Collecting as Self-Exploration in Late 19th-Century French Literature

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ABSTRACT
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Collecting, as it was practiced in the 1880s, meant cultivating a comforting and busy, but also disorienting and disconcerting domestic, and mental, interior. This study examines how this meaning was developed in French literature at the end of the 19th century. I consider how collecting investigates the self, exercises the powers of the mind, inquires into the individual's relationship to society and to texts.

The study takes, as its point of departure, comments about the cultural significance of collecting, as a widespread taste for domestic interiors filled with objects, made by Paul Bourget and Edmond de Goncourt, two writers of the 1880s.

I then focus on fictional texts from the 1880s by J.-K. Huysmans and Pierre Loti, who, more than any other writers at the end of the 19th century, depict collecting as an earnest activity of self-exploration. The specific collections involved are Huysmans' protagonist's whimsically decorated house outside of Paris, Loti's protagonist's collection of Japanese objects in Japan, Loti's protagonist's floating museum on board his ship, and the author Loti's home museum in Rochefort.

Through close readings of my two texts—paying attention to repeated words, descriptions, imagery, figurative language, ironies, contradictions, juxtapositions, ambiguities, tone and intertextual references, textual form and structure—I analyze how collecting is a process of defining the self, an apprentissage.
The arc of my study draws its inspiration from the theme of collecting itself. From the self and mind of the collector, I proceed to examine how he organizes space, to how he interacts with other people, to how he approaches literature.

Huysmans and Loti prefigure the modernist turn toward the superfluousness of objects, insofar as the collector's elaborate reflection on his objects dominates the two texts discussed in this study, *A Rebours* (1884) and *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). As the collector comes to be at home with objects, objects become, increasingly, catalysts for inner mental exploration. Yet the collected objects of des Esseintes and Loti are still, often, special and rare; these characters are not yet exulting in the trivial, universally available object, as later modernists will do. In Huysmans and Loti, there is still great faith in material objects and the artful arrangement of them to satisfy desires, to be the answer to the quest, to fill the lack, to lead one inward, to solve problems.

Already, by the end of the 1880s, the window of earnest self-exploration through collecting, as exemplified by Huysmans and Loti, will close. In Oscar Wilde's 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which became well-known and widely read in France at the time of its publication, collecting in Wilde's text becomes implicated in hiding the truth of oneself.

In Huysmans' and Loti's depictions of collecting art, art objects and other elements, there is, in contrast, a sense of profitable, fruitful exploration of self, rather than a fear of self-exploration. The collecting they portray is a way of coming to be at home in one's own mind—seeking not originality but simply the articulation of one's own perspective.
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INTRODUCTION

Historical Context

This study is not about collecting as hunt, chase, or obsession. It is not about, in La Bruyère's words, a taste for what is rare, unique, what others lack ("pour ce qui est rare, unique, pour ce qu'on a et ce que les autres n'ont point"). It is, rather, about collecting as a process of apprentissage.

In late 19th-century France, collecting art and other decorative objects became more popular than ever before. An interest in the collection appears in numerous French literary texts. As an example, the very popular 1881 play by Jules Clarétie, Monsieur le ministre, overflows with references to decor and aesthetic objects, reflecting just how much the collection mania had by then permeated the culture, and entered literature. A century earlier, the French Revolution had resulted in the dispersion of royal collections, and the birth of the modern museum. The rise of the bourgeoisie and industrialization led to further circulation of an unprecedented number of objects in society. A new democratization of art had begun to take effect. New national pride, and the development of science and technology, along with France's status as a colonial power, all contributed to the establishment of universal exhibitions displaying France's progress through domestic and foreign goods. By the end of the 19th century, collecting, associated with a new access, on the part of each bourgeois individual, to aristocratic, scientific and colonial values had become a widespread cultural activity. Bourgeois interiors became filled with heterogeneous decorative objects.

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To understand fully the significance of the new bourgeois pastime of collecting, it helps to understand a major, and specifically 19th-century distinction between two kinds of collections. Krzysztof Pomian, historian of collecting, writes about these two types of 19th-century collections, the public (musées) and the private (collections particulières): "Tout comme les musées, les collections particulières se multiplient, elles aussi, et elles se diversifient de plus en plus parallèlement à l'accroissement du nombre d'objets qui se prêtent à y être inclus." Both types of collections become more and more numerous over the course of the 19th century.

The ancestors of the modern, post-Revolution museum were grand, princely collections. The ancestors of the 19th-century private collection were the curiosity cabinets of previous centuries. Pomian describes the cabinet as the "petite collection dont le rôle principal sinon le seul, est d'être pour son propriétaire un instrument d'enrichissement intellectuel ou culturel, ou simplement une distraction." In the 19th century, private collections could, to an even greater extent, acquire purposes other than spreading knowledge ("enrichissement intellectuel ou culturel"), which was now the domain of museums. Private collections became "déchargées de la fonction cognitive s'agissant de tout ce qui est muséalisé, sauf lorsqu'elles appartiennent à des savants professionnels." What, then, did the new kinds of private collections represent?

Thanks to the development of museums, private collections could now express more personal meaning than ever before. Referring to the private collection, Pomian writes: "Elle peut traduire non seulement son savoir et son goût mais aussi ses nostalgies, ses rêves, ses fantasmes." Collecting—in the form of domestic decor, including art as well as other kinds of objects—could now express individuality and personality more than ever before. Knowledge and

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taste are outward expressions of individuality and personality. These new private collections could do something different: they could invite the inhabitant or collector to look more deeply inward, toward nostalgia, dreams, and fantasies.

If collected objects could now lead individuals inward, it is not only because of the sheer abundance of collections in homes. Several historical factors of the 1880s and 1890s are important for contextualizing collected objects' significance for the mind.

The idea of a higher power diminished at the end of the 19th century (one example of the sense of the loss of a higher power is Nietzsche's 1882 pronouncement that God is dead⁶), making way for the mind as a new inspiration not only for science but for literature.

In the realm of science, neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud's teacher, who presented hypnotized "hysterical" women at the Salpêtrière hospital in the 1880s, saw in bibelots "documents of psychopathology."⁷ He himself cultivated, according to Deborah Silverman, a "practice of interior design" which "translated into spatial form the principles of subjective self-projection and imagistic suggestibility."⁸ Bibelots, and the domestic collections of which they were a part, reflected and influenced the mind of the spectator, whether a patient or the doctor himself. It is interesting to note that for Freud, collected objects will represent the fixed, innermost depths of the mind. He will compare them to the individual's unchanging past, guarded and preserved by the unconscious.⁹ For Charcot, they represent mental activity.

In the realm of art and interior design, painters and designers were evoking a new intimacy between home and inhabitant. In the Arts and Crafts design movement, which developed around 1880 in England, and helped generate the development of Art nouveau in

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⁶ Nietzsche, "The Gay Science," 1882. p. 120.
France, and aestheticism in England in the 1890s, decor, including the skill of the individual craftsman, was a protest against industrialization's dehumanizing mechanization of life, and its nefarious effects on art. Arts and Crafts promoted the idea of the home as a work of art. Writer and philosopher John Ruskin and designer William Morris participated in this movement, emphasizing the redemptive power of craftsmanship and beautiful materials—domestic artfulness—to correct industrialization's indifference toward aesthetics.

In the 1890s, the Nabi painters (among them Maurice Denis, Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard), were interested in domestic interiors and curved shapes, interests which participated in the rise of Art nouveau as a new, modern, artistic and design aesthetic. The two paintings by Edouard Vuillard below, "Intérieur à la table à ouvrage" (1893) and "La Lectrice" (1896), depict individuals as blending into their domestic environments—into the tapestries, furniture, wallpaper, bedding and rugs that surround them. They creating atmospheres fusing—as if to protect and conceal—an individual with his or her background.
There is a sense of comfort in these paintings, an extension of the self's boundaries, conveyed by the sense of people busy with domestic tasks (suggesting movement), and also by the presence of draping fabric, which wraps and encloses (suggesting immobility). The light pattern in both paintings involves a subtly darker area leading into a brighter area, a transition that is accentuated by the person in the doorway in each image, entering the room, and moving towards the light of the window. It is as if the inhabitants can enjoy both the cozy darkness of the interior, and the brightness entering from outside, just as they could enjoy both movement and immobility.
Yet, in addition to an extension of the self's boundaries, there is also an effect of disorientation—loss of the self's distinct boundaries. Clothing patterns and colors resemble those of the walls and carpets, and a sense of flatness is created through inconsistent use of shadows, in which it is sometimes difficult to tell how much space, if any, lies between a person and the wall behind him or her. Conflicting perspectives—the footstool in the first painting stands out as incongruous with the rest of the painting, as do the pillows in the second painting—add to this effect. People become incorporated into decor, lingering at the margins of the scene, on thresholds, to a disconcerting extent.

Collecting, as it was practiced in the 1880s, meant cultivating a comforting and busy, but also disorienting and disconcerting domestic, and mental, interior. My study examines how this meaning was developed in literature.

**Literary Context: Balzac and Flaubert**

How did the relationship between collecting and literature evolve over the course of the 19th century? Let us begin with realism and naturalism. The idea of collecting in realism and naturalism meant the scientific, exhaustive observation and recording of the visible, social and material world. Balzac sought to create a complete collection of human society and its mœurs, a catalogue of social types. In his 1842 "Avant-Propos" to the *Comédie humaine*, Balzac claimed to "relier ses compositions l'une à l'autre de manière à coordonner une histoire complète, dont chaque chapitre eût été un roman, et chaque roman une époque. En apercevant ce défaut de liaison, qui d'aillers ne rend pas l'Ecosais [Walter Scott] moins grand, je vis à la fois le système favorable à l'exécution de mon ouvrage et la possibilité de l'exécuter."\(^{10}\) Balzac would

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\(^{10}\) Balzac, "Avant-propos," p. 11.
distinguish himself from his model Walter Scott by tying or weaving his books together, into a complete story. He would make his œuvre a more self-conscious collection of smaller works, drawing attention to the way they all would be participating in something larger—the whole collection of stories of the *Comédie humaine*.

In addition to the idea of collection as form, collections also became an important part of the content of Balzac's stories. He situated characters in extensively described material environments, which functioned to define and differentiate people in terms of their position in the society. He affirmed that this was his goal: to pay attention to the human phenomenon of *collecting*. In so doing, he would surpass the scientists and naturalists, whose method he was borrowing, by representing a more complex subject than plants and animals—humans. Humans were more complex, in Balzac's view, specifically because of their collecting habits. They possessed furniture: "L'animal a peu de mobilier, il n'a ni arts ni sciences; tandis que l'homme, par une loi qui est à rechercher, tend à représenter ses moeurs, sa pensée et sa vie dans tout ce qu'il apprécie à ses besoins."  

Collected objects were neither merely decorative nor transparent in their meaning, but communicated information about the values, thoughts, and life of the humans who possessed them. However, characters did not actively and consciously employ those objects to investigate their inner mind.

In one novel, Balzac focuses on a collector. In *Le Cousin Pons* (1847), part of the section *Scènes de la vie parisienne* of the *Comédie humaine*, the collection consoles the protagonist Pons for his failed career as a musician. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that Pons began collecting after he was not awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome, in order to compensate for the glories he would not be receiving as a musician. The narrator speaks of "compensations à la

Collecting replaces an artistic career. Collecting subsequently becomes a passion for Pons, and almost seems to acquire the importance that music once had for him. "Les plaisirs de collectionneur" are, for Pons, "de si vives compensations à la faillite de la gloire, que s’il lui eût fallu choisir entre la possession de ses curiosités et le nom de Rossini, le croirait-on? Pons aurait opté pour son cher cabinet." He grows to treasure his collection as an adequate substitute for his lost musical career.

Balzac is clear, though, about the collection's subordinate relationship to music at the time when Pons began collecting. The passage that introduces Pons' love of collecting immediately follows mention of his failed career as a musician, and immediately precedes the revelation of his *gourmandise*, or love of good food. This order of information implies a hierarchy in which collecting is inferior to music but superior to culinary indulgence. It is less than art but more than appetite. It lies in between what connects us with animals and what separates us from them. Collecting remains a form of therapy, relief or consolation from suffering. Although Pons' collector's pleasures become so powerful that if asked to choose between his collection and artistic glory, he would choose his collection, still, collecting is shadowed by connection with failure in this novel.

While he associated collecting with failure in *Le Cousin Pons*, Balzac associated collecting with originality in a comment seven years before, in his 1840 article "Les Collectionneurs," in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1842), a two-volume work consisting of articles on a variety of topics by contemporary writers. There, Balzac claimed that "les seuls caractères, les seuls hommes vraiment remarquables de notre époque, les seuls qui possèdent une originalité particulière, les seuls qui marchent hors du troupeau commun... Ces hommes

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remarquables sont les collectionneurs."^{14} Identifying collectors as the only true original people of
the period portrays collecting in a more productive and creative light, yet it still articulates
collecting in terms of the binary opposition between failure and originality. I am interested in
leaving behind that opposition, by exploring how collecting reveals and explores the interior
mind.

Balzac does hint at the theme of collecting’s relationship to the mind in another, even
earlier work, in the short story "La Vendetta" (1830), part of the section *Scènes de la vie privée*
of the *Comédie humaine*. He depicts another collection, in the form of a cluttered artist's studio
full of drawings, frames, paintings, old clothing garments, gold armor, machinery. Ornament co-
exists with bareness, poverty co-exists with riches, and care co-exists with neglect. He suggests a
space of original, chaotic matter that gives rise to the universe, or to artistic creation. The
narrator praises the space as possessing a "je ne sais quoi de grand comme la pensée."^{15} The
studio exudes the grandeur of thought itself. The narrator exclaims, "Quel symbole d'une tête
d'artiste!"^{16} The artist's independent, original mind acquires symbolic form in the messy space of
his studio. However, the literary portrayal of a collecting does not venture further, into an
exploration of the mind.

In Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the next major, canonical novel about collecting in the
19th century after *Le Cousin Pons*, collecting does not furnish information of any kind (as it did
in Balzac). Begun in 1872, and posthumously published (unfinished) in 1881, a year after
Flaubert's death, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* recounts the desultory exploits of two comical characters
with the shared ambition of isolating themselves in the country. They study many different fields

^{14} Viel-Castel, "Les Collectionneurs" (1842), *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes: encyclopédie
morale du dix-neuvième siècle* (1839-1842), p. 121.
of knowledge, from agriculture to history. However, they always encounter unreconcilable contradictions that cause them to abandon one pursuit and to embark on a new one. They are destabilized by the uncertainties that emerge from so much information.

In Chapter Four of the novel, Flaubert critiques the practice of collecting bric-à-brac. Bouvard and Pécuchet become archeologists: "Six mois plus tard, ils étaient devenus des archéologues; —et leur maison ressemblait à un musée." The objects they have collected at the start of this episode include the following: "une vieille poutre de bois," "[des] spécimens de géologie," "une chaîne énorme." Like their other pursuits, collecting does not produce knowledge, but unravels it.

They try to impress spectators by engaging theatrically with their collected objects. This role-playing emphasizes the superficiality of their collecting. In contrast to Balzac's Pons, Flaubert's collectors turn their collecting into an improvised performance, in which they use each other as springboards. They create an "open," rather than a "closed," collection, in Luce Abelès' terms, meaning a collection that is oriented towards its eventual spectators, versus a collection that is designed for the sole delectation of the collector. These theatrical presentations disintegrate, just as each new exploit that they embark upon disintegrates, throughout the course of the novel.

Using their collected objects to create theater is a key to the book as a whole. All their inquiries into different fields of knowledge are, in fact, acts of role-playing. They always have in mind what they "should" know, in order to "seem" like experts, but a core is always missing. Their eventual return to copying at the end of the novel (which was their profession before they

17 Flaubert, Bouvard et Pécuchet, p. 154.
18 Flaubert, Bouvard et Pécuchet, p. 154.
decided to retreat to the countryside) only reinforces their attraction to the surface level of knowledge, to superficial knowledge which does not produce anything: working as copyists means copying text, not penetrating it through reading, deciphering or interpreting it.

For Franc Schuerewegen, collecting in this novel no longer signifies an act of making sense of the world by making a whole: "Leur musée n'est pour eux que la source d'innombrables incertitudes, qui, curieusement, semblent accélérer le processus de la fragmentation. [...] L'échec des collectionneurs enseigne que le tout, désormais, n'est plus la bonne mesure pour penser le réel qui, lui aussi, semble s'être réduit en miettes."\textsuperscript{20} All of the uncertainty that radiates from their collecting activity, and that seems to accelerate the process of fragmentation, implies the potential for a new way of conceiving of reality: understanding reality not as a whole, but rather as a pile of crumbs. Comparing the collections in \textit{Le Cousin Pons} and \textit{Bouvard et Pécuchet}, he writes: "La figure de la collection, en tant qu'assemblage de fragments réunis selon un degré variable d'unification, pose bien le problème de la cohérence qui semble être au cœur du débat sur les frontières de la modernité."\textsuperscript{21} Again, collecting is being interpreted in terms of a binary opposition between success in forming a whole, or failure to form a whole. While the idea of fragmentation lies at the heart of literary modernity, it usually implies the sense of a failure to "add up," and a sense of loss, as a result. Whether collecting signifies coherence or incoherence, however, are different issues from whether collecting signifies a fruitful and earnest exploration of the inner mind.

\textsuperscript{20} Schuerewegen, "\textit{Muséum ou Croutéum?} Pons, Bouvard, Pécuchet et la collection," p. 43.
\textsuperscript{21} Schuerewegen, "\textit{Muséum ou Croutéum?} Pons, Bouvard, Pécuchet et la collection," p. 41.
**Literary Context: Goncourt and Bourget**

In contrast, the idea of collecting at the end of the century means exploring the interior mind, in a way that circumvents the opposition between the fragment and the whole. Edmond de Goncourt and Paul Bourget begin to reveal how collecting signifies a mental process.

Literature in the last two decades of the century—sometimes referred to as symbolist, sometimes as decadent—sought to surpass the perceived limitations of naturalism, to move from the exterior, social, material world, to interior, psychic, spiritual or non-visible realities. Instead of conceiving of man as a mechanism at the whim of physiological and social forces, literature would now more aggressively and more self-consciously conceive of man in terms of his inner complexity and individuality, and focus heavily on those elements, in a departure from traditional drama and intrigue. Michel Raimond, author of *La Crise du roman: des lendemains du Naturalisme aux années vingt* (1966), explains that between 1850 and 1880, from Balzac to Zola, the novel had been conceived as "une régulière progression logique et chronologique" whose purpose was to "raconter une histoire." Toward the end of the century, "peut-être même dès l'entreprise de Bouvard et Pécuchet," the novel veers away from "une action nouée par la disposition des événements et la repartition des passions," away from "une intrigue présentant des personnages qui donnent l'impression de la vie," away from "le récit d'événements constitués en une histoire." There is a new de-emphasis on drama, passion, the hero—elements of traditional storytelling since Aristotle.

Although *Bouvard et Pécuchet* emphatically resists exploring the inner mind of its characters, preferring the theme of superficial knowledge, it marked a turning point between traditional narrative and a new interest in the breakdown of such narrative. While it did not yet

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make the inner lives of its characters its focus, it is still significant that collecting plays such a large role in that text. Collecting does not yet facilitate self-exploration, but it is starting to be associated with a different kind of narrative that paves the way for a novel such as *A Rebours* (1884).

In 1881, Paul Bourget, major critic and writer of the end of the 19th century, began publishing the essays that would become his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883, 1885). This work of literary criticism discussed writers who Bourget believed expressed the pessimism of the second half of the 19th century (Baudelaire, the Goncourt brothers, Stendhal, Flaubert, Renan, Taine, Amiel, Tourguéniev, Dumas fils, Leconte de Lisle). In several different essays, on the Goncourts (1882), Ernest Renan (1882), as well as the "Avant-propos" to the 1885 edition, Bourget’s comments invite us to look further into the nuances of the significance of collecting at this time.

In his "Avant-propos" to the 1885 edition of the *Essais*, Bourget presents collecting as a dominant characteristic of the 1880s: "Chateaubriand encadrait son inguérissable dégoût dans les horizons d'une lande bretonne, où se dressaient les tours du vieux château paternel. Nos pessimistes encadrent leur misanthropie dans un décor parisien et l'habillent à la mode du jour au lieu de le draper dans un manteau à la Byron."24 These evocative domestic interiors express pessimism, in his view, just as, earlier in the century, natural landscapes and aristocratic property ("vieux château paternel") had expressed the romantic *mal du siècle*. The space signifying melancholy has now become the domestic interior—the "décor parisien" "à la mode du jour." Collecting conveys the pessimistic soul of his times.

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These "melancholic" bourgeois interiors are characterized by an abundance of "bibelots," an all-encompassing word for a wide range of aesthetic, decorative objects, from paintings and sculptures to fans, figurines and books. In 1883, the word acquires a more noble meaning than it had possessed in the past. In that year, Ernest Bosc, in his Dictionnaire de l'art, de la curiosité et du bibelot, defined "bibelot" thus: "Ce terme, qui à son origine ne servait qu'à désigner des outils, des ustensiles et des objets très divers et de peu de valeur, est aujourd'hui employé par les amateurs et les antiquaires pour désigner principalement des objets d'art et de curiosité." This improved status of the meaning of the word "bibelot" adds weight to the value Bourget attributes to collecting. While aesthetic objects have circulated more freely and in greater abundance throughout the century, they are endowed with specific power at the end of the century.

Bourget wrote his essay "Edmond et Jules de Goncourt" in 1882. Edmond and Jules de Goncourt were brothers who became prominent figures in Parisian literary and artistic circles due to their avid collecting, their novels, and their multi-volumed Journal (full of anecdotes, observations, opinions and gossip, written over almost a half century, from 1851 until Edmond's death in 1896, and published starting in 1887). In this essay, Bourget writes about how bibelots are more than a passing fashion. They are the key to interpreting not only contemporary society but also its literature: "Le bibelot— […] C'est une mode […]; mais l'analyste de notre société contemporaine ne peut pas plus la négliger que l'historien du grand siècle ne saurait laisser sous silence le paysage taillé du parc de Versailles." The equivalent of classical symmetry is romantic messiness, stylistic heterogeneity: "La noble poésie de Racine est en rapport étroit avec l'horizon qui se voit de la terrasse du vieux palais [de Versailles], et une grande portion de notre

25 Bosc, Dictionnaire de l'art, de la curiosité et du bibelot, p. 100.
littérature actuelle demeure inintelligible sans l'aspect de magasin de bric-à-brac.  

The space of the classical garden of Versailles was as important for understanding 17th-century literature as bric-à-brac is for understanding literature of the 1880s: "a great portion of contemporary literature remains unintelligible without the bric-à-brac store aspect." Collecting—in the form of enclosed interior spaces such as the domestic interior and the bric-à-brac store, is a key to interpreting literature, a site or space which, when described in literature, should be carefully analyzed, assumed to signify larger mindsets characteristic of the 1880s.

Bibelot-filled domestic interiors exhibit this same sort of complication. They resist forming an aesthetic whole: "Le bibelot,—ce minuscule fragment de l'œuvre d'art qui met sur un angle d'une table de salon quelque chose de l'extrême Orient et quelque chose de la Renaissance, un peu du moyen âge français et un peu du XVIIIe siècle!" The bibelot is a "fragment of a work of art," suggesting that the bibelot signifies two larger contexts: 1) the domestic interior into which the object has been incorporated, and 2) the original context from which the object was originally taken. In either case, the wholeness of the domestic interior is undermined by the independence of the bibelot, freed or disconnected in some way from its origin. The wide-ranging time periods and styles represented by different bibelots remain juxtaposed—not integrated into a whole. The collection is a framework that highlights the independence and mobility of the bibelot—its resistance to absorption into the whole of the domestic interior.

Bourget sees in collecting a symptom of an inner, unhealthy complication in people's souls: "Le bibelot,—manie raffinée d'une époque inquiète où les lassitudes de l'ennui et les maladies de la sensibilité nerveuse ont conduit l'homme à s'inventer des passions factices de collectionneur, tandis que sa complication intime le rendait incapable de supporter la large et

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saine simplicité des choses autour de lui!" The bibelot is a refined mania of a worried period, in which boredom and sensitive nerves have led men to invent new passions, while right before one's eyes, if only one could see them or be interested in them, lie simple, healthy things. People have invented new passions—the desire for bibelots—that correspond to their inner complexity. This passion for objects means overlooking the healthy simplicity of his life, and seeking, instead, unhealthy complexity.

Complicated furniture arrangements prompt compelling conversations and interactions among people. Interiors form "ce cadre à l'image de la compagnie qui s'y rencontre et qui peut reconnaître sa complexité personnelle dans la complexité de son ameublement." Complicated interiors reflect the inner complexity of the individuals present, and their difference from one another: "Les conversations se croisent, entremêlant les souvenirs des lectures les plus disparates et des voyages les plus éloignés. De quinze personnes, il n'en est pas deux qui aient les mêmes opinions sur la littérature, sur la politique, sur la religion." Conversations interweave different individuals' experiences, their memories from their readings and voyages, and their divergent opinions, in a way that could impede conversation, since "se croiser" suggests people talking past one another, yet the word "entremêlant" suggests stimulating interaction between people.

Regardless of Bourget's qualification of collecting as "unhealthy," as an expression of pessimism or melancholy, it is important to understand from his comments that collecting signifies more than an end-product. It signifies a space of tension, resistance, struggle. Collecting invites us into convoluted and erratic pathways, processes of the soul and mind.

30 Bourget, "Renan" (1882), Essais, p. 43.
31 Bourget, "Renan" (1882), Essais, p. 43.
The particular way in which collected objects send the collector into his own mind is with detachment, as Bourget implies here: "une profusion de bibelots exotiques ou anciens: laques de Yédo ou bronzes de la Renaissance, orfèvrerie du XVIIIe siècle ou flambeaux d'un autre âge. Est-ce que ce salon n'est pas un musée, et qu'est-ce qu'un musée, sinon une école tout établie pour l'esprit critique?"\textsuperscript{32} Cluttered interiors, filled with bibelots, instruct the psychological and emotional interiors to become complicated as well, sharpening the individual's critical faculty. His mind becomes more finely tuned, more nimble in evaluating and comparing. The exploration of the mind that the collection facilitates is not sentimental introspection, but emotionally detached judgment.

This combination of mental complexity and detachment is clear in the following passage, from the same section: "considérez les mœurs et la société, l'ameublement et la conversation. Tout ici n'est-il pas multiple? Tout ne vous invite-t-il pas à faire de votre âme une mosaïque de sensations compliquées? N'est-ce pas un conseil de dilettantisme qui semble sortir des moindres recoins d'un de ces salons encombrés?"\textsuperscript{33} Dilettantism, a mental attitude which acquires material form in ubiquitous bibelots, furniture ("l'ameublement") and conversation, complicates the soul, as in a mosaic. All the parts stand out, instead of blurring together. That is what dilettantism means: an emotionally detached complication of the soul. (It does not mean, here, an undisciplined, non-intellectually rigorous affinity for art, which is often the commonly understood meaning.)

The idea of dilettantism comes to characterize the Goncourt brothers, collectors whom Bourget calls "museum men": "Les frères de Goncourt ont été des hommes de musée, et en cela

\textsuperscript{32} Bourget, "Renan" (1882), \textit{Essais}, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{33} Bourget, "Renan" (1882), \textit{Essais}, p. 42.
des modernes. Confronted with a work of art, the "homme de musée" is not "transporté par sa foi intime et ces puissants symboles"; the "âme" does not "trouve en [cette inexprimable poésie du décor catholique] de quoi recréer l'état du cœur où vécut l'artiste." That refers to a communion between the spectator and the work of one artist. Instead, the spectator passes among many multiple works of art in quick succession, which express "toutes sortes de tempéraments et de nuances diverses de civilisation. [...] l'œuvre d'art [...] n'est plus pour lui qu'un moyen d'entrée dans des personnalités étrangères." Like a foreigner, he understands art like a language he does not speak: "Il la [l'œuvre d'art] comprend, comme une langue qu'il ne parle pas, [...] Ce n'est plus le domaine du génie et de la création, c'est celui du dilettantisme et de la critique." To be a museum man means possessing a new attitude towards art that combines intimate knowledge of art—living amidst it, as the Goncourts did—with an emotional detachment that allows the spectator or collector to retain his critical faculty. The museum is no longer limited to private or public collections, writes Bourget, but is rather a new mindset: "cet esprit de dilettantisme et de critique s'est développé chez nous à ce point qu'il a étendu le musée bien au-delà des collections publiques et privées, en l'introduisant dans le moindre détail de l'ameublement et en créant le bibelot." The desire to collect bibelots has surpassed the government-funded museums or private collectors' collections, to become a museum mindset among the bourgeoisie—emotional detachment while living amidst art.

The museum mindset is in evidence in the collection catalog Edmond de Goncourt wrote, *La Maison d'un artiste*, published in 1881. This text is centered around a house, both

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thematically and formally. The text proceeds room by room, with chapters on the vestibule, the dining room, the bedroom, etc. The catalog begins, in a brief "Préambule," with an assertion of the new importance of the home—the domestic collection Goncourt is about to present to the reader, but also evident in the widespread activity of collecting in the 1880s—as meaningful as an antidote to society and as a new influence on the imagination.

The interior now means more than a quiet haven for sleeping: "La vie d'aujourd'hui est une vie de combattivité; elle demande dans toutes les carrières une concentration, un effort, un travail, qui, en son foyer enferment l'homme, dont l'existence n'est plus extérieure comme au XVIIIe siècle [...] toute la vie ne s'y dépense plus [...] le chez soi a cessé d'être l'hôtel garni où l'on ne faisait que coucher." Modern (city) life demands that the individual gather himself, concentrate ("concentration"), and this effort, this work, is done in the confines of the home. Spending time in the home ("le foyer") has become necessary in order to deal with the struggle ("combattivité") of modern life. Whereas in the past one could live one's life outside, in society, spending what we would perhaps call "quality time" must be done indoors, in the home. The home has a new function: to equip, bolster and console the individual as he confronts the aggressiveness of modern life.

Cultivating such a domestic interior has become a widespread pastime, as many people have felt threatened by the uncertainty of social and commercial life. Goncourt speaks of "cette passion, devenue générale," "auquel se livre presque toute une nation." It owes its development to an "ennui du cœur," "la tristesse des jours actuels," "l'incertitude des lendemains," to a kind of awkward, difficult birthing process ("l'enfantement, les pieds devant, de la société nouvelle"), and to an attraction to immediate gratification ("la jouissance immédiate de tout ce qui les

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40 Goncourt, *La Maison d'un artiste*, p. 2.
charm, les séduit, les tente"), which he also calls "l'oubli du moment dans l'assouvissement artistique.\textsuperscript{41} In a time of precarity, people find solace in art in the home. This indulgence in art is not consolation for failure, as it was for Balzac's character Pons, but consolation for uncertainty. Collecting functions not in terms of the opposition between success and failure, but in terms of how it develops the mind.

Art in the home refines perception. Goncourt speaks of an "éducation de l'œil des gens du XIXe siècle," and "un sentiment tout nouveau" which is a "tendresse presque humaine pour les choses.\textsuperscript{42} These new capacities for observation and feeling incite everyone to collect: "l'éducation de l'œil des gens du XIXe siècle, et encore un sentiment tout nouveau, la tendresse presque humaine pour les choses, [font], à l'heure qu'il est, de presque tout le monde, des collectionneurs et de moi en particulier le plus passionné de tous les collectionneurs."\textsuperscript{43} In an epigraph just before the "Préambule," he proposes a new literary project: that objects have infused humans' domestic space: "pourquoi n'écrirait-on pas les mémoires des choses au milieu des quelles s'est écoulée une existence d'homme?"\textsuperscript{44} Objects have been liberated; their stories can now be told—the memories of things.

In this study, I follow Bourget's exhortation to interpret literature of the 1880s through the lens of collecting ("Le bibelot— […] C'est une mode […]; mais l'analyste de notre société contemporaine ne peut pas plus la négliger que l'historien du grand siècle ne saurait laisser sous silence le paysage taillé du parc de Versailles. […] une grande portion de notre littérature actuelle demeure inintelligible sans l'aspect de magasin de bric-à-brac\textsuperscript{45}), as well as Goncourt's

\textsuperscript{41} Goncourt, \textit{La Maison d'un artiste}, p. 2.  
\textsuperscript{42} Goncourt, \textit{La Maison d'un artiste}, p. 2.  
\textsuperscript{43} Goncourt, \textit{La Maison d'un artiste}, p. 2.  
\textsuperscript{44} Goncourt, \textit{La Maison d'un artiste}, p. 2.  
\textsuperscript{45} Bourget, "Edmond et Jules de Goncourt" (1882), \textit{Essais}, p. 319.
affirmation of the profound impact of collecting on the imagination ("pourquoi n’écrirait-on pas les mémoires des choses au milieu desquelles s’est éculée une existence d’homme?"\textsuperscript{46}), even though I do not focus on the "memory of things," but rather how those "things" lead us into the mind of the collector. I expand on the meaning of collecting for literature through close readings of two texts featuring collecting in a prominent way, and in terms of how it develops the mind.

**Huysmans and Loti**

Several years after Bourget wrote the comments about collecting cited above and Goncourt published his catalog (*La Maison d'un artiste* (1881), J.-K. Huysmans and Pierre Loti offer accounts of collecting in *A Rebours* (1884) and *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), respectively. These are the texts of the 1880s which offer the most nuanced and richest reflections on collecting as a means of investigating the self, mind, and the individual's relationships to society and texts in the 1880s.

The collections involved are Huysmans' character des Esseintes' whimsically decorated house outside of Paris, the protagonist Loti's collection of Japanese objects in Japan, his floating museum on board his ship, and the author Loti's home museum in Rochefort. The collected objects encompass paint colors, personality types, a portrait collection, a sofa, a cornucopia of liqueurs, artificial flowers, seafaring materials, office space, costumed servants, furniture, a turtle, Japanese vases, flowers and other objects, Japanese women, Latin language exercise books, reading niches, leather-bound walls, perfumes, modern French literature, Japanese writing materials and finally, writing itself.

\textsuperscript{46} Goncourt, *La Maison d’un artiste*, p. 2.
Huysmans' novel depicts a 30-year-old man's project of retreating from society in order to decorate a new house. The book tells the story of his collecting project until, at the end of the book, he is ordered by a doctor to return to society and social life for the sake of his health.

Loti's text portrays another solitary man, a sailor, who travels to Japan and takes up residence with a Japanese woman for the period of his stay. At the end of this book, he leaves Japan, bringing with him the many Japanese objects he has collected along the way. These objects resonate with the way Japanese women are described, so that they, too, seem to be collected by the protagonist. In the case of Loti's text, the life and personality of the author form an important dimension of the story. Loti was a passionate collector, and the protagonist is also named Loti. This gesture connects character and author more than is the case in *A Rebours*, and invites the reader to conflate the two.

I am choosing to focus on fiction. The writing by Bourget and Goncourt cited above are non-fictional. Unlike other studies on collecting and literature in the 19th century, I am not including non-fictional collection catalogs. While cultural studies approaches usually involve examining non-literary sources, I am using literature as a privileged source of information about a cultural and historical moment, and about an important idea—collecting. I assume that the fictional texts I concentrate on by Huysmans and Loti offer richer, more nuanced portrayals of the cultural phenomenon of collecting than a catalog whose aim is documentation. Huysmans and Loti are not bound by the imperative of recording what actually exists.

Dominique Pety focuses on the Goncourts’ catalog in *Les Goncourt et la collection: de l'objet d'art à l'art d'écrire* (2003). While Goncourt’s catalog may be said to approach the fictional when he makes reference to objects he did not actually possess, his purpose was to document his own real collection.
Janell Watson, who does discuss fiction in *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust: The Collection and Consumption of Curiosities* (1999), remains concentrated on how literature reveals changes in consumer society. I pursue how fiction reveals truths of its own, influenced by, but not limited to, the meaning of collecting in society.

My study also innovates by concentrating on a narrow historical period, the 1880s, when collecting as a cultural practice was at its height—the moment when collecting resonated most powerfully on a broad scale in French society.

Through close readings of my two texts—paying attention to repeated words, descriptions, imagery, figurative language, ironies, contradictions, juxtapositions, ambiguities, tone and intertextual references, textual form and structure—I analyze how the theme of collecting is wielded by our writers to explore the mind's complexity.

Chapter topics correspond to the major elements of the relationship of a collector to his collection, progressing from the mind of the collector outward: defining his self, composing the space around him, dealing with other people, coming to terms with texts, thereby completing the circle, by leading us back, obliquely, to the mind, this time in terms of the mind involved in reading, interpreting, writing. The first two chapters concentrate on Huysmans, the third on Loti, and the fourth on both.

**Extant Scholarship**

The issue of the literary review *Romantisme* 112 (2001), entitled "La Collection," inaugurated collecting as a new, multi-faceted topic of interest in the study of 19th-century literature. In addition to highlighting the dearth of studies on 19-century collecting, and outlining the evolution of the figure of the collector in 19th-century literature, this work of scholarship
addressed how collecting was opposed to creation in 19th-century literature. For example, in reference to Balzac, Nicole Mozet, in her article, asks how the collecting of language that is involved in writing a novel can be done without impeding creativity: "comment se créer des rituels, des contraintes, des principes de classement, sans perdre la capacité d'inventer?" Collecting is viewed as a limiting, oppressive gesture, incompatible with creativity.

Although some scholars have focused on how collecting creates a whole work of art, they are still implicitly adhering to a binary opposition between failure and success, repetition and innovation. In her book on the Goncourt brothers' collecting cited above, *Les Goncourts et la collection: de l'objet d'art à l'art d'écrire* (2003), Dominique Pety argues that the collection is a complete artistic composition: "La collection [...] procède à l'accumulation de pièces disjointes, elle se caractérise par son morcellement et son éclectisme; mais elle met ensuite en œuvre un projet totalisant [...] par la multiplication des liens logiques, historiques, personnels, que le collectionneur établit entre les pièces." The unity of the collection derives from the collector's creation of connections among objects: Edmond de Goncourt's house museum is "un ensemble statique et clos, mais animé d'une dynamique interne, qui compose les objets en unité organique, qui déploie la richesse de chacun d'eux selon un rythme cyclique."

Other studies have evoked the collection as a rigid whole, but a whole nonetheless. In *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (1999), Didier Maleuvre views the domestic interior as a "museum of preciousness" intended to counteract a new sense of fading objective reality, and alienation. Similarly, in *Monomania: the Flight from Everyday Life in Literature and Art* (2005), Marina van Zuylen analyzes characters who create perfectly ordered, reassuring

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47 Mozet, "Le passé au présent. Balzac ou l'esprit de la collection," p. 84.
domestic worlds. These studies underscore collecting as an act of arriving at a fixed, stable creation.

Other scholars echo the idea of collecting as creative, if not necessarily an act of creating a fixed or stable creation. Mario Praz, historian of interior decoration and literary critic, notes that "à la fin du siècle... C'est sur l'exemple des ateliers d'artistes que se modelèrent les salons de bon goût."\(^{51}\) By furnishing one's living room with heterogeneous objects and furniture, a more typically orderly bourgeois living room could be made to resemble a messy artist's studio, even though the inhabitant was not an artist. Collecting suggested the aura of artistic creation. Lisa Tiersten discusses the concept of the consumer as artist in her book, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-siècle France* (2001). She writes: "The marketplace modernist aesthetic [...] gave rise to a conception of the consumer as artist, the commodity as an art object, and the marketplace itself as an artistic arena."\(^{52}\) The bourgeois consumer could become an artist. Walter Benjamin mourned the loss of originality in an era of mass production, but marketplace forces can also inspire creativity. My interest is, however, on collecting as mental process, rather than on collecting as creation.

Pety does recognize that the fictional collector figure of Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884) conjures more of a mental space than a material space: "à l'inverse du collectionneur préoccupé d'une unité visuelle et plastique pour sa collection, c'est plutôt un espace mental qu'il fabrique, une enveloppe à l'unisson d'un corps seul et satisfait de sa solitude."\(^{53}\) Indeed, des Esseintes is not overly preoccupied by his collection's external unity or creating a unified artistic atmosphere. However, it is too reductive to consider him as being "satisfied with his solitude," his decor in

\(^{51}\) Praz, *L'Histoire de la décoration d'intérieure. La philosophie de l'ameublement*, p. 56.
perfect agreement with his self. The inward turn is not merely easy indulgence, but a process involving effort.

In this respect, Séverine Jouve's *Obsessions et perversions dans la littérature et les demeures à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle* (1996) was an inspiration for this study. She explores the domestic interior as a new source of inspiration for literature, making possible a new literary genre: "l'intérieur comme unique horizon, rendant possible pour son auteur l'accession à un nouveau genre littéraire: les inventaires de propriétaires ou les rêveries à propos de la résidence." In its "catalog-ness," *A Rebours* participates in the development of a new catalog genre in literature at this time, on the heels of Goncourt's 1881 *La Maison d'un artiste*. Both follow a room-by-room structure. Yet, my interest was not in obsession or perversion, but in the elements of my title (self, mind, society, texts).

Collecting is a laborious process of interior mental exploration, concerned neither with failure nor success, but with process. If collecting has not been studied in this light before, it is likely because of the endurance of the opposition between creation and sterility, success and failure, in discussions of 19th-century collecting—oppositions which neatly line up with larger 19th-century oppositions between history and progress. The last 19th-century collector in literature is Proust's Swann, who, although *Du côté de chez Swann* was published in 1913, is a 19th-century character. Swann’s non-creative collecting puts in relief the creative writer that Proust’s narrator will eventually become. In that way, Swann reinforces the antagonistic opposition between collecting and creation.

Late 19th-century collectors participated in the creativity of the avant-garde. As Pierre Cabanne, author of *Les Grands collectionneurs. Tome I: Du Moyen-âge au XIXe siècle* (2003),

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writes, the collector "prend, dans le collectionnisme, au nom de sa créativité, une place qu'il n'avait pas autrefois. Au système traditionnel de la commande et de l'achat se substitue, entre le créateur et l'amateur, une interdépendence grandissante dans leurs relations." Collectors influenced artistic creativity by shaping taste, through funding certain artists. Collectors remained separate from the artists they supported.

My study seeks to disrupt the opposition between collecting and creating by focusing on a process rather than on an outcome: the process of mental exploration.

In *The Collector in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Representation, Identity, Knowledge* (2011), Emma Bielecki discusses depictions of collectors from Balzac to Proust and the anxieties about modernity, identity and selfhood they reveal, amidst the new incessant accumulation of commodities. However, this perspective neglects to address the relationship between collecting and texts, which is the subject of the fourth and final part of my study.

Going beyond how collecting causes the structure of texts to revolve more around daily life (Watson), or how the collection catalog completes the collection (Pety), or how the room the writer writes in infuses his writing (Diana Fuss' *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*, 2004)—all of which share the idea of writing and collecting as being complementary—I reveal a more anguished relationship between writing and collecting at the end of the 19th century.

**Chapters**

**Chapter One:** In this initial chapter, I examine how the collector invests collecting with the power to explore the inner self. He establishes a space of his own outside of society in which he

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can define his self, at his own pace, by sorting through elements of a certain category of object. This involves reintegrating phantom people into his collection, and re-working his relationship to society. Both distance from society and social categories are needed for his definition of self. The collector's ambiguous relationship with society is a metaphor for literature's rocky evolution in the 1880s from naturalism to modernist developments in literature.

Chapter Two: After defining the self and re-working its relationship to society comes experimenting with the mind's powers. In this second chapter, entitled "Compositional Experiments," we see how the collector is not interested in mere formal perfection—either in terms of fixing his self in a rigid way or in terms of creating out of his home collection a work of art. Rather, he is interested in trying out aspects of his mind through his collection. The collection offers opportunities for exercising the powers of the mind through composing space. He travels far and wide without actually moving from the house or even from one single room, and controls memory, time and desire themselves. He attempts to mechanize experiences, but not only for the sake of the outcome, but also for the sake of displaying his process, his mental prowess.

Chapter Three: This chapter moves into the issue of dealing with other people, a theme related to Chapter One's concern with the collector being in between isolation and society. Yet this chapter is more directly concerned with confronting actual, live others. We move to our second author, Pierre Loti, also the protagonist of the novel examined, who collected in a way that brought him into contact with many foreign lands. During his long naval career, Loti gathered objects to not only decorate his ship-cabin, but to furnish his stunning home museum in Rochefort, France.
Collecting in Loti expresses the ambiguity of relationships to others and to other cultures. He never fits in, despite his attempts at integration. He is always in between, similar to the way des Esseintes is working out his relationship to the social.

Chapter Four: This final chapter, entitled "Domesticating Texts," is about how the collector experiences anxiety about his relationship to texts. What place does literature have in his collection? How will he approach literature? How can he make literature approachable? What happens to his self, when confronted with literature? Is literature threatening? How can its power be defused?

I use the word "text" as a broad term to encompass several different relationships with texts: literary criticism, reading, the material form of a book and the act of writing.

At first it seems that texts are merely a major influence and source of inspiration in des Esseintes' collecting project. Des Esseintes asserts his mastery over literary criticism, then seeks to make literature material, like the other objects of his collection. However, as the novel unfolds, texts become overwhelming, too much, excessive. The act of materializing literature did not suffice to control, or manage, texts. The collector cannot absorb them anymore; he encounters a clear limit to his attempt to read. Literature seems to be in control of him, since he is described as vanquished in his reading efforts. Des Esseintes must temporarily stop reading. It is his collection (of flowers) that allows him to stop reading—that distracts him from books—and thus saves him from books.

His collection of perfumes, this time, allows him to try his hand at creating his own perfume, and this experience is elaborately compared to the process of literary creation. This
cross over to the side of writing, rather than reading, is a crucial step on the path to returning to books on his own terms.

When he then returns to books, he is able to appreciate them anew. His book collection seems to bloom before his eyes (not literally, but in the sense of emerging as a bright, cherished possession). The arranging and ordering of this book collection—putting literature in its place—will be the ultimate affirmation of his return to books without feeling threatened by them.

As in Huysmans, in Loti, also, texts need to be controlled. Loti's preoccupation is not with literature but with writing—because the protagonist Loti is not a reader, like des Esseintes, but a writer—he comments on his own writing. Loti, too, seeks a relationship with texts in which he is in control, and not the other way around. His collection offers him the possibility to be more in control of his writing.
Chapter One: Defining the Self

In this initial chapter, I examine the representation of collecting in J.-K. Huysmans' novel *A Rebours* (1884). This novel depicts a 30-year-old man, the duke Jean Floressas des Esseintes, and his project of retreating from society in order to decorate a new house. It tells the story of this collecting project. I explore how Huysmans invests collecting with the power to explore the inner self. If, in the 19th-century sub-genre of the roman d'apprentissage, characters learn what they need to learn, satisfy their desires, match their energies to their talents, and find their roles in society, des Esseintes the collector grapples with all of these issues not by venturing out into society, but by contemplating them from the confines of his new home. He establishes a space of his own outside of society in which he can define his self, at his own pace, by sorting through elements of a certain category of object. This involves reintegrating phantom people into his collection, and re-working his relationship to society. Both distance from society, and social categories are needed for his definition of self. Similarly, literature during this period is experiencing a rocky evolution from naturalism into modernist literary developments. Just as the collector has trouble withdrawing completely from people, so does literature have trouble plunging into the new realm of the mind.

Negative Collecting: Banishing People

Since *A Rebours'* publication, *A Rebours* has inspired readers to dismiss the protagonist as a kind of joke. In an article in *La Revue contemporaine* in the spring of 1885, Jules Lemaitre, responding to comparisons made between Goethe's Werther and Chateaubriand's René, on the one hand, and des Esseintes, on the other, wrote that whereas René exhibited "du vague à l'âme,"
or romantic melancholy and existential angst, des Esseintes simply wears himself out: "il s'embête à crever." Des Esseintes' fatigue lacks Werther's and René's allure. Lemaitre hesitates to take the book seriously: "Le malheur de ce livre, d'ailleurs divertissant, c'est qu'il ressemble trop à une gageure et qu'on a peur d'être dupe en le prenant au sérieux." Huysmans might just be luring his reader into searching for a non-existent deeper meaning.

When readers do sense a deeper meaning in this peevish character, he is often interpreted as a representative of a society repulsed by materialism. Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly admiringly wrote in a July 28, 1884 article in *Le Constitutionnel* that Huysmans "nous écrit la nosographie d'une société putréfiée de matérialisme." Barbey d'Aurevilly sees des Esseintes as a frustrated victim of a new materialism. In this view, des Esseintes represents a widespread feeling of revulsion toward the new heights that consumerism had reached by the end of the 19th century. Following this line of thought, in which des Esseintes cannot relate to the banality of bourgeois life, the novel has traditionally been interpreted as being an *éloge* to artifice and refinement, often as a step on the way towards spiritual conversion, a recurring theme in Huysmans criticism.

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60 The following six titles are representative of the attraction to the theme of spirituality in Huysmans' criticism, inspired by biographical interpretations of Huysmans' work, in which critics claim that the ultimate meaning of Huysmans work lies in Huysmans' own spiritual journey towards Catholicism, of which he became a fervent convert later in life: Jérôme Solal, *Huysmans avant Dieu: tableaux de l'exposition, morale de l'élimination*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2010.
Both of those perspectives—des Esseintes as risible eccentric or disgusted social renegade—flatten his character. They prevent us from seeing how, despite the protagonist's intransigence, the novel itself, through the theme of collecting, engages in much exploration of the self. This exploration is not exclusively a spiritual quest (which is not my topic), but also a quest for self-definition.

At the beginning of *A Rebours*, the duke Jean Floressas des Esseintes banishes other people in order to create a clean slate, a *tabula rasa* in his new home in Fontenay-aux-Roses, for developing his self.

Des Esseintes was stifled by society. In the the "Notice," the preliminary section preceding Chapter One of the novel, we learn how he came to decide to isolate himself from society: "Il rêvait à une thébaïde raffinée, à un désert confortable, à une arche immobile et tiède où il se réfugierait loin de l'incessant déluge de la sottise humaine."61 He sought to escape the onslaught of human stupidity by retreating into an environment characterized by an absence of people ("un désert"), refinement, comfort, immobility. His project will be a protective, placating bulwark against society.

As his dream to escape develops, his desire to isolate himself increases: "Ses idées de se blottir, loin du monde, de se calfeutrer dans une retraite, d'assourdir, [...] le vacarme roulant de l'inflexible vie, se renforcèrent."62 Ideas about burying himself away, shutting himself up in a place away from society, to deafen the din of society, reinforced themselves in his mind. That

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61 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 84.
society is compared to a loud noise suggests that society was interfering with his thoughts in the intrusive way that loud noises do. Society was invading his personal space.

Society, initially characterized as flood or din, is then imagined more specifically. Des Esseintes remembers the people he has seen: "des immondes foules" (revolting, filthy crowds), over-fed bourgeois, who inspired him greater horror than ever of "la face humaine"—"son horreur s'était encore accrue, de la face humaine." Later, in Chapter Five, this idea is echoed. We read of his "besoin de ne plus voir de tableaux représentant l'effigie humaine tâchant à Paris entre quatre murs, ou errant en quête d'argent par les rues." The word "effigie" communicates the idea of a poor and sorry substitute for humanity. Des Esseintes is disappointed with society, and does not want any visual reminders of it.

These phrases, containing the word "humaine" ("la face humaine" and "l'effigie humaine") echo Baudelaire's line about 25 years earlier at the beginning of his poème en prose "A une heure du matin": "Enfin! la tyrannie de la face humaine a disparu, et je ne souffrirai plus que par moi-même." Baudelaire suggests that the suffering continues, even after removing oneself from humanity, even after the tyranny of the human face has disappeared, because he writes: "je ne souffrirai plus que par moi-même"—"I will henceforth only suffer by myself," as if even suffering is rendered more bearable ("Enfin!") by the absence of others. However, Huysmans only mentions the suffering that des Esseintes has eliminated from his life, caused by the sight of other people: "Positivement, il souffrait de la vue de certaines physionomies, considérerait presque comme des insultes les mines paternes ou rêches de quelques visages."
Huysmans does not mention whether or not the suffering continues afterward. However, the intertextual resonance between Huysmans' and Baudelaire's texts suggests that the suffering may continue, planting a seed of doubt in our minds that the duke's project will succeed perfectly.

Des Esseintes is not only bothered by surfaces—people's faces, their physical presences. He is also bothered by something deeper, on the level of society's values. He has retreated out of a disgust with humanity, that is also a disgust with society's obsession with money and money-making. Des Esseintes suffers from what he calls "ces étroits cerveaux de négociants, exclusivement préoccupés de filouteries et d'argent."\(^{68}\) To escape the narrow-mindedness of the preoccupation with business, des Esseintes plans "une nouvelle existence,"\(^{69}\) out of a need for what the narrator will later call (in the passage already cited) his "besoin de ne plus voir de tableaux représentant l'effigie humaine tâchant à Paris entre quatre murs, ou errant en quête d'argent par les rues."\(^{70}\) He no longer wants to see images of people relentlessly searching for money, indoors and out on the street—everywhere.

Beyond escaping from society's obsession with money, he wants to escape others' desires more generally, and seek to satisfy his own desires only. Even before retreating from society, he had created sumptuously strange furniture arrangements, to distinguish himself, cultivating his uniqueness ("se singulariser") through interior decoration and furniture arrangement. We are told that "au temps où il jugeait nécessaire de se singulariser, des Esseintes avait aussi créé des ameublements fastueusement étranges."\(^{71}\) He did this to please others—the passage continues to explain how these sumptuous furniture arrangements involved designing boudoir atmospheres to

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\(^{68}\) Huysmans, \emph{A Rebours}, p. 106.  
\(^{69}\) Huysmans, \emph{A Rebours}, p. 86.  
\(^{70}\) Huysmans, \emph{A Rebours}, p. 141.  
\(^{71}\) Huysmans, \emph{A Rebours}, p. 89.
entertain the women with whom he amused himself by implementing the lighting that would best enhance their features.

But then, the point came when des Esseintes wanted to become fully independent from other people's desires. He dreamed of composing a comfortable interior for his own personal pleasure only. He will now, in his retreat in Fontenay-aux-roses, perform for himself alone. The audience for des Esseintes' decorative whims has changed. His focus has shifted. Now, he scorns those "ostentations puériles et surannées, de ces vêtements anormaux, de ces embellies de logements bizarres,"72 judging his past decorative projects as puerile, outdated, abnormal and odd.

Now, he seeks only to "compose himself" ("se composer") for his personal pleasure: "Il songeait simplement à se composer, pour son plaisir personnel et non plus pour l'étonnement des autres, un intérieur confortable."73 The syntax is revealing: the verb "se composer" succinctly articulates the subject of the entire novel: self-composition. He has divided his life into two periods, an others-focused life and a self-focused life. His retreat is a turning point creating a "before" and an "after." From frivolity (he refers to the "puerility" of his former pursuits) and outdatedness ("surannées"), he turns toward the meaningfulness and "nowness" of pleasing himself alone. Composition for others gives way to composition of the self.

He wants to remove himself from his past life in a deeper sense, as well. He wants to fully escape his childhood. Withdrawal into the house in Fontenay also means selling his childhood home. He is making a complete break with his childhood, even though he did not have the habit of visiting his childhood house (castle) anymore: "Il se détermina à vendre le château de Lourps où il n'allait plus et où il n'oubliait derrière lui aucun souvenir attachant, aucun

72 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 90.
73 Huysmans, A Rebours, pp. 90-91.
regret.” Later, in Chapter Five, this idea is echoed. We read there that he had resolved not to introduce into his "cellule" (cell) any "larves" of repugnance or regret. Rejecting people, things and his own past, will provide him with a blank slate, uncontaminated by anything, however small, that could stir in him repugnance or regret.

Des Esseintes is not withdrawing from society passively, into the domestic interior, as Edmond de Goncourt implies in the passage from *La Maison d'un artiste* quoted in the introduction to this study. Des Esseintes is withdrawing purposely. While both may feel alienated from the chaos of social and economic life, des Esseintes' retreat into a private domestic world is a deliberate act. Des Esseintes alienates himself with intention from society. Huysmans wants us to understand that his novel about a collector is not about languid basking in luxurious decor, but about working to create that protective, placating bulwark against society, first of all, and then working to define himself.

One day, he has the masons start work on the new house, dispenses with his old furniture, dismisses his servants and disappears without leaving his old concierge any address. He is finally ready to embark on the project he has been dreaming about. The detail about getting rid of his old furniture—"il se débarrassa de son ancien mobilier"— acquires special meaning when we see how he starts, just as soon, to accumulate new furniture. He did not get rid of it to become a true ascetic who renounces worldly things. He got rid of it to acquire a *new* set of furniture and belongings.

More specifically, it will be through carefully chosen possessions that he creates a new life. In the quotation above, we read that he had resolved not to introduce into his "cellule" any

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75 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 141.
76 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 86.
77 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 86.
"larves" of repugnance or regret. The word "cellule" evokes the idea of a closed, sparsely decorated space, perhaps a prison cell, perhaps a monk's cell. With the word "cellule," Huysmans is accentuating the idea of des Esseintes' collecting as an exercise not in filling space, but in attempting a thorough fumigation, then carefully composing space, leaving out more than it allows in.

Like Balzac, Huysmans sees personal meaning in the material surroundings of a character; he sees their power to define the self. Huysmans is investing them with meaning, as if to reinforce what Balzac already did, but in a different context, the context of an even more widespread commercialism in French society. In a world in which objects, including mass-produced objects, are omnipresent, and "American values" are considered by many to prevail (by which they mean the values of the market, of buying and selling, of making a profit), des Esseintes is restoring specialness to objects by submitting them to his choice making and self-assertion. Des Esseintes is not rejecting material things, but developing a different relationship with them than that of commercial activity.

Des Esseintes comes up with the money to pay for and furnish a place where he can bathe in a definitive tranquility: "payer et à meubler la maisonette où il se proposait de baigner dans une definitive quietude." He once again longs for an absence of commotion. He will be sheltered, thanks to the fact he will not be easily reachable: "il était certain d'être à l'abri; la difficulté des communications mal assurées par un ridicule chemin de fer [...] le rassurait." The poor quality of the local train service reassures him of a rupture—however partial it may be—from the outside world.

78 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 141.
79 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 86.
80 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 86.
Didier Maleuvre, author of *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (1999), argues that the 19th-century interior is designed in reaction to a sense of alienation caused by the new society and economy: "The interior designs itself as a museum of preciousness in part as a reaction against the de-authentification of object production and objective experience in the nascent world of commodities and mass consumerism."\(^{81}\) According to him, realist writers, which for him include Balzac, the Goncourts and Huysmans, fetishize details (assign them more value than they possess in reality) in order "to slow down the process of the liquidation of objective reality."\(^{82}\) In other words, realist writers—and the writers he cites are all very different kinds of realist writers—fixate on details because they want to create the illusion of an objective reality, shared by everyone. Sensing that subjective reality was on the verge of entering literature, and thus jeopardizing that illusion, these writers sought to maintain an illusion of an objective, common reality.

However, collecting in *A Rebours* is less an attempt to compensate for an evaporating objective reality, by creating what Maleuvre calls a "museum of preciousness," and more a preliminary attempt, starting from a blank slate, to explore inner life. Instead of "museum of preciousness," in other words, it would be more useful to think in terms of a laboratory of self-creation.

Séverine Jouve, author of *Obsessions et perversions dans la littérature et les demeures à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle* (1996), also claims that the interior came to be designed specifically in reaction to what was happening in the world outside the home, and, like Maleuvre—and also like Edmond de Goncourt in the passages from the "Préambule" to his *La Maison d'un artiste* cited in the Introduction to this study—that decorating the interior was a way to exert control

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over the uncertainty of the wider world: "S'aménager un intérieur à la fin du siècle dernier [...] pouvait exprimer un désir ardent d'intégration et de domination du monde par la maison: on tentait de s'approprier l'art par la multiplication des collections, le temps par les reliques et curiosités, l'espace par les livres et la nature par l'exubérance des jardins d'hiver."\(^{83}\) Jouve claims that decorating and arranging an interior expressed a desire to assimilate into itself and dominate the outside world: to dominate art by collecting it, to dominate time by collecting relics, to dominate space by books (by reading them) and to dominate nature by winter gardens. To my mind, once again, des Esseintes is less trying to dominate the world, and more trying to explore himself, by sorting out his thoughts in tranquility.

He is not seeking to be original so much as to do things "differently," which is one meaning of the expression "à rebours."

**Complications of Withdrawal from Society**

Self-sufficiency is an illusion, however. People return. Huysmans' text reveals the complications of withdrawal from tradition and from society. On the one hand, des Esseintes has decided to leave society behind, but on the other, people return, in his mind, often, beginning with the very first chapter of the novel. In this way, his withdrawal emerges, in fact, as a way of reimagining his place in society. Huysmans thus reveals the obstinacy of social categories for defining the self.

In the "Notice," before Chapter One, we are told that before choosing to live in solitude, des Esseintes had evaluated several categories of people in search of like-minded souls, only to discover that each fell short of his criteria.

First, there were the youths who, though debauched (a promising characteristic in des Esseintes' eyes), were not quite debauched enough: they lacked any "réelle surexcitation de sang et de nerfs."\(^{84}\)

Secondly, there were the men of letters, who, though potentially compatible, had the unappealing habit of excessively using book sales as a criterion in their appraisal of literature.

Finally, he had considered women, who had been held out as the most promising group, for their ability to restrain him from the universal disdain that was gripping him: "Une seule passion, la femme, eût pu le retenir dans cet universel dédain qui le poignait," but, alas, she is "usée."\(^ {85}\) "She" has been worn out/worn down, exploited.

Each of these three categories had failed to offer him someone who could meet his standards for friendship, or at least connection. The world, in his eyes, was filled with "sacripants" (rascals) and "imbéciles" to the point where he held no hope for pairing up with an intelligent person who, like him, took pleasure in a "studious decrepitude"—"aucun espoir de s'accoupler avec une intelligence qui se complût, ainsi que la sienne, dans une studieuse décrépitude."\(^ {86}\) He has not found someone who shares his interest in studying his own inner decomposition ("studieuse décrépitude"). The point, though, is that des Esseintes' "mépris de l'humanité"\(^ {87}\) ("scorn of humanity") is tempered by at least this trace of a desire for interpersonal connection, provided to the reader even before Chapter One of the novel.

Des Esseintes' first collecting project, the first independent gesture he makes in his new home after the basic deliveries and accommodations have been made with the help of others, is to choose a paint color for his walls. He meditates on the color spectrum, and on the personality

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\(^{84}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, pp. 82-84.

\(^{85}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 84.

\(^{86}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 83.

\(^{87}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 83.
types he associates with each color, evaluating them with an A to Z systematicity, in order to arrive at a decision about what color he will paint his walls. Invoking personality types has the effect of introducing phantom people into his retreat, recalling the desire for interpersonal connection just discussed.

When everything at the new house was ready, and nothing was left for him to do but choose the arrangement of furniture and decor, "il passa de nouveau et longuement en revue la série des couleurs et des nuances" [...] "Lentement, il tria, un à un, les tons." The paragraphs that follow discuss different colors: "Le bleu...," "les gris," "les bruns," "les verts," salmon colors, and then red, orange, yellow. Blues for the dreamers, reds and yellows for the hearty ones, orange for feverish, unnatural souls like himself. Then, a conclusion: "A toutes, il préférait l'orange." All the colors, except orange, are eliminated, for their heaviness, or coldness, their falseness, their effeminacy (the "roses dont les efféminations contrarieraient les pensées de l'isolement"). He thus scrupulously considers each color's potential, but dismisses each for one reason or another until reaching orange. Orange, he claims, appeals to the eyes of those people "affaiblis et nerveux," with an "appétit sensuel," who are "surexcités." They like this color, "irritante et maladive," "aux splendeurs fictives, aux fièvres acides: l'orange." Since he has already announced that his favorite color is orange, these phrases describe him. Colors emerge as a way for him to reflect on different categories of people, and to reject most of them, in order, finally, to arrive at the category that corresponds to his own irritable, unhealthy, extravagant, feverish personality.

88 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 91.
89 Huysmans, A Rebours, pp. 91-92.
90 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 92.
91 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 92.
92 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 93.
93 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 93.
This evaluation, undertaken in view of arriving at his preferred element of a list, through dismissing other elements, is characteristic of the duke's collecting activity, and emerges in almost every chapter throughout the book. His collection will regularly prompt him to make a choice, to exercise his free will. The collection is not simply an invitation to reverie, but a compulsion to explore the mind constantly through making choices about elements in the collection. The effect of this constant choice making and exercise of control is to present the self as being always in a process of figuring itself out. His decision making is not the same as taste, which is also a kind of choice, but one which involves establishing unity, a unified aesthetic, which des Esseintes is not trying to establish. His goal is to arrive at who he is.

He is arriving at an understanding of who he is based on an understanding, and then elimination, of other types. It is only after defining other categories of people that he arrives at the one that corresponds to him; he needs to pass through those others first. Knowledge is negative knowledge: knowing who one is, by knowing who one is not.

We have seen that des Esseintes has rejected people in two ways. First, by reaching that conclusion that there is no one out there whom he can identify with, and secondly, by eliminating categories of people in the form of personality types suggested by each paint color. He is repeating the same gesture of rejecting people, only now from within the confines of his new home. This means that is a sense, he inviting people (albeit phantom people) into his retreat, in order to reject them again. He is filling space not only with furniture but with people. His self-exploration cannot be done in absolute isolation. He needs to invoke people in order to sort through his thoughts. His collecting is emphatically intertwined with people, from the outset.

In Chapter Two of the novel, des Esseintes shows reliance on other people at the same time that he seeks to banish them. He develops with his servants a non-verbal language, so as not
So different from Baudelaire's flâneur (as Baudelaire writes in his prose poem *Les Foules*, "Il n'est pas donné à chacun de prendre un bain de multitude: jouir de la foule est un art"), Huysmans' character would recoil from the idea of immersion in the urban crowd, yet he recreates his own crowd, of phantoms, while in retreat.

In addition to des Esseintes' sorting through the spectrum of colors and personality types in order to define himself, the form of the text also conveys des Esseintes' self-definition through collecting. Before the extensive reflection on the meaning of each color, des Esseintes' affiliation with a social group has, in fact, already been revealed through a simile—a more subtle way of making a connection than the declaration of an affinity for the color orange. Des Esseintes is compared to night workers.

Before the analysis of colors and personality types, the reason given for reviewing colors was the need to identify the hue that would best stand up to artificial light—the "lumières factices des lampes," since des Esseintes is active mostly at night. At night, we are told, he experiences the same satisfaction as "les travailleurs attardés" who raise the curtains to find that everything outside is silent, dead. His search for the right color is intended to enhance this "jouissance" of the night, when he feels "plus seul," knowing that his room is the only one

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95 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 91.
illuminated—"seule éveilée et debout"—amidst all the other houses that are asleep, "enténérées et endormies."  

The comparison is ironic because on the one hand it emphasizes his singularity (he is different from other people because he is awake when they are not), and on the other connects him with a whole category of people, thus removing him, figuratively, from his solitude (just as his identification of himself with the personality category "orange," did, as well). It is also ironic because he has retreated to this house not to work, but to "compose" for his pleasure alone: "composer, pour son plaisir personnel et non plus pour l'étonnement des autres, un intérieur confortable et paré, néanmoins d'une façon rare, à se façonner une installation curieuse et calme, appropriée aux besoin de sa future solitude."  

And yet, this comparison posits, through the power of an analogy, an affinity between des Esseintes and manual workers.

Marc Fumaroli notes that a comparison suggests itself in the passage to Proust's late-night writing habits. A more significant connection, for our understanding of this passage (Fumaroli's connection is more significant for understanding Proust), are the echo of Baudelaire's "Le Crépuscule du soir" from Les Tableaux parisiens (1861). In this poem, all sorts of people are depicted as working at night while others are asleep: "Des démons malsains dans l'atmosphère/ S'éveillent lourdement, comme des gens d'affaire, [...] La Prostitution s'allume dans les rues;/ Comme une fourmilière elle ouvre ses issues; [...] Et les voleurs, qui n'ont ni trêve ni merci;/ Vont bientôt commencer leur travail, eux aussi." In this poem, the poet recognizes the marginalized classes of the work world; he may compare them to demons, but he also seems to enact an equalizing gesture among all workers, conveyed by the economic "eux aussi," "they

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97 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 91.
98 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 91.
100 Baudelaire, "Le Crépuscule du soir," p. 70.
too." There is an intertextual effect here in which the idea of "des Esseintes as worker" (he experiences the same satisfaction, we are told, as "les travailleurs attardés") is endowed with greater meaning than immediately meets the eye, through the resonance of this passage with Baudelaire's poem. Des Esseintes' collecting activity acquires the meaning of work.

His collecting project, too, is, therefore, a part of society, despite his ostensible attempt to flee society. The solipsism of des Esseintes' secluded retreat is tempered by a poetic association between collecting and manual labor, work that upholds society.

Is he like other people, or is he not like other people? Is he trying to be like other people, is he not trying to be like other people? Is he trying to define himself in a vacuum, or is he trying to define himself in relation to other people? All of these questions are symbolized by the opening scene of the novel, on the very first page of the "Notice," the preliminary section preceding Chapter One. In the context of describing des Esseintes' childhood, providing a kind of pre-history to the novel, this scene presents the family portrait collection at the Château de Lourps, des Esseintes' childhood home, and the theme of the missing person. The portrait collection is incomplete.

First, the description of the portrait collection cites the sturdiness of the old stock in contrast to the debilitation of the descendents. Their shoulders press against the picture frames as if they are about to burst out of their confinement: "A en juger par les quelques portraits conservés au château de Lourps, la famille des Floressas des Esseintes avait été, au temps jadis, composée d'athlétiques soudards, de rébarbatifs reîtres. Serrés, à l'étroit dans leurs vieux cadres qu'ils barraient de leurs fortes épaules, [...]." The descendants, however, are weaker: "les vices

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d'un tempérament appauvri, la prédominance de la lymphe dans le sang, apparaissaient. [...] l'effémination des mâles était allée en s'accentuant.\textsuperscript{102}

The continuity of the line is interrupted: portraits are missing for a number of ancestors: "Ceux-là étaient les ancêtres: les portraits de leurs descendants manquaient; un trou existait dans la filière des visages de cette race; une seule toile servait d'intermédiaire, mettait un point de suture entre le passé et le présent, une tête mystérieuse et rusée [...].\textsuperscript{103} Only one portrait bridges the succession of generations between the former, continuous line of portraits, and the present of des Esseintes' life. The discontinuity establishes the theme of the incomplete collection, and here, it signifies debilitation, a kind of wound, as implied by the word "suture."

Des Esseintes has no idea what his relationship is to society. The image of a gap, of a missing link, in a portrait collection signifies his disorientation. It is an image of missing, absent connections.

**Reflecting on Paris in Tranquility**

Des Esseintes' collection allows him to develop his own relationship with society, one that suits his needs, while he is in his retreat. We see this when he plunges into a memory of an emergency visit to a dentist in Paris in Chapter Four of the novel. The memory occurs at the very moment that his turtle is dying under the weight of all the jewels he has encrusted into its shell—a famous episode from the novel that is referenced by critics much more than the toothache memory which is just as significant. The memory is very distracting, since it is about a very bad toothache he once had, and for which he sought help in an unlikely place (for him), in Paris.

\textsuperscript{102} Huysmans, *A Rebours*, pp. 77-78.

\textsuperscript{103} Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 77.
The turtle episode involves an attempt to make a live reptile part of his quirky decor by encrusting its shell with jewels so that it will create interesting lighting effects on the rug as it moves slowly on it. After the apparent death of the turtle, a silence dominates the house. (The death is confirmed at the very end of the chapter, in the form of an overt analogy between turtle and owner: "Sans doute habituée à une existence sédentaire, à une humble vie passée sous sa pauvre carapace, elle n'avait pu supporter le luxe éblouissant qu'on lui imposait."\(^{104}\)) Then, as if to change the subject, and thus as if to admit the failure of this particular exercise in his decorative project, des Esseintes starts day-dreaming: "Des Esseintes rêvassait."\(^{105}\) He starts dreaming about a completely different subject from turtles, suggesting, along with the abruptness of the transition, a desire on des Esseintes' part to exit the current perturbing circumstances through day-dreaming. The memory is a reprieve from the demise of the turtle, as well as the implied unflattering analogy between him and the turtle.

Des Esseintes opens the window to cool the room, hot from the burning wood stove, and then closes the window when the temperature drops too much. This gesture of opening and closing the window suggests a desire to change the atmosphere, literally and figuratively. The consequent change in temperature reinforces this idea of an abrupt transition: "Ce brusque passage sans transition, de la chaleur torride, aux frimas du plein hiver l'avait saisi [...]"\(^{106}\)

Des Esseintes has a drink to warm himself again, and also, we imagine, to distract him from the turtle's disconcerting immobility: "il se recroquevilla près du feu et l'idée lui vint d'avaler un spiritueux qui le réchauffât."\(^{107}\) The abrupt transition and desire for distraction involve no details about the turtle or his reaction to it. Instead, he huddles himself by the fire, and

\(^{104}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 139.  
\(^{105}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 133.  
\(^{106}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 133.  
\(^{107}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 133.
starts drinking and opening himself to memory. Opening and shutting of the window, the whiskey and memory all conspire to distract him from the turtle.

The whiskey sends des Esseintes down a particular path of memory. This is a moment that surely inspired Proust with his idea of mémoire involontaire: "Peu à peu, en buvant, sa pensée suivit l'impression maintenant ravivée de son palais, emboîta le pas à la saveur du whiskey, réveilla, par une fatale exactitude d'odeurs, des souvenirs effacés depuis des ans." Des Esseintes' thought follows the taste in his mouth and brings back to life memories erased years ago.

The taste reminds him of drinking whiskey at dentists' offices to help numb the pain in his gums: "Ce fleur phéniqué, âcre, lui remémorait forcément l'identique senteur dont il avait eu la langue pleine au temps où les dentistes travaillaient dans sa gencive." His memory is first scattered, leading his mind to all the dentists he has known. Then, however, his memory narrows in on one dentist in particular, the one most engraved in his memory—"plus particulièrement gravé dans sa mémoire": "Une fois lancée sur cette piste, sa rêverie, d'abord éparse sur tous les praticiens qu'il avait connus, se rassembla et convergea sur l'un d'entre eux." The movement of his memory reflects the mental gesture he applies to all subjects throughout the novel: he first scans all elements, then focuses on one.

This is the first memory in the novel that is unequivocally a part of the récit (the narration) and not only of the histoire (the story, including background information). In Chapter One, the narrator told us about how des Esseintes had used to amuse himself, while entertaining

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women, by controlling and playing with memories of his childhood.\textsuperscript{112} It is not at all clear, however, that des Esseintes is supposed to be recalling those memories at that particular point in the narration. Instead, the information could just as well be background information about des Esseintes that the narrator has decided to include at that point. The memory of the toothache, however, is very clearly presented as an act of recollection that is, in itself, an \textit{event} in the story of \textit{A Rebours}.

In this memory, des Esseintes awakens in the night wanting to "[mettre] fin à ses souffrances," put an end to his sufferings, by seeing a dentist.\textsuperscript{113} However, he encounters a problem: the dentists who usually treated him were "des riches négociants" at whose house one could not simply show up unnannounced.\textsuperscript{114} One needed an appointment, something that does not suit des Esseintes' current needs. This characterization of "riches négociants" recalls his castigation of "ces étroits cerveaux de négociants, exclusivement préoccupés de filouteries et d'argent" (these narrow-minded merchants, exclusively preoccupied with trickery and money) in Chapter Two.\textsuperscript{115} He has a problem with merchants.

He now also has a problem with their hours and scheduling—their relationship to time. The dentists he used to see were ones whom "on ne voyait point à sa guise; il fallait convenir avec eux de visites, d'heures de rendez-vous."\textsuperscript{116} One had to make an appointment; one could not simply show up. But now, such exigencies are unacceptable to him: "C'est inacceptable," he says to himself.\textsuperscript{117} He cannot wait for an appointment. His body is dictating a different type of

\textsuperscript{112} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, pp. 87-89.
\textsuperscript{113} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{114} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{115} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 106.
\textsuperscript{116} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 136.
\textsuperscript{117} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 136.
scheduling: no scheduling. He must be seen immediately. He cannot be drawn into their schedules, their hours.

He decides to submit himself to the first dentist he can find, one who is available on the spot, no rendez-vous needed, "l'on n'attend pas."\textsuperscript{118} This dentist is "of the people," with an iron grip: "un quenottier du peuple, un de ces gens à poigne de fer qui, s'ils ignorent l'art bien inutile d'ailleurs de panser les caries et d'obturer les trous, savent extirper, avec une rapidité sans pareille, les chicots les plus tenaces."\textsuperscript{119} Furthermore, this dentist knows how to eradicate the most stubborn "stumps" with an unsurpassed quickness, though he may lack "the art" of dressing cavities and blocking up holes. He is even a mechanic first, and a dentist second: "un mécanicien qui s'intitulait dentiste populaire."\textsuperscript{120} What matters here is not careful art but quick action. The grouping of ideas of speed/ immediacy/ force/ efficacy/ thoroughness is contrasted with that of slowness/ duration/ art/ inefficacy/ superficiality. The former addresses the root of the problem, so to speak. This \textit{éloge} of force over aesthetics is also an \textit{éloge} of a dentist "of the people" rather than a dentist who is a "rich merchant."

To arrive at this dentist, des Esseintes throws himself into the city's streets, and into a milieu he did not usually frequent, gnawing on a tissue and holding back tears: "il s'élança dans les rues en mordant son mouchoir, en renfonçant ses larmes."\textsuperscript{121} Des Esseintes is doing the opposite of what he is doing in his retreat in his new home. In this memory, he is not retreating from society but plunging into it, at least figuratively (throwing himself into the city streets, and unfamiliar streets in particular, since he is going to a dentist "of the people"). The first memory, in this novel about a flight from society, is one that depicts des Esseintes as being forced to leave

\textsuperscript{118} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{119} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{120} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{121} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 137.
his house. This is because he is shaping the city of Paris to his needs, conjuring it at will, re-working his relationship to it. The memory concerns a moment of intense pain, associating, by poetic implication, the city of Paris with pain, although that city will also relieve him of it. Paris—the world he has left—gets neatly resolved and dealt with from the tranquility of his retreat.

Arriving at the dentist is an experience of terror: he is "épouvanté par les larges crachats rouges qu'il apercevait collés sur les marches," the large bloodstains on the steps, and a cry he hears from within nails him to the spot with horror—"le cloua d'horreur." Eventually, he remembers sagging into a chair by a window at the dentist's, after the procedure: "Vaguement il se souvenait de s'être affaissé, en face d'une fênetre, dans un fauteuil." The episode of this memory began with the very same detail of sinking into a "fauteuil," reminding the reader that he is comfortably situated in his collection-retreat from away from the social or urban world. Above, I cited the beginning of the episode as being the following: "Peu à peu, en buvant, sa pensée suivit l'impression maintenant ravivée de son palais, emboîta le pas à la saveur du whiskey." Little by little, his thought followed the impression conjured by the taste of whiskey. Indeed, this sentence connects the whiskey to the start of the memory. Just prior to this sentence, however, there is a sentence situating des Esseintes in a "fauteuil": "Il se renfonça dans son fauteuil et huma lentement ce suc fermenté d'avoine et d'orge" ("he sank down into a sofa and slowly inhaled this fermented liquid of oats and barley"). This sentence does not explicitly connect the chair to memory.

We would expect the dentist episode to end with the image of des Esseintes drinking whiskey at this "dentist of the people," because that is what people often did, but mostly because

the episode seemingly began with the taste of whiskey being the trigger for this memory. Therefore, it is only logical that the memory features, at some point, the act of drinking whiskey, for why, otherwise, would the taste of whiskey have inspired the memory? But in fact, the episode ends with no mention of whiskey in connection with the dentist and tooth extraction. Instead, the episode ends with des Esseintes sinking into an armchair at the dentist's. His memory followed a trail ostensibly inspired by the whiskey, but in fact, it is the word "fauteuil" that connects the present moment to the past event.

Out of nine appearances of the word "fauteuil" in the novel, the first four are in Chapter Four: the first is at the beginning of the dentist episode, when des Esseintes sinks into an armchair, beginning to remember, and the last three are at the end of the dentist episode, involving a chair at the dentist's. It is important to recognize that "fauteuil" is the official textual link between present and past, and not the whiskey, because the idea of "armchair" compares des Esseintes' current situation (the image of sinking into an armchair is an apt symbol for his retreat from society) with the minutes he spent having his tooth pulled out. They are both sites of pain, as well as sites of relief from pain. In the dentist's chair, he suffered, to be free of the pain, and he also freed himself from something else: his usual mode of operating (frequenting rich dentist merchants who controlled their schedules too much) by going to a "dentist of the people" whom he did not have to pay. In his armchair at his new house in Fontenay, he indulges in a painful memory (the pain of his toothache), but will be free of it once the memory is over, we presume, since he is now safe in his self-created world removed from society. Seeing the armchair as the image that connects his present situation with the memory allows us to interpret his collecting enterprise as a liberation from pain.
In Chapter Eight, des Esseintes ventures out of his new house—not in memory, but in reality this time, though he does not go as far as Paris, but to a horticulturalist's shop closer by. This outing stimulates a reflection on all sorts of flowers. First he compares flowers to different classes of society: "Il assimilait volontiers le magasin d'un horticulteur à un microcosme où étaient représentées toutes les catégories de la société." He imagines "les fleurs pauvres et canailles," "les fleurs prétentieuses, convenues, bêtes," "les fleurs de haute lignée," "les fleurs exotiques." This shop contains flowers that represent poor, pretentious and stupid people (the bourgeois), aristocrats and foreigners—des Esseintes thereby superimposes society's strata on the flowers in this shop. He is there to choose a number of flowers for his house. His collecting functions, once again, as an opportunity for reflecting on the social inequalities of the Paris he has chosen to leave.

Des Esseintes feels "un certain intérêt, une certaine pitié" for "les fleurs populacières exténuées par les haleines des égouts et des plombs, dans les quartiers pauvres; il exécrait, en revanche, les bouquets en accord avec les salons crème et or des maisons neuves." Once again, in an evocation of society ("toutes les catégories de la société"), as in the evocation of the city of Paris in the dentist episode, des Esseintes reveals an affinity for poor sections of Paris. As in the association between des Esseintes and the social category of workers discussed earlier, a connection is being affirmed here between des Esseintes and a poorer stratum of people than the bourgeois or aristocratic strata ("un certain intérêt, une certaine pitié" for "les fleurs populacières exténuées par les haleines des égouts et des plombs, dans les quartiers pauvres"). These connections resonate with des Esseintes' abhorrence of bourgeois living (symbolized by "les

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126 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 185.
127 Huysmans, A Rebours, pp. 185-186.
128 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 186.
bouquets en accord avec les salons crème et or des maisons neuves"), for they relate des Esseintes to people who are not, presumably, spending money superfluously and greedily, as he perceives the bourgeois to be doing.

Des Esseintes shapes Paris, from the tranquility of his retreat, to suit his needs, firstly by using it as distraction (from the dying turtle), and secondly by focusing on the harsh economic realities of the city, instead of on the bourgeois orgy of buying and selling with which he was fed up and which prompted his retreat.

**Collecting as Metaphor for Literary Movements**

The tension in *A Rebours* between leaving society behind, but then invoking people in the collector's retreat, resonates with literary developments of the 1880s. Naturalism, the literary manifestation of the century's tendency toward scientific materialism, or positivism, was giving way to new, modernist literary movements that sought to explore the individual more, in contrast to types. *A Rebours* marks an important transitional moment between naturalism and these new movements, as Huysmans himself affirmed in his "Préface écrite 20 ans après le roman" for the 1903 edition. Yet neither Huysmans, in that preface, nor subsequent critics who have also labeled the novel as transitional, have identified the act of collecting as the specific terrain on which the individual's struggle with society plays out, where his eccentricity cannot quite fully break away from naturalist types.

Published in 1884, *A Rebours* was, "le plus controversé dans la presse et les milieux littéraires"\(^\text{129}\) of the year, according to Lucien Descaves (friend of Huysmans, and executor of his will) writing in his preface to the 1929 edition. Citing its difference from books by Zola and

\(^{129}\) Descaves, "Note de Lucien Descaves dans l'édition de 1929," *A Rebours*, p. 354.

The novel's notoriety as a decadent text, even the prototypical decadent text, had mostly to do with a moral judgment, with "decadence" being used to mean morally corrupt or astray. There are indeed references in the novel to provocative acts that fly in the face of bourgeois morality and conventions. Yet that is not the meaning of decadence I want to explore. My interest is in decadence as a detachment of the individual from society, but not necessarily involving moral waywardness.

Never formally associated with a movement, literary decadence began as a disparaging term judging literary developments as a decline. It was then was appropriated by writers in the 1880s as a favorable term for literary innovation. In 1881, Paul Bourget—who I am citing here not in his capacity as a witness of the importance of collecting, but as a theorist of decadence—offered the first definition of decadence as a literary style: "Un style de décadence est celui où l'unité du livre se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la page, où la page se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la phrase, et la phrase pour laisser la place à l'indépendance du mot. Les exemples foisonnent dans la littérature actuelle qui corroborent cette hypothèse et justifient cette analogie."¹ *A Rebours* thematizes this progressive detachment of the word from the text. Des Esseintes detaches himself from society to retreat into his collection.
Making sure to enter an empty house, and only then fill it with belongings, is an act that reinforces the idea of detachment from society. Des Esseintes is moving into a house that shows no signs of previous inhabitants. That makes his rupture from society all the more pure. According to Vladimir Jankélévitch's formulation in 1950, decadence is not a regression into barbarity, but a regeneration through returning to a point zero: "Loin que la décadence soit une 'régression' il faudrait dire, en ce sens, que la rechute en barbarie est plutôt une régénération: l'homme se retrempe en primitivité pour repartir à zéro." A Rebours is certainly portraying a return to a point zero, and it shows us that this return is accomplished through a rejection of what used to define one's self: material possessions, one's former environment and space, and incessant commercial activity. The initial blankness of the house signifies that act of detachment.

The theme of detachment of the individual from society corresponds to Huysmans' deviation from naturalism with the publication of A Rebours. Huysmans writes, in his "Préface écrite 20 ans après le roman" 19 years later, that he had aimed to break away from the naturalist obsession with the common, the average, and pursue the exceptional. He endeavored in this novel to explore the inner soul and mind of a single character who stays mostly at home, decorating and thinking. Huysmans acknowledged A Rebours as a transitional text: "ce qui est, en tout cas, certain, c'est qu'A Rebours rompait avec les précédents," referring to his previous novels, by leading him onto a new path: "c'est qu'il m'engageait dans une voie dont je ne me soupçonnait même pas l'issu." He affirms A Rebours as the turning point in his rupture with Zola's naturalism: "on était alors en plein naturalisme; mais cette école, qui devait rendre l'inoubliable service de situer des personnages réels dans des milieux exacts, était condamnée à se rabâcher, en piétinant sur place.

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130 Jankélévitch, "La Décadence" (1950), p. 361.
131 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 70.
Elle n'admettait guère, en théorie du moins, l'exception. That is indeed what Huysmans will strive to do: write about the exceptional individual, instead of aspiring to write about what he refers to in this passage as "l'existence commune," or "des êtres qui fussent aussi semblables que possible à la bonne moyenne des gens," as he claims naturalism had done. He would thereby advance literature, instead of remaining caught up in stagnant repetition. Huysmans validates naturalism's project when he refers to it as "an unforgettable service" ("inoubliable service"), but affirms that he had wanted to go further.

Zola lamented Huysmans' deviation from naturalism, which Huysmans reflected back on in his 1903 preface: "Zola [...] s'arrêta brusquement et, l'œil devenu noir, il me reprocha le livre, disant que je portais un coup terrible au naturalisme." As Lucien Descaves wrote in 1929, "Jusqu'ici le nom de Huysmans romancier, est lié par un trait d'union conventionnel au nom du chef de l'école naturaliste: Emile Zola." Zola had promoted naturalism in his series Les Rougon-Macquart, as well as in his 1881 essay "Le Roman expérimental." Zola's disapproval only reinforced the novel's originality, since it lent weight to Huysmans' attempt to surpass naturalism.

Zola merely gave the illusion of life, wrote Huysmans: "Zola, qui était un beau décorateur de théâtre, s'en tirait en brossant des toiles plus ou moins précises; il suggérait très bien l'illusion du mouvement et de la vie." The energy Zola put into his decors reflected his experience as a set designer for the stage, yet he did not develop the souls of his characters: "ses héroïs étaient dénués d'âme, régis tout bonnement par des impulsions et des instincts, ce qui

132 Huysmans, A Rebours, pp. 55-56.
133 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 56.
134 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 70.
136 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 58.
simplifiait le travail d'analyse. Ils remuaient, accomplissaient quelques actes sommaires, peuplaient d'assez franches silhouettes des décors qui devenaient les personnages principaux de ses drames.\textsuperscript{137} He reduced his characters to impulses and instincts ("des impulsions et des instincts"), leaving out other aspects of life, choosing, Huysmans implies, an easier manner of storytelling, which "simplifiait le travail de l'analyse." Zola's décors were fully developed, Huysmans suggests, but not his characters. Their souls were neglected: "dénués d'âme."

To include more of reality, specifically a part of reality that naturalism excluded, Huysmans would assume the task of portraying the exceptional individual, who did not conform to "types" or an idea of the average person. (Huysmans also implies that naturalist texts sometimes transcended Zola's theorization of them, but that they officially dismissed the exceptional individual as a valid subject for literature: ":[l]'école du naturalisme] n'admettait guère, en théorie du moins, l'exception" (my italics).\textsuperscript{138}

Concentrating on the intrigue that is possible within a single character—"concentrer le pinceau de lumière sur un seul personnage," would allow Huysmans to "supprimer l'intrigue traditionnelle, voire même la passion, la femme."\textsuperscript{139} He had sought to eschew knowing "pourquoi monsieur Un tel commettait ou ne commettait pas l'adultère avec madame Une telle,"\textsuperscript{140} or, put more succinctly, "Tombera? Tombera pas?"\textsuperscript{141} He had felt "le désir [...] de secouer les préjugés, de briser les limites du roman, [...] faire à tout prix du neuf."\textsuperscript{142} He had sought to innovate by breaking out of the literary tradition of naturalism and its reliance on intrigues of (heterosexual) desire and passion.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[137] Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 58.
\item[138] Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 55.
\item[139] Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 71.
\item[140] Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 57.
\item[141] Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 58.
\item[142] Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 71.
\end{footnotes}
Huysmans had already explored the theme of withdrawal while still part of Zola's "groupe de Médan," a naturalist literary club in the late 1870s whose name referred to Zola's country estate in Médan. Huysmans became associated with naturalism especially due to *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* (1876), and *Les Sœurs Vatard* (1879), dedicated to Zola, and *En Ménage* (1881) which portrayed a failed marriage. Zola's group—Maupassant, Huysmans, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique and Paul Alexis—published *Les Soirées de Médan* in 1880, an ensemble of six short stories written by its members, relating to their experiences of the Franco-Prussian War. Huysmans' was *Sac au dos*, based on a form of social withdrawal: his withdrawal from military service due to illness.

Huysmans' attraction to the theme of social withdrawal is also evident in his admiration for Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* (1869), which he called "un chef-d'œuvre qui a été beaucoup plus que *L'Assomoir* [(1877)] le parangon du naturalisme." He loved it because he considered it the ultimate representative of naturalism's quest to depict the average person, but he also loved it, we may imagine, for its depiction of a kind of social withdrawal akin to that of des Esseintes. *L'Education sentimentale* undermines the idea of a traditional hero, as its protagonists, Charles and Frédéric, fail to participate in the action of life. Unlike Balzac's Rastignac who had embraced the upward social climb with gusto, Frédéric and Charles are socially impotent.

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143 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 56.
144 Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1859) had already mocked novelistic passion; Flaubert had already initiated a new literary project of interrogating the idea, if not yet the form, of traditional novelistic drama. In an 1852 letter to Louise Colet, Flaubert had articulated the goal of writing "un livre sur rien," "qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style," "qui n’aurait presque pas de sujet ou du moins où le sujet serait presque invisible," adding that "les œuvres les plus belles sont celles où il y a le moins de matière; plus l’expression se rapproche de la pensée, plus le mot colle dessus et disparaît, plus c’est beau" (Lettre à Louise Colet, 16 janvier, 1852, p. 70).
A Rebours represents this transition between naturalism and other developments, such as literary decadence, concerned with detachment from the social, and thematizes this transition. In addition to all that we just seen regarding how A Rebours was intended to investigate the new territory of the mind and soul, Des Esseintes also shows signs of naturalist tendencies. Heredity plays a determining role in forming his character at the beginning of the novel. His attempts to control his life throughout the novel eventually yield to social and natural forces. Health problems resurface throughout the novel, and the doctor orders at the end of the novel that des Esseintes return to society if he wants to survive. Physiology is des Esseintes' enemy, consistently threatening the success of his retreat from society. Des Esseintes makes the move of a naturalist writer when thinks in terms of categories of people, rather than in terms of individuals, in the episode of collecting colors/phantom people.

The importance of decor in Huysmans, which the theme of collecting raises to a privileged status, emerges as the ultimate way in which Huysmans exhibits both attachment to and separation from naturalism. He takes naturalism's idea of milieux, and in particular Zola's decors, but then endows these spaces with the potential to illuminate inner depths, to lead a character inward, towards the soul. He situates des Esseintes in a luxurious milieu/decor, the better to expose his exceptional status. While realist decor reflected characters, and naturalist milieux determined characters, A Rebours uses decor to represent the evolution of a character, rather than a fixed character.

Huysmans, unlike Zola, will not promote an illusion of life while secretly promoting decors; Huysmans will promote the decors themselves by assigning them a leading role in the form of the novel itself. Elements of decor structure the novel itself: each chapter introduces a
new item or substance that the collector-protagonist des Esseintes has collected, including books, paintings, perfumes, fake flowers, alcohols.

The collection, in sum, functions as a metaphor for what is happening in French literature in the 1880s: collecting, like writing, involves a move away from the social, into interior depths, yet while still acknowledging the pull of the social.

On a thematic level, entering the mind of the individual is complicated, since society must still be invoked even when the protagonist has renounced society. Collecting as an exploration of the mind means seeking out other people as a way to know itself, to construct itself. The impulse for human contact remains, even in this fantasy of seclusion.

On a formal level, the writer, who ostensibly seeks to explore the inner life of a single character, encounters obstacles to that endeavor. In the theme of the collection, naturalist and post-naturalist gestures combine, and the difficulty of abandoning traditional (naturalist) narrative is made clear.

The collector's *apprentissage* is to walk around, observe, and think, by giving himself mental and physical space from society and other people. From that perspective, he can compose his self. Society and social categories can be reintroduced, but only after space has been made for the mind and self. Collecting re-works the collector's relationship to the social by identifying him with a category of people; by associating him with a social group, marginalized—and distinctly non-bourgeois—night workers; and also by affirming his visit to a poor man's dentist as a liberatory act. *A Rebours* is a transitional text between naturalism and literary decadence in the way it mobilizes the naturalist idea of decors and milieux for exploring inner depths.
Chapter Two: Compositional Experiments

After defining the self and re-working its relationship to society comes exercising, and experimenting with, the mind's powers. Des Esseintes is not interested in mere formal perfection—either in terms of fixing his self in a rigid way or in terms of creating out of his home collection a work of art. Rather, he is interested in trying out aspects of his mind through his collection. The collection offers opportunities for exercising the powers of the mind through composing space. He travels far and wide without actually moving from the house or even from one single room, and controls memory, time and desire themselves. He attempts to mechanize experiences, but not only for the sake of the outcome, but also for the sake of displaying his process, his mental prowess.

With European industrialization well underway, with a new abundance of mechanically produced and reproduced objects circulating commercially, an unprecedented consumerism reigned in French society at this time. Des Esseintes' compositional experiments aim at the mechanization of his self—not the mechanized production of objects, but the mechanized production of states of being and perceptions. The collector strives to create the conditions for repeating mental feats. This collector's project is not a pure rejection of the ostensibly detested, bourgeois consumerist society; it is also an attempt to appropriate an aspect of it for himself, mechanization.

Traveling Without Moving: A Marine Mess

The first and most striking composition of space that arises in the novel is the collector's disordered display of marine paraphernalia in the dining room-turned-ship-cabin, in Chapter
Two. (Des Esseintes has turned his dining room into a ship-cabin, or at least made it appear to be one.) The jumble includes engravings depicting steamers heading for South American cities, itineraries of the "Royal mail steam Packet" and other postal services, chronometers, compasses, sextants, binoculars and maps scattered on a table—"éparpillées sur une table"—on top of which lies a copy of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" (1838), an adventure story set at sea, featuring a stowaway on a whaling ship. Elsewhere in the room are fishing rods, other odds and ends relating to being on the sea, and a "minuscule" anchor. All of these objects are "jetés en tas," thrown into a pile, again emphasizing our impression of a messy display.

The disarray of this seafarer's collection encompasses records and accounts of real and imaginary voyages undertaken by others (the engravings, Poe's story, itineraries), and the equipment needed for future sea voyages (the binoculars, chronometers, compasses, sextants). Visual and literary representations of the sea intermingle with devices for measuring and navigating time and space. Strewn out, these raw materials are not yet packed and organized into a suitcase prepared for a particular voyage. Instead, they are, ready for the creation of a voyage, but not a specific one. This scene of possibility is one of a nascent voyage, thus representing all sea voyages, undifferentiated as of yet. Maps belong to both categories (past/imaginary voyages and future voyages), since to make a map, one must travel, but a map also serves in the creation of new trips.

In arranging a room to resemble a messy ship-cabin, the collector creates the illusion of travel. This allows him to procure the sensations of a long trip without moving: "Il se procurait ainsi, en ne bougeant point, les sensations rapides, presque instantanées, d'un voyage au long cours."145 Thus he procures for himself ("se procurait," the reflexive form of the verb, is used

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here) the sensations of a long voyage, emphasizing his control over this exploit, and without moving (which emphasizes his mental control over the experience). Movement is even useless, no longer necessary: "Le mouvement lui paraissait d'ailleurs inutile et l'imagination lui semblait pouvoir aisément suppléer à la vulgaire réalité des faits. A son avis, il était possible de contenter les désirs réputés les plus difficiles à satisfaire dans la vie normale, et cela par un léger subterfuge, par une approximative sophistication de l'objet poursuivi par ces désirs mêmes." Traveling without moving is a challenge that he is capable of meeting: the imagination seemed easily able to supplement the "vulgar reality" of facts," and believes it is possible to satisfy the desires reputed to be most difficult to satisfy in normal life, by a "light ploy," as if his collection is a tool he has mastered the use of. The collection inspires the collector's imagination, by conjuring a refined duplicate ("une approximative sophistication de l'objet poursuivi"). His imagination has the power to replace actual travel. It transports the collector beyond the confines of the collection, in his mind. Like a launching pad, the composition of space—his messy marine display—frees him to travel beyond the borders of the collection. The collection liberates the collector, spatially. With such an environment, he will be able to produce, and reproduce—mechanize—the sensation of travel on demand. The phrase "une approximative sophistication" suggests this sense of adeptness at creating the conditions for an imaginary voyage. He only needs an approximate scene imitating a real ship-cabin; there is no need for perfect correspondance; setting out the raw materials before him is enough to activate his imagination, which is powerful enough to fill in the rest. He has found a system he can easily repeat for producing the effect of travel.

The copy of Poe's story is bound in "veau marin," sealskin. The material of the binding (coming from a sea animal) corresponds to the marine subject matter of the book—the exterior matches the interior. Exterior matches interior, in des Esseintes' world; his house reflects him, along with his whims and desires, just as this dining room reflects his longing to embark on a long sea voyage and supports him in his ability to mentally satisfy this desire. He is composing the space around him in such a way as to activate his inner powers, and the correspondance between binding and book content here reinforces this theme.

The importance of mental travel as imaginative feat is apparent when des Esseintes tries to undertake an actual voyage, for even then, he engages in a mental voyage. The mental voyage is his preferred mode of travel. Des Esseintes plans a trip in Chapter 11 of the novel: "des Esseintes prescrit qu'on lui apprête ses malles, pour un long voyage." Although the text does not specify why he wants to undertake this trip, what is clear is that he makes the decision immediately after a period of sickness. During this period, a doctor came to the house, without knowing what to do for the patient. Des Esseintes recuperated quickly, surprising his servants, and then started hammering ("tambouriner") on the windows, looking at the sky, asking for his trunks to be prepared. He has recovered naturally, while the doctor was unable to help him. He experiences a victory over modern medicine which inspires him to want fresh air—hence his hammering on the windows.

To prepare, he makes use of his messy marine display, selecting objects from it: "il arpentait fiévreusement la cabine de la salle à manger." The objects in that room were intended as mise en scène for a mental journey, should he ever feel the desire to travel. Yet here he accesses these materials for a real trip, not an imaginary one.

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Fittingly, his trip to London will remain largely imaginary. He only reaches Paris. Even though this is a trip in physical space, and not an imaginary trip, it is not quite a real trip either. His imaginative skills must still intervene, as demonstrated by the way he feels he has been to London, just by reading London guidebooks from a Paris store, by imagining Dickens characters while gazing at dark porto-filled glasses, and by seeing, in the arcades of the rue de Rivoli, a tunnel under the Thames river. Thus, his journey remains primarily a mental one, even when he attempts an actual one.

Returning to Chapter Two, des Esseintes manages not only to afford himself the illusion of travel without moving, but also to infuse the experience with the particular pleasure that derives from remembering the trip, not actually living it. Describing the pleasure of displacing oneself—he uses the word "un déplacement"—the narrator specifies that this is a pleasure similar to what memory provides, rather than that of the present moment of traveling itself: "et ce plaisir du déplacement qui n'existe, en somme, que par le souvenir et presque jamais dans le présent, à la minute même où il s'effectue, il le humait pleinement [...]."¹⁴⁹ He inhales this pleasure fully, this pleasure which only exists in memory and almost never in the present. Des Esseintes, however, will procure the pleasure afforded by memory in the present, instead of having to deal with the variety of feelings and thoughts that are part of actual travel, including the necessary stress and practical thinking in traveling. He cleanses the voyage of its less compelling aspects—the boring, tiresome, and troublesome aspects—and reduces it to pure pleasure. He also cleanses memory of nostalgia. Nostalgia, which combines pleasure with pain, is edited out. A fabricated—purified—memory neatly packages the messy idea of traveling. He preserves the memory of an event that never happened; memory is creative, here. The edited mental trip is constructed,

shaped and pruned, just as the disorder of the paraphernalia on the table is "apprêté," or designed, affected, forced.

This is not the first time des Esseintes has practiced controlling memories. In the very first eight lines of the novel, in the opening of Chapter One, we learn that des Esseintes had controlled his memories, as well as those memories' effects on him, by controlling the décor. In the past, before his retreat, when entertaining women, he had arranged mirrors in such a way as to create the illusion of an infinity of boudoirs, to please both his guests and himself: "Il était depuis longtemps expert aux sincérités et aux faux-fuyants des tons. Jadis, alors qu'il recevait chez lui des femmes, il avait composé un boudoir."150 (We mentioned this memory in Chapter One in the context of discussing how des Esseintes had collected for others in the past, but would now seek to please only himself.) Des Esseintes would also suspend a cricket cage with a cricket from the ceiling, which would be reflected in the infinity of boudoirs. The song of the cricket he had so often heard in his childhood, would cause him to remember his childhood at the Château de Lourps, including, in particular, difficult memories of his mother. This memory would be interrupted by the woman he happened to be with, and he would return to the present reality of the boudoir. The pleasure he would take in this combination of stimulants was that of sullying memories of his family by his current depravity. He was able to orchestrate memories in this eccentric way, through his arrangement of mirrors and cricket cage.

Des Esseintes calls his act of the imagination (the imaginary voyage) an "adroit mensonge dans le monde de l'intellect," a clever lie of the intellect, which suggests that he is deceiving one part of himself with another.151 Other phrases imply the idea of artifice or falsehood connected with his imaginary voyage: he says that there is no doubt that one can

150 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 87.
"jouir," or take pleasure in, "chimériques délices" as much as one can in the "monde matériel," evoking by the use of the word "chimérique" the idea of illusion. He gives examples: "la suggestive lecture d'un ouvrage racontant de lointains voyages" (reading as imaginative fancy/intellectual lie), and the impression of experiencing "un bain de mer" merely by going to the "bain Vigier, situé sur un bateau, en pleine Seine."152 The idea here is about giving oneself the "impression" of travel, and he employs this word in this context.153 However, he also speaks of "illusion."154 He is not aspiring to make the imaginative trip so perfect that it seems completely real. He still enjoys the illusory aspect of the mental feat. One way of interpreting this is that he prefers artifice over reality. Another way of interpreting this is that he is enjoying the process of creating an alternative world, as if he is rivaling with the outside world. It is not the artifice that is the point, but rather his act of seeing himself imitate a phenomenon in the outside world. He is like a child playing at grown-up activities, taking pleasure in drinking tea surrounded by dolls, and not caring that there is no tea in the tea cups.

Des Esseintes is an heir of Don Quixote and Madame Bovary, aware of his preference for illusion over reality. Different from them, he is motivated to analyze the process of living an illusion so that he can reproduce it again and again—mechanize—the illusion.

Later in this episode, Huysmans even evokes a guidebook tone, as if instructing the reader (from the perspective of des Esseintes) on how to achieve what des Esseintes has achieved, emphasizing the fact that des Esseintes is building a foundation for future experiences. Everything is in order, for the moment when he will feel like embarking on an imaginary journey. He is not only indulging himself in a momentary, fleeting experience. Huysmans is

152 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 102.
153 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 102.
154 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 103.
accentuating des Esseintes' collecting as a productive action: "Le tout est de savoir s'y prendre,
de savoir concentrer son esprit sur un seul point, de savoir s'abstraire suffisamment pour amener
l'hallucination et pouvoir substituer le rêve de la réalité à la réalité même."¹⁵⁵ This is how you do
it; this is what it all boils down to. It is a matter of concentrating one's mind. It is a matter of
"abstracting" oneself enough so that dream can be substituted for reality.

He then makes a very direct statement about artifice and nature, the most direct one so far
in the novel: "Au reste, l'artifice paraissait à des Esseintes la marque distinctive du génie de
l'homme. [...] la nature a fait son temps."¹⁵⁶ Thus, he gives an éloge du génie, echoing
Baudelaire's éloge de l'artifice as the height of civilization. Nature is scorned for the "dégoûtante
uniformité" of its landscapes.¹⁵⁷ Any natural phenomenon can be imitated by unnatural means,
whether using electric jets or delicate paper. This well-known passage from the novel ("la nature
a fait son temps") must be seen not only as an éloge of artifice, but also as praise of the
collector's ability to break down, and transmit to the reader, the process of producing that
artificial experience of travel. He is not just a lover of artifice, but a teacher of artifice.

At the end of the chapter, Huysmans confirms the power of des Esseintes' mind to
mechanize experience. Des Esseintes hears a train out the window, and muses that man has
created, in the train, something to rival nature. If God made, in woman, a beautiful work of
nature, human technology has created the train to rival God's creation: "L'homme a fait, dans son
genre, aussi bien que le Dieu auquel il croit."¹⁵⁸ Man has rivaled God by creating a kind of
woman of its own—not a human woman but a mechanical woman (the train). Des Esseintes
imagines the train as a kind of mechanical woman. (Zola will develop the comparison between

¹⁵⁵ Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 103.
¹⁵⁶ Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 103.
¹⁵⁷ Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 103.
¹⁵⁸ Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 104.
women and trains, one of the most powerful symbols of 19th-century mechanization, six years later in *La Bête humaine* (1890).) Des Esseintes compares two different kinds of trains to two different women.

However, it is not the train but des Esseintes' own mind that is revealed to be powerful. After we read about his revery involving a "blond" train and a "brunette" train, the nearby train, whose noise inspired his revery, is described as a mere "enfantin chemin de fer"—"childlike railroad."\(^{159}\) This description contrasts strongly with the image of monstrous and sexually powerful train-women that des Esseintes has just conjured in his mind. The contrast accentuates the power of his imagination over reality. Outside reality seems weak in comparison to his mind.

The array of objects evoking a long sea voyage is placed in explicit contrast with another space of des Esseintes' house, another table-like surface, that of his office and desk, his "cabinet de travail." The dining room "contrastait, d'une manière absolue, avec son cabinet de travail, une pièce définitive, rangée, bien assise, outillée pour le ferme maintien d'une existence casanière."\(^{160}\) This office space is, in contrast, well-organized, well-established, "definitive," suggesting a neatness and careful attention to details regarding the arrangement of objects. It is well-equipped for the life of someone who stays at home (someone who has "une existence casanière")—the opposite of the sea-faring adventurer. The messy arrangement of marine objects was also purposeful, but in an opposite way, for an opposite effect: disorder. The office is spic and span while the dining room is left looking chaotic. The dining room is associated with a long voyage, which implies, in the Baudelairian sense of the word (as in his poem "Le Voyage"), escape from the quotidian. The office signifies work. A contrast is established between the room that invites the inhabitant to dream of travel (and to remember a voyage that never happened), and the room

\(^{159}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 105.
that is down-to-earth, organized, centered on the home and the everyday, and work, whether in the form of correspondance or writing, or other tasks one completes in an office.

The contrast between the two spaces implies that des Esseintes has all his bases covered: travel and its opposite. He is creating a world in which he can satisfy all desires—for staying at home and for travel—by himself. He surrounds himself with the raw materials for different kinds of experiences, which he can then access when fancy strikes. Collecting means displaying one's ability to arrange objects in such a way as to empower the mind. The experiences achieved are secondary to the fact that they are possible, available on command.

**Controlling Time and Desire**

The dining room-turned-ship-cabin offers an experience of both space and time that can be procured on demand, as if manufactured. Without moving, he procures for himself the "sensations rapides, presque instantanées, d'un voyage au long cours."\(^{161}\) A "voyage au long cours," an ocean voyage, implies traversing much space and consuming much time. Yet he has packaged it, mentally, into an experience he can produce for himself in a moment.

Whenever he wants des Esseintes can access these impressions of fleetingness, periods of time in between the *durée* and the *instant*.

The dining room's other function, eating, becomes intertwined with the voyage experience. Des Esseintes can invest eating a meal with the excitement of leaving on a trip. The room is characterized as "cette cabine dont le désordre apprêté, dont la tenue transitoire et l'installation comme temporaire correspondaient assez exactement avec le séjour passager qu'il y

faisait, avec le temps limité de ses repas."\textsuperscript{162} The ship-cabin has an "affected" disorder, a "transitory" appearance and "temporary" feeling, which corresponds to the brief time he spends eating his meals there. The \textit{transitory} and \textit{temporary} appearance correspond to the \textit{passing} "séjour" he makes there whenever he eats a meal, for the \textit{limited} time of a meal. His arrangement of objects evokes the idea of ephemerality, in the way, we imagine, that a half-packed suitcase might bring to mind a task interrupted, a duration of time cut prematurely short. He has spatialized a certain type of time—ephemerality. He seeks to control time by guaranteeing himself the impression of a certain form of time (a subjective experience of time).

Des Esseintes also seeks to control time by rigorously assigning certain activities to certain hours of the day (the measurements of the clock, an objective experience of time). He attempts to regulate his mealtimes in Chapter Two by assigning them a specific time. He has summoned two servants, accustomed to caring for sick people, to work for him. They are the same ones who cared for his mother when she was ill at the Château de Lourps, his childhood home. They are used to "une régularité d'infirmiers," "distribuant, d'heure en heure, des cuillerées de potion et de tisane."\textsuperscript{163} Des Esseintes is attracted to the idea of regularity, a means of controlling time. Here, regularity does not signify boredom, but rather his exercise of control over every detail of time, in the private world of his collection.

The theme of control over his daily habits and temporal precision is repeated in the following line: "Il régla aussi les heures immuables des repas, [...] A cinq heures, [...] puis il dînait vers les onze heures, [...] pendant la nuit; [...] les cinq heures du matin."\textsuperscript{164} All of these time expressions—"à cinq heures," "puis," "vers les onze heures," "pendant la nuit," "les cinq

\textsuperscript{162} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{163} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{164} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 98.
heures du matin," reinforce his attention to the control of time by assigning his activities to specific, fixed times of day. He is making his life predictable, repetitive, with a firm schedule, with rules or guidelines to follow, to create structure. He considers hours of mealtimes "immuables," or unchangeable.

In a moment in this same Chapter Two, when des Esseintes observes the mechanical fish he has installed in his dining room's aquarium, he provides a detail that resonates with the theme of precise clockwork. These fish are "montés comme des pièces d'horlogerie."\(^{165}\) He describes the artificial fish as resembling the inner workings of a clock.

These fish are juxtaposed with the freely swirling drops of color des Esseintes amuses himself at dispensing into their tank. These are green, briny, opal or silver-toned essences, similar to the shades of colors seen in actual rivers.\(^{166}\) The juxtaposition offers a metaphor for des Esseintes' decorating project: to combine control and lack of control (the drops' effects cannot be controlled; you put the drops in and let the water take care of the rest). Within his controlled refuge, there are hermetically sealed corridors and rooms contained within rooms, such as this dining room within a room. At the same time, counterbalancing this gesture of control, there are acts of whimsy and experimentation, to show how the world of his collection controls space and time while allowing for whimsy and experimentation. This contributes to accentuating that his process is the meaning of his collecting, rather than any fixed outcome.

Des Esseintes also controls desire. In Chapter Six of A Rebours, in the form of an explicit memory from his life before he entered his retreat in Fontenay-aux-roses, des Esseintes uses collecting to break up a marriage. Chapter Six of the novel mostly concerns des Esseintes' corruption of a 16-year-old boy (in the past, before his retreat) by causing him to become

\(^{165}\) Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 100.
\(^{166}\) Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 100.
addicted to prostitutes, while des Esseintes plans for him to run out of the necessary funding to support such an addiction. This is the main content of the chapter and consumes the most textual space. It overshadows a preliminary moment of the chapter, a memory in which des Esseintes remembers having been in favor of the marriage of an acquaintance named Aigurande, while everyone else had discouraged this person from marrying: "Seul, parmi ces jeunes gens, des Esseintes encouragea ses résolutions [de se marier] dès qu'il eut appris que sa fiancée désirait loger au coin d'un nouveau boulevard, dans l'un de ces modernes appartements tournés en rotonde." Des Esseintes immediately identifies the roundness of the apartment as a decorating pitfall—furniture will be made to fit this unusual, round apartment, that will be unable to fit in other apartments they might move into. Des Esseintes foresees insurmountable problems caused by this specially-designed collection of furniture, problems which appeal to des Esseintes' sadistic tendencies: "Convaincu de l'impitoyable puissance des petites misères, [...] et, se basant sur ce fait que d'Aigurande ne possédait aucune fortune et que la dot de sa femme était à peu près nulle, il aperçut, dans ce simple souhait, une perspective infinie de ridicules maux." He calculates that the bad furniture will inevitably lead to disputes. He wants to see a union break—to see desire fade—due to bad furniture. Sure enough, "Peu à peu, cet encombrant mobilier devint une source d'interminables ennuis." The round furniture did not fit in any other apartment except for the unusual round apartment for which it was made. This decontextualized furniture collection—made for too-specific a purpose, useless in other contexts—causes the marriage to end. Des Esseintes considers himself to have "strategized" this scenario; he

manipulates a collection of furniture—not his own, this time—to control desire (in this case, to dissolve desire).

Of course, isolating himself from others—the entire project of the novel—is an act of controlling desire, upon which his entire collecting project is founded. Des Esseintes withdraws from society, and the novel features no romantic or sexual intrigue in the narration, corresponding to Huysmans' affirmation in the 1903 preface that he had been trying to distance himself from such intrigue. Huysmans' rejection of women (for their perceived association with the havoc of traditional novelistic intrigue) resonates with a comment by Edmond de Goncourt in the "Préambule" of La Maison d'un artiste (1881). In addition to the comments from this "préambule" which I mentioned in the introduction to this study, Goncourt also refers to the activity of collecting as an escape from women. He claims that the new attraction to collecting, as a pastime among bourgeois, male Parisians, was a sign of the diminishing role of women in men's lives. The individual (male), seated next to the fire, withdrawn and sedentary, now desires a pleasant home, filled with objects: "Dans cette vie assise au coin du feu, renfermée, sédentaire, la créature humaine [...] a été poussée à vouloir les quatre murs de son home agréables, plaisants, amusants aux yeux [...] et cet entour et ce décor de son intérieur, elle l'a cherché et trouvé naturellement dans l'objet d'art pur ou dans l'objet industriel."\(^{170}\)

Setting into his domestic atmosphere makes men need women less, according to Goncourt: "Du même coup, ces habitudes moins mondaines amenaient un amoindrissement du rôle de la femme dans la pensée masculine; elle n'était plus pour nous l'occupation galante de toute notre existence."\(^{171}\) Social withdrawal is associated with a withdrawal from women in which women play a lesser role, are less important, as if the turmoil generated by men's interest

\(^{170}\) Goncourt, La Maison d'un artiste, p. 2.
\(^{171}\) Goncourt, La Maison d'un artiste, p. 2.
in women fades away when the collector sits at home staring at his objects. Indeed, pretty objects are the new focus of man's interest: "l'intérêt de l'homme, s'en allant de l'être charmant, se reportait en grande partie sur les jolis objets inanimés dont la passion revêt un peu de la nature et du caractère de l'amour."\textsuperscript{172} This new interest in objects is a form of passion similar to romantic love.

This new fetishistic relationship between collectors and their cherished, valued aesthetic objects distinguishes the 18th and 19th centuries: "Au XVIIIe siècle, il n'y a pas de bibeloteurs [collectors of bibelots] jeunes; c'est là la différence des deux siècles. Pour notre génération, la bricabracomanie [the activity of collecting bric-à-brac] n'est qu'un bouche-trou de la femme qui ne possède plus l'imagination de l'homme."\textsuperscript{173} There are more young collectors in the 19th century, and their collecting of bibelots has become a mere ("n'est que") stand-in for women, who no longer "possess men's imaginations." Desire is transferred onto the objects of the home.

In 1888, Edmond reiterates this idea writes in his Journal: "la passion de l'objet d'art—et de l'objet d'art industriel—a tué chez moi la séduction de la femme."\textsuperscript{174} Passion for the art object, including industrial ones, has replaced, and put an end to his desire for women.

Balzac also evoked the amorous and sexual overtones of collecting. Pons' "musée," too, was a source of pleasure, with amorous and/or sexual overtones. The purpose of Pons' collection is "pour en jouir à toute heure,"\textsuperscript{175} and on the first page of the novel, when he has just procured a new item, he is compared to "un garçon content de lui-même au sortir d'un boudoir."\textsuperscript{176} Pons' devotion to his collected art is a lover's desire: he is among "les âmes créées pour admirer les

\textsuperscript{172} Goncourt, \textit{La Maison d'un artiste}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{173} Goncourt, \textit{La Maison d'un artiste}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{174} Goncourt, \textit{Journal}, samedi 3 novembre 1888, T. 3, p. 850.
\textsuperscript{175} Balzac, \textit{Le Cousin Pons}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{176} Balzac, \textit{Le Cousin Pons}, p. 31.
grandes œuvres [qui] ont la faculté sublime des vrais amants; ils éprouvent autant de plaisir aujourd'hui qu'hier, ils ne se lassent jamais, et les chefs-d'œuvre sont, heureusement, toujours jeunes."\(^{177}\) The difference is that the collector-as-fetishist remains more subdued or implicit in Balzac, whereas it becomes much more explicit in Goncourt's comment.

Huysmans, as we saw in Chapter One of this study, wrote in the 1903 preface to *A Rebours* that he had been seeking a narrative that would get beyond women, with all of their associations with betrayal, loss, jealousy, the fallout of romantic/sexual desire. He created a protagonist who immerses himself in his collection, as a means of composing not for women but for himself alone. Des Esseintes, too, seeks to escape women. With the image of furniture that has the power to spoil a couple's relationship, though, Huysmans takes the theme of collecting as control over desire to another level—not only removing his protagonist from desire, but crushing it underfoot—one imagines desire being squashed by a gigantic, rounded couch made for Aigurande's rotunda apartment.

**Surpassing Salomé**

In Chapter Five of the novel, des Esseintes imaginatively deploys his collection of paintings to enter the world of one painting in particular, Gustave Moreau's depiction of Salomé dancing in front of Herod. He reveals himself as more of a master of the room than she is.

This collection of paintings recalls the collection of portraits which opened the book—the family portraits of members of the des Esseintes family over the centuries. The difference is that des Esseintes engages with his paintings and uses them to travel back in time. Through these two contrasting depictions of painting collections, Huysmans puts in relief his character's taking up

\(^{177}\) Balzac, *Le Cousin Pons*, p. 31.
the reins. Des Esseintes has chosen his paintings, a marked contrast from that original portrait collection filled with gaps evoking neglect and delapidation.

Des Esseintes is interested in art that transports him out of the contemporary society he hates, just as he has, himself, taken himself out of society. For des Esseintes, Gustave Moreau is an "illuminé" who was able to "s'abstraire," or withdraw himself from the world, in order to see, in the middle of Paris, cruel visions shine.\(^{178}\) A similar verb, se *soustraire à* (escape from), was used in the first sentence of this same Chapter Five to describe des Esseintes: "son désir de se soustraire à une haïssable époque\(^{179}\).\) Separating himself from society is associated with heightened visual powers or insight, and this applies to both Moreau and des Esseintes. Moreau's talent is able to send him into "de longs transports,"\(^{180}\) and des Esseintes is able to activate his own mental powers within the world of his collection.

Des Esseintes specifically sought a subtle painting, immersed in antiquity: "aussi, avait-il voulu une peinture subtile, exquise, baignant dans un rêve ancien, dans une corruption antique, loin de nos moeurs, loin de nos jours."\(^ {181}\) He has already acquired two masterpieces that apparently fit his requirements, one of which depicts Salomé dancing in before Herod.

Looking at these paintings sends des Esseintes into another state, and onto another voyage, both in space and time, recalling other similar journeys in this novel (the potential for an imaginary sea voyage in Chapter Two, the truncated journey to London in Chapter 11, and, as we will discuss later, the overview of Latin literature in Chapter Three which transports him back in time). Here, des Esseintes seeks refuge from the contemporary world by immersing himself not only in his new house but in an image, within that house, of the ancient past. His domestic

\(^{178}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 149.
\(^{179}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 141.
\(^{180}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 141.
\(^{181}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 141.
collection as a whole is not only a refuge, but a launching pad, which sends him into the refuge of other times and places. Des Esseintes wants to be stimulated, mind, body and eyes, while safe and protected in his house. In this sense, he wants to be transported while remaining right where he is, as in the case with the other journeys just mentioned. Des Esseintes wants to be "thrown" back in time and "shaken," to experience terror, uncertainty and loss of control, but at a remove. He weaves into his collection the potential for experiencing fear, so that he can experience these feelings while paradoxically being in total control of them, as in Aristotelian catharsis, or the romantic aesthetic experience of the sublime.

Transporting des Esseintes in time, Moreau's paintings cultivate "la délectation de son esprit et la joie de ses yeux." They are "suggestive" works, throwing him—in a kind of violent, abrupt action—into an unknown world ("le jetant dans un monde inconnu") unveiling to him the traces of new "conjectures" ("lui dévoilant les traces de nouvelles conjectures"), shaking his nervous system by erudite hysterias and complicated nightmares, nonchalant and atrocious ("lui ébranlant le système nerveux par d'érudites hystéries, par des cauchemars compliqués, par des visions nonchalantes et atroces"). He is Bourget's collector, eager for the complicated feelings and thoughts that a carefully composed collection can stimulate.

The transition from the use of the imperfect tense to the use of the present tense to describe the painting accentuates our sense that des Esseintes enters deeply the scene of the biblical story of Salomé, 2,000 years ago. In the beginning of the description, when Herod is being described, verbs are in the imperfect, suggesting a temporal distance between the observing des Esseintes and the subject of the painting. Examples include: "Hérode était assis,"

182 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 141.
183 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 141.
"la figure était jaune," "sa longue barbe flottait."\(^{184}\) By contrast, when the description moves on to describing Salomé herself, the verb tense changes to the present: "Salomé [...] s'avance," "elle commence la lubrique danse," "ses seins ondulent," "elle ne voit ni le Tétrarque [...], ni sa mère."\(^{185}\)

The narrator relates that the figure of Salomé is prevalent and powerful among artists and writers of the time. "Ce type de la Salomé si hantant pour les artistes et pour les poètes, obsédait, depuis des années, des Esseintes."\(^{186}\) However, Huysmans' use of Salomé is less as a representative of woman as controlling, powerful, cold, threatening temptress (which is often how she was viewed at the end of the 19th century\(^ {187}\)), and more as a reflection of des Esseintes, the collector who orchestrates his private world almost perfectly.

We read: "Concentrée, les yeux fixés, semblable à une somnambule, elle ne voit ni le Tétrarque qui frémit, ni sa mère, la féroce Hérodias, qui la surveille, ni l'hermaphrodite ou l'eunuque qui se tient, le sabre au poing, en bas du trône [...]."\(^ {188}\) She is in perfect control, like des Esseintes: she sees what she wants to see, blocking out what she does not want to see. She is concentrated on her task, as is des Esseintes with each of his tasks. Des Esseintes lives mostly at night—and it is specifically at night that des Esseintes is stimulated by these paintings ("pendant des nuits, il rêvait devant l'un d'eux\(^ {189}\)")—and in this way resembles Salomé, a sleepwalker ("semblable à une somnambule"). Later, in Chapter 14, des Esseintes will be described as being

\(^{184}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 142.
\(^{185}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 143.
\(^{186}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 143.
\(^{188}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 143.
\(^{189}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, pp. 141-142.
sent into a trance by his readings, like Poe's Usher, "envahi par une transe irraisonnée, par une frayeur sourde."\(^{190}\)

The description of the atmosphere in the painting reinforces des Esseintes' resemblance to Salomé but also the way in which he surpasses her. Stones from Herod the Tetrarch's robe pierce through his diaphanous beard like stars through clouds: "sa longue barbe flottait comme un nuage blanc sur les étoiles en perreries qui constellaient la robe."\(^{191}\) Perfumes burn all around him, evoking the air as well as scent. "Des nuées de vapeurs" circulate in a smoky, impressionistic atmosphere.\(^{192}\) Jewels, and the light reflecting off of them, penetrate through this atmosphere. The stones adorning Salomé also punctuate the vapors, as the words "scintillant" and "étincelles" suggest.\(^{193}\) Similarly, light pierces through des Esseintes' world in a figurative sense: he makes his way, throughout the novel, amidst lists and layers of items (colors, flowers, perfumes, books, etc.), with the goal of arriving at one or several specific items he truly likes. These discoveries and assertions are like points of light emerging from the slew of possibilities.

The implicit comparison between des Esseintes and Salomé serves to reinforce the des Esseintes' capacity for being the master of his surroundings. However, des Esseintes is more in control than Salomé, because he is not only concentrated, like her, but he can explain everything he is doing to a tee. She sees without seeing, dancing like an automaton. He sees everything, because he is completely self-conscious about his process.

\(^{190}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 311.
\(^{191}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 142.
\(^{192}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 142.
\(^{193}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 143.
Moving Without Traveling: An Over-Taxed Turtle

A tension resurfaces throughout the novel between the careful control des Esseintes exerts over the intricately wrought space of his collection, on the one hand, and the mind's free-wheeling life, on the other. His control is imperfect. Des Esseintes' imaginary travel can be understood as an experiment in mechanically fulfilling desires in the confines of his own house, but such travel can also be viewed in a different light—as mere traveling in place, or moving without traveling—moving without getting anywhere.

In des Esseintes' gilding, and then encrustation of his turtle's shell with jewels in Chapter Four of the novel, he intends for the embellished reptile to enhance his rug, as if the reptile were a piece of furniture. Like a piece of furniture, he orders it, has it delivered, and then observes it moving (very slowly, we imagine), over the patterns on his rug, which itself has been newly ordered and delivered. Given des Esseintes' night owl habits, we imagine him looking at it in the evening, when, in the darkness, the lethargic animal would be barely distinguishable from the rug itself, so that, when it moves, it would create the effect that the rug itself is moving, alive. This is happening in the very room in which des Esseintes "travels without moving" using the array of marine objects intended to transport him in his imagination. The turtle's "moving without traveling" will mock that theme, undermining des Esseintes' imaginative enterprise.

The episode begins with a car stopping in front of his house. The servants are taken a bit off guard since no one ever comes to the house, we are told, not even a postman. Des Esseintes shows evidence, too, of surprise; he needs a moment to remember that he once gave his address to a stonecutter. Otherwise, he is confused about the arrival of this delivery person. This phrasing suggests an absentmindedness about orders he had placed, or perhaps a willful forgetfulness.
about the commercial transactions involved. He wanted to be secluded, and removed from commercial life.

The man deposits his "shield," an "un immense bouclier d'or" in the dining room.\textsuperscript{194} "un immense bouclier d'or" seems to be a reference to the shell of the giant turtle he is delivering. It is described as covering his whole chest, when he arrives carrying it. The creature is now oscillating on the floor.

The turtle was "une fantaisie" that had struck him after he was inspired by a yellow and purple oriental rug that reflected light and was interwoven with a silvery glow. He thought that "il serait bon de placer sur ce tapis quelque chose qui remuât et dont le ton foncé aiguisât la vivacité de ces teintes."\textsuperscript{195} He intended for the turtle's darker tones to sharpen the liveliness of the rug's tints. He juxtaposes two decorative elements; one will enhance the other. Soon after, he came upon a turtle in a store window where he "s'était frappé le front," implying he stopped dead in his tracks.\textsuperscript{196} Then: "Il l'avait achetée."\textsuperscript{197} These sentences are terse, evocative of the commercial mechanism at work: a desire, aimless wandering around the city, seduction by shop window, the purchase, and finally, the anti-climax of actually receiving the object in one's home: "une fois abandonnée sur le tapis, il s'était assis devant elle et il l'avait longuement contemplée, en clignant de l'œil."\textsuperscript{198} Once he had let it loose on the carpet, des Esseintes sat down and contemplated it for a long time, blinking his eyes, as if, once again, taken off guard with this delivery. They also suggest bewilderment: the effects are not as he intended. The raw Sienna

\textsuperscript{194} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{195} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 128.
\textsuperscript{196} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 128.
\textsuperscript{197} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 128.
\textsuperscript{198} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 128.
color of the shell dirties the reflections in the rug instead of activating them. The project backfires. He bites his nails.

Des Esseintes tries to find a solution. He decides to reverse the project: the rug is too new, its colors too bright. Instead of using the turtle for its darker tones, which was the original idea, he decides that the rug needs, instead, something brighter to dull its tones. Hence, he encrusts the turtle's shell with jewels: "Il se détermina, en conséquence, à faire glacer d'or la cuirasse de sa tortue."¹⁹⁹ He is once again working in color management: "il s'agissait de renverser la proposition, d'amortir les tons, de les éteindre par le contraste d'un objet éclatant, écrasant tout autour de lui, jetant de la lumière d'or sur de l'argent pâle. Ainsi posée, la question devenait plus facile à résoudre."²⁰⁰ He is thinking through the situation, searching for a solution ("la question devenait plus facile à résoudre") and finding one, at least temporarily: rendering the turtle brighter than the rug, for contrast, instead of leaving the turtle in its natural dark state, which did not yield an interesting contrast with the rug.

Strangely, the turtle, when it was brought to the house by the delivery man, was already described as being gold: "un Monsieur dont toute la poitrine était couverte, du col au ventre, par un immense bouclier d'or."²⁰¹ The delivery man's chest was covered by an immense gold shield. Des Esseintes is adding gold to gold—creating layers. The turtle, then, was already golden, just not gold. Not gold enough.

After the turtle is returned to des Esseintes with its new shell decoration, it is dazzling like a sun. Des Esseintes is "enchanté."²⁰² Yet he thinks it needs even more: it should be encrusted with jewels. The turtle, gilded even though already gold, is still, to his eyes, a mere

sketch, an outline, raw material: "ce gigantesque bijou n'était qu'ébauché," "il ne serait vraiment complet qu'après qu'il aurait été incrusté de pierres rares." He thus wants to perfect, refine, even further this piece of art. He does not want to leave it as it is, merely gilded.

He searches for inspiration in a collection of Japanese objects he happens to have: "Il choisit dans une collection japonaise un dessin représentant un essaim de fleurs partant en fusées d'une mince tige." This image of the mass of flowers shooting outward is the inspiration for the image he asks a jeweler to create. It comes from someone else (the designer of the Japanese object that inspired des Esseintes with the image), and the incrusting is performed by the jeweler. Des Esseintes' creative act, in between these two, is draw an oval border enclosing this bouquet: "[Il] esquissa une bordure qui enfermait ce bouquet dans un cadre ovale," and to choose the stones: "Le choix des pierres l'arrêta." Once again, he is searching for distinction, trying to choose the stone that is most distinct, uncontaminated by all that he is trying to leave behind. Des Esseintes evaluates precious stones in terms of their commonness, vulgarity, whether they are favored by the bourgeois or not, or evoke colors associated with buses, signs of the city life he has fled. Only the sapphire meets these criteria: "seul, parmi ces pierres, le saphir a gardé des feux inviolés par la sottise industrielle et pécuniaire." However, he concludes that none of these, not even the sapphire, will satisfy him because they are all too "civilisées" and "connues," known or familiar. Therefore, he locates more surprising and bizarre stones. He comes up with a combination of real and fake stones, intended to produce "une harmonie fascinatrice et

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204 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 129.  
208 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 130.
déconcertante.\textsuperscript{209} The tone of the short sentence "Le choix des pierres l'arrêta"\textsuperscript{210} recalls sentences in Flaubert's \textit{Bouvard et Pécuchet}, as if to mock the difficulty des Esseintes is having with this project (the characters of Flaubert's book had difficulty in each of their projects).

He again watches the turtle, as he did when it first arrived: "Des Esseintes regardait maintenant, blottie en un coin de la salle à manger, la tortue qui rutilait dans la pénombre."\textsuperscript{211} For a period of time, this movement of the turtle satisfies des Esseintes and suggests he has succeeded in creating a living work of art. Seeing the turtle makes him "perfectly happy," a rare occurrence for des Esseintes, who is usually described in terms of his likes and dislikes, but not in terms of emotions. He has not exhibited any such positive feeling so far in the novel, certainly not of happiness. The novelty of this change of mood is made evident by the fact that he suddenly regains an appetite—"contrairement à son habitude, il avait appétit."\textsuperscript{212}

However, the utensils he eats with are gilded (in yet another reference to gold), and, in their oldness, appear tired: "Il ne se servait également, en fait de couverts, que d'authentique vermeil, un peu dédoré, alors que l'argent apparaît un tantinet, sous la couche fatiguée de l'or et lui donne ainsi une teinte d'une douceur ancienne, tout épuisée, toute moribonde."\textsuperscript{213} Will the turtle, too, like these utensils, lose some of its covering of gold, to let the silver underneath peek through, creating the effect of an old softness, exhausted and dying? Yes. When he summons his servant to bring the reptile to him, it is no longer moving.

While in the genre of the fantastic, earlier in the century, inanimate objects come to life, des Esseintes is using the turtle's life to achieve some visual effects. He is more interested in
making his living *space* live, or at least shimmer. He tries to transfer the animal's life, in a sense, onto the rug.

The desire to decorate outlandishly, not only with inanimate objects but with living things, recalls the headgear des Esseintes decides his female servant will wear in Chapter Two of the novel (we mentioned his two servants in the previous chapter of this study, in the context of his developing a non-verbal system of communication with them), so that when she passes he will have the impression of being in a Belgian nunnery. He outfits, or decorates her, not wanting her shadow, as it passes by windows, to be "hostile."

He has her wear the costume "en faille flamande, avec bonnet blanc et large capuchon, baissé, noir, tel qu'en portent encore, à Gand, les femmes du béguinage." This makes him feel he is in a cloister, which he characterizes as a dead section of a bustling town. He is animating the inanimate and reifying the animate. He is playing with the intermediate space between life and non-life.

The turtle project has not unfolded as planned. He exercised his mental powers in this episode, and his creativity, but it amounted to excessive gestures that suffocated his original intentions. Had it worked and achieved the visual effects he was looking for, the ugly commercial transaction involved in acquiring of this reptile (which des Esseintes seems eager to forget) would have been redeemed. It would have become a shimmering example of his creative mental powers let loose. Yet, his decorating enterprise has limits. The turtle's death even foreshadows des Esseintes' ultimate fate of being forced to leave his house if he wants to live—the failure of his collecting enterprise. When the death is confirmed at the very end of the chapter, it is in the form of an unmistakeable analogy between it and its owner: "Sans doute habituée à une existence sédentaire, à une humble vie passée sous sa pauvre carapace, elle

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n'avait pu supporter le luxe éblouissant qu'on lui imposait.\textsuperscript{216} Des Esseintes is eventually forced by doctor's orders to return to the society he hates. He cannot endure forever in this thébaïd, just as the turtle cannot live forever crushed by jewels. Des Esseintes cannot push the limits of decorating \textit{ad infinitum}. He cannot control \textit{everything} in this special haven he has created. From this perspective, we could conclude that Huysmans' larger aim is to emphasize the futility of this eccentric collector's endeavors.

Does this mean, then, that failure is, after all, a dominant theme in the novel, despite my emphasis that the novel privileges mental and creative \textit{processes} over success and failure? I do not think so. Of course des Esseintes can be seen as a world-weary soul, but he is more, rather, an over-eager decorator. Using a turtle as decoration might have worked, had des Esseintes not been so enthusiastic. The turtle does not, to my mind, symbolize the protective shell into which des Esseintes retreats, but rather the naïveté of des Esseintes' endeavors. The theme of "not moving" echoes Huysmans' criticism of Zola in his "Préface écrite 20 ans après le roman," in which Huysmans characterized Zola's work as an exercise in treading water, turning in circles—repeating, not advancing. Des Esseintes appears, in this episode, to exhibit that kind of immobility.

Yet what he is actually doing is carving out an intermediate space, encrusting the surface of the turtle's shell with gold and jewels, as if to render surface into depth. His experiment with turtle reflects the design of the collection as a whole: rooms within a house, collections within a collection, rooms within rooms. The corridor linking the dining room to des Esseintes' \textit{cabinet de travail} is "hèrmétiquement fermé.\"\textsuperscript{217} It allows nothing, no sound, no odor, to pass between the two rooms. It is compared to one of "ces boîtes du Japon, qui entrent, les unes dans les autres,"

\textsuperscript{216} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 139.
\textsuperscript{217} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, pp. 98-99.
because of the way it fits into the larger room that surrounds it, and which was the intended, true, "véritable" salle à manger built by the architect.\textsuperscript{218} The dining room is the room in which des Esseintes's turtle project takes place.

Des Esseintes constructs not a "whole work of art" (which is how Dominique Pety envisions Edmond de Goncourt's collection), but rather an intermediate space, defined not by coherence or boundaries, but by in-betweeness: semi-depth, semi-surface, between introspection and performance.

Philippe Hamon, author of \textit{Imageries: littérature et image au XIXe siècle} (2001), refers to the emergence of an aesthetic of flatness and impressions in 19th-century literature, as if in response to a perception of reality as newly flat or empty of meaning: "une esthétique de la platitude et de l’image impressionnée se met en place textuellement et stylistiquement, et comme mimétiquement d’un réel plat ou vide de sens, pour promouvoir des textes conçus comme des albums de photos, ou comme une succession d' 'impressions' ou de 'tableaux' juxtaposés, esthétique anti-narrative."\textsuperscript{219} The theme of \textit{emboîtement} in \textit{A Rebours} nuances the idea of flatness by offering another conception of space, neither flat nor deep. The turtle episode elaborates poetically on the idea of an intermediate space through the image of the encrusted shell of the turtle.

Spaces of \textit{emboîtement} represent the type of interiority at work in this novel. Des Esseintes rejects both spirituality and society, and lives instead on the threshold between them. His collecting is dramatizing that threshold experience, in which he is getting to know his mind.

The turtle episode has been famous since the original publication of the novel, in part because of its connection to the count Robert de Montesquiou, the famous aesthete, dandy, social

\textsuperscript{218} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 99.
entertainer who—like the turtle—animated the salons of Saint Germain-dès-Près. Montesquiou's personality influenced jewelry designers René Lalique and Emile Gallé. His first literary incarnation was des Esseintes. Marc Fumaroli affirms that "il est certain que le succès du roman a été dû en partie, dès l'origine, à l'effet de trompe-l'œil qui donne à des Esseintes une 'ressemblance' avec le personnage de Montesquiou." It also inspired a number of fictional incarnations: Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray (1890), Jean Lorrain's Monsieur de Phocas (1901), and Proust's Baron de Charlus. A symbolist poet, Montesquiou wrote Les Chauves-souris (1892), Le Chef des odeurs suaves (1893) evoking exotic flowers, Les Paons (1900) evoking gems and Les Roseaux pensants (1897). He was a kind of auto-bibliophile, presenting his first volume of poetry, Les Chauves-souris (1892), as a decorative, material, collectible object to friends such as Whistler and Mallarmé. It was printed on papier de Chine, in a silk-bound box.

Contemporary readers enjoyed the challenge of identifying the real person on whom des Esseintes was modeled, suggests Lucien Descaves in his preface to the 1929 edition of A Rebours: "Les plus avisés nomment le comte Robert de Montesquiou; mais c'est seulement en 1892, lorsque celui-ci publiera ses vers: Les Hortensias bleus, qu'il sera identifié avec Floressas [le duc Jean des Floressas des Esseintes], notamment par Bernard Lazare et André Hallays." Like des Esseintes, the count was aristocratic, and had transformed his apartments in Paris into a private museum in which each room exuded a different atmosphere, filled with fantastical furnishings, art, books and furniture.

In Les Pas effacés (1923), Montesquiou's memoirs published posthumously by Paul-Louis Couchoud, and which were, according to Marc Fumaroli, written "certainement pour

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rétablir sur leur auteur une vérité que la légende de des Esseintes avait fini par vaincre."

Montesquiou describes how Huysmans must have learned about the decor of his apartments on the quai d'Orsay from Mallarmé who had recently visited Montesquiou's apartment. Huysmans had no doubt already heard of Montesquiou but had never met him. Montesquiou admits that Huysmans must have been inspired by his gilded turtle. Montesquiou did possess one, which he had used as decoration; in 1882, two years before *A Rebours* was published, Edmond de Goncourt had referred to the turtle in his *Journal* as a "bibelot, à la fois marchant et doré," a bibelot at once walking and gilded. However, Montesquiou claims that it was not his idea originally, but that of Judith Gautier. Noting that it had been responsible in part for the success of the book: "cette tortue dorée, qui a fait une partie de la fortune du livre," Montesquiou seems to want to give credit where due and explain that "Judith Gautier en avait, elle aussi, emprunté, avant moi, le décor au Japon pittoresque, pour une de ces bêtes qu'elle traita de même, et nomma 'Chrysagyre,' à cause de l'argent qui se mêlait à l'or, sur cette carapace fastueuse..." However, Huysmans' episode is much more than the clue to one of the sources of this character, Montesquiou. Huysmans shows how a collected object stimulates the creativity of the collector, and contributes to the carving out of an intermediate space between inner and outer, spatially and psychologically.

However, Edmond de Goncourt wrote in 1891 that the differences between the character and the person outnumbered their similarities: "Montesquiou n'est pas du tout le Des Esseintes de Huysmans. S'il y a chez lui un coin de toquage, le monsieur n'est jamais caricatural, il s'en sauve toujours par la distinction. [...] Sauf un peu de maniérisme dans l'expression, [sa conversation]

est pleine [...] d'aperçus originaux, de trouvailles, de jolies phrases [...] [qu'] il termine [...] par des sourires de l'oeil. Montesquiou, more distinct, more sophisticated than des Esseintes? Des Esseintes, more laughable, caricatural than Montesquiou? Certainly, Montesquiou must have possessed inner depths, and experienced the troubled quest that we are all on, in search of ourselves, but such efforts, such earnestness, were not part of the persona he cultivated for himself. Comparing his persona with Huysmans' fictional character, des Esseintes emerges as distinctive for the relentlessness of his inner questing by means of collected objects. Montesquiou used his collection to promote a mask-like persona, and his poetry, while it evoked bibelots, does not express the earnest effort and striving, to discover the self through objects, that Huysmans' text does.

Fumaroli, who sees them as sharing the quality of having not managed to succeed as writers, nevertheless still considers des Esseintes' mental complication something that must be characterized as being in opposition to creation. He writes: "si puissant est ce vortex intérieur de dispersion et de scintillement stérile, que l'œuvre ne peut plus être, [...] Des Esseintes [...] a cédé à la tentation dont la création de des Esseintes a préservé Huysmans. C'est par là sans doute qu'il 'ressemble' le plus à Robert de Montesquiou", dont le dilettantisme mondain est l'ombre portée d'une réussite littéraire qui s'obstina à le fuir." So powerful is an inner dispersion of the self, according to Fumaroli, that creating a work of art eludes des Esseintes. While Huysmans was spared this fate, by creating his character des Esseintes, des Esseintes is not spared it. Des Esseintes and Montesquiou both edged toward the threshold of artistic creation, both lived art, yet without managing to create successfully.

225 Goncourt, Journal, mardi 7 juillet 1891, T. 4, p. 117.
However, as we have seen, des Esseintes' collecting project, as an exercise in his mental powers and compositional experiments, does not have to be understood in opposition to creation, literary or otherwise. His collecting stakes out new mental space and powers, experimenting with mental travel, and control of memory, time and desire. Huysmans is showing us that collecting means not simply glorifying artifice, but glorifying the collector's ability to arrange objects in such a way as to satisfy his desires whenever he chooses—the collector's ability to produce and even teach that ability to the reader. The figure of Salomé, depicted in one of des Esseintes' beloved paintings by Gustave Moreau, is revealed to put des Esseintes' control over his environment in relief, because she lacks his self-awareness. The demise of the turtle, which occurs in the same room where he set up his marine display for mental travel, reveals that the collector's control over his surroundings and mind is imperfect. Yet through the theme of deepening surfaces (encrusting the turtle's shell), this episode emphasizes the fact that des Esseintes is attempting to carve out a space for himself, in between his own mind and outside society, in which to test out the powers of his mind. He seeks perfect mastery, true, but what is most important is not whether he always achieves it but the fact that he is exercising his mental powers, searching for the keys to mechanize experience, by means of the space of his collection.

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In Un homme libre (1889), the second volume of Le Culte du moi trilogy (1888-1891), Maurice Barrès will also, six years after the publication of A Rebours, portray a character who relentlessly cultivates his self. This character will, like des Esseintes, try to master his desires by mastering the space around him: "pour nous créer ces milieux, il ne s'agit pas d'user de raisonnements mais d'une méthode mécanique, nous nous envelopperons d'images appropriées,
et d'un effet puissant, nous les interposerons entre notre âme et le monde extérieur si néfaste."

Like Barrès' character, des Esseintes knows how to "vary with minutiae" his circumstances and create a bulwark between himself and the outside world by wrapping himself (envelopper) in his collection. Des Esseintes, too, is searching for a mechanical gesture, in the sense of an arrangement of objects he can count on to send him traveling in time and space, and to satisfy his desire for travel. Yet Huysmans makes sure that des Esseintes still encounters chance effects, offsetting his success at mechanization. Huysmans is presenting a character who is immersed not in mechanical process, but in **figuring out** the mechanical process. He still has to confront dead-ends (the turtle). Des Esseintes reveals his attachment to process in the meticulous thought given to all of his experiments, whereas Barrès character seeks to get beyond "raisonnements" (reasoning, thinking).

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Chapter Three: Dealing With Other People

This chapter, entitled "Dealing with Other People," moves into the issue of dealing with other people, a theme related to Chapter One's concern with the collector being in between isolation and society. Yet this chapter is more directly concerned with confronting actual, live others in the novel Madame Chrysanthème (1887), set in Japan. We move to our second author, Pierre Loti, also the protagonist of the novel examined, who collected in a way that brought him into contact with many foreign lands. During his long naval career, Loti gathered objects to not only decorate his ship-cabin, but to furnish his stunning home museum in Rochefort, France. Collecting in Loti expresses the ambiguity of relationships to others and to other cultures. He never fits in, despite his attempts at integration. He is always in between, similar to the way des Esseintes is working out his relationship to the social.

The name "Loti" refers to person, author and character, and thus reflects the intermingling of fictional and real selves that must be included in any discussion of Loti's work. Language and writing participate in his ambiguous relationship to Japan, facilitating a connection with, but also distancing him from, Japan. Similarly, Japanese objects connect him to, but also distance him from, Japan. Collecting in Loti expresses the ambiguity of relationships to others and to other cultures. We will discuss Loti as a collector, whereas we did not need to do this for Huysmans, whose collecting activity was not relevant to our analysis. Japanese women as bibelots become the ultimate symbol of Loti's own in-between status.
Between Home and the Foreign

Writer, navyman, collector and traveler, Pierre Loti, né Julien Viaud (1850-1923), wrote novels, short stories, essays, romances and travelogues, and nonfiction in an autobiographical style. A very popular travel writer of the 1880s, he was also admired by critics, especially for painterly descriptions of natural landscapes. After the publication of Le Pêcheur d'Islande (1886), the Goncourts wrote in their Journal: "Loti est un merveilleux paysagiste, un admirable visionnaire de la nature." His writing does not correspond easily to categories such as naturalist or symbolist, and can be best described as fictionalized travelogues that revolve around the limited point of view and feelings of the protagonist. At a time when people traveled less easily than they do today, yet while France's self image was still tied to its status as one of the two biggest Western colonial powers, Loti nurtured French people's curiosity with his fictionalized accounts of his voyages to Turkey, Japan, Tahiti, Senegal, Brittany, Morocco and Japan. As Bruno Vercier notes in the introduction to Madame Chrysanthème, Loti surpasses Flaubert's ideal of "un livre sur rien" by omitting invented characters and convoluted dramatic intrigue. He sought a different truth, relating to his own inner indecision.

In these travelogues, Loti cultivated mystery around himself, beginning with his manipulation of his name. Up until the time of publishing his books, the historical person Loti was called, and used, his given name, Julien Viaud. When he began to publish books, the name Loti made its appearance. First, it becomes the name of a character. Secondly, it becomes Viaud's new pen name, as well as his new socially-used name.

Loti first appears as the protagonist of Aziyadé (1879), the first book published by Viaud (later Loti). Whether this first book was published by Viaud or Loti is not an issue, because it

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was published anonymously. This means that the name "Loti" first appears as the name of a character only.

The origin of the name Loti in a fictional character, and not in a historical person, was further emphasized by the fact that the second book published by Viaud (later Loti) also left the name of the author ambiguous. Though not exactly anonymous, this second book, *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880), announces itself as written by "l'auteur d'Aziyadé." The author thus played with names and anonymity by furnishing some information (he is the same anonymous person as in the first book), but not all information (people still did not know the anonymous author's identity).

In both the first and the second books, the name Loti is a nickname for the character Harry Grant, an English naval officer. This continues a play with names, within his text itself, since Loti is not even the real name of the fictional character, but is specifically a nickname. In the second book, the narrator explains that the character Loti received his name from a Tahitian flower. So, in the first and second books, the name Loti is a character's nickname inspired by an exotic flower from the foreign land, reinforcing the importance, to this character, of travel in non-Western lands.

Finally, upon publishing his third book, *Roman d'un spahi* (1881), Julien Viaud began using "Loti" as the name of the author of the book. At this point, also, the protagonist becomes French (no longer English). Identity between the character and author was now implied. Specifically, the identity was the result of the author naming himself after his protagonist. The character preceded the author, at least symbolically.
The name "Loti" is no longer a pen name, a *nom de plume*, which means a name a writer publishes under other than his own. In his subsequent books, except for *Le Roman d'un spahi*, "Loti" continues to appear as the French narrator-protagonist.

Loti begins as a character, and then becomes, in addition, the author. It is as if the character gives birth to the author. The character is not only a character; he is also the author. The author is not only the author; he is also a character. If the character preceded the author, then who wrote the book? The anonymous author was the void from which the character was born. In adopting the name of his character, Loti the author made a gesture of conforming to his imaginary creation.

In the Pygmalion myth, the sculptor falls in love with his creation. In Loti's case, he identified with his creation—a collapsing of intrigue right at the origin of the creative act. The self no longer moves outward to a desired other, but rather mystifies its own identity, in a self-reflexive action.

As Roland Barthes writes, both signing with a pseudonym (author is not the same as character) or writing an autobiography (author is the same as character) are common: "Ce n'est pas le pseudonyme qui est intéressant (en littérature c'est banal) [...] S'il est courant de signer le récit de ce qui vous arrive et de donner ainsi votre nom à l'un de vos personnages (c'est ce qui se passe dans n'importe quel journal intime), il ne l'est pas d'inverser le don du nom propre."230 For Barthes, this invention on Viaud's part is "audacieuse." Barthes doubts Loti has any fellow name embroilers in literature—he writes, "je ne pense pas qu'il en existe de semblables dans la littérature"231 (there is, in fact, one: Colette will entitle her autobiography *La Maison de Claudine* (1922) after her character Claudine, who appears in the series of stories from the 1900s including

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Claudine à Paris, Claudine à l'école, Claudine s'en va, Claudine en ménage), thereby implying that her identity is intertwined with that of her fictional character. Both Loti and Colette blur the difference between the two people, one real, one fictional.)

Whereas Proust will insist on the separation between the fictional and the worldly self, against Sainte-Beuve's identification of the two, Loti wants to make the relationship confusing—neither a relation of identity or difference.

As Bruno Vercier writes, Loti felt alienated from his own land and self; he only ever felt "à l'aise" in the company of different people, "en compagnie d'êtres différents." He suffers from being metaphysically displaced in his own life. This makes it harder to reduce Loti to labels: "Faut-il pour autant le taxer, comme on l'a souvent fait, de racisme et de colonialisme, lui qui ne s'est jamais senti à l'aise qu'en compagnie d'êtres différents, par la classe sociale ou par la couleur de la peau?" There is a fundamental questioning of identity, his own identity, that undermines the importance of those concerns. Before any of the stories, there is an original unease, ambiguity, uncertainty, instability, at the root of the author's very existence, condensed in the issues surrounding the name "Loti."

Collecting, both in Loti's personal life and in its thematization in his books, will be a prime way for him to continue to express the confusion of identity. As for des Esseintes, collecting was, for Loti, an urgent matter, more urgent than other aspect of life, and Loti expressed this in his journal intime. He wrote: "Il n'y a d'urgent que le décor. On peut toujours se passer du nécessaire et du convenu." Yet serious, earnest collecting in Loti is less a matter of defining the self and more of articulating the self's extension into other cultures—creating, exploring and integrating other selves into his life. Loti's collecting functioned to destabilize his

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identity. Different from des Esseintes, who tried to define his self and master his mind and desires, Loti is interested in, or at least remains in the stage of dwelling on, the anxiety of unfulfilled desires.

Like des Esseintes' house in *A Rebours*, Loti's house is a collection of striking rooms, which are, in themselves, collections. According to Vercier, Melot and Scaon, the writers of the most thorough book that exists on Loti's stunning home museum memorializing, room by room, his travels and interests, these rooms included a *salle Renaissance* (1896-1897), a *Salle gothique* (1887), a *chambre arabe* (1884), a *mosquée* (1895-1897), a *salon turc* (1877-1894), a *pagode japonaise* (1886). Collecting was arguably the most important creative activity of Loti's life, because other creative activities served his collecting goals. A painter as well as a writer, he began selling drawings in order to offset his family's financial plight, in order to be able to keep the family house that he would develop into a spectacular collection: "c'est dans cette volonté de gagner assez d'argent pour pouvoir racheter la maison à sa mère que s'est développée sa vocation, d'abord de dessinateur illustrateur puis d'écrivain." His *droits d'auteur* ultimately allowed him to buy the house in 1871 and fund his later transformations of it.

Loti's passion for collecting began in his childhood, in his family's home. He had nurtured a small personal museum of fossils, shells, toys, butterflies, birds’ nests, pebbles, dried plants, bibelots, and other objects family members or neighbors brought back for him from trips to French colonies. After attending the Rochefort naval school, he worked as an officer in the French navy for 42 years, from 1867 to 1910. During these years, Loti traveled with the navy

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234 Vercier, Melot and Scaon, p. 54.
235 Vercier, Melot and Scaon, p. 4.
236 Vercier, Melot and Scaon, p. 4.
237 Vercier, Melot and Scaon, p. 4.
238 Vercier, Melot and Scaon, p. 54-55.
to many different countries. While at sea, he would decorate his ship-cabin: "L'officier mettra toujours le plus grand soin à faire de ses cabines de véritables musées flottants en miniature, où il accumule tissus, objets, armes, vitraux, miroirs et vases remplis de fleurs."239 He sought souvenirs of his first-hand experiences in those lands. He did a thorough job of this, by creating floating microcosms of the foreign country in his ship-cabin.

These floating museums were destined for the home museum Loti would eventually create out of his family residence in Rochefort. In this project, Loti superimposed souvenirs from his travels on the domestic space in which he had grown up, and to which he remained deeply sentimentally attached. After buying the family residence in 1871, at age 21, he began, in respites during this naval career, an extensive and extravagant embellishment and metamorphosis of the house—a decorative but also architectural overhaul. One of the many projects this entailed was, in 1886, to demolish the dining room ceiling on the first floor and to install sculpted beams in order to construct a Japanese pagoda in that space.240

Like both Goncourt's and des Esseintes' home collections, Loti envisioned, and created, an eclectic house of heterogeneous rooms which reflected his diverse travels and interest in the aesthetics of particular time periods. He collected both synchronically and diachronically, cross-culturally and temporally.

In 1969, Loti's son Samuel sold the house to the city of Rochefort. In 1973 the French government transformed it into a museum. Loti's house stands out among other eclectic homes (including Alexandre Dumas' home at Monte Cristo in Port-Marly, also containing oriental, Renaissance, and medieval features, and Gérôme's house in Paris) because of its particularly

239 Vercier, Melot and Scaon, p. 10.
strong personality. In the context of the *collectionomanie* of the end of the 19th century, Loti transformed his house to an unusual degree.

Loti's collection project shows a deep attempt at engagement with other cultures, and a deep willingness to experiment with his own identity by so thoroughly rendering his intimate, domestic living space exotic—non-French. He domesticated the foreign and exoticized the domestic.

Loti's project, however, did not have the same soothing effect on Loti as des Esseintes' project does on him. Radically transforming the house he loved implied a tension: Loti could not both preserve and transform it. As serious as he was about the renovations, he could not escape feelings of regret. As Vercier, Melot and Scaon write: "Cette attitude ambivalente—besoin de démolir, regret de l'état antérieur—se manifeste tout au long des travaux. Ecrire *Le Roman d'un enfant* [an autobiographical text] en 1888 obéira, entre autres motivations, à celle de conserver à tout jamais, par les mots, la maison dans son état primitif."\(^\text{241}\) This tension between allegiance to the original, on the one hand, whether the original house or the original countries and travel experiences, and creative appropriation of foreign decor, on the other, was a source of preoccupation and anxiety.

In his *Journal intime* in 1881, Loti describes his house as his stable home (*logis fixe*), true home, where he only comes "from time to time": "C'est ici qu'est mon logis fixe, mon vrai logis, celui où je suis né, celui où de temps en temps je reviens me poser."\(^\text{242}\) His true, stable home, where his roots are, is a place he only returns to occasionally. This suggests that most of the time, he is uprooted, at large, wandering. The fact that he spends most of his time uprooted corresponds to the tension in his collecting project of never feeling he is in the right place. Yet he

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\(^{241}\) Vercier, Melot, and Scaon, p. 15.
also longed for the expansion of identity possible through traveling; in Chapter One of *Madame Chrysanthème*, the text I will be discussing further below, the narrator fears the possibility of one day not being able to take refuge in other cultures: "Il viendra un temps où la terre sera bien ennuyeuse à habiter, quand on l'aura rendue pareille d'un bout à l'autre, et qu'on ne pourra même plus essayer de voyager pour se distraire un peu..." The idea of cultural difference is sustaining for him. Loti seeks to be in two mutually exclusive states simultaneously: "J'ai la nostalgie d'ici et d'ailleurs; je voudrais vivre là-bas et ici." When home, he longs to be away, and vice versa. Each experience is characterized as incomplete. Each is infused with longing for the other experience.

Eric Fougère, writer of *Aspects de Loti: l'ultime et le lointain* (2006), uses the term "interior exile": "Tout le talent de Loti consiste à conforter son exil intérieur." This term seems to refer to the idea of Loti's perpetual imbalance—never feeling that his state of mind is complete because of longing for the other state of mind. He may strive to comfort his interior exile, but does he ever actually manage to do it? Traveling and collecting were ways for him to address or respond to the emptiness at the core of life, but did they actually help him deal with or resolve that ennui? Likely not. He strives to ease his existential disconnection by a concrete decorative and architectural project, as if to ground himself, after all of his travels, and restlessness/uprootedness. He tries to render the familiar foreign and the foreign familiar—the *unheimlich* and its opposite. But Loti, unlike that other perpetual traveler, Odysseus, never quite makes himself at home when abroad, and also never quite returns a stranger to his own place of origin.

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245 Fougère, p. 66.
for he has integrated the foreign into his Rochefort home. Foreign decors seem to make him aware of his incompleteness and instability, rather than ease those feelings.

In contrast, to put in relief Loti's case, we might consider how, for Proust, foreign-seeming rooms served to sharpen his sense of self and singularity—the opposite of feeling incomplete and unstable in a foreign room. In his essay "Sur la lecture," his preface to his translation of Ruskin, *Sésame et les lys* (1906), Proust echoes Loti's longing for what he is not and for where he is not: "Pour moi, je ne me sens vivre et penser que dans une chambre où tout est la création et le langage de vies profondément différentes de la mienne, d'un goût opposé au mien, où je ne retrouve rien de ma pensée consciente, où mon imagination s'exalte en se sentant plongée au sein du non-moi."\(^{246}\) A foreign room makes him think and live as if his self is better defined and sharpened by the contrast between himself and his surroundings. Proust's comment suggests he feels somehow at home ("je ne me sens vivre et penser que dans une chambre...") in an exotic room, whereas Loti does not feel at home anywhere.

As if to make overt his awareness that he could never perfectly re-create the places he had visited—reinforcing the sense of incompletion and instability he felt wherever he was—Loti did not rigorously adhere to historical or cultural accuracy. Interested in "l'effet décoratif plutôt que la vérité historique,"\(^{247}\) Loti participated in the fashion that privileged heterogenous collecting over historical accuracy, as Vercier, Melot and Scaon note: "L'aménagement du lieu [salle Renaissance] relève d'un éclectisme bien représentatif de l'historicisme très en vogue en cette seconde moitié du XIXe siècle [...]."\(^{248}\) In Loti's case, this vogue meant being free to create, rather than feeling compelled to imitate. In 1881, he asked women in his family—who, as

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\(^{247}\) Vercier, Melot, and Scaon, p. 39.

\(^{248}\) Vercier, Melot, and Scaon, p. 37.
women, apparently knew innately how to do this—to make pillows and curtains for the salle turque, rather than using authentic Turkish pillows. As Vercier, Melot and Scaon write about this endeavor: "Il ne s'agit plus de disposer d'une manière plus ou moins artistique des objets rapportés de là-bas, mais de rechercher l'aileurs à partir d'ici; le résultat est pourtant toujours bâtarde, qui juxtapose des éléments de l'ancienne pièce (la cheminée, par exemple) et un décor oriental." In this way, collecting's incompleteness—reflecting Loti's perpetual sense of incompleteness—inspires a new creation.

Loti's eclectic decor served not only private existential preoccupations but also to entertain—an interest that, like the rest of his collecting, dated back to his childhood (as Vercier, Melot and Scaon note, "Ce goût pour le costume prolonge son goût enfantin pour le théâtre et les décors"). Vercier, Melot and Scaon even see in his collecting more of a social function, referring to the rooms of his house as "ces lieux théâtraux, plus dessinés pour la fête que pour le recueillement solitaire."

In any case, both collecting for private existential preoccupations and collecting to entertain were ways for Loti to experiment with his identity, regardless of whether he ever achieved a sense of completion or stability. Both revealed his fascination for other cultures, with costume functioning, like decor, to allow him to approach the exotic. Entertaining in his house meant having an occasion to dress in costume and orchestrate elaborate costume balls, receptions and dinners in his home in Rochefort. The parties began in 1888. His gothic room served as the setting for the first event, le "dîner Louis XI."

250 Vercier, Melot, and Scaon, p. 20.
252 Vercier, Melot, and Scaon, p. 22.
Edmond de Goncourt described hearing about another of Loti's dinners in a *Journal* entry in October 1894, from someone who "a assisté avec sa femme en compagnie d'une trentaine de personnes. Il nous peint le côté enfantin de cet écrivain amoureux de travestissements et dont la vie est un perpétuel carnaval, avec sa chambre bretonne où il s'habille en Breton, avec sa chambre turque où il s'habille en Turc, avec sa chambre japonaise où il s'habille en Japonais." The comment testifies to Loti's attraction to multiplying his identity through decor as well as spectacular costumes intended to be shown off to guests.

Loti's use of collecting to experiment with his identity—and to sound the depths of the instability and incompletion of identity—in a social context (through entertaining) recalls the collecting of Robert de Montesquiou. Loti and Montesquiou share the affinity for putting their collecting to social use, whereas des Esseintes completely isolates himself in his collection. Montesquiou once visited Loti's home, and likely appropriated an idea or two for himself. Montesquiou's collecting was a means of celebrating himself, in a narcissistic way, concerned with impressions made on other people. A 1999 Musée d'Orsay exhibit on Montesquiou accentuated his narcissistic "autocélébration." Loti, like des Esseintes, is more complex than the count because of the way he combines outward display with the inner psychological depths of existential unease.

**Detachment From and Attraction To Japan**

*Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) is Loti's first book set in Japan. It tells the story of the protagonist-sailor's several months' stay in Nagasaki, Japan. It involves not a carefully designed

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254 Vercier, Melot, and Scaon, p. 44.
domestic refuge as in *A Rebours*, but temporary, makeshift domestic refuges: one in the form of the awkward, purchased living arrangement with a woman Loti names Chrysanthème, and another in the form of his floating ship-cabin collection. Loti the author and Loti the protagonist are not identical, but, in light of the purposeful mystery Loti created surrounding them, through his manipulation of the name "Loti" discussed earlier, I have chosen not to distinguish between them. Together, they form the collector Loti.

In Loti's storytelling, a sailor, usually named Loti, arrives in a foreign port and begins a romance with a local woman. As Bruno Vercier notes, *Madame Chrysanthème* presents a complex experience of intercultural difference: "Du regard 'colonial' à la quasi-japonisation, le livre offre toute la gamme possible des rapports du Moi à l'Autre, en passant par l'amusement, le sarcasme, la condescendance, le respect, pour en revenir régulièrement au constat de l'infranchissable altérité."256 *Madame Chrysanthème* is distinct among his travel stories for the degree of detachment Loti feels from Japan, and also from the woman he is ostensibly interested in. As a response to intercultural contact, detachment is more prevalent in *Madame Chrysanthème* than in Loti's other works. The theme of detachment resonates with Loti's own unstable identity, in which he detaches from others and from himself. Both des Esseintes and Loti isolate themselves and consequently have difficulty dealing with other people. Des Esseintes chooses physical isolation, and Loti confronts psychological isolation, experienced while surrounded by people.

The text of *Madame Chrysanthème* consists of 56 short chapters, in 232 pages. This makes an average of four pages per chapter, but a number of them are only a half a page long, and the very last chapter is only three lines long. The brevity of the chapters create an

impressionistic tone, especially combined with the fact that the novel is in the form of a journal, with many entries dated. Adding to the impressionistic tone on a stylistic level are the frequent ellipses at the end of sentences, which I have retained in the passages I quote. (If an ellipsis is not in brackets, it means Loti ended the sentence with an ellipsis. If an ellipsis is in brackets, it means that the sentence continues, in the original text, beyond the part I have quoted.)

Descriptions of landscape as alternately foreboding and inviting convey the exteriority, uncertainty and foreignness of the space of Japan from Loti's perspective. The ambivalence of Loti's feelings regarding Japan signify that even though he is by nature a traveler and sailor, the foreign country never becomes interior—it never becomes familiar enough to be home.

The novel opens with Loti's first glimpses of Nagasaki as he is approaching the city from the water. He interprets a fresh breeze as a sign of hostility: "comme si ce pays eût soufflé de toutes ses forces contre nous pour nous éloigner de lui."\(^{257}\) He senses the "true Japan" as a heavity in the air, a confused cloudiness, in which opaque silhouettes of the mountains rise up: "on vit bientôt comme une lourdeur en l'air, comme un voile pesant sur les eaux: c'était cela, le vrai Japon, et peu à peu, dans cette sorte de grande nuée confuse, se découperent des silhouettes tout à fait opaques qui étaient les montagnes de Nagasaki."\(^{258}\) Hostility, heaviness, confusion and opacity are the characteristics applied to Japan, and specifically to a "true Japan," a recurring phrase in the book. This idea of a "true" Japan appears again when he sees the city from a different angle, calling that angle on the city "probablement le vrai, le vieux Nagasaki japonais qui subsiste encore..."\(^{259}\) He is searching to penetrate a "true" Japan, at the same time that the country is resisting being approached or understood, from his perspective.

\(^{257}\) Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 47.
\(^{258}\) Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 47.
\(^{259}\) Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 52.
Sometimes, however, this new country can be inviting: "On eût dit que ce Japon s'ouvrait devant nous [...] pour nous laisser pénétrer dans son cœur même." Loti imagines Japan opening itself to him, to grant him access into its core ("son cœur même"). Yet, two pages later, when he spots an old, small pagoda, half-hidden above an abyss, the distance between self and other is reinforced once again: "cela surtout jetait [...] aux nouveaux arrivants comme nous, la note lointaine et donnait le sentiment que, dans cette contrée, les Esprits, les Dieux des bois, les symboles antiques chargés de veiller sur les campagnes, étaient inconnus et incompréhensibles..." A discreet pagoda comes to communicate something to him about the entire country, suggesting "une note lointaine," a faraway air, and the feeling that this new country's religion and symbols are unknown and incomprehensible. His sense of foreignness is never permanently alleviated, though there are moments of feeling included in Japanese culture.

Torrential rain seems to compound the impenetrability of the place: "Un vilain temps pour mettre pied à terre une première fois... Comment aller chercher épouse, sous ce déluge, dans un pays inconnu!... Nature is not cooperating with his plans—he encounters obstacles to his management of the exterior world. Japan's landscape is not only generally hostile, heavy, confused and opaque, but is specifically interfering now with Loti's plans. He is now disoriented, forgetting what country he is in: he describes himself as "oubliant tout à fait dans quel pays je suis." He writes: "il me serait impossible de dire où je suis, dans quelle direction nous avons couru; je m'abandonne à mon djin et au hasard." He abandons himself now to his djin, or driver, when he first disembarks and begins his time on land. First the objective observer

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260 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 48.
261 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 50.
262 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 54.
263 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 57.
264 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 58.
analyzing a new landscape, Loti now loses that form of control. We are back to the original characterization of Japan as not only intimidating and mysterious, but actively repelling the newcomer.

The ambivalence of Loti's relationship with Japan as a landscape is echoed in his relationship to the Japanese language. It too, resists being known though translation. At the same time, though, using Japanese words directly, even without being fluent, has the effect of making Loti feel he is connecting more directly with the culture.

The idea of a Japan resistant to understanding, yet also inviting, manifests itself in Loti's sense of the impossibility of translating from one language into another, although insofar as he understands certain words, he has direct access into the culture. He often remarks upon the untranslatable quality of his Japanese experience: "Non, tout cela ne se dessine pas, ne s'exprime pas, demeure intraduisible et insaisissable." More specifically, he considers at one point the Japanese word *mousmé*, which is "un mot qui signifie jeune fille ou très jeune femme. C'est un des plus jolis de la langue nipponne; il semble qu'il y ait, dans ce mot, de la *moue* (de la petite moue gentille et drôle comme elles en font) et surtout de la frimousse (de la frimousse chiffonnée comme est la leur). Je l'emploierai souvent, n'en connaissant aucun en français qui le vaille."

The word is beautiful, and the morpheme "mou" suggests two culture-specific meanings, and he will use it often while speaking in French, to affirm the truth and accuracy of this Japanese word's meaning, and his own insider status in relation to the culture.

Similarly, he decides to use the Japanese word for the guitar-like instrument often played, because he finds no equivalent in French and wants to capture the exactness of what he is referring to: "Jusqu'à présent j'avais toujours écrit sa *guitare* pour éviter ces termes exotiques.

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dont on m'a reproché l'abus. Mais ni le mot guitare ni le mot mandoline ne désignent bien cet instrument mince avec un si long manche, dont les notes hautes sont plus mièvres que la voix des sauterelles;—à partir de maintenant, j'écrirai chamécen.  

He suggests a growing freedom and comfort with the language, since he is now deciding to use the Japanese word, and to worry less about linguistic errors in the past (he mentions having used "ces termes exotiques dont on m'a reproché l'abus"). He also mentions that he sometimes calls his mousmé by her real name, "Kihou, Kihou-San," which he believes suits her better than the French translation "Chrysanthème," which captures the meaning but not "la bizarre euphonié."

Loti is thus aware of the inadequacy of translation. He is uncomfortable with inaccurate translations of the Japanese words for "young girl," "guitar," and of Chrysanthème's name in Japanese. The French terms cannot convey the precision of the Japanese word, he can find no equivalent in French, and so chooses to use the Japanese word.

Being in Japan and surrounded by the Japanese language makes him view the French language as particularly limited, at least for expressing what life is like in Japan: "Pour raconter fidèlement ces soirées-là, il faudrait un langage plus maniéré que le nôtre; il faudrait aussi un signe graphique inventé exprès, que l'on mettrait au hasard parmi les mots, et qui indiquerait au lecteur le moment de pousser un éclat de rire,—un peu forcé, mais cependant frais et gracieux..." In order to convey what he is experiencing in Japan, he thinks, French would require a new symbol, inserted randomly, in between words, indicating a pause for a burst of laughter, which seems to be more a part of language in Japan than in France. Laughter seems to be an official part of speech, like another letter in the alphabet, or another tone. His confrontation

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267 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 203.
268 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, pp. 203-204.
269 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 99.
with the alterity of the Japanese language inspires him with an idea for changing the French language, improving it, at least insofar as expressing things Japanese is concerned.

Of course, there is another problem, neither the problem of translation nor the problem of the French language's limits. There is the problem of Loti's own limited knowledge of Japanese. Language is limited because of the difficulty of translating the cultural specificity of words, but also because of an individual's insufficient command of the language: "Nous sommes là, nous, très dépaysés dans cette fête, regardant, riant puisqu'il faut rire; disant des choses obscures et niaises, dans une langue insuffisamment apprise."270 When Loti occasionally does make himself understood, which means he is, in fact, connecting with the Japanese language and people, he is surprised. He is uncertain at one point about being understood by a Japanese driver when he gives him directions on the way to a maison de thé: "Au Jardin-des-Fleurs,' ai-je dit comme un habitué, surpris moi-même de m'entendre."271 He continues to muse on the communication that is possible, even when he does not know the language well: "C'est incroyable que cela signifie quelque chose, ces mots baroques, ces phrases que j'ai apprises [...] sans conviction aucune."272 Loti is amazed that the words make sense, that he is able to communicate.

Ultimately, Loti finds ways of circumventing the communication obstacles he encounters. He chooses to embrace Japanese words for their specificity instead of using poor French translations. He is aware of how a language contains only one culture, and would need to change in order to express another culture. He also learns Japanese to some degree, though his command is not perfect. Loti dwells upon obstacles to knowing Japan, and yet he also ends up finding find ways of circumventing them. He does this for his relationship to the landscape as well as for his

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270 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, pp. 150-151.
271 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 56.
272 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 60.
relationship to the language. Just as Japan itself is mostly foreboding, but occasionally inviting, so the theme of linguistic impenetrability is sometimes counteracted by a sense of being able to communicate in the language.

The ambivalence of Loti's relationship with Japan, both in terms of landscape and language, also characterizes his relationship to the 18-year-old Japanese woman he decides to "marry" temporarily. She is nicknamed Chrysanthème by Loti. He does this in order to experience Japanese culture and thus render his time stationed in Nagasaki less boring.

Loti first confides to his friend and fellow marine Yves at the beginning of the novel that he intends to marry a Japanese woman: "Moi, disais-je, aussitôt arrivé, je me marie..." The plan then solidifies in his mind: "Mais c'était réellement bien arrêté dans ma tête, ce plan d'existence que je lui exposais là. Par ennui, mon Dieu, par solitude, j'en étais venu peu à peu à imaginer et à désirer ce mariage." Loti imagines his marriage as a kind of alleviation of boredom and loneliness, resonating with des Esseintes' longing for a refuge from society. Loti seeks respite from the monotony of being on the water (not as threatening as what des Esseintes is escaping from) when he expresses his desire thus: "vivre un peu à terre, en un recoin ombreux, parmi les arbres et les fleurs."

The exploit is presented as a common, though not universal, diversion for foreign sailors. The narrator notes: "Ils sont quatre à présent, quatre officiers de mon bord, mariés comme moi et habitant, un peu moins haut, dans le même faubourg. C'est même une aventure très commune.

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273 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 45.
274 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 46.
275 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 46.
Cela s’est fait sans dangers, sans difficultés, sans mystères, par l’entremise du même Kangourou,\textsuperscript{276} the latter name referring to the go-between who arranges the marriages.

Loti’s relationship with Chrysanthème is one of a spectator at a zoo. He spends time in her presence, observes her behavior. But he cannot communicate very well with her, and does not have any sort of intimate connection with her. Their only moment of physical contact is when Chrysanthème demonstrates the meaning of "mousquito bite" in Japanese by pinching him and grimacing in Chapter 34. There is, in addition, a telling reference to the couple he and she do not form, when he observes another couple with this remark: "c'est le couple amoureux et inséparable; les seuls qui vont pleurer peut-être quand l'heure du départ viendra."\textsuperscript{277} He and Chrysanthème, though they too will separate, will not experience any drama—strong emotion, manifest in tears—when they part ways. His relationship does not involve passion or emotional entanglement requiring unraveling. The lack of drama in their relationship is a major theme that Loti draws the reader's attention to.

Instead, Loti’s "marriage" with Chrysanthème expresses his detachment from people. Loti expresses detached interest on nearly every page of the text. He often expresses uncertainty about his project of marrying this woman, wondering at one point, "Quelle idée m'a pris, de m'installer dans tout cet inconnu qui sent l'isolement et la tristesse?"\textsuperscript{278} His loneliness made him seek out Chrysanthème (before he selects Chrysanthème, he is unhappy and lonely: "Non, je ne me trouve pas du tout chez moi, dans ce gîte étrange; j'y éprouve des impressions de

\textsuperscript{276} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{277} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{278} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 69.
dépaysement extrême et de solitude; rien que la perspective d'y passer la nuit me serre le cœur..."279), and yet the loneliness persists and prevents him from ever feeling at ease.

Vercier notes that in comparison with Islam or Tahiti, the Japan of Madame Chrysanthème evokes no desire for the other, and no desire to become the other280: "Ne désirant pas, Loti reste à l'extérieur."281

Loti often combines ridicule and mockery with his detachment, as in this comment: "il me semble m'être fiancé pour rire, chez des marionnettes..."282 While the comparison between the Japanese and marionnettes is the most jarring detail here, he is not only dismissive of them, but also of his own actions. The Japanese people he is living among may be like animated dolls, with no agency of their own, but he also suggests his own decision to "marry" a Japanese woman was based on a whim, and does not carry much meaning either. He does not seem to be some with much more agency than the people he is criticizing. His ridicule and mockery hit their target, but then also seem to turn backward on himself. Both they, and he, are frivolous, in his view.

Defining the self is no longer a matter of "pick a category, pick a color," as in A Rebours, but of dealing with indecision about identity. He detaches from people while still interacting with them, which produces more awkwardness than in the case of des Esseintes, who is no longer in contact with people.

279 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 70.
282 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 77.
Collecting Japan, Japanese Collecting

Loti's ambiguous relationship to Japan is accentuated through the theme of collecting. Just as there is anxiety around the theme of intercultural difference, there is much anxiety around collecting. Loti's collecting distinctly involves other people and substantial, real travels (different from the imaginary or truncated travels of des Esseintes), as if to make explicit the anxiety-producing role of others in the solitary collector's collecting projects.

In *Madame Chrysanthème*, Japanese biblelots are often mentioned ("écrans," "éventails," "gravures," "laques," "lavis" are some of the common ones). In the scene referenced above of entering the bay of Nagasaki, Loti is disappointed upon observing a passing liner full of objects he has already seen elsewhere: "ce fut une déception pour nos yeux [...] des paquebots comme ailleurs [...] [des] choses banales déjà vues partout, rien n'y manquait." Loti has already seen it all: the liner, the objects, nothing is missing. He then comments (in a passage we already quoted above): "Il viendra un temps où la terre sera bien ennuyeuse à habiter, quand on l'aura rendue pareille d'un bout à l'autre, et qu'on ne pourra même plus essayer de voyager pour se distraire un peu..." This theme arises later when he laments the erosion of differences between all countries: "tous les pays de la terre arrivent à se ressembler."

This phenomenon is an undesirable consequence of trade between East and West, which Loti evokes when he refers to "contact with Western novelties": "mais il me semble que je ne l'avais jamais vu aussi clairement qu'aujourd'hui [ce pays]. [...] j'ai conscience de son antiquité antédiluvienne; de sa momification de tant de siècles—qui va bientôt finir dans le grotesque et la

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bouffonnerie pitoyable, au contact des nouveautés d'occident." Loti perceives clearly in all its antiquity, will soon be corrupted by a "pitiful buffoonery" caused by contact with Europe's latest fads, the consequence of the 19th-century combination of industrialization, mass production, and commercialization.

Loti's comments must be further situated in the context of the revolutionary flood of Japanese objects into French society in the second half of the 19th century.

In 1856, three years after the revival of trade relations between France and Japan in 1853, Paris engraver Félix Bracquemond opened a crate of ceramics from the Far East wrapped in prints by the Japanese artist Hokusai. Japanese prints arrived officially—not in the form of packaging materials, but as the main object of interest—in Paris four years later in 1860.

While Hokusai was famous in Japan, where his prints were well known, widely accessible and commercialized, these images were completely new in France. They sparked a new aesthetic, overhauling Western aesthetic traditions, as Jan Hokenson showed in her 2004 book on the subject, *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics: French literature, 1867-2000*. The *japoniste* aesthetic, and consequent East-West aesthetic exchange, influenced Monet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse, as well as Baudelaire, Verlaine, the Goncourts, Zola and Mallarmé. French *japoniste* writers and artists had, in Japanese art, "encountered what seemed a non-symbolic aesthetic that did not mean," featuring flatness, irregularity, asymmetry, use of blank white space, simplicity (use of unpolished wood and stone instead of layered paint), and incompletion as is a sign of growth potential, openness for further development ("That which is

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290 Hokenson, *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics*, p. 27.
291 Hokenson, *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics*, p. 27.
perfectly centered or symmetrical is considered 'dead,' so the uneven surface or the lopsided form is preferred to predictive regularity.\textsuperscript{292} Japonisme participated in the modernization of Western art by "moving literature out of Balzacian typologies and into modernist configurations of language,"\textsuperscript{293} and involving a deep critique of Western aesthetics, and their roots in neo-classical assumptions of symmetry, order, unity and imitation.\textsuperscript{294} Japonisme did not imply, simply, a subordination of the "exotic" to a "superior" French culture.

In 1867, Paris became the first European city to display Japanese art on a grand scale\textsuperscript{295} when the universal exhibition of 1867 promoted the new aesthetic, featuring japonaiseries such as Japanese costumes, antiques, prints and drawings.

In October, 1868, the Goncourt claimed the status of being the first Frenchmen to discern the aesthetic value of Japanese art, and thus to pioneer the aesthetic in France. They wrote in their Journal: "Le goût de la chinoiserie, de la japonaiserie! Ce goût, nous l'avons eu des premiers. Ce goût aujourd'hui envahissant [...] qui plus que nous l'a propagé, l'a senti, l'a prêché, y a converti les autres? Qui s'est passionné pour les premiers albums, a eu le courage d'en acheter?"\textsuperscript{296}

In 1871, Emile Guimet, founder of the Musée Guimet, as well as Henri Cernuschi, whose collection from his Far East travels now constitutes the Musée Cernuschi, both visited Japan. In May 1872, Philippe Burty coined the word "japonisme" in an article in La Renaissance artistique et littéraire.\textsuperscript{297} Edmond de Goncourt's Maison d'un artiste (1881) describes many japonaiseries. The universal exhibitions of 1889 and 1900 highlighted Japan. In 1892, Japanese

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{292} Hokenson, Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{293} Hokenson, Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{294} Hokenson, Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{295} Hokenson, Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{297} Hokenson, Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics, p. 22.
\end{footnotes}
works were added to the Louvre's collections. In 1896, Edmond de Goncourt wrote the first monograph of Hokusai.

Loti went to the source of the new objects attracting so much attention commercially in France. In France, in 1887, Loti writes a story that actually takes place in Japan.

On land, Loti reacts to his new surroundings by subordinating them to images of Japan he has already seen in France, on vases and fans circulating commercially, due in large part to the re-opening of trade between France and Japan earlier in the century. Instead of a confrontation of the two cultures, and despite his lamenting the imminent contamination of Japan by the West, Loti allows the real Japan to conform to its exported images, found on Japanese bibelots in the West: "Oh! Le singulier Japon [...] tout cela que j'avais vu peint sur les fonds bien bleus ou bien roses des écrans et des potiches." The ironic epithet "singulier" draws our attention, by contrast, to the idea of repetition and imitation that seem to be the more accurate qualities defining Loti's conception of Japan. Japan is repeating, imitating, the images he has already seen of it on japonaiseries in France, such as screens and vases. There is nothing "singular" about them. The country conforms to its image, in Loti's eyes; his encounter with Japan's image preceded his encounter with Japan itself. Collecting japonaiseries—a major part of the collecting mania of the 1880s in France—means becoming disoriented as to which precedes the other: the original or the image.

Is Loti being sincere when he uses the word "singulier" ("Oh! Le singulier Japon [...] tout cela que j'avais vu peint sur les fonds bien bleus ou bien roses des écrans et des potiches.")? Unlike most French collectors of japonaiseries, Loti is encountering Japan itself, not its image printed on a vase or screen. However, the ambiguity of his use of the word "singulier" here

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suggests the difficulty of the attempt to see the country as "singulier," one-of-a-kind. Loti is lamenting the fact that the possibility for encountering the "original" Japan (before the explosion of japonaiseries in France) has been lost because of all the Japanese objects circulating in French society and conditioning French eyes to see the image instead of the reality of Japan. The fashion of collecting japonaiseries in France generates a false sense of knowledge about the country and culture those objects came from. Loti, who is actually traveling to the foreign country to see it first-hand, knows that he does not know. His first impression was the impression of Japan based on having already seen Japanese objects in France. Perhaps the image of Japan is "le singulier Japon," perhaps not. Loti poses this uncertainty.

Later, without resolving the uncertainty about whether Loti has encountered the real Japan or not, exposure to japonaiseries in France is developed as a particular kind of knowledge, through the use of two different verbs, in addition to the verb "see." In the following passage, instead of the verb "voir" (meaning to see, and appearing in the quotation we just cited in the paragraph above: "tout cela que j'avais vu peint"), Loti uses the verb "connaître" (to know). He has not only already seen this country before, but he already knows it: "A ce moment, j'ai une impression de Japon assez charmante; je me sens entré en plein dans ce petit monde imaginé, artificiel, que je connaissais déjà par les peintures des laques et des porcelains."\footnote{Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysantheme}, p. 63.} At this moment, he says, he experiences a sense of Japan's charm; he feels he has fully entered the little imaginary, artificial world that Japan is, a world that he already knew from designs on vases and porcelaine.

In another passage which repeats the idea of having already seen this Japan, Loti introduces the verb "deviner," so that not only has he already seen Japan, and known Japan, but
has even already guessed it. The verb "guess" implies, here, a deeper level of knowing: "ces musiciennes que j'avais vues jadis peintes en couleurs bizarres sur papier de riz [...] Je l'avais deviné, ce Japon-là, bien longtemps avant d'y venir." Loti suggests that he posessed the power of making Japan come into existence—at least the power of making his idea of Japan come into existence—long before he actually reached it. He, like all writers, and like all colonialists, is adept at creating things, places and people in his mind. He is aware of the difficulty of making contact with the real Japan, at the same time that he affirms his own powers of invention.

The same juxtaposition of his preconceptions with a reality that conforms to them occurs during his search for a Japanese woman to marry. Upon being presented with a possible "wife," Loti exclaims, "Ah! mon Dieu, mais je la connaissais déjà! Bien avant de venir au Japon, je l'avais vue, sur tous les éventails, au fond de toutes les tasses à thé—avec son air bébête, son minois bouffî [...]." She resembles the many images of women that have decorated paintings on porcelaine or silk in France: "Cette petite Chrysanthème... comme silhouette, tout le monde a vu cela partout. Quiconque a regardé une de ces peintures sur porcelaine ou sur soie, qui encombrent nos bazars à présent, sait par cœur cette jolie coiffure [...], cette taille [...], cette ceinture nouée derrière en un pouf énorme, ces manches larges [...], cette robe [...] avec petite traine."

However, his familiarity with the image of Chrysanthème is countered by his realization that what decorates so many objects in France is only an image. That image does not correspond to what most Japanese women look like, according to him. He notes that this omnipresent woman depicted on paintings and bibelots does not, in fact, depict the typical Japanese woman.

300 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 64.
301 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 72.
302 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 81.
he encounters from first-hand contact with the country: "D'ailleurs, ce type de femme que les Japonais peignent de préférence sur leurs potiches est presque exceptionnel dans leur pays."\footnote{Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 81.}

Thus, he has not, in fact, already seen the women he meets in Nagasaki. He first thinks he knows, but then realizes he does not know.

The openness with which Loti expresses his subjective imaginings, explicitly distinct from the reality of a country experienced face-to-face, defies the lack of self-reflection that we associate with a colonialist perspective. He is aware of how imagination creates reality, and he shows that he is starting to realize the difference between his Japan and the French Japan.

Loti not only acknowledges differences between his preconditioned images of Japan (the French Japan) and the reality (his Japan), but also differences between Japan and the West. In our discussion of the threatening natural landscape, Loti felt a distance between himself and the new country. Later, nature is described specifically in terms that contrast it with the West: Japanese nature is artificial in comparison with the Western landscapes he is familiar with: "Toute cette nature exhubérante et fraîche portait en elle-même une étrangeté japonaise."\footnote{Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 49.}

He speaks of "l'in vraisemblance de certaines choses trop jolies."\footnote{Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 49.} The variety of landforms, rocks, hills, are "des éléments disparates de paysage" which "se trouvaient rapprochés, comme dans les sites artificiels."\footnote{Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 49.} Later in the novel he refers to "un jardin en miniature" as being unnatural: "pas naturel, mais si ingénieusement composé, si vert, avec des mousses si fraîches!..."\footnote{Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 62.}

Artificicality is presented as inherent to Japanese aesthetics, in contrast to the naturalness of Western art: when Loti paints under the eyes of three women, he notes what he perceives to be
their surprise at his style: "Jamais elles n'avaient vu dessiner d'après nature, l'art japonais étant tout de convention, et ma manière les ravit. [...] ces trois Japonaises sont émerveillées de l'air réel de mon croquis."\textsuperscript{308} He thinks they have never seen someone draw from life, since Japanese art is a matter of convention, of artifice. The world Loti is in is "artificial" Japan; the world exterior to him is the "natural" West. 

Japan's foreboding, threatening impenetrability is counterbalanced by a familiarity with Japan: the familiarity that derives from the Japan Loti has already encountered on Japanese objects in France, and also the familiarity that derives from the superior knowledge he has of Japan, in comparison with his fellow Frenchmen back home. However, the "real" Japan still remains elusive. Associating Japan with artifice, and the West with nature, has the effect of perpetuating the mystery surrounding Japan. Loti remains in search of the real Japan—neither image nor reality seem to be it.

Collecting bibelots is not only an extension or echo of Western collecting. It also has its particularities in Japan, thus is difference from Western collecting. Collecting bibelots is, Loti claims, very Japanese: "La recherche de bibelots est, je crois, la plus grande distraction de ce pays japonais. Dans les petites boutiques des antiquaires, on s'assied sur des nattes pour prendre une tasse de thé avec les marchands; puis on fouille soi-même dans des armoires, dans des coffres, où sont entassées des vieilleries bien extravagantes."\textsuperscript{309}

The Japanese style of collecting is very different from Western collecting. It involves hiding bibelots: "Quelle bizarrerie dans le goût de ce peuple! S'appliquer à une œuvre en miniature, la cacher au fond d'un trou à mettre le pouce qui semble n'être qu'une tache au milieu d'un grand châssis blanc; accumuler tant de patient travail dans des accessoires imperceptibles,—

\textsuperscript{308} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, pp. 212-213.
\textsuperscript{309} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 181.
et tout cela pour arriver à produire un effet d'ensemble nul, un effet de nudité complète...

Hiding objects, not displaying them, and an aesthetic of sparsity—"nudity"—, not overflowing abundance, is Japanese. The hidden object is doubly hidden: hidden in the drawer, but also hidden in a piece of furniture that, itself, almost hides the fact it has drawers.

Loti elaborates on hidden objects when describing the emptiness of his "mother-in-law's" interior (he knows this phenomenon from cultural experience): there are "à peine deux ou trois petits paravents posés çà et là,—une théière, un vase où trempent des lotus; rien de plus. Des boiseries sans aucune peinture ni vernis [...] Il y a partout des petites cachettes, des petites niches, des petits placards, dissimulés de la manière la plus ingénieuse et la plus inattendue sous l'uniformité immaculée des panneaux de papier blanc." Loti is fascinated by the paucity of screens, by the presence of just one teapot and just one vase of lotus flowers, by the abundance of places to hide objects: little niches, little closets, little drawers, amidst an immaculate background of white paper panels.

Later, Loti describes a monks' house as "le comble de la simplicité cherchée, de l'élégance faite avec du néant, de la propreté immaculée et invraisemblable. [paragraph break] Et tandis que qu'on est là, cheminant à la suite de ces bonzes, dans ces enfilades de salles désertes, on se dit qu'il y a beaucoup trop de bibelots chez nous en France; on prend en grippe soudaine la profusion, l'encombrement."

The starkness of the empty Japanese house Loti enters upon his arrival in Nagasaki, called the Jardin-des-Fleurs (a maison de thé) also exemplifies this self-effacing style of collecting so different from French collecting. He writes: "Ce qui frappe dès l'abord, dans ces

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310 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 70.
311 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 157.
312 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, pp. 172-173.
intérieurs japonais, c'est la propreté minutieuse, et la nudité blanche, glaciale.\textsuperscript{313} Loti is led into an upper room where there is "absolument rien," minimal decor.\textsuperscript{314} (Twelve years later, in 1899, Loti will choose a spartan bedroom for his Rochefort house.\textsuperscript{315})

He elaborates on French attempts to imitate Japanese decor, and judges them as unsuccessful, because they are not accurate: "Je souris en moi-même au souvenir de certains salons dits japonais encombrés de bibelots et tendus de grossières broderies d'or sur satin d'exportation, que j'ai vus chez les belles Parisiennes."\textsuperscript{316} Smiling to himself suggests that he thinks he knows the truth, because he has been to Japan to see how bibelots are collected and displayed there. He has some advice, as if demonstrating he is aware of being read by a French public: "Je leur conseille, à ces personnes, de venir regarder comment sont ici les maisons des gens de goût,—de venir visiter les solitudes blanches des palais de Yeddo."\textsuperscript{317} Come see for yourself, he says, how emptiness is what is tasteful in Japan. Objects are meant not to be enjoyed but to be labeled and stored away: "En France, on a des objets d'art pour en jouir; ici, pour les enfermer, bien étiquetés, dans une sorte d'appartement mystérieux, souterrain, grillé en fer, qu'on appelle godoun. En de rares occasions seulement, pour faire honneur à quelque visiteur de distinction, on ouvre ce lieu impénétrable."\textsuperscript{318} They are only taken out as a gesture of honoring a guest. They say more about the status of the guest than about the status of the inhabitant. The result is an interior void of visible objects: "Une propreté minutieuse, excessive; des nattes blanches, du bois blanc; une simplicité apparente extrême dans l'ensemble, et une incroyable

\textsuperscript{313} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{314} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{315} Vercier, Melot and Scaon, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{316} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{317} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{318} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 157.
préciosité dans les détails infiniment petits: telle est la manière japonaise de comprendre le luxe intérieur."  

In a July 13, 1888 letter to his brother Théo, Van Gogh cited this description as proof of the correct way to view a japonaiserie, in contrast with European interiors overflowing with such objects: "Est ce que tu as lu Mme Chrysantème? Cela m’a bien donné à penser que les vrais japonais n’ont rien sur les murs. La description du cloitre ou de la pagode où il n’y a rien (les dessins, curiosités, sont cachés dans des tiroirs). Ah c’est donc comme ça qu’il faut regarder une japonaiserie—dans une piece bien claire, toute nue, ouverte sur le paysage."  

Two days later, Van Gogh wrote again to his brother: "Le livre de Loti, Mme Chrysantème, m’a appris ceci: les appartements y sont nus, sans décorations & ornements."  

Hidden from view, objects, and the effects they produce when looked at, are carefully controlled. Spatial containment implies a temporal containment also, since they are removed from their drawer in order to be viewed for limited time only.  

Loti also often refers to smallness as a characteristic of elements of the Japan he is visiting, and often to describe collectible objects. Loti uses the word "petit" self-consciously, claiming that the word is imposed upon him by necessity: "J'abuse vraiment de l'adjectif petit, je m'en aperçois bien; mais comment faire?—En décrivant les choses de ce pays-ci, on est tenté de l'employer dix fois par ligne. Petit, mièvre, mignard,—le Japon physique et moral tient tout entier dans ces trois mots-là..." He admits he uses the adjective often, but says he cannot help himself: Japan can be contained in those three words: petit, mièvre, mignard ("small," "vapid," "precious"/"affected").

319 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 157.  
320 Original manuscript, letter 639, printed in Jansen, et. al.  
321 Original manuscript, letter 642, printed in Jansen, et. al.  
322 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 182.
While the latter two words suggests distaste, Loti draws pleasure from the aesthetic quality of smallness in this description of a sunset scene of a party at his house, intermingled with a sense of possession: "Le soleil très bas, prêt à s'éteindre, entre en plein dans ma chambre, la traverse de ses grands rayons d'or rouge, illuminant les Bouddhas, les fleurs disposées en gerbes bizarres dans les vases anciens.—Elles sont là cinq ou six petites poupées, mes voisines, s'amusant à danser au son de la guitare de Chrysanthème..." A dash is all that operates the transition between observing the sun's dying rays illuminate figurines and vases, and listening to his neighbors dance. His thought jumps from actual decorative objects to women regarded as decorative objects ("cinq ou six petites poupées").

He feels a satisfying sense of possession, in taking in all of these decorative objects, inanimate and animate, a possession which eases his detachment from Japan, and makes him feel closer to the country, more in touch with it on the level of all his senses: "Et je trouve un vrai charme ce soir à penser que ce logis, cette femme qui mène la danse, tout cela est mien. J'ai été injuste, en somme, envers ce pays; [...] je perçois et je comprends mieux tout à coup cette infinité de gentilles petites choses au milieu desquelles je vis, la grâce frêle et très cherchée des formes, la bizarrerie des dessins, le choix raffiné des couleurs." He evokes the pleasure of being surrounded by an abundance of small things, including the five or six "petites poupées" dancing to Chrysanthème's guitare music, while the festive scene is illuminated by the rays of the setting sun. This pleasure is accompanied by a sense of a renewed interest in Japan. Detachment gives way here to pleasure and mild interest, and a sense of "living among" the "nice, small things."

323 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, pp. 201-202.  
324 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, pp. 201-202.
Roland Barthes comments on the theme of the smallness of objects in *Madame Chrysanthème*: "Si les bouquets, les objets, les arbres, les visages, les jardins et les textes, si les choses et les manières japonaises nous paraissent petites [...] ce n'est pas en raison de leur taille, c'est parce que tout objet, tout geste, même le plus libre, le plus mobile, paraît encadré." They also seem small because he feels that he possesses them; it is Loti's possessive gaze that frames them.

Collecting becomes invested with the power to explore intercultural issues. Commerce between countries—and the different ways objects are viewed and collected in each, is the issue Loti is interested in. He confronts commercialization, and its threats to identity, in terms of cultural confusion. For des Esseintes, commerce threatened not his cultural identity but the exploration of his self.

**A Third Way: Loti's Floating Collections**

We are presented with themes of inauthentic collecting, authentic collecting, and a third way: Loti's original collecting. He will neither collect like a French person nor like the Japanese. He collects in the in-between space, neither home nor abroad—his ship-cabin.

Loti's growing collection of Japanese objects, in an upper room of the house he is occupying in Nagasaki, contains "plusieurs lampes, de forme religieuse, qui descendent du plafond; beaucoup d'escabeaux et beaucoup de vases; des dieux et des déesses autant que dans une pagode"—lamps in a religious form, hanging from the ceiling, many ladders and vases, gods and goddesses, as many as in a pagoda. This collection is not typically Japanese: "ce que j'achète s'amonceille là-haut, dans ma maisonette de bois et de papier; —elle était bien plus

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japonaise pourtant, dans sa nudité première, telle que M. Sucre et madame Prune l'avaient conçue. The room in which he is storing his accumulated objects from Japan is not typically Japanese because it is now being filled with his objects, instead of being left in its "nudité première," ostensibly empty (with objects hidden, always), as the owners of the house had intended it to be.

Then, Loti's ship-cabin collection seems to be an authentic Japanese collection. In his ship-cabin, he creates a false Japanese place of worship—false because he is not, himself, a practitioner of their religion. This collection is an outsider's imitation of the foreign culture's places of worship. This issue is emphasized by the fact that he has transformed his cabin into a Japanese shrine so accurately that it deceives his landlord, madame Prune, leading her to start praying: "Il y a même un petit autel shintoïste, devant lequel madame Prune n'a pu se tenir de tomber en prières et de chanter, avec son tremblement de vieille chèvre: 'Lavez-moi très blanchement de mes péchés, ô Ama-Térace-Omi-Kami, comme on lave des choses impures dans la rivière de Kamo..." She stops to pray at an altar that he, an outsider, has created, as a souvenir for himself, but which appears Japanese enough to suit a Japanese person. Loti's collecting here is both authentic and inauthentic.

The shrine we have just described, a floating collection/museum, resonates with the very first description of a collection of Japanese objects, at the very beginning of the book when Loti's ship is still entering the bay of Nagasaki. In that passage, Loti observes a boat deck filled with heterogeneous things, from containers—"des petits paniers, des petites caisses, des récipients de toutes les formes"—to the objects inside them: "des paravents, des souliers, du savon, des lanternes; des boutons de manchettes, des cigales en vie chantant dans des petites cages; de la

327 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 182.
328 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 182.
The range of objects is striking, encompassing more decorative objects such as the screens, lanterns, vases/puppets and porcelain; items for dressing and washing the body (shoes, cuff links, jewelry, soap); and edible, living and entertaining things (soup, singing crickets in cages, obscene photographs). Yet the range of objects does not have meaning, in the sense that no one, no collector, has assembled these objects in particular to create an environment or decor around himself. These objects will soon be disseminated, in commerce. He describes the scene in commercial terms, as "ressemblant tout à coup à un immense bazar."

However, this display has qualities similar to purposeful, intentional collections, at least in the eyes of Loti, who is observing it as his ship sails past. All of it is unwrapped, spread out on the deck, not completely chaotically, but a modicum of artful arrangement: "tout cela, déballé, étalé par terre avec [...] un certain art d'arrangement."

At the same time, everything is spread out, in Loti's eyes, as if due to a grand opening of boxes, each one opening from within another: the baskets, cases and recipients are "inventés de la manière la plus ingénieuse pour s'emboîter, pour se contenir les uns les autres et puis se multiplier ensuite jusqu'à l'encombrement, jusqu'à l'infini; il en sortait des choses inattendues, inimaginables [...]." Loti's description is fascinating for the way it combines closure with a pouring out motion. He sees, simultaneously, boxes fitting one inside the other, and those same boxes opening out one from the other.

In light of this initial description of a collection of commercial objects, that arises at the beginning of the book, the later evocation of Loti's ship-cabin collection acquires an added

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dimension. It, too, is a floating collection, and a real one, because it represents Loti's intentional, deliberate arrangement, and not just the arrangement that he read into that first commercial collection.

As he is definitively sailing away from Japan, at the end of the book, Loti tosses wilting lotus flowers into the sea. This lotus-flower bouquet is a collection because lotus-flower bouquets ("grandes fleurs sacrées"\textsuperscript{333}) have been established as types of collections previously in this book. Loti has referred to Chrysanthème's habit of composing bouquets, and has commented on how she does so: "Quelle forme à part ils ont toujours, ces bouquets arrangés par Chrysanthème: quelque chose de difficile à définir, une sveltesse japonaise, une grâce apprêtée que nous ne saurions pas leur donner."\textsuperscript{334} They intrigue him by their mystery, like Chrysanthème herself. Their vague strangeness is accompanied by a more specific quality: their Japanese-ness (Japanese "sveltesse," and an affected grace that is decidedly not French ("une grâce apprêtée que nous ne saurions pas leur donner")). Loti strives for a flower he can compare these flowers to. He thinks of waterlilies in bloom: the flowers resemble "de très larges nénufars lorsqu'elles sont épanouies [...]."\textsuperscript{335} They are so different from the cauliflower-like bunches created by French florists: "Je les regarde et je songe avec quelque ironie à ces gros paquets ronds en forme de chou-fleur, que font nos bouquetières en France, avec entourage de dentelle ou de papier blanc..."\textsuperscript{336} Japanese bouquets spread outwards, in direct contrast with the idea of "entourage" of the wrapped, Western bouquet, as evoked by the way the Japanese flowers are like waterlilies in bloom, and the way that they exude an odor, and the way that odor expresses all of Japan, in Loti's mind at least. They remain foreign, possessing an "indéfinissable odeur de mousmés, de

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{334} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 108.
\textsuperscript{336} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, pp. 202-203.
\end{flushright}
race jaune, de Japon, qui est toujours et partout dans l'air." He steps forward, towards understanding the other culture, then retreats. At the same time, he is very much implicated in these foreign flowers. He is referring on a symbolic level to himself (lotus=Loti).

Against this image of the unrestricted Japanese bouquet, the end of the book presents a bouquet image signifying containment. As Loti definitively leaves the port of Nagasaki, he compares his view of the city to a bouquet: "Et tout ce Japon finit en rochers pittoresques, en îlots bizarres sur lesquels des arbres s'arrangent en bouquets,—d'une manière un peu précieuse peut-être, mais tout à fait jolie..." Here, the comparison between trees and bouquets, the same image solicited at the very beginning of the book when he first entered the bay of Nagasaki (Loti smelled "parfums de fleur" in the air, and sees bouquets in the landscape: "Des arbres s'arrangeaient en bouquets") participates in an act of closure or conclusion. He is leaving Japan behind him, and in doing so, feels that Japan itself is "ending" in the form of picturesque rocks and strange islands on which trees arrange themselves in bouquets. The fact that he is leaving Japan causes him to view the landscape as if it were wrapping itself up, packaging itself up, behind him. Japan exists only in his mind, perhaps, since it seems to fade along with his departure.

He had taken these flowers as a souvenir of Japan, and yet, because they are now fading and "pitiful," he throws them away: "à présent ils sont finis, pitoyables, semant sur mon tapis leurs pétales roses." Although collecting old, dusty flowers as souvenirs of the lands he has visited has been a habit, he decides to throw these particular ones away: "Moi qui ai conservé

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337 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, pp. 202-203.
338 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 230.
339 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 48.
340 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 49.
341 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 231.
tant de fleurs fanées, tombées en poussière, que j'avais prises, ça et là, au moment des départs, dans différents lieux du monde; moi qui en ai tant conservé que cela tourne à l'herbier, à la collection incohérente et ridicule,—j'ai beau faire, non, je ne tiens point à ces lotus, bien qu'ils soient les derniers souvenirs vivants de mon été à Nagasaki."\(^3^{42}\) He no longer is attached to them—"je ne me tiens point à ces lotus"—even though they are the last "living" souvenirs of his summer in Nagasaki. He is not throwing away a bouquet of chrysanthemums, the flower his character is named after, but lotuses, the flower he is named after. Loti named himself after lotus flowers (he nicknamed his original character Loti, and then took on this name himself). Tossing the lotus flowers away means not only tossing Japan away but tossing himself away. He is bound to Japan through an act of effacement, as if burying himself together with Japan.

The tension between Loti's partial assimilation to—least skillful imitation of—Japanese habits—and his detachment from Japan is reinforced in an intriguing way by a prayer he utters in the very last lines of the book. This prayer is the same one that madame Prune said when she was in his floating replica of a Japanese shrine. Loti apparently memorized it, because now, at the end of the story, he pronounces it. As the author of the story, he chooses to close his story with this prayer. It is the following: "Lavez-moi très blanchement de mes péchés, ô Ama-Térace-Omi-Kami, comme on lave des choses impures dans la rivière de Kamo..."\(^3^{43}\) Repeated by Loti in the context of his departure, the words mean that he is dismissing Japan and his experience there: "Wash me very whitely of my sins, O Ama-Térace-Omi-Kami, as one washes impure things form the River Kamo." Loti is washing his hands of Japan. He takes madame Prune's words, which, by their metonymical relationship to his cabin collection-shrine, evoke his skill at

\(^{342}\) Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 231.

imitation, and then uses them to distance himself from Japan. It was just a game for him, an exercise.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the archetypal traveler Odysseus' sailors are shipwrecked onto the island of the lotus eaters, an episode that resonates because of the connection to Loti’s name, but also for another reason. If those sailors actually stayed on the island of the lotus eaters, they would no longer remember anything. That is what happens on that island: you experience forgetfulness. Ironically, moving onward and leaving the island behind them (leaving the past behind) is what they have to do in order to continue living normally, as people who remember. Like Homer's sailors who linger with the lotus eaters, Loti may be choosing to forget. But on the other hand, he may be forging onward, to remember, but must leave the past behind in order to remember.

Towards the end of the novel, Loti refers to last-minute errands and purchases of Japanese objects: "C'est inouï ce qu'il me reste à faire, ce dernier jour, de courses en djin chez des marchands de bibelots, des fournisseurs, des emballeurs." He emphasizes the quantity of objects he is taking away with him by exclaiming, "Mais quel effrayant bagage! Dix-huit caisses ou paquets, de bouddhas, de chimères, de vases,—sans compter les derniers lotus que j'emporte aussi, liés en gerbe rose."

Loti collects differently from the Japanese, he collects like them.... Is he now a mere tourist buying trinkets on his way out? Can he buy Japan, just like the other Europeans and French people he felt different from? As Vercier wonders: "Etait-ce donc cela la découverte du 'vrai' Japon: courir les antiquaires et les brocanteurs? La passion du bibelot, la manie du

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bouddha, rend-elle aveugle à l’âme de ce peuple si radicalement différent? Fallait-il, puisque les êtres vous échappent, se contenter des objets?”

He is taking them away because he will be able to make them his own back in France, in his house, and not have to deal with either French japonaiseries in France, nor Japanese objects in Japan—annoying reminders of Japan's inscrutability. That will be the third way—his way of understanding his travels, his stay in Japan, and himself. That will be his way of possessing. In the meantime, the theme of floating collections emphasizes his third way, in between two other ways of collecting (French and Japanese), and literally in between cultures because he is sailing in the space between them, on the sea.

The tattoo he procures at the end of the novel resonates with this idea of a third way in between the inauthenticity of (some) japonaiseries in France and the authenticity of objects bought in Japan: "A la suite de mes fréquentations avec des êtres primitifs, en Océanie et ailleurs, j’ai pris le goût déplorable des tatouages; aussi ai-je désiré emporter comme curiosité, comme bibelot, un spécimen du travail des tatoueurs japonais, qui ont une finesse de touche sans égale." This shows how much he desires to incorporate Japan into himself in a way that exceeds mere accumulation of objects. The tattoo (the image, however, is not specified) is a bibelot, but one that is inseparable from himself; it is a corporeal bibelot. Ironically, tattooing is done best in the country from which he remains most detached. Thus, he becomes very well attached to the country from which is he so detached.

He will become a "living" souvenir, thanks to his tattoo, but also due to the collection he will create. That collection will be the ultimate act of combining forgetting and remembering, as it reconstitutes his travels within the confines of one house.

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347 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, pp. 221-222.
Becoming a Woman Bibelot

Huysmans banished women from his narrative about a collection, implicitly recalling Edmond de Goncourt's fantasy of a home without women at the beginning of his collection catalog, *La Maison d'un artiste*, published three years before. In Loti, women return to the narrative as bibelots. In both Huysmans and Loti, creating a collection means carefully controlling desire; desire never carries the story away. In Loti, that control is even more apparent by the way women are not rejected but reincorporated into the story in diminished, anodyne, bibelotized form.

Women are compared to bibelots, dolls—des "potiches drôles," and other decorative, inanimate objects very often throughout the text. They possess "[des] tenues de potiche très correctes, mains et pieds d'enfant," a phrase which characterizes them as having some capacity for movement, but as puppets ("potiche," which can also mean vase), or possibly as children ("mains et pieds d'enfant"), but not as adults. And yet he also characterizes them as adult—adult dolls: he refers to "mesdames les poupées" (lady dolls, addressing himself to them formally and respectfully with "mesdames") who are "presque mignonnes, je vous l'accorde, vous l'êtes,—à force de drôlerie, de mains délicates, de pieds en miniature; mais laides, en somme, et puis ridiculement petites, un air bibelot d'étagère [...]." Again, we are back to static fixity, objects that sit on shelves and do not move. This arc of a mental gesture repeats that of all Loti's thought: it moves hesitatingly toward something, then away from it without having ever fully looked at it head on.

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Loti mocks his own attraction toward human-bibelots, when, in referring to other women as "très mignonnes, les poupées,"\textsuperscript{350} "une petite poupée en toilette,"\textsuperscript{351} "ces petites poupées nippones,"\textsuperscript{352} he speaks of "un jouet bizarre et charmant [...] vraiment, tant qu'à épouser un bibelot, j'aurais peine à trouver mieux..."\textsuperscript{353} By referring so directly to the idea of marrying a bibelot ("épouser un bibelot"), he shows awareness of his bibelotizing regard, and of how he controls desire through making an analogy between people and collectible objects.

Loti even muses at one point on the sleeping Chrysanthème as decorative: "Quel dommage que cette petite Chrysanthème ne puisse pas toujours dormir: elle est très décorative, présentée de cette manière,—et puis, au moins, elle ne m'ennuie pas."\textsuperscript{354} With "quel dommage," Loti wishes for her to be present, but to be present in the form of being asleep, which borders on being absent. Thus, he expresses a desire for her to be partially effaced, as one is when one is asleep.

This commentary is immediately followed by a counteracting thought about all that Loti might not understand about this woman, suggesting that he may, after all, be curious about her as a person, and not only as a decorative object: "si j'avais le moyen de mieux comprendre ce qui se passe dans sa tête et dans son cœur..."\textsuperscript{355} Here, he expresses the idea of "if only I had the means of understanding what is happening in her head and heart." Then, in yet another shift of mood, detachment takes over again, as he reflects that he has lost interest in learning Japanese, since he has been living with Chrysanthème: "Mais, c'est curieux, depuis que j'habite avec elle, au lieu de

\textsuperscript{350} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{351} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{352} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 81-82.
\textsuperscript{353} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{354} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{355} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 109.
pousser plus loin l'étude de cette langue japonaise, je l'ai négligée, tant j'ai senti l'impossibilité de m'y intéresser jamais...”

Yves (Loti's sailor friend), like Loti, also views Chrysanthème as a toy ("joujou"): "Yves s'amuse de ma femme comme d'un joujou et continue de m'assurer qu'elle est charmante." However, Loti makes it clear that he is cutting short any potential role, or agency, in a developing intrigue, that Chrysanthème might play, when he excises her from a conversation with Yves: "Cette petite Chrysanthème, nous l'avions tout à fait oubliée!” Loti goes to great lengths to record his detachment from Chrysanthème.

Loti emphasizes the idea of woman as collectible object from which he detaches when he explicitly declares in the book's dedication that his book is not about Chrysanthème, even though she apparently occupies a leading role in the narrative—and the title. He writes in this dedication the following: "Bien que le rôle le plus long soit en apparence à madame Chrysanthème, il est bien certain que les trois principaux personnages sont Moi, le Japon, et l'Effet que ce pays m'a produit.” The three characters of the novel are "Me, Japan and the effect this country has had on me," and Chrysanthème does not figure among them. Chrysanthème then, strangely, after having been eliminated in this way, becomes an analogy for Loti's text when Loti compares his novel to her. He presents the novel to his duchess friend as a "bibelot," to be read with a "sourire indulgent." By referring to his book as a "bibelot," and also as a "potiche drôle," Loti emphasizes his novel as a material book, and as a collectible object.

357 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 85.
358 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 208.
359 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 43.
360 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 43.
He asks his friend, to whom he is dedicating the book, to remember a photograph of three people: his friend Yves, a Japanese woman and him, taken in Nagasaki. He reminds the duchess, to whom he is dedicating this book, "Vous avez souri quand je vous ai affirmé que cette petite personne, [...] si soigneusement peignée, avait été une de mes voisines. Veuillez recevoir mon livre avec ce même sourire indulgent, sans y chercher aucune portée morale dangereuse ou bonne,—comme vous recevriez une potiche drôle, un magot d'ivoire, un bibelot saugrenu quelconque [...]."³⁶¹ By asking the duchess to receive his book with the same indulgent smile she had for the image of Chrysanthème in a photo Loti had shown her, Loti compares his text to Chrysanthème herself. The dismissal of his own work echoes his dismissal of Chrysanthème. In that echo, his text becomes a woman-bibalot.

Chrysanthème is the foundation for the act of writing. The novel that follows incorporates her; Loti writes about her on almost every page. Chrysanthème inspires his writing. In the only passage in which Loti actually depicts himself writing, it is to the sound of Chrysanthème's and her female friends' guitar music: "Moi, le plus souvent, tandis que se fait leur musique, j'écris, sous la véranda, devant le panorama superbe."³⁶² Vercier writes that Chrysanthème is "l'épouse japonaise, rôle fonctionnel qui permet à Loti de prendre pied à terre, d'avoir une maison japonaise, de vivre à la japonaise, de découvrir ce pays—et de le raconter."³⁶³ However, this "functional role," which we can call inspiration, given that he writes to the sound of her guitar music, is then hidden.

On the level of Loti's larger production as a writer, women are collected in a similar way: they are reduced to collectible objects that can be gathered up, left behind, but then collected as

³⁶¹ Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 43.
³⁶² Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 164.
³⁶³ Vercier, Melot and Scaon, p. 6.
sources of stories for his various books—made manageable, contained, reduced, repackaged, etc. just as we discussed in the case of des Esseintes and his relationship to people earlier. Loti the author "collected" women in other ports, which inspired books: Aziyadé in *Aziyadé*, Rarahu in *Le mariage de Loti*, and Pasquala in *Fleurs d'ennui*. He mingles with a local woman, then detaches from her, and then writes about her: he collects women, in his writing.

We have seen how Loti's perpetual in-between status—like des Esseintes, he is working out his relationship to the social—between home and the foreign, destabilizes the meaning of each of those terms, home and the foreign, as well as the meaning of authenticity and inauthenticity relating to collected objects circulating between France and Japan. Loti's floating collections offer a third way, circumventing these oppositions. The floating collection, in the form of his reconstructed Japanese shrine, or in the form of the bouquet of lotus flowers he throws into the sea while leaving Japan, represents his own way of collecting. The idea of the tattoo as living bibelot, or a bibelot that is part of his body, and then the idea of the woman-bibelot that emerges from his writing, to whom/ to which Loti compares himself, then destabilize the difference between collector and collected object.
Chapter Four: Domesticating Texts

This chapter is about how the collector experiences anxiety about his relationship to texts. What place does literature have in his collection? How will he approach literature? How can he make literature approachable? What happens to his self, when confronted with literature? Is literature threatening? How can its power be defused?

I use the word "text" as a broad term to encompass several different manifestations of texts: literary criticism, the content that is read, the material form of a book and the act of writing.

At first it seems that texts are merely a major influence and source of inspiration in des Esseintes' collecting project. Des Esseintes asserts his mastery over literary criticism, then seeks to make literature material, like the other objects of his collection. However, as the novel unravels, texts become overwhelming, too much, excessive. The act of materializing literature did not suffice to control, or manage, texts. The collector cannot absorb them anymore; he encounters a clear limit to his attempt to read. Literature seems to be in control of him, since he is described as vanquished in his reading efforts. Des Esseintes must temporarily stop reading. It is his collection (of flowers) that allows him to stop reading—that distracts him from books—and thus saves him from books.

His collection, of perfumes, this time, allows him to try his hand at creating his own perfume, and this experience is elaborately compared to the process of literary creation. This cross over to the side of writing, rather than reading, is a crucial step on the path to returning to books on his own terms.
When he then returns to books, he is able to appreciate them anew. His book collection seems to bloom before his eyes (not literally, but in the sense of emerging as a bright, cherished possession). The arranging and ordering of this book collection—putting literature in its place—will be the ultimate affirmation of his return to books without feeling threatened by them.

As in Huysmans, in Loti, also, texts need to be controlled. Loti’s preoccupation is not with literature but with writing—because the protagonist Loti is not a reader, like des Esseintes, but a writer—he comments on his own writing. Loti, too, seeks a relationship with texts in which he is in control, and not the other way around. His collection offers him the possibility to be more in control of his writing.

In a post-Flaubertian literary context in which literature displays a new self-consciousness about the struggle of the act of writing, our two collectors domesticate texts—make them fit comfortably within the confines of a collection. Roland Barthes speaks of a new, late 19th-century figure, the writer-artisan, "l’écrivain-artisan qui s'enferme dans un lieu légendaire, comme un ouvrier en chambre et dégrossit, taillé, polit et sertit sa forme, exactement comme un lapidaire dégage l'art de la matière, passant à ce travail des heures régulières de solitude et d'effort... Cette valeur-travail remplace un peu la valeur-génie." The collector represents that new figure, who encloses himself in spectacular, if not legendary place, and shapes, polishes, sets, hews the raw material of language like a stonecutter.

Weighing in On Academic Tradition

In Chapter Three of *A Rebours*, des Esseintes offers an alternative history of Latin literature to that provided by the current literary establishment. He demonstrates his mastery of the books—

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the range of Latin works that have been designated under "ce nom générique: 'la décadence' " by Sorbonne "intelligences" who have been "domesticated" by "deplorable lessons"—first of all because they are there, in front of him, displayed in a section of his bookcases, contained and accessible in their material form. They are also contained in a mental way, since he lists and comments upon them as if he knows their contents by heart. He then proceeds to demonstrate his mastery of these books by announcing the Latin writers he approves and disapproves of, justifying his reasons, going against the grain of academic tradition (Against the Grain is one of the ways A Rebours has been translated into English). This episode shows the collector's attempt to put literature in its place by defining his relationship to literature.

About 90 authors are mentioned, and des Esseintes' evaluation of these Latin texts consists of lengthy enumerations of the problems he finds with many of them. Though a tone of dismissal or rejection dominates his commentary, such a tone functions to put in relief the few authors and works of which he approves. Once again, as in other chapters of the novel, des Esseintes' collecting serves him in his effort to transcend boundaries, here the boundaries of literary categorizations. Here, that means reorganizing texts. More than originality, he is seeking his own perspective. Rhetorically speaking, he is concerned with the disposition of elements, rather than inventing new elements.

He likes neither Ovid nor Horace, Cicero nor Caesar. The list goes on and on. Criticisms include lack of spontaneity, repetition, sameness, dullness, lack of curiosity, copying word for word, "abject" reverence for grammar, dryness, sterility, lack of imagination, restrictedness.

The Sorbonne's categorization of these books grouped them all together under the pejorative term "la décadence." Des Esseintes calls this term ("la décadence") a "nom

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générique," thereby undermining both the term and the Sorbonne intelligences' critical judgment. Des Esseintes will un-group these writers, considering them one by one, and finding unique problems with each. He will dismiss them in his own way.

As when he rejected people in Chapter One of the novel and as discussed in Chapter One of this study, he carefully articulates (through the third-person narrator transmitting his thoughts) his impressions and judgments about each item before dismissing it. Dismissal means more than mere rejection; dismissal means taking the opportunity to figure out what he thinks about a subject, to make the mental space necessary to articulate his own perspective.

Along with the many dismissals come the approvals, along with their justification. Des Esseintes "begins to be interested in the Latin language" only with Lucan, whose language is "élargie," "plus expressive," an "armature travaillée, ces vers plaqués d'émaux, pavés de joaillerie." (This attraction to an aesthetic of hard, bejeweled surfaces is typical of des Esseintes, as seen in his creation of the jewel-encrusted turtle in Chapter Four of the novel, discussed in Chapter Two of this study.) However, Lucan is not entirely pleasing to him; Lucan still exhibits a "vide de la pensée," an emptiness of thought. We understand why he would be uncomfortable with what he perceives as a lack of thought: Huysmans' entire novel consists of des Esseintes' thoughts, since he is by and large the only character in the book, almost always alone, hardly ever in dialogue with anyone other than himself, immersed in a constant flow of thoughts.

The author des Esseintes prefers above all, and has the fewest criticisms of, is Petronius. He likes what seems to be Petronius' realistic and naturalistic style, in the 19th-century meanings of those terms as documenting all details of daily social life, without discrimination, in a spirit of

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scientific documentation and rigor. He calls Petronius' *Satyricon* a "roman réaliste," and the author a perspicacious observer and delicate analyst. He cites his "langue splendidement orfèvre"; the way that the author does not "show" himself one single time; the description of the vices of a decrepit civilization yet without moral commentary (which corresponds more to naturalism than realism); the lack of intrigue or action (a reference to the increased quantity of text devoted to description instead of narrative progression, which characterized realism and naturalism, even if they still involved more substantial intrigue than later novels would). Des Esseintes identifies analogies between *Satyricon* and the modern French books he likes, affirming his approval of both. (This passage is a good example of the way that the novel affirms its connections to naturalism, even as it stakes out new territory, as we discussed in the last section of Chapter One of this study.)

Again, he shows his divergence from tradition by asserting that instead of Augustine, he prefers "les affectations et les sousentendus de ces poésies [of Sidonius Apollinaris] fabriquées par un ingénieux mécanicien qui soigne sa machine, huile ses rouages, en invente, au besoin, de compliqués et d'inutiles." Praising this author as an ingenious mechanician is ironic given that mechanicalness was one of the traits his dismissed other Latin writers for (see four paragraphs above). Yet the quality resonates with des Esseintes' attraction to artifice, as in his orchestration of mechanical fish in Chapter Two of the novel. Des Esseintes is intrigued by mechanism, including the idea of language as mechanical, writing as a machine, and of the writer as mechanic, relating to Chapter Two of my study. Citing mechanicalness as a quality he both dislikes and likes is a contradiction, and is left unresolved. It would appear that it is a negative

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368 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 112.
370 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 120.
trait in writers who have already been affirmed by tradition, but a positive one in an unpopular writer whom des Esseintes likes. Such a contradiction makes the reader feel that his evaluation is less important that his act of declaring his preferences, simply, in order to assert his difference.

Des Esseintes likes Commodius, and Claudien, Rutilius and Auson.\(^{371}\) These latter three express the dying of the Empire. Claudien revives antiquity, even as the barbarians are pressing at the gates, somewhat as des Esseintes is reviving himself, even as society almost stifled him, and will have to revive himself at the end of the book, in the face of doctor's orders to return to society.

Des Esseintes approves of some writers in the second half of the fifth century, after Augustine.\(^{372}\) This discussion is immediately followed by the description of the Fall of Rome: Christianity "va désormais submerger entièrement la langue."\(^{373}\) In this episode, the fall of the Latin language is the most important story, superimposed on the secondary story of the fall of a civilization. The fall of a civilization is important insofar as it incurs the demise of a language: Claudien's writing revives paganism, in a final valiant effort against encroaching Christianity which is about to "submerg[e] entièrement la langue." Des Esseintes' account of the fall of the Western empire, interwoven with a linguistic decline, is dramatic: "l'Empire d'Occident croula sous le choc; le latin parut s'effondrer, à son tour, sous les ruines du monde."\(^{374}\) The shock of its fall is characterized in terms of a linguistic collapse.

This episode reinforces des Esseintes' mastery over literature (re-evaluation of literature) with the poetic image of a leap through time. The narrator's account acquires speed, at this point: "Des années s'écoulèrent"—years passed. This phrase echoes a very similar phrase in Flaubert's

\(^{371}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 117.
\(^{372}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, pp. 119-120.
\(^{373}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 118.
\(^{374}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 121.
*Education sentimentale* (1869), Huysmans' beloved novel which he deemed the best representative of naturalism. In that novel, the two-word sentence "Il voyagea" at the beginning of Chapter Six of Part Three mocks the protagonist's inflated view of his experiences of travel.\textsuperscript{375}

In light of this echo with *L'Education sentimentale*, the phrase "years passed" in this episode of *A Rebours* reminds us that des Esseintes has not actually traveled, but instead travels mentally. Here, there is less the sense of mockery of des Esseintes' mental leaps and bounds; here, such a sentence expresses the power of his mind to retrace 2000 years of Latin texts. He is a more powerful character, mentally speaking, than Flaubert's characters.

The Latin language rotted, lost its members, exuded puss, its body became corrupted and then "marinated" by the Christians as they "cooked" their new language.\textsuperscript{376} Des Esseintes speaks of "la vieille charogne de la langue latine," the old carcass of the Latin language.\textsuperscript{377} The Christians cooked the old Latin language in a "ragout," after which period (the seventh through tenth centuries), the "maladresse" "exquise" (exquisite awkwardness) of the monks faded.\textsuperscript{378} The transitional period, the period of decadence during which Latin gave way to Christian Latin, and to other languages, and for which des Esseintes has such fondness, is over. That period is compared to a carcass, or ragout, and also to a material being "worked" like jewelry, recalling the writing of Lucan described above as well as des Esseintes' encrustation of the turtle's shell: "Les fabriques de 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, étaient détruites."\textsuperscript{379} The idea of a mechanicalness intriguing to des Esseintes is evoked, once again, by

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{375} Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 121.
  \item \textsuperscript{376} Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 120.
  \item \textsuperscript{377} Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 122.
  \item \textsuperscript{378} Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 124.
  \item \textsuperscript{379} Huysmans, *A Rebours*, pp. 124-125.
\end{itemize}
this image of a language factory ("fabrique") churning out verbs, nouns and adjectives richly described in multiple sensorial terms.

There are fewer and fewer writers he likes after Petronius, when the Latin language begins to dissolve (dissoudre).\textsuperscript{380} If the chronology of writers were a rope, the rope would be frayed at this point. After the gap evoked above ("years passed"), there is then only one author he deems worthy. There is only "un seul poète chrétien, Commodien de Gaza," to represent the third century in des Esseintes' library.\textsuperscript{381} In the following centuries, the gap is not filled: "Les ouvrages des siècles suivants se clairsemaient dans la bibliothèque de des Esseintes."\textsuperscript{382} The works of later centuries scattered themselves (se clairsemaient) in his library, suggesting sparsity: "Son attirance diminuait avec la fin de ces deux siècles [VIIe and VIIIe] [...] il se contentait, comme spécimen de la langue au IXe siècle, des chroniques de l'anonyme de saint Gall."\textsuperscript{383} The chapter ends with yet another gap, this one more striking, an emptiness of a millennium: "A part quelques volumes spéciaux, [...] sa bibliothèque latine s'arrêtait au commencement du Xe siècle. [...] Les vieilles éditions, choyées par des Esseintes, cessaient—et, en un saut formidable de siècles, les livres s'étageaient maintenant sur les rayons, supprimant la transition des âges, arrivant directement à la langue française du présent siècle."\textsuperscript{384} In a "formidable jump across the centuries," he skips, in his material book collection and thus also in his inexorable mental enumeration, from the tenth century to the present. There are no books to fill that period. He has not found any he likes. While the enumeration feels like a chore or a burden he has set for

\textsuperscript{380}Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 116.  
\textsuperscript{381}Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 117.  
\textsuperscript{382}Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 122.  
\textsuperscript{383}Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 123.  
\textsuperscript{384}Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 125.
himself, because it is so obsessive and gives the impression of tedious thoroughness, this "jump" is an alleviation from such obsessive enumeration. The adjective "formidable" lends it power.

Des Esseintes may be obsessive, but he balances that with mental acts of freedom suggesting he is not a slave to his mind, but rather is in control of his collection. He only includes what he likes, even if the result is a major lacuna when seen from a chronological perspective.

These gaps and jumps suggest not only des Esseintes' mental and imaginative power, but also that the collection is a like a character in itself, capable of leaps and bounds. We pass from century to century in a chronological, list-like progression that evokes a certain urgency—the reader feels that he or she is on to the fourth century ("Claudien, une sorte d'avatar de Lucain, qui domine tout le IVe siècle")\(^{385}\), then on to the fifth ("Enfin au Ve siècle, Augustin")\(^{386}\), then on to the sixth ("Le VIe siècle")\(^{387}\). Des Esseintes is not only providing a new "spin" on Latin literature, but he is investing this listing—this collecting—with drama. Des Esseintes even refers directly to his "collection latine"\(^{388}\) as, itself, moving into the second century, as if it has agency:

"sa collection latine entrait dans le IIe siècle de l'ère chrétienne, sautait le déclamateur Fronton, aux termes surannées, mal réparés, mal revernis, enjambait les Nuits attiques d'Aulu-Gelle, son disciple et ami, [...] et elle faisait halte devant Apulée dont il gardait l'édition princeps, in-folio, imprimée en 1469, à Rome."\(^{389}\) The verbs "entrait," "sautait," "enjambait" and "faisait halte" are strong action words, as if the collection is a physical entity, running a race or obstacle course.

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\(^{386}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 119.
The collection acquires life. It becomes a force that animates, underlies, impels forward this
survey of literature. The collection becomes as important as the books themselves.

This episode recalls the description in the "Notice" of the portrait collection (discussed in
Chapter One of this study) at the Château de Lourps, des Esseintes' childhood home that he sells
before moving into his new house in Fontenay. That collection was also characterized by gaps,
which suggested, on a literal level, missing portraits, and, on a figurative level, a thinning
genealogy. In his book collection, des Esseintes takes the idea of gaps and turns it into a sign of
his mental power, as if transforming the idea of decadence and deterioration into mental power.

Joseph Lemaitre asserted at the time of *A Rebours'* first publication that des Esseintes has
difficulty being original: "Un lettré, un mandarin, a beaucoup plus de peine qu'un ignorant à être
original. Il lui semble, à lui, que tout a été dit ou du moins indiqué, et que cela suffit... Il a la
mémoire trop pleine; les impressions ne lui arrivent plus qu'à travers une couche de souvenirs
littéraires." Lemaitre says he is suffocating under the weight of the past, and feels that all has
already been said or at least indicated, and that that is enough. His memory is too full;
impressions come to him only through a layer of literary memories.

However, far from suffocating under the mental weight of all those ideas and
information, des Esseintes is in fact carefully manipulating literary history, as the freedom of the
"saut" (jump) suggests. He feels, in fact, no allegiance to the past, and can wander around in it,
and jump out of it, at will. Instead of being too saturated, his memory (here put to the service of a
review of Latin literature) serves the same function as his house itself: it provides a context for
him to think through a given subject on his own. Des Esseintes seeks perspective, distance, and

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that is what his collecting affords him. The image of the jump reinforces that sense of liberation in the way he creates space for himself.

Des Esseintes is choosing, very carefully, and very selectively, the literature that gets spotlighted in his house. In the preceding chapter, Des Esseintes created a sacred space for books. He displayed two books as decorative items—a heavy in-folio of the *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* by du Cange, which he placed upon a music stand from a chapel, and a "merveilleux canon d'église" containing copies of three sonnets by Baudelaire, "la Mort des amants," "l'Ennemi," and in the middle, "Any where out of this world: — N'importe où, hors du monde" on the chimney (the space between "any" and "where" appears in the original). The first, a Latin glossary, is endowed with proximity to the sacred, in a symbolic sense, by being placed on a music stand from a chapel. The second, a church text, is already religious in nature and confers some of its sacredness onto the poems inserted into it. Displaying these texts so prominently, and, furthermore, between two monstrances in gilded copper from an old abbey, gives the sense of a sanctuary for worshipping literature. He puts his favorite texts on a religious pedestal, to announce (to himself) that these are his favorite texts, to the exclusion of many others. He is in control of literature because, as with the alternative literary history in Chapter Three, he is choosing whom to praise. He needs to make room for literature, and specifically, here, for his literary preferences. This idea of making room for his perspective on literature is carried further in the creation of reading niches.

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Materializing Literature

Just as des Esseintes is creating a breathing space outside of literary tradition (and just as he has created a breathing space outside of society by moving into the Fontenay house and starting a new life there), he is also creating a breathing space outside of books themselves. He puts them in their place first in literary tradition, then in a material way—by translating the contexts of books into domestic spaces, "niches."

In Chapter One of the novel, we learn about his habit from the past of establishing "niches." These are spaces in his house that had the effect of translating books into decor. The description of the "niches" are not part of the present of the narrative, but of des Esseintes' past life, before his retreat, similar to the boudoir he made for women, and the game he would play with mirrors (mirrors reflecting mirrors to infinity). These evocations of his past efforts at carefully crafting and shaping a room reveal that he has already experimented with decoration and the arrangement of domestic space, well before he ever embarked on the ambitious decorating project in his new, isolated house.

He would divide a living room into a series of niches, "diversement tapissées et pouvant se relier par une subtile analogie, par un vague accord de teintes joyeuses ou sombres, délicates ou barbares, au caractère des œuvres latines et françaises qu'il aimait." The decor and fabric colors of the niches matched different books (he will match wall colors to people several pages later, a passage we already discussed in Chapter One of this study; des Esseintes color-codes spaces, interpreting people or literature through the lens of color). We imagine a seat, with fabric of a certain color, and the wall around it painted in that color. These matchings are vague—"par un vague accord de teintes joyeuses ou sombres"—or perhaps imperfect, but what is important is

392 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 89.
that he was creating an analogy—"une subtile analogie"—between books and decor. The vagueness suggests that he did not devise a system in which every detail of the book agreed with the color (which seems outlandish anyway), but rather a system that would allow him, as the reader, to complete the harmonious agreement between color and book, in the process of his reading.

A niche also served to enclose des Esseintes physically as he read. He would "s'installait alors dans celle de ces niches dont le décor lui semblait le mieux correspondre à l'essence même de l'ouvrage que son caprice du moment l'amena à lire."\(^{393}\) He would settle into one of these niches whose decor seemed to him to correspond best to the essence of the book his momentary caprice had led him to read. The implication is that he had an array to choose from. He had made reading subservient to the momentary whims of his mind and soul. The phrase "l'ouvrage que son caprice du moment l'amena à lire" raises the issue of desire. Setting up these niches suggests that he wanted to be prepared for whatever desire might come his way (for a particular book). He would, in other words, be prepared, even for what he could not control—caprices, fancies, whims—which are all by definition spontaneous and unpredictable, relating to Chapter Two of this study). He would plan his surroundings in anticipation of such desires. He wanted to be prepared with the proper physical surroundings, for whichever book struck his fancy. It is as if he were already satisfying his desires, or attempting to satisfy them, in advance. He will not be caught off guard. The particular mix of control and spontaneity reflects the core of des Esseintes' being: he exhibits both neo-classical and romantic tendencies, in attempting to control, but also liberate, desire.

\(^{393}\) Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 89.
Des Esseintes was not trying to substitute the niches for the books themselves; he still wanted to read them ("l'ouvrage que son caprice du moment l'aménait à lire"). It was just that literature by itself was not enough, or was not enough given the reality of all the distractions from everyday life that can interfere with the reading process. Des Esseintes needed to purify and enhance his experience of reading through assigning a given book its own space, not in terms of a spot on a library shelf, but in terms of the spatial rendition of the book's themes and atmosphere. He made literature into something he could enter, or move into, spatially speaking. The niches "contained" literature both by reducing it to a color and also by the way they physically enclosed the reader. He sought to make his literary mood—the taste he had in a particular moment for a particular kind of reading experience—correspond to decor, as if to make that literary mood concrete, to do more than simply read the book. He added to literature, by using it as an inspiration for decor and weaving his own creation (the niche) into literature. His aim was not to change the book, but simply to enhance his experience of it.

The idea of settling into these niches (s'installer)—a habit he cultivated in the past—resonates with the way he is, at the very time we are being told of this past habit, settling into his new house in Fontenay. In this light, his Fontenay retreat represents an expansion of those niches, in terms of the size of the enclosure around him, and also in terms of the layers of enclosures within the house (the dining room is a room within a room, for example, in Chapter Two of the novel). The niches functioned to allow him to commune with a given book, to be totally enveloped by the book, as if to block out anything unrelated to that book. The comparison between the niches and his current enclosure (the house in Fontenay) allows us retrospectively to view the "niches" as a way that des Esseintes "moved into" literature, as if into a house.
The habit of creating niches was a materialization of literature—translating books, spatially, into niches, so that, in his mind, he could harmonize himself with a book, in terms of color and space, in order to engage with it more deeply with the assistance of a specially designed environment.

The materialization of literature echoes the materialization of language that lies at the foundation of the novel, evoked even before the novel proper begins. In the "Notice" which precedes Chapter One and which explains the events that have led des Esseintes to retreat from society, the narrator discusses the old family home of des Esseintes, the Château de Lourps, and its collection of portraits. On the very first page of the novel, in reference to these portraits, the narrator writes, "La décadence de cette ancienne maison avait, sans nul doute, suivi régulièrement son cours."\(^{394}\) In this sentence, the word "maison" signifies the family represented by the portraits. The rest of this novel will literalize (materialize) the word "maison," by its orientation around an actual house. This initial use of the word "house" in reference to a family recalls Zola's naturalist literary project of chronicling the decline of a family. In *A Rebours*, Huysmans is taking the idea of "house" literally by orienting his novel entirely around a house, leaving the people out. There is a fundamental principle at work in this novel in which language and literature must not be translated into another language, but must be translated into material, spatial form.

**The Collection Keeps Literature Out**

Soon after the description of the niches from his past life, des Esseintes binds his walls to resemble book-bindings (still in Chapter One of the novel): "Il se résolut, en fin de compte, à

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\(^{394}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 78.
faire relier ses murs comme des livres, avec du maroquin, à gros grains écrasés, avec de la peau du Cap, glacée par de fortes plaques d'acier, sous une puissante presse." He resolved to bind his walls with coarse-grained leather, with Cape skin, polished by strong steel plates under a strong press. Binding the walls represents another way that des Esseintes uses the theme of literature as a guiding decorative principle.

Different from the niches, binding the walls means turning an entire room into a book, through making the walls appear to be book-bindings. While this at first suggests that des Esseintes is now enlarging, spatially, his experience of literature, by rendering an entire room, and not only small niches, into literature, he is in fact shutting himself out of literature. He turns the walls—the inside of his house—into the outside of a book. This translation of literature into decor is more superficial, since it does not involve translating a book's essence, as in the niches, which is necessarily an act of interpretation. This is because his interest is no longer to connect with books but to separate himself from them. Now he is on the outside of the book (the book's binding) and is no longer communing with the essence of the book. He has created a distance between himself and literature. His retreat has not only blocked out society, but blocked out literature.

The passage on wall binding echoes Balzac's 1831 novel *La Peau de chagrin*, in which the protagonist Raphaël tries to expand, using "powerful presses" ("puissantes presses"), the magic piece of leather to which his destiny is connected. In *A Rebours*, however, stretching leather is associated not with trying to prolong life but with creating a space outside of books. Different from the affirmation of his literary preferences, and different from the creation of the niches, his relationship to literature is starting to become less harmonious and more conflictual.

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395 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 94.
A breaking point is reached in Chapter Seven, when memories from his past life come to distract him too much from his reading: "Depuis cette nuit où, sans cause apparente, il avait évoqué le mélancolique souvenir d'Auguste Langlois [subject of Chapter Six of the novel], il revécut toute son existence.\(^{396}\) One memory lets loose a whole string of memories, leading him to "relive" his entire existence. The phrase "sans cause apparente," suggests that he may not be in control of his memory—memory is involuntary. He seems unsure of why he had the first memory, which allows us to imagine that he may also be unaware of why he continues remembering, "reliving his entire existence." He loses control, it is clear, when he can no longer understand one word of what he is reading: "Il était maintenant incapable de comprendre un mot aux volumes qu'il consultait; ses yeux mêmes ne lisaient plus; il lui semblait que son esprit saturé de littérature et d'art se refusait à en absorber davantage. Il vivait sur lui-même, se nourrissait de sa propre substance."\(^{397}\) Both his mind and body ("ses yeux mêmes") could no longer read. He feels as if his mind is saturated with literature and art to the point of not being able to absorb any more. Lemaitre's comment about des Esseintes being "un mandarin" with "la mémoire trop pleine," cited above, clearly refers to this passage: "Un lettré, un mandarin, a beaucoup plus de peine qu'un ignorant à être original. Il lui semble, à lui, que tout a été dit ou du moins indiqué, et que cela suffit... Il a la mémoire trop pleine; les impressions ne lui arrivent plus qu'à travers une couche de souvenirs littéraires."

To restrain the current of memories, des Esseintes plunges into another sort of book—Latin language books—to divert himself. He calls this effort a "barrage pour arrêter le courant des anciens souvenirs."\(^{398}\) He is thus using one kind of book—language textbooks—as a cure for

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\(^{397}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 169.

the nefarious effects of another kind of book—literature. Language study involves a refreshing,
but perhaps too comfortable, certainty; reading literature troubles such certainty. However, des
Esseintes' troubleshooting—turning toward language textbooks for relief from literature—comes
too late; his memories of his youth are too strong: "Ceux-là étaient plus éloignés et plus certains,
gravés d'une façon plus accusée et plus sûre."399

The unwanted flood of memories, attributed to his isolation, starts to raise dormant
questions about his religious faith: "Au milieu de cette solitude où il vivait, sans nouvel aliment,
sans impressions fraîchement subies, sans renouvellement de pensées, sans cet échange de
sensations venues du dehors, de la fréquentation du monde, [...] toutes les questions, oubliées
pendant son séjour à Paris, se posaient à nouveau, comme d'irritants problèmes."400 Lack of
social stimulation causes him to confront forgotten questions, and this irritates him. He blames
his reading of Latin language books, because they were written by bishops and monks, which
activated thoughts about his religious faith. Therefore, absorbing himself in a different kind of
book (language books instead of literature) did not do the trick. In fact, it aggravated the
problem. Des Esseintes is struggling with his relationship to literature.

Des Esseintes decides, therefore, to renounce reading temporarily, since reading either
overwhelmed him or brought up unwanted memories. At the end of Chapter Seven in the novel,
we read: "Ne pouvant plus s'enivrer à nouveau des magies du style, s'énerver sur le délicieux
sortilège de l'épithète rare, [...] il se résolut à parachever l'ameublement du logis, à se procurer
des fleurs précieuses de serre, à se concéder ainsi une occupation matérielle qui le distrairait."401
No longer being able to intoxicate himself on stylistic wonders, or to agitate himself with the rare

epithet, he resolved to set to work completing his collecting project—outfitting his lodging—to
distract himself with a material occupation. His reading was not material. Apparently, his
attempts to materialize literature, discussed above, did not work well enough. He still needs to
get away from books and apply himself to a purely material endeavor. This means procuring
precious hothouse flowers. His collection of flowers will resolve his problem with literature by
providing him with something firm and tangible on which to focus. In Chapter Eight, he embarks
on collecting hothouse flowers and fake flowers.

An earlier episode about des Esseintes' painting collection in Chapter Five of the novel
foreshadowed the eventual oppressiveness of books. Des Esseintes' painting collection allowed
him to fill days when he could no longer read books, days that resisted reading: "Ces estampes
étaient des mines à renseignements; on pouvait les contemplait sans se lasser, pendant des
heures; profondément suggestives en réflexions, elles aidaient souvent des Esseintes à tuer les
journées rebelles aux livres." His Jan Luyken engravings, which depict the tortures invented
by religions, and gave him goose-bumps and were full of "renseignements," efficiently "killing"
days that resisted books.

Perfume Making: the Collector as Writer

Eventually, however, des Esseintes is able to approach literature on his own terms, in a managed,
controlled way allowing him to maintain his mastery over it. His collection, once again, will help
assist him in this.

In Chapter Ten of A Rebours, whose theme is olfactory hallucinations, a material
substance in the form of perfume (though it is less material than flowers or books, being a liquid

402 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 152.
and odor) provides the model for des Esseintes' own literary creation. Des Esseintes now uses his collecting to prompt his own literary creation. Collecting functions as the intermediate step in the progression from putting space between himself and literature, and embarking on his own writing.

After evaluating the scents and essences that he has collected des Esseintes concocts his own perfume. Des Esseintes first situates himself in his cabinet de toilette, where "des bouteilles de toute grandeur, de toute forme, s'étageaient sur des rayons d'ivoire. [paragraph break in original text] Il les plaça sur une table et les divisa en deux séries: celle des parfums simples, c'est-à-dire des extraits ou des esprits, et celle des parfums composés, désignée sous le terme générique de bouquets." Bottles of all sizes and forms were lined up on shelves of ivory. He placed them on a table and divided them into two series: one for simple perfumes (extracts or spirits), and one for composite perfumes, designated by the name "bouquets." The bottles' origins and time of acquisition are left unstated. What we know is that des Esseintes is analyzing them, by dividing them into two categories based on composition or lack of composition.

Des Esseintes believes his experiments with perfumes have the potential to generate "works," implicitly works of art, defined by their wholeness: each "sens," including smell, is "susceptible, [...] de percevoir des impressions nouvelles, de les décupler, de les coordonner, d'en composer ce tout qui constitue une œuvre." Each sense is susceptible to perceiving new impressions, to multiplying them, to coordinating them, to composing them into a whole which constitutes a work. Just as no one can confuse a painting by a great artist with "une croûte" (a "crust," an evocative term, suggesting mere globs of paint, for a painting judged to be poor), so no one can confuse "un bouquet créé par un sincère artiste" with a "pot-pourri fabriqué par un

403 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 216.
404 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 216.
industriel, pour la vente des épiceries et des bazars. Des Esseintes thus compares his perfume making with the work of artists, and contrasts them with industrial makers of perfumes. Having been an expert in the science of perfumes for years, des Esseintes has not, until now, crossed over into the realm of creation.

Perfume making then becomes an analogy for literary creation, in particular. Des Esseintes compares perfume making to mastering grammar, as a prerequisite for writing literature: "il lui avait d'abord fallu travailler la grammaire, comprendre la syntaxe des odeurs, se bien pénétrer des règles qui les régissent [...]." He first needed to study the grammar, understand the syntax of odors, to penetrate deeply the rules that governed them. The history of perfumes developed "pas à pas," step by step, like the French language. After first being described as a connaisseur of scents, he then progresses to the step of gathering his materials, and then finally sits down to create a perfume of his own. In a climactic moment of creation, des Esseintes is explicitly compared to a writer: "Assis maintenant, dans son cabinet de toilette, devant sa table, il songeait à créer un nouveau bouquet et il était pris de ce moment d'hésitation bien connu des écrivains, qui, après des mois de repos, s'apprêtent à recommencer une nouvelle œuvre." Seated now, in his cabinet de toilette, in front of his table, he dreams of creating a new bouquet. He is overcome by the moment of hesitation well-known to writers who, after months of rest, apply themselves to beginning a new work again.

The comparison between making perfumes and writing does not stop there; Huysmans becomes very specific about des Esseintes' conception of himself as a writer, raising his creative—literary—potential to the heights of an author no lesser than Balzac: "Ainsi que Balzac

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Thus just as Balzac was haunted by the pressing need to blacken much paper to warm himself up, des Esseintes recognized the necessity of warming up his hands by making several unremarkable perfumes.

After this warm-up, he succeeds in creating: "Les expressions, les procédés lui échappaient; il tâtonna; en somme, dans la fragrance de cette fleur, l'oranger domine: il tenta de plusieurs combinaisons et il finit par atteindre le ton juste, en joignant à l'oranger de la tubéreuse et de la rose qu'il lia par une goutte de vanille." The expressions and the procedures escaped him; he experimented; in sum, in the fragrance of this flower, the smell of orange dominated: he tried several combinations and ended up attaining the right tone, by mixing the smell of orange with tubereuse and rose which he linked together by a drop of vanilla.

Finally, after some obstacles, he creates, as if he were a writer. The moment of creation is underscored: "une petite fièvre l'agita, il fut prêt au travail; il composa encore du thé en mélangant de la cassie et de l'iris; puis, sûr de lui, il se détermina à marcher de l'avant, à plaquer une phrase fulminante dont le hautain fracas effondrait le chuchotement de cette astucieuse frangipane qui se faufilait encore dans sa pièce." A small fever agitated him, he was ready to work; he composed again, this time a scent of tea, by mixing cassia tree extract with iris; then, sure of himself, he determined to go forward, to pin down a livid phrase whose haughty din overcame the whispering of this shrewd frangipani which was still wafting through the room.

The use of the term "phrase" affirms the analogy between perfumes and language, and between

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411 Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 221.
perfume making and writing. Des Esseintes is not writing, but Huysmans has used the analogy between perfume making and writing to lend his collecting the aura of writing. Il demeura étourdi sous la violence de ce choc.\footnote{Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 221.} He then is able, however, to take advantage of this moment, this "time of respite" to make leaps through time, as he did when affirming his perspective on academic tradition earlier ("le saut"), "escape" "old, defunct" centuries and outdated vapors, in order to enter [...] into "less restricted" or newer works: "il profita de ce temps de répit pour échapper aux siècles défunts, aux vapeurs surannées, pour entrer [...] dans des œuvres moins restreintes ou plus neuves."\footnote{Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 222.} He is reading, or writing (it remains ambiguous) these "œuvres moins restreintes ou plus neuves." He has crossed over into creation.

The art of perfume making opens itself to him, imparting new knowledge to him: "Peu à peu, les arcanes de cet art, le plus négligé de tous, s'étaient ouverts devant des Esseintes qui déchiffrait maintenant cette langue, variée, aussi insinuante que celle de la littérature, ce style d'une concision inouïe, sous son apparence flottante et vague."\footnote{Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 217.} The mysteries of this art, the most neglected of them of all, had opened themselves before des Esseintes, who now deciphered this varied language, as insinuating as the language of literature, this style of unsurpassed concision, under a floating and vague appearance. We are reminded here of other instances in which the novel presents his activities in terms of an \textit{apprentissage}, an account of what he learns, such as the passage in which des Esseintes articulates the secret of traveling without leaving one's home in Chapter Two of the novel, discussed in Chapter Two of this study.

Des Esseintes has not actually written anything. However, the experience of deciphering the language of perfumes is, for him, akin to being initiated into the mysteries of literary
creation. In his "Note sur le personnage de des Esseintes," Marc Fumaroli comments that "des Esseintes, dilettante de tous les arts, n'est même pas effleuré par le désir d'écrire" \(^{415}\) (des Esseintes is not even grazed by the desire to write), yet this passage unequivocally shows that des Esseintes does exhibit a desire to write, even if this desire remains in the form of an analogy to what he is actually making: perfumes.

Earlier in the novel, meditating on his painting collection had been a means for des Esseintes to exercise his capacity for creating stories—almost like writing. When he placed his paintings of Salomé among his bookshelves, they "lived" under his eyes there: "Ces deux images de la Salomé, pour lesquelles l'admiration de des Esseintes était sans borne, vivaient, sous ses yeux, pendues aux murailles de son cabinet de travail, sur des panneaux réservés entre les rayons des livres." \(^{416}\) Des Esseintes then proceeds to imagine the figure of Salomé, and elaborate on her story, surpassing the Old Testament's evocation of her. The narrator wonders: "Combien de fois avait-il lu dans la vieille bible de Pierre Variquet, [...] l'évangile de saint Matthieu qui raconte en de naïves et brèves phrases, la décollation du Précurseur; combien de fois avait-il rêvé, entre ces lignes: [...]" \(^{417}\) And at this point he quotes the scene in the Gospel of Matthew. He cites a line in which Salomé pleases Herod by dancing. He cites several more lines, too, but these cited lines from Matthew consume scant textual space compared to the lengthy description of the Moreau painting that des Esseintes provides. Those biblical lines are " naïves" and "brèves." None of the evangelists dwelled on—"s'étendaient"—the depraved aspects of Salomé ("les actives dépravations de Salomé" \(^{418}\)), thinks des Esseintes. In this way, des Esseintes enters a foundational, ancient text and expands upon it using a painting as his inspiration. This

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\(^{415}\) Fumaroli, "Note sur le personnage de des Esseintes," p. 368.
\(^{416}\) Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 150.
\(^{417}\) Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 143.
\(^{418}\) Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 144.
foreshadows the perfume making episode, by hinting at his tendency to write, or in this case, re-write, literature.

**Return to Texts Via the Collection**

His perfume collection served as the raw material for des Esseintes to try his hand at making his own perfume. The description of making perfume compared him to a writer on the verge of literary creation. The comparison endowed des Esseintes with the aura of a writer. In that metaphorical way, he acquired a closeness with writers. I interpret this closeness as a sign of his gradual return to texts. The comparison causes the reader to associate des Esseintes with a writer, whereas before, he had reached his limit in being able to absorb texts. He is evolving from an overwhelmed reader to an eager writer—he is relating to texts more on his own terms. Once surfeited with literature, he now will be more in control of texts.

The transition toward being more in control of texts becomes firmly established two chapters after the perfume making passage, when Des Esseintes officially returns to literature in Chapter 12. All of Chapter 12 is devoted to books, constituting a third chapter, in addition to Chapters Three and 14, entirely devoted to discussing literature. The word "return" (*retour*) is used, in both a literal and figurative sense. The narrator refers to returning from a curtailed voyage: he had intended to go to London but only reached Paris. This geographical return to his house after an absence soon evolves into a more figurative return—his return to literature itself.

We read: "Durant les jours qui suivirent son retour, des Esseintes considéra ses livres, et à la pensée qu'il aurait pu se séparer d'eux pendant longtemps, il goûta une satisfaction aussi effective que celle dont il eût joui s'il les avait retrouvés, après une sérieuse absence."\(^{419}\) He feels a kind of

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\(^{419}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 249.
relief that he did not end up separating himself from books for as long as he might have. The fact that he returned sooner than planned turned out to be best for him. That short absence was all he needed to rediscover his relationship with books. He feels satisfaction, the same as if he had actually rediscovered them after a "serious" absence. His mind produces a feeling that is usually brought about by geographical displacement. He has been able, through just a short day trip, to procure the new vision and perspective normally furnished by a long journey (as he did also in Chapter Two of the novel, which we discussed in Chapter Two of this study).

His books seem new to him, because he is now able to perceive in them beauties that he had forgotten since he first acquired them. He peruses his books with new eyes: "Sous l'impulsion de ce sentiment, ces objets lui semblèrent nouveaux, car il perçut en eux des beautés oubliées depuis l'époque où il les avait acquis. [...]

His renewed interest in his library is expanded to include his whole collection, bibelots and furniture included, as if the return to books is a powerful enough event to brighten his whole house. All has become "charming." He appreciates his collecting more having experienced being away from it ("depuis que le hasard des pérégrinations devenait possible"). He starts examining and reordering his books, to check that their bindings and rare paper had not been damaged by temperature or humidity. We learn here in Chapter 12 all about how he originally created his book collection, all the variety of special printings, papers and fonts he arranged to be made or invented for the books he wanted in his collection. He feels a new satisfaction with his

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"methodical organization of his life." Acquiring distance from his own collection has been necessary in order for him to appreciate not only books but his entire collection more fully.

He will again be saved by books when, in Chapter 14, "plunging" into a "numbness" ("cet engourdissement") and a "frustrated boredom" or an "uneasy ideness" ("cet ennuí désœuvré"), he becomes bothered by the unfinished arrangement of his library: "sa bibliothèque dont le rangement demeurait inachevé." Arranging his library will compensate for the boredom that is plaguing him, a boredom that is frustrated in the sense of creating, producing, no "œuvre": "cet ennuí désœuvré." He becomes shocked by the "désordre" of the "profane" books, especially because of their contrast with the order ("le parfait équilibre") of the religious books in his library. Despite breaking out in a sweat after ten minutes of trying to deal with this "confusion," despite calling for his servant to bring him books one by one and place them where des Esseintes indicates, and despite the fact that the project is not difficult because the number of unordered books is small, he nevertheless had become obsessed with ordering the unordered books of his library. He is concerned with "la place qu'elles devaient occuper," and he is described as "veillant à ce qu'elles fussent classées, en bon ordre"—as if attacking a raw material that cannot be left in its natural state, but must be shaped into something by the artist.

This revives the theme of creation, especially literary creation, first presented in the perfume making episode. In the phrase "le vieillard se mit à l'œuvre," referring to his servant helping him, we hear the echo of the other word containing the word "œuvre," on this same page: "cet ennuí désœuvré." The scene is one of turning "désœuvrement" into an "œuvre," or disorder into art.

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Arranging his books means molding literature, in the sense of being in control of the emotions—such as an "indécision troublante"—that it produces in him. He no longer open those books whose "valid art" crumpled or crushed him, hurt him, offended him ("le froissait"). Instead, he has other "aspirations" now, that "agitate" him and that are "indéfinissable." These indefinable things he is looking for are "étrangéité" and "linguistic complication" à la Poe, and an "indécision troublante" that he can make more or less firm according to the state of his soul: "plus vague ou plus ferme selon l'état momentané de son âme." This recalls the "niches" for reading: creating a scenario in which, regardless of his state of mind, he will be able to satisfy its desires or propensities. He wants options, but options he carefully selects.

Des Esseintes will not let himself merely be in thrall to literature; he needs to receive something from it: "il voulait, en somme, une œuvre d'art et pour ce qu'elle était en elle-même et pour ce qu'elle pouvait permettre de lui prêter." He will not be mastered by it. He reads books as if passing them through a rolling mill ("laminoir"), sterilizing all pleasure to be had in reading by accentuating "l'irrémédiable conflit qui existait entre ses idées et celles du monde." He imposes a kind of natural selection on his books, in which he determines which books survive the destructive, relentless analytical machine, in order to arrive at those which most correspond to his ideas, and not to those of the world. He is very different from those idealistic readers, like Madame Bovary or Don Quixote, who conflate books and life. Des Esseintes is a step beyond disillusionment; he wants ammunition, support, for his stand against the world.

But then, we learn that, in fact, he does want to be carried away by literature, just as he was carried by his book collection back in time, and just as he could be carried away by his sea

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paraphernalia on a voyage. He demands to see himself reflected in books, and and to be led on a journey. He wants a work of art that is different from those that he subjects to his "laminoir."

Now, he wants a book that will free him from his obsessive analysis: "il voulait aller avec elle, [...] dans une sphère où les sensations sublimées lui imprimeraient une commotion inattendue et dont il chercherait longtemps et même vainement à analyser les causes." In other words, he wants a book that will prevent him from analyzing a book—a book that resists analysis.

In addition to its ability to transport him to another sphere, full of sublime sensations and unexpected commotion, and in addition to its resistance to analysis, he is searching for a book without signs of the modern world. He wants, as we know, to remove himself from Paris: "Enfin, depuis son départ de Paris, il s'éloignait, de plus en plus, de la réalité et surtout du monde contemporain qu'il tenait en une croissante horreur; cette haine avait forcément agi sur ses goûts littéraires et artistiques, et il se détournait le plus possible des tableaux et des livres dont les sujets délimités se reléguaient dans la vie moderne." He wants to distance himself from books reminding him of the modern world.

The books that meet all of these criteria are by Flaubert and Zola, which lift him out of the trivial life of which he has become so tired: "elles l'enlevaient, lui aussi, plus haut que les autres, hors de cette vie triviale dont il était si las." They allow him to "pénétrer plus loin dans le tréfonds du tempérament de ces maîtres," to penetrate more deeply into the mind of these authors, in a "complète communion d'idées avec les écrivains," recalling the reading niches. In

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addition to exploring his own mind, he wants to explore the minds of others, who are, in this case, writers.

In a passage about how the "homme de talent" feels when the period in which he lives is "plate et bête" and when he is "hanté par la nostalgie d'un autre siècle"\(^{436}\), this "man of talent" seems revealed to des Esseintes, as if des Esseintes is entering the mind of that man of talent. What he finds there corresponds to what we already know about des Esseintes, as if to suggest that des Esseintes is such a man of talent: a writer.

Des Esseintes can no longer harmonize himself with his milieu, he no longer takes pleasure in, or can be distracted by observation and analysis; he feels confused desires for "migration"\(^{437}\) (Chateaubriand uses the same word in a famous passage in René; this evokes des Esseintes' romantic side, his anguished, unfulfilled longing); instincts, heredity starts playing a larger role, leading to memories of things he has not actually experienced himself ("des souvenirs d'êtres et des choses qu'il n'a pas personnellement connus"\(^{438}\)). He enters another period "en toute liberté," a period for which he is better suited ("avec laquelle [...] il eût été mieux en accord").\(^{439}\) He desires harmony with a time period different from his own.

Des Esseintes does not want to be different for its own sake, but in order to be in harmony with that other time. His collection helps him discover this experience of feeling in harmony with a time period. The collection corrects what his life lacks. Although Zola shows no "désir de migration" towards earlier times, he nevertheless evokes a certain nostalgia (for "une

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\(^{437}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 300.
\(^{439}\) Huysmans, *A Rebours*, p. 298.
idéale campagne"), a nostalgia which is, for des Esseintes, "la poésie même."\textsuperscript{440} It is the desire to "fuir loin de ce monde contemporain qu'il étudiait."\textsuperscript{441}

However, he once again encounters a sense of saturation with literature: "à force de les relire, de s'être saturé de leurs œuvres, de les savoir, par cœur, tout entières, il avait dû, afin de les pouvoir absorber encore, s'efforcer de les oublier et les laisser pendant quelque temps sur ses rayons, au repos."\textsuperscript{442} Once again, he must leave books for a period of time, not taking them off their shelves, letting them rest. This phenomenon occurs even with his favorite authors. This time he has not been crushed by literature; he knows what he needs to do to de-saturate himself: "les oublier et les laisser pendant quelque temps."

However, several pages later we read that there were still days when he was broken by his readings: "maintenant que sa névrose s'était exaspérée, il y avait des jours où ces lectures le brisaient, des jours où il restait, les mains tremblantes, l'oreille au guet, se sentant, ainsi que le désolant Usher, envahi par une transe irraisonnée, par une frayeur sourde."\textsuperscript{443} Broken, hands trembling, his ear on the lookout, feeling like Poe's distressed Usher, invaded by an irrational trance, a deaf fear. Books exacerbate his state. Furthermore, after reading Poe, all other literature seems dull; reading has not only weakened him but weakened literature: "toute littérature lui semblait fade après ces terribles philtres importés de l'Amérique."\textsuperscript{444} In a rare exclamation in direct discourse (usually his thoughts are conveyed to us in free indirect discourse), he sighs,

\textsuperscript{440} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, pp. 300-301.  
\textsuperscript{441} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 301.  
\textsuperscript{442} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 301.  
\textsuperscript{443} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 311.  
\textsuperscript{444} Huysmans, \textit{A Rebours}, p. 312.
"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! qu'il existe donc peu de livres qu'on puisse relire." He is disillusioned with literature.

When he reads Mallarmé's poem "Hérodiade" while staring at Moreau's painting of Salomé, the poem "le subjuguait de mème qu'un sortilège"; the poem casts a spell over him. This subjugation, however, gives way to a sense of mastery as he defines the poems and literary forms he prefers. He finds in Mallarmé a "condensed" literature, resembling a "coulis," and this pleases him. It is in Baudelaire's prose poems, though, that he identifies his favorite literary condensed literary form.

In Baudelaire, a single adjective has the capacity to reveal the past, présent and future, to des Esseintes: "l'adjectif [...] ouvrirait de telles perspectives que le lecteur pourrait rêver, pendant des semaines entières, sur son sens [...] [il] constaterait le présent, reconstruirait le passé, devinerait l'avenir d'âmes des personnages." The adjective could state the present, reconstruct the past and guess the future of characters' souls.

Des Esseintes decides that his library will end with his anthology of prose poems. Fittingly, and reinforcing our sense that des Esseintes has, at the end of the novel, connected with literature on his own terms, having overcome moments of feeling broken by it, is the way a certain passage echoes with the very first of Baudelaire's prose poems in his *Spleen de Paris/Petits poèmes en prose*, "L'Étranger." Des Esseintes wonders, upon hearing he must return to Paris, "Qu'allait-il devenir dans ce Paris où il n'avait ni famille ni amis? Aucun lieu ne l'attachait plus à ce faubourg Saint-Germain [...] Et quel point de contact pouvait-il exister entre

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Baudelaire's poem, which is composed of a series of questions asked by a curious person to a foreigner who seems estranged from society, contains the following response by the foreigner: "Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni soeur, ni frère." In response to whether the stranger likes his friends, the foreigner says, "Vous vous servez là d'une parole dont le sens m'est resté jusqu'à ce jour inconnu," and upon being asked if he likes his "patrie," or homeland, he says, "J'ignore sous quelle latitude elle est située." When asked if he likes gold, he responds, "Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu." This foreigner likes only the passing clouds, something that eludes society and all of its ailments.

Affirming his love of Baudelaire as well as the form of the prose poem, in the form of the anthology with which he chooses to complete his library, des Esseintes is also affirming his solidarity with literature at the moment when he feels most vulnerable. Having to return to Paris, he identifies with Baudelaire's foreigner, estranged from family, friends, country and disgusted with the pursuit of money. Des Esseintes' eventual return to literature is revealed here at the end of the novel as the ultimate raison d'être of his collecting enterprise.

His return to literature coincides with the doctor's order that he leave his refuge. Even though des Esseintes wonders what will happen to him, this intertextual message tells us that he has found in Baudelaire a kindred spirit. He is connected to him through the sentiment of disconnection. He is not, as he thinks, completely alone. The meaning of the rocky return to literature that we have just explored is that des Esseintes finally—and just in time—re-establishes his relationship with literature. Superficially, the novel appears to end with his failure to live alone in his refuge, his original undertaking. However, his collecting project will, through the return to literature it has made possible, fortify him in his return to society.

449 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 346.
Collecting Versus Writing in Loti

Like texts in *A Rebours*, texts are obstacles to be reckoned with in Loti's narrative as well. Des Esseintes needed to distance himself from literature—with the help of his collection—before being able to return to it. Loti also portrays collecting as being a mediator between himself and texts, which, in Loti, takes the form of his own writing, or other people's writing, but not literature (published books that have been read by many other people). Therefore, I will be using the term "writing" to discuss texts in Loti. Collecting, collected objects, are ultimately revealed to be more useful than writing, in his project of cultural integration. They do not fortify him, as they did des Esseintes, but they are useful.

*Madame Chrysanthème* is heavily based on Loti's *journal intime* from his stay in Japan. Alain Quélla-Villéger, Loti scholar and editor of this *Journal*, affirms that Loti's novels grow out of his journals: "La plupart des romans de Loti [...] prennent la forme du *Journal* dont ils sont plus ou moins issus; le texte est divisé en entrées datées plus qu'en véritables chapitres, et des lettres s'y intercalent." In *Madame Chrysanthème*, Loti's narrator claims that the novel is, in fact, the journal itself. He declares in the preface that the novel is "le journal d'un été de ma vie, auquel je n'ai rien changé, pas même les dates, je trouve que, quand on *arrange* les choses, on les dérange toujours beaucoup." Whether or not the novel is the actual journal, the journal form is intended to evoke a natural, non-arranged, chronologically progressing presentation of events—with dates on many of the chapters.

In his autobiography, *Le Roman d'un enfant* (1890), Loti described his habit of keeping diaries—which he kept from his adolescence to 1918: "J'y inscrivais, moins les événements de

ma petite existence tranquille, que mes impressions incohérentes, mes tristesses des soirs, mes regrets des étés passés et mes rêves de lointains pays... J'avais déjà ce besoin de noter, de fixer des images fugitives, de lutter contre la fragilité des choses et de moi-même, qui m'a fait poursuivre ainsi ce journal." He wrote to freeze impressions and images, feelings and dreams in time, in order to fight against time's current, sweeping away his fragile self and world.

However, despite its powers, writing is mostly an obstacle to Loti's goal of integrating himself in Japanese culture. First, writing raises memories of more meaningful situations in the past. In Chapter Ten, Chrysanthème is frightened by mice and cries out: "Nidzoumi! (les souris!), dit Chrysanthème." This event immediately provokes a memory of another time, place and language, when another, Turkish, young woman also cried out "mice!" in the middle of the night. That episode, however, was more dramatic (filled with emotion): "Une de nos premières nuits passées à Stamboul, sous le toit mystérieux d'Eyoub, quand tout était danger autour de nous, un bruit sur les marches de l'escalier noir nous avait fait trembler, et elle aussi, la chère petite Turque, m'avait dit dans sa langue aimée: 'Setchan!' (les souris!) ..." The banal mouse incident associated with Chrysanthème recalls to him a more dramatic mouse incident in Turkey—the setting is "mystérieux" and filled with "danger," and Loti and his Turkish woman are both trembling. The situation Loti is writing about, which stimulates the memory, is more interesting to him than the situation he is actually in.

As in Proust's mémoire involontaire, when a past moment resurfaces because of a strong sensorial impression that strikes by chance, Loti's memory is more animated than is his perception of the event that has prompted it. He reacts with a violent physical sensation of

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453 Loti, Le Roman d'un enfant, p. 207.
454 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 86.
455 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 86.
shivering and shaking: "Oh! alors, un grand frisson, à ce souvenir, me secoua tout entier: ce fut comme si je me réveillais en sursaut d'un sommeil de dix années [...]." He is transported immediately to the moment ten years earlier in Turkey. The past attracts, and the present repels: "je regardai avec une espèce de haine cette poupée étendue près de moi." He regards Chrysanthème with a kind of hatred. Similarly, in Chapter 11, a description of a July 14th celebration is immediately followed by a wistful remembrance of the previous year's celebration, when Loti was "au fond de ma vieille maison familiale, la porte fermée aux importuns, tandis que la foule en gaiété hurlait dehors." Once again, he feels detachment from Japan, and it is in the act of recording his feelings of detachment that more meaningful memories return to him, causing him to retain an awareness of his personal history that predates this stay, hindering his integration into Japanese culture.

Secondly, a more complex way that texts are an obstacle to cultural integration arises in the theme of absent writing. At a certain point, the absence of letters makes Loti feel as if he is becoming more Japanese. In other words, the lack of writing helps him enter Japanese culture more deeply. In this way, writing would again be an obstacle to integration. The sense of becoming Japanese and becoming familiar with Japanese objects is directly related to receiving no letters from Europe: "Toujours pas de lettres d'Europe, de personne. Comme tout s'efface, change, s'oublie... Voici que je me fais très bien à ce Japon mignon maintenant; je me rapetisse et je me manière; je sens mes pensées se rétrécir et mes goûts incliner vers les choses mignonnes, qui font sourire seulement." A lack of communication from people back in France seems, in

456 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 86.
457 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 86.
458 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 88.
459 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 203.
the pause of the ellipsis after "s'oublie," to facilitate his cultural assimilation. It frees him to adopt Japanese habits and to style his thoughts in a Japanese way.

The lack of communication with France grants him the freedom to devote himself not only to adopting Japanese habits in an imitative way, but to altering his way of thinking, changing his taste so that his participation in the culture is not only imitative but authentic. He becomes attracted to being able to use tiny furniture and household objects, cute things, which "only make one smile," as if they do not arouse any strong emotion, but are superficial. He gives examples of these things: "je m'habite aux petits meubles ingénieux, aux pupitres de poupée pour écrire, aux bols en miniature pour faire la dinette [...]" These are collected objects.

In a later chapter, Loti again refers to his sense of becoming Japanese, and this is once again related to an absence of writing. This time, the lack of writing is not in the form of absent letters from other people, but, more surprisingly, in the form of his own lack of writing: "Huit jours viennent de passer, assez paisibles, durant lesquels je n'ai rien écrit. [...] Peu à peu je me fais à mon intérieur japonais, aux étrangetés de la langue, des costumes, des visages. Depuis trois semaines, les lettres d'Europe, égarées je ne sais où, n'arrivent plus, et cela contribue, comme toujours, à jeter un léger voile d'oubli sur les choses passées." He is counting the days during which he has not written, and this is followed by the thought that he believes he is getting accustomed to his Japanese interior, and the Japanese language, dress and people. The days of no writing have been "peaceful," which also suggests cultural integration. Again, he refers to the absence of letters from Europe, which were perhaps lost ("égarées je ne sais où"), he does not really know. There is a rupture of communication which has the effect of throwing a light veil...

[460] Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 203.
[461] Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 181.
over the past. The transition into Japanese culture involves both a geographical and temporal break. It is the absence of writing that is the condition for this break.

The two passages above present a lack of writing—either in the form of absent letters from friends or family, or his own lack of journal or fiction writing—as facilitators of cultural assimilation.

A lack of writing not only facilitates Loti's entry into the culture, but it also seems to be specific to Japan, in the sense that Japanese culture itself downplays the importance of language. In places other than Japan, Loti writes, words are not enough: "Dans d'autres pays de la terre, en Océanie dans l'île délicieuse, à Stamboul dans les vieux quartiers morts, il me semblait que les mots ne disaient jamais autant que j'aurais voulu dire, je me débattais contre mon impuissance à rendre dans une langue humaine le charme pénétrant des choses." In other countries to which Loti has traveled, words never seemed to say as much as he wanted to say. He confronted a sense of his own powerlessness to convey, in language, the charm he found in inanimate, material objects. There is a clear sense of difference between Japan and all his previous travels. Japan is distinct, special, even odd, for the way that language and writing seem less necessary or important to Loti when he is in Japan. He seems to be free from that burden, requirement or pressure to express, conveyed in the phrases "les mots ne disaient jamais autant que j'aurais voulu dire," and "mon impuissance à rendre dans une langue humaine le charme pénétrant des choses." Absent writing frees him to enter Japanese culture, and Japanese culture itself is an experience of freedom from the expectation that language will say all that one intends. You do not have to speak, you do not have to find the right words, things can just be themselves and communicate as themselves, without being translated into language. Consequently, words can be

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too much: "Ici, au contraire, les mots, justes cependant, sont trop grands, trop vibrants toujours; les mots embellissent."

However appropriate ("juste") words are, they are too expressive, too vibrant.

If, in Japan, "words are too much," then how does the writer write? What is left for the writer to say, if the people described have already said it all? Despite the freedom Loti feels from writing, and the way that absence of writing frees him to experience Japan, he is still writing. But, not surprisingly given his conflicted relationship with writing, Loti undermines his own writing. He says that his memoirs are filled "only" ("ne... que") with ridiculous details and minute notations: "Mes mémoires... qui ne se composent que de détails saugrenus; de minutieuses notations de couleurs, de formes, de senteurs, de bruits." He disparages his own writing, as leading nowhere, as lacking drama (emotion-filled and action-packed story-telling):

"Ici, je suis forcé de reconnaître que, pour qui lit mon histoire, elle doit trainer beaucoup... [paragraph break in original text] A défaut d'intrigue et de choses tragiques [...]. A défaut d'amour" (my italics). Indeed, chapters do dwell on seemingly insignificant moments, and they are often cut short before a deeper intrigue develops. An example is this moment: "Il est certain qu'ils se plaisent beaucoup, Chrysanthème et lui [Yves]. Mais j'ai confiance toujours, et je ne me figure pas que cette petite épousée de hasard puisse jamais amener un trouble un peu sérieux entre ce 'frère' et moi" (my italics). When Loti wonders about the phantom story's development, as if he is interested in a storyline, this interest trails off: "Qui sait comment cela va

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463 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 84.
464 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 164.
465 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 104.
466 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 106.
tourner, ce ménage? Est-ce une femme ou une poupée? ... Dans quelque jours, je le découvrirai peut-être..."467 The "peut-être" suggests a languidness towards his own story's development.

Loti seems, in one passage, to show evidence of caring about drama. He states that he is preoccupied with how the story will end: "Comment va être le dernier acte de ma petite comédie japonaise, le dénouement, la séparation? Y aura-t-il un peu de tristesse chez ma mousmé ou chez moi, un peu de serrement de cœur à l'instant de cette fin sans retour? Je ne vois pas bien cela par avance. Et les adieux d'Yves à Chrysanthème, comment seront-ils? Ce point surtout me préoccupe..."468 However, despite this assertion of interest, the words "je ne vois pas bien cela par avance" suggest a fogginess in the drama-creating area of his mind. Furthermore, this assertion of interest is muted by his more frequent apathy about the development of his own story.

Loti's ambivalence about pursuing traditional novelistic intrigue, though, emerges, like the idea of absent writing, as being specifically Japanese. While writing his memoirs one day, he sees the potential for romantic intrigue: "Il est vrai, tout un imbroglio de roman semble poindre à mon horizon monotone; [...] Chrysanthème amoureuse d'Yves; Yves de Chrysanthème; Oyouki, de moi; moi, de personne..."469 He sees the potential for amorous drama, but a potential which fizzles out at the end with the realization that he is not in love with anyone, and thus cannot fuel that potential drama. But then he attributes the lack of intrigue not to himself but to Japanese culture. His digressive writing style connects him to Japanese culture, he thinks. Loti is aware of a childhood memory's awkward place in his narrative: "Je reconnais que cet épisode d'enfance et d'araignées arrive drôlement au milieu de l'histoire de Chrysanthème. Mais l'interruption

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467 Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 76.
saugeune est absolument dans le goût de ce pays-ci; elle se pratique en tout, dans la causerie, dans la musique, même dans la peinture [...] Rien n'est plus japonais que de faire ainsi des digressions sans le moindre à propos.\textsuperscript{470} Digressions and interruptions, are particularly Japanese, which means that his writing is also particularly Japanese.

As if to reinforce the theme of language being either absent or excessive, and the theme of absent drama, there is the theme of hidden language. The idea of hidden language suggests a counterbalancing of language's excess and absence. Absence becomes hidden presence. Language's excess becomes less excessive. Hidden language appears in the image of Chrysanthème's sleeves concealing language, a habit representative of Japanese women:

"Comme toutes les Japonaises, Chrysanthème serre une quantité de choses dans l'intérieur de ses longues manches, où des poches sont dissimulées. [paragraph break in original text] Elle y met des lettres, des notes quelconques écrites sur des feuilles fines en pâte de riz, des prières-amulettes rédigées par des bonzes."\textsuperscript{471} She keeps letters, notes and prayers, along with other objects, up her sleeves, in secret pockets.

The significance of all of these small, hidden texts (like Loti's own short chapters in this book) is undermined by the addition of another kind of paper—tissue paper used for nose-blowing and cleaning: contained up her sleeves is "surtout une grande quantité de carrés en papier soyeux qu'elle emploie aux usages les plus imprévus: essuyer une tasse à thé, tenir la tige mouillée d'une fleur, ou moucher son petit nez drôle quand l'occasion s'en présente."\textsuperscript{472} The word "surtout" suggests that she has, in fact, a veritable attic of knick-knacks up her sleeves, most of which are not that significant, but rather practical, such as a tissue to hold a wet flower stem.

\textsuperscript{470} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{471} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{472} Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, pp. 168-169.
with. Chrysanthème's expression is not important to Loti, and this focus on paper, paper intended not for writing, but for for cosmetic purposes, further minimizes the importance of texts in Loti's Japan. Writing is reduced to absorbant paper.

When Loti observes Chrysanthème's special box containing letters and writing supplies,——another container which hides text—collected objects emerge as more significant than writing as facilitators of cultural integration: "Parmi les affaires de Chrysanthème, ce qui m'amuse à regarder, c'est la boîte consacrée aux lettres et aux souvenirs: elle est en fer-blanc, de fabrication anglaise, et porte sur son couvercle l'image coloriée d'une usine des environs de Londres." Loti supposes that Chrysanthème likes this box because of its exoticness—it was made in England ("fabrication anglaise"). It depicts a non-Japanese scene, a London factory. He writes, presuming to know her thoughts: "Naturellement c'est comme chose d'art exotique, comme bibelot, que Chrysanthème la préfère à d'autres mignonnes boîtes, en laque ou en marqueterie, qu'elle possède." He assumes she likes this English bibelot because of its difference from Japanese bibelots. Loti—the-European-observing-Japanese-things gives way to Chrysanthème—the-Japanese-woman-observing-a-European object. Roles are reversed, in Loti's imagination. Loti imagines this box to be an important collectible bibelot in Chrysanthème's eyes, and its quality as bibelot seems, for Loti, to be greater than the texts inside. Those letters merely amuse him—"Cela m'amuserait bien de lire ces lettres d'amies,—et surtout les réponses que leur fait ma mousmé..."—whereas the box itself is a more serious element: he spends more time describing it. The contrast represents the theme of collected objects being more significant than writing, in terms of facilitators of cultural integration.

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(In the passage I cited nine paragraphs above in which Loti, in the absence of letters from France, becomes attracted to cute and tiny furniture and household objects, those household objects, as a collection, also facilitate Loti's entry into Japanese culture.)

Then, writing will only facilitate cultural exploration accompanied by Japanese writing utensils, which are also decorative bibelots. Collecting makes it possible for writing to serve in the project of cultural integration (saves writing). Loti writes at one point: "J'écris par terre, assis sur une natte et m'appuyant sur un petit pupitre japonais orné de sauterelles en relief; mon encre est chinoise; mon encr:er, pareil à celui de mon propriétaire, est en jade, avec des crapauds mignons et des crapoussins sculptés sur le rebord." Loti describes the precise objects he employs to write—the ink and inkwell, and the small desk he uses to write on—in terms of their decorative aspects, including grasshoppers in relief and "cute," sculpted toads: The writing that ensues is his memoirs, which we are reading, and which connect him to Japanese culture: his ink is "pareil à celui de mon propriétaire" (the same as my landlord's). (The ink is Chinese, but his Japanese landlord is using it.)

In the same passage Loti also compares his memoir-writing to that of M. Sucre, a neighbor referred to throughout the novel: "Et j'écris mes mémoires, en somme,—tout à fait comme en bas M. Sucre!... Par moments je me figure que je lui ressemble, et cela m'est bien désagréable..." Loti's excitement at his connection with M. Sucre is quickly undermined by disgust. As always, Loti's relationship to Japanese culture is riddled with the tension between curiosity and detachment, but the point here is that writing functions to implant him in this Japanese world by comparing him, or at least connecting him to, two Japanese people.

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476 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 164.
477 Loti, Madame Chrysanthème, p. 164.
He is inspired by a Japanese woman, writes with Japanese instruments and supplies, and then compares himself to a Japanese memoirist. Even if this latter comparison disgusts him, writing does connect with Japan when associated with local writing utensils. Collecting saves Loti's relationship to writing because even though writing is usually an obstacle to cultural integration, writing with local supplies connects him to the culture.

Collecting also saves his relationship to writing by making possible a different sort of story: the un-dramatic story he undermined in fact becomes validated by the collection. When Chrysanthème visits Loti one day on board his ship (since he continues to return to his ship regularly while living with Chrysanthème), Loti describes the collection he has been creating in his cabin in more detail than he describes the event of Chrysanthème's first visit on board, accompanied by her neighbor madame Prune:

Dans ma chambre, il y a un grand Bouddha sur son trône, et devant lui un plateau de laque où mon matelot fidèle rassemble les menues pièces d'argent qu'il trouve errantes dans mes habits. Madame Prune, qui a l'esprit tourné au mysticisme, s'est crue là devant un autel véritable; le plus gravement du monde, elle a adressé au dieu une courte prière; puis, tirant son porte-monnaie (qui était, suivant l'usage, derrière son dos, attaché à sa ceinture bouffante avec sa blague et sa petite pipe), elle a déposé dans le plateau une pieuse offrande, en faisant la révérence.\footnote{Loti, \textit{Madame Chrysanthème}, p. 175.}

This excerpt (which we discussed previously in Chapter Three of this study) constitutes most of this very short chapter—only half a page long. Loti is intrigued by the verisimilitude of his collection in the eyes of Madame Prune, who thinks herself to be before a real Japanese altar and begins to pray before it with great solemnity. The chapter ends with Chrysanthème asking to see Yves before she departs. Loti writes: "je me suis demandé si ce dénouement assez pitoyable,
vaguement redouté jusqu'ici, n'allait pas bientôt se produire..."\(^{479}\) Thus, once again, there is a hint of traditional intrigue, a love affair, but it is allotted hardly any textual space compared to the space allotted to his description of his cabin, presented above. Loti’s collection of Japanese objects is more worthy of representation in writing than any budding romantic intrigue. Collecting is the way that he connects most with the culture, despite his supposed "marriage" to Chrysanthème. The intrigue is not in marriage, but in his objects.

Loti evokes uncertainty about the efficacy of writing for understanding Japanese culture, unless it is accomplished with local writing supplies. A collection inspires Japanese-style writing: the undramatic story.

In Huysmans and Loti, texts are obstacles to be reckoned with. Des Esseintes needed to distance himself from literature—with the help of his collection—before being able to return to it. In Loti, writing proves an obstacle to cultural integration; collected objects are revealed to be more useful to this end.

In the new literary period initiated by Flaubert, in which the literary creative process comes to depicted as an anguished struggle, a need arises, the need to control the writer's relationship to writing, to ease it, to relieve some of the anxiety surrounding it. Collecting is a solution, in the way that the collector, as a metaphor for the writer, is able to use his collection to improve his conflicted relationship with texts, domesticate them. He returns to literature more peacefully, in the case of Huysmans, and fulfills more effectively the aims of writing (cultural integration) in the case of Loti.

\(^{479}\) Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, p. 175.
Conclusion

As critical discussion on collecting and 19th-century French literature has shown, collecting can be viewed as being on the side of sterile, repetitive accumulation, or on the side of creation, conceived of as being a whole. Yet this perspective neglects to develop how collecting is a process, an activity, an investigation, an exploration, an *apprentissage*. All are different from the terms of the binary opposition between non-creation and creation, failure and success. Even though I have used the terms interchangeably throughout this study, we might say that *collecting* is different from the *collection*. A collection is a fixed, stable, rigid whole; collecting is a process, neither static pile, nor perfect *œuvre*.

Following Bourget and Goncourt, I rooted my study in a contemporary meaning of "collecting" from the 1880s as relating to the widespread taste for domestic interiors filled with objects in the 1880s. That meaning was my starting point, rather than the ideas of later, 20th-century theorists of collecting.

I considered how collecting investigates the self, exercises the powers of the mind, inquires about the individual's relationship to society and to texts in French literature at the end of the 19th century. Huysmans' and Loti's texts, more than any others of this period, depict collecting as an earnest activity of self-exploration. The scope of the study, focusing mostly on two writers of the 1880s is, therefore, narrow.

The specific collections involved in this study were Huysmans' character des Esseintes' whimsically decorated house outside of Paris, the protagonist Loti's collection of Japanese objects in Japan, the protagonist Loti's floating museum on board his ship, and the author Loti's home museum in Rochefort. Through close readings of my two texts—paying attention to
repeated words, descriptions, imagery, figurative language, ironies, contradictions, juxtapositions, ambiguities, tone and intertextual references, textual form and structure—I analyzed how the theme of collecting is deployed by Huysmans and Loti to explore self, mind, society and texts. In Loti's case, I also considered the life of Loti for its relevance to the meaning of collecting in his work.

My hypothesis was that Huysmans and Loti would follow Bourget's ideas in some ways—by portraying collecting as a source or result of melancholic inwardness—while offering other insights beyond what Bourget observed, insights that can be gleaned by close reading.

The arc of this study emerged from the theme of collecting itself, beginning with the self and mind of the collector, proceeding to how he organizes space, to how he interacts with other people, to how he approaches literature. The end point of this study—texts—implies a critical assumption on my part that all literature communicates about the world, and also about texts.

In Chapter One, we saw how collecting defines the self while also giving way to an unforeseen, parallel process of self-definition arising from Huysman's text itself, as opposed to des Esseintes' own thought process. The collector searches to define himself, in relation to the society he has left, and his collection helps him to do so by revealing the personality type he corresponds to. At the same time, Huysmans' text also compares him to another group of people, manual night workers. In his memory of an urgent trip to a dentist, des Esseintes also, in a more conscious way, connects with a poorer section of town, non-bourgeois, thus redefining his relationship to society. Just as des Esseintes is revealed to be not simply retreating from society but actively re-defining his relationship to it, so *A Rebours* is a transitional text in the way that it accentuates collecting, in the form of decors, as a common theme to both naturalism and post-naturalist literature.
A Rebours does not plunge into des Esseintes' mind with the fervor and allegiance to minute meanderings of thought that a later, modernist text will, such as Joyce's Ulysses (1919) or Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse (1927), in which thought is recorded as if from within a character's mind. Neither a writer, nor a painter of works of art, des Esseintes is simply choosing a wall color and thinking about colors of paint—mere foundational elements, raw materials. He has emptied his life of its components; choosing paint colors and defining himself by rejecting categories of people is a foundational, elemental act of self-construction. In A Rebours, material objects constitute a firm anchor for thought, keeping his mind focused on the concrete. We feel the strong presence of an omniscient narrator who is observing des Esseintes' thoughts from without. On the whole, the narrator relates those thoughts to us in an orderly manner (i.e. not directly transcribing the illogical jumps and parapraxes of thought). Marc Fumaroli calls the figure of des Esseintes a weak thread, "un personnage esquissé à peine" (a hardly sketched-out character).

However, what is important to understand is the way Huysmans' novel still ventures into new mental, interior territory, by means of the collection. Whether or not des Esseintes achieves his goals—whether he is more or less "esquissé," fleshed out—is less important than what he is trying to accomplish. The point is the effort made at attempting to figure himself out. As Fumaroli suggests, A Rebours can be considered the first expression of the stream-of-consciousness technique: its "unité de voix, qui fait vivre l'ensemble," despite the disconnectedness of the chapters, is already, "sans même que Huysmans l'eût prévu ou voulu, la première expérience de stream of consciousness littéraire." This idea will be more formally articulated later in the decade by Edouard Dujardin's idea of the monologue intérieur, presented

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in his novel *Les Lauriers sont coupés* (1887), as language that communicates the discontinuity and unintelligibility of nascent thoughts before they are organized into a description by the author; it differs in this way from the psychological novel in which the author describes the most intimate thoughts of the characters.

In Chapter Two, des Esseintes' collecting project, as an exercise in his mental powers and compositional experiments, involving traveling in the imagination, and controlling time and desire. Through the theme of collecting, Huysmans is staking out new mental space and powers, mechanizing experiences, but in such a way that the process of learning to mechanize them is more important that the outcome.

Earlier 19th-century representations of collecting showed objects as possessing supernatural powers (as a magic carpet does in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* (1831)). Now, the mind itself possesses those kinds of powers. Collecting leads the collector into the unknown—not a supernatural unknown but a personal unknown. The collector conducts experiments, whose outcomes, by definition, cannot be predicted, and yet he finds ways, using his collection, to be at ease even when those experiments fail. He even plans for the unpredictable, and in that sense masters unpredictability itself.

In Chapter Three, we saw how Loti's perpetual in-between status—like des Esseintes, he is working out his relationship to the social—between home and the foreign, destabilizes the meaning of each of those terms, "home" and the "foreign." His perpetual in-between status also destabilizes the meaning of authenticity and inauthenticity, in the context of collected objects circulating between France and Japan. Neither Japan nor Europe is the source of objects' meaning, but rather it is the collector who gives them meaning. Loti's floating collections offer a third way, circumventing these oppositions. From Huysmans' theme of mental travel without
going very far (long sea journeys, travel back in time to Salomé and Herod, truncated trip to London and the turtle's truncated movement), we have entered Loti's world of very real and dazzling travels (real in the sense of being what most people think of when they think of travels, a trip in which one moves far away in physical space to less well-known lands), floating collections and a spectacular home museum.

The all-powerful collector in Chapter Two, reigning over an equally spectacular but more manageable domestic world gives way to Loti's exploits in a spectacular exterior, social and foreign world. Other people make their presence felt much more, in Loti, despite his detachment. The idea of "home" becomes tightly intertwined with other people. While des Esseintes officially left behind his childhood home, and all of the oppressive and painful memories there (the Château-de-Lourps), Loti radically transformed his own childhood home and makes a life of traveling away from it and returning to it, and then chooses to establish a temporary home—a home in appearance only, and otherwise devoid of feeling—in Chrysanthème's house, a home that mocks the idea of home. In Loti, "home" becomes inextricable from other people. Loti’s domestic collection, which constantly reminds him of other people and places. Loti must extend des Esseintes' project, by finding a collection even more detached from others, than the domestic collection. This emerges in the floating collection, literally "detached" from land, perfect for the detached Loti. That is how Loti deals with other people—by establishing a collection even more detached from society than that of des Esseintes: a collection that floats. Dealing with other people, through the work of the collection, remains an unresolved, but still present, issue, which makes a larger sense given France's immersion in colonial enterprises at the end of the 19th century.
Women, and the desire they represent, are banished from the collector's world in Huysmans (des Esseintes announces early on that he would now be composing his interior not for entertaining women, but for himself alone, just as Huysmans claimed he had sought to get beyond the traditional intrigue of romantic/sexual passion involving women). Women, and the desire they represent return in Loti in the more complicated form of the bibelot, which is not mere inanimate object, but reverberating, effervescing, resisting object signifying a messy, inward creative process—Loti's text itself. The idea of the woman-bibelot that emerges from Loti's writing, to whom/ to which Loti compares himself, also reveals that it is among bibelots that Loti feels most himself. The collector becomes his collected object—another way Loti detaches from people at the same time that he connects with them, because he has bibelotized them. He brings women back into the narrative as, specifically, a lack of drama, which corresponds to his characterization of his own writing as undramatic. Loti goes further than Huysmans by giving form to the absence of women in the image of the woman-bibelot, and by identifying himself with that image.

In Chapter Four, we revealed how collecting acquires the power to save the collector from texts. The collector's struggle with texts is a metaphor for the idea of the post-Flaubertian writer as artisan painstakingly working his material. Both des Esseintes and Loti respond to this Sisyphus-like image of the writer by domesticating texts. In this way, they resolve the struggle. The collection assists the collector in approaching texts on his own terms. In this way, collected objects acquire a power over texts, the power to re-work the collector's relationship with texts, just as it helped him re-work his relationship with society.

Collecting objects at the end of the 19th century invites interpretations of it as a response to the new urban environment and consumerism resulting from industrialization. More objects
were circulating, for sale, changing hands and being displayed at this time than ever before.

Buying and decorating habits evolved as a consequence, generating the spectrum of attitudes toward material objects, from repulsion to addiction, that has been familiar to Western societies ever since. Certainly, there is an anxiety surrounding material objects and the individual's relationship to them at work in the representation of collecting in Huysmans and Loti. Huysmans' and Loti's treatments of collecting, different from the purpose of the Arts and Crafts Movement we evoked in the Introduction, are not attempting social reform—they care far more about themselves than about society. Yet they do reveal collecting to be a process of apprentissage that is carving out a new, mental space, and reworking the relationship between the individual and society, as well as between the individual and texts.

Huysmans and Loti prefigure the modernist turn toward the superfluousness of objects, insofar as the collector's elaborate reflection on his objects dominates the two texts discussed in this study. As the collector comes to be at home with objects, objects become, increasingly, catalysts for inner mental exploration. We have not yet reached the point in literary modernity, epitomized by Woolf, Joyce and Proust, among others, when the mind's perception of the material world, rather than objects themselves, will become all-important. The collected objects of des Esseintes and Loti are still, often, special and rare; these characters are not yet exulting in the trivial, universally available object, as later modernists will do. Huysmans' text is still structured by rooms and elements of des Esseintes' collection, and Loti's collection is structured by chronology—not yet by memory, as in Proust. In Huysmans and Loti, there is still great faith in material objects and the artful arrangement of them to satisfy desires, to be the answer to the quest, to fill the lack, to lead one inward, to solve problems.
Already, by the end of the 1880s, the window of earnest self-exploration through collecting, as exemplified by Huysmans and Loti, will close. In Oscar Wilde's 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which became well-known and widely read in France at the time of its publication, Dorian collects in the manner of des Esseintes—perfumes, jewels, tapestries and fabrics, clothing—in order to avoid recognizing his own inner, hidden corruption, expressed only by the portrait of him, which ages, while his own face remains young. His collected objects "were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, [...] from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne. Upon the walls of the lonely locked room [...], he had hung [...] the terrible portrait whose changing features showed him the real degradation of his life." Collecting in Wilde's story becomes implicated in hiding the truth of oneself.

In Huysmans' and Loti's depictions of collecting art, art objects and other elements, there is, in contrast, a sense of profitable, fruitful exploration of self, rather than a fear of self-exploration. The collecting they portray is a way of coming to be at home in one's own mind—seeking not originality but simply the articulation of one's own perspective.

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**Collecting and 19th-century Literature**


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