

## HOUELLEBECQ AND THE NOVEL AS SITE OF EPISTEMIC REBELLION

By Delphine Grass

A l'heure actuelle, on ne peut pas vraiment éprouver de désir non publicitaire.<sup>1</sup>

Houellebecq

Michel Houellebecq is a writer who cultivates an incongruous literary garden, where the necessity of describing contemporary objects as equipment for the manufacture of individuals can be said to precede his concern for literary conventions. This has been at the centre of much criticism formulated around Houellebecq's novels. One book in particular by Eric Naulleau called *Au Secour, Houellebecq Revient!* attacks his novels on the grounds that their success relies on his charming the reader by using recognisable elements of everyday life and incorporating them in the novels, in such a way that they could no longer be distinguished from the world of everyday life. Naulleau calls this phenomenon a 'literary evacuation'<sup>2</sup>. According to him, this phenomenon is symptomatic of three tendencies contracted by contemporary literature in France:

- 1) A growing confusion between literature and the world of 'celebrity'
- 2) The coming of age of a literary capitalism
- 3) A crisis of verticality<sup>3</sup>

According to Naulleau, Houellebecq's novels are to be ranked among the likes of celebrity autobiographies and memoirs. This is symptomatic of the fact that in France, Houellebecq has become a 'celebrity' in the true sense of the word: everyone knows him and has seen him on television, but not everyone has read his novels. As a result of his 'media profile', not many people dare take him seriously. Thus not reading Houellebecq in France has almost become an act of political correctness. Paradoxically I will argue that in spite of the author's 'media profile', Houellebecq's novels resist consumerism and subvert 'the coming of age of a literary capitalism' he is accused of endorsing. Indeed those novels depict a world where the only thing that can be represented is consumerism itself. Yet having consumer society as their primary object of representation does not mean that the novels

promulgate or feed that ideology: rather, Houellebecq allows the reader to consider these products independently of their use-value as consumable commodities. In addition to this, Houellebecq's theory of the novel tends to make an epistemic rather than a stylistic statement, how, unlike Naulleau, Houellebecq does not see literature as preceding the text (I will come back to this later), but as a type of modern document. This, of course, comes with its problems; namely, where does literature start, and where does it end?

### I. Houellebecq, the Novel and the Claim for Epistemic Autonomy

In his essay 'Approches du Désarroi' Houellebecq declares this of modern readers:

Worried by a cowardly dread of the 'politically correct', dumbfounded by a flood of pseudo-information that gives them the illusion of a constant modification of the categories of existence (we *can no longer think* what has been thought ten, one hundred, one thousand years ago), contemporary occidental men and women no longer manage to be readers; they can no longer satisfy the humble demand of a book lying in front of them: to be simply human beings, thinking and feeling for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Houellebecq is not the first author to have questioned the intellectual autonomy of his readership; Baudelaire shared similar anxieties:

Is it possible to suggest that a people of whom the eyes have gotten used to considering the results of a material science as the product of beauty has not singularly, after a while, diminished the faculty to judge and to feel what is more ethereal and immaterial in the world?<sup>5</sup>

Both quotes seek to question the concept of the sovereignty of the human as a subject and the concept of literature as a natural state of this subjectivity. By undermining the notion of the reader as subject, which, after all is a predicate to all literature, Houellebecq and Baudelaire extend their intellectual claims from the realm of aesthetics to the realm of knowledge. In other words, their concern has shifted from the aesthetic to the ontological. What can the essence of literature be in consumer society? Behind this question lies the claim that literature can no longer stand on its own but requires legitimating.

Here we touch on one of Houellebecq's central preoccupations: that of knowledge and the

<sup>1</sup> Houellebecq in an interview with Phillippe Solers in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1998  
[http://www.pileface.com/sollers/article.php3?id\\_article=179](http://www.pileface.com/sollers/article.php3?id_article=179) (I translate this quote on page 3).

<sup>2</sup> Naulleau, *Au Secours Houellebecq Revient ! rentrée littéraire, par ici la sortie...* (ed. hiflet & Cie, Paris, 2005), p. 17 (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 18 (my translation).

<sup>4</sup> Houellebecq, 'Approches du Désarroi' in *Interventions*, (Flammarion, first published in Dix, Les Inrokuptibles/Grasset, 1998), p. 75 (my translation).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1859', in *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Robert Laffont: Paris, 1980) p. 750 (my translation).

value of literature. In *Atomised*, Jean-François Lyotard's concepts of 'narrative knowledge', or knowledge that 'determines its own criteria of competence', and therefore does not require legitimating<sup>6</sup>; and 'denotative knowledge', or knowledge that demands to be isolated from other narratives whilst requiring them for social legitimating, are contested. For Houellebecq, the concept of 'narrative knowledge' can be said to play out and indeed justify the very economy of desire he seeks to erase. As it is pointed out by Lyotard himself, narrative knowledge is mostly present 'in the formulation of traditional knowledge'<sup>7</sup>. Yet arguably, tradition can be said to bear little relevance in the modern world, where 'the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality' has become 'a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, narrative knowledge might play some part in the formulation of modern knowledge, but has lost its 'aura'<sup>9</sup> alongside the work of art. It is not so much that language does not play a role in the formulation of knowledge; it is the idea that narratives are no longer the "site" or the public space for epistemic dispute that is raised here. Therefore, it is possible to argue that when one talks about narratives today, one is usually to talk about semiotics rather than meaning. So, similarly to the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, narrative knowledge has lost its authority as far as the formulation of truth is concerned.

Thus scientific or denotative knowledge has become the formulation of modern knowledge. Therefore in Houellebecq's novels, all representations of the "occidental" world we are living in are directly affected by denotative knowledge so that in turn the poetics of literature can no longer be held as purely

---

<sup>6</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne, Rapport sur le Savoir* (Les Editions de Minuit :Paris, 1979) p. 43 (my translation).

<sup>7</sup> ibid, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in [http://www.makebelieve.gr/mr/teaching/UoA-MS/2005/papers/BenjaminWalter\\_78\\_TheWorkofArtMechRepr.pdf](http://www.makebelieve.gr/mr/teaching/UoA-MS/2005/papers/BenjaminWalter_78_TheWorkofArtMechRepr.pdf), pp. 5-6. Also in the original language in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977, (pp. 10-43)

<sup>9</sup> The term 'aura' was coined by Walter Benjamin to describe the 'authority' of a work of art: 'One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.' You can read his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in pdf at [http://www.makebelieve.gr/mr/teaching/UoA-MS/2005/papers/BenjaminWalter\\_78\\_TheWorkofArtMechRepr.pdf](http://www.makebelieve.gr/mr/teaching/UoA-MS/2005/papers/BenjaminWalter_78_TheWorkofArtMechRepr.pdf). The quote from above is p. 4 online.

'narrative' in the traditional sense of the term. As a result of this, the poetics of modern literature have progressively come to exceed literary conventions in a sublime attempt to open itself to the public domain of modernity. For, contrary to most opinions, human subjectivity is not threatened by rational or denotative discourses, and neither are narratives: rationalism only accentuate the apparent distinction between the domain of the public and the domain of the private, so that we live under the impression that our private matters are walled off from the world, which leaves us irremediably bound to this idea of selfhood. Thus as demonstrated in Houellebecq's novels, the science of sexuality does not repress desiring subjects, nor does it liberate them: it only accentuates desire. As such Houellebecq attempts to unbind literature from a sense of self in an attempt to overcome this partition the private and the public.

Houellebecq declares: "Today, we can no longer experience desire independently from advertising"<sup>10</sup>. Contrary to what Naulleau asserts, it is not the literary that has been evacuated from Houellebecq's texts but the aura of style. The aesthetics of the 'Houellebecqian' novel are, as Robert Dion and Elisabeth Haghebaert pointed out, no longer those of 'dialogism in the Bakhtinian sense', but 'rather eschatological'<sup>11</sup>. As I will demonstrate, what Houellebecq performs in his novels is in fact the eschatology of desire as the primary object of our modern consumer society.

In that sense, Lyotard's concept of a self-legitimising narrative knowledge becomes little less than an alibi for fiction to disengage itself with the other side of postmodernism's metaphysics of difference: consumerism, and with it the never-ending yet aporetic desire of the subject. The concept of narrative knowledge is revealed to be no more than yet another digression of our own desire for a form of metaphysical tourism; it is yet another form of narcissistic individuation. So in the narrative of *Atomised* there is no one way street translation of knowledge into discourse, but a dynamic reciprocity between both: literature too is being processed and expanded into by knowledge and information the reader's indisposed ego cannot escape. For knowledge expands and builds into literature the way new buildings and new architecture grow in the mist of old

---

<sup>10</sup> Houellebecq in an interview with Philippe Sollers in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 08/10/1998 (1998), accessible on Philippe Sollers' website [http://www.pileface.com/sollers/article.php3?id\\_article=172](http://www.pileface.com/sollers/article.php3?id_article=172) (my translation).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Dion and Elizabeth Haghebaert, 'Le Cas de Houellebecq et la Dynamique des Genres Littéraires', *French Studies*, Vol. LV, No. 4 (2001), p. 513 (my translation). By dialogism, the authors are referring to Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of language in literature as being a competition of voices and ideologies.

cities: they are for the majority unexpected and unwarranted for by the inhabitants for they do not respect aesthetic conventions, but they stand amongst us nonetheless.

This quote by Matthew Arnold can help us understand what is at stake in Houellebecq's novels:

To know the best that has been thought and said by the modern nations, is to know', says Professor Huxley, 'only what modern literatures have to tell us; it is the criticism of life contained in modern literature.' And yet 'the distinctive character of our times,' he urges, 'lies in the vast and constantly increasing part which is played by natural knowledge.' And how, therefore, can a man, devoid of knowledge of what physical science has done in the last century enter hopefully upon a criticism of modern life? [...] Literature is a large word; it may mean everything written with letters or printed in a book. Euclid's Elements and Newton's Principia are thus literature. All knowledge that reaches us through books is literature. But by literature Professor Huxley means belles lettres. He means to make me say, that knowing the best which has been thought and said by the modern nations is knowing their belles lettres and no more. And *this is no sufficient equipment*, he argues, *for a criticism of modern life.*'<sup>12</sup> (my emphasis)

Houellebecq's theory of the novel has indeed a lot to do with this idea that the French concept of literature as 'belles lettres' or beautiful letters in English, is 'no sufficient equipment for a criticism of modern life'. What he says about H.P. Lovecraft can also apply to himself: 'like Baudelaire, like Edgar Poe, he [Lovecraft] is fascinated by the idea that a rigid application of certain schemas, certain formulas, certain symmetries might render it possible to access perfection'<sup>13</sup>. Not only that, but it is possible to say that Balzac had a similar obsession driving his own literary realism. As he pointed out in his *Avant-Propos de 1842 sur La Comédie Humaine*:

Walter Scott elevated thus the novel to the philosophical value of history [...] he put there the spirit of old times, gathered at once drama, dialogue, portrait, landscape, description; he took in the marvellous and the real, those elements of the epic, he rubbed together poetry with the familiarity of the most humble of languages. But having less imagined a system than found its way in the fire of work or by the logic of this very work, he did not think of linking those compositions to one another, so as to coordinate a complete history of which each chapter

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'Literature and Science' (in response to Thomas H. Huxley's 'Science and Culture', see url <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1880huxley-scicult.html>) in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Seventh Edition, Vol.2, (Norton&Company: New York, London, 2000) p. 1549.

<sup>13</sup> Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft, contre le Monde, contre la Vie*, p.119

could have been a novel and each novel a period. In noticing the shortcoming of linkage, [...] I saw at once the favourable system for the effectuation of my own endeavour and the possibility to execute it.<sup>14</sup>

Balzac is more than inspired by Walter Scott: he is schematising Scott's novels in order to construct his own. He is representing Scott's novel, visualising it not solely as an object of beauty, but as a document containing valuable information.

So in reality, Houellebecq is much closer to Baudelaire and Balzac than he is to Lovecraft. In the same way that Baudelaire sublimated his own poetics into that of a more or less obscure writer at the time such as Edgar Allan Poe, Houellebecq does not hesitate to almost fictionalise Lovecraft's importance in the history of the novel to fit his own theory of literature. This narcissistic exercise enables both Houellebecq, Baudelaire and to an extent Balzac to almost objectify their own writing, to estrange themselves from their own style so as to concentrate more effectively on 'content'. In his *Avant-Propos*, Balzac seems also to indulge himself in the same exercise. As a result, all three writers become at once the victims and the persecutors<sup>15</sup> of their own *écritures*<sup>16</sup>; writing, as it were, becomes an experiment rather than an experience. Instead of posing the subject as a machine to experience his own subjectivity and desires, Balzac, Baudelaire and Houellebecq pose the I of enunciation as an experiment by objectifying the stylistic but also the philosophical conventions traditionally represent the subject in literature. This rigorous dedication goes beyond asserting the aesthetic autonomy of the subject in literature for it also claims epistemic and legislative autonomy for the work of fiction by transcending literature's aesthetic imperative, that of the concept of 'belles lettres', and becoming a singular document of modern life instead.

Balzac, Baudelaire and Houellebecq seek to create a museum of modern life's representational conventions in their own works, or to put it differently, they seek to create a museum on contemporary museums. Needless to say that inside such a desire to desecrate literature as the habitat of subjectivity resides the secret wish for it to regain a certain form of power by presenting it as an object of knowledge. For

<sup>14</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *L'Avant-Propos de 1842 sur la Comédie Humaine*, (Printed by J.Davies, 17 Ascham Road, Bournemouth, 1980), pp. 4-5.

<sup>15</sup> I am alluding to one of Charles Baudelaire's poems called 'L'Héautontimorouménos', that you can find in his *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 57 (my translation).

<sup>16</sup> 'Écriture' is a French word which suggests both 'writing style' and 'hand-writing'. 'Écriture' is different from 'écrit', which means 'what has been written'. In other words, 'écriture' refers to the style, and 'écrit' to the 'content' of a text. Most contemporary debates around literature have revolved around 'écriture' or the writing of texts as opposed to their content.

paradoxically, by losing its claim of individuality as sole guarantee of originality, by claiming its value as a document, literature suddenly becomes porous to other forms of knowledge. This means that the ‘literary’ would no longer be the exclusive domain of literature, the ‘scientific’ the exclusive domain of science. The non-literary, the literary ‘others’ which include not only disciplines such as science, translation, technology and so on, but also the world of consumerism in general, could no longer be seen as mere pollution to the private space of ‘belles lettres’.

The effect produced by Houellebecq’s eschatology of desire is singular: an objective rendering of the emotional and sentimental state of the human being in modern society that goes beyond simple aesthetic autonomy so as to gain philosophical and epistemic value. This words are echoed by Vincent Descombes in his essay ‘Le Beau Moderne’ (which is a response to Jürgen Habermas’s claim that the *modernity* of Baudelaire would be exclusively aesthetic) in which he says: ‘Within modern rationality, one is allowed to exalt autonomy from an aesthetic point of view, on the condition that one restricts one’s claim to the sphere of aesthetics. However, it is illegitimate to pretend to submit the ethical and the scientific to the aesthetic.’<sup>17</sup> Descombes argues that ‘the Baudelairian conception of the beautiful cannot be understood to be solely aesthetic. It disturbs the ‘tri-partition of modern rationality’.<sup>18</sup> As I want to demonstrate, Houellebecq also not only undermines aesthetic conventions but disturbs the very cognitive and ontological partitioning of modernity as such. As a result, Houellebecq undermines the existing narrative-knowledge/denotative-knowledge balance by shifting his focus from the subject of narration to the object of narration, from the desire of the subject to the object desired, removing the ego from modernity’s power-knowledge equation so as to disengage himself from the hyper-amplification of desire already set in place by the partitioning of modern rationality. This shift from aesthetic agitation to epistemic rebellion means that Houellebecq’s novels are not only subversive, but altogether illegitimate, since his claims exceed the field of narrative knowledge to demand a total re-evaluation of literature as an aesthetic practice: for Houellebecq does not just pose literature as an aesthetic practice, but as a site of epistemic and public intellectual strife.

## II. Beyond Aesthetic Autonomy and the Tyranny of Style: Against Epistemic Partition Between ‘Écriture’ and ‘Écrit’, ‘Style’ and ‘Content’

<sup>17</sup> Vincent Descombes, ‘Le Beau moderne’, *MLN*, Vol. 104, French Issue (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 789-803 (pp. 791-2) (my translation).

<sup>18</sup> ibid, p. 801 (my translation).

It is possible to say that Houellebecq has a positivist attitude to writing. In ‘Préliminaire au Positivisme’ he declares about Auguste Comte and positivism that: ‘Matter finds no more grace in the eyes of positivist philosophy than God does. Ontological modesty, submission to an experimental methodology, a foremost will to predict, to explain what it can: a style is given which, while it has enabled all of scientific discovery to occur within the past five centuries, proves to be slower when it comes to seducing a wider audience’.<sup>19</sup> Yet, similarly to Baudelaire and his devotion to ‘correspondences’, Houellebecq does not hesitate to apply positivist, that is, a rigorously analytical methodology to his own writing, with a pious dedication to his self-imposed nemesis. In the eyes of Houellebecq:

Literature gets on with everything, accommodates everything, rummages through the rubbish, licks the scars of unhappiness. A paradoxical poetry of anguish and oppression has been able to emerge from the middle of supermarkets and office buildings. This poetry isn’t gay; it cannot be. Modern poetry has no more the vocation to build a hypothetical ‘housing for being’ than modern architecture has a vocation to build habitable spaces.<sup>20</sup>

So, the accommodating space of literature is not yet a realm for being, it is not a space for things to dwell within: for Houellebecq, writing becomes no longer a habitable space for *l’écriture* or style, no more than a ‘Habitat’ store has the vocation to provide a dwelling in spite of the furniture and the household articles one can find in its premises. But just as strangely as a homeless person could be found sleeping on the pavement before Habitat’s shop windows, literature can sometimes oddly manage to create a habitat out of the unexpected. Thus if ‘content’ or meaning have been made homeless in contemporary literary theories and literature of recent years, they have found a new home in the novels of Houellebecq, but with a difference. Indeed, style is here no longer the soul of ‘subject-matter’ in the novel or, as Walter Benjamin would put it, style is no longer the aura of the written for Houellebecq. To clarify on the topic of style and content in the novel Martin de Haan declares: ‘You are opposed to the idea of *écriture* as object of literature. For you, style is rather one aspect amongst others.’ To which Houellebecq answers: ‘Yes, it is rather like the pieces of a toy one would put together: style is among

<sup>19</sup> Houellebecq, ‘Préliminaire Positiviste’, *Auguste Comte Aujourd’hui*, extrait du Colloque de Cerisy, (édition Kimé: Paris, 2003), p. 8 (my translation).

<sup>20</sup> Houellebecq, ‘Approches du désarroi’ in *Interventions*, p. 79 (my translation).

those pieces. But I cannot see the reason why style should transcend all the other pieces.<sup>21</sup>

His novels are in fact not so much the exploration and expression of the subjective self, as the exploration of ideas and discourses through their generic and rigorous representations. In that also, he reminds one of Balzac in his *Avant-propos de 1842 sur la Comédie Humaine*, for whom the ‘tyranny of reality’ could not outweigh the fantasy of his own ‘chimera’ (Baudelaire too, would refer to the infectious quality of reality on the modern writer in ‘Le Public Moderne et la Photographie’ in ‘Salon de 1859’).<sup>22</sup> But the tyranny of what he refers to in his foreword as reality turns out to be less the reality of the material world than the reality, or the presence of a concept, a desire for knowledge: again, a form of epistemic urge is what drives ‘l’écriture balzacienne’. Like Baudelaire, who managed to overshadow the even more tenacious aura of the poet from within his own creation, Balzac submits humbly to his self-afflicted tormentor. By a singular ‘tour de force’, Baudelaire manages in part to throw himself out of his own *écriture*, and Houellebecq manages to throw *écriture* out of the written. In fact, judging by his above-mentioned comment, Houellebecq would probably say that the aura of the poet has been replaced in the twentieth century by the aura of style or *écriture* (the only thing housed by Habitat today), something he also wants to do away with. In this way, Houellebecq simply extends the struggle for the modern writer, wanting to leave nothing up for grabs to the metaphysical darkness lurking around every corner of Western art, leaving, as it were, no metaphysical alibi for the vacuity of our consumer society.

Indeed Houellebecq’s novels seek to erase the illusion of the I, not to exacerbate it. The characters of Bruno and Michel in *Atomised* are pre-texts to the socio-historical and scientific discourses transferred onto the novel<sup>23</sup>: they are secretions of discourses that they do not motivate, but which motivates them. By de-contextualising the language information and the media industry in literature, Houellebecq explores the manufacture of selfhood in contemporary culture. The figure of the author himself does not escape this narrative rule: in his essay ‘Approches du Désarroi’, Houellebecq gives ‘A Brief History of Information’ in which he describes the evolution of the writer in

parallel to that of the typewriter<sup>24</sup>. This process of reversed sublimation, which, again, submits the subjective to the rigorous study of an episteme (meaning, for example, that the typewriter would not be an extension of the writer’s self, but the writer the extension of the typewriter) reminds me of a quote from René Scherer in his introduction to the 19<sup>th</sup> century critique Charles Fournier’s *L’Attraction Passionnée*: ‘Doubting civilisation in the absolute starts with the undermining of the I’<sup>25</sup>, and for Houellebecq, the I as a desiring subject of consumer society. Thus for Houellebecq, epistemic autonomy from the partitioning of modern epistemic conventions inside and outside literature would be a sort of ‘mise en scène’, enabling him to ultimately doubt the coherence of the subject not only inside, but also outside literature in the absolute. It becomes almost legitimate, in that case, to wonder who came first: the subject or literature. Here is one of the very important aspects of such a claim to epistemic autonomy: aesthetic autonomy would only enable the questioning of the coherence of the self within literature and the arts; whereas epistemic autonomy enables one to make a philosophical claim, that is, a claim that extends to the world outside literary conventions. And indeed for Houellebecq, the epistemic desecration of the ‘I’ must go through the violation of the ‘T’ of enunciation first, and so through the despoliation of literature as the glorified discourse that houses subjectivism as the language of this very utopia.

According to Houellebecq, the novel is a gigantic ‘set’ of modernity via which modernity can be questioned and critiqued by the novel instead of the latter remaining modernity’s aesthetic byproduct. His answer to Eric Nauleau is that, in order not to be engulfed by the ‘coming of age of a literary capitalism’, the novel has to perform its own ‘crisis of verticality’ so as to acquire an even bigger scope than that of market society itself. By ways of mimicry, the novel acquires not only an aesthetic, but an epistemic self-consciousness and therefore autonomy which allows it to effectuate a more powerful critique of the modern. This stems from the fact that for Houellebecq “the subversive” is nothing but an accolade of “individualism”, a philosophy which builds the individual as the temple of originality and vice-versa, and thus disassociate originality from the collective. In defying a social order that no longer really exists but for the benefit of being transgressed, individuals seek in fact to recover their own unique subjectivity or selfhood. Instead, Houellebecq chooses not to subvert anything through his texts, but simply to represent a

<sup>21</sup> Houellebecq, *Etudes Réunies par Sabine Wesemael*, Crin 43-2004, ‘Interview with Martin de Haan’, p. 12 (my translation).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Salon de 1859’ in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Chapter II, (Editions Robert Laffont, S.A., Paris, 1980), pp. 746-750.

<sup>23</sup> As Robert Dion and Elisabeth Haghebaert have pointed out in their essay (see above) p.516, Bruno tends to gather a wealth of socio-historical discourses around him, whereas Michel is the source of scientific discourses.

<sup>24</sup> Houellebecq, ‘Approches du Désarroi’ in *Interventions*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>25</sup> René Scherer, introduction to: Charles Fournier, *L’Attraction Passionnée*, (Libertés, collection dirigée par Jean-François Revel, 1967), p.13.

social order modelled on free-market society, where, in the absence of social unity, people's desires (sexual and material) have surpassed their capacity to realise them.

As the quote from the beginning of this essay indicates, the I has become for Houellebecq more than a social construct, it has become a manufactured product of our consumer's society:

We shall move on to consider that we not only live in a market economy, but more generally in a *market society*, that is to say a space of civilisation where the whole of human relationships, and in a similar way the whole of people's relationship to the world are manipulated by the media via the bias of a simple numeric calculation taking in account rates of attraction, novelty as well as a quality/price ratio. This logic which covers altogether erotic, loving and professional relationships as well as buyer's behaviours per se, has for basis to ease out the setting into place of multiple relational exchanges that can be quickly renewed (between consumers and produces, between employers and businesses, between lovers), so as to promote a fluidity of consumption based on an ethic of responsibility, transparency and choice. [...] Contemporary architecture is thus implicitly charged with a simple program that can be summed up in this way: *the building of shelves for a social supermarket*.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed the world as it is reflected in Houellebecq's novels is a world mediated by the media or the discourse of information itself, be that of journalism, tourism or advertisement. We are never informed anything else but information: the only thing we are informed of is information itself. We are being fed the waste products of our own society: it is branded as new but always the same and therefore never truly 'nourishing'. Everything we eat has been processed, marketed and rehashed by the media. This leads Houellebecq to think that capitalism is a system with a digestive tube, and that we are at the receiving end. Otherness is simulated on us constantly, but never really there.

It is not so much that social constructs permeate our lives so as to keep the hegemony of a certain power or ideology into place; the difference between the self as a stable/unstable social construct and the self as a manufactured product is that one establishes an aesthetic of conservation and memory whereas the other thrives on the dissemination of this very unity so that eventually, the annihilation of the one becomes the consecration of the other. Modern man, in Houellebecq's novels, is precisely trapped between both paradigms of Western civilisation, in the sense that market society equally subverts or idealises patriarchal society in order to sell its waste products. But both subjectivisms have one thing in common: to

establish the illusion of individuality and selfhood, both still revolve around the logic of the subject as centre of enunciation. In other words according to Houellebecq the theoretical deconstruction of the self as 'stable yet made up' social construct has only given rise to another form of subjectivism: once liberated from the fetters of social bondage the subject reappeared in force, free at last to compete for individuation through marketed stylistic differentiation. Similarly to the idea of progress which Baudelaire refers to in this quote, our consumerism could be seen as the ideological alibi of today's modern man:

This modern lantern throws darkness on all objects of knowledge; freedom evaporates, punishment disappears. If one wants to see history clearly one should first put out this perfidious light. This grotesque idea, that has flourished on the rotten terrain of modern fatuity, has discharged each and one of us from our duty, delivered all soul from responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

The last ramparts of social bondage having come down and being disclosed as artificial, the liberated individual can now consider the world as an authentic extension of his own self, as a fiction extending his engrossed subjectivity. In this logic, literature is able to stand for the epitome of this fantasy by precisely housing everything that resides outside the public sphere of knowledge. By refusing to capitalise on modernity's rational partitioning between self and object, style and content, the subjective and the objective, and by not restraining literature's autonomy to the realm of subjectivism, Houellebecq exceeds the rational economy of modernity. It is so that in his novels, difference is nothing but the glorification of choice, the subject as unstable post-modern entity nothing more than a glorified consumer. What he demonstrates in his novels is that there is indeed no authentic subversion possible in a free-market society. What is created instead is an evil homage to an already decadent social model, the false-consciousness of a false-consciousness.

So subjectivism finds no grace in the eyes of Houellebecq: where one could see the latter as a weapon to counter-attack the excesses of materialistic and rationalist philosophy, he represents it as one of its fundamental constituents and alibi. Again, he opposes this literary dichotomy which privileges style over content, subjectivism over objectivism, to the positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte. Commenting on contemporary philosophy, he declares: 'Matter, on its side, seemed to be flying away from success to success. Demagogical and simplistic, Cartesian thinking (on one side a 'machine-universe', composed with material machinery; on the other side the spirit, placed there as

<sup>26</sup> Houellebecq, 'Approches du Désarroi' in *Interventions*, p. 63 (my translation).

<sup>27</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Exposition Universelle 1855' in *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 725 (my translation).

if for safety measure, for the use of sensitive souls or in case of difficult problems) is still imposed on us today'.<sup>28</sup> In other words, contemporary post-modern philosophy, which tends to deconstruct the subject as a stable entity is, according to him, only re-iterating it elsewhere, on the surface of writing, in the event of *écriture*. For him, this re-iterated subject drinks from the same ontological materialistic source as the previous one, (by now seen as a construct failing to recognise itself as a construct): such criticism of Enlightenment philosophy is still based on a division between spiritual and material reality, subjective and objective evaluations of the world. By using subjectivism and the irrational as a weapon against the primacy of rationality in enlightened philosophy, our contemporary ontology of the subject only participates in what Houellebecq would call the never-ending 'metaphysical soap-opera' of the West. In an effort not to take part in this metaphysical soap-opera, Houellebecq's literature, in particular his novels, are made a struggle against their own *écriture*. Armed with unflinching devices against themselves, Houellebecq's novels 'fight on all fronts'<sup>29</sup> with an uncompromising dedication the reader had only thought possible to Cartesian logic itself.

### III. The Allegory of Tourism

Tourism is a good example of this idea of the world as extension of the modern self, or as ontological supermarket. As a discourse, tourism appeals to the spiritual identity of the modern soul. It is conceived as a valuable addition to the editable text constituting the individual, an attractive addition to one's profile on 'My Space', for instance. In other words tourism is, in addition of being a relaxing time away from work, shopping for the soul. Indeed its essence does not necessarily have anything to do with travelling per se. The concept of 'world music' for example, is typical of this phenomenon: what is the concept of 'world music' but music tourism? In *Atomised*, Bruno meets a young woman called Sophie in a holiday camp. They are listening to a band playing what is largely called 'African music'. When Bruno asks Sophie if she enjoys the music she answers that she prefers 'Brazilian music', 'in an attempt to be forgiven for not appreciating "African music"' (note how the two different kinds of music are affiliated to one another, probably under the similarly evasive category of 'world music'). Bruno's answer is somewhat more cynical:

Sophie! Exclaimed Bruno with fervour, I could go on holidays to Brazil. I would tour the favelas. The minibus would be bullet-proof. I would observe little eight year old killers dreaming of becoming thugs,

<sup>28</sup> Houellebecq, 'Préliminaires au Positivisme' in *Auguste Comte Aujourd'hui*, p. 8 (my translation).

<sup>29</sup> Houellebecq, 'Approches du Désarroi' in *Interventions*, Flammarion, Paris, 1998, p. 47 (my translation).

and little whores who die of aids at thirteen. I would not be afraid, because I would be protected by the bullet-proof metal. It would be in the morning, and in the afternoon I would go to the beach among rich drug dealers and pimps. In the mist of this unbridled life, of this urgency, I would forget the melancholia of occidental man. Sophie, you are right: I will seek information in a Nouvelles Frontières agency when I get home.<sup>30</sup>

Bruno's and Sophie's dialogue establishes a direct link between the discourse of tourism, sexuality and the economy of the self. The tourism described by Bruno is metaphysical, in the sense that it pertains to more than travelling or sightseeing: tourism is an attempt to forget the melancholia of occidental man. As a metaphysical phenomenon, tourism can go under the form of music for instance, or any other cultural product of modern life. Tourism gives you the security of a healthy soul, the illusion of not being just an empty shell. If I do up my house, will I become a tourist in my own home? Is 'lifestyle' the tourism of everyday life? The illusion of difference has a powerful grip, yet the discourse of tourism puts everything on the same ontological level playing field. The modern discourse of tourism has indeed nothing to do with travelling: it is a metaphysical discourse, a parasite feeding on others to erase its own vacuity (in the case of home improvement, it even manages to become its own host). Modern tourism is the minibus that goes in the favelas of Brazil to feed on the sight of 'authentic suffering'; it has for vocation to disguise the disarray of occidental men and women. Moreover, the modern tourist is to be distinguished from the 'flâneur' of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*: tourism as it is portrayed in Houellebecq's novels is a form of metaphysical homelessness. Tourism as it is represented in his novels is a spectacular construction where meaning cannot dwell; if tourism does not have anything to do with travelling, it definitely tries to 'take leave' of something. Traditionally associated with discovering new places and meeting new people, tourism could yet be said to be the ultimate attempt to take leave of the other. Indeed, as a social and metaphysical phenomenon, modern tourism could be described as an individualistic extravaganza, a metaphysical orgy for the self. Tourism is 'not' about meeting the other, the essence of tourism is not travelling, it is, on the contrary, a mimicry of difference which fulfils individual fantasies. As shown with Sophie, tourism can be said to be a discourse articulating private life. Usually seen as articulating the domain of the private individual, literature is often mistaken to be an aspect of or assimilated to modern tourism.

In an interview with Martin de Haan, Houellebecq declares: 'I am in a position even worse

<sup>30</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elementaires*, (Flammarion: Paris, 1998) p. 134 (my translation).

than that of the sociologist sometimes, one could say that I work from an ethnological point of view. I think I always thought myself to be a little bit like an ethnologist...in my own country.' The use of obscene language in Bruno's dialogue with Sophie ('Sophie, I want to lick your pussy'<sup>31</sup>) is one way to attack the notion of identity created by contemporary discourses. Obscenity and the use of scientific language have a sobering effect on the reader, for they both remain uncharted by private discourses. We can begin to see appear Houellebecq's literary project in his essay on Auguste Comte, a 19<sup>th</sup> century French positivist whom Houellebecq admires and quotes as one of his major influences. He declares: 'Everything, in the political and moral thoughts of Auguste Comte, seems to be created in order to exasperate the contemporary reader [...] we are still not out of the metaphysical state of which the disappearance he thought to be imminent. In fact, we have less than ever the intention of getting out of it; a satirist could even ask himself whether we are not threatened to escape it from the bottom...'<sup>32</sup> Houellebecq's novels seek to exasperate the reader in a similar way: the recurring use of scientific and 'obscene' or pornographic language in his novels is an attempt to prevent the I to accommodate the narratives, which as a result become porous to other modern collective discourses. Interestingly, and as pointed out by Jean-Pierre Cometti, 'the originality and perhaps the paradox of the position of Comte resides in the fact that the importance given to sentiments in his system is a correlative of his concern for unity and religiosity. For Comte, the subjective element of sentiment- as well as that of the individual- is an abstraction, similarly to that of a strictly hedonistic vision.'<sup>33</sup> For Houellebecq too, the strictly subjective element of literature is an abstraction which walls off literature within the domain of the private. Thus Houellebecq negates all autonomy and therefore individuation of the work of art. In that sense, Naulleau is right to point out that there is a growing confusion between literature and the world of celebrity, but he is wrong to say that Houellebecq is symptomatic of that phenomenon. Houellebecq only exacerbates this reality in an attempt to make it visible to the point of the grotesque.

Psychological reality, usually made a superior topic to that of the flesh in the modern economy of selfhood, is here defeated by the obscene and the scientific. Science and the obscene can have that in common that they both bear a similar importance to the flesh or to what Bakhtin calls 'the material bodily

<sup>31</sup> Martin de Haan, 'Entretien avec Houellebecq' in *Houellebecq, études réunies par Sabine van Wesemael*, p. 20 (my translation).

<sup>32</sup> Houellebecq, 'Préliminaire Positiviste' in *Auguste Comte Aujourd'hui*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Pierre Cometti, 'L'Esthétique Positiviste' in *Auguste Comte Aujourd'hui*, p. 35

principle'<sup>34</sup>; literary discourses are thought to have that in common with tourism that they often privilege the spiritual and the emotional over the objective and the cognitive. This is a false metonymy of literature, which takes on one of its aspects, the subjective, to be its whole. Yet, as Naulleau points out, the myth of literature as a form of emotional tourism remains. For Houellebecq, literature as metaphysical tourism is epitomised by what he calls 'hermetic poetry':

The English tourist goes on holidays in a certain place uniquely because he is certain to meet other English people there. He is the exact opposite to the French tourist, this vain being, so in love with himself that meeting another one of his compatriots abroad is utterly unbearable to him. In this sense, Lanzarote is a destination that can be recommended to French people. One can even especially recommend it to French hermetic poets, who will have all the leisure to produce works such as:

Shadow,  
Shadow of a shadow,  
Traces on a rock.

Or, more in the style of *Guillevic*:

Stone  
Little stone,  
You are breathing.<sup>35</sup>

In parodying such poetry, he parodies the myth of literature as the undeniable domain of the private and inconsequential. In order to not participate in a form of literature that would equate to emotional tourism and as a reaction to the consecration of sentiment as the domain of subjectivism as well as a superficial revolution of the subject, Houellebecq concentrates on the world of ideas and the world of objects instead of simulating the subjective life of his characters. This focus operates through cognitive and ontological digression rather than stylistic originality. For example, in his novels, the consumer's product, a pure aesthetic and stylistic object, is submitted to accounts of a sociological and scientific nature. Indeed Houellebecq realises the importance of a 'mise en scène' of the world of objects over that of his protagonists. For this reason, during the filming of the cinematic adaptation of *Extension du Domaine de la Lutte* (*Whatever* in English)

<sup>34</sup> For a full understanding of the 'material bodily principle', see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). The 'material bodily principle' has to be understood here as 'the body of the people', both literally and figuratively. For Houellebecq, the individuated body, the body as temple of the self is a constant source of anxiety. Beautiful bodies are described in his novels for instance as being 'frightfully healthy' (*Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 112) (my translation).

<sup>35</sup> Houellebecq, *Lanzarote et Autres Textes*, (Librio, 2002), pp. 16-17 (my translation).

by Phillippe Harel, Houellebecq chose to participate in the shooting of the film solely on the grounds for his concern of the set and décor of the film. He says on the subject: 'I knew well the world of businesses, the furnishing of offices, the positioning of hot drinks machines. I knew exactly the configuration of self-service restaurants, the problem of the attribution of parking spaces. I knew exactly in what type of room, during a business trip to the provinces, a technician, a representative, or a business-man would be susceptible to stay in. All in all, yes: I had something to bring to a film.'<sup>36</sup>

Also, in the half-disguised expectancy to catch the human in his own natural habitat, Houellebecq does not hesitate to diversify his narrative devices by including scientific theory and advertisement in his novels, where the reader expects them the least. As a result, the symbolics of narrative desire are disrupted, carnivalised<sup>37</sup>. This results in an aporetic effect which reshapes the reader from a consumer and a desiring subject to being the object *per se* of Houellebecq's narrative. As Jack I. Abecassis puts it: 'this fascination resides in the absolute symmetry between the reader and the fictional character. No longer a space for the heroic and the exploratory, the difference between the reader and fictional character has been reduced to a contemplation of the same by the same'.<sup>38</sup> For instance, Houellebecq does not hesitate to use parts of socio-historical discourses in the middle of one of Bruno's holidays: 'It was in 1987 that the first semi-religious inspiration workshops appeared in the "Site" or "In a few years, the "Site" as so many other sites in France or in occidental Europe" became as it were a relatively commonplace New Age centre, whilst keeping a "seventies" hedonist and liberal trade mark that secured its singularity on the market'.<sup>39</sup> In an effort to defeat the epistemic anthropophagy of "information" that is dominant in modern life, Houellebecq elaborates a theory of the novel that is a site of epistemic transformations, as opposed to a site of epistemic and philosophical vacation.

## Conclusion

Thus, more than an aesthetic provocation, Houellebecq's theory of literature exasperates modernity by attacking it on all fronts. By submitting

<sup>36</sup> Houellebecq's own blog entry: <http://web.mac.com/michelhouellebecq/iWeb/Site/Blog/641EC664-03FB-45CD-B2EF-C8DD26131CD0.html>.

<sup>37</sup> For a full understanding of what I mean by 'carnivalised', see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> Jack I. Abecassis, 'The Eclipse of Desire: L'Affaire Houellebecq' in *MLN*, Vol. 115 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 806 (pp. 801-826).

<sup>39</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 108 (my translation).

the scientific and the ontological to the aesthetics of the novel and vice versa, Houellebecq's literature becomes, as it were, more than subversive: it is altogether illegitimate. For a long time in Western literature, the arts have become increasingly concerned with matters of a cognitive rather than a moral nature. That is not to say that each aspect does not exclude the other. On the contrary, it is rather that, as Alan Thiher declares on Balzac in *Fiction Rivals Science*:

The difference between 18<sup>th</sup> century fiction and Balzac's realism is evident, I think, in the way in which the moral dimension in Balzac is subordinated to an epistemic desire. Ethical judgement about the world, of which there are many in a Balzacian novel, are subordinated to the totalizing knowledge that the novel can offer in the first place. Knowledge precedes evaluation.<sup>40</sup>

Thus it is possible to see Houellebecq's theory of the novel as an interesting proposal for a new form of interdisciplinarity, against the individuation of knowledge and disciplines and the complete partition of cognitive from aesthetic production. For it becomes clear that for Houellebecq, writing or *l'écriture* cannot be sustained as the primary topic for the novel and literature if it wants to survive:

The triumph of scientism has taken away from the novel the natural right to be a place for debates and philosophical splits. This means that there would be on the one hand science and matters of a serious nature, knowledge, the real and, on the other hand, literature, its elegance, its gratuitousness, its games of forms. This is why, I believe, the novel has become a site of writing for writing's (or *écriture*'s) sake. As if it were the only thing left to literature. I disagree and, so as not to give up, I keep repeating to myself this quote by Schopenhauer: 'the foremost condition of a good style of writing is to have something to say'.<sup>41</sup>

This leads him to conclude in the same article that: 'If a novel does not manage to integrate the state of our knowledge, it becomes a pure exercise of style'. As an answer to that comment, I can see fit to recall Baudelaire's words once more: 'This glorification of the individual has necessitated the infinite division of the territory of the arts. The absolute and diverging freedom of each of us, the division of efforts and the fractioning of human will have brought this weakness, this doubt and this poorness of invention [...] Individuality \_ this small property \_ has eaten collective

<sup>40</sup> Alan Thiher, *Fiction Rivals Science*, (University of Missouri Press: Columbia, London, 2001), p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Houellebecq, interview by Catherine Argand, Septembre 1998 in *Lire* <http://www.lire.fr/entretien.asp?idC=34866&idTC=4&idR=201&idG> (my translation).

originality<sup>42</sup>. As such Houellebecq negates all autonomy and therefore individuation of the work of art. So against a concept of literature as modern emotional tourism, it is the duty of the novel, according to Houellebecq, to integrate the state of today's knowledge-production to its structure, in an attempt to overcome the total abstraction of literature from the public domain, that is, from the domain of knowledge production altogether. The pleasures of writing being no longer uniquely synonymous with individual desires, but with their eschatology, the novel becomes capable of subverting the epistemic partitioning established by modernity, thus enabling the structures of knowledge production to remain open-ended and the novel to become porous to other objects of modernity. Thus Houellebecq re-values the novel as sole document of literature, thereby enabling texts that are traditionally appropriate to other disciplines to inform his own. His novels, as it were, become open books of modernity, "illegitimate sites of protest". Science, technology, history, translation all resonate in his novels: all become constitutive of literature as a modern practice for they all become documents forming *le moderne*. Modernity becomes both the object and the site of the false-consciousness that needs to be resisted. So by killing off the individuality of his own text, Houellebecq chooses to re-establish collective originality instead.

© Delphine Grass, 2006

*PhD 2, Comparative Literature (French Literature, Knowledge, and the Problem of Housing).*

*Special thanks to Professor Timothy Mathews for his help and much appreciated advice throughout the writing of this article.*

## Bibliography

- Jack I. Abecassis, *MLN* 115, «'The Eclipse of Desire : L'Affaire Houellebecq', The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000
- Mathew Arnold, 'Literature and Science', *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Seventh Edition, Vol.2, (Norton&Company : New York, London, 2000)
- Auguste Comte Aujourd'hui*, under the direction of Michel Bourdeau, Jean-François Braunstein, Annie Petit, (Kimé : Paris, 2003)
- Honoré de Balzac, *L'Avant-Propos de 1842 sur la Comédie Humaine*, Printed by J.Davies, 17 Ascham road, Bournemouth, 1980
- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. by Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1984

- Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Editions Robert Laffont, S.A, Paris, 1980)
- Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977)
- Charles Fournier, *L'Attraction Passionnée*, collection dirigée par Jean-François Revel, (Libertés 1967)
- French Studies*, Vol. LV, No. 4, (2001)
- Michel Houellebecq's blog entries  
<http://web.mac.com/michelhouellebecq/iWeb/Site/Blog/641EC664-03FB-45CD-B2EF-C8DD26131CD0.html>
- Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft, contre le Monde, contre la Vie*
- Michel Houellebecq, *Interventions* (Flammarion, first published in *Dix*, Les Inrokuptibles/Grasset 1998)
- Michel Houellebecq, *Lanzarote et Autres Textes*, (Librio, 2002)
- Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elementaires*, (Flammarion, 1998)
- Le Nouvel Observateur*,  
<http://permanent.nouvelobs.com/>  
*Lire*, <http://www.lire.fr>
- Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne, Rapport sur le Savoir*, (Les Editions de Minuit : Paris, 1979)
- Eric Naulleau, Au Secours Houellebecq Revient ! rentrée littéraire, par ici la sortie..., (Chiflet&Cie: Paris, 2005)
- Michel Houellebecq, *Etudes Réunies par Sabine Wesemael*, Crin 43 (2004)
- MLN* 104, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989)
- MLN* 115, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000)
- Alan Thiher, *Fiction Rivals Science*, (University of Missouri Press : Columbia, London, 2001)

<sup>42</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1846', *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 687 (my translation).