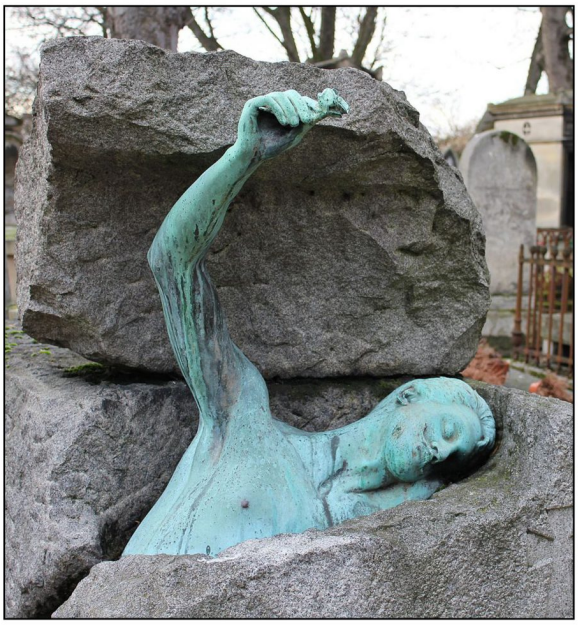
# Bruges-la-Morte

In 1892 Georges Rodenbach published a short novel entitled *Bruges-la-Morte* ("Bruges, Dead City"). Although the book deals more with internal emotions than external reality, Rodenbach included in his book 35 photographs of the city of Bruges (Flemish, *Brugge*). The city thus plays as much a part in the novel as its human characters. This was the first time that a work of fiction had been photographically illustrated.

**The Author**

Georges Raymond Constantin Rodenbach (1855–1898) was born in Tournai, Belgium. His French mother and German father soon moved to Gand (Flemish *Gand,* English *Ghent*) in the Flemish northern region of Belgium, not far from Bruges. Rodenbach studied law at the University of Ghent and practiced briefly before turning to poetry and journalism. He moved to Paris in 1888, where he married a fellow journalist, wrote for the *Figaro* and served as a correspondent for the *Journal de Bruxelles*, He became friends with the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and participated in the literary salons of the day, where he met Edmond de Goncort, Auguste Rodin, the young Marcel Proust, and Odilon Redon. As the 1894 photograph by Nadar shows, Rodenbach became quite the dandy. Bruges-la-Morte was initially serialized in the *Figaro* and then published in book form by Flammarion.



Rodenbach died in 1898 from the complications of an appendicitis. He was buried in Père-Lachaise cemetery. His monument by sculptor Charlotte Dubray (1902) is outrageously romantic. A bronze likeness of the dead poet emerges from the shattered grave holding aloft a rose. Beauty triumphs over death! Joël Goffin suggests that the tomb alludes to various occult and gnostic ideas promoted by the *Salon de la Croix+Rose* (1892-1897) established by Joséphin Péladan.

**The City**

Bruges was a major city in the medieval County of Flanders in the northern coastal plain of what is now Belgium. Connected to the North Sea by the estuary of the River Zwin, Bruges became an important trading center, closely associated with England through the wool trade, and with Scandinavia and the Baltics through the Hanseatic League, which maintained a major office (*Kontor*) in the city.

The city promoted religion as well as trade. The Church of Our Lady has one of the tallest spires in Europe. The Basilica of the Holy Blood enshrines a relic of Christ’s blood brought back from the Holy Land after the Second Crusade. The city was home to one of the larger Béguinages, communities of lay religious women. Some say that these housed women of the middle and upper classes whose fathers or husbands had died in the crusades.

Religion and trade both fostered art. Two great Flemish

painters of 15th Century, Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling, lived in Bruges. Within the Church of Our Lady is a sculpture of *The Virgin and Child* by Michelangelo, bought in 1504 by two wealthy merchants from Bruges.

Flanders changed hands several times during its golden age from the 12th to 15th centuries. At various times allegiance was paid to France, Burgundy, the Holy Roman Empire, and Spain. However, by the 16th century, the River Zwin had become too silted to allow the passage of merchant ships. Wars of religion and succession devastated the countryside and the city lapsed into obscurity.

In the late 19th century Bruges returned into the public eye as a center for tourism. Most of its medieval buildings remained intact. Most striking is the medieval bell tower on the main square with its carillon. The atmosphere of past glories evoked by the canals and cobblestones fit well to the melancholy sensitivity of the fin-de-siècle.

Bruges remains to this day a beautiful city. The following photograph (Emmanuel Parent, 2013, Flickr, cropped) shows the Spiegelrei canal looking toward the Jan van Eyck square and the Burghers' Lodge (*Poorterloge*)

**The Book**

A brief summary of the plot of *Bruges-la-Morte* follows, with occasional quotations (from the Mosley translation) to illustrate the book's poetic style.

Five years after the death of his beautiful young wife in Paris, Hugues Viane remains in mourning. He has moved to the city of Bruges, whose quiet melancholy suits his persisting sadness. He tries to remember all he can about his wife. He does little else. Every day he walks around the city:

> In the mute atmosphere of the lifeless waters and streets Hugues felt his heartache less, and he could think more calmly about his wife. In the line of the canals, he was better able to see and hear her again, to discover her

> Ophelia face floating along, to listen to her voice in the high-pitched song of the carillon. (p. 18)

In a special room in his house Hugues keeps mementos of his wife: several portraits, furniture on which she had sat, cushions that she had embroidered, curtains that she had hung. The most treasured of these objects is a plait of her golden hair, displayed in a crystal case.

On one of his walks, Hugues sees a young woman who looks exactly like his dead wife. Entranced he follows her until she enters the theater. She turns out to be Jane Scott, a dancer in the opera *Robert le Diable* (Meyerbeer, 1831). She plays the spirit of the abbess Helena who comes back to life in the graveyard of the cloister along with her nuns. Tools of the devil, they convince Robert to steal the sacred branch from the tomb of Saint Rosalie. This will give him magical but unholy powers.

Hugues meets Jane, and she soon becomes his mistress. Hugues installs her in a pleasant house on the outskirts of Bruges. The people of Bruges and Hugues' housekeeper are scandalized by this affair. However, Hugues cares not. His sadness lessens. His memories have become a person.

> When he took her head in his hands and brought it close to him it was to look into her eyes, searching them for something he had seen in others: a nuance, a reflection, pearls, even some flowers with roots in the soul. (p. 42)

After a while Jane tires of her sad and serious lover. She takes up with her old friends, though she keeps Hugues as her lover and financial support. One day she decides that she should visit his house, to assess his fortune and see what jewelry she might acquire. She cajoles him with

> that tempting voice possessed by all women at certain times, a crystal voice that sings, swells into haloes, in eddies where men surrender, whirl around and let themselves go. (p.

88)

She visits Hugues on the day of the Procession of the Holy Blood through the streets of Bruges. Hugues is enthralled by the color and the music. Jane is bored, and jests about the mementos of Hugues' wife. She pulls the golden braid out of the crystal case and plays with it, winding it around her neck like a scarf. Hugues tries to retrieve it. Jane resists. Hugues becomes incensed. He pulls the braid taut and strangles her.

> She was dead – for having failed to guess the Mystery and that one thing there was not to be touched on pain of sacrilege. She had laid a hand on the revengeful hair, that hair which, as emblem for those who soul is pure and in communion with the Mystery – implied that the minute it was profaned, it would itself become the *instrument of death.* (p. 101)

The procession returns. The bells ring.

> Hugues repeated incessantly, "*Morte… morte… Bruges-la-Morte*," with a mechanical look, in a slack voice, trying to match "*Morte… morte… Bruges-la-Morte*," to the cadence of the last bells: slow, small, exhausted old women who seemed languishingly – is it over the city, is it over a tomb? – to be shedding petals of flowers of iron. (p. 102)

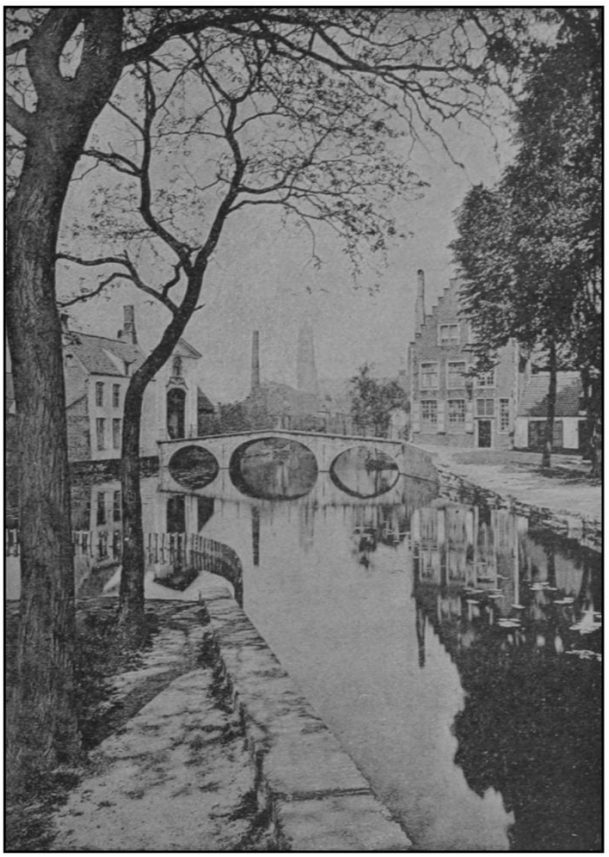
**The Photographs**

Rodenbach considered the photographs an essential part of his book. In his foreward he states that Bruges acts as a "main character, a city associated with states of mind, one that is able to advise, dissuade, induce action." Since Bruges was not simply a back-drop but a force in the action, Rodenbach thought is essential to have the city "reproduced visually within the text: the quays, deserted streets, old residences,

canals, Béguinage, churches, belfries, cult objects.”

The illustrations for *Bruges-la-Morte* were chosen from the catalogue of Lévy and Neurdein, who specialized in touristic photographs used for postcards, souvenirs and stereographs. Most of the chosen images contain no people.

The photographs are loosely associated with events occurring in the text. They show the reader with what Hugues might be seeing while the text describes what he is feeling. For Hugues, Bruges had become the incarnation of his lost love. Like his wife Bruges was once but is no more alive and beautiful.

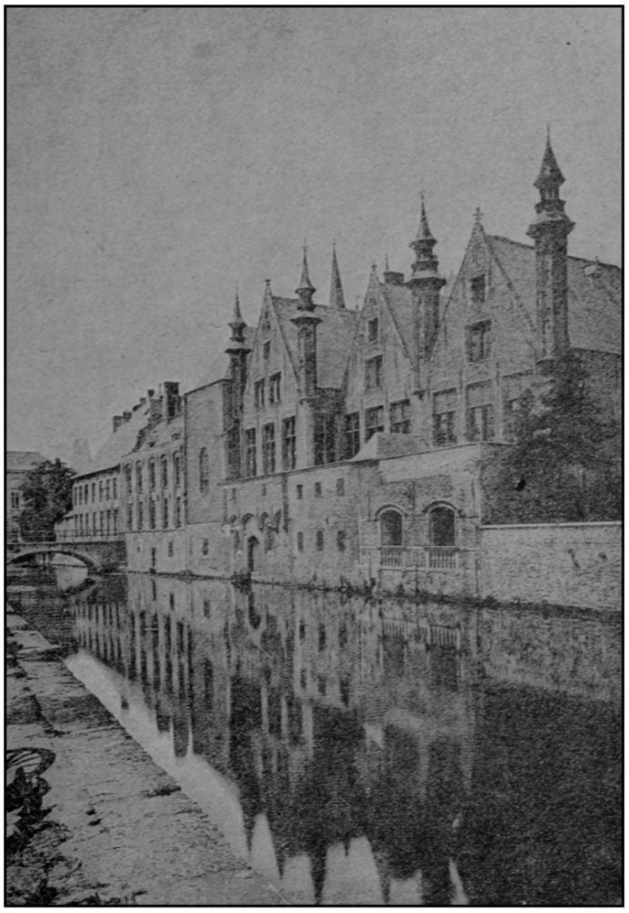


> But as evening fell, he liked to wander about, looking for resemblances of his sorrow in the lonely canals and the religious quarters of the city. (p. 18)

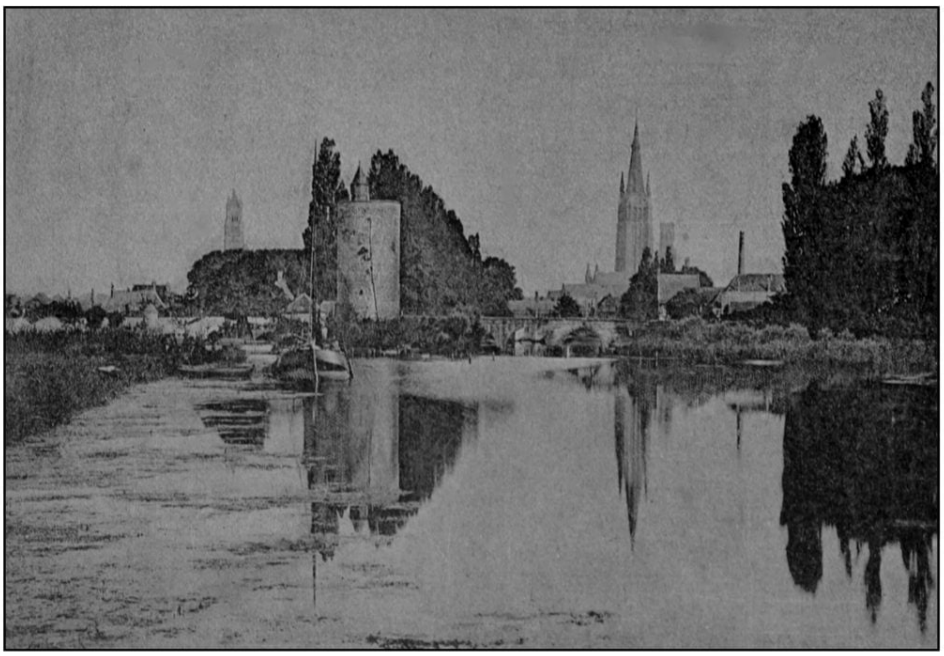
On the right is the illustration that faces the page containing this quotation. It shows the canals and the bridge leading to the entrance to the Béguinage.

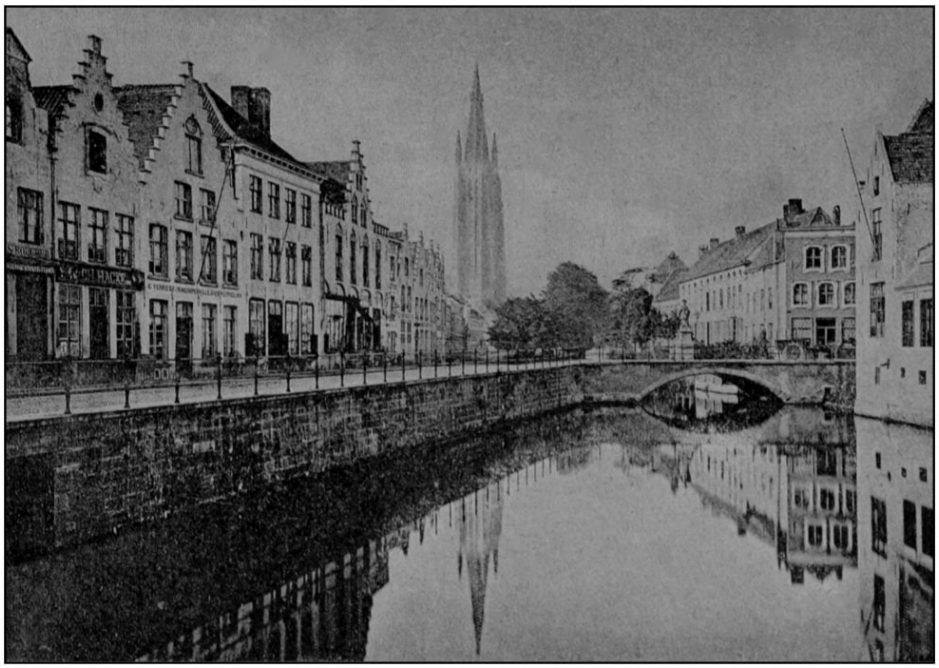
The new art of photography was a way of fixing forever the essence of a person or a place – a way of stopping time. One of the main themes of the novel is that time can neither be stopped nor reversed. The dead do not return. *Bruges-la-Morte* is a novel about memory and representation. Does Jane

represent Hugue’s lost wife or is she simply a resemblance? Photography is intimately related to memory. Old photographs are an aid to remembering the when and where of our past. Sometimes the photographs become our memories.



The canals in Bruges are a boon to the photographer. They allow the real and the reflected to be captured simultaneously. The images suggest another world in the reflection beneath the real.





The use of photographs in novels did not catch on. Readers thought that it was the writer’s responsibility to describe in words where things occurred as well as what was thought. Rodenbach himself noted in a later discussion about the concept of an illustrated novel that “even a mildly astute reader would always prefer to imagine the characters, since a book is only a point of departure, an excuse and a canvas for dreams.” (Dossier in Flammarion edition of *Bruges-la-Morte*, 1998, pp. 331-332). However, I believe he is more concerned in this comment with illustrations that depict the events and

characters in a novel rather than just its setting.

Recently, W. G. Sebald has used photographs in his books *Vertigo* (1990), *The Emigrants* (1992), *The Rings of Saturn* (1999) and *Austerlitz* (2001). Like *Bruges-la-Morte* these writings deal mainly with states of mind. The low-resolution photographs provide a setting for the emotions.

**Fernand Khnopff**

Flammarion engaged the Belgian symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) to provide an illustration for the frontispiece of *Bruges-la-Morte*. Khnopff had spent his early childhood in Bruges. His etching shows Hugues' dead wife lying upon the waters of Bruges before the bridge leading to the Béguinage.

Her pose recalls the 1852 painting of Ophelia by John Everett Millais. This fits with the text

> In the line of the canals, he was better able to see and hear her again, to discover her Ophelia face floating along, to listen to her voice in the high-pitched song of the

carillon. (p. 18)

*Secret-Reflet* (“Secret Reflection”), one of Khnopff’s later works (1902), is in the Groeningemuseum in Bruges. It combines two images. The upper circular picture shows Khnopff’s sister and muse Marguerite touching a mask of Hermes, the messenger of the gods. The lower shows a pastel drawing of the houses of Bruges reflected in the canals. This is similar to the illustrations in *Bruges-la-Morte*. The painting alludes to a secret life beyond or beneath our transient reality. The symbolists were fond of the tradition of hermeticism, deriving from the writings of the mythical Hermes Trismegistus. These brought together various strands of mysticism and Gnosticism to suggest the idea of a secret world, of which only the esthetically sensitive were aware.

**Meanings**

*Bruges-la-Morte* can be read as a simple story of how a young dancer was murdered by her lover. As such it vividly depicts the mental and emotional state of the murderer. Most importantly it shows how the atmosphere of a place – the mist, bells, reflections, loneliness, and religious processions of Bruges – can accentuate the emotions of love and grief, and allow them to change into rage.

This is a prototypical symbolist novel. Literary symbolism was a reaction against the naturalism of Balzac and the realism of Zola. Rather than dealing with the external forces that control one's life, the symbolists focused on the internal emotions and motivations that cause action. The protagonist is typically a solitary and sensitive individual, a precursor of the existential hero of the mid-20th century. And the story looks less at the events and settings and more at their effects on the mind. As Stéphane Mallarmé remarked the goal was 'to depict not the thing but the effect it produces.'

A symbol is a way of representing the invisible. It combines concealment with revelation: an idea is reproduced only through allusion, and yet this allusion increases our

understanding of the idea. The Symbolist Movement tended to spiritualism and the occult. More concerned with the ideal than with the specific, it was perhaps literature's way of replacing the religion that science and realism had defeated.

In his introduction to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899/1919), Arthur Symons concluded

> Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realized by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes ltself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual. (p. 9)

Much, then, rides below the surface in Rodenbach's novel. The story alludes to various myths that tell of the return of loved ones after death, most importantly that of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the canonical version of the myth, Orpheus succeeds in convincing the gods to release Eurydice, but then disobeys their injunction not to look back to see that she is following him out of Hades, and she vanishes. Other versions (e.g. Plato) suggest that the returning Eurydice was only an apparition.

Rodenbach's story is also related to the magical golden bough that mortals need to descend into Hades (e.g. Aeneid, Book VI, ll 171-203). Jane dances as one of the demonic nuns in *Robert le Diable* who convince the hero of that opera to take the magic branch from the tomb of the saint. The golden plait of his wife's hair that Hugues has preserved has both magical and murderous properties. It maintains the memory of his love and

acts as an instrument of death

**Die Tote Stadt**

Erich Wolfgang Korngold was impressed after reading a dramatic adaptation of *Bruges-la-Morte* that had been translated into German as *Die stille Stadt* ("Silent City") or *Der Trugbild* ("Mirage"). In 1920 he completed an operatic version of the play – *Die tote Stadt* ("Dead City"). The libretto, attributed to a fictional Paul Schott, was actually written by Korngold and his father.

The operatic story differs for that of the novel. Hugues becomes Paul (**P**) and Jane becomes Marietta (**M**). Paul's first assignation with Marietta occurs at his residence. She plays the lute and sings an old song, sounding exactly like his dead wife. The song itself is concerned with how love should persist after death. The singing becomes an ecstatic duet:

| | |
|---|---|
| **M**: Glück, das mir verblieb,<br>rück zu mir, mein treues Lieb.<br>Abend sinkt im Hag<br>bist mir Licht und Tag.<br>Bange pochet Herz an Herz<br>Hoffnung schwingt sich himmelwärts. | Joy, that near to me remains,<br>Come to me, my true love.<br>Night sinks into the grove<br>You are my light and day.<br>Anxiously beats heart on heart<br>Hope itself soars heavenward. |
| **P**: Wie wahr, ein traurig Lied. | How true, a sad song. |
| **M**: Das Lied vom treuen Lieb,<br>das sterben muss. | The song of true love,<br>that must die. |
| **P**: Ich kenne das Lied.<br>Ich hört es oft in jungen,<br>in schöneren Tagen. | I know the song.<br>I heard it often in younger,<br>in better days.<br>It has yet another verse—<br>Do I know it still? |

Es hat noch eine Strophe—
weiß ich sie noch?

**M & P**: Naht auch Sorge trüb,
rück zu mir, mein treues Lieb.
Neig dein blaß Gesicht
Sterben trennt uns nicht.
Mußt du einmal von mir gehn,
glaub, es gibt ein Auferstehn

Though sorrow becomes dark,
Come to me, my true love.
Lean (to me) your pale face
Death will not separate us.
If you must leave me one day,
Believe, there is an afterlife.

Paul falls passionately in love with Marietta. The rest of the story – the loss of love, the desecration of the golden plait, and Marietta's ultimate murder – follow in a similar fashion to the novel. However, in the opera these events turn out to be a dream rather than reality, and Paul awakens to find that Marietta is still alive. His dream finally reconciles him to the death of his wife. He sings a new verse to the lute song, bidding her farewell until they meet again – not in this world but in the afterlife.

Harre mein in lichten Höhn –
hier gibt es kein Auferstehn

Wait for me in heaven's plain –
here we shall not meet again.

The opera conveys the intense emotions of the original. However, the addition of music attenuates the sadness, and makes the story far more sensuous.

The following is a 1924 version of the duet *Glück das mir verblieb* with Richard Tauber and Lotte Lehman.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Lotte-Lehmann-Richard-Tauber-George-Szell-Gluck-das-mir-verblieb.mp3

The duet is often sung as a solo concert aria. The following is a 1994 version by Anne Sofie von Otter with the

accompaniment adapted for piano quintet.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Mariettas-Lied-a-s-von-otter-forsberg-piano-quintet.mp3

**Aria**

In 1987, Don Boyd asked ten different directors to produce short films based on famous opera arias. These were put together to make the feature film *Aria*. Bruce Beresford visualized *Glück das mir verblieb* as an intensely erotic engagement between two young lovers (Elizabeth Hurley and Peter Birch) in the city of Bruges. The soundtrack is from the first recording (1975) of the full opera with Carol Neblett and René Kollo. Enjoy!

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ARIA_Die-Tote-Stadt.mp4

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The 1913 edition is available on archive.org

and also at Archives et Musée de la Littérature.

The 1998 Flammarion version reproduces the original text and photographs and contains extensive notes by J.-P. Bertrand and D. Grojnowski.

The illustrations are reproduced in Wikipedia Commons

My quotations are to the English translation by Philip Mosley, originally published in 1986, and reprinted in 2007 by University of Scranton Press. This has no photographs. Another English translation by Will Stone and Mike Mitchell, published by Dedalus Press in 2009, includes a series of photographs of present-day Bruges. Since the original illustrations were an essential part of the book, this seems inappropriate.

***Bruges-la-Morte* Website**

Joël Goffin runs an impressive website *Bruges-la-Morte,* which is packed with information about the book and its author, and which presents his own book (2017) about the novel: *Le Secret de Bruges-la-Morte*.

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