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As his urge to sequester himself from a loathsome age of shameful duplicity intensified, the need to see no longer pictures representing the human figure toiling away in Paris between four walls, or roaming the streets in quest of money, grew more overpowering.

After dissociating himself from contemporary life, he had resolved to introduce into his retreat no larvae of aversions or regrets; he had therefore wanted paintings that were subtle, exquisite, steeped in an ancient vision, in an antique corruption, remote from our ways, remote from our time.

He had wanted, to satisfy his intellect and give pleasure to his eyes, a few evocative works which would project him into an unfamiliar world, revealing to him evidence of fresh possibilities, and stimulating his nervous system with learned depictions of frenzy, with complicated phantasmagoria and dispassionate, horrific visions.

There was one artist above all others whose talent filled him with never-ending ecstasy: Gustave Moreau.* He had acquired Moreau's two masterpieces, and spent night after night pondering over one of these, the painting of Salome.* This work portrayed a throne, set up like the high altar of a cathedral, beneath a ceiling where innumerable arches, arising out of squat, Romanesque-style columns, were studded with multi-coloured bricks, set with mosaics, and encrusted with lapis lazuli and sard; all this within a palace that resembled a basilica, in an architectural style at once Islamic and Byzantine.

In the centre of the tabernacle surmounting the altar, which was approached by a flight of crescent-shaped steps, sat Herod the Tetrarch, his head encircled by a tiara, his legs together and his hands upon his knees. His face was yellow, parchment-like, deeply lined, thinned by age; his long beard floated like a white cloud over the jewelled constellations that shone on the gold-embroidered robe stretched across his breast. Around this immobile, statue-like figure, fixed in the hieratic pose of a Hindu god, burned incense, disgorging a vaporous mass through which—like phosphorescent eyes of wild animals—shone fiery brilliants set into the sides of the throne;

then, rising higher, the vapours unravelled beneath the arcades, where the blue smoke mingled with the golden dust of the great beams of daylight coming from the domes.

In the perverse odour of these perfumes, in the overheated atmosphere of this church, Salome, her left arm extended in an imperious gesture and her right arm bent, holding a large lotus blossom in front of her face, moves slowly forward on tiptoe to the strains of a guitar, whose cords are strummed by a crouching woman.

A pensive, solemn, almost august expression on her face, she begins the lubricious dance which is to awaken the slumbering senses of the ageing Herod; her breasts rise and fall, their nipples hardening under the friction of her whirling necklaces; the diamonds adhering to her moist skin glitter; her bracelets, her belts, her rings, flash and sparkle; on her triumphal gown—pearl-seamed, silver-flowered, gold-spangled—the breastplate of jewellery, each of its links a precious stone, bursts into flame, sending out sinuous, intersecting jets of fire, moving over the lustreless flesh, the tea-rose skin, like a swarm of splendid insects whose dazzling wing-sheaths are marbled with carmine, spotted with saffron yellow, dappled with steely blue, striped with peacock green.

Totally absorbed, with the staring eyes of a sleep-walker, she sees neither the trembling Tetrarch nor her mother, the implacable Herodias, who watches over her, nor the hermaphrodite or eunuch who stands, a terrifying figure, sabre in hand, at the foot of the throne, the lower part of his face veiled, with his eunuch's breasts dangling like gourds beneath his orange-striped tunic.

The image of Salome, which so haunted the imagination of poets and artists, had obsessed Des Esseintes for many years now. Time without number had he read, in Pierre Variquet's old Bible, translated by the doctors of theology of the University of Louvain,* in the Gospel according to St Matthew, the naïve, short sentences that relate the beheading of the Baptist; time without number had he pondered over these verses:

'But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod.

'Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask.

'And she, being before instructed of her mother, said: "Give me here John Baptist's head on a charger."

'And the king was sorry; nevertheless, for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her.

'And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison.

'And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to her mother.'

But neither St Matthew, nor St Mark, nor St Luke, nor the other Evangelists dwelt upon the frenzied charms, the purposeful depravity of the dancer. Her indistinct presence faded away, mysterious and faint, into the far-off mists of the ages, imperceptible to those of a precise, pedestrian cast of mind, accessible only to sensibilities that had been unsettled and sharpened, rendered almost visionary by neurosis; resistant to artists who portrayed flesh—to Rubens, who painted her disguised as a Flemish butcher's wife; incomprehensible to all the writers who were never capable of depicting the disturbing exaltation of the dancer, the subtle majesty of the murderess.

In Gustave Moreau's painting, which was conceived without any reference to the facts of the Gospel story, Des Esseintes could at last see realized that superhuman, strange Salome of whom he had dreamt. No longer was she just the dancer who by a shameless gyration of her hips wrests a lustful, ruttish cry from an old man, who destroys the resoluteness and breaks the will of a king with thrusts of her breasts, undulations of her belly, and quiverings of her thighs; there she became, in a sense, the symbolic deity of indestructible Lechery, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty singled out from among all others by the cataleptic paroxysm that stiffens her flesh and hardens her muscles; the monstrous, indiscriminate, irresponsible, unfeeling Beast who, like the Helen of Antiquity, poisons everything that comes near her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches.

Perceived in that light, she belonged to Far Eastern theogonies; she could no longer be associated with biblical tradition, could no longer even be likened to the living symbol of Babylon, the royal Harlot of the Apocalypse who, like her, is draped in jewels and purple, who, like her, is powdered and rouged; for the latter was not impelled by a fateful force, by a supreme power, into the alluring degradations of debauchery.

Besides, the artist seemed to have wanted to assert his intention of remaining outside the passing centuries, of not specifying either race, country, or period, by placing his Salome within this extraordinary

palace built in a grandiose mixture of styles, by dressing her in sumptuous, fanciful garments, by crowning her with a kind of diadem shaped like a Phoenician tower, like that worn by Salammbô,* and finally by placing in her hand the sceptre of Isis, the sacred flower of Egypt and India, the great lotus.

Des Esseintes speculated about the meaning of this emblem. Did it have the phallic significance with which it is endowed by the primeval religions of India; did it promise the ageing Herod an oblation of virginity, an exchange of blood, an impure penetration solicited and tendered under the express condition of a murder; or did it represent the allegory of fertility, the Hindu myth of life, an existence held between a woman's palms whence it is torn and crushed by the quivering grasp of men overpowered by madness, deranged by a frenzy of the flesh?

Perhaps, also, by arming his enigmatic goddess with the venerated lotus, the artist had thought of the dancer, the mortal woman, the sullied Vessel, the source of every sin and every crime; perhaps he had called to mind the rites of ancient Egypt, the funereal ceremonies of embalmment, when the chemists and the priests lay out the corpse of the deceased on a bench of jasper, use curved needles to extract her brains through her nasal fossae, her entrails through an incision made in her left side, then, before gilding her nails and her teeth, before anointing her with tars and essences, insert into her genitals, to purify them, the chaste petals of the divine flower.

Be that as it may, this canvas held an irresistible fascination, but the watercolour entitled *The Apparition** was perhaps even more disturbing. In that picture, Herod's palace soared up, like an Alhambra, on slender columns iridescent with Moorish tiles that seemed to be embedded in silver and cemented in gold; arabesques, beginning at diamonds of lapis lazuli, swooped along the length of the cupolas whose surfaces of mother-of-pearl marquetry were criss-crossed by iridescent lights, by flashes of prismatic colour.

The murder had been carried out; now the executioner stood impassive, his hands on the hilt of his long, bloodstained sword.

The decapitated head of the saint had risen from the charger lying upon the flagstones, and he was staring, his countenance livid, his open mouth waxen, his neck scarlet and dripping tears of blood. Mosaics framed the face, from which emanated a halo radiating out into shafts of light beneath the porticos, illuminating the horrifying

levitation of the head, igniting the glassy orbs of the pupils which remained fixed, almost riveted, on the dancer.

With a terror-stricken gesture, Salome wards off the ghastly vision which keeps her standing there, motionless, on tiptoe; her eyes widen, her hand clutches convulsively at her throat. She is almost naked; in the heat of the dance, the veils have come undone, the brocaded draperies have fallen; now she is clad only in the creations of goldsmiths and silversmiths, and in pellucid precious stones; a gorgerin encircles her waist as would a corselet, and, like some magnificent fastener, a marvellous jewel flashes with light in the cleft of her breasts; further down, round her hips, a girdle embraces her, concealing the upper part of her thighs where a gigantic pendant hangs, spilling over with rubies and emeralds; finally, on the now bare flesh between the gorgerin and the girdle, her belly swells, dimpled by a navel whose hollow resembles a medallion carved in onyx, a navel that is milky white, tinted with shades of fingernail pink.

In the blazing shafts of light emanating from the head of the Baptist, all the facets of the jewels catch fire; the stones come to life, tracing out in incandescent contours the body of the woman; catching her at the neck, the legs, the arms, with sparks of fire, bright red like glowing coals, violet like jets of vapour, blue like flaming alcohol, white like starlight. The dreadful head blazes with light and continues to drip with blood, which forms clots of deep purple on the ends of the beard and hair. Visible to Salome alone, it embraces in its bleak gaze neither Herodias who sits brooding over her hatred, now finally appeased, nor the Tetrarch who, leaning forward slightly with his hands upon his knees, still pants with desire, driven wild by this woman's nakedness which has been soaked in musky scents, drenched in sweet-smelling balms, and steeped in the fumes of incense and of myrrh.

Des Esseintes, like the old king, was overwhelmed, stunned, unhinged by this dancer, who was less majestic, less haughty, but more unsettling than the Salome of the oil painting. In the unfeeling, ruthless figure, in the naïve yet dangerous idol, the sexual excitement and the terror of the human being were apparent; the great lotus-blossom had disappeared, the goddess had vanished; a fearful nightmare now held in its grip both the performer, intoxicated by the whirling dance, and the courtesan, frozen, mesmerized by horror.

In this picture she was truly a whore, obedient to her temperament of a cruel and passionate woman; she lived again, more polished and more barbaric, more hateful and more exquisite; arousing the languorous senses of man more vigorously, she bewitched and subjugated his will more surely, with her charms as of some great venereal flower that had burgeoned in a sacrilegeous seedbed, and grown to maturity in a hothouse of impiety.

Des Esseintes maintained that never again, at any period, had watercolours been capable of achieving that same brilliancy of hue; never had the limitations of chemical colour been able to produce, on paper, such scintillations of precious stones, such gleaming colours as of stained glass struck by sunlight, such fabulous, blinding displays of fabrics and of flesh.

And, deep in reverie, he sought to understand the origins of this great artist, of this pagan mystic, of this Illuminatus who could sufficiently dissociate himself from the world to see blazing gloriously, in the very heart of Paris, the cruel visions and magical apotheoses of an earlier age.

Des Esseintes found it hard to determine what influences might have shaped him; here and there were vague recollections of Mantegna* and Jacopo di Barbarino;* here and there, confused suggestions of Da Vinci and feverish colours in the style of Delacroix;* but on the whole the influence of those masters was scarcely discernible: the fact was that Gustave Moreau was not derivative of anyone. With no true forebears and no possible descendants, he remained a unique figure in contemporary art. Going back to ethnographic sources, to the origins of mythologies whose blood-stained enigmas he compared and unravelled; uniting and melding into a single entity legends of Far Eastern origin which had been transformed by the beliefs of other peoples, he justified by these means his architectonic fusions, his sumptuous, unexpected combinations of fabrics, his hieratic, sinister allegories to which the disturbing insights of a profoundly modern nervous disorder lent added trenchancy; he remained an eternally painful artist, haunted by the symbols of superhuman depravities and passions, of divine abominations perpetrated without abandon and without hope.

There was a singular enchantment in his erudite, despairing paintings, a magic which stirred you to the depths of your soul, like that of certain poems of Baudelaire's, and left you astounded, bemused, disconcerted, by this art which went beyond the confines

of painting, borrowing from the art of writing its most subtle evocations, from the art of the enameller* its most marvellous brilliancy, from the art of the lapidary and the engraver its most exquisite delicacy. These two pictures of Salome, pictures for which Des Esseintes's admiration knew no bounds, were, to his eyes, living things, as they hung on the walls of his study on special panels reserved for them between the shelves of books.

However, these were by no means the only pictures he had purchased for the adornment of his solitude. Although he himself did not use the first—and only other—floor of his house, having given it over to his servants, the ground floor alone had needed several series of pictures to dress its walls.

This ground floor was laid out as follows: a dressing-room, which connected with the bedroom, occupied one of the corners of the building; the bedroom led into the library, and the library into the dining-room, which formed the other corner. These rooms comprised one side of the building and extended in a straight line that was pierced by windows looking out over the valley of Aunay. The other side of the building contained four rooms which, as far as their arrangement was concerned, were exactly similar to the first. Thus the kitchen formed a corner which corresponded to the dining-room; a large hall, serving as an entrance to the house, corresponded to the library; a small sitting-room counterbalanced the bedroom, and the water-closet the dressing-room. All these rooms looked on to the side opposite the valley of Aunay, in the direction of the Tour du Croy and Châtillon. As for the staircase, it was outside, built on to one of the exterior walls of the house; for this reason the noise made by the servants' feet as they tramped up the stairs reached Des Esseintes's ears in a less distinct, more muffled form.

He had had the sitting-room papered in bright red and on each of its walls had hung, framed in ebony, engravings by Jan Luyken,* an old Dutch engraver, who was almost unknown in France.

He owned the series entitled *Religious Persecutions* by this strange, gloomy, violent, savage artist; these were horrifying engravings that depicted every torture ever invented by religious mania, engravings that screamed forth the spectacle of human suffering, bodies roasted on blazing coals, craniums scalped with sabres, trepanned with nails, hacked at with saws, intestines drawn from the belly and wound round bobbins, fingernails slowly pulled out with pincers, eyes put

out, eyelids turned up and pinned back, limbs dislocated, meticulously broken, bones bared of flesh and scraped, very slowly, with a blade. These pictures, replete with abominable imaginings, stinking of scorched flesh, oozing with blood, filled with shrieks of horror and with curses, made Des Esseintes's skin crawl, keeping him riveted to the spot, unable to breathe, when he entered that red room.

But, quite apart from the shudders they occasioned, quite apart from this man's terrible talent and the extraordinary life that animated his figures, one could observe, in his astonishing, swarming crowd scenes, in the waves of humanity captured with a skill reminiscent of Callot's* but with a power never attained by that entertaining dauber, meticulous re-creations of places and of periods; architecture, costumes, and customs from Rome, in the days of the Maccabees when the Christians were being persecuted; from Spain, under the Inquisition; from France, in the Middle Ages and at the time of the St Bartholomew Massacres and the dragonnades;* all observed with scrupulous care and depicted with consummate skill.

These engravings were mines of information; one could gaze at them for hours without wearying; profoundly thought-provoking, they frequently helped Des Esseintes to while away those days when books held no charm for him.

The life of Luyken was for him an added attraction; it explained, moreover, the hallucinating power of his works. A fervent Calvinist, an obdurate sectarian, obsessed with hymns and prayers, he wrote religious poems which he illustrated, he paraphrased the Psalms in verse, and could become so deeply engrossed in reading the Bible that he would emerge ecstatic, hollow-eyed, his mind possessed by gory subjects, his mouth distorted by the curses of the Reformation, by its songs of terror and of rage.

In addition, he despised this world and gave all his possessions to the poor, existing on crusts of bread; eventually he set sail, in the company of an old servant whom he had infected with his fanaticism, going from place to place at random, depending on where his boat came ashore, preaching the Gospel everywhere, trying to live without eating, on the verge of insanity, almost of brutishness.

The adjoining apartment, the entrance hall, was larger, and panelled in cedar the colour of cigar boxes; it was hung with row upon row of other engravings, other weird drawings. Bresdin's *Comedy of Death** depicts an improbable landscape bristling with trees and

bushes and tufts of vegetation that are shaped like demons and phantoms, and covered with birds with rat heads and vegetable tails, on a ground strewn with vertebrae and ribs and skulls, on which grow gnarled and cracked willows, surmounted by skeletons waving bouquets of flowers in the air as they intone a song of victory. A Christ figure is fleeing across a cloud-dappled sky while a hermit meditates, head in hands, deep in a grotto, and a miserable wretch lies dying, exhausted by privations, prostrated by hunger, stretched out on his back with his feet by a pool of stagnant water.

The same artist's *Good Samaritan*,* a lithograph of an immense pen-and-ink drawing, portrays a fantastic jumble of palms, rowans, and oaks, growing all together in defiance of seasons and of climates, a patch of virgin forest crammed with monkeys, owls, and screech-owls, nodulated with old tree-stumps as misshapen as mandrake roots, a magic wood with a clearing in its centre through which you can glimpse, beyond a camel and the group formed by the Samaritan and the wounded man, a river, then a fairy-like city scaling the horizon, climbing up into a strange sky that is bird-stippled, foam-flecked with rolling billows, as though swollen with close-packed clouds. One might have supposed it to be a drawing by an early master, perhaps someone after the style of Albert Dürer, dreamt up by an opium-befuddled mind; but, although he enjoyed the delicacy of detail and the impressive style of this lithograph, Des Esseintes found himself more particularly drawn to the other works which decorated the room.

Those were pictures bearing the signature: Odilon Redon.* They held, between their gold-edged frames of unpolished pearwood, undreamed-of images: a Merovingian-type head, resting upon a cup; a bearded man, reminiscent both of a Buddhist priest and a public orator, touching an enormous cannon-ball with his finger; a dreadful spider with a human face lodged in the centre of its body. Then there were charcoal sketches which delved even deeper into the terrors of fever-ridden dreams. Here, on an enormous die, a melancholy eyelid winked; over there stretched dry and arid landscapes, calcinated plains, heaving and quaking ground, where volcanos erupted into rebellious clouds, under foul and murky skies; sometimes the subjects seemed to have been taken from the nightmarish dreams of science, and hark back to prehistoric times; monstrous flora bloomed on the rocks; everywhere, in among the erratic blocks

and glacial mud, were figures whose simian appearance—heavy jawbone, protruding brows, receding forehead, and flattened skull top—recalled the ancestral head, the head of the first Quaternary Period, the head of man when he was still fructivorous and without speech, the contemporary of the mammoth, of the rhinoceros with septate nostrils, and of the giant bear. These drawings defied classification; unheeding, for the most part, of the limitations of painting, they ushered in a very special type of the fantastic, one born of sickness and delirium.

And, indeed, some of those countenances, in which gigantic, insane eyes dominated all other features; some of those bodies—inordinately magnified or else distended, as though viewed through a carafe of water—recalled for Des Esseintes memories of typhoid fever, memories that he had somehow never cast off, of the delirious nights and terrifying fantasies of his childhood.

Filled with an indefinable sense of unease by these drawings, just as he was by certain of Goya's *Proverbs** which they recalled, and just as he also was by reading Edgar Allan Poe,* whose hallucinatory phantasms and terror-inducing effects Odilon Redon seemed to have transposed into a different art form, Des Esseintes would rub his eyes and rest them upon a radiant figure which arose, serene and calm, from among these disquieting prints, a figure of Melancholy seated on some rocks before the disk of the sun, in an attitude of despondency and gloom.

The shadows would vanish by magic; a delightful sadness, an as it were languorous dejection would wash over his thoughts, and he would pass hours meditating on this work which, with its touches of gouache stippling the heavy crayon, introduced a luminosity of aquamarine and pale gold into the unrelieved blackness of those charcoals and those prints.

In addition to this series of Redon's works which decorated almost the whole of the panelling in the hall, he had hung, in his bedroom, a confused sketch by Théotocopuli,* a Christ in extraordinary tones, drawn in an exaggerated style, violently coloured, filled with a frenetic energy, a picture from that painter's second period, when he was tormented by the overriding desire to no longer resemble Titian.

This sinister painting, with its shades of boot-polish black and cadaver green, was in keeping with certain theories of Des Esseintes's on the subject of interior decoration. In his view there were only two

ways to arrange a bedroom: either make it into an exciting bedchamber, a setting for nocturnal pleasures; or else devise a place of solitude and repose, a retreat for meditation, a kind of private chapel.

In the one case, the Louis XV style was the obvious choice of the discerning, and particularly of those exhausted by extreme cerebral irritability; indeed, the eighteenth century is the only period which has known how to envelop woman in an atmosphere of depravity, modelling its furniture after the curves of her charms, mimicking her spasms of pleasure, her spiralling convulsions, with the undulating and twisting intricacies of wood and of copper, adding spice to the sugary languor of the blonde with its light, bright décor, moderating the salty piquancy of the brunette with tapestries in cloying, bland, almost insipid tones.

Such a bedroom had once formed part of his lodgings in Paris, including the broad white-enamelled bed which is an additional titillation, a depravity of the seasoned voluptuary who is aroused by the specious chastity, the hypocritical modesty of Greuze's* tender virgins, by the contrived artlessness of a licentious bed that seems destined for a child or a young girl.

In the second case—and now that he intended to leave behind him the disturbing memories of his past life, this was the only possible choice—the bedroom must be contrived so as to resemble a monastic cell; but this gave rise to endless difficulties, since he refused to accept, for his own use, the ugly austerity characteristic of places of penitence and prayer.

By dint of considering and reconsidering every aspect of the problem, he concluded that the effect for which he was striving could be summed up in the following way: to furnish a depressing space with joyous objects, or rather, without sacrificing the ugly character of the room, imprint upon it, by this treatment, a kind of overall elegance and distinction; reverse the approach of a theatrical décor in which tawdry fabrics mimic luxurious, expensive cloths; achieve precisely the opposite effect, by using magnificent materials to create the impression of rags; in a word, to fit out a monastic cell which appeared to be genuine without, of course, actually being so.

He set about it in this way: to imitate that dark yellow paint favoured by administrators and clerics, he had his walls hung with saffron silk; to imitate the chocolate brown wainscoting customary

in that kind of room, he covered those lower areas with thin strips of dark purple kingwood. The effect was enchanting, and suggested, though only very remotely, the displeasing rigidity of the model he was transforming as he copied it; in its turn the ceiling, hung with white holland, could mimic plaster, but without its crude, obtrusive effect; as to the chilly stone floor of the cell, he succeeded in imitating it quite well, thanks to a carpet made in a design of red tiles, with some whitish areas in the wool that simulated places worn by sandals and rubbed thin by boots.

He furnished this room with a little iron bedstead, a fake monastic bed, constructed from very old pieces of polished wrought iron, set off, at its head and foot, by some close-worked ornamentation, of fully opened tulips intertwined with vine branches, taken from the banister of a magnificent staircase in an old mansion.

As a bedside table, he installed an antique prayer-stool which could accommodate a chamber pot inside and a prayer-book on top; against the opposite wall he placed a church-warden's pew, surmounted by a large openwork screen equipped with misericords carved out of the solid wood; he set, in his pair of altar candle-sticks, tapers of genuine wax which he bought in an establishment which specialized in supplying the needs of the Church, for he professed an undisguised aversion to petrol, shale-oil, gas, and stearin candles, to all of modern lighting, which is so garish, so crude.

In bed, in the morning, lying with his head on his pillow before going to sleep, he would gaze at his Théotocopuli, the hideous tones of which tended to play down the smiling yellow of the draperies and reduce it to a deeper shade, and he could then easily imagine that he was a hundred leagues from Paris, far from the world, buried in the depths of a monastery.

And, on the whole, the illusion was easy to maintain, since he led a life almost analogous to that of a monk. He thus enjoyed the advantages of the cloister while avoiding its drawbacks: the barrack-room discipline, the lack of attentive service, the filth, the promiscuity, the monotony of idleness. Just as he had made his cell into a warm and comfortable bedroom, so too had he made himself a life that was normal, pleasant, full of well-being and of occupation, and free.

Like a hermit, he was ripe for seclusion, worn out by life and expecting nothing more of it; and also like a monk, he was overcome

by a tremendous lassitude, by a need for contemplation, by a longing no longer to have anything in common with the heathen—which was what he called Utilitarians and fools.

In short, although he experienced no vocation for the state of grace, he felt a genuine sympathy for those who are confined in monasteries and persecuted by a vindictive society, which cannot forgive them either for the well-merited scorn that they feel for the world, nor the intention they profess of redeeming, of expiating, by a protracted silence, the ever-increasing shamelessness of its preposterous or inane conversations.

6

Sunk into a huge wing chair, his feet resting on the gilded, bulbous ends of the andirons, his slippers scorched by the logs which crackled and shot forth bright darts of flame as though whipped by a blowpipe's fierce blast, Des Esseintes laid down upon a table the old quarto volume he was reading, stretched, lit a cigarette, and abandoned himself to a delightful reverie, racing headlong in pursuit of memories forgotten for many months and now suddenly revived by the recollection of a name which, for no apparent reason, was stirring in his memory.

He saw again, with surprising clearness, the embarrassment of his friend d'Aigurande, when, at a gathering of confirmed bachelors, he had been forced to admit he was making final preparations for marriage. The company expostulated, evoking the horrors of sleeping in a shared bed; all in vain; he had lost his head, and believed his future wife to be intelligent, claiming that in her he had detected exceptional qualities of devotion and tenderness.

Des Esseintes alone, of all those young men, encouraged him in his resolutions, as soon as he discovered that d'Aigurande's fiancée wanted to live on the corner of a new boulevard, in one of those modern apartments built in the shape of a rotunda.

Convinced of the inexorable power of petty vexations—more disastrous than great ones to the well-tempered mind—and depending on the fact that d'Aigurande had no money of his own and that his wife's dowry was virtually non-existent, he perceived, in this simple desire, a never-ending prospect of ludicrous misfortunes.

D'Aigurande did indeed buy furniture built on the round—pier tables with their backs hollowed out in semi-circles, curved curtain rods, carpets cut into crescent shapes, a complete set of furniture made to order. He spent twice the amount that others spend, and then when his wife, finding herself short of money for her dresses, grew tired of living in this rotunda and moved into a square apartment that was less expensive, not a single piece of furniture either suited or fitted it. Little by little, this cumbersome furniture became a source of untold annoyances to the couple; their relationship, already undermined by their shared existence, disintegrated further

with each passing week; they lost their tempers, upbraiding one another for being unable to remain in that drawing-room where the sofas and the tables did not touch the walls and shook, in spite of being wedged, the moment anyone brushed against them. They lacked the resources for remedying the problem, which would in any case be almost impossible. Everything was grounds for bitterness and quarrels, everything from the drawers, which had warped in the wobbly furniture, to the thefts of the maid who, profiting from the inattention resulting from the quarrels, robbed the till; in a word, their life became intolerable; he found amusement elsewhere while she sought, among the resources offered by adultery, a way to forget her grey, monotonous life. With one accord they terminated their lease and petitioned for a separation.

'My battle plan was absolutely correct,' Des Esseintes had told himself then, experiencing the satisfaction of strategists whose manœuvres, thought out far in advance, are crowned with success. Now, seated before his fire, reflecting upon the breakup of that couple whom he had helped, with his sensible advice, to marry, he threw a fresh load of logs into the fireplace and once more launched headlong into his dreams.

Other memories of the same general kind were now thronging into his mind. One evening, some years earlier, in the Rue de Rivoli, he had passed an errand boy of about sixteen, a peaky, sly-looking child, as tempting as a girl. He was laboriously sucking at a cigarette, the paper of which was splitting, punctured by the sharp fragments of tobacco. Cursing, the boy was striking against his thigh kitchen matches which would not light; he used them all up. Noticing that Des Esseintes was watching him, he approached him, his hand on the peak of his cap, and politely asked him for a light. Des Esseintes gave him some scented Dubèque cigarettes, then engaged him in conversation, encouraging the lad to tell him his story.

This was simplicity itself; his name was Auguste Langlois, he worked for a cardboard-maker, his mother was dead, and his father beat him mercilessly.

Des Esseintes listened to him thoughtfully. 'Come and have a drink,' he said. And he took him into a café where he ordered him some very potent punch. The child drank, without saying a word. 'Look,' said Des Esseintes suddenly, 'would you like to have some fun tonight? I'm paying.' And he took the boy to visit Madame

Laure. This lady ran an establishment on a third floor in the Rue Mosnier; she employed an assortment of girls, in a series of red rooms decorated with round mirrors and furnished with couches and wash-basins.

There, crumpling up the cloth of his cap, Auguste had gazed in utter amazement at a troop of women whose painted mouths all opened simultaneously:

'Oh, the little rascal! Isn't he sweet!'

'But see here, dearie, you aren't old enough,' added a big dark woman with bulging eyes and a hooked nose; her role at Madame Laure's was the indispensable one of the beautiful Jewess.

Comfortably settled, almost at home there, Des Esseintes chatted quietly with the manageress.

'Don't be scared, you noodle,' he went on, addressing the child. 'Come on, make your choice, it's my treat.' And he gently pushed the boy on to a couch between two women. At a sign from Madame they squeezed up to him a little, covering Auguste's knees with their wrappers, pushing into his face shoulders frosted with warm, intoxicating powder, while he sat motionless, his cheeks scarlet, his mouth hard, his eyes under lowered lids venturing curious glances, which lingered persistently on the women's thighs.

Vanda, the beautiful Jewess, kissed him, giving him good advice, admonishing him to obey his father and mother, while at the same time her hands strayed slowly over the child, whose rapturous face, transfigured, buried itself in her neck.

'So it isn't on your own account that you've come tonight,' said Madame Laure to Des Esseintes. 'But where the devil did you pick up that kid?' she went on, when Auguste had vanished in the wake of the beautiful Jewess.

'In the street, my dear.'

'But you're not drunk,' murmured the old woman. Then, after a moment's reflection, she added with a motherly smile: 'I understand: but my goodness, you certainly have to have them young, don't you!'

Des Esseintes shrugged: 'You're not with me; no, far from it,' he said; 'the truth is that I'm simply trying to produce a murderer. Now pay close attention to my reasoning. This boy's a virgin, and he's reached the age where the blood begins to seethe; he could chase the girls in his neighbourhood, he could have some fun but go on behaving decently, he could, in a word, enjoy his little share of the

humdrum happiness which is the lot of the poor. On the other hand, by bringing him here, by showing him a luxury which he didn't even suspect existed and which will necessarily imprint itself on his mind; by giving him such a windfall every couple of weeks, he'll become accustomed to these pleasures which his means do not permit him to enjoy; let's suppose that he'll need three months for them to become absolutely essential—and by spacing them out as I shall do, I do not run the risk of sating him—so, at the end of the three months, I shall put a stop to the little income which I'm going to advance you for this good deed, and then he'll steal, to be able to come here; he'll do something quite desperate, so that he can tumble about on this couch, under these gas-lights!

'To take an extreme case, Auguste will—I hope—kill the man who turns up at the wrong moment while the lad's trying to break into his desk; in that event I'll have achieved my purpose, I'll have contributed, as far as lies within my power, to creating a scoundrel, one more enemy of this hideous society which is holding us to ransom.'

The women stared at him, wide-eyed.

'There you are!' he went on, seeing a blushing and sheepish Auguste skulking behind the beautiful Jewess as he came back into the room. 'Come on, boy, it's getting late, say goodnight to these ladies.' And, on the stairs, he explained to him that he could return, every fortnight, to Madame Laure's, without it costing him a penny; then, down in the street, on the pavement, gazing at the bewildered boy:

'We shall not meet again;' he said; 'go straight home to your father, whose idle hand is itching for something to do, and keep in mind this quasi-biblical saying: "Do unto others as you would not have them do unto you"; you'll go far with that precept. Goodnight. Above all don't be ungrateful, let me hear word of you as soon as possible, in the law reports in the newspapers.'

'The little Judas!' Des Esseintes was muttering now as he poked the embers, 'to think I've never seen his name mentioned in the paper! It's true, I wasn't able to cover every eventuality, there were certain risks I could foresee but not preclude, such as Mother Laure cheating, and pocketing the money without delivering the goods, or one of those women becoming infatuated with Auguste, who may perhaps have got it for free when his three months were up; or even the lovely Jewess's vicious proclivities which may have frightened the boy, too impatient and too young to submit to the long-drawn-out preliminaries and electrifying climaxes achieved through artifice. Unless he's been in trouble with the law since I came to Fontenay and am no longer reading newspapers, I've been swindled.'

He stood up and took several turns about his room.

'Still, that would be a shame,' he reflected, 'for by behaving in that way, I was putting into practice the layman's parable, the allegory of universal education which aims at nothing less than transforming all men into Langloises, by—instead of permanently and mercifully putting out the eyes of the poor—by striving to force them to open their eyes wide, so that they may notice that some of their neighbours have destinies that are quite undeservedly more merciful, and enjoy pleasures that are keener and more multi-faceted and, consequently, more desirable and more precious.

'And the fact is,' continued Des Esseintes, following his train of thought, 'the fact is that since pain is an effect of education, since it deepens and sharpens in proportion as ideas spring up, the more one tries to polish the intelligence and to refine the nervous system of those poor devils, the more one will develop in them those fiercely long-lasting seeds of moral suffering and of hatred.'

The lamps were smoking. He trimmed them, and looked at his watch. Three in the morning. Lighting a cigarette, he immersed himself afresh in his reading, which his reverie had interrupted, of the old Latin poem *De laude castitatis*,* written during the reign of Gondebald, by Avitus, Metropolitan Bishop of Vienne.

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 *moïcheïa*, 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 metalled 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-Claris 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 Baschet'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 *Salammbô*: 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),

founder of the *Chronique des arts et de la curiosité* in 1861 which he edited until 1872, along with the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1861–72).

49 *Da Vinci and . . . Delacroix*: Moreau copied Da Vinci from museums especially during his visits to Italy (1857 to 1859), and had professional links with Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), one of the greatest painters of the first half of the nineteenth century, the last major history painter and the embodiment of Romanticism in the visual arts.

50 *enameller*: Huysmans's French text refers here to 'l'art du Limosin', the latter being the name of a family of enamellers from Limoges, most notably Léonard I (1505–77), whose series of forty-six enamels of the royal family and their ancestors is to be found in the Louvre.

Jan Luyken: (1649–1712) was an engraver and writer from Amsterdam who illustrated pietist works of martyrology, including the *Theatre of Martyrs from the Death of Christ until the Present* (1685). His support for Calvinist piety is 'perverted' by Huysmans's sadistic impulses.

51 *Callot's*: Jacques Callot (1592–1635), French etcher, engraver, and draughtsman, one of the major exponents of the Mannerist style in the early seventeenth century. His compositions were in turns fantastic, grotesque, and elegant.

dragonnades: campaigns of persecution against the Protestants, led by Louis XIV, in which dragoons (named after their muskets, so called because they 'breathed fire like a dragon') were quartered upon the persecuted.

Comedy of Death: published by *La Revue fantaisiste* in 1854 (Théophile Gautier wrote a poem with the same title). Rodolphe Bresdin (1822–85) was a remarkable engraver and lithographer whose humble origins are evoked in Champfleury's *Chien-Caillou*. He was introduced to Gautier by Baudelaire and is discussed by Robert de Montesquiou in *Rodolphe Bresdin* (1912) and *L'Inextricable Graveur, Rodolphe Bresdin* (1913).

52 *The Good Samaritan*: composed by Bresdin in 1861 during his stay in Paris.

Odilon Redon: (1840–1916), another artist propelled to eminence amongst the Decadents by *Against Nature*. His work is noted for its interpretations of Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Poe, and the charcoals and lithographs which examine fantastic subjects and illuminate the links between natural and human forms.

53 *Proverbs*: (1816–24), an incomplete set of twenty-two prints by Goya, eventually published in 1864. At once enigmatic, mystifying and resistant, they were initially entitled *Disparates* but were subsequently associated with Spanish proverbs. See note to p. 83 below.

Edgar Allan Poe: (1809–49), more influential in France than in his native America; disseminated via Baudelaire's translations and introductions to his work (1848–65), his depictions of sensations on the edge of normal psychic life are characterized by a sense of the macabre which proved

highly stimulating for Surrealists and Decadents alike. In 1882 Redon produced in limited edition a set of six lithographs *A Edgar Poe*.

Théotocopuli: name used in the nineteenth century to refer to the sixteenth-century painter El Greco (whose real name was Domenikos Theotokopoulos). This reference anticipates the eulogy in Maurice Barrès's *Gréco ou le secret de Tolède* (1911).

54 *Greuze's*: Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805), French painter, notably of genre scenes, portraits, and studies of expressive heads. His reputation was revived after 1850 when critics such as the Goncourt brothers returned with enthusiasm to eighteenth-century painting. By the end of the century his work, especially his many variations on the *Head of a Girl*, fetched record prices. The theme of virginity (and its loss) was highlighted in Diderot's famous interpretation of his *Girl Weeping over her Dead Bird* (1765).

61 *'De laude castitatis'*: (*The Praise of Chastity*). Des Esseintes returns here to the section of his library inventoried in Chapter 3 of the novel. The full title of Avitus' work is *De consolatoria laude castitatis ad Fuscinam sororem*.

63 *Lacordaire*: Jean-Baptiste-Henri Lacordaire (1802–61), friend of Lamennais and collaborator on *L'Avenir*, organ of liberal Catholicism; noted for his Lenten sermons at Notre-Dame (1836) and for trying to reconstitute the order of the Frères Prêcheurs de saint Dominique. Politically active, he was a member of the Assemblée Constituante in 1848.

Sorrèze: or Sorèze, a famous ecclesiastical college founded in the Tarn in 1682. After 1840 it fell from Jesuit control into the Dominican hands of Lacordaire.

65 *the Cluny Museum*: the Musée de Cluny in Paris, a museum of national antiquities stored in the former Hôtel de Cluny, built *c.*1490 as a town residence for the abbots of the Benedictine Abbey of Cluny.

67 *Father Labbé's . . . Synods*: Labbé (1607–67), began the *Collection des conciles* (Collection of the Church Councils) (1672, 18 vols., completed by père Gabriel Cossart).

'Nothing is incorporeal . . . own': cited in Flaubert's *La Tentation de saint Antoine*.

68 *De Quincey*: his *Confessions of an Opium-Eater*, translated by Alfred de Musset in 1828 and adapted by Baudelaire, proved deeply influential on Huysmans.

69 *Schopenhauer*: Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), German philosopher whose version of world-weary pessimism proved highly seductive in the atmosphere of self-conscious decline which characterized late-nineteenth-century France. Made fashionable in France by Elme Caro's *Le Pessimisme au XIX^e siècle: Léopardi, Schopenhauer, Hartmann* (1878).

'Imitation of Christ': devotional work by Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471).