


# Crampton and Engerth: The 'mechanical brides' of J-K. Huysmans

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This article explores the startling comparison Huysmans introduces early in *Á Rebours* (1884) between two French steam locomotives, Crampton and Engerth, and representations of the female form. It suggests that the trope should be read as a modernist cameo proleptically anticipating the story's later interrogation of homoerotic sexual and gender identity. By detailing some of the railway technology involved, the article explains why the comparison between the female form and the steam engine is flighted between *two* locomotives rather than one, demonstrating that the bizarre literary figure presents more than a generalised personification of machinery. Baron Jean des Esseintes' judgement that the two locomotives are more beautiful than Woman plays itself out in significant variations through the texture of the novel, leading eventually to a painful recognition that his rarefied, decadent/aesthetic approach to existence is indeed *Á Rebours*, 'against nature', or 'the wrong way'.

**Keywords:** J-K. Huysmans; *Á Rebours*; Fanny Kemble; Émile Zola; Marcel Duchamp; 'Crampton'; 'Engerth'.

## Introduction

*Á Rebours* (usually translated as '*Against Nature*' or '*Against the Grain*' but meaning literally 'the wrong way')<sup>1</sup> by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907) is the defining late-19th-century instance of the French decadent novel, best known in relation to English literature as an important inspiration behind Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).<sup>2</sup> Published in 1884, the work sets out to be deliberately peculiar and scandalous, a strategy that becomes interesting when set against the life of its author, who reverted to his early Catholicism only 8 years after its publication and went on to produce work of serious piety, an inclination that lurks beneath the surface of this novel even at its most subversive. The founding assumption of *Á Rebours*, derived mainly from Baudelaire, is that Nature has run its course, fecundity and biological invention are exhausted, and the natural order has therefore to be wholly substituted by the contrived and the artificial. The work generates its unique frisson from the tension between its authorial tone of sweet reasonableness and the outrageous idiosyncrasy of its propositions. The writerly performance undermines and contests the earnestness of the naturalist novel, exemplified by Émile Zola in works such as *Thérèse Raquin* (1868) or *Nana* (1880), an aesthetic that typically focuses on the lives of the poor and neglected, portraying their suffering in grim detail with a view to rousing social conscience. As we shall see, Huysmans' novel is a serious yet still playful challenge to this belief in literature as a vehicle for social betterment, a rebellion against a powerful prevailing artistic orthodoxy to which Huysmans himself had earlier subscribed.<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion

When I first read the novel, years ago, a particular passage stood out, lifted above and beyond the overall imaginative scope of the work, an oddity even within a work dedicated to oddity, namely, the presentation of two French steam locomotives, Crampton and Engerth, as typifying Woman – not merely typifying Woman, but far exceeding her in exterior beauty and sensual attraction. The curious comparison lingered in consciousness long after surrounding prose passages had

1. To translate Huysmans' title satisfactorily seems impossible. Among other problems, an accurate translation should subtly suggest a vulgar connotation intimating homoerotic practice.

2. For the sake of stylistic uniformity, one particular translation has been adopted throughout. The history of *Á Rebours* in translation is complicated and begins in 1922 with a bowdlerised version by John Howard, followed by a long line of uncertain translations that culminated in the Baldick text of 1959, the first reliable, unexpurgated version, which enjoyed a long life. Margaret Mauldon's Oxford edition appeared in 1998 and was regarded by many as a marked improvement, in that it better reflected Huysmans' idiosyncratic syntax and prose rhythms (see Classe 2000:682–683). I have chosen to use the latest translation by Theo Cuffe, published in 2018, which lends a flavour of contemporary English to Huysmans' stylistic extravaganza.

3. Huysmans was associated with the so-called Médan group, centred on Zola, comprising Guy de Maupassant, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique, Octave Mirbeau and Paul Alexis, among others. The group was ambiguously identified with naturalism, helping to promote it while also pulling in different directions (Wolter 2009:107–110).

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slipped from memory. Putting its sheer bizarreness to one side, at first I attributed this foregrounding simply to a personal proclivity, my own fascination with railways and locomotives. Then I wondered whether it was the singular offensiveness of the metonymy at work, a base affront to women that somehow dissolved in its own po-faced ridiculousness. (One should not forget that *À Rebours*, while disturbing and disorientating, is also a studiedly comic performance.) Still, the singularity of the passage refused to diminish and sink back into the rich and diverse textures of the novel. I decided to puzzle out the reasons for this, trying to fit the episode into the novel's rationale, its overall 'work ideology'.

Here is the passage in question, the centrepiece of Chapter 2, and the focus of this article:

... [O]bserve closely what is considered Nature's most exquisite work, universally judged to be her most perfect and original creation – namely Woman. Has not man, for his part, and by his own efforts, fashioned an animate and artificial being that easily equals woman, from the point of view of plastic beauty? Is there anywhere on earth a creature – conceived in the joys of fornication and born in the pangs of childbirth – whose form is more dazzling, more splendid than the two locomotives now in service on the Northern lines of the French railway?

One of which, named the Crampton, is an adorable shrill blonde, her long slender body imprisoned in a glittering corset of brass, with the sinewy stretching motions of a cat; a stylish golden blonde whose extraordinary grace can be terrifying as she stiffens her steel muscles, sweat pouring down her steaming flanks, and sets in motion the immense circles of her slender wheels so as to hurtle forwards, a living thing, at the head of an express or a train bearing the day's fresh catch!

The other, the Engerth, is a monumental and somber brunette who utters raucous, guttural cries, her thick-set loins squeezed into a cast-iron plating: a monstrous beast with a dishevelled mane of black smoke, and six low, coupled wheels; what irresistible power is hers as she slowly and deliberately pulls along behind her an unwieldy tail of goods-wagons, causing the very earth to tremble.

Among the frail blondes or majestic brunettes of the flesh there are none that can remotely vie with these specimens of delicate grace and fearful strength; and we can state without contradiction that in his chosen sphere man has done as well as the God in whom he continues to believe. (Huysmans 2018:34–35)

Reading that, one feels that a heartfelt apology to all women might be in order, at least to those who have not succumbed to an impolitic sense of humour.<sup>4</sup> By personifying Crampton and Engerth in this way (and it should be remembered that *la Crampton* and *l'Engerth* are grammatically gendered in French), it is not women as social beings, as lovers and partners, as wives and mothers, that he is invoking. He is writing about women solely 'from the point of view of plastic beauty', about their 'form', about 'flesh' – in other

4.1 put this light-heartedly because the passage is funny and meant to be; but, on a more serious note, there is a widely recognised and overt misogyny in the French decadent novel that is deeply unpleasant. Huysmans is a major culprit. Charles Bernheimer has reaffirmed Naomi Schor's searing thesis that 'representation in its paradigmatic nineteenth century form depends on the bondage of woman'. Schor strongly indicts 'a century of fetishization of the female body' (Bernheimer 1985:311; Schor 1985:142, 145–146).

words, about the visual presentation of the female physique, no less. And his points of comparison are the two steam locomotives Crampton and Engerth (Figures 1 and 2). My contention is that what lies behind and informs this strange conceit goes to the heart of the meaning of *À Rebours* and that this is in fact the novel's controlling expression of its informing idea, the supposed exhaustion of nature. The rest of the novel supports, illustrates and reinforces what we see here, but this is its extreme instantiation.

While the comparison may be annoying, even offensive, in its reference to women, Huysmans' application of it to 19th-century locomotive design is stunningly apposite. One way of mistaking the passage would be to assume that Huysmans' mention of the two locomotives is mere imaginative whimsy, a fleeting illustrative conceit, and that actually he is writing directly about women, or Woman, in some ghastly fantasy of mechanised fleshiness. There is something to be said for this view, as we shall see, but as a dominant interpretation it founders on the fact that there actually were two locomotives called Crampton and Engerth on the French railways when Huysmans wrote, and his description of them is remarkably accurate and evocative. The passage is based on objective, real-world correlatives.

Thomas Russell Crampton (1816–1888) was an English engineer best known for designing the locomotive type named after him, variations of which were widely used in Britain, France and Germany. In 1849, a batch of 12 was built by the *Société Ch.Derosne et Cail* for service with the *Chemins de fer du Nord*. The first locomotive in the batch was actually named Crampton (Davies 1997:9), so when Huysmans writes of a locomotive 'on the Northern lines of the French railway' called Crampton, he may well be referring, not to a class of locomotives, but to a very specific machine. As to the Engerth, Wilhelm Freiherr von Engerth (1814–1884) was an Austrian architect and engineer who won a famous competition (the Semmering Trials) to design a locomotive capable of tackling the gradients on the first trans-Alpine railway through the Semmering Pass on the Vienna–Trieste line. His victory 'heralded a generation of robust and powerful locomotives, perfected after many modifications, which were to hold sway over French networks for 50 years' (Caron 1988:85). When, in 1852, the French Northern Railway Company sought to run heavy goods trains of more than 450 tons for which existing motive power was inadequate, they resorted to Engerth's design. The locomotive had the 'six, low-coupled wheels' described by Huysmans and was semi-articulated, its permanently attached tender supporting the weight of the firebox. The type became the standard heavy goods locomotive of the time for the *Nord* railway.

I want to argue that this strange comparison between two specific steam locomotives and the female form represents not merely a typical, late-19th-century decadent aesthetic, but a prescient foretaste of the emerging modernist movement. The literary figure deployed by Huysmans bristles with telltale anomalies pointing in this direction.

Firstly, and most obviously, the main tradition of the Western nude has been to present the female form as material for passive (largely male) contemplation and thereby to insist on visual stasis. Even the motile dancing girls at the Folies Bergère and similar Parisian venues of the period are there in the first place to be looked at by a static audience. Here is Huysmans' first dramatic departure from tradition. The word 'locomotive' (as in '*ces deux locomotives*') comes from the Latin *loco* – 'from a place', ablative of *locus* or 'place', combined with the Medieval Latin *motivus*, 'causing motion'. The sole purpose of the locomotive is movement, travel, transport (*trans* = across; *port* = carry, from the Latin *portare*). In total contrast, the classical Western nude, as we have seen, offers herself, willingly or not, for the delectation of the static male gaze. Even the teasing nightclub dancer must similarly oblige if she is to fulfil her role. Real-world existence is temporarily bracketed off, sterilised, so that it will not disrupt the contemplation of idealised fleshly beauty. To be sure, Huysmans lovingly describes the outward appearance of his two locomotives, Crampton and Engerth, but his accounts emphasise exclusively their being-in-motion, realising their *telos*, their intended purpose, what they are for – movement through space. The whole bent of the passage is towards picturing machinery in motion, and the analogy with motile animal life is emphatic.

Even here, Huysmans' treatment of that analogy is distinctly atypical. The extraordinary feature of Huysmans' trope is that he focuses on the looks, the external appearance, of the two locomotives and is apparently entirely unconcerned with the engines' technological functioning, their inner workings. His interest is purely visual. This is odd, because at a time when steam technology in the service of public transport was relatively new and revolutionary, it was precisely the reflex mechanical analogy with animal life that excited interest. To cite a well-known English example, as a young girl the celebrated Victorian actress, Fanny Kemble, daughter of the noted Shakespearean actor Charles Kemble, took a ride on the world's first modern railway, the as-yet-unopened Liverpool to Manchester line, sitting on the footplate bench next to the 'Father of the Railways', George Stephenson. She recorded the experience in a letter written in 1830 as follows:

We were introduced to the little engine which was to drag us along the rails. She (for they make these curious little fire-horses all mares) consisted of a boiler, a stove, a small platform, a bench, and behind the bench a barrel containing enough water to prevent her being *thirsty* for thirty miles – the whole machine not bigger than a common fire-engine. She goes upon two wheels, which are her feet, and are moved by bright steel legs called pistons; these are propelled by steam, and in proportion as more steam is applied to the upper extremities (the hip-joints, I suppose) of these pistons, the faster they move the wheels; and when it is desirable to diminish the speed, the steam, which unless suffered to escape would burst the boiler, evaporates through a safety-valve into the air. The reins, bit and bridle of this wonderful beast is a small handle, which applies or withdraws the steam from its legs or pistons, so that a child might manage it. The coals, which are its oats, were under the

bench, and there was a small glass tube affixed to the boiler, with water in it, which indicates by its fulness or emptiness when the creature wants water ... (Kemble 1888:281).

Kemble's description is both charming and perceptive, but notice its compelling focus on how the machine *works*. From earliest days, in relation to steam locomotion, the metaphor of the 'iron horse' had taken hold on the popular imagination. Probably it was not merely the substitution of function, machine for animal, that brought life to the analogy, nor the fact that the early design of railway carriages (as with the motor car) drew heavily on the traditional construction of horse-drawn vehicles.<sup>5</sup> The essential concept of the steam engine – the ingestion of water and fossil fuel, the production of heat and steam, the transformation of this energy under pressure into reciprocating motion, the use of connecting rods to deliver rotary motion, the rhythmic pulse of the exhaust system – all this adds up to a mechanical semblance of animal life. Fanny Kemble feels herself to be describing a 'creature', and she is fully aware that it is 'they' (men) who make these little fire-horses 'all mares'.

A more disturbing French example occurs 6 years after *Á Rebours* in Zola's (1901) railway novel *La Bête humaine* (1890), '*The Beast Within*', also translated as '*The Monomaniac*'. A locomotive engineer, a troubled man called Jacques Lantier, who becomes violent whenever he is aroused by a woman, develops an intense, quasi-sexual passion for a particular locomotive in his charge, named *la Lison*, ostensibly because of its economy, performance and tractability. The trope renders very effectively Lantier's misogynist psychology and social outlook:

It was ... gentle, obedient, easy to set in motion, and gifted with even and lasting speed, thanks to its good vaporization [*good steaming*].

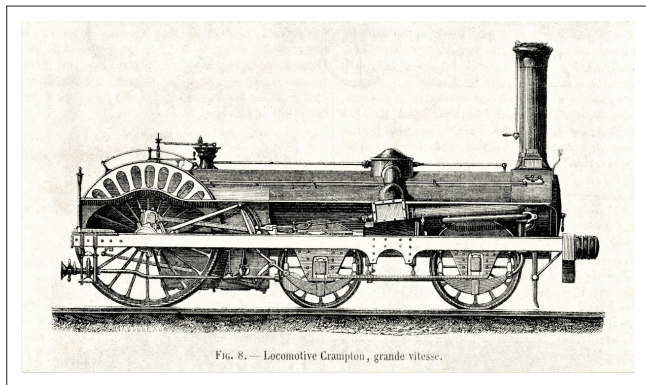
Some pretended that if this locomotive started off so easily, it was due to its excellent tyres, and particularly to the perfect regulation of its slide-valves ... But he knew there was something else ... There was the soul ... to be taken into account, the mystery of the fabrication, that peculiar something which the hazard of the hammer gives to the metal, which the skill of the fitter conveys to the various pieces – the personality of the engine, its life ... (Zola 1901:160–161)

When his engine crashes in a horrific accident as a result of sabotage – two blocks of stone thrown onto the track – Lantier experiences the machine's end as the death of a living creature, the sad apocalypse of an 'iron horse':

The locomotive always so bright, now lay on its back in a black bed of coal, soiled with earth and foam. It had met the tragic end of a costly animal struck down in the public street. At one moment, it had been possible to perceive its mechanism at work through its shattered plates: the pistons beating like twin-hearts, the steam circulating in the slide-valves as the blood of its veins; but the connecting-rods merely moved in a jerky fashion, after the manner of convulsive human arms, and constituted the final efforts of life.

5. Kemble (1883:280) describes the passenger carriages as being 'of a peculiar construction' like 'a sort of uncovered *char à banc*'.





Source: Wikipedia, n.d.a, *Crampton Locomotive*, viewed 01 April 2020, from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Crampton\\_Locomotive\\_\(8286854204\).jpg#/media/File:Crampton\\_Locomotive\\_\(8286854204\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Crampton_Locomotive_(8286854204).jpg#/media/File:Crampton_Locomotive_(8286854204).jpg).

**FIGURE 1:** Crampton locomotive.

Its spirit was slipping away along with the power that gave it life, that huge breath whereof it could not absolutely free itself. The eviscerated giantess sank lower still, passing little by little into very gentle slumber, and ended by emitting not a sound. (p. 327)

The analogy with a horse's death by accident in a street – an occurrence common enough in the period – its strange mingling of animal and human anatomy, and the entailed effluvia of death, is specified by Zola with gruesome precision. The escaping steam is the expiring breath of an 'eviscerated giantess'. However, neither this painful identification with the 'dying' innards of a machine portrayed as an animal, nor Jacques Lantier's bizarre sexualised fascination with *la Lison* (both of which make fictive sense in terms of Zola's novel) have any relation to what Huysmans offers for the reader's contemplation in relation to Crampton and Engerth.

In the examples I have given, Fanny Kemble wants her readers to understand how the steam engine works, not merely what it looks like. Over and above its external appearance, she carefully tabulates its inner workings, as does Zola in describing the 'death' of Jean Lantier's locomotive. Both descriptions are at once 'creaturely' and realistic. Huysmans, on the contrary, utterly ignores his engines' inner construction, their technological functioning, to focus entirely on their looks, their physical appearance as they work, the excess lubrication and steam they exude in motion, their power and performance, their glamour. Bizarrely and mischievously, he wants us to marinate in the notion that their external appearance in motion, taken as a whole, makes these particular steam locomotives far superior in beauty to 'Nature's most exquisite work', the female form.

The intended impact is astounding. In effect, he challenges the reader to imagine Crampton and Engerth in motion but see the female form. What Huysmans achieves with this extraordinary device – not really an image, rather a non-image – is nothing less than the dismantling of all traditional adulation of the female form, especially the nude, and its replacement with the autotelic construction of modern, or modernist, art. Note that the appearance of the two locomotives is described directly, in detail, but the female form not at all, or only by implication. The reader is invited

to see the machines, but to imagine Woman in motion – to see the two machines in motion *as* the female form. The reader must visualise imaginatively what has been offered and make the picture. This is a procedure characteristic of modernist art, to unsee the thousands of stereotypical images of its subject matter, whatever it might be, multiple imitations of imitations, and instead see in a new way. As Gabriel Josipovici (1973) puts it:

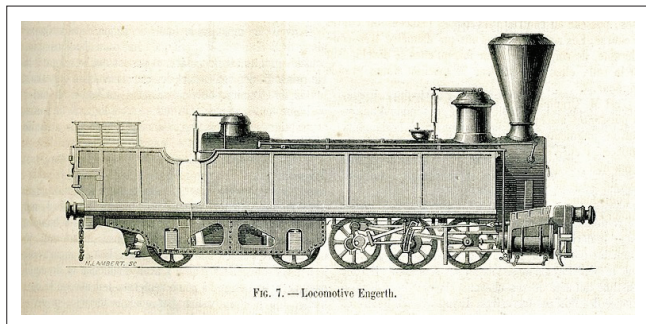
The modern artist ... holds that the work of art is meaningful precisely because it reveals to us the 'otherness' of the world – it shocks us out of our natural sloth and the force of habit, and makes us see for the first time what we had looked at a hundred times but never seen. Art is not the key to the universe, as the Romantics had believed; it is merely a pair of spectacles. (pp. 201–202)

Assuming those spectacles, we see that Crampton is shrill (perhaps a reference to the sound of her whistle) and blonde, with a slender body 'of extraordinary grace'. She has 'the sinewy stretching motions of a cat', and 'sweat pours down her steaming flanks' as her muscles 'stiffen' to heave her train into movement. She has large-diameter driving wheels for speed to handle express passenger trains as well as fast goods trains such as might hurry a catch of fresh fish to market. Equally 'female', Engerth in contrast is 'bulky' and 'somber', her cry 'raucous' and 'guttural'. She is a 'monstrous beast with a mane of black smoke',<sup>6</sup> her movements slow and deliberate – perhaps less 'cat' than cart horse. Her six wheels are low and coupled to achieve greater tractive effort, giving her the 'irresistible power' suitable for pulling slow, heavy goods trains. Both engines sport exotic underwear: 'a glittering corset of brass' for Crampton, while Engerth's 'thick-set loins' are 'squeezed into a cast-iron plating'. The underwear inevitably evokes an image of fin de siècle 'showgirls'.

Huysmans crafts his descriptions of the two locomotives around the seemingly trivial blonde and brunette stereotype (both 'blonde' and 'brunette' are of course feminine-gendered in French), a ubiquitous but strangely opaque contrast with a long history in France and elsewhere. Carol Rifelj (2003–2004:93), in her study of hair in the 19th-century French novel, confirms that the blonde-brunette contrast embodies 'no simple correlation with class, personality, or beauty'.<sup>7</sup> Demographically speaking, natural blondes in France are relatively rare and found mainly in northern areas of the country, with brunettes much more widespread and dominant in the south – but *À Rebours* energises no such geographical tension. Instead, the contrast

6. 'Loose hair carries the possibility of an erotic charge. Long, abundant hair is traditionally associated with sexuality' (Rifelj 2003–2004:88). Note the equine analogy.

7. The blonde-brunette meme has a staggeringly long pedigree in visual art and literature, being well attested in Egypt and Assyria, in the Norse sagas, in ancient Greece and Rome, with a long history in French, German and European literature more generally, and achieving its toxic apotheosis, alas, in Gobineau, Rosenberg and, ultimately, Hitler, that dark-haired champion of the blonde so-called Aryan race (Berne 1959:3–4). In a lighter vein, the trope informs Anita Loos's (1925) comic satire on male intelligence, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and the popular film of that name starring Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe (1953), which was followed by its less-successful sequel, *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1955). Throughout its history the trope remains robust and apparently uncontested, even though to all intents and purposes it represents a rank and senseless prejudice.



Source: Wikipedia, n.d.b, *Engerth Locomotive*, viewed 01 April 2020, from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Engerth\\_locomotives#/media/File:Locomotives\\_\(8293475810\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Engerth_locomotives#/media/File:Locomotives_(8293475810).jpg).

**FIGURE 2:** Engerth locomotive.

between Crampton and Engerth is pursued idiosyncratically in the novel's ensuing account of Des Esseintes' aesthetic and erotic adventures, generating a rich burthen of meanings around his sexual and cultural identity that refers the reader back to this initial description.

From an aesthetic standpoint, there is a clear technological basis for distinguishing the two locomotives as blonde and brunette, respectively. Crampton, the blonde, stands in the tradition of the great British (actually Scottish) locomotive designers of the fin de siècle, Patrick Stirling, Dugald Drummond and Robert Urie (Harvie 1988:238). Their express locomotives have elegant, large-diameter driving wheels, very few of them, with cylinders concealed from view and valve gear delicately masked under fairings: beautiful machines built for speed. Crampton conforms neatly to this aesthetic. In marked contrast, Germanic locomotive design tended prominently to expose mechanical functionality. Engerth, the 'brunette', is built for power. The machine is impressive rather than comely. Christopher Harvie (1988) writes that:

Germanic style seemed to go beyond functionalism to fetishize power ... valves, superheaters and turbo-generators were carried on top of or beside the boiler, itself separated from the wheelbase to produce a sort of travelling version of the Centre Pompidou. (p. 238)

This is an accurate if impolite summation. Engerth had the power, in its day, that Huysmans ascribes to it, but hardly the refined looks of Crampton. He summarises the contrast as that between 'delicate grace' and 'fearful strength'.

This proto-modernist moment in *À Rebours* inscribes the fictive matrix from which the story of Des Esseintes' aesthetic and erotic strivings unfolds. However, the anomalies involved do not end with a brief moment of constructed modernist vision. A deeper peculiarity is the locomotives' being absented from the direct gaze of the 'viewer'. He cannot literally see them. They must exist, can only exist for him, in his mind's eye. Huysmans' vivid descriptions of Crampton and Engerth are either from memory or from documents, and he mentions none. Geographically, Des Esseintes has deliberately positioned his home on the far side of the village away from the railway station, and his reflections on the two locomotives only occur 'whenever

the breeze carried to his ears the faint whistle of the toylike trains winding playfully, like spinning tops, between Paris and Sceaux' (Huysmans 2018:35). The aesthetic stimulus is remote rather than immediate. His house is a mere 20-min walk from the Fontenay station:

... but the height on which it was perched and its isolation insulated him from the hubbub of the vile hordes which the vicinity of a railway station invariably attracts on a Sunday afternoon. (Huysmans 2018:35)

In contrast, the classical Western nude or even the pin-up is meant to deliver an immediate eyeful: to so capture the viewer's attention that he or she is utterly mesmerised. The erotic-aesthetic 'punch' should be inescapable. Instead, we are asked to imagine Des Esseintes, all on his own, contemplating the beauty of two physically absent railway locomotives which he conjures from memory. Moreover, while all his other cherished artefacts, the objects of his obsessive sensory connoisseurship – paintings, books, furnishings, lighting, liqueurs, aromas, music and so forth – are *with* him, wholly within his domestic domain and control, here the objects of his aesthetic or erotic devotion, supposedly a high point, if not *the* high point, of his aesthetic project, are not only remote but built to serve the public at large, the demos, everyone, including the 'vile hordes' of urban modernity that he so loathes. Certainly, the viewer remains static, as visual contemplation of the female form conventionally requires, but the object of his attention is displaced: like particles in an experiment confirming Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the locomotives must be somewhere but could be anywhere. Crampton and Engerth move with unnerving autonomy, fulfilling their real-world function, and certainly do not willingly offer themselves as sensual objects for Des Esseintes' static contemplation.

The determining contrast between Crampton and Engerth is established initially in pure, technological terms, a matter of railway engineering: the necessarily different designs of a glamorous express engine and a powerful goods locomotive, inscribed as blonde versus brunette. As Des Esseintes' aesthetic and erotic quest unfolds, the comparison is elaborated. In designing the bedchamber for his new contemplative, aesthetically refined retreat from the world, he contemplates two possibilities: to make it either 'an alcove of the senses' (Huysmans 2018:84) or something resembling 'a monastic cell' (Huysmans 2018:85). To achieve the former, he anticipates adopting the decorative style of Louis XV because:

... only the eighteenth century had known how to envelop a woman in a depraved atmosphere, imitating her spasms of pleasure and her passionate contortions in the curves and undulations of wood and copper, accentuating the sugary languor of the blonde with its bright and lively décors, mitigating the pungency of the brunette with its tapestries of watery, delicate, almost insipid tones. (Huysmans 2018:85)

This rococo mode, while ominously reminiscent of his past life of debauchery, has the advantage of merging and reconciling blonde and brunette, Crampton and Engerth, at

least in terms of décor. Its glitzy surface enhances ‘the sugary languor of the blonde’, while delicate tapestries accommodate and ameliorate the ‘pungency’ of the brunette. One of many disturbing features of the blonde and brunette stereotype is the outrageous and unaccountable assertion that, in addition to deeper skin tones and (obviously) darker hair, brunettes are more odiferous – hence the ascribed ‘pungency’ (Berne 1959:8).

Later, the blonde-brunette contrast surfaces self-consciously in a contest between two literary modes, naturalism and decadent aestheticism, the tension Huysmans is exploring in the writing of *À Rebours*. One of Des Esseintes’ favourite books is Edmond de Goncourt’s *La Faustine* (1882), a novel that puts the life of 19th-century French tragediennes under the microscope. Its eponymous heroine ‘was by virtue of ancestral influences a creature of the eighteenth century, whose ribaldry and mental indolence and sensual excesses she inherited to the full’ (Huysmans 2018:236). *La Faustine* returns the reader to the lush ambience reminiscent of Boucher, Fragonard or Watteau, those erotic, sensuous painters of the French rococo, by confining itself:

... to the precincts of a noble park, to a boudoir warm with the alluring fragrance of its fair [*blonde*] occupant, a woman with a weary smile, a pouting expression and unresigned, pensive eyes. (Huysmans 2018:235)

According to Des Esseintes, De Goncourt’s entire novel exemplifies ‘a nostalgia for the preceding century, a craving to return to the elegance of a society that had vanished forever’ (Huysmans 2018:235). With this is contrasted the contemporary vogue for the naturalist novel, typified by Zola and firmly rooted in the 19th century.

There was [*in Zola*] no wish to migrate back to vanished regimes, or worlds lost in the mists of time; his temperament, strong and sturdy, enamoured of the luxuriance of life, of full-blooded vigour and moral well-being, deterred him from the artificial charms, the painted and powdered pallor of the last century. (Huysmans 2018:237)

Zola belongs firmly in the brunette camp. The blonde-brunette dipole is foregrounded here with a new inflection, transmuted from referring merely to contrasting decorative styles or social ambiances to conveying direct competition between two literary modes, naturalism and decadent aestheticism, the literary and social practices Huysmans is juxtaposing and contrasting in the writing of *À Rebours*. Des Esseintes’ frail, degenerating physique, weakened by years of sexual debauchery (he is the sole surviving member of a once robust aristocratic lineage), reflects the operation of a relentless Zola-esque naturalism, as expounded in the novel’s brief opening ‘Prologue’, a dispensation to which he will return and resign himself at the end of the novel. The desperate intervening experiment in solitary, hermetic connoisseurship – the heart of the book – puts the alternative ‘blonde’ mode of decadent aestheticism on trial. Not surprisingly, like the poor, jewel-encrusted tortoise Des Esseintes creates for his aesthetic delectation (Huysmans 2018:56–62), the entire enterprise can only relapse onto its organic, naturalist foundations and die.

Meanwhile the real blondes and brunettes of his past, actual women, linger in Des Esseintes’ memory, and he is fond of dwelling on them. Their faux presence is stimulated in his recollection due to a box of violet bonbons, ‘invented by Siraudin and bearing the ridiculous name “Pearls of the Pyrenees”’ (Huysmans 2018:135).<sup>8</sup> Des Esseintes:

... would place one of these bonbons on his tongue and let it melt; then, of a sudden, and with an infinite tenderness there would arise dim and faded recollections of the lascivious doings of earlier days. (Huysmans 2018:134)

Except that, on this occasion, the effect is to bring two of these former lovers vividly to life, thrusting before his eyes their ‘physical reality, in all its crude force and urgency’ (Huysmans 2018:135). One, of course, is a blonde and the other a brunette. The initial puzzlement is that their physical attributes transpose those of Crampton and Engerth. The blonde is an American circus acrobat named Miss Urania, ‘with strong white teeth, a skin of satin pink, a tilted nose, silver-grey eyes framed by a fringe of blonde hair’. Endowed with:

... a supple body, sinewy legs, muscles of steel and arms of iron ... from the outset he had seen her for what she was, a powerfully built and beautiful specimen. (Huysmans 2018:135)

Seemingly, then, despite being blonde, she is an Engerth type, but still beautiful. The brunette, ‘whose monstrous gifts’ had given him ‘immense satisfaction’, is a performing ventriloquist, ‘small and skinny, with black eyes and black pomaded hair, parted like a boy’s on one side near her temple’ (Huysmans 2018:139). Although a brunette, physically she is closer to the Crampton type. The puzzlement over the ‘transposed’ body types, ectomorph for mesomorph, blonde for brunette and brunette for blonde – thereby upending the cognitive template set up in the descriptions of the two locomotives – evaporates with the realisation that Des Esseintes, as a decadent introvert, is experimenting mentally with what today we would call gender fluidity. Watching ‘Miss Urania’ perform:

... he seemed to detect an unnatural sexual transformation taking place in her ... the feminine affections became less and less apparent, while in their stead were developing the agile and vigorous graces of a man, in a word, after starting out as a woman, then hesitating in a condition verging on androgyny, she seemed to make up her mind, to define herself, to become unmistakably and decisively a man.

‘In which case’, thought Des Esseintes, ‘just as a robust young athlete will fall in love with a thin slip of a girl, this trapeze woman should instinctively be attracted to a weak, broken-down, breathless creature such as myself’. By considering his own case and giving rein to the spirit of analogy, he began to have the sensation of approximating more and more closely to the feminine, and was seized with a positive desire to possess this woman, yearning for her as an anaemic young girl might yearn for some great, rough Hercules whose arms could crush her in their embrace.

This notional trading of sexual places between Urania and himself had aroused him. (Huysmans 2018:136)

<sup>8</sup> Paul Siraudin (1812–1883) was a well-known playwright and librettist, specialising in comedies and variety shows, who also owned a sweet shop.



Des Esseintes is excited by, even longs for, the thought of a chiasmic exchange of physiques and sexualities, dramatising the experience of sexual inversion.<sup>9</sup> The delicate blonde stereotype is to acquire a dominating, muscular male physique and fall for the weak, pseudofemininity that Des Esseintes himself manifests in his enervated condition. In other words, Crampton, morphing into a male, will assume the muscularity of Engerth and thereby allow 'his' sexual partner to adopt a (faux?) feminine passivity – or so Des Esseintes fantasises. However, in the end Miss Urania proves a disappointment because, while he had imagined her 'as strong and bestial as the strong man at a fair', she in fact proves to be sexually passive, deficient in education and refinement and moreover displays 'a brutish greed at table'. It was 'not long before he sought to sever the connection ... his premature ejaculation was getting worse under the icy caresses and prudish passivity of this woman' (Huysmans 2018:138). He concludes that 'the transmutation of masculine ideas into her woman's body was pure wish-fulfilment on his part' and that her attractions for him are not innate or intrinsic; they are 'cerebral', created by 'giving rein to the spirit of analogy' (Huysmans 2018:137). He finishes the relationship because 'the truth was that Miss Urania was a mistress like any other, in no way justifying the cerebral curiosity she had aroused.' (Huysmans 2018:138)

The brunette ventriloquist, on the contrary, appeals to him 'by the utter contrast she offered to his American acrobat'. Notably boyish in appearance, and with a Crampton-esque physique, '[t]his brunette reeked of artfully prepared perfumes, heady and dangerous, and she burned like the crater of a volcano' (Huysmans 2018:140). Des Esseintes' compromised and flagging sexual powers have to be stimulated through her ventriloquised subterfuges, which suggest artificially titillating predicaments. A lone woman recreates and peoples imaginary worlds for his jaded contemplation, including the famous dialogue between Sphinx and Chimaera from Flaubert's (1874) *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*. In Flaubert's conceit, the monumental, silent, motionless Sphinx embodies the complete science of the world, having thought so profoundly that it has nothing more to say; in contrast, the inchoate whirlings of the Chimera suggest the flighty, inconstant movements of the imagination. The two monsters are generically too disparate ever to mate and so are reproductively sterile (ed. Porter 2001:308) – a telling instantiation of what Des Esseintes takes as his predicament. Nonetheless, in this example a woman has indeed succeeded in expressing a man's ideas (Flaubert's) through a woman's body. However, the woman herself, the brunette ventriloquist who recreates them, remains utterly remote in these sexual/dramatic encounters, a mere performer. Always she must immolate herself, pretending to be someone 'other'.

<sup>9</sup>'Inversion' was the accepted fin de siècle term for 'homosexuality'. It was believed to be an inborn reversal of gender traits, an interpretation that anticipates modern transgender issues and conceptions. Thirteen years after *À Rebours*, Havelock Ellis's groundbreaking work *Sexual Inversion* defined it as 'sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality towards persons of the same sex'. (Ellis 1897:1)

Des Esseintes never notices 'the sullen expression of the actress forced to play a part and exercise her craft, at home, in her hours of rest, far from the footlights' (Huysmans 2018:141). She is also very expensive. Though he is indeed enthralled by the ventriloquist – more by her performances than anything about the woman herself – she soon abandons him, despite his money, for 'a sturdy fellow with less exacting requirements and more reliable loins' (Huysmans 2018:142). Rooted fictively in that initial comparison between Crampton and Engerth, the blonde-brunette contrast has finally expired.

In the thought experiments involving Miss Urania and the boyish ventriloquist, Des Esseintes imposes strange erotic notions on two objects of suppositional desire. He uses real people to create those objects, fabricating fictions for his own reflection, sexual introspection and aesthetic contemplation. The subjectivities of the 'actors', the sexual partners, are wholly invisible or negated, both for Des Esseintes and for the reader. The various exotic transpositions, the melding and merging of blonde and brunette, Crampton and Engerth, ultimately fail him, and his erotic pilgrimage ends egregiously, if appropriately enough, in the arms of a rent boy, an attachment whose memory 'dominated all others': 'never had he felt such grievous satisfactions' (Huysmans 2018:144). The symbolism of inversion comes to an end with its realisation, briefly confessed but hardly dwelt upon.

Having traced salient aspects of the blonde-brunette stereotype as they unfold through the novel, following a progression from railway technology to abstract aesthetics, to historical ambience, to raw sexuality, it is readily apparent that the originating source for the stereotype *in the text* is that outrageous initial comparison between the two steam locomotives and the female form. It would be easy to dismiss Huysmans' fantasy of two steam locomotives supplanting and surpassing the beauty of the female form as merely the warped imagining of someone transfixed by female sexuality yet utterly terrified of real women. That is why I say that there is something to be said for the view that the descriptions of Crampton and Engerth could be read as merely a rebarbative fantasy of mechanised female sexuality, the blonde Crampton capturing the pretty, racy, decorative, entertaining surface of human mating, the brunette Engerth representing the awesome, governing, unstoppable power of human reproduction. However, Huysmans wants more than this. The issue goes back to his insistence on describing *two* locomotives as a substitute for, or as supplanting, the female form. He wants to interrogate and explore the complexity and fluidity of sexual identity (his own, as invested in his sock puppet, Des Esseintes, but also that of humanity more generally), and the comparison of Crampton and Engerth introduces a proleptic statement of this intent. We begin to understand why the female form is juxtaposed with and supplanted by two differing

locomotives, not just one. To satisfy Des Esseintes' homoerotic projections, there must be a stereoscopic vision incorporating two females, one blonde and one brunette, transposing masculine and feminine sexualities, the conspectus of both to be fancifully apprehended as *one* conception, one experience. The tranquil fleshiness of the female form is transmuted into a stereoscopic mental construct of shaped, inanimate steel in motion – two locomotives, objective, shaped, powerful and beautiful – but utterly remote. Rather than a facile instance of outrageous misogynist personification, which is the usual understanding of what Huysmans is doing here (see, e.g. Kang 2011; Pacteau 1994; Wolter 2003), it is the transmuting of the female form into an imaginative modernist construct freighted with homoerotic longings that constitutes the originality of Huysmans' figurative invention.

## Conclusion

What then, finally, are we to make of his strange comparison between the female form and two French steam locomotives? I want to dub them his 'mechanical brides', a term popularised by Marshall McLuhan's (1967) early text of that name, in which he gleefully exposed the typical machinations of media culture. The term did not originate with McLuhan. He borrowed it from a strange work by Marcel Duchamp, produced between 1915 and 1923 and entitled 'The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even' (Wikipedia n.d.c). The piece is usually known simply as 'The Large Glass'. What makes this work apposite in discussing Huysmans' Crampton and Engerth is that the 'bride' in the upper section of the work is permanently separated from the bachelors below her. She is isolated, suspended in a cage, the implication being that the bachelors in the lower portion of the frame can never reach her. Mechanically separated, they are left permanently longing for her. This is the exactly the state Huysmans plans for Des Esseintes.<sup>10</sup> He is not writing a prescient anticipation of Donna Haraway's (1991) call, in 'A Cyborg Manifesto', for a feminist embrace of technology, nor is he indulging some weird techno-erotic impulse, as seen in David Cronenberg's 1996 movie *Crash*, based on J. G. Ballard's (1973) novel of that name. Des Esseintes can safely admire, even lust over, Crampton and Engerth because they are far away, beyond his reach (Ziegler 1986). He does not have to bother about how they work; someone else does that. He has no idea precisely where they are; their inner being, if it exists, is opaque to him. Were he one day to catch up with them and stare, they would very soon move on. They will never hold him in thrall, and they will always be exactly the same. They have no designs on him. Like many representations of the female form, they have a glamorous surface appeal but none of the contingent

10. An analogous image typifying Des Esseintes' predicament might be the reply of the Cumaean Sibyl in the *Satyricon* of Petronius, given its modernist inflection as an epigraph to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). In translation, Trimalchio says, '... for once I myself saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her "Sibyl, what do you want?" she replied, "I want to die"' (Eliot 1922:59). Both examples depict a situation of remoteness from life, of permanent estrangement, matched by impossible longing.

inner complexities of an actual human being.<sup>11</sup> They are merely an image in his mind. He is safe, and they are beautiful. He is 'freed', issues of sex and gender completely sublimated and transmogrified. The menacing female form (and female sexuality) has been neutralised for him.<sup>12</sup>

Is this a genuine emancipation? By exchanging one form of idolatry for another, the steam locomotive for the female form, at the outset of his enterprise, Des Esseintes inadvertently valorises the main driving force behind the modernising, industrialising age that, on the surface at least, he so vehemently abhors. Steam locomotives are promiscuous; they serve *everyone*. They are by their very nature democratic, the absolute negation of Des Esseintes' solitary quest for spiritual freedom through private, super-refined aesthetic discrimination. The ultimate failure of his quest is already latent in his lauding of Crampton and Engerth. More than personification, analogy or metaphor, in his comparison between the female form and the two steam locomotives, Huysmans stakes his whole literary structure on this one extreme dismissal of human biological connection, knowing, as he does, that there can be no more telling instantiation of *À Rebours*, or 'the wrong way'. At the same time, he initiates a new, modern way of artistic seeing.

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11. Charles Bernheimer (1985:320) captures the overall intention of the novel as follows: 'A *Rebours* ... involves the creation of simulacra, or artifacts that simulate nature without having nature's organic interiority. The surface without depth, made-up, factitious, this is the ideal field for phantastic re-membering'. Obviously, there is much more to *À Rebours* than can be captured in the brief exploration I have made of its opening diagnostic cameo, but further dimensions of the hero's social and sexual predicament, which lie beyond the scope of this article, will be found to resonate in sympathy with what has been described here.

12. Juliana Starr (1993) signals the antifeminist crux of these decadent aesthetic proclivities: 'The nineteenth-century aesthetic doctrines tended to glorify art's transcendent power to raise one above the base, vile, and utilitarian bourgeois mores. Ironically, the exponents of these doctrines often fell into much the same trap as Des Esseintes. For instead of excluding women from their artistic environment, as they intended, they often in fact used art objects to meet their most basic erotic needs. Thus, movements such as impressionism, and art-for-art's sake ... were demeaning to women in that they allowed them a place in the world only to the extent that their visual attractiveness could be used to serve the gaze of the male artist/esthete'. (p. 32)



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