

HUYSMANS  
AGAINST  
NATURE



A NEW TRANSLATION BY  
ROBERT BALDICK

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THE PENGUIN  
CLASSICS

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EDITED BY E. V. RIEU

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J.-K. HUYSMANS

*Against Nature*

A NEW TRANSLATION OF

*À Rebours*

BY

ROBERT BALDICK

PENGUIN BOOKS

Penguin Books Ltd Harmondsworth, Middlesex  
U.S.A.: Penguin Books Inc., 3300 Clipper Mill Road, Baltimore 11, Md  
AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,  
Mitcham, Victoria

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This translation first published 1959

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Made and printed in Great Britain  
by William Clowes and Sons, Ltd  
London and Beccles

## INTRODUCTION

*'It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed.'*

Thus Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, referring to the yellow-backed French novel lent to his hero by Lord Henry Wotton. In 1895, at the *Queensberry trial*, Edward Carson cross-examined Wilde as to the identity and morality of this same French novel. Wilde identified it readily enough as Huysmans' *A Rebours*, but he refused to say anything about its morality or immorality; to ask a writer to pass moral judgement on a fellow writer's work was, he said, 'an impertinence and a vulgarity'. The British public, left to draw its own unsavoury conclusions, probably decided that the author of the notorious 'yellow book' must be a wealthy hedonist, a monster of depravity, a nineteenth-century Elagabalus. Only a few people outside France (including, perhaps, Wilde himself) knew that in fact he was a minor civil servant of modest means, living what was as yet a very humdrum life.

Joris-Karl Huysmans was born in Paris on 5 February 1848, the only son of a French mother and a Dutch father. After a childhood saddened by two major events – his father's death and his mother's speedy remarriage – he became a junior clerk in the Ministry of the Interior, where he was to remain for thirty-two years, writing reports for the *Sûreté Générale* and novels for himself. For a short period before the Franco-Prussian War he also studied law, without much enthusiasm, and lived with a young soubrette in a somewhat sordid liaison described in his first novel, *Marthe*. He spent the first half of the War in hospital, suffering from dysentery, and the second half under fire in the besieged capital; with the return of peace he went back to his office stool, and three years later published his first book.

This was *Le Drageoir à épices* (1874), a collection of highly-coloured prose-poems in the Baudelaire manner, signed with what



*Huysmans supposed was the Dutch form of two of his French names. He then turned to novel-writing, his first three efforts in this genre showing the influence of the three great masters of the contemporary French novel: Edmond de Goncourt, who inspired Marthe (1876), reputed to be the first novel dealing with a prostitute in a licensed brothel; Émile Zola, who was the dedicatee of Les Sœurs Vatard (1879), a well documented study of working-class life; and Gustave Flaubert, to whom the delightful but obviously derivative En Ménage (1881) was a sort of posthumous tribute. Flaubert's influence can also be seen in the short novel A Vau-l'Eau (1882), the tragi-comic story of a little clerk called Jean Folantin, an older, poorer, sicker Huysmans, who samples the humble pleasures of life as systematically as Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet amassed knowledge, and finally decides to 'ship his oars and drift - downstream'.*

*So far Huysmans was still regarded by public and critics alike as a faithful member of Zola's Médan Group of young Realists, or rather Naturalists, together with Guy de Maupassant, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique, and Paul Alexis. But there were already disquieting signs that he had no intention of spending the rest of his life producing bleak social documentaries such as Zola urged his disciples to write and carefully avoided writing himself. His style, for one thing, was too colourful, too individual for a good Naturalist, while in his latest works all pretence of objectivity was abandoned and his heroes stood revealed as J.-K. Huysmans in the thinnest of disguises. What is more, these heroes would often admit to odd fancies that seemed even odder in their context; for instance, in the working-class novel Les Sœurs Vatard, Cyprien Tibaille expressed a longing to 'embrace a woman dressed as a rich circus artiste, under a wintry, yellow-grey, snow-laden sky, in a room hung with Japanese silks, while some half-starved beggar emptied the belly of his barrel-organ of the sad waltzes it contained'.*

*It was clear that Cyprien Tibaille's creator, as one perceptive critic put it, had 'taken a return ticket to Médan'. But Huysmans later claimed that the other members of the Médan Group were almost as tired as he was of following in the Master's footsteps. The novel of the average man, in their opinion, had been done to perfection by Flaubert in his Éducation sentimentale; the novel of adultery had been worked to death by writers great and small; and as for the social documentary, they saw little point in plodding through every trade and*

profession, one by one, from rat-catcher to stockbroker. 'We began to wonder', writes Huysmans, 'whether Naturalism was not advancing up a blind alley, and whether we might not soon be running our heads into a wall.' While his colleagues hesitated, he himself decided on an ambitious attempt 'to shake off preconceived ideas, to extend the scope of the novel, to introduce into it art, science, history: in a word, to use this form of literature only as a frame in which to insert more serious work'. The result was *A Rebours*.

This book was originally conceived as an esoteric extension of *A Vau-l'Eau*. 'I pictured to myself', writes Huysmans, 'a Monsieur Folantin, more cultured, more refined, more wealthy than the first, and who has discovered in artificiality a specific for the disgust inspired by the worries of life and the American manners of his time. I imagined him winging his way to the land of dreams, seeking refuge in extravagant illusions, living alone and apart, far from the present-day world, in an atmosphere suggestive of more cordial epochs and less odious surroundings.' Where poor Folantin had sought satisfaction in the simple, natural things of life, the rich hero of *A Rebours*, Duc Jean Floressas des Esseintes, would resort to the artificial and the exotic; where Folantin had read realistic novels and collected prints of the Dutch masters, Des Esseintes would prefer the poetry of Mallarmé and the pictures of Gustave Moreau; where Folantin had indulged his body in restaurants and brothels, Des Esseintes would use enemas and enjoy 'unnatural loves and perverse pleasures'. But if the clerk and the aesthete went opposite ways in their pursuit of happiness, the result of their quest was to be the same in each case: disgust and disillusionment.

Des Esseintes was not, of course, just a refined reincarnation of Monsieur Folantin: he owed something to half-a-dozen dandies and aesthetes who were living or only lately dead when Huysmans wrote *A Rebours*. Thus there was the 'mad' Ludwig II of Bavaria, who was said to possess an artificial forest inhabited by mechanical animals; there was Charles Baudelaire, who as a young man had furnished his rooms in the Hôtel Lauzun in the same exotic style as Des Esseintes, and Edmond de Goncourt, who in *La Maison d'un artiste* had listed the contents of his Auteuil treasure-house in the same detail; there was the old dandy, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, disciple and biographer of Beau Brummel, and the young dandy, Francis Poictevin, a rich friend



of Huysmans' who later used the original title of *A Rebours* – *Seul* – for a book of his own; and, last but by no means least, there was Robert, Comte de Montesquiou-Fezensac.

This elegant aristocrat, like *Des Esseintes* a scion of one of France's oldest families, enjoyed a well deserved reputation for eccentricity. It was rumoured, for instance, that he would sometimes wear a bunch of Parma violets tucked into his shirt in lieu of a cravat, and that he always dressed in colours which he considered matched the tastes and temperament of his host or guest. But these sartorial idiosyncrasies were as nothing compared to the furnishings of his house in the Rue Franklin, which Stéphane Mallarmé visited one evening in 1883. According to Montesquiou, 'he went away in a state of silent exaltation . . . I do not doubt, therefore, that it was in the most admiring, sympathetic and sincere good faith that he retailed to Huysmans what he had seen during the few moments he spent in *Ali-Baba's Cave*.' Whether it was retailed in good faith or bad, Huysmans certainly made good use of the poet's information, and all the bizarre features of Montesquiou's house – the sledge on a snow-white bearskin, the silk socks displayed in a glass case, the church furniture and the gilded tortoise – eventually appeared, suitably adapted and embellished, in *A Rebours*. Montesquiou himself was understandably annoyed when the public proceeded to identify him with Huysmans' unhealthy hero; thus there is a story that when he ordered some rare works from one of Huysmans' bookseller friends, and the man, failing to recognize his customer, exclaimed: 'Why, Monsieur, those are books fit for *Des Esseintes*!' he reacted violently. As the author of some passable verse, he hoped to achieve immortality as a poet, and it must have been galling for him to realize, before he died in 1921, that he was destined to be remembered only as the prototype of Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* and Proust's *Charlus*.

In fact, the identity of the models Huysmans used for *Des Esseintes* is of little importance compared with the inspiration he derived from contemporary literature, and particularly from the works of Baudelaire, Goncourt, and Zola.

Baudelaire's influence on *A Rebours* is everywhere apparent, from the very title and theme of the book, inspired by the poet's paradoxical praise of artifice and denigration of Nature, to details such as the nightmare finale of Chapter Seven, obviously suggested by the poem

Les Métamorphoses du Vampire. Moreover, the spirit of Baudelaire's *Correspondances* pervades Huysmans' novel, the concept of the interrelation of sense-impressions being pushed to its furthest limits in the famous episode of the 'mouth organ' – although the actual idea of the ingenious arrangement of liqueur-casks was taken from an anonymous eighteenth-century brochure.

Edmond de Goncourt also had a considerable influence on A Rebour. It was from him that Des Esseintes derived many of his aesthetic beliefs and literary opinions; it was Goncourt too who, in his envious anxiety to wean disciples away from Zola, had advised Huysmans to abandon the working-class novel in order to study 'cultured beings and exquisite things', setting him an example with his own most recent novel, *La Faustin*. Huysmans, like Des Esseintes, admired this book for what he called its 'subtle and elegant depravity', and in a significant letter to the author, written in 1882, he had declared that 'this analysis of the sensual and cerebral pleasures of refined and neurotic creatures opened up to me new, if not unsuspected, horizons'.

As for Zola, who might appear at first to have made no contribution to A Rebour, it should be remembered that in many of his novels – generally those we most admire to-day – the poet overrules the Naturalist and gives free rein to his lyrical genius. Des Esseintes expresses warm admiration for one of these novels, *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, and readers of this book will recall a symphony of flowers during the heroine's aromatic death-agony which, like the symphony of cheeses in *Le Ventre de Paris*, foreshadows the symphony of liqueurs in A Rebour.

Nor must it be imagined that Huysmans had abjured every article in the Médan creed: to the end of his life he was to remain faithful to the Naturalist ideal of careful and conscientious documentation. The subject and scope of A Rebour in particular called for detailed research in many different spheres. In the first place, it involved some of that 'field-work' to which every Naturalist was accustomed, taking Huysmans and his note-book to the Bodega on the corner of the Rue Castiglione and the tavern known as Austin's Bar in the Rue d'Amsterdam that are patronized by Des Esseintes in the course of his ill-starred London journey; incidentally, the latter establishment still serves drinks, but the only trace of its English connexion that remains is its name, now *Le Bar Britannia*. Then the nature of Des Esseintes' illness

necessitated a thorough study of the relevant medical textbooks, and Huysmans later told Zola that he had faithfully followed the works of Bouchut and Axenfeld in his representation of every symptom and phase of his hero's neurosis. And finally, to cover the vast range of Des Esseintes' interests and experiments, Huysmans had to consult countless specialist treatises on subjects as diverse as theology and perfumery, floriculture and furniture, picking out unusual details or startling opinions and recasting them in the mould of his own distinctive style. How successfully he used this technique can be judged from the fact that his chapter on late Latin literature earned him the reputation of a brilliant if perverse scholar, and only years later did he reveal that it had been cunningly adapted from Ebert's *Allgemeine Geschichte der Literatur des Mittelalters*.

Huysmans had originally intended *A Rebours* to be no longer than *A Vau-l'Eau*, but this plan miscarried. In a preface he wrote in 1903 for a limited edition of the novel, he explained that 'the more I thought about it, the more the subject grew, calling for painstaking research; each chapter became the essence of a speciality, the sublimate of a different art'. The result was an encyclopaedic work so far removed from the average novel that, when the author was asked in 1883 how he thought it would be received, he was pessimistic – but unrepentant. 'It will be the biggest fiasco of the year', he said; 'but I don't care a damn! It will be something nobody has ever done before, and I shall have said what I want to say . . .'

In fact, when it was published by Charpentier in May 1884, *A Rebours* was anything but a fiasco. As Huysmans wrote twenty years later, 'it fell like a meteorite into the literary fairground, provoking anger and stupefaction, especially among the Press'. The critic Francisque Sarcey was moved to declare in a public lecture that 'he'd be hanged if he understood a word of the novel'; Catholic reviewers damned it out of hand as being hostile to religion, while anticlerical writers thought it treated the enemy too sympathetically; Romantics and Parnassians were outraged by the attacks on Hugo and Leconte de Lisle, while the Naturalists were no less offended by the hero's detestation of modern life. As for Zola, he brushed aside Huysmans' well-meant but dishonest hints that the whole thing was just a literary leg-pull, and sadly reproached his former disciple with 'delivering a terrible blow to Naturalism' and 'leading the school astray'.



On the other hand, the indignation of the novel's critics was more than matched by the enthusiasm of its admirers, both inside and outside France. Thus George Moore called it 'that prodigious book, that beautiful mosaic'; Wilde paid tribute to its potency, declaring that 'the heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain'; while Remy de Gourmont insisted that 'we should never forget what a huge debt we owe to this memorable breviary'.

Certainly these authors and countless others owed a great deal to A Rebours, as any student of modern European literature can testify. Moore's John Norton, in *A Mere Accident* and Mike Fletcher, copies *Des Esseintes* in his furnishing schemes, his reading of Schopenhauer, his taste in church music; Wilde's Dorian Gray models his conduct on *Des Esseintes*' and incidentally explores the subjects of jewellery and tapestry as exhaustively as Huysmans' hero studied perfumery and floriculture; Remy de Gourmont's Hubert d'Entragues, in *Sixtine*, repeats both *Des Esseintes*' literary judgements and his final cry for faith; and Eça de Queiroz's Jacinto, the hero of the great Portuguese novel *A cidade e as serras*, imitates *Des Esseintes* in nearly every respect, even organizing a rose-coloured meal as a delicate variation on the latter's notorious black dinner. These are a few of the more obvious instances of A Rebours' influence, but the total number of *Des Esseintes*' literary progeny is incalculable: almost every unhappy, solitary hero of a twentieth-century novel could probably trace his descent back to Huysmans' great creation.

There are, of course, critics who maintain that *Des Esseintes* himself was intended to be a caricature of such aesthetes as Montesquiou, just as *Amarinth* in Robert Hichens' novel *The Green Carnation* was meant as a satire on Wilde. The flaw in this theory lies in the fact that *Des Esseintes* is basically a self-portrait, for if Huysmans lacked his hero's wealth and breeding, he shared his neurotic sensibility, his yearning for solitude, his loathing for mediocrity, his passion for novelty.

A Rebours indeed forms an integral and important part of the great spiritual autobiography represented by Huysmans' novels. With the exception of *Marthe* and *Les Sœurs Vatard*, all these novels tell the story of the efforts made by one character, under different names, to achieve happiness in various forms of spiritual and physical escapism. Thus in *En Ménage* he hopes to find content in love-affairs conducted

*in his former bachelor establishment; in A Vau-l'Eau, in the humbler satisfactions of life and his snugly furnished rooms; in A Rebours, in artificial, esoteric pleasures and his 'refined Thebaid'; in En Rade (1887), in country life and the dilapidated Château de Lourps where Des Esseintes was born; in Là-Bas (1891), in satanism and the bell-ringer's eyrie at Saint-Sulpice; in En Route (1895), in monastic life and the Trappist abbey where Huysmans was received back into the Catholic Church; in La Cathédrale (1898), in provincial life and the cathedral city of Chartres; in L'Oblat (1903), in semi-monastic life and the village where Huysmans spent two years as a Benedictine oblate. All these hopes are disappointed, but in L'Oblat Huysmans and his last hero show that they have learnt their lesson: the novel ends with an admission that escapism is not only futile but wrong – that one should accept suffering willingly in expiation of one's own sins and the sins of others. With this statement of the doctrine of mystical substitution, Huysmans' spiritual odyssey as recounted in his novels came to an end; it only remained for him to put the doctrine into effect, as he did in the six months of atrocious agony, heroically borne, that preceded his death from cancer in May 1907.*

*It is easy for us to-day, when reading A Rebours, to be wise after the event; to see auguries of Huysmans' subsequent conversion in his hero's hankering after 'the impossible belief in a future life' and his despairing appeal to God; to belittle Barbey d'Aurevilly's prescience in telling Huysmans that after writing this novel he would have to choose between 'the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the Cross'. But it should be remembered that it was seven years before the author of A Rebours asked to see a priest and was introduced to the Abbé Mugnier; eight years before he returned to the Church in the course of a retreat at the lonely Abbey of Notre-Dame-d'Igny. Huysmans himself, when he wrote the novel, was totally unaware that he was already treading the road to Rome; as he later pointed out, he had received a secular education, had abandoned his religion in childhood, and knew no priests or practising Catholics; the cry for faith that he put into Des Esseintes' mouth was therefore quite unconscious. Yet, looking back on A Rebours in 1903, he recognized that it contained the seeds of his future development, the fruits of his past; the brothel and tavern scenes, for instance, so reminiscent of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, might have been taken from Marthe, and the passages on church music or monastic*



life from *En Route*. The novel is, in fact, the keystone of Huysmans' life and work.

It is also, of course, the keystone of the so-called Decadence, that movement in France and England characterized by a delight in the perverse and the artificial, a craving for new and complex sensations, a desire to extend the boundaries of emotional and spiritual experience. Huysmans had imagined that he was 'writing for a dozen persons'; he found instead that he had hundreds of enthusiastic readers who, like Paul Valéry, made *A Rebours* their 'Bible and bedside book' – not only because it mirrored their 'decadent' ideas and aspirations, but also because it revealed and consecrated a new and exciting literature, the literature of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé. Just as in *L'Art moderne* Huysmans had championed Degas and the Impressionists in defiance of public and critical opinion, so in *A Rebours*, with the same unerring skill, he singled out the then neglected authors whom we regard as the most important French writers of his time. Arthur Symonds once aptly described Huysmans' novel as 'the breviary of the Decadence'; but we can see now that it looked beyond the Decadence to Symbolism and Surrealism, and that Remy de Gourmont has been justified in his prophetic judgement: 'It is a book which has stated in advance, and for a long time to come, our loves and hates.'

The significance of *A Rebours*, however, transcends autobiography and literary history, and *Des Esseintes* is more than his creator's alter ego and the quintessential Decadent. He is also, and above all else, the modern man par excellence, tortured by that vague longing for an elusive ideal which we used to call the *mal du siècle*; torn between desire and satiety, hope and disillusionment; painfully conscious that his pleasures are finite, his needs infinite.

Two of Huysmans' contemporaries saw at once that the book epitomized the spiritual anguish of modern times: Léon Bloy and Barbey d'Aurevilly. Bloy declared that 'in this kaleidoscopic review of all that can possibly interest the modern mind, there is nothing that is not flouted, stigmatized, vilified, and anathematized by this misanthrope who refuses to regard the ignoble creatures of our time as the fulfilment of human destiny, and who clamours distractedly for a God'. Barbey noted that 'behind the hero's boredom and his futile efforts to conquer it, there is a spiritual affliction which does even more to exalt the book than the author's considerable talent'. Both recognized that Huysmans'

*supreme achievement was to have created, out of an extraordinary figure apparently incapable of generalization, a type, representative not simply of a group, or of a generation, but of an entire epoch.*

#### NOTE ON THIS TRANSLATION

*I have used Volume VII of Huysmans' Œuvres Complètes (Paris, Crès, 1929), in which certain errors contained in the first edition and in the standard Fasquelle edition have been corrected.*

*Huysmans' style, which Bloy described as 'continually dragging Mother Image by the hair or the feet down the wormeaten staircase of terrified Syntax', is one of the strangest literary idioms in existence, packed with purple passages, intricate sentences, weird metaphors, unexpected tense changes, and a vocabulary rich in slang and technical terms. I have tried to achieve the same effect, using the same constituents, in this English translation; and it is only fair to warn the reader that he may find that the resultant mixture, like the French original, is best taken in small doses.*

*I should like to thank the Delegates of the Clarendon Press for permission to reproduce passages I had already translated in my Life of J.-K. Huysmans (Oxford, 1955); my long-suffering friends and colleagues for help with the terminology of various subjects; and my wife, Grace Baldick, for unfailing encouragement and valuable advice.*

May 1957

R. B.

# AGAINST NATURE

*I must rejoice beyond the bounds  
of time . . . though the world may shudder at  
my joy, and in its coarseness know  
not what I mean.*

JAN VAN RUYSBROECK

