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## INCARNATING DECADENCE: READING DES ESSEINTES'S BODIES

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“Decadence” is a highly suggestive label. Extravagantly dressed dandies who hunt for refined sensual experiences, full of disdain for the banal pleasures of the masses, as well as sexually threatening women preying on men immediately come to our mind. An etymological approach to the term reveals that it originally expressed the decline of a classical standard of values, and indeed, our first associations refer to characters who strictly deny established values, bourgeois moral values in particular. Yet, does this define them sufficiently as “decadent”? A serial killer puts himself beyond the law, so does everyone who evades taxation, but we would hardly call such people “decadent.”

In my reading of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel *A Rebours*, I will argue for a definition of decadence on the grounds of physical experience. Its protagonist, des Esseintes, displays a catalogue of characteristics which reflect many of our first associations with the term. He is portrayed on the very first page of the novel as the last offspring of a declining, aristocratic family:

La décadence de cette ancienne maison avait, sans nul doute, suivi régulièrement son cours; l’effémination des mâles était allée en s’accroissant; comme pour achever l’œuvre des âges, les des Esseintes marièrent, pendant deux siècles, leurs enfants entre eux, usant leur reste de vigueur dans les unions consanguines. (Huysmans 61)

Thus the first denotation of decadence the text offers is based on the nineteenth-century idea of physical decline via incest. Decadence in the wake of the popular reception of Darwin's evolutionary theories would find ample attention in Max Nordau's notorious work *Degeneration*.

Taking this rough definition as my point of departure, I will try to trace the discourses the novel draws on to form des Esseintes's character as well as the remains of a plot, i.e., if it can still be considered a plot. Thus I will try to explain in which ways des Esseintes's evasion from set bourgeois ideals is closely connected with his redefinition, be it conscious or unconscious, of his own body, defining "decadence" as a deliberate transgression of physical codes.

Deeply bored by the bourgeois ways of life in the French capital, which have a nauseating effect on his feeble physical nature, he buys a manor in a little village, Fontenay-les-Roses, not too far from Paris. Des Esseintes needs more refined sensations for his sophisticated nature than those offered him by the established leisure class. In Fontenay he wants to start a new life "against the grain" of the very values he ran away from. He chooses the pose of the dandy,<sup>1</sup> turning himself into an artifact that mocks the base culture of the masses in the best romantic tradition. Baudelaire and his contemporary Barbey d'Aureville rank highly among his idols. Des Esseintes cultivates a narcissistic detachment from anything that could possibly be shared by common people. This deliberate parting from the bourgeois way of life is narrated exclusively from his point of view, with almost no dialogue whatsoever. Thus the reader is invited to wander in the mind of an individual whose tastes soon start to flicker between the bizarre and the pathological. The novel sets off with the burial of its only protagonist in an exquisite house-coffin, which he calls "un désert confortable" and "une arche immobile" (65).

The first half of the novel focuses, however, on des Esseintes's attempt to use his family's degenerate state for his personal artistic purposes. This hereditary disposition is responsible for the hypersensitivity that makes him unique even among his own class: "Décidément, il n'avait aucun espoir de découvrir chez

autrui les mêmes aspirations et les mêmes haines" (65). He turns his back on those unable to understand him, which is also due to the fact that hardly anybody shares his physically refined disposition. Living against the grain means cultivating an existing disadvantage by turning it into a positive, distinguished feature of his own character. Hypersensitivity was, of course, already a typical sign of the self-made "romantic" dandy. The outstanding difference to his *fin-de-siècle* cousin lies in a negative side effect. Whereas the romantic dandy's *mal du siècle* does not necessarily entail physical disease, des Esseintes's "spleen" leads to a functional disorder on the elementary organic level, a fact that is to dominate the second half of the novel.<sup>2</sup> It is the dragging progress of this disease which constitutes whatever remains of a plot in *A Rebours* and which also causes the rather abrupt ending of the novel. His body's sensitivity to sensual impressions is a distinctive feature of des Esseintes's decadence.

In the first eight chapters, however, we encounter a man who still masters his body and its strange desires. Des Esseintes's sensual longings find their visible expression in his home. To meet with its new owner's refined tastes, the old manor has to undergo a serious redecorating. The character's physical needs and sensual cravings transform the home into an imaginary museum, entailing a constant flicker between corporeal reality and hallucination, i.e., between body and mind. The reader moves from chapter to chapter like a bewildered visitor moving from one room to the next with the only shared thematic element being the refinement of sensual experiences.

Des Esseintes postulates harmony between his artistic visions and the colors a sensitive person sees best. With painstaking precision he depicts the nuances of effects colors have on him. Likewise he judges the effects of light, the arrangement of furniture and, of course, books: the library constitutes the central part of his new house, for reading is the diet of his mind. With no exception to the rule, the ideals des Esseintes seeks are based on refined physical impressions. Even the enumeration of his favorite Latin literature, the so-called decadent style preceding the decline and fall of the Roman empire, finds expression in physical metaphors. He praises "un style . . . d'une couleur précise"

(87), somber verses “sentant le fauve” (89), and compares the language of the fourth century to a rotten corpse:

. . . perdant ses membres, coulant son pus, gardant à peine, dans toute la corruption de son corps, quelques parties fermes que les chrétiens détachaient afin de les mariner dans la saumure de leur nouvelle langue. (91)

Sensuality is the focal point of his interest; his body is the instrument by which he judges his experiences. Only precise, yet rare, sensual stimulation clearly pointing to synaesthetic experiences set off the half-conscious trains of thought des Esseintes seeks. In several chapters, the narration explicitly comments on his concept of a quasi-mystical bond between all arts. Music, painting and poetry are to be united into one perfect work of art. Physical sensations, the hunt for the beautiful, as expressed in artificial creation are to free him from the boredom he experienced in Paris. Therefore, his comments on contemporary art are of a particular significance for anybody focusing on the relationship between mind and body in this novel. Gustave Moreau's *Salomé* paintings feature prominently among the protagonist's famous works of art. He adores Moreau's abundance of color, his focus on light and shadow on the canvas that adds a touch of the surreal to the painting.<sup>3</sup>

Even if des Esseintes's delight in aestheticised female cruelty may still be regarded as a last bow to “the dark sight of romanticism” (Praz vii), his emphasis on the interdependency of art to strengthen the physical pleasures is definitely a new tone in the symphony. The very synaestheticism that marks des Esseintes's use of his hereditary physical weakness is projected onto the canvas. His reading of Moreau's *Salomé* paintings does not only reflect his personal cultural sublimation of physical cravings but also suggests an analytical key to its interpretation. Just like anything else that occupies the protagonist's imagination, the paintings appeal to several senses at once: the colors give off scents, their impact affects body and mind likewise. For des Esseintes, Moreau was the first painter to emphasize Salomé's bodily decadence by giving her all the oriental peculiarities European spectators expect, i.e., covering her body with

gold and jewelry causing the paradoxical effect of stressing her nakedness.



Gustave Moreau, *Salomé Dancing Before Herod*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 143.5 x 104.3 cm. © The Armand Hammer Collection, UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

She is at once object and subject displaying ancient cults of fecundity, incarnating everything des Esseintes seeks in women but is afraid to find. He sees in Moreau's rendering of Salomé "une signification phallique" (107), which finds a concrete expression in the lotus she holds in her hands. Des Esseintes reads the medieval symbol of innocence and chastity as a phallic image, stressing the importance of the body furthermore by adding a touch of necrophilia:



Peut-être aussi qu'en armant son énigmatique déesse du lotus vénéré, la peintre avait songé à la danseuse, à la femme mortelle, au Vase souillé, cause de tous les péchés et de tous les crimes; peut-être s'était-il souvenu des rites de la vieille Egypte, des cérémonies sépulcrales de l'embaumement, alors que les chimistes et les prêtres étendent le cadavre de la morte sur un banc de jaspe, lui tirent avec des aiguilles courbes la cervelle par les fosses du nez, les entrailles par l'incision pratiquée dans son flanc gauche, puis avant de lui dorer les ongles et les dents, avant de l'enduire de bitumes et d'essences, lui insèrent, dans les parties sexuelles, pour les purifier, les chastes pétales de la divine fleur. (107)

Death and the female body constitute the fatal network in which men are entangled, the very thing des Esseintes tries to avoid by seeking sexual pleasure in merely regarding Moreau's paintings. His personal lack of power is projected on the perfect body of women covered with gold incarnating male authority by threatening it: an interpretation that is particularly revealing for des Esseintes's views on women.

At the very center of the first half of the novel, the famous fourth chapter extrapolates des Esseintes's aesthetic cravings on the verge of disease: "Il serait bon de placer sur ce tapis quelque chose qui remuât et dont le ton foncé aiguisât la vivacité de ces teintes . . ." (95). Therefore he decides to make a huge turtle crawl over his new carpet. Since the animal's natural color display does not complete the harmony of the carpet, he has its shell covered with gold and precious gems to achieve the desired effect. He is successful, but not for long, since the tormented turtle soon dies on the carpet it was made to perfect. For the first time, des Esseintes's need for sensual perfection shivers between the utterly ridiculous and sheer cruelty.

The same need for synaesthetic perfection drives des Esseintes to another major invention for the refinement of his sensual pleasures. Searching for his opera of the senses, des Esseintes had "une orgue à bouche" made for him (99). This ma-

chine allows him to produce a mixture of different liqueurs with each of them being like a single tone in a melody:

. . . chaque liqueur correspondait, selon lui, comme goût, au son d'un instrument. Le curaçao sec, par exemple, à la clarinette dont le chant est aigret et velouté; le kummel au hautbois dont le timbre sonore nasille; la menthe et l'anisette, à la flûte, tout à la fois sucrée et poivrée, piaulante et douce. . . . (99)

The analogy between at least two arts is thus put into the immediate range of his personal sensual practice. Despite his general repugnance of petit bourgeois codes, des Esseintes shares his contemporaries's fascination with technical devices. He is not prejudiced against the promising news positivist science has to offer him. Be it the possibility of making his synaesthetic dreams come true, as in the case of his "orgue à la bouche," or the famous "susteneur," an ancient version of a food processor, used to help his feeble stomach by means of extra-corporeal digestion.

But already this chapter, so rich in the description of extravagant sensual pleasures, finishes on a gloomy physical experience, since the daydreams set off by the "mouth organ" make des Esseintes remember a visit to the barber. The awareness of his own physical being is now expressed by extreme suffering.

Whereas his obvious dandyism links des Esseintes to the late romantic heritage of Brummel, Baudelaire and his contemporary Barbey d'Aurevilly, the use of his own body to display his distinctive features, his elaborate, naturalistic description of pain of the human body as a fragile pleasure hunting machine, situates him likewise in the naturalist vein as it links him to the contemporary discourses of positivist science and medicine.

Unable to wait for an appointment with a fashionable dentist, he settles for the instant, yet tortuous help of a "mécanicien." This working class barber lacks the social prestige of a fashionable bourgeois doctor, whom des Esseintes cannot consult without an appointment. Diseases as social pastime and painful reality coexist in Fontenay just as in the French reality from which des Esseintes fled. The barber as character remains as shallow as the doctors whose advice plays a more important role



in the second part of the novel. In the fourth chapter des Esseintes is still able to use pain, i.e., the memory of it, as an extreme physical sensation for his artistic self-fashioning. The description of his tooth extraction, triggered by the taste of whisky in a way similar to Proust's "madeleine," constantly vacillates between disgust and masochist fascination. The very elaborate style that used to dominate his portrayal of contemporary art, synaesthetic pleasures or decadent Latin literature, is now employed to describe his agony by comparing himself to "une bête qu'on assassine" (102). So the sensual experience of the extracted tooth does not differ, at least stylistically, from his narration about paintings or tapestry: "il soufflait, brandissant au bout de son davier, une dent bleue où pendait du rouge!" (103). Be it pleasure or pain, his own body is constantly used to seek and induce extreme physical sensations. From this point of view, des Esseintes appears far less passive than mainstream criticism tends to see him.

Des Esseintes's extravaganza has often been analyzed in the context of Mario Praz's fundamental study *The Romantic Agony*. Praz states in the very first sentence of his foreword: "The aim of the greater part of this book is a study of Romantic literature (of which the Decadent Movement of the end of the last century is only a development) under one of its most characteristic aspects, that of erotic sensibility" (vii). Yet Huysmans's adoption of this erotic romantic heritage continues his use of the body which I have traced so far.

Physical impotence is one sign of des Esseintes's disgust with the worldly pleasures he turned away from. His body denies the faint delights of sex for sale in a way that functions as a material metaphor for this disgust. In another way, women are directly held responsible for his choice to abandon common mundane delectations: "Une seule passion, la femme eût pu le retenir dans cet universel dédain, qui le poignait, mais celle-là était, elle aussi, usée" (66). Impotent, beyond all physical longings, he turns to Fontenay. There, sexual fantasies are triggered by a physical simulacrum: eating sweets which contain "une goutte d'essence féminine" (145) in the double sense of the word. Again, the mouth is used to supply pleasure.

The women who dominate his memories share interesting features: the same strength and potential cruelty that marks his interpretation of Salomé in Moreau's paintings, reappears in his sexual longings. Des Esseintes consciously looked for male characteristics. With Miss Urania, it is the strong body, "les charmes agiles et puissants d'un mâle" (145), the body of an athlete that fascinates him. He sees his own reflection in her that transcends gender boundaries. During her performance he watches her changing from woman to man. In a complementary movement he feels himself becoming even more effeminate than his degenerate nature already makes him. The physical strength against which he defines himself becomes the sexual stimulus he finds most attractive in women. It is this "échange de sexe" (146) between him and Miss Urania that causes his sexual needs to return. The actual "performance," however, shows Miss Urania to be far more puritan than her athletic body promised. She cannot fulfill des Esseintes's fantasy of female strength and sexual activity. Neither can the ventriloquist, whose machine-like powers fascinate him. His physical impotence ends their affair. Des Esseintes's last sexual fantasy, set off by the use of the aforementioned extraordinary candies is, remarkably enough, connected to a young man whose fragility and beauty fascinates des Esseintes. Against the context I have just tried to sketch, it is less latent homosexuality, but rather the visible, incarnated transgression of fixed gender boundaries that charms him.

Psychoanalytic criticism, for obvious reasons, reads the novel as a proto-Freudian case history, linking des Esseintes's behavior to regressive tendencies and oral fixations. If we contextualise his behavior with contemporary science and philosophy, however, des Esseintes's peculiar tastes belong less to late romantic than these critical approaches suggest. The classic disease that haunts both des Esseintes's body and his mind is hysteria. He sees it everywhere: in his own physical weakness as well as in his artistic surroundings. The powerful Salomé he adores in Moreau's paintings, is not only the incarnation of female phallic power but also "la déesse de l'immortelle Hystérie" (106). The definition of hysteria that can be deduced

from des Esseintes's symptoms does not only foreshadow Freud but mainly reflects the contemporary discussion.

By the time *A Rebours* was published, the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, head of the mental asylum la Salpêtrière, had already published a considerable body of work on hundreds of women diagnosed as "hysterical."<sup>4</sup> Despite the justified criticism of Charcot's therapeutic work, his greatest achievement for the analysis of this disease is certainly a definition that includes men as well as women. Charcot's works mark the beginning of a psychological understanding of physical lesions. In his career Charcot also wrote more than sixty case histories on hysterical men. He was among the first in clinical psychiatry of the nineteenth century to argue for a definition of hysteria in both sexes, thus finally freeing the disease from the classic uterine etiology that still persisted or was beginning to find its way back into contemporary medicine which defined the female body as inferior on the organic level. On the symptomatic level, however, even Charcot reproduced age-old gender clichés. Whereas women are merely hysterical because of their physical nature, men acquire hysterical lesions through, for example, working accidents. They are not prone to it, as women are.

From the early 1880s until his death in 1893 Charcot published constantly on the subject of hysteria, yet he never gave a congruent theory covering the origins of the disease in both sexes. He considered it to be a neurosis in the strict nineteenth-century sense of the term, i.e., a hereditary neurological disorder which could be triggered by various secondary causes. Despite his insistence on the hereditary, exclusively matrilinear, clearly degenerate and physical etiology of hysteria, Charcot denied that only effeminate, homosexual men could be affected. The majority of his male patients came from working class origin and contradicted the very refined hypersensitivity Huysmans underlines in his protagonist. Whereas Charcot stresses the importance of emotional unrest in the case histories of his female patients, the male ones seem to be affected by visible physical lesions, such as anaesthesia of limbs.

Des Esseintes obviously does not belong to this category, but rather displays clear features of hysterical symptoms in women.

Whereas he seems to underline the old degeneration theory, des Esseintes does cross the gender boundary on the symptomatic level of his hysteria as defined by contemporary scientific discourse. For in the second half of the novel, we face the frail reverse of des Esseintes's sensual refinement. His mind is no longer strong enough to counter the effects of his physical degeneration. The body gets the better of the mind; what used to be a positive feature which distinguished him from his unsophisticated contemporaries turns to disease. "Nerveux" is the term des Esseintes repeatedly uses to describe the reasons for his headaches and recurrent nausea, causing his refusal of all nutrition, and, worst of all, for his frequent nightmarish hallucinations that cease to be the longed for spiritual elevation he came to seek in his self-chosen exile. Creativity, too, stops to be a way of controlling his body's malfunctioning. The synaesthetic impressions with which he deliberately surrounded himself—paintings, tapestry, machines—all begin to turn against him. Suddenly, odors like "frangipane" start to obsess him. His attempts to contain the backlash of sensuality by creative means fail: making perfume proves to be an inappropriate defense against the nausea. The detached pose of dandyism suddenly appears as pathological insomnia, indigestion and anorexia. Strong physical impressions turn into the physical expression of disease.

It is exceptional that, in this peculiar situation, des Esseintes finally turns to a well-established doctor for advice, a doctor who, remarkably enough, does not confirm des Esseintes's personal diagnosis of hysteria. It is only des Esseintes himself who chooses to see himself in this effeminate hysterical frame. He accepts the treatments the doctor suggests and seeks to accelerate this cure with the help of machinery, another outburst of creativity, if you wish. Since his stomach becomes unable to digest normal food, des Esseintes must now turn to the so-called "susteneur," which processes any food he eats. Whereas before he used machines to refine his sensual pleasures, he now tries to restore his health with the help of them. But the effect the machine produces is negligible.<sup>5</sup>

What is indeed striking is the fact that des Esseintes's health is less threatened when he leaves his chosen way of life. His



journey to England, set off by reading Dickens, does not get him further than an English pub in Paris, but there he eats and drinks heartily for the very first time. And it is this experience of food and atmosphere that finally convinces him *not* to make the journey, for his expectations could only be disappointed by reality, just as his sexual memories already proved. Only the mind can sufficiently fulfill the longings of the body, but it is physical gratification that makes all the difference.

With his symptoms getting worse, des Esseintes finally gives in to the doctor's advice and decides to give up Fontenay. The decadent pose, assumed to give his body the exquisite sensual indulgence it appeared to need, has to be relinquished since his truly decadent body rebelled against it.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I call it a pose since a closer analysis shows that des Esseintes's "living against the grain" includes the set codes of dandyism as depicted by Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aurevilly, a fact that has to be neglected for brevity's sake here.

<sup>2</sup> Some critics, including Hiltrud Gnüg, chose to regard des Esseintes as a mock-dandy.

<sup>3</sup> For Huysmans, being as much a novelist as an art critic, Moreau succeeded in using literary techniques in his paintings: "cet art qui franchissait les limites de la peinture, empruntait à l'art d'écrire ses plus subtiles évocations" (110).

<sup>4</sup> In recent years, medical historians as well as literary critics have shown an increasing interest in Charcot's works which find its



outlet in a tremendous body of critical work. For an overview of “new hysteria studies,” see Marc S. Micale’s *Approaching Hysteria. Disease and its Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See Huysmans’s chapters XV and XVI for a discussion of the “susteneur.”

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*Le Corps et L'Esprit*  
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*Paroles Gelées*

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*Selected Proceedings from*  
*UCLA French Graduate Students'*  
*Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference*



# *Le Corps et L'Esprit* in French Cultural Production

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The UCLA French Department Graduate Students'  
Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference  
April 16–18, 1999

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,  
*Le Quart Livre*

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