

## THE REDEMPTION OF DURTAL\*

**H**UYSMANS has treated the subject of repentance; rarest of all perhaps in pure literature. The *degree* of the treatment, if such an expression may be used, makes the new book peculiar; certainly as prose and fiction: the penitent being a man of profound baseness; the spiritual progress being narrated both as far as an author dare, and as exhaustively as skill and patience are capable.

The friends between whom he isolated himself intellectually, des Hermies and Carhaix, dying within two months one of the other, Durtal is thrown upon silence and solitude. From the desolation immediate upon his loss, by way of a projected life of Blessed Lidwine, he comes to a point of spiritual uncertainty, that is to say, to the only spiritual situation possible for him. Then begins the story of any conversion in the world's memory, not restricted to the era of grace.

Durtal, with his history of the Maréchal Gilles de Rais, Durtal, who goes the length of digging up the Satanism of the Middle Age from modern cloaques of revolting depravity, whose vanity it would have been to be the last possible recipient of grace, is the object of an "attouchement divin." This is the spiritual crisis well known to what is called Mysticism, the science which, for want of a name, has taken this most misleading of all names. The germ once planted grows with irresistible force, so assumes the direction, so absorbs the attention, of Durtal, that suddenly he is aware only of the fact that he *believes*, as he says, with not a trace in his memory of any step by which he has passed from the lethargy of decay to the anxieties of a living growth.

Then it is a ravenous pursuit of all the spiritual writings the Romance languages hold, from Saint Denys the Areopagite to Father Faber (a reservation later), a restless pilgrimage through all the churches of Paris. The torment ensues; the struggle of habit with the inexorable, unknown impulse; till agony drives Durtal to an earlier acquaintance, the abbé Gévresin. Follow the conferences of the two men, the one deeply skilled in the malady, the other floundering in all the helplessness such a patient can exhibit. The great stage is reached when, through means of the abbé's monitions, Durtal, at length pushed by a power he feels has taken possession of his very will, goes into a retreat with the Trappistes, makes his confession, is absolved and communicates. The ten days passed at La Trappe occupy half the book.

The record is closely consecutive; digressions are few and under the direct warranty of M. Huysmans' art. The bridge-work from LÂ-BAS is such as might be expected from so accomplished a writer; the solidification of the setting in which Durtal has to move bears the cachet of the Magician. Elaborate information, pitiless visual observation, a rare sensibility, under the play of an obstinate method, which advances fearlessly upon the longest category, ready at each shift with a more

\* J. K. Huysmans, "LÂ-BAS." Paris: Tresse & Stock, 1891. J. K. Huysmans, "EN ROUTE." Paris: Tresse & Stock, 1895.

exasperated epithet, lacerate every scene, make nervous and vibrant each foot of the panorama before which the haggard, despicable hero is for ever hounded.

Above all, what is seen is through the eyes of Durtal; the comments upon the scene are those of the deteriorated Sensitive. M. Huysmans has not hesitated, in the enthusiasm of his subject, to expose the genus scriptor as few who know the truth have the courage to do, priggish, vulgar. Here is the perfection of the attempt less perfect before, to present the baggage of the écrivain with his finical person; M. Huysmans evidently agreed with his friends' verdict on LA-BAS in this feature, for now complete fusion has repaired the earlier fault.

Choice must be recognised in the circumstance of Durtal's conversion being brought about in the lap of the Church. Hence (and of course it could have been effected *directly*) applause falls to the judgment of M. Huysmans. What a bait to his talent the modern, actual aspect of the Church, its agglomerations of styles and traditions! The sensitiveness of Durtal discerns a whole new facet of a mysterious gem at any moment when he is set down to assist at an office. Hearing the voice of a priest whom he cannot see, he can speak of "la vaseline de son débit;" and at the same time find the due expression of the plain-chant a worthy pursuit of a life-time. Its architecture and structural accessories; its images, music, liturgies; the orders of religious, their dress, rules, even pronunciation; the amount of light, the smell, the quality of the worshippers; nothing about the Church which is not of deep interest. But nearer yet to the author's purpose the Church is of vital importance to Durtal; during the period of his spiritual convalescence it gives him *something to do*. Without its insinuations, its constant allurements, its demands upon the laborious attention of the sufferer, it is safe to say EN ROUTE could not have been written; as it is M. Huysmans is obliged to resort to a fully pardonable deceit, and simply omit to mention what Durtal did with the great part of his day.

Having chosen the Church, M. Huysmans shows further wisdom in keeping his hero to an orthodox route. Here again he tacitly asks indulgence of the interested reader, and surely not in vain. As a matter of fact, Durtal, as we have been brought to know him, could not have been kept away from the Heresies. M. Huysmans' caution, in view of this certainty, is extreme. Though one or two German mystics (out of scores) are named, Dr. Tauler, Suso, the two Eckharts and Catherine Emmerich, not one (save the last) is suffered more than a mention by Durtal, for the reason that these are the door of ceremony to the most absorbing of the heresies. Durtal among die Brüder des freien Geistes! Durtal with the history of der Gottesfreund vom Oberland in that valise of his, with the chocolate and the laudanum! The most remarkable "attouchement" ever recorded, that of Tauler, cannot be alluded to. Catherine Emmerich, for reasons, falls across the hard boundary; she is almost alone in this century a mediæval visionary and stigmatisée; the passion of her life and utterances is all an excuse, in face of a tactic

however severe. But doubled discretion has to forbear carefully from mention of Clemens Brentano ; lest Durtal, studying the voluminous diary of nine years' daily intercourse with the illuminated sister, should recognise himself in Clemens, himself with more aplomb, more verve, and lose his road beyond hope.

The whole scheme of this history required a certain harshness, dryness, poverty. Much had to be sacrificed to the purpose of making a novel of such a subject. This accounts for here and there the begging of a question. M. Huysmans holds the novel form to be almost as exacting as that of the sonnet. The length of the book determined from the outset within the limit of half a page, the need for proper balance of all the considerations the novelist has to bear compels him to set his face sternly against any but the most urgent situations. Add to all the proper restrictions of the form M. Huysmans' deliberate rejection of the symbol. This is the writer of *MARTHE*, of *EN MÉNAGE*, the unflinching realist, whose faith is that his system can employ all possible subtlety.

One example of dexterity in turning humble circumstance to beauty, of skilful determination, by simple refinement of observation, of the hour, the vibration of the atmosphere, the pulse even of the supposed observer : *Le temps était tiède, ce matin-là ; le soleil se tamisait dans le crible remué des feuilles ; et le jour, ainsi bluté, se muait au contact du blanc, en rose. Durtal, qui s'appêtait à lire son paroissien, vit les pages rosir et, par la loi des complémentaires, toutes les lettres, imprimées à l'encre noire, se teindre en vert.*

One brilliant episode suffers quotation by its shortness :

*Il faisait nuit noire ; à la hauteur d'un premier étage, un œil de bœuf ouvert dans la mur de l'église trouait les ténèbres d'une lune rouge.*

*Durtal tira quelques bouffées d'une cigarette, puis il s'achemina vers la chapelle. Il tourna doucement le loquet de la porte ; le vestibule où il pénétrait était sombre, mais la rotonde, bien qu'elle fût vide, était illuminée par de nombreuses lampes.*

*Il fit un pas, se signa et recula, car il venait de heurter un corps ; il regarda à ses pieds.*

*Il entra sur un champ de bataille.*

*Par terre, des formes humaines étaient couchées dans des attitudes de combattants fauchés par la mitraille ; les unes à plat ventre, les autres à genoux ; celles-ci, affaissées les mains par terre, comme frappées dans le dos, celles-là étendues les doigts crispés sur la poitrine, celles-là encore se tenant la tête ou tendant les bras.*

*Et, de ce groupe d'agonisants, ne s'élevaient aucun gémissement, aucune plainte.*

This can only delight, not surprise, coming from the master of this mode. And though it will inform no one, the flawlessness must be noted of the nevrothy which is so important a feature of the book.

Of the study of Durtal himself one feels that, isolated, it would have been more interesting than the whole presentment as it stands. The fragment of a spiritual career is exact enough to support the application of the

gauge, the maxim actually cited : La Mystique est une science absolument exacte. It is necessary to remember that what is given us is really only a fragment ; not, as the ignorant are certain to say, the whole course and exhaustion of spiritual operation in a man ; a fragment, to speak truly, quite elementary, and scarcely spiritual at all in results.

All through, Durtal remains deeply ignorant of what is taking place, when a very small amount of insight in the study of the books with which he thinks himself saturated should at least sometimes inform him. All the utterances of the saints he has the fortune to fall among are servilely reported by him, with never a word of spiritual criticism on his part, not even the most rudimentary. We do not find him ever admitted to the simplest "communion of saints ;" the impulse within him, the "touche divine," the "angelic influx," the "Kingdom of God," Goethe's "dämonische," to cite a few of its thousand names, never says to Durtal directly anything more complicated than: Do what this man tells you. He is always in the wretchedness of his spiritual beggary. What really surprises is that he should not blunder upon the first truth of an awakening, that he must go back over the way by which he came. Usually this is easy to a man who has been so wicked as Durtal ; the keen quest of infamy being extra physical in some aspects, a mode of inverted spiritism, in a manner to make a spiritual process seem known already the moment it is suggested.

He is found constantly looking, stupidly, for a miracle to take place in him, a violent destruction of his past, the swift summoning to being of some fruit of long, laborious growth. The "attouchement" is not miracle enough for him. He craves, in his peculiar vulgarity, in the vanity of his worthlessness, a theatrical sign, an explosion of redemption and miraculous repair, an alchemistic operation in favour of his rag of spiritual disposition.

The only reflection he can make upon the contemptuous refusal of the abbé to work in his behalf as he considers himself entitled is a culinary : tous ses conseils se réduisent à celui-ci ; cuisez dans votre jus et attendez.

Herein is seen the fidelity of the author already remarked, not to let wriggle out of sight the radical vulgarity of Durtal. His basest sophistry does not make him contemptible enough ; the real bitter drop he is forced to swallow again is his vulgarity : . . . ces messes gargotées comme l'on en cuisine tant à Paris . . . ils me verseront à pleins bols leur bouillon de veau pieux ! . . . Ses chantres y barattent une margarine de sons vraiment rances !

Durtal has much to say upon all the graces and exquisitenesses, a great deal about the Primitives ; for every sound he will have an epithet at all hazards, often drawn from a mute source. But at every few pages the reader falters upon the reiterated signature of one of these unpleasant metaphors. Durtal, further, had exhausted the *paregoric* virtues of the Gospels. Saint Bonaventura condense en unesorte d'*of meat* des modes pour méditer sur la communion. The reward of translating this criticism upon Saint Bonaventura is the image of a little tin box containing a disgusting chemical aliment.

The Trappistes were right who told Durtal that every wonder was small beside the fact of his being in any disposition of penitence soever. The

great thing for Durtal was to be kept ignorant of his real state and prospect ; it would have been very little encouraging for him to know. His confessor at La Trappe told him that he had been so sick that one might say of his soul : Jam foetet ; he did not tell him that no other thing could be said of his body. The body of Durtal is as lost as is possible ; there is no more hope for that. The soul of Durtal has to make a journey so long that a view of it would ruin him. At the point of utmost progress in EN ROUTE he is at the beginning of the purgative life. In a very long time he will still be at the beginning.

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