

Against the Grain Again

*The Further Adventures of
Des Esseintes*

Brendan Connell



Tartarus Press

*Against the Grain Again:
The Further Adventures of Des Esseintes
by Brendan Connell*

Preface and Chapter I

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Ornamentation from *À rebours*, by J.-K. Huysmans, illustrated
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Preface

In 1884 Joris-Karl Huysmans, one of France's most intriguing authors, published *À rebours* (tr. as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*)—a novel intended for a select few, and one which, without formal plot structure, or the tug-and-pull of the motivations of a cast of characters, would subvert Naturalism by, instead of depicting common existence, offering a case study of an exceptional, cultured being.

The exceptional being was Duc Jean des Esseintes, the sole surviving descendent of a great house which had been degenerating for generations, who, at the beginning of that novel, is introduced as a 'frail young man of thirty, anaemic and nervous, with hollow cheeks, eyes of a cold, steely blue, a small but still straight nose, and long, slender hands'.

An entire chapter of this strange book was dedicated to the Latin Literature of the Decadence, another, in sparkling language, to precious stones, and yet another to the science of perfumes. Filled with elegant depravity, the strange, encyclopaedic novel fell like a meteorite. Casting aside the normal shackles of the genre of which Zola was the Master and Huysmans the disciple, it disturbed and puzzled the Naturalists, shocked the Catholics, and did little to delight the stiff members of the Académie Française, being called 'unhealthy', and 'absurd'.

Others, however,—more restless, inquisitive, aesthetic, or simply endowed with keener senses—were intrigued, delighted, inspired. Léon Bloy claimed the book was the work of an idealist. Barbey d'Aurevilly saw in it the presence of Baudelaire. Paul Valéry declared that it was his Bible. Oscar Wilde not only

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expressed his admiration, but even seems to have implanted it in his own *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as ‘the strangest book’ that hero had ever read.



Around 2003 or 2004, while I was living in the village of Bruzella, in the Canton of Ticino, Switzerland, I began to write *Against the Grain Again*, with the clear idea in mind that it would be a continuation of *À rebours*, beginning just where Huysmans had left and carrying Des Esseintes to other climes. . . .

Work on the book was slow, piecemeal, more in the head than with paper and ink.

Eventually, in 2009, a fragment of sorts, which showed our hero, not directly after *À rebours*, but long after, appeared in an anthology titled *Cinnabar’s Gnosis (A Homage to Gustav Meyrink)*; but that was all.

Time, as tends to happen, passed, with me continuing to claim the book was ‘something I was working on’ though the lantern of inspiration seemed to have gone out long before. I had not the heart to pick up the dusty pieces and cobble them back together.

In the summer of 2018, however, while staying for a period in Bruzella, new ideas for the story began to come to me. Walking daily through the Stations of the Cross, past the hundred-year-old chestnut trees and the dolors of Christ, up to the old church on the hill, Huysmans seemed, once again, to speak to me, to supplement my thoughts, and point the correct path to take. I could see that much of my original method was wrong, and I decided that I would begin afresh; would half close my eyes, so the bright light of the laws of nature would be subdued and the correct vibrations would guide my hand.

And now, having completed the book, it is up to the reader to judge whether it is a success or failure, neither one nor the other, homogeneous or heterogeneous, like watching someone

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who cannot swim wade into great depths, or just a simple farce. But the geometry of these 'works of fiction' is always occult, and the lips which pronounce the words are seldom one's own.

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Des Esseintes

For Brian Stableford,
one of life's great writers.

I

The sound above was like a drum. It traversed the ceiling from left to right and then returned from right to left. There was a pause, a bang, and then a repetition.

Des Esseintes wondered what sort of person inhabited the flat above him—apparently some restless soul, unable to keep still for a quarter of an hour, some odd fellow who lived as if dancing upon hot coals.

He, Duc Jean des Esseintes, had not so much as seen that clamorous creature, but, then again, he himself had hardly been seen since he had entered this restricted cave, translocating from his place in Fontenay.

‘Ah,’ he murmured, pressing the fingers of his long, slender hands together so they formed a sort of pyramid, ‘it cannot be said that my mental state has been much improved by this latest lodging. No doubt above me I have a maniac, some sort of obsessive, who trudges about at all hours, making the plaster of the ceiling tremble and crack as if it were under the vibrations of an armed force. Below me, is some cacophonist, a fellow who, at the most inopportune time shrieks out a tune by Saint-Saëns or Saverio Mercadante on that most abominable of inventions: the flute—and at others is heard talking to himself, mumbling, as if in constant prayer. Indeed, the only occupant who seems to have the least reserve is the stout gentleman opposite, who tiptoes gently about and whose presence I

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would be wholly unaware of, if I had not one day seen his back receding down the stairway.’

Buried in an armchair, his eyes slits of cold displeasure, Des Esseintes contemplated his existence, which seemed not unlike that of some bird of rare plumage confined to a cage, left to peck at a few old and tasteless seeds.

He had been living this way for some months—with curtains drawn, a true son of his mother, a woman who could not stand light or noise and who would have a nervous fit at being subjected to the bark of a dog or being forced to issue out of her house for any period on a sunny day. He had, for countless hours, sat there, brooding on his past, on the decayed state of his mental faculties—wondering if he should have trusted those doctors at all . . . for his mind, to him, seemed to have softened—to have become somewhat pulpy, like the flesh of an over-ripe apple or a pamphlet left in the rain.

It might indeed have been preferable if, in imitation of Quintus Fulvius Flaccus, he had hung himself in his bedroom, or like Amphicrates, had simply starved himself to death, at least avoiding a drawn-out conclusion—an endless parade of vulgarity—a circus of dullness—installed in this city apartment, like some civil servant or failed bachelor merchant—reduced to a single servant who only appeared during certain set hours and lived elsewhere.

The only thing he would need to round out the picture would be to find some low-born mistress—a seamstress maybe—someone to make the nights even more unbearable, who would drown out those silences with shouts and baying such as one might hear at a market or street fair, making sleep even more unattainable.

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Previously he had lived a night time existence, like that of a bat, breakfasting at sunset and thereafter enjoying the solitude of his own thoughts until dawn, but his doctor, a certain Denis Viète, having expressed his concern that Des Esseintes, without radical changes in his style of life, would subject himself to self-destruction, had prescribed regular hours—those of a banker—to sleep by ten and up at six. It was considered vital to his constitution, a supposed remedy against a terrible fate.

‘Improper hours of sleep are a cause for depressive mental emotions,’ the doctor had said. ‘The congested condition of the brain thus invoked could, in your fragile condition, be catastrophic . . . and, even if by some miracle you spared your own life, lead to premature dissolution by other means.’

Thus, when the clock struck half-past nine, Jean mechanically wandered into the bedroom. He looked at the place with dismay. Though fair-sized, it had a strangely empty appearance, hardly one of comfort or homeliness. Aside from the bed itself, the only other furniture in the room was a single chair, a chest of drawers, and a bedside table on which was set a lamp and the 1520 edition of Odo of Cheriton’s somniferous *Flores Sermonum ac Evangeliorum Dominicalium*. He had refrained from putting any sort of knick-knacks or pictures in this chamber—anything that might awaken his mind, stir his thoughts—he wished the room he slept in to be like the cell of a monk.

Dolefully he changed into a pair of pyjamas.

Though not the least tired, he lay down and closed his eyes. He wished he could have taken a few drops of laudanum, but, again—his doctor had forbidden it—and so he

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was left with his mind swinging this way and that, regurgitating old ideas, memories, thrusting together and stirring them, as he tried desperately to delve into nothingness, the oblivion of sleep, battling against his aesthetic emotions, trying to dull his mind and deaden his imagination. And it was at that hour, more than ever, that he wished he had been born with less keen sensibilities—had been born some common lout, one of those fellows whose thoughts slithered along like slugs—slow and simple; since there was little doubt that, the more refined one's tastes, the more lofty one's ideas, the more one suffered—and so it was that he felt a martyr to his own intellect, to his own aristocratic blood.

Just as he was finally beginning to drift to sleep, his thoughts beginning to dissipate into oblivion, he was jolted to his senses by the sound of voices:

'Prostrate yourself!'

'I obey!'

'The flesh excites, the world entices! Suckle ye at his bosom!'

'I desire to serve!'

Then, in a thundering voice: 'Dear Satan, our Lord, who orphans children, who tortures men and sends them off to war, where they lose their limbs and commit rape and other wonderful atrocities, we commend to you our distracted, aberrant service. Lord Satan, you who are so much greater than God, you who find satisfaction in my sins and who are refreshed by tortures and murders, hear our cries that we may henceforth serve you! Satan, you who never forgive or show pity, you, who with your ice-cold seed incubate the wombs of adulteresses and strum-

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pets that they may, with agonising screams, give birth to transgressors and malefactors, your journeymen, that they may commit horrible actions, that they may engage in enormities such as would make even the most blemished souls tremble with disgust, bestow on us your approbation that we may continue unhindered to engage in depravities!’

At first Jean thought he was having one of his habitual nightmares, but then, pinching himself several times in the thigh and neck and seeing that he was awake, he considered that maybe someone was in the room with him, the voices seemed so close at hand. But, as he listened, he soon realised that those frightful tones were intruding through the bedroom wall, were coming from the flat next door where the peaceful gentleman lived.

He lay there in the dark, with his eyes open, listening as the voice, now strident, now pleading pushed its way through the wall.

‘I, a proud slave of Lucifer, one who finds strength, not in good deeds, not in giving bread to the poor or succour to the afflicted, but rather in the most supreme vileness, in the heights of vice, in traumas of blood and semen, in unmitigated lust and extravagant pollution, am here to pay heed to your words. For when you say, “Go and sin more!” I obey, and there is nothing I would do for you that would make me blush, and there is no puddle so filthy that I would not languish in it for you, who have leeches from my heart the last drops of pity and remorse and filled me with the desire for gold and infinite couplings. Now, grant to me, and all those who are here present with me, that we may join together in an orgy of corruption and debasement, the will and power to serve you!’

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This was followed by strange laughter, odd groans that united with random phrases. He could no longer make out the words, only the accents, now lecherous, now juvenile—noises that were all the more frightening for their obscurity.

And then there was silence.

Des Esseintes lay there beneath the sheets, his eyes wide open, his mind trembling like a frightened cat.

Indeed it seemed that his neighbour led a more lively existence than he had previously suspected.



All the next day he was restless. Strange sensations seemed to overtake him. At one moment he felt cold and put on a thick jacket; but then, moments later, sweating like a horse, he tore it off in a fit of agitation. He picked up a volume of Dracontius, read a few pages, and then cast it aside, not having understood a word. When lunch was served, he had not the slightest appetite, and merely took a few sips of wine, which tasted sour, as if it had been made from copper coins rather than grapes.

He lit a cigarette and paced his study.

His mind, beyond his control, kept going over details, the stories and histories he had read of black masses—how, for the host, they used foetuses which, combining with semen, menstrual blood and ashes from the crematory, they ground into a paste; and how they also, at those awful rites, drank chalices of menstrual blood, and sometimes worse, sipping these wretched liquids while consigning themselves to the Dark Lord. Standing around, each hold-

ing a candle of white wax, while the priest held a candle of yellow wax made of hangman's fat—that is to say *adepts hominis*, the fat of men put to death by hanging or any other legal means—with a wick made of the hair of a murdered whore.

'I would have thought,' Des Esseintes mused, 'that what I heard last night was a hallucination if it were not for the fact that such things are all too real, especially in the European capitals, where the vices bloom to their fullest, and where an ample harvest is always there ready for that fellow with horns on his head and fangs like a boar to take.'

Indeed, was it not common knowledge that Paris, more than any place on earth, had men and women dedicated to the service of Satan? Did not the papers, every other day, speak of it spreading like a contagion? Were there not said to be salons in which those who met trampled on the cross, said the Lord's prayer backwards, and committed abhorrent acts on pages of the Holy Bible? Had not a group of female magicians been apprehended just the year before for engaging in demoniacal impregnation? Was it not a known fact that consecrated hosts were regularly being stolen from Catholic churches in order that they might be profaned in the name of the Antichrist?

He sat down in his armchair and, with eyes half-closed, let his mind drift, drawing up a sort of *proces-verbal* of the proceedings that happened next door. From mere thought, his mind seemed to be summoning up visions, so that these things seemed as if they were passing before his very eyes.

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He saw the figures, maybe six in all, as, one by one, they silently marched past the concierge's lodging—shadowy, mysterious beings who would then tip-toe up the carpeted stairwell—would rap ever so softly on the door, the door opposite his own, which, with well-oiled hinges would glide open admitting the visitors within.

These folks would not speak, only greeting each-other with nods of the head and obscure signs as they proceeded into the back-room, which was hung in red, and lit up with tapers. A large table is set in the middle of the room and over it is draped a black cloth with red trim. . . .

And then this group which only congregates under the shades of night, these votaries of Satan gather round. Their costumes so obscure them that it is impossible to tell age or sex, social status or occupation. Are they lords or statesmen, riff-raff or bourgeoisie, these putrid comrades who disguise their stench with flowery scents and meet there at the crossroads of infamy and abomination?

One of the figures steps forward. The hood is pushed back and long red hair falls about the shoulders. It is a daughter of the moon. Other hands, with fingers encrusted in rings and nails glimmering in the candlelight, reach out and help her to disrobe. Now, quite naked, she lays herself upon the table, fully exposing the over-ripe contours of her body, its every cleft and fissure, to the onlookers.

Then another figure steps forward and, the hood of this one also having fallen back, we can see that it is a man—a fellow with broad shoulders and an axe-shaped beard.

'Behold, and fix your eyes on the altar of Satan!' he says in a deep, slightly giddy voice, before throwing himself

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down, thrusting his beard upon the woman's feet on which crosses are tattooed.

Then one of the other members of the party, from the depths of their garments, produces consecrated hosts, those wafers stolen from the Chapelle Expiatoire and La Trinité, from Notre Dame de Lorette and St Augustin. And, after rubbing these hosts over her armpits and then toes, and then the most improper parts of her body, he then drops them into a pitcher of blood—blood derived from we know not whence—is it that of an animal, a man, a child?—all this while the woman is murmuring blasphemies, groaning in erotic transports, either feigned or real, her limbs agitating themselves, her legs opening and closing like scissors. . . .

Finally, during the small hours of the morning, these confederates of Satanism would disperse, letting the streets of Paris swallow them up—and they would return to their day-to-day existences, the mundane routines that disguised their wicked selves. Possibly one was the chaste wife of some public official, another a banker, another—who could tell?—a priest who preached prudence and temperance!

'I wonder,' thought Des Esseintes, 'if on the next Sabbath they will again congregate. . . . If I were to drill a small hole in the wall . . . about the size of a five-louis piece . . .'

And a chill ran down his spine as he thought of what he might see.

Three days later, however, in a noisy and disturbing display, a group of three or four workmen in red shirts marched up the stairs and entered the lodging opposite

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his—the abode of the quiet stout gentleman. Numerous trunks and furnishings were removed, loaded onto carts and taken away. And a notice that an apartment was for rent soon appeared on the gate, near the concierge's lodge.

‘Well,’ Jean murmured, ‘I hope, in any case, that whoever lets the place is as peaceable as the previous tenant.’

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