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Review: Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Drifting (À vau-l'eau)*, translated by Brendan King (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2017)

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Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Drifting (À van-l'eau)*, translated by Brendan King  
(Sawtry: Dedalus, 2017), 109 pp.  
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J.-K. Huysmans (1848-1907) is considered an important figure in not one, but two nineteenth-century literary movements: Naturalism and Decadence. The novella *À van-l'eau*, published in 1882, might be said to hover astride the line dividing the two and to encompass his stylistic transition from the former to the latter, containing as it does both the meticulous attention to the realistic and often mundane details of everyday life that is characteristic of Naturalism, and the self-loathing malaise that is a prominent feature of Decadent art and literature.

*À van-l'eau*, translated by Brendan King as *Drifting* in the new Dedalus European Classics series, is the brief (a mere sixty pages in this English-language version) tale of the hapless middle-aged Parisian clerk Jean Folantin and his ultimately fruitless search for entertainment, stimulation, and, not least, a decent meal. The story begins as M. Folantin is finishing an unpalatable dinner in the first of a series of unsatisfactory restaurants; it is the dead of winter, and his solitary lodgings are cold and dreary. We quickly learn that Folantin's life has been one of poverty and near-constant misery since birth; that he has toiled at the same thankless and low-paying government Ministry job since leaving school (an occupation shared by Huysmans himself), and that he has no family, few friends, and is hopelessly single. The high sex drive of his youth has deserted him, as has any hope of ascending the professional ladder. To top off this seemingly endless recitation of woes, he is plagued by chronic indigestion, which is only made worse by the poor-quality offerings available at the dirty, clamorous, and uncongenial cafés and restaurants within easy distance of his flat (he cannot travel too far without discomfort, we learn, due to a painful leg).

As the almost unrelentingly dismal story proceeds, readers are treated to description after description of inhospitable eating-houses and stomach-turning food, rendered in King's adroit translation so vividly and in such detail that, in true Naturalist fashion, we can almost smell the stale grease in the air and feel the sickening crunch of gristle between our teeth. Folantin finds brief moments of pleasure in the public heated baths and the delicate beauties of the Parisian early spring, but these are all too fleeting as he engages in near-constant flagellation of both himself, for his unfortunate life choices, and the world around him, for being so full of misery and inconvenience (a clear harbinger of the cynicism and world-weariness so prominent in Huysmans's later, more firmly Decadent works).

Folantin's half-hearted attempts to explore art and literature are short-lived; the brief rekindling of an old friendship fails to survive our hero's disgust at his companion's taste in both dining establishments and comic opera, and a fleeting effort to raise his own spirits by focusing on his own comparative comfort in the face of others' poverty and unhappiness flickers out with the return of winter. As the book proceeds, our (anti-)hero's days continue to be an unending series of attempts to fill the empty hours, to discover some tiny spark of interest in something, *anything*, that might flare into passion and bring his life some meaning.

What rescues us from the tedium suffered by Huysmans's hero is twofold: first there is the consummate attention to detail for which the author was known during both the Naturalist and Decadent phases of his career. Reading *Drifting* is an experience of the senses. We taste the unappetizing cheese and runny eggs; we hear the clatter of cutlery and the clamour of voices; we feel the icy sleet battering our faces and smell the cruciferous smoke of cheap cigars. And even in this dreariest of novellas there are moments of exquisitely observed beauty, such as:

[...] and when he tired of knocking the dust off printed volumes, he'd lean over the parapet, and the sight of boats with their tarred hulls, cabins painted leek-green, and main masts lowered, pleased him; he would stand there enchanted, contemplating a casserole pot simmering on a cast-iron stove in the open air, the inevitable black-and-white dog running, its tail cocked, the length of a barge, and blond-haired children seated by the tiller, hair in their eyes and fingers in their mouths.

The second quality that keeps *Drifting* from being unremittingly grim is its black humour. Brendan King has translated eight of Huysmans's books for Dedalus and authored a number of articles on the writer as well; he is clearly quite comfortable with Huysmans's darkly comic style, and, with the exception of a few slightly jarring linguistic anachronisms (King's English-speaking protagonist uses 'Great!' to express frustration and refers at another point to 'stuffing your face'), handles the language with a deft touch. His lengthy introduction to the novella is both informative and accessible, providing valuable insight into its context within both Huysmans's career and the contemporary French literary scene, and making a solid case for *Drifting's* importance as both art and entertainment. A worthy addition to the Dedalus catalogue.