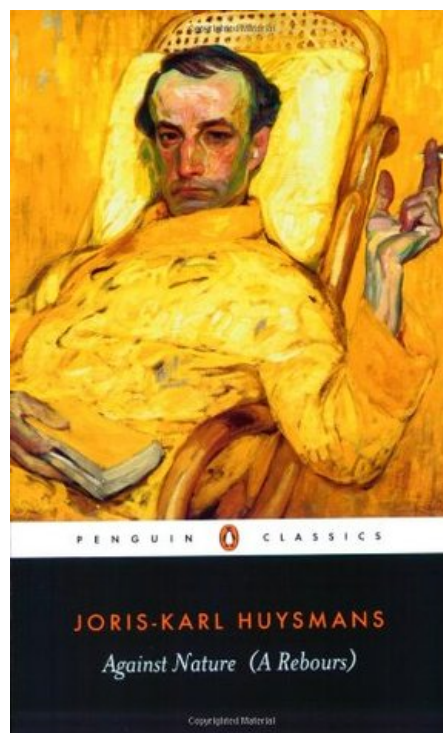




Against Nature

Joris-Karl Huysmans , Robert Baldick (Translator) , Patrick McGuinness (Annotations)

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With a title translated either as *Against Nature* or as *Against The Grain*, this wildly original fin-de-siècle novel follows its sole character, Des Esseintes, a decadent, ailing aristocrat who retreats to an isolated villa where he indulges his taste for luxury and excess. Veering between nervous excitability and debilitating ennui, he gluts his aesthetic appetites with classical literature and art, exotic jewels (with which he fatally encrusts the shell of his tortoise), rich perfumes, and a kaleidoscope of sensual experiences. The original handbook of decadence, *Against Nature* exploded like a grenade (in the words of its author) and has enjoyed a cult readership from its publication to the present day.

Against Nature Details

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Author : Joris-Karl Huysmans , Robert Baldick (Translator) , Patrick McGuinness (Annotations)

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From Reader Review Against Nature for online ebook

Glenn Russell says

“Already, he was dreaming of a refined solitude, a comfortable desert, a motionless ark in which to seek refuge from the unending deluge of human stupidity.”

? Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain*

Against the Grain (alternately translated as *Against Nature*) is a slim novel (110 pages) where French author Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) employs a torrent of baroque descriptions and unending streams of rococo linguistic curlicues to write about a bored, jaded aristocrat by the name of Des Esseintes, who uses his inherited wealth to seal himself off in a custom-made, artificial world where he can live his entire life on his own aesthetic and highly refined terms. There really isn't any dialogue or other characters, nor is there any plot or storyline in the ordinary sense of the term, rather, the novel describes the details of Des Esseintes's life as a monk of the sensual.

We read how Des Esseintes forced his servants to wear heavy felt covers over their shoes so he wouldn't hear the sound of their feet up on the 2nd floor; how, in dealing with the weakened state of his stomach, he planned his meals at the beginning of each season; how his senses were titillated and stimulated: his sense of smell by perfumes and scented powders, his taste by rare wines and all variety of liquors, his eyes by carefully chosen colors and exotic flowers, his hypersensitive touch by silks and cottons and many other fine fabrics. We are also provided exquisite detail of, among other luxurious, lavish, plush, extravagant belongings, his vast library of rare books, ancient and modern, and his marvelous collection of paintings and prints.

My words above are relatively plain, not even close to the style of Huysmans's ornate, exaggerated language. As by way of example, here is Des Esseintes reflecting on two modern authors he enjoys: “Baudelaire and Poe, these two men who had often been compared because of their common poetic strain and predilection for the examination of mental maladies, differed radically in the affective conceptions which held such a large place in their works; Baudelaire with his iniquitous and debased loves – cruel loves which made one think of the reprisals of an inquisition; Poe with his chaste, aerial loves, in which the senses played no part, where only the mind functioned without corresponding to organs which, if they existed, remained forever frozen and virgin. This cerebral clinic where, vivisecting in a stifling atmosphere, that spiritual surgeon became, as soon as his attention flagged, a prey to an imagination which evoked, like delicious miasmas, somnambulistic and angelic apparitions, was to Des Esseintes a source of unwearying conjecture.”

And here is the reaction of Des Esseintes when forced to encounter others on the street, “The very sight of certain faces made him suffer. He considered the crabbed expressions of some, insulting. He felt a desire to slap the fellow who walked, eyes closed, with such a learned air; the one who minced along, smiling at his image in the window panes; and the one who seemed stimulated by a whole world of thought while devouring with contracted brow, the tedious contents of a newspaper.”

Here's a description of one of the many flowers he purchased, “A new plant, modeled like the Caladiums, the *Alocasia Metallica*, excited him even more. It was coated with a layer of bronze green on which glanced silver reflections. It was a masterpiece of artificiality. It could be called a piece of stove pipe, cut by a chimney-maker into the form of a pike head.”

That's enough quotes as I'm sure you get the idea. This is the arched, over-the-top language a reader will find on every page. Either this novel is to your taste or it is not. But there's something about this cult-favorite

of decadent prose that is so intriguing and fascinating. Perhaps it is reading about a lover of the senses and literature and all things aesthetic who has the money and resources to create his very own virtual reality. For me, I love it, finding the lavish, ornate language and many of the descriptions laugh-aloud hilarious.

Although my own life and level of wealth differs greatly from Des Esseintes, I can see part of myself in his immersion in the worlds of art and literature and his absolute revulsion for much of the general run of society and its coarse values (as I write this I have a mental picture of a smirking potbellied husband and his obese wife in their white pants and gold chains waddling into a Las Vegas casino). So, in a way, I am laughing at myself as much as I am laughing at Des Esseintes.

One further note: I chose this translation by John Howard since the audiobook is available through LibriVox (available on-line, free-of-charge). For me, listening to this reading of *Against the Grain* was a lush, rich, glorious experience, reminding me of listening to Frans Brüggen on alto recorder playing *Variations on La Follia* by Corelli. Fortunately you don't have to be a wealthy decadent French aristocrat to indulge in this sumptuous feast of words.

Bill Kerwin says

Did I really read this book forty years ago? Or did I just read the passages about the "perfume organ" and the jewel encrusted turtle and later assumed I had read the rest? If I did read it, I was completely wrong in my evaluation of this as a static, effete precursor to "Dorian Gray," a work marooned in the vanished aesthetic of the late nineteenth century. No, no. "Against the Grain" is much, much richer than that.

For starters, it is an accomplished work of realism that turns realism on its head. Huysman--just as effectively as the Goncourts or Dreiser--knows how to accumulate a wealth of detail to convey the physical reality of the situation he wishes to describe. Just because he's describing the fantastically decorated and furnished apartment of an extremely wealthy aesthete concerned with pleasing no one but himself is irrelevant to this particular aspect of the "novel."

I say "novel" because--in spite of its sound realist credentials--I'm not sure it really is a novel at all. It resembles more the philosophical treatise/fictionalized autobiography of "Confessions of an English Opium Eater" and "Sartor Resartus." In total effect, Huysmans' work has more in common with De Quincey and Carlyle than it does with Zola or Frank Norris.

It also reminds me of that great short story of Flaubert's, "The Temptation of St. Anthony," for Des Esseintes--the novel's protagonist--is a saint of the senses, and on his path to enlightenment he encounters demons, delusions and disease. Indeed, the spiritual aspect of this book is so strong--particular in our hero's love for the fullness of the Catholic tradition--that I'm almost surprised at the reaction to the book in conservative circles. In hindsight, it is easy to see that Huysmans is on the road back to Rome.

And yet . . . the book is wickedly funny too. Huysmans views his protagonist with devastating irony, particularly in the frequent juxtaposition of grandiose schemes with physical illnesses and practical and psychological failings. In addition, in more than a few passages--Des Esseintes scheme for making a murderer out of a street boy is the most remarkable example--Huysmans obliquely reveals a consciousness of

the plight of the poor that suggests a world of Christian compassion and duty beyond all this preciousness.

This is a deep, rich work, and--although it is a classic representative of the fin de siecle--it transcends its age and has the ability to speak to ours as well.

J.G. Keely says

The hipsters are right: society is trying to destroy you--not your body, or your mind, but *you*, the part which makes an individual. That's what society is: the aspect of human life that is not the self, but is communal, the part that causes humanity to behave like a colony of ants.

As brilliant Nietzsche scholar Rick Roderick pointed out, advertisement is the opposite of psychotherapy. The idea of therapy is to take things that are hidden within your brain--biases, prejudices, hangups, fears, habits--and to bring them to the surface, to make you aware of them so they can be processed, or even gotten rid of.

The idea of advertisement is to plant in your brain things you don't realize are there, but which change the way you think. We conflate Coca Cola with comfort and familiarity, the Nike swoosh with athletic ability, Mickey Mouse with childhood; our idea of how relationships work is based on yoghurt commercials.

Today, we marvel at the idea that people used to memorize *The Iliad* and recite it aloud--but when you're ninety years old, you're still going to remember songs about alka-seltzer, plastic dolls that pee, cartoon ninjas, and the theme tune of your local water park. Think for a minute just how much space in your brain is devoted to information like that, stuff you don't know you remember until suddenly, you hear it again. Now, think of how else that space could have been used: what would you rather know instead of those jingles? French? Greek philosophy? How to rebuild a carburetor?

That's how culture gets to you: it surrounds you all the time, trying to make you into a copy of itself, and you and everyone in that culture are a part of that system. We shame other people, we guilt them, we tease them, we make suggestions, we tell them little infectious phrases that are supposed to be helpful. Look over the comments on Goodreads some time and you'll see it at work: people trying to shut up dissent, repeating mantras and plugging their ears, and who clearly think that insulting and belittling people is the same as discussion. But why shouldn't they? It's how they were socialized.

Then, when people confirm our biases--when they align with our groupthink--we listen and nod, we praise them, we tell them 'it's so nice to talk to a person who understands'. It's the confirmation of that tribal need to all be in the same boat together, on the same course.

Then there are systems within that society--churches, military complexes, corporations, stores, entertainment industries, political groups--all of which are trying to sway you, trying to sway society, promoting their own best interests as if there were nothing artificial about it. It's why we accept inequality, why we accept the massive scale of deaths every day from car accidents and untreated addicts and poor people who can't afford medical treatment--we may not always *like* it--but we still accept it.

Really, it's pretty remarkable that we retain any individuality at all. I mean, how strong must that impulse be to reject all these things that people tell us we are supposed to be? We are reminded of this shit every day by books, movies, adverts, and assholes on the bus. Sure, we internalize it to some degree, but for a lot of us, we retain an iconoclastic streak that stops us from being taken over completely.

As Roderick describes it, the mind is constantly under siege: we put up walls to keep out the overwhelming force of culture. Sure, some gets in, but our defenses keep a lot out. Ideas can be infectious, they can be viral, they prey on our hopes and fears, our prejudices and insecurities, but over time, we build up better and better defenses to recognize and root out these ideas.

So when hipsters reject something popular, there's a reason they have that knee-jerk reaction: they feel society's fingers reaching into their skull and they instinctively flinch. That's why they don't want to look like other people, or listen to their music, they don't want to be advertised to or pandered to. They have constructed a sense of identity for themselves--what makes them *them*--and when they see someone else doing the same thing, it threatens their sense of identity.

They're wrong, of course, but their response makes a certain kind of sense. They've traded one aspect of culture for another. They are a subculture, but one that still feeds into and supports the main culture. They are rampant consumers, early-adopters who are constantly looking for new ways to spend their money because as soon as other people start liking what they like, they have to dump it all and buy new stuff. Every subculture becomes co-opted and sold back to the people for a profit, and the way corporations have maneuvered hipsters is brilliant. If they stop consuming fashion, products, information, politics, music, and craft materials, they lose their identity. And so, of course, we see that they are just as dominated and defined by the culture as the 'sheep' they so assiduously mock. They are conformists.

That's always been the problem, though, way back to the Dadaists: if you are obsessed with rejecting mainstream culture, that means you have to follow mainstream culture closely enough to know what it is doing, so you can then reject it. All your actions are defined by that culture, it's just that instead of following the example, you do the opposite, which makes you just as predictable--which means you are just as useful to the culture. Predictable ants are useful ants.

But of course, the real iconoclast doesn't identify themselves with certain bands or aesthetics, with clothes or objects. They create identity based around ideas--and society doesn't want to co-opt ideas. When society takes a movement and sells it back to us, the ideas are the first things stripped out.

The iconoclast doesn't look left and right to see what everyone else is doing before they act, because their actions aren't defined by conforming to or rejecting what others do. They have an internal motivation, a philosophy which tells them what is worthwhile and what is not, and why.

Real iconoclasts are cool. They are fucking amazing. They change the world, they have an ineffable magnetism. They control minds, they guide fashion, so that in a century, you can look back and say 'we think the way we do, write the way we do, dress the way we do, because of a handful of people'. And what tends to define them when they are alive is a near-complete lack of recognition. Society attacks them in all the standard ways: guilt, mockery, critique. Society is uncomfortable, it wants to invade that mind, to break the siege and to remake the person as a useful ant under the status quo. This often kills the iconoclast, or drives him mad, or makes him bitter and misanthropic--sometimes all of the above.

But misanthropy and bitterness are mind-killers. They halt thought. They turn the thinker into a self-prejudiced creature who is no longer willing to think or change, who has been so embroiled in the frustrating stupidity that surrounds him that it stops him in his tracks. That is the trap into which Des Esseintes falls in Huysmans' experimental novel, called *A Rebours* in the French, variously translated in English as *Against the Grain* or *Against Nature*.

Des Esseintes is the false iconoclast, the man who is obsessed with being different for its own sake, but who does not know himself. The long lists of his preferences and dislikes that fill the book are, for the most part, empty opinions. They do not point to some grander philosophy or understanding.

Again and again, he tells us that he despises this or that thing because a merchant's wife likes it. His sense of identity is threatened--he has built it around these objects and movements, and his fondest wish is to keep them all for himself. That is why he locks himself away, alone, and refuses to see anyone. Yet, even then, even in complete isolation, it is *still* not enough to let him discover himself. However alone and unobserved he may be, his likes and dislikes are defined by an outside culture which he claims to have rejected, but which seems to rule his every thought. His attempted iconoclasm becomes mere contrarianism. It is the misanthropy of the problem child who does things he knows he mustn't do--not because he enjoys them, but out of a desire to betray the image of authority he has created in his mind.

One of the more curious threads in the book is the effect which his religious education has had on him: though it has not made him a faithful man, it has inspired him to reject man and the world as worthless and flawed, and to instead spend his time living for another world, a false world which exists only in his mind.

He is the prototype for the man who sits and plays Warcraft alone all day, every day, until he loses his job, his friends, and his family. Des Esseintes harps again and again on a desire to live in an artificial world of his own making--a virtual world. It does not really give him pleasure, it is just a way from him to avoid the world. It is a life without risk, a life where he does not have to confront anything uncomfortable or challenging, which will never hazard upsetting or drawing judgment from anyone--a pointless life of perfect safety which he romantically paints as fraught and challenging, because it allows him to imagine himself as the noble struggler against hardship--but solely on his own terms.

Yet, ironically, he also complains about how there is 'nothing genuine' left in the world, how it is all artificial (for which he decries it) despite the fact that he spends the rest of his time trying to live in another artificial world of his own making. Clearly, artificiality is neither the problem nor the solution, but a mere cover-up for the *real* issues.

His aesthetics are a replacement for faith, which explains why his house is filled with religious iconography repurposed into furnishings for his museum to himself--and yet, not himself, for throughout the text, though he spends his fortune to pursue every idea which seems to him easing at the time, none of it satisfies him--indeed, it drives him mad, makes him sick, destroys him. He is not pursuing his own desires, he is not following his own thoughts and needs, and so he is never satisfied. Instead, he tries again and again to create identity through external trappings, like a college girl who wears a beret in order to feel worldly.

These trappings invariably break down around him--they disappoint him, they do not live up to his hopes. He sits and recites opinions he already holds, and fearing disappointment, seeks nothing new. The whole situation is summed up in the fact that, when he thinks on the horror of being forced to return to society, he laments that he will not be able to meet any men like himself, men who share his opinions. He is not interested in engaging conversation, or in intelligence or brilliance, he does not despair of meeting remarkable people, he is upset because he cannot meet himself--or rather, the self he imagines himself to be.

Indeed, he will almost certainly meet himself when he rejoins society, for it is full of people just like him, who put on a false front to try to convince themselves that they are interesting, but who live hollow lives, providing nothing to the world, leaving nothing of worth to the future, and doing nothing in which they can take the least pride. The unexamined life is not worth living--which is why it destroys him.

If this had been a send-up of such a ridiculous fool, it could have proven a remarkable and wondrous work--it worked well enough for Carlyle, Cervantes, and Sterne--but, though there are certainly moments of irony and contradiction throughout, overall, the message seems to be that Des Esseintes is meant to be taken in earnest--that we are meant somehow to respect or find interesting the cobbles of his life, his scattered opinions, his false identity.

Again and again, the text harps on these facts, repeats them, wallows in them. Each book Des Esseintes

mentions is described by its color, the make of its binding, the type of dye used, the provenance of the ink within, the typeset, but all this detail is to no purpose. It is not like reading a treatise of William Morris' and coming to understand a particular aesthetic of how a book *should* be bound and why--it is a mere litany of excess, the dull and trashy kind of overspending which marks the parvenu.

Certainly, there are some interesting scenes within the book--the famous tortoise episode actually achieving some real insight (and satire), but overall, the book is terribly dull--a piling on of detail upon detail without much central notion to hang them on. Some might argue that the theme is the gross emptiness of decadence, but I don't think the work's scattered repetition does very much to explore it.

It isn't surprising that the work proved influential to men like Wilde, who had come to concentrate so fully on form over function that their wit consisted mostly of switching about common words in convoluted ways until they no longer meant much at all, an absurd style which lacks real bite--and that was the overwhelming impression I took away from Huysmans' work: that for all the fine words and lengthy lists and precise descriptions, there simply wasn't enough conceptual structure underneath to make it hang together. It was a pile of Gothic trappings whose sheer weight broke through the roof of the old church to lay all in a shambles on the floor.

MJ Nicholls says

Some top reviews on here already, let me point you towards Manny, Lee, and Nate for excerpts and analysis. I feel no need to review this one, so I shan't trouble you for likes (Mike—I mean it!) In short, I loved the ornate, glissading descriptions of art, music, perfume, theological texts, peptone enemas, and the fabulous namedropping of French writers such as the Goncourt Brothers, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Charles Cros, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Ernest Hello, Léon Bloy, Barbey d'Aurevilly, and François-René de Chateaubriand, among others. Reminiscent of Gautier's *Mademoiselle du Maupin* but with a gloomier *fin-de-siècle* (fan-de-see-eck-le) outlook. This edition includes reviews from Zola, Mallarmé and critics of the period. (Zola wasn't impressed).

Vit Babenco says

I don't know intentionally or not but *Against Nature* is an absolute opposite of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and it is a complete denial of nature.

"Nature, he used to say, has had her day; she has finally and utterly exhausted the patience of sensitive observers by the revolting uniformity of her landscapes and skylscapes. After all, what platitudinous limitations she imposes, like a tradesman specializing in a single line of business; what petty-minded restrictions, like a shopkeeper stocking one article to the exclusion of all others; what a monotonous store of meadows and trees, what a commonplace display of mountains and seas!"

Endeavouring to "rejoice beyond the bounds of time..." and to make the world shudder at his joy the main hero turns his life into a perfect diamond of decadence... But the decadent ways take their toll.

Nate D says

Des Essientes, a debauched noble at the end of his line, in rebellion against the modern world, humanity, and

nature itself (the title is variably translated as "Against the Grain" or "Against Nature"), sells the family manor and retreats to a country house in order to languish in exquisite hypochondria and nervous affectation. What strength is left to him he expends obsessing over art, literature, design, and even gardening, in dissertations on artificiality and garish morbid splendor that compose most of the book. It is clear that, much as Huysmans seems to mock Des Esseintes' finicky, maladapted nature at times, protagonist and author share the book's aesthetic inclinations* and these are what makes this 1884 "novel" a defining work of Decadence, of the entire fin-de-siècle era.

As such, it's a terribly useful record of cultural context, but fortunately the book's pleasures extend beyond the academic and into sheer voluptuous descriptive prose. Unsurprisingly, Des Esseintes expends much enthusiasm on a few writers whose incidental prose exceeds their overall literary vision, and this may be the case here. The narrative seems to exist mainly (and is indeed sufficient to) entirely submerge the reader in Des Esseintes' overwrought decorating dalliances, symphonies of liquor and perfume, orchid gardens, and faux ship-cabin dining chambers. And these sections are as absolutely splendid as they should be. Admittedly, the literary discussions, more removed from immediate detail, leave me a little colder. Especially when he veers into Latin Catholic theological manuscripts, a subject of which I have next to no knowledge or interest in. Yet they exert a strange magnetism for both protagonist and author. Of course, as they observe, blasphemy (reading "against nature" as "against god") only has real meaning from one who is at root a believer.

*Aesthetic inclinations which, all too often, I also share to some extent. My own interest in Decadence begins with the fantastic proto-surrealist work of Symbolist painters like Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau, both of whose paintings are of special importance to Des Esseintes. Specifically, he hangs two Moreau renderings of Salome (who danced before Herod to procure the head of John the Baptist for her mother) in his sanctuary. Moreau painted many versions of this scene and story, but I believe this is one of the (amazing) paintings specifically referred to in the text:

I've collected all of the art referenced in this novel that I could find here.

Warwick says

An ornate, sickly, claustrophobic book, full of fascinating discussions about art and literature, and studded with items of outré vocabulary (I still haven't worked out what *mæchialogie* means). It is a novel for people who like talking about novels – the plot itself is slim and of little importance. I'll summarise it quickly: des Esseintes, a rich, effete aristocrat, retires from a life of excess and debauchery to live in his retreat at Fontenay outside Paris, where he shuts himself off from the rest of the world and ekes out an existence in a cloying, hypochondriac, lamplit environment that has been elaborately constructed to meet his own aesthetic requirements.

Basically, he's a proto-hipster, who has had enough of dealing with Other People and wants to lock himself away from public opinion. Anything that's popular with anyone else is out – Goya gets taken down from his walls for being not obscure enough.

Cette promiscuité dans l'admiration était d'ailleurs l'un des plus grands chagrins de sa vie ; d'incompréhensibles succès lui avaient à jamais gâté des tableaux et des livres jadis chers ; devant l'approbation des suffrages, il finissait par leur découvrir d'imperceptibles tares, et il les rejetait...

[This promiscuity of admiration was one of the most distressing things in his life. Incomprehensible successes had permanently ruined books and paintings for him which he had previously held dear; faced with widespread public approbation, he ended up discovering imperceptible flaws in works, and rejecting them....]

Although he has given up interpersonal relationships himself (even his servants have to wear felt slippers, so he doesn't hear them walking around), he often reminisces about his previous conquests. I particularly loved the early description of his old bachelor pad, decorated in pink and lined with mirrors, which had been

célèbre parmi les filles qui se complaisaient à tremper leur nudité dans ce bain d'incarnat tiède qu'aromatisait l'odeur de menthe dégagée par le bois des meubles.

[famous among the girls who had been pleased to soak their nudity in this bath of warm carnation infused by the smell of mint given off by the furniture.]

His view of women in general is distinctly un-modern, but often weirdly fascinating. I liked the strange little anecdote of his liaison with a US circus performer, which read like an Angela Carter short story. (Unfortunately, in a complaint soon to become a cliché among European male writers, his American girlfriend turned out to have *une retenue puritaine au lit*). Des Esseintes moves on to date a ventriloquist, whom he makes lie out of sight and enact odd, symbolist dialogues between statues of a chimera and a sphinx that he bought for the occasion.

There are even some aesthete-esque hints towards des Esseintes's homosexual urges, with vague references to a young man who made him think about 'sinning against the sixth and ninth of the Ten Commandments'.

Other senses, too, get close examination. An entire chapter is given over to various exotic scents and perfumes which des Esseintes is trying to create. When it comes to taste, our hero has what he calls a 'mouth organ', which consists of several dozen barrels of alcoholic liqueurs ranged side by side, which he mixes-and-matches to create a variety of gustatory symphonies or harmonies to suit his current mood.

The language all this is described in is deliberately rich and unnaturalistic. Huysmans's basic approach is outlined when des Esseintes explains the kind of writing he admires among Latin authors – full of

verbes aux sucs épurés, de substantifs sentant l'encens, d'adjectifs bizarres, taillés grossièrement dans l'or, avec le goût barbare et charmant des bijoux goths....

[purified verb extracts, nouns that reek of incense, bizarre adjectives rough-hewn from gold, with the barbaric, charming appeal of Gothic jewels....]

I came to Huysmans via Barbey d'Aureville, and it was nice to see that des Esseintes thinks so highly of *Les Diaboliques* that he had a special copy made, printed sacrilegiously on ecclesiastical parchment. Barbey reviewed *À Rebours* when it came out, and made a surprisingly perceptive comment that its author, like Baudelaire, would have to choose between *la bouche d'un pistolet ou les pieds de la croix* 'the mouth of a pistol or the foot of the Cross'. What is it about these Decadent authors – Baudelaire, Huysmans, Barbey

himself – that despite their obvious dislike of religion, they all ended up going back to the Catholic faith? Suffice to say that this novel draws its power to shock and delight from its willingness specifically to go against (*à rebours*) the ideals and principles of a Catholic culture – not that that prevents a more secular modern reader from being shocked and delighted in his or her own right.

And they should be, it's worth it. This book can be oppressive, but it's a wonderful experience.

Forrest says

One doesn't **read** *A Rebours*, one lives in it, like a ghost that is compelled to haunt a place even though it would rather leave behind the place in which it was murdered. Once the book is finally closed, one deals with the hangover caused by existentialist self-loathing for every luxury one has ever allowed oneself.

Manny says

It must have been so exciting to be a novelist in the second half of the nineteenth century. You weren't limited to just creating a novel; if you were talented, you could create a whole new *kind* of novel. Here, Huysmans has written the first example known to me of the novel where nothing happens. Frail, sickly des Esseintes has dissipated a good part of his inheritance on various kinds of vice (there is a memorable passage early on about the mirrors in his bedroom). Now he's tired of it. He resolves to withdraw to a specially designed house in the country where he will live a life of contemplation, as far removed from reality as he can arrange.

The rest of this review is available elsewhere (the location cannot be given for Goodreads policy reasons)

Sketchbook says

A dense drug trip. This celebrated work (1884) offers sensual and philosophic ruminations. There's no story. Each chapter has a theme: art, religion, literature, society, etc. Huysmans lauds painters Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon; writers Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Poe. On a Symbolist "high," the reclusive hero seeks "new perfumes, ampler blossoms, untried pleasures." He arranges obscure words like exotic flowers as he speaks of a mistress "who loved to have her nipples macerated in scents."

Between dreams and nightmares he recalls Miss Urania, an androgynous - "muscles of steel" - acrobat who fills his mind with strange notions. Having children is madness. What have they to look forward to? "...hard knocks, degrading jobs, vile diseases, unfaithfulness, a painful death.." When sick his recipe for an enema mixes cod-liver oil, beef-tea and burgundy with the yolk of one egg. (You understand why it took me some weeks to digest Huysmans).

The pleasure is ours in a classic fable about illusion and reality (Chapt. 11) The hero readies for a trip to London, hoping that unlike a visit to Holland it will not be a disappointment. In Paris he buys a London guidebook. Then, onward to an English tavern where he sees Brit

ladies with "teeth big as tombstones" and men with "pork-butcher faces." There are bisquits, stale cakes and plates of mincepie. He thinks of Little Dorrit and Bleak House. But he must hurry to catch the London boat-train.

He cannot move: he's in the London of his imagination. The 'other' London will only offer disillusionment. He quietly returns home, "having seen what he wanted to experience" -- and feeling the fatigue of a long journey. The artistic temperament has never been more dramatically expressed: "It would be madness to lose by an awkward change of place his imperishable sensations."

Note: Alain de Botton writes that the reality of travel seldom matches our dreams. I stay put.

Bettie? says

Description: *Des Esseintes* is a decadent, ailing aristocrat who retreats to an isolated villa where he indulges his taste for luxury and excess. Veering between nervous excitability and debilitating ennui, he gluts his aesthetic appetites with classical literature and art, exotic jewels (with which he fatally encrusts the shell of his tortoise), rich perfumes, and a kaleidoscope of sensual experiences.

[Read here](#)

Opening: **The Floressas Des Esseintes, to judge by the various portraits preserved in the Château de Lourps, had originally been a family of stalwart troopers and stern cavalry men. Closely arrayed, side by side, in the old frames which their broad shoulders filled, they startled one with the fixed gaze of their eyes, their fierce moustaches and the chests whose deep curves filled the enormous shells of their cuirasses.**

A French example of superfluous man. I'm thinking about that Russian protagonist who wouldn't get up out bed, the name will come back to me at some point, probably in the middle of the night.

Chapter 4 is awash with dissing the classical writers of ancient Rome:

"The gentle Vergil, whom instructors call the Mantuan swan, perhaps because he was not born in that city, he considered one of the most terrible pedants ever produced by antiquity. Des Esseintes was exasperated by his immaculate and bedizened shepherds, his Orpheus whom he compares to a weeping nightingale, his Aristaeus who simpers about bees, his Aeneas, that

weak-willed, irresolute person who walks with wooden gestures through the length of the poem.'

Gustave Moreau's Salome

assafœtida

Les Pornographes sacrés/Mœchialogie

Lee says

Difficult to do this one justice. Took forever to read its 200+ dense pages. Well worth it, especially for the plush, precise, unexpected turns of the language, multi-phrase pile-ups on the Trans-European Translation Expressway. Mostly a catalogue of art, books, and music the main dude likes. The main dude, also, is extraneurotic, extraordinarily rich, aestheticized to the extreme, and willfully isolated from the world. He has a garden of semi-pornographically described carnivorous plants. He paints his pet tortoise gold and studs its shell with precious stones. Inspired by Dickens, he sets off for London to experience its rainy misty derelict nights but instead gets wasted on lagers ales and porters at an English restaurant in Paris, traveling to London in his imagination, returning home fully exhausted from his "journey." The tortoise bit and the imaginary travel bit were the most vivid bits here, the pages most closely seeming like scenes. The rest, really, was essayistic, sort of like the chapters in American Psycho about Huey Lewis, Whitney Houston, Genesis, etc, but this takes place in the 19th Century so it's all about Zola, Baudelaire, Poe, lots of Catholic art and really too many artists and artworks to even begin to list, thereby adding to the list of things I've never heard of but wouldn't mind hunting down, like Ernest Hello or Barbey d'Aurevilly? Read this because someone included Huysmans on a list of frustrated idealists that included Bernhard. Occasionally a few general over-the-top swipes at humanity in this one, but mostly it's an appreciation of the artistic excrescences of human existence.

Two representative passages:

"Literature, in fact, had been concerned with virtues and vices of a perfectly healthy sort, the regular functioning of brains of a normal conformation, the practical reality of current ideas, with never a thought for morbid depravities and other-worldly aspirations; in short, the discoveries of these analysts of human nature stopped short at the speculations, good or bad, classified by the Church; their efforts amounted to no more than the humdrum research of a botanist who watches closely the expected development of ordinary flora planted in common or garden soil . . . Baudelaire had gone further; he had descended to the bottom of the inexhaustible mine, had picked his way along abandoned or unexplored galleries and had finally reached those districts of the soul where the monstrous vegetations of the sick mind flourish."

"In Zola the longing for some other existence took a different form. In him, there was no desire to migrate to vanished civilizations, to worlds lost in the darkness of time; his sturdy, powerful temperament, enamoured of the luxuriance of life, of full-blooded vigour, of moral stamina, alienated him from the artificial graces and the painted pallors of the eighteenth century, as also from the hieratic pomp, the brutal ferocity and the effeminate, ambiguous dreams of the ancient East. On the day when he too had been afflicted with this longing, this craving which in fact is poetry itself, to fly far away from contemporary society he was studying, he had fled to an idyllic region where the sap boiled in the sunshine; he had dreamed of fantastic heavenly copulations, of long earthly ecstasies, of fertilizing showers of pollen falling from the palpitating genitals of flowers; he had arrived at a gigantic pantheism, and with the Garden of Eden in which he placed

his Adam and Eve he had created, perhaps unconsciously, a prodigious Hindu poem, singing the glories of the flesh, extolling, in a style whose broad patches of crude colour had something of the weird brilliance of Indian paintings, living animate matter, which by its own frenzied procreation revealed to man and woman the forbidden fruit of love, its suffocating spasms, its instinctive caresses, its natural postures."

(The second half of that second passage really gets going, huh?)

Anyway, I enjoyed reading this, and although I found it dull through many spots, these duller bits were consistently blown away by the superexceptional gems that stud the slow and plotless turtle shell of this "story."

Sophie says

[Ολ?κληρη η κριτικ? εδ?.]

Το ζ?τημα ε?ναι να μπορε? κανε?ς ν' αφ?νεται, να μπορε? να συγκεντρ?νει το μυαλ? του σ' ?να μ?νο σημε?ο, για να μπορε? να αφαιρε?ται ?σο χρει?ζεται για να πετ?χει την ψευδα?σθηση και να μεταλλ?ξει το ?νειρο της πραγματικ?τητας σε αυθεντικ? πραγματικ?τητα.

?ταν πρωτο-εμφαν?στηκε το μυθιστ?ρημα του Huysmans το 1884 προκ?λεσε αντικρου?μενες αντιδρ?σεις· ?λλοι μ?λησαν για προειδοποιητικ? ιστορ?α, ?λλοι για εγχειρ?διο της σ?γχρονης ζω?ς, πολλο? π?στεψαν πως συμβ?λιζε το τ?λος του μυθιστορ?ματος, εν? κ?ποιοι την αρχ? εν?ς ν?ου τρ?που γραφ?ς.

Ο πρωτ?τυπος τ?τλος του ?ργου, *À rebours*, δηλ?νει την κ?νηση αντ?θετα με τη ρο?, στο αντ?θετο ρε?μα, αλλ? θα μπορο?σε ταυτ?χρονα να υποδηλ?νει και το πε?σμα, τη διαστροφ?, την εσκεμμ?νη δυσκολ?α, αφο? το κε?μενο αφορ? ?ναν εμφατικ? εκκεντρικ? και διεφθαρμ?νο χαρακτ?ρα, ?ναν ασκητικ? κι εκο?σια περιθωριοποιημ?νο, με κεντρικ? του ζ?τημα την εξ?ντληση απ? τη φ?ση, απ? τους κοινωνικο?ς, ηθικο?ς, ιστορικο?ς κι αισθητικο?ς καν?νες. Ε?ναι η *malaise*, η α?σθηση πως ?λα ?χουν ειπωθε?, γραφτε?, γ?νει, πως κ?θε γραφ? αποτελε? στε?ρα επανεγγραφ?, που ωθε? τον ?ρωα ντεζ Εσ?ντ να δραπετε?σει, ως εκ το?του το Αν?ποδα ε?ναι γεμ?το αναφορ?ς στο τ?λος του αι?να, το τ?λος της τ?χνης, το τ?λος της δημιουργικ?τητας. Ωστ?σο, ο τεχνητ?ς παρ?δεισος, δομημ?νος στις αισθ?σεις που προκαλε? η λογοτεχν?α κι οι ?λλες τ?χνες, δεν αποδεικν?εται βι?σιμος.

Αυτ? δε σημα?νει πως η πρ?ζα του συγγραφα? ε?ναι επ?πεδη· π?ρα απ? την περιγραφικ? λεπτομ?ρεια, την ακρ?βεια εν?ς ντοκιμαντ?ρ, την κοινωνικ? παρατ?ρηση που συνδ?εται με τον νατουραλισμ?, το ?φος του Huysmans ε?ναι πολ?χρωμο και μεστ? σε παρ?ξενες λ?ξεις κι ασυν?θιστα επ?θετα. Κι αυτ? ε?ναι που καθιστ? το Αν?ποδα κε?μενο αδ?νατο να ταξινομηθε? με σιγουρι?. Πρ?κειται για νατουραλιστικ? ? για παρακμιακ? ?ργο; Μ?πως για συμβολιστικ?; Αποτελε? ?ραγε μια νατουραλιστικ? ?σκηση γραφ?ς (καταγραφ?, περιγραφ? κι αν?λυση

συμπτωμάτων) που συγκλίνει με τα συμβολιστικά θεματικά μοτίβα (τη μοναξιά, την περιθωριοποίηση) και καθοδηγείται από μια παρακμιακή φιλοσοφία (απαισιοδοξία, διαστροφή, πολιτιστικές ελιτισμούς);

Η σχέση του Ανπόδα με το νατουραλισμό θυμίζει το αρνητικό μιας φωτογραφίας, ο Huysmans δημιούργησε μια αντεστραμμένη εικόνα του νατουραλιστικού εμβληματικού μίτο "race, moment, milieu" που εισήγαγε ο H. Taine, με τον ντεζ Εσντ να επιχειρεί να αποδράσει από την ιστορική στιγμή φτιχνώντας να τεχνητό milieu, να δραπέτεψει βίαια από το κτερικό της εποχής του κι αρχίζει να περιπλανιέται, απλута ελεθερος, σε μια άλλη εποχή, με την οποία, χρή σε μια στατική πλνη, του φανεται πως ταιριζει καλτερα, πως σημεινει ο ιδιος ο συγγραφεας το 1903.

Τσι και το μυθιστορημα ξεκιν γραμμικ, βσει της κυκλικ φσης του λογοτεχνικο φαινομου της παρακμς, κι μως σο προχωρει η αφγηση παρατηρονται αναδρομς στο παρελθν, αφηγηματικς ρωγμς, αναμνσεις που εξαρθρνουν το σχεδν στατικ παρν. Ο ντεζ Εσντ προσπαθε να θυμηθε συγκεκριμνα γεγοντα χρησιμοποιντας διφορα ερεθσματα, γνεται μως θμα των αναμνσεων που δε μπορε να ελγξει κι οτε θλει να επισκεφτε. Η παραδοσιακή μυθιστορηματική πλοκή εκφυλζεται και στη θέση της παρουσιζεται να υβριδιο διαφρων ειδν γραφς: κατλογος, απογραφ, μελτη, εγκυκλοπαδεια, ακαδημακ πραγματαα.

Θυμταν πρσωπα, πζες, κεν λγια που σφηννονταν στο μυαλ του, πως σφηννονται ορισμνοι λακο σκοπο που σιγοσιθυρζει κανες, παρ τη θληση του και που εξαφανζονται απτομα δχως να το καταλβει.

Steven Godin says

After feasting on an excessive orgy of oysters, smoked salmon, quail eggs, marinated lobster, rare partridge breast, honey glazed pig trotters and spiced wine, I followed with a desert consisting of apple strudel with clotted cream and sticky chocolate pudding in a warm orange sauce, I took to the sofa in front of the open log fire while stretching my feet out on the Persian rug, keeping my fine Turkish cigarettes and bottle of plum brandy close at hand I finished reading 'À rebours' (Against Nature).

A rich and decadent novel featuring just one man, the jaded aristocrat Des Esseintes, who leads an isolated life fuelled by his passions for excess and self-indulgence. Referring to society early on as "frightful clodhoppers", this would become the one and only time I laughed, because even though the overall mood is charming and elegant, there is also a lingering sadness for the solitude Des Esseintes chooses. He governs a life's philosophy with the desire to subvert, and even supersede, nature. surrounded by art and a library of books at his fingertips, he takes to the works of Poe, Balzac, De Sade, voltaire, along with poetry and historical readings of the church, religion and medieval ramblings. As we are stuck with Des Esseintes for the whole duration of the book, It would certainly be beneficial to take him to heart, however I loved and loathed him in equal measures.

Thus it was difficult to like this anymore than I did.

For those who deem it a masterpiece, that's understandable, for those who think it's nothing more than nonsense, I could agree. as it's always a read to divide opinion, but I will sit on the fence, comfortable.

Joris-Karl Huysmans, who no doubt has a great pedigree for writing, does take the reader to far off places in the mind, there are episodes which are so arrestingly parabolic that they stand out when looking back at the text. Images like a jewel-encrusted tortoise perishing under its own weight have a mythic quality and chapters can seem like individual exercises, tied together by the Des Esseintes plot (such as it is), like the master narrative of the Arabian Nights or a collection of Dickensian short stories. Huysmans is at his strongest in passages of sensual pleasure. If I was to re-read in 20-30 years time, my views would probably change for the better.

Now, where did I leave those liquor truffles!

Evan says

Highly recommended for the adventurous!

This is one of those books that you will either love or hate, and whatever reason you would have for either reaction I would completely understand and accept as valid. The book is not unlike a laundry list: if your laundry list happened to divide the clothes into type and color of fabric, dimensions, history of the development of the materials used, the sensation of folding each item and ad infinitum. This is the story of an obsessive looking for order, painstakingly describing that order and creating some kind of dogmatic unifying principle around it. Like most unifying principles, it hangs together with spit and gum, but the unifier doesn't realize that.

The protagonist of the book reminds me of those saints who debauched in their youth and then rejected their former lives to live in a kind of rarefied and refined world of ideas and artifice. The main character, Des Esseintes, is a former libertine who in his approaching dotage has rejected his unstructured hedonism and become an epicurean par excellence. He withdraws into a solitary world of extreme artifice in an isolated country mansion, cut off from all humanity and life, with the idea of creating a perfect fantasy world of his own making. He believes he can create a world better than nature; indeed, "against nature" as the title suggests. His pursuit of idealized artistic perfection is almost fetishistic in its insistence on completeness. He is not content on just having a nice copy of a novel, but having it bound in a very particular and very expensive manner that complements his understanding of its philosophical aesthetic. He is an incredible aesthete, thoroughly well-read and schooled in the arts and fashion. He knows as much about the ecclesiastic writers of the Church as he knows about the vagaries of wines and perfumes.

There is one telling and disturbing episode in the book in which the aesthete literally tries to improve on nature, a living thing, specifically a large turtle, by encrusting its shell with precious jewels. The act of doing this kills the creature, and Des Esseintes, for all his supposed poetic intelligence utterly fails to be moved by this or see the irony in his actions other than to be miffed that his plan was dashed. This tampering with things already "perfect" kills the very poetry they already possess. Not only does he fail to see this, but his very obsession is (like the turtle) killing him. Over time, he fails to see that this existence is driving him mad along with compounding physical ailments that various artificial means fail to cure.

The novel goes into exhaustive detail about his pursuits of exceedingly refined, and ultimately cold, aesthetic interests. I found most of this fascinating but also, to be honest, wearing. I can't fault Huysmans, though, for the superhuman patience and diligence it must have taken to write such a book in such unbelievable detail. This was not nearly as much fun as his barn-burning and sexy Satan-worshippers novel, "The Damned," which I read earlier this year - but this book, in its own way was just as good.

[Yes, I have slightly amended the review yet again. This makes two amendments in 2016 alone. Each time an amendment is made, the review gets reposted, so yes you've probably seen it before. Call this the Des

Esseintes perfectionist strain in me. Since this book haunts me, and now that I'm recognizing it as an unsung precursor to the modern novel, I've elevated it to my favorites shelf. I realize I read a library copy and do not have my own. Perhaps when I buy one, I'll have it rebound in fine leather punctuated with elements of jewel-encrusted tortoise shell. OK, no, that's just a little joke.]

(KevinR@Ky, amended, again, in May 2016)

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

Decadent Rants and Harangues

This 1884 novel is a wonderful assemblage of prescient and decadent rants.

Something Huysmans says of another book of rants could apply equally to his own work:

"Conceived as harangues, they contained a certain strong muscular energy and were astonishing in the intolerance of their convictions."

Scoundrels and Imbeciles

Jean Des Esseintes (I'll call him Des E for short) fills his life with literature, art, music, furniture, jewelry, flowers, perfumes, food and liquor.

His journey started as a child:

"Immersed in solitude, he would dream or read far into the night."

Educated by Jesuits, he acquires a *"bold and independent spirit"*.

He grows to scorn his fellow man:

"His contempt for humanity deepened. He reached the conclusion that the world, for the most part, was composed of scoundrels and imbeciles...Already, he was dreaming of a refined solitude, a comfortable desert, a motionless ark in which to seek refuge from the unending deluge of human stupidity."

Des E the Eccentric Dandy

Des E's taste is anything but mainstream, even if he's familiar with it. The thing is he has consumed enough to know what he doesn't like and to be able to discriminate.

He becomes an eccentric dandy. Huysmans writes about the sensuous with a style that has both an economy and a sensuality of its own:

"Out of black-edged plates they had drunk turtle soup and eaten Russian rye bread, ripe Turkish olives, caviar, smoked Frankfort black pudding, game with sauces that were the color of licorice and blacking, truffle gravy, chocolate cream, puddings, nectarines, grape preserves, mulberries and black-heart cherries; they had sipped, out of dark glasses, wines from Limagne, Roussillon, Tenedos, Val de Penas and Porto, and after the coffee and walnut brandy had partaken of kvas and porter and stout."

Whatever we might think of Des E, that's a meal I'd love to have shared with him!

Artifice against Nature

One consequence of Des E's lifestyle is that, the more he discriminates, the more he moves away from other people, until eventually he lives an almost hermit-like existence on the outskirts of Paris, surrounded only by the objects of his own immaculate taste and artifice. It's almost as if his subjectivism has become a form of solipsism.

His aesthetic opposes the artificial against nature. It elevates the dreamlike above the realistic, fantasy above naturalism:

"The secret lies in knowing how to proceed, how to concentrate deeply enough to produce the hallucination and succeed in substituting the dream reality for the reality itself. Artifice, besides, seemed to Des Esseintes the final distinctive mark of man's genius...Nature had had her day...Really, what dullness!...There is not one of her inventions, no matter how subtle or imposing it may be, which human genius cannot create..."

Gustave Moreau - Study of Salome for "Salome Dancing before Herod"

The Consoling Beacons of Ancient Faith

90% of the novel documents Des E's taste. We learn exactly what he likes and what he dislikes. From a literary point of view, you could assemble from the details of his library a reading list more erudite and filled with *"the consoling beacons of ancient faith"* than anything compiled by den Grossenlistengenerator Steven Moore (view spoiler)

Nevertheless, the choice of books for his *"breviary of decadence"* compounds a sense of what can only be described as narcissism:

"...they lifted him far above this trivial life which wearied him so. In them he entered into a perfect communion of ideas with their authors who had written them when their state of soul was analogous to his own."

The Cowardly and the Servile

Inevitably, it seems, the last 10% of the novel witnesses his rapid decline in health. It's almost as if his discrimination is the cause of a social illness, his individualism the cause of a quasi-syphilitic social disease, and he must return to bourgeois Paris, the Church and its conformist flock, in order to cure his hallucinations, nightmares, melancholia, and ennui.

Towards the end, Des E proclaims, *"I am certainly on the road to recovery."*

Yet, as in many cases of mental illness, recovery comes at the cost of authenticity and individualism:

"...nowadays, nothing genuine exists, since the wine one drinks and the liberty one boldly proclaims are laughable and a sham...For what could [I] hope, if not new disillusionments...?"

"To think that all this is not a dream, to think that I am going to return into the cowardly and servile crowd of this century!"

The Consolation of Long Forgotten Books

How little has changed! Maybe we, too, are in need of the "*consoling beacons of ancient faith*" contained in long forgotten books.

Only, Huysmans leaves us with a scintilla of doubt as to whether these very books are not the cure, but a cause, of Des E's dissolute condition.

Still, I'm confident they contain more tonic than virus.

Huysmans' 1903 Postscript/Preface

"As result of this brief review of each of the special articles exhibited in the show-cases of 'Against the Grain' the conclusion is forced upon us - the book was priming for my Catholic propaganda, which is implicit in it in its entirety, though in embryo...

"In all this hurly-burly, a single writer alone saw clear, Barbey d'Aurévilly, who... wrote:-

""After such a book, it only remains for the author to choose between the muzzle of a pistol [and] the foot of the cross.'

"The choice has been made."

J.-K. Huysmans

[Huysmans converted (or reverted) to Catholicism in 1892.]

YO, DES E!

"Yo, this is Des E, don't call me with any guest list requests, that ain't my department. Anything else, leave a message."

Gary says

"The world is too much with us; late and soon," Wordsworth wrote in 1802, "getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Joris-Karl Huysmans' fin de siècle novel, *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*), tells the story of an aristocratic dandy who finds the realities (more specifically, the vulgarities) of everyday life so insufferable that he decides to lock himself away in a house at Fontenay-aux-Roses, "far from the incessant deluge of human folly," to live a solitary life through books, paintings, art and music. Des Esseintes is an eccentric, a decadent, a misanthrope, and an aesthete, who is also obsessed with death and decay. It has been noted that this is the novel which "poisons" Dorian's mind in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and it is indeed tempting to imagine Des Esseintes as Oscar Wilde. *À Rebours* is a fantastic book about what it means to be an aesthete, and it remains just as relevant today as when it was first published in 1884. It will appeal to anyone with an appreciation for good literature, art, and music.

Geoffrey says

The ideal novel for people who hate novels. And other people.

Aubrey says

If Proust composed his *In Search of Lost Time* without having read this book, I'll eat my hat. Of course, the similarities may have been unavoidable when considering that both authors concern themselves with the period of haute couture and Faubourg Saint-Germain culture, and even chose the same aristocrat to model their own wildly eccentric characters on, the Comte de Montesquiou-Fezensac inspiring both Huysmans' Des Esseintes and Proust's Charlus. And it could have been sheer coincidence that Huysmans' delving into the cyclic throes of obsession and boredom seem almost a basic structure for Proust's cathedrals of thought and memory. Still, the semblances are striking, although the differences forbid any possible thoughts of one author relying too heavily on the other. For while Proust is gorgeous and light and understanding of almost every nuance of the human condition, Huysmans is, well.

Looking on the bright side of things, I hope that, one fine day, he'll kill the gentlemen who turns up unexpectedly just as he's breaking open his desk. On that day my object will be achieved: I shall have contributed, to the best of my ability, to the making of a scoundrel, one enemy the more for the hideous society which is bleeding us white.

That's Des Esseintes for you, speaking of a boy-child he had granted three months of bi-weekly brothel visits to, for no other reason but a sudden whim to conduct a viciously abhorrent sort of social experiment. He doesn't get any better through the course of the book; he is as capable of dwelling on the most beautiful of conjectures in full possession of his educated faculties, as he is of condemning the smallest aspect of life with all the spite and bigotry a human could possibly muster.

So what can redeem this spoiled and sickly creature, fully equipped with a substantial fortune, disgust with the whole of the human race, and access to the whole range of what culture, from the loftiest of heights to the most depraved (in his day, at least) of lows and everything that mixes that two, has to offer? For one, the fact that this contrary soul is indeed human despite the weirdly grotesque passions that power it, and through all the oddities Des Esseintes surrounds himself one can still see the insolvable human condition that plagues every one of us. He may be as easy to hate and be disgusted with as easily as he hates and is disgusted with everything beyond his luxuriously painted and perfumed bower, but he does have some measure of taste that one cannot help but take note of, and perhaps even sympathize with.

He wanted, in short, a work of art both for what it was in itself and for what it allowed him to bestow on it; he wanted to go along with it and on it, as if supported by a friend or carried by a vehicle, into a sphere where sublimated sensations would arouse within him an unexpected commotion, the causes of which he would strive to patiently and even vainly to analyse.

He'll pursue this ideal through sight in painting and horticulture, through taste in mouth organs and strenuous dilutions, through smell in perfumes and twisted senses, from the most ancient annals of religion to the newest source of physical debauchery that only those with a sensibility honed by years of monetary excess can hope to afford. That unwholesome mix of artificiality posing as the real thing is fully expressed in the prose itself, metaphors that don't bother to limit themselves to one side of the equation and fully immerse themselves in delight and disgust.

...and the Cypridium, with its complex, incoherent contours devised by some demented draughtsman. It looked rather like a clog or a tidy, and on top was a human tongue bent back with the string stretched tight, just as you may see it depicted in the plates of medical works dealing with diseases of the throat and mouth; two little wings, of a jujube red, which might almost have been borrowed from a child's toy windmill, completed this baroque combination of the underside of a tongue, the colour of wine lees and slate, and a glossy pocket-case with a lining that oozed drops of viscous paste.

Oftentimes, he'll box himself up in snooty prejudices and hypocritical ideologies, but occasionally one will recognize measures of contemporary thought within his reminiscences and desires, one of the most surprising instances occurring when he dwells upon the issue of abortion. At other times he will think on qualities of pieces that at his point in time had not yet been composed, accrediting his thoughts that those who concern themselves with certain ideals will not find themselves content with the current age.

Sensitive to the remotest affinities, he would often use a term that by analogy suggested at once form, scent, colour, quality, and brilliance, to indicate a creature or thing to which he would have had to attach a host of different epithets in order to bring out all its various aspects and qualities, if it had merely been referred to by its technical name. By this means he managed to do away with the formal statement of a comparison that the reader's mind made by itself as soon as it had understood the symbol, and he avoided dispersing the reader's attention over all the several qualities that a row of adjectives would have presented one by one, concentrated it instead on a single word, a single entity, producing, as in the case of a picture, a unique and comprehensive impression, an overall view.

He may have enjoyed the works of Faulkner, whose *The Sound and the Fury* accomplishes just that. Or he may have spurned the work that occupies itself with trivial mundanities and contains not the slightest hint of elevated passions or feverish splendor. The world will never know.

Eddie Watkins says

If the hero of this novel had a more anglo-friendly name, it would be the byword for hyper-neurotic aesthete dandies, as Sherlock Holmes is in the world of detective. I don't know how to properly pronounce *des Esseintes*, so I have always referred to him as that guy from Huysmans' novel. Truth be told I don't even know how to properly pronounce *Huysmans*, or rather I think I do but when I do I feel self-conscious. So I usually just spend my time thinking about des Esseintes and Huysmans, rather than talking about them by name, living in my head with them as it were, which of course is appropriate as this book is all about living in one's head. This on the surface sounds terribly appealing, since I am sure I am not the only person who feels the inside of his head is much more congenial than the outside of it. But don't jump too fast at this enticement, for while Huysmans sets up a very seductive *mise en scene* wherein des Esseintes is free to indulge in byzantine aesthetics of his inner world, the large majority of des Esseintes' enjoyment takes place beyond the confines of this book. In fact this book is a long drawn out account of his fall from inner grace, his slow alienation from the private paradise he assembled before the present day narrative occurs, and his eventual breakdown and expulsion from his dandified Eden. This fall is in fact all the narrative consists of, though the narrative occupies less than a quarter of the book. The bulk of the book is a treatise, in the form of private discourses, on the pleasures of art and literature and sounds and scents, etc. Or at least the pleasures are what the sympathetic reader is inclined to remember... It is just as much about how much he hates everything, and of how even many of his most trusted pleasures ultimately disappoint him. The book is in short a very successful argument for the pursuit of aesthetic pleasures while at the same time being a damning of those very pleasures, which in the end makes it a very powerful book, as des Esseintes is pursuing a spiritual path without completely realizing it; and as I understand it Huysmans charts these

pursuits in his subsequent novels.
