

Trees, Woods and Literature—11

And when the blood spouts and the brain matter splashes over him, he grinds his teeth and laughs. Like a hunted animal he flies to the woods while his henchmen wash the floor and prudently make away with the corpse and clothing.

He wanders in the forests that surround Tiffauges, dark, dense, deep forests such as Brittany still boasts at Carnoët.

He sobs as he goes, drives off in desperation the spectres that assail him, looks about him and of a sudden sees the obscenity of the ancient trees.

It seems Nature is turning evil before his eyes, and that it is his presence causes her depravity; for the first time he comprehends the unchangeable salacity of the woods, spies out the images of lubricity in the great trees.

Here the tree appears to him a living being, standing upside down, its head buried in the tangled tresses of the roots, lifting its legs in the air and spreading them apart, then dividing again into other thighs that stand open in their turn, getting slenderer and slenderer the further they extend from the trunk; there, between those limbs another branch is embedded in a motionless fornication, repeated of a smaller and smaller size from bough to bough to the top; there again, the stock seems a phallus that rises and disappears in a petticoat of leaves or else in the opposite sense issues from a fleece of green and dives into the velvety belly of the soil.

Visions terrify him. He sees again the tender skins of young boys, skins with the white sheen of parchment, in the pale smooth bark of the tall beeches; he finds again the leathery hides of his mendicants in the blackened, rugged envelope of the old oaks; then, where the branches fork, holes gape, orifices where the bark cushions on bowelled entrails, puckered apertures that mimic foul emunctories or yawning organs of animals. Then again, at the elbows of branches, are other visions, hollows underneath arms, pits fringed with grey lichen, there are in the very trunk wounds that open in great lips under tufts of russet velvet and bunches of moss!

Everywhere the obscene shapes spring from the earth and mount to corrupt the heavens; the clouds swell in bosoms, part in the cleavage of buttocks, reveal the rotundity of pregnant bellies, disperse in long-drawn trails of milt; they repeat the sombre luxuriance of the high woods, where nought is to be seen now but visions of thighs, gigantic or dwarfed, festering wounds and dank discharges! And this landscape of abomination undergoes a change. Now Gilles beholds on the tree-trunks terrifying excrescences and dreadful wens. He notes tumours and ulcers, excoriated sores, cancerous tubercles and hideous blotches

of rottenness; it is a pest-house of the earth, a venereal clinic of the trees, wherein rises at the turn of a forest-ride a blood-red beech.

And in these empurpled leaves that fall about him he seems to see a rain of blood drenching him; he falls into a hallucination, dreaming that beneath the bark dwells a woodland nymph and he would fain tear the flesh of the goddess, slaughter the Dryad and violate her at a place never attempted by the lubricity of madmen!

He envies the woodcutter who, can hack and massacre the tree; he bellows in a frenzy, and listens in haggard suspense to the forest that answers his cries of longing with the strident howlings of the winds; he sinks exhausted, weeps and resumes his march till, worn out with fatigue, he reaches the castle and drops on his bed an inert mass.

From *Down There (La-Bas)* by J.-K. Huysmans. An anonymous translation published in an undated limited edition by The Fortune Press, London. It has not been possible to trace the copyright holders.

Joris-Karl Huysmans was born in Paris in 1848 of French/Dutch parents. In 1866 he entered the French Ministry of the Interior where he remained for thirty-two years, making liberal use of official time and stationery in the writing of novels. He then spent two years as a lay monk in a Benedictine abbey and finally died of cancer in 1907.

In the early part of his career he was regarded as a promising novelist in the line of Zola and Flaubert, but his novels are now mainly of value in charting the history of spiritual movements in France. His best-known novel *A Rebours (Against Nature)* (1884) has been described as "the breviary of the Decadence". *La-Bas* (1891) intertwines an account of a group of Parisians interested in satanism with the story of Gilles de Rais. The latter was born in 1404 and, a wealthy young marshal of France, joined with the army of Joan of Arc before the relief of Orleans. After her capture he dissipated his wealth and person in alchemy, necromancy, torture and ritual murder. He may have killed up to 200 children. After a brawl during Mass he was investigated by the bishop, arrested for heresy and hanged for murder in 1440.

The passage from *La-Bas* is freely recommended to those who may wish to launch a counter-attack against the "anti-conifer" lobby.