The life of J.-K. Huysmans, Robert Baldick, Brendan King, Dedalus, 2006, 1903517435, 9781903517437, 592 pages. First published fifty years ago, Baldick's biography presents a narrative of Huysmans' life and work in all its various phases - from the Naturalism of the 1870s to the Decadence of the 1880s, and from the occult vogue of the 1890s to the Catholic Revival of the turn of the century - and it is written with such impeccable scholarship that it is still relied on today as regards matters of fact and detail. For this new edition - the first time the biography has been reprinted in English - Baldick's notes have been extensively revised and updated by Brendan King to take account of the new developments and publications in the field of Huysmansian studies.

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The Mirror of Divinity The World and Creation in J.-K. Huysmans, Robert Ziegler, 2004, Literary Criticism, 385 pages. Author of the notoriously mystifying breviary of the Decadence, A Rebours, Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) has often been perceived as a singularly elusive and changeable....

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Là-bas, Joris-Karl Huysmans, 2001, Fiction, 278 pages. J.-K. Huysmans's gaudy, shocking, and largely autobiographical novel, The Damned (L-Bas) was quickly condemned and just as quickly achieved cult status. It follows Durtal, a....

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Pages from the Goncourt Journal, Edmond De Goncourt, Jules De Goncourt, 2007, Biography & Autobiography, 434 pages. No evocation of Parisian life in the second half of the nineteenth century can match that found in the journals of the brothers Goncourt The brothers Edmond and Jules de ....

This, a work of literature in its own right. First published fifty years ago, this classic new edition, the first time the biography has been reprinted in English, presents a compelling narrative of Huysmans's life and work in all its various phases. Written with impeccable scholarship, it remains a standard work of reference to this day. Baldick's notes have been extensively revised and updated by Brendan King to take account of new developments and publications in the field of Huysmansian studies. Like Froude's biography of Carlyle, Holroyd's Shaw, and Ellmann's Joyce, Robert Baldick's The Life of J.K. Huysmans is consulted as regularly as the writing of the author whose life it chronicles.

Robert Baldick (1944-1972) was one of Britain's leading French scholars. His other books include The Life and Times of Fredrick Lemaître (1959), The First Bohemian: The Life of Henry Murger (1961), and The Siege of Paris (1965). He was also an accomplished translator of many Penguin Classics titles.

Even though this book was published 50 years ago, it is still a core source for anyone interested in this very important writer, particularly for those of us who don't read French. (It should be noted though that this book has also appeared in a French translation.) Baldick, who also translated at least one Huysmans novel (Against Nature), covers the entire life in clear prose, dealing with the author's faults and struggles, though also clearly sympathetic to his subject. There is an index, notes and a list of Huysmans' published works as well as some black and white illustrations. Readers should note that this book has been recently reissued in the UK, so they may want to check Amazon.uk.

Originally published in 1955, the updated 2006 edition is still regarded as the standard work of reference on the life and work of J-K Huysmans. It is published by Dedalus, who also publish many of Huysmans' novels. I first discovered Huysmans' work via his novel 'La-Bas' which I borrowed from the library. In 1991, when I read the 'sequel' to that book, 'En Route', I made this note in my diary: "The only man who can make Catholicism sound as dangerous as Satanism. His writing is beautiful, mystical, alluring."
Born in 1847 to a Dutch father and a French mother, his was an unhappy childhood. In 1856 his father died, and his mother remarried a year later. A 'pale, delicate boy', at school he was bullied. After school he joined the civil service, and lived for a while with an actress. All his life he was to struggle to find a meaningful way of existing. His relationship with the actress - who became pregnant by another man - left him disenchanted and cynical.

In 1884 he published 'A Rebours' ['Against Nature']. Baldick describes its central character, des Esseintes, as 'the repository of Huysmans' secret tastes and untold dreams, and that in their sickly sensibility, their yearning for solitude, their abhorrence of human mediocrity, and their thirst for new and complex sensations, author and character were one.' My own reaction to the novel comes from a 1991 journal entry: "The story of a man apart; a gorgeous, sickly anti-hero hermetically sealed from the common herd by an uncommon intellect. There is no plot as such, the book is a catalogue of things worth caring about (?): literature, art, beautiful things, jewels, perfumes. But where are all the people? Where is love? It's all very rarefied: Latin poets, Salomë, the black dinner, jewelled tortoises: all thrown into this golden baroque stew. Peter Greenaway could make a brilliant film from this."

'A Rebours' was a significant departure from his earlier, Naturalist, works. However, in spite of the decadence of the subject matter, it was significant that des Esseintes finally turns to God to help him find meaning in life. In a letter to Huysmans, his friend Leon Bloy notes that he told Baudelaire 'After Les Fleurs du Mal...it only remains for you to choose between the muzzle of a pistol or the foot of the Cross.' In his letter he wonders if Huysmans (who admired Baudelaire's work greatly) will make the same choice.

For a while, this seemed unlikely. Huysmans, always searching for 'spiritual satisfaction which life, love, and literature had all failed to afford him', became interested in the occult. 'La-Bas', first published in 1891, was written in a new style - 'spiritual naturalism' - and included material on Gilles de Rais [see previous entry in this journal] in a novel that he hoped would examine satanism in both the contemporary and medieval worlds. The novel includes a famous Black Mass scene, but it is not known whether Huysmans himself ever attended such an event. The book's central character, Durtal, also appeared in three later novels, in which Huysmans recorded Durtal's search for spiritual meaning in his life.

Although Huysmans was to turn his back on satanism, he didn't regret this period of his life. In Baldick's words, 'It had taught him to fear and respect things supernatural'. Christian art and mysticism were the means by which Huysmans made his gradual journey towards Catholicism. He had problems accepting Christian dogma and - 'accustomed to a life of sexual indulgence' - the journey was never going to be easy.

In 1892 he went on a spiritual retreat to a Trappist monastery. The literary product of this phase of his spiritual journal was 'En Route', published in 1895. In it, Huysmans intended to 'trace the progress of a soul surprised by the gift of grace, and developing in an ecclesiastical atmosphere, to the accompaniment of mystical literature, liturgy, and plainchant, against a background of all that admirable art which the Church has created.' In a 1995 diary entry, made after reading 'En Route', I wrote: "Durtal has a basic faith, but insists on his religion of choice being aesthetically pleasing - and yet, this is a dense, beautiful book, a hymn to the beauty of words and to the necessity for beauty."

The next book, 'The Cathedral', was to be a study of Durtal's soul 'as it underwent the permeating influence of medieval architecture and art.' Following his retirement from the Civil Service, he finally became - in 1901 - a Benedictine oblate (a layperson dedicated to religious life). This period of life he dealt with in 'L'Oblat', published in 1903. His lifelong misogyny was finally resolved - thanks to his devotion to the Virgin, he came to view women no longer as demonic temptresses but as 'an instrument of salvation.'

Huysmans never found true happiness - to the end of his life he retained the feeling that his life had 'been a failure'. Often he'd envied ordinary people, who seemed content with their marriages and
families, but he knew he wasn't cut out for that kind of life. His one great hope - that he could finally find happiness in a monastic environment - failed him. Nevertheless, from his experiences he learnt the lesson that was to resign him to life, and find meaning in his own unhappiness - 'the belief that escape from life's misery is impossible and that one should accept sorrow and suffering with good grace, for the expiation of one's sins and the sins of others.' A non-Catholic finds little consolation in this view of life, but Huysmans had at least stayed true to his earlier stated belief, that one can only be a pessimist, an anarchist, or a Christian. Diagnosed with cancer, he bore his own suffering with a great deal of dignity and grace, dying in 1907 at the age of fifty-nine.

Dedalus have been steadily printing the novels of the astonishing 19th-century French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans and as a bonus have reissued Robert Baldick's classic biography, one of the most elegant, stimulating and moving of all literary biographies, right up there with Leon Edel's James and George Painter's Proust, revised and annotated by Brendan King. The life and the work are equally compelling.

The Life of J.-K. Huysmans speaks for itself - in glorious detail, you have a compelling narrative of his life and work in all its various phases; from Naturalism of the 1870s to the Decadence of the 1880s, and from the occult vogue of the 1890s to the Catholic Revival of the turn of the century.

Robert Baldick's tripartite division of Huysmans's writing career into Naturalist, Decadent and Catholic stages has seemed irresistibly sensible to subsequent critics. Baldick's landmark biography, which first appeared in 1955 and has now been reissued in paperback by those stalwarts of the Decadent movement, Dedalus. This is a timely project, next year being the centenary of Huysmans's death, and the amendments and additions of the Huysmans scholar Brendan King, will be of genuine interest to those in search of a Life. Baldick's biography has not been superseded in subsequent decades by English or French accounts. King does a fine job, 'mindful' as he is of treading a path between the faithful adherence to the original text and the need to produce a work that took new research into account and was therefore relevant to present day scholars'.

Like Froude's biography of Carlyle, Holroyd's Shaw, and Ellmann's Joyce, Robert Baldick's The Life of J.-K. Huysmans has become not just a standard reference work, to be consulted as regularly as the writing of the author whose life it chronicles, but a work of literature in its own right. First published fifty years ago, Baldick's classic biography presents a compelling narrative of Huysmans's life and work in all its various phases; from the Naturalism of the 1870s to the Decadence of the 1880s, and from the occult vogue of the 1890s to the Catholic Revival of the turn of the century; and it is written with such impeccable scholarship that it is still relied on today as regards matters of fact and detail. For this new edition - the first time the biography has been reprinted in English - Baldick's notes have been extensively revised and updated by Brendan King to take account of new developments and publications in the field of Huysmansian studies.

For a long-time admirer of the rich, eloquent and trenchant prose of Joris Karl Huysmans as exemplified in such masterworks as 'La Bas' (Down There) the very welcome re-issue of this classic biography by Robert Baldick presents a detailed and penetrating account of the life of this great literary artist, essayist and art critic, painting a comprehensive portrait of the various stages of his career from Naturalist disciple of Zola through the periods of his occultist preoccupations and his involvement with the Symboliste milieu of 19th century Paris and transcending all these worldly vanities, to the ultimate flowering of his intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual sensibility realised via his conversion to Catholic Christianity, the quest of JKH is very much a narrative of modern man's disillusionment, disgust and fatigue with the fads, crassness and inane vagaries of the contemporary world and the archetypal inward quest in pursuit of those eternal and immutable verities which only Art and Mysticism can reveal (as one of JKH's characters says art and religion are the only 2 subjects worthy of one's attention, everything else being pretty much a waste of time.) - this well-written biography charts Huysmans' course through life and his involvement with a gallery of interesting and sometimes bizarre characters including the heresiarch-occultist the Abbe Boullan, the bohemian courtesan-model Berthe de Courriere, the volatile and acerbic Catholic writer Leon...
Bloy and numerous luminaries of the French artistic and literary scene. Nor are JKH's feline companions neglected in this intimate and beautiful biography which is itself a work of art and a shrine to the memory of the master. Most of all perhaps I fully share and identify with JKH's profound admiration for the spiritual civilization of the High Middle Ages in Europe as the greatest flowering of Western culture (the great metaphysician and spiritual master Frithjof Schuon said very truly that the terms 'Mediaeval' and 'Christian' can be considered synonyms) and like him I regard all the art after the waning of that age as a descending arc of decline and impoverishment. From the salons and brothels of the Parisian 'Belle Epoque' to the vaulted and incense-laden retreats of ancient churches, gothic chapels and monasteries where, following his conversion the true fervour of his devotion to Our Lady, the Blessed Virgin of Virgins, blossomed in secret hours of inward prayer and devotion, the trajectory of JKH's life is a fascinating odyssey, here documented with replete and fulsome detail. JKH's lingering death by cancer was surely the manifestation of nothing less than a veritable martyrdom in which the great writer personally actualised the mystical doctrine of substitution taught by his favourite mediaeval saint, Blessed Saint Lydwine of Schiedam, and the deathbed scenes conclude this biography in a deeply poignant manner, the great writer refusing morphine amidst his agony as he declared that the doctors were trying to deprive him of the pain through which his expiation of sin would be realised and smoking hand-rolled cigarettes in bed right up till the final hour of his passing from this temporal world. As the Abbe Fontaine said in his moving declamation at the great man's funeral: 'Lord you gave him great talent, and he used it for your glory...’ Read more &rsaquo;


Charles-Marie-Georges Huysmans ([ʃaʁl maʁi ʒɔʁʒ É¥ismɑ̃s]; February 5, 1848 â€“ May 12, 1907) was a French novelist who published his works as Joris-Karl Huysmans ([ʒoʁis kaʁl]). He is most famous for the novel À rebours (published in English as Against the Grain or Against Nature). He supported himself by a 30-year career in the French civil service.

Huysmans' work is considered remarkable for its idiosyncratic use of the French language, large vocabulary, descriptions, satirical wit and far-ranging erudition. First considered part of Naturalism in literature, he became associated with the decadent movement with his publication of À rebours. His work expressed his deep pessimism, which had led him to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer.[1] In later years, his novels reflected his study of Catholicism, religious conversion, and becoming an oblate. He discussed the iconography of Christian architecture at length in La cathédrale (1898), set at Chartres and with Chartres Cathedral as the main focus of the book.

LÀ-bas, (1891), En Route (1895) and La Cathedrale (1898), are a trilogy and feature Durtal, an autobiographical character whose spiritual progress is tracked and who converts to Catholicism. In the novel that follows, L'Oblat (1903), Durtal becomes an Oblate in a monastery, as Huysmans himself was in the Benedictine Abbey at Ligugé, near Poitiers, in 1901.[2] La cathÂ©drale was his most commercially successful work. Its profits enabled Huysmans to retire from his civil service job and live on his royalties.

He was born in Paris in 1848. His father Godfried Huysmans was Dutch and a lithographer by trade. His mother, Malvina Badin Huysmans, had been a schoolmistress. Huysmans' father died when the boy was eight years old. After his mother quickly remarried, Huysmans resented his stepfather, Jules Og, a Protestant who was part-owner of a Parisian book-bindery.
For thirty-two years, Huysmans worked as a civil servant for the French Ministry of the Interior, a job he found tedious. The young Huysmans was called up to fight in the Franco-Prussian War, but was invalided out with dysentery. He used this experience in an early story, "Sac au dos" (Backpack) (later included in his collection, Les Soirées de Médan).

After his retirement from the Ministry in 1898, made possible by the commercial success of his novel, La cathédrale, Huysmans planned to leave Paris and move to Ligugé. He intended to set up a community of Catholic artists, including Charles-Marie Dulac (1862-1898). He had praised the young painter in La cathédrale. Dulac died a few months before Huysmans completed his arrangements for the move to Ligugé, and he decided to stay in Paris.

He used the name Joris-Karl Huysmans when he published his writing, as a way of honoring his father's ancestry. His first major publication was a collection of prose poems, Le drageoir aux épices (1874), which were strongly influenced by Baudelaire. They attracted little attention but revealed flashes of the author's distinctive style.

Huysmans followed it with the novel, Marthe, Histoire d'une fille (1876). The story of a young prostitute, it was closer to Naturalism and brought him to the attention of Émile Zola. His next works were similar: sombre, realistic and filled with detailed evocations of Paris, a city Huysmans knew intimately. Les Soeurs Vatard (1879), dedicated to Zola, deals with the lives of women in a bookbindery. En ménage (1881) is an account of a writer's failed marriage. The climax of his early work is the novella À vau-l'eau (1882) (Downstream or With the Flow), the story of a downtrodden clerk, Monsieur Folantin, and his quest for a decent meal.