

# To do-lists and to-be lists: identities as inventories in Bouvard et Pécuchet and À rebours<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the inventory as a literary strategy in the nineteenth-century French novels *Bouvard et Pécuchet* by Flaubert (1881) and *À rebours* by Huysmans (1884). We argue that the authors adopt the inventory process to determine the main characters' identities in the lack of a proper plot line. For the petty-bourgeois Bouvard-Pécuchet couple, life is a plotless repetition of something ever new to do; for the sophisticated aesthete des Esseintes, it is a plotless repetition of what he wants to go on being. In comparing the two texts, we establish a reversal symmetry between depth and surface. Des Esseintes' inventories (flowers, perfumes, books, gemstones) are presented as solid and deeply meditated, their narrative status relating to categories like mastering, intimacy, and distillation. In contrast, Bouvard and Pécuchet's inventories sound precarious and spontaneous, relating to categories like naivety, extraneity, and cluttering. The same reversal symmetry is also found when comparing the ending of the two novels when their protagonists' fates are decided. Taking inventories as a critical part of the social negative of the era, the two novels represent the pathological poles of the same generational malaise.

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<sup>1</sup> The author thanks the reviewers of this manuscript for their insightful remarks. If in writing *Vertigine della lista*, Eco could recall an anthology of literary lists (Spufford (ed.) 1989) and a monographic study on the same subject (Belknap, 2004), his work, on the other hand, would have inspired a variety of further researches (Milcent-Lawson, Lecolle and Michel (eds.) 2013; Laemmlle, Scheidegger Laemmlle and Wesselmann (eds.) 2021; *Style* 50 (3), 2016).

## 1. Introduction

Addressing a topic such as collections or inventories within the cultural framework of nineteenth-century France allows us to neatly grasp the experience of a double tension, or contradiction, between the theoretical establishment and the practical experience of such concepts (or devices): on the one hand, the rationality and utilitarianism of the paradigmatic construct (its ergonomic function, we might say, which justifies its use); on the other hand, a pragmatics that can run into problems of manageability, even to the point of provoking that sense of ‘vertigo’ evoked by Umberto Eco (2009) in the introduction to the book he wrote to accompany the Louvre's exhibition on lists he curated in 2009.

It is true that contemporary literary studies have tackled both sides of this problem on a broader ground, which ranges from ancient epics (Laemmle et al. 2021: 197-302) to the estranging surrealist lists (Kleiber 2013) or metafiction in the postmodernist narrative (Alber 2016). In the field of novel theory, the listing technique is often associated with narrative realism. For Hamon, for example, a list represents a zero degree of world description: “Une liste c'est une sorte de 'tel quel' à la fois du monde et du langage” (Hamon 2015: 167). In its aspect of mastering and accounting, ordered enumeration can be seen in modern-age fiction as reflecting the progressive establishment of a proto-capitalist mercantile mentality (Lukács 1970), simultaneously faithfully representing it and seeking to undermine and mock it.

This way, from the brute realism of the catalogue of objects, according to Jean Serroy (1989), a list presented in a literary text can move to a regime of unbridled fantasy, fueled by its own growing out of proportion to the normal flow of the narrative (Rabelais's lists, for example):

L'inventaire est là pour capter la réalité nue. Il est recensement minutieux, enregistrement quasi mécanique, opération d'absolue décalque. [...] Et pourtant, de Rabelais à Prévert, de Mathurin Régnier à Balzac ou à Jules Romains, l'inventaire a excité, aussi, l'imagination des écrivains. [...] Tout se passe comme si la chose perdait toute matérialité pour ne plus exister que par le mot. L'inventaire ainsi conçu ne consiste plus à répertorier le monde réel: il est création d'un autre monde, où l'esprit n'obéit plus qu'à la seule logique de sa fantaisie. (Serroy 1989: 211-15)

However, the question I would like to raise with this essay concerns a specific aspect of 19<sup>th</sup>-century French literary production. In this period, between the 1830s and 1840s, Honoré de Balzac composed the novel mosaic that he was to call *Comédie humaine*, declaring, in the *Avant-propos* of 1842, his intention to classify human society according to

a kind of zoologically inspired *Systema Naturae*. Individuals, types, social spaces, and habits of post-Napoleonic society were to be read through various taxonomic levels (Balzac 1951: 3-16). In an introduction to Balzac's *Romans et contes philosophiques*, the famous Romantic critic Philarète Chasles described the French reading public of the time as an audience of skeptical and bored rationalists:

Quel conte allez-vous faire à de telles gens? Ils vous répondront qu'ils ont vu Bonaparte, bivouaqué au Kremlin et couché à l'Alhambra. Ils mettront vos sylphides en fuite, et vos magiciens n'auront pas le moindre intérêt pour eux. Ils vous demanderont par quel procédé chimique l'huile brûlait dans la lampe d'Aladin. [...] L'analyse, dernier développement de la pensée, a donc tué les jouissances de la pensée. C'est ce que M. de Balzac a vu dans son temps: c'est le dernier résultat de cet axiome de Jean-Jacques: *L'homme qui pense est un animal dépravé*. (Balzac 1959: 181)

This is, of course, that social negative that the Romantic-era writer would negotiate through a mixture of critical realism, mysticism, and reverie. The perspective we follow for analyzing this complex cultural atmosphere focuses on what we might call *accumulation policies* in a specific phase of the growth of modern consumer society.<sup>2</sup> Such policies affect the production/organization/dissemination of knowledge, as well as that of material goods. In his study on the rise of the modern material culture, Frank Trentmann points out that:

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries put in motion the pendulum of consumption. Possessions, comforts, tastes, and desires were all growing and becoming more elaborate, setting off a backlash of worries about excess and corruption. More goods provoked greater fear of goods. (2016: 118)

This paragraph highlights our motivation to retrace the literary figures into which nineteenth-century material culture was transposed. The *collector* and the *curious*, as literary characters, feed, respectively and often bulimically, on "objects" whose complexity and/or variety is made possible by certain advances in the technology of artifice and 'notions' – i.e., the theoretical nodes on which those technologies are based, available for reading in manuals and handbooks. Hovering over such characters is the irony, or the fear with which a particular author represents to himself the risk of

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<sup>2</sup> That is the theoretical framework explored in Janell Watson's *Literature and material culture from Balzac to Proust* (2006), which has been one of our primary sources for this study.

(1) foundering in that apartness from the world claimed by his collections or (2) being reduced to a kind of living catalogue of concepts and theories, seemingly valuable for society, but ultimately doomed to inaction and failure.

Addressing such characters as des Esseintes<sup>3</sup> (Huysmans' alter ego in *À rebours*) and the Bouvard-Pécuchet duo (Flaubert's alter ego in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*) as examples of such a procedure, however, we find ourselves dealing with fictional actors whose narrative identities are entirely derived from the lists of objects / concepts they are concerned with: identities that, with these, or in these lists end up getting lost as a result of prolonged *vertigo*. Let us briefly recall, for now, the apparently simple and circular plot of the two novels.

In *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (first printed in 1881),<sup>4</sup> two retired clerks buy a country estate in Chavignolles (Normandy), leaving Paris to focus on learning a series of disciplines, or techniques, initially triggered by an attempt to engage in agronomy and gardening. The chapters follow one another as they move from one topic (or fixation) to another, marked by the duo's constant failure (in understanding, applying, or publicizing their supposed knowledge to the villagers).

In *À rebours* (first printed in 1884),<sup>5</sup> the former dandy and of noble birth Jean Floressas des Esseintes retires from Parisian social life to his estate in Fontenay-aux-Roses, devoting himself to perfecting his ideal of the domestic interior, whose elements, from furniture to artificial plants, from art prints to ancient and modern books, are the subject of the protagonist's meditations. Within a few days, exhaustion and a constant state of '*neurotisme*' lead his doctor to order his return to the city to receive proper care. If Huysmans lived long enough to get through the debate around his work, even to the point of giving a sketchy account of it in the famous *Préface écrite vingt ans après le roman* (Huysmans 2022: 317-37), Flaubert, on the other hand, in addition to nine complete chapters, would leave behind a set of documents that would go on to a complex publishing history.

While des Esseintes' affair closes on his forced and dramatic return to Paris, Bouvard and Pécuchet's tale is interrupted in the middle of the tenth chapter – leaving open the question of a second volume in which the two characters, now reduced to inaction, would figure as copyists of a kind of enormous catalog of notions from the most varied spheres of knowledge (thus somehow returning to what they were doing in their former jobs as secretaries). The most extensive and articulate preparatory texts for this second part are *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (BP: 485-555; Jacquet 1987; Herschberg-Pierrot 1988).

<sup>3</sup> I will employ the lowercase letter for the particle 'des,' as used in huysmanian bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> I will abbreviate as *BP* Claudine Gothot-Mersch's Gallimard edition of this novel (Flaubert 1999). This edition also contains Flaubert's main preliminary texts (like the *Scenarios* and the *Sottisier*) along with the sketches of the second volume, known as *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, *Album de la marquise* and *Catalogue des idées chic*.

<sup>5</sup> I will abbreviate as *AR* the later Gallimard edition by Pierre Jourde (Huysmans 2022).

Even from this summary description, the similarities and oppositions between the two stories reveal a reverse symmetry in how they manage listing as a narrative agent. This is what I will try to demonstrate in this study, but before I proceed with this task, it is essential to recall the cultural context of the 1880s, when the initial reception of these novels took place.

## 1. Dictionaries, bazars, consumerism

Max Milner and Claude Pichois' seventh volume of Arthaud's *Littérature française* defined the French 1800s as the century of dictionaries: "les encyclopédies, répertoires, dictionnaires enregistrent en les classant les connaissances qui s'étendent chaque année plus loin" (Milner and Pichois 1990: 171).<sup>6</sup> It is important to note how this formulation emphasizes the double track on which this work flows (*record* while *classifying*), which responds, on the scholarly level, to the rapid increase in complexity of disciplines and technologies and, on the editorial level, to that increase in the readership that will be the basis of the modern, industrially organized publishing system (Durand and Glinoyer 2005).

One could say that the ground for what we would today call 'scientific popularization' was thus both prepared and, at the same time, undermined by the distrust held by specific sectors of the literary and philosophical community, now towards faith in the general progress of humankind and the actual usefulness of the new sciences for our lives. But what is particularly interesting is why the term 'popularization' is profoundly mistaken when employed about the nineteenth-century literary consumption of accounts and debates on the new scientific discoveries. There is an issue here to consider regarding the distances between insiders and outsiders, as Laura Otis reminds us in presenting the Oxfordian anthology *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century*:

The notion of a 'split' between literature and science, of a 'gap' to be 'bridged' between the two, was never a nineteenth century phenomenon. (...) Science was not perceived as being written in a 'foreign language' – a common complaint of twenty-first-century readers. (Otis 2002: xvii)

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<sup>6</sup> I will recall here some of the most relevant examples: firstly, the most known 1883 Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française* – whose preface still remains an insightful witness of a certain step of the *words-things* relationship inquiry (Littré 1883: i-xxxix); Louis Gabriel Michaud's *Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne*, subject of various releases and expansions from 1811 onward; the Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, issued between 1866 and 1876.



In the absence of a specific editorial work of mediation to fill a gap not yet perceived by the public, the idea that a curious reader could get lost and almost stupefied in the face of direct access to the innumerable “news of the day” in technology and biomedical sciences begins to peep out of authors who engage in the analysis of customs – hence specific novelistic images of characters reduced to walking catalogs of notions, or skills, whose practical usefulness will eventually stumble in their enumeration.

This is how Balzac presents the experts to whom the protagonist of *La peau de chagrin* (1832) turns in search of the solution to the mystery of his fatal talisman (a naturalist, a chemist, an expert in mechanics) and who take care to list the guiding principles and basic vocabulary of their field before an impatient Raphaël, eager to see actual proof of the banality of the object in question (Balzac 1950: 191-206). However, while the ‘curious’ – armed with magazines and handbooks – may attempt to purchase his abstract skill sets the same way he acquires material goods, the typical nineteenth-century ‘collector’ seeks to treat certain material goods as bearers of abstract and highly symbolic value.

In this regard, Janell Watson recalls the nineteenth-century aesthetic phenomenon of the ‘artistic interior’ (2006: 57-82), ideally summarized in Edmond de Goncourt's *La maison d'un artiste* (1881): “a two volumes annotated inventory of his and his late brother’s collections, inscribing the myth of the artist in the title” (67). But whereas the consumption of curiosities turns into clumsiness and dullness for a merely curious person, collecting rare objects can arouse a kind of *nausea* that pleads for the intervention of decluttering mental hygiene (43).<sup>7</sup>

We could imagine an axis connecting the *ridiculous* to the *perilous*: this would link (in *La peau de chagrin*) the scientific laboratory with the bazaar where the novel's protagonist had initially found his talisman. There confusion (visual, historical, symbolic), disorder and fragmentation reigned: “trois salles gorgées de civilisation,” elements of interrupted series alternating in a picture (“de raison et de folie”) impossible to recompose, “un miroir plein de facettes dont chacune représentait un monde” (Balzac 1955: 23). One might consider the elements in Balzac’s bazaar as *highly and obscurely representative*, as opposed to the scientific lab instruments that will instead appear to us as *poorly and plainly representative* – each of these two settings hiding some pitfalls.

<sup>7</sup> We may further notice, along with Watson, that a collecting space, of any kind, would summon a domestic dimension whose nurturing practice would not be gender-neutral throughout Eighteenth-century novel (72-82). Since such spaces as the family foyer, or the courtesan’s boudoir – both envisaged as women-managed areas – were so distinctively associated to feminine accumulation of fashionable bibelots, then an exceptional *bachelor*-domesticity would have had to deal with certain *masculinization* strategies for the fictional presentation of the collections it held. According to Watson, such strategies (like *aestheticization*, or *femininization* of the bibelots) could be read as efforts to build what she calls a *macho domesticity*, dealing in artistic and scientific issues, in opposition to a feminine collecting habit associated with fashion and decoration issues.

If we follow Oscar Wilde in his statement about the “1800s as we know it,” being essentially an invention by Balzac (Wilde 1891: 33), we will not be surprised to find in *La peau de chagrin* an axis connecting the two later novels with which we shall now deal. But, as we shall soon see, in the bookish and encyclopedic order of the subjects addressed by Bouvard and Pécuchet, Flaubert triggers the chaos whose problematic management will serve to flesh out his two characters. By contrast, in the chaos of objects and valuables collected by des Esseintes,<sup>8</sup> in his refined *intérieur*, Huysmans builds an order through the archaeological survey of a specific intellectual identity, exposed list after list.

## 2. Two novels from the 1880s

Within the vast range of possible connections between Huysmans's work and its evident Flaubertian sources (Issacharoff 1976: 21-72; Lalonde 1993; Cassou-Yager 1997; Rowell Blackman 2003), an initial juxtaposition between the two novels we are discussing is due to the journalist, and Huysmans's friend, Paul Ginisty, in a review of *AR*, a few months following its first release. Pierre Jourde provides an excerpt from it in his introduction to the Gallimard edition I am referring to: “la névrosé de M. Huysmans, comme un Bouvard ou un Pécuchet d'une espèce nouvelle, passa, lui aussi, en revue, le répertoire des connaissances humaines” (*AR*: 17). Both works in fact, as Jourde puts it, could fit into the genre of the *roman encyclopédique*, or *roman d'idées*, declinations of that splintering of narrative structures that Paul Bourget recognized as hallmarks of the new ‘decadent novel.’<sup>9</sup> But where BP would recall the Flaubertian dream of the ‘book about nothing,’ *AR* could be seen as a ‘book about everything’ (*ibid.*) as long as it shifts the focus of its encyclopedism from *surface* to *depth*:

Là où Flaubert met en scène l'impossibilité pour l'homme du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle de maîtriser l'accumulation des savoirs, et donc d'avoir une vue globale de la réalité, l'encyclopédie de des Esseintes lui sert à tenter de passer à une autre réalité. (*ibid.*)

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<sup>8</sup> This chaos is perceived by a reader who is unfamiliar with the specific terms used by Huysmans for his gems, his rare plants, nor with the names of the various minor authors of Latin Decadence. Jean de Palacio devoted a section of his essay on Decadence to the problem of glossaries as part of novel setting in *fin-de-siècle* culture (De Palacio, 2012: 55-73).

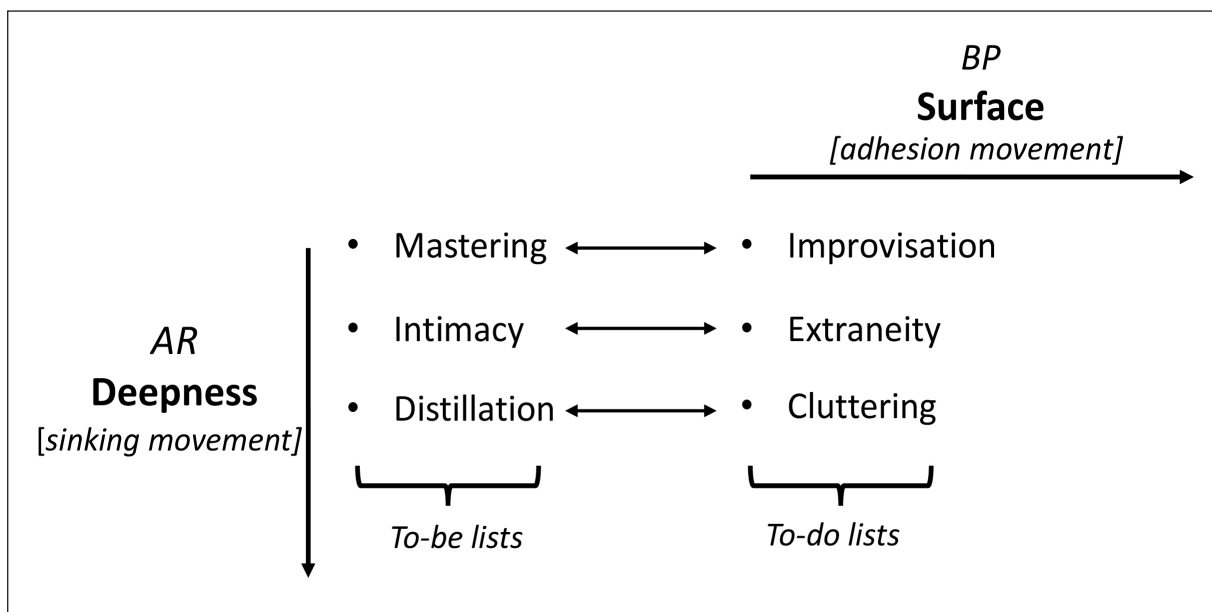
<sup>9</sup> Reference is to the first series of Paul Bourget's *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883: 25), a collection of XIX literary portraits which was to elaborate a positive sense of *decadent style*, based on Baudelaire's aesthetics.

Such a reverse symmetry (depth/surface) is made possible in the novel text by the specific ways in which the enumeration device is used in relation to the actions, or non-actions, of the characters: We get to know des Esseintes through a *one-man's encyclopedia* – the inventory of what he has been, is and would like to be, reflected in value-bearing objects. And the Bouvard-Pécuchet duo, on the contrary, through an ideal everyman's encyclopedia, fit for the one who decides to put himself up-to-date with the knowledge of his time and set himself up with a series of lists about things to do or to read.

In the next part of this essay, I will illustrate how these reverse and symmetrical sense paths unfold on the terrain of different narratives of the list and lead to two equally symmetrical forms of the characters' loss of identity: one (des Esseintes) goes too far in the refinement of his senses to be able to adapt to the outside world, so he must abandon them or die. The other two (Bouvard and Pécuchet) fail to identify themselves and wander in the encyclopedia. So, there is nothing left for them to do but copy.

We will thus have two forms of reaction to vertigo, or rather, two paths through the vertigo of the list, representing the pathological poles of the same generational malaise. But through novels such as *BP* and *AR* we might see that as a discomfort in controlling, not the content, but rather the simulacra of knowledge, i.e., the written/oral traces that are turned into circulating precepts – and through which the aesthete proceeds by *filtering*, while the curious confusingly *piles up* the most disparate items.

To explore this opposition further, I will detail a possible tripartition based on some text passages I will compare. The overall picture can be rendered through the following diagram.





In both cases, however, a specific *list policy* is challenged: the one based upon the notion of a descriptive insert that interrupts a narrative flow or that comes between key events in the storyline (Hamon 2015: 171; Von Contzen 2016: 246). In this regard, it is noteworthy that both Flaubert and Huysmans described the process of composing their respective novels by associating specific chapters with the 'matter' inventoried in each.

Et à mesure que j'y réfléchissais, le sujet s'agrandissait et nécessitait de patientes recherches: chaque chapitre devenait le coulis d'une spécialité, le sublimé d'un art différent; il se condensait en un 'of meat' de pierreries, de parfums, de fleurs, de littérature religieuse et laïque, de musique profane et de plain-chant. (AR: 321)

So Huysmans wrote in his 1903 *Préface*. Similarly, Flaubert described the challenges he met when drafting *BP* in several letters:

Je suis perdu dans les combinaisons de mon second chapitre, celui des sciences<sup>10</sup> (...). [...] Je succombe sous la théologie! et je t'assure, loulou, qu'il faut avoir la tête forte et vaste pour coordonner et rendre plastiques toutes les questions qui sont à traiter dans ce gremlin de chapitre-là!<sup>11</sup> [...] Je suis perdu dans la Pédagogie. (...) Mais je sens mon chapitre.<sup>12</sup> (Flaubert 1963: 278-91)

What is noticeable about these accounts is that they seem to refer to the work of drafting an encyclopedia rather than a novel. But if we assume these two textual types can meet, a question could come to mind: how can an encyclopedia fit into a novel? A possible approach might be to feature an encyclopedist as a novel character – this being what Queneau would have done with his Henry de Chambernac writing an encyclopedia of 'literary fools' in *Les enfants du limon* (1938).<sup>13</sup>

However, in *AR* and *BP*, we are not confronted with the problem of one or several characters struggling with making a more or less circumscribable text. Here, the encyclopedia does not feature a character-related item but appears as a textual template upon which the storyline is flattened. For such cases, we should rephrase the previous question to ask how a novel can *be situated* within an encyclopedia.

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to M<sup>me</sup> Roger des Genettes, April 1877.

<sup>11</sup> To his niece Caroline, January 1879.

<sup>12</sup> To the same, March 1880.

<sup>13</sup> Queneau himself gave an account of his reinterpretation of Bouvard and Pécuchet's task in his *Comment on devient encyclopédiste* (1963); see also: Tonomi, 2022.

If we look for an answer in the overall structure of *AR* and *BP*, it would seem that two different pathways open up for writing – both based on the author’s work on his sources (what we might call his primary inventory) returning, on the diegetic plane, through an *ostensive* rather than *allusive* way:

1) A dramatization of inventories that deals with the lists as a series of micro-actions. This is the route Flaubert takes in *BP* through the dialogue between his two protagonists who reason about one topic, or one book passage after another – or through descriptions of their attempts to make a series of practical techniques work.

(2) An exasperation of the rhetorical effects of an inventory, such that it reshapes a list of items into a kind of prose poem. This is the direction Huysmans took in describing both the ideas and the objects called upon to form the whole man-thing identity that is *des Esseintes*.

### 3.1. How to manage objects (*mastering vs naivety*)

A primary symmetry between *AR* and *BP* emerges from describing the respective characters’ settings. At this level, two opposite ‘retreats’ from the world unfold, the aesthete’s and the bourgeois’s.

*Des Esseintes* escapes from Paris to take refuge in his ‘house museum’ at Fontenay, isolating himself from any unnecessary contact with the outside world. The story opening, however, presents him with the need to complete his work of furnishing and decorating the house interior. We learn, then, that both the objects that have already entered his household routine (certain varieties of tea, specific first editions of books) and those he is in the process of sorting out for purchase, such as gems for the tortoise, furnishings, rare plants, may come from the most varied parts of the world, through the medium of merchants, artisans, or highly specialized workshops. There is thus a closure of the domestic environment to its local surroundings, coexisting with a virtual openness to the global luxury market.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, on their side, after having bought their small country estate and land in Chavignolles, get introduced to the local notables and are eager to engage with the townspeople throughout their stay. They offer the products they are trying to cultivate, propose guided tours of their archaeological museum, and essay their new ideas through the public exchange of mundane conversations. They even try to bring medical help to the poor when they improvise themselves as physiologists or phrenologists. But this local openness is short-sighted: to get books, they rely on certain acquaintances who provide them with what they need in drips and drabs. For garden work, they go on the cheap, as well as for the tools and objects they buy here and there. Even among their geological or archaeological finds, there is nothing of value.

What we can notice beyond this luxury vs. cheapness comparison is that both stories are presented as *domestic affairs*. What distinguishes des Esseintes and the Bouvard-Pécuchet couple from later literary encyclopedists is that they are encyclopedically managing the living space of household inhabitation (Watson 2006: 83-108). The arrangement or coordination of ‘things,’ whether animate or inanimate, is one aspect of the direct representation of a character's relationship with his space. It seems appropriate, therefore, to start from this shared framework the series of textual comparisons between the two works, verifying an initial symmetry between the ability and inability of des Esseintes and Bouvard-Pécuchet, respectively.

Chapter V of *AR* is organized around two ‘reasoned enumerations’: the first illustrates a connection between des Esseintes's artistic tastes and the domestic use of a particular set of paintings useful for inducing a certain kind of reverie (123-37). We read nothing about the material circumstances of the staging of this ‘exhibition’; its narrative role is not to show us how des Esseintes works in his surroundings. Instead, the second enumeration presents the solutions adopted by the latter for a specific problem of style – the decoration of a bedroom that imitates a convent cell without reproducing its characters of harsh and self-punishing asceticism (137-38). Given this problem, des Esseintes’s idea for solving it consists of arranging an effect of sadness/bruteness through a combination of cheerful elements (“Arranger avec de joyeux objets une chose triste,” 138). The list of adopted measures is given as follows. Firstly, the walls and floor:

Pour imiter le badigeon de l’ocre, le jaune administratif et clérical, il fit tendre ses murs en soie safran; pour traduire le soubassement couleur chocolat, habituel à ce genre de pièces, il revêtit les parois de la cloison de lames en bois violet foncé d’amarante. (...) Le plafond fut, à son tour, tapissé de blanc écru, pouvant simuler le plâtre, sans avoir cependant les éclats criards; quant au froid pavage de la cellule, il réussit assez bien à le copier, grâce à un tapis dont le dessin représentait des carreaux rouges (...). (138)

Then, the room furniture:

Il meubla cette pièce d’un petit lit de fer, un faux lit de cénobite, fabriqué avec d’anciennes ferronneries forgées et polies (...). En guise de table de nuit, il installa un antique prie-Dieu dont l’intérieur pouvait contenir un vase et dont l’extérieur supportait un eucologe; il apposa contre le mur, en face, un banc-d’œuvre, surmonté d’un grand dais à jour garni de miséricordes sculptées en plein bois, et il pourvut ses flambeaux d’église de chandelles en vraie cire qu’il achetait dans une maison spéciale, réservée aux besoins du culte (...). (138-39)

Chapter IV of *AR*, instead, is about how to decorate the hull of the famous turtle, which des Esseintes had noticed in the aquarium of the Chevet restaurant. Here, again, we have two sections of the same enumerative series – that relate to the precious stones to be set on the hull after having it gilded by a craftsman. The first section elucidates the protagonist's taste in precious: “le choix des pierres l'arrêta” (113). The second illustrates the choices actually made and proceeds as follows. As regards the hull's pattern:

Il composa ainsi le bouquet de ses fleurs: les feuilles furent serties de pierreries d'un vert accentué et précis: de chrysobéryls vert asperge, de péridots vert poireau, d'olivines vert olive, et elles se détachèrent de branches en almadine et en ouwarovite d'un rouge violacé, jetant des paillettes d'un éclat sec de même que ces micas de tartre qui luisent dans l'intérieur des futailles. Pour les fleurs, isolées de la tige, éloignées du pied de la gerbe, il usa de la cendre bleue; mais il repoussa formellement cette turquoise orientale qui se met en broches et en bagues et qui fait, avec la banale perle et l'odieux corail, les délices du menu peuple; il choisit exclusivement des turquoises de l'Occident (...). (114)

And for the hull's border:

Celui-ci avait d'abord songé à quelques opales et à quelques hydrophanes; mais ces pierres intéressantes par l'hésitation de leurs couleurs, par le doute de leurs flammes, sont par trop insoumises et infidèles; l'opale a une sensibilité toute rhumatismale; le jeu de ses rayons s'altère suivant l'humidité, la chaleur ou le froid; quant à l'hydrophane elle ne brûle que dans l'eau et ne consent à allumer sa braise grise qu'alors qu'on la mouille. Il se décida enfin pour des minéraux dont les reflets devaient s'alterner: pour l'hyacinthe de Compostelle, rouge acajou; l'aigue-marine, vert glauque; le rubis-balais, rose vinaigre; le rubis de Sudermanie, ardoise pâle. Leurs faibles chatoyements suffisaient à éclairer les ténèbres de l'écaillé et laissaient sa valeur à la floraison des pierreries qu'ils entouraient d'une mince guirlande de feux vagues. (115)

The turtle affair is well-known. The decorative interventions cause the animal's death, which does not particularly upset des Esseintes (122).

As it appears clear, in both cases (the bedroom set and the turtle's), we are looking at a series of items that unfold neatly, each according to its purpose, until together they form a whole that turns out to be ideally suited to a certain kind of need. The number

of items reveals how complex and multifaceted such needs matured in the mind of des Esseintes. But the critical effect that enumeration must achieve we can well see in the turtle set: the breadth of some of its paratactic structures, combined with the over-precise and, at times, obscure terminology employed, gives us the dimension of the chaos from which an order can emerge.

Bouvard and Pécuchet, on their side, with great enthusiasm and without much pretension, begin to take care of their estate starting from certain earthworks (Mouchard, 1974). So, they get themselves written guides to follow: “leur décision fut prise. Dès le soir, ils tirèrent de leur bibliothèque les quatre volumes de *La Maison rustique*, se firent expédier le *Cours* de Gasparin, et s'abonnèrent à un journal d'agriculture” (BP: 82).

Coming now to Chapter II of *BP*, and here, as in the case of *AR*, the characters' actions are presented through various series of problems. These series mainly pertain to three macro-areas: field cultivation, greenhouse cultivation, and arboriculture. It is Pécuchet, in the first place, who deals with specific plants and vegetables by building a small greenhouse: “et il passait là des heures délicieuses à éplucher les graines, à écrire des étiquettes, à mettre en ordre ses petits pots” (85). This is where issues begin to arise:

La couche fourmilla de larves; – et malgré les réchauds de feuilles mortes, sous les châssis peints et sous les cloches barbouillées, il ne poussa que des végétations rachitiques. Les boutures ne reprirent pas; les greffes se décollèrent; la sève des marcottes s'arrêta, les arbres avaient le blanc dans leurs racines; les semis furent une désolation. Le vent s'amusa à jeter bas les rames des haricots. L'abondance de la gadoue nuisit aux fraisiers, le défaut de pincage aux tomates. Il manqua les brocolis, les aubergines, les navets – et du cresson de fontaine, qu'il avait voulu élever dans un baquet. Après le dégel, tous les artichauts étaient perdus. (85-86)

At least consoled by his cabbages, and by one in particular that (though being inedible) gives him the pride of having cultivated a ‘monster,’ Pécuchet attempts to devote himself to what he calls “le summum de l'art”: that is, the cultivation of *melons* (86-87). Despite the care and precepts followed, the vegetables that reach maturity present a discouraging scene:

En effet, comme il avait cultivé les unes près des autres des espèces différentes, les sucrons s'étaient confondus avec les maraîchers, le gros Portugal avec le grand Mogol – et le voisinage des pommes d'amour complétant l'anarchie, il en était résulté d'abominables mulets qui avaient le goût de citrouilles. (*ibid.*)

While examining the final results, along with Bouvard, Pécuchet tries to devise an excuse for each unsuccessful specimen. Still, in the end, he pulls the last one out of the window, admitting that he does not understand anything about it (*ibid.*). Bouvard is no better off with farming the fields, and after a poor first harvest, he tries to modernize his equipment:

Le colza fut chétif, l'avoine médiocre; et le blé se vendit fort mal, à cause de son odeur. [...] Il crut bon de renouveler son matériel. Il acheta un scarificateur Guillaume, un extirpateur Valcourt, un semoir anglais et la grande araire de Mathieu de Dombasle. Le charretier la dénigra. (89)

None of the farm workers know how to use the tools listed here. Bouvard himself tries but fails amid general derision. The works subsequently undertaken continue to yield poor results, and a fire breaks out among the sheaves of wheat piled by Bouvard, severely damaging the property. Finally, a storm destroys the nursery of fruit-bearing trees. To escape the tyranny of 'Providence' and 'Nature,' the two companions turn to canning and fill a former laundry room with the necessary boxes and jars, believing they can even stop the seasons (111). At this juncture, they also begin to become concerned with fermentation processes, buying the equipment of a failed distiller (112). Overwhelmed by new enthusiasm, they even go so far as to attempt to produce an exceptional *cream*:

Enfin ils rêvèrent *une crème*, qui devait enfoncer toutes les autres. Ils y mettraient de la coriandre comme dans le kummel, du kirsch comme dans le marasquin, de l'hysope comme dans la chartreuse, de l'ambrette comme dans le vespetro, du calamus aromaticus comme dans le krambambuli; – et elle serait colorée en rouge avec du bois de santal. (113)

This ultimate synthesis of flavors and ingredients will never come to light. As they open the jars of preserves only to find that they have gone wrong, a roar shocks the laboratory: the pot still in which the cream was being prepared has exploded from the force of the steam inside (115). This traumatic event puts an end to the agricultural projects and Chapter II. At this point, the two men wonder if they have not consistently failed because of their ignorance of chemistry – an issue that triggers the start of the subsequent chapter.



### 3.2. Assimilating values (*intimacy vs. extraneity*)

If, as we have said, Huysmanian enumeration proceeds smoothly, both within the different series and in the connection of one series with another, the one employed by Flaubert to describe the progress of the two clerks' exploits advances in jolts. In each series, micro-actions or micro-events break up the lists, showing their precariousness – while in the passage between one to another, setbacks and failures frustrate the two performers.

Bouvard and Pécuchet face a crucial liability: they are not familiar enough with any of the subjects covered in that long encyclopedic journey that will lead them from the earth sciences to the natural sciences, to the historical, and further on.

In the exploration of des Esseintes's personality, many of the frameworks we encounter in our reading exhibit two sides: a flip side with what des Esseintes has left behind, outgrown, and at some point, despised, and a right side with what still interests him, or what at least he tries to browse through from time to time (in the case of books). In this regard, I had hinted, in presenting the *AR*'s text frames related to the 'bedroom' and the 'tortoise,' at some theoretical passages that may precede the description of an actual scene – these testifying the link between des Esseintes' lived experience and his objects. This theoretical 'flip side' of an actualized list can be a list in its own right, as in the case of what precedes the choice of gemstones in Chapter IV of *AR*:

Le diamant est devenu singulièrement commun depuis que tous les commerçants en portent au petit doigt; les émeraudes et les rubis de l'Orient sont moins avilis, lancent de rutilantes flammes, mais ils rappellent par trop ces yeux verts et rouges de certains omnibus qui arborent des fanaux de ces deux couleurs, le long des tempes; quant aux topazes, brûlées ou crues, ce sont des pierres à bon marché, chères à la petite bourgeoisie qui veut serrer des écrins dans une armoire à glace; d'un autre côté, bien que l'Église ait conservé à l'améthyste un caractère sacerdotal (...) cette pierre s'est, elle aussi, galvaudée aux oreilles sanguines et aux mains tubuleuses des bouchères qui veulent, pour un prix modique, se parer de vrais et pesants bijoux; seul, parmi ces pierres, le saphir a gardé des feux inviolés par la sottise industrielle et pécuniaire. (113)

Thus, we have a list of 'famous,' somewhat 'generic' stones as a prelude to a more detailed set comprising those that suit a particular taste and need (the set we read about in 3.1 above). We may say that these two sets form the *AR* 'gemstones section.' Still, only one tells us about a 'collection' brought together by des Esseintes – and thus enters the character acting horizon. Both, however, compose a coherent piece of the 'inventory' through which Huysmans sets out a whole backstory for his protagonist. Taken together, they manifest what des Esseintes feels he ought to be.

Such a procedure is repeated in the itinerary through the Latin decadence library, which constitutes the famous Chapter III (Chevallier 2002; Accardi 2014). However, the general list of authors and works is much broader and tighter here. The selection has not been made between items absent and present in the collection but rather between those that remain in the background of the enumerative series and those on which the series itself indulges, transforming them, for a few paragraphs, into subjects of enumeration in their turn. For example, the list of certain stylistic traits and specific contents of Petronius's *Satyricon* covers a vast textual space (AR: 98-100) and is hard to summarize here. But what is important to emphasize is the process by which we arrive at the Petronius entry (so to say): a kind of zigzag path among the authors of the first century B.C., from which I extract this passage that mentions some names cherished by the false literati:

Salluste moins décoloré que les autres pourtant; Tite-Live sentimental et pompeux; Sénèque turgide et blafard; Suétone, lymphatique et larveux; Tacite, le plus nerveux dans sa concision apprêtée (...). En poésie, Juvénal, malgré quelques vers durement bottés; Perse, malgré ses insinuations mystérieuses, le laissaient froid. (AR:97-98)

This series proceeds through other names, lingers for a moment to praise certain traits of Lucan, and finally arrives at the author of the *Satyricon*. This process is repeated, century after century (up to the 9th), as other great names emerge from the lists left in the background. It will be reproduced in the other chapters devoted to the 'modern' sections of the library (Catholic literature and secular literature). The inventorial device whereby a name, within a list of names, opens up beneath it its further list of appreciative traits, however, can be reversed, and these traits can take on the hues of contempt and disregard.

What is essential is the maintenance of a figure-background relationship, in which we have: (1) emergence of a name associated with a list of significant merits; (2) emergence of a name associated with a list of rejections; (3) background of names that give the dimension of time spent reading and assimilating such a hierarchy of values.

Such a temporal dimension, on the other hand, does not exist for Bouvard and Pécuchet: about the two of them, we do not discern a backstory that can in any way be connected to any of the issues they deal with and their estrangement from the various domains of knowledge they deal with, leads to a series of issues with the assimilation of concepts and values, which are reflected in the management of spaces and objects. For instance, coming back to their agricultural enterprises, we find a scene with Bouvard struggling with a stack of manuals for cereal cultivation:

Bouvard (...) rencontrait des obstacles. Ils se consultaient mutuellement, ouvraient un livre, passaient à un autre, puis ne savaient que résoudre devant la

divergence des opinions. Ainsi, pour la marne, Puvis la recommande; le manuel Roret la combat. Quant au plâtre, malgré l'exemple de Franklin, Rieffel et M. Rigaud n'en paraissent pas enthousiasmés. Les jachères, selon Bouvard, étaient un préjugé gothique. Cependant, Leclerc note les cas où elles sont presque indispensables. Gasparin cite un Lyonnais qui pendant un demi-siècle a cultivé des céréales sur le même champ: cela renverse la théorie des assolements. Tull exalte les labours au préjudice des engrais; et voilà le major Beatson qui supprime les engrais, avec les labours! (BP: 87-88)

A similar palimpsest of contradictions will present itself to the two *bonshommes* as they decide to comprehend aesthetics and the various theories of beauty – an enterprise that should serve them to orient themselves in their journey through literary genres that had begun in BP V. Here, Bouvard reads to his friend a summary note he transcribed, which challenges the established literary canon:

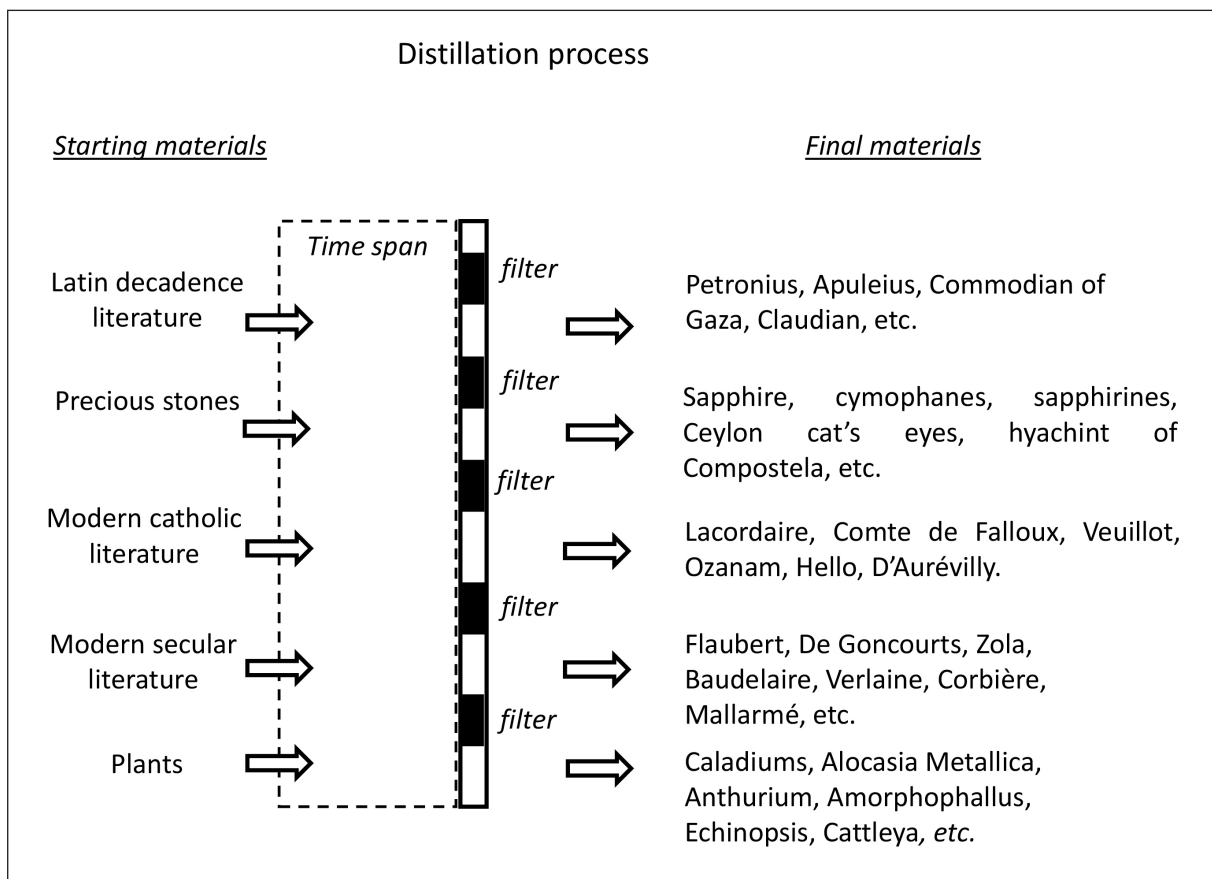
Bouhours accuse Tacite de n'avoir pas la simplicité que réclame l'histoire. M. Droz, un professeur, blâme Shakespeare pour son mélange du sérieux et du bouffon. Nisard, autre professeur, trouve qu'André Chénier est comme poète au-dessous du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Blair, Anglais, déplore dans Virgile le tableau des harpies. Marmontel gémit sur les licences d'Homère; La Motte n'admet point l'immoralité de ses héros; Vida s'indigne de ses comparaisons. (221)

As we can see, being 'new to everything' for the two companions is an obstacle to any hierarchical stratification of personal preferences or beliefs. Their *readable* identity (Cohan 1983) depends on the repetition of 'interferences' between the terms of the lists they face rather than on a repetition of the size ratios between figures and backgrounds, as happens for des Esseintes.

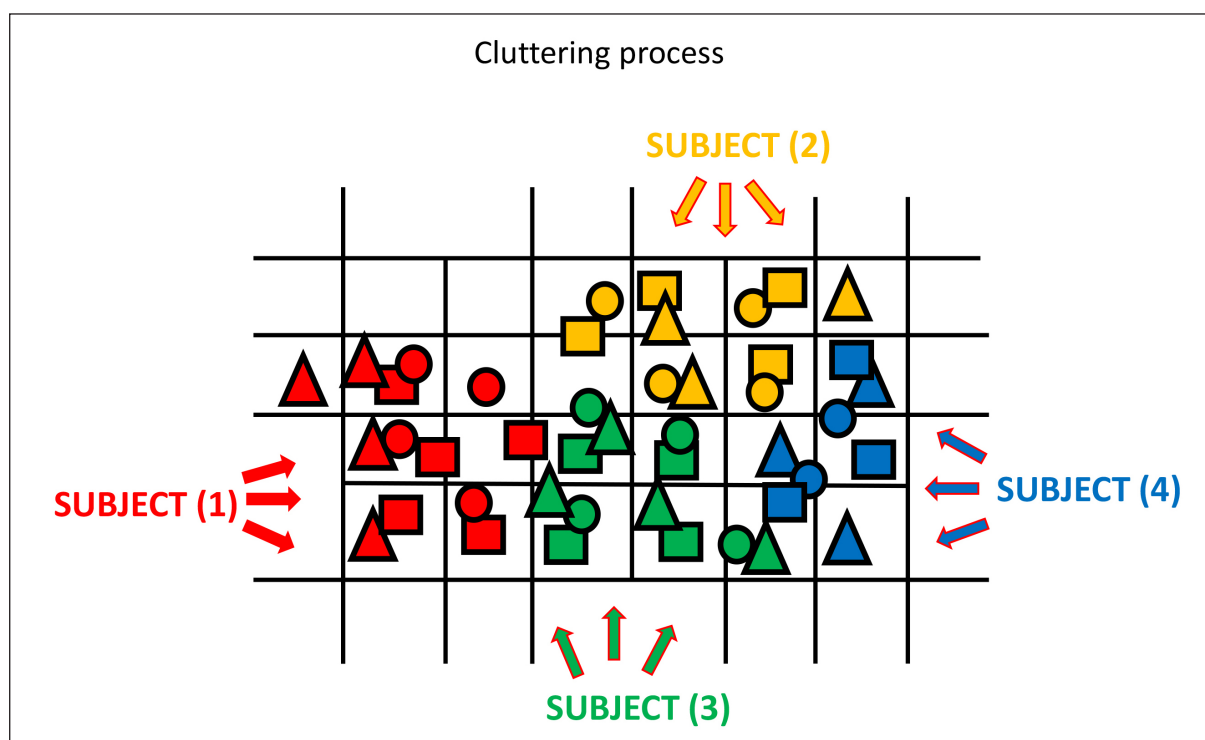
### 3.3. Results: *distillation vs. cluttering*

As we have come to understand by now, from the lists defining the life and personality of des Esseintes, certain products arise which we might call 'refined' and which are set against the background of the 'raw' materials offered by various fields of knowledge and technology. The path that proceeds from the raw to the refined draws the boundaries of the overall inventory of what a particular man can be. We are dealing, to be exact, with a method of *extracting essences* based on a certain kind of element fermentation: we could consider it as a veritable process of *distillation* – that same process at which we saw Bouvard and Pécuchet poorly fail with the explosion of their pot still.

The whole extent of des Esseintes' domestic existence is organized around this process. According to one's aesthetic degree and mood state, one can distill spaces: the essence of a monastery cell into a bedroom (as we have seen) or the essence of a ship's cabin into a dining room (AR: 86-89). One can distill objects, finding one's gemstones – those suitable to embody one's specific gemstone desire. And, of course, the readings, drawing from each literary century, are the most meaningful examples. Also responding to this process is the enumeration style, where each insertion goes to form a well-crafted interlock. There is thus an internal organization of enumerative series, which we might describe with an image like this:



On the opposite side, we have Bouvard and Pécuchet. Why are they such bad distillers? The trouble that adds to their inability to sort through the confusion of opinions and knowledge is their wanting to establish such an order *in the present*, in a continuous doing devoid of lived depth. Essentially, they want to put everything into the pot before they have had time to figure out what can fit together and what cannot and how the tool is used. Des Esseintes' distillation becomes, here, an encumbrance, which we might represent with this other figure:



Moreover, in both novels, several passages explicitly thematize the two processes. For example, the scene of Bouvard's reading of his notes on the scholars' aesthetic judgments ends with Pécuchet scrambling for a final composition of the picture:

Il aurait voulu faire s'accorder les doctrines avec les œuvres, les critiques et les poètes, saisir l'essence du beau; – et ces questions le travaillèrent tellement que sa bile en fut remuée. Il y gagna une jaunisse. (BP: 221)

The flaw in this attempt lies in wanting to combine the two mentioned methods, to grasp (*saisir*) an essence by the agreement (*accord*) of the elements. This way, the extraction does not work, leading to the side effects of body disease. It does not go any better for des Esseintes when it comes to enjoying his collections. Around the middle of Chapter IV of *AR*, we see him contemplating with satisfaction the result of the turtle hull interventions in one of the rare moments of mental and physical well-being in his home life. But for most of his time at Fontaney, des Esseintes suffers in body and mind, and his fine collections can only help and ease his woes *to a certain extent*.

Regarding books, for example, we get the backstory of what he owns and prefers (along with what criteria have shaped those preferences). Still, on the front of the practical relationship between the actant character and such objects, in the space of the story, des Esseintes's attempts to escape boredom by reading do not go well. The reason why is illustrated by Huysmans as follows:

A force de les avoir passées, dans son cerveau, comme on passe des bandes de métal dans une filière d'acier d'où elles sortent ténues, légères, presque réduites en d'imperceptibles fils, il avait fini par ne plus posséder de livres qui résistassent à un tel traitement et fussent assez solidement trempés pour supporter le nouveau laminoir d'une lecture; à avoir ainsi voulu raffiner, il avait restreint et presque stérilisé toute jouissance. (...) Il était arrivé maintenant à ce résultat, qu'il ne pouvait plus découvrir un écrit qui contentât ses secrets désirs; et même son admiration se détachait des volumes qui avaient certainement contribué à lui aiguïser l'esprit, à le rendre aussi soupçonneux et aussi subtil. (265)

## Conclusion

We now begin to understand how the two paths can come to a breaking point. For des Esseintes, the distillation process involves a dangerous pleasure, that sickens the mind and fuels isolation, deleterious to thought, ultimately resolving itself in 'no more joy at all.' The depth of his identity lists gives us the idea of a consciousness hypertrophy in which one risks sinking. As des Esseintes sinks, his doctor pulls him out of the Fontenay estate to bring him back to city social life. Yet, losing the whole of his man-things, little will remain of him.

For the two former clerks, however, the physical and mental space to cram objects and concepts will ultimately break down (like the pot still). It will then be necessary to gather what remains and start again, this time with no other space than the automatic recording of one entry after another. The Bouvard and Pécuchet we have come to know will flatten out more and more until they dissolve on the surface of collective knowledge – this being the start of the so-called *dictionary of clichés*.

These two paths might ultimately represent two ways of exorcising two different forms of accumulation fear. The fear of sinking under the weight of continuous refinement and getting lost in the seas of the collectible or inventoriable.

We may also notice how these two fears participate in a broader cultural paradigm in which positive sciences and, more generally, a secular approach to human knowledge have changed forever the very purpose of listing and collecting practices. In their study on pre- and post-Enlightenment catalogues of Catholic Saints, Jenny Ponzio and Gabriele Marino (2021) point out how a 'modern' encyclopedic technique could have informed the ancient practice of Saints' lives catalogue drafting by the introduction of non-hierarchical and impartial listing principles – alongside with the alphabetical order form.



This study is particularly relevant for the issue we are concerned with, i.e., the late eighteenth-century French literary atmosphere. For the 1870s or 1880s savant, the cultural process by which modern life experience had come from Enlightenment rationality to industrialized and bureaucratized society was not perceived as linear or continuous, as it may seem to us in retrospect. Novelists like Huysmans and the late Flaubert had to deal with the burden of the romantic generation's artistic and philosophical experiences – and especially with their actual or presumed failures in finding some anti-Enlightenment organization principles for knowledge, along with a new religious and Christian-like feeling. Interestingly, some Romanticism-related writers had tried to bring back a perspective of human history around the mid-eighteenth century that could be organized around a list of *representative lives*. These are Emerson's 'representative men' (1850), Carlyle's 'heroes' (1841), Hugo's 'genies' (1864), and Nerval's '*illuminés*' (1852).

Urging the readers' encyclopedic curiosity has nothing to do with such enterprises, inspired as they are by a genuinely anti-encyclopedic purpose. To draft a short, partial, and personal-biased selection of a few elect, entrusted with the goal of giving answers, directions, and moral rules to humanity – not so differently from the ancient *martyrologies*.<sup>14</sup> This being said, a few decades before these great essays, someone else had started to write his catalogue of human types: that was Balzac, and in doing such, he was keeping in mind a peculiar belief that a post-Napoleonic world would have shown us a model of history and society that had less and less to do with *destiny, glory, or heroism*; a society where representativity relations would simply connect a cultural token, to a civil register-like categorization.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, such a framework would pass a contradictory legacy to fin-de-siècle authors, with Flaubert and Huysmans both leaning towards Balzac's viewpoint and setting, each in his way, a fictional scene in which the meaning of organizing knowledge units, as well as value-bearer objects, would submit itself to such the question: *to what end?* This ultimately resulted in the main characters' inability to coexist peacefully and their respective and opposite way of searching for an answer.

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<sup>14</sup> I have not included among the above-mentioned works, a case such as early Eighteenth-century Chateaubriand's book, *Les Martyrs* (1809), since it lacks of that dossier-shaped structure which could serve the purpose of a tokens / paradigm textual organization. This latter would, instead, result in Emerson's forms of *irradiating greatness*, Carlyle's forms of *historical heroism*, Hugo's forms of *human spiritual genius*, and Nerval's forms of *cognitive eccentricity*.

<sup>15</sup> Also see, on this subject, Peter Brooks' *Balzac's lives* (2020).

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