

## The Individual in the (Catholic) Mass: Restoration, Self and Community in Liturgy and Literature

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In the turbulent 1830s, the young priest Prosper Guéranger determines to restore France's dispersed Benedictine community. Guéranger revitalizes a religious community, as well as a thousand years of monastic tradition. He does this work with full knowledge that he will be criticized, in the ethos of postrevolutionary France, for sacrificing the individual to the collective. In the decadent 1890s, Joris-Karl Huysmans writes *En route*, a novel that continues the narrative of the novelist's alter-ego Durtal. Durtal, disgusted with life in Paris, leaves on retreat to a Trappist monastery, where his soul is "surprised by grace" in the atmosphere of "mystical literature, liturgy and plainchant" (Huysmans qtd. in Baldick 288). Durtal undertakes his own individual 'rebuilding' within the monastic community.

My article focuses on the conversion narrative in a century dedicated to the reinforcement of individualism both personal and regional. These authors represent a cultural continuum in the nineteenth century, one that sublimates the personal to the collective, yet with the seemingly paradoxical objective of raising up the individual. The figures I study here represent different modes of religious activity or adherence; each approaches religious discourse in ways that investigate the place of the individual within the infrastructure of a plural organism.

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*A fiddler who was present, and who appeared to act as the appointed minstrel of the company, forthwith struck up a Scotch reel; and that in tones so invigorating, that Hugh and his friend (who had both been drinking before) rose from their seats as by previous concert, and, to the great admiration of the assembled guests, performed an extemporaneous No-Popery Dance.*

Charles Dickens (1841)<sup>1</sup>

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1. Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* 181.

Charles Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*, half of which is set during London's anti-Popery riots of 1780, depicts the religious crowd as "a vast throng, sprinkled doubtless here and there with honest zealots, but composed for the most part of the very scum and refuse of London, whose growth was fostered by bad criminal laws, bad prison regulations, and the worst conceivable police" (359). This description—and Dickens' novel in general—may seem an odd starting point for a paper on Catholic restoration efforts across the Channel and half a century after the London riots, but the novel offers a unique point of entry for several of the same broader issues at stake in the two French writers I will discuss here. For one thing, Dickens' historical fiction (in both *Barnaby Rudge* and the later *A Tale of Two Cities*) tackles the desperate need for systemic reform (explicitly, in *Barnaby Rudge*, reform of the social and legal systems); and does so, for another, by exploring the complex relationships between individual subjects in times of upheaval and the collective identities that either result from or contribute to those upheavals. Finally, the most superficial similarity comes from the 1841 novel's focus on one particular genre of tumult, that is, political turbulence as manifested around the cultural fulcrum of religious expression. Dickens' novel captures a specific historical moment in European intellectual history, when religious and cultural expression come under sharp political scrutiny, and these three ways of being in society must subsequently redefine their discursive modes.

If Dickens' novel speaks to the socio-political side of religious expression, two other nineteenth-century figures represent other facets of this equation. Dom Prosper Guéranger, restorer of the Abbey of Solesmes and author of *L'Année Liturgique* (*The Liturgical Year*, published in fifteen volumes from 1841 to 1901), is the most explicitly "religious" subject of this study, in the doctrinal or consecrated sense of the word. Joris-Karl Huysmans, Catholic convert and Decadent author, on the other hand, represents through his protagonist (and fictional alter ego) Durtal the artistic and cultural—or even counter-cultural—expression of religion as a new possibility for individual or community identity in *fin-de-siècle* France.

I shall spend some time with each of these narratives, considering them in the context of their particular places in a century dedicated to the reinforcement of individualism both personal and regional. Dickens' novel showcases one paradigm of collective mentality in a time of unrest. Dom Guéranger and Huysmans, too, in real and fictional contexts after the Revolution deconstructs the Catholic model in France, represent elements of a social and cultural continuum at work throughout the nineteenth century; one that goes "against the

grain” by sublimating the personal to the collective, yet with the seemingly paradoxical objective of raising up the individual. Each nineteenth-century figure we will encounter in this article, from Dickens to Durtal, represents a different mode of religious activity or adherence, and each approaches the discourse of religion in ways that investigate and interrogate the place of the individual within the infrastructure of a—by nature and etymology<sup>2</sup>—plural organism.

### **“the dense throng”: The Dickensian Mob as Agent of Ironic Conversion**

Dickens’ first historical novel anticipates nineteenth-century sociological studies by exploring the “herd behavior” of the anti-Catholic mob in 1780’s “Gordon” riots. The view of the religious crowd in Dickens’ novel, a mob that amasses as it passes through the streets, distinctly represents the crowd itself as a character, whose plural nature as a group made up of many individuals is grammatically transformed into a singular, albeit oneiric, organism:

They had torches among them, and the chief faces were distinctly visible. . . . After them, the dense throng came fighting on: some singing, some shouting in triumph, some quarrelling among themselves; some menacing the spectators as they passed; some with great wooden fragments, on which they spent their rage as if they had been alive, rending them limb from limb, and hurling the scattered morsels high into the air; some in a drunken state, unconscious of the hurts they had received from falling bricks, and stones, and beams; one borne upon a shutter, in the very midst, covered with a dingy cloth, a senseless ghastly heap. Thus—a vision of coarse faces, with here and there a blot of flaring smoky light; a dream of demon heads and savage eyes, and sticks and iron bars uplifted in the air, and whirled about; a bewildering horror . . . it flitted onward and was gone. (370, emphasis added)

In the course of the paragraph, the plural nouns (“they,” “the chief faces,” “wooden fragments,” “scattered morsels”) give way to grammatically singular ones (“one,” “a senseless ghastly heap,” “a vision,” “a dream,” “a bewildering horror”). Even elements that remain plural (“coarse faces,” “demon heads and savage eyes”) are encompassed within singularity (“a vision,” “a dream”).

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2. Whether we take “religion” in the Ciceronian sense of *relegare*, “to re-read,” or the later *religare*, “to bind tightly together.”

Later, Dickens will return to the mob as a unified entity: "A mob is usually a creature of very mysterious existence," his narrator tells us. "Where it comes from or whither it goes, few men can tell. Assembling and dispersing with equal suddenness, it is as difficult to follow to its various sources as the sea itself" (380). It is clear from these passages that, for Dickens, the mob becomes a character in its own right: the group becomes an individual. In describing the riots of 1780, Dickens explores the interplay between individual subject and mass mentality: how they form, inform or contradict one another, how they cooperate in (self) definition(s).

As a point of comparison, Alexandre Dumas' 1845 *La Reine Margot*, which also treats a historical episode of mass violence based on religious questions, displays a certain reluctance to detail the clashes of crowds. Dumas' version of the St Bartholomew's Day Massacres—one of the bloodiest episodes of the wars of religion in France, and named for having begun on St Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1572—largely represents the weeks-long religious uprisings and systematic killing of tens of thousands of French Protestants obliquely, whether through chapter headings like "Les Massacrés/ The Victims" (Chapter 8) or "Les Massacreurs/ The Butchers" (Chapter 9), or by setting the mob actions "off stage," allying the reader's experience of the massacres with one character's point of view. Dumas compares La Mole, the fleeing character, to a *cerfaux abois* ("hart amid baying hounds") (114), further emphasizing his isolation, and rendering him more human as the mob in his pursuit becomes even more faceless and animal.

The massacring crowd in *La Reine Margot* occurs as a minor episode in the novel. Dumas uses the St Bartholomew's Day Massacres as a tool for foregrounding the liaison between (Catholic) Marguerite de Valois and (Protestant) La Mole, figuring their romantic affair as a kind of metonymical nexus for the complex political and religious affairs of sixteenth-century France. *Barnaby Rudge*, however, works in the opposite direction: that is, the development of one individual character (even the novel's eponym) takes secondary place to the socio-political machinery under the Dickensian microscope.

"Religion" is, however, a grand and vague word for what happens in *Barnaby Rudge*. In fact, Dickens paints religious life in eighteenth-century England as a bleak and colorless thing, a matter more of cultural heritage or unthinking rivalry than belief. It is no accident that Dickens' version casts as leaders of the riots a half-wit, a petty criminal and a two-timing hangman. The characters associated with religious practices in this novel all exemplify falseness or hypocrisy, from the "skin deep" piety of Mrs Varden and Miggs to the murderous Catholic-Protestant animosity between Chester and Haredale

(neither of whom is shown actually practicing the faith that supposedly nourishes their family feud). As such, the anti-Catholic specifics of the 1780 riots are unimportant; these could be protests against any social body or organism. The historical fact that Protestants perpetrated these acts of destruction against Catholic churches and households merely provides the background for Dickens' true foci: the intertwined questions of whether a person can surmount his past, and how to express individual identity within a community context. In fact, I would suggest that for Dickens, the truest "religion" is that created by the social collective—not one particular faith practice, but the rite and rigor of the crowd. The novel's final chapters inform us about the tragic irony of some of those put to death for their participation in the violent riots: "It was an exquisite satire upon the false religious cry which had led to so much misery, that some of these people owned themselves to be Catholics, and begged to be attended by their own priests" (569). For Dickens, the danger of "religious" practice without the balancing elements of either true faith or moderation lies in that the identity of the individual (who possesses at least the capacity for moral integrity) is subsumed into the frenzy of the mass (which does not); mindless mass action can lead an individual into treacherous self-contradiction.

I begin with this discussion of Dickens in order to set the stage for the two writers who will guide the rest of my article. For what I am really talking about is not limited to the socio-philosophical history of nineteenth-century France, but touches on the larger question of community discourse, as created, recreated, destroyed or sustained during times of extreme social division. Moreover, where "religion" is an ironically marginal plot element in *Barnaby Rudge*, it is absolutely integral to the work of both Guéranger and Huysmans, as we shall see.

### **Liberty, Fraternity, Psalmody: Guéranger and the Solesmes Revolution**

*Barnaby Rudge* recounts anti-Catholic uprisings in eighteenth-century England in a way that not only resuscitates this particular episode from history but also reflects occurrences on the European continent from the same era. John Gage points out that, with the growing threat to the French monarchy in 1792 and 1793, "came the development of a particularly savage English image of the *sans-culotte*, based very much . . . on the perception of English mob-violence—notably in the London Gordon riots of 1780" (495). The so-called Gordon riots began in June of 1780, after Lord George Gordon, president of the Protestant Association, addressed a crowd of some sixty thousand people

in St George's Fields, Southwark, calling for a repeal of the Parliamentary Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1778 (Rudé 94-95). By the time the Third Estate convened and pronounced its famous "Tennis Court Oath" nine years later, England had already provided an example of several elements that would become crucial tenets of the French Revolution: a vehement outcry against papism as representing absolute monarchical rule; a march on the Houses of Parliament; destruction of Church edifices and property; destruction of Newgate Prison. The scene Dickens describes (albeit somewhat romanticized) might be said to forecast the events in France of 1789-93.

Where English Catholics retained their rights despite the rioters, however, the Catholic Church in the French Revolution suffered a blow from which it would never fully recover. On 13 February 1790, following a provisional suspension of religious vows effected just after the beginning of the Revolution, the French Assembly passed a law abolishing all religious orders. According to this new law, "The legisla[tur]e no longer recognizes the solemn monastic vows of both sexes. In consequence, it declares that the Orders and Regular Congregations in which such vows are taken are and will be suppressed forever in France, without possibility of revival" (Soltner ix). With a single article of legislation, the Assembly thus did away with fourteen centuries of monastic tradition and laid the groundwork for a new, specifically French religion—by which I mean both the sole state-sanctioned worship-ideology, Gallicanism, and the religion of the State itself. This latter—the supremacy of the State as a hierarchical religious organization—in its turn paved the way for the increasing *dechristianization* that characterized nineteenth-century France, leading ultimately to the full separation of Church and State passed in 1905.

Despite the absolute nature of the Assembly's 1790 proclamation, events throughout the nineteenth century helped to prove that political decisions are rarely either final or irrevocable. With the Bourbon restoration, especially under King Louis XVIII (1815-1824), France saw the hesitant reappearance of the Jesuit, Trappist and Franciscan orders. During this time, however, Catholics in general and priests in particular experienced a period of ambivalence about the direction of the Church in France. Public debates (in partisan religious newspapers like *L'Avenir* and *L'Univers*) recurred between Gallicanists and Ultramontanists—or, in modern terms, religious liberals and religious conservatives. Some subscribed to a vision of Catholicism that allied Church and State in a France-specific theocratic democracy. An influential and impassioned orator-priest, Félicité de Lamennais, founder of the newspaper *L'Avenir*, advocated the separation of Church and State in order to ensure greater freedoms for the Church. The controversy around this proposed

separation created a real chasm at a time when religious practice remained on shaky ground in the post-Revolutionary (and post-Empire) France of the Restoration. When Lamennais' movement was condemned by the Holy See, its embittered adherents had the unenviable choice of separating from Rome or being accused of ultraconservative allegiances, in a political climate where such an accusation carried additional dangerous weight as the Restoration changed focus and moved toward greater individual freedoms (and less power for the monarchy).

In the continuing turbulence of early nineteenth-century France, a young priest determined to restore the vibrancy and solemnity of Benedictine history. In 1831 the twenty-six-year-old diocesan priest Prosper Guéranger read a newspaper ad for the sale of the Priory of Solesmes. The priory had passed into private ownership during the Revolution, then become a site of several failed commercial enterprises. Guéranger's biographer explains that "[t]he monastery was even in danger of falling into the hands of 'the black gang,' men who didn't hesitate to turn the most cherished landmarks into profit-earning quarries of stone" (Soltner 24). Guéranger had the thought of gathering several young priests together at Solesmes to "reestablish there the Order of Saint Benedict, with the Divine Office and studies" (Soltner 25). After two years of fundraising, permission-requesting and constitution-writing—not to mention defending this restoration project when Lamennais, one of its strongest and most vocal supporters, was harshly denounced by the Vatican—Guéranger received the news that all his requests had been granted: Solesmes would be, once again, an Abbey, and the Benedictine Order, with its dual focus of prayer and work (*ora et labora*), would live again in France.

In the years that followed this legal and financial victory, Guéranger encountered the difficulties of both obliterating "the worldly habits of the young monks which they had acquired during the days of revolutionary secularism" (Soltner 88) and combating the lingering perception, popularized by Napoleon, of monastic life as "useless," a conception according to which the contemplative vocation stood contrary to the needs of the State, even irrelevant. In order to keep his monastic community alive, Dom Guéranger had to demonstrate the "applicability" of this work both to the political entity of France undergoing repeated upheaval and self-definition, and to the spiritual entity of the Church in France as it sought to renew and redefine the validity of liturgical life against the forces of secularization. He saw the reestablishment of religious orders, especially the Benedictines, as an integral element to the larger project of recuperating France from the violence and destruction of the Revolution.



Guéranger undertook not only the long process of revitalizing an individual religious community, but also the arduous task of rebuilding a thousand years of monastic tradition, from vestments and chant manuscripts to the masonry of the abbey itself. He did this work with full knowledge that he would be criticized, in the ethos of post-Revolutionary France, for sacrificing the individual to the collective; yet he persevered, discerning in the social transactions of liturgy an inspired unity that could uphold and broaden the integrity of the individual voice while incorporating it into a greater unity in a way no political diatribe or social treatise could accomplish. Under Guéranger's tireless effort and direction, the Abbey of Solesmes became a center of liturgical study and manuscript reproduction.

One of the most important ways in which Guéranger accomplished the work of renewal was through an insistence on strict adherence to ancient monastic traditions. According to Guéranger, the liturgy as celebrated in churches of the confusing post-Revolutionary period had lost meaning, having strayed from the Roman rite and thus devolved into a practice with no center. The only ontologically sound center for Catholic practice, Guéranger insisted, was Rome. And the liturgy of the Roman Church alone "expresses and holds together the unity and universality of the Faith, across the development of tradition, but only as it refers back to the visible representative of Christ, the only principle of the Church's unity" (Soltner 91). Soltner continues: "In giving back to his century the profound meaning of liturgical prayer, the abbot of Solesmes fought against two forms of individualism: a personal individualism, by upholding the superiority of ecclesial prayer; and a national or regional individualism, by emphasizing the importance of this unity—never to be confused with uniformity" (91). Individuals—monks, priests, bishops and faithful alike—must devote themselves to rebuilding the Church in France, Guéranger's work proposed, and they must do so by effecting a return to and revalorization of the Mass. The Mass becomes the ultimate outpouring of community through which each individual participant is brought to greater wholeness. Guéranger foresaw the objections to his project—mainly, that he was "sacrificing the individual to society" (Soltner 91)—and forestalled them in the introduction to his *L'Année Liturgique*, in which he analyzed and explained each season of the life of the Church, and each feast within the season. *L'Année Liturgique* represents an "enormous work realized by the Abbot of Solesmes to reconstitute the Romanesque medieval liturgy, and to revivify the symbolism attached to each day of the year conceived as a liturgical and sacred cycle" (Viègnes 70). The introduction to this work explains that the Church's prayer cannot take an individual member of the Church away from



himself—rather, participation in the collective social transaction of liturgy more firmly grounds each faithful in union with God, *through* the “brilliance and harmony of the chants” (Guéranger xx). The work of rebuilding one religious community and its traditions would logically begin at the level of the individual person, who adds his voice to the great psalmody that, in Guéranger’s vision, renovates society as a whole.

The work of renovation begins on an infinitesimal scale. In the earliest days of the abbey’s revival, and in the absence of official chant books, Guéranger’s monks developed the practice of cutting and pasting sections of the antiphonary in order to compile daily propers for their liturgical celebrations. Over time, however, France more widely saw a revival of interest in the chant, as dioceses abandoned their “idiosyncratic ‘neo-Gallican’ liturgies” (Soltner 105) and returned to the Roman rite. Guéranger suggested a groundbreaking systematic approach to recovering an authentic version—through a comparison of medieval manuscripts housed in various libraries across France, Germany, and Belgium. This process, which combined archival research with semiology, paleography and historical musicology, entailed transcribing the chant into standardized systems of syllabification, notation and stave-arrangement, and culminated eventually (though in 1903, after Guéranger’s death) in the papal permission to re-edit the Roman Gradual, based on the Solesmes monks’ definitive work “la Paléo” which thus synthesized and authenticated each antiphon, psalm, introit, hymn, alleluia and sequence in the vast Gregorian repertoire.

Dom Guéranger began the vast undertaking of the “Paléo,” but “it was not until [Guéranger’s successor Dom] Mocquereau began photographing chant manuscripts that the concept would be fully realized—for the first time in music’s history” (Bergeron 96). The paradox of this musicological approach lies in that a plural text becomes a singular element. The resultant neumatic translation was criticized as “secularized”:

By releasing chant from its sources, the photograph liberated the music from its immediate liturgical and performative contexts and, at the same time, made it available to a new kind of reception—a reception in which the chant’s “performance” could now be understood as a form of pure analysis. In the abstract, collective space of comparative philology, a melody like “Justus ut palma” inevitably fell silent, becoming nothing more than a lattice, a matrix, a grid. (Bergeron 96)

I would argue, however, that the processes of monastic musicology work in two directions. A page from Mocquereau’s 1889 *Paléographie musicale*

dedicated to *exemples de notation neumatique avec traduction* (“examples of neumatic notation with translation”), for instance, features the Introït from the First Sunday of Advent, *Ad te levavi animam meam* (“Unto Thee have I lifted up my soul”). The Introït is reproduced, in Mocquereau’s study, in four distinct yet interacting ways: top to bottom, in a row of numbers that “referred the reader to a ‘table of principle neumes’” (Bergeron 96); then a row of cursive neumes that indicated how monks articulated and inflected the chant while singing; then in square musical notation across a four-line Gregorian stave; and finally in Latin text aligned beneath the notes. This “layered” representation of the chant provides a visually natural polyvalence, not just of the text itself, but also of *ways of reading* it. Thus, even if the philological approach to reconstructing a liturgical text can be said to “singularize” or “secularize” chant, the comparative document by its very nature emphasizes the text’s plurality. Moreover, “as each neume assumed its position in [a] precisely numbered sequence, individual parts took on a new kind of significance, the vertical columns generating whole vistas of new evidence that overwhelmed the unity of a single melody” (Bergeron 98).

The very processes and understandings at work in the chant reflect the liturgical and philosophical principles of Guéranger’s position on the role of individuals within the Church as a whole. That is to say, in the tradition of religious community life, specifically in contemplative communities where the Psalms comprise the largest part of daily and weekly prayer, the text of the Psalms performs a metonymic function: one verse stands in for the entire text, so the act of reciting or chanting a single verse represents praying the Psalm as a whole. Thus the diverse melodies of Catholic rituals in the Gregorian “genre” alternate between antiphon and psalm, the psalmody complementing the text of the main prayer with poetic cadences in repeated melodic lines specific to each antiphon’s tonality, modality and duration. This kind of spiritual metonymy suggests a process of divine substitution, by which individual elements are reflected in the work of the whole. The psalm implies psalmody, the verse implies the psalm, and each neum—the Gregorian musicological figures, notes or groups of notes—implies the verse. Katherine Bergeron, studying the history of the Gregorian revival in nineteenth-century France, cites the Swiss linguist Adolphe Pictet, who “imagined a form of ‘linguistic paleontology’ that could extrapolate a whole history of language from a single word” (94). This “extrapolation” is precisely the kind of spiritual metonymy at work in the Gregorian liturgy—its *praxis* rather than its study. The smallest element reflects, liturgically, the movement of the whole, in a spiritual transaction that revalorizes the individual, even as the individual seems subsumed

into the mass (and the Mass). In the same way, the individual or the religious community represents the practice of faith as a whole, and—at least in the Benedictine ideology—the individual *is* the Mass.

### **“all the colors of the soul”: Huysmans and the Decadent Conversion**

What Dom Guéranger, and his successors, Doms Joseph Pothier and André Mocquereau, accomplished at Solesmes in the decades between 1830 and 1870 represented new directions and possibilities for community life in modern France—and ultimately, Europe in general, as abbeys found themselves linked through the work of manuscript synthesis and study. The effects of Guéranger’s work continued to be felt in the still turbulent period of the fin-de-siècle, especially in artistic circles.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the century we find an unlikely counterpart for Dom Guéranger, yet one who is profoundly influenced by Guéranger’s work and writings: the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Huysmans’ primary literary contributions were published during the 1880s and 1890s, some fifty years after the re-founding of Solesmes and after a century of revolutions culminated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, effectively dissolving the Second Empire and forcing the country to define once again its political, philosophical, religious, economic and sociocultural directions for the future. Huysmans’ writing is impregnated by the ethos of this period, like that of his most famous contemporary, Emile Zola. *Fin-de-siècle* French literature in general is marked by recurrent pessimism, but also by an aesthetic and generic experimentation that lends itself to two subgenres of the Naturalist school: Symbolism and Decadence. Huysmans “pushes the envelope” of style and genre, and his best-known novel *A rebours* (*Against the Grain*), from 1884, pilots the Decadent movement in a real departure from Naturalism.

*A rebours* showcases French literature’s first “Decadent” protagonist, des Esseintes, and features a total immersion in the individual’s experience of 1880s Parisian pessimism, anticlericalism, and general ennui. Further, in *A rebours*, Huysmans develops a character who subsists entirely on his own processes of production (artistic and bodily) within the extremely limited space of his Parisian apartment. Des Esseintes essentially encloses himself in an autophagic, solipsistic world of echoes and “anchoritic solitude” (Ziegler 24)—a world with no other. In Huysmans’ early novels, the possibility of

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3. In fact, we might wonder whether the philosophies underlying Gregorian chant—specifically, the basic note unit, the “punctum”—might not have direct effects on late nineteenth-century movements like Pointillism, which emphasizes the place and importance of individual elements in understanding the whole.

otherness exists as a threat to individual wholeness. “For [des Esseintes], the sublimation of material into beauty portends a spiritual purification requiring that he distance himself from the crowd with its hubbub, stupidity and uncleanness” (Ziegler 24). Most importantly, des Esseintes’ narrative trajectory implies a near-total elimination of alterity, a full distancing from any other subjectivity than his own.

*A rebours* serves as a point of departure for Huysmans’ later novelistic series based on the character Durtal, the author’s thinly veiled fictional alter-ego, whom Huysmans depicts descending full-tilt into the world of urban debauchery—prostitution, Satanism, hedonism—before emerging from it into the austere aestheticism of monastic life. The first Durtal novel, *Là-bas*, focuses sharply on the details of the anti-hero’s debauched life and dispirited affect. Durtal is an aesthete and critic, plagued by strong carnal appetites, disillusioned by both himself and his social milieu; he is perhaps *the* most individualistic character of late-nineteenth-century French literature, and his trajectory in *Là-bas*—which ends with a Black Mass and a scandalously defiled consecrated Host—leaves us little room to imagine how the character’s story might continue.

Yet *Là-bas* is just the *Inferno* of Huysmans’ Dantesque cycle. Three more Durtal novels follow, beginning with the surprising *En route*, in which the troubled protagonist begins to examine the Catholic faith outside occulted Paris. Durtal leaves the city on retreat to a restored Trappist monastery, where (Huysmans says) his soul is “surprised by grace” in the ecclesiastical atmosphere of “mystical literature, liturgy and plainchant” (Baldick 288). Among the difficulties Durtal faces, on his path toward full communion with the Catholic Church, is the persistence of his own character—a tendency toward doubt and complexity that frequently leads him into a state of despair as he tries to bring to fruition the spiritual trajectory begun as a retreatant. Durtal, the product of his epoch, suffers from the ennui and vague emptiness of a life he sees as ill-spent, and seeks to reconcile his spiritual with his temporal self, in everything from skepticism to scheduling, as he undertakes his own “rebuilding” within the monastery’s walls.

Durtal’s monastic retreat mirrors Huysmans’ own conversion experience, and through the trilogy-of-conversion novels the author manages to supplant the intensely individual narration of des Esseintes in *A rebours* and Durtal in *Là-bas* with a community-oriented one. After a period of spiritual frustration and false starts, Durtal finally “achieves prayer through the liturgy: this savagely independent soul enjoys bending to the minutely ordered disciplines of communal prayer” (Cogny qtd. in Viègnes 72). And, as Robert Ziegler signals with

a certain irony, once Huysmans-as-Durtal “[relinquishes] the solipsistic world-view of des Esseintes, [he] breaks out of the circle of self-communion and is better able to heed the message of God” (245). Conversion frees him from “the logocentric prison of the self,” but he remains “vulnerable to the Decadent vice of transgressive language” (245)—Durtal must therefore undergo a period of silence, that mystical space beyond expression to which Huysmans’ characters have only limited access. Within this space, the language that best *speaks* his experience, in a Wittgensteinian sense, is that of chant, whose metered breaths and pulses bring him closer to self-comprehension and connectivity.

Huysmans stresses the importance of the individual within liturgy through a seeming contradiction: that is, the delicate balance between individual components of prayer and the entity of prayer itself. Indeed, this is a balance that Durtal’s “savagely independent soul” experiences with some frustration, notably in the comic scene when he attempts to say the rosary:

“Let me see, the prior told me to recite ten every day—ten beads or ten rosaries?”

“Beads,” he said, and almost at the same moment answered, “Rosaries.”

He remained perplexed.

“But that is idiotic, he could not have told me to go through the rosary ten times a day; that would amount to something like five hundred prayers on end; no one could do such a task without losing his wits. There is no doubt, it is clear he meant ten beads!

“But no! for if a confessor gives a penance, it must be admitted that he would proportion it to the greatness of the sins. And as I have such repugnance for these drops of devotion taken in globules, it is natural that he should gorge me with a large dose of the rosary!

“Still . . . still . . . I should not have even time for it all in Paris; it is absurd!” (202)

Overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of prayers he imagines he must pronounce, Durtal loses sight of the prayer itself—the “Ave” is transformed in this moment of doubt into a medicinal formula, “devotion taken in globules,” “a large dose.” Huysmans thus emphasizes the danger of overscrupulousness: units of prayer, taken out of context and absurdly exponentiated, tend toward mindlessness. At the same time, the author accentuates the centrality of the individual (person or prayer) within the praxis of the whole. “[W]ould one set of ten, however well said, be equal to five hundred prayers . . . ?” Durtal wonders (after having tortured himself with ten rosaries), and comes upon an answer: “Christ posi-

tively declared that we should not use vain repetitions in our prayers" (205). The paradox, Durtal learns, is that each word matters: a single prayer carries the weight of many. As we have seen in the monastic communities discussed above, for whom one verse stands in for the entire psalm, one decade of the rosary here stands in for the entire Marian prayer sequence.

Ziegler criticizes *En route* as a novel of "linguistic dispossession" (245), a journey away from the vitality and color of Naturalist/ Decadent subjectivity that "wastes away into holiness" (242), but I would like to suggest that Huysmans' work offers more *continuity* than such a reading allows for. Instead of the prurient details of a modern life in which the self is experienced as a dungeon, *En route* shows details as offering new possibilities for the self: a life unfettered by temporality, aligned with traditions of the eternal, the created world replete with opportunities for grace and redemption. Moreover, this minimization of individual experience affords the subject a greater sense of his "true self":

"Incapable of collecting himself, of comprehending himself," . . . [Durtal] experiences an absence, then realizes that "Christ was present in person." "Incapable of collecting himself," Durtal nonetheless is one—no longer the painfully divided Decadent subject, no longer the spectator of self plagued by what Maupassant calls "a redoubling of spirit." (Ziegler 242)

And in terms of Huysmans' craft, the shift in focus from daily urban traps and trappings to the strict liberation of the Trappists gives new meaning to the objects and details described. In the words of Paul Valéry, "In the beginning of mystical life, under its first shock, all details disappear . . . Everything becomes meaningless or immense/ overwhelming, while the new man approaches. Then, once habit has been remade, different, in that changed place the smallest objects are reborn, and they say new things" (qtd. in Viègnes 74). For Durtal at the novel's close, the graceful "machinery" of conventual prayer gains new value: "[E]very exercise which seems at first useless has a reason for its being," he muses;

the rosary, which seems to be only a humming-top of sounds, . . . reposes the soul wearied with the supplications which it has recited, . . . hinders it from babbling and reciting to God always the same petitions, the same complaints; it allows it to take breath, to take rest, in prayers in which it can dispense with reflection, and, in fact, the rosary occupies in prayer, those hours of fatigue in which one would not pray. . . . (297)

The careful detail, vibrancy and “noise” of Huysmans’ earlier, Decadent, novels remain central to the writer’s craft in his later, religious works—but their focus is different, and it sheds light on a new ethos for both author and subject, one in which the individual is released from his subjective prison through the penetration of grace in communal prayer.

In this new ethos, we can see a clear link to Dom Guéranger’s decades-earlier definition of liturgy, that mysterious word made up of *leitōs* “public” and *ergō* “work”—within the liturgy, each object takes on a unique function, and each monk is invested with a role that puts him at the service of some object. Describing the celebrations of Mass and Divine Office, Huysmans enumerates the thurifer, candle-bearer, cross-bearer, mitre-bearer, bell-ringer, and other roles integral to the functional ceremony of the liturgy, and demonstrates the ways in which individual identities are effaced before the objects in their semiological functions (Viègnes 75). Just as objects (even the priest himself) become signs, the monks associated with the objects themselves become ontologically linked to the performance of those signs, and the operation of all these functions together enacts the public work which, in turn, prepares the way for the sacrifice that is the center of all Catholic meaning. In contrast to the “horror”-inspiring crowds of *Là-Bas*, in *En route* Durtal’s inscription of liturgical ontology within the fin-de-siècle ethos allows him to subvert the very aesthetic of Decadence that he helped to create, and to convert his literary legacy into one that redeems the individual by showing community as an instrument of salvation.

To return to Dickens for a moment, I submit that we can read one message of *Barnaby Rudge* in much the same way: through the nightmare of false religious expression in the riots, the novel achieves a truer understanding of both religious toleration and faithful expression. The “negative example” furnished by the rioting crowd is ultimately itself transformed to a positive expression of pardon and piety when, after his reprieve from the gallows, Barnaby is carried home by “a dense mob” marked by “a glow of joy and good-humour” (579). This brief description reverses the novel’s own language about the mob as a “dense throng” (370), converting the mass into an agent of positive individual revalorization.

### **Prayer at the Social Level: The Individual is the Mass**

Dom Guéranger and Huysmans are very different writers, coming from opposite directions in history, literary tradition, politics, personal experience, and culture, and representing disparate experiences of the nineteenth century. Yet both move toward the same center: the liturgical work lifting up individ-



uals, *through* community, closer to union with the divine. *How* they accomplish reaching this center is what I find most interesting.

Guéranger came out of the rhetoric and idealism of the Révolution, with its emphasis on “collective individualism”—the importance of overhauling the State in order to valorize each citizen’s experience of the citizenry, through documents and legislations like the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen*, for example. While stating his clear departure from the political, philosophical and religious climate of the epoch, Guéranger nonetheless puts this contemporary rhetoric and ideology to use, especially in focusing the energy of a single citizen on the reconstruction of an ancient trans-national tradition and community. In doing so, he participates in the same contemporary dialogue that authorizes and validates communal experience—i.e., the creation of the Republic—as a means of expressing with greater precision the integrity of the individual.

Huysmans, on the other hand, comes from the side of experiential malaise, the *mal du siècle* taken to its extreme: Durtal, as he tells his confessor in some despair, has already “committed every kind of debauch” (180) and, in his curiosity, boredom, or search for redemption on the purely secular level, has devalued himself as an individual and strayed far from the Church which he recognizes as “the only port where [he] can find shelter” (22). The Durtal of *En Route* in many ways inherits the legacy of Dom Guéranger, who rebuilds religious community in the increasingly anticlerical France. Huysmans, in reaction to both the malaise of his time and the aesthetic devaluation rampant in the nineteenth-century Catholic Church in France, portrays the most unlikely individual’s return to a sense of community that he must then transport with him back into the city upon leaving the monastery. Indeed, as Michel Viègnes notes, “the concept of liturgy is inseparable from that of collectivity. It is impossible to conceive of a solitary, individual liturgy. Besides, Dom Guéranger insists on the fact that the liturgy ‘is not simply prayer, but prayer considered at the social level’” (71). This collective aspect of the liturgy is fundamental to understand its effect on Durtal: like the sanctuary, the product of a collective *psyche*, the liturgy helps Durtal to step outside himself, to let himself “melt into an unnumberable soul in a state of adoration, ecstasy, before the terrible or merciful splendor of God. This collective soul serves as an intermediary between him and the spiritual world. . . . We therefore find here the opposition between the collective and the individual, . . . as important in the life of Huysmans as in his work” (Viègnes 71-2). At the end of the novel, since he cannot transform all of Paris into an urban monastic community, he must transform himself into an ambulatory metonym for the conven-

tual experience, carrying within his single self the communal meaning and practice of liturgical work.

Huysmans, like Guéranger, uses the rhetorical devices available to him at the time of writing, and late nineteenth-century aesthetics and ideologies—specifically, its insistent accent on the individual, the Naturalists’ attention to socio-cultural detail, and the pervasive ennui that marks the novel’s troubled protagonist. Viègnes remarks that Huysmans’ Catholic trilogy “echoes a theme from *A rebours*, since des Esseintes harbors an aesthete’s passion for [religious objects]. . . . Each object, each detail, no matter how small, of the liturgy, is an indispensable element of the whole” (74). Outside the cloister, the process of coming to conversion happens in the opposite direction from Dom Guéranger: Huysmans relies on the dialogue contemporary to his time, which authorizes and valorizes individual experience, as a means of expressing with greater generosity the necessity of the mass, and the liberating clarity of the Mass.

One could say that *fin-de-siècle* French literature reaches a pinnacle of “individualism” in expression—from Decadence to Symbolism, and with influences by the developing scientific field of alienism, which seeks within the individual subject the traces, roots and signs of behavior, especially behavior that goes “against the grain.” If we consider Huysmans’ contemporary (and sometime rival), Emile Zola, we can see the grand traces of a similar movement, or a similar preoccupation with the metonymic relationship of individual and community: Zola depicts the degeneracy of an entire society under the Second Empire, precisely through his serial representations of one family. Though it would be far-fetched to postulate the serial murderer Jacques Lantier, or the deranged entrepreneur-cum-arsonist Octave Mouret, as a kind of Zolien “everyman,” nonetheless the author’s project is precisely to show these pathological specimens as representative of society as a whole. Individual experience informs the communal, and helps to determine its trajectory. Thus Durtal’s narrative, like Huysmans’ own conversion, must happen within this model, in fact can *only* happen within the overarching narrative of society’s focus on the individual—and so the author uses this focus and all it imports to tell a different story, one that moves contrary to the contemporary ideas whose language it adapts, by suggesting a return to belief and worship that remains attainable to even the most fallen subjects, and offering the collective a chance of redemption *through* the very modality that would seem to contradict this goal.

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