



## Literature of Exhaustion: Representations of Mental Fatigue in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*

**Abstract:** A phenomenon known well before the onset of modern society, registered as a medical term not until the second half of the 19th century, when physiologists and psychologists inquired into physical and mental exhaustion resulting from excessive work as well as that which had no work-related etiology. Such condition of the severe mental fatigue which entailed deficiency of nerve-force was defined by American neurologist George M. Beard as neurasthenia. Taking into account scientific studies of enervation, the article examines some late 19th-century literary treatments of exhaustion in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* to present them as peculiar, decontextualized cases of exhaustion for exhaustion's sake.

**Keywords:** mental fatigue, exhaustion, neurasthenia, Beard, Huysmans, Collins

Exhaustion became a medical term proper only in the second half of the 19th century, when physiologists and psychologists examined the condition of physical and mental fatigue. Of course, fatigue, understood as a state of “weariness from exertion,” did not come into existence in the 19th century; but it had always been treated as a natural response of the body (and the mind) to some forms of strenuous activity: a long spell of work or a demanding journey could take one to a “breaking point” at which the body was calling for respite (etymologically meaning both delay and respect). Even when fatigue involved pain: be it sore feet, aching muscles or head, it was not perceived as a morbid condition.

However, in the industrial age fatigue not only rose to prominence, but also, in some of its manifestations at least, acquired the status of disorder. This in itself may seem an anomaly in that the ideal of mechanized production (and the Industrial Revolution at large) was the alleviation of human toil: one should talk about fatigue less. Only one talked about it more. Practically all new contexts in which fatigue functioned carried negative implications. Engineers wrote of tiredness or fatigue of metals, which could lead to the breaking of metal parts

and serious accidents, while physicians inquired into human fatigue, which could impair efficiency of production or cause a critical error, resulting in an explosion or collision. A new, pejorative, term came into being: “industrial fatigue.” This name referred to “a state of overstrain or exhaustion resulting from excessive work not being balanced by adequate rest and exhibiting itself primarily in diminished personal capacity for doing work.”<sup>1</sup>

Fatigue caused by the strain of overwork entailed both physical and mental or intellectual exhaustion, and as such received much attention from physiologists and psychologists alike: Angelo Mosso, Emil Kraepelin, Josefa Joteyko, to name but a few whose studies are examined by Anson Rabinbach in his excellent book *The Human Motor*.<sup>2</sup> But there was still another version of mental fatigue, a phenomenon not related exclusively to the industrial or professional milieu of work, but to a larger experience of modernity whose increasing demands human energies could not match without the danger of exhaustion. Ultimately, exhaustion became a more adequate term to describe the condition, and it was one which had a proper medical resonance since it signified not so much tiredness as overtiredness, the beyond-the-repair state of fatigue.

Although majority of scientific studies of fatigue appear in the last two decades of the 19th century, when, as Rabinbach suggests, “energies of society” become visibly sapped by “demands of modernity,”<sup>3</sup> modernity was identified as the agent of nervous exhaustion some years earlier. Literature suggests the connection first, when Victorian writers such as Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater or John Addington Symonds acknowledge the spirit of ennui, languor, “sick fatigue” or paralysis haunting the works of modern times.<sup>4</sup> This peculiar paralysis came as a reaction to contemporary instability, intellectual and spiritual controversies, and the sense of confusion which left one not only baffled, but also psychologically drained. Walter Houghton quotes one such record of numbing exhaustion, supplied by Charles Kingsley who fell prey to mental and physical inertia: “I can’t

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1. A. J. McIvor, “Employers, the Government, and Industrial Fatigue in Britain, 1890–1918,” *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, vol. 44, no. 11 (1987): 724, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27726482>.

2. See: Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor. Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Rabinbach does not analyze literary works much, but on p. 40 he uses the phrase “literature of exhaustion,” which is employed in the title of this article. Since he makes no reference to John Barth’s famous essay “The Literature of Exhaustion,” it is impossible to state whether it was a conscious borrowing on his part, in which, however, exhaustion is understood in its principal sense of the state of extreme physical or mental tiredness.

3. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 146.

4. See: Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 64–77.

think; I can't write, I can't run; I can't ride – I have neither wit, nerve, nor strength for anything.”<sup>5</sup>

Several years later science lent its authority to validate such states of having no nerve: in 1869, George Miller Beard provided the medical name for the condition, namely “neurasthenia,” to describe increasingly frequent cases of energy depletion, the phenomenon which he attributed to the strain of modern civilization. Of course, fatigue attached to neurasthenia has a pathological value: literally, since on the ground of its quality or intensity and metaphorically, because of its dissociation from work and effort proper. Some scientists would propose a finer distinction between fatigue as a healthy aftermath of exertion, and so a means to recuperation, and exhaustion as its aberrant counterpart, a state in its own right, a condition of no return.<sup>6</sup> Taking into account scientific studies of enervation, the article examines two late 19th-century literary treatments of exhaustion in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À Rebours* and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* to present them as peculiar, decontextualized cases of exhaustion for exhaustion's sake.

*À Rebours*, the textbook of Decadence, constitutes the most obvious literary depiction of exhaustion is provided by a French novel, Joris-Karl Huysmans. At its center resides a solitary character, affected by the *fin-de-siècle malaise*, the protagonist representative of a new kind of the individual bred by the age: “the sickly, the consumptive, the neurotic.”<sup>7</sup> For all the notoriety the novel enjoys – what with the status of “a poisonous book”<sup>8</sup> bestowed upon it by Oscar Wilde and contemporary reviews making much of perversion and decay – *À Rebours* tells, ever so languidly, a tale of “the diseased nerves”<sup>9</sup> and exhaustion. The narrator reports the protagonist's medical concerns with the similar painstaking kind of delectation with which he depicts his aesthetic excesses, and this, together with the heavily descriptive mode deployed in the account of the mental life of the individual, gives the novel a semblance to a case study.

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5. Charles Kingsley, *His Letters and Memories of His Life*, edited by Fanny Kingsley (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1877), vol. 2, 93, quoted in: Houghton, *The Victorian Frame*, 75.

6. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 152.

7. Patrick McGuiness, “Introduction,” in Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (À Rebours)*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003), xviii.

8. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003), 156. Dorian Gray does not, of course, specify the title of “the strangest book that he had ever read,” but the link to *À Rebours* is provided by its subsequent description as “a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own” (p. 156).

9. Arthur Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” in *Victorian Prose. An Anthology*, ed. Rosemary J. Mundhenk and LuAnn McCracken Fletcher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 451.

“[A] novel without a plot”<sup>10</sup> has for its beginning and end the same issue: that of declining health which calls for a dramatic change in lifestyle. It commences with the flight from Paris only to end with the return to Paris, both changes of location prescribed by physicians for exactly the same reason. Enclosed between is the life of seclusion. The novel’s starting point, Prologue, is quite literally a point of departure as we see a young aristocratic, “frail [...] anaemic and highly strung”<sup>11</sup> man, Duc Jean Des Esseintes, carefully prepare for his withdrawal from Paris, or humanity, to embrace a reclusive life in the remote suburbs. Prologue constitutes an account of the protagonist’s history: his family background, education, social and hedonistic involvements, but it also reads like a medical record, an account of the *patient’s* history: his increasing enervation and its various symptoms such as irritability, hypersensitivity, “pains at the back of his neck,” shaky hands, “overfatigued senses.”<sup>12</sup> The explanation for the infirmity lies, partly, in some genetic predispositions, resulting from the practice of intermarriage, as the mother is briefly recollected in her capacity of an invalid, “a still supine figure in a darkened bedroom” who suffered from “a nervous attack whenever she was subjected to light or noise,” and who “died of nervous exhaustion,” while the father of whom even less is said also died prematurely, contracting “some obscure illness.”<sup>13</sup> Yet for all this family medical history, the source of his impaired health can be found also without as it is the draining lifestyle that ultimately takes its toll on Des Esseintes.

The bodily and mental exhaustion corresponds to the exhaustion of various extravagant passions and perverse desires he has pursued; the critical point is reached, when “the flagging senses”<sup>14</sup> can no longer respond to new powerful, and largely outrageous stimuli to which he subjects himself in the course of an amateur, self-ordained therapy. Tedium and tiredness set in: “His overfatigued senses, as if satisfied that they had tasted every imaginable experience, sank into a state of lethargy; and impotence was not far off.”<sup>15</sup> The already pondered vision of a sheltered existence, away from “the thunderous din of life’s inexorable activity,”<sup>16</sup> materializes at last, prompted by doctors’ advice of a less demanding way of life, which could stem the loss of vitality. And while, despite the abundance of medical idiom pervading the book or recurring appearance of doctor characters, there is no clear-cut diagnosis of Des Esseintes’s condition, and so

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10. Wilde, *The Picture*, 156.

11. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 3.

12. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 8–9.

13. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 4.

14. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 9.

15. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 9.

16. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 9.

the malady remains unnamed; there are, nonetheless, enough symptoms given to suggest a literary depiction of a case of neurasthenia, “the most extreme form of mental fatigue.”<sup>17</sup>

In his pioneering study, George Beard defined neurasthenia as consisting not in “excess of emotion,” but “deficiency or lack of nerve-force.”<sup>18</sup> The remarkable economy of the definition was counterbalanced by extravagant symptomology. The enumeration of symptoms in *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion* takes Beard some eighty pages, and the list seems so comprehensive itself so as to cover almost every kind of complaint, with many of them of vague nature and no evident physical damage.<sup>19</sup> It meant that practically there was no bodily organ that was exempt from the malady’s debilitating sphere of influence: from hair (dryness, loss) to feet (cold, painful). Although the list drawn by Beard strikes one as inclusive, some would still find fault with it, pointing at various omissions, which criticism the American neurologist accepted as he admitted that “an absolutely exhaustive catalogue of the manifestations of the nervously exhausted state cannot be prepared.”<sup>20</sup>

Such a wealth of symptoms seemed to make neurasthenia an oddly common disorder; anyone could readily appropriate some and proclaim themselves a sufferer. At the end of the century, Clifford T. Allbutt, himself a physician, employed a less sympathetic tone, when he pooh-pooed the popularity of nervous maladies with specifically the idle rich, always oddly energetic to embrace some new disease: “what was ‘liver’ fifty years ago has become ‘nerves’ to-day.”<sup>21</sup>

Another threat of devaluation came from the elusive character of symptoms and ailments alike, which made it easy for patients to self-diagnose, but complicated for physicians to pin down. For as Rabinbach would have it, “[n]eurasthenia was not simply a malady, but frequently an unstable mimesis of other maladies.”<sup>22</sup> While the patient provided a vague, ambiguous and often also contradictory relation of their condition, the physician sought to give it validity and “stabilize the chaos of appearances,” thus acting, Rabinbach suggests, like a critic imposing

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17. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 153.

18. George M. Beard, *American Nervousness, Its Causes and Consequences. A Supplement to Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1881), vi, <https://archive.org/details/americanervous00beargoog/page/n14/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

19. See: George M. Beard, *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)*, ed. A. D. Rockwell (New York: E. B. Treat, 1894), 34–117, <https://archive.org/details/apracticaltreat03beargoog/page/n39/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

20. Beard, *American Nervousness*, 8, <https://archive.org/details/americanervous00beargoog/page/n38/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

21. Clifford T. Allbutt, “Nervous Diseases and Modern Life,” *Contemporary Review*, no. 67 (1895): 217.

22. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 160.

“coherence [on] the diffuse meanings.”<sup>23</sup> Yet even the medical authority did not necessarily carry weight to manage the highly subjective aspect of neurasthenic symptoms. Beard saw this as an important stumbling block, writing that to those who do not suffer them, they “appear trifling and unreal.”<sup>24</sup>

This persistent record of symptoms and anomalies takes the form of self-absorption and marks what Rabinbach sees as the crucial aspect of exhaustion: the extreme interiorization of the subject. Although he actually proposes the phrase in connection with seclusion neurasthenics prefer, one may refer it also to the aforementioned habit of self-centeredness or, rather, self-diagnosis; the sufferer’s alertness to any, however slight, sign of irregularity their body communicates, which, they, in turn, must be ready to communicate to others, be it physicians, relatives, or even accidental visitors. However irritating to the latter two groups, these narratives of the self could not be dismissed by the former, providing them with unreliable perhaps, but still useful diagnostic material.

Such a turn inwards, manifested as an acute self-consciousness, distinguishes Des Esseintes, who routinely takes stock of his ailing self, or Frederic Fairlie, a proto-neurasthenic peripheral character from Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*. His first appearance in the novel already makes him a softened, subdued presence, a figure of retirement. Portrayed as a languid, aloof and effeminate man, he performs an auxiliary role as foil to the energetic, friendly and masculine Marian Halcombe. While obviously Mr. Fairlie constitutes an immediate inversion of a gender anomaly manifested in Marian, only just met by Walter Hartright, the narrator of this part of the novel, there is more to him than the excess of feminine properties – disturbing rather than attractive – most often discussed by literary critics.<sup>25</sup> Equally problematic, Lyn Pykett points out, are his other excesses: “Combining an excess of sensibility and aesthetic overrefinement with the oversensitivity of the nervous modern subject, he is simultaneously overcivilised and degenerate – a combination which was at the center of a significant cultural anxiety in the second half of the nineteenth century.”<sup>26</sup>

Certainly, more so than Des Esseintes, he carries a social theme; his portrayal is very much done in the spirit of the Dickensian representation of the nobility: debilitated, listless, inert, and allegedly out of touch with the modern world, the

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23. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 160.

24. Beard, *A Practical Treatise*, 26, <https://archive.org/details/apracticaltreat03beargoog/page/n31/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

25. See: Richard Collins, “Marian’s Moustache. Bearded Ladies, Hermaphrodites, and Intersexual Collage in *The Woman in White*,” in *Reality’s Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins*, ed. Maria K. Bachman and Don Richard Cox (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 131–172.

26. Lyn Pykett, “Collins and the Sensation Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 55.

fair and frail Mr. Fairlie spells the decline of the privileged rank, whose idleness – once accepted as a prerogative – now becomes suspect, when offset by the ethos of exertion and enterprise of the middle class. But he carries a medical theme too. Collins performs a smooth transition from the social to the medical, when he makes Mr. Fairlie declare his refined aristocratic oversensitivity as a not necessarily welcome ability to detect the lingering odour of the “plebeian fingers”<sup>27</sup> of brokers and dealers who once handled the valuable drawings which are now in his exquisite possession.

If one is to be guided by the order of Beard’s catalogues of symptoms, neurasthenic disorder manifests itself through excessive sensitiveness, mild depression, mental irritability, whereby one gets “irascible over trifles,”<sup>28</sup> and a feeling of intense exhaustion, when even “sitting quietly in a chair seems to be an exhausting effort to which every nerve and bone and muscle is unequal.”<sup>29</sup> It is precisely this incapacity of any effort, vocal or muscular, that informs Mr. Fairlie’s condition, yet not only does he feel himself unable to make the slightest exertion, but cannot cope with watching other people’s more energetic movement or hearing a sound louder than a whisper, without his nerves being affected.

The medical theme comes to the fore when the several descriptions of the character develop into an inadvertent case study of 19th-century exhaustion. If hypochondria is an illness without a specific cause, so is Mr. Fairlie’s exhaustion: without a cause, one which has no connection with or origin in activity or exertion, whether physical or mental. Rather, it seems to be curiously appended to idleness, the condition reproached in most people, but for a long time exonerated in the well-born, to the point of its being seen as their unquestionable prerogative. When the Industrial Revolution altered the perception of work, and energy and business gained recognition, idleness lost the moral and social high ground, and so did the upper classes. Comfortably ensconced amidst rare, beautiful and precious objects, Mr. Fairlie can now become sneeringly demeaned as being “not so entirely without occupation as [...] at first supposed,” when the occupation involves his “frail white fingers listlessly toying”<sup>30</sup> with some rare coin.

However, Mr. Fairlie’s entitlement to idleness comes not only from his social status, but also from his relentless complaints on “the wretched state of [his]

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27. Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42.

28. Beard, *A Practical Treatise*, 48. <https://archive.org/details/apracticaltreat03beargoog/page/n53/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

29. Beard, *A Practical Treatise*, 96. <https://archive.org/details/apracticaltreat03beargoog/page/n101/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

30. Collins, *The Woman*, 40.

nerves,” as he diagnoses himself “an invalid.”<sup>31</sup> The self-diagnosis lacks accuracy and his condition never transcends the fashionable elusive formula of poor nerves, which several years later will have received the name of neurasthenia or nervousness. Inevitably, all his social interactions, scarce as they are, are nullified by his health reports. With no visible affliction, these self-oriented monologues can enlist little sympathy and are regarded as tiresome “imagination of the [patient], proofs of hypochondria.”<sup>32</sup> That, Beard contends, may be an understandable and self-inflicted response given “the slippery, fleeting, and vague nature of [the] symptoms,”<sup>33</sup> hard to comprehend by physicians, let alone unprofessionals. Hartright – a drawing master, and so himself a man of fine sensibility – has little compassion for his employer’s state of nerves, when he concludes that “Mr. Fairlie’s selfish affectation and Mr. Fairlie’s wretched nerves meant one and the same thing.”<sup>34</sup> Marian, Mr. Fairlie’s niece – whom he claims with insincere envy to boast a “robust nervous system”<sup>35</sup> – legitimizes his seclusion and dismisses the disorder: “Mr. Fairlie is too great an invalid to be a companion for anybody. I don’t know what is the matter with him, and the doctors don’t know what is the matter with him, and he doesn’t know himself what is the matter with him. We all say it’s on the nerves, and we none of us know what we mean when we say it.”<sup>36</sup> Neurasthenia best goes it alone.

While self-absorption marks the subject’s turn inwards, the interiorization that literary representations of exhaustion principally dwell upon concerns architecture. The neurasthenic is a man of the interior. Rabinbach illustrates the case of what he terms the “interiorized subject,”<sup>37</sup> bent on the exclusion of external stimuli with Des Esseintes’s capricious designs, but Collins’s novel offers an earlier instance of “a bizarre interior architecture of nervous exhaustion.”<sup>38</sup> It is as such an interiorized subject that Mr. Fairlie becomes introduced, and the description of the hermetic space he inhabits precedes the description of his person. Led by a servant to meet his employer, Hartright notes a sequence of passages and stairs separating Mr. Fairlie’s private apartment from the rest of the house. The asylum-like room

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31. Collins, *The Woman*, 40.

32. Beard, *A Practical Treatise*, 28, <https://archive.org/details/apracticaltreat03beargoog/page/n33/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

33. Beard, *A Practical Treatise*, 117, <https://archive.org/details/apracticaltreat03beargoog/page/n123/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

34. Collins, *The Woman*, 41.

35. Collins, *The Woman*, 178.

36. Collins, *The Woman*, 34.

37. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 41.

38. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 41.



itself turns out to be tailored to the lassitude and hypersensitivity of the inhabitant; the ideal room for the “wretched nerves” must entail softness.<sup>39</sup>

Although upholstered furniture, curtains, and thick carpet Mr. Fairlie’s room displays create the feel of comfort and opulence, they are less in the service of touch and more acoustics. Insulation takes precedence over decoration: the invalid’s room is sealed off from the hall by a pair of doors: one “covered with dark baize”<sup>40</sup> and the other equipped with curtains which are to absorb the noise accompanying the entrance of servants or unlikely visitors. Similarly, a “thick and soft”<sup>41</sup> carpet provides an extra insulating layer, protecting the delicate nervous system from offensive sensations. Natural light coming into the room is subdued and evenly dispersed by blinds concealing windows and with them any hint of the outside world. This, at all costs, must be kept at bay. At issue is not only the tempering of light, but also of sound: already hushed, the darkened chamber gives an illusion of being even more silent. Light, sound, movement – everything is “unspeakably disagreeable”<sup>42</sup> or “indescribable torture”<sup>43</sup> to the sufferer.

In many ways, the padded chamber favored by the neurasthenic is an ultimate version of the typical Victorian interior. Sundry historians of culture (Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Giedion, Asa Briggs, Richard Sennett) note the remarkable predilection for soft furnishings in the 19th century to explain it through practical rather than aesthetic reasons: “Against the armature of glass and iron, upholstery offers resistance with its textiles.”<sup>44</sup> A nonessential before, upholstery specifically becomes a necessity in the experience of the industrialized journey, which – although advertised as smooth – subjected the passengers’ bodies to persistent jerks and vibrations, Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out, explaining that the development in the construction of carriages led to solutions which would give them more elasticity: hence the use of springs, stuffed seats, and, in some instances, carpeted floors.<sup>45</sup> Industry engineered both the jolts and the means to cushion the shock provided by them since along horse-hair traditionally used

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39. Of course, softness constitutes an important feature of the nineteenth-century interior design. Traditionally a superfluous privilege for the idle sedentary classes, a lineament of comfort, it became also a vital recuperative strategy for the industrious and the mobile in the wake of the Industrial Revolution.

40. Collins, *The Woman*, 38.

41. Collins, *The Woman*, 38.

42. Collins, *The Woman*, 41.

43. Collins, *The Woman*, 40.

44. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 218.

45. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey. Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 123–124.

to pad seats there were also used wool combings now easily and profusely supplied by textile factories.<sup>46</sup>

Tested and proven in the mechanical environment, upholstery becomes a regular feature of domestic interiors. In the days of mechanical production, armchairs, or “comfortable chairs,” are an affordable commodity offering rest after a day’s work to people of all classes. Upholstery becomes a dramatic feature of domestic interiors, too, in that it tends to be overdone so as to disguise any hint of its substructure and, by analogy, any possible connection with industry. Within the living-room, states Schivelbusch, “there are no mechanical-industrial jolts or jerks to be counteracted. Thus the jolt to be softened is no longer physical but mental: the memory of the industrial origin of objects, from railway stations or exhibition halls constructed out of steel, to chairs constructed out of wood.”<sup>47</sup>

The mental jolt that upholstery serves to neutralize involves more than the structural frame beneath, it is more than a resistance of one material against the other that Benjamin wrote about; the remarkable softness which informs the domestic interior in the second half of the 19th century may signify a larger act of resistance: that against modernity itself. In the case of *The Woman in White* such an interpretation does not hold: chronically resident in a distant rural location of Cumberland, enclosed within the folds of his apartment, Mr. Fairlie, with no sense of the outside, has too little contact with or even awareness of the shocks and jolts of modernity to willfully contest it.

The explanation may, however, have more relevance for *À Rebours*, since Des Esseintes clearly seeks to dissociate himself from modernity which he regularly denounces. While his flight from Paris is, to borrow Rabinbach’s phrase a “flight from fatigue,”<sup>48</sup> modernity inspires both his exhaustion and the wish for a retreat. The narrative of Des Esseintes’s life given in *The Prologue* chronicles moments of acute disappointment and dreams of “a desert hermitage equipped with all modern conveniences, a snugly heated ark on dry land in which he might take refuge from the incessant deluge of human stupidity.”<sup>49</sup> It is a partial rejection in the end since some material manifestations of modernity cannot be comfortably forfeited, and when he eventually effects the retreat, already nursed in the mind, he does not burn his boats. The change of location is played apparently safely: the escape from Paris stops at the suburbs, keeping an option of an easy return open and, in this manner, actually blunting a temptation of going back to the old place and ways.

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46. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 340.

47. Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 124.

48. Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 41.

49. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 8.

Still, the proper measure of the retreat is not geographical distance, and, most certainly, in keeping with the English title, *Against Nature*, the countryside cannot, must not, be the preferred direction: the withdrawal takes the form of the celebration of artifice, the unnatural. More important than the surroundings is the interior and a meticulous organization of the immediate space whose every element, its aesthetic value aside, serves to secure the well-being of the protagonist. The chronically descriptive chapters that make up *À Rebours* contain, to quote Ludmilla Jordanova, “a total picture both of his environment and of his physiological, psychological, and aesthetic responses to it,” and a record of the interaction between the body and the mind.<sup>50</sup>

Obviously while depictions of the interior decoration in the aestheticist novel spill over many pages, one can also note the curiously functional aspect of some measures: the two faithful servants “accustomed to a methodical sick-room routine [...] and inured to the absolute silence of cloistered monks” are generously given the first floor of the house, yet the protagonist significantly reduces their presence as “he made them wear thick felt slippers, had the door fitted with tambours and their hinges well oiled, and covered the floors with long-pile carpeting, to make sure he never heard the sound of their footsteps overhead.”<sup>51</sup> And while the sight of the woman servant cannot be entirely avoided, it can be at least retouched, as she has to wear the costume of a Flemish beguine in another act of manifest dissociation from reality. Other forms of adjustment follow, whereby various corridors and passages are padded and sealed so as to keep out sounds and smells of domestic commonplace life. And if such precautions seek to pamper Des Esseintes’s “state of nervous sensitivity,”<sup>52</sup> to which he admits, they also ultimately enable him the thorough exclusion of the contemporary uncultured world: “the rising generation, the appalling boors who find it necessary to talk and laugh at the top of their voices [...], who jostle you in the street without a word of apology and who, without expressing or even indicating regret, drive the wheels of a baby-carriage into your leg.”<sup>53</sup>

Just as plush and carpets lining 19th-century interiors appeared to offer a response to modernity, its rigid and unforgiving materials, its rush and hurry,<sup>54</sup> so did neurasthenia. George Miller Beard traced the emergence of nervous exhaustion to the development of civilization which persistently drained individuals’ energy reservoir: “When civilization, plus these five factors [steam power, the periodical

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50. Ludmilla Jordanova, “‘A Slap in the Face for Old Mother Nature’: Disease, Debility, and Decay in Huysmans’s *À Rebours*,” *Literature and Medicine*, no. 15.1 (1996): 117, 122.

51. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 18.

52. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 25.

53. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 25–26.

54. See: Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), 247.

press, the telegraph, the science, and the mental activity of women], invades any nation, it must carry nervousness and nervous diseases along with it.”<sup>55</sup> Likewise, W. R. Greg complained of “hurried and high-pressure existence” in the “age of stir and change,”<sup>56</sup> taking its toll on people’s health. Enervation happened when one had to perform some unusual exertion, and modern civilization provided many, too many, of these, thus forcing one to draw upon the reserve of nerve-force. It is in the amount of this reserve nerve-force that individuals differ, some always living on the brink of nervous insolvency, Beard explained. While “[t]here are millionaires of nerve-force,” he continues the analogy, “there are those [...] who, without being absolutely sick, without being [...] ever confined to the bed a day with acute disorder, are yet very poor in nerve-force.”<sup>57</sup> This in itself is manageable as long as there is no disruption of the pattern of one’s existence, “[b]ut a slight mental disturbance, unwonted toil or exposure, anything out of and beyond [the] usual routine, even a sleepless night, may sweep away that narrow margin, and leave [one] in nervous bankruptcy.”<sup>58</sup> With the awareness that such irregularities, when they actually take place, have a draining effect, the neurasthenic develops a fear of them, imagining possible distresses they will bring and the expenditure of nerve-force they will entail, which very apprehension has just as debilitating impact. If the neurasthenic lives in horror of inconveniences, then their life-purpose seems to be their elimination. In the scientific studies of fatigue published at the end of the 19th century, the prevalent view was that it had a protective role, since all human action is regulated “by the constant effort to avoid fatigue.”<sup>59</sup>

The avoidance of fatigue follows the so-called law of the least effort, whereby the body and mind act with utmost economy. While the concept of efficiency essentially belongs to the environment of work and productivity (and became the fulcrum of Taylorism), it has its relevance in the world of inertia. Whether ever engaged in any professional work or not, the neurasthenic can be industrious enough in creating their own ergonomic microcosm. And so, the assistance of the valet notwithstanding, Mr. Fairlie is helped by the spatial arrangement of objects

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55. Beard, *American Nervousness*, 96, <https://archive.org/details/americannervous00beargoog/page/n38/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

56. W. R. Greg, “Life at High Pressure,” *Literary and Social Judgments*, vol. II (London: Trübner & Co., 1877), 262.

57. Beard, *American Nervousness*, 9, <https://archive.org/details/americannervous00beargoog/page/n38/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

58. Beard, *American Nervousness*, 10, <https://archive.org/details/americannervous00beargoog/page/n38/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

59. Armand Imbert quoted in: Josefa Joteyko, *The Science of Labour and Its Organisation* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1919), 19, <https://archive.org/details/scienceoflabouri00joteuoft/page/18/mode/2up> (2.02.2021).

in the room, with things being always close at hand so that even simplest gestures would use the least amount of energy. And the gestures themselves exhibit the fear of action; involving merely the tips of his fingers, they are so slight that virtually imperceptible. Verbs of action employed in the description naturally lack vigour: Mr. Fairlie only *toys* or *trifles* or *coquettes* with his coins and brushes, the peak of exertion being the *tinkling* of the hand-bell to summon the servant.<sup>60</sup>

It is this logic of the elimination of effort that assists the manipulation of space exhibited by Mr. Fairlie and, more dramatically, Des Esseintes who abstract and decontextualize their interiors turning them into museums and sanatoriums at the same time. Seclusion and dissociation from its environs define specifically the latter's house as a space of retreat, but the salutary value of this sepulchral abode resides primarily in its being under absolute command of the inhabitant. Hence the cult of the artificial and the interior. Unlike other spaces, geographical and social, it can be a space entirely of his own choosing, always manipulated into sensory obedience, providing requisite stimuli, and, above all, precluding all unwelcome sensations and, by the same token, exertion required to confront them. The house in Fontenay is an asymmetrical milieu too: like all spaces of collection, it is a space for the exhausted body and mind: after all, one of the advantages of inanimate objects is that they spare one the effort of reciprocity. This economy has its illustration, for instance, in the dining-room designed as "a clever simulation"<sup>61</sup> of a ship's cabin, complete with the aquarium containing mechanical fishes and artificial seaweed, timetables and charts, navigation instruments and fishing tackle. Mere gazing at all these could give one "a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience," "the pleasure of moving from place to place which in fact exists only in recollection of the past and hardly ever in experience of the present, [the] pleasure [that can be savored] in full and in comfort, *without fatigue or worry*."<sup>62</sup>

One must agree with Ludmilla Jordanova's claim that while literature "has much to offer historians of science and medicine," it cannot be seen as having "direct documentary value."<sup>63</sup> For all the chronological proximity or coincidence, science and literature were writing different tales of exhaustion. Science analyzed fatigue (or exhaustion, its pathological relation) as an economic, physiological, psychological, and social problem arising from the pressures of modernity which was depleting corporeal and mental energy. Neither of the two literary cases of exhaustion subscribes to this image. In some ways, they could even be said to go

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60. Collins, *The Woman*, 40–41, 354, 162.

61. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 21.

62. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 21. Emphasis added.

63. Jordanova, "A Slap in the Face," 126.

against the grain of the scientific examination in that they weaken the credibility of the condition (deplete it of seriousness) as they display exhaustion for exhaustion's sake. Nurtured in the sanitized, aestheticized, and sheltered environment, decontextualized culturally, socially, medically even, the literary version of exhaustion itself becomes an abstraction, too interiorized to relate to.

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