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## THE ODOROUS TEXT: A DELEUZIAN APPROACH TO HUYSMANS

*"You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses  
between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects."*<sup>1</sup>

In a lengthy, key chapter devoted to the diverse modes of becoming,<sup>2</sup> Deleuze and Guattari are at pains to distance themselves from a schema which would differentiate between structured entities or identities on the one hand (human beings, material objects, etc.), and spatio-temporal variables on the other. In such a schema, the starting-point would be a given subject/object acting in conjunction or negotiation with the transient phenomena of space and time. For Deleuze and Guattari, however, as the above quotation illustrates, "you"<sup>3</sup> are no more individuated than is a day, a season, a climate, a wind. In pursuit of this analysis, they adduce numerous examples from literature, art, and music, maintaining that literature and art are privileged zones in which to experience the workings of these fleeting movements or affects. This has proved to be a problematic notion for some readers. Perhaps it is not overly demanding to relate the multiple and unpredictable sounds of birds to the music of Messiaen, or the shifting lights and colours of the natural world to various forms of impressionist painting. However, is not literature prevalently an exploration of subjects/characters deploying and negotiating with affect? What is a "nonsubjectified affect" in this context?

For Deleuze and Guattari, affect is "nonsubjectified" in the sense that it is a pre-personal intensity which, as a mobile force, may gather up a body and allow it to pass from one experiential state to another. Thus, bodies are not so much generators of affects as assemblages formed from affects. A brief

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1. I quote here from the published translation, by Brian Massumi, of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: The Athlone Press, 1988) 262.

2. "Becoming-intense, becoming-animal, becoming-imperceptible . . ." *A Thousand Plateaus*, 232–309.

3. In the original French, Deleuze and Guattari drop the use of the impersonal "on" at this point in their analysis in order to address the reader(s) directly as "vous." See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, vol. 2, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980) 320. Hereafter referred to as *MP*.

example: in Samuel Beckett's play *What Where*, fear in the vicinity of torture and domination forms the affect-landscape against which the transacting figures of Bam, Bem, Bim, and Bom are progressively discerned.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, literature provides free play for the creation of affect precisely because it allows for the formation of impersonal forces (fear, desire, joy) which can remain immune from the stock cause-and-effect responses of quotidian existence. In everyday life, smells, sights, sounds, etc. are apprehended globally and in terms of their functionality: "I smell hot oil, I see a table prepared, I hear the sound of frying. Therefore, I shall soon eat dinner." In literature, on the other hand, affect is intensive rather than extensive; it may appear in its singularity, divorced from an ordered or consistent sequence. As such, affect may be endowed with disruptive power. It does not confirm a pre-existent set of suppositions or relationships—in that sense, it is "nonsubjectified"—but rather, it produces new and divergent movements, or *devenirs* [becomings]. As Claire Colebrook aptly describes in reference to Deleuze: "It is the task of art to dislodge affects from their recognised and expected origins. Pinter's plays are presentations of affect precisely in those milieus where they are least expected: such as the menace or terror of marriages and bourgeois life (*The Lover*) or the hostility and violence of acts of charity and hospitality (*The Caretaker*)."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is precisely the disruptive capacity of affect which Deleuze values within literature, driving him to reject texts which are formulaic, rooted in allegory, or anchored in predetermined expectations of outcome. Instead, he turns by preference to what he calls "minor literature," the term "minor" here not denoting insignificance or marginality, but, rather, attaching to writing which creates identity rather than reflecting it, and in which language remains provisional. Minor literature thus provides a site of challenge to so-called canonical literature, or literature which assumes a majority voice.<sup>5</sup> This does not mean, of course, that the practitioners of such minority writing are identified by a set of shared characteristics. On the contrary, their writing exhibits a *strangeness*, a visionary or even hallucinatory quality which allows new and diverse affiliations to form. Hence, "d'un écrivain à un autre, les grands affects créateurs peuvent s'enchaîner ou dériver, dans des composés de sensations qui se transforment, vibrent, s'étreignent ou se fendent [. . .]. L'artiste ajoute toujours de nouvelles variétés au monde."<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the operations of affect must be traceable along multiple route-paths, and in a variety of literary contexts. How, then, may these coursing

4. Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002) 23.

5. See, for instance, *MP*, 127–39; Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977) 47–67.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1991) 166. Hereafter referred to as *PP*.

forces of affect be apprehended within a work of literature? If, as Deleuze and Guattari maintain, "l'artiste est montreur d'affects" (PP 166), how does this "showing" take place? For Deleuze, insofar as literature is peopled, and tends to foreground the transactions of organic bodies, it engages fundamentally with the senses. Sensory impressions may arrive apparently arbitrarily, but may also exert profound influences upon moods or behaviours. In accordance with earlier observations, a Deleuzian analysis would not begin with the premise of individuals exhibiting and exercising their capacities to look, listen, touch, etc., but would witness the passage of visions or auditions and allow for individuals to form from these apprehensions and experiencings. In terms of the literary sites which would give rise to such an analysis, Deleuze frequently professes his attachment to what he terms "Anglo-American literature," and his wariness of a French literary tradition which he deems to be over-attached to historical awareness, continuity, and hierarchy. It might be observed, nevertheless, that the porosity of his literary canalisations could hardly permit them to be watertight. Early in his career, he had produced a book-length study of Proust. In *Proust et les signes* (1964), Deleuze demonstrates his attentiveness to the subtle operations of smell, taste, gesture, etc. from which the Proustian character emerges. It might be argued that Proust's monumental *A la Recherche du temps perdu* represented for Deleuze a special case, on the grounds of its keen attunement to sensory phenomena. Yet one does not have to look far in French literature to find examples of writing that also contain intensities of affect, profoundly linked with the senses, which play a crucial role in the narrative. This article considers one such example in the work of J.-K. Huysmans, applying a Deleuzian understanding of affect to what is arguably Huysmans' best-known work, *A Rebours*.

In pursuing this analysis, I have singled out the domain of odour as a shaping factor, and this is done for a specific reason. Just as minor literature exists in contrast to major literature, the sense of smell contrasts in similar fashion to the traditionally more prestigious senses of sight and hearing. Sight continues to exert its supremacy as the indispensable companion to postmodern cultural artefacts. Whether it is read as malevolent (the penetrative, consuming gaze), beneficent (the seductive shock of colour, shape, and line), neutral (the efficacy of its communicative competence), or as a kaleidoscopic mix of all these potentialities, the power which sight wields is ubiquitous. Most people, forced to imagine losing all their senses but one, would elect to retain their sight. Smell, on the other hand, is often regarded as the most dispensable of the senses. Further, it has sometimes been deemed to be one of the least intellectual of the senses, precisely because it does not lend itself to conceptualisation. The vocabulary available to reflect the gradations of identity and intensity that odour offers is markedly restricted when compared with that available for visual or auditory phenomena. In minor literature, language is not assured,

magisterial: it “stutters,” to use Deleuze’s phrase.<sup>7</sup> In describing odour, too, we hesitate and stutter.

### *Odour and Writing*

Before turning to the case study of *A Rebours*, then, a brief consideration of some influential treatments of odour by literary writers is indicated. One prevalent strand of thought categorises sight and hearing, and to some extent touch, as the analytic senses, playing a major role in the development of infantile consciousness. Rousseau, in whose work Deleuze was deeply immersed at an early stage of his career,<sup>8</sup> is a notable exponent of this view. Sight and touch are for Rousseau the most important senses in childhood, since they are the ones in most constant use.<sup>9</sup> Smell he regards as a sense which only comes into its own later in life: “Il est certain que ce sens est encore obtus et presque hébété chez la plupart des enfants. Non que la sensation ne soit en eux aussi fine et peut-être plus que dans les hommes, mais parce que, n’y joignant aucune autre idée, ils ne s’en affectent pas aisément d’un sentiment de plaisir ou de peine, et qu’ils n’en sont ni flattés ni blessés comme nous” (E 252).

Rousseau’s model here is somewhat problematical, in that it does not deal with the effects of repetition. Repeated associations between odour and context may arouse strong reactions in children as surely as in adults. Moreover, the model does not account for the phenomenon of flashbacks to childhood stimulated by smells perceived in adulthood. Even if these Proustian-style recollections are precisely that—recollections of an adult—they nevertheless refer to sensory input recorded powerfully during childhood.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is easy to see why Rousseau should have accorded such importance to sight and touch in children. Children can be *observed* noticing visual phenomena

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7. See, for instance, the essay “Bégaya-t-il . . .” in Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et clinique* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1993) 135–143. Hereafter referred to as CC.

8. Deleuze taught a course on Rousseau’s political philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1959–60 and published an article on Rousseau in 1962 on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the writer’s birth. This article, entitled “250e anniversaire de la naissance de Rousseau. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, précurseur de Kafka, de Céline et de Ponge,” and published in the journal *Arts* 872. 6–12 (juin 1962) is reproduced in Gilles Deleuze, *L’Île Déserte et autres textes*, ed. David Lapoujade (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2002) 73–78.

9. See J-J Rousseau, *Emile*, Tome I (Paris: Nelson, 1935) 235. Hereafter referred to as E. In this and subsequent quotations from *Emile*, I refer to Book II of Tome I.

10. Rousseau and Proust may also be fruitfully contrasted in connection with taste. For Rousseau, “l’activité de ce sens [goût] est toute physique et matérielle: il est le seul qui ne dit rien à l’imagination” (E 243).

around them, and touching surrounding objects. As they do so, they may simultaneously speak out their observations on these phenomena. Children, like adults, may not speak so readily or confidently about smell. This does not indicate that they are unaware of olfactory stimuli. Smell resides within an invisible, aerial medium which seems to render its characteristics less verifiable. Moreover, perceptions of odour vary greatly between individuals. Rousseau contends that sensitivity to smell may be more pronounced in women than in men. Yet, almost two centuries earlier, Montaigne, in a delightful essay on smells, describes his acute awareness of the extraordinary capacity of his facial hair to retain for hours the smells with which it has been in proximity. To sniff Montaigne's whiskers is a diagnostic tool for discerning his movements over the past twenty-four hours: "Si j'en approche mes gans ou mon mouchoir, l'odeur y tiendra tout un jour. Elles [les moustaches] accusent le lieu d'où je viens."<sup>11</sup> It is more difficult, in fact, to remain indifferent to odours than to sights or sounds. Montaigne finishes his essay by remarking that, much as he admires the visual beauty of Venice and Paris, these cities are marred for him by their prevalent odours of marsh and mud. Strong odours such as these exercise our powers of discrimination: we distinguish attractive from repulsive, fresh from rotting, health-giving from miasmatic. To this extent, according to Steven Connor, in his study, *The Book of Skin*, smell is "the most ethically active sense, as well as the medium through which we are most powerfully, because involuntarily, acted upon."<sup>12</sup> Connor goes on to question whether or not there could ever be such a thing as a neutral smell: could a smell which provoked no reaction still be considered to be a smell? Montaigne certainly thought that the choicest smell was that which was indiscernible. Approvingly quoting Plautus, he observes: "La plus parfaite senteur d'une femme, c'est ne sentir à rien, comme on dict que la meilleure odeur de ses actions c'est qu'elles soyent insensibles et sourdes" (*ES* 348). It must be recognised, nevertheless, that Montaigne is here considering the question of body odour. In a pre-deodorant age, the absence of body odour—even the scented sweat said to be exuded by Alexander the Great—is itself to be prized. The absence of gamey smells is not synonymous with the absence of all odour. Human skin, whether living or dying, cannot be devoid of smell. Indeed, in Patrick Süskind's wonderful novel *Perfume*, the central character, Grenouille, is shunned by all precisely because he has no smell. As a baby, he is dumped at a monastery, suspected of being possessed by the devil. Other children, explains his wet nurse "smell good all over [. . .]. Their feet for instance, they smell like a smooth

11. Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, ed. M. Ray (Paris: Garnier, 1962), Tome I, Book I, Chapter LV, 349. Hereafter referred to as *ES*.

12. Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) 211.

warm stone—or no, more like curds . . . or like butter, like fresh butter, that's it exactly. They smell like fresh butter. And their bodies smell like . . . like a pancake that's been soaked in milk."<sup>13</sup>

Montaigne's interest, then, seems to lie primarily in odour as the imprint, the residue, of an event or experience. Rousseau, on the other hand, looks in precisely the opposite direction, regarding smells primarily as predictive. For him, the sense of smell is to taste what sight is to touch—namely, it alerts the senser to something lying ahead: "Il le prévient, il l'avertit de la manière dont telle ou telle substance doit l'affecter, et dispose à la rechercher ou à la fuir, selon l'impression qu'on en reçoit d'avance. [. . .] Les odeurs par elles-mêmes sont des sensations faibles; elles [. . .] n'affectent pas tant par ce qu'elles donnent que par *ce qu'elles font attendre*" (E 251; my italics). Smell, then, is an *apéritif*, an appetiser, for an anticipated gratification—a gourmet meal, or a gourmet sexual experience. As Rousseau somewhat coyly puts it: "Le doux parfum d'un cabinet de toilette n'est pas un piège aussi faible qu'on pense" (E 252). It is the sense-archivist Proust who perhaps provides the most compelling bridge between Rousseau's and Montaigne's understanding of smell. For him, smells are not necessarily "des sensations faibles"; they may nevertheless follow the Rousseauesque model in withholding, but promising, a further meaning. Hence, the flash of sunlight on a stone, or the smell of trodden leaves, provide the narrator with pleasure not only in their immediacy, but also "parce qu'ils avaient l'air de cacher, au delà de ce que je voyais, quelque chose qu'ils invitaient à venir prendre et que malgré mes efforts je n'arrivais pas à découvrir."<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, the excavation of the sensation, the patient attendance upon it, reveal for the narrator a passageway to memory. Perhaps the most important definition to emerge from Rousseau's analysis of smell, however, is that "[l]'odorat est le sens de l'imagination" (E 252). The kinds of awareness elicited by smell are, as we have seen, not easy to enshrine in images or concepts. It is almost impossible to describe smells without reference to some other taxonomy. As the *Encyclopédie des Symboles* points out: "Les parfums ont cette particularité qu'on ne peut jamais les désigner par eux-mêmes, mais seulement par la substance ou la plante qui les émet ou se trouve à leur origine."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, perfumers often resort to the language of music to describe a fragrance. Hence, a perfume is interpreted as a harmonious chord, with top notes (usually floral) and deeper, more exotic base notes. In this case, then, one ethereal, invisible force—perfume—is described in terms of another—music—which, like it, exerts its influence *sine materia*.

13. Patrick Süskind, *Perfume*, trans. John E. Woods (London: Penguin, 1987) 13.

14. Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) 214.

15. *Encyclopédie des Symboles*, ed. Michel Cazenave (Paris: Livre de poche, 1996) 507.

Commercial perfumers are of course very aware of the deep link between perfume and the imagination. As Richard Stamelman illustrates in a comprehensive review of French perfume slogans, Lancôme promoted its perfume *Poème* using the teasing phrase: "Parfois les mots ne disent pas tout," while Guerlain's promotion for the perfume *Mitsouko* reads: "Le secret de charme est de ne pas tout dévoiler."<sup>16</sup> As Deleuze points out, Rousseau is well aware of the potential gap between a declaration and its more intimate realisation. He points out that Rousseau "aime la vertu plus qu'il n'est vertueux [. . .]. [I]l a trop d'imagination pour renoncer d'avance et par volonté."<sup>17</sup> However, the reception of odour, as we have seen, is an arena in which the will plays little part. If, then, as Rousseau maintains, smell really is "le sens de l'imagination," then it might also be expected to have a natural affiliation with the domain of literature. Moreover, because of its unpredictability and resistance to verbal taxonomies, odour contains all the possibilities of disruption and narrative dislocation which Deleuze foregrounds in his considerations of so-called minor literature.

### *The Case of Huysmans*

In Huysmans' 1884 novel *A Rebours*, the central figure, des Esseintes, seals himself up in a secluded villa outside Paris, serviced by an aged married couple, and devotes himself to the assiduous pursuit of artifice and illusion for his own esoteric pleasure. This carefully managed pleasure, rarely adventitious, is procured in an intensely pro-active manner. In this respect, it may be compared to that sought by Stendhal's heroes, memorably described by Jean-Pierre Richard: "Le bonheur pour eux ne s'attend pas, comme dans l'ancien épicurisme: il se chasse et se force. La sensation est une proie, à la fois le cadeau d'un hasard et la récompense d'un courage."<sup>18</sup> For des Esseintes, Nature has had its day: "Il n'est, d'ailleurs, aucune de ses inventions réputée si subtile ou si grandiose que le génie humain ne puisse créer."<sup>19</sup> Within this context, one important arena of challenge is that of olfaction. As Alain Corbin remarks: "Le livre de Huysmans remet en cause la hiérarchie olfactive qui, depuis plus d'un siècle,

16. Richard Stamelman, "The Eros—and Thanatos—of Scents," *Sites*. 1 (January 2002): 84.

17. Gilles Deleuze, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, précurseur de Kafka, de Céline et de Ponge," *L'Ile Déserte et autres textes*, ed. David Lapoujade (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2002) 76.

18. Jean-Pierre Richard, *Littérature et Sensation* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1954) 18.

19. J.-K. Huysmans, *A rebours/Le drageoir aux épices* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975) 76. Hereafter referred to as AR.

faisait figure de dogme."<sup>20</sup> The disputed dogma in question is that which holds that the natural world is the motherhouse, the issuing authority, of all fragrance. *A Rebours* is an extraordinary novel in the sense that it consists not so much of a progression or accumulation, as of a kind of Deleuzian "mille plateaux": a series of layers, or episodes, many of which could seemingly be interchanged, without detriment to the whole. Successively, des Esseintes immerses himself in colours, flowers, architecture, theology, literature, book-binding, music, perfumery, all the time exerting himself to work *à rebours*—that is, against the grain, approaching from an irregular angle, trying to free himself from previously-held assumptions. In this, he differs from the central figures of Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, written a decade or so before. The program of enquiry undertaken by Bouvard and Pécuchet—an engaging but profoundly un-Deleuzian couple—is undertaken with a view to acquiring scholarship and expertise, and becoming familiar with existent taxonomies, rather than to journeying into alternative, unsounded domains. Moreover, their investigation of the next knowledge system is reactive: it tends to be prompted by a deficiency made apparent to them by their previous research, such that no chapter or activity is self-contained. Hence, it is only when the distillery containing their homemade liqueur explodes into smithereens that they decide to study chemistry.

Within the narrative, Flaubert's autodidacts give rise to both sympathy and humor. *A Rebours*, in contrast, is on some levels rebarbative, with its long, ungainly sentences, its fondness for archaisms, and its obsessive attention to detail. Yet it is the experience of many that the novel soon begins to claw and to fascinate the more the reader is drawn into this sequestered laboratory of sensation and aestheticism. This is also the case with Oscar Wilde's protagonist, Dorian Gray. One of the most important influences on Dorian Gray, apart from his mentor Lord Henry, is a book Lord Henry sends him. The book is not identified in the novel, but is clearly *A Rebours*, which had been published just seven years before Wilde's own novel. Referring to the novel, Dorian Gray declares it to be written in a "curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once."<sup>21</sup> For him the experience of reading it is like becoming dizzy on the scent of incense: "It was a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain" (DG 176). Later, he begins distilling oils and burning gums in order to investigate the influence of odours upon temperament and mood. Some of these influences are benign: hence, aloes are deemed to lift melancholy. However, in a turn from aromatherapy to what we might call aromatoxicology, Dorian Gray appears to concentrate

20. Alain Corbin, *Le Miasme et la Jonquille* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986) 245.

21. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1992) 175. Hereafter referred to as DG.



primarily on malign effects produced by odour, such as sickness induced by spikenard, anxiety produced by musk, or madness induced by hovenia.

For Dorian Gray, the novel which has commanded his attention does not merely *describe* odours; its pages seem to exhale them in all their insidious power. The Deleuzian notion of affect here finds realisation in the workings of odour as a generator of divergent movements, of non-human becomings. Gray's attribution of odour to the pages of *A Rebours* is significant, for one of the most compelling of its chapters, chapter 10, is concerned with des Esseintes' experiments with the art of perfumery, an art said to be "le plus négligé de tous" (AR 194). Here again, he works with antipodal gusto. Moreover, his odoriferous counter-attacks have been given impetus by his compulsion to drown out an unwelcome and overpowering odour of frangipani which appears to have wafted into his vicinity from without. Des Esseintes' earlier fascination with perfume had been connected with the search for harmony and complementarity of fragrances, for the internal consistency of the bouquet. Now, however, he deliberately casts aside his previous route-paths: "Il voulut vagabonder dans un surprenant et variable paysage" (AR 199). Perfumes, he observes, are hardly ever derived from the flowers which label them (jasmine being a notable exception). To this extent, perfumery may fulfil one of the primary tenets of des Esseintes' decadent project: to cock a snook at Nature, to prove that artifice, the laboratory, can produce scents which equal and even surpass anything which springs from the conjunction of earth, seed, water, and fresh air. In order to do this, however, he has to learn what he calls "la syntaxe des odeurs" (AR 194), so that the syntax may be splintered from within.<sup>22</sup> Just as the production of language relies upon an absorption of the underlying rules, the grammar, of its construction, des Esseintes applies himself to understanding these rules within the language and diverse dialects of perfume. These he traces through different periods of French history, always linking the prevalent perfumes with the linguistic characteristics of the period. Hence, the heavy, ecclesiastical odours of frankincense and myrrh are associated with the pulpit rhetoric of the seventeenth century, while patchouli, camphor, and clove conspire to complement the Orientalist verse of the nineteenth century.

Having studied the grammar and etymology of perfume, des Esseintes becomes an exegete, or perhaps what we would call a deconstructionist. He sets himself "à démonter et à remonter les rouages d'une oeuvre, à dévisser les pièces formant la structure d'une exhalaison composée" (AR 196). He is now ready to sweep previous languages aside and become a generative grammarian.

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22. Compare Jean-Pierre Richard: "La phrase, comme l'a admirablement montré Proust, se ferme hermétiquement sur elle-même; mais en même temps on devra la sentir s'ouvrir de tous côtés" (*Littérature et Sensation* 213-14).

Beginning with what he calls "une phrase, sonore, ample" (AR 199), he constructs a perfume redolent of expanses of meadow blossom, but gradually introduces more exotic aromas, regulating the dosage by means of vaporisers and ventilators. Des Esseintes' house has become, as Daniel Grojnowski describes, "un lieu clos et un espace mental,"<sup>23</sup> enshrining his room, which is like a giant thurible. Within it, the symptoms produced in him by the inhalation of these vapours do indeed correspond to those described by Dorian Gray: "The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain." Des Esseintes may have begun with a calm and studied concentration upon the syntax of perfume, but as he experiments, he enters a phase of acceleration and delirium, abandoning his punctuation, shattering the same syntax he had laboured to understand. His language is at last becoming dangerous, confronting order and exhibiting what Julia Kristeva would call, in counter-current to the symbolic order, a "semiotic vehemence."<sup>24</sup> It is becoming impermissible and therefore poetic, as he transforms into a kind of Ezra Pound of the perfumery. It is, in fact, in relation to the poetics of perfume—its innovative rhythms, sounds, and refrains—that Dorian Gray demonstrates his sensitivity. Having drawn attention to the mind-altering capabilities of the book's languid exhalations—its "poisonous" quality—he goes on to describe the hypnotising power of its internal rhythms: "The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and creeping shadows" (DG 176).

What is infiltrating the consciousness here is not so much a sudden awareness of perfume in its singularity, but a susceptibility to its repetitions or recapitulations, like a refrain in poetry or music. Des Esseintes also describes the interplay between refrain and experimentation, or theme and variation. Just before the stab of pain shoots through his temples and temporarily disables him, the complex bouquet he has compiled is suddenly displaced by the reappearance of the originating perfume of meadow blossom. This resurgence has occurred after an increasingly frenetic assemblage of fragrances, described in one hurtling, interminable sentence which occupies a whole paragraph. During this prolonged delirium, des Esseintes deploys all his resources, emptying

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23. Daniel Grojnowski, "A Rebounds" de J.-K. Huysmans (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) 57.

24. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 80. For further discussion of the destructive characteristics of poetic language, see also Julia Kristeva, "D'un Château l'autre," *Polylogue* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977) 149–72.

all his vaporisers and giving free rein to the creation of paradoxical combinations. After this paroxysm of atomisation and dispersion, the room is pervaded by "un parfum général, innommé, imprévu, étrange, dans lequel reparaissait, comme un obstiné refrain, la phrase décorative du commencement" (AR 201). Then, as if exhausted by recurrence and permutation, there is, as in Ravel's *Bolero*, an abrupt cessation, a final collapse. Des Esseintes, jabbed by pain, revives to find himself in his dressing-room and staggers across to the window to take a draught of fresh air, the very air whose whiff of frangipani had driven him to his smell manufactory in the first place.

This moment of catastrophe has arrived by means of an unsteady trajectory of accumulation and reduction, of form and disintegration. Des Esseintes began with the establishment of syntactic relations, but then strained and provoked these relationships, turning them outwards rather than inwards or laterally, and then abandoning himself to them.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, it is useful to place this complex process within a Deleuzian context in which Ravel's *Bolero* provides an analogous example. In the first volume of *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie: L'Anti-Œdipe*, Deleuze and Guattari had already referred to Ravel in the context of the productivity of desire. They point out: "Ravel préférait le détournement à l'usure, et substituait au ralenti ou à l'extinction graduelle les arrêts brusques, les hésitations, les trépidations, les ratés, les cassages."<sup>26</sup> Eventually, the volatility of the elements provokes a spasm, as they go on to explain: "L'artiste amasse son trésor pour une proche explosion" (AO 39). The explosion results not from the haphazard coincidence of elements, but from the retention of just enough formal elements to destabilise the structure over time. In *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari state: "Le *Boléro* est, poussé jusqu'à la caricature, le type d'un agencement machinique qui conserve de la forme le minimum pour la mener à l'éclatement" (MP 331). This bursting point is not inevitable, although, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, it is a recurrent characteristic of Ravel's compositions, which often rely on swirls of refrain and reprise. In the wider context, however, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the *ritournelle*, or refrain, is open to a multiplicity both of environments and of pathways. The refrain, they assert (MP 323), must not be restricted to the domain of sound: it may be exhibited by odours, materials, colours, postures, and so on. Huysmans uses the same word, *ritournelle*, to

25. Jean Borie persuasively characterises these contrasting stages as two distinct operations, the first active and the second passive. The first consists of application to the task of creating simulacra, while the second is "troublante, dangereuse, qui vise à libérer des forces incontrôlables et à se laisser, par elles, posséder". See Jean Borie, *Huysmans: Le Diable, le célibataire et Dieu* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991) 125.

26. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, vol. I, *L'Anti-Œdipe* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972) 39. Hereafter referred to as AO.

refer to the re-assertion of a previously-established perfume when a superimposed perfume has been withdrawn: "Il força la dose pour l'obliger à revenir ainsi qu'une ritournelle dans ses strophes" (AR 200).

The *ritournelle* is an example of a recurrence, but it cannot be a pure repetition, a replaying of the circumstances of its original occurrence. It occurs in time, space, and environment, and this is why its outcome cannot be predictable. Deleuze and Guattari take an example from ornithology to illustrate this. The male wren takes possession of his territory and promulgates a refrain to advertise this. This is a territorialising refrain, associated not just with song, but with gesture and with his construction of the nest. Once the female wren arrives, the refrain develops into a more deterritorialised impulse. The male again wields a blade of grass, but this time it is not to build the nest, but to mimic the building of a nest, to advertise his prowess in nest-building by dancing with his materials. The grass-stem is a vector refrain, to provide a passage from one assemblage to another. The refrain itself is outreaching and social. Once the female is secured, the same refrain may turn towards reterritorialisation, as the couple consolidate this new configuration. Alternatively, it may spin off into further configurations, or revert to the original one. The important point is that the refrain is infinitely transformable. It may pass from one assemblage to another, or it may accompany the passage to extinction. As Deleuze and Guattari describe: "La machine peut déborder tout agencement pour produire une ouverture sur le Cosmos. Ou bien, inversement, au lieu d'ouvrir l'agencement déterritorisé sur autre chose, elle peut produire un effet de fermeture, comme si l'ensemble tombait et tournait dans une sorte de trou noir" (MP 411). This black hole may produce collapse, or it may itself be merely a stage: "Il peut arriver que des processus innovateurs aient besoin, pour se déclencher, de tomber dans un trou noir qui fait catastrophe" (MP 412). This is, in fact, precisely what happens to des Esseintes in *A Rebours*. Recovering from his collapse, he props himself up at the window, and absents himself from present sensation to immerse himself in memories of a past trip to Paris with a former mistress. But the interlude is brief. Suddenly, the smells from the valley assault him again, and then "la métamorphose s'opéra, ces bribes éparses se relièrent et, à nouveau, la frangipane" (AR 207). His resources are at an end: he succumbs to faintness, and collapses across the window-sill. This black hole is, in fact, a temporary vortex. There are further episodes, further transformations, in store for the recuperated protagonist. However, this chapter gives the lie to those who would assert that the assembly of chapters in *A Rebours* is random. Chapter 10, the chapter on odours, situated at the heart of the novel, is in my view the key chapter, and the one which can be seen to be the catalyst for ensuing chapters. In it, des Esseintes begins with materials and essences, but proceeds from them to abstract, invisible transactions based upon sensory perceptions of his own creation. The refrains of odour merge

with those of colour and sound in being *sine materia*, devoid of form and matter. For Deleuze and Guattari, odour and music, invisible and immeasurable, can incarnate energies, speeds, and intensities with peculiar insistence.

Such is the perception, I would contend, of both des Esseintes and of his emulator, Dorian Gray, who "used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations" (DG 198). Among these "myriad sensations" or plateaux is that of odour, which exerts its influence by concentration, dispersal, and infiltration. Moreover, insofar as odour, like music, acts invisibly and often unpredictably upon states of mind, it can provoke violent dislocations of experience or narrative. What Deleuze observes of Proust may just as readily be said of Huysmans' *A Rebours*: "L'odeur d'une fleur, quand elle fait signe, dépasse à la fois les lois de la matière et les catégories de l'esprit."<sup>27</sup>

### *Minor Literature/Minor Criticism*

This article has sought to demonstrate the productivity and elasticity of a Deleuzian understanding of affect in literary writing by singling out the olfactory domain, taking as a case study Huysmans' *A Rebours*. In so doing, the argument advanced here has to some extent affiliated "minor literature" with the traditionally "minor" status of smell in relation to the other senses. In concluding, it is useful to remind ourselves of what "minor literature" is *not*. Deleuze is not concerned here with writing which is insignificant, underappreciated, or somehow on the margins. Such characteristics of its reception may or may not be observable; they do not form part of its definition. Many of the examples of the "devenir-minoritaire" of writing which are cited frequently by Deleuze are, in fact, found in the work of writers as prominent as Beckett, Kafka, Melville, Woolf, James. More importantly, minor writing is that which speaks *outside* the systemic voice, which writes *away from* a predetermined identity or style, which seeks the foreign language which lies within the familiar tongue.

A final and relevant question to pose might, then, be: to what extent is Deleuze himself seeking the "devenir-minoritaire" of literary criticism? Clearly, in both his solo writing and in that undertaken with Guattari, Deleuze demonstrates a visceral response to literary texts. This is particularly the case in his late collection of essays, *Critique et clinique*. Yet, terms such as "literary criticism" or "critical analysis" sit oddly with these explorations. Deleuze's writing on literature is seductive precisely because it alternates between assertion and

27. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Paris: PUF, 1964) 112.

provisionality. It “stutters” suggestively, proclaiming the need to evade proclamation. For Deleuze, all participants in literature—writers, readers, critics—need to disarm, to remove all potential blockages, so that writing can achieve a “delirium” in which the workings of affect are given free play: “un délire qui l’emporte, une ligne de sorcière qui s’échappe du système dominant” (CC 15). In this understanding, writing as process or trajectory is primary. Its generation is not about “being a writer”: “Ecrire, c’est aussi devenir autre chose qu’écrivain” (CC 17). When Deleuze writes about literature, then, he travels alongside writing; he is not “a literary critic.” This is not to say that there is anything haphazard or dilettante about his attention to literature: it is nakedly committed and often sweeping in its ambit. The work of Huysmans is not numbered amongst the major foci of Deleuze’s literary attention. Nevertheless, if a “Deleuzian analysis” is to have any exploitable validity, it must be available to work in relation to a wide range of literary texts. *A rebours* provides a striking example of a narrative rocked and buffeted by affect manifesting itself prodigiously and crucially in the domain of odour.

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