

Salomé: History and Decadence

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Abstract

This article explores the oppositions and paradoxes of the representation of the story of Salome and John the Baptist in late nineteenth century French Symbolist poetics by basing the discussion on French dandyism and using Eliot Aronson's concept of cognitive dissonance. It engages the literary and artistic representations of Salome in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*, Stéphane Mallarmé's "Hérodiade," the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, artistic representations of Salome by Gustav Moreau, and the historical account of the death of John the Baptist by Flavius Josephus. I show how, in the late nineteenth century, French Symbolists reconciled issues between the "fallen institutions" of politics and religion by focusing on Salome and John the Baptist to illustrate the Dandy's reconciliation and substitution of authority within Modernism.

Key words: *nineteenth century, French Symbolism, French dandyism, Salome, Modernism.*

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The employment of oppositions and paradoxes evidenced in Huysmans's *À rebors* reflects the attempt to explain a social consciousness never before witnessed in history. The end of the nineteenth century was arguably the most traumatic in terms of the social psychology of the Western world. The individual struggled with beliefs that the heretofore religious explanations of the origin and meaning of existence failed to account for the material advancements of science. Conversely, the advancements of science only explained existence within the material realm. In effect, religion and science left gaps of meaning open to question, leaving the individual in a state of cognitive dissonance (Aronson, 2003).¹ Eugen Weber (1986) explains that

[s]ome tried to reconcile science and parascience in a grand philosophical synthesis, but most simply grasped the opportunity to reject (and transcend?) the fallen world around without conforming to one of its fallen institutions (32).

The reconciliation of these oppositions and paradoxes in *À rebors* provides us with a reflective document, or a running social commentary on this phenomenon. Specifically, I would argue that *À rebors* illustrates how the individual reconciled the paradoxes evident in religion and science by substituting them with subjective, personal reality in a society of “fallen institutions.” Des Esseintes serves as an example of these historical events and practiced substitutive reality at this time in history. Thus *À rebors* paints the picture of the manifestations of the paradoxes created out of crisis, but the book also takes into account the importance of different types of artistic representations. Obviously, painters and writers were in direct dialogue with each other, and drew upon each other often to represent the same motif, or tropological construct, albeit within another artistic medium. The best example of this practice is found in Huysmans when he conveniently places the painting of Salome in des Esseintes' *maisonette* and when he directly quotes Mallarmé's “Hèrodiade.” The point of this insertion of the painting and the poem is the most interesting aspect of the *fin-de-siècle* psyche immersed in the tension of paradoxes. These paradoxes stem from the individual's attempt to reconcile and substitute ideas of authority from church, state, and

science – with all of its subheadings of medicine, psychology, anthropology, geology, etc. I propose that the juxtaposition of art, poetry, and prose in Huysmans functions as a method of reflection upon and reconciliation with the power struggles of the *fin-de-siècle* psyche. Of course, these juxtapositions elucidate the choice of one figure posing as a tropological construct that was created out of the tension among all of these “fallen institutions.” The figure chosen was Salome, and why she became the ultimate figure of this reconciliation and substitution in *À rebors*.

To understand des Esseintes’ point of view about the tension between authority and the recreation of authority within himself is to identify and define the tactics employed by the individual so that he could find a scope, or a point of reference from which to work through the process of reconciliation. This point of reference can be found in the manifestations of Dandyism in Western Europe. Particularly, des Esseintes deserves the recognition of being the consummate representation of the Dandy in French literature, but an explanation of Dandyism is paramount to locate this point of reference within the history from which it came. Charles Baudelaire (1961) offers a definition of the oppositions and paradoxes of Dandyism:

Le dandysme, qui est une institution en dehors des lois, a des lois rigoureuses auxquelles sont strictement soumis tous ses sujets, quelles que soit d’ailleurs la fougue et l’indépendance de leur caractère (1177).

Those who consecrate themselves to Dandyism situate themselves outside of the laws that other members of society adhere to, yet they are obligated to obey the strict and rigorous laws created by their sect. Obviously, this idea is reminiscent of the monastery or seminary where men voluntarily removed themselves from the society of which they were a part in favor of participating in a microcosmic community that was separated from mainstream society. The difference between the seminary and the Dandy manifests itself in the need to separate because of illness. Des Esseintes’ neurosis is the reason why he exiles himself to his *maisonette* as opposed to the voluntary internal search for spiritual

fulfillment that could ultimately be shared with others in need of spiritual healing. This is not to state, however, that neurosis is the only reason why des Esseintes participates in this way of life. Baudelaire explains that the purpose of self-exile revolves around satisfying subjective passions, senses, and thoughts. The idea of the satisfaction of passions is different from those of a traditional monastery, as Baudelaire intimates, because they are completely internalized and exist only for the individual. The aspect of self-exile for des Esseintes is necessary because he constantly searches for sensual experiences in which to immerse himself. For example, he loses himself in the portraits of his family, in the smells of flowers, in the taste of chocolate, and in the improvement of a turtle's physical appearance, and all for the sake of satisfying his sensual aesthetic passions, senses, and thoughts. Thus des Esseintes relies upon his own sense of aesthetic preferences to create experiences for himself to enjoy.

Another correlation between the traditional monastery and the life of the Dandy is the necessity of money. Consequently, money is the foundation of the paradoxes of Dandyism. If a man intends to forgo the trappings of everyday society, then he must have the time and the means to do so. In the monastery, the individual would often pledge his inheritance to the religious order of which he was a part. The emphasis on money for the Dandy, Baudelaire insists, fulfills the paradox of the pursuit of love. The Dandy does not seek only conjugal love or satisfaction and fulfillment in the reverie of another. Since the Dandy must go outside of the social structure, he closes himself in, and thereby negates the idea that satisfaction, happiness, and contentment that can be found in or through another. Lawrence Kramer (1990) explains this phenomenon as the nineteenth century shift from what he calls the "classical" situation, sexual desire, together with its occasional counterpart, erotic love, [which] appears as a physical disposition kindled in one person by another" to the understanding of desire "as a persistent force within the personal subject. Desire becomes a basic component of subjectivity itself, one of the cluster of basic forces that establishes subjectivity as the chief institution of personhood" (136-137). Hence, the Dandy only seeks to satisfy the passions of himself by himself through

his own means, and therefore the dandy must be independently wealthy so that he can look inward for his fulfillment. Des Esseintes meets these requirements of the Dandy as well since he lives off the money that his family had, he refuses to interact with anyone, even his housekeeper, and each experience he has is carefully contained within the realm of his own mind, thought processes and memories. Of course, the problem of finding the means to pursue this way of life manifests itself in the reality that some element of the outside world is necessary to complete the process of total enclosure of the self by the self. Baudelaire explains then that money, which comes from the outside world, is but a means for the Dandy to achieve his sensorial satisfaction, and the material manifestations of money, such as clothing and accessories, are but a symbol “de la supériorité aristocratique de son esprit”(1178). This idea presents us with yet another paradox. If the Dandy removes himself from the trappings of mainstream social structure and negates the importance of reliance on others, then why does he need symbols of the aristocracy to adorn himself with? One approach to understanding this glaring contradiction would be to take the accent off “aristocratique” and emphasize “esprit.” The spirit of the aristocracy is not exactly the aristocracy, which opens the door to democratic dogma, yet it sufficiently excludes those who are not of the class that can understand or subscribe to the aristocracy. In other words, it is a perfect employment of the idea of democracy because it holds sufficient reason to keep the riffraff out. As the idea of democracy illustrates, not everyone can aspire to “une originalité contenu dans les limites extérieures des convenances,” which is, of course, the reason why the Dandy follows his chosen way of life. The ideas of aristocracy and democracy can coexist because one is represented in practice and the other is represented in spirit. Baudelaire goes on to explain that, with the foundation of money and the pursuit of originality, the Dandy can partake of

Le plaisir d'étonner et la satisfaction orgueilleuse de ne jamais être étonné. Un dandy peut être un homme blasé, peut être un homme souffrant; mais, dans ce dernier cas, il sourira comme le Lacédémonien sous la morsure du renard (1178).

Baudelaire explains that paradoxes are essential to the spirit of Dandyism. The sumptuousness of the symbols of aristocracy also function as another form of aesthetic pleasure for the Dandy even more than the noble concern with the coexistence of political thought. Who wouldn't prefer to be outfitted in rich fabrics, like silk, for instance, which holds not only the pleasure of touch, but also the pleasure of sight? The point of view seems more honest given the Dandy's "artistic" engagement with the paradoxes of deliberately trying to evoke the response of surprise while not revealing the pretense of trying to surprise. The subtle use of aristocratic symbols evokes more of a surprise when worn by someone who openly disagrees with aristocratic politics. In this fashion, the Dandy could remain true to the tenets of his sect because the Dandy does not participate in the *action of being surprised*, but rather he is involved only in the *evocation of the surprise response in others*. And all the while he would be savoring the richness of his aristocratic symbols and, as Baudelaire explains, he would be able to straddle the line between spiritualism and stoicism. This represents the spiritual side of the Dandy's behavior, and his inception of the surprise response, while not participating in the action of being surprised represents his stoic side. These tenets are commensurate with the Dandy's concern with and immersion in the arts as representations that evoke responses in others while relying upon aesthetic principles of design and materials.

The tension and reconciliation between the power struggles at the end of the nineteenth century plus Baudelaire's explanation of the "art" of the Dandy presents a checklist for des Esseintes. Huysmans employs these concepts by way of the individual man, who represents good, and the traditional guise of a woman, who represents evil, or in *fin-de-siècle* terms, individual, church, state, and science. I say traditional because the traditional choice for representation of an object of desire is usually a woman. But the object of desire for des Esseintes does not hinge upon the actual acquisition of the woman, rather Huysmans posits the woman as the vehicle for his metaphoric depiction in order to illustrate how des Esseintes desires the process of reconciliation of himself to himself, thereby allowing des Esseintes to create his own reality. Huysmans succeeds in elevating the figure of a woman to the status of the object of

art for des Esseintes instead of the object of desire. The ultimate goals of reconciliation and substitution are of acceptance and appeasement of authority so that des Esseintes is no longer in doubt of authority because the authority exists within himself. Thus, Huysmans employs traditional notions of good versus evil, but he illustrates the process in nontraditional ways.

Huysmans chose Salome as his vehicle of illustration. Of course, there are myriad interpretations of this choice, but I will focus on why he chose this political and religious figure to represent the paradoxes of authority. Salome was chosen by many nineteenth century artists and authors as a subject for study. Most notably, Gustav Moreau assayed to capture her in over 70 paintings, including the painting that des Esseintes is so taken with in chapter five of Huysmans's *À rebours* (Metzler, 1987). The captivating virgin murderess is an excellent trope for the representation of the tensions between authorities at this time in history. I say excellent because there are three historical accounts of her story, all of which leave the endowment of Salome's appeal to the imagination, thereby allowing des Esseintes to recreate her for himself within his own mind. The recreation facilitates des Esseintes' reconciliation and substitution of authority since, in a way, he plays God, government, and scientist.

The first two accounts of Salome's story are found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. The first striking fact about both gospel narratives is that neither of them mentions Salome by name. The second interesting observation is that both gospels are completely devoid of any sensuality surrounding Salome's dance. As well, each gospel writer manages to cast the incident in the light of the tensions that existed between the political and the religious during Christ's lifetime. Matthew's account is the shorter of the two, and consequently leaves Salome more open to interpretation. Matthew states

Although he [Herod] wanted to kill him [John the Baptist], *he feared the people, for they regarded him as a prophet*. But at a birthday celebration for Herod, the daughter of Herodias performed a dance before the guests and delighted Herod so much that he swore to give

her whatever she might ask for. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.' The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and the guests who were present, he ordered that it be given, and he had John beheaded in the prison (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1986. Italics mine.).

Notice that Matthew frames Herod's ultimate decision to grant Salome's request within the context of Herod's fear of retribution from his subjects due to the popularity of John as a prophet. For Matthew, the death of John the Baptist remains between religion and politics, and it illustrates the tension between the two in this biblical account. As well, Salome's name is not mentioned, but her mother's name, Herodias, is mentioned. Interestingly enough, Salome is given a line of dialogue in Matthew, but the idea of John the Baptist's head on a platter remains ambiguous. It appears as though Herodias, her mother, stipulated this detail, and that Salome simply did what she was told, rendering her role in the affair somewhat less violent. Nevertheless, Matthew's biblical account of the incident is significantly reduced in detail when viewed in conjunction with Mark's account.

The Gospel According to Mark also places the incident between the political and the religious, but Mark emphasizes this tension much more than Matthew does since Mark is considered to be the first gospel written to an audience of first generation converts to Christianity during the time of widespread persecution. Mark relates

Herod feared John, *knowing him to be a righteous and holy man*, and kept him in custody. *When he heard him speak, he was very much perplexed, yet he liked to listen to him....* [O]ne day when Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet for *his courtiers, his military officers, and the leading men of Galilee*. Herodias's own daughter came in and performed a dance that delighted Herod and his guests. The king said to the girl, 'Ask of me whatever you wish and I will grant it to you.' He even swore [many things] to her.... She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the Baptist.' The girl hurried back to the king's presence and made her request, 'I want you to give me at once on a platter the head of John the Baptist.' The king was deeply distressed, but because of his oaths and the guests he did not wish to break his word to her. So he promptly dispatched an executioner with orders to bring back his head (92-93. Italics mine.).

By asserting that Herod knew that John was a “righteous and holy man,” Mark successfully reassures his audience of converts that even those who were responsible for the death of such prophets recognized their importance and wisdom. He also describes in much fuller detail the scene of the banquet by including a sort of “guest list” that is filled with those that Herod relied upon for political support. Mark presents the incident as tension between the political factions at play during this period of history. Like Matthew, Mark doesn’t mention Salome’s name, and he does give both Salome and Herodias lines of dialogue. I contend that Mark’s account braids more strands of the event together in terms of tension due to the fact that we can read both Herodias’s and Salome’s interaction in the discourse. Salome’s verbal request for the head of John the Baptist conveys a deeper tension since her mother puts her up to asking for the head in dialogue, although Salome herself adds the part about his head *on a platter*. Thus, her status as a virgin murderess in Mark depends more on the fact that this child cannot only make such a request at the behest of her mother, but also adds the violent and gruesome action of executing a man with the insertion of asking for the head to be presented on a platter.

The third account of Salome’s existence comes from Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian, who stipulates that the death of John the Baptist came about for purely political reasons. Salome is never mentioned as a participant in his execution, rather she is mentioned by name only when Josephus lays out the genealogy of Herod. Regarding the political reasons for John’s death, Josephus states that Herod Antipas, Salome’s step-father, had a great fear of being overthrown since he was not a Jew or a Roman (Josephus, 1906). When the people of Herod’s territory took such an interest and liking to John the Baptist, Herod experienced great anxiety about the possibility that John might incite the people to depose him. Françoise Meltzer (1987) shares Josephus’ claim that the major impetus behind the death of John the Baptist was political:

Herod Antipas had good reason to be afraid of John. Antipas, to begin with, was tetrarch of Galilee. When the Roman general of Pompey had marched into Palestine in 63 BC., he had captured Jerusalem and reduced Jewish territory to Judea, without the coastal cities and the

confederacy towns of Decapolis (central Transjordan). Several other smaller regions were also left to the Jews: Galilee and Peraea, east of the Dead Sea.... His political situation was shaky and dangerous: he was neither a Jew nor a Roman. ...Josephus's claim that Antipas killed John because he represented a political threat is quite plausible (30).

However, I would argue that Herod's shaky political situation had more to it than just Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem. Consider that Herod, who was still married to his first wife, married his brother's wife, Herodias, who was still married to his brother. Upon hearing this, John publicly told Herod that "it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife (Mark 6:18). Given John's influence over his followers, there existed more reason for Herod to be overthrown by his people for this deed. While I agree in part with Meltzer's claim that Herod killed John for political reasons, I would argue that the fact that Herod's army had recently been defeated by his first wife's father, Aretas, who, upon hearing that Herod's army had committed bigamy against his daughter with Herodias, attacked and destroyed Herod's army, had as much to do with John the Baptist's death as Pompey's recent victories (Josephus 382). The religious ramifications of Herod's bigamy rest primarily with the public opinion of why Herod's army was defeated. Josephus links the political with the religious at the end of his account of Herod's defeat:

Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment for what he had done against John, that was called the Baptist, for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism;.... Now, when many others came in crowds about him; for they were greatly moved or pleased by hearing his words; Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise rebellions (for they seemed to do anything he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not being himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. Accordingly, he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus,...., and was there put to death. Now, the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, a mark of God's displeasure against him (382-383).

The fact that Herod's father-in-law was responsible for the actual defeat of Herod's army as retaliation for Herod's bigamy is as much to blame as Herod's fear of political upheaval. Even Josephus's historical account cannot discount the religious and political tensions at the time since he includes why the Jews of Herod's territory thought he was defeated. Although Josephus omits the part about Salome's dance inciting Herod to grant her wishes, he does give evidence to the religious aspect of John's death, thereby citing the coexisting political and religious tensions of the day.

Thus Salome's story was already pinioned between the tensions of religion and politics as early as the first accounts of Western Christianity and Western politics. Her availability to both camps is understandable and justified. But her appeal to artists and writers who wanted to represent the tensions between power structures comes in her dancing because this propels her into yet another realm of sensuality, sexuality, and desire. Bram Dijkstra (1986) elucidates her appeal to many nineteenth century artists when he explains that

In the turn-of-the-century imagination, the figure of Salome epitomized the inherent perversity of women: their eternal circularity and their ability to destroy the male's soul even while they remained nominally chaste in the body. Salome became the endlessly multiplied image of woman as Concha, the relentlessly perverse near-adolescent, eighteen-year-old temptress...(384).

Dijkstra pinpoints the tension concerning Salome as both a religious figure and as a tropological construct equipped to embody the reconciliation of the individual to himself at the end of the nineteenth century. Telltale paradoxical terms, such as "near adolescent, eighteen-year-old temptress" are used to describe her dual nature "as both exotic and veiled" (Showalter, 1990). Since the historical and biblical accounts of the story fail to depict the sensuality and sexuality of her dance, this element of the story is left completely to the imagination of the artists who embossed it with their descriptions befitting this tumultuous time in history. Huysmans represented these tensions and paradoxes in the *fin-de-siècle* with Salome in their respective artistic mediums of painting and poetry.

Huysmans's employment of Salome serves as one of des Esseintes's "escapes" into himself. In this exercise, des Esseintes gives himself over to his analyses, which are narrow in scope but nonetheless dense in their suggestiveness, and revolve around the Moreau painting of Salome. Des Esseintes stares at the painting, which is located in his *maisonette*, and he drifts deeper into himself as he contemplates the painting. His examination of the scene elucidates the political and religious symbols that make up Moreau's composition of the scene:

Un trône se dressait, pareil au maître-autel d'une cathédrale, sous d'innombrables voûtes jaillissant de colonnes trapues ainsi que des piliers romans, émaillés de briques polychromes, serties de mosaïques, incrustées de lapis et de sardoines, dans un palais semblable à une basilique d'une architecture tout à la fois musulmane et Byzantine (104).

The juxtaposition of such terms as "un trône," "une cathédrale," "des piliers romans," and "une architecture tout à la fois musulmane et Byzantine" hearken the conflicts between the doctrines that all of these institutions are associated with because they do not necessarily seem to go together, although they are linked to each other through artistic and political influences. It would not be out of the ordinary for a palace to resemble a cathedral or a basilica, but it would seem odd to base the design of a cathedral on the concept of a palace. Moreover, the symbol of the cathedral and the symbol of the mosque are both places of power that function as a form of authority in spiritual and political ways.

Des Esseintes begins to scrutinize Salome as the central figure in the painting, and as he does so, Salome fulfills her participation in her story that is lacking in historical and biblical accounts. Mark and Matthew may have given Salome a place in discourse, but it is des Esseintes who brings her to life as he imagines her body moving in the political and religious space Moreau has provided for her.

La face recueillie, solennelle, presque auguste, elle commence la lubrique danse qui doit réveiller les sens assoupis du vieil Hérode; ses seins ondulent et, au frottement de ses colliers qui tourbillonnent, leurs bouts se dressent; sur la moiteur de sa peau les diamants, attachés, scintillent; ses bracelets, ses ceintures, ses bagues, crachent

des étincelles; sur sa robe triomphale, couture de perles, ramagée d'argent, lame d'or, la cuirasse des orfèvreries dont chaque maille est une pierre, entre en combustion, croisées serpenteaux de feu, grouille sur la chair mate, sur la peau rose thé, ainsi que des insectes splendides aux élytres éblouissants, marbrés de carmine, ponturés de jaune aurora, diapers de bleu d'acier, tigrés de vert paon (105).

Des Esseintes brings the full effect of Salomé's "danse lubrique" before her step-father to life as her body moves in the splendor of light. Even the jewels with which she bedecked herself "look back" at des Esseintes; he is captivated by the play of light that their facets allow. Salomé's skin takes on a rose tea glow. The sexual implication of the rose tea glow is that her skin is blushing pink due to sexual arousal. Even though Moreau brought Salomé into existence within the visual realm, it is des Esseintes who adds another dimension to her as he is captivated by the painting. One approach to understanding the layering of existence is to consider that des Esseintes participates in the act of perceiving the object of art through the notion of the aura that it produces. Walter Benjamin (1968) explains the spectator's interaction with the aura of the work of art:

Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us in return (188).

As des Esseintes looks at the painting of Salomé, he interacts with it on a deeper level of perception as he invests the painting with the ability to respond to him, thereby creating a dialectic with Salomé in which she can participate. Since she can participate in the dialectic, she no longer assumes the status of the object of desire or the object of art. When she is endowed with the ability to respond in turn, Salomé assumes the status of another subject that is different from des Esseintes. Because of des Esseintes's preferences and neurosis, he endows her not only with titillating movements, but also he endows the jewelry that she is wearing with the ability to reflect light since one of his primary fetishes has to do with shiny, reflective objects. The result of this interaction culminates in

the satisfaction of des Esseintes's visual pleasures since he has created this dimension of Salome. Huysmans's use of Moreau in chapter five allows des Esseintes to create an experience that serves to bring the tropological construct of Salome to life – he brings her to the status of a subject. This reconciles des Esseintes's crisis of authority because he creates his own system of perception for himself. Des Esseintes is free from the tension between the “fallen institutions” of *fin-de-siècle* culture because, having rejected them in favor of closing himself in his *maisonette*, he creates his own system of belief that resides in his capability to bring inanimate objects to life within his own imagination.

Despite the sensual and sexual “layering” that des Esseintes projects on Salome in chapter five, she is still not represented as being a in totality, which is the reason des Esseintes “layers” her in the first place. In order to experience Salome in totality, des Esseintes gives Salome a voice and the ability to speak via Stéphane Mallarmé's “Hérodiade.” Mallarmé's choice of using Herodias's name is indicative of the fact that he read the gospels as he began his work on “Hérodiade.” Mallarmé also decided to make Salome into a “double hero,” which is what the name means in French, when he chose to use this name. Since Salome's full participation was significantly reduced historically and biblically, and Moreau's painting cannot grant Salome a place in discourse, the door was open for Mallarmé to represent her poetically and vocally. Mallarmé's “Hérodiade” describes Salome's reflections, both literal and figurative, before she goes to dance before Herod. Huysmans's directly quotes Salome as she sits before her mirror, preparing herself for her performance:

O mirror!

Eau froide par l'ennui dans ton cadre gelée
 Que de fois, et pendant les heures, désolée
 Des songes et cherchant mes souvenirs qui sont
 Comme des feuilles sous ta glace au trou profond,
 Je m'apparus en toi comme une ombre lointaine!
 Mais, horreur! des soirs, dans ton severe fontaine,
 J'ai de mon rêve épars connu la nudité (219)!

It is no wonder that des Esseintes is so taken with this portion of “Hérodiade” since he is so captivated by shiny objects, like mirrors, and

that he practices this same exercise each time he delves into himself to create an experience for himself. The experience he creates with Salome is something he relates to quite well since he occupies his time contemplating his memories the same way Salome contemplates hers when she is in front of her mirror. For des Esseintes, however, the mirror is not altogether an essential element for contemplation of himself. It appears that he can use anything as a mirror, even the Moreau painting, since he revels in shiny, reflective surfaces that will reflect back his projection on them.

Des Esseintes takes the liberty of elevating Salome from an object of art to a subjective entity after he layers the representations of her and she becomes a three dimensional presence. Des Esseintes's ultimate product of his way of life is to create, and he seizes upon an inanimate object of art that is manifested in painting and poetry, and gives it a life of its own. Des Esseintes brings Salome to life for his own enchantment. The reconciliation of authority is achieved because he delights in the creation of his very own mind for own delight. Des Esseintes's sacrosanct analyses of Salome give her more life because he layers her portrayals, which gives her historical dimension, visual dimension, and poetic dimension. In other words, des Esseintes brings Salome into totality and reconciles the tensions of "fallen institutions" within himself through these experiences, creating his own authority while he remains cut off from the outside world.

À rebors is but one example of the phenomenon of reconciliation with and substitution of the paradoxes evident in religion and science through the convergence of several types of artistic representations. The importance of Salome's trope facilitates the process of subjective creation, which stresses the importance of the individual's image of reality that he alone has created. Since the system rests within the individual, the success or failure of the process again rests within the individual, allowing him to harmonize the conflicts within himself so that he may re-enter the reality of society without cognitive dissonance, or continue the process until he finds a way to make peace with himself and the world around him.

ⁱ Eliot Aronson, *The Social Animal*. Ninth edition. (Worth Publishers, 2003) 174-175. “Basically, cognitive dissonance is a state of tension that occurs whenever an individual simultaneously holds two cognitions (ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions) that are psychologically inconsistent. Stated differently, two cognitions are dissonant if, considering these two cognitions alone, the opposite of one follows from the other.”

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