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Misunderstood Symbolism:

Rereading the Subjective Objects of Montesquiou's First *Maison d'un artiste*

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The Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac is best known today as the real-life model for literary dandies including Marcel Proust's Baron de Charlus, Henri de Régnier's Vicomte de Serpigny, Jean Lorrain's Monsieur de Phocas, and J.-K. Huysmans' Des Esseintes. Yet he was also a poet, critic, artist, and impresario in his own right: the author of several books of Symbolist verse, the designer of furniture with Emile Gallé, the decorator of a number of interiors and homes, and the host of innovative literary and artistic happenings. Despite such accomplishments, however, Montesquiou could not shake the public's conviction that he was an aristocratic dabbler, the gregarious twin of the decadent Des Esseintes.¹ Though Stéphane Mallarmé admired Montesquiou's aesthetics (if not his poetry), other Symbolists were critical of both person and works. Gustave Kahn, for example, described him as 'the world's most laborious sayer of nothing'.² Modern critics from Cornelia Otis Skinner to Philippe Jullian have continued to echo Kahn, emphasizing Montesquiou's frivolity and cementing his reputation as 'the prince of aesthetes'. Others, like Rose Fortassier, have gone so far as to suggest that the descriptions of Montesquiou's homes in his posthumously-published 1923 memoirs, *Les Pas Effacés*, were inspired largely by Huysmans' *A Rebours*.³

This essay seeks to return Montesquiou to his rightful place as an important but misunderstood innovator whose aesthetic experimentation of the 1880s exerted a profound

influence on those who would come to be known as ‘Symbolists’.⁴ To this end, a juxtaposition of his descriptions of his first apartment at 41, Quai d’Orsay in Paris – the acknowledged model for the ‘Thébaïde raffinée’ of Huysmans’ *A Rebours* – with the little-discussed photographs Montesquiou had taken of this residence, probably in 1887 or 1888, illuminates the originality of his vision.⁵ These images support his narrative claims while providing insight into the aesthetic innovations that so astonished Mallarmé in 1878 that he would later describe them to Huysmans, forever branding Montesquiou as the real-life model for Des Esseintes. Like the profusion of precious objects evoked in Montesquiou’s poetry, the seeming incoherence of the valuable items amassed in his home dazzled the uninitiated. Yet to those familiar with Montesquiou’s aesthetics, his genius lay in the careful order that guided the position of these objects.⁶

Photographs of Montesquiou’s infamous yet rarely-seen first home (only a few people visited it)⁷ provide an excellent base for exploring both Symbolism’s relationship to material objects and the pitfalls of using silent objects to communicate subjective values. Indeed, this essay will focus on the ways in which misunderstandings about his pre-Symbolist installations stemmed from the communicative paradox at the heart of Kahn’s call for Symbolists to ‘objectify the subjective’ (‘objectiver le subjectif’).⁸

Montesquiou is a privileged figure for examining the subjectivity latent in Symbolist art and literature because of the careful records he kept for posterity. He was so distressed by contemporaries’ tendency to associate him with Des Esseintes that he dedicated a lengthy section of *Les Pas Effacés* to dispelling the public’s ‘fabulous and nebulous interpretations’ (I: 97). More than half of this three-volume book is dedicated to ‘Mes Demeures’, careful descriptions of each of the poet’s residences, in which he spells out the vision that governed his seemingly

eclectic arrangement of material objects. If this essay focuses particularly on his first home at 41, Quai d'Orsay (1874-1888), it is in part to disprove the claims of those who argue that he justified his design retroactively by relying upon Symbolist theories that had become well-known by the end of his life. In reality, many of the rooms in his apartment were completed before both Mallarmé's 1878 visit and the 1886 'Symbolist Manifesto', thus well before what Sharon Hirsh has called the 'apex of the domestic interior' (1890s). If anything, it was Montesquiou's ideas – filtered through Mallarmé and Huysmans – that influenced Symbolist artists, and not the reverse.⁹ Before exploring the misunderstandings that led to Montesquiou's rejection by many of his contemporaries, however, it is important to understand the context that led to the choices he made in decorating his notorious first home.

In 1874, the nineteen-year-old Montesquiou had just finished school and had moved into the attic apartment of his family residence at 41, Quai d'Orsay in Paris. His first attempts at interior decoration were thus constrained by the spaces allotted him by his father; indeed, much of the Quai d'Orsay apartment's eclecticism stemmed from its layout.¹⁰ This attic apartment where he would live for fifteen years (from the ages of nineteen to thirty-three), was comprised of a series of eleven tiny rooms – Montesquiou called the layout intestines ('boyaux') – connected by a service stairway grafted to the main stairway of the family's residence (PE II: 108). Montesquiou made the best of the situation, giving this sinuous climbing entrance the allure of a forest pathway frequented by pilgrims singing canticles and throwing flower petals. To achieve this impression, he draped the entire hallway in 'verdures', antique green tapestries with forest motifs, and placed a moss-coloured and textured carpet on the ground. Bronze and faience animals and processional lanterns enhanced the forest illusion, and Montesquiou

suggested the pilgrims by hanging archaic musical instruments from the ‘trees’ of his tapestries.¹¹

It is clear from Montesquiou’s description that the decoration of this entrance was guided much more by what he called ‘thematic correspondences’ (PE II: 119) -- in the vein of Baudelaire and Wagner -- than by the prevailing taste of his social milieu, aristocrats who, like his father, favoured the stylistic unity of period rooms [Figure 1].¹²



Figure 1. Another apartment at 41, Quai d’Orsay. BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol. 138

Montesquiou’s choice of colours, textures, images, sounds, and smells was calculated to transport the inhabitant from the bustling quays of the Seine outside and into the realm of the imaginary, all by way of the senses. Each subsequent room similarly experimented with material

objects, juxtaposing unusual colours, textures, shapes, perfumes, or names to inspire a synesthetic (and spiritual) experience greater than the sum of the individual objects.

At the top of the entrance stairs of his ‘forest passageway’, for example, visitors would have rung the bell of his ‘monastery’ by pulling a cord made of interlocking bronze monkeys (PE II: 109). A rococo cane handle served as doorknob, opening a door providing entrance to a small dining room also designed to evoke the outdoors.¹³ Given the prominence of William Morris ‘honeysuckle’ cretonne fabric in four different tones, hung to create the illusion of vines swaying in the breeze, this room must have dated from after 1885 when Montesquiou travelled to England and met Whistler, Burne-Jones, and Morris himself.¹⁴ Indeed, Montesquiou’s admiration of these artists is notable for his time; while Pre-Raphaelite works were exhibited at the 1855 Paris Universal Exposition, they received mixed critical response and it was not until the late 1880s and 1890s (with the rise of Symbolism) that they became popular in France.¹⁵

Montesquiou placed coloured glass drinking vessels in front of a window in this ‘garden’ room to evoke stained glass without diminishing the room’s light. A tall ark-shaped shelf, which doubled as a place to hold utensils, was intended as a kind of bower to protect diners from the insects that so often spoil real al fresco meals (PE II: 110). Once again, the unexpected juxtaposition of objects appealed to the imagination through the senses, thus plunging the inhabitant into a country setting far from the bustling outside world.

In a corner of this dining room Montesquiou installed a sculpted oak segment of a tower staircase in order to continue the vine motif both visually and intellectually by playing on the double sense of the word ‘vrille’ – both a ‘tendrill’ and a ‘spiral staircase’. Pearl ‘grapes’ on golden vines affixed to green velvet (a piece from the Renaissance) ran along its outside edges

and the space under the stairs formed a kind of ‘perch for people’ (PE II: 111).¹⁶ The motif was complemented by adjacent door panels featuring children harvesting grapes and set against a background of red stained glass intended to evoke a muted sun.¹⁷ This door served as a transition from the outdoor-themed dining room to the salon [Figure 2], which was dominated by a sun motif (PE II:112-13).



Figure 2. The ‘sun’ room. BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol. 126

Here, Montesquiou hoped to replicate the impression of being enclosed in a lacquered box of varying golden hues. To create this effect, he covered the three brightest walls with gilded leather featuring different motifs, thus creating a warm effect and making the room seem

larger; the fourth wall was covered with a garnet-coloured fabric to create depth. The diaphanous English glass occluded exterior light, thus reinforcing the pink tones. The floor was covered by the ‘coral stream of a Khorassan carpet’ (PE II: 114) whose reds and golds completed the golden room’s effect (PE II: 116). To compensate for the low ceiling, he covered it with an amaranth-coloured cloth and used short furniture: benches, stools, and Chinese casks, for example. Pink cache-pots held hyacinths of the same colour. The ‘veil of this temple’ was created by a curtain figuring the rosebush of St. Bernard, roses grafted on a double stem. Two screens with gold-leaf reflected purple hues, all of which were intended to give the room ‘a joyous soul’ (PE II: 117). This and the following room were created for the sheer aesthetic pleasure luxury could produce. As he put it in what he called his ‘Baudelairean epigraph’ to the *Hortensias bleus*, colours and shapes can inspire heightened emotional and spiritual states: ‘*In an apartment decorated with ingenious furniture and adorned with caressing colours, a man’s spirit alights and his entire being prepares for happiness.*’¹⁸

Montesquiou’s association of colours and moods was not limited to interior decorating. In fact, he was particularly well-known for expressing sartorial emotions, for tailoring his costume to the tenor of events.¹⁹ Henri de Régner, for example, was so impressed by Montesquiou’s attire at the opening of the 1891 Salon that he described it at length in his *Journal*: ‘he was dressed in a very long frock coat cut from an orangey cloth, its hue more rotten than acid, with lapels of a lighter silk and voluminous trousers of the same colour as the coat. At his boutonniere clawed a singular and fantastical varnished tulip, emblazoned with golden yellow and brown’.²⁰ While this remarkable costume was appropriate for an art opening, Montesquiou often expressed his mood in more subtle ways, dressing in acceptable dark

clothing, for example, but adjusting his cravat eccentrically or extending his handkerchief more than customary. This play with nuances is on display in Whistler's well-known portrait of Montesquiou, his 'Arrangement in Black and Gold'. As Elisabeth de Gramont put it, 'Robert de Montesquiou sought to contrast colours, to stand out while remaining soberly clad'.²¹



Figure 3. The 'moon' room. BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol. 127

Montesquiou's fondness for muted colours was reflected in the room adjoining the sun room, a chamber dedicated to the moon and dominated by silver and blues [Figure 3]. The wall on the window side was night-blue, thus creating a shadowy corner. The facing wall was covered in grey cloth with small monochrome designs ('petits dessins en camaïeu') sprinkled with pale gold. The wall behind the mantel was covered in silver leather, marked with bluish

branches. The fourth wall was covered with mouse grey (Stevens) velvet. The carpet, also greyish, was intended to resemble a leaf-strewn carpet with its attendant shadows (PE II: 117). This is the room Montesquiou considered his aesthetic sanctuary and the place where he played out his fascination with Asian art.

Reading *Les Pas Effacés*, one can intuit the organizational motifs leading from room to room. The strange tapestry-covered entranceway and the dining room afforded a transition to the visitor from outside to in, as colours, textures, odours, tastes, sounds, and images moved progressively from day to night. The ‘moon’ room, for example, was, as Montesquiou called it, ‘a very ordered jumble, penetrated with symbols’.²² A photograph [Figure 3] reveals that this chamber featured nocturnal animals and motifs like bats and panthers painted on a variety of objects. Peacocks, hydrangeas, and monkeys were also present, as were life-sized painted fish, which swam along the longest wall on transparent gauze creating the illusion of water. A crystal coffer was filled with fabrics that – when full – looked like a block of marble with soft veins. A giant glass vase (as ‘big as a young slave’) was filled with either an iris or a spray of musk and an ivory mandora hanging on the wall seemed to play antiphonies in honour of the moon (PE II: 118-119). In each case, Montesquiou combined these objects in order to create new aesthetic and spiritual associations.

This kind of synaesthesia extended to his bedroom [Figure 4] where a satin wall-covering progressively changed colour – from mauve to night-blue to lilac – to represent the day dwindling into night and then into the purple of dawn, the fusion of the two. On the walls, in a lilac lacquered frame was a *kakémono* with a clump of wisteria and a polychromatic Kien-Long plate figuring bats. A Japanese cat in porcelain served as a nightlight; holes in its back projected

light forms on the ceiling. On the deep violet carpet was a low bed made of fragments of sculpted Chinese wood in the form of a chimera. He had it created because of the play on words – he liked the idea of an enchanted sleep, waking up again ‘dans sa chimère’ or in his dream (PE II: 121). Montesquiou ended his memoir’s tour here, in the most personal space of his home, by reiterating the fact that his narrative had attempted to convey some of the subjectivity these objects had been meant to embody: ‘And there you have it, succinctly but exactly; I have described the exterior of this interior, and also a bit of its soul.’²³



Figure 4. Montesquiou’s bedroom. BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol. 132

It is no coincidence that Montesquiou ended his retrospective apartment tour with the less materially dense space of his bedroom, a chamber where dreams could flourish without external

sensorial stimulus. In fact, throughout his memoirs he attempts to valorise what he calls his ‘dream style, linked by the association of ideas’.²⁴ It is precisely the subjectivity of the assembly, in which the ‘strict laws’ governing their organization comes from the artist himself, that constitutes the genius of Montesquiou’s experimentation with his apartment at 41, Quai d’Orsay. Visitors remarked that these rooms were, indeed, reflections of Montesquiou: ‘his moods projected on the wall’, while others noted the extent to which all of his homes were ‘precious’ spaces where ‘objects speak’.²⁵

A decade before Gustave Kahn called upon Symbolists to ‘objectify the subjective’, Montesquiou was doing just that, following in the tradition of pre-Symbolists like Baudelaire and Wagner, themselves so influential in the development of what would come to be known as the Symbolist aesthetic. In his insistence on the importance of subjectivity in art, Montesquiou echoed one of the major tenets of the later Symbolist movement: to be true to oneself.²⁶ Indeed, while thematic and sensorial links guided his organizational techniques, Montesquiou’s primary ambition was to please himself, to the extent that he discouraged visitors lest their presence cause his creations to lose their power over him (I: 123). This is clear in the rooms already described, but even more so in the two minuscule rooms at the top of the ‘vrille’ staircase. He lined one in green and gold leather stamped with peacock feathers symbolizing the ‘hundred eyes of knowledge’ – a modest echo of Whistler’s 1876-1877 ‘Peacock Room’ [Figure 5]. Used as his library, it was filled with bookshelves, which contained engravings and Japanese masks, a desk, and a green leather trunk for manuscripts (PE II: 111).²⁷



Figure 5. The library. BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol. 133

The neighbouring room, the old sacristy, was, as he described it, a garret (PE II: 112). He lined the irregularly shaped space in leather representing – in gold against a red background – thousands of miniature spider webs [Figure 6]. Minuscule objects and furniture matched the tight space and a large spider hung from the skylight; it was echoed on a black kimono.²⁸ For Montesquiou, both of these tiny rooms became spaces of daydreams ('rêveries') and worship ('mon oratoire'), the richness of the colours, textures, and motifs serving as inspiration for his poetry.



Figure 6. The old sacristy turned spider garret. BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol. 134.

While subjectivity was critical for Montesquiou's decorating projects, the rooms' very singularity – and especially their reliance on their creator for elucidation – led to misunderstandings about them. Kahn may have called upon artists to 'objectify the subjective', yet the issue of legibility – the relationship of the communicating poet to the silent object – would become one of the sorest points of contention among French Symbolists. Kahn himself would make it a 'fourth criterion' of Symbolist poetry for the poet to practice a critical activity intended to explain the ideas underlying poetry ('The Origins', p. 332). This explicit elucidation

of the poet's thought, however, contradicted Mallarmé, who refused to admit a single interpretation, preferring (as did Montesquiou) for objects to achieve an associative level of communication driven by the senses:

Naming an object takes away three quarters of a poem's pleasure, which comes from the joy of slow deduction; the real dream lies in *suggesting* it. This is the perfect use of the mysterious symbol: evoking little by little an object to show its mood or, conversely, choosing an object and drawing out its mood through deciphering.²⁹

Unlike Kahn, for Mallarmé and Montesquiou the creator's intent was ultimately less important than the multiple meanings generated by the reader or viewer.³⁰ While Symbolist poets were in agreement about the importance of objects, they were thus in disagreement about how to engage with them. Could the objects be trusted to speak through the work of art? Or did they need a spokesperson? If so, what was this person's role?

This dilemma is clear in the case of Montesquiou's first apartment. While the glowing narrative accounts he retroactively lavished on these rooms in *Les Pas Effacés* encourage modern readers to recognize their creative potential, photographs of them do not. While it is true that the black and white format does not capture the light, colour, textures, and perfumes that played such important roles as organizational motifs, Montesquiou's narrative is crucial for 'reading' these rooms as anything more than (as he himself described them) a 'fouillis', a jumble or hodgepodge. In Figures 2 and 3, for example, objects of varying patterns, shapes, and sizes cover every bit of available space, while furniture of different sizes and shapes point in divergent directions. Indeed, one wonders how it was possible to move about such densely packed rooms. Without his narrative, these photographs seem a prime example of what would later come to be known as Victorian clutter, the 'bric à brac' Montesquiou himself so abhorred in contemporary

interiors.

This impression of clutter is not just a trick of the twenty-first century eye; Montesquiou's rooms were largely illegible by the standards of the 1870s. Indeed, Montesquiou himself referred to his eclectic and anachronistic assemblages as 'heresy' with regard to the taste of his contemporaries, who, like his father, preferred the unified style of period rooms [see Figure 1]. Edmond de Goncourt, Montesquiou's ideal decorator, who was himself a proponent of period rooms, confirmed this 'heresy' in his reaction to the younger poet's subsequent apartment on the Rue Franklin, which he described as a 'muddle ['méli-mélo'] of disparate objects, old family portraits, horrid Empire furniture, Japanese *kakemonos*, Whistler etchings'.³¹ Photographs confirm Goncourt's impression. Without Montesquiou's insistence that this 'clutter' was 'ordered' ('un fouillis si ordonné'), that his rooms consisted of a 'stream of bibelots [...] restrained by very strict laws and governed by thematic correspondences as systematic as Wagnerian *leitmotiv*',³² it is difficult to see beyond the profusion of objects.

Nonetheless, some modern critics have proposed that this 'ordered clutter' exemplifies Montesquiou's avant-garde genius: a kind of modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the often surprising ensemble effect is greater than the individual objects. Recognizing his skill at giving unexpected functions to traditional objects (a rococo cane for a doorknob; choir stalls for chairs), Antoine Bertrand has likened many of Montesquiou's creations to Duchamp's *ready mades* (I: 98), while Didier Coste has proposed that Montesquiou's passion for arranging objects in view of creating novel effects made him the first modern interior designer ('ensemblier').³³ Nonetheless, to the uninitiated, the silent and colourless objects in Montesquiou's photographs do not so much express as suppress subjectivity, reducing a sophisticated sensorial system of correspondences to

seemingly unintelligible – if luxurious -- clutter.

Such issues of subjectivity and legibility made finding good ‘readers’ of his ‘maison d’*un artiste*’ a critical task for Montesquiou; like many Symbolists, he sought interpreters of his work in like-minded poets or artists who would not stop at the objects themselves. Mallarmé was one such visitor. Appreciating the poet’s work – well before it was common to do so – Montesquiou thought he would be the ideal visitor to his home. He thus invited him in one evening in 1878 on the way to dinner, fully expecting Mallarmé to confirm his brilliance: ‘I was sure that this curious mind, this admirable man, this indubitable artist would intensely feel the ocular representation to which I was exposing him so unexpectedly, and my personality, which he already valued, would be further enhanced by a new day full of wonders.’³⁴ Did Mallarmé understand? Could he, in fact, read the objectified representation of Montesquiou’s subjectivity on display in his apartment?

Looking at the photographs of the apartment at 41, Quai d’Orsay, one can imagine how the impecunious Mallarmé might have left this ‘Ali Baba’s cave’ in a state of ‘cold exaltation’, as Montesquiou described it, particularly if the count did not have time to explain his symbolic intentions. The overwhelming materialism of this home, whose piles of ‘treasures’ were amassed throughout the eleven tiny rooms, some of which have not even been evoked here, may well have seemed a modern-day realization of Ali Baba’s treasure trove. Given the abundance of exquisite materials, it is little surprise that when Huysmans wrote to Mallarmé in 1882 to introduce himself to the poet and to ask for copies of certain poems, the Naturalist’s description of a work in progress (a study of ‘a great race’s final offspring, who is disgusted by American life and who scorns the aristocracy of money’), triggered Mallarmé’s memory, prompting him to

confirm that Huysmans' fictional character existed in the real world: 'the young man descended from an ancestor's portrait [. . .] living in the sacrificed world of the dreams we love'.³⁵

Though we do not know exactly how Mallarmé described Montesquiou's apartment to Huysmans, it is clear from *A Rebours* that Mallarmé was a good 'reader', accurately conveying to Huysmans both material elements (the 'cathedral corner' from which Montesquiou preached sermons on beauty to tailors [Figure 7] and the bejewelled tortoise) and Baudelairian 'correspondences' at play among the seemingly disparate objects in each room of the Quai d'Orsay apartment.³⁶ It is precisely the thematic, synesthetic, and secularly spiritual principles that governed Des Esseintes' home decorating that would so appeal to the Decadent and Symbolist readers of *A Rebours*. Yet the 'silence' of such objects is also largely to blame for the misunderstandings that transformed the Pre-Symbolist Montesquiou into the materialist Des Esseintes.



Figure 7. The 'cathedral corner'. BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol. 128

While Montesquiou clearly created his rooms as an act of self-expression, as an act he equated to writing itself – ‘I consider these fantasies of walls and furniture as *writing*, both literary and musical’³⁷ – the Naturalist Huysmans focused on materialism in transposing Montesquiou’s apartment (which he had not seen) into fiction. In the novel, *Des Esseintes* creates these rooms not as art per se, but as a form of therapy to calm his troubled nerves, to inspire particular states of mind that will distract him from himself.³⁸ Montesquiou, on the other hand, arranged objects in innovative new combinations to evoke ideas or – more often emotions

– informed by what he understood as the spirit of the things themselves. The correspondences (in the Baudelairean sense) among his artistic productions were particularly impressive: decorative arts engendered poems, which engendered more art, like the marquetry chest of drawers Montesquiou designed with a hydrangea motif. Built by Emile Gallé and exhibited at the 1892 Salon du Champ de Mars, it was likened by critics to one of Montesquiou’s elaborate book bindings and it would itself inspire more poetry.³⁹ A section of the 1896 *Les Hortensias bleus*, entitled *Céans*, contains eleven poems inspired by the eleven rooms of his apartment. Allegedly written in 1883, this section is particularly indicative of his tendency to see interior decoration and writing as kindred acts. Poems such as ‘Manières’ equate verse to bibelot (‘I would this verse an artistic bibelot | special, unusual, particular, strange : | With, round its perimeter, from time to time, a glance | of disturbing Colour, many-hued and bizarre’ (p. 139)).⁴⁰ Similarly, in ‘Transfusion’ a straightforward description of the Persian carpet in his ‘sun room’ develops into a Baudelairean understanding of the correspondences among words, objects, subjectivity, and environment:

In the woolly muted moss of carpets
Shimmers and powders, glows and sparkles
The golden sand of lacquer ; or the upright elegance
of Persian ewer on enamel floors ;
--Here living objects seem to stem from words,
So permeates, transmits, and encircles
The extension of a personal soul
In their contour, their silhouette, their game,
Comprising the exquisite ambiance of milieu. (p. 141)⁴¹

Montesquiou’s evocation of the ‘living objects’ of his room and representation of them as an extension (‘la prolongation’) of the poet’s subjectivity (‘une âme personnelle’), repeat – in verse – the decorating goal expressed in the prose of his memoirs: objectifying the subjective.

How then did Montesquiou's eminently Symbolist project – one admired by Mallarmé – become the subject of public ridicule to the extent that he was considered a 'toqué' – or weirdo – and branded the model for Des Esseintes until his death?⁴² One answer is that Montesquiou's pre-Symbolist aesthetic of 1878 was simply too radical to be valued in the early 1880s, much as the Goncourts were dismissed as 'toqués' for their collecting until the 1880s when rococo and Japanese art came into vogue.⁴³ As Proust would later remark, Montesquiou was a trendsetter, a 'Professor of Beauty' for the younger generation; he often recognized art and artists ('les talents-étoiles', p. 513) that others had not yet remarked, seeing clearly where others did not ('voir distinctement là où les autres ne voient qu'indistinctement', p. 514).⁴⁴

Another answer, the one Montesquiou himself proposed, is that the Naturalist bias of *A Rebours* deformed his aesthetic originality by presenting his creative impulse as a symptom of degeneracy. Des Esseintes' creations – as inspirational as they would later become for Decadents and Symbolists – are – in the novel itself – symptoms of Des Esseintes' underlying sickness. In fact, through his character, Huysmans 'subjectifies the objective'; he presents nature through a temperament. This is precisely the Naturalist tendency to which Kahn had reacted in calling upon Symbolists to 'objectify the subjective' ('objectiver le subjectif (l'extériorisation de l'Idée) au lieu de subjectiver l'objectif (la nature vue à travers un tempérament)'). In Huysmans' novel, Des Esseintes' decorating passion is a biological tic, the degenerate behaviour of a feeble aristocrat. The fictional character's impulse was then projected upon Montesquiou, whose decorating was dismissed as the eccentricity of the degenerate last member of an illustrious aristocratic family.

Montesquiou, however, considered his decorating an art form and his subjectivity the

determining element of artistic genius in general. For him arranging objects in unique ways (instead of adhering to period styles) was the ultimate artistic act: 'only [arrangements of anachronisms] allow personal and even genial manifestations in the ordering of objects, with, when successful, the reward that only he who distributed the elements, as with the words of a poem or the notes of a symphony, could fully excel'.⁴⁵ One could not ask for a clearer confirmation of the aesthetic championed by Kahn. Yet if no one could 'read' this highly personal art, was it really art? For contemporaries of Montesquiou the answer was 'no'. Decadents admired the ideas governing both his decorating and poetry, while recoiling when confronted with the creations themselves. As Arthur Symons put it in *Colour Studies in Paris*, Montesquiou enjoyed an impressive reputation – he was even considered the origin of Oscar Wilde's 'worship of the sunflower' (p. 55) -- until his work was published:

It was known that he wrote poems, but no one had seen them; he had resolved to out-Mallarmé Mallarmé and he succeeded so well that it was generally supposed that these vague, shrouded poems were the quintessence of what was perversely exquisite in spirit and in form, probably few in number, but no doubt not less faultless than original. (p. 59)

Once the 500-page *Les Chauves-Souris* was published (1892), readers found these poems as cluttered and incomprehensible as the photographs of his interiors. This effect is perhaps clearest in the 1896 *Les Hortensias bleus* where section headings ostensibly guide the reader through a well-defined domestic procession defined by the 'I' of the poet ('Introit', 'Chapelle blanche', 'Chambre claire', 'Chambre obscure', 'Ite'). Yet these headings' further (and asymmetric) subdivision ('Berceuses', 'Virginelles et Puellules', 'Intus', '*Zotechæ et Musicæ*', 'Céans', 'Altior', and the like), with some titles indicated in boldface, some in italics, and others in Roman font, makes it difficult to grasp the overall structural pattern. His poetry resembles the

rooms of his apartment where organizational motifs (colour, images) vanish beneath the volume of objects that fill them. Indeed, without the organizing presence of the artist to explain his thinking, Montesquiou's home decorating, like his poetry, seems, as Symons put it, 'calmly crazy', 'there is all the disorder without any of the delirium of madness [. . .] fluent, contorted, and interminable nonsense have never been more cogently demonstrated' (p. 61).

Montesquiou -- the theorist and the legend -- profoundly seduced his contemporaries with subjective ideals much more attractive in concept than in reality. They resembled Des Esseintes' synaesthetic mouth organ, whose different keys produced drops of a drink whose taste was calculated to capture a symphony, but whose blend of curaçao, creme de menthe, gin, and kirsch would likely have been so cacophonous as to repulse even the least discerning gourmand. One wonders what visitors would have made of Des Esseintes' house. Without Huysmans' narrative, would they have been able to appreciate its synesthetic organization? Or would his character been criticized – as was Montesquiou - for his 'muddle of disparate objects'? Despite their idealization of the 'silence of objects', nearly all the Symbolists relied, in one way or another, on narrative devices that would make their subjectivity understood. Montesquiou was no exception and, without the description he lavished on his home in *Les Pas Effacés*, stand-alone photographs of his home could easily be dismissed as yet another example of fin-de-siècle clutter.

The misunderstandings surrounding the count's first apartment on the Quai d'Orsay cannot thus be ascribed completely – as he tried to do in *Les Pas Effacés* – to Huysmans' Naturalist tendency to turn Montesquiou into a parody of the eccentric aristocrat, to 'subjectify the objective'. Huysmans was, however, partially to blame. In order to vaunt the Naturalist pedigree of his book (and probably – as an employee at the Ministry of the Interior -- to deflect

attention from his own ‘degenerate’ imagination), Huysmans insisted in letters to writer friends that Des Esseintes was based on a real-life model, despite the fact that he was derived from a variety of sources.⁴⁶ Others quickly spread rumours that Montesquiou was his model, which Huysmans did not deny. This identification of Montesquiou as a degenerate and eccentric aristocrat played to a Naturalist (and Symbolist) bias against the wealthy, thus giving fodder to a fin-de-siècle critical tradition inherited from Sainte-Beuve, in which artists were judged in terms of their lifestyle. Montesquiou, like his admirer Marcel Proust, who is alleged to have based much of *La Recherche* on the activities and sayings of the Count,⁴⁷ was thus caricatured by contemporaries for his social pursuits and personality: for being a snob, a dandy, and a social butterfly. They described him as a dilettante or degenerate whose aesthetic creation had little to do with real artistic talent. Goncourt summed up the problem neatly in his *Journal*: if Montesquiou had been destitute and had frequented bars as did Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, his work might have been deemed ‘extraordinary’. As an aristocrat, however, he could only be disparaged.⁴⁸

The misunderstandings surrounding Montesquiou’s artistic creations were also a result of his Symbolist tendency to ‘objectify the subjective’, to ‘paint not the thing, but its effect’,⁴⁹ as Mallarmé put it. Montesquiou trusted silent objects to bring viewers to a higher aesthetic plane, but many – like Edmond de Goncourt – did not stay long enough to see beyond the surface. Those - like Proust, Maurice Barrès, Elisabeth de Gramont, or Octave Mirbeau - who described Montesquiou as a true artist, focused not on the material objects surrounding him, but on the ways in which his personality enchanted them, transforming them into a reflection of own unusual subjectivity. In an 1892 review of Montesquiou’s *Les Chauves Souris*, for example,

Mirbeau evoked his ‘passion for the unique’, his gift of converting ideas, thoughts, objects into ‘a strange quintessence’, a enchanting and ‘mystifying supernaturation’ that perplexed non-artists.⁵⁰

Both Naturalist mis-classification and Symbolist incomprehension pushed Montesquiou – who lived until 1921, long enough to recognize the mechanisms responsible for his critical failure – to reconsider his narrative strategy. He left the school of Mallarmé – where interactions among objects should speak for themselves – for the school of Kahn – where it was the poet’s duty to explain the idea governing his work. No longer trusting objects to convey accurately his subjectivity, Montesquiou began, in the years after *A Rebours*, an overt campaign of self-promotion – public lectures, poetry readings, newspaper articles, and interviews – all intended to elucidate his work’s mysteries and to promote himself as a respectable artist.⁵¹ Although the Quai d’Orsay apartment remained private from 1874-1888, subsequent homes served as the settings for lavish artistic and literary happenings – conferences, poetry readings, concerts, and balls – to which he invited the French cultural elite. As Antoine Bertrand has pointed out, opening his home to well-known artists, writers, journalists, doctors and bankers during these parties drew attention to the excellent taste that guided his organization of the events (his programs), the composition of his poetry, and the objects displayed in his home (II: 705). Yet these later homes were not as private an expression of personality as the earlier one had been. Later in life, Montesquiou would collaborate with his partner, Gabriel Yturri, as with professionals, such as Georges Hoentschel, a noted late nineteenth-century collector and interior decorator who admired Montesquiou’s taste.⁵² Widely-published photo-interviews of these ‘tasteful’ homes provided Montesquiou with a critical forum to illustrate and defend his

aesthetic, always in the hopes of repairing his reputation.⁵³ Indeed, he considered *Les Pas Effacés* as the equivalent of Goncourt's 1881 *La Maison d'un artiste*, a retroactive attempt to justify his taste to uncomprehending contemporaries. But to no avail; he was reviled more for this self-promotion than he was for his earlier reclusiveness. At his death in 1921 he was still widely ridiculed as an inferior model for Des Esseintes and dismissed by Symbolists for his overt attempts to 'explain' his work.

Because of his critical failure in his own time, Montesquiou's work remains largely forgotten today. It is thus ready for reappraisal, ready to be stripped of the Symbolist and Naturalist misunderstandings that so perverted earlier interpretations. Today, Montesquiou can be considered a consummate installation artist whose artistic experimentation, whose writings about home decorating, and whose legend enriched fin-de-siècle discussion about the importance of subjectivity in art. For Montesquiou, interior decorating was like assembling a rich mosaic of one's own subjectivity: 'the successive and diversified portable mosaic of furniture, constantly undone and redone around me throughout my life using manual and visual products of the human race'.⁵⁴ While his results did not always live up to the theories governing them, the self-titled *La Vie et les Oeuvres de Robert de Montesquiou*, volumes of scrapbooks containing images, works, letters, newspaper articles, and commentary that he assembled for the ideal future readers of his work – allow one to gauge the intensity with which he experimented with subjective objects.

Most importantly, his theories about subjectivity and his experiments with synaesthesia were enormously influential. Mallarmé, informed by Montesquiou's commentary in 1878, accurately translated for Huysmans the Baudelairean 'correspondences' at play among the

seemingly disparate objects in each room of the Quai d'Orsay apartment. Huysmans' understanding of and transposition into *A Rebours* of the synesthetic links governing the objects in Montesquiou's sanctuary was the aspect of his novel that most appealed to his primary readers, those affiliated with the French and English Decadent movements, who proclaimed 'A Rebours' the 'breviary of the Decadence'.⁵⁵ While Montesquiou has been accused of basing his memoirs on Huysmans' novel, the black-and-white photographs - though they cannot capture the multi-sensory complexity of the Count's experimentation - do attest to his innovation and aesthetic experimentation. Ironically, however, it is not Montesquiou's creations that garnered fame. Rather, legends about his unique attitude toward objects - transmitted via Mallarmé and Huysmans - would go on to exert a tremendous influence on European Symbolist practices of the 1890s. From Mallarmé to Huysmans to Wilde, Ensor, and Khnopff, an entire generation turned to the home as a privileged space of self-expression and artistic creation.

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Notes

Research for this essay was made possible by a grant by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I extend my thanks to Willa Silverman for advice concerning Montesquiou's papers and the archives containing them.

1. In his preface to *Les Pas Effacés* (Montesquiou's memoirs), Paul-Louis Couchoud rails against the injustice done to Montesquiou by Huysmans: 'Les solides beautés de son oeuvre n'ont pas atteint le public. Sa figure a été masquée par la fiction effrontée d'Huysmans. Il a voulu, avant de mourir, montrer sa vraie figure et préparer à son oeuvre des lecteurs plus attentifs.' Robert de Montesquiou, *Les Pas Effacés* (Paris: Emile-Paul Frères, 1923), p. 5.
2. Kahn describes Mallarmé's favourable impression of Montesquiou's personality, dandyism, and elegance in 'Les Origines du symbolisme.' *La Revue blanche* 26 (1901): 321-48 (p. 333). Alleged to have said this in an article for *La Revue blanche*, Kahn is cited in Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Elegant Wits and Grand Horizontals* (Paris: Houghton Mifflin, 1962). In his *Livre des masques*, Remy de Gourmont called him '[une fleur] qu'on regarde avec curiosité dans un parterre, dont on demande le nom et dont on garde le souvenir' (Paris: Mercure de France, 1896), p. 239, while in *Colour Studies in Paris* Arthur Symons evoked Montesquiou's 1892 *Les Chauves-souris*, a 500-page book of poetry as 'calmly crazy' (Paris: E. P. Dutton, 1918), p. 61.
3. *The Prince of Aesthetes* is the English title of Jullian's 1965 biography. In this work, aesthete is used as compliment; other scholars use the term derisively. Fortassier, 'Preface' to *A Rebours* (Paris: L'Imprimerie nationale, 1981), p. 10.
4. While I examine the 1880s in this essay, both Antoine Bertrand and Willa Silverman have recently argued that Montesquiou was a man with impeccable taste who continued to play an important role in fin-de-siècle society as a trendsetter. Bertrand, *Les Curiosités esthétiques de Robert de Montesquiou* (Geneva: Droz, 1996) and Silverman, 'Unpacking his Library: Robert de Montesquiou and the Esthetics of the Book in Fin-de-siècle France', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 32.3-4 (Spring-Summer 2004), 316-31. Along with Joy Newton, and Didier Coste, they have advocated for the artistic merits of Montesquiou's home decorating, collecting, and writing.
5. Montesquiou's abundant papers, including newspaper clippings and photographs, were organized after his death by secretary Henri Pinard and pasted into a series of scrapbooks entitled *La Vie et les Oeuvres de Robert de Montesquiou*. These volumes follow the chronology of Montesquiou's memoirs, thus providing visual commentary that confirms the claims of his narrative. They were acquired by the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1964 as part of the 'Papiers Robert de Montesquiou'. It is not clear when the photographs were taken, though it is certain that it occurred before he left the apartment in 1888. Given the fact that Edmond de Goncourt had his home in Auteuil photographed several times from 1883 to 1889 (Montesquiou met Goncourt in 1882), it is possible that Montesquiou was similarly inspired to chronicle the home as a work of art.
6. 1878 is given by the editors of Mallarmé's *Correspondance* as the date of his visit. The two were quite friendly at this time, particularly since Montesquiou had taken a liking to Mallarmé's son Anatole, who would die the following year. See Jean-Luc Steinmetz, *Stéphane Mallarmé*

(Paris: Fayard, 1998). Many accounts of this visit are incorrect, setting it at Montesquiou's subsequent apartment on the Rue Franklin, for example, or inferring that it occurred much later, as does Robert Baldick in his *Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1955), pp. 80-81. Others assume that Huysmans actually visited one of Montesquiou's apartments, which was not the case.

7. Bertrand lists only José Maria Heredia, François Coppée, Émile Gallé, Gabriel Yturri, and Jacques-Emile Blanche, who visited once (I: 112).

8. See Kahn, 'Réponse des symbolistes'. *L'Événement*, 28 September 1886. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the French are mine.

9. Most scholars place the home-decorating movement after the publication of Goncourt's *Maison d'un artiste* (1881) and *A Rebours* (1884), situating its zenith in the 1890s with the elaborate Symbolist interiors of James Ensor and Fernand Khnopff. See, for example, Sharon Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 218. Montesquiou's pre-Symbolist apartment dates from at least a decade earlier; Mallarmé's visit took place in 1878.

¹⁰ This was, in fact, his first full-fledged experiment in interior decorating, though he claims in his memoirs to have created elaborate installations for as long as he could remember.

11. This staircase can be glimpsed at the bottom of a photograph of the entryway contained in BnF MSS NAF, 15037, fol 124. In his *Curiosités esthétiques*, Antoine Bertrand provides call numbers for a number of photographs of this apartment, but they are not always accurate. I have used the folio numbers noted during my own study of the photographs.

12. Photographs of his father's quarters at 41, Quai d'Orsay (MS BnF MSS NAF, 15037, fols. 137-38), contained in the same dossier as the images of his rooms, reveal the striking difference in taste that governed the two parts of the same home.

13. This room is also visible through the open door of the photograph featuring the entryway (BnF MSS NAF, 15037, fol 124).

14. See Bertrand, I: 67 and Edgar Munhall, *Whistler and Montesquiou: The Butterfly and the Bat* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985) for more details about this trip.

15. See Susan P. Casteras, 'Symbolist Debts to Pre-Raphaelitism: A Pan-European Phenomenon', *Worldwide Pre-Raphaelitism*, ed. by Thomas J. Tobin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 119-34.

16. This 'vrille', its 'perch', and the door panels are visible in BN MSS NAF, 15037, fol 125.

17. This door is visible in BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol 125.

18. Montesquiou's emphasis. He cites this passage, calling it a 'Baudelairean epigraph', in *Les Pas Effacés* (II: 96).

19 Philippe Thiébaud provides a number of examples in 'Ego Imago', in *Robert de Montesquiou, ou, l'art de paraître* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1999), pp. 7-19.

20 Henri de Régner, *Les Cahiers inédits (1887-1936)* (Paris: Editions Pygmalion, 2002), p. 255.

21 *Robert de Montesquiou et Marcel Proust* (Paris: E. Flammarion, 1925), pp. 222-23.

22. 'Un fouillis si ordonné, si pénétré de symboles' (PE II: 119).

23. 'Voilà succinctement, mais exactement; j'ai décrit l'extérieur de cet intérieur, et aussi un peu de son âme' (PE II: 122).

24. 'Un style de rêve, enchaîné par l'association des idées' (PE II: 112).

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25. Elisabeth de Gramont called them ‘états d’âme projetés sur le mur’ in a description of his interior decoration, remarking the complicated symbolism behind them, p. 58. In a letter to Montesquiou, Maurice Barrès praised his rue Franklin apartment as a ‘précieux endroit où les choses parlent’. Undated letter, BnF MSS NAF 15038, fol. 101. Cited in Bertrand I: 99. Montesquiou himself echoed Gramont (or she echoed him) by referring to his rooms as his ‘états d’âme projetés sur le mur’ and adding ‘Notez que toutes ces recherches, qui sembleront, à beaucoup, des insanités, tout au moins, des puérilités, étaient, de ma part, sérieuses et sincères’ (PE II: 121).
26. Kahn wrote that this was the ‘first’ criterion of his poetry in ‘Les Origines du symbolisme’, p. 332.
27. See BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol 133.
28. See BnF MSS NAF 15037, fols 134, 136.
29. ‘*Nommer* un objet, c’est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu; le *suggérer*, voilà le rêve. C’est le parfait usage de ce mystère qui constitue le symbole: évoquer petit à petit un objet pour montrer un état d’âme ou, inversement, choisir un objet et en dégager un état d’âme, par une série de déchiffrements.’ This was Mallarmé’s response to an interview with Jules Huret for an 1891 interview for *L’Echo de Paris*, reprinted as *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1891), 55-64 (p. 60). The emphasis is his.
30. See Balakian for a discussion of the differences between Kahn and Mallarmé in *The Symbolist Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 1967), p. 90. Roger Pearson has called this associative communication ‘The Translation of Silence’ in a book, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, that uses this expression as its subtitle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
31. In *Les Pas Effacés* Montesquiou chronicles his hero-worship of Edmond de Goncourt, particularly with regard to collecting and interior decorating. The count considered his 1923 *Les Pas Effacés* as his own version of Goncourt’s *La Maison d’un artiste*. Joy Newton and Monique Fol have traced some of the links between the two in ‘Robert de Montesquiou et Edmond de Goncourt: Une Amitié littéraire’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 6.1-2 (1978), 85-103. It was thus particularly crushing for Montesquiou that Goncourt described his home as: ‘[. . .] un méli-mélo d’objets disparates, de vieux portraits de famille, d’affreux meubles de l’Empire, de *kakémonos* japonais, d’eaux-fortes de Whistler’ (III, 604). Montesquiou reprints passages of Goncourt’s *Journal* concerning him in *Les Pas Effacés*. His annotations reveal the bitter disappointment he felt at his mentor’s cavalier comments: ‘C’est comme ça qu’il appelle cette réconciliation des styles dont j’étais si fier’ (PE II : 216).
32. ‘Aucune liberté dans ce flux de bibelots, endigué dans des lois fort strictes, et régi par des correspondances thématiques, non moins que systématiques, aussi ordonnancées que les *leitmotiv* wagnériens’ (PE II: 118).
33. Didier Coste, ‘Robert de Montesquiou poète critique: La Cristallisation du décoratif’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 11.3-4 (1983), 334-49 (p. 338).
34. ‘Cet esprit curieux, cet homme aimable, cet artiste indubitable ne pouvait que ressentir, avec une très vive intensité, la représentation oculaire en présence de laquelle je le plaçais à l’improviste, et qui se trouvait jeter brusquement, sur ma personnalité qu’il appréciait, un nouveau jour plein de merveilles’ (PE II: 123).

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35. Huysmans approached Mallarmé in a 27 October 1882 letter requesting copies of his poetry. In this letter, he evoked the topic of his next novel, ‘le dernier rejeton d’une grande race dégoûté de la vie américaine et méprisant l’aristocratie d’argent.’ Cited in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Correspondance*, ed. by Henri Mondor and Lloyd James Austin (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), II: 234. Mallarmé replied, describing Montesquiou as ‘[. . .] le jeune homme, descendu d’un portrait d’ancêtre [. . .] vivant dans le monde sacrifié des songes que nous aimons’. Letter ccclxxv to Huysmans. 29 octobre 1882. *Correspondance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), II: 233. He would later come to regret it, but at the time the Count authorized Huysmans to publish fictional elements inspired from these confidences.
36. Montesquiou discusses Huysmans’ borrowings in *Les Pas Effacés* (II: 125). Bertrand evokes François Coppée’s memory of the function of the ‘cathedral corner’, while noting the possibly apocryphal nature of the story, told secondhand by André Germain (I: 69). One can see images of the ‘cathedral corner’ in BnF MSS NAF 15037, fol 128, the dressing room in fol 131, the bathroom in fols 130, 135.
37. ‘[. . .] je tiens de telles fantaisies murales et mobilières, pour des *écritures*, à la fois littéraires et musicales’ (PE II: 112). Montesquiou’s emphasis.
38. Interestingly, Montesquiou himself talks about the ‘vertu thérapeutique’ he assigned to his apartment (PE II: 123).
39. Octave Mirbeau in ‘Les Chauves-Souris’, *Le Figaro* (16 octobre 1892). For more about Montesquiou’s elaborate book designs, see Silverman. In his memoirs, Montesquiou shows the polyvalence of his artistic tastes, moving back and forth, cross-referencing his artistic installations as having inspired poems and vice versa. Many of his creations were themselves inspired by literary sources such as Flaubert’s *Salammbô*. Bertrand’s *Les Curiosités esthétiques de Robert de Montesquiou* explores – over two volumes – the myriad ways in which Montesquiou’s aesthetics entwined all the arts.
40. ‘Je voudrais que ce vers fut un bibelot d’art, | Spécial, curieux, particulier, étrange: | Avec, sur son pourtour, quelquefois, un regard | De Couleur, bigarré, bizarre et qui dérange’. This citation and the following come from the definitive 1906 edition (Paris: G. Richard).
41. ‘Dans la mousse laineuse et sourde des tapis | Où chatoie et poudroie, où rougeioie et miroitre | Le sable d’or du laque; ou l’élégance droite | De la buire persane aux parterres d’émaux; |—Où des objets vivants semblent sortir des mots, | Tant se pénètre, se communique et s’annelle | La prolongation d’une âme personnelle | En leur contour, en leur silhouette, en leur jeu, | Composant l’ambiance exquise du milieu.’
42. Goncourt defends Montesquiou in the same *Journal* entry that describes his visit to the rue Franklin apartment: ‘Montesquiou n’est pas du tout le Des Esseintes de Huysmans. S’il y a chez lui un coin de *toquage*, le monsieur n’est jamais caricatural, il s’en sauve toujours par la distinction.’ 7 juillet 1891 (III: 605).
43. Edmond’s complains, in *La Maison d’un artiste*, about having long been treated as ‘un homme tellement privé de goût par les Dieux’ (I: 36).
44. See ‘Un Professeur de Beauté’, an article first published in *Les Arts et de la vie* on 15 August 1905 and reprinted in *Essais et articles* (Paris: Editions Gallimard [Bibliothèque de la Pléiade], 1971), pp. 506-20. ‘Ce ne sera certainement pas un des moindres titres de M. de Montesquiou d’avoir singulièrement devancé le goût de sa génération et de celle qui l’a

précédée, de l'avoir averti, formé et excité, de l'avoir mis sur la piste de beautés nouvelles, *qui furent toujours des beautés réelles*' (p. 512). And indeed while Montesquiou's fondness for *japonaiseries* was of his time, his appreciation of artists and poets such as James McNeill Whistler, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, Paul Helleu, Gallé, Mallarmé, and others was in advance of his peers, as Elisabeth de Gramont notes, citing his talent for 'placing' an artist in high society: 'Il en parlait cinq ou six fois, et tout le monde en voulait' (p. 49). For more information about the French predilection for Japanese art see Jan Walsh Hokenson, *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2004) and Akane Kawakami, *Travellers' Visions: French Literary Encounters with Japan, 1881-2004* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).

45. 'Seuls [ces assemblages d'anachronismes] autorisent des manifestations personnelles, même geniales, dans l'ordonnance des objets, avec cette récompense, pour les réussites, que nul ne pouvait y exceller, hors celui qui en a distribué les éléments, comme les mots d'un poème ou les notes d'une symphonie' (PE II: 113)

46. See Antoine Bertrand's summary of the scholarship on this point in *Les Curiosités esthétiques*, I: 113-15, which shows the extent to which Des Esseintes really was composite, based on figures including Francis Poictevin, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Louis II of Bavaria, Edmond de Goncourt, Baudelaire, and Huysmans himself (I: 113). While Huysmans' confessor, l'Abbé Mugnier, identified Montesquiou as Huysmans' model in 1891, Huysmans also told Zola that Montesquiou was not 'the' model; if Des Esseintes were Montesquiou he would have expressed his disgust for Naturalism.

47. See, for example, Elisabeth de Gramont, who accuses Proust of 'une véritable transfusion de pensée. Seulement les longues phrases coupées de parenthèses de Montesquiou mènent à l'ennui, tandis que celles de Proust mènent à des horizons nouveaux. L'étincelant de la conversation du poète, que celui-ci n'a pu faire passer dans ses proses, Proust en attrape le tour, qu'on rencontre dans ses livres', pp. 34-35.

48 'Oh! mon Dieu, si Montesquiou-Fezensac était un bohème comme Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, était un fréquenteur de brasserie, on le trouverait peut-être un poète extraordinaire. Mais il est bien né, il est riche, il est du grand monde: on ne le trouvera que baroque!' *Journal* III (12 juillet 1892), p. 731.

49. 'Peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit.' 30 October 1864 letter to Cazalis cited in Steinmetz, p. 91.

50 'M. de Montesquiou a la passion de l'unique. Il donne à tout ce qu'il pense, aime et touche: étoffes, sensations, bibelots, un caractère d'étrangeté quintessenciée, des formes de mystifiante surnaturation, qui peuvent étonner le bourgeois nestorien, mais qui enchantent l'artiste par l'esprit très fin, le goût très pur, la sensibilité très vive, et aussi par cette très particulière ironie dont le poète nuance, à l'infini, l'élégance de son dégoût, les politesses de son dédain.' 'Les Chauve-Souris', *Le Figaro* (16 October 1892).

51. For this surprising shift from recluse to social butterfly see Thiébaud, pp. 7-8.

52. Montesquiou acknowledges their influence in PE III: 62.

53. He states this in his prefaces to *Les Pas Effacés* and *Les Hortensias bleus*.

54. 'Cette mosaïque mobilière et mobile, successive et diversifiée, constamment défaite et refaite autour de moi, et tout du long de mes jours, avec les produits du genre humain dans le genre

manuel et visuel' (PE I: 95).

55. See, for example, the chapter on 'The Later Huysmans' in the second edition of Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Constable, 1908).