

J.K. HUYSMANS

on

MATHIS GRUNWALD

(MATHIS GOTHARDT NEITHARDT d.1528)

It was indeed a far cry from the debonair Golgothas adopted by the Church ever since the Renaissance to this blood-spattered, tear-stained Calvary! This tetanic Christ was not the Christ of the Rich, the Adonis of Galilee, the healthy young fop, the handsome boy with the ruddy locks, forked beard and insipid equine features, whom the faithful have worshipped for the past four hundred years. This was the Christ of St. Justin, St. Cyril and Tertullian, the Christ of the Early Church, a Christ who looked vulgar and ugly because he took upon himself all the sins of the world and assumed, in his humility, the most abject of appearances.

This was the Christ of the Poor, a Christ who had become flesh in the likeness of the most wretched of those he had come to redeem, the ill-favoured and the indigent, all those in fact upon whose ugliness or poverty mankind wreaks its cowardly spite. This was also the most human of Christs, a Christ frail of flesh, forsaken by the Father until such time as no further torments were possible, a Christ succoured only by his Mother, to whom he must have cried out, as do all who suffer, like a child, though by then she was powerless to help him.

By what was doubtless a supreme act of humility, he had willed that the Passion would not exceed the limits imposed by the human senses; and, in obedience to incomprehensible laws, he had consented that his Divinity should be suspended, as it were, from the first blows and insults, through the spitting and the scourging, till the unspeakable torments of an interminable death-agony. In this way he had been the better able to suffer, to agonize, to die like a common thief, like a dog, basely, vilely, enduring this degradation to the bitter end, even to the ultimate horror of putrefaction, the final ignominy of decay.

Never before had realism attempted such a subject; never before had a painter explored the divine charnel-house so thoroughly, or dipped his brush so brutally in running sores and bleeding wounds. It was outrageous and it was horrifying. Grunewald was the most daring of realists, without a doubt; but as one gazed upon this Redeemer of the doss-house, this God of the morgue, there was wrought a change. Gleams of light filtered from the ulcerous head; a superhuman radiance illumined the gangrened flesh and the tortured features. This carrion spread-eagled on the cross was the tabernacle of a God; and here, his head adorned with no aureole or nimbus but a tangled crown of thorns beaded with drops of blood, Jesus appeared in his celestial supra-essence between the Virgin, grief-stricken and blinded with tears, and St. John, whose burning eyes could find no more tears to shed.

These faces, at first sight so commonplace, shone with the ecstasy of souls transfigured by suffering. This was no common criminal, nor this a poor beggar-woman, nor this a country yokel: these were supra-terrestrial beings in the presence of a God.

Grunewald was the most daring of idealists. Never had a painter so magnificently scaled the mystical heights, or so courageously leapt from the topmost peak of the spirit up into the very sphere of the heavens. He had gone to both extremes; and from the depths of squalor he had extracted the finest cordial of charity and the bitterest tears of woe. In this picture was revealed the masterpiece and supreme achievement of an art which had been bidden to represent both the invisible and the tangible, to manifest the piteous uncleanness of the body, and to sublimate the infinite distress of the soul.

(From *La-bas*, translated by Robert Baldick.)

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