

Regusted with life: the therapeutic value of humour in J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* [Against Nature]

Richard Hibbitt

University of Leeds, UK
R.Hibbitt@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

Although J.-K. Huysmans's Decadent novel À rebours [Against Nature] is not known primarily as a comic novel, it has amused readers for different reasons since its publication in 1884. Henri Bergson identifies the body as a source of comedy, which is why tragic heroes do not drink, eat, or warm themselves up. I develop Bergson's premise here to read Against Nature as a tragicomedy where the protagonist's attempts to live an artificial existence are subverted by the functions of the body: eating, drinking, excreting, and copulating. But the humour is not limited to these bodily functions: we can also discern it in the structure of the novel, the narrator's deadpan tone, and the protagonist's hybrid status as both dandy and clown. Building on an insight by André Breton, I argue that the comedy in Against Nature has a therapeutic value in the etymological sense of therapia as healing. I link this to Freud's view that the mechanism of the joke can be aligned with the functions of the grammatical person. As the first person of the joke, Huysmans through his narrator provides this therapy for his protagonist, the second person or subject of the joke. As for us, the readers or third persons of the joke, the therapy resides in the solitary or collective reception of this cautionary tale: if we find ourselves raging against other people or the demands of our bodies, we need to remember the importance of laughter, healthy living, and sociability. Des Esseintes, the protagonist of Against Nature, is disgusted with life; I conclude that he needs to become regusted in order to regain his taste for life and to stay alive. Reading Against Nature as both a comic novel and a therapeutic process enables us to see literary Decadence in a new light and to think more broadly about the therapeutic effects of comedy.

Keywords: Huysmans, Bergson, Breton, Freud, Decadence, aestheticism, artifice, tragicomedy, therapy.

1. Introduction

In his essay *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* [Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic], originally published as three separate articles in *La Revue de Paris* in 1899, Henri Bergson identifies the inevitable comic potential of the human body: “Dès que le souci du corps intervient, une infiltration comique est à craindre. C’est pourquoi les héros de tragédie ne boivent pas, ne mangent pas, ne se chauffent pas” (Bergson, 2007, p. 40); “No

sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared. On this account, the hero in a tragedy does not eat or drink or warm himself” (Bergson, 1921, p. 52). Bergson’s theoretical reflections on comedy provide us with a wide range of axioms and examples, encompassing its incompatibility with emotion, its role as a corrective to rigidity, and its relation to concepts such as automatism, exaggeration, repetition, inversion, reciprocal interference, dreams, artifice, absent-mindedness, irony, wit, and the absurd. It is also interesting to note what Bergson does *not* discuss, such as bathos, nervous laughter, or the existence of comedy in apparently non-comic works (most of his literary examples come from Molière, but he also refers frequently to Cervantes, and in passing to writers including Jerome K. Jerome, Johann Nestroy, Jean Paul [Johann Paul Friedrich Richter], and Mark Twain). For the purposes of this article, it is particularly interesting that Bergson keeps the tragic and the comic separate: he does not consider the possibility of the tragicomic, nor reflect on the blurring of genres seen in Romanticism. This becomes apparent later in the essay when he considers the comic element in character:

“Cette différence essentielle entre la tragédie et la comédie, l’une s’attachant à des individus et l’autre à des genres, se traduit d’une autre manière encore. Elle apparaît dans l’élaboration première de l’œuvre. Elle se manifeste, dès le début, par deux méthodes d’observation bien différentes.

(Bergson, 2007, p. 127)

[“This essential difference between tragedy and comedy, the former being concerned with individuals and the latter with classes, is revealed in yet another way. It appears in the first draft of the work. From the outset it is manifested by two radically different methods of observation.”]

(Bergson, 1921, p. 165)

Bergson sees tragic characters – he cites Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, and Lear – as individuals, whereas comic characters tend towards types, such as *The Misanthrope* and *The Miser*. But although this distinction may hold true for classical and neo-classical drama, it seems limited when applied to literary works where these codes are not followed. With regard to the body always being in the domain of the comic, we can adapt Bergson’s insight to argue that the body is intrinsically *tragicomic*: it can never be completely controlled and will eventually grow old, fail, and die. The body, in all its imperfections, is a potential site of tragicomedy, exemplified by the pathos of Pozzo in the second act of Samuel Beckett’s *En attendant Godot* [*Waiting for Godot*], begging for pity after involuntarily farting. Flatulence is of course not the only bodily function with comic potential: eating, drinking, excreting, and copulating are all fraught with intentional or unintentional humour. Social codes governing public and private behaviour in different contexts – including questions of taste – teach us how to organise and control these functions, but we can never exert complete control.

In 1884, fifteen years before Bergson published his essay on comedy, the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans published his novel *À rebours* [*Against Nature*], renowned as a foundational work of literary Decadence. It narrates the attempts of its protagonist, the young aristocrat and dandy Duke Jean-Floressas des Esseintes, to live a completely aestheticized life away from other human beings (he retains two servants, who are under instructions not to speak to him). Ultimately this experiment fails: the novel ends when Des Esseintes becomes gravely ill and is ordered by his doctor to return to Paris to live a ‘normal’ life among other people again. One interpretation of the text is to read it as a critique of both dandyism and Decadence as a *modus vivendi*. This reading views Des Esseintes’s attempt to live a solitary life as unnatural: the French title *À rebours* is usually translated into English as either ‘against

the grain' or 'against nature', which is based on the narrator's description in Chapter 7 of "ce confinement contre nature où il s'entêtait" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 113); ["that unnatural confinement to which he obstinately clung"] (Huysmans, 1998, p. 64). I read the failure of his experiment as the irruption of the tragicomic body into the text: Des Esseintes attempts to control his desires and drives, but the natural workings of the body cannot be suppressed. The first part of this article traces the instances of this unruly body in the text as it approaches the point of crisis. The second part analyses the humour in the novel in the context of its contemporaneous reception in the *fin de siècle* and subsequent critical views, focusing in particular on André Breton's view that Huysmans's black humour has a therapeutic function. The third part develops Breton's insight to read the comedy in *Against Nature* as a form of therapy for both the protagonist and the reader(s), which is aligned with Freud's view that the mechanism of the joke can be aligned with the functions of grammatical persons in a sentence. The arrival of the medical doctor toward the end of the novel imposes a therapeutic regime of sustenance and sociability on Des Esseintes. I argue that the comedy in the text adds a further dimension to this therapy.

2. Humour and the body in *Against Nature*

Huysmans's *Against Nature* has made readers laugh since it first appeared, as several early reviews demonstrate (see Huysmans, 2014; Meunier, 1885). At first sight this humour derives largely from the eccentricities and occasional farcical behaviour of its protagonist. However, the sources of comedy are not limited simply to a selection of occasional interludes that provide light relief from the sustained analyses of art, literature, music, interior design, perfumes, and plants. Further sources of humour can be identified both in the narrator's deadpan tone and in the reader's response to the unusual narrative structure of the text, which suggests that the comedy is both pervasive and heterogeneous. The tone is certainly not light-hearted: the omniscient extradiegetic narrator scrupulously avoids the temptation to poke fun at the protagonist, concentrating instead on the detailed description of his actions, surroundings, possessions, opinions, recollections, and dreams. Yet although the narrator eschews the temptation of complicity with the reader that would derive from an ironic commentary on the protagonist's thoughts and actions, the neutrality of narration is paradoxically comical because of this very lack of indulgence. Nor is the protagonist a wisecracking joker inclined to dispense *bons mots*, witticisms, or repartee; in fact, he barely speaks and the novel is almost devoid of dialogue. The humour in the text resides primarily in its reception: in Freud's terms, in the "third person of the joke" (Freud, 2002, p. 178).

One of the most striking features of *Against Nature* is the way that it shifts the conventional nineteenth-century emphasis on plot development from movement to stasis. The prologue summarizes in seven or eight pages the first few decades of Des Esseintes's life, including his parents' death and his gradual dissatisfaction with the attractions of Parisian life for a rich bachelor. The remainder of the book – sixteen short chapters occupying 200 pages – consists of the narration of his attempts to live an artificial existence, interspersed with chapters on his interest in literature, painting, music, and other subjects. This shift in emphasis – the prologue contains enough potential material for an entire *Bildungsroman* – allows Huysmans's narrator to focus in detail on the effects of Des Esseintes's experiment, akin to a scientist observing an experiment in the laboratory (in this respect *Decadence* is a continuation of Naturalism, rather than an outright repudiation). Nearly all the narrative is focalized through the mind of Des Esseintes: we follow his daily activities, reflections, and reminiscences. This in turn allows the reader to follow the protagonist's vicissitudes as if in

real time; there are few explicit references to time after the prologue, so we are unaware of how much time elapses before the doctor's ultimatum at the end of the book.

I identify eight moments in the novel where the body is a source of comedy, notwithstanding the fact that another reader may not agree with my choices. The first of these occurs in Chapter One, where Des Esseintes recalls a "funereal dinner" he held in Paris to mark the "temporary demise" of his virility: "Le dîner de faire part d'une virilité momentanément morte, était-il écrit sur les lettres d'invitations semblables à celles des enterrements" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 50); ["The invitations to this dinner to mark the temporary demise of the host's virility were written out in a form similar to that used to announce a funeral"] (Huysmans, 1998, p. 12). As readers we may smile at the incongruity, peculiarity, and excess of this celebration, where all the food, drink and decor are black. With hindsight we can see this dinner not simply as an example of the dandy's hyperbolic artifice but also as the first recorded instance in the novel of Des Esseintes's attempts to control his body, in this case his libido. The next example comes in Chapter Four and concerns not a recollection but a current activity: the narrator describes Des Esseintes's "orgue à bouche" ["mouth organ"], a term used here to refer to his attempts to 'play' his vast collection of liqueurs: "Il appelait cette réunion de barils à liqueurs, son orgue à bouche [...] Du reste, chaque liqueur correspondait, selon lui, comme goût, au son d'un instrument" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 83); ["He called this collection of casks of liqueur his mouth organ [...] Furthermore, the flavour of each cordial corresponded, Des Esseintes believed, to the sound of an instrument"] (Huysmans, 1998, p. 39). Once more we may find ourselves smiling at this whimsical eccentricity while marvelling at Des Esseintes's attempts to aestheticize all the aspects of his life, from his surroundings to his sustenance. However, unlike the decision to mourn his lost libido, in this case he wants to develop his taste buds through experiments with synaesthesia: the exaggeration here concerns plenitude rather than abstinence. On this occasion the creosote taste of an Irish whisky reminds him of phenol, which brings back the memory of having an infected molar being pulled out early one morning by a Parisian dentist where no appointments were necessary: the macabre description of the tooth's extraction can also be construed as an example of black humour through the caricatural description of the terrifying dentist and his elderly female assistant (1998, pp. 40-43).

As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that, despite his best efforts, Des Esseintes cannot control his repressed sexual desires. At the end of Chapter 8, he has an erotic dream which turns into a nightmare, tempered by an element of comedy. Initially he dreams about a woman wearing green stockings, but when she turns around her face is ravaged by the effects of syphilis. He escapes from her by going through a door that opens onto a clearing in a forest, where he sees an unexpected scene: "Devant lui, au milieu d'une vaste clairière, d'immenses et blancs pierrots faisaient des sauts de lapins, dans des rayons de lune" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 131); ["Before him, in the middle of a vast clearing, enormous white clowns were jumping about like rabbits in the moonlight"] (Huysmans, 1998, p. 79). Des Esseintes fears that he may be crushed by these enormous somersaulting clowns; for the reader, however, this unexpected comic image, accentuated by the simile and connotation of fecundity, provides respite from the grotesque description of syphilis. It is short-lived, however: the vision of syphilis returns, now as a hybrid image of woman and plant. The brief comic element here is indicative of any absurd dream, where incongruous elements are juxtaposed: the allusion to the circus also exemplifies the ambiguity of comedy, where the exaggerated behaviour of the clowns can inspire both fear and laughter.

The comic element is also evident in Chapter 9, where Des Esseintes, by now bored equally by his solitary life and his collection of art and literature – and unexpectedly aroused by reading Dickens –, attempts to satisfy his renascent libido by recalling his previous lovers,

with the aid of a certain pastel purported to trigger memories of debauchery. Among others, he recalls paying a female ventriloquist to practise her art when they are in bed together, pretending either to be a mythical creature such as the Sphinx, or – on a slightly more prosaic note – to be her own husband coming home to catch her in bed with her lover. But the ventriloquist soon tires of Des Esseintes: “Malheureusement, ces séances furent de durée brève; malgré les prix exagérés qu’il lui paya, la ventriloque le congédia et, le soir même, s’offrit à un gaillard dont les exigences étaient moins compliquées et les reins plus sûrs” (Huysmans, 2014, p. 142); [“Unfortunately these sessions were of brief duration; despite the exorbitant prices he was paying her, the ventriloquist dismissed him and that very same evening gave herself to a likely fellow with less complicated requirements and more reliable loins”] (Huysmans, 1998, p. 89). We are transported briefly to the realm of the bedroom farce rather than the circus, which introduces a further comic element: arguably it is here where the comic undercurrents in the text become more apparent, resulting for some readers not just in a wry smile but an actual laugh. This can be attributed to the introduction of farce: not only is it amusing to imagine these theatrical bedroom antics, but the thought of Des Esseintes having to hide in the wardrobe to suddenly escape from an imaginary irate husband makes the whole episode ridiculous. A variation on these comic tropes is also evident in Chapter 10, where Des Esseintes’s experiments with perfumery lead him to recall a previous lover who was aroused by situations where there were specific odours: “où qu’elle pouvait humer, au milieu des caresses, l’odeur de la suie, du plâtre des maisons en construction, par les temps de pluie, ou de poussière mouchetée par de grosses gouttes d’orage, pendant l’été” (Huysmans, 2014, p. 154); [“when she could inhale, while they were making love, the smell of soot, or of the rain-soaked plaster of unfinished new houses, or of dust spattered by heavy raindrops during summer storms”] (Huysmans, 1998, p. 99). Here our response may be once more the surprised smile or raised eyebrow rather than an actual laugh: as with the first two examples discussed above, it is the eccentricity of people’s bodily functions that creates the comic effect.

In the remaining chapters of the novel, the sources of physical humour move from sex to food. In Chapter 11, Des Esseintes devours an enormous meal for one in a restaurant near Gare Saint-Lazare before a planned train and boat trip to London; having enjoyed so much the heavy array of English food and drink (oxtail soup, smoked haddock, sirloin steak with potatoes, Stilton cheese, and a rhubarb tart, washed down with two pints of ale, a glass of porter, and coffee laced with gin), he decides that he no longer needs to visit England and returns home (1998, pp. 111-112). Our amusement at this scene is a response to unexpected behaviour, whether we see it as bathetic or not. In Chapter 13, he experiences an unexpected “perverted craving” (1998, p. 137) for the bread and cheese *tartines* enjoyed by local children that he sees outside his garden in the street; he asks his servants to prepare these snacks for him, but cannot digest them. Des Esseintes’s gradual inability to stomach any food results in a visit by the doctor, who recommends that he should be nourished via enema until his stomach problems disappear. This culminates in Chapter 15 in the surprising inclusion of a recipe that is soberly described as his ‘enema menu’:

<i>Huile de foie de morue</i> [Cod-liver oil]:	20g
<i>Thé de bœuf</i> [Beef tea]:	200g
<i>Vin de Bourgogne</i> [Burgundy]:	200g
<i>Jaune d’œuf</i> [Yolk of egg]:	n. 1

(Huysmans, 2014, p. 238; Huysmans, 1998, p. 171)

The effect of this on the reader may be more an exhalation of surprise than a belly laugh: the response of amazement that Des Esseintes's experiment in artificial living has led him to circumvent the frustrating business of eating and digesting altogether. Gradually, however, he is able to ingest a light punch orally, which the narrator describes simply as the "normal route": "par les voies ordinaires, un sirop de punch à la poudre de viande dont le vague arôme de cacao plaisait à sa réelle bouche" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 238); ["by the normal route, a syrupy punch containing powdered meat, which had a vague aroma of cocoa that pleased his actual palate"] (Huysmans, 1998, p. 172). The novel ends shortly afterwards as Des Esseintes angrily accepts that he has to leave his cloistered home, return to Paris, and live again amidst what is described in the prologue as "l'incessant déluge de la sottise humaine" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 44); ["the incessant deluge of human folly"] (Huysmans, 1998, p. 7).

The incidents discussed above embrace several different types of comedy: eccentricity, exaggeration, caricature, absurdity, farce, bathos, and irony. They are all connected by the presence of the unexpected: the amusement derives from Des Esseintes's attempts to control his body and others' bodies. His attempts to live a life governed by 'good taste' end in what might be construed as 'bad taste': the zonal confusion of juxtaposed eating and defecating. But the irruption of comical bodily functions into the text has a serious effect: Des Esseintes's failure to suppress his libido or permanently bypass normal means of sustenance is part of a failed experiment which risks ending in death; in this sense, the comedy enables a tragedy to be averted. The second part of this article will consider the ways in which different critics have interpreted the comic elements of *Against Nature*: how does the comedy influence our response to Huysmans' depiction of Des Esseintes's experiment?

3. Reading the humour in *Against Nature*

Several of Huysmans's contemporaries commented on the humour in *Against Nature*, as the various letters and reviews collected by Daniel Grojnowski testify (Huysmans, 2014; see also Meunier, 1885; Jourde, 1991). Zola noted in a letter to Huysmans that some of the comic elements, including the "lavements nourissants" ["nourishing enemas"], exemplify "la blague sérieusement faite" ["the joke made in seriousness"], which neatly describes the narrator's tone (Huysmans, 2014, p. 340). The critic Ferdinand Brunetière singled out the "situations burlesques" such as the episode of the enema, playfully suggesting that, had he known about such scientific advances, Molière himself might have included a similar scene in his 1673 comedy *Le Malade imaginaire* [*The Imaginary Invalid*]: "Et quant à l'idée de 'protester contre le bas péché de gourmandise' en se nourrissant *a posteriori*, ceux qui goûtent *Le Malade imaginaire* jusqu'au bout [...] regretteront éternellement que l'état de la médecine de son temps n'ait pas permis à Molière d'en exploiter tout le bas comique" (Brunetière, 1884, p. 699); ["And as for the idea of "protesting against the base sin of gluttony" by feeding oneself *a posteriori*, those who appreciate completely *The Imaginary Invalid* [...] will regret forever that the state of medicine in his time did not allow Molière to exploit all the base comedy"]. Although Brunetière's overall appraisal of the novel was unfavourable, he shows how this "base comedy" belongs to a tradition of theatrical humour as spectacle; this is a type of humour that Bergson describes, but which is found here in an unusual source: a novel about an aristocrat.

Other critics noted comedy running throughout the novel. André Hallays surmised that readers who found it complex, unnatural and long-winded would nonetheless be entertained: "Ils pourront cependant se divertir à cette lecture, grâce à un comique rare et original, le comique de la folie!" (Jourde, 1991, p. 149); ["they will however be entertained whilst

reading, thanks to rare and original comedy – the comedy of folly!"]. Guy de Maupassant's review similarly highlighted the integral role of comedy in Huysmans's approach to *Decadence*: "Le romancier J.-K. Huysmans, dans son livre stupéfiant, qui a pour titre *À rebours*, vient d'analyser et de raconter de la façon la plus ingénieuse, la plus drôle et la plus imprévue, la maladie d'un de ces dégoûtés" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 355); ["The novelist J.-K. Huysmans, in his stupefying book, *Against Nature*, has just analysed and narrated in the most ingenious, funny and unexpected fashion the illness of one of these disgusted people"]. Maupassant illustrates his point not by referring to the more obvious comic moments, but by two long quotations, one from the first chapter, on the subject of Des Esseintes's preference for the colour orange, and the other from the tenth chapter, where he experiments with creating different perfumes. He describes *Against Nature* as "ce livre extravagant et désopilant" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 355); ["this extravagant and hilarious book"]. Although perhaps only a minority of readers would choose the epithet 'hilarious' to describe the novel, Maupassant's critique foregrounds two wider sources of humour in the text: Des Esseintes's experiments in artificiality *per se*, and the tone in which they are depicted. In this reading, the whole book becomes comic. Paul Ginisty's review refers to the book as "une prodigieuse 'fumisterie' d'artiste" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 355); ["a prodigious artist's 'hoax'"]. Understanding the term 'fumisterie' as a hoax suggests that the entire novel can be seen as a kind of joke at the expense of its protagonist, its readers, and possibly its author.

More recent commentators on the novel have developed this reading to include reference to subsequent developments in comedy. In his introduction to the Oxford World's Classics translation, Nicholas White makes an analogy with Beckettian humour: "In a manner which Beckett's devotees would recognize, *Against Nature* nevertheless achieves a stoical and at times outrageously funny sense of the absurdity of Des Esseintes's endeavours, in incidents such as the funereal dinner, the episode of the extracted molar, and his enema 'menu'" (White, 1998, p. xvi). The elements of situation comedy are noted by Patrick McGuinness in his introduction to the Penguin translation, where a parallel is drawn with Flaubert: "Ahead of our era of artificial intelligence, Flaubert exposed the era of artificial stupidity, and there is an element of Bouvard and Pécuchet in Des Esseintes. It is legitimate to find some of his antics farcical: his world of knowledge without context, reference without points of reference, discovery without application is in part related to theirs" (McGuinness, 2003, p. xxxiii). McGuinness argues that Huysmans shared this view of his protagonist: "Though he became one of literature's most famous and most imitated characters, for Huysmans and many of his more alert contemporaries Des Esseintes was a ridiculous figure, a caricature trapped in his own claustrophobic farce" (2003, p. xxxiv). Daniel Grojnowski ends his preface to the 2014 Flammarion edition by emphasizing the dual quality of this humour: "C'est un roman drôle dont les épisodes, dans la tradition de l'humour, sont frappés à chaud – et à froid" (Huysmans, 2014, p. 310); ["It's a funny novel where the episodes – in the tradition of humour – are both hot and cold"]. We might infer from Grojnowski's appraisal that the novel combines conventional elements of humour with the strangely humorous neutrality of their narration.

Two other critics have considered the comedy in *Against Nature* in greater depth. In *French Laughter* (2008, pp. 62-79), Walter Redfern discusses several sources of humour in his analysis of the text. Redfern notes that the notion of *à rebours*/against the grain is inherently comic, as is the figure of the dandy: he refers to Des Esseintes's "maniacal" experiments (2008, p. 64) his "pedantry" (2008, p. 65), and his "arseways-round philosophy of existence" (2008, p. 71), comparing him to "the circus clown trying to perform some intricate task and failing catastrophically" (2008, p. 69). Redfern adds a further dimension when he suggests that Des Esseintes may also be in on the joke: "he retains the capacity to

play jokes or tricks on himself, as if an inbuilt sense of humour stopped him from ever succumbing totally to those chimeras” (2008, p. 68). This insight develops our reading of the novel by foregrounding the clown over the dandy, although some may see them as two sides of the same coin. Redfern sees Des Esseintes as a specific comic type: “He is a big talker and a small doer. To that extent, he belongs to the ancient comic tradition of the *miles gloriosus*, the braggart non-combatant” (2008, p. 72). In this reading Des Esseintes is placed in a comic lineage of risible characters from ancient Greek and Roman comedy through the *commedia dell’arte* to the TV sitcoms of the present day. By suggesting that Des Esseintes has an “inbuilt sense of humour” which enables him to cope with these failures, Redfern enables us to see him as a skilled actor playing a straight role to comic effect. In this respect we can also posit Des Esseintes as a precursor of the cinematic tradition of silent comedy.

The most extensive analysis of comedy in Huysmans’s works is found in Gilles Bonnet’s study *L’écriture comique de J-K Huysmans* (2003), which refers to all of Huysmans’s nine novels and to many of his short stories, in particular *La Retraite de Monsieur Bougran* (*M. Bougran’s Retirement*) (Huysmans, 2020). Bonnet discusses different facets of Huysmans’s comic writing, including opacity, caricature, satire, black humour, tragicomedy, the burlesque body, slapstick, derision, and parody. There are, however, few references to *Against Nature*, apart from a section entitled ‘*À rebours au-delà de l’ironie*’ [*Against Nature* beyond irony] (Bonnet, 2003, pp. 285-300). Here Bonnet analyses the particularly modern element of the book which many of Huysmans’ first readers identified: should they (and we) take this book seriously, as a joke, as both, or as neither? He suggests that it has become impossible to choose between either the comic or the serious (2003, p. 287); I read this impossibility to choose as part of the tragicomic. Bonnet links Huysmans’s reiterative use of language to *fumisme*, a contemporaneous aesthetic movement that also blurred the lines between what might be seen as true or false (2003, p. 292), which reinforces Paul Ginisty’s view that the novel can be seen as a hoax [*fumisterie*]. Bonnet concludes that the novel is quintessentially modern because it transcends conventional modes of signification, including irony, to anticipate the ‘texte multivalent’ [multivalent text] (2003, p. 299) proposed by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*. As a consequence, the text itself becomes a kind of game for the reader to play (2003, p. 305). I would add to Bonnet’s reading that much of the comedy he identifies elsewhere in Huysmans’ works – such as the references to Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton in the section on black humour and mime (2003, pp. 200-04) – can also be found in *Against Nature*.

It is clear that there is a critical consensus that *Against Nature* can be read as a comedy and that Des Esseintes can be seen as a comical figure. But beyond exposing his protagonist’s folly, how else might we understand the function of comedy in the text? A further way of understanding the comedy is to consider its therapeutic value. Huysmans’s propensity for black humour had already been noted by André Breton in his *Anthologie de l’humour noir* [*Anthology of black humour*], published in 1939. Huysmans is one of 46 writers included in the collection, represented not by *Against Nature* but by extracts from the novels *En ménage* [*Living Together*] (1881) and *En rade* [*Stranded*] (1887). Breton begins his brief introduction to the extracts by quoting Huysmans’s own reference to his “pincée d’humour noir et de comique rêche anglais” [“pinch of black humour and rough English comedy”], taken from a spoof interview that Huysmans wrote himself and published in 1885 under the pseudonym ‘A. Meunier’ (Breton, 1966, p. 189; Meunier, 1885). Breton gives the following appraisal of Huysmans’s self-diagnosis: “L’espèce d’humour qui est recommandée dans cette phrase à la façon d’une épice, Huysmans, jusqu’à l’apparence d’*En route*, en 1892, date à laquelle nous le perdons, semble en avoir fait la condition même du maintien de l’appétit mental” (Breton, 1966, p. 189); [“The type of humour recommended in this sentence like a kind of spice

seems to be the necessary condition for Huysmans to maintain mental appetite up to the publication of *En route* in 1892, which is the date when we lose him”]. The ‘loss’ mentioned here by Breton refers to Huysmans’s embracing of Catholicism in the 1890s, rather than his death in 1907; although *En route* was in fact published in 1895, Breton’s distinction designates all the works that follow *Là-bas* [*Down There/The Damned*](1891). For our purposes, we can include *Against Nature* among the works of the 1880s which Breton sees as characterized by black humour; of particular interest is the reference to humour as Huysmans’s condition for maintaining mental appetite, which might be interpreted as the desire to write – or to carry on living? – *per se*.

Breton also makes an astute point about the lack of self-indulgence in Huysmans’s comedy, noting how he allows the readers to enjoy for themselves all the pleasure of humour in the text. Breton views this as a therapeutic method: “Il y va ici d’une intention délibérée, d’une méthode thérapeutique réfléchie, d’une ruse destinée à nous faire surmonter notre propre misère” (Breton, 1966, p. 190); [“He proceeds here with a deliberate intention, a considered therapeutic method, a stratagem designed to make us overcome our own misery”]. The inference is that Huysmans’s comedy involves a strategy of authorial self-sacrifice: he foregoes the narratorial pleasure of signalling and luxuriating in the humour in the text, in order for us as readers to create it for ourselves, with an attendant therapeutic benefit. Like Maupassant, Breton also argues that this humour is not just apparent in the eccentricities described in the text, but in Huysmans’s style itself: “Le style de Huysmans, merveilleusement refondu en vue de la communicabilité nerveuse des sensations, est le produit du détournement de plusieurs vocabulaires, dont la combinaison déchaîne à elle seule le rire spasmodique, alors même que les circonstances de l’intrigue le justifient le moins” (Breton, 1996, p. 190); [“Huysmans’s style, marvellously recast in the light of the nervous communicability of sensations, is the product of rerouting several types of vocabulary, which combine to set off spasmodic laughter when the circumstances of the plot justify it the least”]. It is at this juncture where Breton’s analysis of Huysmans’s humour corresponds to the notion of the entire book as an elaborate joke or hoax that provokes the spasm of unexpected laughter.

Breton’s view is cited approvingly by the narrator of Michel Houellebecq’s 2015 novel *Soumission* [*Submission*], a fictional Huysmans specialist at the Sorbonne, who also emphasizes the generosity of Huysmans’s humour: “Comme le note avec justesse André Breton, l’humour de Huysmans présente le cas unique d’un humour généreux, qui donne au lecteur un coup d’avance, qui invite le lecteur à se moquer par avance de l’auteur, de l’excès de ses descriptions plaintives, atroces ou risibles” (Houellebecq, 2015, p. 15); [“As André Breton correctly notes, Huysmans’s humour constitutes the unique case of a generous humour where the reader is one step ahead and invited to laugh in advance at the author, at the excess of their plaintive, atrocious, or risible descriptions”]. Houellebecq’s conflation here of author, narrator, and protagonist in the single figure of the “auteur” is interesting: it posits Huysmans as the creator of this generous humour, which is directed back at him, similar to a knowingly self-deprecating comedian inviting the audience to laugh both at and with them. But it is Breton’s reference to the therapeutic value of comedy which is the most useful for my argument, which will now consider *Against Nature* as a form of therapy for both its protagonist and its reader(s).

4. The therapeutic function of laughter

We began this article with a quotation from Henri Bergson about the body as an intrinsic source of comedy. Bergson also writes that “un personnage comique est généralement comique dans l'exacte mesure où il s'ignore lui-même” (Bergson, 2007, p. 13); [“a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself”] (Bergson, 1921, p. 16). This axiom is both applicable to Des Esseintes – although Walter Redfern sees Des Esseintes as more knowing – and a complement to Breton’s observation about the narrator’s lack of self-indulgence: neither protagonist nor narrator show explicit awareness of their comic potential, which places the production of comedy in the minds and bodies of the readers. One of Bergson’s contemporary readers was Sigmund Freud, who draws on Bergson in the final section of *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) when considering the origins of the comic, quoting his reference to the “‘substitution quelconque de l’artificiel au naturel’ [any kind of substitution of the artificial for the natural]” (Freud, 2002, p. 216). Freud then quotes Bergson’s view that the pleasure in imitating the natural by the artificial is linked to the pleasure of child’s play, which can also be seen in *Against Nature*: we laugh at Des Esseintes because in one respect he is an adult who has created an aestheticized theme park where he can play by himself, similar to Jacques Tati in *Play Time*. In *Laughter and ridicule: towards a social critique of humour*, Michael Billig notes: “Significantly Freud uses this essentially motiveless theory of humour when he comes to discussing parents laughing at children, particularly at the naivete of children” (2005, p. 169). We can interpret our laughter at Des Esseintes’s naivety as similarly motiveless: we do not set out to be amused, but our laughter is involuntary.

Freud’s reflections on the comic also provide us with further means to understand the humour in *Against Nature*. His consideration of situation comedy is especially pertinent: “For the comedy of situation is mostly based on embarrassments in which we rediscover the helplessness of the child; the worst of these embarrassments, the disturbance of other activities by the imperious demands of our natural needs, corresponds to the child’s still insecure control of bodily functions” (Freud, 2002, p. 220). Des Esseintes tries to exert complete control over his body by suppressing his libido and bypassing his stomach, but his body rebels against him. We quoted above Patrick McGuinness’s reference to Des Esseintes being trapped in a “claustrophobic farce”; this farce can also be seen as a sitcom in regular short instalments, as if written in advance for television: here Des Esseintes becomes a *fin-de-siècle* Mr Bean. Freud’s emphasis on the unexpected element of comedy is also illuminating: “The comic turns out first of all to be something unintended we find in human social relations. It is found in persons, in their movements, forms, actions and traits of character – originally perhaps only in physical characteristics, and later in mental [*seelisch*] ones as well – and in their respective ways of expressing them” (2002, pp. 184-85). This conception of humour is relevant not only for our response to Des Esseintes but also for our response to the narrator; in other words, for both of the principal sources of comedy in the text. Freud posits that the movements of a clown appear funny to us because they are “disproportionate and impracticable” (2002, p. 185); we can apply the same logic to our response to Des Esseintes’s exaggerated behaviour. This exaggeration can also be identified in the narrative tone and the narrative structure: both hyperbole and litotes can be seen as disproportionate, and *Against Nature* simultaneously exaggerates the traditional parameters of the novel and understates its own innovation, to disconcerting yet comic effect.

Freud famously surmises that laughter may arise when we observe exaggerated behaviour: “If the other person’s movement is disproportionate and impracticable, the surplus energy I expend to understand it is inhibited *in statu nascendi*, as it is being mobilized, so to speak, and declared to be superfluous; it is free to be used elsewhere, possibly for release in laughter” (2002, p. 189). This hypothesis is one explanation for the unexpected reader

response to the novel. A parallel can be drawn here with Breton's observation about Huysmans's narrative abstinence: the withheld humour here carries a similar charge of energy that is left for the reader to expend. Freud's observations on irony are similarly relevant to reader response: "in the listener it [irony] produces a comic pleasure, probably by provoking him to an expenditure of energy on contradiction – which is promptly recognized to be superfluous" (2007, p. 170). But in *Against Nature* this energy does not derive from a conventional ironic commentary but from the subversion of the reader's expectations, which produces a different type of response, akin to both nervous laughter and the laughter of incomprehension. Freud differs from Bergson insofar that he acknowledges that humour and emotion can co-exist: he writes of "the various forms of 'broken' humour, the sort that smiles in the midst of tears", and refers to "[t]he humorous pleasure gained from sympathy" (2007, p. 222). This is both a defensive process and a form of displacement, where our sympathy is transformed into humour. With regard to *Against Nature*, we are not just laughing at Des Esseintes's naivety and farcical behaviour, but also out of sympathy for his plight; beyond this, we may also be laughing as a defence mechanism against absurdity on both textual and existential levels, or, in Breton's terms, as a way of overcoming our own misery.

Freud's essay on the joke does not consider the therapeutic value of humour identified by Breton, but we can extrapolate a therapeutic benefit based on the comic responses discussed above. One way of approaching this is through an analogy with Freud's analysis of the technique of the joke in terms of the first, second, and third persons, which he mentions at various points in his study. He posits the third person as the listener to the joke, who "purchases the pleasure of the joke with a very small expenditure of his own" (2002, p. 145). He then refers to the second person as the object of the joke, in the context of the naïve: "The naïve has to emerge without any contribution from us in the speech and actions of other people, who take the place of the *second* person in the comic or in the joke" (2002, p. 178). Finally, he refers explicitly to the first person as the creator or narrator of the joke: "the same technique that is used here by the first person of the joke as a means of releasing pleasure by its very nature produces comic pleasure in the third person" (2002, p. 201). This tripartite model can also be applied to the form of the novel: first person = author and narrator; second person = protagonist and other characters; third person = reader(s). This model is particularly germane to *Against Nature*, where the narrator describes the protagonist's behaviour for the comic pleasure of the reader. The therapeutic value of this humour is that it enables us not simply to laugh at Des Esseintes but also to empathize with him. The doctor arrives towards the end of the text and saves Des Esseintes by imposing a different diet and ordering him to return to Paris. This healing process is both reinforced and developed by the comic elements of the text, which enable us to warm to Des Esseintes, in the same way that that adults laugh affectionately at children. Michael Billig emphasizes the significance of empathy in Freud's view of humour: "Far from being driven by tendentious motives and the temporary suspension of empathy, this laughter, according to Freud, relies on the friendliness of empathy" (2005, p. 170). By reading Huysmans through this combined lens of Breton and Freud, this particular type of comic bibliotherapy enables us to empathize with Des Esseintes's tragicomic plight whilst still laughing at him. What are the wider uses of this therapeutic process?

5. Conclusion

If we read *Against Nature* as a cautionary tale about the possible consequences of leading a solitary life and suppressing bodily functions, we can see that the humour here plays a similar role to the macabre humour in certain kinds of children's literature, where attempts to flout the 'natural order' may meet a sticky end. Disgusted by living, Des Esseintes attempts to replace the natural with the artificial. If everything natural is considered as bad taste and everything artificial as good taste – the dandy's aspiration – then taste here is subjected to a complete regime of control. But the experiment fails. Des Esseintes is forced to become *regusted* with life: to taste food naturally again and to return to the company of other human beings, however little they are to his taste. One of the saddest moments in the novel is the death of the tortoise at the end of Chapter 4: the animal does not survive the imposition of jewels onto its shell, thereby providing a warning about the risks of excessive artifice for a sentient being. Fortunately, Des Esseintes is not left to die from his experiments in artifice: the doctor imposes therapy upon him in the etymological sense of *therapia*, or healing. As the first person of the joke, Huysmans through his narrator provides this therapy for his protagonist, the second person. As for us, the readers or third persons, the therapy resides in the solitary or collective reception of the cautionary tale: if we find ourselves raging against other people or the demands of our bodies, we need to remember the importance of healthy living and sociability. This does not mean, however, that abstinence or celibacy are always unhealthy: another possible lesson from this particular cautionary tale is that some form of communal or spiritual life is necessary for our well-being. This is one reason why *Against Nature* has been interpreted as a lament for lost faith, an interpretation reinforced by Huysmans's own reflections on the novel in the preface written twenty years after its publication (Huysmans, 2014, pp. 320-33). Finding faith is, of course, another way to become regusted with life.

The sudden appearance of the giant clowns jumping like rabbits in the nightmare recounted in Chapter 8 of *Against Nature* can be read as a *mise en abyme* of the novel as a whole: it is a tragicomic text, where the moments of comedy allow us the pleasurable release of laughter. Our possible responses as readers of the comedy in the novel – raised eyebrows, smiles, snorts, titters, sniggers, even belly laughs – are the final examples of the involuntary irruption of bodily functions into the text. We can see this as what might be called a form of laughing therapy, which helps us to deal with the potential tragedy of being alive. Indeed, as Alessandra Lemma notes in *Humour on the couch: exploring humour in psychotherapy and everyday life* (2000, pp. 90-120), the healing properties of laughter have long been noted. *Against Nature* may never become known primarily as a comic novel: it can be read without any reference to comedy, as, for example, Debra Segura (2007) does in her reading of the text as an allegory for the world after germ theory. However, its comic elements have become more apparent in wider culture. In *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction*, Matthew Bevis quotes Bruce Robinson, the writer and director of the film *Withnail and I*, who "once said that Huysmans's *À rebours* was the funniest book he'd ever read" (Bevis, 2013, p. 18). Bevis suggests astutely that Des Esseintes is a "prototype for Withnail", before making an incisive comment on the value of comedy: "Comedy characteristically begins with desire before encouraging us to laugh at it, but – in doing so – it can also reconcile us to desire, make it somehow easier to live with" (Bevis, 2013, p. 18). Breton suggests that Huysmans's humour sustains our mental appetite and can help us to overcome our own misery. We can read Bevis's insight here not only as a further example of the therapeutic value of humour identified by Breton in the work of Huysmans, but as a further example of the therapeutic value of humour *per se*. This reconciliation is a way of dealing with the natural demands of the body – and a way of reminding ourselves that we can never completely control our tastes or our desires. And although this article began by suggesting a nuanced view of Bergson's

essay on comedy, it will end by echoing his proposition that laughter is a corrective to rigidity. As Michael Billig puts it: “Without laughter, social life would fall prey to rigidity; it would ossify. That is why the cruelty of ridicule is necessary” (2005, p. 128). To this we can add: and also the therapeutic value of empathetic laughter.

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