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Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Romans et nouvelles* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade)
(Paris: Gallimard, 2019), 1791 pp.
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Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I: 1867-79
(Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), 1381 pp.
ISBN 9782812451409

Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV: 1888-91
(Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), 1127 pp.
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For many general readers of French literature the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans, who began his writing career by allying himself to Émile Zola's naturalist movement and ended it as a mystical Catholic, remains a minority interest, intriguing in parts, certainly, but subsidiary both to the traditional literary canon, and to the contemporary currents of academic discourse. Nevertheless, there has been something of a revival in Huysmans's literary fortunes over the last few years: in 2017 Classiques Garnier published the first volume of an ambitious nine-volume *Œuvres complètes*, which will incorporate practically all of Huysmans's published and unpublished works; a major exhibition devoted to Huysmans as an art critic ran from 26 November 2019 to 1 March 2020 at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and from 3 April to 19 July 2020 at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporaine, Strasbourg; and now the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, whose editions have long been seen as marking a writer's entry into the French literary pantheon, has finally inaugurated Huysmans into their iconic leather-bound series. It would be an over-simplification to say that all this is the result of Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission* [*Submission*], the narrator of which is a Huysmans specialist at the Sorbonne who is offered the editorship of a proposed Pléiade edition, but the lively debate aroused by the novel certainly had the effect of introducing Huysmans to a new readership. When asked about the Pléiade's long-overdue decision to include Huysmans, André Guyaux, who, together with the critic Pierre Jourde, directed the editorial team responsible for the edition, admitted: 'L'idée était dans l'air, mais Houellebecq y a incontestablement contribué.' [The idea was in the air, but Houellebecq undoubtedly contributed to it.]¹

Initially, when the Pléiade and Classiques Garnier first announced their respective Huysmans's projects many assumed that they would be rival editions, each fighting for the same limited readership. The idea of a new *Œuvres complètes* was certainly welcome (the first *Œuvres*

complètes, directed by Huysmans's testamentary executor, Lucien Descaves, dates back to 1928-1934 and contains little in the way of explanatory notes or critical apparatus), but two competing editions seemed a bit like overkill. In reality, the Pléiade and Classiques Garnier editions actually embody two different approaches to the presentation of Huysmans's work, and both are clearly targeted at different readers. The first obvious difference is that the Pléiade is not, as one might have assumed given its long history of producing complete (or practically complete) editions of classic writers, in any way an *œuvres complètes*. Although it contains all of Huysmans's major pre-conversion fictional works – *Marthe*, *Les Sœurs Vatard*, *Sac au dos*, *En ménage*, *À vau-l'eau*, *À rebours*, *Un Dilemme*, *En rade*, and *Là-bas*, together with the first of the conversion novels, *En route* – it leaves out Huysmans's art criticism, his journalism, his first book of prose poems and stories, posthumous works such as his novella *La Retraite de Monsieur Bougran*, and, most controversially, his last two 'Catholic' novels. Completeness is not the goal here; the edition is aimed – like most of the Pléiade series – at the informed reader, rather than the academic specialist or the student of literature.

By contrast, *classiques Garnier*, directed by Pierre Glaude and Jean-Marie Seillan, takes the term *œuvres complètes* literally. Its massive volumes – the two that have appeared so far weigh in at 1381 and 1127 pages respectively – aspire to include everything that Huysmans committed to print, with the result that even long-time devotees will come across material that was previously unfamiliar to them, and its thorough critical apparatus is obviously directed at the academic market.

Both new editions draw heavily on the knowledge and skills of members of the Société J.-K. Huysmans. Guyaux is the current president of the Société, while Francesca Guglielmi, a Huysmans and Léon Bloy specialist who provided the Pléiade's critical apparatus for *Marthe* and *Là-bas* (with the assistance of Guy Ducrey) is the Société's vice president. Added to which, the names of a number of the Pléiade editors – Pierre Jourde, Per Buvik, Gaël Prigent, and Andrea Schellino – will be familiar to readers of the Société's annual *Bulletin*. As for the *Classiques Garnier* edition, Seillan is another Société luminary whose writings on Huysmans have been appearing in its *Bulletin* and elsewhere for the last thirty years. His book tracing the development of Huysmans's political views, *Huysmans: politique et religion* (2009), is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the ideological roots of Huysmans's fascination with the Middle Ages and his return to Catholicism.

The Pléiade's critical apparatus is, as might be expected, more straightforward and easier to use than that of the *Classiques Garnier* edition. Not only is all the critical material kept separate at the back (apart from a nominal amount of footnotes that clarify obscure words in the text), the Pléiade edition helpfully includes two ribbon bookmarkers, so it is possible to bookmark both the

text and the relevant notes, making switching between the two very simple. The critical apparatus itself follows the format typically adopted by the publisher in the past: each work has a separate critical section comprising a preface that situates the work within its contemporary context and describes its genesis and composition, a short note on the text explaining which version has been used and whatever variants or publication anomalies there might be, a short bibliography of relevant critical texts, followed by the notes themselves. For the most part, these are succinct and informative, rather than extensive or overly academic in tone. Such is the general density and obscurity of Huysmans's references, however, that even the experienced editors of the Pléiade are not immune to the odd error. In *À van-l'eau*, for example, Huysmans makes reference to a 'cabinet à cinq centimes' situated on the Place Saint-Sulpice. Curiously the notes describe this as a 'cabinet de lecture', a reading room where subscribers could borrow or read books and journals. However, contemporary photos of the Place Saint-Sulpice in the 1880s show that this 'cabinet' was actually a public urinal. Later, in the same novella, Huysmans makes what is surely an incomprehensible allusion to 'le vieux sanglier que possédait autrefois la maison Bailly' [the old wild boar that used to be owned by the Maison Bailly]. The notes to the Pléiade tell us, correctly enough, that the Maison Bailly was a firm of furniture removers, but not what the significance of the old boar was. Again, Huysmans's recondite allusions often give way to persistent research – in fact the boar was a gift from a grateful customer in the 1860s who intended it to be enjoyed as a Sunday roast, but the Maison Bailly's proprietor, unable to kill it, decided to keep it in the firm's courtyard instead, where it became something of a local celebrity, attracting the attention of passers-by and schoolchildren, including the adolescent Huysmans.

The decision by the editors of the Pléiade edition not to include Huysmans's final two post-conversion novels, *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat*, is certainly a controversial one. These have traditionally been seen as forming, along with *En route*, either an autobiographical trilogy, or a tetralogy if you also include *Là-bas* (in which Huysmans's alter ego Durtal is introduced for the first time). It could be argued that both *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat*, though nominally published as novels, are devoid of plot and action, and constitute a thinly-disguised transcription of Huysmans's own spiritual journey into the turbulent waters of turn-of-the-century Catholicism rather than being works of fiction as such. There were probably also practical and logistical reasons for the exclusion: *La Cathédrale* was by far Huysmans's longest novel and to have included it alone would have pushed the page count beyond acceptable limits. Either way, the decision has prompted an aggrieved response from those who see Huysmans's spiritual journey as a key component in understanding him as a writer. The weekly Catholic magazine *Famille chrétienne* complained bitterly about the exclusion in its pages: 'Est-ce un choix idéologique? Ses responsables éditoriaux auraient-

ils expurgé volontairement l'œuvre de Huysmans de sa partie catholique?' [Was this an ideological decision? Did those leading the editorial team want to purge Huysmans's work of its Catholic part?].

Leaving out *La Cathédrale* would have been easier to comprehend if some rationale had been given by the Pléiade editors. As it is, neither the general introduction – which otherwise gives an interesting and insightful account of Huysmans's life and work – nor the 'Note sur l'édition' even mention the book by name. This is surely a curious omission given that the novel was for many years Huysmans's most well known and emblematic book – before the twentieth-century fascination with the decadent tradition and its adoption of *À rebours* as a kind of cult classic, that is.

Inevitably, given the dichotomous nature of Huysmans's readership, the Pléiade edition looks certain to divide its readers. Those who see Huysmans primarily as a naturalist whose work becomes progressively less interesting in proportion to his attraction to Catholicism, will find almost all they need: a well-edited, compact edition of the works that define Huysmans as a fin-de-siècle writer. Indeed, taken together, the Pléiade's introductory prefaces, which make good use of Huysmans's voluminous correspondence (much of it still unpublished) in their account of the genesis of the novels, provide a fascinating and succinct biography of the writer's life, albeit one that stops in 1895. On the other hand, those who see Huysmans's work through the teleological lens of his conversion to Catholicism will be sorely disappointed. Guyaux has expressed his desire for a second volume, which would go some way to salving the wounds caused by the omission, but realistically, even if a second volume does appear, it would be something of a ragbag, with Huysmans's late Catholic works being shoehorned in alongside his art criticism and journalism. In this regard, the Classiques Garnier edition will probably be the more satisfying in the long run – assuming Seillan has the energy to see the remaining seven volumes through to completion – in that it will present in chronological order the most comprehensive and critically rigorous collection of Huysmans material ever published.

¹ All translations are my own.