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Robert Ziegler. *The Mirror of Divinity: The World and Creation in J.K. Huysmans*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004. 385p.

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Ziegler's work begins with the "Mirror of Reality" (37-135), followed by "The Mirror of the Self" (137-210), and "The Mirror of Divinity" (218-338). A Conclusion (339-347), Bibliography (375-380) and Index close the volume. The "Introduction" (11-35) provides a clear overview of the contents: from Huysmans' "ekphrastic impulse to transform painting into language" (11), to his embracing of naturalism (15) that leads him eventually to "illustrate the incompatibility of naturalist aesthetics and naturalist subject matter" (18). Huysmans the Decadent will feature "heroes [his "dyspeptic pessimists"] who turn the mirror toward themselves" (23). Through "spiritual naturalism" he redirects his attention to the "physical expression of divine creativity" (30). At the end of Huysmans' trajectory that leads him away from Zola and the naturalist writers, the novelist addresses the issue of suffering and his "dolorist philosophy acquires an aesthetic as well as a spiritual dimension" (33), so that through an alchemical process of purification "the subject of a work...approaches the infinite beauty that he [Huysmans] identifies as God" (35).

Readers may feel inundated by the alchemy of exotic and learned expressions such as "encomiums" (18), "paeans" (20), "autophasia" (23), "topological" (25), "spagyric arts" (28), "nigredo of soil" (31), "epiphalianium" (35), and "heteroglossia" (58), to note a few. Interested readers will find in the remainder of the volume a lucid and sometimes hallucinatory dissection of sixteen of Huysmans' works analyzed from a most original perspective and an impressive densely textured style.

In *Marthe* (1876), the writing of the fledgling novelist, not yet a disciple of Zola or a full-fledged Decadent, exhibits an aesthetic complexity combining nature (prostitution and love), and art (poetry, painting, and theater), fecundated on the part of Ziegler by a sexual interpretation of their intermingling, "fertilized by a stray spermatozoon from the Goncourt" (41) and the spermatozoa of the writer's critical appraisals. One of the central themes in *Marthe* is the self-destruction of art and self-destruction as art, a process in which Marthe, a suicidal alcoholic is "consigned to the oblivion that is the realm of women without men" (54).

In *Les Soeurs Vatarad* (*The Vatarad Sisters*), Huysmans tackles the relationship between reality and art: more specifically theater, painting, and sculpture. In Chapter Three on "Sac au dos" ("Knapsack"), Ziegler dissects the thematic richness provided by taboos surrounding human digestive processes: food as poetry leads to colic, dyspepsia, enemas, excrements and bedpans, gastric attacks of flatulence, and diarrhea. It is with some relief and satisfaction that the reader is reminded at the very

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beginning of Chapter Five that what he has just read in the preceding chapter addressed the incoherence (and perhaps incongruity) of reality. In “Sac au dos” Ziegler sums up in a simple and transparent statement that “Huysmans demonstrates the impossibility of the naturalistic ideal of absolute objectivity” (98) preparing us for Huysmans’ progressive distancing from Zola. But the guru of Naturalism, no doubt conceded, not in so many words but certainly in practice, to the impossibility of “absolute [or scientific] objectivity in literature.” What we admire in Zola today is his visionary quality, his sporadic ever-youthful Romanticism, his Impressionist style and rich language.

One of the finest chapters (Part II, Chapter 9) is dedicated to *La Retraite de Monsieur Bougran* (*The Retreat of Monsieur Bougran*). It centers on the interpretation of the subtleties of the language of law, expressed in lush vegetal imagery, lack of clarity, opaqueness, and unreadable formulas—a herbarium of dried-up plants in need of pruning. This diet of indigestible language will eventually make Bougran sick. The chapter marks a turning point away from the base body language and toward greater linguistic simplicity and ascension toward God.

“The Mirror of Divinity” contains six works. *Là-bas* is the author’s masterpiece, and “a pivotal work in which a new course for the novel is charted” (214). Huysmans explores spiritualism, devil worship, campanology, homeopathic medicine, astrology, and more. Other works include *En route*, *La Cathédrale*, *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam*, *L’Oblat*, and *Les Foules de Lourdes*, all influenced by Huysmans’ conversion to Catholicism.

In *The Mirror of Divinity* there is no escape from the body’s powerful presence, its penises, erections, menstrual blood, bellies, lakes of pus, digestive processes, flatulence, gas, wind, fornication, etc. In spite of this prevalence of base naturalism scholars will find much to admire in Ziegler’s work. Many of them appear in the *The Mirror of Divinity* making it a Who’s Who in Huysmans Studies. Their voices and those of the writer, the voices of his readers and characters, and Ziegler’s own voice make this a rich “interactive” text. Freud is mentioned some six or seven times at the most but his spirit—of man’s convoluted mental states—lurks from behind every page: in the interpretation of legal and body language, the interpretation of dreams (Durtal is seen as well-digger of the soul), and the imagery of nightmares (fornicating trees, for instance). Psychology, with its Freudian orientation invades the fiction and blurs its transparency, in spite of the writer’s aspiration to simplicity in *The Crowds of Lourdes*, which closes the volume.

“Bleeding, secreting, weeping, women are the vocabulary of their body fluids, somatic signs interpreted by male physicians, psychologists, and confessors” (279).

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Women in the world of Huysmans (except in *The Crowds of Lourdes*) lack redeeming qualities. One of Ziegler's comments seems to reinforce the idea of their "intellectual nullity" and their inability to signify except in the language of the body. The publisher of *Universal Review* apparently felt that *The Retreat of Monsieur Bougran* (1888) suffered from "a paucity of strong female interest." Ziegler reads the publisher's neutral and moderate comment as "insufficiently salacious," suggesting that women (and not men) were attracted only by lust and libido. The publisher, however, may have had in mind something more neutral and complementary to women. Female and male readers of *The Retreat of Monsieur Bougran*, had it been published, would have found the subject of the obscure language of law less attractive. Language, on the other hand, used as a creative tool begins to hush the music of the body (the squelching of bitter eructations, the thunder of intestinal rumbling, and the gunfire of gas and wind) and Ziegler turns Chapter Nine in "The Mirror of the Self" into one of the finest chapters in the book.

*The Mirror of Divinity* represents an *incontournable* (essential) study for seasoned Huysmans specialists. It contains an abundance of creative, sexual, aesthetic, and Freudian interpretations of the French writer's itinerary from base naturalism and Decadence, to Pygmalionism and dolorism, interpreted as the divine alchemy of suffering, and finally to his destination of pure spiritual naturalism and divine love. ✱