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French literature: post-realism and anti-realism

van Wesemael, S.

Publication date

2011

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Reconsidering the postmodern: European literature beyond relativism

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Wesemael, S. (2011). French literature: post-realism and anti-realism. In T. Vaessens, & Y. van Dijk (Eds.), *Reconsidering the postmodern: European literature beyond relativism* (pp. 93-113, 256-258, 289-290). Amsterdam University Press.

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Reconsidering the Postmodern
European Literature Beyond
Relativism

Edited by Thomas Vaessens
and Yra van Dijk

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

Chapter 5

French Literature

Post-Realism and Anti-Realism

Sabine van Wesemael

Introduction

There are two types of modern writers: those who respect the conventions of the realistic novel and those who are opposed to them, having to a greater or lesser degree departed from the ambition to represent the non-literary reality. This is what the French postmodernist Alain Robbe-Grillet argues in a metafictional comment in his novel *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984). Modernists such as Proust and Larbaud wanted to express an intermittent, inner reality. Breton set out to understand surreality. Perec followed strict, mathematical rules while writing his experimental texts which his readers could reconstruct only with difficulty. Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote fragmented novels which seemed to deny any link with the non-literary reality: 'Un roman ne renvoie qu'à lui-même,' he said in his theoretical text *Pour un nouveau roman*. And authors such as Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Jean Echenoz, both from Minuit (the publishing house that became the hallmark for a formalist kind of prose), more recently chose to approach reality in a minimalistic way. In their novels, the characters hardly develop, reflections in a psychologizing manner are not to be found, the plots have not been arranged in a causal order, both authors display an aversion to realistic descriptions. Novels such as *Je m'en vais* and *La Salle de bain* express a postmodern view to humankind and society where alienation and ontological doubts are the central points.¹

In addition to these anti-realistic movements, twentieth-century French literature has always known a more traditional tendency, too. For instance, one could think of authors such as Marguerite Yourcenar and Michel Tournier who, for good reason, are often referred to as 'classiques modernes'.

Postmodernism in France

Postmodernism was a dominant movement in France in the 1960s and 1970s, featuring authors such as Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Duras, Simon and Butor who published theoretical writings that put forward their poetic ambitions, such as *Pour un nouveau roman* by Robbe-Grillet and *L'ère du soupçon* by Nathalie Sarraute. The movement found theoretical support in structuralists such as Genette. The often-quoted remark of Robbe-Grillet of "un roman ne renvoie qu'à lui-même" clearly expresses the fact that these *nouveaux romanciers* were not sympathetic to the non-literary reality, and harboured no wish to express any commitment, considering the literary text a closed entity within which any form of traditional realism had to be undermined: no clear character drawing (Robbe-Grillet was even of the opinion that the personage itself had to disappear from the novel), no reflections in a psychologizing manner, special focus on the object that in the action often takes the place of the personage (here, the French will speak of 'chosification'), no chronological, causal

narrative style, and an aversion to analogical usage because reality fails to be captured, even in a literary way. For instance, the novel *La Jalousie* by Robbe-Grillet amounts to little more than an incoherent collection of text fragments that the reader-puzzler is supposed to reconstruct. The personages of the novel have no or scant descriptions. The man from whose point of view the narrative is told is likely to be a jealous husband who is peeping at his wife A through the Venetian blinds as he suspects her of having started an adulterous relationship with their neighbour Franck. The shape of the text excellently expresses the narrator's emotions; descriptions of A and Franck enjoying a dram on the verandah or reading an African novel together are endlessly repeated, with the usual variations and inconsistencies, but without the narrator having any certainty about their relationship. This French structuralist and experimental postmodernism intention to express epistemological and ontological doubts broke with the conventions of the realistic novel, going back to authors who had done so previously: Proust and Breton had been shining examples to both Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute.²

A Reaction to Postmodernism

French historians of literature such as Dominique Viart and Bruno Blanckeman (*La Littérature Française au présent*) state that from the 1980s postmodernism gradually had to give way to a (neo-) realistic movement that no longer engaged in the above-mentioned experiments of form and style. They mention a 'return of the narrative', a reassessment of the conventions of the realistic novel: clear character drawing, determinism and causality, linear course of action, daily parlance, social criticism, detailism, etc.

In *Le Miroir qui revient* Robbe-Grillet is reacting against these modern authors who are distrustful of the experimental formalism of postmodernism:

Nowadays the reaction to any attempt to escape from traditional representation is so vehement that the daring remarks I used to make will be drowned out by an old discours, seemingly restored, against which I have always spoken out so passionately. [...] So should we resume these terrorist actions of the 1955-1960s? Sure, we should.³

Viart and Blanckeman put forward a number of arguments to enforce their proposition about a 'return of the narrative'. First of all, the modern novel puts the impersonal nature of much post-modern literature behind it, as for instance the infinity of ego-documents published from the 1980s goes to show. The former 'nouveaux romanciers' also write autobiographical texts: *Enfance* by Nathalie Sarraute, *L'Amant* by Marguerite Duras, *Le Jardin des plantes* by Claude

Simon and *Le Miroir qui revient* by Alain Robbe-Grillet are a few striking examples. Furthermore, many modern authors are opposed to the hermetic nature of many post-modern texts, and display an ambition to describe a non-literary reality. Annie Ernaux, Virginie Despentes, Marie Darrieussecq, François Bon, Michel Houellebecq and Frédéric Beigbeder each in their own way try to make comments on contemporary society. However, not only the individual views on humankind and society are back at centre stage, history, too, is again the subject matter of literature. Over the last two decades numerous novels have been written about the First and Second World Wars, ranging from Jean Rouaud's *Les Champs d'honneur* to Philippe Claudel's *Les Âmes grises* and from Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* to Lydie Salavaire's *La Compagnie des spectres*. Still, Viart and Blanckeman are right in admitting that at the moment it is not a matter of slavishly imitating nineteenth-century conventions, and that all disruptive, modernist, twentieth-century tendencies did leave the contemporary French novel with deep marks:

Contemporary literature is not characterized by restoring tradition. The indications of 'retour du sujet' and 'retour du récit' give a distorted view of what is really going on. The 'I', as the large quantity of autofictitious texts demonstrates, is surely back at the centre, the 'story' is quite in vogue again. This is not to say, however, that authors reapply traditional literary forms. A more correct claim would be to say that 'sujet' and 'récit' (but 'réel', 'Histoire', 'engagement critique', 'lyrisme'... as well) have a compelling presence again, but will, at the same time, be problematized, frequently still raising insoluble problems.⁴

The contemporary French novel is often rather a hybrid form, converging realism and postmodernism. Not by any means could *Le Miroir qui revient* (1985) and *L'Amant* (1984) be considered traditional autobiographies. They may be specified as 'nouvelles autobiographies', as the 'nouveau roman' strategies that undermine realism still affect them. To be sure, the novel *Les Âmes grises* by Philippe Claudel, dealing with the brutal murder of a little girl at the time of the First World War, is punctuated with realistic descriptions of setting and character, yet the novel is permeated by postmodern characteristics, too. The very title of *Les Âmes grises* alone indicates that reality is not black or white – nor can it immediately be known – but multi-interpretable and doubtful instead: ultimately, the murder will not be solved. Jean Rouaud's description of the First World War in *Les Champs d'honneur*, too, is markedly impressionistic, differing strongly from the realistic descriptions in the patriotic novels written at the time of the *Grande Guerre* of which *Le Feu* by Barbusse and *Le Croix des bois*

by Dorgeles are fine examples. The novels by bestselling author Michel Houellebecq, too, are prize examples showing that nowadays authors frequently opt for combining traditional narrative techniques and postmodern principles.

Post-Realism and Anti-Realism: Late Postmodernism in French Literature

French literature since the 1980s may be characterized by this negotiation between the two strands of literature that were prevalent in its literary tradition: realism on the one hand versus experiment (postmodern) on the other. What emerges therefore is a hybrid novel, which will be illustrated by three cases in this section. I will discuss two contemporary authors (Houellebecq and Claudel) whose novels express this hybrid postrealism. They will be compared to an author who claims to hold to postmodern principles, repudiating any form of realism, Alain Robbe-Grillet, but whose work is undoubtedly influenced by the turn to the narrative as well.

Michel Houellebecq

Michel Houellebecq is quite averse to the experiments of form and style of postmodern literature. In *Interventions*, a collection of essays, he writes about this, in his view, objectionable formalism:

There is something sad in this spectacle. I myself will always feel anxious whenever I see the riot of techniques that any 'Minuit-formalist' will put to use for so poor a final result. So as to put fresh heart into myself, I would often in my mind repeat Schopenhauer's statement: "The first rule, indeed by itself virtually a sufficient condition for good style, is to have something to say".⁵

Viart and Blanckeman assign Houellebecq to the 'hyperréalistes' because, like his personage Daniel, considering himself a modern Balzac, he aims to provide our modern society with comments, sure enough choosing a form and style with a nineteenth-century touch. With iron logic Houellebecq demonstrates that not only our economy but our emotional lives, too, are under complete control of the deterministic market forces of demand and supply. The physically unattractive narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* has little success with women, losing himself in an ultra-nihilistic view on humankind and society as a result. Over forty and starting to wear woollen pyjamas in bed, Isabelle, in *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005, English translation 2005: *The Possibility of an Island*) is traded in by Daniel for the much younger and sexually more active Esther.

The opening passage of *Les Particules élémentaires*, describing Bruno's and Michel's childhoods, could very well be read as a contemporary application of determinism, known from Zola's 'roman expérimental'.⁶ For lack of his mother's love, Michel is driven to science whereas Bruno is bound all his life to try and compensate for this lack of affection by compulsive sexual conquests. Houellebecq's characters will be realistically drawn, the course of action is often linear, his novels are permeated by reflections on contemporary society, his style being ordinary and accessible; it is rare for him to employ rhetorical figures. The scenario-writer Daniel¹ who, as has been mentioned before, considers himself a 'commentateur social' and idolizes Balzac, is noticing at the same time that he is having difficulty with identifying himself with his characters, as nowadays there is no place for conquerors of the world who are completely driven by their ambition to bend reality to their will. Like Daniel¹, the writer Michel Houellebecq maintains a love-hate relationship with realistic authors such as Balzac; he does use realistic conventions of the novel, yet he will also ridicule them, the breach with postmodernism being much less radical than might be thought on cursory reading. The Freudian causality the narrator of *Les Particules élémentaires* finds between the early childhood experiences of Bruno and Michel and their future emotional developments is so simplistic that it eventually fails to enhance the realistic value of the text. What are the postmodern characteristics of Houellebecq's novels?

Firstly, there is the loss of identity. Like many postmodern writers, Houellebecq will opt for average anti-heroes, nihilistic incarnations of man, who have been completely alienated from themselves and their surroundings and thus suffer from a lack of identity. For instance, in *Plateforme* can be found numerous passages that are critical of contemporary individualism, and where, on the contrary, the lack of authenticity of modern humankind will emerge. When Michel decides to go and live together with Valérie, it comes to him, while moving house, that he has no personal attachment to any of the items, and he is losing himself in the following shocking reasoning:

Nor did I have any photos of myself: I had no memory of what I might have been like when I was fifteen, or twenty or thirty. I didn't really have any personal papers: my identity could be contained in a couple of files which would easily fit into a standard-size cardboard folder. It is wrong to pretend that human beings are unique, that they carry within them an irreplaceable individuality; as far as I was concerned, at any rate, I could not distinguish any trace of such an individuality. As often as not, it is futile to wear yourself out trying to distinguish individual destinies and personalities. When all's said and done, the idea of the uniqueness of the

individual is nothing more than pompous absurdity. We remember our own lives, Schopenhauer wrote somewhere, a little better than a novel we once read. That's about right: a little, no more.⁷

The novels of Houellebecq illustrate the theories of the much-praised French philosopher/sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky as he explained them in *L'ère du vide* and *Les Temps hypermodernes*. Lipovetsky holds that, as a consequence of the disintegration of ideological and moral frames of reference, modern humankind has been left quite to its own devices and is in danger of losing itself in lamentable narcissism. Houellebecq has adopted this criticism on individualism and continues to show that unicity is not the main characteristic of contemporary man. This idea of a soulless humankind is developed in the most consistent way in his latest novel, *La Possibilité d'une île*, where cloned, robot-like figures are leading virtual and detached existences with all their consequences. Daniel²⁴ commits suicide and his successor Daniel²⁵ decides to leave the guarded compound in order to go and seek for the human emotions he has had to do without.

Many a postmodern novel will focus on this erosion of the 'I'.⁸ For example, the novels of Robbe-Grillet, where dummy-like figures are roaming about without any depth at all being given to their inner selves or, more recently, the texts of the so-called 'impassibles' such as Toussaint, Oster, Gailly and Delville. Like Toussaint, Houellebecq writes about people who suffer under a feeling of moral and emotional poverty, about marginal figures painfully aware of the meaninglessness of their existences. The narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* says that smoking cigarettes is the only form of freedom left to him, and the main character in *La Salle de bain* of Toussaint shuts himself in the bathroom so as to escape reality.

This dismantling of the 'I' results in personages weighed down by psychiatric symptoms:⁹ The depressed narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and Bruno in the *Particules élémentaires* both find themselves in a psychiatric clinic, and Daniel¹, too, has a complete nervous breakdown when the young Esther runs out on him. Houellebecq chooses to give expression to the mental confusion in his characters in the form and style of his novels, though he does not go as far as Robbe-Grillet whose *La Reprise* is a chaotic sequence of psychotic hallucinations. The final argument in *Les Particules élémentaires*, where Michel's view of the future is explained, will be considered an alarming delirium by many a reader; the nihilistic and misogynistic thoughts of the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* result from his depressed disposition and will be brushed aside by many people as too morbid; and neither will people take seriously Michel's plan (*Plateforme*) to open posh brothels throughout the world

where the sexually frustrated Westerner could have his every whim fulfilled.¹⁰ Characters in Houellebecq, but not Robbe-Grillet, are identifiable up to a certain point, but they are also marked by depersonalization and the neurotic symptoms that go with it, making them, after all, less realistic than one initially tends to think.

This loss of identity also results in the tendency for Houellebecq's personages to lose touch with reality. They play a role in their own fiction. Though Houellebecq would certainly not deny the referential function of language completely, he seems in part to subscribe to the postmodern conviction that a breach has occurred between language and reality. Many of his personages are slaves to their own construction. Michel (*Plateforme*) can see the Thai exotic reality only through the eyes of hotel brochures and travel guides, Daniel²⁴ and Daniel²⁵ have to submit themselves meekly to the directions of the *Sœur Suprême*, and *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is a long-winded treatise on the disastrous consequences of the soulless telematica revolution for modern humankind. One of the narrator's colleagues, Jean-Yves Fréhaut, thinks himself to be merely a leading figure in this revolution:

His own life, as I would subsequently learn, was functional in the extreme. He was living in a studio flat in the 15th arrondissement. The heating was included in the rent. He barely did more than sleep there, since he was in fact working a lot – and often, outside of working time, he was reading Micro-Systèmes. The famous degrees of freedom consisted, as far as he was concerned, in choosing his dinner by Minitel.¹¹

A second postmodern aspect of Houellebecq's novels is the conviction that humankind is caught in linguistic structures. The consequence is that, like many postmodern novels, Houellebecq's work is distinctly eclectic and intertextual. *Plateforme* abounds in quotations from travel guides such as *Le Guide du Routard* and the *Guide Michelin*; *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is permeated with the jargon as used in the IT sector; and both *Les Particules élémentaires* and *La Possibilité d'une île* are heavily relying on physical science theories such as the quantum mechanics of Bohr and Heisenberg as well as on eugenic laws. Houellebecq opts for this pastiche approach to demonstrate that contemporary humankind has become alienated from itself and its surroundings, being just a slave to its own structure, that is to say to the thought patterns enforced on it from the inside and outside. Besides, it seems almost impossible for him as an author to evade this theme altogether, as another main characteristic in his novels is that they will rely on strategies and techniques derived from popular genres such as travel books, utopias and sci-fi stories. Like many

postmodern authors, Houellebecq, too, undermines the dividing line between serious and popular arts with great satisfaction. For instance, Jean Echenoz's ambitions are to undermine the traditional conventions of the serious novel by deriving narrative techniques from popular genres such as detective novels, biographies and adventure novels. His novel *Ravel*, describing the French composer's last ten years of his life, is also distinctly eclectic because Echenoz is amply drawing from existing biographies, not shrinking from occasionally reproducing whole text fragments verbatim. So rather than a novel in the traditional meaning of the word, *Ravel* is a 'biofiction', that is to say a text that is continuously alternating between historical facts and fiction.¹²

For instance, the protagonist of *La Salle de bains* by Toussaint, like the main character in Houellebecq's *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, considers himself a minor actor who created a role for himself because it fits in very well with his strategy of survival: he is trying to put in practice Pascal's thirteenth *pensée*, 'divertissement'. But where Toussaint's personage dozes off into a lethargic sleep in the bath, Houellebecq's and Robbe-Grillet's figures will show an ultra-violent response to their sense of alienation. They will overstep the mark in order to feel alive after all. Transgression is in fact a main characteristic in Houellebecq's novels and may well explain the reason why they caused such a fuss. The narrator in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* wants to chop off the lovely legs of the disco dancers with an axe, and he incites his companion in misfortune Tisserand to murder a young black man who is quite successful with the same girls. Michel in *Les Particules élémentaires* and Savant in *La Possibilité d'une île* proclaim the end of the human race, and Michel in *Plateforme* would like to avenge his father's death by killing a number of Muslims. Violence seems to be the alternative for depersonalization. Still, this aggression is not aimed only at the other. Many of Houellebecq's personages will mutilate themselves because self-mutilation makes them feel that they exist. As I have shown in my book, *Michel Houellebecq. Le plaisir du texte*, almost all dreams in his novels express castration fantasies. Bruno indulges in fantasies about being a little pig that is slaughtered in a slaughterhouse, his half-brother Michel dreams about rubbish bins filled with cut-off genitals, and the narrator in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, when waking up in the morning and seeing a pair of scissors sitting on his bedside table, can hardly resist the temptation to cut off his sex organ. Sure enough, it is particularly in the field of sexuality that the personages are in danger of taking up bad ways. All of them feel drawn to sexual acts that overstep the mark, some to neutralize their fear of the opposite sex, others to satisfy their uncontrollable sexual impulses. The narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is a misogynous masturbator who vomits whenever he sees a girl, because in this world of market and combat, only ugly women such

as Catherine Lechardoy ('God has not, in truth, been too kind to her'¹³) are responsive to him. Michel (*Les Particules élémentaires*) has been living chaste ever since Annabelle cheated on him. On the other hand, his half-brother Bruno, Michel (*Plateforme*) and Daniel₁ maintain pornographic views on the opposite sex, sexuality being to them the only source of comfort in their otherwise pathetic existence. Bruno has wild nights with the accommodating Christiane; and while promoting sex tourism, Michel and Valérie are only too happy to be indulged by the chambermaids whom they engaged on behalf of their customers; and Daniel₁ feels most attracted to the young Esther as she devotes herself with conviction to her exclusive sexual services, her inspiration being the performances by porno stars. While playing a role, she, too, likes to imitate the behaviour of others:

'Don't worry...' she said; then she knelt down to suck me off. She had a very honed technique, doubtless inspired by porn films – it was immediately obvious for she had that gesture, which you learn quickly in films, of throwing back her hair to allow the boy, for want of a camera, to watch you in action. Since their beginnings, fellatio has always been the jewel in the crown of porn films, the only thing that can serve as a useful model for young girls [...].¹⁴

Extension du domaine de la lutte excepted, the novels by Houellebecq are punctuated with lovemaking scenes that leave nothing to the imagination, expressing the pornofication of our society. Though Houellebecq's figures do find again a sense of symbiosis and oneness in the brevity of physical love, still the pornographic sexuality they often take to will not in the end give them any satisfaction. At the end of *Les Particules élémentaires*, the profligate Bruno goes into a psychiatric clinic where he is chemically vasectomized, and Daniel₁ regrets the fact that Esther is driven by sexual desire alone and that she fails to attach any significance at all to love; she leaves Daniel₁ for a younger lover. Whereas transgression is an 'opération sacrée' to Bataille that is to deliver mankind, Houellebecq in the end judges it negatively. He shows that by now all taboos have been broken and that on this score, too, contemporary humankind is left empty-handed: the act of overstepping the limit will give a brief moment of pleasure, yet in the long run it will only feed precisely those feelings of depression and disappointment which it had sought to compensate.

The criticism of modern consumer society is one of the main differences between Houellebecq and his postmodern predecessors. The author voices Lyotard's conviction that modern man's inner void is easily accounted for due to today's absence of any ideological frame of reference. Robbe-Grillet does not have the ambition to voice his opinion about contemporary society; his is a

much more abstract approach, wishing to describe the human condition in a separate way from principles restricted to time and place.

Like any author, Houellebecq also has, to a certain extent, the ambition to say something general about the fate of humankind, but his trademark is unmasking lofty, social ideals. In *Plateforme*, Michel pokes fun at communism when he lets himself be indulged by the chambermaid in a luxury hotel in Cuba; in *Les Particules élémentaires* the high ideals of the May '68 movement are ridiculed in the figure of Janine Ceccaldi, the unconventional, egocentric mother of Bruno and Michel, *La Possibilité d'une île* being a prolonged satire on the salvation doctrine of various religious convictions. Even elohimism, which wants to realize immortality by cloning humans, fails to bring relief as the soulless, dehumanized clones end up deeply unhappy: Daniel₂₄ commits suicide, and Daniel₂₅ decides to break the genetic chain and sets out on a tough hike straight across Spain only to immerse himself in one of those pools surrounding the former Lanzarote. Whereas the personages of Houellebecq continue to put forward ideas critical of society, the *engagement* remains a more implicit element in the postmodern novel. As its title indicates, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is about the excesses of our modern consumer society, about capitalizing on our emotional lives and the pornofication of contemporary society resulting from it; *Plateforme* ridicules Islam, the Western perception of sexuality being depicted as poor and without any sincere empathy; Michel, one of the two half-brothers in *Les Particules élémentaires*, felt like inventing an alternative for our society that, to his mind, is directionless and close to ruin, etcetera.

Still Houellebecq cannot be said to be bringing the 'roman engagé' as promoted by Sartre back to life; rather, like in many postmodern novels, the possibility of social engagement is brought up for discussion. Houellebecq's criticism on the capitalist consumer society and the May '68 ideals seems leftist, whereas his diatribe against Islam and his disillusioned analyses of the consequences of the sexual revolution caused critics to classify him among the 'nouveaux réactionnaires'.¹⁵ As has been remarked, his personages will not choose unambiguous social commitment, but end up stranding themselves, like many postmodern novels, in a nihilistic ideological vacuum. Houellebecq's novels do make use of the strategies of the Utopian novel (there is a long discussion on Huxley's *Brave New World* in *Les Particules élémentaires* – and not for nothing), at the same time ridiculing any utopian wish; rather, they are dystopias. For instance, *Lanzarote* is a parodic rewriting of the Grail myth where Rudi, a Belgian policeman seeking rescue from his oppressive existence, joins a sect preaching the raping of small children, and in *Les Particules élémentaires*, the chaste academic Michel is sublimating his sexual frustrations by designing a new human characterized by his immense sexual

potency: the surface of his skin is covered with Krause-bodies creating unbeatable erotic experiences.

Houellebecq makes his anti-heroes dream about a better life and a happier humankind, but he will never make their wishes a reality; indeed, the clash between high ideals and the disillusioning reality will irrevocably lead to the tendency to destroy themselves and the other. Annabelle, Christiane, Tisserand and Daniel²⁴ take their own lives, Michel and the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* decide to disappear without a trace, the sensual Valérie is killed in a bomb attack by Muslim extremists who took offence at the luxury brothels she and her compaignon Michel opened all over the world, and the narrator of *Lanzarote* feels more depressed than ever following his stay on the volcanic isle that bears the promise of regeneration by the primeval elements. Houellebecq makes use of all standard satirical devices to bring home to the reader that his ideas of social criticism are not meant to be taken too seriously: he is putting them into the mouths of failures, ridiculous individuals who are treated by the author with a good deal of irony and sarcasm, the stories of their lives all the time taking the edge off the meaning of the message. Bruno and Daniel¹ feel happy only when they know themselves loved by the sexually unconventional Christiane and Esther, and, as a result, their fates show that the sexual revolution brought about many good things, too.

Daniel distinguishes three types of artists in *La Possibilité d'une île*: the revolutionary, who thinks his art would get the masses going; the 'decorator' who withdraws into his ivory tower, not caring about the world around him; and the humorist who has no wish to change the world either, but wants to make it an acceptable place by transforming the violence required for any revolutionary act into a laugh. Daniel¹'s and his friend Vincent's careers unerringly illustrate Houellebecq's position in the debate on the fundamental assignment facing the artist. Vincent starts his career as a committed artist but soon has to acknowledge that his serious art fails to mobilize the public; abandoning his revolutionary ideals, he retires to his basement. On the other hand, the scenarios of Daniel¹ express a provocatively moral and ideologically ironic relativism so characteristic of the writings of Houellebecq himself and the much more formalist 'nouveau nouveau roman'. For instance, think of the hilarious way in which Toussaint, in *La Télévision*, makes his main character go through the various stages of detoxification after he decided to stop watching TV. In his book *Crépuscules*, Lipovetsky argues that in our current Western society, all higher values in fact become parodic: 'Postmodern unbelief, the neo-nihilism that is taking shape is atheistic nor moralistic, from now on it will be humoristic.'¹⁶ Daniel¹ comments on the success of his latest show bizarrely entitled 'Forward Snowy! Onwards to Aden', as follows:

From the outset, I got on to the subject of the conflict in the Middle East – which had already brought me a few significant media successes – in a manner which, wrote the *Le Monde* journalist, was 'singularly abrasive'. The first sketch, entitled 'The Battle of the Tiny Ones', portrayed Arabs – renamed 'Allah's vermin' – Jews – described as 'circumcised fleas' – and even some Lebanese Christians, afflicted with the pleasing sobriquet 'Crabs from the Cunt of Mary'. In short, as the critic for *Le Point* noted, the religions of the Book were 'played off against each other' – in this sketch at least; the rest of the show included a screamingly funny playlet entitled 'The Palestinians are Ridiculous', into which I slipped a variety of burlesque and salacious allusions about sticks of dynamite that female militants of Hezbollah put around their waists in order to make mashed Jew. I then widened this to an attack on all forms of rebellion, of nationalist and revolutionary struggle, and in reality against political action itself. Of course, I was developing throughout the show a vein of right-wing anarchy, along the lines of 'one dead combatant means one less cunt able to fight', which from Céline to Audiard, had already contributed to the finest hours of French comedy [...].¹⁷

The morbid humour that is so characteristic of Daniel¹'s texts also typifies the work of Houellebecq, but like his personage, his creator eventually has to acknowledge that this ironic relativism offers no relief, that humour eventually is of no use. Daniel¹ is struck with a feeling of utter dejection when he is watching the tapings of his shows, he has to vomit when he sees the audience burst out laughing because in his view laughter is the ultimate expression of cruelty, and the following disillusioning comments of the narrator of *Les Particules élémentaires* expresses Houellebecq's criticism on ironic relativism: 'You can look at life ironically for years, maybe decades; there are people who seem to go through most of their lives seeing the funny side, but in the end, life always breaks your heart.'¹⁸

To Thomas Vaessens, professor of Dutch literature, this criticism of irony is typical of late postmodernism. In his view, Dutch authors such as Grunberg, Zwagerman and Februari have had enough of the unproductive postmodernist cynicism.¹⁹ The situation in France is somewhat more complicated due to the fact that texts by most prominent French postmodernists such as Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Sarraute, Duras and Simon certainly could not be characterized by frequent use of satiric stylistic devices such as irony and sarcasm; on the contrary, they are generally not particularly humorous. Nor should it be taken for granted that Houellebecq would distance himself from the books that every so often are humorous novels indeed, by minimalist authors such as Echenoz, Toussaint or Delville; in his frame of reference, they play no role at all. So rather

than betraying an aversion to postmodern literature, Houellebecq's criticism of the ironic relativism shows a wish to radically break with the postmodern mentality so clearly described by Lipovetsky.

Even acting in an aesthetic manner will fail to offer any rescue. Michel (*Plateforme*) is convinced that his novel about his love for Valérie will not keep him from oblivion, Daniel harbours deep doubts about whether his cloned descendants will be interested in his life story, and the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* does not consider art to have any purifying influence at all:

If I don't write about what I've seen, I will suffer just the same – and perhaps a little more so. But only a bit, I insist on this. Writing brings scant relief. It retraces, it delimits. It lends a touch of coherence, the idea of a kind of realism. One stumbles around in a cruel fog, but there is the odd pointer. Chaos is no more than a few feet away. A meagre victory, in truth.²⁰

The narrator would prefer to spend the remainder of his days reading. The only escape open to him seems to be to cease taking part, to step out of his role.

Like the postmodernists, Houellebecq radically breaks with the elitist conception of art of the modernists, but unlike the postmodernists he is drawn by the nineteenth-century realist 'esthétique du laid'. Like them, he opts for an everyday, marred style as this style effectively expresses the shallow emotions of his personages, and he puts earthly characters on the scene whose life stories and neuroses are to a large extent deterministically defined by their social contexts. As has been mentioned, however, he is also making fun of the realistic conventions of the novel as the referential illusion continues to be undermined by the merciless deconstruction of mankind and society, so that in the end there is hardly anything left of them.

Alain Robbe-Grillet

As we have seen, with his intertextual, transgressive novels, conscious of ontological doubt, the rift between language and reality, the alienation of humankind from itself and its surroundings, Houellebecq is closer to a postmodern author such as Robbe-Grillet than might be thought at first. Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Reprise* (2001) also deals with dismantling the 'I'. The story is about a French secret agent on a mission in Berlin who is ignorant of the facts of his assignment. He is constantly changing his identity, his name being now Franck Matthieu and now Henri Robin. Moreover, wherever he goes, he sees lookalikes pursuing him, and eventually he loses himself in psychotic delusions. The personages in Robbe-Grillet's latest novel, *Un roman sentimental*, are also explicitly anti-realistic: they will be referred to as personages, fictitious creations of a narrator whose status,

too, remains obscure as he now expresses himself in the first person singular, now merges with one of the figures filling a central role in the string of perverse scenarios the reader is being presented with. Since the 1950s Robbe-Grillet has claimed that he wants to banish the character from literature, and *Un roman sentimental* shows he never sought to repudiate this basic principle. At the start of the novel, we are introduced to a narrator who expresses himself in the first person singular, describing how he finds himself in a white, neutral room ablaze with light. He wonders where he is: in a morgue, a coffin, a ward or a cell? On one of the walls is a picture of a landscape with a few figures painted in it. The text suggests that all personages fulfilling a role in the perverse scenarios told in the novel are coming from the mind of the narrator, who brings the painted characters to life. So the reader will wonder what the status of the text and the personages might be: are we dealing with a description of crazy hallucinations, or is the text expressing the dreams and imaginings of the author, who has time and again indicated his fascination with perverse sexual acts with underage girls in real life, too. Anyway, it is a fact that the personages have been represented unrealistically; Gigi, her father, and all young girls who, in the course of the narrative, are being raped, tortured or prostituted hardly have any identities of their own; they are characterized by their perverse sado-masochistic acts only.

So Robbe-Grillet and Houellebecq both seem to describe the alienation of modern humankind in relation to itself. However, a significant difference between both authors is that like Lipovetsky, Houellebecq explains this phenomenon in a sociological way, always harping on the alienating effects of contemporary disideologized society for humankind, whereas Robbe-Grillet takes the philosophical view, interpreting the problematical perception of one's own individuality as inherent in the human condition.

The novels by Robbe-Grillet, like those of Houellebecq, mainly contain robot-like figures caught in linguistic structures that transform reality. The neutral narrator of *La Jalousie* presents the reader with a completely incoherent story about the alleged adulterous affair between his wife and the neighbour. Having no grasp of reality, he is giving himself fully to his runaway fantasies. Rather than describing reality in an objective way, he is thinking it up, thus getting caught up in his own delusions. Gigi and her father in *Un roman sentimental* are only fictitious figures with no true identity because the perverse scenarios in which they play the leading part overstep a mark to such an extent that they could be attributed only to the disordered fantasies of the author/narrator. Robbe-Grillet calls his latest novel a 'fiction fantasmatique', being quite aware of the fact that if he were to put his perverse fantasies in practice, he would simply get taken to court.

Transgression, in particular in the sexual sphere, is a main characteristic

in many postmodern novels. Houellebecq's texts have caused the usual outrage, but still, in recent years the most amazing novel has certainly been *Un roman sentimental* (2007) by Robbe-Grillet. As has already been said, this novel tells the shocking story of a perverse father who abuses his accommodating daughter Gigi in brutal ways. Father and daughter completely give themselves over to sado-masochistic games, organizing cruel torture parties they enjoy immensely. In *Le Miroir qui revient*, Robbe-Grillet had already confessed that only perverse scenarios managed to rouse his desire, and that he felt attracted to very young girls in particular, indulging these fantasies to the full in *Un roman sentimental*. The postmodernist Robbe-Grillet, as a matter of fact, is working more along the lines of Bataille and does not express any negative value judgment like Houellebecq: in the postmodern novel, transgression is another means of escaping the suffocating straitjacket of norms and values, whereas Houellebecq seems, on the contrary, to subscribe to the importance of this straitjacket.

However, it is true of both authors that their breaking of taboos spoils the quality of realism of the text, though in this case, the breach with realism in the postmodern novel is more radical than in the case of Houellebecq. *Un roman sentimental* is, as has been said, a chaotic sequence of perverse scenarios the status of which never becomes quite clear. On the other hand, Houellebecq and Robbe-Grillet do share the opinion that transgression is the natural outcome of a lack of identity. So alienation and its resultant violent transgression are characteristic of both the 'hyper-realistic' writings of Houellebecq and many a postmodern novel.²¹

Philippe Claudel

So, is Robbe-Grillet wrong when claiming that the contemporary French novel is too indebted to nineteenth-century realism? Is his call for resuming the terrorist actions of the 1955-60s falling on deaf ears? I think that Viart and Blanckeman are right in observing that every age will develop its own realism and that the 'return of the narrative' as observed by them in no way implies that postmodernism has had its day once and for all.

This is also true for authors such as Philippe Claudel who seem to be breaking radically with postmodernism. His novel *Les Âmes grises*, which won the Prix Renaudot, is often quoted as an example of a contemporary novel that succeeded in holding on to a large readership precisely because of its classical, realistic set-up. It is a fact that Claudel is less indebted to postmodernism than Houellebecq, which makes a comparison with an author such as Robbe-Grillet less obvious, but for Claudel's novels, too, it is still true that they have been positively permeated by postmodern principles. In *Les Âmes grises*, a novel with a First World War setting, a policeman is trying to reconstruct what happened

in a small French village near the front line twenty years after the fatal murder of a little girl, Belle de jour. In order to do so, he refers to his own memory and to the testimonies of others. He tells about the soldiers at the front who, to escape the horrible reality of the trenches, hang around the local pub and brothel, and about young Lilia Verhareine, volunteering for a job as a teacher because she wants to be close to her fiancé who was sent to the front as a soldier. He describes how the villagers are only too keen to deny the reality of the war, but that death is found to be infectious: Lilia commits suicide after her fiancé is killed or else she is murdered by the prosecutor Destinat, the little Belle de jour is strangled, and the policeman's wife dies in childbirth in the absence of her husband, who had been unable to come home due to the roads being obstructed by battalions of soldiers on their way to the front. *Les Âmes grises* is a sort of detective novel, but one in which the crimes go unsolved. We will never know whether Destinat or a deserter killed Belle de jour no more than we will make sure about the rights and wrongs of Lilia's death. The novel does make use of the nineteenth-century realistic conventions of the novel, but undermines them at the same time; it is far less conventional than one might be inclined to think on cursory reading. *Les Âmes grises* is peppered with long-winded realistic descriptions that support both the dramatic course of the action and the psychological profiles of the personages and that are not to be found in novels by Robbe-Grillet. For instance, the policeman gives a detailed description of Destinat's life story, he talks about Destinat's parents, his marriage, the early death of his wife, his unrelenting attitude as a prosecutor, portraying him as an unapproachable and solitary man who might be capable of committing a murder; Lilia nicknamed him 'monsieur Tristesse'. The following description of Destinat's bedroom might just as well be found in a novel by Balzac:

*Destinat's room was nothing like the others. The bed was narrow, a monk's bed: iron bedposts and a simple mattress, no trimmings, no tester hanging from the ceiling. The walls were simply lined with grey, no paintings or decorations. Beside the bed stood a small table with a crucifix on it. At the foot of the bed there was a washstand with jug and basin. A high-backed chair. A little desk with nothing on it. No book, no paper, no pen. The room was like the man himself. Cold, silent, it made you uncomfortable, but it inspired respect. It had drawn a sense of distance from the man who slept there, impervious to laughter forever. The very orderliness of the place endorsed the idea of dead hearts.*²²

This extract, for example, brings strongly to mind the pages-long description of the lodging-house of Madame Vauquer with which Balzac opens his famous

novel *Le Père Goriot*, ending it with the remark: 'Toute sa personne explique la pension comme la pension implique sa personne' – 'her whole person, in short, provides a clue to the boarding-house, just as the boarding-house implies the existence of such a person as she is' (quote translated by Marion Ayton Crawford). However, whereas with Balzac the subsequent course of the action follows naturally from this opening extract, the descriptions in *Les Âmes grises* are only an expression of the narrator's persistent longing to find out the truth, but no confirmation of it. Much as he does his best, Destinât will remain an inscrutable man to him, like the husband in *La Jalousie* by Robbe-Grillet:

*For years, I have been trying to understand, but I do not think I am any cleverer than the next man. I fumble, I get lost, go round in circles. In the beginning, before the Affaire, Destinât was just a name to me, an official position, a house, a fortune, a face I encountered two or three times a week and to which I would raise my hat. As for what went on behind the face, I had no chance of knowing! Since that time, having lived with his ghost for so long, he has become quite the old acquaintance, the companion in misfortune, a part of myself you could say, and one that I have tried to persuade to speak, tried to bring back to life so that I can ask it one question. Just one. Sometimes I tell myself that I am wasting my time, that the man was as impenetrable as the thickest fog, and that a thousand evenings with him would not be enough.*²³

The very title *Les Âmes grises* gives a clue that nobody is solely good or solely evil, that we all are wandering souls whom morality has a scant hold on. This implies that unambiguous character drawing is impossible. Man can only be known in part. This notion in itself is not exclusively characteristic for late postmodernism, but falls back on the principles of the *nouveaux romanciers* from the 1950s and 1960s, who were already of the opinion that we cannot know the truth, everything being dependent on the point of view. The young Lilia has long been described as a pure soul, as a lost fragrant flower in a village steeped in hatred and violence, but in the end even this pure soul will not go unspoiled. She is prepared to kill if by doing so she could save her fiancé's life. For instance, she flies into a rage when, in the hills surrounding the village, she meets the policeman who, exempt from military service due to his position, is bearing a shotgun:

He stood there like a clown. At that moment I hated him more than anyone else in the world. He stammered a few words that I could not make out. I turned my back on him.

*I would give the lives of thousands of men like him for a few seconds in your arms. I would cut the heads off them myself, just to feel your kisses on my lips again and look into your eyes. It doesn't matter to me if I'm hateful. I couldn't care less about other people's opinions and morals. I would kill to have you alive.*²⁴

The policeman started to write after his wife's death so as to fill the void she, and other deceased people with her, left behind. However, he is aware of the fact that his project is doomed to fail because reality cannot be known:

*If anyone asks how I have filled the years leading to this point, today, I would not be able to answer them. I did not see time pass, even though it seemed to pass so slowly. I kept a flame burning, and I interrogated the darkness without gleaning more than snatches of answers.*²⁵

The result is a kaleidoscopic, non-chronological tale that is less coherent than, for instance, *La Jalousie*, but in which various realities continue to be compared to each other. Schoolmaster Le Contre is unable to come to terms with the facts of the acts of war and, hit by madness, he daubs the verses of the *Marseillaise* on the walls of his staff residence with his own excreta: 'The madman had written those verses, written them and rewritten them, like a demented litany, so that we felt trapped inside the pages of some hideous book.'²⁶ Once an essential defender of Dreyfus, Corporal Matziev turns out to be a merciless and godless sadist during the war: he tortures a deserter to make him confess. The deserter Rifolon, confessing the murder of Belle de jour in order to escape the war crimes tribunal, shows in his statement that in a time of war, different rules and laws apply. When Judge Mierck calls him a murderer, Rifolon replies: 'Of course we've killed. That's what we were meant to do. Kill the other boys, the ones who look like our brothers. We kill them, and they kill us. It was your lot that told us to do it.'²⁷ The difference between good and evil has grown vague. Moreover, not omniscient, the narrator is permanently forced to resort to the often dubious interpretations of others. In this way, he reconstructs the story, filling in the gaps with his imagination, which lends the narrative its speculative nature: 'I kept a flame burning, and I interrogated the darkness without gleaning more than snatches of answers.'²⁸ Often the narrator himself was not on the scene when crucial events happened. It is Barbe, Destinât's chambermaid, who over a bottle of brandy tells him about the evening that Lilia and the prosecutor spent together. The narrator wonders whether he was fooled, whether her memory might have been warped by alcohol. The policeman, too, is refusing to state or examine certain facts. For in-

stance, he fails to question the prosecutor about the evening of Lilia's suicide. The manuscript the reader is presented with turns out to be hardly more than an incoherent collection of memories and interpretations: 'This must all seem a terrible muddle, hopping shambolically from one thing to the other, but that's how my life has been, little snippets chopped up and impossible to stitch back together again.'²⁹ Like in *La Jalousie*, the shape of the text expresses the narrator's emotions; no jealousy this time, but a devastating sense of guilt due to his failure as both a human being and a policeman.

The narrator is in constant doubt, not expressing any unambiguous moral value judgment, and so he seems to subscribe to the ontological doubt so characteristic of postmodernism. Yet, unlike an author such as Robbe-Grillet who would flatly reject any reflection of the non-literary reality, Claudel intends to convey a certain message, because in the end the chaotic interpretations of the narrator do express a judgment about the events of the First World War. The narrator is sympathetic to the mangled soldiers taking out their anger at the factory workers who were not under mobilization orders ('Lucky devils', 'Draft dodgers'³⁰) and he shows that France, too, is to blame for the war: 'Thanks to pride and stupidity, one country was ready to throw itself into the jaws of another.'³¹ The soldiers sent to the front are portrayed as victims who are, with vacant stares, going to meet their doom:

*But they weren't laughing now. They were as stiff as statues, the same dark iron colour as well. Their eyes were not eyes but bottomless abysses, open onto nothing.*³²

In this way Claudel means to convey a balanced picture of the role played by France during the First World War, and to demonstrate that France, too, is to blame for the atrocities that occurred at that time. Worshipping French soldiers as heroes and pretending all of France was united in facing the enemy is then unbecoming; there was great tension between the soldiers and their French compatriots, exempt from military service, who would prefer to deny the reality of the war:

*In the beginning, after the first fighting, it felt very strange seeing these fellows coming through with their faces rearranged by exploding shells and their bodies carved up by machine-gun fire, while we, the same age as them, kept nice and warm and quietly got on with our little lives. Of course, we knew the war was going on. We saw the mobilisation notices, and we read about it in the papers. But, deep down, it was all a pretence. We'd found a way out of it. We coped with it as if it was a dream, a bitter memory. It wasn't us, it didn't touch our lives.*³³

Reality is not black or white, but grey. Via his account of the First World War, Claudel means in general terms to show the effects of violence, madness and sorrow on humankind. Since her fiancé was sent to the front, Lilia has felt an inner void, and the narrator, too, has lost all touch with life after his wife died: 'I have been dead for a long time. I pretend that I am alive, but my sentence has been deferred, that's all.'³⁴ So as to survive, every personage clings to the role that has fallen to them: the prosecutor 'pursued his profession with clockwork precision',³⁵ the insensitive, sadistic Judge Mierck is pleased with Belle de jour's death because he has to solve a real murder at last, and about the mayor's attitude during the interrogation of the two deserters, the narrator remarks: '... his small duty complete. What happened now was of no concern to him'.³⁶

Conclusion

So *Les Âmes grises* is, then, a fine example of postrealism because the novel shows that contemporary realism radically breaks with the hermetic nature of much postmodern literature, at the same time being permeated by postmodern principles such as ontological doubt, the melting together of various realities, discontinuity and alienation of humankind from itself and its surroundings. And so Viart and Vercier are right whenever they claim that today traditional literary forms are being reconsidered, and that in this way a hybrid form will arise in which, in various degrees, realism and postmodernism come together.

The main principles of postmodern poetics could also be found in the novels by Houellebecq: ontological doubt, the rift between language and reality, the alienation of humankind from itself and its surroundings, the transgression of norms and values, eclecticism, the desecration of Art, the blurring borderline between serious and popular expressions of art, the minimalist style. Houellebecq's œuvre most evidently shows that postmodernism is still rampant in the contemporary novel which, sure enough, at the same time opposes this formalist poetics by its very neorealist characteristics. The concept of 'postrealism' may well cover the hybrid nature of the work by one of France's most successful authors. Daniel outlines this renewing postrealism as follows:

*I don't mean that my sketches were unfunny; they were funny. I was indeed a cutting observer of contemporary reality; it was just that everything now seemed so elementary to me, it seemed that so few things remained that could be observed in contemporary reality: we had simplified and pruned so much, broken so many barriers, taboos, misplaced hopes and false aspirations; truly, there was so little left.*³⁷

Chapter 5 – French Literature

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