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Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France

by

Robert Ziegler

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Introduction

In a letter to a friend, J.-K. Huysmans once explained that what sparked his interest in the occult and supernatural was a wish to find "some compensation for the horror of daily life, the squalor of existence, the excremental filthiness of the loathsome age we live in."[1] Horrified by the trend toward secularism and money worship, he had seen the crooked streets of Paris made straight, robbed of their charm, the city's beauty destroyed by Baron Haussmann's geometric urban grids. Human interaction, with its complexity and richness, had given way to business dealings with their emphasis on profit. Even the sacraments had been profaned by tradespeople and merchants, who diluted Communion wine by adding alcohol and alum and who substituted oat flour and potato starch for Eucharistic wheat. It was Huysmans's ambition to use his art to mask the vulgarity of life that explains in part his fascination with the aesthetics of Satanism. It is also what motivated him to uncover the clandestine practice of devil worship in turn-of-the-century Paris, what fueled his research into the monstrous crimes of medieval Satanist Gilles de Rais.

Born in Paris in 1848, Huysmans was baptized in the Latin Quarter at Saint-Séverin, a church that would figure prominently in his later religious writings. Huysmans's early work gave little foreshadowing of his eventual turn toward supernaturalism. Instead, books like *Sac au dos* (*Knapsack* 1878), which fictionalized his service in the Mobile Guard during the Franco-Prussian War, his rollicking account of working-class life and romance in *Les Soeurs Vatard* (*The Vatard Sisters* 1879), situated the fledgling novelist squarely in the emergent naturalist camp. However, Huysmans's association with Emile Zola and his inclusion in the Médan group proved short-lived as he soon judged naturalism as presenting an incomplete picture of human life. Huysmans's metaphysical

ruminations, his plumbing of the unconscious are already evident in his gaudy masterpiece, *A rebours* (*Against the Grain* 1884), and in the labyrinthine dream narratives woven into the country novel *En Rade* (*Becalmed* 1887). Huysmans's growing interest in religion and the occult was in part motivated by a need to explain the mystery of suffering. In the years following the publication of *En Rade*, the health of his longtime mistress, Anna Meunier, worsened dramatically. Literary colleagues and close friends like Barbey d'Aurevilly and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam died in quick succession, the latter after a painful, protracted illness. Suffering to Huysmans could not be a matter of accident or circumstance, and instead presupposed a supernatural causality that gave it purpose and meaning.

At the same time, Huysmans's impatience with the aridity of naturalist aesthetics moved him to investigate the domains of the diabolical and sublime. However, his immersion in esotericism was inspired by more than disillusionment with the triumph of materialism in fin-de-siècle France. Unable to find in Catholic teaching an explanation for the apparent cruelty of God, impervious to human suffering and slow in returning to save the downtrodden, Huysmans evolved a personal belief system grounded in mystical eschatology, whose adherents formed an aristocracy of self-sacrifice and genius. The problematic deity found by Huysmans and his fictional heroes in Catholic orthodoxy was the heartless, detached, impassive figure mentioned in *A rebours*. Like des Esseintes, Huysmans had been scandalized by the doctrine of original sin, revolted by the apotheosis of the scoundrel and the oppression of the innocent. He thus agreed with Schopenhauer, who had famously observed: "If a God did make this world, I should not like to be this God, for the misery of the world would break my heart."[2]

By following Huysmans's evolution as an esotericist and man of faith, one finds that – more than any other public figure – his career followed the trajectory of fin-de-siècle occultism. He stands out as the author of the most notorious Satanic novel of the era, *The Damned* (*Là-bas* 1891); he interacted with virtually all of the leading hermeticists of the day; he engaged in necromantic warfare with his diabolical adversaries, warding off their spells with magic apotropaion and exotic, mystic rituals. Huysmans later became conversant with the apocalyptic doctrine of Eugène Vintras, adopting from the heretical cultist a belief in the coming Third Age of the Paraclete. Following his conversion and apparent return to traditional church dogma, Huysmans evolved a personal view of Catholicism as a religion of martyrdom and miracles, in which

supernatural wonders fought eternally with monstrous evil, striving for dominion in the daily lives of ordinary people.

A denizen of the French capital, Huysmans spent much of his life as a functionary at the Ministry of the Interior. This unremarkable career as a government employee contrasts with his colorful and turbulent role in the world of fin-de-siècle mysticism and art. First a full-throated partisan of Emile Zola and the naturalist cause, Huysmans proclaimed that the artist's place was in the raucous confusion of the world, among real people whose coarseness was grist for naturalist depictions. Naturalism, in Zola's view, was a democratizing force, a scientific instrument used to diagnose social evils and prescribe remedies. While Huysmans dismissed the theory in Zola's *Le Roman experimental* (*The Experimental Novel* 1880), he had welcomed naturalism's interest in the lives of common people, had embraced the goal of examining the plight of the poor and dispossessed. Defending Zola, whose *L'Assommoir* had been characterized as pornographic, Huysmans argues that a writer should escape the prison of Romantic subjectivity: "we go into the street that teems with life; we try to plant on their feet beings of flesh and bone, beings that speak the language that was taught them, beings that throb with life."[3]

From 1879 to 1880, Huysmans, increasingly involved in art criticism, had taken to championing the innovative works of the Impressionists, writing laudatory essays on Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, publishing a collection of his reviews in *L'Art moderne* (*Modern Art*) in 1883. Huysmans's own subjectivist aesthetic placed him at odds with Zola, his erstwhile mentor. Yet his disaffection with naturalism had more to do with its scientific apparatus, its diagnostic methods, and utopian pretentions.

In *Là-bas* (*The Damned* 1891) Huysmans's protagonist, the novelist Durtal, denounces naturalism's emphasis on appetites and instincts, on insanity and sex. It had degenerated, as Durtal argues, into a "sentimental surgical support, a spiritual truss."[4] While naturalism had taken Huysmans outside, into the streets, his Decadent masterpiece, *A rebours*, barricades him in a cloistered world of artificiality. For the hero, Jean Floressas des Esseintes, art's realm is an aestheticizing consciousness. Visitors are forbidden in his retreat at Fontenay. Soundless servants wearing slippers are consigned to the mansion's upper floor. Surviving on a diet of rare perfumes, flowers, and poetry, des Esseintes admits no mistresses, etherealizing women into memories.

But with elimination of the outside world came a craving for unreality, as des Esseintes furnishes his bedroom with the austerity of an anchorite, collecting religious bibelots, consecrated custodials, and chasubles – and

intuiting that beyond literature lies the domain of the transcendental. Sharing the author's skepticism, des Esseintes had scoffed at the "psychology of mysticism," yet had toyed with the idea of worshipping a divinity *a rebours*, summoning God by invoking Satan, following a liturgy of sacrilege. Fantasies had come to him of "shameful and impure abuses of the holy water and the holy oil." He had imagined God's antagonist, "a rival full of vigor, the Devil, [...] cabbalistic excesses, black masses, witches' Sabbaths, thoughts of exorcism, all these came into play."[5]

Foreshadowed by des Esseintes's dilettantish interest in diabolism, Huysmans's own path toward conversion had led him to an investigation of the Satanic, both in medieval history and in the reality of contemporary Paris. In Huysmans's blockbuster novel on the mysteries of devil worship, he presents a picture of the occult world in fin-de-siècle France. There, as Richard D. E. Burton claims, Huysmans's "reader gains access to a curious and disturbing (anti)religious underworld, part real, part inverted, in which spiritualism, sexual perversion, and madness intersect, populated by men and women who, thirsting for some kind of absolute gratification but despairing of or hostile to orthodox Christianity, turn to Satanism as a way out of the 'materialist prison house' of late nineteenth-century France."[6]

Biographer Robert Baldick questions whether Huysmans ever witnessed a Black Mass of the kind he describes in a memorable chapter of his novel. However, Baldick's commentary underscores the ambiguous status of Huysmans's book, as well as the complex reaction it elicited from the public. Part novel, part documentary on contemporary Parisian mores, part archeological reconstruction of medieval Satanic practices, Huysmans's text became popular by appealing to audiences' love of sensationalist invention as well as to serious readers' concerns with the religious problem of good and evil.

In his book, pederast choirboys with powdered cheeks and carmined lips attend a priest presiding over a ritual enveloped in the smoke of toxic incense. In a later scene, Huysmans's hero is taken to a squalid chophouse, to an upstairs bedroom whose filthy mattress is strewn with desecrated Hosts. Huysmans's hero had been sickened by the ignominy of contemporary devil worship, and while Satanism as it was practiced in the distant Middle Ages had been haloed with the sulfurous mystery of conjecture, the Black Mass Durtal witnesses enacts only the banality of evil.

By 1887, Huysmans's research into the occult had put him into contact with the foremost magicians of the day. Stanislas de Guaïta, with

his vast knowledge and personal wealth, had established himself as the Eminence Grise of the esoteric movement and would publish in 1890 *Au Seuil du mystère* (*On the Threshold of Mystery*), an encyclopedic overview of Occidental occultism. Gérard Encausse, whose pseudonym, Papus, was taken from the works of Apollonius of Tyana, had authored popularized analyses of the Kabbalah and the Tarot, and, in 1888, together with Guaïta, he had founded L'Ordre de la Rose-Croix, intending to reawaken the traditions of Rosicrucianism and alchemy in turn-of-the-century France. Most important was the acquaintance Huysmans made with the visionary Jules Bois, author of *Le Satanisme et la magie* (*Satanism and Magic* 1895), for which Huysmans contributed an important introduction. There Huysmans chronicles the spread of nineteenth-century Luciferianism, warns of the malignancy of Palladism, a Satanic cult linked to the Freemasons and which was later exposed as an imposture perpetrated by master hoaxer Léo Taxil.

However, it was not until Huysmans made contact with the notorious Joseph-Antoine Boullan, whose expertise in Satanism Huysmans viewed as essential in documenting his novel, that the author finally penetrated into the dark heart of fin-de-siècle necromancy. One of the fin de siècle's most colorful figures, Boullan had been the target of criminal prosecution and the object of church sanction on numerous occasions before Huysmans began corresponding with him in 1890. Co-founder in 1859 of the Society for the Reparation of Souls, Boullan had become infamous for his sorties into supernaturalism and sacrilege. Accused of ceremonial child-murder, of authorizing orgiastic rituals, Boullan was allegedly an accomplished exorcist conversant with an array of occult practices. Aware of Boullan's spotted reputation, yet wishing to be accurate in his writing, Huysmans had set aside his reservations and had written directly to the controversial cleric. Huysmans's hope had been to disprove materialism's impoverishing principles, to demonstrate that the devil did exist, to "show Zola, Charcot, the spiritualists, and the rest that nothing of the mysteries which surround us has been explained."[7]

After an extended exchange of correspondence between the cleric and the writer, Boullan, in 1890, sent his housekeeper, the eccentric oracle Julie Thibault, to inquire about Huysmans's intentions in an interview conducted face to face. Not long after Julie had delivered a positive report to her employer, Huysmans had been inundated with information about the secrets of black magic: incubism, succubism, bewitchments, and counter-spells, ceremonies for warding off attack by deadly larval beings.

Huysmans's indebtedness to Boullan as his initiator into occult matters had led him to take sides in the ensuing conflict between initiates. Years before, Guaïta's ally, fellow occultist Oswald Wirth, had infiltrated Boullan's sect with the goal of exposing its sacrilegious practices, rituals devolving into adultery and incest. Having found Boullan guilty and passed a death sentence against him, Guaïta dispatched against the priest a host of invisible assailants. Warned by ornithomantic messages and astrological charts, Boullan had protected himself by conducting the Sacrifice to the Glory of Melchidedek. Huysmans had been challenged to a duel, Guaïta and Bois had exchanged pistol shots, and Boullan had died mysteriously in 1893, "done to death by magic," as Huysmans would steadfastly maintain.[8]

When *Là-bas* first appeared in February 1891, it became an instantaneous bestseller catapulting the author into fame. While some readers of *L'Echo de Paris*, in which the book appeared in serial form, were sufficiently scandalized to cancel their subscription to the paper, the novel's reception was generally favorable, and the controversy surrounding Huysmans's work resulted in impressive sales. Several prominent occultists disputed the authenticity of Huysmans's research, as Péladan dismissed the book as fraudulent invention, and Papus claimed that Huysmans's sources had largely been encyclopedias on Satanism. Yet even these acrimonious denunciations had generated publicity, and Huysmans's star continued rising as his novel flew off the shelves. "And when, on its publication in book form in April, the Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer banned the novel from its railway stalls, its success was assured," as Baldick adds by way of summary.[9]

Yet Huysmans's association with Boullan and his visionary handmaiden, Julie Thibault, continued to direct the author's spiritual evolution long after his anatomy of Satanism was published. Huysmans's disgust for reality and its enshrinement in naturalist art had prompted him to seek escape into the otherworldly and supernatural, "anywhere out of the world," as Baudelaire described it. And while Huysmans's misanthropic temperament had made the truth of Satanism seem more plausible, once the writer had explored the netherworld, he had turned his eyes heavenward, *là-haut* (up there).

Little by little, Boullan had instructed Huysmans in the doctrine of the notorious heretic and prophet Eugène Vintras, whose controversial teachings on sexuality and suffering had continued to affect disciples long after Vintras's death. The so-called "Prophet of Tilly," relentlessly persecuted by the church, Vintras had advanced a powerful message on the imminence of the apocalypse, attracting important members to

his messianic cult. Boullan shared Vintras's unorthodox views on adultery and redemption and professed the same mystical expectation of the forthcoming world's end, and, following Vintras's death in 1875, Boullan had successfully positioned himself as his successor.

It was from Vintras that Boullan drew his views on expiatory suffering on behalf of others. And so, when Huysmans's mistress, Anna Meunier, had declined into insanity and had been interned in the asylum of Saint-Anne in 1893, he likely recalled Boullan's explanation of the doctrine of Mystic Substitution. Boullan's theory was that Anna's ordeal had been divinely ordained, and that those whom Christ loves best are those he allows to suffer most. As Baldick remarks, it was from Boullan and from his coreligionist Léon Bloy – "those two apostles of pain"[10] – that Huysmans was initiated into the mysteries of Dolorism, the belief that suffering was a privilege, a mark of election – that the torments of a few purchased the redemption of the many.

Huysmans's meditation on the expiatory plight of Anna Meunier – his admiration for the pilgrim/prophetess Julie Thibaut – had softened the antipathy for women he had exhibited for so long. Initially, Huysmans had been infected by Schopenhauerian misogyny, believing that the female animal was what imprisoned man in a world of instinctual automatism. Like many of his Decadent contemporaries, Huysmans had despised woman "in her pure carnal existence." He had come to believe that sexual passion could be experienced only "on the level of culpability," that it could be understood only as "a privileged expression of Satanism, a fundamental impulse toward self-debasement that constitutes true perversity."[11] However, in the teachings of Vintras, Huysmans had found an image of women as avatars of the Mater Dolorosa, intercessors whose bodily suffering secured a deliverance of the spirit.

When, in 1891, Huysmans's spiritual quest first put him in contact with Abbé Arthur Mugnier, the priest who would guide him toward his eventual conversion, the novelist was still torn by his warring images of women: as the Beast of Revelation, the Maenad or the Harlot, a Schopenhauerian instrument of man's utter degradation, or as the embodiment of compassion who mourned her son beneath the Cross. During his visits to Mugnier's residence, Huysmans confessed to his sexual obsession with a prostitute, Fernande, transposed in his unpublished novel, *Là-haut*, as the boyish sex worker, Florence, "who with her tomboy's open face goes about with her nose up in the air."[12]

The drama that played out in much of fin-de-siècle fiction – in the works of Léon Bloy as well as in the pre-conversion books by

Huysmans – describes male authors as helpless pawns of Satanic Lust Goddesses or as grateful beneficiaries of the expiatory trials of female martyrs. In Bloy, these roles are often played by an identical female figure: the prostitute rescued from the street who undergoes a spectacular awakening, becoming a saint whose tears wash the author's sins away. Transformation of man's pruritus into a glorious salvation – effected by a woman who suffers unspeakable torments on his behalf – suggests that Dolorism is supported by an unconscious sadism, as women are made to suffer to redeem the men whose perdition they had caused. Huysmans's ambivalence toward woman takes the form of a Manichean drama: "Lust and the Church, however implausible it seemed, worked together to share him equally. Wishing to possess him, they raised themselves up and resolutely joined in the struggle."[13]

Vintras's alleged institution of the ritual of the *ladder of life*, where women use their sexuality as the instrument of the Fall, in order to raise the sinner up and ensure his spiritual redemption, illustrates what, for Huysmans and other fin-de-siècle mystic writers, would define Eve's relationship to Mary.

Huysmans's conversion and retreat at the Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame d'Igny (begun on July 12, 1892), a sojourn recounted in detail in his autobiographical novel *En Route* (1895), marks a disappearance of the she-devils who formerly had tortured him and whose evil majesty he had heralded in his essay on Félicien Rops (*Certains* 1889). These give way to gentle soul-guides like Durtal's housekeeper, Madame Bavoil, or to Warriors of the Lord, the mystic Sin-eaters, the *gluttons for pain*, who were propitiatory victims transmuting guilt into forgiveness.

Already in *Là-haut*, Huysmans had contemplated undertaking *a white book,* a counterweight to the biography of the medieval child-murderer, Gilles de Rais: "he jumped at once from one extreme to another, and after digging into medieval Satanism in his study of the Maréchal de Rais, he had found nothing interesting left to probe than the life of a saint. It was then that a few discoveries made in Gorrès's *Mystique Divine* had launched him on the trail of the Blessed Lydwine, in search of new documents."[14]

From the brothel to the church, from Fernande to the Virgin, Huysmans moves from the black book of the devil to a hagiography of suffering immaculacy. Published in 1902, *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* describes not only the end of Huysmans's journey from misogyny to hyperdulia. It also marks the humbling of the foremost Decadent supernaturalist, whose name and narrative presence are eclipsed by the glory of his subject.

Huysmans's remarkable reconstruction of the life of the fifteenth-century Dutch visionary is both a clinical record of religion as psychopathology and a study of the operation of a soteriological economy – of suffering as it redresses the balance of good and evil in the universe. It also illustrates a dialectic at work in fin-de-siècle supernaturalism, between elitism and fraternalism, isolation and the gift of self. A generation of artists who had started with a sense of solidarity, resolved to go into the streets and tell the stories of those they saw there, had become an aristocratic coterie of occultists and Magi, inaccessible in their fortresses of esoteric wisdom. Huysmans' character, Durtal, had climbed into the bell-tower of Saint-Sulpice where, with his initiate-acquaintances, he had discussed the odiousness of life, the oafishness of common people, and the dawning of the Third Age of the Paraclete.

Huysmans's apparent confusion, manifested during the writing of *Là-bas*, between exorcists and necromancers, Satanists and their adversaries, might be expressive of an underlying ambivalence toward the devil – not as the champion of the rich, not as the vassal of the banker, but as the spokesman for the ostracized, as Huysmans's friend Jules Bois describes him. In certain centuries, as Bois says, humanity sometimes falls so low, humanity dishonors itself so much that it calls on Satan, not on God. Herein lies the devil's power: "he suffers" as Bois concludes.[15]

Indeed, suffering is the leitmotif in the mystical writings of the fin de siècle. Although it is endured alone and thus defines an aristocracy of chosen victims, it is welcomed and undergone on behalf of an anonymous collectivity of sinners. From Vintras and Boullan, Huysmans had received the message of apocalypticism, and in the opening of *Sainte Lydwine*, he describes the harrowing of fifteenth-century Europe, the ascendancy of despots, perverts, and blasphemers whose transgressions must be counterbalanced by the agonies of saints. The turn of the nineteenth century, like the conclusion of Lydwine's era, saw the weight of evil grow so great that God would soon unleash his vengeance.

Included in *Là-haut*, with the account of Huysmans's 1891 pilgrimage to La Salette, is the text of *Mélanie's secret*, the message delivered by the Virgin to the unlettered cowherd Mélanie Calvat at the time of the Apparition on September 19, 1846. Warning of dire events to come – famine, pestilence, church turmoil – if the clergy did not reform itself and the faithful failed to observe the Sabbath, the Virgin's message reinforced the millenarianism of numerous fin-de-siècle Catholics. Among these were Huysmans and his nemesis, Léon Bloy, both of whom seemed to long for a detergent Armageddon.

The era of the Holy Spirit, as envisaged by Vintras, is explained in a discussion among intellectuals and occultists in *Là-bas*. With the conclusion of the Second Age of the crucified Redeemer, the need for expiatory suffering would similarly end. No longer would man be the slave of his sexual desires and, in accordance with a mystical eugenics, only the elect would reproduce. Having served as redemptive martyrs or as instruments of Satan, women would usher in the Paraclete at the same time that their roles became obsolete. Yet in professing Vintrasian doctrine, Huysmans had not moved beyond his original misanthropy, his loathing for the insolent triumphalism of the "fetid bourgeoisie," "the apotheosis of crooked politicians and financiers."[16]

It was only in the aftermath of his conversion that Huysmans left his novels' center stage, that the voice of the aesthete grew less clamorous and shrill. Huysmans had resembled his occult brethren for whom magic was an insignia of distinction, for whom *Gnosis* or privileged wisdom permitted membership in a new elite. Yet in the writings of his contemporaries, there had been a willingness to go down among the people. Guaïta had referred to the need to descend the ladder of secret knowledge. Papus had assumed the role of popularizer of arcane doctrine. And Joséphin Peladan, the most overweening of the hermeticists, had seen the need to mentor neophytes in writing *Comment on devient mage* (*How One becomes a Magus* 1892).

When Huysmans next had heard the devil speak, it was after his taking of Communion, when a disputatious voice had denied the authenticity of the sacrament. Whereas, in *A rebours*, des Esseintes is locked in his soliloquizing consciousness, pleased to pursue a dialogue exclusively with himself, Durtal in *En Route* hears his own voice as the devil's, and so prays for inner silence so that he can hear the word of God.

The decentering of Huysmans's character is traced by his positional relocation. In his historical analysis of the architectural symbolism of Chartres (*The Cathedral* 1898), the narrator does not expand to fill a sumptuous Thebaïd but is dwarfed by the magnificence of an edifice built by a mystic collectivity. In 1889, Huysmans became an oblate at the Benedictine Abbey of Saint-Martin in Ligugé, living outside the cloister, adjacent to, but not belonging to, the Order – moving toward it (*ob*), as is etymologically suggested by his title, remaining marginalized by choice in the practice of his faith. And finally, in *Les Foules de Lourdes* (*The Crowds of Lourdes* 1906), the last novel of Huysmans's life, his narrative alter-ego, the self-analyzing Durtal, finally disappears so that the writer's subjectivity ceases to be his sole material.

The naturalist who, in the street, had mingled with the people "throbbing with life," becomes a naturalist observer of the crowds of pilgrims who throng to Lourdes. Wishing to emulate Claude Bernard in using fiction as diagnostic medicine, Zola had proposed that his methodology treat the sick and the insane, curing poverty and alcoholism with science-based enlightenment.

In the writings of other fin-de-siècle Satanists, occultists, and mystics, the suffering of the poor emerged as a prominent concern: in the compassionate revolt of Jules Bois's empathetic Lucifer, in Vintras's image of the downtrodden as the crucified members of Christ's body, in Léon Bloy, for whom the flesh and blood of the poor were Eucharistic substances. On the one hand, monsters and pariahs sought compassion from the devil; on the other, martyrs' pain was the alchemy that turned self-pity into altruism.

In Huysmans's last book, he returns to naturalism that had been the point of his departure. He goes out in the street, studying those deformed by lupus, ravaged by cancer, twisted by paralysis. In writing *Lydwine*, Huysmans had learned that suffering only prepared the way for rapture and that, in being crucified with Christ, the martyr was blessed with mystic ecstasy. For the saint, the only sickness she is impatient that Christ relieve is the affliction of corporeity, the martyrdom of life.

Already in the spring of 1900, Huysmans had begun to exhibit symptoms of the cancer of the jaw that would take his life seven years later. By 1905, when he undertook his work on *Les Foules de Lourdes*, his physical condition was little better than the invalids who made their way to the pilgrimage city.

In Lourdes, Huysmans describes repairing to the clinic of Doctor Boissarie, seeing a physician trace the interface between medicine and miracle. Charged with scientifically ascertaining the authenticity of divine cures, the doctor applies his medical knowledge to determine the point at which it fails. Fin-de-siècle occultism is positioned on this threshold – between science and supernaturalism, chemistry and alchemy, mathematics and Kabbalism, empiricism and magic. However, the most important boundary that the Magus learns to cross is between a self immured in pride and others needing comfort. More than the Virgin's miraculous healing of diseased organs and shattered limbs are the acts of solicitude and kindness done by people for their brothers.

Huysmans had never felt God's presence more strongly than when he witnessed wealthy women leaving home and coming to Lourdes to serve as caregivers and nurses. The aesthete once enshrined in the opulent refuge of his solipsism becomes a magician whose clairvoyance allows

him insight into others. The benighted female animal, controlled by ignorance and instinct, becomes an intercessor whose suffering allows her empathy and compassion. This is the occult miracle Huysmans sees done every day in Lourdes: selfishness fired away in the crucible of pain, then ennobled and transmuted into generosity and service. The occultist journey, guided by the mystery of suffering, moves from the self into the street, from introversion to fraternalism. Sharing in the Passion of the Savior or in the bereavement of his Mother, the decadent occultist becomes an adept in the divine alchemy of pain. "After the necessary period of incubation," as Huysmans writes in *Lydwine*, after self-love turns to service, "the Great Work is completed." From the retort of the soul comes the purity of gold, which Huysmans equates with Love that cures "despondency and tears." This is the true Philosopher's stone," he writes in a coda to the era:[17] suffering that ends suffering and inaugurates the Holy Spirit's Reign. "Neither shall there be mourning nor crying anymore," after an elite joins their stricken brothers to complete God's work on earth.

Following J.-K. Huysmans in his migration through the rarefied, sometimes infernal precincts of fin-de-siècle supernaturalism, this volume begins by touring the devil's lair, then visits the austere chamber of the Magus, and finally climbs to the celestial plane of miracles and mysticism.

In turn-of-the-century France, an encounter with the devil often inspired the seeker to begin a quest for the divine. Chapter 1 explores Decadent Satanism both as an aesthetic and a belief system. Serious occultists like Stanislas de Guaïta and Gérard Encausse (Papus) initially dismissed the devil as nothing but a bugbear that appealed to deviants and fools. Jules Bois, in his masterly study of both traditional and modern Satanism, evokes a colorful image of the country Sabbath as an anarchic, rollicking event, yet depicts clandestine Black Masses celebrated in nineteenth-century churches as despairing, cold, and evil ceremonies inspiring only respectful dread and horror. At the same time, the devil who captivated artists of the era as an urbane sophisticate emerged as a charmingly wicked reflection of the author himself.

In an age in which both faith and art had been robbed of majesty by science, the aesthetics of diabolism were held up as a source of expressive innovation. Thus, the mysterious allure of Satanism set in the remoteness of the Middle Ages, the sacrilegious banality of fin-de-siècle devil

worship, and the rehabilitation of the Evil One as a glamorous avatar of the writer are themes explored in an analysis of Huysmans's bestselling exposé on Satanism.

While Satanism provided material for serious literature, it was also perceived as a genuine threat by the church, re-energizing an institution recently demoralized by the ascendancy of reason and materialism. Perpetrated over a number of years, Léo Taxil's elaborate and masterly hoax – his invention of the Luciferian cult of Palladism – is the object of study in Chapter 2. Reconstituting Taxil's imposture as a source of popular entertainment, this examination also describes it as a response to the prevailing culture of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, and as fuel for the propaganda campaign waged by Pope Leo XIII, who warns of the evils of Freemasonry in his 1884 encyclical, *Humanum Genus*. "Emerging from the shadows of an occult conspiracy," the Freemasons, as Leo warns, had enlisted Satan's aid in order to separate the interests of the church and the state, and to promote "the monstrous systems of the Socialists and Communists."[18]

As is argued in Chapter 3, the leading esotericists of the day often sought to distinguish magic, as an initiatic discipline, from necromancy, deemed a refuge for criminals and pariahs. As the aesthetics of Satanism had promoted an ideal of urbane transgressivity, occultism also pictured the Magus as a narcissistic character, a superior, if lonely, being. However, in the works of Stanislas de Guaïta, Gérard Encausse, Edouard Schuré, and Joséphin Péladan, the Magus is shown as learning the virtue of self-sacrifice, mingling with the people whom he edifies.

Chapter 3 traces the evolution of the fin-de-siècle thaumaturge as an adept conversant with the numerological secrets of the Kabbalah, the hidden symbolism of the Tarot, the esoteric traditions of Rosicrucianism. However, the Magus is also depicted as a pedagogue and mentor, obedient to the church, respectful of its doctrine, willing to bestow his privileged knowledge on the people whom he serves.

Chapter 4 explores the process by which this ideal of self-abnegation was carried to the extremes of penitential martyrdom. Explaining the practice of mystic substitution, whereby the suffering of innocents redeems the guilt of unrepentant sinners, this chapter reviews the controversial and little-known teachings of heretical cultist Eugène Vintras. While Vintras began by denouncing the Vatican, excoriating a Pontiff regarded as immoderate and self-glorifying, the way in which Vintras's teachings influenced the generation of fin-de-siècle mystics was by elevating the poor, stressing the sanctity of human suffering, and according a special status to women as the Lord's sacrificial

vessels. Touched by Vintras's precepts, writers like Ernest Hello (*Prières et méditations* [*Prayers and Meditations*]), J.-K. Huysmans (*Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam*), and Léon Bloy (*La Femme pauvre*) [*The Woman Who was Poor*]) adopted an unusual brand of mysticism predicated on anti-intellectualism, rigorous self-mortification, and an embrace of suffering allowing the visionary to re-enact the Passion of Christ.

The end of the era of Decadence – with its celebration of an aristocracy of aesthetes, its apotheosis of an elite of artists and intellectuals – was also accompanied by a renunciation of literature as a forum for private and exclusive expression. During the flowering of fin-de-siècle occultism, what had been the proud solipsism of the Decadent aesthete was translated first into the hauteur of the Magus with his esoteric wisdom, and then into the raptures of a saint whose religious visions were indescribable in the profane idiom of the people. However, as Chapter 5 establishes by way of concluding, the fin-de-siècle emergence from the fortress of the self, the mingling of a privileged subject in the throngs of fellow-sufferers signaled the end of occult practices as exclusive and incommunicable. When Huysmans departed from his sanctuary of scholarly monasticism and recorded his sojourn at the pilgrimage site of Lourdes, his chronicle marked a redefinition of turn-of-the-century supernaturalism. *Non sibi*: extraordinary blessings were shared with the unfortunate, secret wisdom was imparted to earnest seekers, miracles, experienced collectively, were performed as good works done on behalf of one's fellow man. Occultism, ceasing, as is etymologically suggested, to mean knowledge that is hidden, became a gift the initiate henceforth consented to shower on his brothers.

1
The Satanist

Perhaps the most spectacular manifestation of fin-de-siècle supernaturalism was the country-wide explosion of reports of the meetings of secret cults and the bloody rituals of Satanic societies. So deep was concern over the spread of devil worship that the Catholic Church published *La Revue du Diable*, whose mission was the exposure of clandestine Satanic practices. Among its targets, a prominent socialite, Lucie Claraz, was excommunicated in 1895 for engaging in Satanic activities. Another object of religious and legal sanction, a farmer, Bernard, from the Département of Allier, was convicted as "a sorcerer in scientific relations with the Devil," and sentenced accordingly to six months' imprisonment.[1]

Counterbalancing anxieties over Satanism as a metaphysical threat was a perception that the devil was an instrument used by impostors skilled at profiting from popular fascination with supernatural evil. Dismissed by detractors as scandal-mongering or hysteria, the fad of devil worship was also widely regarded as being sustained by an interest in the commercial exploitation of the public.

In Britain, renowned occultist Alfred Waite characterized France as fertile ground for the spread of black magic since it was, as Waite believed, a place where gullibility and superstition flourished. While crediting the authenticity of J.-K. Huysmans's *succès de scandale Là-bas*, an 1894 exposé of devil worship in contemporary Paris, Waite devotes attention primarily to recording instances of imposture, chronicling growing concerns over the malignant influence of Freemasonry. Waite focuses in particular on the origins and history of the Luciferian sect of Palladism, describing at length the paranoid extravagances of Dr. Bataille's *Le Diable au XIXe siècle* (*The Devil in the Nineteenth Century*), a compilation of

spurious memoirs about Satanism and its rituals, practices occurring from Charleston to Ceylon.

Serialized in the press, beginning in 1892, and devoured by a public that made it one of the decade's bestsellers, Bataille's work purports to be the diary of a ship's physician recording manifestations of Satanic activity in France and around the world. A sprawling 2,000-page excursus denigrated by Waite as "a perfervid narrative issued in penny numbers with illustrations of a highly sensational type,"[2] Bataille's book is replete with colorful anecdotes of the kind that Waite reports: a witch doctor's cottage tenanted by a Tamil-speaking ape, the summoning of Beelzebub that culminates with the emergence of zombie fakirs, "eaten to the bone by worms," dragged out among skeletons "while serpents, giant spiders and toads swarmed from all parts."[3] Waite's dismay is clearly offset by a measure of amusement so that, ultimately, his panning of Bataille has the effect of popularizing an already successful popularization.

The often-contradictory reactions to Bataille's treatise on Satanism show how the issue of devil worship was viewed at the turn of the century from a surprising variety of perspectives. For serious practitioners of the occult sciences like Waite, the question of the devil's existence was primarily a matter of truth or deception. Refusing to judge Bataille's narrative as entertainment or diversion, Waite argues that the book contained no believable miraculous material. It is absurd, Waite asserts, that apes should talk, in familiar or exotic languages. It is impossible, Waite remarks about another tale Bataille tells, that a "female pythoness, aged 152 years, should allow herself to be consumed in a leisurely manner by fire."[4] Failing to evaluate Bataille's work on the basis of the pleasure afforded readers, Waite asserts the obvious in dismissing its contents as "transparently fabulous." "To attribute a historical veracity to the adventures of Baron Munchausen might scarcely seem," Waite summarizes, "more unserious that to accept this *récit de témoin* [eye-witness account] as evidence for transcendental phenomena."[5]

Lively and protean in popular narrative, the fin-de-siècle Satan became repellent and cold in first-hand accounts – like those documented in Huysmans's *Là-bas*. Unlike the devil who presided over contemporary ceremonies – banalized by witnesses' experiences – the uncertain Satan of folklore was the product of the imagination of the people invoking him. From an overview of literature on the fin-de-siècle devil, one sees the being first threatened by science, then assaulted by skepticism, and finally revitalized in art works whose creator worshiped the devil inhabiting his mind.

Those who disputed the reality of the devil's existence were motivated by different concerns. There were the dabblers in the dark arts who wished to avoid criminal prosecution or the threat of excommunication. And there were serious occultists condemned as Satanists or frauds who therefore sought to uphold the legitimacy of their own study. Thus, a broad confederacy of rationalists, intellectuals, occultists, doctors, and scientists often spoke in similar terms when denying the devil's existence as a physical being. A psychiatric disorder, a crude appeal to a foolish and credulous public, a symbolic embodiment of the human propensity toward cupidity, violence, and lust, the devil was widely described as the product of a primitive and disordered brain.

However, the Decadents also intuited that Satanism was not just an issue of fact, and that – more than an entity whose existence was demonstrable – the devil was the product of fear and nostalgia. The Satan who receded into the remoteness of history, who withdrew into the implausibility and vagueness of folklore, could be summoned forth by those whose creativity cast him in the shape of their desire. As Satan migrated from the domain of ontology into the realm of fiction and fantasy, he grew in stature, his avatars multiplied, and his majesty was enhanced by style and artistry.

The multifaceted richness of the devil who presided over the fin de siècle is most thoroughly represented in Huysmans's *Là-bas*, a work whose own genre complexity emerges as one of the story's underlying themes. Part autobiography, part history, part fiction, the novel resembles the devil it pictures, showing that what empiricism makes poor is what conjecture enlivens. Huysmans's lessons are echoed by contemporaries like his nemesis Stanislas de Guaïta, who also realized the connection between fantasy and evil. Guaïta may dispute the factuality of Huysmans's account of a Black Mass seen in Paris, showing himself "anxious to bring a corrective to Huysmans's affirmations,"[6] yet in his historic overview of sorcery, Guaïta's anatomy of Satan shows him to be a rich and complex figure. Guest of honor at midnight Sabbaths, the devil known as *Maître Léonard* mutates from a creature the size of a squirrel into a monstrous goat with twisted horns. With his body emitting "a vague fluorescence" that radiates in spirals, pestilential effluvia enveloping him in "a pale atmosphere,"[7] the devil baptizes the Sabbath bride with urine on a plain lit up by torch-fire. This is a different devil from the being who, to modern intellectuals, is only a symbolic embodiment of human ignorance and vice.

Following Huysmans, Guaïta traces the evolution of the devil who, from the fearsome Sabbath sovereign, dwindles into a ridiculous