

Man of Bruges' destiny

A new English translation of Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte* has **Paul Stump** re-examining a defining masterpiece of Belgian literature

In 1896, Arnold Bennett wrote of Bruges: "In most places one finds the commonplace and has to search for the beautiful. In Bruges one finds the beautiful and has to search for the commonplace, and doesn't find it easily." Bennett spoke for a sizeable proportion of Europe's artistic community, who might have not given Bruges a second glance a few years before, when it had seemed a town of no more importance than humdrum backwaters like Kortrijk or Oudenaarde. Then Georges Rodenbach changed everything.

Rodenbach was born in 1855 in Tournai into a brewing family. After studying at the Collège Sainte-Barbe (also the *alma mater* of Emile Verhaeren

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and Maurice Maeterlinck), he trained as a lawyer in Paris and spent most of his life there, finding its thriving cultural life a blessed liberation from what he called "positivist, sterile, material" Belgium.

A friend of Mallarmé, he wrote poetry in the cloudy, suggestive, sensual language of the period. The great literary scholar and translator Jethro Bithell, who introduced much Belgian literature to Anglophones, disparaged his "weary alexandrines", timidly cast in the inevitable and inescapable shadows of Verlaine and Rimbaud. But it was as a novelist that Rodenbach made his mark, and changed not only his life but that of an entire town.

His 1892 novel *Bruges-la-morte* (like all cultivated Flemings of his era, Rodenbach spoke and wrote in French) is a short work with a long legacy. It tells



Rodenbach in the 1890s, as photographed by Nadar

the story of Hugues Viane, a recent widower, who has made a cult of his grief for his lost wife. In his bereaved reverie, he sees in the desolate decay of Bruges a mirror of his own interior ruin.

Bruges, once so full of life, is now a forgotten relic whose beauties are wasting away into memories; the torpid stillness of stagnant canals, gloomy, crumbling towers and belfries; here, the

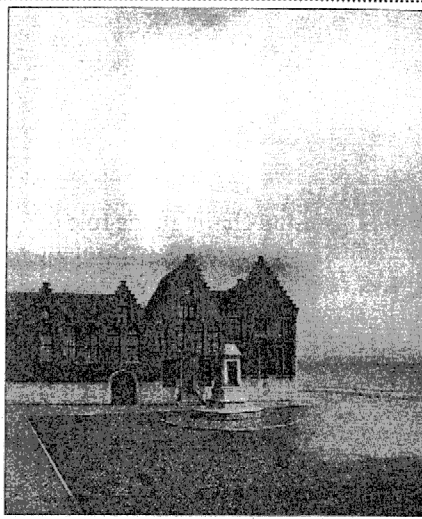
past is a living, breathing thing. Hugues, who cannot and does not wish to escape the past, is a willing prisoner in this dream-thronged mausoleum. Until he glimpses the dead beloved, miraculously alive again; or at least an exact likeness of her. This turns out to be a dancer, Jane Scott, performing in a local production of Meyerbeer's 1831 fantasy opera *Robert le diable*. The two embark on an affair; but even after the novel's violent conclusion, a climactic murder against the backdrop of obsessively tolling church bells and Beguines' processions, we are never quite sure exactly what this arrangement entails. Similarly, the nature of Hugues' relationship with his wife (whose name we never learn) remains undisclosed. But then little in this bizarre book is ever disclosed, save for an achingly lyrical distillation of Bruges' atmosphere through a forensic accumulation of detail (a favourite Symbolist device).

Some will note similarities with Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, another period masterpiece: love raised to a mystic passion, tragic suffering and above all the unbearable poignancy of striving after the ineffable. Like all Symbolism, it attempts to express either through elaborately-rendered allegory or intense detail (or both) the inexpressible.

The novel was a phenomenal success, and Rodenbach made an ill-advised stage adaptation of it, *Le Mirage*. He never saw it staged, dying in 1898 at just 42. The most memorable image we have of him is a startling portrait by the French painter Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer whose eerie half-lights and wintry, cloud-hung atmosphere (the background is the town itself, in suitably sombre cast) – not to mention the rapt, otherworldly eyes of the sitter – tellingly render the writer and his hero Hugues effectively one and the same.

Ungrateful local worthies harrumphed and grumbled. 'Why Bruges the dead?' The popular response to Rodenbach essentially ran: "OK, chum – so the canal to the sea silted up and left us stranded – but we are much more than a ruin. We have a future". They did, and most of it lay in tourism. The Bruges cult had begun – thanks to Rodenbach.

In the wake of *Bruges-la-morte*, the painter Fernand Khnopff, a genuine local, found success by using the city's archaic, watery forlornness for some of his most evocative work. The proto-Surrealist *La Ville abandonnée* (1904) portrays an uncommonly benign but



Fernand Khnopff's *La Ville abandonnée*

inexorable North Sea apparently lapping at the kerb of a Bruges street. The town's facades and canals also feature in the grave and funereal work of William Degouve de Nuncques, one of the great forgotten Symbolist painters. What made the town's name worldwide, however, was a Rodenbach-derived opera of 1920 by the Austrian composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die Tote Stadt*.

What doubtless further helped the book – and its subject – was Rodenbach's

daring and ultimately brilliant decision to intersperse the text with photographs of his locations. Illustration of serious fiction was far more widespread then than now, but photography was a new departure. In a stroke it effectively rendered the book not only novel but also elegantly unconventional Baedeker.

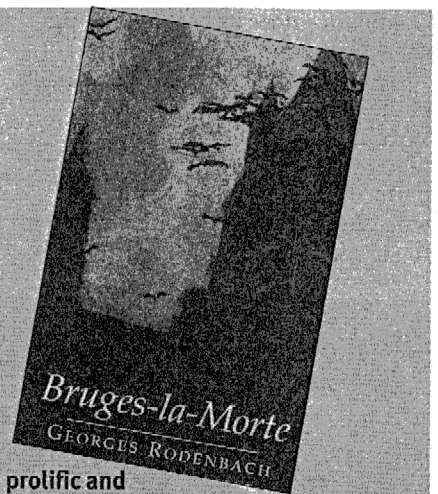
A Fleming in exile, Rodenbach wrote to a friend: "One only loves what one no longer has. Truly to love one's own little homeland, it is best to go away, to exile oneself for ever... for the homeland to grow so distant it seems to die. The essence of art... is the dream, and this dream dwells only upon what is distant, absent, vanished, unattainable." A better definition of the Symbolist aesthetic would be hard to find.

Now English readers can savour anew this allusive, elusive masterpiece, a milestone in the literary evocation not only of place but also of loss. Mitchell and Dedalus Press are to be congratulated by anyone who cares about books, Belgium – or Bruges. The town has changed now, of course; but as anyone who knows it can testify, before sunrise, or just after dusk when the streets empty, the illusion that beautiful, solitary ghosts are gliding over the cobbles, across the flat-calm waters and around the gables is a hard one to dispel.

Bruges-la-morte

Do not read this book when distressed. While the likes of Proust may touch deeper nerves with more sensitivity, Rodenbach's possessed prose, stalked by repetitions, will salt the wounds of the bereaved or unrequited. For all its evocations of staticity and silence, however, the book pings along in the manner of an Arthur Schnitzler novella (*Dream Story* or the neglected *Redegonda's Diary* are never far away). Like all good Symbolist literature, monumental emotional significance is reduced to detailed cataloguing of mood and place and rendered the more haunting for it.

Translators Mike Mitchell and Will Stone occasionally ruche the silken web of Rodenbach's language with blunt usage: 'got engaged', 'got a headache'. A flock of gulls 'takes off when it could just as easily ascend, clumsiness that sits ill with the



prolific and well-turned lyricism of Rodenbach's words.

Trifles – the reliable Dedalus have served us a triumph, which distils Symbolism like almost no other work of art and should be bought and devoured by anyone with the slightest interest in Belgium or literature. **PS *Bruges-la-morte* can be ordered now from Waterstones, price £12.80. Go to www.waterstones.be for more info.**