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Lauren Clark

Rustaq College of Applied Sciences, bf48yp@student.sunderland.ac.uk

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Lauren Clark

Rev. George Brittain and Joris-Karl Huysmans and sensitive subject/object matters: Literary representations of cultural change?

Two controversial and critically neglected authors broach the issue of cultural change in the literature of Ireland and France respectively *du debut au fin de siècle*: Reverend George Brittain (1788-1848) writing in the 1820s and 1830s, and the decadent *fin de siècle* Franco-Dutch author Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907). The year 1848, an interim between both authors' lifespans, also marked a tragic interregnum in Irish national history as the Irish Famine reached at its most destructive point, occurring in the 'back-yard' of a relatively prosperous region.' (Ó Gráda, 1997, 141) In artistic terms during this period, Brittain and Huysmans were each hotly attuned to the imaginative responses to Irish and French national history. Namely, these responses included a blossoming of Romanticism in the early nineteenth-century and debates as to how Realist or Naturalist experimentation in the novel was not necessarily progressive aesthetically, nor was it an effective form of cultural representation. To both authors, anti-Catholicism, Satanism, prostitution, provincial humour and the seedy underbelly of Paris would represent the *Zeitgeist* of two countries amidst significant ideological and cultural change. Nonetheless, the jury remains out on whether either author preserved or provoked evolving Irish and French community consciousness or were precursors of cultural change at their times of writing. This seems strange in a critical climate of anthologies accounting for the cultural aspects of the Irish nineteenth-century novel, the national tale and the regional tale. Indeed, James H. Murphy and Claire Connolly's laudable literary and historical accounts of the Irish novel see Brittain relegated to marginalia with the author praised for his expertise in mocking Longford's priests, where he served as rector of Kilcommock in the diocese of Ardagh (Connolly, 2011, 125-163). In a similar vein, Christopher Lloyd, Michel Bataille and Robert Baldick aside, scant are the critical accounts of Huysmans' novels that consider the sociological nature of a subject matter that is wilfully perverse. Little effort has been made

to reorient critical focus on the greater structuralist contribution of Huysmans' seemingly scandalous fiction with the author remaining on the margins of decadence and naturalism whose style was certain, content was obscene but his artistic purpose remains unclear. Indeed, both Huysmans and Brittainé can be considered in terms of the tenets of structuralism which consider the mythological implications of literature and its reframing of humankind as subject matter. As such, the authors open up enclosed and enclloistered parts of French and Irish society for interrogation using fiction as their vehicle. Upon publication, the French publishing house Hetzel dismissed Huysmans' first novel *Le Drageoir aux Épices* (1874) for fear that it would reignite the Commune once again in the French language and this resulted in the novel being published from the relative safety of Belgium at his own expense.

Brittainé was similarly provocative in fiction composed in the years during and surrounding the Catholic emancipation. As an advocate of Anglican evangelicalism, he chose the Roman Catholic priesthood as a suitable target towards which he launched an unrelenting fictional offensive. He denounced this group as "the colossal curse of Ireland" in an 1834 edition of the *Dublin University Magazine* whilst Isaac Butt was its editor (O'Ferrall, 2007, 24). By a comparative analysis of Huysmans' and Brittainé's most radical novels then, *Là Bas* (1891), *Marthe* (1876) and *Irishmen and Irishwomen* (1830), it will be argued that thanks to these sensitive subject matters, the public imagination of France and Ireland was able to be glibly reinacted in fictional terms. As such, that which was repressed by the dominant state apparatuses of late nineteenth-century France and the paranoia of proselytising evoked by the Catholic emancipation in Ireland were each fictionalised to the point of parody in Huysmans' and Brittainé's fiction. Hence, a wider concern about the ideologies of Ireland and France at these authors' times of writing, provide readers with a form of 'warts and all' documentation not unlike the French structuralism recounted by Claude Lévi-Strauss. This seemingly controversial approach and deliberate provocation, it shall be suggested, pre-empted the dominant structuralist concerns of twentieth-century French critical theory in so far as the mythological

interpretations of and pragmatics behind human behaviour were put into the crossfire. As it is the anthropological clout of Huysmans and Brittainé that will be broached here, it is important to note that structuralism does not consider the inclusion of unchaste material as a literary interpolation and neither does it cast value judgements upon subject matter. Hegemonic or dogma-skewed interpretations of Brittainé and Huysmans' fiction have little place in light of this analysis which will appraise their wider aesthetic agendas as opposed to lamenting the public outcry at the content of their novels. Of course, speaking for *le peuple* or indeed their 'imagination' is the making of revolutionary reactions or at least 'winds of change' and for this reason a tentative approach is required.

In 1828, George Brittainé was appointed as an evangelical rector of Kilcommock parish, Longford, and he remained there during the Catholic emancipation, tithe wars and O'Connell's Repeal campaigns until his death in 1848. Interestingly, all eight of Brittainé's novels emerged between 1828 and 1840, a tumultuous period in Irish literature and politics as contemporary authors such as Maria Edgeworth could attest. In light of this, Brittainé's literature is peppered with references to what some have termed a 'Protestant paranoia' and others 'anti-Catholicism' at the democratic promise of O'Connell's Repeal campaign and its greater implications upon the social mobility of Catholics. Fergus O'Ferrall is amongst the most recent of three critics to have addressed this author in any great detail and he asserts that "a substantial effort of imaginative empathy is required to appreciate his novels". This 'imaginative empathy' should be acknowledged alongside the prolific Protestant and Tory ideologies which appeared in Brittainé's fourth novel, *Irishmen and Irishwomen* (1830). Noteworthy too is the fact that throughout the 1830s, Brittainé continued to publish his fiction in the *Dublin University Magazine* in full acceptance and knowledge of it being a mouthpiece for Protestant ideology. Although, according to Margaret Kelleher, Brittainé's writings did not become widely available to an English readership "until their republication in the 1870s in editions significantly rewritten by Rev. H. Seddall" (Kelleher, 2006, 460). One wonders to what extent this was a preventative or precautionary measure to rewrite Brittainé's criticisms of Catholicism in such terms as to

diminish their provocative or potentially progressive sentiments for an evolving British readership. Nonetheless, Brittain upholds the didacticism, stereotypes, regional dialogue and narrator condescension employed by his contemporary William Carlton but with a definitive regional bent. It is clear that the recurring satirical characters, corrupt priests and conversion narratives employed are foils for underlying fears of proselytism in a rapidly changing agrarian context.

On the other hand, Joris-Karl Huysmans began writing the lascivious prostitute narrative *Marthe* after the death of his mother in 1876. In the ten years following the publication of *Là Bas* in 1891, Huysmans had converted from occultism and esoterism back to Catholicism, had endeavoured to become a monk and penned hagiographies, before dying a martyr in 1907. During this period spiritual hell and superstition stimulated the imaginative faculties of the French population and their potential for change. Huysmans can be considered for his association with some of the leading Naturalists of the *fin de siècle* and he was in regular correspondence with Edmond de Goncourt and Henry Céard in the 1870s. In the author's research for a text about the Naturalist movement's figurehead entitled *Émile Zola et L'Assommoir*, Brendan King argues that unlike Zola, for Huysmans, Naturalism was "a means to an aesthetic end" (King, 2006,19). The aesthetic end for Huysmans was to interrogate the ideologies behind decadent and Naturalist schools, all the while carving out a space for literature which was representative of the changes required in the French mindset. In a similar manner to Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*, a staged conversation between Des Hermies and Durtal in the initial chapters of *Là Bas* makes it apparent that decadence was putting artistic practice in the crossfire of literary debates in *fin de siècle* France:

"I do not really care how the naturalists maltreat language, but I do strenuously object to the earthiness of their ideas. They have made our literature the incarnation of materialism-and they glorify the democracy of art!"[...]

His sad experience led him to believe that every literary man belonged to one of two classes, the thoroughly commercial or the utterly impossible. The first consisted of writers spoiled by the public [...]

Ravenous they aped the ways of the world of big business [...] the second consisted of café loafers, 'bohemians' (Huysmans, 1976, 7-19).

Huysmans's approach permitted him to write within a self-contained and self-authorised framework which was the ideal setting from which he could challenge his contemporary authors and impressions of the liturgical governance of French society. To this it must be added that a substantial amount of personal experience and spirituality tempered Huysmans' fiction, to counteract any impressions of that narrative detachment which Brittainé excelled in. James H. Murphy has observed that narrative detachment was a "standard trope of polemical fiction" which was evolving as a genre in the 1820s and 1830s. Indeed, Murphy cites Brittainé's preface to a short story collection as constituting an account of "sincere Irish peasants eager to embrace Protestantism in the face of opposition not only from priests but from misguided landlords" (Murphy, 2011, 27). It seems necessary to test this maxim by comparing Brittainé's fiction with that of an author who was less hesitant to employ the subtleties or tropes of polemical Irish fiction. To successfully test the imaginative merits of Brittainé and Huysmans' fiction, I shall now evaluate how their novels endeavour to engage with the potential for cultural change at their times of writing.

Brittainé and Huysmans: Precursors to change?

Given such *outré* inclinations in writing, how then could either of these authors be attuned to a public consciousness from which they felt ostracised and about which they held deep suspicions? Was the aim a form of competitive inventiveness to broach bridled bigotry, blasphemy and scandal? Certain clues lie in the lengths that French and Irish authorities went to in order to censor literary threats to the moral health of the nation. In a climate of censorship, the French poet Jean Richepin, whom Huysmans admired, served time in prison for publishing a collection of ballads about prostitutes and down and outs. Indeed, *Marthe* was published from the relative safety of Brussels which also ensured that it did not appear at the same time as Goncourt's similar tale *La Fille Elisa*. In Ireland, over a

century before the lay law known as the Censorship of Books Act (1929), Brittain was so conscious of his suggestive contributions to the public imagination that he published anonymously. Had he published the same material in 1929, it would have certainly fallen outside of the confines of acceptable reading material stipulated in the act. He also actively sought out a sympathetic readership by choosing to appear in the *Dublin University Magazine*. Nonetheless, to paint either author as purely reactionary is to overturn the delicate axes upon which their fiction rests and to underestimate how acutely the French and Irish public imaginations were provoked and evoked. To this end, it is useful to consider the staunchly sociological agenda Brittain and Huysmans employed. By this, I refer to the distinct aesthetic stances that each author took to represent public unease over matters relating to the Catholic Church. This was done by escalating controversial subject matters in literature (Huysmans) or parodying bigotry (Brittain) to the point of social documentary, rather than aping the dominant Romanticist or Naturalist schools of literary thought which would less ably transcribe the public imagination. In *Les Trois Cultures*, the sociologist Wolf Lepenies wrote of the interrelated nature of English, French and German cultures from a literary and scientific perspective. On the subject of writers becoming scientific sociologists the author is effusive:

[To] leave Romanticism behind and simultaneously to curtail the ambitions of a Zola presented no problem at all: science generalised and quantified, and if the '*roman à l'intention scientifique*' did this, it was in danger of debasing itself to mere vulgar reportage - as in fact had happened with several novels of Zola. (Lepenies, 1988, 86)

Unlike other naturalists, such 'mere vulgar reportage' was far from Huysmans' intention when he assiduously related the plight of Durtal, the protagonist of *Là Bas*, as his life became gradually entwined with that of the serial killer Gilles de Rais about whom he was writing a book. Perhaps, as researchers we might take this as a warning. It is little wonder that *Là Bas* which vividly depicts a black mass, exorcism and an unconsummated affair, raised eyebrows and criticism amongst nineteenth-century critics for its taboo subject matter. What has been scantily regarded however is Huysmans' didactic purpose in

the novel which overrides the distasteful content. Huysmans successfully provides an account of medieval sadism, astronomy and a history of French Catholicism through the discursions of Des Hermies. Four years before his death, critics such as Jean Lionnet were puzzled by the artistic purpose of Huysmans' conversion narratives *entre-guillemets*. Lionnet laments:

L'art dans sa spontanéité, serait-il donc incompatible avec la règle religieuse? Le cas de M.Huysmans, très original artiste et très sincère converti, nous aidera peut-être à élucider cette inquiétante question. Nous allons voir ce qu'il était autrefois, et ce qu'il est devenu, maintenant qu'il pousse la dévotion jusqu'à se faire hagiographe. (Lionnet,1903, 85)

The question should be rather, is spontaneous and risqué literature a stimulant for change even at the risk of its governmental suppression? The answer is an emphatic 'oui' as far as the novel *Marthe* is concerned. One episode in particular sets out Huysmans' brand of aestheticism very potently. At the beginning of a fateful relationship that she has with an actor from a theatre group named Léo, Marthe drunkenly stumbles across Hogarth's fourth tableau from *A Harlot's Progress*. As a precursor to the mirror stage, this enables Marthe to recognise her own artistic position *dans la pensée publique* and to question eighteenth-century artistic renditions of the oldest profession. In contrast to the Naturalists' tendency to articulate social deprivation, penury and hardship in great detail and without the input of the characters that inhabit these settings, unusually here an illiterate prostitute is awakened to the artistic representation of her social standing:

But these extravagances, these high spirits, this abundance of flesh à la Rubens, these swathes of lily-white and vermillion, this rich profusion, this sumptuousness of fleshliness, these waves of carmine and mother of pearl- didn't hold her attention for long. She looked, without pausing, at several other pictures, then stopped thoughtfully in front of an engraving by Hogarth, one of the episodes from *A Harlot's Progress* [...] all this evoked in her very precise memories and she remained fascinated, silent [...] and then, as if awakening from a dream, she said quietly to herself: 'Yes, that's just how it is!' (Huysmans, 2006, 57)

Marthe recognises the ability of artistic impressions to accurately depict the baser

aspects of her chosen career. Unlike Huysmans' heroine, the peasant characters of Brittain's second novel *Irishmen and Irishwomen* are not afforded an occasion to recognise their own characters in the same manner, because they are subjected to a narrative condescension which paints them into more static and less inquisitive roles. This is a deliberate device employed by Brittain to uphold a didactic stance and by comparison, it is Huysmans' peasants that constitute a living tableau of agrarian life. The novel *Irishmen and Irishwomen* is set on Lord Farnmere's estate in the 'inconsiderable village' of Derrynaslieve. The village is employed as somewhat of a microcosm of the macrocosmic sectarian problems in rural Ireland and it is a 'condition of Ireland' narrative set in the pre-Repeal years. Humorous interactions between Catholic and Protestant members of the community substantiate a series of vignettes which are not plot driven. There is a clear anti-Catholic tone in the novel and akin to Carleton's *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* which was published the same year, Catholic superstition is ridiculed by clichéd references to the fated mixed marriage, the inefficacy of priests and characters' bruised knees after circling sacred wells on all fours on Sundays. Following the marriage between Mr Millward and Miss Oglandby for instance, a treatise on religious conversion is elicited where it is remarked that "anything like serious religion was a new thing in Ireland [...] it differed nothing from what causes so little sensation now, but is quietly dismissed under the name of Methodism, or Calvinism, or the New Light" (Brittain, 1851, 66). If Huysmans' agenda was aesthetic, it is through humour and mock-didacticism that Brittain accessed the public imagination of early nineteenth-century Ireland. In offering up the Irish Anglican Evangelical novel as imaginative fiction, Brittain mildly satirised a commonly held belief that the early nineteenth-century novel should exist as an instrument of moral persuasion. This takes the form of condescending omniscient observations on the part of the narrator whose tongue remains firmly in cheek:

We have often heard it remarked by travellers on the Continent that there is a very striking difference to be perceived between the Protestant and Roman Catholic countries, as to the external appearance of the people and their habitations: and though the charge of bigotry and intolerance may be most sentimentally brought against us, we must be content, that a like difference, though in a less degree, can be observed

between the professors of the two religions in Ireland [...] There are pig sties inhabited by Protestants, and there are decent cottages in the possession of Roman Catholics; but they are one and the other exceptions [...] The Protestants, whatever their taste may be as to dress, have altogether a more respectable appearance. (Brittaine, 48)

As O’Ferrall has noted, recent research by Kerby Miller highlights the erosion of the Protestant middle class in the Ballymahon area and further studies have commented upon localised sectarianism which marred Protestant and Catholic rural communities in the 1820s (O’Ferrall, 27). Considering this, Brittaine’s fiction might effect a change in public consciousness amongst Protestants at his time of writing by alerting readers of his fiction to the dangers of trivialising social interactions between both communities. Further, Claire Connolly assiduously comments upon the inseparability of Irish cultural understanding and sectarian culture in early nineteenth-century fiction:

Irish novels written between the 1790s and 1830s partook of a sectarian culture, such that (whatever the individual author’s views) the twin forces of religion and politics pressed themselves upon all attempts to conceive of Irishness in cultural terms. (Connolly, 2011, 128)

Both Miller and Connolly seem to suggest that for a few authors, writing of sectarianism or bigotry during this period was an imaginative enterprise and an attempt to reconstruct Irish cultural identity from its disparate and conflicting parts. As such, Brittaine might well be regarded as a canny observer of the interplay between religion and politics in the lead up to the Catholic Relief bill some months before the publication of *Irishmen and Irishwomen*. To what extent these social observations effected an evolution in critical thinking about literature in Ireland and in France ought to be tested as the links between structural anthropology and Brittaine and Huysmans’ subject matters are considerable.

Brittaine, Huysmans and Structural Anthropology

Brittaine and Huysmans' historically-resonant approaches to understanding and probing the consciousness of nineteenth-century France and Ireland sit well with French structuralist and poststructuralist thought. Indeed, the slogan of structural analysis issued by Claude Lévi-Strauss makes this very model of social circumspection patent, "it is hopeless to expect a structural analysis to change our way of perceiving concrete social relations. It will only explain them better" (Lévi-Strauss, 1976, 80). It is clear from Huysmans' *Là Bas* and *Marthe* and *Irishmen and Irishwomen* by George Brittain that each author struggled with the critiquing the contentious aspects of life. These were subject to great binary myth-conceptions. Nominally these included the evolving role of Catholicism in state and social affairs in nineteenth-century France and Ireland.

Must we then play the pupils of didactic, teacher structuralism by following the seedy anecdotes of Brittain and Huysmans' writings? The structural analysis of language is taken for granted quite readily and quite unwittingly in this respect. It would be crude to claim that French structuralism requires simply stating the obvious or parroting a long established, internal system of meaning with which human nature has fast become assimilated. The pre-established and *unnatural* relationships that we have with language often appear *natural*, such as can be revealed in the difficulty of translation:

The French use the word *louer* (*une maison*) = 'to let (a house)' indifferently to mean both 'pay for' and 'receive payment for', whereas German uses two words, *mieten* and *vermieten*; there is obviously no exact correspondence of values. (Saussure, 2001, 970)

Saussure would therefore contend that through human interaction with language, the *sign* is interpolated each time it is translated. Indeed, bad translations of French fiction, a clumsy Gallicism, or word for word interpretations betray the extent to which meaning could be taken for granted by nineteenth-century or even twentieth-century readers. Interestingly, there is no translator accredited to the consulted translation of Huysmans' *Là Bas* (*Down There*). This edition appears to be a republished version of the Keene Wallis translation which appeared in 1924 and only in 2001 did a new translation by Brendan

King surface. Nonetheless, the difficulties of translating Huysmans extend beyond distasteful subject matter. For instance, Robert Baldick observes that Huysmans' often had a comic and violent intent by employing lexical choices to deliberately shock and repulse the reading public. This would no doubt have impacted upon France's public imagination by putting established morality and dogma into the spotlight. Indeed, this was especially the case in regard to the public reception that Huysmans' novel *En Route* (1894) received:

Fortunately, *En Route* met with a more widespread and encouraging response. The book rapidly went through edition after edition, while nearly every periodical in the country reviewed it, in some cases several times. 'One thing is clear,' Huysmans told Dom Besse* "and that is that the subjects of mysticism and monasticism don't leave people indifferent but make them howl". And he added with amused satisfaction that "when you come to think of it, it's funny to be able to make an unbelieving public swallow doses of mysticism and liturgy, and to shout at them there's nothing enviable or decent in the filthy times we live in except the cloister" (Baldick, 1955, 226).

Flouting the immense success of *En Route*, it is apparent that Huysmans' intent was not ubiquity but deliberate provocation to stir up the consciousness of a nation becoming more and more spiritually interested in the *fin de siècle*. Furthermore, Rev. H. Seddall's rewriting of Brittain's novels in the 1870s and 1880s demonstrates the extent to which similar misconstructions of meaning could have been rendered by authors writing in the same language. For the French language however, the problem exists partly because structuralism, built upon the foundations of formalism, aimed to demystify the scope of literary analysis. Although formalism controversially posited that the poetic function of a text is its most dominant feature, the formalist ghost continues to haunt the structuralist literary machine and was probably lurking *dans les coulisses* at the funeral of Barthes' author. This does not appear to be, as some have argued, an ulterior motive to imply that

* The name of a Benedictine monk who Huysmans was introduced to in Paris in 1894.

literature akin to that of Huysmans has been mystified or marginalised from *le peuple* or their imagination by the use of sensitive subject matters. Politics, democracy and power relations are false neutralities which would dictate that structuralist and poststructuralist practitioners are incapable of concealing the distance from which they write. Considering George Brittain's profession and Joris-Karl Huysmans' personal penchant for prostitutes, the anti-Catholicism and wilfully perverse aspects of their writing can be better explained in this manner. According to the formal right to extend linguistics in order to encompass different ideas, which need not be signs, *le peuple* does not necessarily come into the structuralist equation. By this, it would follow that Huysmans and Brittain's writing is neither catering for nor deliberately inciting the public imagination in an obvious fashion. If they did, this would be stating the obvious: that multiple meanings are possible in literature. Considering the French legacy of structuralism, both authors marry commentaries about church and state with speculation about the degenerative aspects of human relations in the early and at the end of the late nineteenth-century. Whether through deliberate exaggeration or underplaying the impact of adverse social relations, structuralism acts as a canny subterfuge for both authors to enable larger social circumspection to be arrived at in times of great censorship and susceptibility.

Through their social observations and historical circumspection, it seems to me that Brittain and Huysmans employed the very social documentation lauded in Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*. The author pays homage to these tenets when he amusingly describes how Bolivian tribes express satisfaction of their meal, while on board a boat to Corumba:

The *feijoada* (black bean dish) was variously declared *muito boa* or *muito ruin*, that is "first rate," or "foul"; similarly, they had only one expression to describe the desert, which was either *bem doce*, very sweet or not sweet enough. (Lévi-Strauss, 1992, 202)

Given the fact that the more one knows about the systemics of language, the more one employs this machinery; structuralists can be seen to reproduce their doctrine, in such a way as to highlight it, in their discourse. This simulacrum seems to be exactly what is at

play when Lévi-Strauss suggests that expressions of taste are not universally transferrable. Now, it would appear that we must not only listen to structuralism which ‘better explains,’ our world, but the structuralist method is tacitly woven into the explanatory texts authored by structuralists themselves to ensure reader conformity. Perhaps then, we ought to feel coerced into an agreement with structuralism and compelled to accept Des Hermies belief that “[t]he tail ends of all centuries are alike. They’re always periods of vacillation and uncertainty” (Huysmans, 217)? Not so. The ethical nature of this is beyond the pale: if, in seeking out structuralism, one finds that it is written into the very language of structuralist theory as literature, this is *immersion totale*. No coercion necessary. In light of this, the protagonists of *Marthe*, *Lá Bas* and *Irishmen and Irishwomen* are so controversial that any detraction from fictional discourse into the narration of a sociological observer is testing. This movement or change demonstrates the paradigm of micro to macrocosmic structural observation advocated by the structuralists of the twentieth century.

As such, by alerting the reader to the scandalous and intolerant *mentalités* of nineteenth-century France and Ireland, Huysmans and Brittain were tapping into structuralist thought which was conceivably open to change. In this manner, even the most controversial and disparate of Irish and French authors can be likened for their unique dedication to exposing the Franco-Irish imagination of the nineteenth-century and motivating change. Rather than relegating their fiction to the margins of literary schools or neglecting their critical contribution to the nineteenth-century novel in France and in Ireland, Brittain and Huysmans ought to be reappraised in full consideration of the critical innovation and social observations that they brought to bear as predecessors of structuralism.

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