

After blazing up like dry straw, his enthusiasm for the digester died away just as rapidly. His nervous dyspepsia, which had, initially, been pacified, returned; and then, that concentrated nourishment was so binding and caused such an irritation of the bowel that Des Esseintes was obliged to discontinue its use forthwith.

His malady resumed its progress, accompanied by entirely new symptoms. The nightmares, the olfactory hallucinations, the visual disturbances, the harsh cough as regular as clockwork, the thudding of the arteries and heart and the cold sweats were succeeded by auditory delusions, those disorders which occur only in the final stages of the disease.

Des Esseintes, consumed by a raging fever, suddenly heard the babbling of water, the buzzing of wasps, then these sounds blended into one which resembled the whirring of a lathe; this whirring grew higher and softer, gradually changing into the silvery tone of a bell. Then he felt his delirious brain being wafted away on waves of music\* and enveloped in the swirling mysticism of his adolescence. The songs learnt from the Jesuit Fathers came back to him, recreating, on their own, the college and the chapel where they had reverberated, and communicating these hallucinations to the olfactory and visual organs, mantling them in fumes of incense and in shadows lit by the glow of stained-glass windows beneath lofty arches.

Under the Fathers, religious ceremonies were performed with great splendour and solemnity; an excellent organist and an outstanding choir made these spiritual exercises an artistic delight profitable to the service of religion. The organist was devoted to the old masters, and on Church feast days would mark the occasion with a mass of Palestrina's or Orlando Lasso's, a psalm by Marcello, an oratorio of Handel's, a Bach motet; in preference to Father Lambillotte's\* languid, facile compilations (so favoured by the priests), he would play some sixteenth-century *Laudi spirituali* whose hieratic beauty had many times enthralled Des Esseintes.

But above all else he had experienced ineffable pleasure from listening to plainsong, to which the organist, in defiance of current fashion, had remained faithful. This type of music, now seen

as a decadent and barbarous form of the Christian liturgy, as an archeological curiosity, as a relic of the remote past, was the very language of the ancient Church, the soul of the Middle Ages; it was the eternal prayer in song, modulated in accordance with the movements of the soul, the everlasting hymn offered up for centuries past to the Most High.

This traditional melody, with its powerful unison, its harmonies as majestic and massive as blocks of hewn stone, was the only one that could truly blend with the ancient basilicas and fill their Romanesque vaults, of which it seemed to be the very emanation and living voice.

Time without number Des Esseintes had been overpowered with awe and reverence by the sense of an irresistible presence, when the *Christus factus est* of the Gregorian chant went soaring up into the nave amid the pillars that trembled in the swirling clouds of incense, or when the faux-bourdon of the *De profundis* groaned forth, mournful as a stifled sob, poignant as a despairing cry of mankind lamenting its mortal destiny and imploring the tender mercy of its Saviour!

Compared with this magnificent plainsong, created by the genius of the Church, as impersonal and anonymous as the organ (whose inventor is unknown), all religious music seemed to him profane. Essentially, in all the works of Jomelli and Porpora, Carissimi and Durante, in the finest conceptions of Handel and of Bach, there was no renunciation of popular acclaim, no sacrifice of artistic effect, no abdication of human pride listening to itself pray; at most, with those impressive masses by Lesueur\* which were celebrated at Saint-Roch, the religious style had reasserted itself, solemn and august, and had, in its uncompromising starkness, drawn closer to the austere majesty of the ancient plainsong.

Since that time, utterly disgusted by those fake *Stabat Maters* dreamt up by a Pergolesi or a Rossini, by all that encroachment of secular art into liturgical art, Des Esseintes had kept well away from those questionable works which are countenanced by an indulgent Church.

Furthermore this permissiveness, tolerated under the guise of attracting the faithful but actually aimed at filling the collection plate, had immediately produced a harvest of arias taken from Italian operas, of contemptible cavatinas and indecorous quadrilles, played *con brio* by full orchestras in churches converted into boudoirs and

turned over to second-rate performers who bellowed away up in the clerestory, while down below fashionably dressed ladies examined one another's finery with a jealous eye and swooned at the cries of the ham actors, whose impure voices were defiling the sacred tones of the organ!

For years now he had firmly refused to take part in these pious diversions, remaining faithful to his childhood memories and even regretting having heard some *Te Deums* composed by great masters, for he remembered that admirable *Te Deum* of plainsong, that hymn of such awe-inspiring simplicity, created by some saint or other, a St Ambrose or a St Hilary, who, without the complicated resources of an orchestra, without the musical techniques of modern science, proclaimed a passionate faith, a frenzied joy which burst forth—expressing the feelings of all humanity—in earnest, assured, almost celestial tones!

It must be added that Des Esseintes's ideas on music were in flagrant contradiction with the theories he professed on the other arts. In the sphere of religious music he really only approved of the monastic music of the Middle Ages, that austere music which provoked in him an instinctive nervous reaction, as did certain pages of old Christian Latin texts; and besides, as he himself admitted, he was incapable of appreciating whatever ingenious devices contemporary masters might have introduced into the art of Catholic music. In the first place, he had not studied music with that same passion which had attracted him to painting and to literature. He played the piano as well as the next man, and was, after much initial stumbling, capable of more or less deciphering a score, but he knew nothing of harmony, the technique essential for truly grasping a nuance, for appreciating a subtle point, for savouring, with genuine understanding, a musical refinement.

Furthermore, secular music is a promiscuous art, since you cannot experience it on your own, at home, the way you can read a book;\* to enjoy it, he would have been forced to mingle with the unvarying audience that fills the theatres to overflowing and haunts that Cirque d'Hiver\* where, under a broiling sun and in a stifling atmosphere, you can watch a hulking brute beating time as though he were beating a sauce, and massacring disconnected excerpts of Wagner to the intense delight of an ignorant crowd!

He had never felt up to plunging into this mob in order to hear

Berlioz, even though some fragments of his compositions had enthralled him with their passionate exaltation and vaulting fire, and he was also only too conscious that not one scene, not so much as one single phrase in any of the mighty Wagner's operas could with impunity be divorced from its context.

Portions sliced off and served up in a concert's bill of fare lost all their significance, were deprived of all their sense, for, just as the chapters of a book complement one another and all lead to the same conclusion, to the same objective, Wagner used his melodies to depict the characters of his *dramatis personae*, embody their thoughts, and express their motives whether visible or hidden, and these ingenious and recurrent repetitions were only comprehensible to those listeners who had followed the subject from its exposition and watched the characters gradually take shape and grow, in a setting from which they could not be removed without causing them to wither, like branches cut from a tree.

Consequently Des Esseintes believed that in this rabble of melomaniacs who every Sunday went into ecstasies on the benches of the Cirque, there were scarcely twenty who, when the attendants kindly stopped chatting and allowed the orchestra to be heard, recognized the score that was being massacred.

In view also of the further fact that the intelligent patriotism of the French prevented any of their theatres from putting on a Wagner opera, devotees of music who were not versed in its arcana, and either could not or would not travel to Bayreuth, had no option but to remain at home, and this was the reasonable course adopted by Des Esseintes.

On a different level, music of the more popular, less demanding kind, and excerpts from old-fashioned operas, held almost no appeal for him; the cheap little airs of Auber and Boïeldieu, Adam and Flotow,\* and the rhetorical banalities turned out by composers like Ambroise Thomas and Bazin\* repelled him in the same way as did the outdated affectations and vulgar charms of the Italians. He had therefore kept resolutely away from the musical arts, and, from the many years that this abstinence had continued, the only pleasant memories he retained were of a few performances of chamber music when he had heard some Beethoven and, especially, some Schumann and Schubert, which had wrung his nerves in the same way as did the most deeply felt, most anguished poems of Poe.

Certain of Schumann's parts for the cello had left him actually gasping and choking, in the grip of hysteria; but it was above all Schubert's Lieder that uplifted and carried him away, leaving him afterwards as prostrated as though from a great outpouring of nervous energy, during an extreme mystical experience. Schubert's penetrating music thrilled him to the marrow, forcing a multitude of forgotten griefs and ancient discontents to surface in a heart astonished at containing so much confused misery and ill-defined pain. This desolate music, this lament coming from the furthestmost depths of the soul, both terrified and enchanted him. Never had he been able to hum 'Des Mädchens Klage'\* to himself without tears of nervous agitation filling his eyes, for there was in that mournful song something more than grief, there was something wrenching that tore at his heart-strings, something that evoked a dying love-affair set in a forlorn landscape.

And whenever they came back to his lips, these exquisite, funereal laments conjured up, in his mind, a place on the outskirts of a city, a mean and voiceless place where silently, in the distance, lines of men and women, wearied and bowed down by life, were disappearing into the twilight, while he himself, surfeited with bitterness and replete with disgust, felt himself alone, utterly alone, in the midst of a tearful Nature, overwhelmed by an inexpressible melancholy, by a relentless anguish, the mysterious intensity of which precluded all consolation, all pity, all repose. Like the tolling of a death-knell, this despairing melody haunted him now that he lay in his bed, prostrated by fever and agitated by a feeling of apprehension which was all the more implacable in that he could no longer determine its cause. Finally he just let himself drift, swept hither and yon in the flood of anguish released by this music which, for a brief moment, would be blocked by the low, soft notes of psalms singing in his head, while his battered temples felt as if they were being pounded by the clappers of tolling bells.

One morning, however, these noises died away; feeling more in command of himself, he asked the servant to give him a mirror; it immediately slipped from his grasp; he scarcely recognized himself, his face was mud-colour, his lips dry and swollen, his tongue furrowed, his skin rough; his hair and his beard, which his manservant had not trimmed since he fell ill, added to the horror of the cadaverous face and the huge, watery eyes which burned with a feverish

glitter in that skeletal head covered with bristling hair. He was more frightened by this alteration in his looks than he was by his physical weakness, by the uncontrollable vomiting which rejected all attempts at nourishment, or by the depression into which he was sinking. He believed he was done for; then, despite his overwhelming state of prostration, the energy of a desperate man made him sit up, and gave him the strength to write to his Paris doctor and to order the servant to set off immediately, find this doctor, and bring him back, no matter at what cost, that very day.

All at once he went from a mood of the most complete despair to one of the most bracing optimism; this physician was a famous specialist, a doctor renowned for his cures of nervous disorders; 'he must have cured cases that are more difficult and dangerous than mine,' Des Esseintes told himself; 'I'm sure to be up and about in a day or two'; but then this feeling of confidence was followed by one of utter disillusion: 'however learned and intuitive they may be, doctors don't know a thing about neuroses, they don't even know what causes them.' This doctor, like the others, would prescribe the eternal zinc oxide and quinine, potassium bromide and valerian. 'But who knows,' he continued, clutching at straws; 'if these medicines have done me no good up to now, it's probably because I didn't take them in the proper doses.'

In spite of everything, this prospect of relief was putting new life into him, when he was assailed by fresh misgivings: 'as long as the doctor actually is in Paris, as long as he does agree to come'; and he was immediately beset by the fear of his servant's not being able to find him. His spirits began to sink again, swinging, with every passing moment, between the most irrational hope and the wildest foreboding, exaggerating, in his own mind, both his chances of a rapid cure and his fears of imminent danger; the hours passed and the moment came when, in despair, at the end of his tether, convinced that the doctor would certainly not come, he told himself furiously that if help had reached him in time he would undoubtedly have been saved; then his anger at the servant, at the doctor whom he accused of letting him die, vanished, and he became angry at himself, reproaching himself for having waited so long to ask for help, convincing himself that he would now be cured if he had, even as recently as yesterday, insisted on effective medicines and suitable nursing.

These alternating surges of alarm and hope that were jostling about in his otherwise unoccupied head gradually died away, but the shocks had finally depleted his remaining strength; he fell into an exhausted sleep broken by incoherent dreams, a kind of faint punctuated by periods of insentient wakefulness; in the end he had so completely lost any awareness of his own desires and fears, that when the doctor suddenly entered his room he seemed bewildered, evincing neither astonishment nor joy.

The servant had undoubtedly informed him of Des Esseintes's way of life, and of the various symptoms which he himself had been able to observe, since the day when he had picked up his master from where he was lying beside the window, overcome by the potency of the perfumes, for the doctor asked few questions of the patient, with whose early history he had, in any case, long been familiar; but he examined him, listened to his chest, and carefully scrutinized his urine, in which certain white streaks identified for him one of the main determining causes of the neurosis. He wrote out a prescription and, after saying he would be back soon, departed without another word.

This visit comforted Des Esseintes, although he found the doctor's silence alarming, and entreated his manservant not to conceal the truth from him any longer. The latter asserted that the doctor had not shown any anxiety, and Des Esseintes, notwithstanding his suspicions, could not detect anything whatever about the old man's tranquil face that suggested the demurrals of prevarication.

His thoughts now became more cheerful; his aches and pains had in any case abated and the weakness that he had been feeling in every limb had taken on a certain sweet, comforting quality that was at once indefinable and languid; furthermore he was astonished and pleased not to be encumbered with drugs and medicine bottles, and a feeble smile came to his lips when the servant brought him a nourishing peptone enema, warning him that this procedure was to be repeated three times each day.

The operation was successful, and Des Esseintes could not forbear from tacitly congratulating himself on the event, which was in a sense the crowning achievement of the life he had created for himself; his predilection for the artificial had now—without his even desiring it—achieved its supreme fulfilment; one could go no

further; to take nourishment in this manner was unquestionably the ultimate deviation from the norm that anyone could realize.

'How delightful it would be,' he said to himself, 'to continue on this simple diet once your health was fully restored! What a saving of time, what a radical deliverance from the dislike that meat inspires in people who have no appetite! What a complete release from the tediousness that invariably accompanies the necessarily limited choice of dishes! What a spirited protest against the vile sin of gluttony! And finally, what a decided slap in the face for that old Mother Nature whose unvarying demands would be permanently silenced!'

And he went on murmuring to himself: 'It would be a simple matter to sharpen your appetite by swallowing a powerful aperient, then when you could truthfully say: "Whatever can be the time? Surely the dinner must be ready by now, I'm as hungry as a hunter," the table would be laid by placing the august instrument on the tablecloth and then, in just the time it takes to say grace, you would have eliminated the tiresome, vulgar chore of eating.'

A few days later, the servant presented him with an enema the colour and smell of which differed entirely from those of the peptone concoction. 'But this isn't the same!' exclaimed Des Esseintes, staring uneasily at the liquid in the instrument. He asked for the menu, just as though he were in a restaurant, and, unfolding the doctor's prescription, read:

<i>Cod-liver oil:</i>	20 g.
<i>Beef tea:</i>	200 g.
<i>Burgundy:</i>	200 g.
<i>Yolk of egg:</i>	1

This made him wonder. Because of the ruined condition of his stomach, he had been unable to take any serious interest in the art of cooking, and now he suddenly found himself pondering over recipes of inverted epicurism; then a bizarre idea crossed his mind. Perhaps the doctor had supposed that his patient's strange palate was already weary of the taste of the peptone, perhaps, like a clever chef, he had meant to vary the flavour of the food, and forestall the possibility that the monotony of the dishes would bring on a total loss of appetite. Once launched on these reflections, Des Esseintes drew up some novel recipes, designing meatless dinners for Fridays, increasing the

dose of cod-liver oil and of wine and striking out the beef tea, since meat was expressly forbidden by the Church; but soon there was no longer any point to his thinking about these nourishing liquids, for very gradually the doctor succeeded in controlling the vomiting and in getting him to swallow, by the normal route, a syrupy punch containing powdered meat, which had a vague aroma of cocoa that pleased his actual palate.

Weeks went by, and finally the stomach consented to function; occasionally, he would still experience bouts of nausea, but these were relieved by ginger beer and by Rivière's anti-emetic draught.

Finally, little by little, the organs recovered, and with the help of pepsins actual meat was digested; Des Esseintes regained his strength and was able to stand up and try to walk about his room, leaning on a stick and holding on to the corners of the furniture; instead of rejoicing at this success, he forgot about his former suffering, grew annoyed at the length of the convalescence, and berated the doctor for dragging things out in this leisurely manner. Some unsuccessful experiments had, it was true, slowed down his cure; his stomach could not tolerate iron, even when it was mixed with laudanum, any more than it could tolerate quinquina; these had to be replaced by arsenates, after two weeks wasted in futile attempts, as Des Esseintes impatiently pointed out.

Eventually, the moment came when he could stay up for the whole afternoon and walk unaided round his rooms. Then his study began to irritate him; the defects to which habit had accustomed him struck him forcibly when he returned to it after this long absence. It seemed to him that the colours he had chosen to be viewed by lamplight did not look well together in the daylight; he considered changing them, and spent hours devising subversive harmonies of hues, hybrid matings of fabrics and of leathers.

'I'm certainly well on the way to recovery,' he said to himself, registering the return of his former preoccupations, his former tastes.

One morning, as he was gazing at his orange and blue walls, musing about ideal hangings made out of Greek Orthodox church stoles, dreaming of gold-embroidered Russian dalmatics, of brocade copes decorated with Slavonic lettering worked in precious stones from the Urals and rows of pearls, the doctor came in and, observing the direction of his patient's eyes, questioned him.

Des Esseintes told him about his unrealizable dreams; and he was

beginning to scheme about fresh experimentations with colours, to speak of new couplings and contrasts of tones that he proposed to set up, when the doctor poured cold water on his plans by assuring him in a peremptory manner that at any rate he would not be putting his plans into effect in *that* house.

And, without giving him time to draw breath, he declared that he had set about restoring the digestive functions as rapidly as possible, and it was now essential to tackle the neurosis which was not in any sense cured, and would require years of diet and medical care. He then added that before trying any kind of medication, before embarking on any hydropathic therapy (which would in any case be impossible to carry out at Fontenay), he must abandon this solitary existence, return to Paris, get back into ordinary life, and try to enjoy himself, in short, like other people.

'But I don't enjoy the things other people enjoy!' protested Des Esseintes indignantly.

Ignoring this observation, the doctor simply assured him that this radical change of life-style which he was stipulating was, in his opinion, a matter of life and death, a matter either of a return to health, or of insanity rapidly followed by tuberculosis.

'Then it's death or deportation!' exclaimed an infuriated Des Esseintes.

The doctor, who was imbued with all the prejudices of a man of the world, smiled and made for the door without answering him.



Des Esseintes shut himself up in his bedroom, turning a deaf ear to the banging of the hammers as the servants nailed down the crates they had packed; each blow struck him in the heart, sending an excruciating pang through his flesh. The sentence passed by the doctor was being carried out: the fear of once again suffering those torments he had already endured, the dread of an agonizing death, had influenced Des Esseintes more powerfully than did his loathing of the detestable existence to which medical authority was condemning him.

'And yet,' he reflected, 'there are people who live alone, never speaking to a soul, who lead a wholly inward life, isolated from society, for example prisoners in solitary confinement and Trappist monks, and there's no evidence to suggest that those poor devils and those saints ever become lunatics or consumptives.' He had mentioned these examples to the doctor, but to no avail; the latter had simply repeated, in a curt tone which admitted of no argument, that his verdict—which incidentally was confirmed by the opinion of all the specialists in nervous diseases—was that distractions, amusement, pleasure, were the only means of influencing this malady, the psychological side of which lay beyond the chemical efficacy of medicines; and, irritated by his patient's recriminations, he had declared once and for all that he refused to continue treating him if he did not agree to a change of air, and to following a different regimen of health.

Des Esseintes had immediately taken himself off to Paris, where he had consulted other specialists, impartially describing his case to them, and, when all of them, without hesitation, supported their colleague's prescriptions, he had rented a vacant apartment in a new building, returned to Fontenay, and, white with rage, ordered his servants to pack the trunks.

Sunk into his armchair, he now sat brooding over this categorical injunction which overturned his plans, broke the ties with his present life, and buried all his dreams for the future. So, his perfect happiness was at an end! This haven in which he had found shelter must

be abandoned, he must sail right out again into that tempest of stupidity that had battered him in years gone by!

The doctors spoke of amusements and distractions; but with whom, and with what, could they possibly suppose that he might amuse or enjoy himself? Had he not outlawed himself from society? Did he know one man capable of trying to lead a life such as his own, a life entirely confined to contemplation and to dreams? Did he know one man capable of appreciating the delicacy of a phrase, the subtlety of a painting, the quintessence of an idea, one man whose soul was sufficiently finely crafted to understand Mallarmé and to love Verlaine?

Where, when, in which social group should he make soundings in order to discover a twin soul, a mind freed from the commonplace, a mind that blessed silence as a boon, ingratitude as a comfort, suspicion as a haven, a sanctuary? Should he search in the circles he had moved in before his departure for Fontenay? But most of the well-born nonentities he had frequented must, since those days, have become even more stultified by their drawing-room existence, grown even stupider at the gaming-tables, or ruined themselves in the arms of prostitutes; most of them must even be married; after having enjoyed, all their life, the leavings of hoodlums, it was now their wives who possessed the leavings of the street-walkers, for the first-fruits belong by right to the masses, the commonalty alone refuses to accept other people's rejects!

'What a delightful general post, what a fine series of substitutions, this custom adopted by a society which still believes itself prudish!' Des Esseintes told himself. And then, the decayed nobility was finished, the aristocracy growing feeble-minded or vicious. It was dying away; its members were either senile, their faculties degenerating further with each successive generation, so that eventually they possessed the instincts of gorillas fermented in the skulls of stable boys and jockeys, or else—like the houses of Choiseul-Praslin, Polignac, and Chevreuse\*—it was wallowing in the filth of litigation, which brought it down to the same level of turpitude as the other classes.

The very mansions, the immemorial coats of arms, the heraldic uniforms, the pomp and ceremony of this ancient caste had vanished. The estates, now no longer profitable, had been put up for auction together with the chateaux, for there was no money to buy the evil

pleasures of the flesh sought by the befuddled descendants of the old families!

The least scrupulous, the least obtuse, threw aside all shame; they dabbled in dubious intrigue, sifted through the muck of money deals, and appeared, like common swindlers, at the bar of the lawcourt, where they slightly raised the tone of human justice which, unable to remain always impartial, solved matters by making them librarians in the penitentiaries.

This craving for profit, this itch for filthy lucre, had also affected that other class which had always turned for support to the nobility, namely the clergy. You now noticed, on the back page of a newspaper, advertisements about corns of the foot that had been cured by a priest. The monasteries had transformed themselves into places of manufacture for apothecaries and liqueur makers. They sold recipes or themselves made the products: the Cistercians, chocolate; the Trappists, semolina and tincture of arnica; the Marists, bisulphate of medicinal chalk and vulnerary water; the Dominicans, anti-apopleptic elixir; the disciples of St Benedict, Benedictine; the monks of St Bruno, Chartreuse.

Trade had invaded the cloister where, instead of antiphonaries, thick ledgers rested on the lecterns. Like a leprous infection, the greed of the century was ravaging the church, keeping monks bowed over inventories and bills, transforming the Fathers Superior into confectioners and quacks, the lay brothers into common packers and pharmacy workers.

Yet even so, in spite of everything, it was still only among ecclesiastics that Des Esseintes could hope to find relationships that to some extent corresponded to his tastes; in the company of canons—generally learned and well-bred men—he might have passed some congenial, cosy evenings; but to do so he would have needed to share their beliefs, and not be torn between his sceptical ideas and the surges of conviction which surfaced from time to time, buoyed up by memories from his childhood.

He would have needed to hold opinions identical with theirs, and not accept (as he was wont to do in his moments of enthusiasm) a Catholicism gingered up with a little magic, as occurred under Henri III, and a touch of sadism, as happened at the end of the last century. This special brand of clericalism, this depraved, artfully perverse

mysticism towards which, at certain times of day, he was drawn, could not even be discussed with a priest, who would not have understood it, or who would have promptly, and with horror, rejected it.

For the twentieth time, he wrestled with this same insoluble problem. He would have liked to see an end to that distrustful state of mind with which, at Fontenay, he had struggled in vain; now that he was going to make a completely fresh start, he would have liked to force himself to possess faith, and, once he possessed it, to make of it a protective crust, to fasten it with clamps to his soul, to place it beyond the reach of all those ideas that undermine and uproot it; but the more he desired it, the less was the emptiness of his soul filled, the longer did the Saviour delay his coming. At the same time as his hunger for religion grew, at the same time as, with all the strength he could muster, he summoned, like a ransom paid against the future, like a subsidy for his new life, this faith which he could glimpse, but from which he was divided by a distance he found terrifying, ideas came beating at his ever-restless brain, brushing aside the infirm purposes of his will, rejecting, on grounds of common sense and mathematical proof, the mysteries and dogmas of religion!

'One ought to be able to prevent these arguments with oneself,' he thought miserably; 'one ought to be able to close one's eyes, and let oneself go with the current, forget those accursed discoveries that, for the past two centuries, have rent the structure of religion from top to bottom. And yet,' he sighed, 'it's neither the physiologists nor the sceptics who are destroying Catholicism, it's the priests themselves, whose blundering compositions would totally destroy the most tenaciously held convictions.'

Had not a Dominican, a Doctor of Theology, one Reverend Father Rouard de Card,\* a preaching friar, written a pamphlet entitled *On the Adulteration of the Sacramental Substances* in which he categorically demonstrated that the majority of Masses were null and void, due to the fact that the substances used in the rites were adulterated by the tradesmen? For years now, the holy oils had been mixed with poultry grease; the candle-wax, with calcinated bones; the incense, with common resin and old benzoin. But what was worse, was that the indispensable materials for the holy sacrifice, the two substances without which no offering is possible, had likewise been rendered impure: the wine, by repeated diluting, by illicit additions

of Pernambuco wood, elderberries, alcohol, alum, salicylate, litharge; the bread, that bread of the Eucharist which must be kneaded from the finest of wheat flour, by haricot-bean flour, potash, and pipe-clay!

And now they had gone even further: they had dared to eliminate wheat entirely, and shameless merchants were manufacturing almost all the Eucharistic hosts out of potato starch! However, God refused to manifest himself in potato starch. This was an undeniable, indisputable fact; in the second volume of his *Moral Theology*, his Eminence Cardinal Gousset had himself also discussed, at some length, this question of fraud, from the divine point of view; and, according to the unquestionable authority of this expert, the priest celebrating Mass could not consecrate bread made from the flour of oats, buckwheat, or barley, and although the matter was unclear in the case of rye-bread, there was no room for any discussion or debate when it came to potato starch, which, to use the ecclesiastical wording, was in no sense a competent substance for the Holy Sacrament.

Because this potato starch can be kneaded quickly and because of the attractive appearance of the unleavened bread it produces, this shameful deception was so widespread that the mystery of the transubstantiation now hardly ever took place, and priest and faithful alike communicated, all unawares, with neutral substances!

Ah! Long gone were the days when Radegonde,\* Queen of France, would with her own hands prepare the bread destined for the altars, the days when (as the custom of Cluny required) three priests or three deacons, fasting, wearing the alb and the amice, would wash their face and their fingers, pick through the wheat grain by grain, crush it under the grinder, knead the dough with a water that was cold and pure, and then bake it over a bright fire, singing psalms all the while!

'But the fact remains,' thought Des Esseintes, 'that this idea of always being cheated, even at the Lord's Table, is hardly such as to reinforce a faith that is already wavering; and then, how can one believe in an omnipotence that is hindered by a pinch of potato starch or a drop of alcohol?' These thoughts further darkened the prospect of his future existence, making his horizon appear more threatening, blacker.

It was obvious, there remained no haven, no shore where he might shelter. What was to become of him, in this Paris where he had neither family nor friends? No longer did any tie bind him to the

Faubourg Saint-Germain, to those quavering dotards who were decaying into dusty obsolescence, who lay like so many broken, empty husks, surrounded by a new society! And what point of contact could exist between him and that bourgeoisie which, little by little, had moved up, using every disaster to enrich itself, fomenting every catastrophe so that its own crimes and thievery might be cloaked in respectability?

After the aristocracy of birth, it was now the aristocracy of money; it was the caliphate of the counter, the rule of the Rue du Sentier,\* the tyranny of commerce with its venal, narrow ideas, its vain and deceitful instincts.

More villainous, more vile than the despoiled nobility and the clergy in its decline, the bourgeoisie was borrowing their pointless ostentation and their obsolete arrogance, which it debased with its lack of good breeding; it was stealing their faults and converting them into hypocritical vices; overbearing and sly, mean and cowardly, it was pitilessly gunning down its eternal, inevitable dupe, the common people, whom it had with its own hand unmuzzled and set at the throats of the ancient castes!

The battle was now over. The masses, their task accomplished, had, in the interests of public health, been bled white; the bourgeois, confident and jovial, was lording it through the power of his money and the contagion of his stupidity. The consequence of his rise had been the crushing of all intelligence, the negation of all probity, the death of all art; and indeed the artists in their degradation were down on their knees, showering ardent kisses on the foul-smelling feet of the high-placed chisellers and low-born despots on whose charity they lived!

Painting was now a flood of vapid futilities; literature, a riot of stylistic insipidity and timid ideas, for honesty was demanded by the shady speculator, integrity by the swindler who, while pursuing a dowry for his son, refused to provide one for his daughter, chastity by the anticlericalist who accused the clergy of rape and—stupid hypocrite that he was, entirely devoid of true artistic depravity—went sniffing about in dubious bedchambers at basins filled with greasy water; and at warm, pungently dirty petticoats!

It was the vast whorehouse of America\* transported on to our continent; it was, in short, the widespread, entrenched, immeasurable boorishness of the financier and the self-made man blazing, like some



ignoble sun, over the idolatrous city which grovelled as it chanted vile canticles of praise before the ugly tabernacle of the Bank!

'May you crumble into dust, Society; old world, may you expire!'<sup>\*</sup> exclaimed Des Esseintes, filled with indignation at the ignominious spectacle he was conjuring up; his protest shattered the nightmare that oppressed him. 'Ah!' he said; 'to think that all this is not a dream! To think that I shall be rejoining the depraved and servile rabble of this age!' He turned for help and comfort to Schopenhauer's consoling precepts; he repeated to himself the painful axiom of Pascal's: 'The soul sees nothing that, upon reflection, it does not find distressing,'<sup>\*</sup> but these words echoed in his mind like meaningless noise; his ennui broke them up, stripping them of all significance, all consolatory power, all gentle, effective potency.

He finally realized that the arguments of pessimism were incapable of giving him comfort, that only the impossible belief in a future life would give him peace.

A fit of rage, like a fierce gale, swept away his efforts at resignation, his attempts at indifference. He could no longer deceive himself, there was nothing, nothing left, everything had been brought down; the bourgeoisie sat about on the ground, as though on a Sunday outing, stuffing themselves from paper bags, amid the majestic ruins of the Church which had become a place of assignation, a pile of débris, defiled by contemptible gibes and infamous jokes. Surely, in order to prove their existence beyond any doubt, surely the terrible God of Genesis and the pale Crucified Christ would revive the cataclysms of the past, reignite the rain of fire that once consumed those cities of the damned, those abodes of death of long ago? Was it possible that this filth would continue to flow and with its pestilence swamp this old world in which nothing now grew save seeds of iniquity and harvests of shame?

The door opened suddenly; in the distance, framed by the doorway, appeared men dressed in cocked hats, with clean-shaven cheeks and little tufts of hair on their chins, heaving packing cases and moving furniture; then the door closed again behind the servant, who was carrying out some parcels of books.

Exhausted, Des Esseintes collapsed into a chair. 'In two days' time I shall be in Paris,' he exclaimed; 'it really is all over; the waters of human mediocrity, like a tidal wave, are rising up to the sky and will engulf this haven whose sea-walls I have with my own hands most

unwillingly breached. Ah! My courage fails me and I am sick at heart! Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who longs to believe, on the galley-slave of life who is setting sail alone, at night, under a sky no longer lit, now, by the consoling beacons of the ancient hope!

festival on Good Friday 1885 at the théâtre du Château-d'Eau, 50 Rue de Malte, near the place de la République. There he heard the *Tannhäuser* overture and the prelude to *Parsifal*. Huysmans wrote about the overture for Dujardin's *Revue wagnérienne*, but historians of music have not been kind about his knowledge of Wagner (see André Coeuroy, *Wagner et l'esprit romantique* (1965) and Léon Guichard, *La Musique et les Lettres en France au temps du wagnérisme* (1963)). Though he also dismisses comic opera, Des Esseintes does have time for the smaller-scale intimacy of chamber music, and in particular the lieder of Schubert.

- 164 *Father Lambillotte's*: (1797–1855), composer and musicographer who undertook the restoration of Gregorian chant. Cited by E. de Goncourt and Montesquiou.
- 165 *Lesueur*: the Masses of Jean-François Lesueur (d. 1837) were still being performed at the church of Saint-Roch where they were created.
- 166 *the way you can read a book*: De Quincey's opium-eater offers a model of this privileging of solitude above the crowd scenes of the concert hall. *Cirque d'Hiver*: from 1861 the Cirque Napoléon (renamed the Cirque d'Hiver in 1870), in Rue Amelot, was the venue for Pasdeloup's popular classical concerts.
- 167 *Auber... Flotow*: these composers represent the tradition of French comic opera which Huysmans finds so banal. Daniel François Esprit Auber (1782–1871), associate of the librettist Scribe and composer of light, vivacious operas such as *La Bergère châtelaine* (1820) and in particular *La Muette de Portici* (1828). François Adrien Boïeldieu (1755–1834), composer of comic operas including *Le Chapeau rouge* (1818) and *La Dame blanche* (1825), who also provided the singer P. J. Garat with charming songs for piano accompaniment. Adolphe Charles Adam (1803–56), composer whose considerable output includes over seventy-five comic operas such as *Le Châlet* (1834) and *Le Toréador* (1849), and a pianist of some renown. Described by Dieudonné Denne-Baron as 'the worthy emulator of Boïeldieu', he was from 1848 professor of composition at the Conservatoire. Friedrich von Flotow (1812–83) studied composition with Reicha and piano with Pixis in Paris, to which he returned in 1863.
- Thomas and Bazin*: Charles Louis Ambroise Thomas (1811–96), French composer of ephemerally popular operas such as *Psyché* (1857) and *Hamlet* (1868), who succeeded Auber as director of the Paris Conservatoire in 1871. François Bazin (1816–78) composed, *inter alia*, comic operas such as *Maitre-Pathelin* (1856) and *Voyage en Chine* (1865). Elected to the Académie des beaux-arts in 1872.
- 168 *Des Mädchens Klage*: (The Girl's Lament); the poem was sent by Schiller to Goethe in 1798, appeared in the *Musen-Almanach für das Jahr 1799*, *Die Piccolomini*, and then in the former's *Gedichte* of 1800. It was set to music three times by Franz Schubert, most famously in 1815.
- 175 *Choiseul-Praslin, Polignac, and Chevreuse*: one of the scandals and trials which contributed in some part to the onset of the 1848 Revolution, or at least to creating an atmosphere in which it was possible, concerned the

Duc de Choiseul-Praslin who was having an affair with his children's tutor and on 18 August 1847 had strangled his wife, the daughter of Maréchal Sébastiani; although Fortassier finds such a reference 'barely conceivable', the most notable member of the second family named was the Count of Polignac (1780–1847), prime minister to Charles X in 1829–30, who was held responsible for the repressive policies which caused the latter's downfall (see his *Études historiques, politiques et morales*); most notable in the third case was Marie de Rohan, Duchess of Chevreuse (1600–79), active in unsuccessful intrigues against Richelieu and Mazarin, including the Fronde.

- 177 *Reverend Father Rouard de Card*: a reference to *De la falsification des substances sacramentelles par le R. P. Fr. Pie Marie Rouard de Card* (Paris: Poussielgue-Rusand, 1856), which Huysmans had in his library.
- 178 *Radegonde*: Radegunde (d. 587), a Frankish queen whose piety was so noteworthy that it was said that her husband, Clotaire, had married a nun not a queen. Actually consecrated as a nun after he killed her brother, she founded a monastery in Poitiers.
- 179 *Rue du Sentier*: a busy commercial thoroughfare in the 2nd arrondissement of Paris.
- America*: anti-Americanism in the Stendhalian tradition. Huysmans deplores the importation of the ways of what he sees as a culturally and politically shallow and materialistic country.
- 180 *old world, may you expire!*: associated by Fortassier with the apocalyptic vision which threatens the vision of hope at the end of Zola's *Germinal*, published in the same year as *Against Nature*, both of which seem to reflect a collective fear and fascination at the growth of nihilist politics in *fin-de-siècle* France.
- The soul... distressing*: an earlier version of Blaise Pascal's famous fragment 'Divertissement' (Lafuma 136; Brunschvicg 139) to be found in Bossut's 1779 edition of the *Pensées*.
- 183 *'L'Assommoir'*: (*The Drunkard*); initially criticized for its Naturalist candour, Émile Zola's (1840–1902) novel of 1877, the seventh in his *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, was a scandalous success which signalled his commercial pre-eminence.
- 'L'Éducation sentimentale'*: this landmark novel (1869) of sexual and political disillusionment is a story of adultery *manqué* plotted around the events of 1848 and 1851 by the Realist novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821–80). It anticipates the world-weariness of Huysmans's anti-hero and the undermining of traditional plot structures by the lack of 'development' in *Against Nature*.
- 'Soirées de Médan'*: collection of short stories (1880) about the Franco-Prussian War by the major Naturalist writers in France. These include, as well as Alexis, Céard, Hennique, and Maupassant, both Huysmans himself (who contributed *Sac au dos*) and the master he denies, Zola.
- 186 *'A vau-l'eau'*: (*Downstream*) Huysmans's novel of 1882 focuses on the pessimistic Folantin for whom 'Only the worst happens'. Des Esseintes's

aesthetic and economic superiority over this antecedent allows Huysmans to depict an alternative to the disappointments of the contemporary world from which Folantin cannot escape. This is why it is appropriate for Huysmans to give Des Esseintes paintings by Moreau rather than by Degas.

- 188 'En route' and 'L'Oblat': published in 1895 and (*The Oblate*) 1903, both reflect Huysmans's movement in the 1890s towards a reactionary and mystical Catholicism.

*Maro*: i.e. Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro).

*Durtal*: another quasi-autobiographical anti-hero of Huysmans, who appears in *Là-bas*, *En route*, *La Cathédrale*, and *L'Oblat*.

'*La Cathédrale*': (1898), by Huysmans, a fiction woven around his study of the history and symbolism of Chartres cathedral.

- 190 '*Là-bas*': (*Down There*) Huysmans's novel of 1891 depicts Durtal's analysis of the medieval sadist and Satanist, Gilles de Rais, in the context of a contemporary Paris gripped by the subterranean forces of black magic.

*St Hildegard . . . Eucher*: St Hildegard (1098–1179), German abbess and mystic apparently blessed with visionary and prophetic powers, as recorded in her *Scivias, visionum et revelationum libri iii* (completed in 1151). Melito, Christian writer of the second century, Bishop of Sardis, and a champion of orthodoxy and apostolic tradition. Author of *Apologia*, two books on the paschal controversy and a selection from the Old Testament. Fragments appeared in Routh's *Reliquiae sacrae* (1814). St Eucherius (d. 450), Bishop of Lyons, author of *De laude eremi*, *De contemptu mundi et secularis philosophiae*.

- 191 *Rimbaud . . . Laforgue*: Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), a companion and lover of Verlaine. The latter dubbed him a *poète maudit* for his visionary evocations of ecstasy and anguish and had his *Illuminations* published in 1886. Jules Laforgue (1860–87) was an anticipatory voice of modernism and a creator of poetry (*Moralités légendaires* (1887) and *Derniers vers* (1890)) which is by turns playful, facetious, and ironic in the face of a Schopenhauerian universe.

- 192 *d'Aurevilly*: Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (1808–89) was a major precursor of the Catholic resurgence (known as the *ralliement*) reflected in French literature towards the end of the century. His reactionary journalism and criticism influenced not only Huysmans but also Péladan and Bloy. See discussion of his work in Chapter 12 of *Against Nature*.

- 193 '*Les Sœurs Vatard*' . . . and '*En ménage*': (*The Vatard Sisters* and *Living Together*) published in 1879 and 1881 respectively, examples of the early Naturalist fiction of Huysmans.

- 194 *the good Sicambrian*: from the Latin *sicambri*, a Germanic people, originally from the Rhineland, defeated by Drusus who transported many of them to Belgian Gaul where they mixed with the Franks (with whom they were often confused).

*Rocambole*: the hero of adventure novels by Ponson du Terrail, published from the late 1850s onwards. Hence the adjective *rocambolesque*, meaning far-fetched or fantastic.

*Gervaise and a Coupeau*: the couple at the centre of Zola's *L'Assommoir*, whose initially sound intentions are undone by weaknesses of character and twists of fate, not least the perpetual return of Gervaise's first lover, Lantier, who even manages to leave a genetic imprint visible in the couple's daughter, Nana.

- 195 *I entered a Trappist monastery . . . in 1892*: Huysmans first retreated to the Trappe d'Igny in 1892 and returned in 1893, 1894, and 1896.

- 197 *M. Lemaître*: Jules Lemaître (1853–1914) was a critic and playwright who gave up teaching to devote himself to writing. His influential journalistic essays are collected in the vast *Les Contemporains* and *Impressions du théâtre*.

*Sarcey*: Francisque Sarcey (1827–99) was a sceptical and conservative journalist, lecturer, and influential drama critic who attacked *Against Nature* virulently in a lecture in the Salle des Capucines.

'*Revue des Deux Mondes*': founded in 1829, this somewhat staid review of the arts, culture, politics, and economics was by the 1860s the most widely read of such publications. Contributors included Leconte de Lisle, Hérédia, and Maupassant (among many other famous names of the time).

*Wafflard and Fulgence*: reference to Joseph Désiré Fulgence de Bury's collaboration on *Le Célibataire et l'homme marié* (1824), *Le Voyage à Dieppe* (1821), and *Un moment d'imprudence* (1819) with the French dramatist Alexis-Jacques-Marie Wafflard (*sic*), who specialized in comedy and vaudeville.

*After such a book . . . the cross*: famous quotation in which, as Huysmans reminds us, Barbey d'Aurevilly predicts the choice between a suicidal Schopenhauerian vision and a return to religious faith (in line with Barbey's own Catholicism) which the author of *Against Nature* must face. This Preface is itself testament to the fact that Huysmans chose the latter path.