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## The Banality of Monstrosity: On Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*

The publication of Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission* (2015), with its controversial vision of a future French Islamic Republic, on the very same day as the murderous attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* is already the stuff of literary legend. Even before this unlikely confluence of events, the media anticipation surrounding the novel promised something incendiary, "a *Satanic Verses* for the age of ISIS".<sup>1</sup> Long-time Houellebecq observer Marc Weitzmann commented that, by now, the novelist's place in France has become "so strange, almost monstrous", that it is practically impossible to write about his work with appropriate critical distance.<sup>2</sup> Although *Soumission* depicts the conversion of France to an Islamic state as a largely peaceful and democratic transition, from the point of view of the secular state this vision of a future-France is indeed altogether monstrous. Particularly unconscionable for an advanced neoliberal democracy must be the suggestion that women would desert the labour market en masse; the de facto control of women's dress in public; and the explicit islamicisation of that most secular of institutions, the French education system. Yet many commentators note that Houellebecq somehow manages to render this improbable scenario believable. Bernard Maris (both friend and exegete of Houellebecq's, famously murdered during the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*) commented that, as in all of Houellebecq's previous novels, we are presented in

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Kliman, "The Subtle Despair of Michel Houellebecq", *The Washingtonian*, 19 November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Weitzmann, "Paresseuse désinvolture", *Le Monde*, 9 January 2015.

*Soumission* with “une projection futuriste extraordinaire et crédible”.<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Léger talks about the “réalisme ambivalent de Houellebecq, tendant vers l’inquiétante étrangeté.”<sup>4</sup> For Guy Berger, Houellebecq manages to render believable, or at least free of absurdity, a narrative that is evidently a kind of fable.<sup>5</sup> Through close reading of the novel and comparison to some of Houellebecq’s other works, this article will demonstrate how Houellebecq achieves this unlikely literary coup before considering the implications of this vision of a near-future France. How justified are the accusations of racism and Islamophobia that have been leveled against Houellebecq and his novel? Is Weitzmann right to claim that *Soumission* is “à la fois le roman le plus clairement réactionnaire et le plus faible littérairement de Michel Houellebecq”?<sup>6</sup> Throughout this discussion, we will remain attentive to those aspects of Houellebecq’s writing, and his vision of a near-future France, that might be considered in one way or another monstrous, uncanny or grotesque. Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund stress that the grotesque is the privileged domain of ‘incongruity and uncertainty’, and that it is marked by ‘disjunctions between the vile and the comic, disgust and irony’.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the concept of the grotesque is perhaps useful in helping us to think through the singular appeal of Houellebecq’s work. For every reader amused by his apparent satire, there is

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Maris, “La Conversion de Michel”, in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, Paris: L’Herne, 2017, p. 156. First published in *Charlie Hebdo* 1177, 7 January 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Léger, “*Soumission* de Houellebecq: Le droit à l’irresponsabilité?” *Esprit* (February 2015), pp. 41-4 (p. 44).

<sup>5</sup> Guy Berger, “Un conte satirique: *Soumission*”, *Commentaire* 149 (2015), pp. 197-200 (p. 198).

<sup>6</sup> Weitzmann, “Paresseuse désinvolture”.

<sup>7</sup> Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, p. 2.

another offended by his seemingly unironic prejudice. The difficulty of making final judgements as to Houellebecq's stance or intention is caused by the fact that his own narrators share this fundamental ambivalence, the narrative voice constantly seemingly to fluctuate 'between disgust and irony'.

### **I: Sleights of hand**

How, then, does Michel Houellebecq encourage us to believe in the democratic election of an explicitly Muslim party to government in France? He does so in part through an astute analysis of the French political landscape. Houellebecq was wrong, we now know, in his predictions for the 2017 presidential elections, the outcome of which he foresaw as "ce spectacle honteux, mais arithmétiquement inéluctable, de la réélection d'un président de gauche dans un pays de plus en plus ouvertement à droite".<sup>8</sup> This observation of a slide to the right is not simple editorializing by Houellebecq but is confirmed in sociological analysis. The centre of political gravity in France, as across Europe, has shifted from left to right in response to certain key factors: the increasing wealth of older people; a greater stratification of educational opportunities resulting in the stigmatization of those at the lowest levels of attainment; and the increasing atomization of society that renders collective action inconceivable for many.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the Muslim Brotherhood emerges as the only party realistically able to challenge the Front National in the elections of 2022, since it unites the right, the left and the centre: it is socially conservative but economically liberal and

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission*, Paris: Flammarion, 2015, p. 51. (Subsequent references will follow the quotation in parentheses.)

<sup>9</sup> See Hervé Le Bras and Emmanuel Todd, *Le Mystère français*, Paris: Seuil Points, 2015, pp. 235-237.

includes grass-roots action to tackle social problems in France's majority non-white suburbs. *Soumission* was, if nothing else, prescient to have foreseen the rebellions of disaffected voters that surprised the western world in 2016. Voters are tired of the increasingly meaningless alternation between centre-left and centre-right candidates, suggests Houellebecq, which begins to resemble "le partage du pouvoir entre deux gangs rivaux" (50). The narrator's resigned conclusion is that "l'écart croissant, devenu abyssal, entre la population et ceux qui parlaient en son nom [...] devait nécessairement conduire à quelque chose de chaotique, de violent et d'imprévisible" (116). What is monstrous in Houellebecq's depiction of French politics is not the Muslim Brotherhood specifically, but the very operation of power. As Edwards and Graulund point out, Foucault's work showed how power can become monstrous or grotesque, 'exceed[ing] the control of individuals or groups of individuals'.<sup>10</sup> Power becomes concentrated in small but dense blocks of influence that grow increasingly further from the supposed power base of the people. In response, and in a short-sighted attempt to protect their own interests, those same people are willing to bring to power a government that will, in the longer term, destroy the very bases of their identity while attacking their fundamental civil liberties.

Of course, the implication of *Soumission* is that this process is already underway and thus the novel can be read (as it is by Guy Berger<sup>11</sup>) as a satire of the political classes, a denunciation of their willingness to accept any compromise rather than lose their claim to power. The grotesque has long been used for satirical purposes, as was observed in the mid-nineteenth century by

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<sup>10</sup> Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, "Un conte satirique".

John Ruskin. The grotesque, in this sense, is simply ‘distortion, delineating the gap between imagined possibility and reality’.<sup>12</sup> Hence, it is suggested that the Parti Socialiste agreed to the Muslim Brotherhood’s outrageous terms around education (decimation of state funding but massive private endowments for Islamic schools and universities; eradication of women and non-Muslims from the teaching profession) only because “ils étaient au fond du trou” (146) (as for the UMP, “le concept [de l’éducation] lui est même presque étranger” [146]). The use of real-life politicians in the narrative, particularly the unfortunate François Bayrou who is memorably described as a man who “n’a jamais eu, ni même feint d’avoir la moindre idée personnelle” (152), inevitably adds to the political realism of Houellebecq’s portrait.

Beyond this political realism, Houellebecq arrives at his unlikely conclusions through a familiar sleight-of-hand around gender. As in several of his other novels – most famously *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998), but also *Plateforme* (2001) and *La Possibilité d’une île* (2005) –, the drift of Houellebecq’s prose tends to imply that a society chooses a radical new form of social organisation largely as a result of its frustration and impatience with a lived sexual reality that has become untenable for heterosexual men and women. Houellebecq denounces, here as elsewhere, the way in which a discourse and a logic more appropriate to the economic or professional spheres have contaminated the space of intimate relations. Thus the relationships of one’s youth are comparable to internships (*‘stages’*, 20) that one multiplies in order to gain experience in advance of an envisaged future ‘permanent’ role, much as

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<sup>12</sup> Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, p. 17.

casualization has fragmented and rendered insecure the employment experience of young people. Pornography and prostitution are the models ruling this commoditized sexual arena: the narrator repeatedly visits sex workers and all sex scenes are described in a pornographic register in which anal penetration, group sex and facial ejaculation are considered totally banal. As in the earlier novels, Houellebecq suggests that heterosexual, and especially conjugal, relations in the west have reached a kind of stalemate. Following a disappointing barbecue at the home of his friends Bruno and Annelise, François the narrator of *Soumission* reflects on their married lives, and particularly the role of Annelise, similar to the life of “toutes les femmes occidentales” (93): taking great pains to be seductive in her dress and manner at work, she is exhausted and dispirited, upon returning home, “elle s’effondrait, passait un sweatshirt et un bas de jogging” (94). When it comes to the maintenance of an erotic life for the couple, the husband “devait nécessairement avoir la sensation de s’être fait baiser quelque part” (94).

As so often with Houellebecq, this vision relies on a mode of characterization in which women have essentially no interior life but exist as sexual cyphers, either to titillate or to prove a point. Thus François’s girlfriend Myriam is a pornographic fantasy of a sexy teenage goth whose greatest wish is to give sexual pleasure to a man twice her age. Besides proving the casualness of sexual relations by leaving François for a younger man, she exists mainly to demonstrate the fate of Jewish people in the France of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>13</sup> In this context, France’s election of a Muslim government can

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<sup>13</sup> Surprisingly, Seth Armus calls Myriam a “believable and attractive” character and suggests that Houellebecq “hing[es] the story on [her] fate”. However, if this

easily come across as a punishment of sexually powerful western women: observing a young black woman in tight jeans, François notes with a combination of glee and regret, “elle allait certainement disparaître, ou du moins être sérieusement rééduquée” (90). In places, Houellebecq’s breezy depiction of the installation of Islamic law over private gendered space in France can come across as a neat solution to the cruel inequalities of erotic capital lamented elsewhere in the author’s work, something like a revenge of the unlovable virgin Tisserand from *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994).<sup>14</sup> In another sense, though, the depiction of sexuality in *Soumission* confirms a masochistic, or emasculated, view of contemporary western masculinity: as Thierry Hoquet paraphrases, “la virilité ayant déserté l’Europe, c’est par les immigrés qu’elle y revient”.<sup>15</sup> The novel is thus complicit with the most unreconstructed orientalist fantasies of ‘eastern’ sexuality, imagining both potent men and submissive yet devilishly accomplished young women. *Soumission*’s closing chapters cheerfully install a polygamous and pedophilic system of gender relations with François contentedly envisaging “une épouse de quarante ans pour la cuisine, une de quinze ans pour d’autres choses...” (262).

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characterization suits Armus’s rather curious interpretation of *Soumission* as a kind of neo-Zionist novel, it misrepresents the under-developed role that Myriam really plays in the narrative. See Seth Armus, “Trying on the Veil: Sexual Autonomy and the End of the French Republic in Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission*”, *French Politics, Culture & Society* 35.1 (2017), 126-145 (pp. 133, 127).

<sup>14</sup> Solange Bied-Charrenton makes this point in “La Possibilité d’une oeuvre”, *Le Figaro* hors série *Michel Houellebecq: Le grand désenchanté* (2015), 60-66 (p. 66). Another writer who takes seriously the question of the ‘solution’ posed by *Soumission* is Timothy Gouldthorp, *Solutions to the Problems of Western Civilization in the Novels of Michel Houellebecq*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Queensland (2017), see for instance pp. 159-160.

<sup>15</sup> Thierry Hoquet, “Bander dur et oublier l’amour”, *Critique* 816 (2015), pp. 431-437 (p. 432).



Houellebecq's work repeatedly seems to suggest that the situation of gender and sexual relations in the west has become so grotesque – where an exaggerated parody of sexuality in public is increasingly the counterpart to a de facto renunciation of sex in private – and the complex of reasons underlying this situation so intractable (historical, economic, technological, but also complicated by leftover evolutionary motivations), that the only way to envisage a 'solution' is for it to be monstrously disproportionate. Thus Houellebecq seems to propose a cloned post-human super-race (in *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île*) or a re-imagining of the relationship between the developed and developing worlds as a generalized and regulated form of mass sex tourism (*Plateforme*). The monstrosity of these visions (and, by extension, of the implementation of sharia law across France) makes it difficult to see them as anything but satire; yet the poignant sincerity with which Houellebecq describes the miserable lived experience of his unlovable protagonists gives us pause in jumping to that conclusion.

To put this another way, the shocking events described in *Soumission* are further rendered unaccountably banal by Houellebecq's inimitable, but deceptively simple, style. Critics have a tendency to ignore or dismiss Houellebecq's style: Cody Delistraty goes as far as to assert that "his style is generally accepted as second-rate: something readers put up with in order to get to his ideas".<sup>16</sup> But a close reading reveals that, if Houellebecq's ideas are so striking, it is at least in part because of the author's careful control of the

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<sup>16</sup> Cody Delistraty, "Can Lorin Stein Translate Michel Houellebecq into a Great Writer?" *Slate*, 16 October 2015, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon\\_valley/2015/10/16/michel\\_houellebecq\\_a\\_writer\\_who\\_benefits\\_from\\_translation.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2015/10/16/michel_houellebecq_a_writer_who_benefits_from_translation.html)

language in which he presents them. *Soumission* is notable for the long, slow rhythm of its sentences – the opening sentence alone contains two semi-colons – possibly modeled on the late-nineteenth-century prose of Joris-Karl Huysmans, focus of the narrator’s research and something like the novel’s patron saint. To a degree, this style mimics a sober academic discourse, treating the events of the Muslim Brotherhood’s election as cause for dispassionate analysis rather than emotional reaction. At the same time, however, these sinuous and sophisticated sentences are peppered with slang and vulgarity (again not unlike Huysmans), as when an ironically grandiose style is used to describe a commonplace pornographic scenario (26), or when a coarse phrase like “Qu’est-ce que ça peut te foutre?” is sardonically softened through an indirect interrogation: “J’allumai une cigarette [...] tout en me demandant ce que ça pouvait bien lui foutre” (30). Through these shifts in register, François is presented as *both* lucid social analyst *and* apathetic everyman. Indeed, the novel’s persistent lexical field of fatigue and inertia creates the sense of a nation ground down by an exhausting social system, as well as a soul-destroying bureaucracy, and so *either* ready to welcome radical change in hope of a better future *or* too tired and disillusioned to react at all. Thus the narrator of *Soumission* breaks off his relationships “sous l’effet d’un découragement, d’une lassitude” (24); he sighs in conversation and repeatedly uses the adjective “épuisant” (37). He describes his social life as “une succession de petits ennuis” (99) and concludes “je m’étiolais, ce n’était pas contestable” (38). Agathe Novak-Lechevalier has described *Soumission* as “un roman

délibérément atone”.<sup>17</sup> While I agree that this (apparently) flat and featureless narratorial voice is crucial in setting up the remarkably prompt and uncomplaining submission to an Islamic state in France, I disagree with Novak-Lechevalier when she suggests that this lifelessness contrasts with “l’art de la détonation qui caractérise habituellement le style de Houellebecq”.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, as I and others have demonstrated elsewhere<sup>19</sup>, the affectless, depressive voice of Houellebecq’s narrators and protagonists is practically a constant in the author’s novelistic universe; it is what allows the writer’s ‘detonations’ to resound with such impact but it is also what explains and, in a sense, justifies them, since the narrator-protagonists’ depression conceals, and is stoked by, a profound, but inevitably impotent, anger at the world.

There is perhaps something uncanny about Houellebecq’s style, which further adds to the disquiet with which his novels have been received. As the preceding discussion of Houellebecq’s tone and register makes clear – both alarmist and dully apathetic at once – there is indeed something worrying and strange about the world depicted in *Soumission* (‘l’inquiétante étrangeté’ being the usual French translation of Freud’s *Unheimlich*), yet also something undeniably familiar. For Freud, the Uncanny is frightening but familiar because it marks the return of the repressed.<sup>20</sup> This might lead us to ask whether

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<sup>17</sup> Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, “*Soumission*, la littérature comme résistance”, in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, Paris: L’Herne, 2017, pp. 154-155 (p. 155).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013, pp. 32-45. On the depressive discourse in Houellebecq’s work, see also Martin Robitaille, “Houellebecq ou l’extension d’un monde étrange”, *Tangence* 76 (2004), 87-103.

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile*

Houellebecq's work is so troubling for many readers because it presents as prosaic fact some of our most unspeakable fantasies: what if I could replicate myself not through the messy, arduous business of sex and parenting but through a clean, scientific process of cloning? What if I could satiate my burdensome physical desires, and shore up my waning sense of cultural superiority, by going abroad and paying for cheap sex with dark-skinned foreigners? What if France became a strictly Muslim-controlled state and everyone's place in society was suddenly unambiguous again, governed by a strict hierarchy and a clear division of roles?

## **II: A Society's Suicide?**

This depressive discourse in Houellebecq's novels frequently gives way to thoughts of suicide, but these are both personal and, so to speak, civilizational. Both *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* depict a kind of species suicide as the exhausted human race cedes its position to a more evolved successor. One interpretation of *Soumission* would thus be to see the election of the Muslim Brotherhood as a collective suicide on the part of secular France, turning over the control of its territory to the more demographically dynamic and ideologically assured Muslims. For this reason, some have seen *Soumission* as the fictional pendant of Éric Zemmour's polemic *Le Suicide français* (2014) in which the journalist denounces the loss of France's political sovereignty and global influence over the past forty years.<sup>21</sup> The idea of a civilizational suicide

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*Neurosis and Other Works*, translated and edited by James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press/Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955, pp. 217-256.

<sup>21</sup> Éric Zemmour, *Le Suicide français*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2014. Among the critics who explore the comparison between Houellebecq and Zemmour are Léger,

has become something of a recurring trope in recent socio-political commentary: Douglas Murray's book *The Strange Death of Europe* opens with the assertion that "Europe is committing suicide"<sup>22</sup>. In a somewhat less emotive tone, but along broadly the same lines, the eminent French political philosopher Pierre Manent worries that "l'Europe se désarme en son coeur"<sup>23</sup>. Houellebecq, like Zemmour, has a tendency to blame the legacy of May '68, particularly its feminist and libertarian strands, for the current rudderless plight of France. With all traditional values (family, nation, work, etc.) dissolved, the only authority left to guide citizens is the market such that their only meaningful identity is as consumers.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Houellebecq, in *Les Particules élémentaires*, argues that the breakdown of the family removed the last bulwark capable of protecting the individual from the ruthlessness of the market.<sup>25</sup>

Zemmour, more clearly than Houellebecq, is nostalgic for virile and authoritarian masculinity. His book opens with the symbolic Death of the Father, that is to say the national mourning occasioned by the funeral of Charles de Gaulle in 1970. Fathers in Houellebecq's universe have always been weak or absent, fundamentally uninterested in their children, as proves to be the case again in *Soumission* when François's father dies having not spoken to his son for two years (188). When powerful, responsible men do appear in Houellebecq's novels (often company directors), they are typically apprehended with

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"*Soumission* de Houellebecq", Christophe Barbier, "Houellebecq, mauvais écrivain mais bon sociologue", *L'Express*, 6 January 2015 and Adam Gopnik, "The Next Thing", *The New Yorker*, 26 January 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Murray, *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Manent, *Situation de la France*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2015, p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> Zemmour, *Le Suicide français*, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, Paris: J'ai lu, 2000, p. 169.

bewilderment as much as admiration. It is perhaps, therefore, a little surprising that, in *Soumission*, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Ben Abbes, is a supremely charismatic statesman whose ambition knows no bounds, a man explicitly compared to General de Gaulle (158). Other commentators have seen a more troubling parallel, however: for Marc Weitzmann, the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood as depicted in *Soumission* is comparable to France's capitulation to Pétain in 1940<sup>26</sup> and Seth Armus likewise describes the dawning realization of the reader that "we are in Occupied Paris"<sup>27</sup>. Olivier Guez suggests that the France portrayed in *Soumission* resembles the bleak portrait assembled in the writings of Drieu la Rochelle in the 1930s, as though Houellebecq were invoking "notre inconscient pétainiste ou une nostalgie masochiste de la capitulation des années noires"<sup>28</sup>. If the taking of power by the Muslim Brotherhood can be seen as a kind of Occupation, then *Soumission* is condemned, for many French commentators, by the absence of any obvious call to resistance. Instead, the nation surrenders meekly, as though resigned to its fate. As Todd Kliman rightly summarises, "This passive acceptance of what, for many in Europe, right now, is a cataclysmic fear, the dawn of a terrifying new age, a kind of anti-Crusades, is among the book's many provocations."<sup>29</sup>

Like all of Houellebecq's novels, then, *Soumission* is marked by a mood of defeat and despair. For Armus, there is "an overwhelming air of sadness that permeates the novel"<sup>30</sup> and for Kliman this colours "every page, every scene,

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<sup>26</sup> Weitzmann, "Paresseuse désinvolture".

<sup>27</sup> Armus, "Trying on the Veil", p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Olivier Guez, "Esthétique de la capitulation", *Le Point*, 12 March 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Kliman, "The Subtle Despair of Michel Houellebecq".

<sup>30</sup> Armus, "Trying on the Veil", p. 131.

every observation”.<sup>31</sup> As always in Houellebecq’s work, however, we need to ask to what extent this worldview can be attributed to the author as opposed to being the projections of a pathological protagonist. François describes the French people as resigned and apathetic, yet even he acknowledges at one point that he may simply be extrapolating from his own impassive attitude: “jusqu’à ces derniers jours j’étais encore persuadé que les Français dans leur immense majorité restaient résignés et apathiques – sans doute parce que j’étais moi-même passablement résigné et apathique. Je m’étais trompé.” (116). We should note that, although never explicitly named as such, François is essentially an alcoholic and many of his observations reflect the irritability and susceptibility to exaggeration and paranoia characteristic of that condition. All of the major dialogues in the book, plus several of the solitary reflections, are accompanied by heavy drinking: his conversation with the secret service agent Tanneur (where they enjoy Cahors and Armagnac); his long interview with the Director of the Sorbonne, Rediger (Meursault and boukha); the reception at the newly re-opened Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne, where he is on his fifth glass of wine before he speaks to anybody; he even goes out to purchase a fresh bottle of Calvados before tackling his administrative correspondence. As mentioned above, François is also estranged from his family; this, combined with his solitary profession, leaves him profoundly isolated socially. As such, François, like the bachelor heroes (*héros célibataires*) of Huysmans, occupies a marginal position

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<sup>31</sup> Kliman, “The Subtle Despair of Michel Houellebecq”.

in society and regards it as though from outside. In the words of Jean-Pierre Bertrand, the *héros célibataire* is “à la fois étranger et supérieur” to society.<sup>32</sup>

For instance, although François is part of the higher educational establishment in France (a professor at the Sorbonne), he tends to regard the education system with contempt. The novel presents a portrait of French higher education as a sterile and distant institution, largely peopled by lazy, privileged individuals who work very little (François can discharge all of his duties with a single day a week on campus [27]) yet feel irrevocably entitled to this lifestyle as though wider socio-economic trends should have no impact upon their hallowed vocation: “ceux qui parviennent à un statut d’enseignant universitaire n’imaginent même pas qu’une évolution politique puisse avoir le moindre effet sur leur carrière; ils se sentent absolument intouchables.” (79) This arrogance persists even though intellectuals in the academy no longer exert any meaningful influence over public debate: “Une protestation même unanime des enseignants universitaires serait passée à peu près complètement inaperçue” (179). Universities, here, are hardly bastions of radical thinking. Again, the comparison has been noted to the years of the Occupation, when many university professors in France passively accepted the purging of Jewish faculty from the academy in the interest of keeping their own jobs.<sup>33</sup>

As we know, *Soumission* ends with the suggestion of François’s conversion to Islam, a politically expedient solution allowing him to keep his job

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Marc Smeets, ‘Michel Houellebecq: Un homme, une (sou)mission’, *Relief* 9.2 (2015), pp. 99-111 (pp. 107-8).

<sup>33</sup> This point is made by Robert Zaretsky, “Houellebecq Skewers French Academe”, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 March 2015 and Armus, “Trying on the Veil”, pp. 139-140.



and enjoy a vastly increased salary at the Sorbonne. As commentators have noted, this hypothetical conversion is more a question of personal interest than of faith but then, throughout the novel, as Murray Pratt points out, the narrator is “drawn to the easiest solutions”<sup>34</sup>. For the novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard, *Soumission* is a satire “directed toward the intellectual classes, among whom no trace is found of idealism, and not a shadow of will to defend any set of values, only pragmatism pure and simple”<sup>35</sup>. It is in this sense that my titular echo of Hannah Arendt is perhaps justified. In the France of *Soumission*, academic freedom is withdrawn, women’s behaviour is closely policed in both public and private, and Jews are quietly driven out of the country, all with the tacit approval of the French electorate. This is precisely the kind of complicity – based in short-sighted self-interest – that the citizens of the Third Reich demonstrated with the policy-makers of the Nazi regime and that Arendt lays bare in her chilling account.<sup>36</sup> Again, however, part of the insult felt by many upon reading *Soumission* was Houellebecq’s choice to present this process as “absurdist comedy” or even “light farce” rather than “bitter denunciation”<sup>37</sup>.

If the ironies affecting the narrative voice in *Soumission* make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about Houellebecq’s stance in relation to the discourses voiced in the novel, this is no doubt deliberate because the debates surrounding questions of nationhood and identity are so fraught with emotion and political

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<sup>34</sup> Murray Pratt, “Michel Houellebecq’s *Soumission*: Adventures in Space, Time, Possibilities and French Studies”, *Australian Journal of French Studies* 54.1 (2017), 29-44 (p. 33).

<sup>35</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, “Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission*”, *New York Times*, 2 November 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, London: Penguin, 2006 [first published 1963].

<sup>37</sup> Kliman, “The Subtle Despair of Michel Houellebecq”.

sensitivity. The virtual dissolving of the identity of France effected by the Muslim Brotherhood in *Soumission* is surely shocking for most French and Francophile readers: it is, indeed, arguably monstrous, a kind of 'culturicide'. As with the political satire discussed above, however, there are prominent commentators in France (alongside Zemmour the most visible is no doubt Renaud Camus<sup>38</sup>) who argue that this liquidation of all that is most meaningfully French has been in train for several decades already. These discourses are often considered offensive, and even perhaps monstrous, because they are seen to be closely aligned with the rhetoric of the Front National and therefore in a more or less direct lineage with a fascist politics that, in living memory, has been responsible for genocide. There is, therefore, a kind of infernal logic to these debates: to protest about the perceived erasure of a historically significant culture can lead, with a few deductive leaps, to the protestor being identified as an apologist for genocide. It is surely the circularity of this argument that is most grotesque and the slippery narration of *Soumission* marks Houellebecq's attempt to avoid its traps while satirizing its reductive character. Thus the novel ironically depicts a near future in which the desperate attempt to keep the Front National from power (on the supposed grounds that its values are inconsistent with the Republican triumvirate of liberty, equality and fraternity) leads almost directly to the destruction of France as we know it. Yet, at the same time, *Soumission* teases the would-be French nationalist reader with the suggestion that only an Islamic France, under the supremely ambitious leadership of Mohammed Ben Abbas, may be capable of bringing about a twenty-first-century renaissance of

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<sup>38</sup> Renaud Camus, *Le Grand Remplacement*, Neuilly-sur-Seine: David Reinharc, 2011.

European civilization, that is precisely the opposite of the alarmist fate foreseen by Camus, Le Pen et al.

These considerations imply that, contrary to the rhetoric of the secular state, nation-building and civilizational longevity cannot be durably separated from religious identity and practice. Agathe Novak-Lechevalier has suggested that *Soumission*'s narrator is the symptom and inheritor of a "profond déficit à la fois spirituel et ontologique" in western culture that is "le vrai sujet du livre".<sup>39</sup> In order to interrogate this supposed 'deficit', we must confront the always difficult question of the place of religion in Houellebecq's work.

### **III: Thinking historically about religion**

For instance, J.-K. Huysmans, the focus of François's academic specialism and a figure who occupies proportionally more of the novel than the nation's putative transition to an Islamic state,<sup>40</sup> is arguably such an important presence in *Soumission* because his artistic trajectory offers certain parallels to Houellebecq's own, at least when viewed through the somewhat exaggerating lens of ironic postmodern self-awareness. Huysmans became notorious following the publication of scandalous, obscene, blasphemous novels like *À rebours* (1884) and *Là-bas* (1891) only to undertake a dramatic conversion to Catholicism and publish a series of novels describing his spiritual journey and his retreat into a quasi-monastic life. Houellebecq, too, became infamous for his highly publicized novels – especially *Les Particules élémentaires* and *Plateforme* – with their openly pornographic sex scenes and provocative suggestions around the licensed

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<sup>39</sup> Novak-Lechevalier, "*Soumission*, la littérature comme résistance", p. 155.

<sup>40</sup> As Pratt points out, "Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*", p. 35.

commerce of intimacy. If he has yet to become a monk, Houellebecq's work has repeatedly stressed the need to retreat from urban life in order to facilitate contemplation, and his novels and poetry express a persistent spiritual hunger that can never entirely be dismissed as ironic.<sup>41</sup> The triumph of Islam in *Soumission* is less surprising to readers familiar with the runaway global success of the religious cult described in *La Possibilité d'une île*, or even with the fictional Houellebecq's quiet conversion to Catholicism at the end of his life in *La Carte et le territoire* (2010).<sup>42</sup> Houellebecq has explained in interview that Huysmans was the original spur for *Soumission*, the novel initially intended to be the account of a conversion to Catholicism, along the lines of Huysmans's *En route* (1895) but that he found himself unable to write the necessary scene of spiritual epiphany that would mark the conversion.<sup>43</sup> As a result, Agathe Novak-Lechevalier calls *Soumission* "un roman sur l'impossibilité de croire"<sup>44</sup>, a reading supported by the novel's long epigraph from *En route*, taken from the end of that novel's first chapter, which describes how one can be drawn to the trappings of religious ritual and driven by a desire for communion, yet still unable to believe.<sup>45</sup> Still, *En route* suggests that a religious conversion need not be a dramatic epiphany; it can operate slowly: "c'est quelque chose d'analogue à la digestion d'un estomac

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<sup>41</sup> The best source on religion in Houellebecq's work is Louis Betty, *Without God: Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016. See also Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, pp. 141-148 and Douglas Morrey, "Stillness and Slowness in the Work of Michel Houellebecq", *Irish Journal of French Studies* 14 (2014): 1-22.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, Paris: Flammarion, 2010, p. 318.

<sup>43</sup> Houellebecq in Bourmeau, "Un suicide littéraire français", [Mediapart.fr](http://mediapart.fr), 2 January 2015. The interview was originally published in English in *The Paris Review*, 2 January 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Novak-Lechevalier, "*Soumission*, la littérature comme résistance", p. 154.

<sup>45</sup> See Joris-Karl Huysmans, *En route*, Paris: Folio, 1996, p. 74.

qui travaille, sans qu'on le sente"<sup>46</sup>. There are no doubt as many reasons for conversion as there are conversions. Durtal, the narrator of *En route*, admits that it is largely his solitude and idleness that have driven him into the arms of the Church.<sup>47</sup> Added to this is his profound love of Catholic art and music, a conversion on aesthetic grounds that is not without recalling Rediger's epiphany in the art nouveau surroundings of the Bar Metropole in *Soumission* (255-6). At bottom, though, *En route's* Durtal is an incorrigible snob, constantly criticizing the level of intelligence and elegance he finds among Parisian priests. If he feels affinity to the Catholic church, it is partly because so much Christian doctrine recognizes – like Schopenhauer, another of Houellebecq's favourite authors<sup>48</sup> – all that is 'ignoble' about life.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, if François feels little regret for the passing of French civilization as we know it, it is because he is largely contemptuous of most of its institutions. We might note, for instance, two withering descriptions of the SNCF (188; 156), complaints that seem particularly unjustified given that François, elsewhere in the novel, chooses to travel in his Volkswagen Touareg.

In many ways, then, J.-K. Huysmans is a dubious spiritual guide.

Nonetheless, for all its skepticism and opportunism, *Soumission* can come across as a novel with a religious heart. At the centre of the novel are a series of half-planned pilgrimages to sites of Christian history in France – Martel, Rocamadour, the abbey at Ligugé – described with a sense of respect and wonder. Karl Ove

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> On the relationship of Houellebecq to Schopenhauer, see Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq*, pp. 121-6. See also Michel Houellebecq, *En présence de Schopenhauer*, Paris: L'Herne, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Huysmans, *En route*, p. 83.

Knausgaard remarks that the description of the black Madonna at Rocamadour is “exquisite in a novel that otherwise seems to shun beauty or not to know it at all”<sup>50</sup> while Bruno Viard notes that in the passage devoted to Péguy’s mystical verse, also during the chapter in Rocamadour, “on ne peut qu’être frappé par le ton de recueillement et de gravité des treize pages situées au milieu du roman où le temps semble suspendu”.<sup>51</sup> There is a quiet sense, here, of a dormant, but fundamentally unbroken Christian civilization against which steady backdrop the secular Republic appears as a short-lived anomaly. In a similar way, Hervé Le Bras and Emmanuel Todd demonstrate that Catholic values persist in *la France profonde* even after the extinction of the faith practice, but the same cannot be said for the values of the secular religion of communism.<sup>52</sup>

A view of history on the broad civilizational scale has been a constant of Houellebecq’s narratives of social suicide, from the distant future perspectives of *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d’une île* that throw the absurdities of contemporary life into sharp relief, to the frequent recourse to the language of natural history to remind us of our place within an on-going process of evolution. *Soumission* casts its historical net widely: the Holy Roman Empire is a repeated point of reference for the ambitions of Mohammed ben Abbas and the Muslim Brotherhood and the novel’s last major dialogue takes place against the backdrop of the Roman arènes de Lutèce in Paris. Decadence is a recurring theme, not only in the discussion of Huysmans but linking the bloated and

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<sup>50</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, “Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission*”.

<sup>51</sup> Bruno Viard, “L’oeuvre instable: Situation politique et historique de Houellebecq”, in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. by Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, Paris: L’Herne, 2017, pp. 354-359 (p. 357).

<sup>52</sup> Le Bras and Todd, *Le Mystère français*, pp. 61, 74.

narcissistic culture of contemporary Europe to the fall of the Roman Empire: in a sort of free indirect citation of Rediger's discourse, we read that "parvenue à un degré de décomposition répugnant, l'Europe occidentale n'était plus en état de se sauver elle-même – pas davantage que ne l'avait été la Rome antique du V<sup>e</sup> siècle de notre ère". (276) Bearing in mind the reference, above, to Péguy and the First World War, various commentators have suggested that *Soumission* resembles the European cultural pessimism of the era of high modernism, represented by figures like Thomas Mann and Robert Musil.<sup>53</sup> In Houellebecq's quasi-scientific language, this cultural pessimism is given a demographic framing: once neo-liberalism has undermined the social and moral authority of the family, its days are demographically numbered: "alors venait, logiquement, le temps de l'Islam" (271). Again, though, Houellebecq's apparent argument, if perhaps slightly simplistic and alarmist in tone, is matched by the ideas of many more sober thinkers. For the culture of neo-liberal capitalism, relentlessly fixated on the satisfaction of desires (or, which amounts to the same thing, on the creation of new desires to be satisfied by new products), working, at best, toward the short-term consolidation of capital, risks cutting itself off from both the past and the future. Pierre Manent argues as follows:

Si la société formellement libre n'est pas aussi une communauté d'expérience capable de lier les trois dimensions du temps, elle s'installera dans un présent perpétuel où il ne se passe en vérité plus rien. Plus précisément, elle se confondra imaginativement avec l'espace du 'monde' où il n'y a que dispersion sur une surface plane

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<sup>53</sup> See for instance Guez, "Esthétique de la capitulation" and Mark Lilla, "Slouching toward Mecca", *New York Review of Books*, 2 April 2015.

puisque l'expérience nouvelle, ou qui pourrait être nouvelle, n'a plus de lieu d'appartenance, ni de remémoration, ni de projet.<sup>54</sup>

Houellebecq's work, in its sustained critique of neoliberalism, has consistently sought to combat this culture of erasure. Houellebecq's best work has a profoundly historical dimension, reminding us of the cultural origins of our present condition and insisting upon just how recent its advent has been and, as a result, how precarious its claim to ideological, and even civilizational, authority. The future projections of Houellebecq's novels invite us to contemplate the end of our culture as a spur to collectively re-imagining its possible continuation.

As we have repeatedly demonstrated in this article, Michel Houellebecq sees contemporary western – or at least French – society as at an impasse. Its political culture may be laudably democratic and accountable, but it is too bogged down in petty bureaucracy and short-termist gains to address the major economic, environmental and demographic crises of our time. We may have won unprecedented sexual freedom, but its cost is a generalized performance anxiety and an over-riding sense of fatigue at the ubiquitous spectacularization and mercantilization of sex. Economic globalization has given opportunities for travel and cultural exchange to millions of people but has insidiously eroded local manifestations of identity and belonging, the decline of which it has even become uncouth to lament. The drift of Houellebecq's oeuvre, culminating, for now, in *Soumission*, seems to suggest that the only way out of this impasse would involve appealing to a higher moral authority and therefore reinvigorating the faith

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<sup>54</sup> Manent, *Situation de la France*, pp. 82-83.



cultures that have been dormant in much of western Europe for the past century or more. Yet Houellebecq remains hesitant about proposing this as a veritable solution since, as *Soumission* demonstrates, the religious pantomime becomes grotesque if it is not underpinned by any genuine spiritual feeling or any real attempt to modify behaviour in view of the more ascetic lifestyle that might bring one into contact with God. François may end *Soumission* by giving serious consideration to an Islamic conversion but surely no reader would expect him thereby to renounce his dependence on alcohol and it is clear that his principal motivations are the opportunity to keep his job with a dramatically increased salary plus the enticing prospect of a mini-harem of attractive young wives allocated to him without the need for any effort on his part. Of course this cannot be taken seriously as a spiritual solution to our current social problems. Instead, in its very grotesquerie, it points up both the need to imagine such a solution and our unfortunate distance from it. As Edwards and Graulund remark, ‘the grotesque offers a creative force for conceptualizing the indeterminate that is produced by distortion, and reflecting on the significance of the uncertainty that is thereby produced’.<sup>55</sup>

In a recent book that renews the call for political responsibility among public intellectuals in France, Geoffroy de Lagasnerie dismissed Houellebecq’s “si mauvais roman” arguing that, whatever literary qualities the book might possess, they are outweighed by its Islamophobic overtones that pander to the same paranoid fears as are stoked by the Front National. As Lagasnerie

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<sup>55</sup> Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, p. 3.

succinctly put it, “le racisme vaut-il une belle phrase?”<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, this kind of hasty misreading of Houellebecq is all too common and stokes a very public antagonism toward the author that further militates against the careful assessment of the work. Lagasnerie implies that the monstrous ideological message of Houellebecq’s novel is weakly compensated for by the ingenuity of his pretty phrase-making. But this is a misunderstanding of the author’s literary project that, in its archaic reduction to a simplistic form/content opposition, is itself grotesque. For, while some of the positions expressed in *Soumission* may indeed be dubious, it is rarely completely clear just whose sentiments we are reading. The confusion of voices in the novel, through reported speech and narratorial distance, suggests instead the very obfuscation and obscurity of the discourses surrounding race and religion in France. Houellebecq satirizes a polyphony of second-hand, ill thought-out views that are the symptom and result of an ingrained consumer culture in which values have become thoroughly detached from any real ethical ground and irrevocably tied to the dictatorship of short-term pleasure and gain.

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<sup>56</sup> Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, *Penser dans un monde mauvais*, Paris: P.U.F., 2017, pp. 32-33.