A Rebours by Joris-Karl Huysmans: a critique of public life, an experiment in private life

Christophe Van Gerrewey

I would like to propose, for the occasion of this conference, an interpretation of *à Rebours*, the novel by Joris-Karl Huysmans from 1884, as a critique of public urban life on the one hand, and as an experiment in private life on the other hand.

The story of *A rebours* is probably well-known. The protagonist, and actually the only character worth mentioning, is Duc Jean des Esseintes, a thirty-year old child of impoverished aristocracy, who is at the end of the nineteenth century still rich enough to never have to work a day in his life. After an education by the Jesuits, Des Esseintes is disillusioned with every aspect of modern life. He therefore decides to withdraw from this life and from other people completely. He sells the small castle in which he grew up, and he buys a small house in the countryside, twenty miles away from Paris. Apart from the introduction, all 16 chapters of *A rebours* are devoted, on the one hand, to the characteristics of the aesthetic and intellectual life that Des Esseintes tries to lead all on his own, cloistered between the walls of his country house; and on the other hand, to the memories he has of his life as a young urban bachelor in Paris – memories that are, for the most part, devoted to the extreme, indulgent and tiring experiences that exactly made him withdraw from the city.

Most of the time, and quite famously so, *A rebours* is regarded as the bible of decadence, as the biography of a highly sensitive and somewhat effeminate and probably homosexual character that can no longer stand the sensory impulses of urban life. Des Esseintes wants to experience life in measured and verifiable doses, and he is, as such, a pathological and dangerous case. Even the true defenders of the book at the time loved it because it was terrible. Already in 1890, 6 years after the publication of *A Rebours*, it is of great influence on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the novel by Oscar Wilde. It even makes a small appearance in the book, when Gray receives an unnamed book as a gift from a friend. ‘It was the strangest book that he had ever read,’ writes Wilde. ‘It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things

that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some mediaeval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book.'

To call a book poisonous means storing it in a particular cabinet, where the extreme literature is stored that might be entertaining in a darkly humorous way, or that could be a warning for an excessive lifestyle. But – and this is the point that I would like to make here – *A rebours* is important on a more structural and conceptual level. Why would it have been, otherwise, that someone like Paul Valéry admitted to keep *A Rebours* constantly at his bedside table? That is, because, like no other novel before or since, it both describes and embodies the evolution of public and private life at the end of the nineteenth century.

The diagnosis of urban life by Des Esseintes foreshadows the postwar theoretic investigations in the decay of the public domain. Already at the first pages of the classic *The fall of public man*, first published in 1974, Richard Sennett writes how 'today, public life has become a matter of formal obligation. […] Manners and ritual interchanges with strangers are looked on as at best formal and dry, at worst as phony. The stranger himself is a threatening figure, and few people can take great pleasure in the world of the cosmopolitan city.'

This despairing view on civilization, and this distaste for all things public, is indeed apparent in all the motivations that Huysmans gives for the decision of Des Esseintes to lock himself up. And these reasons do not only concern sensual experiences, but also more political, substantive and thematic issues. In short: Des Esseintes revolts against every part of what Habermas later called *Offentlichkeit* – 'openbaarheid' in Dutch – and what is, more appriorately for its decaying state, in English simply called 'publicity'. Every form of 'publicity' – and Habermas, for example, defined three forms: political, literary and representative *Offentlichkeit* – is experienced as disgusting by Des Esseintes.

A few examples from *A Rebours*: 'He was continually being chafed almost beyond endurance by the patriotic and social exaggerations he read every morning in the papers, overrating the importance of the triumphs which an all-powerful public reserves always and under all circumstances for works equally devoid of ideas and of

style.' 'He was sick and tired of these people whose indulgences struck him as paltry and commonplace, carried out without discrimination, without excitement, without any real stirring of blood or stimulation of nerves. They were witless fellows, with a suffiency of good looks, but without a spark of mind or spirit; prime dunces who had exhausted their masters' patience, but had nevertheless fulfilled the latters' ambition to send out into the world obedient and pious sons of the Church.' 'He loathed with all his powers of hate the new types of self-made men, the hideous boors who feel themselves bound to talk loud and laugh uproariously in restaurants and cafés, who elbow you, without apology.' 'He was revolted by the spiteful and petty judgments of the members of the literary society, their conversation that was as hackneyed as a church-door, their nauseous discussions invariably appraising the merit of a work solely according to the number of editions and the amounts of profit on the sales.' In short: not literature, not religion, not politics – there is nothing that contemporary men share with each other that can be called worthwhile.

The question is of course: why? Whose fault is this? Sennett offers a double-fold explanation: modern late-nineteenth-century man has in a sense corrupted 'public life' by converting it into a grand psychic system. 'Masses of people', Sennett writes, 'are concerned with their single life histories and particular emotions as never before. Because this psychological imagination of life has broad social consequences' Sennett calls this imagination 'an intimate vision of society. "Intimacy" connotes warmth, trust, and open expression of feeling. But precisely because we have come to expect these psychological benefits throughout the range of our experience, and precisely because so much social life which does have a meaning cannot yield these psychological rewards, the world outside, the impersonal world, seems to fail us, seems to be stale and empty.'

Applied to Des Esseintes, one could say that his modern consciousness – that certainly drifts into narcism – has made an appreciation of public life impossible, especially because public life was no longer what it used to be, because of the 'new' psychology of all human beings. It is no longer possible to adduce arguments in support of something if these arguments are not entirely personal and internal – in this sense, public life is seen, from a distance, as shallow and inauthentic, while it is 'enacted' by those who still want to enact it, from the inside, in a non-public but

private way – and therefore sabotaged. Sennett writes, that ‘people are working out in terms of personal feelings public matters which properly can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal meaning.’ We no longer want to be public because we no longer know how to be public.

This is where the paradoxical counterproject by Des Esseintes enters the stage. He does explicitly not want to demolish the public domain forever. His existential strategy is, therefore, fundamentely *positive*. It is of course critical of public life, but it can only exist in the near vicinity of the public domain. This is clear already when Des Esseintes is looking for a house to withdraw in, while at the same time he knows he wants the city nearby. ‘He experienced a lively sense of relief, seeing himself just far enough withdrawn for the flood of Paris activity not to touch his retreat, yet near enough for the proximity of the metropolis to add a spice to his solitariness.’ He takes with him two servants, a married couple, and he asks the woman to wear a great black hood: ‘the shadow of this mediaeval coif gliding by in the dusk gave him a conventual felling, reminding him of those peaceful, pious settlements, those abodes of silence and solitude buried oout of sight in a corner of the bustling, busy city.’ The intimacy that Des Esseintes wants is unthinkable without the public life of the city.

One could argue, in line of the theory of Sennett mentioned earlier, that the character fictionalized by Huysmans, longs for a sort of old-fashioned, classic and intact public life, in order to contrast it with his new-found, modern, decadent and highly personal life. Sennett has compared the modern decay of the public domain with that of the Roman Empire. But he stresses that ‘the difference between the Roman past and the modern present lies in the alternative, in what privacy means. The Roman in private sought another principle to set against the public, a principle based on religious transcendence of the world. In private we seek out not a principle but a reflection, that of what our psyches are, what is authentic in our feelings.’ In this line of reasoning: if public life was once transcendent, we have made it immanent together with our private life. The public domain was the place where things happened that were larger, more important and that had more grandeur than our own private existence. Because of the export of domestic life into public life, this kind of transcendence is completely gone. Who locks himself up in his house, gets therefore more of the same: the trap, as Sennett calls it, ‘of single life-histories and particular emotions.’

We should, however, not go too fast, and dismiss *A rebours* as a chronique of the merging – and thus of the failure – of public and private life. What if the case of Des Esseintes turns things upside down: what if he indeeds considers modern public life as entirely immanent – but tries to turn his own private life into something transcendent? With Des Esseintes, Huysmans has created a character that with all his might is trying to attain in private all the benefits of what once was self-understandingly public. And with *A Rebours*, a novel that consciously shatters the near scientific theories and illusions of the naturalism of for example Zola or the Flaubert of *L'Education Sentimentale*, he has written a plotless novel that might be both structurally and stilistically attuned to the new 'immanent' and 'narcistic' world view – it still tries to rescue and revalue this experience by making it public and thus transcendent by means of the *Offentlichkeit* of literature.

The dream here – or the loneliness of the project, which accounts to the same thing – consists for Des Esseintes in experimenting with experience in complete privacy but in such a way that the value of the experience is still as fundamental as in 'classic' public life. As I said earlier, every chapter of *A Rebours* is a sort of investigation into several domains of aesthetic, artistic and cultural life. The purpose of the experiment is to see whether – in the absence of a public domain – one can live the 'good life' without leaving home and without needing other people. Des Esseintes reads Latin and French literature; he indulges in sensual experiences by means of food, perfume, drinks; he watches and studies art, pictures, precious objects; he grows beautiful and monstruous flowers; – and most importantly, he travels all around the world without leaving his home. There is a famous scene in which Des Esseintes, after all a little bit bored with his private life, decides to take a trip to England, to London. But he does not make it – in the end, just before he has to take the train, he simply decides to stay home. 'What was the good of moving,' he asks himself, 'when a man can travel so gloriously sitting in a chair? Was he not in London, whose odours and atmosphere, whose denizens and viands and table furniture were all about him? What could he expect, if he really went there, save fresh disappointments?' The underlying motive here is exactly that all things wither to nothing when confronted with the modern reality of public life or the mechanics of modern tourism. Des Esseintes, together with *A Rebours*, is therefore searching, indeed against the grain, for what we would call, with a contemporary term, a *virtual* reality – which is actually a sort of extremely

private publicity or *Offentlichkeit*.

Sennett has stressed in *The fall of public man* that the nineteenth century is not yet over. And indeed, the problem of Des Esseintes is still very eminently ours. We can wonder, however, if the both critical and projective challenge it poses has been really taken by heart. On the one hand, Huysmans himself has declared the private-public-experiment unsuccesfull, because at the end of *A Rebours*, Des Esseintes has to go back to Paris, on doctor's orders, and in his own thoughts, 'has to give himself over to the waves of human mediocrity'. And on the other hand, on a more general level, the majority of the urban literary studies, of architecture theory and of urban design have conservatively lamented the demise of the public domain, and have only tried throughout the twentieth century to make the decaying public life 'real', good and old-fashioned public life again. The challenge of *A Rebours*, against the grain, made at the end of the nineteenth century, and thus at the beginning of the era that is still ours, is how to make private life public – not on a spatial or urban scale, but on the scale of the human mind and experience.