

## PROLOGUE

Judging by the few portraits that have been preserved in the Château de Lourps,\* the line of the Floressas des Esseintes consisted, in bygone days, of muscular warriors and grim-looking mercenaries. Cramped and confined within those old frames where their great shoulders stretched across from side to side, they startled you with their staring eyes, their handlebar moustaches, and their swelling chests that curved outward to fit the enormous shell of the breast-plate.

Those were the ancestors: the portraits of their descendants were missing; a gap existed in the series of faces of that family line; one canvas only served as intermediary, providing a link between past and present, an inscrutable, wily face, its features lifeless and drawn, with cheekbones accentuated by a dash of rouge, thickly pomaded hair intertwined with pearls, and a taut, white-painted neck emerging from the goffers of a highly starched ruff.

In this painting of one of the closest friends of the Duc d'Épernon and the Marquis d'O,\* the defects of a debilitated constitution and the excess of lymph in the blood were already apparent.

It was obvious that the decline of this ancient house had followed an inevitable course; the males had grown progressively more effeminate; as if to perfect the work of time, for two centuries the Des Esseintes intermarried their children, thus exhausting, through inbreeding, what little strength they yet possessed.

Of this family, which had once been so numerous that it occupied almost all the lands of the Île-de-France and the Brie, there now remained but one solitary descendant, the Duc Jean, a frail young man of thirty, nervous and anaemic, with hollow cheeks and cold, steel-blue eyes, a straight nose with flaring nostrils, and dry, slender hands.

By an odd atavistic coincidence, the last descendant resembled his early forebear the court favourite, for he had the same extraordinarily pale blond pointed beard, and the same cryptic expression, at once weary and cunning.

His had been a dismal childhood. Susceptible to scrofula and burdened by persistent fevers, he nevertheless succeeded, thanks to fresh

air and careful nursing, in safely weathering the rough waters of puberty, and then his nervous system regained control, checking the languour and apathy of chlorosis and bringing to full completion the process of maturation.

The mother, a tall woman, silent and wan, died of extreme debility; then the father, in his turn, succumbed to some indeterminate malady; this occurred when Des Esseintes was almost seventeen.

The only memory of his parents that he retained was one of fear; he knew no feeling of gratitude or of affection. His father, who as a rule resided in Paris, he scarcely knew; his mother he remembered as lying motionless in a dark room in the Château de Lourps. Only rarely did husband and wife meet, and of those occasions he recalled lacklustre encounters, with the father and the mother seated opposite one another before a table lit only by a lamp with a large, very deep shade, because bright lights and noise brought on the attacks of nerves to which the Duchess was subject; they would exchange barely a couple of words in the semi-darkness, then the Duke would coldly take his leave, and hurry to catch the first available train.

At the Jesuit College where Jean was sent to be educated, he found life kinder and sweeter. The Fathers pampered this child whose intelligence amazed them; but, despite their efforts, they could not make him settle down to any systematic programme of study; he did well at certain subjects, excelling at Latin while still very young, but he was, by contrast, quite unable to construe two words of Greek, he revealed no aptitude for modern languages, and seemed irremediably obtuse the moment they tried to teach him the basic principles of science.

His family hardly paid him any attention; sometimes his father would visit him at his boarding school: 'Hallo, goodbye, be a good boy, work hard.' He spent the summer holidays at the Château de Lourps; his presence did not disturb his mother's reveries; she seemed barely conscious of his presence, or else might watch him for a few seconds with an almost painful smile on her face, then disappear once again into the artificial night with which the thick case-moment curtains shrouded the room.

The servants were tedious and old. The child, left to his own devices, rummaged about among the books on rainy days; on fine afternoons he wandered round the countryside. What he really delighted in was to go down to the little valley and head for Jutigny,

a village which lay at the foot of the hills, a tiny huddle of cottages whose thatched caps were speckled with tufts of houseleek, and patches of moss. He would lie in a meadow, in the shade of the tall haystacks, listening to the muffled sound of the watermills and breathing in the cool air of the Voulzie.\* Sometimes he would go as far as the peat-bogs and the green, dark hamlet of Longueville, or he might climb up the wind-swept hillsides from where the view was immense. There, below him on one side, he could see the valley of the Seine, receding as far as the eye could reach and merging with the blue of the confining distance; on the other side, high up on the horizon, the churches and tower of Provins seemed to tremble in the powdery gold of the sun-filled air.

Reading or dreaming, he would soak himself in solitude until nightfall; by dint of always mulling over the same thoughts his mind became more concentrated and his as yet indeterminate ideas matured. After every holiday he went back to his teachers more thoughtful and more stubborn; these changes did not escape them; perspicacious and astute, trained by their calling to probe the deepest levels of the soul, they were not taken in by this lively but intractable intelligence; they realized that this pupil would never enhance the glory of their school, and since his family was rich and appeared indifferent to his future, they immediately gave up their attempts to steer him towards the colleges that prepare students for lucrative professional careers; and although he would readily debate with them any theological doctrine that interested him by its subtlety and fine distinctions, they did not even consider encouraging him to enter their Order, because despite their efforts his faith remained weak; in the last resort, out of prudence and fear of the unknown, they allowed him to study those subjects that appealed to him and to ignore the others, not wishing to alienate this independent spirit by subjecting him to the nagging demands of lay assistant-instructors.

In this manner he lived perfectly happily, hardly conscious of the fatherly yoke of the priests; he continued his studies in Latin and French, in his own fashion, and although theology did not figure in his curriculum, he completed the grounding in this science which he had begun at the Château de Lourps, in the library left by his great-great-uncle Dom Prosper, a former Prior of the Canons Regular of Saint-Ruf.\*

The day dawned, however, when he had to leave the Jesuit college; he was about to come of age and acquire control of his fortune; his cousin and guardian the Comte de Montchevrel gave him a reckoning of his stewardship. The relationship between these two was of short duration, for there could be no point of contact between them, one being old, the other young. Out of curiosity, and idleness, and politeness, Des Esseintes did visit the Count's family, and on several occasions sat through grimly boring evenings in their mansion in the Rue de la Chaise,\* while relatives of his, women older than time, conversed about quarterings, and heraldic crescents, and obsolete ceremonial.

Even more so than these dowagers, the men who gathered round the whist table revealed themselves as fossilized nonentities; these descendants of valiant knights of yore, these scions of feudal families seemed to Des Esseintes's eyes a group of asthmatic, finicky old men, endlessly repeating the same pointless remarks, the same age-old phrases. As happens in the snapped-off stem of a fern, a fleur-de-lis seemed the only thing imprinted in the decaying pulp of those ancient brain-pans.

The young man was filled with inexpressible pity for those mummies buried in their elaborately panelled Pompadour-style hypogea, for those morose sluggards who lived with their gaze permanently fixed on a nebulous Canaan, an imaginary Palestine.

After several visits to those circles he decided, invitations and reproaches notwithstanding, never again to set foot there. He then began to consort with young men of his own age and his own class. Some, who like him had attended Catholic boarding schools, still bore the special stamp of that education. They went to church, took communion at Easter, frequented Catholic clubs, and, avoiding one another's eyes, kept their encounters with prostitutes as secret from each other as if they had committed a crime. They were, for the most part, obtuse, obsequious dandies, successful dunces who had tried the patience of their teachers but had, nevertheless, fulfilled the latter's aim of peopling society with submissive believers.

Others, educated in the state colleges or at lycées, were less hypocritical and more free and easy, but they were neither more interesting nor less narrow in their views. These men were libertines, devotees of musical comedy and of horse-racing, who played lansquenet and baccarat, and bet fortunes on horses, on cards, on every

diversion dear to the empty-headed. After a year's trial of these companions, Des Esseintes was filled with an immense weariness by their excesses, which struck him as petty and facile, pursued with no discrimination, with no feverish involvement, with no genuine, intense excitement of blood and nerves.

Little by little he dissociated himself from them, and sought the company of men of letters with whom his mind would surely find more common ground and feel more at ease. This was yet another delusion: he was revolted by their spiteful, mean-spirited opinions, by their conversation which was as trite as a weekday sermon, by their sickening discussions which measured the value of a work by the number of editions and the profit on the sales. Meanwhile he also observed the free-thinkers, the doctrinaires of the bourgeoisie, people who claimed the right to every freedom in order to stifle the opinions of others, rapacious and insolent puritans whose breeding he considered inferior to that of the neighbourhood bootmaker.

His contempt for humanity increased: at length he realized that, for the most part, the world is made up of scoundrels and half-wits. There was absolutely no hope of his finding, in another person, the same yearnings and aversions that he felt, no hope of his joining forces with another intellect which would take pleasure, as he did, in a life of studious ineffectiveness, no hope of associating a sensitive, devious mind such as his with that of a writer or a man of letters.

In a state of irritable unease, filled with indignation by the triviality of the ideas he heard exchanged and accepted, he became like those people described by Nicole,\* who hurt all over; he began incessantly excoriating his too-thin skin, he began to suffer from the jingoistic and social nonsense asseverated each morning in the newspapers, and to exaggerate, in his own mind, the extent of the success that an all-powerful public invariably and inevitably accords works written without either ideas or style. Already he was dreaming of a peaceful, civilized retreat, a comfortable desert, a snug, immovable ark where he could take refuge, far from the incessant deluge of human folly.

One passion only, the passion for women, might have restrained him in this universal contempt that was gnawing at him, but that passion too was spent. He had tasted the feasts of the flesh, with the appetite of a capricious man who suffers from malacia, who is beset by pangs of desire yet whose palate rapidly grows dull and surfeited;

in the days when he consorted with so-called country gentlemen, he had attended those long-drawn-out suppers where, at the dessert stage, drunken women unhook their gowns and bang their heads on the table; he had also frequented theatrical dressing-rooms, sampled actresses and singers, and had to endure, over and above the innate stupidity of woman, the frenzied vanity of third-rate performers; then he had kept women who were already celebrated whores, contributing to the prosperity of those agencies which provide questionable pleasures in exchange for money; in the end, sated and weary of this unvarying profusion, of these identical caresses, he had plunged down in among the dregs of society, hoping to revive his desires by contrast, and thinking to arouse his dormant senses with the provocative squalor of extreme poverty.

No matter what he tried, he was oppressed by an overpowering sense of ennui. He grew desperate, and resorted to the dangerous caresses of virtuoso professionals, but then his health began to fail and his nervous system became hypersensitive; the nape of his neck was already painful to the touch and he could not keep his hand still: if he grasped a heavy object he could hold it straight, but if he held something light such as a small glass, his hand jerked limply about.

The doctors he consulted frightened him. It was time to call a halt to this life-style, to give up these practices which were exhausting his vitality. For a while he lived quietly, but before long inflammation of the cerebellum set in and once again goaded him to action. In the same way that pubescent girls hanker after tainted or revolting food, he began to dream of, then to indulge in, bizarre sexual practices and deviant pleasures; this marked the end; as though satisfied at having exhausted every possibility, as though worn out with the strain, his senses were overpowered by inertia, and impotence was close at hand.

When his sanity returned, he found himself alone, sober, abominably tired, craving an end that the cowardice of his body prevented his attaining. His idea of hiding himself away, far from the world, of burrowing down into some nest, of muffling the never-ending racket of relentless existence in the way straw muffles the street-noises outside the homes of the sick, grew more intense.

In any case it was now time to take action: the reckoning he made of his assets appalled him: he had consumed the greater part of his

inheritance in wild and extravagant living and the remainder, which was invested in property, brought in only derisory returns.

He decided to sell the Château de Lourps, which he no longer ever visited, and which for him held no tender memories, no sense of loss; he also liquidated his other assets and bought government stocks and bonds; in this manner he provided himself with an annual income of fifty thousand francs, and he also put aside a lump sum with which to buy and furnish the small house where he planned to steep himself in eternal quietude.

He ransacked the outskirts of the capital and found a small property for sale above Fontenay-aux-Roses,\* in an out-of-the-way spot, with no neighbours, near the fort; his dream was fulfilled: in that neighbourhood, which was relatively free from the depredations of the Parisians, he was certain of being safe: the difficulty and unreliability of communications, which depended on an absurd train service from the other end of the town, and on little trams that seemed to determine their own routes and times of departure, reassured him. Picturing this new life he hoped to establish filled him with a joy that was all the greater, because he saw himself as cast away on the shore at a sufficient distance for the tide of Paris to no longer reach him, yet still close enough to the capital to ensure his solitude. And, indeed, since it only has to be impossible to get to a particular place, for one instantly to feel the urge to go there, there was a good chance that, by not cutting himself off irrevocably, he would not be tormented by any return of a need for society, by any regrets.

He set masons to work on the house he had acquired, and suddenly, one day, without telling anyone of his plans, sold off his old furniture, dismissed his servants, and disappeared, leaving no address with the concierge.

More than two months elapsed before Des Esseintes was able to immerse himself in the silent tranquillity of his house at Fontenay; purchases of every kind still kept him roaming the Paris streets and scouring the city from end to end.

And yet how thorough had been the researches he had undertaken, how deeply had he reflected, before entrusting his home to the decorators!

He had long been expert at distinguishing between genuine and deceptive shades of colour. In the past, in the days when he received women in his apartments, he had designed a bedroom where, amid the small pieces of furniture carved in pale Japanese camphor wood, beneath a sort of canopy of pink Indian satin, women's bodies took on a soft blush under the artfully prepared lighting that filtered through the fabric.

This bedroom, where mirrors mirrored one another and reflected an infinite series of pink boudoirs on the walls, had been celebrated among the prostitutes, who loved to soak their nakedness in this bath of rosy warmth, perfumed by the minty aroma coming from the wood of the furniture.

But, even aside from the benefits of that artificial atmosphere, which seemed to transfuse fresh blood into complexions faded and worn from constant use of makeup and from misspent nights, he felt, in that languorous environment, special pleasures on his own account, pleasures made keener and in a sense energized by memories of past afflictions, of vanished troubles.

Thus, out of loathing and contempt for his childhood, he had hung from the ceiling of this room a little cage of silver wire, in which a captive cricket sang, just as crickets had sung among the cinders on the hearths of the Château de Lourps; listening to that song he had heard so often, all the constrained, silent evenings he had spent with his mother, all the neglect he had experienced during his sickly, repressed youth surged up within him, and then, aware of the paroxysms of the woman he was mechanically caressing, whose words or laughter broke into his vision and brought him abruptly back to reality, to the bedroom, to earth, his soul would be filled with

turmoil, with a need for revenge for the miseries he had endured, with a fierce urge to defile the family mementoes, with a furious desire to lie, panting, upon cushions of human flesh, to explore to the last drop the fiercest and the bitterest of carnal excesses.

And there were other times when he was gripped by an irritable moroseness, when, on rainy autumn days, he would be filled with abhorrence for the streets, for his own home, for the muddy yellow sky, for the dirty grey clouds, and he would seek refuge in this retreat, gently shaking the cage and watching the infinite play of its reflections in the mirror, until his intoxicated eyes noticed that the cage was not moving at all, but that the entire bedroom was swinging and gyrating, filling the house with a rose-coloured waltz.

And then, during that period when Des Esseintes had felt the need to draw attention to himself, he had devised sumptuous, peculiar schemes of decoration, dividing his salon into a series of variously carpeted alcoves, which could be related by subtle analogies, by indeterminate correlations of tone, either cheerful or gloomy, delicate or flamboyant, to the character of the Latin or French works he loved. He would then settle himself in that alcove whose furnishings seemed to him to correspond most closely to the essential nature of the work which the whim of the moment induced him to read.

Lastly, he had had a high-ceilinged room prepared for the reception of his tradesmen; they would enter and seat themselves side by side in church stalls, and then he would climb up into an imposing pulpit and preach to them on dandyism,\* exhorting his bootmakers and tailors to comply in the most scrupulous manner with his briefs on the cut of his garments, and threatening them with pecuniary excommunication if they did not follow to the letter the instructions contained in his monitories and his bulls.

He acquired a reputation for eccentricity, to which he gave the crowning touch by dressing in suits of white velvet and gold-embroidered waistcoats, with, in place of a cravat, a bunch of Parma violets set low in the open neck of the shirt. He used also to host dinners for writers which caused quite a stir, one in particular, a copy of an eighteenth-century feast when, to celebrate the most trifling of misadventures, he organized a funerary collation.

The black-draped dining-room where he gave this dinner opened on to the garden, which had been transformed overnight, its paths sprinkled with charcoal, its little pond now rimmed with basalt and



filled with ink, its shrubbery planted with cypresses and pines. The meal was served on a black tablecloth decorated with baskets of scabias and violets, and lit by green-flaming candelabras and by chandeliers in which wax tapers burned. While a concealed orchestra played funeral marches, the guests were waited on by naked black women, wearing stockings and slippers of silver cloth sprinkled with tears.

From black-rimmed plates they ate turtle soup, Russian rye bread, ripe Turkish olives, caviar, salted mullet roe, smoked Frankfurt black puddings, game in gravies the colour of liquorice and boot-blackening, truffled sauces, chocolate caramel creams, plum puddings, nectarines, preserved fruits, mulberries, and heart-cherries; from dark-coloured glasses they drank the wines of Limagne and Rousillon, of Tenedos, Val de Peñas, and Oporto, and, after the coffee and the walnut cordial, they enjoyed kvass, porters, and stouts. The invitations to this dinner to mark the temporary demise of the host's virility\* were written out in a form similar to that used to announce a funeral.

But these extravagances in which he had once taken such pride had burnt themselves out; now he was filled with contempt for those childish, outmoded displays, for that eccentric clothing, for that bizarre ornamentation of his apartments. Now he simply wanted to arrange, for his own enjoyment rather than for the amazement of others, a domestic interior that was comfortable yet appointed in an exceptional manner, to fashion for himself a unique and tranquil setting suited to the requirements of his future solitude.

When the Fontenay house was ready, and the alterations had been carried out by an architect in accordance with his plans and wishes, when all that remained was to decide on details of the furniture and décor, he again, and at considerable length, examined the whole range of colours and their gradations.

What he sought were colours that increased in intensity by lamp-light; little did he care if they appeared insipid or harsh by daylight, for it was at night that he really lived, believing that you were more completely at home, more truly alone, that the mind was only aroused and kindled into life as darkness drew near; he found too that there was a particular pleasure in being in a well-lit room, in being the only person up and about amid the shadowy, sleeping houses, a kind of pleasure which perhaps included a touch of vanity,

a most unusual kind of satisfaction, like that experienced by people working late at night when, drawing aside the window curtains, they realize that round about them everything is dark, everything is silent, everything is dead.

Slowly, one by one, he sorted through the shades of colour. By candlelight, blue is almost an artificial green; a dark shade of blue, like cobalt or indigo, turns black; a pale shade turns grey; a true and gentle blue, like turquoise, looks faded and lifeless. So unless it was coupled with another colour, as a helper, blue could not possibly be used as the predominant shade in a room. On the other hand, iron greys grow still gloomier and heavier; pearl greys lose their azure tints and mutate into a dirty white; browns turn lethargic and cold; as for dark greens, such as emperor green and myrtle green, they behave like bright blues and merge into shades of black; that left the paler greens, like peacock green, the vermilions, and the reddish-brown laquers, but light washes out their blue tones, leaving behind only the yellow ones, which themselves then appear spurious and murky.

Tints of salmon, maize, and rose were also out of the question, for their effeminizing character would interfere with thoughts inspired by solitude; nor, lastly, could violets be considered, since they lose their colour; only red survives at night, and what a red! A viscous, winy, vulgar red; in any case he thought it quite pointless to make use of this colour, since by ingesting *santonin*\* in the appropriate dosage, everything looks violet and it is then easy to change the hue of one's wall hangings without so much as touching them.

When these colours were set aside, only three remained: red, orange, and yellow. The colour he preferred to all others was orange, thus confirming by his own example the truth of a theory which he asserted was almost mathematically exact: to wit, that there exists a harmony between the sensual nature of a truly artistic individual, and the colour that his eyes perceive as most significant and most vivid.

If, in fact, you disregard the majority of ordinary mortals whose coarse retinas can discern neither the peculiar cadence of each colour nor the mysterious charms of their gradations and their subtleties; if you also ignore those bourgeois eyes which are insensible to the ceremonial and triumph of strong, vibrant colours; if you then consider none but those whose discriminating vision has been refined

through contact with literature and art, he was convinced that the eye of that individual who dreams of ideal beauty, who craves illusions, who seeks some mystery in his women, is as a rule attracted to blue and its derivatives—mauve, lilac, and pearl grey—always provided these remain soft in tone, and do not cross that boundary where they lose their identity and are transformed into pure violets and forthright greys.

By contrast, those men who affect the military style, who are full-blooded, handsome, and brash, who scorn society's restraints, fling themselves into things, and promptly lose their heads, those men, for the most part, take pleasure in the dazzling brightness of yellows and reds, in the blinding, intoxicating clang of bright reds and chrome-yellows.

Lastly we have those weak and nervous people whose sensual appetite demands foods enhanced by smoking and pickling, and those with over-stimulated or consumptive constitutions; their eyes, almost without exception, are drawn to that irritating, morbid colour, with its deceptive splendours, its febrile sourness: orange.\*

Des Esseintes's choice, therefore, did not admit of the smallest doubt; but very real difficulties still remained. If red and yellow are made more glorious by candle-light, the same is not always true of their compound, orange, which can flare up angrily, often turning a fiery nasturtium red.

He studied all its nuances by candle-light, and discovered one shade which he felt would not lose its stability and disappoint his expectations; when these preliminaries were completed, he decided, at least as far as his own study was concerned, to try to avoid Oriental fabrics and carpets, which, now that wealthy businessmen can buy them at a discount in the latest department stores, have become so boring and so commonplace.

In the end he decided to have his walls bound like books, in heavy smooth Morocco leather, using skins from the Cape glazed by huge plaques of steel under a powerful press.

Once the panelling had been decorated, he had the mouldings and the tall skirting-boards painted with a dark indigo blue enamel, similar to that used by coach-builders on the panels of carriages; the slightly domed ceiling, also covered in Morocco leather, displayed, like a vast sky-light framed in its orange mounting, a circle of sky of royal blue silk, in whose centre silver seraphims—embroidered long

ago, for an ancient cope, by the Weavers' Guild of Cologne\*—winged their way swiftly upward.

When all this was in place, the entire effect, at night, blended together, becoming tempered and settled; the blues of the panelling, now stabilized, were sustained and as though warmed by the oranges, while these in their turn maintained their integrity, being supported and, in a sense, enlivened by the compelling proximity of the blues.\*

As for the furniture, Des Esseintes did not have to undertake any lengthy researches, inasmuch as books and rare flowers were to be that room's only luxury; later he planned to decorate the still-bare panelling with a few drawings or paintings, but for now he contented himself with installing shelving and bookcases of ebony on most of the walls; he scattered wild-animal skins and blue fox pelts on the parquet and, alongside a massive fifteenth-century money-changer's table, he placed some deep, winged armchairs, and an old wrought-iron stand taken from a chapel, one of those antique lecterns on which, in the past, the deacon placed the Antiphonary, and which now held one of the weighty in-folios of the *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* of Du Cange.\*

The casement windows, whose bluish, crackled panes, studded with the bulging, gold-flecked irregularities of bottle glass, cut off the view of the countryside and allowed only a deceptive light to penetrate, were in their turn hung with draperies made out of antique stoles, whose darkened, smoky gold threadwork was quenched by the almost lifeless russet of the weave.

Lastly, upon the mantelpiece which was likewise draped in fabric cut from the sumptuous folds of a Florentine dalmatic, between two gilded copper Byzantine ostensories which came from the former Abbaye-au-Bois of Bièvre,\* stood a marvellous ecclesiastical canon with three separate compartments, as intricately fashioned as a piece of lace, containing, beneath the glass of its frame, three works by Baudelaire, copied on genuine vellum in exquisite lettering like that of a missal and splendidly illuminated: to left and right the sonnets on 'La Mort des amants' and 'L'Ennemi',\* and in the centre the prose poem with the English title: 'Anywhere out of the World.'\*

After the sale of his possessions, Des Esseintes kept on the two old servants who had looked after his mother and between them had served as steward and concierge of the Château de Lourps, which remained untenanted and empty until it was put up for auction.

This couple he brought to Fontenay; they were accustomed to caring for the sick, to the regular, hourly dispensing of doses of draughts and tisanes, to the unvarying silence of the cloistered monk who lives without communication to the outside world, in apartments where the windows and doors are kept permanently closed.

The husband was responsible for cleaning the rooms and buying food, the wife did the cooking. He let them have the first floor of the house, made them wear thick felt slippers, ordered double doors installed with well-oiled hinges, and thick carpeting to pad their floors so that he would never hear the sound of their footsteps overhead.

He came to an understanding with them as to the meaning of different rings on the bell, depending on how many peals and whether they were short or long; he indicated, on his desk, the spot where each month they were to place the household account book while he was asleep; in fact he so arranged matters that he would not often have to speak to them or see them.

Nevertheless, as the wife had sometimes to walk round the side of the house to reach a shed where the wood was stored, he wanted her silhouette, as she passed his windows, not to seem inimical, and he had made for her a costume of Flemish faille, with a white cap and a large black cowl pulled down over it, such as the lay sisters of the *Béguinages* still wear today in Ghent.\* The outline of this head-dress slipping past him in the dusk gave him the feeling of being in a convent, reminding him of those silent, God-fearing communities, those dead neighbourhoods shut away and buried in a corner of a busy and lively town.

He also established unvarying times for his meals; these were in any case uncomplicated and quite frugal, the weakness of his digestion no longer permitting him to assimilate elaborate or rich dishes.

At five o'clock, in the winter, after night had fallen, he breakfasted

lightly on two boiled eggs, toast, and tea; then he dined at about eleven o'clock; drank coffee, sometimes tea and wine, during the night; and finally picked at a bit of supper towards five in the morning, before going to bed. He ate these meals, the times and the menus of which were definitively fixed at the start of each season, on a table in the centre of a small room which was separated from his study by a passage-way that was hermetically sealed and also padded, allowing neither odours nor sounds to penetrate the two rooms it served to connect.

This dining-room resembled a ship's cabin with its vaulted ceiling, its semicircular beams, its bulkheads and floorboards of pitch-pine, its tiny casement cut into the panelling like a porthole. Like those Japanese boxes which fit one inside the other, this room was inserted into another, larger room, the actual dining-room built by the architect.

The latter had two windows; one was now invisible, concealed by the bulkhead which could, however, be slid aside at will by pressing on a spring, in order to renew the air which, entering through this opening, could then circulate around the pitch-pine box and penetrate within it; the other, directly opposite the porthole in the panelling, was visible but no longer served as a real window; in fact, a large aquarium filled all the space between the porthole and the genuine window, housed in the actual wall. Thus, in order to light the cabin, the daylight had to pass, first, through the window, where the panes had been replaced by a sheet of plate glass, then through the water, and finally through the permanent glass pane of the porthole.

In autumn, at the moment when the samovar stood steaming on the table and the sun had nearly set, the water in the aquarium, which during the morning hours had looked vitreous and cloudy, turned red, dappling the golden panelling with the glowing radiance of blazing embers.

Sometimes of an afternoon, when Des Esseintes happened to be up and about, he would set in operation the various pipes and ducts that permitted the aquarium to be emptied and refilled with clean water, and then pour in some drops of coloured essences, thus creating for himself, at his own pleasure, the various shades displayed by real rivers, green or greyish, opaline or silvery, depending on the colour of the sky, the greater or lesser intensity of the sun, the



more or less imminent threat of rain, depending, in a word, on the stage of the season and the state of the atmosphere. He would then imagine he was between-decks in a brig, and would watch with great interest as marvellous mechanical fish, driven by clockwork, swam past the porthole window and became entangled in imitation seaweed; or, while inhaling the smell of tar which had been pumped into the room before he came in, he would examine some coloured engravings hanging on the walls that depicted—like those in the agencies for steamship lines and for Lloyd's—vessels bound for Valparaiso and the River Plate, and framed notices listing the itineraries of the Royal Mail packet steamers, the Lopez and Valéry Companies,\* and the freight charges and ports of call of the Atlantic mail-boats.

Then, when he tired of consulting these timetables, he would rest his eyes by contemplating the chronometers and compasses, sextants and dividers, binoculars and maps that were scattered over a table upon which was displayed only one book, bound in sealskin, *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*,\* printed specially for him on pure linen-laid paper, selected by hand, bearing a seagull as its watermark. Finally, he could examine a heap of fishing rods, nets browned with tannin, rolled up russet-coloured sails, and a tiny anchor made of cork and painted black, piled up near the door that communicated with the kitchen via a passage with padded walls which, like the corridor between the dining-room and study, absorbed every odour and every sound.

In this manner, without ever leaving his home, he was able to enjoy the rapidly succeeding, indeed almost simultaneous, sensations of a long voyage; the pleasure of travel—existing as it largely does only in recollection and almost never in the present, at the actual moment when it is taking place—this pleasure he could savour fully, at his ease, without fatigue or worry, in this cabin whose contrived disorder, whose transient character and as it were temporary furnishings corresponded almost exactly with his brief sojourns in it, with the limited time spent on his meals, and which provided a complete contrast with his study, a permanent, orderly, well-established room, fitted out for the solid sustainment of a domestic existence.

Besides, he considered travel to be pointless, believing that the imagination could easily compensate for the vulgar reality of actual experience. In his view, it was possible to fulfil those desires reputed

to be the most difficult to satisfy in normal life, by means of a trifling subterfuge, an approximate simulation of the object of those very desires. Thus, nowadays it is widely known that, in restaurants celebrated for the excellence of their cellars, gourmets enjoy drinking fine vintages made out of inferior wines which have been treated by the method of M. Pasteur.\* Now, whether genuine or fake, these wines have the same aroma, the same colour, the same bouquet, so therefore the enjoyment experienced in tasting these adulterated imitations is absolutely identical with the pleasure one would take in savouring the pure, natural wine which is unobtainable today, even at an astronomical price.

By applying this devious kind of sophistry, this adroit duplicity, to the world of the intellect, there is no doubt that you can enjoy, just as easily as in the physical world, imaginary pleasures in every respect similar to the real ones; no doubt, for example, that you can embark on long explorations by your own fireside, stimulating, if need be, a reluctant or lethargic mind by reading a suggestive account of distant travels; nor is there any doubt that you can—without stirring from Paris—obtain the beneficial sensations of sea-bathing; you would simply have to go to the Vigier baths which are located on a boat in the middle of the Seine.\*

There, by salting your bathwater and mixing into it, according to the formula given in the *Pharmacopœia*, sodium sulphate, hydrochlorate of magnesium, and lime; by taking from a tightly closed, screw-topped box, a ball of twine or a tiny piece of rope specially purchased in one of those huge ship's chandlers whose enormous warehouses and basements reek of sea-tides and sea-ports; by sniffing those fragrances which will still cling to the twine or piece of rope; by perusing a really good photograph of the casino and zealously studying, in the *Guide Joanne*,\* a description of the beauties of the seaside resort where you would like to be; by letting yourself be rocked in your bath-tub by the waves made by the *bateaux-mouches*\* as they pass close beside the pontoon; finally, by listening to the moaning of the wind gusting under the arches of the bridge, and the rumbling of the omnibuses as they cross the Pont Royal just a few feet above you, the illusion of being near the sea is undeniable, overpowering, absolute.

The secret is to know how to go about it, to know how to concentrate the mind on one single detail, to know how to dissociate

oneself sufficiently to produce the hallucination and thus substitute the vision of reality for reality itself. Des Esseintes considered, furthermore, that artifice was the distinguishing characteristic of human genius. As he was wont to remark, Nature has had her day; she has finally exhausted, through the nauseating uniformity of her landscapes and her skies, the sedulous patience of men of refined taste. Essentially, what triteness Nature displays, like a specialist who confines himself to his own single sphere; what small-mindedness, like a shopkeeper who stocks only this one article to the exclusion of any other; what monotony she exhibits with her stores of meadows and trees, what banality with her arrangements of mountains and seas!

Moreover, there is not one single invention of hers, however subtle or impressive it may be thought to be, that the human spirit cannot create; no forest of Fontainebleau or moonlit scene that cannot be produced with a floodlit stage set; no waterfall that hydraulics cannot imitate so perfectly as to be indistinguishable from the original; no rock that papier-mâché cannot copy; no flower that specious taffetas and delicately painted papers cannot rival! There is no doubt whatever that this eternally self-replicating old fool has now exhausted the good-natured admiration of all true artists, and the moment has come to replace her, as far as that can be achieved, with artifice.

And then, if one carefully considers that work of Nature's generally deemed to be her most exquisite, that creation of hers whose beauty is, everyone agrees, the most original and the most perfect, namely woman: has not man, for his part, made, entirely on his own, an animate yet artificial being that is, from the point of view of plastic beauty, fully her equal? Does there, in this world, exist a being conceived in the joys of fornication and born of the birth pangs of a womb, of which the model and type is more dazzling or more splendid than those of the two locomotives now in service on the railroad of Northern France?

One of these, the *Crampton*,\* an adorable blonde with a shrill voice, a long slender body encased in a gleaming brass corset and the supple, nervous resilience of a cat, is a stylish golden blonde whose extraordinary grace is almost frightening as, stiffening her muscles of steel and breaking into a sweat that streams down her warm flanks, she sets in motion the immense rosaces of her elegant wheels and

leaps forward, a living thing, at the head of an express or a train bearing the day's catch!

The other, the *Engerth*,\* is an enormous, gloomy brunette with a hoarse, harsh voice and thick-set hips squeezed into armour-plating of cast iron, a monstrous creature with a tousled mane of black smoke and six wheels coupled together low on the ground; what overwhelming power is hers when, setting the earth atremble, she slowly and ponderously pulls along behind her her heavily laden train of merchandise!

Comparable types of delicate slenderness or terrifying strength are most certainly not to be found among the frail, golden-haired beauties and handsome majestic brunettes of our human race; one can definitely assert that man has done as well, in his own sphere, as the God in whom he believes.

These thoughts came to Des Esseintes when he heard, carried on the breeze, the faint whistle of the toy trains that spin about between Paris and Sceaux; his house was some twenty minutes from the Fontenay station, but because of the height and isolation of its position, the hubbub made by the disgusting crowds that invariably haunt the neighbourhood of a station on Sundays could not reach as far as that.

As for the village itself, he scarcely knew it. One night he had gazed through his window at the silent landscape which slopes down to the foot of a hillside, on whose summit stand the batteries of the Verrières woods.\* In the shadows, to left and right, indistinct shapes rose up one behind the other, while above them, far away, loomed other batteries and other fortifications, whose high supporting-walls seemed in the moonlight to have been washed over with silver gouache, against a background of dark sky.

Its size diminished by the shadow of the hills, the plain looked as if its centre had been powdered with dry starch and daubed with white cold-cream; in the balmy air that fanned the faded grasses, generating cheap, spicy scents, the trees, chalk-white in the moonlight, fluffed out their pale foliage, replicating their trunks with black shadows that striped the limy soil, on which pebbles sparkled, like shards of broken china.

Because of its painted and powdered appearance and its air of artifice, this landscape was not displeasing to Des Esseintes; but, ever since the afternoon spent looking for a house in the village of

Fontenay, he had never walked on the roads during the day; the verdancy of the area did not, in any case, interest him at all, for it did not even afford the delicate and plaintive charm of the pathetic, sickly vegetation that barely manages to cling to life on the suburban rubble-heaps near the ramparts. And then, in the village that day, he had seen corpulent middle-class worthies with side-whiskers, and well-dressed individuals with moustaches, who flaunted their magistrate's features or military mien as if they were parading the holy sacrament; since these encounters, his horror of the human countenance had increased.

During the final months of his stay in Paris, when, having lost faith in everything, he was oppressed by hypochondria and ravaged by spleen, he had reached such a pitch of nervous sensibility that the sight of a disagreeable object or person would etch itself into his brain so deeply as to require several days for its imprint to be even slightly dulled; during that period the touch of a human form, brushed against in the street, had been one of his most excruciating torments.

The sight of certain physiognomies caused him actual suffering, and he saw almost as insults the benevolent or peevish expressions on certain faces, feeling an urge to box the ears of, for example, this gentleman who strolled along half-closing his eyes in a learned manner, or of that one who rocked back and forth on his heels while gazing admiringly at his own reflection, or of yet a third who seemed prey to a thousand concerns, as with furrowed brow he pored over the long-winded articles and the news reports in a daily paper.

He could smell the presence of such ingrained stupidity, of such loathing for what he himself believed in, of such scorn for literature, for art, for everything that he himself adored, implanted and firmly rooted in these shallow tradesmen's brains—brains preoccupied exclusively with swindles and money and accessible only to that ignoble distraction of mediocre minds, politics—that he would return home in a fury and lock himself in with his books.

Lastly, he loathed with all the intensity of which he was capable the rising generations, those new classes of dreadful louts who feel the need to talk and laugh loudly in restaurants and coffee houses, who jostle you without apology on the pavements, and who without even a word of excuse or so much as a slight bow, ram you in the legs with the wheels of a baby carriage.

One section of the bookshelves lining the walls of his orange and blue study was filled exclusively with works in Latin, works which are classified under the generic term 'The Decadent Period'\* by those intellects which have been tamed into conformity by the deplorable, endlessly reiterated lectures of the colleges of the Sorbonne.\*

In actual fact, the Latin language, as it was practised during the period which professors still persist in calling the 'Golden Age', did not appeal to him in the least. That limited language, whose constructions, so few in number, are almost entirely without variation, syntactical flexibility, colour, or nuances, whose seams have been smoothed over and trimmed of the rugged but sometimes picturesque expressions of earlier ages, was capable, at a pinch, of expressing the pompous nothings, the vague platitudes rehearsed by orators and poets, but it exuded such a lack of curiosity, such a listlessness, that one had to go right back, in linguistic studies, to the French of Louis XIV's reign, to encounter another style as wilfully enervated, as solemnly wearisome and lacklustre.

Among writers, the dulcet Virgil, he whom schoolmasters call the swan of Mantua,\* doubtless because he was not born in that city, struck him as not only one of the most terrible pedants but also one of the dullest bores that Antiquity ever produced; his well-washed, powdered shepherds, spewing out, turn by turn, vast quantities of cold and sententious verses, his Orpheus whom he likens to a tearful nightingale, his Aristaeus snivelling over some bees,\* his Aeneas, that irresolute, indeterminate character who struts about gesturing woodenly, like a silhouette in a shadow box, behind the ill-fitting, obtrusive transparency of the poem, infuriated him. He might well have put up with the tiresome twaddle that these puppets proclaim to the wings in their unnaturally contrived dialogues, he might also have put up with the brazen borrowings from Homer, from Theocritus, from Ennius, from Lucretius, the outright theft, revealed by Macrobius, of the Second Book of the *Aeneid* which he lifted almost word for word from a poem of Pisander's, in brief, all the indescribable inanity of that bunch of cantos; but what he found

## EXPLANATORY NOTES

- 1 *Ruysbroeck the Admirable*: fourteenth-century Flemish mystic, referred to again in Chapter 12 of *Against Nature* for a prose style which 'offered an incomprehensible but appealing amalgam of mysterious ecstasy, sentimental effusions, and scathing outbursts'. Thus not unlike Huysmans's own. Huysmans borrowed the epigraph from the opening line of the second of the canticles which close Ernest Hello's 1869 translation, *Rusbrock* (sic) *l'Admirable*. Not in the manuscript of *Against Nature*.
- 3 *the Château de Lourps*: six kilometres from Provins, in Seine-et-Marne, south-west of Longueville and north-west of Jutigny. Also evoked in his novel *En rade* (1887); Huysmans spent several days there in 1881, and subsequently the summers of 1884 and 1885.  
*Duc d'Épernon and the Marquis d'O*: Jean-Louis de Nogaret, Duc d'Épernon (1554-1642), was one of Henri III's favourites and played a key role in his rapprochement with Henri de Navarre. François, Marquis d'O (1535-94), was Henri III's superintendent of finance, important in the latter's conversion to Catholicism, and yet a noted *débauché* himself. Huysmans's misleading depiction of these favourites' 'debilitated constitution' reflects a commonplace of romantic versions of history which were ill-disposed towards Henri III. See Dumas père's play *Henri III et sa cour* (1829).
- 5 *the Voulzie*: a small river in the Seine-et-Marne region, running from close to Plessis-la-Tour via Provins into the Seine near Brey. It was celebrated in a song by Hégésippe Moreau.  
*Saint-Ruf*: arrived in Provence in the fourth century, where he is said to have become the first bishop of Avignon. From the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries a religious congregation bore his name.
- 6 *Rue de la Chaise*: this was one of the plushiest locations in the Saint-Germain district of Paris. Huysmans would often dine at *La Petite Chaise* where this road meets the Rue de Grenelle.
- 7 *Nicole*: in fact Huysmans makes use here of a description of the seventeenth-century moralist and theologian, Pierre Nicole, by poet, novelist, and critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-69), which is found in the latter's *Port-Royal* (1840-59).
- 9 *Fontenay-aux-Roses*: Huysmans himself had been sent there on medical grounds in 1881 and returned to edit *Against Nature*. His residence was at 3 Rue des Écoles (demolished in 1955).
- 11 *dandyism*: initially an aristocratic mode of dress and manners exemplified by Beau Brummel and designed to express superiority over the utilitarian values of the rising bourgeoisie, it acquired from Baudelaire and

- Barbey d'Aurevilly the philosophical status of social and aesthetic revolt as a cult of artificiality, detachment, and self-control.
- 12 *dinner to mark . . . host's virility*: an idea borrowed from Grimod de la Reynière (1758-1838), author of the pioneering *Almanach des gourmands, servant de guide dans les moyens de faire grand chère* (1803-12), and related in his *Correspondance* and Bachaumont's *Mémoires secrets*, though Huysmans may have come across the description in Monselier's *Les Oubliés et les dédaignés* (1857).
  - 13 *santonin*: or *santonica herba*, produced from *santonica*, the dried unexpanded flowerheads of a species of *Artemisia*, produced in Turkestan and used as an anthelmintic.
  - 14 *orange*: in his *Journal* entry for 16 May 1884 Edmond de Goncourt complains that it was in fact he who uncovered the properties of this colour in *La Maison d'un artiste*. The latter account shares with *Against Nature* an obsessive concern with the aestheticization of domestic space.
  - 15 *Weavers' Guild of Cologne*: this association was very powerful throughout the Middle Ages until the revolt of 1618 which led to the migration of workers to Aix-la-Chapelle and other northern towns.  
*blues*: as in Renoir's paintings, for instance, we can see in this particular example of blue and orange the influence of Chevreul's theory of complementary colours.  
*'Glossarium' . . . of Du Cange*: Charles du Fresne du Cange (1610-88) was an eminent author of studies of Byzantine history and of two dictionaries of medieval Latin and Greek, including the three-volume *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae latinitatis* of 1678. Successive revised editions appeared throughout the eighteenth century.  
*Abbaye-au-Bois of Bièvre*: founded in the eleventh century by the Benedictines and reformed in 1513 as the Val-de-Grâce, this abbey was destroyed by the Huguenots in 1562 and by flooding in 1573. By dropping the 's' from the name of the village where the abbey was located Huysmans evokes (consciously or otherwise) the name of the river which runs through it. As Christopher Prendergast reminds us, 'There was, of course, always an alternative river, that anti-Seine, the Bièvre, whose seedy charms were praised . . . by Huysmans (in both the *Croquis parisiens* and *Le Drageoir aux épices*), and, in more sentimentally affectionate register, by Delvau' (*Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 203).  
*'La Mort des Amants' and 'L'Ennemi'*: Huysmans refers here to two poems from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), the former ('The Death of the Lovers') evoking the theme of decaying desire elucidated in this chapter; and 'The Enemy'.  
*'Anywhere out of the World'*: one of Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose* (*Le Spleen de Paris*), whose English title was borrowed from Thomas Hood's 'The Bridge of Sighs'. The poems were published posthumously in 1869.

and served as a model for Huysmans's own attempts at this hybrid genre. The latter's sense that the prose poem might provide an ideal mixture of freedom and constraint at the level of form is theorized towards the end of Chapter 14 of *Against Nature*.

- 16 *the lay sisters . . . in Ghent*: the Beguine convent at Ghent dates back to the seventeenth century.

- 18 *Lloyd's . . . Valéry Companies*: these commercial references are in large part authentic: for instance, Lloyd's Rhine Westphalia, maritime insurers, 13 Rue de Rougemont; and the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, 38 Avenue de l'Opéra and 26 Rue d'Hauteville.

'*The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*': Edgar Allan Poe's work, translated by Baudelaire, features a journey towards an hallucinatory Antarctic.

- 19 *M. Pasteur*: Louis Pasteur (1822–95), the famous French chemist who proved that micro-organisms caused fermentation and found ways of saving the beer, wine, and silk industries when they were threatened by such organisms. Author of *Études sur le vin* (1866) and *Études sur la bière* (1876).

*Vigier baths . . . the Seine*: named after the attendant on this boat near the Pont-Neuf who became its owner after marrying the widow of its creator, Poitevin.

'*Guide Joanne*': series of travel guides (including the 21-volume *Itinéraire général de la France*) founded in the nineteenth century by the man of letters, Adolphe-Laurent Joanne, and developed by his son Paul-Bénigne Joanne, a geographer.

*bateaux-mouches*: large riverboats for sightseeing.

- 20 *the Crampton*: a separate tender locomotive for fast trains, built by Coill between 1848 and 1859, designed by Thomas Russell Crampton and used by the Chemins de fer du Nord, the Chemins de fer de l'Est, and the PLM.

- 21 *the Engerth*: a tender locomotive for goods trains invented by the Austrian Wilhelm d'Engerth for a competition in 1851 for the Semmering mountain line.

*the Verrières woods*: the home-town of the romantic hero of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*, Julien Sorel, whom we first encounter absorbed in reading when he should be working on his father's sawmill.

- 23 '*The Decadent Period*': Huysmans borrows this term from Désiré Nisard's *Études de mœurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (Hachette, 1834), but the two authors differ in that Huysmans uses the term 'decadent' in a positive light. In the chapter on Lucan in volume 2 of his study Nisard associates decadent writing with excessive description and also argues that modern literature 'has fallen into its descriptive period. Not for sixty years [i.e. since 1775] has there been so much description.' This process will, of course, be extended in a 'decadent' novel such as *Against*

*Nature* where descriptions and details threaten to displace events and plotting, though there is still a recognizable beginning, middle, and end, even if they are not those of the traditional novel. The major 'classical' author to entice Des Esseintes is Petronius, whereas his tastes were inclined towards the later 'decadent' authors. He finds Virgil pedantic and plagiaristic (from Homer, Theocritus, Ennius, Lucretius, and in particular Pisander as exposed by Macrobius' commentary on Virgil, *Saturnales*, v. ii. 4). His admiration for Ovid is limited and he loathes Horace. Neither Cicero, Caesar, Sallust, Livy, Seneca, Suetonius, Tacitus, Tibullus, Propertius, Quintilian, the Plinys, Statius, Martial, Terence, nor Plautus find favour.

*the colleges of the Sorbonne*: this plural also refers to the University of Leipzig where Adolphe Ebert (see note to p. 27 below) worked. The literary choices made in this chapter were influenced in no small degree by the latter's *Allgemeine Geschichte der Literatur des Mittelalters*, translated into French by Joseph Ayméric and James Condamin as *Histoire générale de la littérature de Moyen Âge en Occident*, vol. 1, *Histoire de la littérature latine chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu'à Charlemagne* (Paris: E. Lerroux, 1883). This is pointed out in the retrospective 'Souvenirs sur Huysmans' published in Remy de Gourmont's *Promenades littéraires*.

*the swan of Mantua*: Virgil (70–19 BC), author of the *Aeneid*, was so nicknamed because he was born in Andes near Mantua.

*Orpheus . . . Aristaeus snivelling over some bees*: the rendition of the Orpheus myth in the form in which it came to be known appears in Book IV of the *Georgics*. In the contrast between the farmer Aristaeus and the singer Orpheus we see the opposition between economic man and artistic man. Des Esseintes, of course, uses his economic means (which Folantin does not enjoy) in order to satisfy his artistic sensibilities. Aristaeus actually learns how to regain his bees after losing them to nymphs who were angered by his role in the death of Orpheus' wife, Eurydice.

- 24 '*Chickpea*': the name of the Roman statesman Cicero (106–43 BC) means 'chickpea' in Latin.

- 25 *an interest in the Latin language*: it is only from Latin authors of the first century AD that Des Esseintes begins to take genuine literary pleasure: in particular from the *Pharsalia*, an epic poem by Lucan about the civil war between Pompey and Julius Caesar, and the *Satyricon*, the long picaresque novel by the satirist Petronius. The latter, 'this realistic work, this slice carved from the flesh of Roman daily life', is of particular importance as a model for Huysmans's conception of the modern novel, even though only parts of books 14, 15, and 16 survive. They describe the disreputable adventures of two young men, Encolpius (the narrator) and his friend Ascyltus, and of the sexually promiscuous boy Giton who plays one off against the other. Although Huysmans represents an extreme moment in the history of the nineteenth-century novel, Tony Tanner argues in



and charming style of Gothic jewellery, were destroyed. The old editions, so cherished by Des Esseintes, ended, and, with a prodigious leap over the centuries, the books that now covered the remaining shelves, heedless of the passage of the years, led directly to the French of the present day.

Late one afternoon a carriage drew up in front of the house at Fontenay. Since Des Esseintes received no visitors, since the postman dared not even set foot within those unfrequented precincts, having neither newspaper, nor journal, nor letter to deliver there, the servants hesitated, uncertain whether or not to open the door; then, on hearing the ringing of the bell as it clanged vigorously against the wall, they ventured to uncover the spy-hole cut into the door and saw a gentleman whose entire chest, from neck to waist, was concealed by a huge golden shield.

They informed their master, who was breakfasting. 'Certainly, show him in,' he said, recollecting that he had once given his address to a lapidary, so that he could deliver an order.

The gentleman bowed and placed his shield upon the pitchpine parquet of the dining-room. Rocking itself and rising up a trifle from the floor, it stretched forth a tortoise's serpentine head; then, suddenly taking fright, retreated into its shell.

This tortoise\* was the consequence of a whim of Des Esseintes's, which antedated his departure from Paris. One day, while gazing at a shimmering Oriental carpet and following the sheen of the silvery lights darting about on the woven woollen threads, plummy purple and golden yellow in colour, he had thought: it would be a good idea to place upon this carpet something that moves, and is dark enough in hue to set off the brilliance of these tones.

Wandering haphazardly through the city streets in the grip of this idea, he had reached the Palais-Royal, and in front of Chevet's shop-window had struck himself upon the forehead: an enormous tortoise was there, in a tank. He had bought it; then, once it was let loose on the carpet, he had sat down in front of it and watched it for a long time, screwing up his eyes. Unquestionably, the dark brown and raw Sienna shades of that shell dimmed the play of colours in the carpet without bringing them to life; the overwhelmingly silvery lights now barely even gleamed, deferring to the chill tones of unpolished zinc that edged the hard, dull carapace.

He gnawed at his fingernails, searching for ways to reconcile these ill-matched partners and to avoid the absolute divorce of these tints;

he finally saw that his first idea, of trying to enhance the fire of the carpet's colours by the movement of an object placed upon it, was mistaken; in brief, that carpet was still too garish, too undisciplined, too new. The colours had not become sufficiently muted and faded; it was a matter of inverting the idea, of tempering and deadening the tones by contrasting them with a brilliant object which would subdue everything around it, which would cast its golden light over the pallid silver. Put like that, the problem became easier to resolve. He decided, therefore, to have his tortoise's shell gilded.

Once back from the gilder's where it had been lodging, the creature blazed like a sun, shining triumphantly over the subjugated tones of the carpet, radiant as a Visigoth's shield inlaid with scales by an artist of barbaric tastes.

At first, Des Esseintes was enchanted with this effect; then it struck him that this gigantic jewel was still unfinished, and would not be truly complete until it had been encrusted with precious stones.

He chose, from a Japanese collection, a design depicting a cluster of flowers showering out from a slender stalk; he took this to a jeweller, sketched in an oval frame round the bouquet, and informed the stupefied lapidary that the leaves and petals of each of these flowers were to be made of gem stones and set in the actual shell of the tortoise.

Choosing the stones took some time; diamonds have become extraordinarily commonplace now that every tradesman sports one on his little finger; Oriental emeralds and rubies are less degraded, and they do emit a glowing fiery radiance, but they look too much like the green and red eyes of certain omnibuses which display headlamps in those two colours; as for topazes, whether burnt or raw, they are cheap stones, dear to the hearts of the lower middle classes who revel in stowing away their jewel-cases in their mirrored wardrobes; then again, although the Church has perpetuated the hieratic character—both unctuous and solemn—of the amethyst, that stone too has been debased on the blood-red earlobes and tubulous fingers of butcher's wives who seek to adorn themselves, for a modest outlay, with genuine, weighty jewels; of those stones only the sapphire has managed to keep its fires inviolate from industrial and financial absurdity. Its scintillations, flashing out over clear and icy waters have, one might say, preserved the purity of its discreet and haughty

lineage. Unfortunately, in artificial light, its clear flame no longer sparkles; its blue waters sink low and seem to slumber, only awakening to glittering life at break of day.

None of these gems at all satisfied Des Esseintes; they were, in any case, too civilized and too well known. He ran some stones that were more unusual, more bizarre, through his fingers, finally selecting a series of both real and artificial gems, which in combination would produce a harmony at once fascinating and unsettling.

He fashioned his bouquet of flowers in the following manner: the leaves were set with stones of an intense, unequivocal green: with asparagus-green chrysoberyls; with leek-green peridots; with olive-green olivines; and they stood out against branches made of purplish-red almandine\* and ouvarovite,\* sparkling with a dry brilliance like those flakes of scale that shine on the inside of wine-casks.

For those flowers which were isolated from the stem and well separated from the base of the spray, he employed azurite, but he rejected out of hand that Oriental turquoise which is used on brooches and rings and which, along with the humdrum pearl and the odious coral, delights the hearts of the humbler classes; he chose only Western turquoises, stones which are, strictly speaking, simply a fossil ivory impregnated with coppery substances and whose blue-green is clogged, opaque, sulphurous, as though yellowed with bile.

That done, he could now set the petals of the flowers blooming in the centre of the bouquet, those flowers closest to the trunk, using stones that were transparent, glinting with vitreous, morbid lights, with feverish, piercing flashes of fire.

He formed them using only cat's eyes from Ceylon, cymophanes and sapphirines.\* These three stones did indeed emit mysterious and perverse scintillations, painfully wrested from their icy, murky depths. The cat's eye is a greenish grey, striped with concentric veins that constantly appear to shift and change position, depending on the way the light falls. The cymophane has azure moirés running across the milky tints floating within it. The sapphirine glows with bluish phosphorus flames on a ground of dull chocolate brown.

The jeweller successively noted down the places where the stones were to be set, 'And what about the edge of the shell?' he asked Des Esseintes.

Initially, the latter had thought of using a few opals and hydrophanes; but these stones, which are interesting because of their

indeterminate colouring and fitful radiance, are much too intractable and unreliable; the opal has a truly rheumatic sensitivity, the play of its rays being affected by the degree of damp, of heat, or of cold, whereas the hydrophane will glow only in water, being loath to set its grey embers afire unless it is first wetted.

He finally chose stones whose tones would contrast with one another: the mahogany-red of the hyacinth of Compostella and the blue-green of the aquamarine; the vinegar pink of the balas ruby and the pale slate-grey of the Sudermanie ruby. Their feeble iridescence was enough to light the shadows of the shell without distracting the eye from the blossoming of the jewels, which they encircled with a narrow wreath of indeterminate flames.

Des Esseintes gazed now at the tortoise as, cowering in a corner of his dining-room, it glittered in the semi-darkness. He felt perfectly happy; his eyes were intoxicated by those resplendent corollas blazing on a golden ground; and then, being, for him, unusually hungry, he dipped his toast—spread with a quite unique butter—in a cup of tea, brewed from a flawless blend of Si-a-Fayoune, Moyou-tann, and de Khansky,\* green teas which had come by very special caravans from China by way of Russia.

He drank this liquid perfume from cups of that Chinese porcelain which is called eggshell because it is so translucent and light, and, just as he would use nothing but those enchanting cups, he would also use, for cutlery, nothing but genuine silver-gilt that was a trifle shabby, so that the silver, barely visible through the faintly eroded layer of the gold, gives it a suggestion of something sweetly old-fashioned, a vague hint of something utterly weary and close to death.

After swallowing his last mouthful of tea, he returned to his study and had his servant bring in the tortoise, which still obstinately refused to move.

It was snowing. In the lamplight, blades of ice were growing on the outside of the blue-tinged window-panes and the hoarfrost, like melted sugar, glittered on the gold-spangled bottle-glass of the windows. Absolute silence enveloped the little house as it slumbered in the shadows.

Des Esseintes let his mind wander: the big log fire filled the room with scorching exhalations; he set the window slightly ajar. Like some great hanging of reversed ermine, the sky rose before him, black and dappled with white. An icy wind gusted, intensifying the

wild scudding of the snow, inverting the proportions of black and white. The heraldic hanging of the sky turned itself over, becoming true white ermine, itself dappled with black by the tiny patches of night strewn among the snowflakes.

He reclosed the casement; this sudden change, without transition, from scorching heat to the chill of midwinter had given him a shock; huddling by the fire, he thought he might drink something alcoholic to warm himself.

He went into the dining-room, where a cupboard built into one of the bulkheads contained a series of little barrels set side by side on minute stands of sandalwood, each pierced by a silver spigot low down in its belly. He called this collection of casks of liqueur his mouth organ.\*

A rod linked all the spigots and controlled them with a single action, so that once the apparatus was set up, it only required the touch of a button concealed in the panelling for every tap to be turned on simultaneously and fill the minuscule goblets which stood beneath them. The organ could then be played. The stops labelled 'flute, horn, vox angelica' were pulled out, ready for use. Des Esseintes would drink a drop of this or that, playing interior symphonies to himself, and thus providing his gullet with sensations analogous to those which music affords the ear.

Furthermore, the flavour of each cordial corresponded, Des Esseintes believed, to the sound of an instrument. For example, dry curaçao matched the clarinet whose note is penetrating and velvety; kummel, the oboe with its sonorous, nasal resonance; crème de menthe and anisette, the flute, at once honeyed and pungent, whining and sweet; on the other hand kirsch, to complete the orchestra, resonates in a way extraordinarily like the trumpet; gin and whisky overpower the palate with the strident blasts of their cornets and trombones; liqueur brandy booms forth with the deafening racket of the tubas, to the accompaniment of the rolling thunder of the cymbals and the drum as the rakis of Chios and the mastics strike with all their might upon the skin of the mouth!

He was also of the opinion that the correlation could be extended and that string quartets could perform under the palatal vault, with the violin represented by fine old liqueur brandy, smoky, pungent and delicate; rum, being more robust, more sonorous and rumbling, took the part of the viola; vespetro, heart-rendingly long-drawn-out,

melancholy and caressing, was the cello; while an old, pure bitter stood in for the double-bass, vigorous, solid, and black. One could even, if one wanted to form a quintet, add a fifth instrument, the harp, which was very closely imitated by the vibrant flavour and aloof, high-pitched, silvery note of dry cumin.

The correlation could be extended even further: there were tonal relationships in the music of the liqueurs: to cite only one example, Benedictine stands, so to speak, for the minor key of that major key made up of those cordials which commercial specifications designate by the label of green Chartreuse.

Once he had grasped these principles he was able, after some erudite experimentation, to play himself silent melodies on his tongue, soundless funeral marches of great pomp and circumstance, and to hear, in his mouth, solos of crème de menthe, duets of vespetro and of rum. He even succeeded in transferring actual pieces of music to his jaw, following the composer step by step and rendering his thoughts, his effects, and his subtleties, through close associations or contrasts, through roughly estimated or carefully calculated blends of liqueurs.

At other times he himself would compose melodies, performing pastorals with the gentle blackcurrant cordial which filled his throat with the warbling trills of the nightingale's song, or with the sweet cacaouchouva which hummed sickly-sweet bergerettes like the 'Ballads of Estelle'\* and the 'Ah! mother, shall I tell you?\*' of bygone days.

But, that evening, Des Esseintes felt no urge to listen to the taste of music; he confined himself to taking one note from the keyboard of his organ, carrying away a little cup which he had filled with a genuine Irish whiskey. He settled down again into his armchair and slowly sipped the fermented juice of oats and barley; a powerful, unpleasant flavour of creosote filled his mouth.

Little by little, as he drank, his thoughts followed the impression that had been evoked on his palate, closely pursuing the taste of the whiskey and awakening, by a fatal conjunction of odours, memories that had long since vanished. That bitter carbolic aroma inevitably reminded him of the identical savour which had saturated his palate on those occasions when dentists had worked on his gums.

Once embarked on that train of thought, his musings, which had at first encompassed all the practitioners he had known, became

more concentrated, focusing on one in particular, stirring a bizarre recollection which had engraved itself on his memory with special intensity.

It was three years ago; beset by a raging toothache in the middle of the night, he had plugged his cheek with cotton wool and, stumbling against the furniture, had paced up and down his room like a madman. The molar had already been filled; there was no hope of saving it; the only remedy lay in the dentist's forceps. Feverishly awaiting the dawn, he determined to endure the most agonizing of operations so long as it put an end to his suffering.

Nursing his jaw, he debated what to do. The dentists he patronized were well-to-do practitioners whom one could not visit at will; the times of appointments had to be arranged in advance. 'That's out of the question,' he thought, 'I can't wait any longer'; he made up his mind to go to any dentist he could find, some poor man's tooth-puller, one of those men with a grip of iron who, though untutored in the (in any case useless) art of treating caries and filling cavities, are skilled at extracting, with unparalleled speed, the most tenacious of stumps; such people open their doors at dawn and there is no waiting. Seven o'clock struck at last. He raced out of his house, and, recollecting the name of an operator who called himself a dentist of the people and lived on a corner by the river, he rushed down the streets, biting his handkerchief and blinking back his tears.

On reaching the house, recognizable by a huge black wooden sign with the name 'Gatonax' spread across it in enormous pumpkin-coloured letters, and by two little glassed-in display cases in which plaster teeth were carefully aligned on pink wax gums and connected in pairs by brass wire springs, he gasped for breath, his forehead drenched in sweat; a horrible panic overtook him, a cold shiver ran over his skin, his pain subsided, his suffering ceased, the tooth fell silent.

He stood there, in a daze, on the pavement; steeling himself, finally, to face the pain, he had climbed up a dark staircase, mounting four steps at a time to the third floor. There, he had found himself before a door on which, in sky-blue letters, an enamel plate repeated the name on the sign. He had pulled the bell, then, terror-struck by the big blood-red gobs of spittle he saw plastering the stairs, he had turned round, determined to suffer toothache all his life, when a harrowing cry pierced the dividing wall, filling the stairwell and

riveting him to the spot in horror, just as a door opened and an old woman invited him to enter.

Shame had prevailed over fear; he was ushered into a dining-room; another door had crashed open, admitting a terrible grenadier-like figure dressed in a frock coat and black trousers rigid as wood; Des Esseintes followed him into another room.

From that moment on his feelings became confused. He vaguely recalled sinking into an armchair in front of a window, and stammering, as he touched his tooth with a finger: 'It's already been filled; I'm afraid there's nothing can be done.'

The man had immediately put a stop to his explanations by sticking a colossal forefinger into his mouth; then, muttering into his curly waxed moustaches, he had taken an instrument from a table.

It was then that the drama really began. Clutching the arms of his chair, Des Esseintes had felt a cold sensation in his cheek, stars had swum before his eyes and, in the grip of unbelievable agony, he had started stamping his feet and bellowing like an animal being slaughtered.

A cracking sound was heard: the molar broke in two as it came out; he felt then as if his head was being wrenched off, as if his skull was being shattered; losing all control, he screamed at the top of his voice, frantically fighting off the man who was setting upon him once more as if he meant to shove his arm right down into his belly, but then, suddenly, taking a step back, lifted up the body that was attached to the jaw, and brutally let it fall back into the armchair on its buttocks, while he stood there filling the window-frame, breathing heavily, and brandishing on the end of his forceps a purple tooth dripping with red!

Utterly exhausted, Des Esseintes had spat out a bowlful of blood, waved aside the old woman who, coming in again, offered to wrap his stump in a newspaper for him, and had fled, paying two francs and in his turn expelling bloody spittle on to the stairs, and then found himself once again outside in the street, full of joy and ten years younger, feeling an interest in the most trivial little things.

'Brrrr!' he muttered, depressed by the onslaught of these recollections. To free himself from the vision's horrifying spell he rose to his feet and, returning to the present, began to worry about the tortoise.

It was still quite motionless and he felt it with his fingers; it was

dead. Accustomed, no doubt, to an uneventful existence, to a humble life spent beneath its poor carapace, it had not been able to bear the dazzling splendour thrust upon it, the glittering cope in which it had been garbed, the gems with which its back had been encrusted, like a ciborium.



includes chronicles by Fréculf, Bishop of Lisieux, and Regino; the tenth-century poem *De bellis parisiacae urbis* on the Norman siege of Paris by the Saint-Germain monk Abbo le Courbé (Huysmans uses *courbé* to translate Dom Rivet's Latin *cernuus*, stooping or bowing forwards); and Macer Floridus' poem *De viribus herbarum* ('On the properties of plants'), an imitation of Walafrid Strabo's *Hortulus* which may well have been read by Huysmans.

- 33 *volumes that were modern or undated*: in spite of the 'prodigious leap over the centuries' from the tenth century 'to the French of the present day' in Des Esseintes's library, he does own a handful of miscellaneous items. Abbé Jacques-Paul Migne (1800–75), French editor and printer, founded the newspaper *L'Univers religieux* (1833) which was to become Louis Veuillot's Ultramontane organ, and opened at Montrouge near Paris the publishing house which brought out in rapid succession numerous religious works at popular prices, including the *Patrologia* (the Latin series in 221 vols., 1844–55; the Greek collection first published in Latin in 85 vols., 1856–61; and then the Greek texts with Latin translations in 165 vols., 1857–66), of which Des Esseintes owns 'a few odd tomes'. He also possesses Johann Christian Wernsdorf's *Poetae latini minores* (1780–98); work by the Dutch scholar Johannes Meursius, author of *Roma luxurians sive de luxu Romanorum, liber singularis* (1631), on the luxury and refinement of the Roman Empire; Friedrich-Karl Forberg's *Manual of Classical Erotology (De figuris veneris)* (re-edited in 1882); the *Moechialogy* (from the Greek *moicheia*, adultery), an account of sexual morality by doctor and trappist, P. Debreyne (1786–1867), published in Paris by Poussielgue-Rusand in 1846; and the *Diaconals*, an ecclesiastical term for the supplementary sections reserved for the reading of deacons in texts on moral theology, especially those treating the breaches of the Sixth Commandment (which can be traced back to volume 3 of Alphonse de Ligouri's *Theologia moralis* of 1718).
- 35 *tortoise*: an idea based on the jewel-encrusted tortoise in which the *fin-de-siècle* dandy (and partial model for Des Esseintes) Robert de Montesquiou, delights. The latter writes in his collection *Les Hortensias bleus* of 'ma tortue au dos d'or caillouté de turquoise' ('my gold-backed tortoise metallated with turquoise').
- 37 *almandine*: corruption of 'alabandine', a dark red quartz whose name comes from the town of Alabanda in Asia Minor.
- ouvarovite*: green emerald garnet found in Bissersk in the Urals (from the proper noun Ouvarof).
- sapphirines*: gems already highlighted by Huysmans in his description of the passage des Panoramas in Paris in *Croquis et eaux-fortes. Effet du soir* (1876).
- 38 *Si-a-Fayoune, Moyou-tann, and de Khansky*: rather than choosing actual varieties of tea Huysmans invents names apparently on the basis of their euphony.

- 39 *mouth organ*: an idea revealed to Huysmans by père Polycarpe Poncelet's *Chimie du goût et de l'odorat, ou principes pour composer facilement et à peu de frais les liqueurs à boire et les eaux de senteur* (*Chemistry of Tastes and Odours, or principles for the simple and inexpensive composition of drinks and perfumes* Paris: Lemercier, 1755). This notion of *correspondances* between different senses echoes not only Baudelaire's famous poem of that name but also Zola's 'symphony' of cheeses in *Le Ventre de Paris* (*The Belly of Paris*, 1873), as Fortassier observes.
- 40 *'Ballads of Estelle'*: allusion to Jean-Pierre-Clariss de Florian's pastoral idyll, *Estelle et Némorin* (1787), invoked by Berlioz's account of youthful passion in his *Mémoires*. Florian's tale of shepherd and shepherdess set in the time of Louis XII was a successful chapbook. Fortassier cites a review of Hervé's staging of the tale in 1876.
- 'Ah! mother, shall I tell you?'*: an anonymous eighteenth-century pastoral romance in which a shepherdess confesses her weakness for her beloved shepherd, Silvandre. It inspired several variations for piano by Mozart and appeared in the mid-nineteenth century in *Chants et chansons populaires de la France*.
- 44 *Gustave Moreau*: (1826–98), painter of mythological and religious scenes, brought to prominence in symbolist and Decadent circles by Huysmans's account here.
- Salome*: an oil-painting displayed at the Salon of 1876, then at the Universal Exhibition of 1878, now in the Armand Hammer Collection in Los Angeles. Huysmans worked on his depiction of this biblical tale from a Goupil photograph bought for three francs at Bascher's on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. See Introduction, p. xvii.
- 45 *University of Louvain*: the Department of Theology at the University of Louvain was famous for Catholic vernacular translations of the Bible, first printed in September 1550. The 1578 version (actually revised on the basis of rival Protestant Genevan versions) was frequently reprinted. Pierre Variquet would appear to be a seventeenth-century Parisian printer who also produced works by Dancel and Paulus Courtois, for instance.
- 47 *Salammbo*: Carthaginian priestess in Flaubert's eponymous novel of 1862. See note to p. 147 below.
- 'The Apparition'*: an important watercolour displayed along with *Salome* at the Salon of 1876 and owned by the Cabinet des Dessins du Louvre. It proved to be particularly influential on Redon.
- 49 *Mantegna*: Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431–1506), pre-eminent amongst Italian painters of the fifteenth century. In addition to its antiquarian content, his art is characterized by brilliant compositional solutions and an innovative use of perspective and foreshortening. Painted a number of pictures on the theme of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*.
- Jacopo de Barbarino*: or Barbarii, was a fifteenth-century Venetian engraver who had just been rediscovered by Émile Galichon (1829–75),