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St. John's University, New York

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J.-K. HUYSMANS AND TWO FRIENDS: JOHN GRAY AND ANDRÉ RAFFALOVICH

G. A. Cevasco

St. John’s University, New York

I

Shortly after its publication in 1884, A Rebours came to the attention of young British writers and artists. Aesthetes in England who had devoured Walter Pater’s Renaissance were eager for an even richer diet, and they found it in Huysmans’ daringly different volume. So enamoured were they with this “Breviary of the Decadence,” as Arthur Symons labelled A Rebours, that soon, consciously and unconsciously, they began to imitate its style and borrow its themes. The impact that Huysmans had upon such British aesthetes as Oscar Wilde, George Moore, Aubrey Beardsley, and Max Beerbohm has already been traced. Two other interesting writers that the author of A Rebours influenced significantly are John Gray and André Raffalovich. At best, Gray and Raffalovich have had an appeal only to a limited number of readers, but both are slowly becoming more widely known.

Some associate John Gray primarily with an evocative volume of poems, Silverpoints (1893). Others know him as a member of the Wilde circle and that he is mentioned in De Profundis when Wilde bewails the fact that he should have remained on friendly terms with Gray instead of taking up with Lord Alfred Douglas. Better informed readers know that nothing of any substance was published about Gray and Raffalovich until the early 1960s. There had not been that much interest in Raffalovich; and in Gray’s case, after his death in 1934, his family and friends preferred to keep his name out of the public eye. Upon his death, Gray’s manuscripts and papers were collected and stored in the Dominican Chaplaincy, Edinburgh. Though the Dominicans were cognizant of Gray’s literary accomplishments, it is thought they did not want his later years as a dedicated priest sullied in any way with undue emphasis on his early days as decadent and dandy, especially since some forty years before he had been connected by scandal with Wilde. In 1895, at the time of Wilde’s folly and public humiliation, a barrister represented Gray at Wilde’s trials with a watching brief in case his name were mentioned. It was not.

Through Wilde, Gray had met many of the celebrities of the period. He became acquainted with Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, William Butler Yeats, and many another poet.
and some minor publishers. On his own Gray established relationships with several figures in the Parisian coteries of the 1890s, particularly with Pierre Louys and Paul Verlaine. The most significant of all Gray's friendships, one that continued for more than forty years, began in 1892 when Arthur Symons introduced him to André Raffalovich, an aristocratic Parisian Jew from a prominent banking family. Raffalovich, who liked to consider himself a patron of the arts, offered Gray the kind of encouragement a young author likes to hear. Gray was impressed with Raffalovich's warmth, his polished manners, his intellectual attainments. He soon learned that Raffalovich had published several critical essays, four volumes of verse, and a novel.

_Cyril and Lionel_, Raffalovich's first book of poems, was published in London in 1884; it went virtually unnoticed. His second book of verse, _Tuberose and Meadow sweet_ (1885), created some excitement after Wilde mocked it in the _Pall Mall Gazette_ of 27 March 1885. His third book of poems, _In Fancy Dress_ (1886), and a forth, _It Is Thyself_ (1889), created little stir; nor did his novel, _A Willing Exile_ (1890), receive critical acclaim. Raffalovich's books, however, did put him in touch with other writers in England and France; and it was through Raffalovich, it has been suggested, that Gray first met Huysmans.4

André's mother, a woman of impressive beauty and creative intelligence, had established a salon in Paris to which she invited prominent artists and writers, financiers and scientists, professors and politicians. She often entertained such figures as Sarah Bernhardt, Colette, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mallarmé, and possibly Huysmans. If indeed Huysmans had been a guest at Madam Raffalovich's home, it is likely that Gray would have met him there.

As a devotee of French literature, Raffalovich greatly admired the author of _A Rebours_ and possessed virtually every edition of his works.5 The admiration that Raffalovich had for Huysmans was shared by Gray; both read _A Rebours_ as a breviary. When Huysmans' novel first came to their attention can only be conjectured. Most likely, Raffalovich obtained a copy shortly after its publication; Gray probably came across it in his late teens when he first developed a keen interest in French literature. Like Raffalovich, Gray was an eager young Francophile and he took readily to one of the most sensational books of the eighties. Such being the case, it is reasonable to question why Gray did not allude to _A Rebours_ in any of his articles or letters. One answer undoubtedly lies in the fact that Gray felt Wilde had just about captured the work and made it his own. Gray certainly was aware of the extent to which Wilde had been influenced by _A Rebours_ in his writing of _The Picture of Dorian Gray_; but, unfortunately, there is no record of any thoughts Gray might have had on Wilde's use of “the poisonous
book” of which Dorian owned nine copies, each bound in a different color to suit various moods and fancies.

Gray had a high regard for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and there is no reason to assume that he looked upon Wilde’s novel as a pale imitation of *A Rebours*, as some of Wilde’s captious critics now contend.6 Gray must have been fascinated by Wilde’s transmutation of Des Esseintes’ palace of art into Dorian Gray’s New Hedonism. Wilde, on his part, often addressed Gray as “Dorian.” Other times, Wilde referred to Gray as the poet—and Gray played the role in earnest. His verse was as fastidious as his dress. He loved to recite his latest poems at literary salons, and he did so in a gentle, affecting voice. That he read extremely well was remarked upon by Arthur Symons. In one of his letters to Raffalovich, he commented how Gray won Walter Pater’s admiration and friendship after the latter heard the former recite one of his poems. “A certain expression passed over Pater’s face,” Symons noted, “and he asked Gray to say it over again. ‘The rest is silence’.”7

Almost every account of Gray’s movements between 1891 and 1893 alludes to John Gray as “Dorian” Gray. But then Gray began to object to the name. One reason he did so hinges on Wilde’s carrying on in scandalous fashion with Lord Alfred Douglas. For John Gray to be dubbed “Dorian Gray” implied that Gray, like Douglas, was one of Wilde’s intimates. Exactly what relationship existed between Wilde and Gray cannot be documented. The Wilde-Gray relationship is one complicated by many factors, but what is definitely known is that a rupture in their friendship had already occurred when Wilde stood trial in 1895. Gray did not offer his support. Like virtually all of Wilde’s friends and associates, he kept discreetly away.

A few years before, Gray had been prominently referred to in the press as one of Wilde’s protégés. He had also been identified as the real-life hero of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. On the front page of its June 1892 issue, for example, the London *Star* described Gray as “the original Dorian of the same name.” The unidentified writer for the *Star* knew that several of Gray’s close friends usually greeted him, not as John, but as Dorian. William Rothenstein in one of his letters remarks that one day he saw Dorian Gray wandering about Chelsea under the name of John Gray.8 And Ernest Dowson noted that one night he heard “Dorian Gray [read] some beautiful and obscure verses in the latest manner of French Symbolism.”9 At first, John Gray delighted in the appellation “Dorian.” In a letter that he sent Wilde, dated 9 January 1891, he even closed with the words “Yours ever, Dorian.”10

At the time, Gray had been proud to be seen with Wilde. He found an extraordinary stimulus in Wilde’s talk, and not being a university...
man, Gray at first looked up to Wilde as someone who could impart to him the education that a young poet required. Within a short period, their relationship grew intense and idealized, very much like that of Lord Wotton and Dorian Gray. On the literary level, however, John Gray did not find Wilde as valuable a mentor as he found Huysmans, and though Gray failed to record his early indebtedness, the influence of A Rebours can be found in several poems he wrote early in the nineties, especially in his first published volume, Silverpoints. This landmark of “decadent” verse is the kind of book that Des Esseintes would have treasured in his library; for Gray, like Huysmans, believed that every well-written volume should be beautiful inside and out. Gray’s delicate Silverpoint poems, accordingly, were printed on handmade Von Gelder paper with extra-wide margins and uniquely bound in tall and very slender (eleven by twenty-two centimeters) volumes covered with green cloth adorned with wavy gold lines running from top to bottom. Superimposed upon the lines of the covers are sixty-six flame-like willow leaves and blossoms, also in gold. The green and gold have special meaning, for in each poem of the twenty-nine making up the anthology, there is some allusion to nature or plants; and as though to imply the superiority of art over nature, the gold pattern dominates the green color.

II

One of the most Huysmansian poems in Silverpoints is “The Barber.” In this work, Gray’s artificer is like another Des Esseintes who employs cosmetics, wigs, and strange dyes to improve upon nature. In his second stanza, moreover, Gray writes of “beryls and chrysolites and diaphenes,/ And gems whose harsh names are never said” with the same enthusiasm that Huysmans catalogued precious stones in Chapter IV of A Rebours. As is widely known, when it came to gems, A Rebours proved a decisive factor in the setting of a fashion; for virtually every young symbolist at one time or another was influenced by Des Esseintes’ fascination for exotic stones and experimented with extravagant jewel imagery. Gray was no exception.

In another work entitled simply “Poem,” Gray makes use of geraniums, houseleeks, and daisies highly reminiscent of Des Esseintes’ interest in real and artificial flowers that Huysmans wrote about in Chapter VIII of A Rebours. “The daisies’ leprous stain/ Is fresh,” Gray wrote in his first stanza. “Each night the daisies burst again,/ Though every day the gardener crops their heads.” In his second stanza, “a wistful child, in foul unwholesome shreds/ Recalls some legend of a daisy chain/ That makes a pretty necklace.” In his final stanza, Gray writes how the sun, the leprous flowers, and the foul child form a
questionable trinity, and the reader is left to ponder why the child made the daisy necklace in the first place.

The sinister daisies recall, one critic points out, "the splenetic irony...found in Baudelaire, in la névrose of the Goncourt, and in the malaise de siècle of Huysmans."11 Another critic maintains that "the real source of the sinister daisies...is not...the Fleurs du Mal, but their mutation A Rebours, where Des Esseintes is described as cultivating a set of monstrous plants...."12 As for Gray's descriptions of the daisies' daily execution, this same critic regards them more an evocation of Huysmans than Baudelaire: "Gray's use of this imagery is one more piece of evidence that he adopted Huysmans' version of Baudelaire."13

Gray used similar flower imagery in several other poems, especially in the lead poem of Silverpoints, "Les Demoiselles de Suave." Just as Des Esseintes fabricated flowers and preferred his artificial creations to real blossoms, so Gray, too, in this poem exalts the artificial over the real. His self-conscious ladies of Sauve command the attention of nature, as though nature is beholden to art. And at the poem's end, the garden in which they find themselves becomes more like a palace as these "Courtly ladies through the orchard pass/ Bend low, as in lord's halls; and springtime grass/ Tangles a snare to catch the tapering toe." Gray's choice of flowers, artificial and real, like that of Des Esseintes', is unique and symbolic.

None of Gray's secular poems, as far as can be determined, ever came to Huysmans' attention; but Raffalovich took it upon himself to direct a copy of Gray's Spiritual Poems (1896) to the author of A Rebours. Unfortunately, Huysmans did not comment specifically upon any one of the forty poems making up Gray's volume.1 Conjecture allows the inference, however, that Huysmans admired Gray's religious zeal and his fascination with those ecstatic moments of mystical union with Christ on the part of various saints that the poet so beautifully expressed in several of his verses. Indeed, in one letter that Huysmans wrote to Raffalovich, he did state that he found Gray's devotional works quite interesting, and he even went so far as to draw a favorable contrast between Gray's efforts in a most demanding genre with what was then being written in France, "where religious poetry consists only of low canticles."14

In another letter Raffalovich wrote Huysmans in 1896,15 he inquired if the novelist had read an essay of Gray's, "The Redemption of Durtal," that had been published in the fourth number of the Dial. Huysmans responded that he had.16 Though he could not read English, it seems that Huysmans had a friend translate Gray's provocative discussion of En Route and Là-Bas into French for him. Huysmans
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was naturally curious about what Gray had to say about Durtal, the hero of both novels, behind whom Huysmans lurks ill-disguised.

The title of Gray’s article, “The Redemption of Durtal,” indicates the subject he was most concerned with at the time, repentance. Having his own less-than-virtuous existence in mind, Gray could write with special understanding of Huysmans’ En Route. It was Huysmans’ degree of treatment that allowed Gray to label this novel “peculiar”: “the penitent being a man of profound baseness” with his “spiritual progress...narrated...as far as an author dare, and as exhaustively as skill and patience are capable.”\(^{17}\) In his analysis of Huysmans’ fictionalized study of conversion, Gray began with the problem of Durtal’s spiritual malaise and ended with his acceptance of the Faith. “The record is closely consecutive,” Gray commented; “digressions are few and under the direct warranty of M. Huysmans’ art.”\(^{18}\) What impressed Gray most about the novel is Durtal’s “constantly looking, stupidly, for a miracle to take place in him, a violent destruction of his past, the swift summoning to being of some fruit of long, laborious growth,” his craving “in his peculiar vulgarity of his worthlessness, a theatrical sign, an explosion of redemption and miraculous repair, an alchemistic operation in favor of his rag of spiritual disposition.”\(^{19}\)

Gray could see his own spiritual problems in those borne by Durtal. He, too, like another Durtal, had been “constantly looking, stupidly, for a miracle to take place in him.” Several paragraphs later, Gray, still identifying closely with Durtal, ends his essay with the statement that, “at the point of utmost progress in En Route, Durtal was still at the beginning of the purgative life, and that even after a very long time he would still be at the beginning.”\(^{20}\)

That a young British writer had written so enthusiastically of him and his novel En Route was flattering to Huysmans. He was less than enthusiastic with some of the views Gray had expressed. In a letter to Raffalovich, Huysmans acknowledged that he found Gray’s essay adulatory; still, he found it necessary to add that he discovered signs of “non-comprehension, so frequent among critics, of all the mystical, or simply real, side of the book.”\(^{21}\)

To what extent En Route may have influenced Gray’s own conversion can only be conjectured. On 14 February 1890, however, he took the final step and was conditionally baptized. Shortly thereafter he was confirmed. Of importance is the fact that, at the same time Gray was taking instructions in his adopted faith, Wilde was writing The Picture of Dorian Gray. Could Wilde have had John Gray in mind when he wrote that “it was rumored of [Dorian]...that he was about to join the Roman Catholic communion; and certainly the Roman ritual...had a great attraction for him.”\(^{22}\) If so, Wilde knew John Gray

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better than John Gray knew himself; for Wilde also wrote in his novel that Dorian had “a special passion...for everything connected with the service of the Church,”23 but that “mysticism, with its marvelous power of making things strange to us..., moved him [only] for a season....”24

Gray’s initial conversion did not endure. Despite his baptism and confirmation, he continued to lead a most mundane and meaningless life. He refused to adhere to the moral implications of his Faith. Whether it was weakness or indifference he probably did not realize at the time. Not until nine years later, after a great deal of soul-searching, did he make a significant observation. “I went through instructions as blindly and indifferently as ever anyone did,” he lamented, “and immediately I began a course of sin compared with which my previous life was innocence.”25 Why Gray fell away from the initial fervour of his attraction to Catholicism he never did say. What is most significant, however, is that he underwent a second conversion a few years later. Towards the end of 1894 or early in 1895, at about the same time that he broke with Wilde, Gray, empty and desperate, once again turned to things of the spirit.

Gray’s metanoia was now so deep and lasting that he determined to prepare for the priesthood. Towards the end of 1898, he made a break with the London literary scene. On October 25, he entered The Scots College, Rome, a candidate for holy orders. Though now in his early thirties, he nonetheless quickly settled into the life of a student. From all reports, he got on well with the other seminarians, most of whom were at least ten years younger than he. They were different from his former artist and literary friends, but they accepted Gray as readily as he adjusted to them. That he had an unusual aquarium, grew purple hyacinths, and had a tortoise for a pet was, after all, his business, not theirs. If any of them had read Huysmans’ A Rebours and remembered Des Esseintes’ odd aquarium, his love of exotic flowers, and his bejewelled tortoise, they never mentioned it to Gray.

After completing his theological studies, Gray was ordained on 21 December 1901, in the Basilica of St. John Lateran. The tale that Gray’s ordination required the special intervention of the Pope cannot be documented; nor can it be substantiated that a solemn promise was extracted from Gray not to stir up scandal by taking up with former questionable friends. In any case, Gray went to Edinburgh, where he served as a priest for the remaining thirty-six years of his life.

Raffalovich was not one of Gray’s “questionable” friends, for he too converted to the Church of Rome. Indeed, it has been speculated that Raffalovich would also have sought ordination but for his poor state of health. It is interesting to add that about the time of Gray’s
ordination Raffalovich was so zealous a convert that he even sent Huysmans a large crucifix as a gift. He did so mainly because he admired Huysmans' *En Route*, the influence it had upon him, Gray, and countless others it had brought into the Church. What influence Huysmans had upon the spiritual life of Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Henry Harland, and other poets and painters of the period who also converted to Catholicism cannot be measured, though it has been claimed that they, too, like Gray and Raffalovich, "followed their master, Huysmans, into the Faith for his reason: ...the Church was the only body to have preserved the art of past centuries, the lost beauties of the ages." 26

III

Wilde was also drawn to *En Route*. When it was first published, he was too busy with other matters to read Huysmans' novel, though undoubtedly he scanned Gray's article, "The Redemption of Durtal." His trials changed things. After his conviction for immorality and his sentencing to two years at hard labor in one of Her Majesty's prisons, Wilde requested permission to read certain books, one of which was *En Route*.

Neither Gray nor Raffalovich had any way of knowing of Wilde's interest in Huysmans' novel. Gray did know, however, of a questionnaire that Raffalovich had sent to Huysmans and other prominent writers on the subject of homosexuality. 27 Raffalovich published his research in 1896 in a treatise he entitled *Uranisme et Unisexualité: Étude sur Differentes Manifestations de L'Instinct Sexuel*. Since the entire subject was taboo in England, made especially so by Wilde's notorious trials, Raffalovich published his study in France.

*Uranisme et Unisexualité*, which incorporates a forty-seven page pamphlet, *L'Affaire Oscar Wilde*, Raffalovich had published in 1895, is, to put it mildly, unkind to Wilde. Raffalovich, who had a homosexual nature himself, posited in his study that there were two distinct types of sexual inverts. The "inferior" type (such as a depraved Oscar Wilde) simply craves venereal pleasure. The "superior" type sublimates his disordered appetite in order to enhance the intellectual and spiritual side of man. 28

As was his custom, Raffalovich sent copies of his book to friends and acquaintances. After Huysmans read his copy of *Uranisme et Unisexualité*, he wrote Raffalovich: "Your book brings back to mind some horrifying evenings I once spent in the sodomite world, to which I was introduced by a talented young man.... I only spent a few days..."
with these people before it was discovered that I was not a true homosexual—and then I was lucky to get away with my life....”29

Raffalovich’s pioneer study of sexual inversion brought him a measure of attention. His treatise was so well researched and clearly written that, after its publication, he was generally referred to as Dr. Raffalovich, though he did not possess a doctorate—medical, academic, or honorary.30 Several psychiatrists were highly impressed with the work. Havelock Ellis, for one, quoted liberally from Uranisme et Sexualité in his own Psychology of Sex, which was published in America in 1897 and brought him an unsought-for notoriety. Ellis, it might be added, was an early devotee of Huysmans and once called upon him in Paris. Years later Ellis wrote, “When I look back, Huysmans remains for me, of all the men I have ever known, perhaps the most unalloyed embodiment of genius.”31

Gray and Raffalovich were just as convinced of Huysmans’ genius as was Ellis, but for them Huysmans was as much a genius of spirituality as a genius of literature. And when their good friend Aubrey Beardsley was dying of consumption and had to leave the damp climate of England for southern France, they wanted the young artist to meet the author of En Route. In a letter that Beardsley wrote to Raffalovich, dated 13 April 1897, he thanks Raffalovich for arranging a meeting with Huysmans in Paris, but for reasons unknown the meeting did not take place.32

Beardsley’s death at the early age of twenty-six deeply affected Gray and Raffalovich, and they both made a trip to Menton to attend a funeral mass said for their friend at the Cathedral on 17 March 1898. To honor Beardsley’s memory, Gray wrote an obituary in French and submitted it to La Revue Blanche.33 Though Huysmans did not refer to Gray’s tribute to Beardsley in anything he wrote, he more than likely read it shortly after it appeared in print. It is reasonable to infer that Raffalovich, otherwise, in one of his letters would have called it to Huysmans’ attention.

Gray left all such correspondence to Raffalovich, and Huysmans dutifully responded to each one of Raffalovich’s letters. Gray, apparently, did not exchange any letters with Huysmans, but in a letter written as late as 1904, Gray mentions Huysmans in a letter to Raffalovich. “I have given a great part of this morning to reading Huysmans on Grunewald,” he wrote. “It has given me such very great pleasure and I see quite well why. I used to think clumsily enough that the painter had a modern soul capable of wilful revolt against the sugared trash of the devotional picture, an explanation entirely inept. Huysmans puts the whole thing on a superb human basis....”34
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Inspired by Grunewald as interpreted by Huysmans, John Gray attempted to put spiritual experiences on "a superb human basis." He did so quite successfully in his later spiritual poetry, especially in various works that he published in his last volume of verse, *Poems*, which appeared three years before his death on 14 June 1934, exactly three months to the day after the death of his companion of more than forty years, André Raffalovich.

Any attempt to sum up the influence that Huysmans had on Gray and Raffalovich is fraught with the dangers of oversimplification. Would their lives have been significantly different had they not fallen under the spell of Huysmans' books? Admittedly, Huysmans' literary influence did little to turn either Gray or Raffalovich into outstanding writers. A fair-minded estimate, however, allows the inference that, although it is likely Raffalovich's works will continue to gather dust, Gray's poetry will continue to be read. Bibliographical evidence indicates that Gray's works are slowly becoming more widely known, that his life will continue to attract more and more scholars.35

What is equally important is that the author of *A Rebours* proved a valuable stepping stone in the lives of the "Two Friends." Unlike Wilde, who through folly and insolence destroyed himself and disgraced his family; or Dowson and Johnson, who dissipated their lives away with alcohol; or other prominent nineties figures who had to be institutionalized, or who died at their own hand; Gray and Raffalovich were survivors of what Yeats labelled the "Tragic Generation." Certainly it is not too rash to conclude that the forces which directed their lives and their literature were to a large extent set in positive motion by one of their leading idols, J.-K. Huysmans.

NOTES


3 In 1963, Brocard Sewell edited *Two Friends: John Gray and André Raffalovich* (Aylesford, Kent), a collection of essays by
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5Sewell, *Footnote to the Nineties*, p. 58.


7Uncatalogued letter, Dominican Chaplaincy, Edinburgh.

8G. F. Sims Catalogue No. 25, item 145.


10This letter is in the Donald Hyde Private Collection, New York, NY.


13Ibid., p. 133.


16Ibid.


18Ibid.

19Ibid., p. 10.

20Ibid., p. 11.
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23 Ibid., p. 155.

24 Ibid., p. 148.

25 Uncatalogued letter from Gray to Raffalovich, 10 February 1899; Dominican Chaplaincy, Edinburgh.

26 McCormack, p. 40.


28 P. W. J. Healy in his "Uranisme et Sexualité: A Late Victorian View of Homosexuality" (New Blackfriars, 59 [1978], 56-65) maintains that Raffalovich's relationship with Gray was of the "superior" type.


30 Even Baldick, a scholar extremely careful with facts, in his The Life of J.-K. Huysmans refers to the author of Uranisme et Sexualité as Dr. Raffalovich.

31 From Rousseau to Proust (Boston, 1935), p. 11.


33 "Aubrey Beardsley," La Revue Blanche, 16 (1898), 68-77.

34 Uncatalogued letter from Gray to Raffalovich, 21 November 1904; Dominican Chaplaincy, Edinburgh.