France’s "Submission"

For those disinclined to believe in coincidence, the date of the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, January 7, and that of the publication of Michel Houellebecq’s latest novel, *Soumission* (Submission), in which a Muslim is elected President of France, were linked in some unspecified way, though it will now never be known precisely in what way.[1] Certainly the novel had received an enormous amount of publicity before publication, so that almost everyone knew of its central conceit. If the novel is dead, as many have claimed, its ghost is certainly able still to haunt us.

Houellebecq is a writer with a single underlying theme: the emptiness of human existence in a consumer society devoid of religious belief, political project, or cultural continuity in which, moreover, thanks to material abundance and social security, there is no real struggle for existence that might give meaning to the life of millions. Such a society will not allow you to go hungry or to live in the abject poverty that would once have been the reward of idleness, whether voluntary or involuntary. This, in Houellebecq’s vision of the world, lends an inspissated pointlessness to all human activity, which becomes nothing more than a scramble for unnecessary consumer goods that confer no happiness or (at best) a distraction from that very emptiness. For Houellebecq, then, intellectual or cultural activity becomes mere soap opera for the more intelligent and educated rather than something of intrinsic importance or value. That is why a university teacher of economics in one of his books describes his work as the teaching of obvious untruths to careerist morons, rather than as, say, the awakening of young minds to the fascinating task of reducing the complexity of social interactions to general principles.

So brilliantly does Houellebecq describe the arduous vacuity of the life of his protagonists that one suspects (or knows?)

that his books are strongly autobiographical, not in the shallow sense that the incidents in them are necessarily those that he has lived, but in the deeper sense that the whole of what one might call the feeling-tone of his protagonists is actually his. This tone is in a way worse than mere despair, which has at least the merit of strength and of posing a possible solution, namely suicide; the Houellebeckian mood is as chronic illness is to acute, an ache rather than a pain. In *Soumission*, for example, the protagonist, a university teacher of literature, describes his (and, implicitly by extension, our) daily life as but a succession of trivial, boring problems and imperative tasks that are the dark side, as it were, of modern convenience: "blocked washbasin, internet connection broken, speeding ticket, dishonest cleaning lady, mistake in tax return." I doubt whether there is anybody—any middle class person at any rate—who will be unfamiliar with these irritations that can, if they accumulate, come so easily to dominate our thoughts and to color our attitude to life.

Food and sex partake of the meaninglessness of Houellebecq's world. For example, the microwave is almost the only instrument in his *batterie de cuisine*, and when it fails to heat supermarket-prepared meals he is reduced to hummus and taramasalata or home delivery. As for sex, it is merely an intermittent itch that has to be scratched; it is never the expression of affection, let alone of love, and if by any chance a relation forms between the participants, it is bound either to fizzle out in boredom or end in recrimination. The very ease with which sex can now take place deprives it of any special meaning and turns it purely physiological.

Houellebecq's physical appearance as relayed in the press suggests that he fully inhabits the word he describes. He looks like a man who has crawled out of a giant ashtray after a prolonged alcoholic binge in clothes that have not been washed for weeks. This does not mean, however, that he approves of the world he inhabits: it is simply that he can

conceive of no other, at least for Western man, and if anyone thinks otherwise he is deceiving himself. Grunge is reality; everything else is veneer.

The very success of the Enlightenment project is the root of its failure. Having eliminated myth and magic from human life, it has crushed belief even in itself out of society. This is suggested with characteristic economy by Houellebecq when his protagonist takes a trip, arbitrarily and without clear purpose, to a village called Martel, named after Charles Martel, the victor of the Battle of Poitiers in 732 A.D. that halted the advance of Islam. He, the protagonist of *Soumission*, reflects that in these parts "Cro-Magnon man [once] hunted the mammoth and the reindeer; nowadays they have the choice between an Auchan and a Leclerc [two large supermarket chains], both situated in Souillac." Bravery and excitement have given way to comfort and convenience; degeneration is the inevitable and unavoidable result.

It is not to the point that the Western world, as Houellebecq characterizes it, is in fact much more complex, much less dispiriting, than he allows, that technical advance continues, for example, or that not everyone leads the semi-Hobbesian life (nasty, brutish, solitary, and long) that he describes. This would be to take *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as weather forecasts rather than as warnings of tendencies: warnings that, by alerting people to the dangers to which they advert, might help to avert catastrophe. Houellebecq is a visionary rather than an empirical sociological researcher; if he insists on living the life that his books tells us is, or might be, our future, one can only surmise that it is because of psychological peculiarities of his own.

The plot of *Soumission* is simple, but clever and plausible (which does not, of course, mean that, being set in the future, it is a prediction). Having won another mandate of five years in 2017, François Hollande presides over further catastrophic economic and social decline. In the elections of

2022, a four-cornered fight among the Socialist Party, the Movement for a Popular Union (Sarkozy's party), the National Front, and the Muslim Fraternity (a new Islamic political formation imagined by the author, supposedly moderate, led by Mohammed Ben Abbes, a graduate of one of France's elite *grandes écoles* and the son of Algerian immigrants), results in the national Front coming first and the Muslim Fraternity second. In the run-off election, the latter wins easily, however, with both the socialists and the Popular Union supporting it rather than the National Front and going into coalition with (now) President Ben Abbes.

Meanwhile, the Muslim Fraternity has modeled itself on the Muslim Brotherhood and, confident of demographic developments in France that work to Islam's advantage and with a clear understanding that ultimately culture is more important in determining a society's future than its economy, insists only on controlling the schools and universities.

The protagonist and narrator of *Soumission* is a teacher of French literature in a Parisian University, a specialist in the work of Joris-Karl Huysmans, principally known today for his novel of decadent aestheticism, *À rebours*. This was a clever choice on the part of Houellebecq, for Huysmans returned to Catholicism later in life and became an oblate, his last book being *Les foules de Lourdes* (The Crowds of Lourdes). In other words, Huysmans followed the path that the protagonist, in desperate need to escape his current nihilistic condition, will follow; but Catholicism, in the meantime, having lost its faith and becoming, under Pope Francis, little more than transcendental social work to the hosannas of the right-thinking, there is no living faith in France except Islam for him to convert to. It is Islam, *faute de mieux*.

The subtlety of Houellebecq's book consists of demonstrating that the spiritual need of the protagonist can be made to coincide with his material interest. The universities are

closed for a time after the accession of Ben Abbes to power, but re-open sometime thereafter. Teachers such as the protagonist of *Soumission* are offered redundancy on full pension, which he at any rate is happy to take. The alternative is continuing in his post, at a salary three times greater than that before, the difference being paid for by subventions from Saudi Arabia and Qatar—subventions which, incidentally, allow the universities of Paris to escape from their dispiriting grunginess under French state finance to some semblance of the grandeur of the medieval Sorbonne. But the *quid pro quo* for receiving the higher salary and being permitted to teach at the university at all is conversion to Islam.

At first the protagonist accepts early retirement on a full pension; but if his life had been essentially empty before such retirement—the work of teaching literature at university level being absurd, leading either a tiny minority of students to perpetuate the teaching of literature, or a great majority of them to work completely unconnected to their studies—it becomes a complete vacuum thereafter.

The generous conditions of retirement deplete the universities of most teachers of standing, but the Saudi and Qatari paymasters are anxious that "their" universities should retain and, if possible, increase their world prestige and standing (just as the Qatari owners of the most famous French football club, Paris Saint-Germain, want "their" club to be among the most prominent in Europe, to the immense financial advantage of the footballers who play in it, most of whom are actually about as Parisian as Doctor Johnson). Whatever else the protagonist may be, he is at least an outstanding scholar of Huysmans's life and work—because there are not many others. He himself is under no illusions about the significance, intellectual or practical, of his expertise, but the prestige of a university, even for those who, such as the new paymasters or *de facto* owners of the Parisian universities,

never pick up a book, depends upon its reputation for scholarship.

The academic head of the protagonist's university, Professor Rediger, had long been known for his Islamophilia, anti-Zionism, and support for the academic boycott of Israel before the arrival of President Ben Abbes in power. Of Belgian origin and Catholic background, he has converted to Islam, but remains worldly and sophisticated, and lives in a magnificent Parisian house. He wants to attract the protagonist back into the academic fold and invites him to that house, where he serves a really excellent Meursault to go with the Lebanese mezze. The professor is married polygamously, first to an older woman responsible for the smooth running of his household and second to a fifteen-year-old girl who excites him sexually and who is not permitted to reveal herself to another man except fully covered.

The protagonist does not feel able to ask the professor why he still drinks alcohol despite a clear prohibition against doing so by his new religion. To ask such a question would be naive, unworldly, or priggish, and enough of the old Parisian *savoir vivre* remains under the new dispensation, at least for the moment, for the protagonist not to want to appear naive, unworldly, or priggish, as he would if he asked this most obvious question, the kind that a mere AngloSaxon would ask. And the professor's relations with his two wives—perhaps he has two more hiding somewhere—seem to be those of effortless domination, unproblematic in fact. Since the protagonist's relations with women have always been difficult, a year with the same woman being the longest he has ever managed, in large part because sexual equality so often creates power struggles within a couple, unabashed patriarchy such as that promoted by Islam would be a solution to his loneliness. The Islam of the professor being a state of happy hypocrisy, there seem to be no disadvantages to it.

The professor has written a short book of 128 pages, including

calligraphic illustrations, of Muslim apologetics, *Dix questions sur Islam* (Ten Questions on Islam), which has sold three million copies, and which, in best Jesuitical fashion, he hands the protagonist as he is leaving his house. The protagonist finds the book convincing and duly converts before twelve witnesses in the Great Mosque in Paris. There is a cocktail party afterwards to celebrate his conversion. The latter is of great value to him: soon afterwards he returns to giving his university courses, with their "pretty, veiled, timid female students." He is now in seventh heaven: "Each of these girls, however pretty they might be, felt happy and proud to be chosen by me, and felt honored to share my bed. They deserved to be loved; and, for my part, I came to love them." The protagonist has reached a sublunary Islamic heaven: in effect limitless economic ease and any number of virgins at his disposal. There the book ends.

It is seldom that liberty of any kind is lost all at once," wrote Hume. "Slavery has so frightful an aspect to men accustomed to freedom that it must steal in upon them by degrees and must disguise itself in a thousand shapes in order to be received." This book is, or could be considered, an illustration of Hume's insight. The author does not feel it necessary to point out that the protagonist, having converted, will not be free to apostatize should he subsequently decide that he has made a mistake; Islam is like a vein, it has an built-in mechanism of preventing backflow, so that conversions flow in one direction only. Free enquiry on many subjects will henceforth be denied him, and eventually even the subject of his scholarship is likely to be prohibited, though perhaps not straightaway.

This novel is far from a crude anti-Islamic polemic, however, as many might have supposed it to be from its pre-publication publicity (Houellebecq has expressed himself very unfavorably on Islam elsewhere). It is rather a meditation, admittedly using all the author's habitual tropes which fortunately, or

perhaps unfortunately, are susceptible to an infinite number of bitterly amusing variations, on the state of Western civilization and what makes that civilization vulnerable to attack from so intellectually nugatory a force as Islamism which, by all reasonable standards, has nothing of any value whatever to say to the inhabitants of the twenty-first century. In other words, it is an implicit invitation to us to look inwards, to think of what is wrong with *us* rather than with *them*. Whether we or they will read it like this, I rather doubt. As to a solution, it is hardly the place of a novel to supply it. But whatever it might be, Islam is certainly not it.

1 *Soumission*, by Michel Houellebecq; Flammarion, 320 pages, $49.95.

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