

Michel Annihilation

Houellebecq's

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (December 2024)

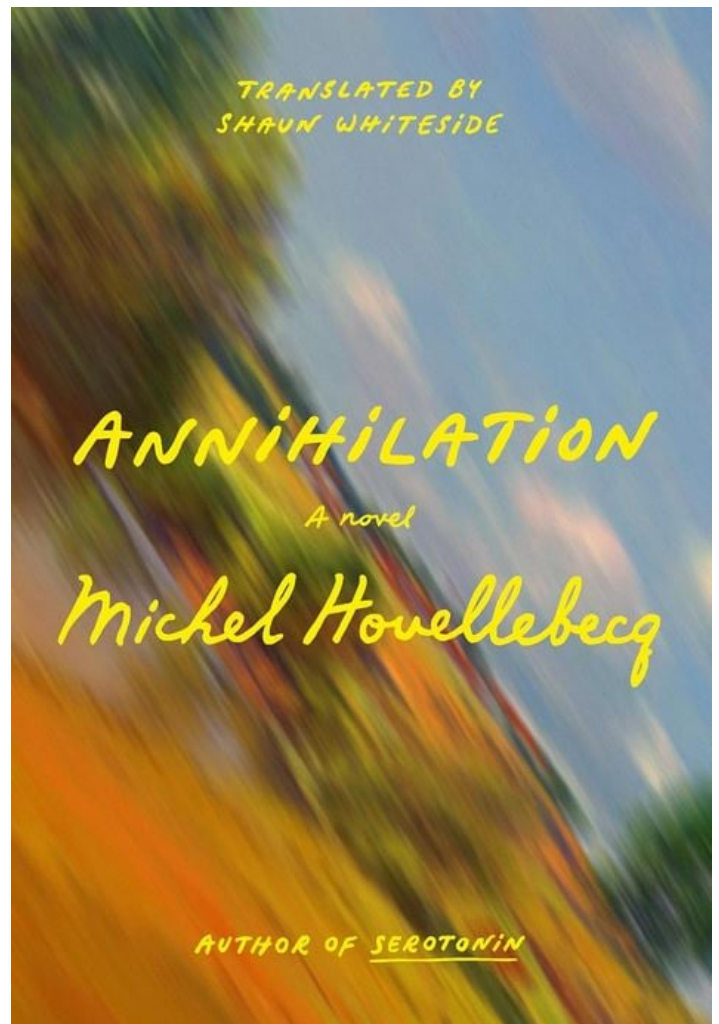


The Annunciation (Daniel Hallé, 1659)

What was the point of installing 5G if you simply couldn't make contact with one another any more, and perform the essential gestures, the ones that allow the human species

to reproduce, the ones that also, sometimes, allow you to be happy? –Michel Houellebecq, Annihilation

Postmodernism has reached a critical mass, Michel Houellebecq suggests, in his new novel *Annihilation* (*Anéantir*). Perhaps 'suggests' is too mousy a word for the French author of *Submission*, *The Elementary Particles*, *Platform*, *Serotonin* and many other works. Longtime readers of Houellebecq, seasoned readers who are no longer shocked by the author's overtly visual testament to postmodern depravity and degradation, are quick to point out that Houellebecq's novels are a tour de force that depict the corrosive and explosive effects of meaningless and existential ennui in postmodernity.



To read Houellebecq's ideology-busting literature of the deep, isolating trenches that postmodernism has built around human relations, creating dysfunction out of once stable reality, readers need to be willing to accept the literary convention that literature capable of enjoying a long shelf life describes the world, society, and man in poignant detail.

If postmodernity is a cancer, how can we excise it before it consumes everything in its path? Houellebecq harbors few illusions about the necessary corrective to cure us from the

deathly root of postmodernity: nihilism. Yet, *Annihilation* is different from his previous novels given the author's turn to Catholicism.

The problem is that postmodern decay casts a wide net, offering enough corruption and degradation to tempt mass man in unprecedented numbers. This is what the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset means by demoralization. Postmodernism's safety-in-numbers and en masse depravity is its own justification and best closing argument. Postmodernism's debauchery has something to offer for everyone, Houellebecq contends.

Postmodernity, nihilism, and Marxism cannot be separated. This trifecta of the destruction of the hierarchy of values and the inversion of human reality has corrupted the human psyche since the start of the twentieth century. That is the legacy of the ideologically dominated twentieth century.

Contrary to the trite and exhausted Marxist platitude that philosophy and literature must *change* the world—not merely explain it—Houellebecq beckons thoughtful readers to witness, and hopefully delve, into the damage that Marxism and its attendant values have done to the hierarchical structure of human values, our capacity to decipher human reality, and a life-affirming way of life, if not public policies.

Now that the rabbit is out of the bag and the gloves are off regarding the moral/spiritual decay and social/political rot that postmodernism has ushered, Houellebecq intimates, let us reflect about what the praxis of in-your-face-nihilism truly means, circa 2027 France, the time and setting of *Annihilation*. The unapologetic themes and situations of Houellebecq's novels make his work a *fin-de-siècle*, paradigm shift glance at decadence, its roots, and daunting effects. Woke choir boys beware.

Annihilation is yet another instance of Houellebecq beckoning

readers that “the game’s afoot” regarding the damaging effects of postmodernism on the human psyche. How can man release himself from the pervasive claws of postmodernity’s Platonic cave of nihilistic delusions we are steeped in? Is that even possible?

“The game’s afoot,” King Henry V tells his troops before the battle of Agincourt in Shakespeare’s play *Henry V*. Arthur Conan Doyle popularized the phrase in “The Adventure of Abbey Grange.” Consider Henry’s spirited talk to his men:

*In peace there’s nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility;
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favour’d rage;*



Michel Houellebecq

Postmodernity is the result of ever pervasive Marxist ideology. Looking to the future of man, does postmodern moral/spiritual rot warrant a sustained war against ideology? The culprit of postmodern depravity and degradation, Houellebecq affirms in all his books, is nihilism. If nihilism is the cancer that has corrupted and corroded all aspects of human life in postmodernity, Houellebecq is the doctor that warns us, "this may hurt a little," while taking a literary biopsy that reveals the ills of our postmodern predicament.

Paul Raison, the protagonist of *Annihilation*, is employed as Adviser to the French Minister of Finance. He is married to Prudence, a Treasury Department official. As government employees, they keep long, sterile hours that play havoc with their life together. In typical Houellebecq fashion, their children-less marriage is a sorry, dysfunctional simulacrum: "They had attained instead a kind of standardized despair."

Broken lives abound in Houellebecq's novels, just like in postmodernity. The author is merely relating the story of this unprecedented moral/spiritual and existential debacle with literary flair. Paul and Prudence's marriage is indicative of the current state of morality. Houellebecq uses the couple as one of an apparent infinity of similar 'case studies' that pullulate in postmodernity. As *Annihilation* develops, its themes and motifs become augmented and dispersed through other dysfunctional characters and situations. Moral/spiritual dysfunction is endemic; the driving force of our time, Houellebecq tells us.

Paul's professional preoccupation is taken up by a series of highly sophisticated and efficient attacks by hackers on government computer infrastructure. Throughout the first part of the novel, Houellebecq juxtaposes Paul's drab professional life with his equally morose marriage, his father's stroke and subsequent debilitation, and his rekindling with his frigid brother and orthodox Catholic sister. Eventually, his relationship with his sister takes center stage in the novel. She shows him a life-path that he has never been exposed to that begins to break Paul's cycle of meaninglessness and existential disorientation. Paul starts to take refuge in his sister's convictions. He becomes drawn to her because she is a traditional Catholic, not the woke, cafeteria-style variety. This is a departure from his other novels, though Houellebecq's readers witness this development in several of his latest novels.

The first part of *Annihilation* may appear slow to develop, especially for causal, first-time readers of Houellebecq. A novel of 544 pages, *Annihilation* makes the depiction of the banal and corrosive ideological world a necessary prerequisite—like jabbing neutralizing boxers—which robs time and vitality from the existential/moral maturation of well-grounded people. That is the point of the first half of the novel.

Annihilation is not lacking in Houellebecq's well-placed sentences that can stand alone as aphorisms. A master of realism, the author cuts through hypocrisy—like death's scythe plucks people from Earth. Paradoxes brim in *Annihilation*. Houellebecq is no fan of debased postmodern bourgeois values: "The coincidence was not accidental; an improvement in living conditions often goes hand in hand with deterioration of reasons for living, and living together in particular."

Houellebecq contrasts Paul's life with his father's, a baby-boomer. This creates a generational demarcation point between the two. This is significant because Paul's world is frigid and wallowing in postmodernism's altar to meaninglessness, a form of nihilistic emancipation from human reality. Consider the following poignant line of dialogue: "A typical baby boomer, then ... You really have the feeling," he went on, "that people of that generation weren't only more energetic, more active, more creative and broadly speaking more talented than us in every sphere, including marriage."

Paul reanimates his relationship with his Catholic sister after their father has a stroke. This is the key moment in the novel that changes his existential mood and perspective from despair to hope. He begins to compare his sister's Catholic faith with his wife's pagan wicca practices. Readers of Walker Percy will recognize this transformation as Paul's gradual acceptance of the Catholic faith, which he never suspected possible before reuniting with her. Paul concedes to accompany his sister, Cécile, to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

While Paul is busy managing family affairs after his father's stroke, he is involved with his boss, Bruno, who is running for president of France in 2027. Being steeped in the world of politics makes Paul realize how low good will in human relations has fallen. He becomes disenchanted, especially with the press: "Strangely enough, the press, while it had lost almost all of its readers, had increased its power to do harm over the past few years, it could break lives now, and it

didn't hold back from doing so, particularly at election time, legal proceedings were pointless, a simple suspicion was enough to destroy somebody."

Paul's interest in social/political matters wanes; he struggles to make sense of his life. He begins to see through the thin veneer of banality, emptiness and dysfunction that postmodern ideology promotes. In the second half of the novel the narrator, and large sections of the dialogue, address the theological and philosophical implications of free will, determinism, nihilism, Satanism, and grace in the Catholic faith.

The second half of *Annihilation* takes an unexpected turn. The computer hackers turn out to be Satanists who no longer hide their vitriol against the human person: "For most occultists, the shift from the straight pentagram to the inverted pentagram symbolizes the victory of matter over spirit, chaos over order, and more generally the forces of evil over the forces of good."

While Houellebecq's narrator alerts readers to the goings-on of the social/political scene in France in 2027 and Paul's disenchantment with postmodern life; most of the characters suffer unnecessarily, twitching and turning morally/spiritually without understanding or identifying the source of their ailment. This is the point in the novel when Paul, who is working with the French government to uncover the computer hackers, becomes alerted to life-affirming values that he never presumed possible.

Paul is informed by an artificial Intelligence expert about the endgame of technology: "I didn't quite understand," he went on, 'if they were integrating human neurons into electronic circuits, or electronic bugs into human brains; I think it's a bit of both, and that their goal in general is to create hybrid beings between computers and humans. It's a company that enjoys considerable funding; it has capital from

both Apple and Google.”

Paul’s acceptance of Christianity takes a twisted and tortured path. It comes about as the result of the wasting away effect that postmodernism has on the human person. The narrator writes, “He was glad of the opportunity granted to see the church of again; he had a sense of something unfinished in his life with the church—and perhaps with Christianity in general.” Paul’s work in the French government is the social/political management and organization of society, resources, and the demands and passions of people. His is an ideological world that is sprinkled with realpolitik, where practical matters override moral/spiritual considerations. Yet, his turn toward Catholicism makes him a stranger in the physical world: “Was the world material? It was a hypothesis, but as far as he knew the world might just as well be made up of spiritual entities; he no longer knew what science actually meant by ‘matter’, or even if it still used the term, he didn’t really have a sense that it did, as far as he remembered it was probably more to do with matrices of probable presences...”

Having navigated through his disenchantment with the social/political world, his father’s stroke and his frigid marriage, Paul turns fifty and is diagnosed with cancer of the mouth. He consoles himself with the idea that “in the end he had managed to attain a certain form of happiness, and that it was a shame to die now...”

Annihilation does not have the stock-in-trade, story-book happy ending of bestsellers. None of Houellebecq’s novels do. What it does possess is a fervent understanding of the immense lies that radical ideology tells people in postmodernity to invert the essence of human reality. Paul mentions self-help books and the disconnect that these books have with reality. Instead, he is struck by the last page of Arthur Conan Doyle *The Last Bow: Some Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes*, a work that was published in 1917.

Paul finds solace in the poignant exchange between Holmes and Watson, their accurate description of the changing tide of the world. In typical Houellebecq manner, the exchange between Doyle's characters enables Paul to put his life in perspective in a postmodern world that has vanished love, sacrifice and genuine empathy, values which he has lately come to learn from his sister's Catholicism:

'There's an East wind coming, Watson.'

'I think not, Holmes, it is very warm.'

'Good old Watson! You are the one fixed point in a changing age. There's an East wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it's God's own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared. Start her up, Watson, for it's time that we were on our way.'

While Paul does not believe that World War I strengthened England and Europe, he is appreciative of Holmes' hope during the darkness of War World I.

Paul's cancer progresses. At the end of the novel, he and Prudence discover love for each other: "Perhaps the world definitely existed in reality, Paul said to himself, perhaps there was no place for them in reality that they had only passed through with frightened incomprehension. But they had been lucky, very lucky. For most people that journey, from start to finish, was a lonely one."

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Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy in Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included [Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay](#), [Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man](#), [Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy](#) and [Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in [Philosophy Today](#) Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is [Philosophical Perspective on Cinema](#).

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