To postulate a poetic of desire is to invoke the comportments of difference. The call for
difference breeds inevitably a radical encounter with failure. The multiplex problematic
of text as posture sires repercussions in Huysmans’s A rebours. The novel is sustained by
a series of tropes rescinded as the non-figurability of otherness calls for inscription by
proxy. The pleasure of the text resides in the de-signifying power of representation.

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the
foundation of all there lay only a wildly seething power,
which, writhing with obscure passions produced every-
thing that is insignificant, if a bottomless void never sati-
ated lay hidden beneath all – what then would life be but
utter despair? (Søren Kierkegaard)

To postulate a poetic of desire is per force and irrevocably to invoke the comport-
ments of difference. The discursive and performative interdependence of desire and
difference, their utter impartibility, pre-empts in fact the lithe inventions of post-mod-
ernism by which such co-presence is, in a sense, anachronistically valorized. Still, if
critics and scholars have taken stock of the pre-Derridean pairing, if they have dispas-
sionately acknowledged that desire is the philological by-product of difference de-
ferred, their hypothesis falls yet wide of the mark, as it draws with excessive dispatch
to a shuddering halt, leaving unturned and unsaid the irremediability, indeed the sub-
versiveness of this indissoluble two-ness. More enigmatically still, embedded in the
symbiotic coupling of quest and otherness is the promise of incompatibility, the
pre-inscribed certitude of inadequacy, the inverted assurance of demise. Whence the
deconstructive imperative.

From the early Renaissance to the present, for Rabelais as for Robbe-Grillet, for
René as for Roquentin, for Phèdre and Folantin, Gaston and Godot, Jourdain and
Genet, for Candide, Emma, and surely for Bardamu, the call for difference breeds in-
evitably a radical encounter with failure. Untamed, bungled, ill-devised, impolitic desire cedes its place to defeat – not gratuitously, as if by choice, but definitionally, inviolably, a-priorily. And the text becomes – as consequence – a cipher — metaphysical and narratological – of just that utter undoing, of that pre-ordained, ignominious decease. The illegitimacy of the enterprise is its very substance. A stance of hope, an act of quest are patently reified only to be dismounted, subsumed, over-determined by the impossibility of repletion. In such a revisionist optic, Lamartine’s desperate plea for the anchoring of life, Molière’s call for the containment of mis-fired ambition, Beckett’s cry for an end to entropy constitute metonymic representations of the same losing game, like spectacles of inglorious perdition, what Shakespeare aptly dubbed “that lame and impotent conclusion.” Signification thereby derives from the space, the interstitial gap disjoining the inscribed clamor for, and postulated belief in, triumph and the concomitant ineluctability of eternal wantingness. To sustain such a duplicitous vision, literarity must accede to the ruses of semblance. And unfailingly – it does.

The multiplex problematic of text as posture, as set-up, as subterfuge, in itself a compelling and tangled one, sires repercussions all the more contrived and extirpative in Huysmans’s *A rebours* (see Gasché: 81–106; Gaviria: 44–57; Lloyd: 131–168; Porter: 19–44). For here, a narrative engages in ludic, unvoiced dialogue with the self; in a kind of auto-annulling proliferation and excoriation of matter un-meaning. So do we witness a pseudo-challenge from within, a masquerade *in ambuscade*, a involuted confabulation heaved to the second power. Entrapped in such a literary lair, how does the text mean?

On the surface, allegedly, Des Esseintes’s decadent discourse translates a genuine, if forever thwarted, pursuit of alterity: a tortuous code, respitlessly pushing back the boundaries of speech, struggling to render what is most inexpressible in thought, what is most vague and elusive in form, straining to transcribe the illusive confidences of neurosis, the dying confessions of passion grown depraved, and the strange hallucinations of obsession turned madness, alas, the ultimate utterance of the Word, summoned to final destination and driven to its last hiding-place. Perceived in this light, the protagonist’s palpable desire (*son désir pulsionnel*) would strike as indistinguishable from its literary homologues — precedents and successors alike. On closer scrutiny, however, we discover that such parity runs counter to textual truth. The novelist lays a baited trap before the reader, entertains a meta-dramatic hoax (see Przybos: 219–259, Barnett, “Herméneutique”; Audoin: 109–142). For, quite apart from his paradigmatic siblings, Huysmans’s leading man, the backsliding recidivist here center-staged collaborates with undaunted consciousness in the playact: he is in control, attuned to the failures to be wrought, eager to live out the seeming-ness of each engineered permutation:

> Après les fleurs factices singeant les véritables fleurs, il voulait des fleurs naturelles imitant des fleurs fausses. (191)

1 All references are drawn from the Folio edition.