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Douglas Morrey

4. From Confusion to Conversion: Listening to the Narrative Voice of Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*

Abstract:
Submission (2015), a novel in which a Muslim political party is elected to govern France, has been widely interpreted as part of a ubiquitous discourse of "declinism" in contemporary French intellectual culture. The novel has been accused of complicity with a reactionary politics favouring a return to strong patriarchal authority and national pride, while the narrative of the triumph of political Islam is frequently interpreted as a thinly veiled act of Islamophobia. This ideological interpretation is, however, complicated by the bad faith of the novel's unreliable narrator, and by the ironic treatment of his narrative voice. By taking the elusiveness of this narration more fully into account, it becomes possible to read *Submission* as a tentative – if never unambiguous – narrative of religious conversion. To this extent, the treatment of Islam in *Submission* can be seen as consistent with the persistent, but ambivalent, role of religion in Houellebecq's wider work.

Keywords: Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, unreliable narrator, narrative voice, Islamophobia

1. *Houellebecq, postsecularism, and French identity crisis*

Michel Houellebecq is a writer whose work can clearly be seen to map the postsecular turn in contemporary culture. The French novelist's earlier work – in particular *Extension du domaine de la lutte/Whatever* (1994) and *Les Particules élémentaires/Atomised* (1998) – presented a withering critique of a nihilistic, individualistic, hedonistic society that Houellebecq sees as the particular legacy, in France, of the libertarian carnival of May '68, and the general legacy, in the western world, of

secular humanism. Houellebecq has stressed that he believes a society cannot survive over the long term without religion, or at least something equating to religion (Houellebecq and Lévy 2008: 166). Although the author is a self-professed atheist – despite a youthful fascination with Catholicism (Houellebecq and Lévy 2008: 146-9) – Houellebecq's work repeatedly implies that, in order to grow and prosper, societies need something structurally similar to religion, even if those institutions are ultimately positivist in nature and inspiration. Given Houellebecq's long-standing interest in nineteenth-century social reformers like Auguste Comte and Charles Fourier, it is also possible to see the novelist's work as extending a long tradition of French reflection on the spiritual deficit of the post-revolutionary secular state (Houellebecq 2009: 243-53; Bourdeau 2017).

This conflict at the heart of Houellebecq's work between nihilistic self-gratification and an ineradicable striving for the spiritual is perhaps best dramatized in his 2005 novel *La Possibilité d'une île/The Possibility of an Island* in which a corrupt religious sect bankrolls scientific research into physical immortality through cloning. The narrative of this novel is inextricably ambiguous: the "Elohimite" sect is, at bottom, little more than a joke – a vehicle for the "Prophet"'s inflated ego and sexual gratification that becomes a resurrection cult following a media-spun cover-up of an internecine murder. Still, this sect rapidly becomes, through its scientifically underpinned promise of eternal life, the most popular religion in the world and the end result of its ideology is nothing less than *species change*: the replacement of humanity by a genetically-engineered "neo-human" largely free from humanity's destructive appetites. In the light of this earlier work, Houellebecq's highly controversial 2015 novel *Soumission/Submission* – which imagines a Muslim political party taking power and installing a version of Sharia law in France – can be seen as just the latest development in a long-term representational project. Weary of the consumer pressures, social failures and spiritual vacuum of secular neo-liberalism, Houellebecq's imagined France returns to religion in an effort to restore order, meaning and purpose to its society.

The problem, however, is the particular religion to which this fictional nation turns. It is, at the very least, provocative to imagine a democratically elected Islamic government in a country where Muslims make up – according to the best estimates and in the absence of official census data – no more than eight per cent of the total population (Fassin 2019: 20). But, in addition, *Submission* was published in a cultural context in France in which prominent intellectuals have variously lamented the decline of French national identity (Finkielkraut 2015), accused the nation of committing cultural and diplomatic suicide (Zemmour 2014), and warned of a "great replacement" of indigenous French culture by a demographically dynamic immigrant Muslim population (Camus 2011). As Shlomo Sand has argued, a paranoid Islamophobia has "become a major intellectual currency in France" (2018: 244) and, at the time of publication of Houellebecq's novel, "the relationship of France to its Muslim residents had reached a kind of boiling point" (206). In this context, it was easy to see *Submission* as lending a new cultural legitimacy to the alarmist media discourses of these right-wing commentators (Pérez 2015: 115).

Commented [MD1]: nb. 'Finkielkraut' (with an i) is the correct spelling.

Like most novels set in the future (the events of the narrative take place in 2022), *Submission* can be read as a reflection on the present of its writing and Houellebecq's novel has been characterized as something like "the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of French literature" (Onfray 2017: 13): an acknowledgement and expression of a people's fear of being "dominated by a foreign culture" (Toranian and Viry 2015: 33). Even leaving aside the tragic coincidence of the novel's publication with the Islamist terrorist attacks on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, *Submission* became highly controversial in France because, more than Houellebecq's earlier novels, it was explicitly focused on "the specific question of the condition of France" (Crowley 2019: 26). Michel Onfray (2017: 65) suggests that the novel was additionally designed to displease since it satirizes precisely the intellectual class most likely to read and comment upon it: journalists, politicians and academics. One's reaction to, and interpretation of, *Submission* became a kind of ideological "test" in a certain French milieu (Julliard 2015). Much of the mainstream, left-leaning press in France accused Houellebecq of complicity with Islamophobic conspiracy

theories. For instance, Éric Fassin (2019) has argued, on the basis of both textual and extra-textual evidence, that the focus of Houellebecq's writing has moved, over the course of his career, from a critique of capitalist liberalism to a concerted attack on Islam.

Now, one cannot reasonably object to a professional writer choosing a contemporary cultural controversy as the subject of his novel; it remains, however, for us to unpack the ideological sense of Houellebecq's provocation in *Submission.* Is he positing a French Islamic state as a serious possibility and, if so, is the reader to understand this as an alarmed warning about a proximate future challenge to France's proud secular inheritance? Alternatively, should the prospect of an Islamic state be regarded more dispassionately as a possible "solution" (however imperfect) to some of the social ills and cultural failures of western secular capitalism? In this sense, *Submission* could be read as a further instalment in Houellebecq's series of critical utopian fictions (see for instance Varsava 2005; Campbell 2018). On the other hand, if the Islamic government is not a serious proposition, then presumably the novel should be read as a satire, but then who or what are its targets? This article seeks to answer (or at least to untangle) these questions through a close reading of the novel. I argue that *Submission* may, in fact, be read as a sincere postsecular conversion narrative, but that this reading is made difficult by the fundamental unreliability of Houellebecq's first-person narrator. The ironic treatment of Houellebecq's narrator means that many of the apparent ideological positions voiced in the novel should be regarded with considerable caution. Meanwhile, buried within this distracting mass of frequently questionable sentiments, is a narrative of religious conversion, the emotional stages of which can be seen to throw new light on the novel's intractable ideological questions. Nonetheless, the conversion narrative is equally waylaid by Houellebecq's ironic narratorial processes such that the novelist stops short of unequivocally offering faith practice as a narrative or ideological solution to the novel's dilemmas.

2. Nostalgia and decline? Unpacking the ideology of Submission

Anders Borg-Sørensen remarks (2017: 133) that "a reading of Houellebecq's *Submission* necessitates a discussion of ideology" and such discussions have hardly been lacking in the reception of the novel. Indeed, Houellebecq's text has been scrutinized and criticized almost as though it were a politician's speech or an essay by a political philosopher. Instead, what is lacking from the debate is sustained consideration of the literary qualities of *Submission* and the effects they may have on what might otherwise appear a straightforwardly ideological discourse. This article seeks to recuperate *Submission* as a work of literature, gauging the subtlety and complexity of its ideological message through the finesse of its style and narration. It is, however, somewhat surprising that such a careful text-based reading should be necessary given that exegetes of Houellebecq's work have been defending and demonstrating the author's ability as a literary stylist for close to two decades (Estier 2015). It is no doubt the politically incendiary subject matter of *Submission*, coupled to the dramatic, and highly mediatized, coincidence of the novel's publication with the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, that have led to a wilful forgetting of the literary qualities of this narrative, particularly in its French reception.

In the following two sections, I will set out in some detail the textual evidence to support the ideological readings of *Submission* that have been offered by a number of other critics. Having done this, I will go on, in subsequent sections, to show how the unreliable status of Houellebecq's narrator, and the frequently ironic narrative voice, render these initial ideological conclusions untenable, or at least overly simplistic. Finally, I will explore the conversion narrative contained within the novel and consider how it may inflect our reading of these ideological questions. Michel Houellebecq has been accused of contributing to the discourse of "declinism" in contemporary France, a strand of intellectual debate that posits a state of terminal decadence in French culture (and, more broadly, in Europe or the entire western world) leaving it open to invasion by foreign interests. Such a vision often implies a nostalgia for an older set of patriarchal-nationalist values that have fallen out of favour under the reign of neoliberalism,

identity politics and "political correctness." *Submission* arguably sets up its declinist agenda in its first chapter, with a three-page-long paragraph that evokes "a Western civilization now ending before our very eyes" (Houellebecq 2016: 6) and "the last vestiges of a dying welfare state" (8). Later in the novel, we are told by the narrator that it was "obvious" that "France, like all the other countries of western Europe, had been drifting towards civil war" (94). In a line that anticipates the populist electoral victories of recent years, the narrator reflects that those who profit from a given social system may be unable to imagine its demise, whereas the same society's most disenfranchised "can contemplate its destruction without any particular dismay" (44).

Submission presents contemporary French (and, by extension, European) democratic politics as a predictable, self-involved and ultimately largely impotent media circus. The alternation between centre-left and centre-right governments is compared to "a power-sharing deal between two rival gangs" (40). It is implied that the media is complicit in a centrist conspiracy to silence popular support for the far right (53) but that same media is hypocritically delighted by the prospect of real political instability because of its positive effect on television-audience ratings (62). It is further suggested that the Muslim presidential candidate, Mohammed Ben Abbes, succeeds partly through his canny manipulation of the media who, paralyzed by their fear of appearing racist, neglect to probe the detail of his policies (88-9). Ben Abbes, meanwhile, appears as the first French politician in several generations to display "a truly historic vision" (126): he is compared to de Gaulle (129) and even to Napoleon (242)! Ben Abbes and the Muslim Brotherhood bring with them a return to traditional patriarchal values that the narrator acknowledges "worked" (31), in the sense of perpetuating themselves, whereas the rampant individualism of neoliberal capitalism has led to falling birth rates and fractured families. Indigenous Europeans are simply losing the demographic war (56) as a consequence of narcissistic western sexuality, of the selfishness of the baby-boomer generation (we note, as usual in Houellebecq, the narrator's estrangement from his parents) and of hedonistic capitalism. The

Muslim Brotherhood's massive withdrawal of funding from state education, throwing responsibility back upon the family and encouraging a desertion of women from the workforce, is seen to result in the kind of economic growth and confidence not seen in France since the post-war "Trente Glorieuses" (164-5).

Academics can provide no more resistance to this conservative revolution than can the media or mainstream politicians. Universities are presented as another self-absorbed enclave cut off from the real world, as at the quarterly cocktail party of the *Journal des dix-neuvièmistes* where colleagues rehearse arguments that are already over a century old while sheltered from the distant sounds of civil unrest (45-8). These academics believe themselves to be above politics, "untouchable" (63). The improbably rapid and comprehensive takeover of the Sorbonne by Muslim authorities seems deliberately designed to satirize the chronic inability of western institutions to take decisive action. Marc Weitzmann (2015) has argued that "the problem with *Submission* is the complete absence of narrative counterpoint. The diagnosis of the supposed decadence of the West is never challenged."

Should we conclude, then, that Houellebecq is nostalgic for an older model of society? Certainly, the past is very present in *Submission*: the late nineteenth century is a constant point of reference thanks to the narrator's study of Huysmans. But many more distant civilizations are also evoked, from prehistoric hunter-gatherers, through the Holy Roman Empire, to the thousand-year reign of medieval Christendom. This multiplication of historical periods arguably therefore gives a sense of infinite regress to the idea of European decadence that renders it problematic. Indeed, on a smaller scale, the idea – popular with Zemmour and Douglas Murray (2017) – that France, or Europe, have committed a slow suicide in recent decades is casually dismissed by Rediger who declares that the suicide of European civilization culminated in the First World War (Houellebecq 2016: 214-15). On the very next page, the narrator wonders whether the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 might not be a more significant date (215). In fact, the narrator of *Submission* is remarkably clear-eyed about nostalgia, declaring in the subsequent

chapter: "The past is always beautiful. So, for that matter, is the future. Only the present hurts…" (222)

3. The case for Islamophobia

It is not entirely straightforward, then, on the basis of textual evidence, to conclude that Houellebecq is a nostalgic reactionary: contemporary western culture is presented as inefficient to the point of decadence and, in places, the narrative appears to posit authoritarian politics as a "solution" to this problem; yet the novel's long historical vision renders this ideological position problematic by suggesting that nostalgia for a supposedly more ordered past has always been part of European cultural discourse and should therefore necessarily be treated with caution whenever it is invoked to argue for dramatic political change. Can we corroborate with any more certainty the accusations of Islamophobia that have dogged the novel's media career? Shlomo Sand (2018: 211) calls *Submission* "one of the most manifestly Islamophobic books published in France so far this century" and it is true that Houellebecq was tried, though acquitted, for incitement to racial hatred on the basis of remarks made about Islam in 2001 (Chemin 2015b). Russell Williams (2019: 63) speculates that this acquittal left the author "inoculated from further prosecution" and thus able to give freer rein in subsequent writings to his Islamophobia. Arguably, the narrative of *Submission*, in which Ben Abbes plans to expand the European Union to incorporate north African and middle-eastern states, reflects the paranoid conspiracy theory of "Eurabia" championed by Bat Ye'or (2010) who argues that a tacit collaboration between the interests of radical Islam, anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism has shaped European politics over the last half-century. One can also see that the novel contains elements of casual racial stereotyping. A group of brown-skinned young men on a university campus are immediately perceived as threatening (Houellebecq 2016: 23) and, once the Muslim Brotherhood begin to demonstrate some electoral buoyancy, the automatic assumption is that they will bring with them a regressive, misogynistic form of Islam (66-7). Ben Abbes is even

described as resembling "a neighbourhood grocer" (88). The novel repeatedly betrays an understanding that the French population is "openly right wing" (40) and, as such, pitted against a left-leaning establishment that desires nothing less than "for France to disappear" (119) into a federal Europe. The evocations of medieval Christendom sometimes come close to suggesting a fascist ideology of "blood-and-belonging."

Much of this material, then, *appears* faithfully to parrot the ideology of white nationalist conspiracies of the replacement of indigenous Europeans by an immigrant other. Once again, however, the novel's development suggests that this vision is risibly simplistic and easily challenged. Ironically, when the Muslim Brotherhood come to power, it is not with the kind of radical left Islamism ("*islamo-gauchisme*") projected by reactionary doom-mongers in France, but rather with a sort of neo-conservatism that preaches family values and the small state. The richest irony of *Submission* is that the identitarian movement with which some critics have aligned Houellebecq is shown to have unexpected similarities with political Islam (a re-valuing of patriarchy, a re-assertion of Europe on the world stage, etc.). The novel's most prominent *identitaire* (Rediger) is now a converted Muslim proselytizer who sees his white-nationalist past as simply a misstep on the path to his true ideological home. Rather than espousing an identitarian agenda, then, this narrative twist must *either* satirize such individuals as gullible turncoats *or* invite them to see unsuspected similarities between their own beliefs and those of their supposed foreign invaders.

The difficulty that critics have found in determining the ideological stance of *Submission* is illustrated by the parallels that many have noted between the narrative situation of Houellebecq's novel and the Nazi Occupation of France during the Second World War. The narrator's Jewish girlfriend, who emigrates to Israel with her family early in the novel, can effectively be read as a narrative device demonstrating the fate of Jews under authoritarian regimes in France (Armus 2017). The academics who convert to Islam in order to remain at the Sorbonne are explicitly associated with "an act of *collaboration*" (Houellebecq 2016: 239, original

italics). But the ideological stance underlying this imagery has been variously interpreted. Fassin recalls (2019: 17) that Marine Le Pen also used the rhetoric of "Occupation" to describe large groups of Muslims conducting Friday prayers on the streets of Paris, thus implying an incendiary comparison of Muslims to Nazis. Others have suggested that *Submission* contains "a masochistic nostalgia for capitulation" (Guez 2015) and Weitzmann (2015) argues that the very tripartite structure of the novel – confused apprehension of a threat, exile to rural France, gradual coming to terms with the new regime – mirrors the way in which French narratives represented the Occupation. Still other commentators (Julliard 2015; Onfray 2017) see the imagery of collaboration as a scathing attack on weak-minded French intellectuals that was misrecognized by precisely those journalists and academics who are its target.

The situation is further complicated by the gendered representation of Islam in the novel. The narrator indulges in orientalist fantasies about the exotic "birds of paradise" concealed beneath modest Islamic dress (Houellebecq 2016: 74) and, following the emigration of his girlfriend, repeatedly pays for (and sodomizes) sex workers of Arab heritage as though in an unconscious re-assertion of his western male privilege. Much is made of the legitimacy of polygamy under Islamic law and the very young age of certain Muslim wives is underlined. It is made very clear that the prospect of a young wife (or indeed several of them) is held out to the narrator as a kind of reward for the conversion to Islam that will also allow him to keep his job. The same is true of the narrator's colleagues Steve and Loiseleur. This therefore implies that the "collaboration" of these academics has little to do with ideology, or even with professional ambition or greed, but is largely motivated by baser instincts. In each case, the contrast between the rather doleful characterization of the previously confirmed bachelor and their sudden transformation into well-partnered ambassadors of the academic community is starkly humorous. This is particularly true of Loiseleur, whose initial presentation as being "generally in a state that approached the unhygienic" (Houellebecq 2016: 239) is almost immediately juxtaposed with his transformation in which "one couldn't help detecting a woman's hand at

work" (240). Berg-Sørensen insists (2017: 132) that this sardonic treatment of the manipulation of male intellectuals through their libido is "the most satirical part" of the novel.

4. *The unreliable narrator*

How, then, are we to interpret the advent of a French Islamic state in *Submission*? Notwithstanding the satirical elements outlined above, should we lend any credence to the narrative's provocative suggestions that an Islamic government could provide a new economic and cultural stability to the nation, restoring a lost natural order to gender relations? Or is the novel's vision, as Sand suggests (2018: 216-17), "a pure dystopia": "a heavy black cloud wrapped in perfumed cotton wool to give consistency to the fragile identity of a nationalism in crisis." The ideological landscape of *Submission* appears confused and contradictory. Commentators on the novel have tended, some implicitly and others explicitly, to see this *either* as betraying Houellebecq's weak grasp of very complex socio-political material *or* as a wilful misdirection that cynically evokes the promise of a "soft" political Islam the better to confirm paranoid fantasies of a Muslim reterritorialization of Europe. What is missing from both these interpretations of the novel is a serious consideration of its narrative voice. Accounts that neglect to engage this question tend either to imply that the narrator is a simple mouthpiece for Houellebecq's own views, or to assume that François is somehow authoritative (perhaps because he is an institutionally accredited intellectual). Neither assumption stands up to scrutiny. The following two sections analyse the novel's narrative voice in detail in order to show how it complicates and undermines some of *Submission*'s apparent ideological position-taking. Indeed, one of the most productive critical comments about this novel has perhaps been made by Regenia Gagnier (2017: 427) who suggests that Islam is to *Submission* what Africa is to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899): "a mere backdrop for the break-up of one petty European mind."

François appears to have a degree of cultural authority, as a professor of French literary history at the Sorbonne. When one looks closer, however, several factors undermine this

authority: despite his role, François is contemptuous of the Humanities in higher education (Houellebecq 2016: 10); he admits he has never read a history book (85); he has not "the slightest vocation for teaching" (11) and indeed we rarely witness him doing any academic work; his publications are minimal – one book and a rather flippant-sounding article (28); Rediger even describes François's doctoral thesis as "almost impossible to read" (206).

More broadly, François is a dishonest, or at least inconsistent, narrator. He claims, on the novel's second page (6), to have "neither the skill nor the desire to analyse" people, yet he does precisely that throughout. He repeatedly complains of being alone (59) yet enjoys many invitations from friends and colleagues and has several dates and sexual encounters during the course of the narrative. He claims not to like young people (11) yet is a serial seducer of his female students. His actions often fail to match his stated intentions, for instance going for tea with Steve despite not liking him (or tea, 20) or sleeping with dates or sex workers even though "I'd rather have avoided it" (14) or "I felt no real desire" (162). As Per Buvik has observed (2011: 76), there is often a kind of "*Bovarysme*" in the self-deception and bad faith of Houellebecq's narrators. Bruno Blanckeman (2013: 51) adds that "their very lucidity is often the occasion for a blindness that leads to their downfall." François may have moments of dispassionate clarity, but he is largely unable to recognize or talk about feelings and, as such, lacks self-awareness.

François, in short, suffers from twin afflictions that seriously damage his credibility as a guide, or even as a witness, to a major cultural shift. He is an alcoholic, heavily reliant on drink both on social occasions and in private, such that he is often distracted, or even semi-conscious, during some of the novel's key dialogues about the coming Islamic state (with Tanneur [Houellebecq 2016: 131] or with Rediger [209]). He is also pretty clearly depressed. François's narrative voice is characterized by a lexis of fatigue and exhaustion; he envisages the future with despair, relating to his body almost exclusively as a site of pain (80) and to social life as "a series of petty annoyances" (81). He isolates himself, forgetting his own birthday (78), spending

Christmas alone (171), and sometimes failing to leave his apartment more than once a week (171). As already mentioned, François has no relationship with his parents who, it is implied, may themselves have been depressed: his mother is described as "that neurotic bitch" (189) and he has no childhood memory of ever meeting any friends of his parents (159).

This evidence of depression is surely sufficient to explain François's nihilism. It is a striking symptom of this depressive nihilism that, at a dramatic turning point in France's history, François chooses not to participate in the political life of his country, instead returning to his books or enjoying a trip to an unusually deserted supermarket (97-8). Indeed, he flees the capital altogether, not even bothering to vote in the elections. When he discovers the aftermath of a murder at a filling station, François seems to interpret this as evidence of the impending civil war, yet there is little reason, by this stage of the narrative, for us to trust his judgment, given that his reaction – calmly stepping over the corpse of the dead cashier in an attempt to release the gas pumps, before helping himself to a sandwich from the shelves (106) – is clearly that of a sociopath.

In Michel Onfray's blunt summary (2017: 49), "François doesn't like himself; he doesn't like other people either." Agathe Novak-Lechevalier has suggested that Houellebecq's characters are so isolated they have typically lost the ability to recognize themselves in the other. What remains is an ironic enunciative voice, "fundamentally aloof, aggressive and divisive" (2013: 68). A close reading of *Submission* reveals that François has a fatal tendency to read his own, often rather pathological, perception as universal (this is itself ironic given the observation quoted above about the French establishment's incapacity to empathize with society's have-nots). Thus, for instance, François assumes that most people are just as depressed as he is (Houellebecq 2016: 14) and just as emotionally inarticulate (16). He takes it as read that "the vast majority of French people would always be resigned and apathetic" (94) because this accurately describes his own political stance.

Because François survives on a diet of ready-meals, he assumes that no one knows how to cook from raw ingredients any more (77). Perhaps most significantly, this solipsism colours François's intimate relations. He surmises that everyone of his age is as unlucky in love as he is (75) and shares his cynical view of it (28). He also seems to believe that sex workers share his sentiments, noting that "Slutty Babeth" "had a taste for sodomy" (i.e. like him, 155) and that "Nadia" is "afraid of enjoying herself, as if it might lead to actual feelings" (154, which is surely more a description of François's emotional state than the likely disposition of a paid partner half his age). Still in the realm of sex, François is confident that "most men" taking an interest in Islam would gravitate immediately toward the question of polygamy and, additionally, that any young Muslim girl, "no matter how pretty […], would feel honoured to share my bed" (250).

The vast majority of characters in *Submission* are discussed by the narrator with withering contempt or, at best, with sardonic humour, a tendency that has been fairly constant in Houellebecq's work from his very first publications (Noguez 2003: 117). It is striking, then, that the one character who largely escapes this rule, in *Submission*, is the Muslim convert and proselytizer Rediger. François's open admiration for Rediger is such that it is not far-fetched to see a *frisson* of sexual excitement in the relations between the two men. When they first meet, Rediger confidently places his hand on François's shoulder and the narrator is struck by the other man's "lovely smile" (199), albeit coquettishly observing that "he knew it, and knew how to use it" (200). François is easily seduced by Rediger's desirable address with its antique décor. Rediger tells François in no uncertain terms that he "wants" him (206[1]) and the narrator admits "I had never felt so *desirable*" (207, original italics). The narrator is reluctant to leave Rediger's house (216) and, in a kind of Freudian lapsus, "accidentally" leaves his rucksack behind so that

[1] The English translation here – "I want you on my team" (Houellebecq 2016: 206) – is rather more innocent than the ambiguous French "vous êtes quelque chose que je veux", literally "you're something I want" (2015: 247).

he'll have to return the following day (221). When he meets Rediger again, François admits to being "truly happy to see him" (241).

On the basis of this evidence, it is hard not to share Onfray's assessment (2017: 45) that François is ultimately presented as a weak man who is fascinated by and envious of power, and in particular of men who display the confidence and authority that he clearly lacks. (We might note that Mohammed Ben Abbes, although never directly encountered in the narrative, is also commonly described with a kind of awed admiration.) More than this, though, the infatuation with Rediger evokes the commonplace theory that adherence to fascism is bound up with an erotics of sado-masochism, an idea explicitly gestured to by Houellebecq's choice to set the scene of the two men's longest encounter in the house in which Anne Cécile Desclos was inspired to write *The Story of O* (Houellebecq 2016: 217).

In summary, the ironic narration of *Submission* presents François as man of dubious intelligence, despite his social status and intellectual snobbery, and as a man of relentless bad faith, despite his willingness to present himself as an authoritative voice of culture. The narrative repeatedly shows us how François's vision of events is clouded by alcohol and by his chronic depression, which renders his worldview erratic, irritable and close to solipsism at times. His despair at contemporary French society reflects, above all, François's weariness with his own mind, body, habits and lifestyle. Meanwhile, his apprehension of the nascent Islamic state with a mixture of flat affect and bemused opportunism can only be taken as representative if we accept the entire population of France as being as listless as François is, which would meaning falling into his narcissistic trap. *Submission*, then, appears as a character study of a depressed and credulous individual who must be approached with caution as an unreliable narrator. James Phelan (2005) observes that unreliable narrators may either misreport (and therefore misinterpret and misevaluate) events, or they may underreport, the latter sometimes being a condition of the former. Underreporting would seem to be a significant part of the problem in *Submission*, since François's perspective on the dramatic political events in France is severely limited by his narrow

social circle and the disengagement apparently caused by his depression. To follow a distinction proposed by Greta Olson (2003), François's alcoholism and depression make him more of an "untrustworthy" than a "fallible" narrator, what Shen (2013) glosses as "dispositionally" rather than "circumstantially unreliable."

5. *Narrative voice*

It is certainly the case, as Regenia Gagnier suggests, that the crisis of the secular state in *Submission* serves to throw the narrator's existential crisis into sharp relief. But Islam is not only a convenient "backdrop" in this novel, as Gagnier puts it (2017: 427); it also becomes the motivation for a serious and moving reflection on the place of religion in contemporary culture. If *Submission* is able to be all of these things at once – narratologically recondite character study, satire of contemporary intellectual discourse in France, and sober reflection on the spiritual deficit of European culture – it is because of the multiple layers of irony in which the narrative, and the narrative voice, are wrapped. As Bruno Blanckeman has remarked (2013: 49), "Few oeuvres in contemporary literature accord such a decisive role to irony as does Houellebecq's." How is it, then, that so many readers seem to have missed, or misunderstood, this irony? It is true that the narrative voice can often by very seductive in its appearance of sober analysis. As indicated in section 2 above, *Submission* contains many very long paragraphs and very long sentences and the multiple subordinate clauses within these sentences can sometimes give an impression of inevitability to the situations described, which, on the scale of the whole novel, tends to present the advent of the Islamic state as the outcome of a logical sequence of events and consequences.

It is also the case that the narration often invites the reader's complicity through casual locutions that presume assent and thus reinforce this sense of inexorableness: "as we all know" (Houellebecq 2016: 10), "of course" (15), "The obvious answer is…" (38), "as one can see" (Houellebecq 2015: 12, elided from the English translation). It is easy to assume that such

locutions are the mark of an expert narrator demonstrating his erudition when, to the contrary, one can read them as ironic asides indicating that the narration is here satirizing the pomposity of different genres and registers. Dominique Noguez has noted (2003: 102) that the lengthening of sentences in Houellebecq is often a sign that he is deliberately pastiching another genre or style. *Submission* contains many examples of pastiche: of sociological analysis and of political science, but also of automobile journalism (Houellebecq 2016: 156), thus implying a rather irreverent levelling of these different registers. In addition, sometimes the register will shift in mid-discourse, as when Tanneur's erudite analysis of political strategy is scattered (in indirect discourse) with insults worthy of a polemical pamphlet (such as the "progressive mummified corpses" of *soixante-huitards*, 126). Elsewhere register is deliberately incongruous, as in the use of a florid lyrical style to describe a banal scenario encountered on Youporn (17-18)

Not infrequently, Houellebecq adds a further layer of distance between the narrating voice and the enunciation through the use of italics or inverted commas as though to signal the appearance almost of Flaubertian received ideas. The narrator is sometimes aware of this dubious citation, noting the way his interlocutor nods "as if I'd just expressed an idea" after he slips the journalistic clichés "*the balance of power*" and "*symbolic benchmark*" into conversation (26). This technique thus further ironizes the authoritative, analytical account of politics, helping to de-naturalize a political discourse in which certain ideological statements tend to be taken as truisms, such as that "the pro-growth right had won the 'battle of ideas', [and] that young people today had become *entrepreneurs*" (125, original italics). In this particular example, this ideological position is presented as a kind of free indirect rendering of the politics of Mohammed Ben Abbes, presented – again indirectly – in the voice of Tanneur but within the context of a boozy dinner party that leaves the narrator so drunk he momentarily "tune[s] out of the conversation" (125). In other words, the narration here is not just at one remove from the neoliberal ideology quoted, but is distanced by four or five layers of irony. This multiplication of markers of irony means that, as Éric Bordas pointed out (in Buvik 2013: 77), it can be practically impossible to

distinguish between a critical and a complicit usage of a particular term or idea in Houellebecq's work. Blanckeman suggests (2013: 61) that, by "overplaying" the irony in his style, Houellebecq prevents it from becoming "an integral way of knowing or a pure manner of thinking." Christèle Couleau, finally, proposes (2013: 22) that, by juxtaposing the trivial or vulgar with its opposite (the noble, for instance), Houellebecq is able to offer a fleeting "awareness of the sublime" that may, at least momentarily, escape the all-pervasive irony.

To put this another way, it can be difficult to analyse the unreliability of the narrator in Houellebecq's work since it is often so problematic to identify – as so many critics have sought to do – the position of the implied author against which to measure that of the narrator. This is partly because Houellebecq deliberately and provocatively sets up points of comparison between his narrator and the widely disseminated public image of himself as author (see Chemin 2015a). In addition, however, Houellebecq's public and media appearances have become infamous for his adoption of provocative stances on political and cultural questions that can sometimes be interpreted as a cynical attempt to "play" the media both for publicity and to expose its own hypocrisy.

However, as Maxime Decout (2015) suggests, the attempt to measure the neatness of fit between a narrator's pronouncements and an author's implied views is itself misguided since literature is always and necessarily characterised by bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) at multiple levels. Decout follows Jean-Paul Sartre in suggesting that bad faith is tied to the very phenomenology of being, since bad faith emerges in the discrepancy between my self and the image of myself projected both by me and by others. A work of literature that allowed for no bad faith in its characterization would thus be thin and unconvincing. In addition, however, bad faith can be seen as a fundamental quality of language, and of literary language in particular to the extent that it pretends to reproduce reality while in fact doing nothing of the kind. "Since all language is in bad faith, every novel is too, but the tour de force is that therein lies its meaning and its truth" (Decout 2015: 64). For Decout, literature, as an art of bad faith, allows us to understand that

rationality and objectivity are not the only – or always the best – ways of apprehending reality or of relating to others. In so doing, the unreliability and disingenuousness of literature allow us better to appreciate our own inconsistency as readers and subjects of thought and action.

6. Submission *as conversion narrative*

A good illustration of this bad faith in action is that episode of *Submission* that may stand as the novel's most controversial or problematic element: the narrator's hypothetical conversion to Islam at the end of the narrative, related in the conditional tense in the novel's last chapter. One's interpretation of this ending will depend largely upon one's overall ideological reading of the novel, the competing accounts of which were set out in sections 2 and 3 above. If *Submission* is a warning about the erasure of French identity by a more confident and dynamic Islam, then the conversion shows how Islam poses such a serious threat that even subjects as improbable as François could end up converting. If *Submission* is a satire (of French *identitaires*), then, in its very implausibility, it mocks the discourse of the great replacement. If the novel is a satire of the French intellectual class, then it warns against intellectual and moral collaboration.

But one further interpretation that almost no one seems to have considered would be to take *Submission* seriously as a conversion narrative. I propose that a reading of the novel that takes full account of subtlety and complexity of the narrative voice allows, and even invites, this interpretation. As has been widely reported (Toranian and de Viry 2015: 24; Chemin 2015c), Houellebecq's original intention with the novel was to write a narrative of conversion to Catholicism but he found himself incapable of writing the moment of epiphany. Houellebecq describes himself as an atheist and claims he is "too old" to convert (Toranian and de Viry 2015: 22). The idea of conversion is partly inspired by the figure of Huysmans, whose last books, discussed at some length in *Submission*, describe a long, slow turning to Catholicism by the author's alter ego Durtal. François retraces some of Durtal's steps but concludes sadly that "I was almost completely lacking in spiritual fibre" (Houellebecq 2016: 77). However, leaving aside

the fact that François's narrative voice is not reliable enough to be consistently believed, we must remember that Huysmans's last novels – in particular *En route* (1895), which provides the epigraph to the first part of *Submission* – actually describe a gradual process of accommodation to the religious life accompanied by a distressing absence of faith. In the absence of faith, but with a hunger for spiritual nourishment, Durtal's worship and communion becomes a kind of performative conversion: as Regenia Gagnier puts it (2017: 422), he is "physically performing what cannot be believed." It is, perhaps, possible to see a similar process at work in François's trajectory in *Submission*.

The remnants of Houellebecq's planned Catholic conversion scene can be found in the chapter set in the pilgrimage site of Rocamadour, in the very centre of the novel. In Rocamadour, François feels as if he has "somehow stepped out of historical time" (Houellebecq 2016: 134). He is impressed by the "power" emanating from the statue of the Black Madonna and infant Jesus, which he finds "almost terrifying" (136). He feels his "own individuality dissolving" in this spiritual contemplation which is prolonged for several weeks (136). Finally, he finds himself "in a strange state", in which the Virgin appears to be "rising from her pedestal and growing in the air" (138). But he concludes that he is perhaps "just hungry," and "in an attack of mystical hypoglycaemia" (138). Although it would be easy to see this bathetic materialist interpretation as mocking the very idea of spiritual epiphany, we should remember – quite apart from the metaphorization of spiritual into physical hunger, already noted in Houellebecq's work by John McCann (2010: 189) – that practically all accounts of faith contain admissions of doubt, or of the postulant's feelings of being unworthy of the benediction of grace. Indeed, as mentioned above, Huysmans's own conversion epic documents in detail the on-going movement of approach and withdrawal that characterizes the life of faith. After all, in *the very next paragraph*, François is again rhapsodizing about the "sovereignty" and "power", the "something mysterious, priestly and royal" possessed by the statue (Houellebecq 2016: 139).

In addition, although François may protest that he has been "fully deserted by the Spirit," (139), a few chapters later we find him embarking on a retreat to the Benedictine monastery at Ligugé Abbey. This retreat appears as a response to a particularly acute phase of the narrator's depression, the decision coming after François "burst[s] into unexpected, uncontrollable tears" (172) after spending Christmas alone. The experience at Ligugé, like that at Rocamadour, is ambiguous. The narrator appreciates the rhythm of life measured out in prayer and unchanged for centuries (178) and enjoys the psalms "full of sweetness, hope and expectation" (181). But he complains at being unable to smoke and, in an increasingly obtuse and angry voice, contrasting with the earlier placid lyricism, he pretends to be unable to understand, other than materially, the references in the Benedictine literature to "a continual loving exchange" (181). On leaving the Abbey, François goes straight to a bar where he dulls this inner struggle by "mindlessly downing" several strong beers (182) yet admits: "It gave me no satisfaction to be back among people like myself" (182).

In short, then, François's possible conversion to Islam at the end of *Submission* can be seen as the culmination of a long process documented in the novel. Houellebecq himself has asserted (Toranian and de Viry 2015: 9) that François converts because everything is taken away from him: first Myriam, then his parents and his job. His (half-hearted) attempt at Catholic conversion is unsuccessful and, having completed his preface to the complete works of Huysmans, he has even exhausted his favourite author. Having nothing left, the narrator has no reason to resist what is offered to him. Yet this does not, in itself, invalidate the conversion. Indeed, it is often upon hitting rock bottom (to use the parlance of Alcoholics Anonymous), when all meaning has gone, that the very thirst for meaning is reborn. The fact that an apparently meaningless world continues, dimly, to signify is enough to call many to faith. Indeed, François, as a depressed addict, rootless and aimless, is understandably more in need of faith than most.

It is not necessary to accept unequivocally the veracity or sincerity of François's conversion to Islam at the end of *Submission*. If he did convert, he would hardly make a devout

Muslim, and his sudden bifurcation from Catholicism to Islam admittedly smacks of confusion and opportunism. Still, the fact that a conversion is convenient does not necessarily render it less genuine. The narrator rather snidely observes (Houellebecq 2016: 220-1) that Huysmans's eventual conversion allowed him to retain most of his bourgeois comforts, but the sincerity of his spiritual journey is nonetheless beyond doubt. Simply put, we need to regard religious conversion in *Submission* as more than an ironic twist, a simple narrative device. Indeed, anyone who is on, or has been on, a path of conversion is likely to identify with this narrative, with its waves of doubt and despair brightened by moments of inspiration and insight. But, more broadly, and extending the ambitious reach of some of Houellebecq's earlier novels, the trope of conversion implies that the whole of western European culture may now be seeking a kind of metaphysical foundation for an existence that has otherwise become futile, fragmented, and directionless.

7. *Conclusion*

As is the case with all of his major novels, it can be difficult to unravel exactly what Michel Houellebecq is saying in *Submission*. It is, in the last analysis, difficult to deny that some of the suggestions made in the novel echo those of reactionary, "declinist" critics in France. But there is little clear sense of nostalgia in *Submission*, no obvious or consistent desire to return to a fantasized strong, patriarchal France. As Onfray notes (2017: 20), Houellebecq "scoffs at work, family and nation, but he also scoffs at the opposite of work, family and nation." At the same time, the narrative of *Submission* insistently and ironically points up just how much the discourse of declinism actually shares with, or plays into the hands of, Islamism. But no one, surely, would conclude that Houellebecq is behaving as an Islamist, given that the real knowledge of Islam on display is somewhat minimal and that actual Muslim or Arab characters are conspicuous by their absence from the novel (Roy 2015). Should we then conclude that the whole enterprise is a monumental joke, a satirical portrait of the woeful discourses on both sides of the identitarian

debate? While there may be a grain of truth to that, it is important to note that *Submission* is not relentlessly comic. On the contrary, as Seth Armus remarks (2017: 131), there is "an overwhelming air of sadness that permeates the novel." This is largely because of the narrator's depressive voice, which we have analyzed in this article. François's depression is partly caused by his social situation, isolated and estranged from his family, and partly by social pressures and expectations around work and ambition and, in particular, sex and relationships. Although the narrator has moments of sharp-eyed lucidity, he often seems unaware of the extent of his depression, and his self-destructive behaviour and violent outbursts need to be interpreted with this in mind. In the context of this depression, the novel can be read as the narrator's genuine and moving search for meaning and *Submission* thus makes sense as a tentative, if largely failed, conversion narrative. The difficulty of the novel, but also its richness, stems from the fact that these different narrative and hermeneutic strands work alongside each other: it is difficult to take the conversion narrative seriously because of all the satirical material about French intellectual culture; but it is equally hard to take the satire as nothing but a joke because of the moving and earnest conversion narrative in which it is embedded.

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