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Michel Houellebecq: The Impossibility of Being an Island

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Michel Houellebecq has positioned himself as one of contemporary literature's foremost outsiders. Eschewing mainstream French literati, his own readership, critical reception, and the academy, he presents a striking example in his novels of the paradoxes of literary singularity. As Murielle Clément suggests in *Houellebecq revisité*, his work can be characterized as "une île impossible" (104), or an impossible island. This paper will explore key elements of his troubled dialogue with the canon through questions of narrative aesthetics and Humanist philosophy, with a focus on the manifold influences from literary history that impact his prose. In particular, he borrows from the realist mode of expression exemplified in nineteenth-century authors like Balzac, in a return to *pre*-postmodern models and a brazen rupture with contemporary literary theory. In reading Houellebecq as a reactionary figure, I will suggest that his "island status" relies on an "archipelago" of influence that links his work to contemporary debates in French literary circles, even as it attempts to isolate his writing from literary criticism since poststructuralism.

Although Houellebecq's claims to "island status" can certainly be traced to the author himself, the literary press has been keen to fan the flames of a quixotic egotism by permitting him to offer extensive treatises on his own singularity. In an interview with *Inrockuptibles*, the author

asserts that “sur le plan littéraire, je ne me sens pas le fils de la génération qui m’a précédé [...] si bien que peu d’auteurs m’ont vraiment influencé” (Weitzmann 57). Houellebecq nonetheless speaks extensively about his many literary influences in other interviews, calling into question the possibility of using his self-criticism to explain authorial intent. These conflicting accounts of his literary production might be partially explained by his return to authors from previous generations in search of literary models that are more conducive to conveying his worldview; it is indeed those from earlier periods that seem to influence Houellebecq most.

Literary scholars seem often to express outright distaste for his self-ascribed originality. According to Andrew Bennett, contemporary literary criticism tends to remain wary of authors who proclaim to be “the fount, the origin of all meaning” (21). In this regard, it remains faithful to a basic tenet of poststructuralist criticism from the 1960s and 1970s, which focuses instead on the “irreducible plurality” identified by Roland Barthes in his famous essay “The Death of the Author” (159). Considering the text as a space where social discourses are combined, poststructuralist criticism can in its most rarified form treat the text like a “tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture” (146). In this type of reading, the originality of the author derives from the ability to weave together these quotations in a new and meaningful way, rather than to create isolated works and never-before-imagined concepts. In such a poststructuralist context, the independent position that Houellebecq attempts to adopt in relationship to literature appears virtually untenable. Even a perfunctory list of the writers and philosophers engaged directly by Houellebecq’s novels

illustrates that his work remains inexhaustibly linked to a vast plurality of such centers of culture.

For example, Houellebecq makes approximate borrowings from Kantian moral theory and appropriates notions of positivist altruism from Auguste Comte. He frequently alludes to the literary aesthetics of Thomas Mann and Fyodor Dostoevsky, based upon his belief that the novel serves as “un lieu naturel pour l’expression de débats et de déchirements philosophiques” (*Interventions* 53). In his prose, Houellebecq emulates Céline’s acerbic nihilism, Camus’ absurdist *écriture blanche* and Hemingway’s reductive narratives. The laconic opening line of *Plateforme* distinctly echoes *L’étranger*, substituting Michel’s father for Meursault’s mother: “Mon père est mort il y a un an” (11). Its closing passages, where Michel has reached the end of his “journey,” are imbued with a flat and desolate nihilism which both emulates and exceeds that of Céline: “Je m’imagine je ne sais pourquoi que je mourrai au milieu de la nuit [...] Mon appartement sera loué à un nouveau résident. On m’oubliera. On m’oubliera vite” (370).

Houellebecq’s twentieth-century influences indeed extend to predominantly Anglo-Saxon genres, including science fiction in the tradition of Howard Phillips Lovecraft, dystopia as portrayed by Aldous Huxley, and a graphic brand of *ennui* exemplified by the work of Bret Easton Ellis. In addition to this range of literary influences, Houellebecq appears obsessed with popular television. Last, Jack Abacassis makes close analogies between *Les Particules élémentaires* and various American movies:

Within a single narrative, [it] encapsulates the disturbing post-1968 chilling horror of *A Clockwork Orange*, the porno-violence of *8mm*, the nihilism and

despair of *American Beauty* and the horrifying science fiction of *The Matrix*. All these threads are woven into a gripping psychological novel, a social critique and a disturbing science fiction. (825)

Given these various cultural sources of inspiration, we can begin to envisage Houellebecq as a master of pastiche. Much as Quentin Tarantino draws his “originality” from the skill with which he conflates cinematic, literary and pop references, he seems to derive his own “singularity” from many origins.

Among the multitude of influences that have shaped the stylistic and aesthetic contours of the Houellebecqian island, it is nineteenth-century writings which resonate the loudest. The supreme air of confidence with which Houellebecq pens his portraits creates distinct echoes with Realist and Naturalist works. Much like them, his novels include occasionally witty, though more often brutal portraits made fierce with cynicism. In addition, Houellebecq borrows his most cited mantra from Schopenhauer, a nineteenth-century German philosopher: “la première, et pratiquement la seule condition d’un bon style, c’est d’avoir quelque chose à dire” (*Interventions* 53). Likewise, he draws on Stendhal who refuses a romantic “beau style” in favor of a streamlined plotline, or “procès verbal,” which acts as a critical mirror held up to society’s realities. As in each major literary movement in the nineteenth century, Houellebecq organizes his poetic verse around themes of social and political importance, such as “Chômage,” “Séjour-Club,” “Répartition-Consommation” and “Dernier rempart contre le libéralisme,” to take only these examples from *Le sens du combat*. Although Houellebecq’s reductive narratives might prove most akin to

twentieth-century literary styles, they can thus also be linked to these earlier sources.

Several other nineteenth-century writers offer similar points of comparison. For example, Houellebecq’s clever and subtle, yet ultimately pessimistic portrayal of hypocrisy parallels the problems of modernity that Flaubert highlights in the conceit and *ennui* of *Madame Bovary*. Indeed, an interesting analogy can be made between Emma Bovary and Valérie, the female protagonist of *Plateforme*, who remains essentially a banal and “ordinary” woman. Introduced as having “un visage [...] qu’on pouvait qualifier de modeste ; ni belle ni laide, à proprement parler” (49), Valérie has a first verbal exchange with Michel that leads him to conclude that she was “soumise *en général*” despite her zeal for “extreme” living (50). Furthermore, Houellebecq demonstrates a concern for social outcasts who are not unlike the marginal characters in Emile Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart*. Houellebecq’s first novel is populated by manic-depressive computer programmers, while his subsequent novels feature lecherous drug addicts, prostitutes, the sexually impaired, and, in *La possibilité d’une île*, characters who are duped by a lugubrious cult leader.

Yet, it is Honoré de Balzac’s novels and novellas which arguably offer the most apt analogies to Houellebecq’s fiction in light of their robust and pugnacious social commentary. It is more than incidental that many of Balzac’s most celebrated quotations figure in Houellebecq’s chapter prologues. For instance, *Plateforme* begins with these words: “Plus sa vie est infâme, plus l’homme y tient ; elle est alors une protestation, une vengeance de tous les instants” (8). Taken from *Scènes de la vie Parisienne*, this intertextual reference immediately anchors Houellebecq’s contemporary tale of alienation and revolt in Balzac’s attack on injustices brought about by nineteenth-century modernity. Indeed,

many of Houellebecq's own literary mottos, such as "insistez sur la maladie, l'agonie, la laideur" and "soyez abjects, vous serez vrais" (*Lire* 24), are reminiscent of various celebrated citations from the master of Realism in that they likewise insist upon the paradoxical ways in which vulgarity serves as a means to ennoble characters.¹ These aphoristic dictums point towards a common tonality in Houellebecq's and Balzac's prose, which is borne out by similarities in their respective narrative aesthetics.

First, Houellebecq and Balzac both tend to introduce their characters by way of choice gambits—more often than not sordid in nature—followed by a steady stream of description, and, lastly, narrative conjecture. In *Le Père Goriot*, for instance, Balzac presents Eugène de Rastignac as "un de ces jeunes gens façonnés au travail par le malheur, qui [...] se préparent une belle destinée en calculant déjà la portée de leurs études, et, les adaptant par avance au mouvement futur de la société, pour être les premiers à la pressurer" (29). Balzac insists on directing our attention to the most visible of details, namely attire. A characteristically unflattering appraisal of his character's physical appearance follows: Rastignac ordinarily wears "une vieille redingote, un mauvais gilet, la méchante cravate noire, flétrie, mal nouée de l'Étudiant" (34). The use of a capital letter on the word "Étudiant" emphasizes here that Rastignac represents above all the archetype for a social category. His flaws enter into a mimetic relationship with the world outside the novel, and symbolize a reality beyond the scope of his individual coming-of-age story.

In similar fashion, Houellebecq frequently invokes his characters' physical and moral defects from the outset of his descriptions. In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, for example, he introduces Tisserant through an extended representation

of his attire. The strikingly unhandsome character wears "un splendide costume aux motifs rouges, jaunes et verts—on dirait un peu une tapisserie du Moyen Age [...] tout son habillement évoque le personnage du cadre commercial hyper-dynamique, ne manquant pas d'humour" (62). This portrait is immediately supplemented by the information that "le problème de Raphaël Tisserant—, le fondement de sa personnalité, en fait—, c'est qu'il est très laid. Tellement laid que son aspect rebute les femmes" (62). Like Balzac, Houellebecq dwells on physical minutiae in descriptive prose, then rapidly shifts to central flaws in character and narrative dilemmas, as though the material and moral world were directly linked. In their prosaic character assassinations, both authors convey a sense of disapproval, pity, and contempt towards their own protagonists.

These writers use similar narrative conventions to portray secondary characters, as well. There are indeed striking resemblances between the Maison Vauquer inhabitants from *Le Père Goriot* and Michel's travel companions in *Plateforme*. Balzac devotes no fewer minutiae to the novel's "lesser" characters than to its main protagonists: "la vieille demoiselle Michonneu [qui] gardait sur ses yeux fatigués un crasseux abat-jour [...] cerclé par du fil d'archal qui aurait effarouché l'ange de la Pitié [...] Quel acide avait dépouillé cette créature de ses formes féminines? Elle devait avoir été jolie et bien faite" (31). The rhetorical questioning of the subject is a device which only underlines the sense of authorial omniscience. Balzac uses nearly the same methodology to portray each of the house tenants: wretched details, followed by the authorial conjecture. The narrator notes that Monsieur Poiret looks like "une espèce de mécanique [...] la tête couverte d'une vieille casquette flasque, tenant à peine sa canne à pomme d'ivoire jauni dans

sa main,” then asks: “Quel travail avait pu le ratatiner ainsi ?” (31–32). Rather than respond to this question, the narrator conjectures that some other livelihood must have “wrecked” him so, without actually specifying what type. This unshared knowledge leaves the narrator in a position of authority in relationship to the reader as well as the character.

Although Houellebecq’s descriptions prove rather more “neutral” than Balzac’s verbal extravagance, he also uses speculation as a narrative device. In his novels, the transition from omniscient narrator to a first-person narrative creates a more subjective effect, while continuing to make use of realist techniques. In *Plateforme*, the first of Michel’s fellow tourists resembles a veteran politician, “Antoine Waechter jeune, si la chose est imaginable,” who at first glance appears like Robin Hood “avec quelque chose de suisse,” though the narrator concludes: “Pour tout dire il ne ressemblait pas à grand-chose, mais il avait vraiment l’air d’un con” (48). Michel speculates that the man and his spouse had in all probability “reproduced,” unlike the second couple: “l’homme maigre, moustachu et nerveux, [sa] femme, sèche et menue [... qui] donnaient l’impression de n’avoir baisé depuis trente ans” (47–48). These attacks on the couples’ mediocrity may be more sexual than Balzac’s introductory passages, but they are no less acerbic.

Like Michel and Valérie in *Plateforme*, Houellebecq’s other protagonists actively seek and, to different degrees, find salvation in the form of a stable, loving, heterosexual relationship. Their relentless belief in redemption through unity with the Other cannot be denied, even if Michel is ultimately plunged into the same nihilistic despair that pervades most of Houellebecq’s novels. For instance, in the poem that Daniel writes to the young Esther in *La possibilité d’une île*, he not only speaks of a unity of soul and oneness of

being achieved through love, but also implies that these peaceful qualities were part of a predestined fate:

Au fond j’ai toujours su
 Que j’atteindrais l’amour
 Et que cela serait
 Un peu avant ma mort
 J’ai toujours eu confiance,
 Je n’ai pas renoncé
 Bien avant ta présence
 Tu m’étais annoncée (182)

This poem built around faith in a prophecy and sacrifice without renunciation clearly evokes a Christian vocabulary that reminds the reader of Humanist ideals. The novel thus illustrates that the Elohimites’ goal to achieve eternal life through cloning is profoundly nightmarish and dystopian; for all its hideousness, the present remains the primary space in which to forge hope for humanity. At the novel’s denouement, when Marie²³ and Daniel²⁵ leave their solitary existence to seek out other neo-humans and “la vie réelle” (474), their revolt also speaks of an innately human desire for community and companionship. Paradoxically, the ability to attain the proverbial, utopian “island” lies in the rejection of seclusion; thus, *La possibilité d’une île* ultimately affirms the *impossibility* of “being an island.”

Despite this importance of romantic love and collective hope, Houellebecq also inherits a fascination with “unlimited individualism” (Golsan 49), which he associates with materialism and promiscuity. As in Balzac, Zola, or Flaubert, the reader finds representations of modern selfhood, subjectivity and ipseity, a unified “I” able to confront the world, love, loss, and death. This solid foundation for a sense

of self in his characters confirms that Houellebecq attempts a return to the *pre*-postmodern era. There is no mistaking his virulent antipathy for the world forged by the “soixante-huitards,” whose libertarian and anti-Humanist values are systemically criticized, especially as incarnated by Bruno and Michel’s mother Janine in *Les particules élémentaires*. In abandoning her children to live in a hippie commune in California, Janine appears irresponsible, reckless, and loathsome. Her own lifestyle choices seem to contribute to Bruno’s social and sexual deficiencies, leading him to hurl insults at her in their final encounter as she lies on her deathbed: “tu n’es qu’une vieille pute [...] tu mérites de crever” (319). According to Jack Abacassis, Houellebecq aims to explore “a space of narcissistic monstrosity” caused by extreme individualism and sexual permissiveness (817). His rupture with 1968 ethics and ethos has translated into a larger break with literary theory and practice associated with this era. Houellebecq generally refuses to enter into dialogue with the work of his contemporaries or with ideas stemming from poststructuralist schools of thought.

However, a notable exception to this rule appears in *Les particules élémentaires*, in the fictional encounter between Philippe Sollers and Bruno, a half-brother to Michel who has failed as a writer. Bruno is surprised to receive Sollers’ admiration for his “brutal” poetry: “Vous êtes réactionnaire, c’est bien. Tous les grands écrivains sont réactionnaires. Balzac, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Dostoïevski : que des réactionnaires. Mais il faut baiser, aussi, hein? Il faut partouzer. C’est important” (229). It is interesting that the metaphor in this passage links writing in dialogue with other authors to sexual promiscuity. The informal verbs “baiser” (to have sex) and “partouzer” (to participate in an orgy) indeed suggest that the contemporary author who reacts against

society also figuratively couples with (or is in bed with) the nineteenth-century writers mentioned. The Sollers that Houellebecq depicts here shows no literary fidelity, since he also suggests that Bruno read Péguy and Sade, a pro-Fascist and a pro-anarchist, respectively. After their encounter, Bruno believes that his collaboration with such a bastion of the postmodern literati establishment would be absurd. For his part, Sollers renounces his decision to publish Bruno’s work. Though the passage remains relatively lighthearted and leads to a collaborative dead-end, its sarcasm carries more than a grain of seriousness. Houellebecq shows an awareness that it would be impossible to maintain a hermetically sealed literary space not forced to interact with postmodernism. Although his characters fail to create a sustainable relationship, the novel acknowledges their co-existence and interaction—perhaps, a flirtation.

The case for dismissing Houellebecq as deluded in his desire for literary isolationism is weakened by virtue of this textual encounter with Sollers. His attempt to create islander status ultimately appears more like a reaction against critique informed by poststructuralist theory than an unwillingness to engage with it. If it can be established, as James Leonard and Christine Wharton argue, that “collaborational writing can be seen to advance the structuralist and poststructuralist program for writing in general” (34), Houellebecq’s fictional mockery of collaboration as writerly licentiousness might be read as a way to oppose such a program. Yet, Houellebecq ironically uses such an antagonistic tone to affirm relationships throughout *Ennemis publics* (2008), a volume of letters that he exchanged with Bernard-Henri Lévy. The two prominent figures agree that they have virtually nothing in common, except that both rebel against French intelligentsia, and therefore are subject to virulent attack. To introduce this

correspondence, the editor chooses the first letter from Houellebecq to Lévy, which emphasizes their difference: "Tout, comme on dit, nous sépare — à l'exception d'un point, fondamental : nous sommes l'un comme l'autre des individus assez méprisables." As this work demonstrates, Houellebecq prefers collaborative practices that continue to respect the individuality of participants, if not to underscore their dissimilarities. Much like his correspondence with Lévy, novels by Houellebecq use spatio-temporal distance as a guarantee to maintain the "island status" of his writing even as he links it to other isolated texts. Just as letters are exchanged only between those distanced from each other in space, his novels draw primarily on literary influences removed from his own time.

Eager to be at the forefront of a new event in the French *littérasphère*, criticism devoted to Houellebecq's novels in the mainstream and literary press often borders on the hyperbolic and sensational. An article in *Le Nouvel Observateur* referred to the novelist as "the first literary star since Sartre." Many portray him as a radically innovative force amongst a wave of new writers, such as Valérie Despentès and Maurice Dantec. The *Magazine Littéraire*, for instance, cites Houellebecq as being at the forefront of "la relève des avant-gardes!" A consensus prevails that posits his writings as radical and original, with even the *Le Monde* demurely commenting upon "the new tendency in literature." An *Art Press* critic categorically states that his verse reads "as if the history of poetry had never happened." Generally, there seems to be little perceived sense of contradiction in portraying Houellebecq as a pioneering force for the future and as a heritor of tradition according to mainstream media. Yet it is striking to observe the extent to

which popular discourse on literature has become disconnected from literary criticism.

Although critics develop sporadic comparisons between Houellebecq's work and the literary canon, its reception seems confounded by his break with post-1968 literary practices. The accolades "new" and "original," so liberally attributed to zeitgeist-defining works in the French press, have become rare achievements in academic criticism. While the caustic and socially mimetic prose published by Houellebecq may have signaled a change of direction for French literature in the 1990s, being provocative and sensational is no longer tantamount to being singular or original, or even departing from cultural "norms." If "originality" still exists in literary scholarship, then it continues to be understood in modernist terms, as a creative endeavor that "marks a significant departure from the norms of the cultural matrix" (Attridge 35).

Through realist aesthetics, Houellebecq instead creates an archipelago of "island" writings by drawing parallels between his own work and that of outstanding nineteenth-century figures like Balzac. Ironically, Houellebecq and literary academics alike remain faithful to modernist modes of thinking; they diverge to the degree in which they choose to retain different elements of its overarching paradigms in their search for new directions in postmodernity. Whereas Houellebecq advocates maintaining a relatively stable sense of self and a Humanist approach to questions of community, literary critics seek to destabilize identity and traditional social norms. Yet, Houellebecq posits the quest for stability *against* a backdrop of instability, thereby recognizing concerns with linguistic and cultural slippage that have endured since poststructuralism, while critics continue to deny his claims to

originality for the very reasons that they identify it with a (now virtually impossible) departure from cultural norms.

The strongest case for dismissing his work's critical importance would be to contend that its study merely represents a return to literary concerns of the past. Houellebecq is nevertheless far from alone in authoring contemporary works which draw heavily upon earlier aesthetic schools. Intertextual pastiche is indeed considered a predominant form of literary, artistic and cinematic production of the present moment, and is often acclaimed as "new" and "innovative."² A failure to engage with such works therefore feeds into the "island" myth that Houellebecq has sought to create, even while criticizing it. Moreover, it would be unreasonable to suggest that his contemporary novels attempt to uphold exactly the Humanist worldviews that predominated throughout the nineteenth century. His novels may flirt, or even "partouzer," with the narrative aesthetics and Humanist philosophy of ages gone by, and yet by the very nature of their recent publication, they cannot be divorced from the postmodern era.

The question remains: Why should intellectuals and literary critics take an interest in a work defined by its strong reactionary currents that blatantly disavow contemporary literary theory? Aside from Houellebecq's savage attack on nearly all ideas connected with May '68 and the French intellectual establishment, there are admittedly other arguments for holding his work at bay from serious academic consideration. Notably, he unleashes provocative and often pernicious verbal assaults against various minority groups, women and Islam. But if Houellebecq uses antagonism as a means by which to forge new creative and social bonds—turning the *poète maudit* into one among many social outcasts—then these attacks might be more than an attempt

to create publicity or to revolt against the establishment that outlived May '68. They might reflect very real frustrations felt by *les exclus* who recognize the impossibility of being an island.

¹ For instance, Balzac's observation that "la douleur ennoblit les personnes les plus vulgaires, car elle a sa grandeur, et pour en recevoir du lustre, il suffit d'être vrai" (*César Birotteau* 1838).

² The films of Quentin Tarantino provide a perfect example of this.

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