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Objects, Designs, Experiences: Euphoric and Dysphoric Interiors
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Abstract. This article examines the affective impact of interiors and of the objects that furnish them on characters in narrative. It contrasts interiors designed by the characters themselves with interiors with inherited design, as well as euphoric with dysphoric interiors. The cross-classification of these two binaries yields the four categories that are discussed in the article. James Joyce's short story "Eveline" (1914) stands for a dysphoric inherited design. In this story a young girl is prevented from seeking a new life overseas by the dusty objects of her house, from which she cannot imagine being separated. In Xavier de Maistre's *Voyage Around my Room* (1790), the narrator's imagination transforms forced confinement in a room into a trip offering valuable learning experiences. Two examples of characters who are able to design their own interior are discussed: in one, J. K. Huysmans *Against Nature* (1884), do-it-yourself design results in a dysphoric interior; in the other, Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* (2010), the narrator creates a happy space that he makes into his home. These four narratives are compared and contrasted according to the main character's attitude toward objects.

Key words: narrative, objects, interiors, travel, museums

An interior, whether a single room or a whole house, is a space that can be made into a place by the objects that furnish it. The space of the interior, delimited by four walls, a floor and a ceiling, is a given, an empty container whose shape is imposed on the dweller, unless this dweller is an architect who creates their own space. The place is a design, the product of objects deliberately selected for a specific purpose. In the best of cases, the design, done by the dweller, expresses their identity, making the room or the house into a place for retreat, meditation, relaxation, security and creativity. (It is not without reason that Virginia Woolf regarded "a room of one's own" as a condition for women to become writers.) In unhappy cases, the design is imposed on the dweller by somebody else, and the interior may become a prison, an instrument of alienation or a symbol of unfulfilled identity. But an interior with inherited design could also provide happiness, and a self-designed interior could lead to frustration. These two oppositions of euphoric vs. dysphoric and self-design vs. inherited design will provide the two guiding axes for my exploration of a sample of literary interiors. My selection follows two criteria: the interiors must exercise a strong affective impact on their dwellers, and they must contribute decisively to the unfolding of the plot. This second criterion eliminates those interiors that are extensively described but only play an episodic role in the life of the characters, as we often find in those 19th century novels obsessed with description.

Dysphoric inherited design

My example of a dysphoric interior designed by others is "Eveline," a short story from James Joyce's *Dubliners* rightly celebrated for its innovative narrative techniques and for the emotional intensity packed in its five or six pages. Eveline is a young woman of nineteen who lives a joyless, repetitive life as a saleswoman in Dublin, taking care of her younger siblings, and exploited by her violent, probably alcoholic father who beats her and takes her paychecks. But as the story opens, she has a chance to escape from this drab existence: she has met a sailor, Frank, who wants to take her to Buenos Aires, where he lives, and marry her. In the first scene of the

story Eveline is seen looking out of a window in her house, reflecting upon her life, her childhood memories, and her decision to leave. A jump cut to the harbor shows Eveline about to embark with Frank; but when the call to board the ship comes, Eveline stands paralyzed on the shore, unable to take the step that would change her life forever.

The locations of the two scenes in the story stand for contrasting themes and symbols: the inside vs. the outside, the known vs. the unknown, the closed past vs. the open future, the stability of home vs. the turbulence of the sea, dust-covered objects vs. dynamic waves. Let's take a closer look at the first terms of these oppositions and at their incarnation in the room where we find Eveline at the beginning of the story: "She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odor of dusty cretonne. She was tired" (Joyce 2017, 27; all further references to this edition). Tiredness is Eveline's response to her present condition, making her unable to free herself from the symbolic dust that accumulates on the heavy fabric curtains and elsewhere in the room and that she removes once a week, only to see it return, for her life is an endless repetition of the same chores. We do not know much about the design of the room, but we can imagine that as a turn-of-the-century interior, it is full of heavy, unmovable furniture that represent, according to Baudrillard, "an organism whose structure is the patriarchal relationship founded on tradition and authority, and whose heart is the complex affective relationship that binds all the family members together" (210). Family, tradition, authority: these indeed are the chains that, so far, have bound Eveline to her life. They are represented by the few objects within the room that attract Eveline's attention:

Home! She looked around the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided. During all those years she had never found the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the colored print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. He had been a school friend of her father. When he showed the photograph to a visitor, her father used to pass it with a casual word: "He is in Melbourne now." (28)

The yellow color of the photograph and the broken state of the harmonium mean that these objects have been there for a long time, and that nobody cared to change or fix them when they deteriorated. Only the print of the saint retained its color, suggesting the vividness of the religious faith of Eveline. But who made promises to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque: was it Jesus, in one of the saint's visions (Alacoque was a mystic who introduced worship of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a worship particularly strong in Ireland), or was it Eveline, who may have repeated to the saint the promise made to her dying mother of keeping her family together by taking care of her younger siblings? Family and religion are also suggested by the broken harmonium, a small, cheap substitute for an organ that was found in many churches and homes at the time. The photo of the priest not only continues the religious theme, it also expresses paternal authority, since it represents a friend of the father. But why is the picture still there, now that the priest has emigrated to Melbourne, an action that the father probably disapproved of, judging by his terse comment to visitors "He is in Melbourne now," just as he disapproves of Eveline's dating of a sailor, a liaison he tries unsuccessfully to prevent. (But perhaps the comment and the survival of the photo express a secret envy.)

Eveline longs for a home, and when she pores over the objects that occupy the room, she thinks “now that she was about to leave [her hard life] she did not find it a wholly undesirable life” (28). As pitiful as they are, the objects in the room mean home to her. “In her home anyway she had shelter and food; she had those she had known all her life.” Homes are supposed to be unique places, the center of one’s world, but in one of several reversals of attitude in the scene, Eveline tries to convince herself that there is another home for her in Buenos Aires and that she can trust Frank to give it to her: “She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him on the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres [sic] where he had a home waiting for her.” (29). “But in her new home, in a distant country, it would not be like that. [Eveline has just thought of the humiliations she endures at the store, her place of employment.] Then she would be married. She, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been.” (28). Married women receive more respect than single ones in patriarchal societies because they are mistresses of a household, and because they share some of the respect due to their husbands; but Eveline knows that there is a flaw in this reasoning: her mother was married and had a home, but this did not prevent her father from treating her so poorly that she ended up dying insane in her own home.

The story ends with this passage:

All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. [Frank] was drawing her into them: he would drown her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing. “Come!” No! No! No! It was impossible. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish...He was shouted to go on but he stilled called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him so sign of love or farewell or recognition. (32)

It is not a sense of duty created by her promise to her dying mother to keep the family together that prevents Eveline from boarding the ship: she is described as a “helpless animal,” and no thought crosses her mind. Nor is she really held back by the individual features of the objects from which she had “never dreamed of being divided”: Eveline’s attachment to them stems exclusively from the sense of security and stability that emanates from their having always been there. Her clinging to the solid railing as the boat is about to depart—we can hardly call it a decision to stay-- is due to a fear of the unknown incarnated in the turmoil of the sea: to a failure of the imagination.

Euphoric inherited design

In contrast to Eveline, the narrator of *Voyage Around my Room* (*Voyage autour de ma chambre*) by Xavier de Maistre (written in 1790, published in 1794) is driven by an adventurous spirit that enables him to find contentment in a room already furnished with objects. De Maistre (Chambéry 1763- St Petersburg 1852) was an aristocrat from Savoy, now a French province but then part of the Kingdom of Sardinia. The younger brother of the conservative political philosopher Joseph de Maistre, Xavier shared the anti-revolutionary convictions of his brother. He pursued a military career, emigrated to Russia after Napoleon invaded his homeland, and fought for the tsar against the emperor. *Voyage Around my Room* is not the work of a professional author (it was Joseph, not Xavier, who decided to publish it) but of a cultivated dilettante who wrote it to kill time while being sentenced to forty-two days of house arrest in

Turin after fighting (and winning) a duel, an eminently aristocratic but forbidden practice. The short book was a great success; it inspired not only a sequel by de Maistre (*Nocturnal Expedition Around my Room*, written in 1798, published in 1825), but also multiple imitations in the 19th and even 20th centuries (Stiegler 2013): the idea of traveling in place was attractive to a bourgeois culture that preferred the safety of object-filled interiors to the dangers and inconvenience of physical journey.

Unlike a prison, the room that the narrator cannot leave for forty-two days is not a hostile, foreign environment: it is filled with his own things, as well as with everything necessary for writing. Xavier is attended to by his servant, Ioanetti, and he enjoys the company of his dog, Rosine. Compared with the misery endured by the homeless on the streets of Turin, the room seems to the narrator “prodigiously lavish. What useless luxury! Six chairs, two tables, a writing desk, a mirror! What ostentation” (de Maistre 1994, 51; all further references to this edition).

Parodying the travel narratives that were popular at his time, de Maistre situates his room within space and specifies its exact size: “My room is situated at forty-five degrees latitude, according to the measurement of Father Beccaria. It runs from east to west, and forms a rectangle that is thirty-six paces around, keeping well nigh to the walls.” (8). Here the room is treated as a territory for traveling, not as a place for dwelling: we learn nothing about the building and the kind of neighborhood in which it is located, nor about on which floor it resides. Its properties are not social but geometrical and geographical. Extending the travel metaphor, the narrator views his armchair as a post-chaise, and his clothes—a comfortable robe—as his traveling coat.

De Maistre’s trip around his room combines method and randomness. Method prevails in the organization of the text into forty-two chapters, each corresponding to a day in captivity, and as an itinerary that visits successfully the bed, the paintings on the wall, the desk and the library, using the armchair as vehicle. When his imagination takes him away from one of these landmarks, the narrator is careful to remind the reader where he left his trail: “I must not get ahead of myself: in my eagerness to communicate to the reader my system of the soul and the beast,¹ I left the description of my bed sooner than I ought to have “(19). Once he passes a landmark, the narrator does not return to it. For instance, when he falls down from his chair after having been startled by his dog (even room travel can be dangerous!), Xavier writes: “the fall from my post-chaise has done the reader the favor of shortening my voyage by a good dozen chapters, since while picking myself up I found myself in front of my writing desk, having missed my chance to comment upon a number of prints and paintings still remaining to be examined, which may have prolonged my digressions on art” (54).

But the narrator cannot stick to a systematic itinerary. He is not one of those people who “so control their steps and ideas, who say: ‘*Today I will pay three visits, write four letters, and finish the piece I have begun.*’ My soul is so open to every manner of idea, taste, and sentiment, it avidly takes in everything that turns up!” (8, italics original). If the room traveler limited his movement to a circumambulation, the voyage would be over quickly, but it encompasses instead “a great deal more; for I shall often walk across [the room] lengthwise and breadthwise, and diagonally too, following no rule or method—I shall even zig-zag this way and that, and follow every possible line in geometry, if necessary” (8). The travel is not that of the body but of the imagination, and following the example of Laurence Sterne, whose novel *Tristram Shandy* can be found in his library, de Maistre welcomes any digression (Payet 2020). Two chapters allude openly to *Tristram Shandy* by being made mostly of dots, like chapters in Sterne’s novel. *Voyage Around my Room* does in space what *Tristram Shandy* does in time: just as Sterne’s fictional autobiography never manages to complete the coverage of the narrator’s life up to the present—

and in fact loses time as it goes on, because writing takes more time than living—de Maistre’s text is unable to complete the tour of the room. After forty-two days his home confinement comes to an end, and so de Maistre stops writing, but there is no sense that he has returned to his point of departure: forty-two days were not enough to take the reader around the room. We do not know if there is anything between the library, the last landmark to be reached, and the bed, the first stop in the journey, and the text does not allow the construction of a complete mental map of the room. On the last day the narrator complains: “Why did they not let me finish my voyage?” (82).

Each of the landmarks in the room provide a particular kind of pleasure, contributing to the enjoyable nature of the experience: the armchair and the bed offer comfort to the body; the bed, in addition, is associated with erotic pleasure, and with the delight of observing the first rays of the sun on a summer morning. The narrator would like to allow the reader to share his enjoyment of the paintings that decorate his room but the limits of language do not make this possible: “I most sincerely wish that I could let the reader examine them one by one to amuse and distract him along the road that remains to be traveled before we reach my writing desk; but it is as impossible to explain a painting clearly as it is to paint a faithful portrait from a description” (32). The desk is full of letters that revive the past: “What a pleasure it is to revisit in those letters the charming circumstances of our early years [sentence addressed to a past love of his]. To be transported anew to those happy times that we shall never see again.” (55) As for the library, it is full of novels and poetry that opens the space of the room to an infinity of imaginary worlds and provide vicarious experiences. But these pleasures are mitigated by dark thoughts: the bed is not only a “cradle of delight,” it also witnesses disease and death and therefore represents the whole of human experience: “it is love’s throne; --it is a sepulchre” (10). The paintings illustrate tragic scenes, and even the idyllic image of a shepherdess in the Alps make Xavier think of the coming invasion by French troops that will destroy this happiness—a thought obviously added in 1794 to the 1790 manuscript. Thanks to the letters in the desk Xavier is able to measure the evolution of his old self into his present self, “and the truth, falling among us like a bomb, has forever destroyed the enchanted palace of illusion” (55). Even the imaginary worlds of fiction provide ambiguous pleasures: “As if I didn’t have enough trouble of my own, I willingly share those of thousands of imaginary characters as well, and feel them as keenly as I do mine: how many tears have I not shed for the unhappy *Clarissa* [from Richardson’s eponymous novel] or for *Charlotte’s* lover [from Goethe’s *The Sufferings of Young Werther*]” (60). Even though Xavier knows that Milton’s Satan is worse than those revolutionaries in France, “none of it avails in curing me of my predisposition in his favor” (63). This power to make us empathize with evil characters has often been held against fiction, from Plato’s complaint that drama makes poets speak through the voice of, and therefore identify with less than admirable heroes (*Republic*, book III) to contemporary critics (I am not one of them) who object to Nabokov’s *Lolita* because by adopting the perspective of the pedophile Humbert Humbert, the novel makes him far too likable.

The books in the library are typical of de Maistre’s relation to objects: it is not their materiality, the contemplation of their sensory features that matter to the narrator but the stories they evoke and the worlds they open to his mind. For instance, a dried rose on Xavier’s desk reminds him of a story—not particularly flattering for either protagonist—where he brought the rose to his mistress, but she totally ignored him, concerned instead with her beauty as she sat at the mirror, preparing for a ball. Objects in the room are not so much a focus of attention, as

springboard for a centrifugal imagination that experiences the room and its objects not as a closed space but as “an enchanted realm containing all the wealth and riches of the world” (82).

From his literary models, 18th century English novelists, de Maistre learns to maintain a playful, dialogical attitude toward his readers, reassuring them that he has not lost his way when the text seems to stray away from its itinerary (cf. the quote from p. 19), or teasing them by claiming that a dried rose is not worth a chapter, when in fact he devotes an entire chapter to its story. This dialogical stance allows him to consider attitudes other than his own, and prevents him from taking himself too seriously. For instance, after making highly controversial statements about the superiority of painting over music (because the latter is the slave of fashion, and compositions of the past supposedly no longer please), de Maistre admits that his impartiality is hypocritical (he would later make a living in Russia painting miniatures, though he gives no sign of musical sensibility). Like most theories, his reflections on art start with a bold claim that crumbles upon critical examination, for “discussion elicits objection, ---and all ends up in doubt” (41).

The moralist and mathematician Blaise Pascal once attributed all the misfortunes of mankind to the inability to remain quietly in one’s room. It was easy for Pascal to find fulfilment in his room: he was a mystic, and he could pass time doing mathematics. But de Maistre is a man of the world, and though he enjoys the self-introspection and intellectual explorations made possible by his captivity, he regrets that his confinement had to take place at the time of the carnival, when he misses so much fun, rather than at the time of Lent, when nothing is going on. Upon leaving the room, on the forty-second day, one side of the narrator (the Soul) is worried that on the supposed day of his freedom the world will impose new shackles to him, the shackles of the necessity to conform to social order. But the other side (the Beast) is delighted when the front door opens and he can wander again the streets of Turin. Xavier is not naturally inclined to be hermit, but he does the most of an adverse situation, and he passes this test with grace, wit, humanity, and a refreshing lack of self-importance.

Dysphoric self-design

We may think that if we were able to completely control the design of our room or house, we would find pleasure in it, but J. K. Huysmans’ 1884 novel *Against Nature (A Rebours)* undermines this assumption. *A Rebours* can be considered a hybrid of manifesto and critique of Décadence, a late nineteenth century literary movement born in France that reacted against realism, naturalism, industrialization and the cult of progress with a fascination for the artificial, the sensual, the occult, the morbid, and what was then considered the sexually perverse. Through their thematics, as well as through the use of symbolism and of a highly intricate, recherché style, Décadent writers engaged in a spiritual quest that challenged the aesthetic and moral norms of bourgeois culture.

A Rebours is a novel with a single character engaged in a single activity: the plot can be summarized as des Esseintes arranges his house (Caraion 2020, 178; Doležel 1999). The last descendent of an aristocratic family, a dandy and an esthete, the duke Jean des Esseintes sells the ancestral castle and uses the money to create a world within the world that fights the existential *ennui* of the *fin de siècle* generation by satisfying his elitist, rarefied taste and his contempt for humanity. The house he chooses is an undistinguished building in the suburbs of Paris, away from society, that he turns into a cloistered space similar to a monk’s cell, “barred from all communication with the outside world and confined to rooms where the doors and windows

were always shut” (Huysmans 1959, 32; all further references to this edition). A couple of old servants live on the second floor, trained to serve their master meals at rigidly defined times and to attend to his every need, wearing felt slippers so as to be both invisible and inaudible. Des Esseintes lives on the ground floor, a space divided into eight rooms that the text describes map-style: on one corner of the building a dressing-room communicating with a bedroom, then a library and a dining-room occupying the opposite corner. The other side of the building consists of “four rooms corresponding exactly to the first four in their layout” (70) and somewhat related in their function: across from the dining-room is the kitchen, across from the library is an entrance hall similarly devoted to the arts (literature in one, painting in the other); the bedroom faces a boudoir equally suggestive of sexual activities (though none takes place there in the time-span covered by the novel); and facing the dressing room is the bathroom (“les privés”), both spaces dedicated to private habits.

Des Esseintes design philosophy can be captured by two phrases: absolute control over every detail, and obsession with the artificial, which he considers “the distinctive mark of the human genius”: “Nature, he used to say, had had her day: she has finally and utterly exhausted the patience of sensitive observers by the revolting uniformity of her landscapes and skylines” (36). The obsession with the artificial triumphs in the design of the dining room: “This dining-room resembled a ship’s cabin, with its ceiling of arched beams, its bulkhead and floorboards of pitch-pine, and the little window-opening let into the wainscoting like a porthole. Like those Japanese boxes that fit one inside the other, this room had been inserted into a larger one, which was the real dining-room planned by the architect” (33). By enclosing a simulated ship cabin within another room, des Esseintes is able to eliminate most of the natural light that comes from the two windows. One window is blocked by the inside structure; as for the other, it is “rendered useless by a large aquarium occupying the entire space between the port-hole and [the] real window in the real house-wall” (33). Moreover, the panes of the real window have been replaced by “a sheet of plate-glass,” so that when daylight penetrates into the cabin, it has been filtered by both this sheet and the water of the aquarium. The aquarium is filled with mechanical fish driven by clockwork, and des Esseintes can change the color of the water at will with a variety of drops. The elimination of natural light is crucial to the choice of the color scheme of the room: des Esseintes opts for orange, because it looks the best in artificial light.

The simulated ship cabin enables des Esseintes to satisfy his dreams of travel without having to bother with the inconvenience of leaving home. “Travel, indeed, struck him as being a waste of time, since he believed that the imagination could provide a more-than-adequate substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience” (35). Unlike real travel, the journeys of the imagination are not subordinated to a specific goal: like Baudelaire, his idol, whose poem “Any Where Out of the World” is prominently displayed in his house, des Esseintes seeks escape for its own sake, rather than dreaming of real destinations. Later in the novel, feeling sick and in need of diversion, he decides to take a trip to London, hoping to find the London of Dickens and other authors, but he gets no further than Paris, satisfied with the experience of England provided by the atmosphere of an English pub at the Paris train station. Why bother with the original when you can have an imitation, especially since the original may disappoint you?

Though des Esseintes generally despises the materialism, commercialism, and the so-called Americanization of his time, he regards its technological inventions as the triumph of the artificial over the natural. Just as woman was the supreme creation of nature, the locomotive is the supreme creation of the industrial age. Des Esseintes feels an erotic attraction to two models: the Schlereth, a voluptuous blonde, and the Engerth, a fiery brunette. In sexual matters, his taste

similarly takes him toward the unnatural: before retiring from the world, he had an affair with a circus performer, Miss Uranie, who acted as a man, while he turned himself with her into a little girl. Des Esseintes only finds nature tolerable when it imitates the artificial. For a while “the admirable artistry” of fake flowers had enthralled him; “but now he dreamed of collecting another kind of flora: tired of artificial flowers aping real ones, he wanted some natural flowers that would look like fakes” (97). He particularly admires a flower that looks like syphilis, the disease that claimed so many writers and artists in the nineteenth century.

For an object to become part of des Esseintes’ design it must fulfill two conditions: it must be aesthetic, and it must be unique. There is admittedly some comfortable furniture—a practical feature—in the bedroom, boudoir or library, but it is only because the pieces combine comfort with elegance that des Esseintes tolerates them. His insistence on unique objects, reflections of the uniqueness of his person, is illustrated by several of the things that decorate his house. For a night table, he uses an old priedieu taken from a church, and he decorates his bed, “a mock hermit’s bed, made of old wrought iron,” “with an intricate design of tulips and vine-branches intertwined, a design taken from the balustrade of the great staircase of an old mansion” (76). Though des Esseintes tries to fashion his bedroom after a hermit’s retreat, the fancy antiques taken from the church and the estate stand in blatant contradiction with the vow of poverty that drives hermits from the world. Reduced to a decorative role, the priedieu and the wrought iron flowers are isolated from their context, activate no memories, and do not contribute to a spiritual atmosphere: the isolation of hermits may appeal to des Esseintes, but he feels “no vocation for the state of grace” (76).² Another example of des Esseintes attitude toward objects is his treatment of Baudelaire’s masterwork, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), a text that des Esseintes worships. Books as works may contain unique texts, but books as objects exist in many similar copies. Des Esseintes will have none of this: he orders *Les Fleurs du Mal* to be printed in a very large format similar to the kind of book used in the celebration of the Catholic Mass, on a very light Japanese felt, bound in special pig-skin, in an edition limited to a single copy. But once books become precious objects, they are usually no longer read (at least not by des Esseintes), and the voice that expresses itself through their texts becomes silent. The life-choking effect of des Esseintes’ treatment of objects finds its most dramatic expression in the episode of the tortoise. Watching an oriental carpet, he decides one day that it would be a good idea “to place on this carpet something that would move about and be dark enough to set off those gleaming tints” (53). He buys a huge tortoise and places it on the carpet, but the dull tints of its back do not sufficiently bring out the brilliant colors of the carpet; he then decides to have the tortoise’s carapace glazed with gold. A while later, after being absorbed in painful memories,

he felt suddenly uneasy about the tortoise. It was lying, absolutely motionless. He touched it; it was dead... It had not been able to bear the dazzling luxury imposed upon it, the glittering cape in which it had been clad, the precious stones which had been used to decorate its shell like a jewelled ciborium.” (62)

The death of the tortoise prefigures the failure of des Esseintes’ experiment in aesthetic living. As long as the project was unfinished, he could tinker with the details; for instance, during a bout of illness caused by his permanent *ennui*, and after trying without success to go outside, “he made up his mind to complete the interior decoration of his thebaid³ by filling it with costly hothouse flowers, and so provide himself with a material occupation that would distract his thoughts, soothe his nerves, and rest his brain” (95). But the flowers can only flourish in a

stifling hothouse atmosphere unsuited for humans. Des Esseintes gets another reprieve from his boredom after his aborted trip to London, when he sees the objects in his house in a new way: “Everything indeed –books, bric-à-brac, and furniture acquired a particular charm in his eyes...he steeped himself once more in this refreshing bath of settled habits” (144). To occupy his time, des Esseintes decides to rearrange his books. But one cannot do so forever: des Esseintes interior finally chokes him because there is nothing to do in it. Designed by des Esseintes’ mind, the house makes him a prisoner of his own mind. By trying to control every detail in his house, des Esseintes left no room for growth, for change, for surprise and for renewal. Suffering from multiple nervous and physical ailments that cause all of his senses to break down, he is given a choice by his doctor to change his lifestyle, or to die from it. Today we would advise: go outside, get some exercise, take care of your body. When he finally leaves his stuffy interior and moves back to Paris, des Esseintes reluctantly chooses life (or whatever life is left in his exhausted body) against art, thereby renouncing the aesthetics of *Décadence*. It will take an aesthetic revolution, one embodied in Umberto Eco’s concept of the open work (1989) that constantly renews itself in unpredictable ways, in a dialogue between multiple minds, to break the pact of the *Décadence* movement between art and death.

Euphoric self-design

My example of this category is *The Museum of Innocence*, a novel by Orhan Pamuk about the creation of a fictional museum that shares its name with a real-life museum created by Pamuk himself. ⁴There are considerable differences in why Pamuk and his hero decide to create a museum: for Pamuk, it is love of objects as expression of daily life in Istanbul, while for his hero, Kemal, it is love for a particular woman. But through a narrative effect known as double deixis (Herman 2002), we understand that when Kemal describes his vision for his future museum, or when he displays in the book a ticket for a free entrance, the text refers at the same time to both museums, so that they cannot be totally separated.

The novel takes place Istanbul from 1975 to 1984. The narrator, Kemal, belongs to the upper crust of Istanbul society, a class that tries to emulate European culture at all costs. While engaged to Sibel, a heavily Westernized young woman, he falls in love with Füsün, an eighteen year old salesgirl of stunning beauty who is a poor distant relative of his. They engage for a short time in a passionate sexual relation, but after Kemal’s formal engagement to Sibel, Füsün disappears and Kemal is heartbroken. His strange behavior leads Sibel to break the engagement. When Füsün renews contact with Kemal a few months later, she has been forced into marriage to a young man she does not love because the loss of her virginity has compromised her matrimonial prospects. For eight years, Kemal visits Füsün four times a week for supper in her parents’ house, where she still lives with her husband, and he spends his evenings watching television with the family. He also steals various objects from the house, because they bear the imprint of Füsün’s presence. Finally Füsün gets a divorce, she agrees to marry Kemal and they set out on a car trip to Paris. During the trip they renew their physical relation, but the next day Füsün drives Kemal’s car into a plane tree, killing herself and seriously wounding Kemal. Was it suicide or was it an accident? The text leaves both possibilities open. After Füsün’s death, Kemal creates a museum with all the objects he has stolen from her house, as well as with additional objects that he purchases later, and he asks his friend Orhan Pamuk to write his life story. (For clarity’s sake, I will refer to the fictional Pamuk as Orhan, and to the real one as Pamuk.) Orhan accepts, but rather than writing a regular biography of Kemal, he will write a

novel told in the first person by Kemal, so that Kemal, the apparent narrator, will really be Orhan pretending to be Kemal. This future novel is of course the one we have just read, so that the text of *Museum of Innocence* curls back upon itself, through the same kind of effect that we find in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Kemal's relation to objects evolves through the novel. He begins as a fetishist lover who regards objects as a substitute for Füsün, just as, in Caravaggio's painting of Abraham's sacrifice, a work mentioned in the text, a ram is substituted for Isaac. It may be argued that Füsün is less a person for Kemal than an object that he ardently covets, but cannot possess: first because he is engaged to another woman, then because Füsün is married to another man, and finally because she is dead. An unreliable narrator, Kemal wants to persuade the reader of a great love affair between Füsün and himself, but this love is very one-sided. He never cares about what Füsün thinks, about the long-term effect on her life of his obsession with her—he only cares about her appearance, repeatedly referring to her as “my beauty.” Füsün is indeed an allegory much more than an individuated character—an allegory of the artist's obsession with beauty. But while Kemal cannot possess the whole of Füsün, he can possess parts of her by stealing the objects that touched her body: objects such as combs, barrettes, earrings, and the butts of the cigarette that Füsün smoked. He regards these objects as trophies, and gathering them is the real reason for his regular visits to her house. His interest gradually broadens from objects that touched Füsün's body to objects that represent her daily life environment, such as salt shakers, coffee cups, and the porcelain dogs that sit on the TV, to which he attributes emotions (they need companionship). He learns to appreciate objects for their own sake, rather than as substitutes for Füsün. When the room where he stores his acquisitions is filled from floor to ceiling, he decides to make his collection public by turning it into a museum that functions not only as a mausoleum for Füsün (mausoleum is the etymology of the word museum), but as a celebration of everyday life in Istanbul in the mid twentieth century. “Now the only way I could make sense of those years was to display all that I had gathered together—the pots and pans. The trinkets, the clothes and the paintings—just as the anthropologist might have done” (Pamuk 2010, 496; all further references to this edition). From bashful hoarder (for hoarding is generally regarded as a disease), Kemal has evolved into a proud collector, and by making his collection public, he becomes a cultural benefactor of the community.

To get inspiration for his future museum, Kemal tours the small museums of the world that embody the passion of their creators for a certain type of object and represent the antithesis of the pompous official museums of the West, whose mission is to celebrate a country through its timeless masterpieces or its glorious history. Kemal learns from these small museums that the seemingly trivial objects in his collection are “worthy of proud display” (495), and that his life, which his relatives consider wasted, can become meaningful through the creation of his own museum. One museum in particular strikes Kemal's imagination: the house of the painter Gustave Moreau in Paris, where the artist gathered thousands of paintings, and which “in due course became a museum, which encompasses as well his large two-story atelier...Once converted, the house became a house of memories, a ‘sentimental museum’ in which every object shimmered with meaning.” (497). Moreau felt so comfortable among these memories that he spent the rest of his life living in his house-museum. Similarly, Kemal lives, or plans to live in his museum.

I write “lives or plans to live,” because the time frame of the existence of Kemal's museum is ambiguous. It is presented as a work in progress at the end of the novel, when Kemal dies some twenty years after Füsün, while re-visiting a small museum in Milan. (Since narrators

cannot normally represent their own death, the narration of this episode is taken over by Orhan, who speaks here in his own name, rather than pretending to be Kemal.) Yet according to most of the novel the museum already exists. Kemal as narrator poses as a guide to his museum, and he frequently interrupts his narration when referring to an object with comments about the display of this object in his museum. For instance, after narrating a meal with his fiancée Sibel in a fashionable restaurant, Kemal writes: “Now, years later, and after a long search, I am exhibiting here an illustrated menu, an advertisement, and a napkin from Fuaye, one of the European-style (imitation French) restaurants” popular with wealthy people (12). When instructing Orhan about how to write his biography, Kemal tells him that all the objects in the museum should be mentioned in the text.

What Kemal says of the small museums also applies to the displays of objects in his own museum: “My contentment flowed not just from these museums as collections, but from the harmony in the arrangements of their pictures and objects” (501). Like the real museum, Kemal’s museum consists of boxes in the style of Joseph Cornell in which the objects mentioned in the text are artistically arranged, talking among each other, for, according to Kemal, things may be sentient and have emotions: “‘I get upset to see things thrown away and forgotten,’ I said. ‘They say the Chinese used to believe that things had souls’” (378). In the real museum, each box corresponds to a chapter in the novel; in Kemal’s museum, the individual boxes capture happy moments in his relation to Füsün. Taken together, the collection of boxes represents Kemal’s memory, so that when he decides to live in his museum, he elects to live in an image of the past that he experiences as forever present. But memory is more than a collection of individual moments; it takes a unifying thread, that is, a narrative, to turn these moments into a meaningful whole that is more than the sum of its parts; this is why Kemal asks Orhan to write his story. By living within his memories, Kemal makes every moment equally accessible to his mind; similarly, the museum should make all the boxes and the moments they represent visible from any point of view: “‘Never forget, Orhan Bey, that the logic of my museum must be that wherever one stands inside it, it should be possible to see the entire collection, all the display cases and everything,’ Kemal Bey would say. ‘Because all the objects in my museum—and with them, my entire story—can be seen at the same time from any perspective, visitors will lose all sense of Time.’” (519-20).

How can this visibility of all moments, which, according to Kemal converts Time into Space, be achieved by the architecture of the museum? To create his museum, Kemal buys from Füsün’s mother the house where the family resided. Its distinctive shape offers an excellent example of how design must adapt to available space. Like the real-life museum, the house is a narrow, wooden structure of three stories located in a vibrant popular neighborhood that maintains traditional Turkish architecture. The boxes are arranged in chronological order, so that the movement of the visitor through the museum recreates the temporal dynamics of the story. But as is the case with all chronologically arranged museums (as well as with printed books), the visitor can always escape the flow of time by moving back to a previously seen display, or moving forward by skipping some boxes. Due to the narrowness of the house, the display is arranged over three stories linked by a spiral staircase. The architect whom Kemal hired to turn the house into a museum created an open space in the heart of the building, so that, when visitors reach the top and look down at the other stories, they will see all the boxes simultaneously, or rather, the top of all the boxes, thus realizing Kemal’s idea of making the entire collection visible at once. It is in this sense that Time is transformed into Space.⁵

On the top floor, in both the actual and the fictional museum, is the room of Kemal. It used to be a dark space infested with cockroaches and spiders when Füsün's family lived in the house, but now it is a "clean, bright room open to the stars by a skylight" (510) where Kemal can sleep, "surrounded by all the objects that reminded me of Füsün and made me feel her presence" (ibid). Like Gustave Moreau, after turning a house into a museum, Kemal turns the museum back into a house. "What could be more beautiful than to spend one's night surrounded by objects connecting one to his deepest sentimental attachment and memories" (ibid). In *The Innocence of Objects*, a partly factual, partly fictional text that serves as a catalog to the actual museum and as a bridge between his museum and the novel, Pamuk writes that it is in this room that Kemal told his life story to Orhan, so that Orhan could write it down. Through the creation of this room, Kemal has finally reached the fulfillment and serenity that evaded him during his life. As he contemplates from the perspective of the top floor all the boxes that represent moments in his life, they all become happy memories, though many of them were frustrating when the past was the present. The novel concludes with this command of Kemal to his biographer: " 'My last words in the book are these, Orhan Bey, please don't forget them.' ... 'Let everyone know, I lived a very happy life'" (532). These words, through which Pamuk's novel and the book-within-a-book to be written by Orhan converge in the same ending, bear witness to the success of the design of the museum-home.

Conclusion

The study of the affective impact of interiors in narrative stands at the crossroad between spatial and object-oriented narratology. From spatial narratology (Ryan, Foote and Azaryahu 2016) it can borrow topics of investigation such as the distinction between space and place, the possibility of movement within the interiors, the relation between the interior and the exterior and the mode of description of interiors (i.e. map-style, tour-style and hybrids; cf. Fludernik 2014). In this article, however, I have favored an object-oriented over a spatial approach. The four narratives discussed here suggest a number of vectors for the analysis of the attitude of characters toward objects. One of these vectors has to do with the function of the objects that attract their attention. Functions can be classified into three main types: practical, aesthetic and mnemonic (Ryan 2025). The first two types are self-explanatory, as for the third, it refers to objects whose main reason for existing is to evoke memories, such as souvenirs. But an object manufactured to fulfill one function can often be appreciated for another reason: for instance, a practical object can be treasured because it evokes certain memories, or it can be admired for its aesthetic value. Additional vectors of differentiation illustrated by the four narratives are the distinction between unique and serially made objects, whether a character's attitude toward objects is active or passive, and whether objects are alive or lifeless. Based on these criteria, I propose here a comparison of how the protagonists of our four narratives experience objects.

The objects that supposedly decorate the living room of Eveline's house are not particularly aesthetic. The harmonium was originally a serially made practical object, but it no longer works. The photo of the priest, owned by the family as an original, was a mnemonic object for the father, but it evokes no memories for Eveline. Only the serially made print of the saint may have some meaning to her as a devotional object, that is, as a witness of her faith.⁶ But if these objects matter to Eveline, it is not because of their appearance, their usefulness, or their connection to the past: it is exclusively because they have always been there, and because Eveline cannot imagine being separated from them. Her attitude toward objects is entirely

passive, and this passivity is echoed by the lifelessness of the objects, which are only good to gather dust. All these features contribute to Eveline's dysphoric experience of her house, even though she tries hard to view her life as not so bad.

De Maistre's room is furnished with all three kinds of objects: practical ones (the bed, the armchair, the desk), aesthetic ones (paintings, books), and mnemonic ones (a portrait of his mistress, a bust of his father). The question of unique vs. serially made objects does not play a role in the narrator's relation toward objects, nor is he particularly attentive to their physical features. For de Maistre, objects serve primarily as props in a game of make-believe: the chair is a stage coach, and the other pieces of furniture are the stages in his journey. Functioning as inspiration to a very active imagination, their role is to tell stories that open the closed space of the room to other worlds, so as to make the narrator's confinement enjoyable.

Of the three object functions that have been defined above, only the aesthetic function matters for the hero of *A Rebours*. Having broken with the past and sold his ancestral castle, des Esseintes does not want objects that remind him of his personal history; and having servants who take care of all his needs, he can ignore practical objects, or confine them to those rooms that the novel never explores, the kitchen, dressing room and privy. His insistence on uniqueness stems from a disgust with mankind, society, and ordinary life: all the objects he treasures are elaborate creations custom-made for him alone, and he would never think of sharing them with others. As long as his house is in the design stage, he maintains an active attitude, but when the design is complete and there is nothing more to do, it becomes a prison that confines him to a passive state. Objects have no autonomous life for des Esseintes, they are merely instruments in the service of his effete tastes.

Pamuk's hero is the anti-des Esseintes. The contrast between the two goes far beyond the fact that Kemal makes his design into a home, while des Esseintes must flee it in order to survive. Whereas des Esseintes rejects any object that could connect him to the past, Kemal turns the mnemonic function into an obsession. Whereas des Esseintes fills his house with rare aesthetic objects, the kind one finds in traditional museums, Kemal collects the most ordinary, mass-produced objects, thereby participating in a new museum movement that celebrates everyday life. Whereas des Esseintes keeps his things for himself, Kemal shares his collection with the public. And alone among the heroes of the four narrative I have discussed, Kemal entertains the possibility that objects may be sentient, and that design consists of listening to what they have to say.

¹ The "system of the soul and the beast" is a theory of the self that de Maistre presents, tongue in cheek, as a major metaphysical discovery made during his confinement: "I have noticed, through many and sundry observations, that man is made up of a soul and a beast. -These two beings are absolutely distinct, yet so contained with each other, or rather on top of one another, that the soul must be superior to the beast to be able to make such a distinction" (11). Much of the *Voyage* is presented as a dialogue between the soul and the beast. Giving these concepts the attention they deserve would however exceed the scope of this article.

² Eight years after writing *A Rebours*, Huysmans converted to Catholicism.

³ Des Esseintes use of the name thebaid to describe his house refers to a province of Egypt known as a favorite place of retreat for Christian hermits.

⁴ I have discussed the interrelation between the two museums in chapters 6 and 9 of *Object-Oriented Narratology*, but since my focus here is euphoric design, I concentrate on the hero's reasons for creating a museum rather than on Pamuk's exposition of his own vision in *The Innocence of Objects*.

⁵ In the real museum, the visitor who looks down from the third story will see a spiral inlaid in the ground floor; this figure represents the Aristotelian conception of time as a spiral that links all the discrete moments, just as Pamuk's narrative connects all the moments in Kemal's life. But there is no mention of this spiral in the novel, and only those readers familiar with the actual museum or with Pamuk's *The Innocence of Objects* will be able to imagine it.

⁶ Devotional objects are difficult to classify in my three categories; they are neither aesthetic nor practical, but they could be regarded as mnemonic, in that they remind people of their faith. Since their main function is to proclaim their owner's faith, however, they are more properly described by adding "testimonial" to the three categories.

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