, and not to attempt to explain what is mysterious by mental malady. The novel ought, if possible, to fall naturally into two divisions, which must, none the less, be welded together, or rather interfused—just as they are in life—the history of the soul and the history of the body, and should concern itself with their action and their reaction, with their conflict and their union. It is essential, in a word, to follow the highroad so deeply dug by Zola; but it is also necessary to trace a parallel pathway in the air, another road, by which we may reach the Beyond, to achieve thus a spiritual naturalism, which will have a pride, a perfection and a strength all its own."⁷

The new shibboleth, then, is spiritual naturalism. The new art

⁵ *Là-bas*, pp. 1f.

⁶ Huysmans has traveled far away from the views he held but seven years before this when he set his name to a profession of materialism in the *Revue indépendante* of May, 1884.

⁷ *Là-bas*, p. 6.

which Huysmans—the names Huysmans and Durtal are now used interchangeably—wishes to inaugurate, is to be a synthesis of body and spirit, of matter and mind, of the seen and the unseen. From now on Huysmans will supplement physical observation with psychological observation. His reform, as we shall see, extends to substance rather than to manner and method. This member of the group known as *l'école de Médan*⁸ does not wholly disentangle himself from the ideas of the naturalists. Although he now repudiates certain of their doctrines, he clings to their methods of work.⁹ He is a dissenter of the naturalist school, and yet a naturalist. As a matter of fact, the Fleming Huysmans—and he could not and would not be anything but a Fleming¹⁰—was a naturalist by temperament rather than by conviction. From this moment he will apply the experimental method of the naturalists to the supernatural as well as to the natural.¹¹ Chaos and chimeras will not be treated by him differently from the real world of real men and women.

The novelty of his ideas pleases our author, whose ambition it has always been to differ from all others of his craft. Here was an opportunity to get out of the rut, to conquer virgin territory. This spiritual naturalism, this attempt to treat spiritual phenomena in a naturalistic way, is, in his belief, wholly his own invention. Dostoyevsky, he admits, comes very near this literary form. But this Russian writer, he adds, is “moins un réaliste surélevé qu'un socialiste évangélique” (less a higher realist than an evangelical socialist),¹² who has given the most beautiful expression to that deep pity for human suffering, which is so characteristic of Russian literature.¹³ Huysmans might have added, however, that this mystic, ecstatic visionary allows only his abnormal characters, in their

⁸ The group took its name from the place where its master Zola had his country home. The young naturalists published in 1880 a collection of stories, in Decameron-like fashion, under the title of *Soirées de Médan*. “Sac-au-Dos” was Huysmans's contribution to this volume. Huysmans was Zola's favorite disciple.

⁹ Cf. René Doumic's essay on Huysmans, which appeared under the title “Les décadents du christianisme” in the volume *Les jeunes: études et portraits* (1896), pp. 52-84. This essay is included in the English volume which was published in 1899 under the title *Contemporary French Novelists*. Paul Levin, in his book *Den naturalistiske Roman* (1907), considers Huysmans as a consistent naturalist.

¹⁰ Cf. Dom A. Du Bourg, *Huysmans intime* (1908), p. 22.

¹¹ Cf. A. Thorold, *Six Masters in Disillusion* (1909), p. 92, and the abbé P. Belleville, *La conversion de Huysmans* (n. d.), p. 67.

¹² *Là-bas*, p. 7.

¹³ Cf. the writer's article “The Gloom and Glory of Russian Literature,” *Open Court*, XXXII (1918), p. 406.

hallucinations, to lift the veil and catch a glimpse of the spirit world. It is true that he analyzes the minds of his characters, but a state of mind must be produced by a corresponding state of body for him to be a fact. While Dostoyevsky thus is a consistent naturalist, philosophically as well as esthetically, Huysmans, by giving validity to psychical phenomena as such, abandons naturalism as a philosophy.

However, Huysmans's debt to Russian writers was greater than he was willing to admit. To begin with, it was under the influence of Russian fiction that French novelists welcomed Christian ideas.¹⁴ Furthermore, it was in imitation of Dostoyevsky, who, on account of his interest in the demonic element in human nature, was called the Great Demon,¹⁵ that the supernaturalism in Huysmans first took the form of the diabolical. Yet it would be wrong to claim a wholly foreign origin for the satanism of Huysmans. It is quite evident that his satanism is directly descended from the diabolism of Baudelaire¹⁶ and of Barbey d'Aurevilly, which, in its turn, may be traced back to the satanic Catholicism of Chateaubriand.¹⁷ Of further influence on our author was the painter Félicien Rops, to whom he devoted the longest chapter in his book of art criticisms, *Certains* (1889).¹⁸ Rops's series of paintings *Les sataniques* and Barbey d'Aurevilly's collection of stories *Les diaboliques* (1874) were sponsors to Huysmans's *Là-bas*.

But greater than the influence from books and paintings was Huysmans's own natural bent toward diabolism. "Sa gravitation est du côté des Ténèbres," wrote Léon Bloy in his review of *Là-bas*, "son abominable livre ne permet plus d'en douter." (His gravitation is toward the Kingdom of Darkness; his abominable book permits

¹⁴ The neo-Christian influence of the Russian novelists on French literature began with the publication of *Le roman russe* by Vogüé in 1886. The Russian influence on French literature is discussed by V. Charbonnel, *Les Mystics dans la littérature présente* (1897), pp. 1-34. Cf. also Doumic, *Contemporary French Novelists* (1899), p. 352, and *Quarterly Review*, CXC (1899), p. 81.

¹⁵ Cf. the writer's review of Scarborough's *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, *The Journal of English and German Philology*, XVII (1918), p. 450. To Mr. Robert Lynd (*Old and New Masters*) Dostoyevsky's whole world is "an inferno."

¹⁶ F. Brunetière, *Questions de critique*, (3d ed., 1897), p. 255, calls Huysmans an imitator in prose of Baudelaire; cf. also *Gentleman's Magazine*, CCLXXXI (1896), p. 597, *La Revue*, CXIV (1916), p. 423, and *Revue des Pyrénées*, CCI (1918), p. 33.

¹⁷ Cf. Barre, *op. cit.*, p. 33, and A. L. Guérard, *French Prophets of Yesterday* (1914), p. 35.

¹⁸ A description of these paintings will also be found in G. Coquiote, *Le vrai J.-K. Huysmans* (1912), p. 86ff.

no more doubt on this point.)¹⁹ We shall hear, from Huysmans himself, the reason for a man's inclination toward satanism: "The execration of impotence, the hatred of mediocrity—that is perhaps one of the most indulgent definitions of diabolism."²⁰ Life to Huysmans was revolting in the highest degree. He felt a horror for contemporary banality, vulgarity and insipidity. The human soul was to him bankrupt, defunct. The stupidity of men and the ugliness of things filled him with bitter despair. How bitter his weariness of life was may again be learned from his own lips: "I am simply bored to death. . . . I am bored by myself, independently of place, of home, of books. . . . Bored by myself—ah, yes, most heartily! How tired I am of watching myself, of trying to detect the secret of my disgust and contentiousness. When I contemplate my life I could sum it up thus: the past has been horrible; the present seems to me feeble and desolate; the future—it's appalling."²¹ "No one," says Havelock Ellis, "had a deeper sense of the distressing state of human affairs than Huysmans."²² For this frightful mess in this best of all possible worlds there could for Huysmans only be one explanation, which is, that, in the eternal combat between the good and the evil spirits, the evil spirit has finally gained the upper hand, and that the mastery of the world now resides with the Devil. "Manicheism," says Huysmans through the mouth of Des Hermies, "is one of the most ancient, the simplest of religions, at all events, the religion which explains best the abominable mess of the present time."²³ For the good of humanity as well as for his own good, a man with this view of the world may take sides with the baffled spirit of good, yet he cannot but show an interest mingled with admiration for the victorious spirit of evil.

Moreover, the taste of Huysmans for all that is artificial and high in flavor, as seen in *A rebours*, inclines him toward demonism. Decadentism passes almost imperceptibly into diabolism. The secret sympathy which unites him with the eccentricities of all ages, as evinced in his selection of the type of Des Esseintes, makes him now write the history of Gilles de Rais, the Des Esseintes of the

¹⁹ Cf. Léon Bloy, *Sur la tombe de Huysmans* (1913), p. 53.

²⁰ *Là-bas*, p. 76.

²¹ *La cathédrale*, p. 220.

²² Havelock Ellis, *Affirmations* (2d ed., 1915), p. 161.

²³ *Là-bas*, p. 84.

fifteenth century as he himself calls him.²⁴ But this medieval satanist serves only as the author's *point d'appui* for a portrayal of contemporary demonomania. Huysmans skilfully interweaves medieval satanism with its modern manifestations. His real aim is not to reconstruct the history of a medieval satanist, but to show the hysterical folly of the demonomaniacs of his day.

It is not altogether evident from the novel *Là-bas* whether or no Huysmans himself really believed in the existence of a satanic cult in Paris. In later writings, however, he expressed his firm belief that Satan-worship was prevalent not only in Paris but all over France and Belgium.²⁵ The principal proofs of the existence of satanism for him were the frequent thefts of consecrated wafers throughout France, which, as he presumed, were employed in the celebration of the Black Mass.²⁶

In *Là-bas* Huysmans seems to have in mind the modern Rosicrucians, illuminists, spiritualists and other occultists of the type of the Marquis de Guaita and Josephin Péladan, but in his prefatory essay to Bois's *Le satanisme et la magie* the Masons are included among the Devil-worshippers, although, to be sure, they are called Luciferians instead of satanists and thus rendered slightly less

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68. Huysmans has also published his study of Gilles de Rais separately under the title *La sorcellerie en Poitou. Gilles de Rais* (1897). The crimes of this original Bluebeard are also detailed by Mr. Baring-Gould in his *Book of Waverloves* (1865).

²⁵ The satanic cult of France was, on the whole, of a very harmless nature. It appears to have been carried on by small groups of poets, who would meet on a Sunday evening to read their verses written in praise of the Prince of Darkness; cf. L. Maigrin, *Le romantisme et les mœurs* (1910), p. 187. It is not the object of this paper to go into this matter at length, but the reader who is interested in this question will find ample material in the following books and magazine articles: Alexandre Erdan, *La France mystique* (1853); Charles Sauvestre, *Les congrégations religieuses dévoilées* (1867); Stanislas de Guaita, *Essais de sciences mandites* (1886). Marquis de Guaita was at the head of the Rosicrucian Society, which was founded in Paris in 1888. M. Jules Bois, author of *Les petites religions de Paris* (1893) and *Le satanisme et la magie* (1893), has constituted himself the historian of satanism and even loves to pose as the Devil's evangelist. Of interest to the reader will also be Miss Marie A. Belloc's interview with Jules Bois, which appeared under the title "Satanism: Ancient and Modern" in the London monthly magazine *Humanitarian*, XI (1897), pp. 81-87. M. Bois's views on satanism are also detailed in the article by Thomas Walsh, "The Amateurs of Satan," in the *Bookman*, IX (1899), pp. 220-223. M. Bois has in recent years found competitors in R. Schwaebé, who has written the novel *Chez Satan: Roman de mœurs de satanistes contemporains* (1906), and the study *Le satanisme flagellé: Satanistes contemporains, incubat, succubat, sadisme et satanisme* (1912), and in Joanny Bricaud, author of *J. K. Huysmans et le satanisme* (1913) and of *Le satanisme contemporain*. The Poles, who have always proven to be apt pupils of the French, have also caught the satanic fever. The noted Polish novelist Stanislas Przybyszewski, author of *Homo sapiens*, has also written a study on satanism and magic under the title *The Synagogue of Satan*.

²⁶ Cf. Huysmans's preface to Bois's book on satanism, pp. x-xv.

odious. The distinction between these two classes of diabolists consists in the fact that while the satanists worship the Devil as the spirit of evil, the Luciferians see in him the spirit of good. Huysmans put his faith in the "revelations" of the anti-Masonic writers of his day. The accusations of Devil-worship and immorality against the Masons, with which Europe was flooded toward the end of the last century, were called forth by the papal encyclic "Humanum Genus," in which the faithful were urged to "snatch from Freemasonry the mask with which it is covered, and to let it be seen what it really is." The snowball was set rolling by Leo Taxil, who, in the very year of his conversion, gave to the world the first of his "complete revelations concerning Freemasonry" in the shape of two volumes called *The Brethren of the Three Points* (1884).²⁷ This great accuser of the Masons was followed by others, chief among whom were Mgr. Léon Meurin, S. J., archbishop of Port-Louis in Mauritius, author of *The Freemasonry: the Synagogue of Satan* (1893), and Signor Domenico Margiotta, commander of a pontifical order, whose chief book of accusation is *The Palladism as Cult of Satan-Lucifer* (1895).²⁸ He received from the pope the apostolic benediction for his denunciation of the Masons, his former associates. Other anti-Masonic writers were Paul Rosen, author of *Satan and Company* (1888), Jean Kostka (pseud., Jules Doinel), who wrote *Lucifer Unmasked* (1895), Dr. Bataille, whose novel *The Devil in the Nineteenth Century* appeared in serial form in 1892-1895, and Miss Diana Vaughan, who in her *Memoirs of an Ex-Palladist* claimed to have seen Lucifer as a very handsome young man, clad in a golden *maillot*, and seated on a throne of diamonds.²⁹

²⁷ Other books by Leo Taxil are: *The Cult of the Grand Architect* (1886); *Sister Masons, or Ladies' Freemasonry* (1888); and *Are There Women in Freemasonry?* (1891).

²⁸ Obviously Signor Domenico Margiotta does not uphold the distinction between satanists and Luciferians marked by Huysmans.

²⁹ It is now generally believed that Leo Taxil, Dr. Bataille and Miss Diana were all different pseudonyms of Gabriel Jogand-Pagès, who started his literary career as editor of *L'Anti-Clérical*, an anti-clerical paper of the lowest type. He kept up the deception as long as he could, and, on the eve of being exposed, publicly confessed that it was all a hoax (1897); cf. A. L. Guérard, *French Civilization in the Nineteenth Century* (1914), p. 274. The reader who is interested in this Catholic-Masonic controversy is referred to the following writers: Arthur Lillie, *The Worship of Satan in Modern France* (1896); Bräunlich, *Der neueste Teufelsschwindel* (1897); Charles Henry, "Der entlarvte Lucifer" in the Stuttgart Socialist monthly *Die neue Zeit*, XV (1897), Part II, pp. 490-498. The best short account is given by F. Legge in his article "Devil-Worship and Freemasonry" in *The Contemporary Review*, LXX (1896), pp. 468-483. The fairest presentation of the whole matter is Arthur Edward Waite's *Devil-Worship in France* (1896). The present writer has drawn chiefly upon Legge and Waite in the preparation of this part of his paper.

Huysmans has many surprises for the American reader. He will learn first of all that Devil-worship existed in his own country as well as in Europe, and that Americans were at the head of two international associations for the Propagation of the Faith in the Prince of Darkness. The "Ré-Theurgists-Optimates,"³⁰ founded in 1855, with headquarters in America, had for their grand master, it is claimed, no less a person than the poet Longfellow, whose official title was "Grand-Prêtre du Nouveau Magisme Evocateur" (High Priest of the New Evocatory Sorcery).³¹ At the head of the other diabolical organization stood the Southern poet General Albert Pike, who was called "le vicaire du Très-Bas, le pontife installé dans la Rome infernale" (the vicar of the Very-Low, the pontiff installed in the Infernal Rome), by which Infernal Rome our good Southern town Charleston is meant.³²

The impression must not be gained, however, that all the diabolism in *Là-bas* was evolved out of the author's imagination. As a matter of fact, Huysmans had no imaginative power whatsoever.³³ As a naturalist he relied wholly on observation and documentation for his material, and, as has already been stated, the infernal phenomena were now treated by him in the same manner which he had until then employed in his description of earthly things. He must have read hundreds of folios and collected mountains of notes in the preparation of this book. Léon Bloy calls it a cataclysm of documents. In this novel, this writer continues, Huysmans shows himself more than ever "une cataracte du ciel documentaire" (a cataract from a sky of documents).³⁴ He supplemented his reading by personal observation. He zealously fre-

³⁰ This extraordinary phrase is, as Mr. Legge suggests, "apparently compounded of three languages: *Optimates* is used by Cicero for the aristocratic as opposed to the popular party; *Theurgos* is one who works wonders by means of the gods. . . . *Ré* is, apparently, the Egyptian sun-god Ra," who seems to have been confused with the Egyptian demon Set-Typhon; cf. *Contemporary Review*, LXX (1896), p. 472, note.

³¹ *Là-bas*, p. 95. Huysmans innocently follows his authorities, who, ludicrously enough, confused the poet Longfellow with a Scotchman by the same name, said to have helped in the organization of the "New Reformed Palladium"; cf. Waite, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³² Cf. Huysmans's preface to Bois's book, p. xv. Albert Pike is alleged to have introduced into France, in 1881, together with the Mormon Bishop John Taylor, the so-called "Maçonnerie Palladique" (Palladic, i. e., Luciferian, Masonry). For a detailed discussion of the whole affair see Waite, *op. cit.*, pp. 32ff.

³³ Cf. Rémy de Gourmont, *Promenades littéraires*, 3d series (5th ed., 1916), p. 15.

³⁴ Cf. Léon Bloy, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

quoted, for several years previous to the publication of *Là-bas*, the circles of the occultists and spiritualists in Paris.³⁵ A great part of his information, in regard to the machinations of unfrocked priests was furnished by an ex-abbé named Boullan, in Lyons.³⁶ This ex-abbé, who figures in *Là-bas* as Dr. Johannès, an exorcist, was well competent to furnish the information, since he himself committed the acts which he laid at the door of his opponents. While he hoodwinked Huysmans in regard to the character of his own work, he could well speak with authority on contemporary satanism. It is needless to say that the description of the Black Mass, which is so marvelously painted in all its revolting details, was not taken from observation. The reader cannot bring himself to believe that practices of this kind still existed in modern times. Huysmans never attended a Black Mass,³⁷ and, we trust, never met a woman of the type of Mme. Chantelouve. The details of the Black Mass were derived from witches' trials and supplemented by a study of the life of Vintras, a wonderworker, who was charged by two former members of his sect with the celebration of the Black Mass.³⁸

While not altogether trustworthy in regard to modern satanism, Huysmans's presentation of medieval demonology and witchcraft is, on the whole, rather sound. *Là-bas* was not meant to be a novel in the ordinary sense of the word. Huysmans with his naturalistic pretensions to scientific accuracy intended it to be a serious study, and in the journal *Echo de Paris*, where it first appeared, it has as subtitle "Etude sur le satanisme." *Là-bas* is, indeed, a storehouse of occult sciences. We learn in this book all about ecclesiology, liturgy, astrology, therapy, alchemy, theology, theosophy, cabbalism, spiritualism, theurgy, sorcery, necromancy, sadism, vampirism, incubism, succubism, and all other varieties of black magic, in addition to somewhat more conventional subjects, ranging from painting to cooking. We are, moreover, told, as has already been stated, the history of Gilles de Rais, we are instructed in regard to the meaning of the sacrifice of Melchisedek, and we are informed concerning the person of the Antichrist and the teachings of Paracelsus. The central episode of this frightful book, as it has

³⁵ Cf. Bricaud, *Huysmans et le satanisme* (1913), p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17ff.

³⁷ Cf. F. Legge, *op. cit.*, p. 469; J. G. Huneker, *The Pathos of Distance* (1913), p. 310.

³⁸ On the sources of the Black Mass, see Bricaud, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Gourmont, *loc. cit.*; Legge, *loc. cit.*

aptly been called,³⁹ is, of course, the Black Mass, which begins with a horrible profanation of the Eucharist and ends with a promiscuous orgy. The celebration of the Black Mass vividly recalls a Walpurgis Night when witches, mounted on goats and broomsticks, were flocking to desolate heaths and hills to hold high revel with their master Satan. The Witches' Sabbath, be it well remembered, was not altogether an imaginary affair, but really had a foundation in fact. It was a secret survival of the ancient fertility cult, and the witch is but a degraded form of the old priestess of fertility.⁴⁰ The materialist Des Hermies shows a true historical insight when he remarks on Durtal's description of the Black Mass: "Je suis sûr qu'en invoquant Belzébuth, ils pensent aux prélibations charnelles" (I am certain that in invoking Belzebub they think of carnal prelibations).⁴¹

But Huysmans did not remain long at this stage of his esthetic development. The diabolical was but his point of deflection from the physical to the psychical. His combination of medievalism and modernism soon went over wholly into medievalism, of mysticism and materialism, into mysticism. His spiritual naturalism was but a transition to supernaturalism, his satanism to sacerdotalism, his Manicheism, to monasticism. His contempt for the present fills him with a longing for the past. He dreams of that "dolorous and exquisite period," the Middle Ages. At that time, in contrast to the present, a human personality could fully develop, expand and show forth in the highest relief. Great art, likewise, existed in those good old days. "In sculpture and painting there were the primitives, in poetry and prose, the mystics, in music, the plain-chant flourished, and in architecture the Romanesque and the Gothic—and all this held together."⁴² This medieval art was inspired by Christianity. A religion which inspired this art, our author argues, must be true as well as beautiful. Huysmans, who, like his spiritual ancestor Chateaubriand, looks at everything *sub specie pulchritudinis*, sees in Christian art the proof of Christian truth.⁴³ His affection for the Middle Ages thus brought him into the bosom of the Cath-

³⁹ Jean Lionnet, *L'évolution des idées chez quelques-uns de contemporains* (1903), p. 96; cf. Léon Bloy, *op. cit.*, p. 53. M. Georges Pellissier, *Études de littérature contemporaine* (1898), p. 21, has well summed up the described book in the two words "érotomanie satanisante" (satanizing erotomania).

⁴⁰ Cf. the present writer's book *The Origin of the German Carnival Comedy* (1920), p. 41.

⁴¹ *Là-bas*, p. 363.

⁴² *En route*, p. 10; cf. also *Là-bas*, pp. 169ff.

⁴³ Cf. Charbonnel, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

olic Church, which is the depository in modern times of the medieval spirit. Huysmans now abandons *Là-bas* for *Là-haut*, sensual vice is exchanged for spiritual grace, satanic blasphemy for mystical ecstasy. Satanists are succeeded by saints. The sorcerer Flamel yields his place to the mystic Huysbroeck.

But even within the sacred walls of the Church Huysmans is not free from diabolical thoughts. The Devil follows him into the Trappist monastery where he has finally decided to go into retreat in order to escape the temptations and obsessions of evil. The first night Huysmans passes in that asylum of peace is marked by such frightful assaults by the Tempter as he has never experienced even on the boulevards of Paris. Our author experiences the fate of that fabled magician's apprentice and learns to his horror that it is far easier to summon Satan than to banish him. He can as little rid himself of the Devil as of his own shadow. Satanism remains to the end of his days his favorite topic of conversation. "His books," says his friend Gourmont, "are chaste in comparison with his conversations."⁴⁴ Those who have read *Là-bas* will admit that this is saying a great deal.

The conversion of Huysmans was perhaps less a matter of choice than of necessity. When his book *A rebours* appeared, Barbey d'Aurevilly, reviewing it for the journal *Le Constitutionnel*,⁴⁵ gave its author the same advice he had given Baudelaire upon the publication of the *Flowers of Evil*: "Après les Fleurs du Mal il n'y a plus que deux partis à prendre pour le poète qui les fit éclore, se brûler la cervelle ou se faire Chrétien." (After the Flowers of Evil there are but two courses open for the poet who made them blossom: either to blow his brains out or to become a Christian.)⁴⁶ Huysmans, in deciding for the Cross as the lesser of two evils, followed the example set by his master Baudelaire. As a matter of fact, he often made light of his religion, and spoke of it as sadism, a bastard Catholicism. In a preface to Gourmont's *Le Latin mystique*, Huysmans pointed out the fundamental difference between Catholicism and literary mysticism. He apparently wished us to infer from his words that the two are not necessarily identical and perhaps even incompatible with each other.⁴⁷ What Villiers de l'Isle-Adam says of Baudelaire, that, though professedly a Catholic, he was "un Catholique possédé d'un démon" (a Catholic possessed by

⁴⁴ Cf. Rémy de Gourmont, *op. cit.*, pp. 11f; cf. *Academy*, LV (1898), p. 127.

⁴⁵ *Le Constitutionnel* of July 28, 1884.

⁴⁶ Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Les œuvres et les hommes*, Part III.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Quarterly Review*, CXC (1899), p. 90.

a demon),⁴⁸ is equally true of Huysmans. The two mystics resembled each other not only in their diabolical writings but also in the diabolical features of their faces.⁴⁹ In speaking of Huysmans, Havelock Ellis, who saw him often in Paris, says: "His face, with the sensitive, luminous eyes, reminded one of Baudelaire's portraits, the face of a resigned and benevolent Mephistopheles who has discovered the absurdity of the Divine order but has no wish to make any improper use of his discovery."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Cf. Vicomte Robert du Pontavice de Heussey, *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam: His Life and Works* (Eng. tr., 1904), p. 149.

⁴⁹ Maxime du Camp, in his *Souvenirs littéraires*, says that Baudelaire's head was that of a young devil who had turned hermit.

⁵⁰ Havelock Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 161. The reader must not gain the impression that this article has been written in disparagement of Huysmans. The present writer holds Huysmans in very high esteem, although, to be sure, he prefers the earlier to the later Huysmans. No slur was intended on the character of our author, either. It is admitted by all who knew Huysmans that while he was a contentious person and never had a good word to say about his fellow-men, he had a noble heart and a ready hand to help all who were in need. We need but refer to his deep devotion to his poor friend Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, whose chief support he was in his last agony.