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Fernand Khnopff, Georges Rodenbach, and Bruges, the Dead City

Lynne Pudles

“La ville est morte, morte, irréparablement!
D’une lente anémie et d’un secret tourment. . . .”
 (“The city is dead, irreparably dead!
Of a slow anemia and a secret torment. . . .”¹)

A picturesque town of Gothic churches, towering belfries, tortuously winding cobblestoned streets, gabled roofs, medieval turrets, and somnolent canals, the city of Bruges was romanticized and idealized by Symbolist artists and writers at the turn of this century. Viewed as representative of a lost age of spirituality and a striking contrast to modern, industrialized urban life, Bruges, “the dead city,” had a special significance for Belgians, who saw it as intimately connected not only with their glorious historical past, but with the rich tradition of mysticism in Belgium. In the medieval city of Bruges, and in the medieval Flemish mystics Jan van Ruysbroeck and Soeur Hadewijk and Flemish artists such as Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling, they saw their spiritual ancestors.

For the Belgian artist Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921), Bruges had a particular significance, not only as the Symbolist “Bruges d’autrefois,” but as the city of his childhood. It served him as a private symbol of the soul, much as it had for Georges Rodenbach (Fig. 1), whose influential novel *Bruges-la-Morte* not only made Bruges renowned as “the dead city,” but created for a generation of Symbolist artists and writers the quintessential image of the city as “soulcape.”²

Although Khnopff lived in Bruges only briefly as a child,³ he repeatedly created images of the city. So too did Rodenbach, whose writings on Bruges seem to have had a decisive influence upon the artist. The extent of that influence has,

however, never fully been recognized. My purpose here is to examine Khnopff’s most important drawings of Bruges and to propose new interpretations by relating them directly to Rodenbach’s writings.

Knopff’s relationship with the writer and his works, along with his frequent use of literature for inspiration, easily encourage such connections. The artist’s contact with Rodenbach came through his brother, the writer Georges Khnopff. It was Georges who, in 1881, first brought him into the circle of writers, artists, and critics associated with the journal *La Jeune Belgique*, with which Rodenbach was affiliated.⁴ Khnopff soon became friendly with the avant-garde writers of the review, and from this point on, he received many commissions for frontispieces and illustrations to literary texts. He also began doing paintings and drawings inspired by literature.⁵

Among the writers who inspired Khnopff was Rodenbach. Stimulated by a line of his verse, the artist executed the pastel *A Beguiling: Et ses cheveux étaient tout rouges de mon sang . . .* Georges Rodenbach (*A Beguiling: And Her Hair Was All Red with My Blood . . .* Georges Rodenbach) in 1888. The following year, he created the drawing *A Georges Rodenbach. Une Ville morte* (*To Georges Rodenbach. A Dead City*). Three years later, Khnopff provided the frontispiece for Rodenbach’s novel, *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892), and in 1903 he was engaged to

Shorter versions of this paper were presented at the Fogg Museum, Harvard University, April 1988, and at the Midwest Art History Society Annual Meeting, March 1989. For their helpful comments during its preparation, I would like to thank my former colleagues at the University of Chicago, Reinhold Heller and Michael Camille, as well as Marla Hand, Sharon Hirsh, and David Spadafora. I dedicate the essay to the memory of my teachers, Herschel B. Chipp and L. D. Ettlinger.

¹ G. Rodenbach, “Du silence” (1888), repr. in *Le Règne du silence: Poème*, Paris, 1891, 230. All translations are mine, unless noted otherwise.

² G. Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-morte*, Paris, 1892, also published in ten issues of *Le Figaro*, February 4–14, 1892. The phrase “paysage de l’âme” (“soulcape”) is drawn from “Du silence,” 186.

³ According to various sources, Khnopff lived in Bruges from around the age of two until the age of six, seven, or ten. See W. S. Sparrow, “English Art and Fernand Khnopff,” *The Studio*, March 1894, 205; H. Fierens-Gevaert, “Fernand Khnopff,” *Art et décoration*, iv, 1898, 116; F. Khnopff, cited in E. Louis, “Echos du Salon Termondais,” *La Fédération artistique*, xxvi, July 1899, 324; L. Dumont-Wilden, *Fernand Khnopff*, Brussels, 1907, 34; L. Morrissey, “Fernand Khnopff: The Iconography of Isolation and of the Aesthetic Woman,” Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1974,

26; and Delevoey, de Croës, and Ollinger-Zinque, 82; a second, revised edition of this catalogue was published in Brussels, 1987.

⁴ For Fernand Khnopff’s contact with writers, see “Biographie” in Delevoey, de Croës, and Ollinger-Zinque, 417–433; H. Juin, “Fernand Khnopff et la littérature,” in Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, and Hambourg, Kunsthalle, *Fernand Khnopff 1858–1921*, Brussels, 1979, 17–32; *idem*, *Fernand Khnopff et la littérature de son temps*, Brussels, 1980; S. Burns, “A Symbolist Soulcape: Fernand Khnopff’s *I Lock My Door upon Myself*,” *Arts Magazine*, January 1981, 8; Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, *Fernand Khnopff et ses rapports avec la Secession viennoise*, Brussels, 1987, 128–138; and C. de Croës, “Knopff, ami des lettres,” Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bunkamura, *Fernand Khnopff. 1858–1921*, Tokyo, 1990, 191–195. Khnopff was also drawn into the circle of artists, writers, and critics associated with the journals *La Wallonie* (Liège, 1886–92) and *L’Art moderne* (Brussels, 1881–1914). See A. J. Mathews, *La Wallonie 1886–1892. The Symbolist Movement in Belgium*, New York, 1942.

⁵ See Appendixes A and B.



1 Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer, *Georges Rodenbach* (exhibited 1896), pastel, 35 × 54cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay (photo: Du Brul)

design the stage sets for a German production of *Le Mirage*, a play adapted from Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-Morte*.⁶ Most of Khnopff's pictures of Bruges were executed shortly after the completion of those sets and may have been inspired by his involvement with Rodenbach's play.

Both Khnopff's and Rodenbach's images of this Flemish, medieval city can be seen within the larger context of two important currents in nineteenth-century cultural history: the pan-European romanticization of the Middle Ages and Belgian nationalism.⁷

The Gothic revival is the most obvious example of nineteenth-century medievalism. It expressed itself not only in copies of medieval architecture, but also in the taste for Neo-Gothic garden pavilions, furnishings, armor halls, costumes, and even tournaments.⁸ Chivalric and particularly Arthurian legends also became popular subjects, especially in the art and literature of the Pre-Raphaelites and other Victorian artists.⁹ Khnopff, an extreme Anglophile and a friend of Edward Burne-Jones, lectured and wrote on the

English Arts and Crafts movement and the Pre-Raphaelites,¹⁰ and he shared their interest in the Middle Ages.

In Romantic art of the early nineteenth century, Gothic churches, cathedrals, and ruins figured prominently. While Gothic ruins appear impressive or picturesque in the works of Turner and Constable, or gloomy and foreboding in the painting of Louis Daguerre and F.-M. Granet, in the work of Friedrich and his followers they serve as symbols of transcendence and the spirituality of a lost age.¹¹ It was the latter Romantic idea that the Symbolists would espouse.

Belgian artists and writers of the nineteenth century turned to medieval history as a way of extending their claim to a national past. Belgium, as an independent nation, had come into existence only in 1830, after hundreds of years of foreign rule. The need of a young country to express a national spirit manifested itself in the nationalistic history paintings of Gustave Wappers, Nicaise de Keyser, Edouard de Bieffe, Henri Leys, and Louis Gallait,¹² in the historical novels of Henri Moke, Jules de Saint-Genois, J. B. Coomans,

⁶ G. Rodenbach, *Le Mirage. Drame en 4 actes*, Paris, 1901. The production for which Khnopff designed the sets opened on Sept. 15, 1903 under the title *Trugbild* at the German Theater of Berlin. There are no depictions of Bruges by Khnopff between the time of his frontispiece for *Bruges-la-Morte* and his stage sets for *Le Mirage*.

⁷ The literature on medievalism is vast. See E. Kaufman and S. Irish, eds., *Medievalism: An Annotated Bibliography of Recent Studies in the Art and Architecture of Britain and North America*, New York, 1989.

⁸ See M. Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, New Haven and London, 1981, and the catalogue in J. Burnham and J. Harris, eds., *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, Manchester, 1984, 65–83. See too K. Clark, *The Gothic Revival, An Essay on the History of Taste*, London, 1928, and G. Germann, *Gothic Revival in Europe and Britain: Sources, Influences, and Ideas*, Cambridge, Mass., 1972.

⁹ See Burnham and Harris; M. Whitaker, *Legends of King Arthur in Art*, Cambridge, 1990; and D. Mancoff, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art*, New York, 1990.

¹⁰ See F. Khnopff, "L'Art anglais," *Annuaire de la Section d'Art et d'Education de la Maison du Peuple*, Brussels, 1893, unpag.; "Some English Art Works at the 'Libre Esthétique,'" *The Studio*, III, Apr. 1894,

32; "Walter Crane," *L'Art moderne*, Dec. 30, 1894, 412; "In Memoriam: Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Bart.: A Tribute from Belgium" [excerpts of lecture given at Le Cercle Artistique], *Magazine of Art*, 1898, 520–526; "Des souvenirs à propos de Sir Edward Burne-Jones" (lecture given Aug. 5, 1915), *Bulletins de la Classe des Beaux Arts, Académie Royale de Belgique*, Brussels, 1915, 9–16.

¹¹ Rosenblum, in R. Rosenblum and H. W. Janson, *Nineteenth Century Art*, New York, 1984, reproduces paintings of Gothic ruins and/or churches by Friedrich (p. 48), Constable (p. 137), and Daguerre (p. 128), while H. Honour, *Romanticism*, New York, 1979, reproduces relevant works by Turner (p. 163), Granet (p. 162), Delpech (p. 185), Vauzell (p. 162), Blechen (p. 160), and Oehme (p. 159). See too R. Mortier, *La Poétique des ruines en France*, Geneva, 1974.

¹² A selection of nationalistic history paintings by Wappers, de Keyser, and Gallait is reproduced in G. Charlier and J. Hanse, *Histoire illustrée des lettres françaises de Belgique*, Brussels [1958], 253 and 256. Relevant works by the above artists and by de Bieffe and Leys are reproduced in P. Lambotte, et al., *Histoire de la peinture et de la sculpture en Belgique. 1830–1930*, Brussels, 1930, pls. 10, 13–15, and 21. For a good overview of Belgian Romantic history painting, see L. Jottrand, "Le Romantisme—Les Peintres d'histoire et de portraits," in Lambotte, et al., 9–40.

and Felix Bogaerts,¹³ in the folkloric tales of Charles de Coster and Charles Lemonnier,¹⁴ in the history books sponsored by the Commission Royale d'Histoire,¹⁵ and in the writings of Emile Verhaeren, Maurice Maeterlinck, Rodenbach, and other Belgian Symbolists.¹⁶ The journal *La Jeune Belgique*, with which Rodenbach and Khnopff were associated, spoke for the desirability of a national literature. Its editor, Max Waller, called for the rejection of Parisian literary models and emphasized the cause of Belgian nationalism.

Similarly, Belgian artists turned for inspiration to the late Middle Ages, a high point in Flemish cultural history. The art of the "Flemish Primitives" now came into fashion, and in 1893, Khnopff lectured in Brussels on the art of the Flemish Gothic painters, Hans Memling, Quentin Metsys, and Jan van Eyck.

In the late nineteenth century, Bruges, with which Van Eyck and Memling were closely identified, became a symbol of Belgium's splendid Gothic past, an age of unsurpassed cultural, economic, and artistic achievement. It was Rodenbach who was responsible for creating interest in the city. With its evocative Gothic buildings and graceful canals, Bruges became a place of pilgrimage for artists and writers whose imaginations were kindled by *Bruges-la-Morte*.

Khnopff was only one of many who were influenced by Rodenbach. Among the writers to pay homage to Bruges were Camille Lemonnier, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Emile

Verhaeren, Stéphane Mallarmé, Isi Collin, André Ruijters, Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert, Stefan Zweig, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Paul Spaak, Rainer Maria Rilke, Marcel Loumaye, Michel de Weyser, Henri de Regnier, and Camille Mauclair.¹⁷ In poetry and prose, they romanticized Bruges as a medieval city frozen in time.

Artists too were drawn to the city. On Mauclair's advice, the French painter Henri Le Sidaner visited Bruges in 1898: ". . . j'étais le Rodenbach en peinture. . .," he wrote.¹⁸ Other Symbolist artists came too, including William Degouve de Nuncques, a Belgian, and Georges de Feure and Lucien Levy-Dhurmer, Frenchmen who executed respectively the illustrations for Rodenbach's descriptive vignettes, "Petits Nocturnes de Bruges" and a posthumous edition of *Bruges-la-Morte*.¹⁹

Fernand Khnopff was, however, the first among these artists to have been inspired by the writer. His images of Bruges draw much of their iconography from Rodenbach's writings and transcend mere illustration.

Among the most provocative of Khnopff's images is *La Ville abandonnée* (*The Abandoned City*), 1904 (Fig. 2). This large pastel drawing was completed just one year after Khnopff designed the stage sets for *Le Mirage*. It is one of many pictures of Bruges that he produced that year, and, like the others, it was almost certainly motivated by his involvement with Rodenbach's play.

¹³ Henri Moke, a disciple of Sir Walter Scott, wrote several historical novels, including *Le Gueux de mer, ou la Belgique sous le duc d'Albe*, Paris, 1827; *La Bataille de Navarre, ou le Renegat*, Paris, 1828; *Le Gueux des bois, ou les patriotes belges de 1566*, Bruges, 1828; *Philippine de Hamaut, ou les prisonniers du Louvre*, Paris, 1830; and *Hermann, ou le civilisation et la barbarie*, Paris, 1832. The Romantic historical novels of Baron Jules de Saint-Genois include *Hembyse, histoire gantoise de la fin du XVIe siècle*, Brussels, 1835; *La Cour du duc Jean IV, Chronique brabançonne, 1418–1421*, Brussels, 1837; *Le Faux Baudouin*, Brussels, 1840; and *Le Château de Wildenborg*, Brussels, 1846. See too J. B. Coomans, *La Clé d'or, histoire merveilleuse du XVe siècle*, Brussels, 1837; *idem, Richilde, ou épisodes de l'histoire de la Flandre*, Ghent, 1841; and F. Bogaerts, *The Butchers of Ghent or El Maestro del Campo*, Antwerp, 1939. For a good overview of Belgian Romantic literature, including the genre of the historical novel, see G. Charlier, "Le Mouvement Romantique (1825–1850)," in Charlier and Hanse (as in n. 12), 249–282.

¹⁴ C. de Coster, *Légendes flamandes*, Brussels, 1847; *idem, Contes brabançons*, Brussel, 1861; *idem, La Légende d'Ulenspiegel*, Brussels, 1858; C. Lemonnier, *Nos Flamands*, Brussels, 1869; *idem, Contes flamands et wallons*, Paris, 1873.

¹⁵ The Commission Royale d'Histoire published texts, such as J.-B. Nothamb, *L'Essai historique et politique sur la révolution belge*, Brussels, 1833, and M.-L. Polain, *Essais historiques sur l'ancien pays de Liège*, Brussels, 1836.

¹⁶ See, by E. Verhaeren, *Les Flamands*, Brussels, 1883; *Villes mortes*, Bruges and Brussels, 1894; *Toute la Flandre*, Brussels, 1904–11; *Les Héros*, Brussels, 1908; "La Flandre," *Notre Pays. La Race et le milieu belge*, Brussels, 1909; *Les Villes à pignons*, Brussels, 1910; *Poèmes légendaires de Flandre et de Brabant*, Paris, 1916; *Pages belges*, Paris and Brussels, 1926. Also see M. Maeterlinck, "La Mystique flamand," *La Belgique*, July 24, 1897, 626–627; G. Rodenbach, *La Belgique (1830–1880). Poème historique*, Brussels, 1880.

¹⁷ By C. Lemonnier, see *La Belgique*, Paris, 1888, 348–419; *L'Île vierge*, Paris, 1897; *La Chanson du carillon*, Paris, 1911, in which homage is paid to Rodenbach (p. 3); *La Vie belge*, 1905, with homage to Rodenbach (pp. 168–179). Also see D. G. Rossetti, "On Leaving Bruges," *Ballads and Sonnets*, London, 1891, repr. in *idem, The Complete Poetical Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, New York, 1918, 315. By E. Verhaeren, see "Un Soir," *Les Apparatus dans mes chemins*, Brussels, 1891, repr. in *idem, Poèmes*, ser. 3,

Paris, n.d., 104–105; "Bruges au loin," *Toute la Flandre. La Guirlande des dunes*, Paris, 1907, 79; "L'Entrée de Philippe le Bel à Bruges," "Guillaume de Juliers," "Les Van Eycks," "Aujourd'hui," "L'Escaut," *Toute la Flandre. Les Héros*, Brussels, 1908, 19–31, 51–55, 83–98. Also see S. Mallarmé, "Rememoration d'amis belges," *Excelsior*, July 1893, repr. in *idem, Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, 1945, 60; I. Colin, *Les Baisers*, Liège, 1898, dedicated to "Maître Georges Rodenbach. En grande admiration"; A. Ruijters, "La Flandre et ses villes," *La Belgique. Revue encyclopédique*, CCIII, July 24, 1899, 628–631; H. Fierens-Gevaert, *Psychologie d'une ville. Essai sur Bruges*, Paris, 1901, dedicated to the memory of Rodenbach. (A copy of this book was found in Khnopff's library, the contents of which were sold after his death in 1922. The inventory of the sale is reprinted in J. Howe, "Iconographical Studies in the Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff," Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1979, 290–291.) S. Zweig, "Bruges," *Silberne Saiten*, Berlin and Leipzig, 1901; J. K. Huysmans, "Bruges," *De Tout*, Paris, 1902, repr. in *idem, Pages choisies*, Paris, London, and New York, n.d., 87–92, with Rodenbach cited (p. 89); P. Spaak, "Bruges," *Voyages vers mon pays*, Bruges, 1907, 132; R. M. Rilke, "Quai du Rosaire, Bruges," *Neue Gedichte*, Leipzig, 1907; M. Loumaye, "Bruges," *Les Roses du silence. Poèmes*, Brussels and Paris, 1913, 49–52, dedicated to the memory of Rodenbach; M. de Weyser, *Les Cloches de Flandre*, Paris, 1918, with a quotation by Rodenbach (p. 61); M. de Weyser, *Les Beffrois au soleil. Poèmes*, Bruges, 1927; H. de Regnier, "Les Bruges," *Flamma Tenax*, Paris, 1928; C. Mauclair, *Le Charme de Bruges*, Paris, 1930; and *idem, Bruges*, Paris, 1938. For other homages to Georges Rodenbach, see *La Nerve*, July-Aug. 1923 (issue dedicated to Rodenbach) and *Partir* (Numéro spécial consacré à l'occasion du cinquantième anniversaire de la mort de Georges Rodenbach), xxvi, Dec. 1948–Jan. 1949.

¹⁸ H. Le Sidaner, letter to Douaisiens, cited in Musée de la Ville de Dunkerque, *Henri Le Sidaner 1862–1939*, Dunkirk, 1974, 4.

¹⁹ G. Rodenbach, "Petits Nocturnes de Bruges," *L'Image*, vi, May 1897, 161–163, illustrated with four drawings by G. de Feure, engraved by Van de Putt and Leyatt. G. Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, Paris, 1930, illustrated with eighteen pastels by Levy-Dhurmer, with a preface by C. Mauclair. Degouve de Nuncques also did a painting entitled *La Nuit à Bruges* (*Night in Bruges*), 1897, repr. in R. Delevoy, *Symbolists and Symbolism*, Geneva, 1982, 111, and discussed in my essay, "The Symbolist Landscape Paintings of Valerius de Saedeleer and William Degouve de Nuncques," in preparation.



2 Fernand Khnopff, *La Ville abandonnée*, 1904, pastel and pencil on paper, 76 × 69cm. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (photo: Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Brussels)

La Ville abandonnée also appears to have been based upon a photograph. Although arguing that photography was not an art form in its own right,²⁰ Khnopff consistently relied on

photographs in the genesis of his work. Clearly, they were the source for his depictions of Bruges, for he frequently stated that he never returned there after his departure as a child, because he did not want to see the destruction that the nineteenth century had wreaked upon the city. According to a contemporary anecdote, his efforts to preserve his idealized vision went so far that, when obliged to return to Bruges on one occasion in 1906, he ordered a cab to take

²⁰ F. Khnopff, "Is Photography among the Fine Arts?" *Magazine of Art*, 1899, 156–158, and *idem*, "A propos de la photographie dite l'art," *Bulletins de la Classe des Beaux-Arts*, Académie Royale de Belgique, Brussels, 1916, 93–99.



3 Photograph of Memling Square, Bruges. From Delevooy, de Croës, and Ollinger-Zinque, 81 (photo: Du Brul)

him directly from the train station to his destination while he wore spectacles with black lenses to spare himself the view.²¹

The setting of *La Ville abandonnée* is Hans Memling Square in Bruges, a square dedicated to the memory of the revered Flemish artist, with whom Khnopff himself was often identified during his lifetime.²² Comparison of this image with a turn-of-the-century photograph of the scene (Fig. 3) reveals the simplifications and alterations imposed by the artist. The most significant is his removal of the statue of Memling from its pedestal, thereby making more emphatic the notion of abandonment suggested by the drawing's title, *The Abandoned City*.

The idea of abandonment is the central theme in Khnopff's drawing; yet curiously, the nature of that abandonment has never been recognized. It has always been argued that in this picture, Bruges is being "invaded by," "swallowed by," or "encroached upon" by the sea.²³ I would like to propose the opposite interpretation: Bruges is being *abandoned* by the sea. This is supported not only by the title of the

work, but by historical fact, literary connections, and formal analysis.

A thriving trading center during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the city of Bruges was drastically altered by economic reversals in the following century. In the late fifteenth century, Bruges fell into decline because of the silting up of the Zwyn channel, its access to the sea. Consequently, by 1500, Antwerp had replaced Bruges as the major trading center of Northern Europe. Foreign merchants, as well as local inhabitants, abandoned the once lively town, leaving behind them an economic "ville morte."

Rodenbach referred to this abandonment of Bruges by the sea and the consequent death of the city in many of his writings. Khnopff surely knew these works, given his collaboration and connections with the writer. In "Villes flamandes," Rodenbach describes the sea's "retreat" and its "betrayal" of Bruges.²⁴ Similarly, in *Bruges-la-Morte*, he writes: "This was Bruges-la-Morte, the dead city . . . chilled to death at the cessation of the great heartbeat of the sea . . . Bruges, that city from which the sea—like a great happiness . . .—had retreated."²⁵ In the essay "Agonies de Villes: I—Bruges," Rodenbach traces the demise of the city to that historical moment when it was cut off from the sea: "One day in 1475, the North Sea unexpectedly withdrew. . . ." This brought the death of the abandoned city.²⁶

Khnopff's drawing gives us a visual equivalent of Rodenbach's forsaken city. Bruges has not "been abandoned, to be swallowed by the sea."²⁷ Rather, it has died, because of its *abandonment* by the sea. At the right side of the square, where it meets the water, is a white void left by the retreat of the sea. The white space, which gradually deepens into blue in the distance, shows where the water has pulled back, withdrawing toward the blue horizon.

Many aspects of Khnopff's image recall Rodenbach's writings. One must note that Bruges is an inland city, not, as depicted in this drawing, at the edge of the sea. Rodenbach, however, in "Paysages de villes," describes Bruges as a "dead city on the edge of the water."²⁸ Elsewhere, he writes of the funereal calm of deserted squares, and abandoned houses with dead, staring windows.²⁹ He speaks, too, of the "cold silence" of "the dead city at the edge of the water" with its

²¹ L. Tombu, *Peintres et sculpteurs belges à l'aube du XXe siècle*, 1907, 93.

²² For comparisons of Khnopff with Memling and other Flemish Gothic artists, see Fierens-Gevaert (as in n. 3), 118, 124; Anon., "L'Essor Exposition de 'Noir et Blanc,'" *La Jeune Belgique*, II, 1882–83, 353–354; E. L. de Taeye, *Les Artistes belges contemporains*, Brussels, 1894, 744; and G. Ritter, "Deux Salonnets à Liège," *L'Art moderne*, 1912, 361.

²³ Respectively, F. C. Legrand, *Symbolism in Belgium*, trans. A. Kennedy, Brussels, 1972, 72; J. Howe, "Fernand Khnopff's Depictions of Bruges: Medievalism, Mysticism, and Socialism," *Arts Magazine*, Dec. 1980, 131; and P. Mosley, intro. to G. Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte* (see Sources), ix. See, too, G. Metkin, "Fernand Khnopff et la modernité," in Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, et al., *Fernand Khnopff* (as in n. 4), 46, in which he describes the city as being "infiltrated" by the sea. Similar metaphors appear in Galerie L'Ecuyer, *Fernand Khnopff*, Brussels, 1971, n.p., and F. C. Legrand, *Der Symbolismus in der belgischen Zeichnung*, exh. cat., Frankfurter Kunstverein Steinernes Haus am Romberg, Frankfurt am Main, 1988, 40. Similarly, in the most recent exhibition catalogue of Khnopff's work, Musées des Beaux-Arts de Bunkamura, *Fernand Khnopff. 1858–1921*, 160, C. de Croës writes that in *The Abandoned City*, the sea symbolizes the victory of water over the terrestrial element.

²⁴ ". . . Cette mer du Nord est d'humeur fantastique. Elle a trahi Bruges. . . . Elle a de soudains reculs, comme d'un grand amour qui se retire . . ."; G. Rodenbach, "Villes flamandes," *Evocations* [a selection of articles from newspapers and magazines between 1883 and 1898], Paris, 1924, 119.

²⁵ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 29.

²⁶ "Un jour en 1475, la mer du Nord brusquement se retira . . . et Bruges, dorénavant éloignée de cette vaste mamelle de la mer qui avait nourri ses enfants, commença à s'anémier et depuis quatre siècles elle agonise"; Rodenbach, "Agonies de villes: I—Bruges," 15. This essay originally appeared in the *Supplément littéraire du Figaro*, June 16, 1888. It is also reprinted under the title "Bruges" in *La Nervie. Revue franco-belge d'art et de littérature. Numéro spécial consacré à Georges Rodenbach* (as in n. 17), 186–190.

²⁷ Howe, "Khnopff's Depictions of Bruges" (as in n. 23), 131.

²⁸ "Ville morte au bord de l'eau . . ."; Rodenbach, "Paysages de villes," *Le Règne du silence* (as in n. 1), 82.

²⁹ "Une paix de cimetière régnait dans les quartiers déserts . . . avec des maisons dont les vitres mortes me regardent . . ."; Rodenbach, "Agonies de villes: I—Bruges," 20–21.

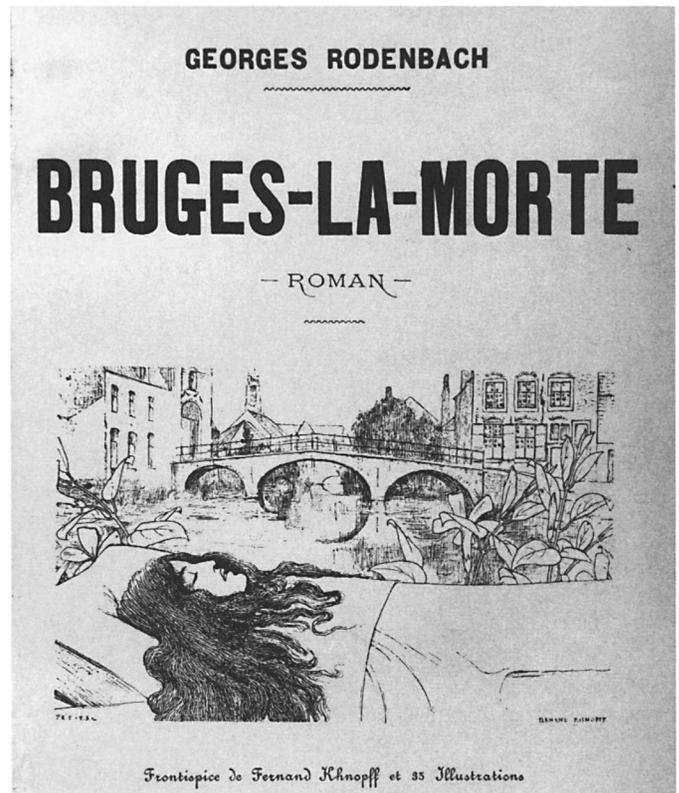
"mourning houses" and its "condemned windows . . . oriented towards the tomb."³⁰

In *Bruges-la-Morte*, Rodenbach writes, "A sensation of death emanated from the shuttered houses, from windows like eyes blurred in the throes of death."³¹ Khnopff presents a similar image of the dead and abandoned city, his remote and impenetrable façade recalling Rodenbach's houses with their shuttered, dead windows; even the doors, which lack doorknobs or latches, are impenetrable and blind. He captures too the poet's sense of a cold, deathly silence. "On sent un froid silence uniforme qui plane" ("A cold, even silence is felt hanging.")³² This silence is evoked by the emptiness of the scene.

Much of *La Ville abandonnée* is concerned with the void: the empty square, the empty sky, the empty pedestal, and the retreat of the sea. The flat building appears hollow and so, too, does the pedestal. In place of its original plaque ornamented with Gothic tracery, Khnopff has depicted a gaping, black hole. This curious hole serves as the focal point of the drawing, due to its central placement and its singular blackness. Through shape and color, it relates formally to the rectangular doors and windows, thereby reinforcing the tectonic and, hence, static quality of the image. Thematically, it relates to the other voids in the picture: over half of the drawing consists of the empty sky, while much of the rest is taken up with the empty square and the retreating sea. This void, this abandonment, is the actual subject of the drawing, for "the dead city," "*The Abandoned City*," has been abandoned by the sea.

This drawing is only one of many works that can be related to Rodenbach's writings. An obvious example is the frontispiece of *Bruges-la-Morte* (Fig. 4). The novel's title reflects the central theme of the book, the identification in the mind of Hughes, the protagonist, of his dead wife, "la morte," with the city of Bruges. In Khnopff's drawing, the formal parallelism of the figure with the bridge and the town makes tangible Hughes's identification of his wife with the city: "Bruges était sa morte. Et sa morte était Bruges." ("Bruges was his dead wife. And his dead wife was Bruges.")³³

The relationship is further amplified through the layout of the letters of the title, extending from one edge of the image to the other. Physically, as well as symbolically³⁴ and linguistically, the words *Bruges-la-Morte* mirror the images below of



4 Fernand Khnopff, frontispiece of Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, Paris, 1892 (photo: Russell Malone, Northwestern Library, Special Collections)

"Bruges" and "la Morte." By rhyming the horizontal figure of the dead wife with the stretched-out bridge and the horizontal view of the city, as well as with the extended horizontal line of the title, Khnopff associates the dead woman, the city, and the words and the concept, "*Bruges-la-Morte*," and in doing so, he mirrors the Symbolist doctrine of analogy or *correspondance*,³⁵ an idea at the heart of Rodenbach's novel.

In the drawing, the figure of the dead wife floats like Ophelia on the surface of the water. Khnopff's image has been compared to the renowned *Ophelia* of 1852 by the English Pre-Raphaelite, John Everett Millais.³⁶ This painting was almost certainly known to Khnopff, who lectured and wrote on the Pre-Raphaelites.³⁷ More importantly, Khnopff's

³⁰ "Dans quelque ville morte, au bord de l'eau, vivote/ La tristesse de la veillesse des maisons/ . . . Mais depuis lors, ces yeux des pensives demeures,/ Dans leurs vitres d'eau frêle ont senti dépérir/ Tant de visages frais, tant de guirlandes d'heures/ Qu'ils en ont maintenant la froideur de la mort!/ (Or mes yeux sont aussi les vitres condamnées/ D'une maison en deuil du départ des années)/ Et c'est pourquoi, du fond de ces lointains de nord,/ Je me sens regardé par ces yeux sans envie/ Qui ne se tournent plus de côté de la vie/ Mais sont orientés du côté du tombeau . . ./ Yeux des villes maisons dont mes yeux sont les frères,/ . . . On sent un froid silence uniforme qui plane;/ . . ."; Rodenbach, "Paysages de villes" (as in n. 28), 82–85.

³¹ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 8.

³² Rodenbach, "Paysages de villes," 85.

³³ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 19.

³⁴ Among the Symbolists, words themselves were viewed as symbols. See J. Moréas, "Le Symbolisme: Manifeste," *Le Figaro littéraire*, Sept. 18, 1886, repr. in L. Vanier, *Les Premières Armes du Symbolisme*, Paris, 1889,

25–39. In this essay, often referred to as "The Symbolist Manifesto," Moréas characterizes Symbolism as the clothing of ideas in symbols.

³⁵ The idea of *correspondances* or parallelism is one of the most central in Symbolist thought. Popularized by the influential French proto-Symbolist poet, Charles Baudelaire, it originated with Neoplatonism and was reintroduced by the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. (See E. Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, New York, 1911, 44; originally published as *De coelo et ejus mirabilibus, et de inferno, ex auditibus et visis*, London, 1758; trans. into French by A. J. Pernity, under the title *Les Merveilles du ciel et de l'enfer et des terres planétaires et astrales par Emanuel D. Swedenborg, d'après le témoignage de ses yeux et de ses oreilles*, Berlin, 1782.) Baudelaire adapted Swedenborg's ideas in his theory of *correspondence* or universal analogy, according to which everything corresponds to everything else and there exists a mirror-like relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds. See C. Baudelaire, "Correspondances," *Les Fleurs du mal*, Paris, 1857.

³⁶ Metkin (as in n. 23), 46; and Howe (as in n. 23), 128.

³⁷ See note 10 above for examples.

Ophelia-like figure relates to images within the text of *Bruges-la-Morte*. Grieving for his lost love, Hughes walks each day along the canals, for there floating upon the water he can see his wife's "Ophelia face." Later, he contemplates suicide, and the dark waters of the canal seem to call to him, reminding him again of the tragic, drowned heroine.³⁸

It seems that *Bruges-la-Morte* provided the imagery not only for Khnopff's frontispiece to the novel, but also for several other of his drawings of Bruges, such as *Souvenir de Bruges. L'Entrée du béguinage* (*Memory of Bruges. The Entrance of the Beguinage*), 1904 (Fig. 5), *Des Souvenirs de la Flandre, Un Canal*, 1904 (Fig. 6), and *Un Canal*, 1905 (Fig. 7), all of which were based upon topographical photographs that were published along with Khnopff's frontispiece in the original 1892 edition of the novel.³⁹ With the exception of the radical cropping of the motifs, these drawings are essentially literal transcriptions of the photographs (Fig. 8). They show once again Khnopff's reliance on Rodenbach's works.

One of the most obvious examples of reference to the writer is a drawing called *Avec Georges Rodenbach. Une Ville morte* (*With Georges Rodenbach. A Dead City*), 1889 (Fig. 9). As with other works by Khnopff inspired by literature, such as *Avec Verhaeren. Un Ange* (*With Verhaeren. An Angel*), 1889, and *Avec Joséphin Peladan. Istar*, 1888, the use of the word "avec" in the title signifies that the drawing is not an illustration of a particular event or portion of the author's work, nor was it done in collaboration with the author, but is instead a kind of vicarious collaboration, an independent image inspired by the writer's work. The phrase "la ville morte" appears in well over a half-dozen of Rodenbach's writings.⁴⁰ The imagery in Khnopff's drawing relates to two of those texts.

In front of a misty backdrop of a canal, houses, and the famous belfry of Bruges, a young nude woman draws close to a crown set before her, gazing at it wistfully with attraction and regret. In mood, as well as imagery, the scene recalls

Rodenbach. In one of his important and yet little known essays, "Agonies de villes: I—Bruges," he tells his readers that cities are a little like women. They have their times of youth, of blossoming, and of decline. Bruges, he says, is like a deposed queen, today forgotten and impoverished, but a powerful and magnificent monarch of Europe in former days.⁴¹

In Khnopff's drawing, the motif of the crown has never been explained. I would propose that it refers to the "deposed queen," Bruges.⁴² Furthermore, the female figure herself is an allegorical representation of the city, an association with many art-historical antecedents.⁴³ More importantly, however, it is Rodenbach who tells us in his text that cities are like women. Her attitude of wistfulness seems to express her regret for the past, for the queen's loss of her position, power, and glory.

Other images in Rodenbach's essay are paralleled in the artist's drawing. Among them are the "faded tones" of the ancient buildings, the belfry in the distance, and the calmness of the canal, as well as the mood of longing and regret.⁴⁴

The same theme of sorrow for the demise of "the dead city" is also expressed in Rodenbach's poem "Du silence":

La ville est morte, morte, irréparablement!
D'une lente anémie et d'un secret tourment,
Est morte jour à jour de l'ennui d'être seule . . .
Petite ville éteinte et de l'autre temps qui
Conserve on ne sait quoi de vierge et d'alanguï . . .

(The city is dead, irreparably dead!
Of a slow anemia and a secret torment,
Dying, day by day, from the weariness of being
alone . . .
Small, lifeless city of another time which
Conserves a certain something, virginal and languid. . . .)⁴⁵

³⁸ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 8.

³⁹ These photographs are identified in the preface to *Bruges-la-Morte* as "Semilgravures par Ch.-G. Petit et Cie, d'après les clichés des maisons Levy et Neurdin." A selection of photographs from the novel, some of which have been cropped, however, are reproduced in Delevoey, de Croës, and Ollinger-Zinque, 430. One of them reproduced here, Fig. 8, represents the photograph on which *Un Canal* is based.

⁴⁰ Among these are *Bruges-la-morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 8; "Du Silence," 230; "Agonies de villes: I—Bruges," 26; "Villes flamands," 124; "Paysages des villes," 82; "Coeur de l'eau," *Le Règne du silence*, 58; *Le Carillonneur*, Paris, 1913 (originally published 1897), 36; and *Villes mortes*, n.p., n.d., unpag. [Brussels: Le Spectateur Catholique, 1897]. My thanks go to Jacques Detemmerman of the Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Françaises in Brussels for providing me with the bibliographical information on the latter publication.

⁴¹ "Les villes sont un peu comme les femmes: elles ont leur temps de jeunesse et d'épanouissement; puis vient le déclin. . . . En Flandre surtout, dans la Flandre flamande, en ce silence de province si proche d'ici et qui semble si lointain, il y a ainsi des villes tombées dans la misère ou l'oubli: Ypres, Furnes, Courtrai, Audenaerde, ces mélancoliques veuves des communiers; mais parmi ces déchéances de l'histoire et cette détresse entre toutes lamentable, une agonie de ville—c'est Bruges, la reine détronée, qui se meurt là-bas de la mort la plus taciturne et la plus émouvante, parce que Bruges aujourd'hui oubliée, pauvre, seule dans ses palais vides, fut vraiment une reine dans l'Europe d'autrefois . . ."; Rodenbach, "Agonies de villes: I—Bruges," 13–14. This essay, later published in *Evocations*, for which the pages are cited here, originally appeared in *Le Supplément littéraire du Figaro*, June 16, 1888, the same year as Khnopff's drawing. The metaphor of Bruges as the crowned

queen of the North was used also by Camille Lemonnier in *La Belgique*, Paris, 1888: "Bruges, la reine du Nord, elle a aussi ceinte du diadème qui lui assurait la royauté des mers, repose, auguste et sacré, dans la gloire d'un merveilleux sepulcre" (p. 348).

⁴² The crown is a variation on the *Bügel* type, worn by German emperors in the Middle Ages. I am grateful to Professor Walter Cahn for his identification of the type. Despite the figure seated on top, a curious addition created by the artist, the crown in the drawing bears a striking resemblance to the imperial crown of Austria. This crown would have had a special significance for Khnopff, who was fond of stressing that his 16th-century ancestors were members of the Hapsburg court. The Hapsburg dynasty was in power at the time of Bruges's greatest strength, as well as at the time of her dramatic decline.

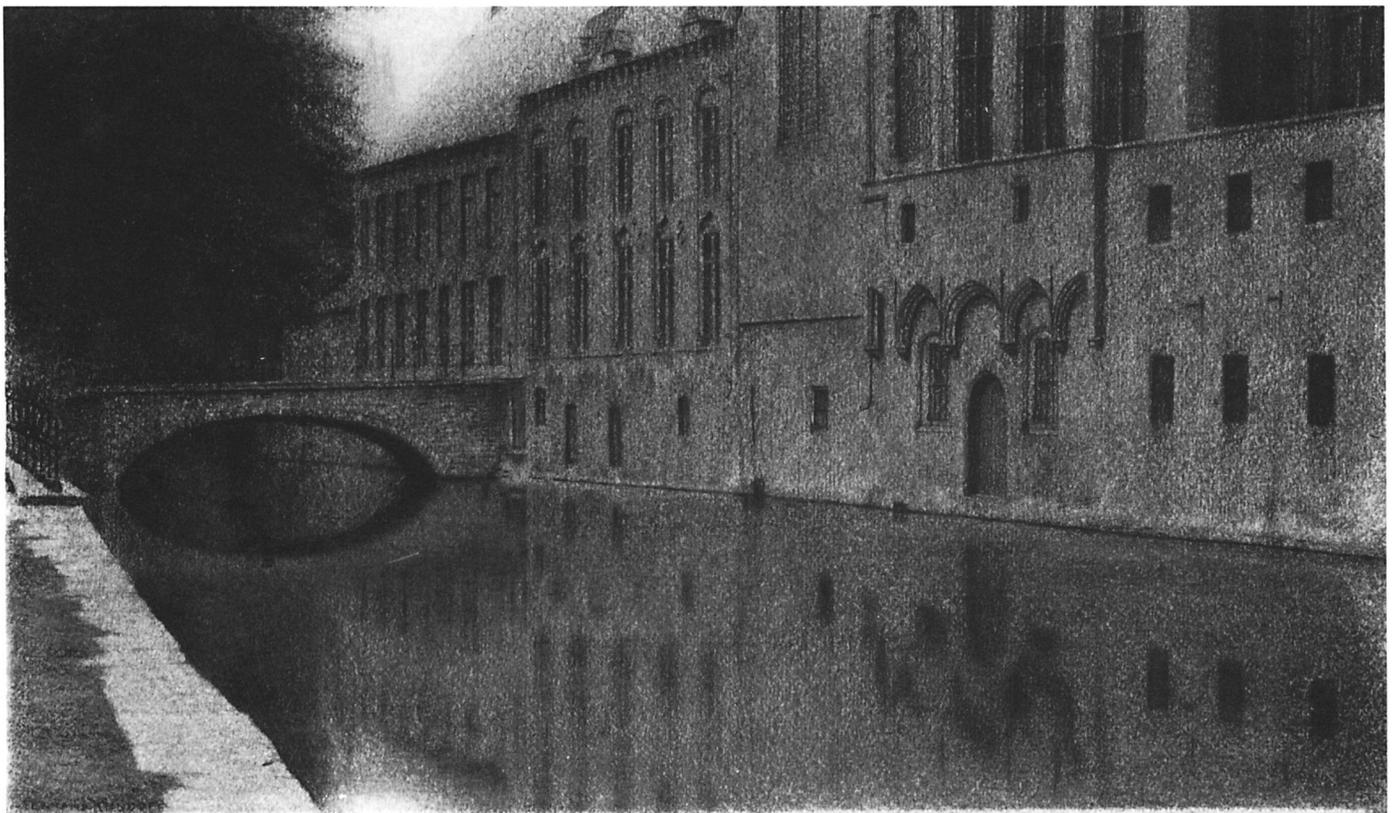
⁴³ Among the most relevant of those antecedents is a work by Khnopff's teacher Xavier Mellery, his undated triptych entitled *Bruges*, which features a female figure as the personification of the city. It is catalogued as inventory number 3910/1–3 in *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Catalogue inventaire de la peinture moderne*, Brussels, 1984, 417. For a discussion of Mellery's Symbolist works, several themes of which he has in common with Khnopff, see L. Pudles, "Images of the Interior Life: Xavier Mellery's *L'Ame des choses*," *Le Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, 1/IV, 1992 (in press).

⁴⁴ "La silencieuse melodie des teintes fanées" (p. 17), "ce cadavre de l'eau immobile" (p. 21), "une paix de cimetièrè règne dans les quartiers deserts, au long des quais taciturnes. . . . Comme la ville est loin! la ville est morte! . . . Et c'est pour ses obsèques qu'une cloche là-bas, tinte" (pp. 21–26); Rodenbach, "Agonies de villes. I—Bruges."

⁴⁵ Rodenbach, "Du silence," 230.



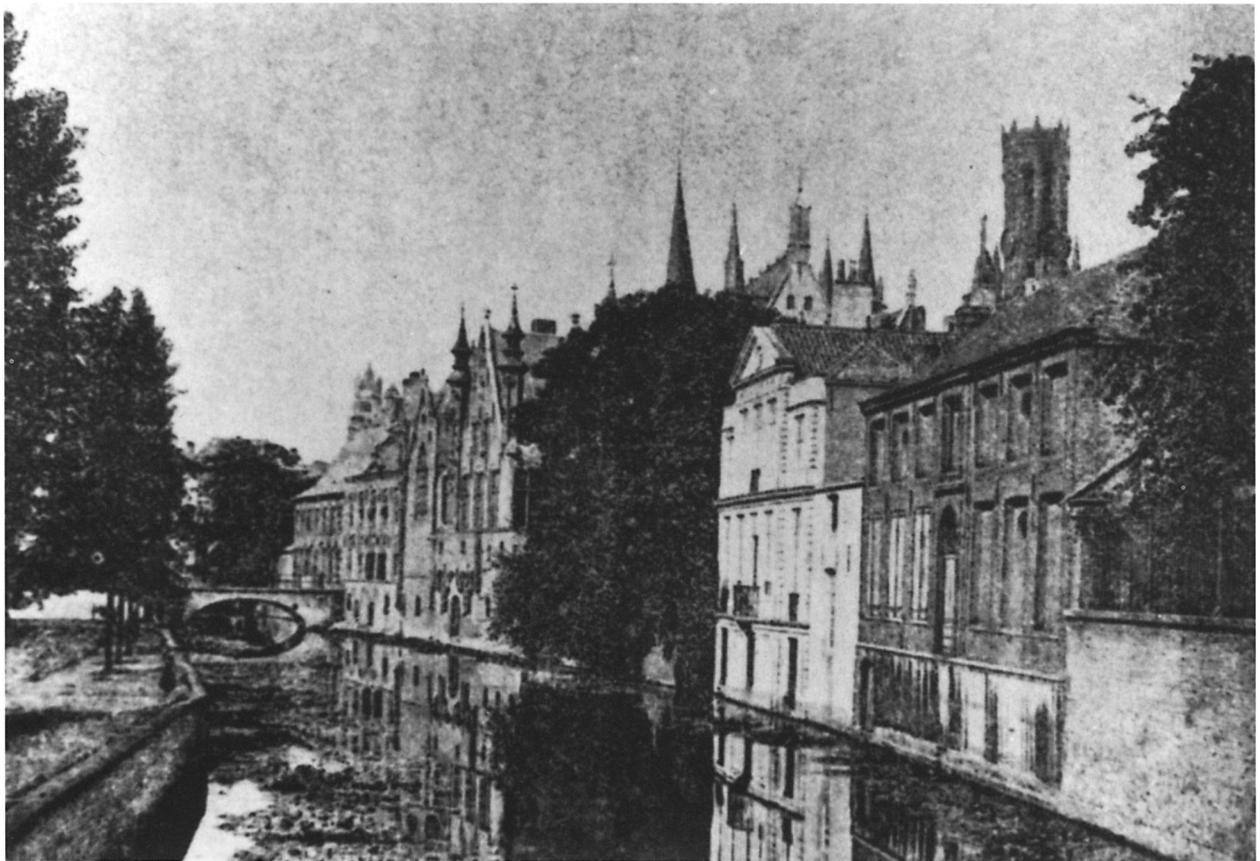
5 Fernand Khnopff, *Souvenir de Bruges. L'Entrée du béguinage*, 1904, pastel on paper, 27 × 43.5cm. New York, Hearn Family Trust, courtesy Barry Friedman Gallery (photo: Speltdoorn)



6 Fernand Khnopff, *Des Souvenirs de la Flandre, Un Canal*, 1904, pencil, charcoal, and pastel on paper, 25 × 41.5cm. New York, Hearn Family Trust, courtesy Barry Friedman Gallery (photo: Speltdoorn)



7 Fernand Khnopff, *Un Canal*, 1905, watercolor and pastel, size unknown, present whereabouts unknown (photo: Speltdoorn)



8 Photograph from G. Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, Paris, 1892 (photo: Du Brul)



9 Fernand Khnopff, *Avec Georges Rodenbach. Une Ville morte*, 1889, pastel and ink on paper, 26 × 16 cm. New York, Hearn Family Trust, courtesy Barry Friedman Gallery (photo: Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Brussels)



10a Fernand Khnopff, *Avec Grégoire le Roy. Mon cœur pleure d'autrefois*, 1889, pencil and colored pencil, 14.5 × 9cm, frontispiece of G. LeRoy, *Mon Cœur pleure d'autrefois*, Paris, 1889. Brussels, private collection (photo: Speltdoorn)



10b Fernand Khnopff, *Avec Grégoire le Roy. Mon Cœur pleure d'autrefois*, 1889, colored pencil and white chalk on paper, 25 × 14.2cm. Paris, private collection (photo: Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Brussels)

This poem by Rodenbach relates to yet another drawing of Bruges, the frontispiece to Grégoire Le Roy's book of poetry, *Mon Cœur pleure d'autrefois* (*My Heart Weeps for Former Days*), Paris, 1889 (Fig. 10). It is a picture of a young woman kissing her own reflection in a mirror, behind which appears a view of Bruges. Ironically, nowhere in Le Roy's book is such an image suggested, but it does appear in Rodenbach's "Du silence." In the fifth section of his ode to solitude and silence,

⁴⁶ "Les miroirs, par les jours abrégés des décembre,/ Songent—telles des eaux captives—dans les chambres,/ Et leur mélancholie a pour causes lointaines/ Tant de visages doux fanés dans ces fontaines/ Qui s'y voyaient naguère, embellis du sourire!/ Et voilà maintenant, quand soi-même on s'y mire,/ Qu'on croit y retrouver l'une après l'autre et seules/ Ces figures de soeurs défuntes et d'aïeules/ Qu'on croit, se penchant sur la claire surface,/ Y baiser leurs fronts morts, demeurés dans la glace!" Rodenbach, "Du silence," 191.

The canal/mirror metaphor, like the "captive water" metaphor cited above, is used throughout the poem, for instance: "Les canaux somnolents entres les quais de pierre/ Songent . . . L'eau qui rêve . . . L'âme de

Rodenbach's poet-hero leans over to kiss the mirror, in which reside the dead faces from his past; the "captive waters" in his glass are identified with Bruges.⁴⁶

In the poem, the mirror and the city are the two central images. Bruges is described primarily in terms of its mirroring waters, but is identified also by its *beguinage*, or cloister, and its belfry.⁴⁷ Similarly, the two main motifs in Khnopff's drawing are the kiss in the mirror and the city of Bruges, also

l'eau captive . . . / Dans les canaux muets aux eaux inanimées/ Qui semblent des miroirs reflétant des fumées./ . . . Et les pâles canaux entre leurs quais de pierre/ . . . Plus rien n'entre parmi leurs eaux coagulées/ Dont la blancheur ressemble à des vitres gelées/ Derrière qui l'on voit, dans le triste du soir,/ L'âme de d'eau, captive au fond, qui persévère/ A ne rien regretter du monde en son lit noir/ Et qui semble dormir dans des chambres de verre!" pp. 224–225.

⁴⁷ "En un doux beguinage a l'ombre d'un clocher . . ."; Rodenbach, "Du silence," 204.

identified by the water, the shadowy belfry, and the entrance to the *beguinage*. These two motifs, Bruges and the mirror, are joined together by the lines of the bridge. By turning to Rodenbach's poem "Du silence," with its identification of the "captive waters" of the poet's mirror with Bruges, they become "bridged" not only formally, but thematically.

This same poem can also be used to explain the bringing together of what appear to be two completely unrelated drawings into a single work, which Khnopff entitled *Le Secret-Reflet* (*The Secret-Reflection*), 1902 (Fig. 11). The unusual, hyphenated title may have been influenced by Rodenbach's title *Bruges-la-Morte*, and it similarly emphasizes the relationship of the two images. In the upper drawing, called *The Secret*, a female figure wearing gloves and draped in heavy fabric bids a mask to keep silent.⁴⁸ The lower drawing, called *The Reflection*, depicts the reflective waters of a canal in Bruges.

The Secret, which has references to the occult, should be placed within the context of Khnopff's belief in the artist as mystic and his close involvement with esoteric circles; it relates to several other pictures by Khnopff that, like this one, connect themes of secrecy and silence with references to mysticism, the artist, and the Symbolist aesthetic.⁴⁹

The Secret must, however, in some way be related to the image below, and the connection can be found through Rodenbach's "Du silence." The poem links the theme of the secret with that of the reflection. In "Du silence," the poet looks into his mirror, in which is held "a secret." What he sees there, he sees too in the reflective waters of the canals in Bruges. Those reflections are associated with the captive waters of his mirror.⁵⁰ Considering the extent to which Khnopff based his images on Rodenbach's writings, many of which can be shown to have been based on "Du silence,"⁵¹ I would like to suggest that the round, mirror-shaped panel containing *The Secret* is related to Rodenbach's mirror, in which he says was held "a secret"; below it, in *The Reflection*, are the reflective waters of the canal, compared by the poet to the captive waters of his mirror.

Similar themes and images appear in the poem and picture. Both images of Bruges concentrate on the canal's reflections. According to the poet, the reflections are like his memories, the whiteness of those memories, like the ambiguous "white silences of art." Rodenbach compares the still

water of the canal to his soul, dreaming. The poet dreams before his mirror, of its mysteries and its secrets that are held inside his room. The room that he describes is like Khnopff's covered guardian of the secret, for it is "swathed like a mummy," its "forehead [covered by] a band of cloth." It is the closed room of introspection, of *reflection*, "la chambre de sa memoire" ("the chamber of his memory"), where secrets may be grasped only in solitude and silence. The poet notes his affinity with recluses. He compares himself to nuns who are veiled, chaste, and silent. The nuns, like Khnopff's veiled and silent figure in *The Secret*, are the poet's "Sisters, of a common mother, Silence."⁵²

The theme of silence is central in both the poem and the drawing. In *The Secret*, the gesture of silence unites the figure with the mask. Recalling the mirror imagery of the poem, each looks at the other, a mirror image of herself. Evoked here are the poet's themes of self-examination and reflection. The latter theme is mirrored once again in *The Reflection* below ("dans le profond miroir, comme en un canal mort"; "in the deep mirror, as in a dead canal").⁵³ Rodenbach's poem "Du silence" incorporates the themes of solitude, silence, secrecy, chastity, introspection, reflection, mystery, and mirroring, all of which can be found in Khnopff's *The Secret-Reflection*.

One last work remains to be discussed, the artist's lost triptych, entitled *Bruges, d'autrefois* (*Bruges of Yesteryear*), 1905 (Fig. 12). The three panels of the triptych include *D'autrefois* (*Yesteryear*, Fig. 13) in the center, *Un Canal* (Fig. 7) on the left, and *Le Tombeau de Marie de Bourgogne* (*The Tomb of Mary of Burgundy*) on the right. Together they pay homage to "the dead city," Bruges.

At first glance, the left panel, *Un Canal*, appears to be a relatively straightforward depiction of the physical appearance of the city, its buildings, trees, pavements, and canals. The highly naturalistic image is based on a photograph from *Bruges-la-Morte* and is virtually identical to it (Fig. 8), except for the radical cropping of the image at the sides and the top. As in *The Reflection*, the cropping draws our attention to the mirror-like reflections in the water, a compositional formula that is typical of Khnopff's photography-based depictions of Bruges. Also typical is the depopulated and static quality of the image, the stillness of the "dead city's" canal recalling Rodenbach's "cadavre" of immobile water, and the entire scene evokes his "mortuary impression" of the city.⁵⁴

This "mortuary impression" is reinforced by the two other parts of the triptych, the dark, tomb-like image of the central panel and the tomb of Mary of Burgundy on the right. This

⁴⁸ The veiled female figure in *The Secret* is Khnopff's sister Marguerite, who often stands indirectly for the artist in his work, as she most probably does here. Her veil is an important image in occult tradition, where it is connected with both the veiling and unveiling of secret truths, and thereby relates to the standard Symbolist view of the artist as mystic. (See the esoteric and Symbolist review *La Voile d'Isis. Organe hebdomadaire du groupe indépendant d'études esotériques de Paris*, 1890–98.) The veil is also a traditional symbol for virginity and seclusion, themes with which Khnopff often identified the artist, and with which Rodenbach identified the poet in *Du silence* (p. 204).

⁴⁹ For more on this, see my "Fernand Khnopff and *La Vie cérébrale* Solitude, Silence, Secrecy, and Narcissism," in preparation. See too S. Canning, "Fernand Khnopff and the Iconography of Silence," *Arts Magazine*, Jan. 1981, 170–176.

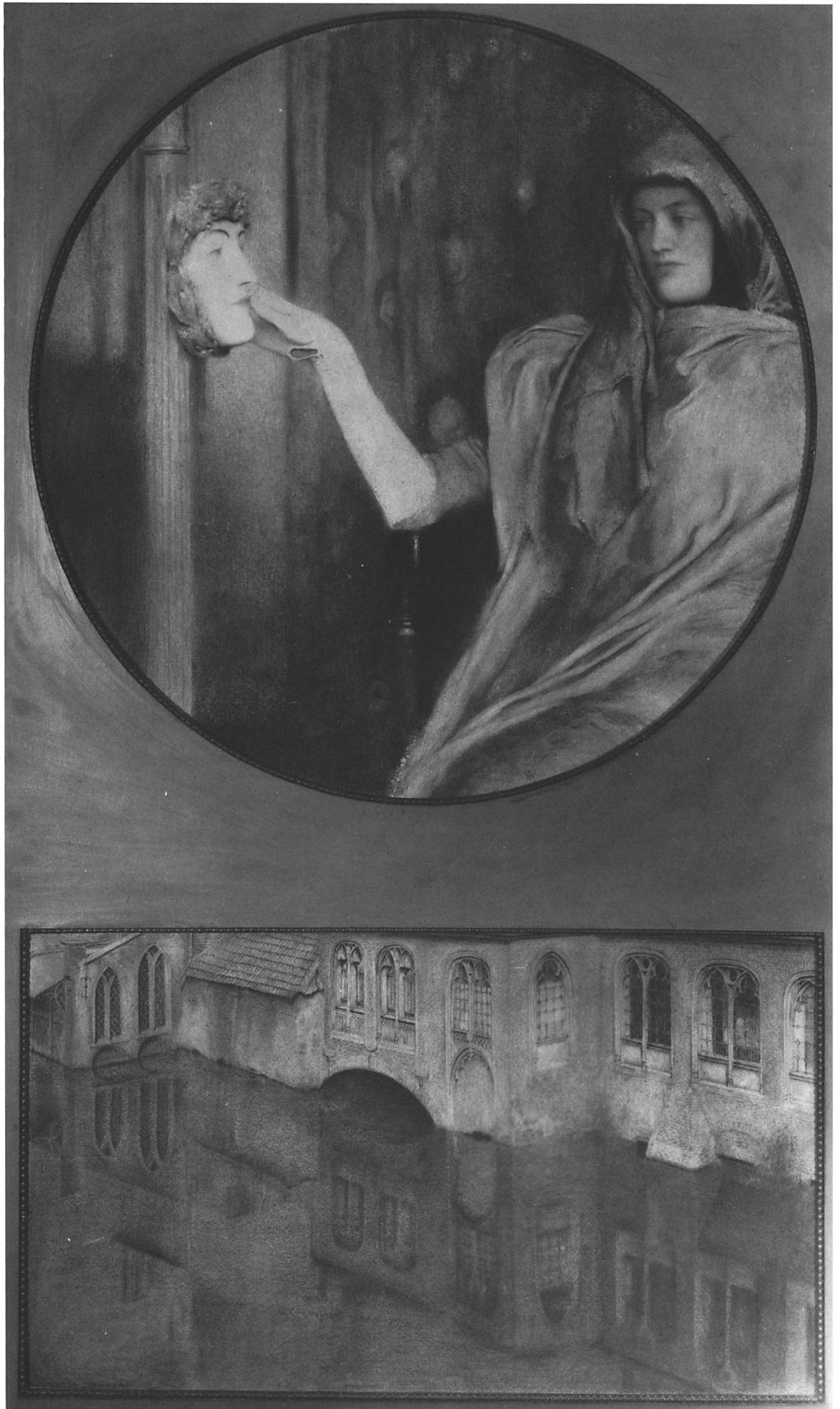
⁵⁰ ". . . On eût dit qu'elle avait un secret/ D'une chose très triste et dont elle était lasse/ D'avoir vu de mystère dans la glace! . . ."; Rodenbach, "Du silence," 195. For the canal/mirror metaphor in "Du silence," see n. 46 above.

⁵¹ The following five works by Khnopff are related to Rodenbach's "Du silence": *Du silence*, 1890; *Le Silence de la neige*, 1916; *A Georges Rodenbach. Une Ville morte*, 1889; and *Mon coeur pleure d'autrefois*, 1889; as well as a drawing, unknown to me, identified by P. Jullian as *L'Eau pâle qui s'en va en chemins de silence* (*Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s*, New York, 1971, 145). For a more complete discussion of the relationship of "Du silence" to these works, see Pudles, (as in n. 49).

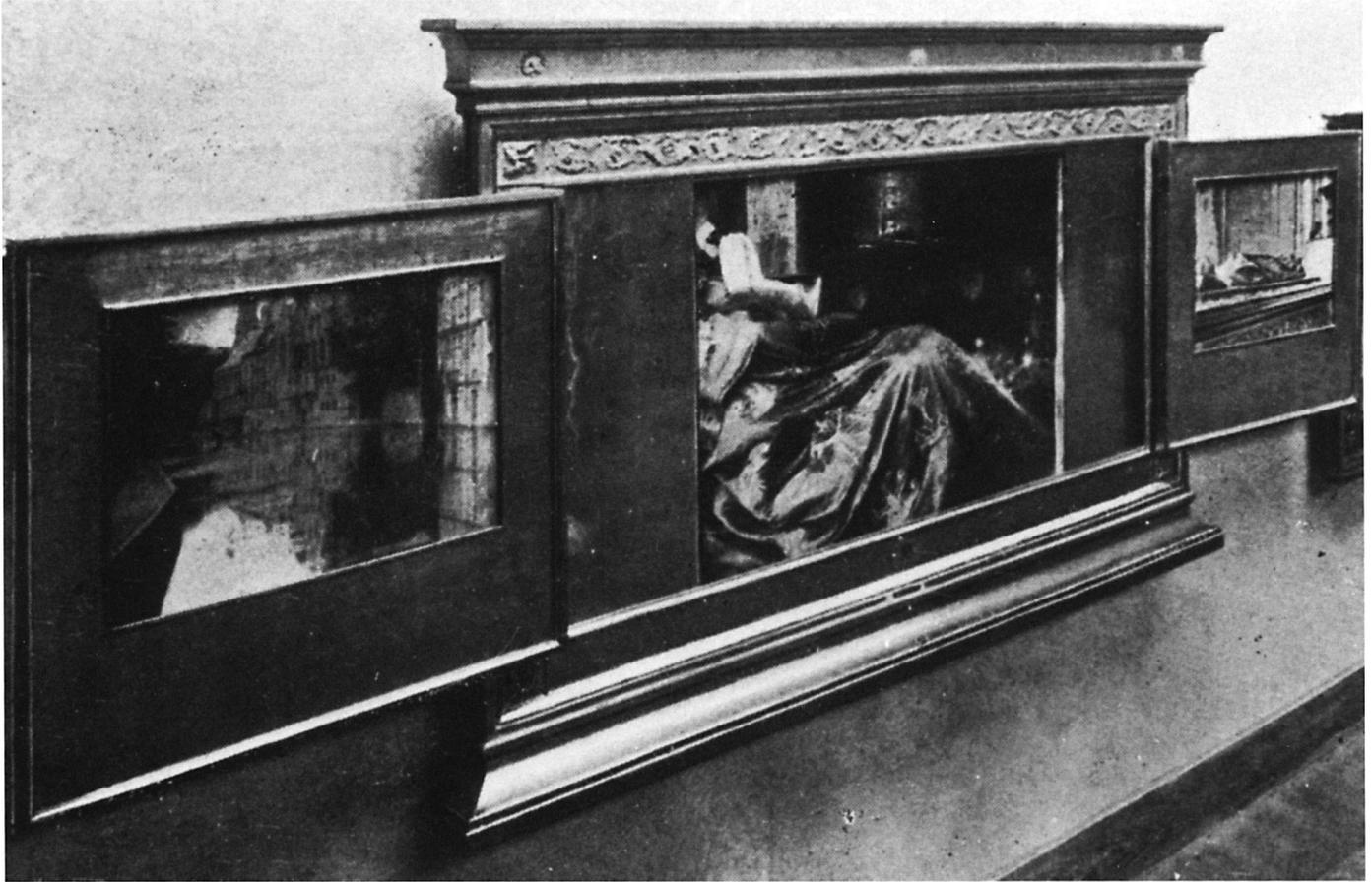
⁵² Rodenbach, "Du silence," 185–231.

⁵³ Rodenbach, "La Vie des Chambres" III, *Le Règne du silence*, 8. The poet uses the same mirror/canal metaphor as he does in "Du silence."

⁵⁴ "L'immense impression mortuaire que la ville nous a donnée . . . ce cadavre de l'eau immobile"; Rodenbach, "Agonie de Villes: I—Bruges," 18, 21.



11 Fernand Khnopff,
Le Secret-Reflet, 1902,
 pastel on paper,
 49.5cm diam.; colored
 pencil on paper, 27.8
 × 49cm. Bruges,
 Groeningen Museum
 (photo: Institut Royal
 du Patrimoine Artis-
 tique, Brussels)



12 Fernand Khnopff, *D'autrefois*, triptych, 1905, watercolor and pastel, size unknown, present whereabouts unknown (photo: Speltdoorn)

tomb, one of the most famous sites of the city, is situated in the church of Notre-Dame, where Hughes of *Bruges-la-Morte* would go “to enjoy the mortuary atmosphere.”⁵⁵ Just as Rodenbach, in his novel, compared the entire city to a tomb,⁵⁶ Khnopff’s tomb may be a metaphor for the “dead city” itself, for the entire triptych pays tribute to Bruges’s dead past.

The tomb metaphor was also taken up by a contemporary critic and biographer of Khnopff in his discussion of the central panel *D'autrefois*. He described the allegorical figure there as the personification of the city of Bruges, wrapped in a splendid shroud for a descent into the tomb.⁵⁷

Khnopff’s shrouded figure may have been suggested by Rodenbach’s “Du silence,” in which he describes the sleeping city as wrapped in a shroud.⁵⁸ Its magnificence evokes the splendor and luxury of Bruges’s Gothic past, a luxury that was reflected in the art of the time, in the rich fabrics and extravagant costumes painted by Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hans Memling, among others. According to one contemporary critic, the sumptuous garment in *D'autrefois* evokes not only the former magnificence of Bruges, but also its “marvelous and mystic art,” represented in the designs that ornament the cloak, including a figure crowned with a halo, like the saints of Memling and Van Eyck.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 9.

⁵⁶ “. . . Is it over the city, is it over a tomb?” Rodenbach, *Bruges-la Morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 78. Mortuary metaphors describing Bruges were common at the time. See Lemonnier (as in n. 17), 356 and Spaak (as in n. 17), 132. For a discussion of the image of the city of Bruges in the work of Camille Lemonnier, in his *La Belgique*, 1888; *L’île vierge*, 1897; and *La Chanson du carillon*, 1911, see R. Mortier, “Bruges dans l’oeuvre de Camille Lemonnier” in *Société Française de la Littérature Comparée, Actes du Second Congrès National: Les Flandres dans les mouvements romantiques et symbolistes*, Lille, 1957, 131–137. In the same volume, see A. Kies, “L’Image de la Flandre chez quelques écrivains belges de

l’époque symboliste,” 103–109, for a discussion of the image of Flanders in the work of Maurice Maeterlinck, Emile Verhaeren, and Eugene Demolder.

⁵⁷ Dumont-Wilden (as in n. 3), 54.

⁵⁸ “La ville est morte/ . . . Et semble encore dormir tandis qu’on l’enlinceule./ Car voici qu’à présent, pour embaumer sa mort . . .”; Rodenbach, “Du silence,” 230.

⁵⁹ M. Biermé, “Fernand Khnopff,” *La Belgique artistique et littéraire*, VIII, July-Sept. 1907, 107.



13 Fernand Khnopff, *D'autrefois*, 1905, watercolor and pastel, size unknown, present whereabouts unknown (photo: Institut Royale du Patrimoine Artistique)

These Flemish artists were the masters to whom many of the Belgian Symbolists looked with nationalistic pride as models for their own spiritualized art.⁶⁰ Khnopff, whose work was often compared to that of Memling, revealed his admiration for this master through repeatedly depicting those sites in Bruges associated with the artist, such as Memling Square and the Hospital of St. John.⁶¹ The latter appears prominently in the upper left corner of *D'autrefois*,

and its image is based on a photograph published in *Bruges-la-morte*. This hospital-turned-museum is one of the most celebrated places in Bruges, for it houses many of Memling's most important works. The site is intimately connected to Bruges's artistic heritage and should be seen in *D'autrefois* as a reference to that glorious past.

Bruges is often viewed as the birthplace of Flemish art. Rodenbach referred to it as the "door of art" and held that it

⁶⁰ Among those artists were George Minne, Albert Servaes, Valerius de Saedeleer, and Gustave van de Woestijne, all of whom were associated with the school of Laethem-St.-Martin. For discussions of these artists and their identification with the Flemish "Primitives," see G. Chabot, "La Première Génération des peintres au village de Laethem-Saint-Martin," *Gand artistique*, Dec. 1, 1924, 288–296; A. de Ridder, *Laethem St. Martin. Colonie d'Artistes*, Brussels and Paris, 1945; P. Haesaerts, *L'École de Laethem-Saint-Martin*, Brussels, 1945; L. and P. Haesaerts, *Laethem-Saint-Martin, Le Village élu de l'art flamand*, Brussels, 1966; L.

Pudles, "The Symbolist Work of Georges Minne," *Art Journal*, Summer 1985, 120–129; and Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, *Le Premier groupe de Laethem-Saint-Martin. 1899–1914*, Brussels, 1988. Interest in the art of the Flemish Primitives grew even stronger after an exhibition of their work in Bruges in 1902.

⁶¹ Memling Square is featured in *La Ville abandonnée* and the Hospital of St. John in *Le Secret-Reflète*, and *A Bruges. L'Hôpital Saint-Jean (In Bruges. The Hospital of Saint John)*, ca. 1904, as well as here, in *D'autrefois*.

is only in this city that one can really have an understanding of the Flemish "Primitives."⁶² Central to that understanding, he said, must be a recognition of the spirituality of their art, an awareness of the "faith of the great Flemish artists . . . for whom painting was like prayer."⁶³

The idea of the Gothic age as an epoch of spirituality was an important component in the late nineteenth-century myth of "Bruges d'autrefois." This was manifest in contemporary ideas about the mysticism of Flemish Primitive artists and was also reflected in Khnopff's choice of the Reliquary of the Holy Blood as a central motif in his allegorical representation of the city. Set prominently at the top of the central axis of the picture, the shrine hovers there mysteriously in a glowing aura of light. Khnopff's image of it derived from a photograph published in *Bruges-la-morte*.

The reliquary itself is surrounded by mystery, for inside is a cylindrical crystal flask, which is said to contain the congealed blood of Christ, brought back from Jerusalem after the Second Crusade by Thierry of Alsace. According to legend, until the year 1300, the red-flecked, white liquid within the flask remained firm and solid throughout the week, until Friday, at which time it liquified and boiled until the ninth hour, the hour of Christ's death.⁶⁴

This mysterious object is an important attribute of the city, like the Hospital of St. John or the tomb of Mary of Burgundy. It is also at the center of Bruges's religious ritual. Once a year, the shrine is carried in the Procession of the Holy Blood, the single most important event in the religious life of the city, with a tradition that extends back to Bruges's medieval past. This connection with history, with "Bruges d'autrefois," is emphasized by Rodenbach in *Bruges-la-Morte* in his description of the Procession.⁶⁵

This important event has a special significance in the novel, for it serves as the backdrop for the dramatic crescendo of *Bruges-la-Morte*. As the shrine passes in the streets

below his window, Hughes punishes his mistress for her "sacrilege" of his own shrine, in which he kept the sacred "relic" of his dead wife's hair. With the sacrosanct hair wrapped tightly around his mistress's throat, he strangles her while the bells peal for the Procession of the Holy Blood. It is here that the novel ends, with the sound of the bells compared to flowers of iron shedding petals over the city and the city itself likened to a tomb.⁶⁶

Related to Rodenbach's writings is the motif of the flowers in Khnopff's image, as well as the claustrophobic, tomb-like darkness against which they are set. This darkness expresses the late nineteenth-century view of Bruges as a city of piety and mystery. According to Rodenbach, "Bruges is the Flemish soul placed in the shadow. . . ."⁶⁷ Glowing against the darkness are the curious flowers in Khnopff's image. Several of them appear to be lilies, one of the most common of his motifs.⁶⁸ Generally, as in conventional Christian iconography, they are identified with the Virgin Mary and associated with chastity. The theme of purity is connected to that of Bruges by Rodenbach: he tells us that Madonnas are found on every corner in Bruges and that the city itself speaks to the glorification of chastity.⁶⁹

Next to the lilies appear to be poppies. The poppy is also an important motif elsewhere in Khnopff's work, where, as the flower of opium, it signifies sleep and dreams.⁷⁰ These themes are relevant to *D'autrefois* as well. According to a contemporary critic, the woman in the drawing holds beneath her nose a chalice filled with flowers, and as she breathes in their perfume, their narcotic vapor makes her sleep.⁷¹ One may assume that she dreams of Bruges's glorious past, which is, after all, the subject of the entire triptych, *Bruges d'autrefois*.

This work, like Khnopff's other images of Bruges, captures the late nineteenth-century nostalgia for the past, for a lost age of splendor and piety. For Belgian Symbolist artists and

⁶² "Bruges—Porte de l'Art. . . . Ce n'est qu'à Bruges qu'on peut bien comprendre les Primitifs flamands"; Rodenbach, "Villes flamandes" (as in n. 24), 110.

⁶³ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 55.

⁶⁴ For discussions of the Reliquary of the Holy Blood, see J. Boon, C.S.S.R., *Sanguis Chrsti. The Play of the Holy Blood of Brugge*, Leuven, 1947, 9–10; S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, II, Cambridge, 1952, 283–415; F. Morlion, "The History of Christianity in Belgium," in J.-A. Goris, ed., *Belgium*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1945, 217–225; G.W. Edwards, *Belgium*, Philadelphia, 1920, 161–175; and F. Cali, *Bruges. The Cradle of Flemish Painting*, London, 1964, 35–36.

⁶⁵ "And through the window, Hughes' eyes met the Knights of the Holy Land, the armoured crusaders in golden brocade, the princesses of historical Bruges, all those who are linked to the name of Thierry of Alsace, bringers of the Holy Blood from Jerusalem. Now it was the young offspring of the noblest Flemish aristocrats who took these parts, wearing ancient materials, rare lace, age-old family jewels. It seems as if the saints, warriors, and donors of Van Eyck's and Memling's paintings had sprung back to life miraculously from their eternal places in the museums"; Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 78. For similar flower and tomb metaphors, see Rodenbach, "Du silence," 296.

⁶⁷ "[Bruges] resta taciturne et mystique, au lieu qu'elle triompha pleinement à Anvers, plus bruyante et ostentatoire. Bruges, c'est l'âme

flamande mise à l'ombre, Anvers c'est l'âme flamande mise au soleil. Bruges eut Memling, qui est un moine angélique, Anvers est Rubens, qui est un ambassadeur"; Rodenbach, "Villes flamandes" (as in n. 24), 113. For a similar contrast by another Belgian Symbolist writer, see E. Verhaeren, *An Aesthetic Interpretation of Belgium's Past*, London [1917], 8, in which Antwerp's sensuality again is contrasted to Bruges's mysticism. Similarly, André Ruijters contrasts "Gand, le pullulent," with "Bruges, le taciturne," in "La Flandre et ses villes," *La Belgique. Revue encyclopédique*, CCIII, July 24, 1898, 629. See too J. K. Huysmans, "Bruges" (as in n. 17), 87–92.

⁶⁸ The lily appears in *Sohtude* or *L'Isolement*, 1890–91; *I Lock My Door upon Myself*, 1891; *Ex Libris: On n'a que soi*, 1892; *Bruges-la-Morte*, 1892, *An Arum Lily*, 1895; and *Une Recluse*, 1909, among others.

⁶⁹ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, trans. P. Mosley, 24. For another identification of Bruges with chastity, see M. de Weyser, "Le Silence," *Les Cloches de Flandre*, Paris, 1918, in which he describes the city as "la ville madone," paying homage to Rodenbach, not only by quoting the latter writer at the beginning of his poem, but by using as his title "Le Silence" with its obvious reference to Rodenbach's "Du silence."

⁷⁰ The poppy is a central motif in *I Lock My Door upon Myself*, 1895, and *Une Recluse*, 1909, where it becomes associated with the mask of Hypnos, god of sleep and bringer of dreams.

⁷¹ Biermé (as in n. 59), 107.

writers, the city of Bruges was above all a symbol, one with important intellectual, spiritual, and nationalistic significance. It stood for Belgium's glorious, Gothic past, viewed as a period of unparalleled political, economic, cultural, and artistic accomplishment. Seen as representative of a bygone spiritual epoch, it was a contrast to the materialism of the modern age. For the Symbolists, Bruges was much more than a city. It was transformed into a cultural myth and ideal, an embodiment of their values. The "dead city" was a foil to the despised, modern world. Irrevocably lost, Bruges was mourned by the Symbolists: "La ville est fière, et douce, et grande par la mort." ("The city is proud, and peaceful, and great by its death.")⁷² "Comme la ville est loin! La ville est morte!" ("How far away is the city! The city is dead!")⁷³

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Appendix A

Selected List of Khnopff's Frontispieces and Illustrations

- Max Waller, *Le Baiser*, Paris, 1883
 Edmond Picard, *La Forge Roussel*, Brussels, 1884
 Josephin Peladan, *Le Vice suprême*, Paris, 1885⁷⁴
 ———, *Istar*, Paris, 1888
 ———, *Femmes honnêtes*, Paris, 1888
 Emile Verhaeren, *Les Sours*, Brussels, 1888
 ———, *Les Débâcles*, Brussels, 1888
 Camille Lemonnier, *La Belgique*, Paris, 1888
 Grégoire Le Roy, *Mon Coeur pleure d'autrefois*, Paris, 1889
 Josephin Peladan, *Le Panthée*, Paris, 1892
 Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, Paris, 1892
 Pol de Mont, *Clarbella*, Utrecht, 1893

⁷² E. Verhaeren, "Aujourd'hui," *Poèmes légendaires de Flandre et de Brabant*, Paris, 1916, 78.

⁷³ G. Rodenbach, "Agonies de villes. I—Bruges," 26.

- Stephane Mallarmé, "A la nue accablante tu," *Pan*, April–May 1895
 Fernand Khnopff, "Le Sommet," *Pan*, September–November 1895
 Maurice Maeterlinck, "La Mort de Tintagile," *Ver Sacrum*, 1898
 Emile Verhaeren, *Toute la Flandre*, 3 vols., Brussels, 1907, 1908, and 1911
 Maurice Maeterlinck, *Pelléas et Melisande*, Brussels, 1920
 Paul Spaak, *Origine et développement des lettres belges*, in *Notre Pays*, II, *L'Art et la vie en Belgique (1830–1905)*, Brussels and Paris, 1921

Appendix B

Selected List of Khnopff's Works Inspired by Literature

- D'après Flaubert*, also known as *D'après Flaubert. La Tentation de Saint-Antoine*, 1883
D'après Josephin Peladan. Le Vice suprême, also known as *Le Vice suprême*, 1st version destroyed, 1885; 2nd version, 1885
De l'animalité, 1885, inspired by Josephin Peladan
A Beguiling. Et ses cheveux étaient toutes rouges de mon sang . . . George Rodenbach, 1888
Avec Verhaeren. Un ange, 1889
Avec George Rodenbach, Une ville morte, 1889
Avec Grégoire Le Roy. Mon coeur pleure d'autrefois, six versions, 1889
I Lock My Door Upon Myself, 1891, and *Who Shall Deliver Me?*, 1891, both inspired by Christina Rossetti's poem *Who Shall Deliver Me?*, first published in *The Argosy*, February 1866, 288
La Poésie de Stephane Mallarmé, also known as *La Tendresse* or *En écoutant les fleurs*, 1892
Acrasia, also known as *Acrasia (The Fairie Queen)*, ca. 1890–94 and 1897, and *Britomart*, also known as *Britomart (The Faerie Queen)*, 1892 and 1894, both inspired by Edmond Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, Bk. II, London, 1590
Sire Halwyn or *La Légende de Sire Halewyn*, two versions, ca. 1903, inspired by Charles de Coster's "Sire Halewyn," *Légendes flamandes*, Brussels, 1900
Isolde, 1905, inspired by the Tristan and Isolde legend (originally by Thomas of Britain, ca. 1185; by Gottfried von Strassburg, ca. 1210; adapted by Richard Wagner, 1857–59, the latter of which is the probable source of inspiration for Khnopff's image)
Melisande, 1907, inspired by Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Melisande*, Brussels, 1892
Illustration pour St. Jean (John 16:20), ca. 1918

⁷⁴ The first drawing for *Le Vice suprême* was destroyed before the publication of the book and the second was not printed due to technical difficulties. See Delevoy, de Croës, and Ollinger-Zinque, 160–161 and 481.

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