

Science, Belief and the Art of Subjectivity: From Fromentin's to Huysmans's Modern Primitifs

“**O**ne of those who defined themselves as modern in order to *believe*”:¹ J.-K. Huysmans’s autobiographical comment in an 1883 letter to Paul Bourget, pinpoints an emerging paradox both in his and his period’s art. That is, an increasing focus on art and literature as stimuli for suggestively aestheticized religious and mystic experiences, yet as mediated through the *fin-de-siècle*’s newest scientific interests and discourses. There is a rich literature on science, its interfaces with art and transforming ideas of the spiritual from the mid-nineteenth century onwards – from Jules Verne’s “science-in-fiction,”² Darwinist-inspired spiritual evolutionism,³ to Symbolist occultism – especially in fuelling fascination with shifting boundaries of fiction and life; sensation and self; modernity and the spiritual. The extent to which resurgent late nineteenth-century religious revivals or their newer expressions contributed to, politicized, and complicated this momentum is perhaps less explored and merits closer study.⁴ This article’s concern is a more specific, yet neglected aesthetics and politics of spiritual revival through conceptions of art which, arguably, were to contribute compelling new insights within these broader developments. Focusing on two of the period’s most prominent art writers – Fromentin and Huysmans –

it examines their suggestive navigation of tensions between science, the natural, art and subjectivity around a growing interest in the spirituality of Northern European Renaissance artists as so-called “primitives” to develop models of art that do not so much transcend, but rather amplify these tensions.

My article’s particular focus is two-fold. First it considers how and for what purposes, Fromentin and Huysmans reposition ideas of “primitive” or regressive artistic tendencies from earlier art-historical periods as touchstones for a *fin-de-siècle* evolving modernity of vision and perception. My second, closely linked theme examines Huysmans’s developed interest in such innovations to show how, via Impressionism and especially from *Certains* (1889), his concern with a suggestive spirituality of both art and its experience, becomes consummately embodied in his emblem of the *primitif* modern artist.

Eugène Fromentin's suggestively spiritual "Primitifs": observation and invisibility

The genesis of this figure can be traced to Eugène Fromentin's 1876 *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois*, especially to the final section's journey to uncover the neglected "masters" of early Flemish and Dutch Renaissance art. Indeed it is here that Fromentin's overarching themes of artistic revival and pilgrimage ("pèlerinage"), observation and reflection, of "visibility" and "invisibility," reach their symbolic conclusions. What begins in the spirit of French Third-Republican discourses of nation-building through revivalism becomes instead, as unfolded in the geographically and spiritually displaced *pays* of the Brussels Musée des Beaux-Arts, "un pèlerinage"⁵ through the art of the Low Countries, to occulted and "invisible" histories, "lost on the world's great highways," that Fromentin intimates lie at the limits, "our frontiers" ("nos frontières"), of the familiar and charted.⁶ And the final section's "Belgique," bookending the Introduction's pilgrimage, develops these ideas with particular prescience around rediscovery of the early modern artist as a touchstone for new artistic creation and revelation. Fromentin's principal concern, here, is to uncover and shed light on hitherto unseen aspects of early Netherlandish and Flemish Renaissance visual culture, recuperating invisible "masters" from rarity and neglect in a final-stage emblematic return to a notional source in medieval craft, "this first wave of creations," of all Flemish and Dutch art.⁷ Yet in channelling his broader theme through the van Eyck brothers' and Hans Memling's intuitive realisms, Fromentin presents them as portals to a visionary new art of seeing for the late nineteenth-century viewer. That is, they become emblems of developed spiritual as much as national potency. Modelling an art of reflection, they evoke

"moral depths by means of their [painterly] surfaces" ("le fond moral avec les surfaces") as well as evolving descriptive observation, magnifying perception to the point where it becomes visionary.

Of significance here is Fromentin's art-critical evocation of Jan and Hubert van Eyck's and Memling's use of realism as artistically and socially regressive, or "primitive," in a sense borrowed from his mentor Taine,⁸ in aspects of their art's perceived "primitiveness" of conception, yet also as richly generative in sensory, imaginative and artistic terms. This involved a significant repositioning of the central arguments of Taine's 1869 *Philosophie de l'art dans les Pays-Bas*. In this study, based on his 1867 Sorbonne lectures, Taine had developed the central innovations broached in his *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1864), emphasizing the work of art as a product and distillation of its determinant historical race (understood as "culture"), moment and milieu: a race, moment and milieu, deducible from the work of art as a type of selective "evidence" or "document."⁹ But his *Philosophie de l'art dans les Pays-Bas* marked a critical expansion of these ideas, suggesting an artistic prototype and teleology for Taine's vision of contemporary scientific social advancement with its avatars in Dutch art and culture of the so-called Golden Age. Here, despite the innovations he ascribes to early Renaissance Netherlandish and Germanic art in its vigorous, new "living form" of art ("une forme vivante"), characterizing a progressive, emphasis on a "human" reality, Taine positions it as a springboard for an evolutionary genealogy of cultural progress.¹⁰ His is a narrative, therefore, that acknowledges the Van Eycks, Quentin Massys, Memling and the art of their contemporaries as emblematic of their period's "dual artistic character" ("le double caractère de l'art"). Yet, above all, he sees it as marked by its medievalism and socially regressive emblems of Christian ritual in "paintings for the altar or

oratory,"¹¹ to be displaced by the more humanistic, progressive vision expressed in Dutch seventeenth-century art, pre-eminently by Rembrandt's.¹² Fromentin traces a similar path of interests. However, it is precisely Taine's trajectory and its underpinning teleological drive towards rational explanation of the work of art as itself a rational, scientific expression of its history, that Fromentin's seeks overturn by his view of early Renaissance visual culture as sites for a mysterious "science" of inward evolution. In fact, his "primitives" provide stimuli for a reflective journey of perception and imagination which, for Fromentin, takes his readers to questions equally central to contemporary literary and visual scientific naturalisms and to their limitations. Indeed, they move readers to the possibilities of a deeper "seeing" which rejects discovery and scientific observation as mere encyclopaedic knowledge accumulation,¹³ to amplify the inward potential of the visible.

These ideas are evocatively explored in Fromentin's long description of "The Lamb of God," the central interior panel of the Van Eycks' *Ghent Altarpiece* (completed 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent), where this idea of heightened seeing codes an evolution of the process of descriptive observation itself. Even more striking is Fromentin's emphasis on how the panel's focus, the act of Redemption accomplished, is mediated "not by the art of the manuscript illuminator but in painting,"¹⁴ in other words, aesthetically, by its art. Reflection is stimulated and prolonged by an accumulation of visual and material detail, and temporal narrative devices that move the reader as if meditatively, in space and time (through the panel's iconographic details), as well as immersively into a visually intensified world. Description, however, becomes the basis for a greater mystery of exploration intimated in the panel's patterns and rhythms of natural and aesthetic motifs and effects, from the earthly bands of worshippers – "[from]

ancient bards to Ghent bourgeois; [with] abundant beards, faces a touch flattened, protruding lips, utterly lively expressions” – to the celestial sensations of the receding landscape with its “delicate colours” (“couleurs tenders”), fading “faintly tinged with blue marine” to the “iridescent pallor” of a poetically-charged dawn.¹⁵

It is here, as Fromentin suggests, not at its visual and symbolic centre, but at the panel’s blurred horizons, that “the spirit may there pause at infinity and dream there of infinity without divining the depths of the mystery it evokes.”¹⁶ But this limitless mystery is also intensified by Fromentin’s sensory and art-critical magnifications of it, bringing the Van Eycks’ much older, emblematic realism closer to the perceptual experience of *the fin-de-siècle* viewer’s, actively developing the beholder’s senses through art-poetical evocations of indeterminacy to create a spirituality of both sensation and *mood*. Mirrored in Fromentin’s unfolding critical evocation, his text thus creates an analogous, mobile “poetry of looking” (“une poétique du regard”) to borrow Barbara Wright’s term.¹⁷ But this is also a poetry of painting’s materiality as spiritual metaphor, taking readers to further corresponding textual and sensory journeys: from presence to inwardness, from external to internal “view,” from sensation to ineffable mood, much as the devices of fifteenth-century Netherlandish religious art encouraged viewers to travel metaphorically by episodic narrative and descriptive fragments of observable reality, from secular to sacred realms.¹⁸

Yet Fromentin also positions the van Eycks as transitional figures. Their art becomes a staging-post towards Hans Memling’s greater realism, seen as more spiritualized, intense, expressive and as visionary. Here, the focus shifts to Jan van Eyck’s Bruges *Virgin and Saint Donatian* (*The Madonna with Canon van der Paele* 1434–36: Bruges, Groeningemuseum). Once more, Fromentin’s concern

is to heighten and intensify a sense of the robustness of its “natural” effects, drawing out its mixture of “primitive” and opulent physicality: the Virgin, evoked as “ugly” (“laide”), her child, malformed – (“rachitique”), “a poor little malnourished type;”¹⁹ Saint George, characterized as strangely effeminate: “an androgynous type” (“une sorte d’androgyné”); the Donor with his hands “scored, all wrinkled” (“carrées, toutes rides”), his face, a “mask” its “rigid muscles, hardened, pitted by age” (“muscles réduits, durcis [...] crevassés par l’âge”), all knit together by “subtle values” (“valeurs subtiles”) and colour tonalities, correspondingly “deep, muted and rich” (“grave, sourd et riche”).²⁰ Yet if this precise realism borders on the visibly aberrant and strange, Fromentin’s innovation is a powerful and new association that sees van Eyck’s art of vision as less evolved, artistically and spiritually, than Memling’s more suggestive, synaesthetic art of feeling. Memling, Jan van Eyck’s neglected pupil, eclipsed by an almost cult following stimulated by his elder’s art from mid-nineteenth century onwards,²¹ is thereby resituated and *re-imagined* not, as for Taine, emblematic of an inferior and atavistic stage of art and social development, but as a “primitive” in a more expanded, illuminating sense. His is now linked with a complexly mysterious art, more spiritually attuned to the nervous sensitivities and psychological inwardness identified by Paul Bourget as defining the signal modernity of the late nineteenth-century beholder/reader’s experience.²²

The final section of “Belgique” teases out and develops this shift in emphasis. Indeed, Fromentin’s close-up on Memling’s *Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine* (c. 1479, Bruges, Hôpital St-Jean) forms a mirroring pendant to van Eyck’s Bruges Virgin, heightening qualities that, in contrast to van Eyck’s, are evoked as strange, bizarre and unearthly. St Catherine anticipates an almost proto-Symbolist over-refinement. Her face is “child-like and girlish” (“enfantin

et feminine”), her hands “full and long, tapering and transparent”; the seated Saint Barbara presents a similarly unearthly and attenuated grace with her “high, narrow neck” (“nuque haute et lisse”), her lips, “sealed and mystical” (“serrées et mystiques”).²³ Paradoxically, however, it is in these seemingly “primitive” visual languages, that Fromentin finds expressed an art closer to its medieval “origins.” It is an art highly attuned to its materials and manual processes; an art of “luxury and the beauty of craft” characterized by a rich but concise expressivity of means that seems to develop in intensity before its perceived decline into imitation and formula.²⁴

But even more significant for this argument are the ways in which Fromentin’s descriptive evocations again suggest links between these strange and “spiritualized” expressions of realism, new languages of art and a corresponding evolution in mid-nineteenth-century sensory and perceptual faculties. Textual magnifications (bordering on excess) of unusual sensory effects beginning in observation, thus become vehicles to transcend descriptive mapping, amplifying perception and illuminating the unseen. Fromentin’s art-critical language develops this idea, bringing Memling the artist and, more potently, his art’s mystery out of the shadows. Loaded with lexical evocations of sound, sight and touch that signify intense insight, these in fact, invert what Philippe Hamon calls naturalism’s “milieux transparent” – descriptive effects that render *visible*,²⁵ instead pushing the reader’s acquisition of “savoir” (description’s principal function) to intuiting the “unreadable” (“illisible”). There is, for example, Memling’s “extreme resonance of colour” and “passages of half-tones and vaporous half-tints not known even to Van Eyck.”²⁶ In sum, what matters for Fromentin, is that such effects, in which colour-play (tonal, as tint, contrast and intensity) has become a principal agency of insight, are markers not of primitive, but of

evolved vision and heightened capacity to grasp this, of a greater transfigured realism “which strikes one here *like a light*.”²⁷ It is an “illumination” in which Fromentin’s poetization of Memling’s visual and material mysteries and the beholder’s engagement in this process, becomes central to the transfigured “reality” it connotes: a process, inviting a “seeing” with the spirit and not just as Van Eyck does with the eye. Memling’s art thus becomes emblematic of a more significant journey, via perception and the museum, of a quasi-spiritual recovery and rediscovery. It metaphorizes what Wright calls “a privileged space” (“un lieu privilégié”), a Baudelairean “spiritual retreat” (“mansuétude surnaturelle”) in which making art, including poetically, and the sacred “act” may coalesce.²⁸ Even more than this: it figures a space which Fromentin actively identifies with an evolving state of subjectivity, reflection and *potential* creation, like the museums that house Memling’s paintings, as “a sort of virgin circumstance”²⁹ of vision, language and art.

This final point is arguably Fromentin’s striking innovation. On one hand, Memling’s art is projected as an alternative counter-cultural source for a modern mysticism. Yet on the other, this mysticism is located less as an ambition for late nineteenth-century nation-building or a new faith-based “enlightenment,” but as suggestively correspondent with a contemporary text and perspectives, seemingly distant from Fromentin’s. That is, Mallarmé’s 1876 defence of Manet’s *plein-air* painting as a touchstone for a new artistic vision and numinous ideology of it, that discovers mystery, spiritual qualities – “une sorcellerie,” also suggestively political – in the “science” as well as artistry of his art.³⁰ Such subtleties in Fromentin’s approach, his suggestion, via Memling’s and his other “primitives” art, of their “science” of the visible as also evocative of mysterious intuition, did not go unacknowledged by his readers. Indeed these innovations in Fromentin’s art writings were highlighted

in an important 1881 reassessment of their “delicate art of complex analysis,”³¹ challenging views, notably Zola’s, that placed them as “reactionary” and which instead linked them to a new, perception-driven and inward-looking modern, literary naturalism, in which the Goncourts’ “nervous realism” and Huysmans’s early writings are seen as determinant exemplars.

Huysmans’s “spiritual” matter: science, artifice and “les primitifs”

From an early point in his art criticism, Huysmans, like Fromentin, was similarly preoccupied with an emerging fascination with a more spiritually-directed art of late Medieval and early Renaissance so-called “primitives” and to the potential of its temporally and aesthetically “regressive,” yet spiritualized aspects. But his attitude to this interest, unlike Fromentin’s, was initially ambivalent, shown in his scepticism towards late-nineteenth-century Medieval and spiritual revivals with their consumerist trappings, *bibelots* and cultish mysticism.³² As he quipped late in life about a growing tide of “modern” saints and spiritualism: “The main difficulty is to distinguish between hysterical subjects and those filled with the spirit of divinity.”³³

A youthful attraction to early Northern (and Italian) Renaissance art is thus initially tempered by his distaste for its contamination by modern bourgeois fashions. His 1879 Salon review, for example, attributes to the Belgian Jan van Beers’s religious costume-dramas, a voguish realism imitating a “primitif” style – “It’s Van Eyck in hats [...] up-to-the-minute archaism” – while communicating nothing of its modernizing spirit.³⁴ Religious fakery inspires further bile about the recently-built Church of Nôtre-Dame de la Trinité as a shell without “croyants” for the bourgeois “church-

as-smoking-room” (“l’église-fumoir”), this “prayer-stool-cum-boudoir” (“ce prie-dieu Sopha”), little more than a fashionable backdrop for aspiring ladies taking their “lunchs mystiques.”³⁵ And sacred object cults, running themes in both his fiction and art criticism, is a recurrent obsession. We find it mercilessly satirized in the proliferating “relics” accompanying the pilgrims’ oblations at the start of *La Cathédrale* (1898), or in *Les Foules de Lourdes* (1903), in the opening account’s “explosion of knick-knackery of luxury goods”³⁶ at the holy Grotto; its phantasmagoria of ghostly religious *bric-à-brac*, substituting for mystic revelation, for “l’esprit divin.” But in Huysmans’s late art criticism, a developed interest in the art of the so-called “primitives,” elaborated in his 1904 evocation of Matthias Grünewald’s art, coupled with what Huysmans sees as the potency of “a realism of hidden regions” (“d’un réalisme avec dessous”)³⁷ – offered a way out of a spiritual darkness, both aesthetic and ideological.³⁸ The regressive “realist” of an earlier age becomes, as for Fromentin, but through more explicitly contemporary aesthetic and cultural routes, an emblem for a suggestive spirituality of art and being – one that resituates the “sacred” in the act of perception and ideas of its corporeal embodiment, as much as in spiritual subject-matter or in ways of capturing and communicating it.

Paradoxically, this is a process that begins not merely in revivalism, but as for Fromentin, is linked both with ideas of enhanced perception and a mysterious painterly materiality, stimulated by Huysmans’s initial interest in Impressionist modernity. Moreover, Huysmans’s view of Impressionism echoes ideas which Paul Bourget, in an important early article linking literary naturalism and visual Impressionism, situated not in “Impressionist” modern-life subjects, but in its treatment, foregrounding, as Bourget sees, by continuous nervous “exasperation,” a modern urgency of nerves in a focus on the potential of perception

to re-create the “real.”³⁹ This focus permeates Huysmans’s early 1880s responses to Impressionist art in ways that suggest his treatment of Impressionism in *L’Art moderne* (1883) as part of a trajectory of interests and approaches, not, as some scholars see them,⁴⁰ opposed to but anticipating the apparently anti-modern, Symbolist themes of *Certains* (1889), extending to his post-conversion *Trois primitifs* (1905).

In 1883, for example, Huysmans repeatedly reads Impressionist painting against the grain of its perceived objectivity and such narratives of its progressive modernity as Edmond Duranty’s.⁴¹ Instead, he stresses its heightened sensations of uncanny, unseen forces acting on nature, for example, turning Monet’s visions of modern railways into phantasmagorias, or seeing Pissarro’s hyper-real colour notations as alchemically-conjured landscapes, evoked as “melting to excess,” (“chauffées à l’outrance”).⁴² Fantastic “science” and exaggerated perception, here, work to extend the language of his art criticism. What is more, its painterly stimulus is more pointed than Fromentin’s in its tussles with a corporeal, political and ontological problem of naturalism’s mutating identities as an evolving discourse of late nineteenth-century science and art. Their intertwining becoming as much part of the critical dynamics of Huysmans’s engagement with Impressionism as related to the sources that inspire it. It is a process, indeed, carried much further in *Certains*, as manifest in heated descriptions of Cézanne’s “furnace-like” still-lives that again metamorphose nature into “a wild frenzy” (“un hourdage furieux”), of disintegrating matter, paint and colour.⁴³

But it is in *Trois primitifs*, and especially in Huysmans’s treatment of Grünewald’s art, that these ideas converge and develop further potency in the regressive, yet psychologically developed modernity of the “spiritualized”

naturalist artist. In its subject-matter, themes and aesthetic preoccupations, *Trois primitifs* seems far from the “modern-life” interests and their “decadent” reversals of Huysmans’s 1880s art-writings and fiction. Yet *Trois primitifs* does not so much reject contemporary literary or visual models of naturalism, nor Huysmans’s preoccupations with their scientific underpinnings, as reanimate it as a discourse charged with the potential both to suggest and *embody* the spiritual. The idea is central to Huysmans’s stress on Grünewald’s corporeal art he characterizes as “spiritual naturalism.” And it is elaborated forcefully in his long meditation on the expressive realism of Grünewald’s Colmar *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512–15; Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar) that, for Huysmans, compels viewers artistically and mystically on a spiritual journey where no theologian can follow. Such interests also significantly build on earlier ones, reprising Huysmans’s travels in 1888 to discover German “primitifs”⁴⁴ and first encounter with Grünewald’s Cassel *Crucifixion* (1523–4, Karlsruhe: Kunsthalle). It is an encounter also yoked ontologically with the artificial thrust of his *Certains* articles, in which this growing interest in “primitif” artists converges with modern Impressionist art, science and their writing into Huysmans’s art-critical and literary concerns at this period to develop alternative models for a contemporary (Northern-focused) spiritual art.

In *Certains*, for example, Degas’s 1886 *Bathers* paintings incite in him powerful modern-Medieval transferences, between visions of their bathers’ strangely atrophied flesh, unearthly, almost putrescent beauty and what he calls “*the unseen*, so resonant of certain “primitifs.”⁴⁵ “Le Monstre” compares Redon’s *Tentation* lithographs (*La Tentation de Ste Antoine*, 1888, Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago) to the hellish fantasies of both modern germ science and medieval bestiaries in a hybrid metaphor of darkness:

psychological, natural and aesthetic, as potent new sources of mystery in art. But, again, “les primitifs” and, in particular, Grünewald’s art, provide the stimuli for these developed science-artifice-spiritual analogies. Memorably reimagined in his novel *Là-Bas* (1891), in Durtal’s confrontation with the visceral spirituality of Grünewald’s Cassel Crucifixion, and its projection to Durtal’s time across the “chasms” of a lost world,⁴⁶ Huysmans finds his emblem, not of a revival, style or cliché of “the Middle-Ages rewound” (“le moyen âge raccordé”),⁴⁷ but of an active interference, an embodied, corporeal mysticism, as an occulted modernity in late nineteenth-century art and literature. Indeed, the need for emblems that might continue to answer to both imperatives yet revitalize and transform them, is central to Huysmans’s contrasting Flemish and Cologne school “pilgrimages” in *Trois primitifs*, highlighted with particular force in his detailed evocation of Grünewald’s “spiritual naturalism”: this discussion’s final focus.

Trois primitifs: regression and perception – towards a modern “spiritual” art

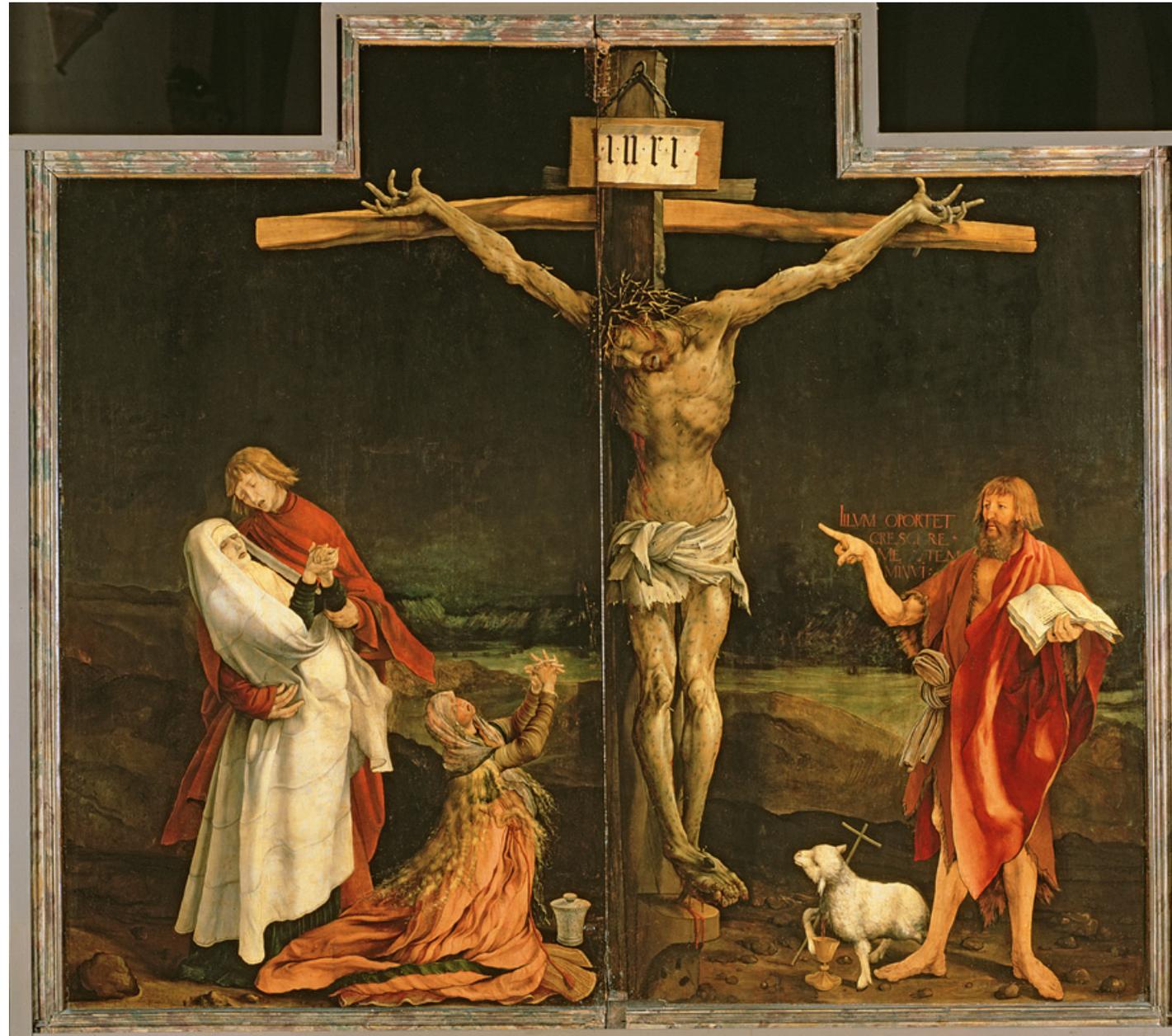
At its core is Huysmans’s developed treatment of his theme of the “regressive” modern artist. Indeed, the 1904 “Grünewald” article,⁴⁸ as the centre-piece of *Trois primitifs*, in an important sense, reprises – temporally and imaginatively – the final stages of the journey of *Les Maîtres d’Autrefois* to the aberrant but “spiritualized” realisms of Dutch and Flemish art. Like Fromentin’s “Memling,” it “pioneers” – retrieving from obscurity a new “primitive” modern, even though Fromentin’s remains an occulted presence in Huysmans’s text. It follows, too, other travels, art-historical and fictional, from Emile Verhaeren’s 1886 “Les Gothiques allemands” – the first treatment to identify a potential *fin-de-siècle* appeal in Grünewald’s intense colourism and “art farouche”⁴⁹ – to Durtal’s encounters

(in *Là-Bas*) with “primitive” artists (notably, again, Rogier van der Weyden, Metsys, Memling, the van Eycks), their “untranslatable” disturbances in image, mood and verbal evocations, acting as points of transference, “an exit from the senses,” between an unseen spirituality of past and present.⁵⁰ But Huysmans amplifies these sources in two ways that are of signal relevance here. First, is his stress on the abnormal intensity of Grünewald’s language of expressive realism – he does this through a heightened mediation of its sensational effects on its viewers – as a model for reanimating contemporary naturalism linked with his conception of the *primitifs*’ “absolute realism permeated by gushes of the spirit” (“réalisme absolue avec jets d’âme”).⁵¹ Second, is his communication of this idea in an expressive science and artistry of perception as spiritual, which in turn, figures a transformation and evolution in the viewer’s potential “spiritual” engagement with Grünewald’s art.

The journey begins, emblematically, like the final stages of Fromentin’s, in an apparently forgotten corner of art history. Yet Huysmans’s detailed response to Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* turns his revival into another more illuminating exploration. That is, he sees in Grünewald’s expressive naturalism an art pushed to frontiers of realism and symbolism to a point of aesthetic and spiritual expansion – where art, materiality, subjective and spiritual realities converge.

Central to this idea is Huysmans’s stress on the perceptual and cognitive mystery of the viewer’s experience of the *Isenheim* polyptych, differing from contemporaries’

Matthias Grünewald (Mathis Nithart Gothart), *The Crucifixion*, from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, c.1512–15, oil on panel, Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar, France/ Bridgeman Images .



interest in Grünewald's art, by his approach to it as a dialogue. The Altarpiece's complicated structure, with its four layers of painted surfaces, unusually has, as its outside panel, the *Crucifixion*, depicted not as an event, but as a meditation on the most gruelling aspects of suffering. Huysmans's encounter with it fleshes out this aspect, emphasizing the *Crucifixion's* sombre and livid realism, as materially, cognitively and even spiritually overwhelming. Yet the movement is also to recover what is aesthetically and spiritually modern and pertinent, especially from the human and material darkness of the "Crucifixion": a process Huysmans mirrors further on, in magnifying the plenitude of the brilliant colour and strange majesty of the *Resurrection* and final scenes of the Desert Saints within. His focus thus turns on the abnormal intensity seen as central to Grünewald's expressive plastic language, stressing, in a vocabulary remarkably similar to his 1889 treatment of Cézanne's "hourdage" ("frenzy"), its "typhoon of disintegrating art" ("typhon d'art déchainé"), "impression of overwhelming horror" ("impression de lamentable horreur"), making it difficult to take in, "it stuns you" ("il vous abasourdit"),⁵² evoking an unknown, that transcends a capacity to grasp it in language. What is more, the sense of being at the limits of narrative or art-critical possibility, creates a parallel dynamic of the alterity of the *Crucifixion's* visual and material "typhoon" and the *Resurrection's* answering "effusion of an almost palpable divinity" ("effusion de la divinité presque tangible") (figuring similar "violations" of body/language boundaries in *Les Foules de Lourdes*⁵³), which Huysmans builds through an abnormal intensity of perceptual encounter, that becomes a form of disperception as malady and *vision*. This approach, while not new to Huysmans's art-criticism, here acquires greater aesthetic and cognitive complexity. His evocation of Grünewald's crucified Christ as a collection of leaky and rotten body

parts, with his giant, disproportionate body, "livid and putrefying," "nails, blue with decomposition," "chest, striated with the stripes of martyrs,"⁵⁴ would seem almost comical if it were not so frightful. And this idea of perceptual revulsion bordering on the pathological⁵⁵ as key to grasping the intensity of Grünewald's "realism," is developed in Huysmans's amplified contrasts between the "brutal" Colmar (*Isenheim*) Christ and the more visually and theologically refined later Karlsruhe copy.

Yet, for Huysmans, it is also by its very limitations that the Colmar Christ, both "theological and primitive" ("théologique et barbare"), seems to push the boundaries of Grünewald's art to a new expressive level. Strikingly, this visual "barbarism" is again linked to something highly modern and evolved on the part of the viewer: to a perceptual, subjective intensity it invites. Indeed, Huysmans develops what become the Colmar Christ's generative discontinuities of colour, scale and sensory effects in a further series of contrasts between visual scale, Christ's exaggerated one; St. John's, "bald and sickly" ("glabre et minable"); Mary Magdalen's "ugly and dislocated" ("laide et disloquée"), contrasting with the Virgin's ("ethereal, fine and absolutely modern" ("frêle et fine, toute moderne"),⁵⁶ and their linking in an overarching dynamics of material, aesthetic and spiritual darkness and light.

These ideas are reprised most forcefully in the *Crucifixion's* evocation of its subjects' passage through a state of material and figurative disintegration, from "a backdrop beginning in darkness,"⁵⁷ to aesthetic and spiritual re-composition. But here also, the stress on heightened perceptual registers, especially of colour sensation, that for Huysmans "fills the eye" with dark and radiance – "giving hue and tone, despite their sombre depths," lights up "Christ's vitreous skin," irradiates the Virgin's "astonishing whiteness"⁵⁸ – pushes a perceptual grasp of Grünewald's visceral, symbolic

realism to a point of abnormally intense cognition, to a point in other words, *where heightened cognition creates space for the spiritual*. Yet inasmuch as Huysmans suggests an inner absorption of the art-work through extended linguistic and imaginative "imitations" (*imitatio*) to induce a state of intense spiritual preparedness – advent, which in Medieval Christian mysticism, emerges as a pre-condition of faith,⁵⁹ Huysmans also intimates this as aesthetically and psychologically conditioned and contingent. Perhaps most striking, however, is that Huysmans repositions Grünewald's modernity in its very dissolution of hierarchies between body, sensation, art and mystery, in which boundaries of history and the present; perception and being are enlarged, become "spiritualized."

In this way, Huysmans's presentation of the Colmar polyptych, what he identifies as strikingly spiritual in Grünewald's art, transcends a focus on a "pseudo-spirituality" of subject, object or type, distancing his approach from Catholic spiritual revivals or, indeed, the virulent mysticism of such groups as Joséphin Péladan's "Rose+Croix," which he dismisses as "mysticism for schoolboys" ("mysticisme des pions").⁶⁰ It becomes, rather, a process analogous to the Symbolist critic Aurier's idea of "prolongation" as spiritualized poetic expansion.⁶¹ As his mirroring evocative diptych of the Colmar Resurrection panel shows, the sense of Christ's "blossoming and scintillating" transfiguration, heightened by its material and chromatic suggestiveness: "these Japanese fabrics which metamorphose [...] from one colour to another,"⁶² is seen, therefore, as much to do with a potential of perception and its capacity to recreate spiritual plenitude, as of subject-matter or its expression. Picking up on a Symbolist idea of form as a route to the ineffable, Huysmans situates the mysticism of Grünewald's *Resurrection as translated* by "the game of colours and lines" ("les simulacres des couleurs et des lignes")⁶³ that serve to pro-

long aesthetic reflection, taking viewers, as Huysmans avers, more deeply into spirituality than any theologian could. But significantly, these “Symbolist” elements of Grünewald’s art do not negate its naturalist visual and painterly effects as means of extending or “prolonging” its suggestive power. Rather, for Huysmans, Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* reveals him as “a full-throated mystic” (“en pleine hallali mystique”⁶⁴): a process in which the viewer-as-mystic, is moreover implicated, compelling engagement as much with the material force and “barbarism” of Grünewald’s vision as with its spiritual message. As Huysmans affirms: “He [Grünewald] is at the same time, a naturalist and spiritualist, savage and civilized, frank and complicated.”⁶⁵

He is also modern, offering a visceral experience of art as a form of “primitive” reality that Huysmans now associates with a powerful racial vitality. Paralleling a rather unsettling connection Fromentin makes between Memling’s spiritually rarefied types and their “purification” by his art, this racial subtext points to a darker message in Huysmans’s “Grünewald,” explicit in its pendant “Frankfurt Notes,” in a stark vision of the “primitif” as a racially exclusive ideal.⁶⁶ In sum, what is striking here is that Grünewald’s presentation as a barbarian (“un barbare”), gestures less to an emblem of martyrdom with which Huysmans could identify, as some scholars argue,⁶⁷ but to something more mould-breaking. That is the re-positioning of the *fin-de-siècle* viewer as a “primitive,” whose perceptions are galvanized to a point of responsive tension and primal identification, strung, as it were, between the dark glass of the aesthetic and belief.

If Fromentin’s physical and emblematic pilgrimage in the closing pages of *Les Maîtres d’Autrefois* traces a neglected history of art to the possibility of a more spiritualized present one, in short, from the museum to the sanctified space, Huysmans’s visit to Colmar is also framed as a

journey. But it is one paradoxically that leads rather from art to the cloister, than from the cloister more deeply into art. Similarly, the example of Grünewald’s spiritual naturalism subsumes a more narrowly-focused 1890s Symbolist interest in suggestive or expressive languages of “form” as routes to the ineffable into an amplified and mysterious naturalism. It fuses science and subjectivity in the exemplary emblem of Grünewald’s regressive modernity, making this – and not Catholicism per se – portal to, and bearer of, spiritual and aesthetic insight in a new re-energized model of art, at once visceral and luminous, both dark and light, as “mystique,” “symboliste” and “barbare.”

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

- 1 Huysmans to Bourget (1883), in *Mélanges Pierre Lambert consacrés à Huysmans*, Pierre Cogny, et al. (Paris: Nizet, 1975), 35.
- 2 See Timothy Unwin's challenge to received ideas of Verne as a writer of "science fictions," arguing instead Verne's more complex mediations of "science," "art and illusion": *Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 7-10.
- 3 Notably in Fae Brauer and Barbara Larson, eds., *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms and Visual Culture* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2009) and in relation to Redon's art,
- 4 Richard Griffiths's *The Reactionary Revolution: the Catholic Revival in French Literature, 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1966) remains the main study in this field.
- 5 Eugène Fromentin, *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois* (1876), "Belgique I," in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. G. Sagnès (Paris: Eds Gallimard, 1984), 571. (All citations are taken from this edition, hereafter abbreviated as LMA: OC).
- 6 "égarée sur les grandes routes du monde," LMA: OC, 572.
- 7 "ce premier flot d'inspirations," LMA: OC, 788.
- 8 Notably in relation to Taine's series of lectures at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, published as his *Philosophie de l'art dans les Pays-Bas* (1869) which Fromentin acknowledged as his main inspiration (Fromentin, Letter to Hortense Howland, 17 September 1875, Fromentin, *Correspondance*, ed. Barbara Wright, 2024-5) and his key themes of race, moment and milieu, developed in his narrative of "progress" from earlier "barbarisms" (including early Flemish and Dutch artists), to a vision of secular progressivism. Embodied in Dutch art of the Golden Age, pre-eminently by Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, Taine identifies in Rembrandt's art a synthesis of the "abstract" and "individual," as both an exemplary model of "naturalism" and of artistic and social evolution (*Philosophie de l'art dans les Pays-Bas*, 1866 and 1869, republ. *Philosophie de l'art*, 2 vols, 2, Paris: Hachette, 1904, 77): all citations hereafter are taken from this edition).
- 9 On his conception of the work of art as 'document' and vis-à-vis problems of the 'aesthetic', see Colin Evans, *Taine: Essai de biographie intérieure* (Paris: Nizet, 1975), 320-28.
- 10 Taine, "La Peinture dans les Pays-Bas," *Philosophie de l'art* (2), 15.
- 11 "tableaux d'autel ou d'oratoire," Taine, "La Peinture dans les Pays-Bas," 21.
- 12 For an overview of Taine's approach to Dutch and Flemish art, see T.H. Goetz, *Taine and the Fine Arts* (Madrid: Playor, 1973), 113-129; however, the important relationship between Taine and Fromentin on this subject remains unaddressed.
- 13 Fromentin "Manuscrit des Maîtres d'Autrefois" [*Ffos 473-477*: Amsterdam, July], OC, 1213-15.
- 14 "non pas en enlumineur de missel, mais en peintre," LMA: OC, 792.
- 15 "des bardes antiques jusqu'à des bourgeois de Gand; barbes épaisses, visages un peu camards, lèvres faisant la moue, physiologies toutes vivantes"; "faiblement teinté d'outremer"; "a blancheur nacré" LMA: OC, 792-3.
- 16 "l'esprit peut s'y arrêter à l'infini, y rêver à l'infini sans trouver le fond de ce qu'il exprime ou de ce qu'il évoque," LMA: OC, 793.
- 17 In this way, Wright argues, Fromentin's art criticism develops a "double vue," a suggestive interplay between painterly and poetic expression especially through mobility of perspective, movement and colour to engage the reader's 'personal involvement in a sketch which is always in a state of becoming'. Wright, 'La langue de la critique d'art dans *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois* d'Eugène Fromentin', *Colloque Eugène Fromentin: Travaux et Mémoires de la Maison Descartes Amsterdam*, 1 (Lille: Université de Lille, 1979), 21.
- 18 On "mental pilgrimage" in the work of Jan van Eyck and Memling, see, C. Harbison, Jan van Eyck: *the Play of Realism* (London: Reaktion, 1991), esp. 186-7.
- 19 "un pauvre petit modèle mal nourri," LMA: OC, 794.
- 20 LMA: OC, 795.
- 21 On the issue of van Eyck's growing popularity and Memling's neglect (mainly in nineteenth-century British reception), see J. Graham, *Inventing Jan van Eyck: The Remaking of an Artist for the Modern Age* (London: Berg International, 2007), 7-8.
- 22 Especially in his widely-read 1881 essay on Baudelaire: see Paul Bourget, "Charles Baudelaire," *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883), repr. *Paul Bourget: Essais de psychologie contemporaine, études littéraires*, ed. André Guyaux (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 3-18.
- 23 "pleine et longue, fuselée et nacré," LMA: OC, 797.
- 24 "luxe et la beauté du travail"; "avant de se corrompre," LMA: OC, 798-99; 798.
- 25 Philippe Hamon, "Qu'est-ce qu'une description?" *Poétique*, 12 (1972), 473.
- 26 "extrême résonance du coloris"; "passages des demi-teintes vaporeuses et fondues que Van Eyck n'avait pas connues [author's emphases]," LMA: OC, 800.
- 27 "qui éclate ici comme une lumière," LMA: OC, 801.
- 28 Barbara Wright, "La langue de la critique d'art dans *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois* d'Eugène Fromentin" (1979), 30.
- 29 "une sorte de virginité de circonstance," LMA: OC, 803.
- 30 "a sorcery of art, a life which is neither that of the individual or of the senses, but the play of phenomena conjured by his science, and revealed to our astonished eyes in its perpetual transformations and its invisible actions, made visible" ("une sorcellerie de l'art, une vie qui n'est ni de l'individu ni des sens, mais de l'ordre des phénomènes conjurés par la science, et montrés a nos yeux étonnés avec ses métamorphoses perpétuelles et son invisible action, rendue visible"), Stéphane Mallarmé, "The Impressionists and Edouard Manet" [author's translation] trans. G. T. Robinson, *The Art Monthly Review* (no. 9, 30 September 1876): repr. (French translation) in *Mallarmé: écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), ed. Michel Draguet, 313.
- 31 Of Fromentin's "very supple and concise critical art [...] which with its means, its subtleties of analysis, has a fineness and a deliciousness" ("art très souple et très sûr chez le critique [...] cela avec des moyens, des complications d'analyse, une finesse et un délié"), Paul Souquet, "Eugène Fromentin," *La Nouvelle revue*, Vol. 8 (1881), 865-885 (883).
- 32 On medievalism, consumerism and "les primitifs," see for example, Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, *Consuming the Past: the Medieval Revival in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), especially, 37-60.
- 33 "La grande difficulté est de distinguer entre les sujets hystériques et ceux que remplit l'esprit divin," J.-K. Huysmans, "Saints modernes et miracles modernes," Interview with Frederick Lees (*The Humanitarian: a Monthly Review of Sociological Science*, February 1899), J.-K. Huysmans: Interviews, ed. Jean-Marie Seillan (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002), 265.
- 34 "c'est du Van Eyck toqué [...] de l'archaïsme chargé," "Salon de 1879," *Huysmans: Ecrits sur l'art*, ed. Jérôme Picon (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2008), 60-1 (all citations are taken from this edn: hereafter abbreviated as *Ecrits*.)

- 35 “Salon de 1879,” *Écrits*, 100-1.
- 36 “explosion de la bimbeloterie de luxe,” Huysmans, *Les Foules de Lourdes* (Grenoble: Millon, 1993), 80.
- 37 Huysmans, Letter to Arij Prins (March 1886), *Lettres inédits à Arij Prins 1885-1907* (Geneva: Droz, 1977), 36-7.
- 38 See Robert Baldick’s account, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: OUP, 1955), 264.
- 39 Paul Bourget, “Paradoxe sur la couleur” (first published in *Le Parlement*, 14 May 1881), repr. Bourget, *Études et portraits: portraits d’écrivains et notes d’esthétique* (1889-1906), edn déf. (Paris: Lemerre, 1919), 267-73. On this article, and Bourget’s conception of “nervous realism,” see Juliet Simpson, “Bourget, Laforgue and Impressionism’s Inside Story,” *French Studies*, Vol. LV, no. 4 (October 2001), 467-83.
- 40 See, for example, Alain Buisine, *Huysmans à Fleur du peau* (Artois: Artois Presses Universitaires, 2004), 13-15. Cf. M. Smeets, *Huysmans l’inchangé: Histoire d’une conversion* (Amsterdam, New York: Faux Titre, 2003) who argues a consistency between the naturalist/decadent type, dandy and ‘spiritual’ figure/artists in Huysmans’s late fiction (166-7).
- 41 Especially in his *La Nouvelle peinture* (1876) in which Duranty attempts to situate what he terms the ‘new painting’ in an objective context of interpretation, relating Impressionist innovations in techniques and subject matter to contemporary scientific and social advances.
- 42 Huysmans, “Exposition des Indépendants en 1881,” *Écrits*, 205.
- 43 “Cézanne” (1889), *Écrits*, 265.
- 44 From 31 July to 30 August 1888, visits included to Cologne, Lübeck, Berlin, Weimar, Erfurt, Gotha and Cassel: Huysmans’s reaction to his Cassel visit is intimated in a letter to Jules Destrée on his return from Germany (September 1888) noting that, ‘I have long studied the Primitifs in museums’ (“j’ai longuement étudiée les Primitifs dans les musées”) and further that, “I have some fragments in my books underway” (“j’ai des morceaux dans mes livres en vogue (sic)” – a reference to the description that would appear in *Là-Bas*: Huysmans, *Lettres inédites à Jules Destrée* (Geneva: Droz, 1967), 152.
- 45 “*Invu si juste* des certains primitifs,” “Du Dilettantisme,” *Écrits*, 255.
- 46 Huysmans, *Là-Bas* (1891), préf. Yves Hersant (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1985): see esp. 33-4.
- 47 Denouncing Medieval pastiche in the period’s decorative art and architectural innovations (“Le Musée des Arts Décoratifs,” 1889), *Écrits*, 341.
- 48 Huysmans, “Les Grünewald du Musée de Colmar,” *Le Mois littéraire et pittoresque*, 63 (March 1904), 282-300; republished with minor alterations, *Trois primitifs* (Messein, 1905), *Écrits*, 299-415.
- 49 Emile Verhaeren, “En voyage: Les Gothiques allemandes,” *L’Art moderne* (15 August 1886), republished in part, *La Vogue*, 2 (27 September – 4 October 1886); also important in this respect, is Tédodor de Wyzéwa’s treatment of Cologne School artists (although excluding Grünewald): “Les Peintres primitifs de l’Allemagne,” *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 92 (15 April 1889), 856-883.
- 50 “une échappée hors des sens,” Huysmans, *Là-Bas* (1985), 32.
- 51 Huysmans, Letter to Destrée, 12 December 1890, *Lettres inédites à Jules Destrée* (1967), 173-4.
- 52 “Les Grünewald du musée du Colmar,” *Écrits*, 391-2.
- 53 On this and the idea of Huysmans’s language as “suffering,” see Robert Ziegler, *The Mirror of Divinity: The World and Creation in J.-K. Huysmans* (Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2004), 331-338.
- 54 “livide et vernissé”; “les ongles devenus bleus pourrissent”; “la poitrine [...] rayée par le grill des cotés,” “Les Grünewald du musée de Colmar,” *Écrits*, 392.
- 55 At this point, Huysmans reinforces his suggestive perceptual play with sensations of malady and spirituality in referencing comparisons between the Crucifixion’s revolting spectacle of putrefaction and cases described in Jean-Martit Charcot’s and Paul Richer’s “Les Morts,” *Les Difformes et les maladies dans l’art* (Paris: Lecrosnier et Babé, 1889), 130 (*Écrits*, 405).
- 56 “Les Grünewald du musée de Colmar,” *Écrits*, 393.
- 57 “un fond, commençant de nuit,” “Les Grünewald du musée de Colmar,” *Écrits*, 394.
- 58 “les tons malgré tout sombre du fond”; “les chairs vitreuses du Christ”; “éclatante blancheur,” “Les Grünewald du musée de Colmar,” 394.
- 59 Notably in the writings of the fourteenth-century Flemish mystic, Jan van Ruysbroeck (d. 1381) in *The Spiritual Espousals* (c.1340: transl. Eric Colledge, London: Faber and Faber, 1952; repr. 1983) in its proposition of a three-part journey from the active to the inward/contemplative state: the inspiration for the fifteenth-century *devotio moderna* developed in writings attributed to Thomas à Kempis (*Imitatio Christi*) and later, of particular interest for Maeterlinck and his *fin-de-siècle* mystic contemporary, Ernest Hello: see his *Jan van Ruysbroeck: Oeuvres choisis* (Paris: Perrin, 1902).
- 60 Huysmans: Interview with Bernard Guinaudeau, *La Justice* (2 April 1892), in *J.-K. Huysmans: Interviews*, (2002), 121.
- 61 Indeed, Albert Aurier refers to this idea of Symbolist ‘translation’ (describing his art-critical method) as “un prolongement spirituel,” “Henry de Groux,” *Le Mercure de France*, 3 (October 1897), in *Albert Aurier: textes critiques 1889-1892* (Paris: Ecole nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1995), 79.
- 62 “ces tissus japonais, qui se transforment [...] d’une couleur en une autre,” “Les Grünewald du Musée de Colmar,” *Écrits*, 398.
- 63 “Les Grünewald du musée de Colmar,” 398.
- 64 “nous sommes avec lui en pleine hallali mystique,” “Les Grünewald du musée de Colmar,” 397
- 65 “Il est à la fois, naturaliste et spiritaliste, sauvage et civilisé, franc et retors,” “Les Grünewald du musée de Colmar,” 412
- 66 Principally against what he refers to as “contamination” by modern Jewish materialism: “Francfort-sur-le-Main, Notes,” *Trois primitifs* (1905), *Écrits*, this idea: 434.
- 67 See Alain Buisine on Huysmans’s response to Grünewald as an act of spiritual identification (*La Fleur à peau*, 2004), 14. Cf. Marc Smeets on its “Baudelaireanism” (*Huysmans l’inchangé*, 2003), 142-47.