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Joseph Acquisto

## The Decadent Writer as Collector and Flâneur

### On Intertextual Networks and Literary Spaces in Huysmans

*Etrange* was the word most often used to describe J.-K. Huysmans' first published book, *Le Drageoir aux épices* (1873), an idiosyncratic group of short texts written at the borders of several genres, most notably the prose poem and the short story. Commentators most frequently call attention to the ways in which the *Drageoir* prefigures later aspects of Huysmans' style, first his naturalist and then his estheticist period. The editor of the recent critical edition repeats several times in his introduction that the *Drageoir* "esquisse déjà [les contours] d'une œuvre à venir" and "apparaît comme un présage des engagements et démissions successifs envers les différentes esthétiques qu'il adoptera par la suite."<sup>1</sup> Such comments are, on one hand, a logical approach to an author's early work in which he is still experimenting with several styles and seeking his own literary voice. On the other hand, however, this approach to the *Drageoir* fails to address the text on its own terms. I argue here that Huysmans adapts and transforms the model of writer as *flâneur* in this early work while simultaneously figuring as a collector of various nineteenth-century textual traditions and conventions. A complex intertextuality below the surface of the *Drageoir* allows Huysmans to evoke, adopt, extend, parody, or reject a series of modes of writing in play during the 1870's. Huysmans explores the literary territory of his period much as a *flâneur* might explore the city, moving with a purposeful aimlessness, receiving and reacting to various features of the landscape.

It is worth pausing a moment over the concept of a collection and its relationship to the kind of literal and literary *flânerie* that Huysmans pursues. Naomi Schor notes the importance of both col-

lecting and *flânerie* in Walter Benjamin's literary imagination, asserting that "collecting, rather more than *flânerie*, is the activity that most closely approximates that of the author in that collecting and especially [. . .] book-collecting involves the retrieval and ordering of things past."<sup>2</sup> The texts comprising the work are heterogeneous in composition and arrangement, but the networks of images and approaches point toward an impulse to ordering, for a collection always implies a certain logic, or at least an invitation to seek similarities at or below the surface of the collected works. It is in this sense that Huysmans becomes a quasi-Benjaminian collector of texts. Benjamin asks of his own library: "For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?"<sup>3</sup> While Huysmans has assembled the collection, it becomes in turn the reader's task to impose a certain order upon it, by reading "horizontally" across its various texts and "vertically" between the *Drageoir* texts and literary works of the past which are evoked by the *Drageoir*.

Huysmans' title prefigures some of the crossroads I shall explore. A *drageoir* is both a closed and an open space, a container that separates its content from its surroundings, without making that separation definitive, as a closed container would. Already in this image, Huysmans suggests a free-floating border between insides and outsides, a similar type of border, in fact, to that which exists between a descriptive text and the physical or mental landscape it traces. Such descriptive texts participate in the landscapes they describe, all the while remaining distinct from them. Gaston Bachelard hints at this relationship of texts to their objects in *La Poétique de l'espace*: "L'espace saisi par l'imagination ne peut rester l'espace indifférent livré à la mesure et à la réflexion du géomètre. [. . .] [I]l est vécu non pas dans sa positivité, mais avec toutes les partialités de l'imagination."<sup>4</sup> For Louis Forestier, the interest of Huysmans' text lies in "une rivalité entre les possibilités de l'écriture et un certain nombre de productions artistiques."<sup>5</sup> On this view, Huysmans uses the *drageoir* "pour insister sur un désordre apparent du contenu ou, si l'on veut, sur [. . .] l'esthétique du désordre" (Forestier 164). The style and tone of the various works are no less dissimilar than the work's themes; they range from a flowery romanticism to a parody of that very voice, and on to long passages of realist or naturalist description. In this sense, *Le Drageoir*

is very much a product of its moment in literary history, as the early 1870's witnessed the emergence, but not yet the full flowering, of the naturalist and symbolist movements that were to dominate the end of the nineteenth century. These are the years of works as diverse as Lautréamont's and Rimbaud's poetry, the first volumes of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart*, Flaubert's *Tentation de Saint Antoine*, Barbey's *Diaboliques* and Hugo's *Quatrevingt-treize*. By mixing the content of his *drageoir*, Huysmans situates the text at a series of crossroads in literary history, reflecting on them as their mixtures trouble, but ultimately fascinate, the reader attuned to these juxtapositions.

If Huysmans' narrator is sometimes cast as a *flâneur*, the reader also is implicated in purposeful wandering through the texts, teasing out the relationships among what is presented there. Just as a *flâneur* needs a home from which to depart and to which to return, so too I build my network of readings from the focal point of one text from which to depart and return after pursuing some of the stopping points, that is, other texts and their literary and political subtexts. Conveniently, there is one text in the *Drageoir* which serves as an ideal home base for this analytical *flânerie* because it casts the narrator in the role of the *flâneur* wandering through a Paris neighborhood, stopping in a variety of settings along the way.

This text is "La Rive gauche," which features the movement, contrast, and chaos of a working-class neighborhood along La Bièvre. Huysmans consciously situates his narrative in an in-between space, a "monde à part": "Ce n'est pas la campagne des environs de Paris, [. . .] ces bois qui regorgent de monde, le dimanche, et dont les taillis sont semés de papiers gras et de culs de bouteilles; ce n'est pas la vraie campagne, si verte, si rieuse au clair soleil; c'est un monde à part, triste, aride" (132). Huysmans represents this neighborhood as somehow less authentic than other spaces because it has qualities of several spaces at once. It is not green enough or sunny enough to be "true" countryside, and yet it is not exactly a truly urban landscape either. Almost immediately the cool and passive voice of the *flâneur* is transformed into a more conventional romantic voice describing the Bièvre:

Quelquefois même elle exhale des relents de bourbe et de vieux cuir, mais elle est presque toujours bordée de deux bandes de hauts peupliers et encadrée d'aspects bizarrement tristes qui évoquent en moi comme de lointains souvenirs ou comme les rythmes désolés de la musique de Schubert. (131)

Rather than remaining the passive receptacle of sensory impressions, as a typical *flâneur* might do, Huysmans' narrator is carried off to the past or to the soundscape of Schubert's music.

It is essential to note that Huysmans is not a typical *flâneur*. This literary trope, like many others, is taken up and altered in the *Drageoir*. Charles Nunley calls attention to Huysmans' *flânerie* with reference to his later collection of short texts, *Croquis parisiens*. Nunley notes that in Huysmans' short texts, "the perspective of the viewing subject plays a decisive role in determining our perception of the outside world."<sup>6</sup> And again:

Instead of truly breaking out of his bourgeois shell, Huysmans allows his stubbornly "casanier" *flâneur* to hide behind it wherever he goes. No matter how sincere his desire to leave the opulence of Paris's well-to-do neighborhoods behind [. . .], the *flâneur* of *Croquis parisiens* fails to relinquish the trappings of a calculated, hygienically intact bourgeois self. (Nunley 191)

In this sense, Huysmans rewrites the Baudelairean *flâneur*, whose "bain de multitude" allowed him to extract "une singulière ivresse de cette universelle communion."<sup>7</sup> Instead of the "ineffable orgie," Huysmans traces a decidedly textual mode of *flânerie*, where the "bourgeois shell" that surrounds him in the streets yields to a playful and expansive interaction with various modes of textual production.

In fact, this rewriting of the *flâneur* is visible even in the characteristics of the street which the narrator of "La Rive gauche" has chosen for his walk. The street lends itself poorly to a typical *flâneur*'s observations, since there are obstacles to clear vision. The narrator indicates that "les volets sont fermés, les portes closes sont émaillées de gros clous" (131) and that "la vue est bornée" (132); it is as if the setting refuses to cooperate with the narrator's plans. These obstacles to actual vision give birth to the narrator's metaphoric imagination, as he transforms description into poetic imagery, the artificial into an image of the natural: "On eût dit de la lanterne, au milieu de ce treillis de cordelettes, une gigantesque araignée tissant sa toile" (131). He brings the description back from the hypothetical or metaphoric to the "real" at the close of the first long paragraph: "On croirait être devant un étrange gazon, si parfois des grenouilles ne sautaient des herbes et ne faisaient clapoter et rejaillir sur le feuillage des gouttelettes d'eau brune" (131). Huysmans paints, then, a strange space of both tightly

packed houses and frogs jumping in the grass, and peopled by working-class families but visited by jugglers and acrobats. The space is chaotic and divided, and the narrator does not attempt to impose order upon it. Rather, the text highlights this strangeness by its juxtaposition of realist and romantic tones and its portrayal of the space in question as participating both in urban and rural environments.

This juxtaposition of romantic and realist modes strongly evokes another text in the *Drageoir*, “Ballade chlorotique,” whose contrasts between the beauty of a sunset and the abject description of sickness and death are worth pausing a moment to examine as a first point of departure from “La Rive gauche” and a first example of how Huysmans functions as a collector in *Le Drageoir*. The sentence that serves as a “refrain” for the “Ballade chlorotique,” whose form represents a nod to François Villon, evokes at the outset a poetic if clichéd description of twilight: “Mollement drapé d’un camail de nuées grises, le crépuscule déroulait ses brumeuses tentures sur la pourpre fondante d’un soleil couchant” (119). The ensuing description of a woman and her child advancing along the street hesitates between a romantic and naturalist tone while extending the literary clichés: “Une jeune fille se traînait à ses pieds, tenant sa poitrine à deux mains, râlant, crachant le sang. Grâce! criait-elle, grâce! ô Phtisie! Aie pitié de ma jeunesse, mais la goule implacable la serrait dans ses bras et picorait sur ses lèvres de longs baisers” (119). The romantic refrain recurs at the end of the text to give it a cyclic structure and to evoke the technique of the medieval *ballade*, whose refrain shifted slightly in meaning each time it recurred, transformed by each new preceding verse. In Huysmans’ text, however, these subtle transformations become a biting sense of irony and a willed disunity in the clash of moods in this text.<sup>8</sup>

Huysmans also uses this same sort of juxtaposition, not for highlighting the distance between the poetry and the misery of Paris, but for comic effect, another device “collected” in *Le Drageoir* and accessible by extending our readerly *flânerie* to “L’Extase,” which begins with a stereotypically poetic description: “[L]a lune émergeait de l’horizon, étalant sur le pavé bleu du ciel sa robe couleur soufre” (127). The narrator is enjoying an interlude with his beloved, when the woman suddenly gets up: “[E]t j’entendis comme un crépitement de pluie dans la feuillée. Le rêve délicieux s’évanouit [. . .] C’était

donc vrai, elle, la divine aimée, elle était comme les autres, l'esclave de vulgaires besoins!" (127). While it is important not to erase the sense of the comic from this text, Huysmans' technique as parodist extends to many levels here. The poem addresses, of course, the question of literary taboo generally and, more specifically, what subject matter is appropriate for a genre such as the prose poem, which presumably extends the range of the lyric poem, but perhaps not to the extent of a bathroom break in the midst of a romantic tryst. This is also, of course, a poem of lost illusions, as the narrator suffers from the discovery that his beloved is all too human, recalling, for instance, Jonathan Swift's satirical poem "The Lady's Dressing Room," or Baudelaire's reaction to Madame Sabatier when the latter finally offers herself to the poet.<sup>9</sup> The narrator is pained by the revelation of his beloved as an ordinary human, just as so many characters in recent novels had suffered bitter disillusionments of some sort, from Lucien de Rubempré in *Illusions perdues* to Frédéric Moreau in *L'Education sentimentale*. The ridiculousness of Huysmans' narrator's situation is of course far removed from the grand disillusionments of these monumental novels, but in the context of the *Drageoir*, which explicitly imitates and parodies so many aspects of precursor texts, we may read in "L'Extase" not simply a case of low-brow comedy but in fact a commentary on precisely the kinds of stories of lost illusions and disenchantment that had been favorite subjects for Balzac and Flaubert. In this tale of exaggerated disenchantment, Huysmans invites us to take an ironic view of the forms of larger-scale shattered illusions and the heroes who suffer from them. In short, Huysmans parodies not only lost illusions but also the act of crying over, or even stopping for a moment to meditate on, illusions lost.

Extending the breadth of Huysmans' parody even further, we might look for more direct intertextual links to "L'Extase" among the poetry of the time. An intriguing set of parallels could be established with Paul Verlaine's poem, "C'est l'extase langoureuse," published in 1872, one year before the *Drageoir*:

C'est l'extase langoureuse,  
C'est la fatigue amoureuse,  
C'est tous les frissons des bois  
Parmi l'étreinte des brises,

C'est, vers les ramures grises,  
Le chœur des petites voix.

O le frêle et frais murmure!  
Cela gazouille et susurre,  
Cela ressemble au cri doux  
Que l'herbe agitée expire . . .  
Tu dirais, sous l'eau qui vire,  
Le roulis sourd des cailloux.

Cette âme qui se lamente  
En cette plainte dormante,  
C'est la nôtre, n'est-ce pas?  
La mienne, dis, et la tienne,  
Dont s'exhale l'humble antienne  
Par ce tiède soir, tout bas?<sup>10</sup>

Here we have the sort of languid poetic vision that is a hallmark of Verlaine's style, with its anaphoras announcing a sonorous universe reflecting the peace of the scene the poet evokes in this poem, which in its innocence of vision contrasts with Verlaine's erotic poetry in other collections. It is not difficult to imagine the "Extase" of Huysmans' title as stemming from and answering Verlaine's "extase langoureuse," and while there are few other instances of lexical repetition (the notable exception being the word "tiède" describing, in Verlaine, the evening and, in Huysmans, the "senteur" of his beloved's neck), Huysmans does take up, and then questions, Verlaine's poetic vision.

The two texts share a quasi-pastoral nocturnal setting inhabited by the poet and his beloved. The general shape of the two works is the same, a tripartite structure in which a fairly conventional state of blissful calm is evoked, followed by the metaphorical description of a faint sound and the poet's reaction. Within this structure, Huysmans effects the changes that make of "L'Extase" a biting commentary on the literature of bliss that Verlaine evokes. Verlaine's concern with the soul ("Cette âme qui se lamente") becomes the body reduced to its basest functions in Huysmans, while the union of poet and beloved in Verlaine becomes an abruptly terminated embrace and a reaction that hovers between misogyny and misanthropy in Huysmans. In both texts there is a downward vertical movement. Verlaine's poem progresses from the upwards-oriented "bois" and "brises" to the "herbe



agitée” where he sits, but Huysmans’ vertical drop is more abrupt and disquieting, from the “lune émerge[ant] de l’horizon” to the metaphoric fall, not unrelated perhaps to the path of his beloved’s urine, in the last paragraph: “Le rêve délicieux s’évanouit . . . je retombais sur la terre, sur l’ignoble terre” (127). Huysmans thus playfully alters Verlaine’s closing words “tout bas,” an expression which, in this context, evokes both the soft volume of the “murmure” and the lovers’ position on the ground. Huysmans’ final words decry the “vulgaires besoins” of his ladylove, effectively capping this reshaping of poetic language which seeks to install the literal in the privileged place occupied by metaphor in verse poetry such as Verlaine’s. Huysmans’ text, in this light, proves much more subtle than a first glance at the crudeness of the anecdote might suggest.

When we last left our *flâneur* in “La Rive gauche,” he had encountered some visiting acrobats. There is a pause in the narration after a detailed description of the acrobats’ performance and before the narrator continues his observations from a cabaret and then from the street. Between these paragraphs is a short one featuring yet another abrupt change of tone:

Il était tard. Le soleil se couchait et les nuages qui l’entouraient semblaient éclaboussés de gouttelettes de sang; il était temps de dîner, j’entrai dans le cabaret et m’attablai à côté d’un gros chat que je caressai et qui me râpa la main avec sa langue. On me servit un dîner mangeable, et, arrivé au moment où l’on roule une cigarette en prenant son café, je regardai les buveurs qui peuplaient ce bouge.

The voice of the poet, as opposed to that of the realist narrator, dominates in the first sentence and a half. While the sunset and the cat evoke obvious Baudelairean intertexts, there is another text in *Le Drageoir* that provides an extended meditation on the metaphoric value of the sunset. I now turn to “Camaïeu rouge,” a piece set in a sufficiently sumptuous “decadent” interior: “La chambre était tendue de satin rose broché de ramages cramois, les rideaux tombaient amplement des fenêtres, cassant sur un tapis à fleurs de pourpre leurs grands plis de velours grenat. Aux murs étaient appendus des sanguines de Boucher et des plats ronds en cuivre fleurdonnés et niellés par un artiste de la Renaissance” (77).

The text takes a surreal turn when the sunlight intensifies:

A ce moment, le soleil inonda le boudoir de ses lueurs rouges, piqua de scintillantes bluettes les spirales du verre, fit étinceler, comme des topazes brûlées, l'ambrosiaque liqueur et, brisant ses rayons contre le cuivre des plats, y alluma de fulgurants incendies. Ce fut un rutilant fouillis de flammes sur lequel se découpa la figure de la buveuse [. . .]. (77)

The narrator is so overcome by this blinding sight that he closes his eyes, only to discover, when he reopens them, that the intense light is gone. Moreover, both the red boudoir and the woman have since disappeared:

L'été, cependant, alors que la nostalgie du rouge m'opprime plus lourdement, je lève la tête vers le soleil, et là, sous ses cuisantes piqures, impassible, les yeux obstinément fermés, j'entrevois, sous le voile de mes paupières, une vapeur rouge; je rappelle mes souvenirs et je revois, pour une minute, pour une seconde, l'inquiétante fascination, l'inoubliable enchantement. (77-78)

While such an emphasis on the color red might lead us to expect an erotic or violent charge, “Camaïeu rouge” becomes in the end a meditation on nostalgia and memory. With this literary celebration of a transient moment in time, Huysmans joins his text to those of romantic poets such as Alphonse de Lamartine, who evoke the melancholy stemming from the impossibility of preserving a moment of bliss, except as a memory and its transformation into a text. For romantic poets, the poem becomes the vehicle by which the poet and, vicariously, the reader, may relive the intensity of the fleeting moment.

Such an unabashedly “romantic” sentiment as the kind of nostalgia for a sunset that “Camaïeu rouge” advances highlights a certain backward-looking tone in Huysmans’ text. Given Huysmans’ propensity for collecting and reworking or commenting ironically on established literary genres and styles, we can read “Camaïeu rouge” as a meditation on romantic poetic tropes generally. The “nostalgie du rouge” becomes a sort of nostalgia for romanticism and its textual modes whereby a poet could dwell at length on the melancholy of a passing sunset without the irony that had penetrated French literature since at least Baudelaire’s “Coucher du soleil romantique.” The mode in which Huysmans composes “Camaïeu rouge” inevitably looks nostalgic or outdated by the early 1870’s, but this is not to say that Huysmans is merely a belated romantic. Huysmans proves in many other pieces, such as the parody of romanticism in “L’Extase,” that he

too is capable of ironic distance from the romantic mode. The sunset of “Camaïeu rouge” serves to remind the reader, then, of the transience not just of sunsets but of literary styles, as Huysmans stands at the crossroads where romanticism, realism, and an emergent naturalism and estheticism meet.

Other texts in the collection thematize, not remembering, but rather forgetting the past. One of *Le Drageoir*’s prose recreations of the medieval *ballade*, “Ballade en l’honneur de ma tant douce tourmente,” compares a beloved’s eyes to wine and opium on account of their power to break the poet’s will. In a long series of exclamations, the poet expresses the desire to drink in those eyes and adds: “Je veux boire l’oubli, l’irrémissible oubli, sur tes lèvres veloutées, sur ces fleurs turbulentes de ton sang!” (129). Forgetting, it seems, is just as difficult for the poet as remembering. There is in much of the *Drageoir* a restlessness with the present, as the poet looks forward or back in search of some other state of consciousness. In “Ballade,” passion remains, but forgetting seems to elude the poet. Extending our reflections on the *Drageoir* as an intersection of several literary styles, we can see this desire to forget as an effort at rejecting immediate literary predecessors, who, fittingly, dominate this poem about struggling to break free from the past. Baudelaire’s shadow looms large in a text exploring “ivresse, vertige, enchantement, délire” (129) and in the intertext of “Le Lethé,” where the Baudelairean poet wishes to plunge his head into the fragrant skirts of his beloved and breathe, “comme une fleur flétrie / Le doux relent de mon amour défunt” (Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes* I: 155).

These considerations of the heritage of romanticism in the *Drageoir* have taken us far from our starting point in “La Rive gauche,” whose image of the sunset as “gouttelettes de sang” served as the impetus for exploring this network of intertexts. This suggestion of romantic sunset comes but a brief moment before the same paragraph, quoted above, concludes: “On me servit un dîner mangeable, et [. . .] je regardai les buveurs qui peuplaient ce bouge” (133). The text of “La Rive gauche” is restless, as the narrator’s mindset and his mode of description shift as quickly as the scenes unfurling before him while he watches the city or wanders its streets. This textual restlessness is an essential aspect of the esthetics of *flânerie* but also of collecting,

as the juxtaposed scenes, like objects next to one another, invite the active participation both of the writer who arranges them and the reader who interprets them. There is a relationship between author and audience that resembles the one between performer and public, since a spectacle invites an active exchange whereby the performance is presented to the spectator who imposes meaning upon it. This spectacular quality constitutes an important extension of the relationship we have been tracing between collecting and *flânerie*. After dinner, the narrator of “La Rive gauche” goes to the rue de la Gaîté, “une des rues les plus bruyantes” (133), a milieu strongly anchored in several kinds of performance. He first enters a working-class ball where bacchic revelry dominates in a scene of carefree and active women and children.

Nothing happens, however, in this stop at the workers’ ball, for the narrator then announces abruptly that he has decided to attend a concert. There is then something of a carnivalesque turn to the events, as the first tenor performing in the relatively majestic space is given a rather lackluster review,<sup>11</sup> while a drunkard in the audience receives the narrator’s full admiration and the following description of his face:

Quelle richesse de ton! quel superbe coloris! Cet homme appartenait évidemment à l’aristocratie des biberons, car il écartelait de gueules sur champ de sable, et ce n’était assurément pas avec du vermillon et du noir de pêche qu’il s’était blasonné le mufle, mais bien avec la fine fleur du vin et le pur hâle de la crasse. (134)

Huysmans’ irony turns to sarcasm as he appropriates the language of heraldry in order to mock the drunkard in a kind of pseudo-esthetic contemplation of the scene before him. This observation infused with biting sarcasm is brought to an abrupt end by a drum roll and cymbal crash which awaken the narrator from his reverie.

The next stop on the narrator’s tour of the Left Bank is a *march-and de vins*, where the tenor of the concert hall is exchanged for “Charles, le fameux chanteur populaire” (135). With this second singer, Huysmans inscribes actual songs in the text, both of them patriotic. The first is evoked only by title (“Le Chant de la canaille”), whereas the refrain of the second song (“Châteaudun”) is transcribed in Huysmans’ text, as the collective voice of the crowd which joins in the chorus: “Les canons vomissaient la foudre / Sur Châteaudun . . . Qu’importe à ce pays! / Il préfère se voir en poudre / Que de se rendre

aux Prussiens ennemis" (135). The narrator foregoes explicit further comment on the Franco-Prussian war that haunts this otherwise jolly scene. The war reference paves the way for one final intertext, where Huysmans provides not a transcription of lyrics but a prose variation on a folk melody with subtle yet direct links to war. This will lead us to the last phase of our textual *flânerie*, an investigation of the riches hidden behind short references to popular song lyrics in "La Rive gauche" and "Variation sur un air connu," which rewrites the refrain of the tune "Il pleut, il pleut bergère."

In place of the invitation to shelter and perhaps to love in the first stanza of the folk melody,<sup>12</sup> Huysmans provides an ominous tone in the short paragraph that opens and closes "Variation": "Il pleut, il pleut bergère; presse tes blancs moutons: l'orage hurle, la pluie raje le ciel de fils gris, les éclairs strient de jets blancs les nuages qui se heurtent et s'écroulent; rentre tes blancs moutons" (133). This is the only part of the song that Huysmans quotes verbatim in "Variation." The original lyrics go on to depict a comforting domestic scene where the singer welcomes the shepherdess to his home where his mother and sister await. The singer offers her a place to sleep and reassures her in the final strophe: "Ne rougis pas, bergère, / Ma mère et moi, demain, / Nous irons chez ton père / Lui demander ta main" (Sabatier 41). The seven paragraphs of development between the refrains in Huysmans' "Variation" offer a bleak rewriting of the pastoral conventions of the song. The animals themselves are terrified by the onset of the storm: "Les pauvres bêtes bêlent désespérément et lèvent au ciel leurs têtes hagardes" (123). The description of the shepherdess changes her from a vision of pastoral innocence to an unrelentingly "naturalist" portrait: "O ma petite bergère, que tu es changée! [. . .] tu clapotes lourdement dans l'eau avec des souliers gauchis et des pieds énormes!" (123). Far from the image of youth and beauty implied by the pastoral tradition, the eyes of Huysmans' shepherdess "ne décèlent plus que le grossier hébètement d'une fille de ferme" (123). Huysmans goes on to inscribe yet another text into his "Variation" by invoking two long-vanished pastoral characters, Estelle and Némorin, the heroes of the pastoral novel *Estelle* by Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian, published one year before the Revolution.

The tone of nostalgia, disappearance, and regret operating in other

texts appears at the heart of “Variation” as well, as the narrator laments: “Las! Tout cet exquis et pimpant attirail a disparu depuis longtemps! Ces ondoiements de jupes, ces bruissements de linge, ces cliquetis de pierres fines, ces sifflements de la soie dans des forêts de théâtre, ont disparu pour jamais!” (123). After this regretful look back, the border between fiction and reality becomes destabilized, as Huysmans begins to construct a future for the shepherdess in Paris where he imagines her reduced to prostitution (124). One has the impression that there is more at stake in this poem than a strictly literary passage from the idealist pastoral tradition to the announcement of the arrival of naturalism and its preference for honest portrayal of the underclass. Huysmans laments not merely a change in esthetic preference, but rather a set of social conditions that make the distance between highly constructed fictions and lived reality all too apparent. The narrator imagines that the remnant of the refrain of “Il pleut, il pleut bergère” will resound in the soul of the shepherdess-turned-prostitute, “pleine de rancunes et de détresses” (124).

If it was a popular song in “La Rive gauche” that brought us to the intertext of “Variation sur un air connu,” it is the latter which will return us to the Rue de la gaîté by the narrator’s musings in the antepenultimate paragraph. He imagines the shepherdess/city girl in the back room of a secondhand clothes shop, finding “la défroque des bergères de Watteau [qu’elle ira] promener dans un bal, à la recherche d’une pâture incertaine” (124). A costume imitating a painting that creates a world that never existed outside the realm of fiction: this is all that remains of the portrait of innocence from which Huysmans departs here. As we follow the imaginings of the narrator, we are led back to the workers’ ball and to the other kinds of entertainment to be had in “La Rive gauche,” which, when we left it, was awash in the strains of a patriotic tune. While the transcription of the patriotic lyrics is the most direct intrusion of politics into the meditations on fiction in *Le Drageoir*, it is not the only such intrusion. It does not require much arduous intertextual archaeology to unveil a certain political subtext in “Variation sur un air connu.”

As mentioned above, the characters that Huysmans evokes near the center of “Variation” seem at first merely to provide a concrete example of the metamorphosis of pastoral figures, imported from a pastoral novel of 1788 by Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian. There is more than a subtle hint, in light of the narrator’s lament for the trappings

of the pastoral, now “disparu pour jamais” (123), that the political instability in France since 1789 is linked to the definitive disappearance of the naïve idyll of the pastoral tradition. So too are the death of the pastoral and swift political change united in the case of the author of *Estelle*, who died in 1794 at the age of 39, weakened by his imprisonment during the Revolution. Beyond this, even the charming and innocent “Il pleut, il pleut bergère” has a direct connection to the Revolution. Its lyrics were penned by Philippe Fabre d’Eglantine, a dramaturge and revolutionary whose biography contrasts highly with the innocence of his lyric. A member of the National Convention, Fabre d’Eglantine voted for the death of the king and was part of the committee which created the revolutionary calendar, itself an attempt literally to erase all traces of a past era in order to start anew with a fresh set of ideals. Fabre d’Eglantine was guillotined by order of the Committee of Public Safety in the same year as Florian. Both of Huysmans’ intertexts in “Variation,” then, lead to 1794 as the end-point of an idealism stemming from both sides of the political spectrum. Belatedly, Huysmans seems to imply a parallel between the kind of literary soul-searching of the transitional 1870’s and the political implications of literary pastoralism as it morphs, in “Variation,” into a distant fantasy replaced by harsh urban reality. *Le Drageoir*, in the multiplicity of its styles and voices, becomes an attempt to situate literature in the light of a refusal of the pastoral and of an unconvincing romantic idealism, with nonetheless a refusal fully to embrace the mimetic efforts of realism and naturalism on the part of this one-time disciple of Emile Zola.

In the face of such a complex set of intertexts, it would be difficult for us to provide a convincing tidy conclusion to the literal and literary wanderings implied in the pages of “La Rive gauche.” Rather than imposing meaning on the sequence of events, the narrator simply adds after quoting the refrain of “Châteaudun”: “Sa chanson terminée, il sortit. Nous fîmes autant et allâmes nous coucher” (136). The city offers a geography of cultural and sensual pleasures without constraining participants in sharply defined patterns of beginnings and endings. This arbitrary ending of “La Rive gauche” echoes the free intertextual patterns operating within this account of a stroll through Paris. Far from merely depicting the place in a gesture toward

ekphrasis, the poet makes a strange space even stranger by introducing personal reveries or metaphoric associations. The narrator determines the space he presents to the reader even as he frames the text in terms of his observations during a walk. We can see “La Rive gauche,” then, as a microcosmic reproduction of the larger structure of *Le Drageoir*, where a most heterogeneous set of genres, tones, styles, and subject matter find their place in the collection.

Inherent in this collecting of the literary past is its reordering and reinterpretation. Texts such as “La Rive gauche,” which seem to assert a subjective and particularized vision of the writer-*flâneur*, invite at least a flirtation with a political subtext inscribed in the song lyrics which themselves invited further exploration of “Variation sur un air connu,” which revealed not only an affinity between the texts but also the difficult relationship between the pastoral and the revolutionary. Huysmans’ *Drageoir* has proven a fecund space in which the literary imagination may wander. His text recalls Gaston Bachelard’s assertion that “il y aura toujours plus de choses dans un coffret fermé que dans un coffret ouvert. La vérification fait mourir les images. Toujours, *imaginer* sera plus grand que *vivre*” (Bachelard 90). Huysmans’ half-open, half-enclosed container invites both imagination and experience, as it assembles its texts while leaving the reader free to wander among them and to assemble the past and present they contain. Huysmans rejects closure both in “La Rive gauche” and in the *Drageoir* generally, preferring to extend the analytical *flânerie* beyond the limits of the text’s endings. This refusal of closure is itself a final point of convergence between writing, collecting, and *flânerie*. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal remind us that “if collecting is meaningful, it is because it shuns closure and the security of received evaluations and instead opens its eyes to existence—the world around us, both cultural and natural, in all its unpredictability and contingent complexity.”<sup>13</sup> Going beyond a reading of *Le Drageoir aux épices* as a precursor text and beginning to plumb its depths, we may begin to sharpen our literary vision well enough to notice the “contingent complexity” of the literary scene in and through which the early Huysmans operates and in which we readers still have an important role to play.



## Notes

1. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Le Drageoir aux épices*, ed. Patrice Locmant (Paris: Champion, 2003) 10 and 12, respectively. All page references to the *Drageoir* are taken from this edition.
2. See Naomi Schor, "Collecting Paris" in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994) 252.
3. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 60.
4. Gaston Bachelard, *Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967) 17.
5. Louis Forestier, "Du bon usage des coffrets" in Keith Cameron and James Kearns, eds., *Le champ littéraire 1860–1900* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 164.
6. Charles Nunley, "Huysmans and the Aesthetics of Solitude in *Croquis parisiens*" in *French Forum* 21 (May 1996): 189.
7. Charles Baudelaire, "Les foules" in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–1976) I: 291.
8. Forestier evokes a similar tension between tradition and innovation in his analysis of the liminal sonnet which introduces the *Drageoir* and which he calls "une forme tout à la fois fixe et transgressée" (Forestier 166).
9. "Et enfin, enfin il y a quelques jours, tu étais une divinité, ce qui est si commode, ce qui est si beau, si inviolable. Te voilà femme maintenant." See Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) I: 425.
10. Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962) 191.
11. "Je ne sais trop, à vrai dire, ce qu'il chante: il brame certains mots et avale les autres" (134).
12. "Il pleut, il pleut bergère, / Rentre tes blanc moutons; / Allons à ma chaumière, / Bergère, vite allons." See Claudine and Roland Sabatier, ed., *Chansons de France et d'ailleurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) 40.
13. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds., "Introduction" to *The Cultures of Collecting* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994) 5–6.