On the Brink of the Abyss

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
University of Tasmania, June 2010
Declaration

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15 June 2010
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Abstract

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 Grünwald (1475-1528), and Symbolist artists Gustave Moreau (1836-1898), Odilon Redon (1840-1916) and Félicien Rops (1833-1898).
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Professor Jonathan Holmes, Deputy Head of School, Tasmanian School of Art (Hobart), University of Tasmania and Dr Llewellyn Negrin, Head, Art & Design Theory, Tasmanian School of Art (Hobart), University of Tasmania, for their invaluable support and guidance during the research and writing of this thesis.

I would also like to thank peers and colleagues at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania and the South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia for their encouragement and support. Special thanks to Maria Kunda, Patricia Scott, Dr Julie Gough, Dr Anna Phillips, Dr Pamela Zeplin, Dr Irmina van Niele, Assoc Prof Jack Cross, Ann Mather, Beth Roberts and Keith Giles. Also, Assoc Prof John Barbour, Professor Noel Frankham, Mr Paul Zika, Professor Kay Lawrence, Professor Drew Dawson and Professor Michael Rowan. Thanks also to Dr Brendan King, Dr Ken Bolton, Michael Edwards and Dr Teri Hoskins.

The research and writing of this thesis has been facilitated by two residencies at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania’s Rosamund McCulloch Studio, Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris; a travel grant from the Goddard Sapin-Jaloustre Scholarship Trust, and a research grant from the Research Office, Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences, University of South Australia.
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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 employé; 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 transpires 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

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**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), Josèphin 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 maintained that the tangible world was a reflection of the intangible and that Beauty was comprised of an


\(^3\)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.
‘eternal, invariable element’ and a ‘relative, circumstantial element.’

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 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.

In their texts and images the Symbolists adopted strategies such as the fragmentation of text, idiosyncratic use of multivalent 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 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

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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 Grünewald, 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.*  

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*:

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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.  

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). 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 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

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9 Linda Marie Walker on Hélène Cixous, C3@CW seminars, SASA, UniSA, April/May 2007.
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. 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 Là-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. Selected Letters of J.-K. Huysmans (1989).

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

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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: Là 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 translated by Terry Hale was published as Becalmed by Atlas Press, London in 1992.
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 *Hérodiade*, effectively emphasising the pathological characteristics of the characters and reveals nihilistic tendencies.

### 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). 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.

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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.


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.
