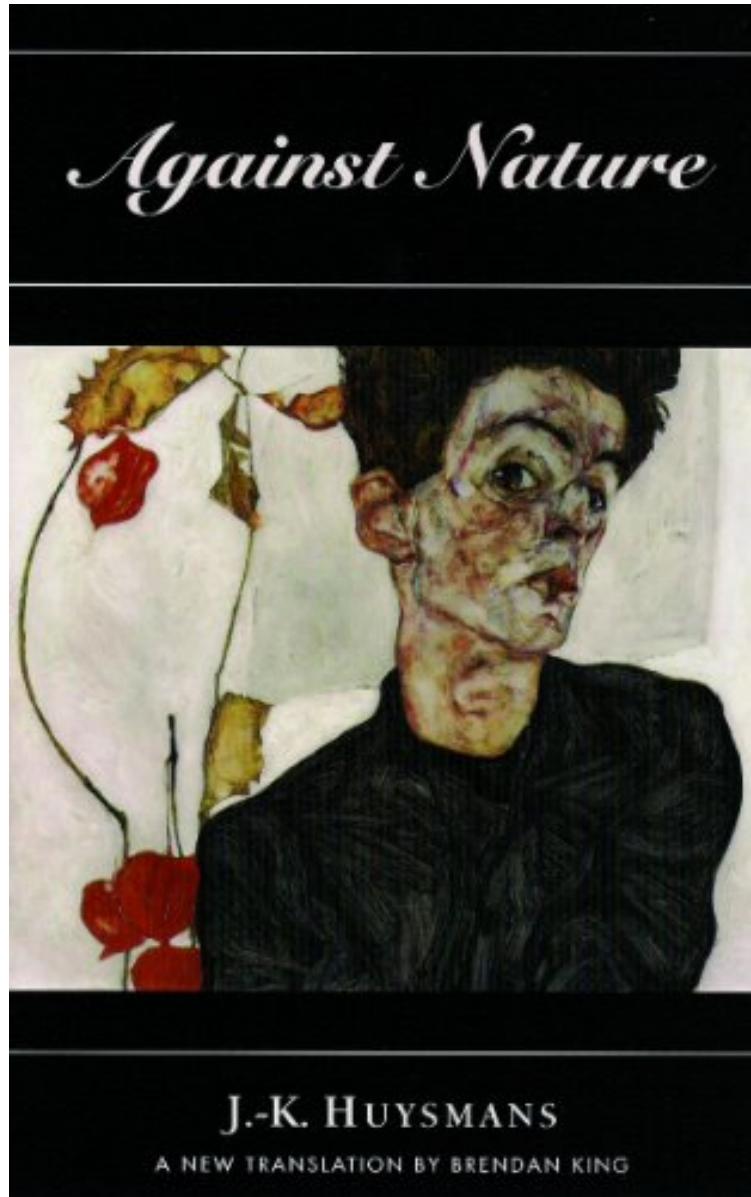


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## Against Nature (Decadence from Dedalus)

J.-K. Huysmans

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**J.-K. Huysmans : Against Nature (Decadence from Dedalus)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Against Nature (Decadence from Dedalus):

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Heavy as leadBy disciple of ImanuelThis has not been an easy book to read in any sense. Sometimes I wonder why I do it to myself: I mean, read books so dense and psychological and European that I can say I'm "subjecting" myself to them. No, I won't be re-reading this one. I am glad I'm now unable

to enjoy the book really on its own terms, yet I can also say it was not a waste of time. What's the angle here, you might ask? Well, it's as much an extreme experiment in style as a novel. This book is almost 100% in the head of one character, and the only one who gets any dialog. He is a disgustingly rich and idle post-dandy who, having "done it all" and fed up with the coarseness of taste of his society (that being 19th century France, no less) retreats into the cloister of his own mansion to pursue the utmost refinement in all things: ideas, books, art, experiences, objects, etc. Selfish and vain to the nth degree, of course. This unholy cloistering and the attendant intense mental rumination happens to be his one true pleasure, yet increasingly a waning one. Yes, it features the full tour-de-force of cultural literacy that such a reading experience would imply, but the annotations in the back of the book lower the bar considerably for readers. Otherwise, you might be shocked by just how educated and discriminating the author can be, and moreover by how graphic. This edition is a fine, fine example of modern publishing, with annotations so useful and a translation from French so well done that it's even ... decadent. If my interest as a reviewer was only in that, I would have given five stars. But I don't suffer a heavy dish of bleak cynicism gladly. This was a fairly chilling book for me to read sometimes because I saw a lot of my neurotic "old man" in the protagonist, yet the 20-years-later preface by the author J.K. Huysmans makes it clear that we are not bereft of hope in the New Man. What I mean is, Huysmans eloquently explains that this novel, while despairing, is the rock bottom from which all his later Christian literature builds up. I must say however, that Huysman's brand of literary gloom-and-doom as a foundation for the hope in Christ to follow is not nearly as compelling as that of Dostoevsky's or Flannery O'Conner's. I never felt the implicit presence of God behind the alienation and despair of this character that I felt in reading of that of Dostoevsky's "Underground Man", for one, even though this book's protagonist obsesses over religion much much more. In my experience, the unbendingly SENSATE indulgence of this character's alienation vis a vis that one, really tarnishes it. If Huysmans as a devout Catholic retains deep-set flaws, it's because he remains snobbish and severe and detached from the gregarious aspect of most any other believers' experience. That's not a great way, either. I think I will later on read the also-famous novels by Huysmans about the Durtral character (really a skew of himself). However, the first those (The Damned) is focused on the garish debauchery of French Satanism (you read that right) and at least as adult and graphic as anything here, and nary a ray of light. And that one came out well AFTER the author's conversion to the religion of Love. Yes, even as a communing Catholic this author was still quite borked in the head. And here I am reviewing his book. Funny that a person like me born in the Near East, and living in Kentucky, USA, ever bought, read, and reviewed a book like this. Stranger than fiction.

Against Nature is Huysmans's great fin-de-sicle novel anticipating many of the strains of modernism in its appreciation of Baudelaire, Moreau, Redon, Mallarme and Poe. 'It will be the biggest fiasco of the year - but I don't care a damn! It will be something nobody has ever done before, and I shall have said what I had to say.' As J -K Huysmans announced in 1884, Against Nature was fated to be a novel like no other. The hero, des Esseintes, is a neurasthenic aristocrat who has turned his back on the vulgarity of modern life and retreated to an isolated country villa. Here, accompanied only by a couple of silent servants, he pursues his obsessions with exotic flowers, rare gems, and complex perfumes and embarks on a series of increasingly strange aesthetic experiments, starting with the decision to give his giant pet tortoise a jewel-encrusted shell... "Huysmans' study of obsession and aesthetics got up no end of reviewers' noses on its 1884 publication. It's not hard to see why: decadent aristocrat Jean Floressas des Esseintes, afflicted by nerves so grievous they cause his spine to freeze when he sees a servant wringing out washing, takes turns kicking out at classical poets, modern novelists and the church. The poor are grotesque, the rich are decaying and the bourgeoisie simply insufferable. Only Dickens, Baudelaire and the odd enema provide respite. Cloistered in an opulent house in the suburbs of Paris, Des Esseintes undertakes a series of experiments in living which prove to be an absolute hoot. He decorates an unfortunate tortoise with precious stones, tries to go to England, but only makes it as far as a nearby pub, and attempts to turn an urchin into a killer by buying him credit at a brothel. This largely plotless mix of bilious satire, broad comedy and literary criticism may have lost some of its immediacy, but it remains a captivating, contradictory work of art."James Smart in The Guardian