DIALECTIC OF INDIVIDUALITY: MODES OF THE AESTHETE-DECADENT
SENSIBILITY IN BAUDELAIRE, HUYSMANS, AND RILKE

by

PAGET HARRIS

(Under the Direction of Ronald Bogue)

ABSTRACT

The aesthete-decadent sensibility expressed in Charles Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, J.-K. Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, and Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* demonstrates a developing reaction to the changes affecting the social life and urban environments of 19th- and early 20th-century Paris. These texts represent different modes of the aesthete-decadent sensibility that correspond to the particular dialectic of individuality that is activated through each work’s treatment of artifice, memory, and sensory experience. The trajectory of these changes in sensibility is also determined by the effects of consumerism on the individual’s experience of urban life. In conclusion, a significant reconceptualization of the individual emerges through an analysis of how the relationship between art, life, and subjectivity are treated in each of the three works.

INDEX WORDS: Decadence, Aestheticsm, Fin de siècle, Baudelaire, Huysmans, Rilke, Paris, 19th-century Industrialization, Dialectic of Individuality, Flâneur, Decadent
DIALECTIC OF INDIVIDUALITY: MODES OF THE AESTHETE-DECADENT
SENSIBILITY IN BAUDELAIRE, HUYSMANS, AND RILKE

By

PAGET HARRIS
B.A., The University of North Carolina, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA
2005
DIALECTIC OF INDIVIDUALITY: MODES OF THE AESTHETE-DECADENT
SENSIBILITY IN BAUDELAIRE, HUYSMANS, AND RILKE

by

PAGET HARRIS

Major Professor: Ronald Bogue
Committee: Thomas Cerbu
Beatrice Hanssen

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2005
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................................................1

CHAPTER

1 BAUDELAIRE’S *LE PEINTRE DE LA VIE MODERNE*: CONSTANTINE
   GUYS AS AESTHETE FLÂNEUR .........................................................................................9

2 HUYSMANS’ *A REBOURS*: DES ESSEINTES AS ISOLATED
   DECADENT ......................................................................................................................28

3 RILKE’S *THE NOTEBOOKS OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE*: MALTE AS
   ALIENATED POET .........................................................................................................53

CONCLUSION .....................................................................................................................74

WORKS CITED ....................................................................................................................78
INTRODUCTION

The fin de siècle aesthete-decadent sensibility arose in part as a reaction to the issues surrounding 19th-century urbanization in France. Amid the increasing populations of the urban poor and the bourgeoisie, the subjective impressions of the individual and his or her cultivation of personal encounters with the external world offered a mode of escape and dissent. Aesthete-decadent texts react to shifting class relations from a perspective that expresses disgust with bourgeois values and that attempts to reassert the primacy of the individual’s aesthetic experience. This pursuit of an intensely lived aesthetic existence often has the effect of illuminating problems that arise in the dialectical relationship between the interior world of artists and their external surroundings. The movement between these spheres unfolds through an activation of artifice, memory, and sensory experience that brings into question the boundaries that delineate the relationship between art and life. The aesthete-decadent sensibility as represented in the literature of this period engages in such aesthetic experimentations in order to affirm the unique experience of the creative individual. Three different modes of this aesthete-decadent sensibility emerge in Charles Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), J.-K. Huysmans’ *A Rebours* (1884), and Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). By focusing on these works that span roughly fifty years of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, changes as well as sustained tendencies in the aesthete-decadent perspective begin to emerge.

All three works express a distinct antipathy toward the increasing intrusion of bourgeois standardization and the capitalist economy into the realm of urban life. The cultivation of a
unique individual aesthetic perspective becomes the primary mode of resistance for the protagonists. In the opening paragraph to Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, he directly critiques the bourgeoisie for blindly following a popularized notion of art that he argues against through his detailed consideration of the drawings of Constantine Guys. Baudelaire’s appreciation of Guys’ unique and “modern” style indicates that Baudelaire sees aesthetic taste as not a matter of consensus, but as a result of the artist flâneur’s ability to aesthetically appreciate what the majority do not notice or consider beautiful. In this way, the aesthete-decadent sensibility is in direct opposition to the bourgeois view of art, which Baudelaire characterizes as follows:

> The world – and even the world of artists – is full of people who can go to the Louvre, walk rapidly, without so much as a glance, past rows of very interesting, though secondary pictures, to come to a rapturous halt in front of a Titian or a Raphael – one of those that have been most popularized by the engraver’s art; then they will go home happy, not a few saying to themselves, ‘I know my Museum.’ (1)

Similarly, Huysmans in *A Rebours* voices the idea that once a work of art becomes popularized, the aesthete is no longer in a position to appreciate its unique beauty. This notion is continually emphasized in the novel, clearly evident when Des Esseintes proclaims that: “The loveliest melody in the world becomes unbearably vulgar once the public start humming it … [and] is thereby polluted in the eyes of the initiate and becomes commonplace, almost repulsive” (108-9). Hence, the aesthete-decadent sensibility reacts to the changing social and political landscapes of 19th-century Europe through the cultivation of an intensely individualistic aesthetic. This reaction against the status quo encourages the aestheticization of life in an effort to emphasize the unique perspective of the creative individual.

> The depiction of an intense individualism is the focus of all three works. Each text depicts a different type of creative individual who expresses the aesthete-decadent sensibility. In
Baudelaire’s essay, Constantine Guys represents the artist flâneur who realizes his creative vision through a “cult of the self,” one that emphasizes the individual’s ability to engage in a malleable identity as a means of contesting prescriptive social roles. Baudelaire notes that “few men are gifted with the capacity of seeing; there are fewer still who possess the power of expression” (10). In Baudelaire’s analysis, Guys is an artist of modernity who achieves a unique individual aesthetic through his ability to engage in a dynamic perceptual experience of urban life.

By contrast, the figure of the isolated decadent as represented by Des Esseintes, in Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, does not require interactions with the external world in order to realize his intense individuality. Instead, he becomes the sole source of his own aesthetic experience by escaping society through a self-imposed isolation, during which he cultivates his aesthetic sensibility through meditations on decadent art, literature, and music. Des Esseintes’ decision to seclude himself is rooted in an intense disillusionment with a society with which he fails to find any connection. His seclusion is an effort to preserve his individual aesthetic taste: “It became perfectly clear to him that he could entertain no hope of finding in someone else the same aspirations and antipathies; no hope of linking up with a mind which, like his own, took pleasure in a life of studious decrepitude” (22). His self-imposed isolation becomes a way for him to reject bourgeois society as well as affirm his stance as a unique individual.

In Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Malte represents a combination of the artist flâneur and the isolated decadent. As a poet of the city experiencing a profound sense of alienation, Malte’s intense individualism is a response to the increasing institutionalization of death, illness, and “degeneracy.” The urban environment has led to the increasing depersonalization of bodily experiences that are directly at odds with former ideas of the ritual
and community. He comments on how the hospital has come to resemble a factory, “with production so enormous, each individual death is not made very carefully…it’s the quantity that counts…the desire to have a death of one’s own is becoming more and more rare” (8-9). In the Notebooks, as in the other two works, the unique experiences of the individual as expressed through the aesthete-decadent sensibility contest the changing urban landscapes and bourgeois consumerism that accompanied the Industrial Revolution. The increasing commoditization and regulation of sensory experience, the body, and temporality are countered by the protagonists’ efforts at aesthetic experimentation.

The treatment of artifice, memory, and sensory experience in each text reveals how the relationship between the protagonist and his environment enacts a dialectic that becomes increasingly problematic. In all the works, the aesthete-decadent sensibility expresses an intensified individualism through which the protagonists strive to transcend their compromised position within the external world. Guys, Des Esseintes, and Malte all eventually realize, however, that their aesthetic relationship to the external world often undermines their creative individualism. Guys reveals this problematic situation most obviously through his sensory relationship to the crowd, which Baudelaire describes as an experience during which “he is an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for ‘non-I’ ” (10). Des Esseintes encounters this problem through a temporal entrapment, in which he is unable to escape the results of limiting the circulation of his impressions to himself. Malte becomes incapable of delineating the boundaries between his poetic insight and the surrounding urban landscape, such that the internal and the external become increasingly confused. By emphasizing the processes involved in the dialectic between the individual’s environmental stimulus and his realization of a creative individualism, these
works illustrate how the protagonists’ attempts to transcend the negative contexts of their social environments become increasingly difficult.

The differences between aestheticism and decadence reflect a different response to the individual’s creative engagement with reality, but both hold the realm of art above that of life and nature. The aesthete is in many ways interested and involved in the changing urban environments of his time and strives to enact a type of performance that works to aestheticize life. The decadent has much less interest in the aesthetic transformation of the world and seems more inclined toward the cultivation of transgressive actions for his own sake. In many ways decadence becomes one particular expression of aestheticism that reworks the phrase “art for art’s sake” into a call for “art for pleasure’s sake.” The decadent’s pleasure derives from his ability to cultivate an extremely individualistic and often perverse aesthetic, whereas the aesthete’s activation of art is directed toward the transformation of the terms through which he relates to the world. While the differences are subtle, the aestheticism / decadence distinction helps to illuminate the particular failures of each protagonist in his attempt to activate an aesthetic existence.

Over the roughly fifty years that these texts span, the impact of industrial capitalism on urban environments became increasingly influential in delineating the relationship between art and life. The creative individualism sought by all three protagonists is gradually more susceptible to the marketability of identity and aesthetic experience. In Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France, Rosalind Williams charts three distinct moments in the consumerism of the period, which roughly correspond to the three modes of the aesthete-decadent sensibility that are the focus of this study. She argues that the increasing number of participants in the burgeoning market economy of the late-19th century intensified the
distinction between the mass consumer and the cultivated consumer. However, she points out that both experienced “the image of self [as] closely tied to possessions” (139). This correspondence between identity and material goods suggests that the dialectic of individuality is increasingly affected by commodity acquisition, regardless of the individual’s social standing. In her discussion of what she terms “elitist consumption,” Williams describes a type of consumer who resembles both the aesthete flâneur and the isolated decadent in his pursuit of a cultivated uniqueness. She emphasizes the extent to which “elitist consumption” involves the procurement of elusive and often “useless” items. Individuals’ esoteric purchases and their desire to visually consume the products of capitalism indicate that they realize their individuality through their connection to the capitalist economy:

Elitist consumers considered themselves a new type of aristocracy, one not of birth, but of spirit – superior individuals who would forge a personal mode of consumption far above the banalities of the everyday. (110)

In this way, creative individuals’ artistic consumption of their external surroundings and their accumulation of cultural objects and commodities becomes a new way to assert their aesthetic cultivation. However, as Williams proceeds to point out, this dependence upon the external world of material goods and transformed urban landscapes has the effect of involving creative individuals in the world from which they strive to extricate themselves. Aesthete-decadent individuals progressively lose control of the dialectic of individuality. Thus, they are increasingly prone to reproducing and propagating the market economy that is the source of the cultural standardization they so disdain. She describes this dilemma as follows:

The elitist consumer never finds a resting place, never attains an equilibrium, but must keep buying and discarding, picking up and dropping items, perpetually on the move to keep one jump ahead of the common herd. He therefore shares the fate of the mass consumer who…finds that illusions of wealth are always disappearing as once-unusual objects are sold in every department store and therefore lose their capacity to convey the aura of wealth. (139)
Thus, consumerism affects the aesthete-decadent sensibility to such an extent that the pursuit of creative individualism works to propagate the capitalist economy. In Baudelaire’s and Huysmans’ works this usurpation of the dialectic by commerce has the effect of equating the desire of the mass consumer with the flâneur’s and the decadent’s. Williams also notes that a “democratization of art” resulted from this commercialization of life and art. By working to integrate art into “the life of the people, so that it would again become part of everyday life” (164), decorative arts reformers attempted to expose the connection between commerce and aesthetics. Malte’s consciousness of the marketability of identity and his subsequent city encounters with his alienated interiority anticipate this effort to raise awareness of the aesthetic realm. However, the attempt to reinstitute the connection between the community and the aesthetic is not powerful enough to overcome the overwhelming sense of individualism that had been instituted through previous market tactics. Williams’ arguments offer a helpful means of conceptualizing how the dialectic of the individual is tied to the changing capitalistic economies of late 19th- and early 20th-century cities. She shows persuasively that the notion of individuality as an elitist pursuit came increasingly under the power of the market. This was so much the case that by the beginning of the 20th century the desire to escape the alienated plight of the individual became the focal point for many modernist artists. Thus the transitions of the aesthete-decadent sensibility I trace are directly connected to the changing terms through which the protagonists attempt to realize their creative individualism. The influence of the external economy ultimately leads to these artists’ failure to sustain an autonomous individualism, and in the final stages there is a desire to return to community in order to pursue aesthetic pleasure in life.

The individual’s rejection of the increasingly industrial bourgeois environment of capitalism begins to threaten his creative autonomy. As a result, the boundary between art and
life becomes problematic as the dialectic of individuality becomes subsumed into the capitalist system. As the circulation of commodities slowly invades the individual’s aesthetic relationship to the world, an increasing solipsism becomes expressed over the course of the three texts. From the artist flâneur who realizes and loses his individuality on the urban streets of Paris, to the isolated retreat of the self-destructing decadent, to the increasing alienation of the poet who deciphers a roving identity through symbols in the city, the aesthete-decadent reflects a sustained effort to affirm the aesthetic experience of the individual in the face of the changing social and economic contexts of 19th- and early 20th-century Paris. However, the creative individual ultimately falls back on the institutions that his efforts attempted to undermine. These works demonstrate the impossibility of achieving an aestheticization of life that affirms the autonomy of the creative individual. In this way, the aesthete-decadent sensibility developed as a response to the changing social contexts of the time while failing to evade the systems of their dissent.
CHAPTER 1

BAUDELAIRE’S *LE PEINTRE DE LA VIE MODERNE*:

CONSTANTINE GUYS AS AESTHETE FLÂNEUR

In Baudelaire’s essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, he discusses the aesthetics of the artist flâneur as typified by the life and work of Constantine Guys. This study represents an early expression of the aesthete-decadent sensibility and as such it illustrates many of the central concerns behind the attempt to assert an individual creative vision within the shifting contexts of 19th- and early 20th-century France. Guys’ work is concerned with the relationship between art and life that is the focus of aestheticism. In the essay, the artistry of the flâneur stems from his observations of the city, specifically the crowd, that establish the primacy of individual experience and reveal the strong connection between the construction of subjectivity and the urban environment. According to Baudelaire’s argument, Guys’ ability to activate the perspective of the flâneur allows him to realize a type of fluid identity that manifests itself in his sketches. By merging with the crowd, yet still engaging an individualistic perspective, this early mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility emphasizes how the dialectic between interiority and the external world is activated through intense sensory experiences. The artist flâneur draws upon these urban interactions during the creation of his work through an activation of memory and artifice that enables him to express an aesthetics of modernity that asserts his individuality. Both Baudelaire’s essay and Guys’ aesthetic flâneur perspective demonstrate how the aestheticist concern with the relationship between art and life becomes a means of Contesting changing urban
environments. In this way, Baudelaire’s essay shows how the cultivation of individual artistic experience might work to combat the increasingly bourgeois perspective both in the realm of urban experience and in aesthetic judgment itself. However, this manifestation of the aesthete-decadent individual as a transgressive urban artist becomes increasingly difficult to sustain as 19th-century consumerism intensifies.

Baudelaire introduces his interest in Guys’ sketches and his perspective as an artist by arguing that the art of modernity derives from the distinction between two types of beauty, that of the eternal and that of the transitory. He claims that the latter is identifiable with the notion of modernity as the expression of “a relative, circumstantial element…the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions [un élément relatif, circonstanciel…l’époque, la mode, la morale, la passion]” (3/685).2 This type of “particular beauty, the beauty of circumstance, and the sketch of manners [la beauté particulière, la beauté de circonstance et le trait de mœurs]” (1/683), is the focus for the artist of modernity. Through astute observations of these expressions of his era, the artist not only captures details unique to the present, but also affirms his own stance as an individual situated within the particularities of his environment. Guys is a “painter of modern life,” in that he becomes implicated within the subject of his sketches during both his initial observations and in the process of creating his work. His aesthetic goal moves away from the desire to capture and communicate an eternal and deep meaning and toward a focus on the fleeting, transitory, and dynamic aspects of life. By introducing the subject of his essay, and by extension, the subject of Guys’ works, as an engagement with this idea of modernity in art,

---

1 For this reason, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* expresses the more worldly and engaged spirit of the aesthete rather than the disillusioned perspective of the decadent. I will interchangeably refer to Baudelaire’s essay and Guys’ work as exemplary of the artist flâneur and the aesthete flâneur.

Baudelaire situates himself as a proponent of an aesthetic discourse predicated on the notion of continual refashioning both at the level of creation and reception. This notion of a dynamic and surface level aesthetics is a direct refutation of the bourgeois notion of static meaning in art and in its popular reception. By opening his essay in this way, Baudelaire indicates that he is not simply engaged in an admiring study of Guys’ work, but that he is also expressing his own ideas of an aesthetics of modernity. Guys as a representative of the artist flâneur acts as the metaphor through which Baudelaire addresses the importance of intense sensory engagement with the urban scene in order to capture the transitory, surface-level impressions of life. Baudelaire’s assertion that “by ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent [La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent]” (12/695) is expressed by the structure and style of the essay itself; hence his project serves as a striking manifestation of the aesthete-decadent sensibility in its sustained textual self-awareness.

The structure and focus of the essay come to resemble the project of its description in many ways. Similar to the flâneur’s experiments with the sensory, the temporal, and the artificial, Baudelaire’s essay also activates these qualities through a type of sustained self-awareness evident in the construction and style of the text. This textual performance works as yet another mode of argumentation that demonstrates how the subject of a modern aesthetics seeks to elude determinate classification. As Timothy Raser argues, the aesthetic program communicated by the essay indicates the close artistic correspondence between Guys as a subject and Baudelaire as a narrator: “Baudelaire adopts literary procedures which resemble Guys’ devices in drawing. He suggests, he does not state; he narrates, he does not describe; he proposes accounts as ephemeral as Guys’ drawings” (163). These narrative techniques work to challenge bourgeois standards of art and artistic judgment that Baudelaire mentions in the first
paragraph of his essay when he indicts generic museum-going habits. The essay is also organized in a way that is not conducive to traditional forms of argumentation. As such, many critics have commented on the impenetrability of the text while others have considered the essay as a demonstrative performance of the aesthetics of modernity that Baudelaire discusses. The first half of the essay (sections 1-6) documents Baudelaire’s thoughts on modernity, Guys as representative of the artist-flâneur of modernity, and the processes which Guys employs in the creation of his work. The second half (sections 7-13) engages in an alternation between topical studies of Guys’ sketches, and Baudelaire’s thoughts on artifice and the dandy. Through this type of fragmentary organization, the essay defies categorization and as such becomes resistant to the type of determinate meaning of the bourgeois aesthetic mentality. Another way Baudelaire’s essay enacts an aesthetics of modernity as a form of resistance is by focusing on the life and work of a relatively obscure artist. Many critics have argued that Baudelaire was mistaken in not choosing Manet as the “painter of modern life” for his essay. However, Baudelaire’s insistence on the anonymity of Guys’ character indicates his intentional choice of an unrecognized and marginal author to evade the appropriation of an artist and the message of his aesthetic program (Raser 156). By employing a descriptive style that emphasizes the fleeting and transitory quality of his modern aesthetics, by privileging the marginal in choosing Guys as his subject, and by structuring his essay in such a fragmentary manner, Baudelaire creates a work that in its own way engages in a textual flânerie. By finding aesthetic pleasure through such untraditional narrative means that never linger over any topic long enough to lose the transitory and ephemeral spirit of inquiry, Baudelaire’s essay expertly echoes the topic of its study.

3 For examples of the variety of critical responses see Timothy Raser’s article “The Subject of Le Peintre de la vie moderne.”
4 See Pierre-Georges Castex’s work Baudelaire critique d’art, 1969.
Baudelaire’s discussions of the flâneur have in many ways come to define the term and as such most critics consider the flâneur to be an urban, specifically Parisian, persona who emerged in conjunction with the massive urban rebuilding projects that occurred over the course of the 19th century. In this view, flânerie (as the activity of the flâneur) describes an individual’s continual movement throughout the city during which he engages in intense observations of the urban scene that contribute to his own creative sense of identity. However, the degree to which flânerie expressed a transgressive urban individualism shifted according to the city’s transformations over the course of the 19th century. The increasing commercialization of the urban environment that began with the construction of the Paris Arcades and ended with the “Haussmannization” projects of the 1860s affected how the concept of the flâneur was understood to function within the urban environment. In the early to mid part of the 19th century, the flâneur was seen as a representative of progress, whereas later in the decade he began to symbolize a reaction against the increasing commodification of culture and the ensuing acceleration of urban life. As Mary Gluck suggests, by the 1860s there was a shift from bourgeois notions of a popular flânerie toward the idea of the avant-garde flâneur that reflected how this persona no longer acted as a proponent of modernization and popular culture: “Modernity had ceased to be a social text that waited to be deciphered by the urban writer; it had become an aesthetic text, that needed to be freshly created through the artist’s imaginative act” (77). In this view, by the mid-19th century, the notion of the flâneur had become tied to a type of social critique that unfolded through an individual’s aesthetic relationship toward his urban

---

5 Baudelaire expresses the flâneur perspective in much of his poetry, specifically in the prose poems “Crowds” and “Windows” from *Paris Spleen* which I cite from the duel language edition published as *Twenty Prose Poems*, translated by Micheal Hamburger, 1988.
surroundings. This perspective not only worked to assert the individual’s unique creative
existence, but also as a way to protest the standardization of Parisian culture.⁶

The artist flâneur as depicted in Baudelaire represents one of the early manifestations of
the aesthete-decadent sensibility. As an individual engaged with, yet simultaneously detached
from, the urban scene, the flâneur’s perspective allows for the assertion of individuality through
the activation of his unique creative perception in the crowds of the city. This perspective is
characterized by a certain dialectic in which “the sovereignty of individual” is “dependent on the
contingencies of spectacles such as crowds” (Tester 5). Thus, the depiction of Constantine Guys
as an artist flâneur shows how the individual’s creative encounter with the world creates his own
sense of self in relation to that world. In this way, the individual becomes a continually evolving
entity subject to the urban influences of his environment, someone whose sense of self is at odds
with the bourgeois notion of a contained and consistent identity. In her discussion of the avant-
garde flâneur as artist,⁷ Gluck explains how this type of individual achieved a highly developed
ability to perform a dynamic notion of identity:

Rather than being a type, defined by codes applicable to all members of the class,
the avant-garde flâneur was a unique individual, who represented a principle of
differentiation and originality. His identity was based, not on typification, but on
masks, disguises and incognitos, through which he defined his empathic
identification with modernity. (77)

At the start of his introduction to Constantine Guy in section three, Baudelaire points out that
Guys’ unique perspective as a flâneur stems from his love of “crowds and incognitos [Grand
amoureux de la foule et de l’incognito]” (5/688), which leads him to engage in the manipulation

---

⁶ Walter Benjamin’s important works on the phenomenon of the flâneur and flânerie have informed many critical
understandings of this 19th century figure. At the end of this chapter, I will return to his view of how the
simultaneous growth in capitalistic enterprise and consumerism came to negatively affect the increasing awareness
of the crowd and the spectacle that is the focus of the flâneur.

⁷ Gluck opposes this type to the generic version of the flâneur that was depicted in popular literature of the 1830s
and 1840s.
of his identity. These incognito performances enable the aesthete flâneur to merge with the
crowd in order to simultaneously lose and assert his individuality. In this way, the more
inconspicuous he is the greater is his ability to realize his unique singularity among the masses.
Baudelaire notes that Guys engages in the pursuit of “originality to the point of shyness [M.C.G.
pousse l’originalité jusqu’à la modestie]” (5/688), suggesting that by working toward the utmost
anonymity among the crowd he attains a heightened affirmation of individuality and creative
perception. This type of individuality challenges the notion of a prescribed and contained
bourgeois selfhood, since the flâneur is subject to a continual fluctuation of self through his
perceptions and incognito performances. This is also the subject of Baudelaire’s prose poem
“Crowds,” in which he asserts that the flâneur’s perceptive stance functions as a “holy
prostitution of the soul [cette sainte prostitution de l’âme]” (27/26), and hence is part of a
dynamics of identity that is “eternally denied to the egoist, shut up like a trunk [dont seront
terinellement privés l’égoïste, fermé comme un coffre]” (27/26). These containment metaphors
indicate that the artist flâneur’s experiences within the crowd represent a mode of resistance that
seeks to evade assimilation into the system of bourgeois notions of identity. Unlike the
consumers traversing the boulevards of capitalism, the flâneur occupies an ever-fluctuating space
“in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite [dans le fugitif et l’infini]” (Le Peintre, 9/691) that
affirms his individuality while simultaneously denying his stability of self. This illuminates the
problems involved in the dialectic of individuality that often emerge as a concern for the
aesthete-decadent sensibility. Baudelaire describes the existential situation of the flâneur in the
following way: “To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the
world, be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world [Etre hors de chez
soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi; voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché
au monde)” (9/692). In this way, the aesthete flâneur feels completely dependent upon the urban environment while simultaneously detached from his surroundings. Such a stance allows for the assertion of individuality and uniqueness; the flâneur thereby imagines that he has special access to secrets of the city to which the masses are oblivious. This relationship between the crowd and the artist flâneur, however, will become increasingly problematic.

Baudelaire strives to illustrate the unique perceptive stance of the flâneur by comparing his perspective to a specific type of visual gaze that enables a certain kind of sensory response. These metaphors suggest the ways in which sensory experiences of the city work to transform the body of the individual. In this manner, Baudelaire indicates that flânerie requires a strange kind of passive awareness to activate the creative perspective. He first compares the artist flâneur’s mode of perception to that of a child whose unmediated view of the world results in his absorption of unique and intense visual details. For Baudelaire, the child is able to astutely observe the transitory details of life without interference from habitual modes of seeing that characterize the socially conditioned adult perspective: “the child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always drunk [l’enfant voit tout en nouveauté; il est toujours ivre]” (8/690).

Activating the child-like perspective, the artist flâneur becomes fully aware of the visual stimuli of his surroundings and is able to perceive details that are ordinarily overlooked. The second metaphor compares the bodily sensations of the flâneur to that of the convalescent. The flâneur as convalescent is someone whose “inspiration has something in common with a convulsion, and that every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent nervous shock which has its repercussion in the very core of the brain [l’inspiration a quelque rapport avec la congestion, et que toute pensée sublime est accompagnée d’une secousse nerveuse, plus ou moins forte, qui retentit jusque dans le cervelet]” (8/690). These two metaphors suggest that the artist flâneur’s
perspective is activated through a visual mode of perception that corresponds to a tactile experience realized through the body. In many ways this immature gaze and weakened body of the child-convalescent offer a perceptual mode of resistance to the bourgeois urban experience. This perspective is “neither healthy enough to participate in the social mechanism, in short to work … nor sick enough to be removed from society” and as a result the flâneur’s point of view represents a “socially ambiguous perspective” (Spackman 42, 45). Opting out of the productive capacity of industrial society, the convalescent, like the child, also symbolizes a perspective at odds with the regimentation of society.

The processes of memory and artifice that follow from the initial sensory perceptions of the flâneur during his urban experiences also indicate how this figure represents a mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility. After his immersion in the crowd, the artist retreats to his quarters and completes his sketches from memory. Memory enables the artist to exert his individual perspective, and in this regard the attempt to achieve a mimetic correspondence between art and life becomes unimportant. By countering the bourgeois interest in “realistic” representation as a means to appropriate and commodify the world, Guys emphasizes the centrality of the individual with access to his unique memory impressions. Baudelaire argues that this type of creative representation derived from memory admirably fails to engage in a sense of “justice” in representation. Instead, art derived from memory leads to a type of distortion such that “many a trifle assumes vast proportions; many a triviality usurps the attention [mainte trivialité devient énorme; mainte petitesse, usurpatrice]” (16/699). As a result, the artist flâneur works against an “egalitarian” representation of the world, in favor of expressing his own individual impressions. Baudelaire’s critique of the urban popularization of art and culture becomes possible through the
memory of the artist that emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual such that “the more our artist turns an impartial eye on detail, the greater is the state of anarchy [Plus l’artiste se penche avec impartialité vers le détail, plus l’anarchie augmente]” (16/699). Thus Guys’ process of creation after his urban experience also comes to resemble a political act of dissent.

The fragmentary nature of Guys’ compositions indicates the manner in which the creative process serves as another mode of destabilizing aesthetic meaning and judgment. Baudelaire’s continued use of the term “composition” in the discussion of Guys’ sketches suggests the multiple elements at play in the act of creation. As Raser points out, “the word composition occurs at least seven times” in the essay, and this usage “implies not unity but multiple elements, elements between which there is play,” such that the “composition produces an image more intense than does ordinary sensation” (161). Such a fragmented approach to composition is also reflected in Guys’ practice of working on many drawings at the same time: “He works in this way on twenty drawings at a time…the sketches pile up, one on top of the other – in their tens, hundreds, thousands [Il prépare ainsi vingt dessins à la fois…les croquis s’empilent et se superposent par dizaines, par centaines, par milliers]” (17/700). In this way the creative act resembles a type of flânerie as Guys surrounds himself with fragments of his perceptions that reenact the experience of the urban scene. Baudelaire also comments that it is difficult to determine whether Guys’ sketches are complete. The open-ended quality of the sketches is then yet another way in which Guys’ work represents a reaction against the standardization of art. The unfinished nature of Guys’ work prevents it from being easily appropriated by the bourgeois spectator. This ambiguity of completion, accentuated by the fragmentary process of artistic creation, is also reflected in the structure of Baudelaire’s essay itself. Such a correspondence

---

8 While this method of creation resembles Wordsworth’s appeal for the artist of Romanticism to create from “images recollected in tranquility,” it seems that Baudelaire is more concerned with separating the projects of the individual
indicates the extent to which Baudelaire interweaves his own aesthetic arguments with the technique and persona of Guys.

The second half of the essay involves a study of the different subjects represented in Guys’ work. In these sections, Baudelaire indirectly argues that Guys’ sketches reveal the ways in which the various social personas in modern life are created through specific performances of style and gesture. This consideration of how artifice is captured and celebrated in Guys’ sketches becomes yet another way of furthering Baudelaire’s anti-bourgeois argument in favor of an aesthetics of modernity. Baudelaire focuses on how the dress and gestures of the different professions represented in Guys’ sketches connect to the transitory and the contingent aspects of modern life. In doing so, he reveals how artifice acts as the true subject of modernity through the technique of privileging surface over depth. In section 11, “In Praise of Cosmetics,” Baudelaire explicitly discusses the necessity of artifice as a continual reworking of the terms of the “natural.” In his view, artifice acts as a type of resistance by contesting the standardization of identity and aesthetic response. He explains how fashion and cosmetics enact “a sublime deformation of Nature or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her reformation [une déformation sublime de la nature, ou plutôt comme un essai permanent et successif de réformation de la nature] (33, my italics/716). The artist flâneur’s preoccupation with artifice signals a reaction against aesthetic renderings that attempt to discover “deep intrinsic meaning.” In this regard, the aesthetics of modernity characterized by the artist flâneur is “no longer associated with the deep structures of social life but with the surface artifacts of cultural display” (Gluck 78). This attachment to surfaces results in a quality of self-awareness and play such that the artist flâneur might both depict and enact displays of artifice that reveal the extent to which surface-level details construct various social identities.
Baudelaire orients his description and analysis of Guys’ drawings to emphasize the artist’s preoccupation with artifice and the role it plays in the formation and recognition of social identities. The first three sections cover Guys’ sketches of warfare, political ceremony, and the military man. Each of these studies focuses on the postures and the gestures that characterize a formalized code of behavior and dress. Baudelaire spends most of his analysis in these sections emphasizing the extent to which the depiction of artifice in these works becomes increasingly more significant than the historical events that they capture. Instead of a photographic rendering of the event, Guys’ sketches appeal to the delineation of the fashion and postures dictated by the variety of political and military roles. In this way, any attempt to depict an individual’s identity by capturing a deep “core” referent becomes superfluous. Guys illustrates the artifice of these “official functions” by capturing such details as “light lying in pools or exploding in bursts, drops or diamonds of it sticking to the rough surfaces of uniforms and court toilettes [M.G. excelle à peindre le faste des scènes officielles…de lumière faisant nappe ou explosion, et s’accrochant en gouttes ou en étincelles aux aspérités des uniformes et des toilettes de cour]” (22/705). This type of descriptive language emphasizes Guys’ ability to render the transitory, surface-level impressions that are the focus for the artist of modernity. By refusing to portray his subjects in an overly realistic or psychological manner, Guys affirms his status as an individual who captures details unique to his perceptive abilities.

The persona of the dandy as inspired by Guys’ sketches represents the most admirable exemplification of artifice for Baudelaire. Significantly, this figure is primarily outside the social conventions of dress and behavior and thus becomes an exemplar of how the play of identity as revolt might result from an active and self-conscious pursuit of artifice. The performance entailed in dandyism thus becomes a means of identity fashioning that places
highest value on the originality of the individual and his ability to manipulate his appearance. Due to this emphasis on originality, it seems appropriate that in the section on the dandy, Baudelaire makes no direct references to any specific Guys sketches. This narrative technique suggests that dandyism is a process of continual identity formation and deformation that does not engage in a simple process of following rules or adhering to a fixed typology. Whereas the political and military scenes chronicle postures and dress as socially prescribed performances, for Baudelaire the figure of the dandy implies an acute awareness of engaging in “opposition and revolt…of that compelling need, alas only too rare today, of combating and destroying triviality [tous participant du même caractère d’opposition et de révolte…de ce besoin, trop rare chez ceux d’aujourd’hui, de combattre et de détruire la trivialité]” (28/711). In this way, the dandy represents an intensified version of the flâneur, able to detach himself from the crowd by playing the game of performance, such that he becomes an individual who is “permanently revolté but who does not ask for a revolution” (Botz-Bornstein 286). The cool demeanor of the dandy becomes a mode of exposing the emptiness of many postures. It also serves as a potential attitude of dissent that disrupts habitual bourgeois modes of urban experience by cultivating artifice in life. Dandyism as a conscious performance of identity brings attention to the surface rather than the illusory depths of meaning in a similar way that Guys’ sketches capture the transitory details of modernity. In this way, the figure of the dandy works to illuminate the social constructedness of identity and as such to suggest the possibility of expressing a position of social dissent through the playful and rebellious performance of artifice in life.

Baudelaire states that dandyism is a “cult of the self…the joy of astonishing others, and the proud satisfaction of never oneself being astonished [C’est le plaisir d’étonner et la

---

9 Earlier in the essay, Baudelaire explains that Guys does not fully embody the role of the dandy, since his intense passion for his surroundings prevents him from adopting an attitude of complete disinterestedness.
satisfaction orgueiluse de ne jamais être étonné)” (27/710). By emphasizing that the dandy
reveals the malleability of identity, he suggests that such performances serve as protests to the
increasing standardization of urban life. However, the style that the dandy cultivates through
such indifference becomes increasingly problematic, since the dandy ends up reinforcing a
system of rules in his dissent. In short, in order to rebel against society, the dandy must
necessarily recognize society and even directly participate in it, especially with the burgeoning
consumer culture that provides increased resources for his extravagant performances. The
problems encountered in dandyism are also shared by the artist flâneur, in that the artist flâneur’s
creative perceptions become increasingly subject to the impact of cultural commoditization. As
Haussmann’s projects accelerate toward the later part of the 19th century, the autonomy of the
creative individual becomes increasingly threatened, for this process of industrial standardization
directly impacts the dialectic between the artist flâneur’s internal experience of subjectivity and
that of the external urban environment. The openness of the artist flâneur’s perspective that once
allowed for his affirmation of a unique creativity now leads to the risk of his being appropriated
by the circuits of commodity exchange that surround him. Increasingly, the sensory experiences
of the artist flâneur in the throes of capitalism cannot be extricated from the bourgeois urban
reality of their dissent. The idea expressed in Baudelaire’s prose poem “Crowds,” that
“multitude, solitude [are] interchangeable [Multitude, solitude: termes égaux et convertibles]”
(27/26), becomes problematic, as the flâneur’s perspective is impacted by the increasing
industrialization of his urban environment. This dialectic of individuality results in the dilemma
that the flâneur as an “agent of change has no power to escape his dependency on the ‘host’
system, and that very dependency is itself the condition of such ability as he has to disturb,
destabilize, and transform the system through his power of resignifying” (Chambers 145). The
artist flâneur thus becomes dependent upon the external world for the expression of his independence from his environment. The result of this relationship is that the terms of the dialectic are beyond the control of the individual, and hence he can “exert no control over the meaning of the discourse whose agent of production he is” (146). The artist flâneur becomes increasingly subject to the changes in his surroundings, specifically to those inherent in the increasing industrialization of culture.

Baudelaire’s metaphoric descriptions of the artist flâneur’s urban experience indicate the extent to which the changing Parisian environment impacts his perspective. This is particularly evident when the artist flâneur’s merging with the crowd is compared to the functioning of a mirror and the mechanics of a kaleidoscope. This comparison demonstrates even more precisely how the wandering and vacant individual is increasingly appropriated by his urban surroundings. Instead of cultivating a dynamic identity through his unique experiences of urban life, the flâneur finds his identity undermined by the city. This description of the relationship between the observer and the crowd emphasizes the way in which the effects of 19th-century technology led to the manipulation of perception. The flâneur undergoes an intense exchange with the surrounding environment:

Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life…. (9-10)

[Ainsi l’amoureux de la vie universelle entre dans la foule comme dans un immense réservoir d’électricité. On peut aussi le comparer, lui, à un kaléidoscope doué de conscience, qui, à chacun de ses mouvements, représente la vie multiple et la grâce mouvante de tous les éléments de la vie.] (692)

The vulnerability faced by the flâneur in this strange dialectic seems to result from the way in which his gaze establishes him as a kind of mechanical center of the universe. Such a solipsistic
viewpoint works to unknowingly implicate him within the system of capitalist enterprise. In his famous writings on the flâneur, Walter Benjamin argues that as shifts in the urban landscape and the commoditization of culture increasingly affected the practice of flânerie, the flâneur’s “responses” to the crowd began to turn him and his malleable identity into a commodity (55). Benjamin comments extensively on this commoditization of the artist flâneur and links his cultural appropriation to the increasing intrusion of technology and commodity culture into the realities of urban life. In his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” he describes the “shock effect” that results from the changing environments of industrialization and how these impact the experience of the flâneur: “the shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker ‘experiences’ at his machine” (176). This shock experience results in the appropriation of individual perception, since “technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training” (175).

The artist flâneur becomes increasingly vulnerable to the fluctuations of the city as soon as his creative perspective becomes compromised. Priscilla Ferguson considers how the urban places traversed by the flâneur became subject to increasing “commodification of everyday life” (32) such that consumerist culture began to increasingly manipulate the individual. The terms of the dialectic of individuality shift, so that instead of “the flâneur confidently marking possession of the city, the city now takes possession of the flâneur” (38). The destruction of the Paris arcades that accelerated in the later half of the 19th century during the massive Haussmann building projects radically altered the connection between individuals and their urban surroundings. Commenting on the effects of the changes in city planning, Keith Tester states that: “The arcades of Paris before Haussmann were so important. They were public spaces which were protected from the circulations of the city. When the arcades were demolished, the
flâneur was thrown into the way of circulation” (15). The result of this transformation was the regulation of the spaces and experiences open to flânerie. The ensuing construction of the boulevards and the creation of the commercial department store “radically modific[ed] the individual’s relationship to the city and to society” (Ferguson 35). This enclosure of flânerie effectively “abolished the space between the individual and the commodity” (35), and as such the perspective that had formerly established the primacy of individual urban experience as a mode of dissent became increasingly subject to the workings of bourgeois consumerist culture. The accelerating circulation of commodities affected the relationship between the individual and his environment so that flânerie became implicated within a new dialectic of consumerism. In this way, the flâneur’s perceptive experience of the urban scene ceased to function as a creative expression of the individual and became a manifestation of the workings of capitalism.

The dialectic of the flâneur’s individuality precludes his ability to intentionally revolt against his increasing implication in the capitalist system. If he were to protest the intrusion of commercial culture into his experiences of the city, then he would cease to remain anonymous and his unique creativity would be subject to aesthetic stipulations. Since one of the most important aspects of flânerie is that the flâneur does not realize his individuality through reference to an internal core, but instead, the flâneur is “composed from the outside, rather than from within” (Gluck 77), for the artist flâneur to become conscious of his situation becomes even less likely. For Benjamin, this “hollowness” of the flâneur reveals his increasing vulnerability to appropriation into the bourgeois functionings of capitalism.

The flâneur only seems to break through this ‘unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest’ by filling the hollow space created in him by such isolation, with the borrowed—and fictitious—isolation of strangers…insofar as a person, as labour power, is a commodity, there is no need for him to identify himself as such. The more conscious he becomes of his mode of existence, the more he proletarianizes himself, the more he
will be gripped by the chill of the commodity economy and the less he will feel like empathizing with commodities. (54)

Thus, if the flâneur were to become conscious of his appropriation within the system, he would destroy the dialectical perspective of a malleable identity so central to his experiences of the city. Remembering Baudelaire’s comparison of the flâneur’s perspective to that of the child and of his bodily sensations to those of the convalescent, one might also consider Benjamin’s argument that the crowd acts as a type of narcotic for the flâneur, his experience resembling a mode of intoxication that turns him increasingly into a “hollowed out commodity.” He comments that for the flâneur, the crowd “permeates him blissfully like a narcotic…the intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers” (55). In short, the flâneur remains blissfully unaware of the transformations occurring in the city through which he wanders.

The artist flâneur’s dialectical relationship with his surrounding urban environment not only leads to the appropriation of his creative individuality, but also works to promote the capitalist system. Speaking of the kaleidoscope metaphor discussed above, Mazlish points out another reason why the flâneur might not have reacted negatively to his increasing assimilation into society: “The paradox is that ‘universal life’ is capitalism, and the landscape, bourgeois Paris. The circumstances of the flâneur’s life are the very condition of his being a flâneur” (49). Jean-Paul Sartre also argues that the works of Baudelaire reveal the difficulty of individual rebellion when the individual is implicated in and to a large extent formed by the society of his dissent. Sartre sees Baudelaire’s dandyism as representative of this effort to exert individuality while evading responsibility, stating that:

He applies his will to the negation of the established order, but at the same time he preserves this order and asserts his belief in its existence more strongly than
ever. If he ceased to do so for a single moment, [he would be] saddled with a total responsibility. (71-2)

The problem that the artist flâneur faces is thus revealed to be his dependence upon the systems that have the potential to bring about his very demise—either physically or ethically. In this way, the aesthete-decadent sensibility begins to face increasing problems raised by the attempt to blur the distinction between art and life. The aesthete flâneur’s attempt to cultivate the aesthetic above all other experiences ultimately results in his being unwittingly affected by the bourgeois systems of his initial dissent, and as a result, in his becoming a purveyor of the consumerist culture.

One response to these increasing challenges to the flâneur perspective is the complete withdrawal of the individual from society. This movement signals a rejection of the standardization of the urban environment and an attempt to affirm the integrity of the creative individual. J.-K. Huysmans’ novel, *A Rebours*, documents such a retreat from society. During his self-imposed isolation, the main character, Des Esseintes, attempts to maintain the primacy of individual aesthetic experience by moving the dialectic of flânerie indoors. His retreat signals an attempt to escape assimilation into the urban commodity culture. In Huysmans’ work, both the interior and exterior terms involved in the dialectic of the individual are determined by the aesthetic taste of Des Esseintes. By assuming control over both his environment and his individual aesthetic experience, Huysmans’ decadent protagonist demonstrates a new way of approaching the aestheticization of life. In this way, the second mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility works to reestablish the primacy of aesthetic experience and to escape the impact of consumerist bourgeois society through an intense individualism experienced in isolation.
CHAPTER 2

HUYSMANS’ A REBOURS:

DES ESSEINTES AS ISOLATED DECADENT

The individual’s retreat from the depersonalizing urban environments of late 19th-century Paris is depicted in J.-K. Huysmans’ A Rebours, a novel which recounts the isolation of the aesthete-decadent, Des Esseintes, and his attempt to realize an aesthetic existence of his own design. Over the course of his self-imposed exile, Des Esseintes engages in numerous experiments that illustrate his desire to control his sensory experiences while also allowing himself to be affected by them. By moving the aestheticization of life indoors, the dialectic of individuality shifts into a type of extreme solipsism since he becomes both the source and receptor of his aesthetic experience. Many of the experimentations that Des Esseintes undergoes during his aesthetic enclosure reveal his critique of fin de siècle society. However, his excursions into artifice and sensory stimulation often overwhelm him in the form of intense memories and hallucinations that contribute to his nervous exhaustion. Des Esseintes’ confusion of bodily and temporal experiences increasingly impedes his ability to maintain a controlled distance from his decadent lifestyle, and his aesthetic existence spirals out of his control. His neurosis has the effect both of driving him on to further experimentations in an attempt to counter boredom and of making him vulnerable to the nervous exhaustion that accompanies over-saturation of the senses. In the end, Des Esseintes does not succeed at becoming the master of his own aesthetic experiments, for his extreme immersion in decadence collapses the terms involved in the dialectic of individuality. His failure to affirm his isolated individual experience
once again indicates the extent to which the aesthete-decadent sensibility cannot fully escape being implicated in the external environment of its dissent.

The Prologue to the novel, with its brief account of the history of Des Esseintes and his family, situates the decline of the aristocratic individual amid the increasing population of the bourgeoisie in the context of fin de siècle France. This ancestral lineage has weakened over time and as a result the effects of this decline have become increasingly manifest in the bodies of the descendants. The dissolution of the Des Esseintes family results in part from procreative exhaustion, since they “had taken to intermarrying among themselves, thus using up what little vigour they had left [les Des Esseintes marièrent, pendant deux siècles, leurs enfants entre eux, usant leur reste de vigueur dans les unions consanguines]” (17/67). The last descendant of the line, Duc Jean des Esseintes, is frail and sickly as a child, a clear indication that the “degeneration of this ancient house [la décadence de cette ancienne maison]” (17/67) has led to a perilous state of impotent nervous exhaustion. After failed attempts to integrate into different social groups, Des Esseintes moves to Paris where he takes pleasure in the lavish display of his decadent lifestyle. However, this urban existence becomes increasingly difficult for Des Esseintes to maintain as his nerves can no longer handle “the thunderous din of life’s inexorable activity [le vacarme roulant de l’inflexible vie]” (23/73). His sensitivity to the increasing pace and cultural commoditization of the city overwhelms Des Esseintes both physically and mentally. As a result, he experiences a growing sense of nervous exhaustion. Feeling that he has realized the possibilities of experience to the full, he succumbs to the degenerative tendencies of his ancestral heritage. His continual pursuit of pleasure has caused his body to weaken and has led his mind to stagnate. Thus, his decadent dilemma becomes a two pronged pathology of

---

10 I will be citing both Robert Baldick’s translation, Against Nature, published by Penguin (1959) and the original as published by Imprimerie Nationale (1981).
bodily fatigue and mental boredom: “His over fatigued senses, as if satisfied that they had tasted every imaginable experience, sank into a state of lethargy; and impotence was not far off” [comme satisfaits d’avoil tout épuisé, comme fourbus de fatigues, ses sens tombèrent en léthargie, l’impuissance fut proche]” (23/73). His situation becomes a self-perpetuating cycle of degeneration in which his recurrent illness results from his attempts to elude boredom through excessive sensory excitation. This in turn leads to further illness and the subsequent boredom that reemerges during recovery. Des Esseintes’ choice to undergo a self-imposed isolation initially results from his desire to gain control over his aesthetic environment and thereby escape the urban dialectic of the aesthete flâneur individual. Hence, in an effort to protect his failing body and escape the ravages of boredom, Des Esseintes chooses to reject fin de siècle society and seclude himself in a suburban house at Fontenay-aux-Roses.

Des Esseintes’ aesthetic experiment in isolation affirms the unique experiences of the individual and also signals a movement away from the mid-19th-century urban perspective of the aesthete flâneur. In an effort to assert his individuality and affirm his aristocratic background, Des Esseintes responds to the threatening changes of the fin de siècle by moving the aesthete-decadent sensibility into the private space of the home. By rejecting the city with its increasing population of naïve consumers, Des Esseintes combats the appropriation of the individual by capitalism. His activation of an intensified aesthetic existence results in the creation of a new type, the isolated decadent, which requires that the self act as both the sole source and receptor of aesthetic experience. Disgusted with society and contesting the commodification of culture, he decides to devote his life to engaging in the “non-productive” pursuit of pleasure.

Des Esseintes’ retreat from society not only signals a rejection of the bourgeois perspective, but also indicates an increasing suspicion of the problems involved in the aesthete-
decadent mode of the artist flâneur. As discussed at the end of the last chapter, the flâneur’s increasing vulnerability to the systems of commerce began to affect his individual creativity. By losing control of his urban aesthetic experience, the artist flâneur had become yet another commodity, incapable of engaging in the unique pursuit of artistic pleasure. Thus, Des Esseintes’ move to Fontenay symbolizes an effort to reassert the individual will involved in an aesthetic realization of life. By contesting the appropriation of the artist flâneur, Des Esseintes represents the second mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility. His isolation may be seen as an attempt to move the creative potential of flânerie indoors. This is indicated by the fact that he remains close enough to the city to be reminded of its influence:

Thinking of the new existence he was going to fashion for himself, he felt a glow of pleasure at the idea that here he would be too far out for the tidal wave of Parisian life to reach him, and yet near enough for the proximity of the capital to strengthen him in his solitude. (24)

[En songeant à la nouvelle existence qu’il voulait organiser, il éprouvait une allégresse d’autant plus vive qu’il se voyait retiré assez loin déjà, sur la berge, pour que le flot de Paris ne l’atteignit plus et assez près cependant pour que cette proximité de la capitale le confirmât dans sa solitude.] (74)

His decision to seclude himself in a suburb of Paris reflects his desire to engage in a transformation of flânerie and the terms of its performance. This new manifestation of the aesthete-decadent perspective allows him to affirm control over his individuality in isolation while also remaining in touch with the tumultuous environs of the city. In this way, he situates himself in the symbolic position of the ultimate observer, one who can engage with urban experience, yet without being indiscriminately affected by it. His collection of cultural art and his close proximity to Paris enable Des Esseintes to realize the urban inspirations of flânerie according to his own careful consideration. He comments that his new home was “this time for his own personal pleasure and not to astonish other people [pour son plaisir personnel et non plus
pour l’étonnement des autres]” (28/78). Thus, Des Esseintes attempts to establish control over the aesthetic terms involved in his dialectic of individuality.

Des Esseintes’ aversion to travel and his preference for artificial over “real” experiences indicate that he has no need for the variety of the external world that is the passion of the artist flâneur. He does not search for creative self-affirmation through the intense experience of the “other” in the urban environment. Unlike Constantine Guys, with his desire to merge with the crowd, the decadent in isolation realizes his unique experience by rejecting his involvement in the system of bourgeois capitalism. The emphasis placed on mobility in Baudelaire’s essay is strikingly different from that depicted in Huysmans’ novel. Whereas Guys is described as a “man of the world,” Des Esseintes has no desire for unrestricted movement. This indicates the extent to which the retreat of the individual from the city becomes an attempt to activate aesthetic experience solely through the imagination and experimentation of the individual: “Travel, indeed, struck him as being a waste of time, since he believed that the imagination could provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience [Le mouvement lui paraissait d’ailleurs inutile et l’imagination lui semblait pouvoir aisément suppléer à la vulgaire réalité des faits]” (35/88). Moving away from Baudelaire and Guys’ celebration of the various social types that populate the urban experience, Des Esseintes expresses the opposite sentiment, preferring to separate his elite interests from the “vulgar reality” of modernity. The “hollow” personalities captured in Guys’ sketches as exemplary of the artifice and gestures of modernity instead become indicators of the negative effects of the consumerist society in its push toward standardization. In this way, the rebellion of the isolated decadent exemplifies Benjamin’s “collector,” who reacts against the commoditization that haunts
the artist flâneur. Benjamin notes how the individual’s seclusion disengages the aesthetic from its potential use as a commodity:

The interior was the place of refuge of Art. The collector was the true inhabitant of the interior. He made the glorification of things his concern. To him fell the task of Sisyphus which consisted of stripping things of their commodity character by means of his possession of them. But he conferred upon them only a fancier’s value, rather than use-value. The collector dreamed that he was in a world which was not only far-off in distance and in time, but which was also a better one…in which things were free from the bondage of being useful. (168)

Thus the isolated decadent’s collection of objets d’art and his personalized experiments in artifice become more desirable than those found in the “reality” of the external world since they are separated from the contexts of production and use value. Des Esseintes’ retreat not only removes him physically from consumerist society, but also takes his cultural artifacts out of circulation as well. In this way, Des Esseintes transforms the terms of flânerie by limiting commodity circulation to the confines of his home’s interior. By refusing to take part in the productive circuits of exchange, he strives to escape the ravages of capitalism by limiting his aesthetic experience to a dialectical exchange with himself. Through the careful construction of his aesthetic environment, Des Esseintes acts as the external inspiration for his internal creative realizations.

For Des Esseintes, the cultural artifacts contained within his home, his memories, his sensory experiments, and his imagination provide the materials with which to engage in an intensely subjective flânerie. Des Esseintes retains the desire of the flâneur to be inspired by his surroundings, while yet maintaining an utmost degree of control. His cloistered flânerie retreat at Fontenay-aux-Roses thus represents a change in the aesthete-decadent sensibility such that the individual serves on both sides of the creative dialectic. Des Esseintes’ carefully constructed environment and his experiments resemble the tumultuous crowd through which he realizes his
aesthetic existence. Everything that surrounds him at Fontenay is an expression of his unique aesthetic taste and thus acts as an assertion of his individuality. At the same time, the end result of this interiorized flânerie is that Des Esseintes effectively “feeds off” himself in order to provoke new creative perspectives. By becoming the purveyor and subject of his own aesthetic experimentations, Des Esseintes introduces new challenges to the aesthete-decadent sensibility.

Initially, Des Esseintes tries to salvage his individuality and rescue his body from the ravages of urban time and commerce by controlling the routines and the decoration of his house. By regulating and structuring his environment, he situates himself as the center of his own aesthetically fashioned universe. The seclusion and the regimentation that he imposes on his new mode of life allow Des Esseintes to assert his individuality as well as preserve his fragile body. In order to soothe his over-burdened nerves, he initiates strict systems of control that introduce a monastic-like routine into his everyday existence. These rules regulate his daily eating habits: “He went on to fix his mealtimes according to an unvarying schedule [Il régla aussi les heures immuables des repas]” (33/86). They also dictate the activities of his servants: “He also arranged a code of signals with them so that they should know what he needed by the number of long or short peals he rang on his bell [Il convint avec eux aussi du sens de certaines sonneries, détermina la signification des coups de timbre, selon leur nombre, leur brièveté, leur longueur]” (32/85). In his effort to create an environment subordinate to his will, Des Esseintes becomes preoccupied with the organization and decoration of his home. His attention to aesthetic detail is reflected in his deliberations over wall color and the detailed organization of his library. This effort to exert his individuality through control opposes the dynamic relationship between art and life experienced by the artist flâneur. In this way, Des Esseintes
constructs his own realm of aesthetic tyranny through the regimentation and controlled creation of his environment.

Des Esseintes’ preference for the artificial also enables him to assert his aesthetic individuality through the regulation of his surroundings. Artifice allows him to affirm the opposite of the accepted norm and thus realize his individuality by acting à rebours (against nature). These pursuits are characteristic of decadence and become a “means of demonstrating the primacy of the internal universe over the external world…by creating material simulacra as a means of freeing the imagination” (Pierrot 75). In this view, artifice offers a path toward individual liberation that is achieved through strength of will. Des Esseintes’ preference for the artificial is clearly evident in his collection of greenhouse flowers. In his selection of “natural flowers that would look like fakes [il voulait des fleurs naturelles imitant des fleurs fausses]” (97/160), Des Esseintes cultivates plants with exotic and sickly appearances. Thus in defiance of traditional horticulture, he realizes his individual superiority through the propagation of artifice. Des Esseintes describes how his selection of plants demonstrates his individuality and superiority when he comments that he prefers exotic flowers that have “nothing whatever in common with the popular plants or the bourgeois bloom [n’ayant plus rien de commun avec les plantes de la rue et les flores bourgeois]” (96/160). In his essay “The Decay of Lying,” Oscar Wilde argues that art and artifice improve upon nature. He claims that an individual’s aesthetic cultivation reflects his ability to perceive unique experiences of the external world: “One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence” (312). In a similar manner, Des Esseintes makes the majority of design choices in his home according to
such a preference for artifice. He thereby creates a world in which art reigns supreme and attests to his creative individual superiority.11

The most pronounced of his artificial creations is the ship cabin dining room that recreates the experience of dining on the high seas. The hermetically sealed room is described as similar to “those Japanese boxes that fit one inside the other [cette sal à manger ressemblait à la cabine d’un navire avec son plafond voûté]” (33/86). Through this design, Des Esseintes seals himself off from the rest of the world. The ship cabin dining room includes a porthole window, ventilation that exudes the smell of tar, and a large aquarium filled with mechanical fish. Each of these sensory replicas reflects Des Esseintes’ individual aesthetic interest. He wants to control every facet of his environment. He manipulates the color of the water in the aquarium, for example, “thus producing at will the various tints…which real rivers take on [il y faisait verser des gouttes d’essences colorées, s’offrant, à sa guise ainsi, les tons…qu’ont les véritables rivières]” (34/87). By subordinating his surroundings to his every desire, Des Esseintes attempts to assert individual control over his external reality. In this way, he represents a shift in the aesthete-decadent sensibility of dissent. Unlike the aesthete flâneur with his dynamic way of life, the isolated decadent reacts against creative standardization by becoming the dictator of his own aesthetic existence. While Baudelaire argues for artifice as the “repeated attempt at the reformation of Nature” (33) that precludes the establishment of norms, Des Esseintes uses artifice to establish his decadent authority and to affirm the individualism of his aesthetic existence.

A striking example that shows how Des Esseintes’ use of artifice differs from that of the urban artist flâneur is the adornment of his tortoise. In order to accentuate the design of his

---

11 Another example of Des Esseintes’ preference for artifice at the Fontenay retreat is his bedroom that replicates a monk’s cell through the illusion of fine fabric that appears poor (75).
carpet at Fontenay, he commissions an artisan to emboss his tortoise’s shell in gold and line it with jewels. For Des Esseintes, this artificially adorned tortoise demonstrates his personal taste and his ability to control his environment. This reformation of “nature” becomes a means of asserting his individuality. Des Esseintes’ decorated tortoise responds to a tradition practiced by the aesthete flâneur. Just as the practice of flânerie moves off the street into the seclusion of private space, the meaning of the tortoise also shifts. As Benjamin points out, in the mid-19th century, the walking of tortoises was fashionable for the urban flâneur as a symbolic act designed to shock the general public as well as to assert one’s individuality. These walks were an act of dissent on the part of the urban flâneur; they served as “his protest against industriousness…the flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace” (54). However, the tortoise of the decadent Fontenay retreat is a private symbol that reflects Des Esseintes’ efforts to affirm his individuality through the practice of extravagant artifice in isolation. The tortoise demonstrates his ability to cultivate and control the terms of his own pleasure without the need for an audience. The unadorned tortoise functioned as a rebellious symbol through which the urban flâneur publicly communicated his disdain for progress. In contrast, the decorated Fontenay tortoise reflects Des Esseintes’ desire to affirm his uniqueness separate from engaging in public displays of social dissent. Since the tortoise no longer represents a means of publicly protesting 19th-century industriousness, it seems quite telling that not long after the newly adorned tortoise arrives at Fontenay, it dies. This brief experiment in artifice foreshadows the self-destruction that will eventually force Des Esseintes to leave his isolated retreat.

Des Esseintes’ literature and painting collections also indicate that his aesthetic individualism does not require stimulus from direct encounters with the outside world. These
works of art challenge his controlled lifestyle by encouraging an intense subjective involvement in their interpretation. His interest in artifice first starts to shift during his detailed descriptions of Gustave Moreau’s Salome paintings (Salome and The Apparition). Instead of solely functioning as a mechanism of control, artifice increasingly becomes a means of counteracting the boredom of his routine lifestyle. Des Esseintes slowly transforms his isolated existence by finding entertainment in “evocative works which would transport him to some unfamiliar world…and shake up his nervous system [œuvres suggestives le jetant dans un monde inconnu…lui ébranlant le système nerveux]” (63/123). He is no longer satisfied with the establishment of his individual will through a controlled and careful artifice. As a result, he resorts to pursuits of pleasure that challenge his aesthetic response in that they activate unexpected sensations. In his reading of the Moreau paintings he focuses on the elements of artifice that constitute Salome’s performance. Des Esseintes first identifies with Herod’s response to her jeweled attire as depicted in the painting. Then through elaborate description, he vicariously turns Salome into an aesthetic object by concentrating on the surface-level of her dress and gesture. Thus, the gazes of Herod and Des Esseintes illuminate the jewels that reflect the movement of her dance:

Under the brilliant rays emanating from the Precursor’s head, every facet of every jewel catches fire; the stones burn brightly, outlining the woman’s neck, legs, and arms with points of light, red as burning coals, violet as jets of gas, blue as flaming alcohol, white as moonbeams. (68)

[Sous les traits ardents échappés de la tête du Précurseur, toutes les facettes des joailleries s’embrasant; les pierres s’animent, dessinent le corps de la femme en traits incandescents; la piquent au cou, aux jambes, aux bras, de point de feu, vermeils comme des charbons, violet comme des jets de gaz, bleus comme des flammes d’alcool, blanc comme des rayons d’astre.] (128)

12 This is similar to Guys’ depiction of the surface-level artifice found in the fashion and gesture of different modern types, specifically in the quoted description of how light reflects off the uniforms and dresses of those assembled at an official function (22).
Through such an intensely metaphoric description of the painting, Des Esseintes creates his own vision of Salome. The painting propels him into intense reflection during which he reads himself onto the work of art. In this way, the text engages in a *mise en abyme*, similar to that found in Baudelaire’s essay. Des Esseintes’ vicarious identification with the observer in the painting (Herod) allows him to experience an intensely subjective aesthetic pleasure. However, Des Esseintes’ ability to distinguish between his aesthetic response and the painting itself becomes difficult to discern. It is at this point that he begins to become increasingly trapped in the dialectic of his isolated aesthetic experiences. His confusion of the aesthetic object with his own response leads to a loss of control, and these reactions often adversely affect his bodily and mental states of being. As a result, his existence becomes increasingly solipsistic. Through these challenges to his aesthetic encounter and response, the boundaries of Des Esseintes’ individuality begin to weaken.

Des Esseintes’ confusion of his interior state with his surroundings results from his inability to control all aspects of his aesthetic responses. At the outset of his isolation, he affirms his individuality through the willful activation of artifice and the structured manipulation of his environment. However, in order to counteract the boredom of such routines, he starts to engage in sensory experiences that threaten his autonomous control over his aesthetic existence. The narrator comments on how for Des Esseintes, artifice functions most effectively when you are “able to concentrate your attention on a single detail, *to forget yourself sufficiently to bring about the desired hallucination* and so substitute the vision of a reality for the reality itself [de savoir concentrer son esprit sur un seul point, de savoir s’abstraire suffisamment pour amener l’hallucination et pouvoir substituer le rêve de la réalité à la réalité même]” (36, my italics/89).

---

13 Des Esseintes’ reading of Salome as an aesthetic exercise for realizing his own individual pleasure is similar to the way in which the descriptions of Guys’ sketches work to further Baudelaire’s own aesthetic arguments.
In this passage, artifice both affirms individuality through aesthetic control and initiates an aesthetic response that requires a fluidity of identity. The commands to “forget yourself” and to intentionally realize your “desired hallucination” seem impossible to reconcile. The paradoxical nature of artifice thus results from the individual’s simultaneous assertion and renunciation of control. Through increasing encounters with sensory manipulations that bring into question the autonomy of the individual, Des Esseintes loses the ability to anticipate his aesthetic responses. The sole creator of his external surroundings, he is increasingly enmeshed in a solipsistic existence. Haunted by memories and bodily sensations that arise outside his control, Des Esseintes becomes the unwitting source of his own aesthetic crisis. Victimized by the aesthetic designs of his own creation, he considers how:

He had to live on himself, to feed on his own substance…Solitude had acted on his brain like a narcotic, first exciting and stimulating him, then inducing a languor haunted by vague reveries, vitiating his plans, nullifying his intentions, leading a whole cavalcade of dreams to which he passively submitted, without even trying to get away. (84)

[Il vivait sur lui-même, se nourrissait de sa propre substance…la solitude avait agi sur son cerveau, de même qu’un narcotique. Après l’avoir tout d’abord énervé et tendu, elle amenait une torpeur hantée de songeries vagues; elle annihilait ses desseins, brisait ses volontés, guidait un défilé de rêves qu’il subissait, passivement, sans même essayer de s’y soustraire.] (147)

The sensations of his body and their effect on his mind have weakened his will, and as a result, his environment now dictates his existence. By the midpoint of the novel, Des Esseintes has exhausted all attempts to lead a controlled aesthetic lifestyle. Instead, he finds himself undergoing experimentations that threaten to bring about his destruction.

The state of decline characterized by Des Esseintes’ decadent dilemma results from his need both to rigorously control his existence and to intensify his pursuit of pleasure. The cultivation of such extreme sensory experimentations has the effect of threatening the stability of
the individual for he is unable to anticipate the results of his aesthetic experience. In short, the “shock experience” of Benjamin’s flâneur returns. The individual loses the ability to control his response and as a result he becomes increasingly subject to becoming the “hollow” commodity vessel. As the days of his stay at Fontenay continue to pass, Des Esseintes becomes more prone to experimentations with sensory manipulations that undermine his aesthetic control. His experiments in synaesthesia further his confusion between interior experience and the external. During these events, he does not know in advance what memories and sensory responses will be activated. Over time this results in a state of nervous exhaustion that prevents him from fully escaping modern society.

Through the experience of synaesthesia, Des Esseintes undergoes the dissolution of his will. This process involves an interconnection of the senses whereby one sense provokes another. The synaesthetic effect is clearly active in Des Esseintes’ experimentations with a device he calls his “mouth organ [orgue à bouche]” (58/118). The mouth organ is the first of many sensory encounters in which his loss of aesthetic control becomes detrimental to his health. Des Esseintes’ mouth organ connects taste and sound, such that “each and every liqueur, in his opinion, corresponded in taste with the sound of a particular instrument [chaque liqueur correspondait, selon lui, comme goût, au son d’un instrument]” (58/118). He would often begin “playing internal symphonies to himself [se jouait des symphonies intérieures]” (58/118) by drinking different combinations of liqueur. These synaesthetic compositions are initially a source of great pleasure for Des Esseintes, but he slowly loses control over the directions in which his aesthetic responses lead him. One night when he has “no wish to listen to the taste of music [nulle envie d’écouter le goût de la musique]” (59/119), he encounters the first of many horrifying memories that arise beyond his control. On this particular occasion, the taste of
whiskey reminds him of an excruciatingly painful tooth extraction. He recalls the details of this event to such an extent that it seems as if he is reliving the experience: “By now it seemed as if his head were being pulled off and his skull smashed in; he lost all control of himself and screamed at the top of his voice [il lui avait alors semblé qu’on lui arrachait la tête, qu’on lui fracassait le crâne; il avait perdu la raison, avait hurlé de toutes des forces]” (62/122). His synaesthetic experiment changes from a pleasurable aesthetic experience to an overwhelming, “gruesome recollection [l’assaut de ces souvenirs]” (62/122) of a painful physical experience. In this way, Des Esseintes’ creative perception is slowly taken over by unpleasant memories and their corresponding effects on his body. These experiments invade Des Esseintes’ isolation and he becomes increasingly prone to terrifying memories, visions, and hallucinations. At times, he attempts to reassert his control through experimentations designed to exercise his aesthetic will, but such efforts only further exacerbate his neurosis. Over time, Des Esseintes becomes trapped in the dialectic of individuality of his own design. He can no longer delineate his aesthetic environment from the memories provoked by his sensory aesthetic experiences.

These debilitating memories and their impact on his ailing body are symptoms of Des Esseintes’ status as the last descendant of a declining aristocracy. The sensory experimentations lead to recollections of the past that often provoke further illness. This process has the effect of entrapping Des Esseintes in his past and weakening his body. Thus, the connection between his body and his experience of time prevents him from moving beyond his past and escaping the pain of a stagnant temporality. Similarly, the Des Esseintes ancestral line is also relegated to the past since the family has become increasingly less successful in producing heirs to ensure its continuance. This temporal stagnation characterizes the situation at Fontenay, where Des Esseintes acts as both the source and receptor of his aesthetic experience. By attempting to
remove himself from the fluctuating circulatory paths that ensure the continuance of capitalistic enterprise, Des Esseintes limits the boundaries of his temporal and bodily existence. He becomes the sole source for his aesthetic experiences; and this isolation causes his body and mind to stagnate in a destructive lethargy. A type of symbolic impotence characterizes his memories, and they collectively express his rejection of the productive capacity of the individual within late 19th-century society.

Two memory episodes show how Des Esseintes’ preoccupation with impotence and decline is a reaction to the circulations of capitalism. In these instances his recollections do not unfold from some sensory stimulation. Instead, they arise for “no apparent reason [sans motifs du reste]” (78/139) and reveal telling events that occurred during his life in Paris.14 The first memory reflects his disdain for bourgeois values, in that it involves his active attempt to sabotage the success of a marriage. He recalls his former life in Paris, the disgust his social group voiced toward their friend D’Aigurande’s decision to marry, and his feigned enthusiastic encouragement of the marriage. Des Esseintes viewed D’Aigurande’s marriage as an opportunity to illustrate the ridiculousness of integrating into a bourgeois lifestyle. His decision to promote the marriage also stemmed from the fact that the couple had decided to live “on the corner of a newly constructed boulevard, in one of those modern flats built on a circular plan [au coin d’un nouveau boulevard, dans l’un de ces modernes appartements tournés en rotonde]” (78/139). For Des Esseintes, their quick seduction by the rebuilding projects and their subsequent consumerism demonstrated how capitalism negatively transformed the city and the individual. As a consequence of his disdain for the increasing intrusion of commerce into the designs and routines of individual life, Des Esseintes encouraged the marriage so that it might

---

14 The lack of sensory provocation involved in these recollections suggests the extent to which Des Esseintes is still psychologically traumatized by his urban experiences.
fail. Thus, his sabotage was designed to demonstrate the problems with “modern” styles of domestic living. Once D’Aigurande and his wife moved into their new circular home and purchased specially made circular furniture to fit the rooms, their financial resources were exhausted. Shortly thereafter, the wife decided to move to a “flat with ordinary square rooms [se lassa d’habiter cette rotonde et s’en fut occuper un appartement carré]” (79/140) with the unfortunate consequence that “not a single piece of furniture would fit in or stand up properly [aucun meuble ne put ni cadrer ni tenir]” (79/140). As a result of their inability to live extravagantly and remain married, the couple separated. Reemerging from his memory of this real life experiment, Des Esseintes congratulates himself on having successfully short-circuited one couple’s attempt at a bourgeois lifestyle, remarking that he felt the “satisfaction of a strategist whose maneuvers, worked out long beforehand, have resulted in victory [cette satisfaction des stratégi...]} (79/140). In this way, Des Esseintes feels that he exposed the dangers of modern consumerism and the impossibility of living a unique existence within the confines of bourgeois marriage. Thus, Des Esseintes’ memories of his former anti-bourgeois actions remind him of the urban commercialism that he desperately tries to escape at Fontenay.

The memory that immediately follows Des Esseintes’ recollection of ruining the bourgeois couple’s marriage reflects his desire as well to contest the lower classes’ susceptibility to the capitalist system. He recalls the time when he introduced a young boy named Auguste Langlois to an upscale brothel and agreed to pay for his future visits. He then abruptly cut off the funding for these pleasures with the expectation that the young boy would turn criminal and murderous in order to continue fulfilling his desire. Although Des Esseintes’ success in this sadistic scheme was never confirmed, he hopes that one day Auguste will commit a murder
which will reveal the corruption implicit in modern society. Pondering this vicarious form of social protest, Des Esseintes comments: “On that day my object will be achieved: I shall have contributed…to the making of a scoundrel, one enemy the more for the hideous society which is bleeding us white [‘…alors, mon but sera atteint, j’aurai contribué, dans la mesure de mes ressources, à créer un gredin, un ennemi de plus pour cette hideuse société qui nous rançonne’]” (82/145). In this way, Des Esseintes attempts to rebel against the modern system of consumerism and desire by exposing the negative results of habitual consumption and gratification. He created Auguste as a perverse version of a sensual consumer to show how desire may be conditioned by forces outside individual control. Des Esseintes’ experiment reveals that sexual pleasure in modern society often operates as a commodity that strips individuals of their autonomy.

His memories of sabotaging the bourgeois marriage and of attempting to corrupt the lower classes enable Des Esseintes to reexperience his disdain for fin de siècle society. Elizabeth Donato comments on the similarity between these two memories, pointing out that in both “the demise of the victim is directly tied to man’s fundamental need for luxury, to consumerism, and economic pressures” (139). In this way, Des Esseintes’ efforts become an “insidious attack against a bourgeois temporality that revolves around the consumption of manufactured goods and on the comforts of married life” (Donato 139). During these recollections, he seems to relive his previous life in Paris, at one point commenting on the feeling that “more memories…now came crowding in on him [d’autres souvenirs pressaient maintenant]” (79, my italics/140). This suggests that the effects of his previous urban existence haunt him even in his isolated retreat. Des Esseintes’ memories also reflect his interest in subverting the procreative drive that contributes to the continuance of bourgeois lifestyles and modern consumerism. In this manner,
his memories maybe associated with the degeneration of the Des Esseintes family. His antisocial actions thwart the procreative potential of the nuclear family and encourage a non-procreative sexual debauchery. Thus, Des Esseintes’ memories reflect his seemingly unconscious desire to turn his victims into impotent men similar to himself. His decision to isolate himself from capitalist modernity prevents his “productive capacity” in both the realm of consumerism and sexual procreation.

Des Esseintes’ memories of earlier relationships also illustrate his preoccupation with the subversion of the procreative drive of sexuality. Undergoing a synaesthetic experiment during which he savors the flavor of special purple candies, he recalls two of his former lovers. He was attracted to these women because they challenged traditional gender roles. The first woman was a trapeze artist named Miss Urania, whose masculine qualities Des Esseintes found appealing. She exhibited the “vigorous charms of a male…she seemed to have made up her mind and become an integral, unmistakable man [les charmes agiles et puissants d’un mâle…elle semblait se résoudre, se préciser, devenir complètement un homme]” (111/179) while he began to feel that “he for his part was turning female [Cet échange de sexe, entre miss Urania et lui, l’avait exalté; nous sommes voués l’un à l’autre, assurait-il]” (111/179). Through his relationship with Miss Urania, Des Esseintes fantasized about gender reversal. This fantasy allowed him to contest the biological drive of procreation and thus jeopardize the “productive capacity” of relationships.

The second woman he recalls was a ventriloquist who entertained Des Esseintes with her use of displaced vocalizations during their sexual encounters. He encouraged her to throw her voice like an “actress forced to play a scene, to practice her profession at home [de la comédienne obligée à jouer une scène, à exercer son métier, chez elle]” (115/183). Her ventriloquism turned her into an empty form for realizing for the realization of his fantasies. In the process, his sexual
experience with her was transformed into a type of autoerotic pleasure. Des Esseintes’ control over the ventriloquist and her ability to “become someone else” suggest that sexual relationships involve a loss of control that challenges the autonomy of the individual. Such a loss of control corresponds to the way in which desire becomes increasingly alienated from the individual in the system of capitalist consumerism. Perhaps in response to this correlation between sexuality and commerce, Des Esseintes ends his relationships with these women. By rejecting the need for a sexual partner, Des Esseintes prevents himself from becoming involved in the productive circulation of goods in society.

These memories increasingly plague Des Esseintes and cumulatively result in his return to an even more exacerbated nervous condition. Such remembrances intensify his dialectic of individuality and his isolation becomes pathological. In this way, his attempt to reject his “productive” role in society becomes increasingly self-destructive. He says that “when he came out of one of these reveries, he felt worn out, completely shattered, half dead [il sortait de ces rêveries, anéanti, brisé, presque moribond]” (117/185). These experiences of physical and mental exhaustion increase, and as a result, he returns to the strict regimentation of his diet and daily routine. The charting of his illness becomes methodical and develops into his new obsession. As Donato points out, this scheduled monitoring becomes increasingly prevalent in the final chapters. His synaesthetic experiments also take their toll, and he starts hallucinating without any sensory provocation. During one hallucination, Des Esseintes’ loss of control over his body is directly correlated with his mental orientation: “Never had he felt so upset, so weak, so ill at ease…he started seeing double…he was the victim of optical illusions [Jamais il ne s’était senti aussi inquiet, aussi délabré, aussi mal à l’aise…il vit les objets doubles…il se disait

---

15 This is similar to Des Esseintes’ reading of Salome, during which he aestheticizes her figure and thereby activates an intensely subjective perspective.
bien qu’il était le jouet d’illusions sensorielles]” (167, my italics/240). His attempt to reject industrial society by living a “non-productive” aesthetic existence has turned against him. Des Esseintes’ isolation ultimately leads to the deterioration of his body and mind, and as a result, he is forced to leave Fontenay and return to the city. The intensified and unrestrained dialectic of his aesthetic existence has, in the end, completely exhausted him.

The abortive structure of the novel also echoes Des Esseintes’ preoccupation with contesting the generative impulse of consumerist society. The sixteen chapters are not constructed as a conventional narrative. After the Prologue “the succeeding chapters could very well be in any order whatsoever, as far as traditional plot is concerned” (Weir 94). Des Esseintes’ status as the last descendant of his ancestral line is introduced at the outset of the novel, thus suggesting that the generative potential of the narrative is doomed from the beginning. Hence the nature of the protagonist works against traditional plot development with its notion of narrative continuity. By evading such textual formalities that enact a bourgeois temporality, the novel engages in a kind of destructive self-obsession. David Weir comments on this narrative difference, noting how: “Decadence…implies finality, and this implication is at odds with the conventional novel, with its elaborate devices that work to delay finality” (94). In this regard, the novel engages in a “non-productivity” counter to bourgeois propagation. A Rebours also illustrates its narrative impotence through the use of fragmentation that precludes arrival at any insightful climaxes. Many of the chapters end by frustrating the hope for a resolution, and as a result, they cumulatively coalesce into an expression of exhaustion. In a moment of textual self-awareness toward the end of the novel, Des Esseintes reflects on the unique style of decadent writers. He admires the tendency toward incompletion and imperfection that characterizes their style:
Imperfection itself pleased him…it was in their [decadent writers’] confused efforts that you could find the most exalted flights of sensibility, the most morbid caprices of psychology, the most extravagant aberrations of language called upon in vain to control and repress the effervescent salts of ideas and feelings. (185)

[L’imperfection même lui plaisait…c’était parmi leurs turbulentes ébauches que l’on apercevait les exaltations de la sensibilité les plus suraiguës, les caprices de la psychologie les plus morbides, les dépravations les plus outrées de la langue sommée dans ses derniers refus de contenir, d’enrober les sels effervescents des sensations et des idées.] (260).

The self-reflexive techniques of fragmentation and non-developmental structure underscore the narrative situation of Des Esseintes. His continued illness and return to society do not confirm to traditional narrative patterns. This correspondence between textual composition and the narrative emerges as a sustained tendency of the aesthete-decadent sensibility. In this way, the relation between art and life plays out through both textual self-awareness and the protagonist’s aesthetic experiences.

The circular nature of the novel also indicates that Des Esseintes does not fully realize his aesthetic program, for he is unable to completely escape the functions of capitalism. The narrative opens with his retreat from society and it ends with his reentry into society. Ultimately, Des Esseintes finds himself completely entrapped by his aesthetic project. He has become both his own consumer and his own commodity. Thus, over the course of his stay at Fontenay, the dialectic of individuality is increasingly confused as the delineation between the individual and the external world becomes blurred. The connection between the controlled decoration of his home and his aesthetic experiences, the exchange between Des Esseintes’ memories and his bodily responses, and the relation between his boredom and subsequent experimentation replicate capitalism’s ubiquitous circulation of goods. These cycles contribute to Des Esseintes’ neurosis by undermining his individuality. The more Des Esseintes pursues sensory pleasure, the more exhausted and ill he becomes. This exhaustion leads to his increased need for
routinized and controlled environments, and then boredom once again emerges along with the desire for new intensified pleasures. Thus, the dialectic of the individual that became problematic for the artist flâneur also leads to Des Esseintes’ self-destruction as an isolated decadent. The aesthete flâneur’s vulnerability to capitalism also characterizes Des Esseintes’ crisis of individuality. He no longer can provide the “commodities” with which to feed his “consumerist” individualism. As a result, his body begins to self-destruct and his ideological perspective shifts. The unrestrained dialectic of individuality that turns Des Esseintes into the consumer of his own aesthetic existence during his stay at Fontenay-aux-Roses ultimately results in his failure to escape modern society.

Des Esseintes’ attempts to realize his aesthetic existence are also connected to material culture in a way that is explicitly dependent upon consumerist society. Des Esseintes is connected to the commodity just as much as the urban flâneur is. His involvement with the system is alluded to early in the novel when he contemplates the idea of sadism. He concludes that the sacrilege of sadism “cannot be deliberately and effectively committed except by a believer, for a man would derive no satisfaction whatever from profaning a faith that was unimportant or unknown to him [le sacrilège…ne peut être intentionnellement et pertinemment accompli que par un croyant, car l’homme n’éprouverait aucune allégresse à profaner une loi qui lui serait ou indifférente ou inconnue]” (162/234). In a similar way, Des Esseintes depends upon the external urban world to realize his secluded aristocratic existence. His individual superiority of taste is contingent upon his knowledge of generic bourgeois culture. In addition, his extravagant expenditure of material goods and financial resources makes his isolated aesthetic existence possible. By taking advantage of “mercantile society in order to feed his dreams” (Donato 153), Des Esseintes participates in the capitalist system. His Fontenay retreat also
“requires the complicity of a restricted but present social network” (150) as demonstrated by his employment of the architect who plans his home, the artisan who designs the tortoise shell, the gardeners who deliver his exotic plants, and the servants who attend to most of his living necessities. Thus, Des Esseintes is completely implicated within the system from which he seemingly withdraws in disgust. His failure to realize an isolated aesthetic existence and thereby reject the standardization of modern life is largely a result of his continued consumerism. Instead of attaining solitude, Des Esseintes has populated Fontenay with the material goods and workers of capitalist society.

In the final chapters of the novel, Des Esseintes’ recognition of his dependency on the external world begins to surface. Unable to withstand the destructive tendencies of his aesthetic retreat, he strives to reassert his “productive” individuality. He starts to actively chart the progression of his sickness, and his perspective shifts to reflect an increasingly judgmental view of decadence. Contemplating his return to modern society, Des Esseintes proclaims to himself that “only the impossible belief in a future life could bring him peace of mind [l’impossible croyance en une vie future serait seule apaisante]” (219/298). He now looks for reassurance in progress and faith, terms that he previously associated with the bourgeoisie. His distaste for the modern masses also changes as he no longer indicts their homogeneous existence. Instead, in a final act of inversion, Des Esseintes equates the bourgeoisie with decadence. He bemoans their continued growth, not due to their standardization of culture, but because of the degeneracy that he now associates with their class: “Could it be that this slime would go on spreading until it covered with its pestilential filth this old world where now only seeds of iniquity sprang up and only harvests of shame were gathered? [Est-ce que cette fange allait continuer à couler et à couvrir de sa pestilence ce vieux monde où ne poussaient plus que des semaines d’iniquités et
des moissons d’opprobres?]” (219/298). In this way, Des Esseintes’ physical exhaustion is accompanied by a striking ideological shift. It is as if his failure to maintain his solitary aesthetic retreat had resulted in a final act à rebours. By inverting the initial terms that led to his decision to live at Fontenay, Des Esseintes justifies his new-found faith in modern society.

Des Esseintes’ return to Paris and his impending conversion indicate the failure of his aesthetic experiment. By turning himself into an isolated unit of circulation, he never completely extricates himself from the influences of urban culture and capitalism. This intensified dialectic of individuality and his dependence upon material culture ultimately bring about his own destruction. Des Esseintes’ reentry into the urban environment anticipates the third moment of the aesthete-decadent as depicted in Rainer Maria Rilke’s The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge. In this work, the poet navigates a new mode of the dialectic of individuality that results from the dissolution of boundaries between the self and the city. Malte’s solitary interactions with the urban environment lead to the discovery of an alienated interiority, and as such he represents an interesting culmination of the other two aesthete-decadent modes. By deciphering his individuality through symbols in the city, Malte combines the creative mobility of the artist flâneur with the atrophied aestheticism experienced by Des Esseintes in his decadent isolation.
CHAPTER 3
RILKE’S THE NOTEBOOKS OF MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE:
MALTE AS ALIENATED POET

In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rainer Maria Rilke moves the aesthete-decadent individual back into the urban environment of Paris. The experiences of Malte, the alienated poet of this work, indicate that the individual’s creative encounter with the external world has led to his increasing isolation. The novel’s depiction of Paris also reflects how the late 19th-century growth of industry has altered the individual’s creative experience. The city in 1910 is characterized by depravity and destitution, which afflict Malte both physically and mentally. This urban experience results in a kind of creative sickness for the poet. In the first part of the *Notebooks*, although Malte suffers the torments of urban life, he gains poetic insight from his experiences. His surroundings often seem to possess an intimate knowledge of his interior self. This displacement of interiority onto the urban environment results in Malte’s increasing recognition of the creative individual’s alienation in modernity. Thus the distinction between the public and the private realms becomes tenuous and Malte is led to ponder the increasing influence of consumerist culture on creative experience. Realizing that creative individuality has become a marketable commodity, Malte struggles against the dialectic of the individual and moves toward a desire for community. Through his growing awareness of the consumer influence on the dialectic of individuality and the subsequent displacement of the individual in modernity, Malte demonstrates the failure of the aesthete-decadent attempt to evade the influences of capitalism. In the end, he is unable to contest his implication in capitalism since
his poetic insight is dependent upon the alienation propagated by the system itself. Thus, the
*Notebooks* confirm the aesthete-decadent individual’s failure to fully escape being influenced by
the environment of his or her dissent.

Malte is an outsider in the city of Paris. His alienation is tied to his foreignness, his
poetic perspective, and his recurrent illness. The urban surroundings prey upon his poetic
sensitivity, and his vulnerability to the overwhelming sensory experience of the city poses many
problems for him. As Kristiaan Versluys points out, “Malte feels penetrated by things. The
indifference with which the average urbanite parries the psychological shock caused by the city
is for him an impossible attitude. Everything grips him. Everything shakes up his inner being”
(124). In response to his displacement, Malte writes down his reactions to the city. These self-
conscious reflections reveal the impact modern urban life has had on the notion of the individual.
Increasingly, the city becomes a source for encountering the self as an alienated entity. Malte’s
awareness of his existential plight becomes an important aspect of his creative experience. This
new relationship between the individual and his or her external environment has led to the
“privatization of flânerie, the withdrawal into the interior and into the self” (Ferguson 38). Such
a change in creative individuality coincides with shifts in the aesthete-decadent sensibility, as the
individual moves further inside, both literally and metaphorically. From the urban celebrations
of the artist flâneur, to the interior environs of the isolated decadent, to the subjective reflections
of the alienated poet, the individual becomes increasingly withdrawn in response to modern
urban experience. By recognizing the ties between consumerism and aesthetics, Malte represents
the final stage of the creative individual as traced through the aesthete-decadent sensibility. He
sees that the changes wrought by 19th-century industrialization and cultural commodification

---

16 Like Des Esseintes, Malte’s illness has afflicted him since childhood. Illness becomes a marker of creative
individuality for the aesthete-decadent sensibility.
have alienated the creative individual as well as other sectors of society. The crisis of
displacement is now shared universally. He notes that most individuals have lost interest in the
creative fashioning of their lives: “You come, you find a life, ready-made, you just have to slip it
on” (9). The inevitable consequence of modern life is that the individual becomes a commodity—
something produced, distributed, and acquired. The sense of alienation that results from Malte’s
awareness of capitalist influences on aesthetic experience is a source for both the poet’s torment
and his inspiration.

Malte is aware of the fact that in this atmosphere of consumerism, identity undergoes a
process of continual change. The creative individual experiences a type of roving identity that
shifts according to the environment. Malte’s understanding of this destabilized identity leaves
him with an existential awareness of the continued alienation he will experience. He describes
this self-reflective stance through the metaphor of the writer and language. In this view, once
ideas and feelings are given expression, they no longer belong to the poet:

For the time being, I can write all this down, can still say it. But the day will
come when my hand will be distant, and if I tell it to write, it will write words that
are not mine. The time of that other interpretation will dawn, when there shall not
be left one word upon another, and every meaning will dissolve like a cloud and
fall down like rain…I often used to feel this happening inside me when I was
about to write. But this time, I will be written. I am the impression that will
transform itself. (52)

Hence, the relationship between the writer and the world is inverted. No longer in control of the
impressions which he records, the poet becomes increasingly written by the city itself. Since this
occurs “indirectly in external realities analogous to his own inner existence” (Jephcott 163),
Malte never achieves complete control over either his creative work or his identity. His
alienation prevents him from dictating the terms of his aesthetic existence and makes him acutely
aware of how the external realities of urban life determine interior experience. Thus, Malte
engages in a new type of creative individuality, in which he recognizes the impossibility of ever completely knowing the self. This third mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility precludes the liberated aesthetic detachment of Guys; it also precludes the attempted aesthetic control of Des Esseintes. Instead, the poet’s aesthetic existence arises from encounters with his alienated interiority. Thus, unlike either Guys or Des Esseintes, Malte is conscious of his inability to resist the impact of modernity on his creative individuality. His unstable identity and his isolation become sources for his poetic insight, sources which he experiences as both turmoil and inspiration.

Malte’s initial observations of Paris focus on the negative influence of industrial development. The city is described as a place of danger and destitution where the inhabitants suffer from an oppression that threatens their existence. He describes this ominous environment in the opening sentence of his Notebooks: “So this is where people come to live; I would have thought it is a city to die in” (3). The sensory impressions of his first experiences in Paris evoke an inescapable feeling of fear and repulsion. The city has a disturbing impact on each of his senses. The smells of “iodoform, the grease of pommes frites” (4) inundate him on the streets. He is disturbed by the sight of “a man who staggered and fell,” as “a crowd formed around him” (3). The sounds of “electric trolleys…and cars” (4) echo through his apartment and disrupt his sleep. These disturbances invade the individual’s senses and indicate that industrial changes have begun to affect all aspects of urban life. Malte cannot escape the sickness and suffering that his surroundings provoke. His periodic illness is thus connected in many ways to the sensory impact of this destitute environment. The urban infiltration of his perceptions results in his increasing alienation. He has no control over the effects that his external environment have on his internal state. Malte says of the influence his urban surroundings have on him that: “I have
an interior that I never knew of. Everything passes into it now. I don’t know what happens there” (5). The external world becomes an interiority to which Malte is denied access. This elusiveness of identity indicates that Malte experiences alienated individuality through his encounters with the city. Such an estrangement from internal experience results in a confusion of public and private spaces and eventually leads the poet to an existential crisis.

The urban environment has ceased to be a source of delightful intoxication, as it was for the artist flâneur, and instead has become an assaultive force, replete with depravity and confusion. This shift is illustrated clearly in the *Notebooks* when Malte recounts the terrifying experience of losing himself in a crowd. The disorienting event both isolates Malte as an individual and simultaneously threatens his individuality. In this experience, the poet undergoes a sense of both public and personal alienation in the city. He is estranged not only from his own experiences, but also from identifying with the experiences of those who surround him. He describes this new relationship between the crowd and the creative individual as follows:

Something drove me out again into the streets, which rushed toward me in a viscous flood of humanity… it was actually they who were moving, while I stood still…perhaps everything was stationary, and it was just a dizziness in me and in them that seemed to make everything whirl. (48)

In this encounter with the urban masses, the poet and the crowd merge into what amounts to solipsistic terror. He is unable to distinguish between himself and the crowd that surrounds him. Malte also has a physical reaction to this encounter: “a stupefying pain was circulating inside me, as if something too large were rushing through my blood” (48). His illness is exacerbated and he flees the street in a desperate attempt to regain his wellbeing. As he escapes, he exclaims, “Now
it’s over. I have survived. I am sitting in my room” (48). This interior space of refuge provides Malte with temporary solace for his rescued individuality.\(^{17}\)

Malte’s aversion to the crowds that fill the Paris streets is replaced by his fascination with the apartment neighbors that surround him. He prefers to imagine their private lives, rather than to encounter the public personas of people on the street. These neighbors form an invisible web that surrounds Malte in his interior urban existence: “Ever since I have been drifting about on my own like this, I have had innumerable neighbors; neighbors above me and below me, neighbors on my right and on my left, sometimes all four kinds at once” (168). The orientation of his neighbors places them in such close proximity to the poet that his apartment resembles a kind of “invisible” crowd. The private and public realms begin to blur within the space of the apartments as Malte ponders the lives of these secluded and mysterious individuals. His unseen neighbors also aggravate his illness. The poet’s vulnerability to the urban environment follows him into the private space of his apartment. He describes the symptoms that their presence inflicts upon him and comments that the only way he is certain of their existence is “through the disturbances they cause in certain tissues” (168). Malte is also concerned about the former tenants that occupied his room. Their presence haunts his interior space and contributes to his sense of displacement. He feels uncomfortable in the second-hand furniture used by the previous occupants (Rilke 49). In such a way, “even the most private place in the city bears the imprint of public use” (Versluys 123). Thus, neither the external spaces of the city as celebrated by the artist flâneur nor the internal retreat as cultivated by Des Esseintes provide Malte with a means to affirm his creative individuality. Instead, both public and private spaces contribute to his developing sense of alienation. The sensory impact of the city and its effect on the poet’s

\(^{17}\) In comparison with Guys, Malte has the opposite reaction to the crowd. However, Malte’s flight from the city street recalls Des Esseintes’ retreat from the dangerous impacts of urban life.
creative sickness contribute to the destabilization of his creative individuality. As a result, Malte increasingly encounters his poetic self as an alienated and roving identity.

The sensory exacerbations of Malte’s illness lead him to consider how the individual becomes displaced and alienated. His sensitivity enables him to encounter an urban existence that contests the boundaries between the internal and the external. One of the ways that this unfolds is through his “recognition” of various sites and people in the city. These symbols remind him of his past, but just as often they appeal to an aspect of his individuality previously unknown to him. In this sense, the city afflicts Malte with a type of déjà vu. This displaced process of recognition works to blur the distinction between both the internal and the external, and the past and the present. Malte thus becomes a witness to his own unfolding subjectivity, since the terms influencing his roving identity lie outside his control. Although he is alienated from his surroundings, he also discovers that his estrangement opens him to new modes of perception. Malte “risks being absorbed into and annihilated by the outside world…but the same psychic permeability that threatens his selfhood also accounts for the exceptional richness of his city experience” (Versluys 124). Malte’s defense against the tumultuous city is to document his creative encounters in order to discover the terms of the dialectic involved in his alienated identity.

This process unfolds primarily through Malte’s recognition of symbols and signs throughout the city. Through these encounters, the role of memory in the Notebooks becomes tied to a notion of time in which the past is contained within the present. This alienated past contributes to Malte’s creative sickness as he increasingly activates his accumulated memories through external encounters. One of the more elaborate examples of the merging between the poet and his environment occurs during Malte’s observations of a solitary wall of a partially
demolished tenement house. As he contemplates the remains, Malte describes in synaesthetic
detail the past events and people that occupied the home. Then he experiences a sudden moment
of “recognition” and exclaims: “I began to run as soon as I recognized this wall. For that’s what
is horrible – that I did recognize it. I recognize everything here, and that’s why it passes right
into me: it is at home inside me” (48). Thus, the external world is contained within the
individual and the individual’s memories are actualized in external reality. Earlier during
Malte’s recollection of his childhood he comments that his childhood home “has been broken
into pieces inside me” (25), thus drawing a distinct parallel between his memory and this later
encounter with the urban tenement house. Temporal and spatial boundaries begin to dissolve
since the poet encounters his past through the mediation of the surrounding urban environment.
This experience precludes the establishment of individual autonomy and results in a roving
identity. Through this collapse of the internal world of the individual’s past and the external
world of “recognition,” memory functions in the Notebooks as an alienated source of inspiration.

Malte experiences his alienation not only through encounters with symbols that evoke
memories but also through intense urban experiences. Through the increasing expansion of his
interiority, the distinction between the poet and his urban surroundings begins to dissolve. The
dialectic of the individual begins to run rampant; the more the poet expands his notion of self, the
greater his experience of alienation. Reflecting on the city’s power to release the poet from a
bounded individuality, Malte expresses a simultaneous feeling of ecstasy and terror. His
confusion induces an alienated subjectivity, a fact that he emphasizes by addressing himself in
the second person:

Your heart drives you out of yourself, your heart pursues you, and you are already
almost outside yourself, and can’t get back in. Like a beetle that someone has

---

18 This “embedded repetition” of imagery is a technique used throughout the Notebooks, one that underscores the
roving identity of Malte’s experience of creative individuality.
stepped on, you gush out of yourself, and your little bit of surface hardness and adaptability have lost all meaning. (74)

The relationship between Malte and the city disrupts the clear-cut dialectic of individuality that characterized the other two modes of the aesthete-decadent sensibility. The poet’s confusion of the internal and the external coincides with the increasing collapse of the private and the public spheres in modernity. Unable to distinguish between himself and the city, the poet experiences a roving identity that challenges the notion of the bounded individual. Malte is thus alienated from either an internal or an external perspective from which he might affirm his individuality. The result of this inability to ground the dialectic is that the poet engages in a continually shifting conceptualization of himself and his surroundings. Hence, while Malte’s creative sickness might cause him pain, it also prevents him from falling victim to the dialectical downfalls of the aesthete flâneur or isolated decadent. The poet avoids the aesthete flâneur’s appropriation by his external surroundings and the isolated decadent’s destructive tendencies. Instead, Malte experiences the alienation of interiority that results from the dissolution of the boundaries between the self and the world. However, this liberation of the dialectic leads to a type of roving identity. This unstable force has the potential to impact an individual at any time and in any place in his encounters with urban life.

Malte’s contemplations of artifice also contribute to his awareness of the connection between commerce and the alienation of identity. Remembering his childhood experiments with costumes and masks, he is equally fascinated, terrified, and inspired by the ease with which an individual can transform his identity. Malte describes the power that artifice exercised over him: “Hardly had I put on one of them when I had to admit to myself that it had me in its power; that it dictated my movements, my facial expression, even my thoughts” (103). Such manipulations of appearance indicate that identity is often determined beyond the individual’s control through
the meanings imbued in material goods. Malte’s costume influences his internal state and thus leads to the production of an alienated identity. Malte describes another of these dress up episodes, in which he becomes the mirror and his image the reality. He comments on how the images “permeated me against my will…I lost all sense of myself, I simply ceased to exist…only he remained: there was nothing except him” (107). The individual comes face to face with his alienated interiority as a part of the external world. This childhood scene provides an insightful key to Malte’s experience of Paris. As E.F.N. Jephcott observes, there is a striking similarity between this mirror episode and Malte’s city experiences:

By a reversal of rôles like that in the childhood episode, he loses his identity and becomes both the mirror and the reflection in it. That is to say, he experiences himself no longer through self-consciousness in the normal way, but through his impressions of the outside world. *External reality becomes a kind of metaphor for his own existence.* (161, my italics)

For Malte, artifice contributes to the confusion of one’s identity by making the terms of the dialectic increasingly fluid. Unlike the self-awareness and control that the aesthete flâneur and the isolated decadent cultivate through the sustained use of artifice, the alienated poet encounters this form of creativity as a means to question the delineation between internal and external realities.

Malte also considers the identity performances of other urban individuals. The poet affirms his increasing awareness of the connection between the alienation of identity and the capitalist economy through these observations. During one of these contemplations, Malte uses metaphorical language to emphasize the consumerist overtones of identity production and ponder the alienation experienced by other urban dwellers. His observations lead him to comment on the variety of masks that people employ in their lives: “There are multitudes of people but there
are many more faces, because each person has several of them” (6). He notes that an individual’s use of artifice resembles a type of economic production, distribution, and exchange. The way that individuals make use of their “faces” corresponds to the degree of their participation in a type of identity-economy. Those who are reserved in expending their supply “wear the same face for years” and, as a result, their main face “wears out, gets dirty, splits at the seams” (6). These individuals horde their collection of “faces” in the same way that one might collect material objects. As such, they build up a surplus supply of identities and accumulate this wealth to pass on to future generations. Malte notes this attempt at economic thriftiness: “Of course, since they have several faces, you might wonder what they do with the other ones. They keep them in storage. Their children will wear them” (6). The second type of individual engages in a flagrant expenditure of faces. Since these individuals “think they have an unlimited supply” (6), they quickly run out of faces and experience a shortage of social influence early in life. These flagrant spenders become subject to the last level of economic existence— that of the poor and destitute. In his description of a vagrant woman who metaphorically “pulls off her face,” Malte observes the disjunction between an individual’s public persona and his or her interiority. He says, “I shuddered to see a face from the inside, but I was much more afraid of that bare flayed head waiting there, faceless” (6). The woman’s poverty prevents her from attaining a complete mask; this confirms the poet’s feeling that identity is increasingly tied to the market economy. Malte’s encounter with the alienated interiority of this vagrant terrifies him. The poet begins to realize that his own alienation is something that is experienced by others as well.

19 The cultivation of artifice that was previously reserved for the privileged personas of the artist flâneur and the isolated decadent has become a marketable phenomenon.
Similar pathological traumas appear in the bodies of people that Malte terms “the outcasts.” The outcasts play an important role in Malte’s attempts to struggle against the dialectic of alienated interiority. In one sense, they are human manifestations of the devastating effects of 19th-century industrialization and consumerism. Malte describes them as the refuse of modernity: “they are human trash…they stick to a wall, a lamp-post, a billboard, or they trickle slowly down the street” (40). These people disturb and haunt the poet as he continually encounters them during his wanderings through the city. He is particularly distressed by their various physical ailments and how these conditions exclude them from participation in society. The uncanny quality of the outcast is characterized by either an excess of inertia or an incapacitating stillness. Their bodily conditions limit their ability to communicate and participate in their urban surroundings, since they often become the center of voyeuristic spectacles. They are alienated from both the sensory experiences of their bodies and their surroundings. In many ways, Malte identifies with these alienated persons and is empathetic toward their condition. Since Malte “interiorizes what is external,” he shares their experience of alienated identity; “when he sees suffering…he undergoes suffering” (Versluys 126). In one particular encounter, Malte follows a man unable to control the spasmodic contortions of his body as he roams the streets of Paris (Rilke 65). Although the man attempts to control his condition, he doesn’t escape the scrutiny of the surrounding crowd. Malte identifies with the man’s growing anxiety as he follows him through the city streets:

I continued to follow this man…I was bound to him… I understood why he was afraid of people, and I myself began to examine the passersby, cautiously, to see if they noticed anything…I couldn’t keep my anxiety from growing. I knew that as he walked and with infinite effort tried to appear calm and detached, the terrible spasms were accumulating inside his body; I could feel the anxiety he felt as the spasms grew and grew… (68-9)
Malte experiences his own alienation through a vicarious identification with this man. Thus, in addition to the inanimate objects of the city, the outcast individuals also act as sources for the poet’s experience of an alienated identity. By confronting him with a displaced subjectivity, the outcasts become symbols of Malte’s own poetic struggles.

Although their condition results from the devastating effects of urban consumerism, Malte also admires the outcasts as persons who exist outside the social system. Their exclusion from society and the circulations of commodities leads to their being ostracized, but it also grants them a special type of freedom. Versluys argues that the poet’s admiration of the outcasts is a result of their “state of relationlessness and possessionlessness, which involves…the renunciation of material goods” (126-7). The poet’s semi-identification with the outcasts often leads him to interpret their actions as a type of secret language through which they resist standard modes of urban existence. Malte wants to understand their view of the world, but recognizes that their mode of living is beyond his poetic insight. During an encounter with an outcast woman, he contemplates the significance of the objects that she displays for him:

I felt that it was a sign, a sign for the initiated, a sign only outcasts could recognize; I sensed that she was directing me to go somewhere or do something. And the strangest part was that I couldn’t get rid of the feeling that there actually existed some kind of secret language which this sign belonged to, and that this scene was after all something I should have expected. (40)

The woman attempts to direct him with signs, and their interaction unfolds as a theatrical encounter. Both Malte and the woman realize that urban identity amounts to a performance that is activated through signs and symbols. In this way, they enact a parody of the alienation that individuals experience through their “recognition” of signs in the city. However, the outcast signs cannot be interpreted (either by Malte or by the outcasts themselves) since this would require the establishment of a communal perspective that recognized other identities. Malte
doesn’t experience his urban surroundings except as alienated extensions of himself; this solipsism precludes the establishment of a community of resistance with the outcasts. He recognizes that his poetic sensibility prevents him from having “the courage to live that kind of life” (212). While the outcasts’ situation represents the negative results of the capitalist transformation of the city, it also establishes a perspective which commerce cannot reach. Malte finds the outcasts both pathetic and admirable. Their alienation and the special status it confers on them are similar to his own privileged alienation as a poet in the city that terrifies and inspires him.

The problems encountered by the outcasts (specifically their vulnerability to social spectacle and their inability to communicate with others) indicate that they represent the dangers of extreme alienation. In their acute state of displacement, the outcasts are no longer conscious of their dialectical relation to the environment. If Malte moved further into the dissolution of the dialectic, he would no longer be able to reflect upon his existential condition. Just as the outcasts no longer consciously recognize their roving identity, the poet runs the risk of losing his ability to reflect on the relationship between the internal and external. By losing the awareness that plays such an important role in the first part of his Notebooks, Malte would eventually undergo a self-annihilation that would make his poetic encounters with the city impossible. Thus, the outcasts “highlight the dangers…[that] total openness towards the outside world entails” (Versluys 127). If Malte became completely immersed in the world of the outcasts he would engage in the complete destruction of his creative self (Versluys 127). In order to retain his poetic perspective and continue his search for reflexive symbols in the city, Malte must not allow the outcasts to overly affect him. If the poet were to identify too closely with the outcasts or attempt to become one of them, he would lose his self-conscious struggle for poetic insight.
Malte realizes that the capitalist alienation of identity leads to such an immobilization by isolating individuals from one another. He sees that the outcasts’ only hope of escaping their displacement and his only chance to avoid a similar alienation is through a return to community. At this point, Malte begins to recognize the aesthetic void that has emerged during his solipsistic experiences in the city. He starts to question whether an aesthetic existence is possible without recognizing the autonomy of others. Thus, in the second part of the Notebooks, Malte becomes increasingly aware of the problems posed by the dialectic of individuality when it results in the production of a roving identity.

The need for community that Malte realizes through his encounters with the outcasts is related to Rilke’s notion of Things as poetic receptacles of universally shared aesthetic experience. In his Rodin lectures, Rilke explains how Things escape the alienation wrought by modernity through their embodiment of eternal meanings. He emphasizes how Things exist outside time and space, since with Things “all movement comes to rest, and turns to contour; out of past and future time something enduring closes: space, that great peace of things void of compulsion” (72). Things unite individuals into a type of community by arousing feelings that do not isolate aesthetic experience into individual realizations. Rilke addresses the audience as a community and describes how Rodin’s sculptures “awaken memories in you which are not yours, which are older than you [in order] to restore relationships and to renew connections that lie far from you” (71). However, in the temporal and spatial turmoil of the modern city, the collective relationship to Things has been disrupted. Whereas Rodin’s sculptures exist outside of time, most other modern objects resist permanence. Rilke comments on the disjunction between the modern world and Things, noting that “the inwardness which constitutes this age is without form, ungraspable: it flows” (95). This crisis of artistic form is similar to the crisis of roving
identity that Malte faces in the *Notebooks.* After continual encounters with his alienated identity in the city, the poet realizes that his creative individuality is predicated on either a solipsistic perspective or one that assumes the universality of alienation. Thus alienation precludes the bounded identity and community that characterize the realm of Things.\(^{20}\) The fragmentation and alienation of modern urban surroundings lead to the loss of shared and communicable aesthetic experience and the dissolution of community. Malte views the problem of modernity for both individuals and Things as deriving from the lack of a sustained and bounded identity. This in part stems from the alienation that has led to the loss of community stability:

One is almost persuaded: nowhere shall these [T]hings find their place. For who should dare to take them in?...but because we no longer have a common home. Because we must always carry our greatness about with us, instead of setting it down from time to time in the resting-places of greatness. (72, *Rodin*)

For Rilke, the alienating force of modernity has worked to isolate and displace individuals. His effort is to envision a community based aesthetic that might offer a means of stabilizing identity. This desire for a bounded existence also haunts Malte as he recognizes the extent of his alienation and the eventual consequences of a roving identity. In response, he looks to the past, in the form of memories and a parable. Through these nostalgic contemplations, Malte addresses the possibilities of community and the reasons to struggle against the dialectic of individuality in modernity.

Malte’s thoughts on death as a social phenomenon reflect changes in the individual’s relationship to community, and hence in the individual’s conception of his own identity. Malte remembers that in the past individuals existed as bounded individuals who realized their identity through their relationship to the community. This collective sharing of meaning was especially evident during the dying process which Malte specifically remembers when he recalls the death

\(^{20}\) The object spawning Malte’s contemplation of Things is the lid of a can that also functions as a metaphor for the
of his grandfather, Chamberlain Brigge. He remembers that death as a type of performance, in which the individual “as if on the stage of a theater, in front of the whole family and the assembled servants and dogs, discreetly and with the greatest dignity passed away” (16). Death expressed a community-based idea of bounded individuality, one that is no longer possible in the modern era with its “factory-like production of death” (8). This notion of a bounded identity tied to community is distinct from the roving identity experienced by the alienated poet in modernity.

In the past, every individual experienced a death of his own such that “you had your death inside you as a fruit has its core” (10). There was no confusion between an individual’s interiority and his or her external environment. As a result, the individual did not experience any crisis of identity since he or she was not overtly conscious of his interiority. However, awareness of the alienation that pervades modern life prevents a return to this bounded notion of identity. The more people become aware of the dialectic of the individual that is activated through capitalism, the more alienation deepens. Thus, the third mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility becomes paralyzed in the knowledge that the loss of community has led to the production of roving identities. Malte’s desire for the bounded identity of community remains an elusive and impossible dream. He remains trapped by the processes of displacement and alienation that capitalist society propagates as the condition of modern existence.

Malte begins to realize that a return to bounded identity and community is not possible in modernity. Such a communal existence is unattainable precisely because the displacement of subjectivity results in the bringing to consciousness of the dialectic of individuality. By becoming aware of the alienation that prevents an individual from attaining a bounded notion of self, the creative individual becomes trapped by his awareness of roving identity. The cumulative effect of Malte’s experiences of displaced subjectivity in Paris leads to an impasse.

---

poet’s understanding of the relationship between the internal and external (182-3).
Investigations into the relationship between life and art are no longer possible in an environment that blurs the distinction between the individual and his surroundings. As Malte comments, the authentic and the artificial are indistinguishable in an increasingly solipsistic and alienating society:

We discover, indeed, that we don’t know our part; we look for a mirror; we want to rub off the make-up and remove everything that is artificial and become real. But somewhere a piece of our disguise still sticks to us, which we forgot…And this is how we go around, a laughing-stock and a half-truth: neither real beings nor actors. (231)

The return to community is impossible because of the collusion of the realms of life and art. For Malte, the impossibility of discerning the real from the artificial is connected to the disappearance of community and the production of identities which lead to the alienation of individuality. Malte begins to realize that alienation in the modern world not only affects his poetic sensibility, but also determines the desires and torments of the everyday individual. Community dissolves and the crisis of the individual becomes pervasive. Attempting to highlight this isolation, Malte comments that: “we don’t have a theater, any more than we have a God: for this community is needed. Each individual has his own particular impressions and anxieties, and he lets the others see as much of them as serves his purpose” (233). Thus, the performance of identity and the alienation of self have come to characterize the experience of most individuals. The desire to establish one’s individuality (as a means to combat the roving identity of alienation) is no longer the exception, but the rule. The aesthete-decadent cultivation of the creative individual has become a universalized desire. Ironically, Malte sees the solution for this state of alienation as a return to community, and to standardized aesthetic practices. In this respect, the third mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility calls for the democratization of
art through the propagation of community. In the effort to avoid appropriation, the aesthete-decadent sensibility has come full circle.

The story of the Prodigal Son which ends the *Notebooks* acts as a parable for the increasing alienation evident in modernity and the existential crisis faced by the creative individual. Malte’s desire to realize a communal existence in spite of his alienated identity is reenacted through Rilke’s version of this Biblical narrative. Upon his return to the community, the Prodigal Son attempts to reconcile his awakened consciousness of his interiority with the collective expectations for the individual. However, he will never achieve full integration into the community since he has become aware of his identity as an entity separate from communal existence. The resulting alienation unfolds as a split between private and public selves.

Reflecting on the dilemma of navigating between these two perspectives, the poet/son questions:

> Can he stay and conform to the lying life of approximation which they have assigned to him, and come to resemble them all in every feature of his face? Can he divide himself between the delicate truthfulness of his will and the coarse deceit which corrupts it in his own eyes? (253)

Similarly, Malte’s estrangement from community results in his inability to reconcile his identity. By the end of his *Notebooks*, Malte enters a state of identity paralysis and ultimate alienation. He realizes that a bounded identity within a community is not possible since he has become conscious of the dialectic of his interiority. He also understands that cultivating the roving identity of his poetic self will lead to further alienation. Thus, Malte as the Prodigal Son is forced to engage in the performance of false identities. He has been subsumed into the system of identity commodification. The alienation that modernity has propagated precludes a complete return to communities of the past. The Prodigal Son recognizes this existentialist dilemma, and Malte concludes his *Notebooks* by emphasizing the isolation of the individual in the context of modern society: “They interpreted his outburst in their own way…they all misunderstood
him...How could they know who he was?” (260). The alienation that results from his disdain of capitalism has led to the poet’s assimilation into the system. His attempt to realize his creative individuality through encounters with a roving identity has failed; the impact of his urban surroundings has proved inescapable. In this sense, questions concerning the alienated interiority that Malte experiences at the outset of his Notebooks, give way at the end of the Notebooks to questions concerning the commodification of public and private identities.

This third mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility expresses yet another crisis for the dialectic of the individual in his attempt to realize a creative individuality. The poet cannot escape his dependence upon the capitalist system that produces the conditions for his alienation and subsequent creative inspiration. Although the poet might attain temporary poetic insights through his roving identity, this mode of creative encounter eventually leads to a debilitating alienation (as exemplified by the outcasts). In order to preserve the self and counter the effects of capitalism, the poet eventually returns to a notion of community. However, his estrangement from communal identity prevents him from fully reintegrating himself within such an existence. As a result of his inability to realize an autonomous creative individuality, he is forced to engage in performances of inauthentic identities. By concluding his Notebooks with the Prodigal Son parable, Malte indicates the failure of reconciling the alienation of creative individuality with the desire for communal understanding.

With The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, the aesthete-decadent attempt to assert individuality has reached a crisis point. The search for an individual voice has become a universal condition of modernity. Awareness of the connections between the dialectic of the individual and capitalism has led to the experience of alienation on a mass scale. The paralysis that results from Malte’s estrangement from his present surroundings and his inability to return
to his past become characteristics of the individual in modernism. This desire for the past and disillusionment with the present have the effect of entrenching individuals within an alienated existence favorable to consumerism. The central concerns of the aesthete-decadent sensibility begin to disappear with the increasing recognition that the problems encountered by the creative individual have been subsumed within the consumerist market. During his stay in Paris, Malte undergoes a crisis of identity in which he attempts to avoid, but ultimately plays into, the circulation of capitalist commodities.
CONCLUSION

The aesthete-decadent sensibility as depicted in Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, and Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, demonstrates a sustained effort to subvert the standardization of aesthetic experience. In all three works the protagonists attempt to establish their creative individuality in order to escape the late 19th- and early 20th-century trappings of capitalism. The relationship between the internal world of the creative individual and his external environment initially unfolds as a highly personalized dialectic. Over time, however, Guys, Des Esseintes, and Malte all encounter the similar problem of their continued implication in the systems of their dissent. They experience the disillusionment of their attempts at an aesthetic existence when the terms of their dialectical relationship begin to break down. The different dialectics activated by the three protagonists correspond to the shifting effects of capitalist consumerism. They also reflect the different ways in which the creative individual conceives of the relationship between art and life, and thus provide insight into the subtle distinctions between aestheticism and decadence.

Baudelaire’s treatment of Constantine Guys focuses on the artist flâneur’s identification with urban experience. This mode of creative individualism emphasizes the positive immediacy of sensory experience, the contemplative creation from memory, and the promotion of artifice in art and life. As a flâneur, Guys forms his dialectic of individuality through a process of continual exchange between his internal impressions and the external varieties of urban experience. In this sense, his dialectic can be characterized as “hollow.” Through the artist flâneur’s enactment of performances that work to aestheticize life, he “aspires to treat life, not as
a battle but as a spectacle” (Johnson 20), and thus engages the tenents of aestheticism. In this mode of the aesthete-decadent sensibility, the creative individual requires both a constant audience and a constant supply of material goods in order to realize his public performance of an aesthetic lifestyle. However, this emphasis on the malleability of identity through a receptive relationship to the urban environment has the result of making the artist flâneur increasingly vulnerable to the appropriation of his perspective. Aestheticism and the “hollow dialectics of individuality” both encourage the indiscriminate exchange between art and life. The corresponding effect in the market economy is the escalation of the circulations of exchange that implicate the individual in his surrounding environment; desire is constantly being created and sought on the streets of Paris. The artist flâneur can never get his fill of the crowd and the commodities that fill the city, and therefore he must continue his search for more inspiration and new encounters. As the possibility for this type of aestheticized experience increases with the introduction of new commodities, the creative individual experiences an increasing lack of control.

Huysmans’ portrayal of Des Esseintes as isolated decadent in A Rebours documents the creative individual’s attempt to realize an aesthetic existence through the practice of intensified control. During his retreat, Des Esseintes strives to exert his power over the dialectic of individuality and thus assert his identity through a calculated selection of material goods. In this regard, his creative individualism is exemplary of decadence as the “desire to thwart, chastise, and finally humiliate” (Calinescu 172) the indiscriminate circulations of the market economy. Through this transgressive decadence, Des Esseintes determines the circulation of goods and the terms of consumption according to his own taste. His collection of material culture works to establish a “self-contained” dialectic. This dialectic is indicative of the way in which
commodities become increasingly integrated into the private lives of individuals. The interior space becomes filled with collections of objects that reflect the individuality of the consumer. Des Esseintes’ efforts to maintain control over the circulation of goods at his retreat becomes more difficult to maintain. As his self-perception is increasingly determined through commodities, he loses control over the terms of the dialectic and his illness returns. The aesthetic control sought by the isolated decadent becomes more elusive as he is increasingly estranged from his commodity-filled surroundings.

Rilke’s depiction of Malte in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* offers an interesting blend of aestheticism and decadence. Malte’s creative individualism unfolds through his encounters with an alienated interiority located in his external environment. He realizes his aesthetic existence through sensory-memory “recognitions” of people and places. Through such a destabilized and displaced creative individuality, Malte experiences a “roving dialectic.” As a result, he becomes increasingly aware of the creative individual’s compromised position within capitalism. He sees how the techniques of artifice and the aestheticization of life have led to the production of desire. In response, Malte considers a return to community and shared aesthetic values. Through his experiences of a roving identity, Malte engages in the aestheticist blurring of art and life. He also gains an awareness of the need for the decadent stabilization of self as a controlled and bounded entity that leads to the desire for transgression. However, the displacement of his creative individuality precludes his complete immersion in either of these modes, and thus Malte is a precursor to modernism.

In his comments on the transitions in literary perspective that occurred from the fin de siècle to the early decades of the 20th century, Jean Pierrot notes that the aesthete-decadent problems of navigating the relationship between art and life change by the end of the century.
Artists are no longer interested in using aesthetic techniques to escape their surroundings and affirm their creative individuality. Instead, the artist increasingly reflects on how environments construct aesthetic experience. Creativity becomes less about transcendence, and more about a process of revelation:

Imperceptibly but ineluctably, the barrier that previous generations believed to exist between the universe and human consciousness, between reality and dream, was beginning to disappear. Far from trying to escape from life and reality, [early 20th-century writers] see them as the essential nourishment of man’s imagination. Thus the contempt for reality that characterized earlier generations was succeeded by the discovery of new dimensions within that reality. What has become important is to know how to reveal the wonder, the unexpected, the poetry that lies hidden behind the superficial or banal appearances of our familiar world. 

(260)

Thus, the task of the artist shifts into a kind of covert operation in which the individual discovers his or her creativity by exposing the malleability of reality. The artist that succeeds the aesthete-decadent strives to subvert the marketed meanings of commodities by consciously reconfiguring the individual’s relationship to the external world. By the first decades of the 20th century, the solipsism encountered by the aesthete-decadent has become completely debilitating. The creative individual of modernity attempts to evade this collapse of aesthetic meaning by actively engaging with his or her external environment through a mode of alienated detachment. As the escape promised by the creative individuality attempted by Guys, Des Esseintes, and Malte begins to fade, the artist looks increasingly toward the possibilities of a creative community. The aesthete-decadent failure leads to the early 20th-century return to the search for a unifying aesthetic that might resist the capitalist propagation of artistic individualism.
WORKS CITED


