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Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*: Adventures in Space, Time, Possibilities and French Studies

MURRAY PRATT

Redefining French Studies has proven a fertile (and necessary) exercise over the last few decades, as scholars have sought to position, and reposition, theoretical enquiry, pedagogy and the fields of literary, cultural and social critique associated with the term, within debates about globalisation, the transnational and the interdisciplinary.¹ More generally, concepts associated with national identities have been revisited² in the light of contemporary reconfigurations and deterritorialisations of the postcolonial, revealing the extent to which literature in particular engages cosmopolitics (and cosmopoetics) that entail a critical, rather than an instrumental, nationalism as an important pole in how cultural belonging is produced and disseminated, experienced and located. Within these dynamics, considerations of a contemporary novel that situates the national, specifically France, as its focus, requires readings that bring to bear the country's inherent (self-)difference, otherness, trans-ience, all the more so given that the novel in question, Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*,³ due to the nature of its plot and its relevance to current events, became implicated in national searches for meaning that ensued.

To say 2015 was a difficult year for Paris, and for France, would be an understatement. The nation, and indeed the world, is still trying to understand the terrorist atrocities experienced in January and November 2015, and the questions they raise are far-reaching, for the country, its citizens and its values. These include questions about why and how the events took place, about what responses are appropriate, but also more fundamental interrogations about the nation's engagement with issues such as multiculturalism, integration, communities, the social sphere, gender, poverty and religion. In a social-media-dominated, immediacy-articulated, contemporary experience-scape, we also interrogate our own participation, our affective responses, our curation of a collective mourning,

¹ See, for example, Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand (eds), *French Cultural Studies: Criticism at the Crossroads* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010); Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (eds), *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).

² Weihsin Gui, *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics: Postcolonial Literature in a Global Moment* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

³ Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015).

as French, scholars, Francophiles, or others. Importantly, there emerge concerns about whom the “we” behind these questions might designate. Are we (and in what senses) Charlie? Jews? Muslims? Not Charlie? The/a *tricolore* France? At peace with the Tour Eiffel and its symbolic role as a unifier? At war (as Président Hollande would later have it, establishing a trope that would only become more apposite as further atrocities occurred in 2016), but if so with whom, with what? Images and symbols associated with the national, just as much as academic disciplines, are, rightly, increasingly scrutinised and contested just as they are increasingly and differentially mobilised and deployed.

Je coupai le son, mais continuai un moment à regarder l’image. Une immense banderole barrait toute la largeur de l’avenue, portant l’inscription : « Nous sommes le peuple de France ». Sur de nombreux petits panneaux disséminés dans la foule était écrit, plus simplement : « Nous sommes chez nous » ...⁴

This account of silent spectatorship, combining televisual witnessing with rhetoric and slogans, the focus on solidarity, national belonging and security, articulates some of the experience “we” evidenced in 2015, in response to January’s shootings or November’s indiscriminate attacks. Indeed, turning on the news to see mass occupations of the Place de la République, vigils, rallies or gatherings became part of “our collective consumption” (I use all three terms advisedly) of Paris’s *annus horribilis*, one way that shock, grief, outrage and disbelief have been anchored and worked through. In this case, however, the words do not describe “our” “own” viewing of the events of 2015. Instead, they refer to a demonstration by supporters of the (a fictional) Front national, led by (a fictional) Marine Le Pen, during the projected presidential elections of May 2022, and the viewer is equally a fictional character, François, the protagonist of Michel Houellebecq’s 2015 novel, *Soumission*.

The revolution will be fictionalised

This article begins to explore the ways in which Houellebecq’s publication (and, crucially, its reception) highlights a set of questions about how literature and the social are mutually interlinked, about national belonging and individual positioning, and about models of reading that leap across spatial and temporal categories as a disruption of assumptions – be these social, cultural, political or personal. This entails consideration of how *Soumission* featured in the public discourse surrounding the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, not least as a result of the fateful irony of its being released on the same day as this defining atrocity took place. However, subtending this timeline of events and the novel’s interrelation with non-fiction, I also argue that the narrative enacts a model of reading and response that offer a

commentary on the contemporary politics of affect, spectacle and crisis that we are currently witnessing.

Writing, art, representation and ideas articulate and shape the worlds we inhabit as much as politics; they (re-)formulate and (re-)situate the statements we make, endorse or contest. Creative thinking and production can contextualise policy, counter dogma, defuse rhetoric. A novel, in short, is something that is read, rather than merely positioned, and I would like therefore to begin, not with the media furore about the publication, but with concerns familiar to Humanities researchers, to scholars of French Studies. In doing so, I am pointing both to the novel’s synchronicity with what passes for our real world – the hyper-immediacy of interpretation that enfolds all public output – and also attending to the internal logic and diegesis of Houellebecq’s fictional construct. I am also advocating readings on the move: that encounter our worlds in transition, that refer across text and world, texts and worlds, and permit us, as readers, as researchers, to transit from space to space, and take time to reflect, rather than pass time in consuming.

The plot of *Soumission* revolves around a relatively quiet revolution in Paris, an ideological evolution rather, that, working through the democratic process, if never entirely transparently or unproblematically, radically transforms the institutions of the capital and the nation it represents. As such, it is very much a *roman à thèse*, in that its central dilemma is about how an individual aligns ideologically and personally with a shifting culture-scape, what life decisions make sense and how and why they are taken. At its heart are considerations of French national identity, Islam, the modern and postmodern mindset, yes, but also (as might be anticipated from Houellebecq’s broader canon) the everyday Confucianism that serves as a vehicle for conformity, irons out and facilitates social change. Surprisingly perhaps, but again less so given its author’s persistent concerns with the failings and frailties of the human, these great debates and grand idea here sit side by side with the ultra-mundane, jostle for prominence alongside pages describing ready meals, motorway journeys, socialising rather than social transformation.

Thus it is, then, that the Sunday morning following his viewing of the public demonstration described above, and at a time of momentous change for the country, François packs his suitcase, fires up his Volkswagen Touareg and heads out of town. He is on the move, heading away from the civil upheaval, arguably evading the political. Once *en route*, Houellebecq takes the time to describe (for us) in detail the vehicle’s specifications (V8 diesel, 4.2 litres, capable of 240 km per hour), to contrast the narrator’s lofty intentions in buying this high-spec piece of top gear (exciting forest discoveries) with its actual utilisation (trips to an antiquarian bookshop), and is soon busily describing the passing countryside (revealed to be quite attractive, with valleys but no ponds or rivers). Prior to this, however, a brief passage outlines, in so far as this is clear to the protagonist himself, the motivation for the trip.

⁴ *Soumission*, pp. 119–20.

Je n'avais aucun projet, aucune destination précise ; juste la sensation, très vague, que j'avais intérêt à me diriger vers le Sud-Ouest ; que, si une guerre civile devait éclater en France, elle mettrait davantage de temps à atteindre le Sud-Ouest. Je ne connaissais à vrai dire à peu près rien du Sud-Ouest, sinon que c'est une région où l'on mange du confit de canard ; et le confit de canard me paraissait peu compatible avec la guerre civile. Enfin, je pouvais me tromper.⁵

Rather than any clear exposition of his reasons for leaving the city, what we read here are tentative ratiocinations, personal calculations, engagements with identity, tradition, taste – absolutely in keeping both with how we navigate our everyday lives away from (and even during) major political events, and with the selfish gene theory (albeit a version not overly optimistic about the reproduction of the species) into which the Houellebecqian hero tends to be plugged. More than this though, and repeating the earlier departure from France of Miriam, the novel's love/sex interest, a dynamic of retreat begins to emerge within the novel; a concern with getting away, disengagement, being elsewhere; and much of the novel figures its protagonist in search of alternatives to the politicised landscape of the capital.

He discovers that the political stalemate in France has become so widespread that service stations have run out of petrol (although, thankfully, we note in passing, not of chocolate croissants), obliging him instead to make a stop in the Dordogne, and he remains for some time holed up in rustic, touristic locations in the heart of the country, at the historical and geographical centre of the nation. During his fugues, he visits villages such as Martel and Rocamadour, the latter, as if by coincidence, home of a cathedral with a statue of a black Madonna, and re-engages with the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans, the nineteenth-century author whose œuvre informs François's academic career. Coincidences multiply, as it is also here, in Rocamadour, that François has a chance encounter with his University president, and her husband, who, by further coincidence, is centrally involved in the many and various political machinations determining the future of the Elysée.

This is the first of a series of trips taking François away from Paris, each time to rural France. Following on from Houellebecq's earlier *La Carte et le Territoire*,⁶ the geography of the country beyond the metropole figures as a site of expansion and differentiation, albeit one that remains nonetheless interconnected, via the territorialisations of the autoroute, communications networks, tourist guides and shopping centres, to the anodyne featurelessness of hypermodernity familiar from the work of Marc Augé.⁷

Here, though, the character is able to contextualise, within his personal

heritage of scholarly pursuits, family links, regional traditions, the questions about nation and religion facing the country, and he does so with ambivalence, at the same time attempting to understand the seismic social change taking place in the capital and to escape from it. What I wish to emphasise here is that, rather than simply recounting a series of events positing a future Islamic revolution in France (or indeed advocating it, as some of the media commentary will suggest), the novel aims to situate the fictionalised social upheaval alongside a varied, diverse, competing set of human concerns, from the everyday and banal to considerations of career, academia, time, place, art: our very human quests for identity, meaning or belonging. Howsoever places are invested with historical or collective memory, they are also sites that are revisited differentially at each encounter, invested in and remobilised depending on the personal circuits elaborated around them. Interpretation, like timing, is everything.

Timeline (Version 1)

Wednesday 7 January 2015. As we have established, Flammarion published the latest novel by Michel Houellebecq, entitled *Soumission*. The novel is a utopia, perhaps a dystopia, or, in Foucault's terms, a heterotopia (a place of otherness, that functions differently). It is set in a France of the near future, 2022, and charts the country's transition, triggered by the democratic process of Presidential elections which see a face-off between Marine Le Pen and Mohammed Ben Abbes, the leader of a Muslim Brotherhood Party, to a government informed by Islamic values and principles. The novel's narrator, François, an academic (he is asked to prepare the Pléiade edition of Huysmans), witnesses the city's changes through the prism of his personal life, and ultimately converts to Islam himself, tempted by the privileges, not least the promise of polygamy, that this affords him in the new regime.

In the days leading up to its publication, Houellebecq's novel, already partially leaked, attracted considerable media attention and criticism, with, for example, a France 2 report on the eve of its publication crystallising concerns about the book as painting an irresponsible caricature, encouraging fear of Muslims;⁸ a refusal to engage with alternative futures; and a *cadeau de Noël* for the Front National. Interviewed on the programme, Houellebecq comments that the book is fictional, that it imagines only a possibility, one that contemplates the return of religion as an antidote against excessive individualism, and narrated by a character who, rather than being driven or motivated, is drawn to the easiest solutions.

Two days prior to Houellebecq's television interview, media commentator Alain Finkielkraut had launched a confused yet bitter attack on the novel in his

⁵ *Soumission*, pp. 125–126.

⁶ Michel Houellebecq, *La Carte et le Territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

⁷ Marc Augé, *Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

⁸ France 2, 6 January 2015. See also an interview published on 2 January 2015: Sylvain Bourmeau, "Scare Tactics", *The Paris Review*. Available as: <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/01/02/scare-tactics-michel-houellebecq-on-his-new-book/>. All Internet references available when last checked, 13 June 2016.

regular radio broadcast,⁹ accusing Houellebecq of being tired, quoting a review of his “fable” as rancid, and finding it absurd that rather than denouncing France’s progression towards Islam, he celebrates this submission, in the name of a reckless abandonment to the other, and in ways that will further fuel civil tension in the contested urban areas of Paris and other cities.

On Wednesday 7 January, reflecting these emerging lines of critique and referring to the novel’s conclusion (albeit conflating author and character), the front cover cartoon of satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* depicted a gummy Houellebecq, with the caption, “En 2015 je perds mes dents; en 2022 je fais le Ramadan”.

At approximately 11.30am on Wednesday 7 January, largely considered as targeting the magazine because of its audacity in depicting the prophet, gunmen entered the premises of *Charlie Hebdo* and shot dead 12 people in (what was then) France’s worst experience of domestic terrorism in recent memory. The next day, France’s prime minister, Manuel Valls, responded to the atrocity on RTL with a well-turned soundbite stating: “La France, ça n’est pas Houellebecq. Ça n’est pas l’intolérance, la haine et la peur.”¹⁰

If the events outlined above transpired to associate the events with the novel, the nature of these links may not be as self-evident as the 24 hour news cycle would have it. To characterise one author as the epitome of anti-French values, by referring to (one of) his works or to his comments in interviews, might make for a newsworthy headline, but it does little to advance understanding about the events themselves, and far less to account for how the novel engages with debates.

Timeline (Version 2)

In this latter context, it is possible to take a longer view. In doing so, one might extend the events of January forward in time, to encompass other, more devastating attacks on Paris, Nice, Berlin, beyond. However, a wider perspective might also include the different histories that inform the spaces, places, memories and legacies of a nation, or, to model an approach on the intermixing of the mundane and the ideological that characterises Houellebecq’s novels, the personal experiences and engagements that any one of “us” brings to the mediascape, as a consumer and, increasingly, as a producer.

It is Saturday 21 November 2015. Brussels is in lockdown as authorities hunt for perpetrators. Tanks occupy la Grande Place. Across England, the Marseillaise is played at every Premier League match. Around the world, monuments have been lit in the colours of the French *tricolore*. For the second time in a year, Paris witnessed what would previously have been unimaginably devastating terrorist attacks, this

⁹ Alain Finkielkraut, RCJ, 4 January 2015. Available as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86dAIFnrBOA>.

¹⁰ See for example <http://www.lindependant.fr/2015/01/08/manuel-valls-la-france-ce-n-est-pas-michel-houellebecq-pas-l-intolerance-et-la-peur,1976657.php>.

time resulting in more than 100 deaths. Hollande declares the events to be an act of war, and redoubles attacks on Islamic State positions in Syria. This is not a novel.

In 1884, Joris-Karl Huysmans publishes *A rebours*. The protagonist of Houellebecq’s *Soumission* is a Huysmans scholar, and, quantitatively, more of the novel is concerned with François’s professional, scholarly and personal investment in his works, their philosophical interpretation and deployment – and with his affective, often misogynistic, encounters and imaginary – than with the nation’s political transition to an Islamic state.

By Friday 9 January, Houellebecq is reportedly under police protection and/or at an unspecified rural retreat. In an interview broadcast on Canal + on the evening of Monday 12 January,¹¹ he appears to be shaken, tearful and deeply affected by the loss of his friend, economist Bernard Maris, one of those murdered. He replies to questions by Antoine de Caunes stating that liberty is not possible without some provocation. He also confirms that “he is Charlie”, echoing the prevalent JFK-esque social media meme “Je suis Charlie”, that became a required twitter and facebook mantra in the 48 hours following the atrocity.

During the 1920s, American author Ernest Hemingway works on a series of memoirs depicting the social whirl and party lifestyle he enjoyed in Paris. Written up before his death and published posthumously in 1964, *A Moveable Feast (Paris est une fête)* becomes a bestseller in France in late 2015. As often as not its purchasers (rather than, or perhaps after, reading them) place the books on pavements next to small candles and plastic wrapping containing flowers. BBC News broadcasts a short tribute film where diverse Parisians read quotes from the novel in cafés.

By the end of January, the novelist has emerged from his self-imposed purdah to indicate that Valls did not know what he was talking about, and that he found him “chiant”. Twittersphere spats continue throughout the year.

In the eleventh century, pilgrims are recorded visiting a holy site featuring the black Madonna in the Cathedral of Rocamadour.

By mid-2015, the meme “Je suis Charlie” has become a topic for academic conferences, but has been supplanted from prominence on facebook by new trends.

At some time shortly before 1470, Renaissance artist, Francesco del Cossa was at work painting an allegorical fresco in Ferrara’s Palazzo Schifanoia, following a dispute with his patrons about payment for his contribution. In Ali Smith’s Man Booker shortlisted novel of 2014, *How to Be Both*,¹² del Cossa (in an unspecified spectral way) accompanies the present-day narrator, George, as she mourns the loss of her mother, who had used her dying days to visit the fresco, and to comment on the twenty-first century, observing our curiously horseless world, a place where

¹¹ “Le Grand Journal” Canal +, published 14 January 2015. Available as <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c00wgcTXr1s>.

¹² Ali Smith, *How to Be Both* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014).

“illuminated windows” depict “the art of love” to disenchanted viewers, holding the small, tablet-sized windows, like little painted icons, before their eyes.

November 2015. Our present-day icons provide us with a handy app (all apps are handy), drawing on an earlier rainbow experiment, that transforms users' posed faces into personal *tricolores* causing intellectuals everywhere to agonise further as to the appropriateness of performing the required three clicks to be or not to be France.

Charlie and the memes

Understanding the socio-cultural phenomenon that the “Je suis Charlie” tag, its uses, contexts and variants represented, in France and beyond, would, indeed, be the stuff of an entire conference panel, and an excellent series of papers on the topic was presented at the 40th anniversary conference of *Contemporary French Civilization* (Baltimore, September 2015). For the purposes of the current article, however, I want to focus on the rapidity, ubiquity and dispensability of the phenomenon, in alignment with meme theory, whereby, as Richard Dawkins and Susan Blackmore have argued, ideas evolve in some senses independently from our control, and we are, in many ways, merely their hosts.¹³ The pseudo-science of memetics that has arisen around this idea has come in for considerable interrogation, notably by Mary Midgley, who has taken issue with its reductionist and competitive assumptions, making the case instead for more holistic understandings of how cultures shift over time.¹⁴ Nonetheless, in its application to social media, and specifically the way this fuels and embraces our growing need to replicate tropes across facebook and other platforms, memetics queries personal autonomy. Equally, concepts such as assemblage or technogenesis, with their emphasis on flux, come close to defining the movement of the social media meme through their emphasis on the arbitrary and transitory, their interconnections with the vested interests of corporations, and the ways in which the socio-cultural terrain informs and shapes our participation in information flows. As Katherine Hayles writes in *How We Think*, “[w]hen objects acquire sensors and actuators it is no exaggeration to say that they have an *umwelt*, in the sense that they perceive the world, draw conclusions based on their perceptions, and act on those perceptions”.¹⁵ Charlie, like some Whovian angel or worshipped icon, whenever we look away, comes to life.

Memes and assemblage theory also provide a way of thinking about Michel Houellebecq's literary universe, in particular its concern with evoking a contemporary human condition in ways that contest our privileged sense of agency, be this with regard to technology, politics, love or religion. As Douglas Morrey

notes, for example, other than a “residual attachment to sex”, “there is, in many of Houellebecq's protagonists ... a certain refusal of agitation and almost total lack of interests in the traditional sense”.¹⁶ *Soumission* is no exception to this pattern. The novel's protagonist, François, is not the national everyman his name suggests, or at least not in the sense of one who encapsulates ideals, values, or the dynamism of the political. He declares himself unfamiliar with “France”.¹⁷ His response to the democratic coup is characterised instead by drift and irresolution, and his purview is one that deals with the social upheaval by taking solace in brand certainties and commonplaces. In his journeys into the backwaters of the country, he encapsulates Houellebecq's pessimism, a reduction, if not to the absurd, to those post-capitalist banalities that constitute the fabric of our purchases and fuel an illusion of individual taste, control or choice. Rather than an autonomous actor, far less a nineteenth-century hero capable of resistance and revolt, as would seem to be required by Finkelkraut, his existence is premised on the vacuities and consumption choices of contemporary living, where nothing has lasting value or meaning, where the “like” of the instant is the fabric of our meme-assembled existences. Any interest in politicisation within this context is reduced to the entertainment value of election night on television, and at the beginning of the novel François makes it clear that, while he partakes willingly of the twists and turns of the televisual spectacle, he is about as political as a hand towel.¹⁸ Patriotism and the notion of the republic, he comments later, and perhaps in anticipation of November 2015, have only been good for a succession of stupid wars.¹⁹

To put this another way, the main mistake made by Finkelkraut and others involved in the stramash about *Soumission* may be to think that we have a say in the matter; that it is the plebiscite, far less the will of the people, that determines alone whether France decides its fate, elects a President, becomes Islamicised, or even which memes take precedence in our social network. The novel's meandering journeys through geography and history while “a nation decides its fate” are ones that question whether the idea of mattering is absolute, cut-and-dried, or its scales and values accessible and transparent. As Morrey argues, the novelist's oeuvre is best understood in the context of the post-human: his universe is one where, at best, there is an “urgent need to relinquish our egocentric culture and reconnect with each other at the simple level of bodily pleasure and basic human kindness before it is too late and we lose the capacity to experience such things”, or, at worst, “a perspective that takes a much broader species-eye view of our current context and [...] presents the decline of humanity as an evolutionary fatality over

¹³ Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁴ Mary Midgley, *Myths We Live By* (London: New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁵ Katherine Hayles, *How We Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 17.

¹⁶ Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 148.

¹⁷ *Soumission*, p. 126.

¹⁸ *Soumission*, pp. 74, 50.

¹⁹ *Soumission*, p. 163.

which there is little sense in being judgemental".²⁰ Morrey positions Houellebecq's writing ambivalently within this dynamic, and consequently he reads the narrative perspective as one "which deliberately plays down the significance of individual humans: [...] we find passages of historical, sociological or economic analysis in which individual protagonists appear as little more than packages of symptoms or articulated representatives of wider trends".²¹

In *Soumission*, this ambivalence characterises the novel's interplay between the radical and unstoppable shift in the social and political landscape, and the small choices, fluidities and juxtapositions that determine the destiny of a specific individual, whether these relate to his sexual partners, tourist destinations or fast-food choices. Insofar as the media reviewers of the novel pick up on the main character's position, it is primarily to focus on his ultimate conversion to Islam. However, in the unfolding of the narrative moments that lead there, this outcome reads as less of a willed decision, and more the logical progression of a number of factors (intellectual argument, academic heritage and prestige, desire, his father's precedent, peer or meme momentum, happenstance encounters and readings), with little clear distinction between conscious choices and his subjection to the social Zeitgeist. If commentators pick up on the promise of polygamous cross-generational nuptials as determining François's eventual conversion to Islam, they fail, however, to situate his "submission" within the further context of yet another classical literary reference within the novel. Yet, it is by way of an analogy with *Histoire d'O*²² that the protagonist is convinced to see the religion as an acceptance of the absolute. Eroticism and libido, as much as morality or ethics are required in understanding the conversion of Houellebecq's character, as evidenced by his regret that the streets of Paris now require a dress code that prevents him from indulging his former hetero-presumptive habit of peering on passers-by. Houellebecq's post-human is very human, in that for all that technogenesis, memetic assemblage and the ascent of the corporate-political nexus determine our fate, the personal, corporeal and the interests of the self are responsible for shaping and limiting our responses to those influences. Houellebecq implies that François is no more the master of his destiny in deciding to convert to Islam than he can choose his hormones, or has a say in which brand of frozen *blanquette de veau* to select in the supermarket.

Other spaces

Or, at least, that's one reading. Like those of Alain Finkielkraut or Manuel Valls, the analysis above, however far it takes us on this particular fugue, is ultimately reductionist (in that by settling for unity of meaning, it condenses a complex fictional artefact into a meme or message) and problematic (by dint of overly

fixating on character, assuming that human attributes can be transferred directly from the page to a philosophy, and ultimately endorsing one, as it happens, thoroughly misogynistic, self-centred and pessimistic world view—whether that of the protagonist or his author). I would like, if I may, to take one further look at how we might read *Soumission* in the context of the events of 2015, one that reinstates a sense of agency by emphasising how we respond to a novel as fiction, interact with art, use the study of French, of the Humanities.

In his essay "Des espaces autres", first delivered as a lecture in 1967 and published in 1984, Michel Foucault introduces the notion of the heterotopia, "une espèce de contestation à la fois mythique et réelle de l'espace où nous vivons", to explain the ways in which every civilisation creates spaces that are both within society but stand outside it.²³ The heterotopia, he writes, possesses "la curieuse propriété d'être en rapport avec tous les autres emplacements, mais sur un mode tel qu'ils suspendent, neutralisent ou inversent l'ensemble des rapports qui se trouvent, par eux, désignés, reflétés ou réfléchis". It is

[u]ne sorte d'expérience mixte, mitoyenne, qui serait le miroir [...] le miroir fonctionne comme une hétérotopie en ce sens qu'il rend cette place que j'occupe au moment où je me regarde dans la glace, à la fois absolument réelle, en liaison avec tout l'espace qui l'entoure, et absolument irréaliste, puisqu'elle est obligée, pour être perçue, de passer par ce point virtuel qui est là-bas.²⁴

His examples are diverse. He includes those institutions where a society hides away undesirable elements (prisons, care homes, hospitals), saunas and brothels (where codes of behaviour function differently), but also gardens, cinemas and museums, in that they bring to life other places and other times in a space that is nonetheless part of our own world.

What strikes me as particularly interesting here is the sense in which, for Foucault, such spaces contain a "contestatory" charge, suggesting, equally unusually in both his world view and that of Houellebecq, possibilities beyond pessimism, a potential for evading control, subverting inevitabilities, and perhaps even for agency and resistance. The concept of heterotopia has been applied to literature before, notably by Peter Johnson in his application of the concept to Blanchot and Roussel, and what Johnson notes is its usefulness in positioning textual space as a site of displacement and withdrawal, where different logics can emerge that both function differently from and comment upon their context:

Literature's space is deeply ambiguous and similar somewhat to Foucault's description of the heterotopian mirror: nowhere and here. It is most often described as the outside [*le dehors*] that is both unreachable and unavoidable. Literature

²⁰ Morrey, p. 11.

²¹ Morrey, p. 10.

²² Pauline Réage, *Histoire d'O* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1954).

²³ Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres", 1967. Available at <http://desteceres.com/heterotopias.pdf>.

²⁴ Foucault, "Des espaces autres".

presents a void or interval 'in place of the place it takes'. It is cut through with a different time and is never quite itself. . . .

Textual spaces have the freedom to be utterly different and to undermine all traditional unities of language and their attachment to things. The 'different' non-discursive spaces as outlined by Foucault in his lecture in their own way both reflect and at the same time interrupt or disrupt the spaces that surround them. Each space is at variance somehow and 'never quite itself'.²⁵

The co-incident operation of the heterotopia can be found throughout Houellebecq's novel, in each of the alternative landscapes to which François travels, or in his repeated encounters with spaces of the spiritual, such as when he considers the "strange statue" of the black Madonna, described as bearing witness to a universe that had entirely disappeared. The effect is described in the following terms:

Le jugement moral, le jugement individuel, l'individualité en elle-même n'étaient pas des notions clairement comprises par les hommes de l'âge roman, et je sentais moi aussi mon individualité se dissoudre, au fil de mes rêveries de plus en plus prolongées devant la vierge de Rocamadour.²⁶

More than this, however, reading *Soumission* as a quest for heterotopian space provides readers, commentators and French Studies scholars alike not so much with a template or process for interpreting the text, but with something akin to an assemblage, articulation, technique or set of suggestions about how to move between the novel and the world, the personal and the political, how to imagine being in both places at once. This possibility can operate in all sorts of ways, has as many applications as there are research questions. I would like, however, to suggest three ways in which a heterotopian reading of *Soumission* might be approached.

First and foremost, the series of rural retreats, where a driver may turn off the *autoroute* and enter into a distillation of history, a preservation of tradition, both belong to France, indeed epitomise its *terroir*, but also stand outside, away from the predominant national script. In and of themselves, villages function, perhaps, as tourist theme park heterotopias, but, at the same time, in their affective emptiness, they are also places that might best be understood within the logic of the *non-lieu*, the hypermodernity Marc Augé memorably described at the 2013 Australian Society for French Studies conference.²⁷ Within the narrative, however, the rural functions as a non-Paris, an unfolding of the contours of the hexagon

²⁵ Peter Johnson, "The Heterotopian Space of Literature", 9 August 2012. Available as <http://www.heterotopiastudies.com/the-heterotopian-space-of-literature/>.

²⁶ *Soumission*, pp. 166–167.

²⁷ The 2013 ASFS conference, whose theme was *Distance/proximité*, was held at the University of Queensland, 9–11 December. See *Distance/Proximity*, special issue of the *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 53: 1–2 (2016).

where priorities are brought into new topographies, where the ramifications of political upheaval acquire other perspectives.

In a different sense, the transformations of the capital itself also figure as heterotopian, in that they figure as sites where (other) cultures come into contact. This applies both to the changing time-lapse streetscapes that the Islamification of Paris brings, and to the cultural resistance to social change that Houellebecq describes in his evocation of Choisy's Chinatown in the *13^e arrondissement*. In describing each of these competing tendencies, the focus on how the city is other to itself is foregrounded:

Le changement de régime politique n'avait pas laissé de trace visible dans le quartier. Des groupes compacts de Chinois [...] transportaient des pâtes de riz, de la sauce de soja, des mangues. Rien, pas même un régime musulman, ne semblait pouvoir freiner leur activité incessante – le prosélytisme islamique, comme le message chrétien avant lui, se dissoudrait probablement sans laisser de traces dans l'océan de cette civilisation immense.

Il en allait un peu différemment au centre Italie 2. Comme je le présentais, le magasin Jennyfer avait disparu, remplacé par une sorte de boutique bio provençale proposant des huiles essentielles, du shampoing à l'huile d'olive et du miel aux saveurs de la garrigue.²⁸

While it is difficult to disregard the cultural absolutism and ethnicising assumptions of François's (or Houellebecq's) evocations of the city, this passage nonetheless attends to the everyday heterotopias of the cosmopolitan – if anything, and against Houellebecq, pointing to how migration has globalised our urban landscapes such that no city is ever completely itself, always containing suggestions of other cultural, and national, or post-national, possibilities.

Paris and the rural, but equally the spaces that constitute the political, mundane and spiritual, I would contend, constitute a system of heterotopias. Rather than passive acquiescence, François's journey through this articulated world represents an interrogation of the system itself, and our occupation of it.

Secondly, the monuments of Paris, in *Soumission*, and in particular the rarified atmosphere that typifies Houellebecq's account of the Sorbonne, could be considered in heterotopian terms. The university, in the novel, occupies a space that can either offer a retreat from the machinations and deal-making of the political, or, just as easily, serve as the scene for power-broking, diplomacy, plotting and backstabbing. It both belongs to the civic, and sits outside it, enabling, precisely, deals to be made, ideas to emerge, worlds to collide. At its best, both within the novel and beyond it, a heterotopian understanding of the university is a site where new possibilities might be entertained. As such, it can facilitate research on the move, open possibilities. In other ways, however, the heterotopian university can acquire

²⁸ *Soumission*, pp. 175–6.

conservative, nationalistic overtones, and the danger that a heterotopia can collapse into a reified symbol is always present. It is no accident that President François Hollande, on the morning following the November attacks, chose symbolically to make an address at the Sorbonne, and to lead the nation, and then the world, in a rendition of La Marseillaise and the call to arms and glorification of war that it encapsulates. The challenge for French Studies, and for the Humanities in general, is to retain an optimism that shared learning is possible, dialogue an option, and an affirmation that the heterotopia implied by immersing our research in other cultures, times and world views is of value.

Thirdly, following the display of official solidarity with the victims of the November events on monuments worldwide, enacting France in other geographical contexts, it may be too soon to know for sure what this particular cross-national manifestation of heterotopia intends. Being “France” in every city of the world can be read in many ways, some of them of concern, in their reaffirmation of nationalism. However, if the global phenomenon of a world sharing in Paris’s grief can be understood in beneficial terms, it is not as a hardening of positions against difference, a refusal to imagine change, but rather as a recognition that one city’s pain and fear can be felt in another space: that, through our capacity to present where we are not, we are more connected than we are divided, to echo the words of assassinated British MP, Jo Cox. A quote from Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* points to this ideal of internationalism and, outdated or not, the optimism of carrying our hopes, or our elsewheres.

If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast... We always returned to it no matter who we were nor how it was changed nor with what difficulties... it could be reached. It was always worth it and we received a return for whatever we brought to it.²⁹

Conclusion

I wish, then, to point to the heterotopian potential of art, whether literature or other forms, as those qualities that value encounter and transformation, operate via assemblage and ambivalence, in contradistinction to certainty, foreclosure, the definite.

Rocamadour, home to the statue of the black Madonna, could be seen as the spiritual heart, or perhaps more accurately, the heart of darkness, or spiritual *vide*, at the centre of the novel’s quest structure. Contemplating the statue in the cathedral, which he visits every day, responding to the sculpture through close attention to

²⁹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964). The citation is from the epigraph to the posthumous publication of the novel, and attributed to remarks the author made to a friend.

the artist’s choices and the universe they represented, and in doing so replicating earlier pilgrimages to the site and linking these with his own intellectual, spiritual... and mundane concerns, what François confronts is not a moment of religious conversion in the classic sense, when the world falls into place, into one point, but rather a confrontation with otherness, a search for an opening into different ages, different places, a heterotopian moment when he seeks what he describes as a dissolution of his individuality.³⁰

Needless to say, this central dynamic in the novel, both as *mise en abyme* and heterotopia, is not alluded to at all in the mediatisation and mainstream reception of *Soumission*. It is, however, this other process of submission (not the country’s political capitulation, nor even his conversion to Islam, but rather the protagonist’s abandonment of ego in a gradual and, to some extent, reasoned, acceptance of events and their implications for him) that is the novel’s primary focus. First and foremost, and regardless of the tragic hyper-topicality that attended its publication, reading Houellebecq’s novel ought to be situated in its literariness, its fictionality, its heterotopian function as art. However, far from implying that such a reading precludes its contextualisation within contemporary cultures and societies, it is by fully entering into the complexities, nuances and ambivalences afforded by reading literature, or contemplating art, that our personal negotiations with the world and the text, our adventure in space and time, become activated.

Figured in this text as François’s geographical fugues; his recourse to Huysmans and the prisms of literature through which his ideas have been shaped; his encounters with religion, and contemplation of the art of earlier cultures; a heterotopian reading of *Soumission* opens up spaces of otherness, refraction or, to use one of the author’s preferred terms, “possibility”. It invites a process far from the automatic or instantaneous of the social media meme or political soundbite, one that situates, articulates, assembles ideas, tendencies and dilemmas across contexts and histories, rather than reducing meaning to the immediacy of the instrumental. Houellebecq’s novel, viewed in this light, and in line with the author’s recurring concerns, is certainly concerned with the ways in which religion presents alternatives to individualism. Islam in *Soumission*, like the religions and cults he evokes in earlier texts, offers an aspirational trope, a moment within the text where the author can consider difference, entertain possibility, akin to what Morrey calls “a calming of desire”.³¹ More than this, however, Houellebecq is engaged in what might be termed entertaining possibilities, in literary form, as a potential response to and exploration of the vicissitudes of the post-human condition, whether this is viewed in terms of the emptiness of everyday life or the geopolitical alignment of a nation that has lost its mission. It is, I would infer, in the plenitude of literary form, the sentence-by-sentence unfolding of ambiguities, ambivalences, doublings

³⁰ *Soumission*, p. 167.

³¹ Morrey, p. 148.

and analogies that constitute his “fable”, that thoughtful spaces emerge where the contemporary event can be contextualised.

Writing in the *New Statesman* on 10 January 2015, Slavoj Žižek calls for a thoughtful response to the *Charlie Hebdo* killings,³² one that condemns, but takes care to transcend demonisation. Drawing on a broader philosophical and literary tradition, his reasoning enables contextualisation, comparison, and a bigger picture whereby fundamentalism and the ways it responds, albeit mistakenly, to the myths of liberal humanism might be considered side-by-side. In brief, he is calling for a system of articulated heterotopias, one capable of acknowledging complex worlds and moving beyond the national and nationalisms. Whatever one’s views about Houellebecq’s personal philosophies or proclivities, there is at work in the literary possibilities of the novel an opening up of one potential space in which to think the contemporary via the past, the present via the future. As conjured in the following quote from Ali Smith’s aptly entitled 2014 novel *How to Be Both*, or like the contemplation of art, or the work of Humanities, reading *Soumission* brings into being multiple perspectives, heterotopias and possibilities:

A picture is most times just picture: but sometimes a picture is more... I like very much a foot, say, or a hand, coming over the edge and over the frame into the world beyond the picture, cause a picture is a real thing in the world and this shift is a marker of this reality: and I like a picture to shift into that realm between the picture and the world just like I like a body really to be present under painted clothes where something, a breast, a chest, an elbow, a knee, presses up from beneath and brings life to a fabric: I like an angel’s knee particularly, cause holy things are worldly too and it’s not a blasphemy to think so, just a further understanding of the realness of holy things.

But these are mere mundane pleasures [...] beside the thing that happens when the life of the picture steps outside the frame.

Cause then it does 2 opposing things at once.

The one is, it lets the world be seen and understood.

The other is, it unchains the eyes and the lives of those who see it and gives them a moment of freedom, from its world and their world both.³³

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³² Slavoj Žižek, ‘Are the worst really full of passionate intensity?’, *New Statesman*, 10 January 2015. Available as <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/01/slavoj-i-ek-charlie-hebdo-massacre-are-worst-really-full-passionate-intensity>.

³³ Smith, *How to Be Both*, pp. 307–308. The use of the colon to separate “sentences” and of the figure “2” rather than the word “two” are stylistic markers used by Smith in the original.